Yuna and Rikku's Excellent Pilgrimage

by Qu Marsh

Summary

Yuna and Rikku try to find their way back home after a road trip gone awry. Or, There and Back Again: An Ex-Summoner's Tale.

Notes

I wrote this with fic with a soundtrack in mind; so, where available, I've provided links to the tracks on YouTube (as of this writing). None of the songs are important to understanding the story; they're just background music for particular scenes/chapters.

All inline lyrics are from Dar Williams' "Road Buddy," except where otherwise noted. (c) and (p) 1997 Burning Field Music; used without permission.
Washed up on a strange shore, Yuna begins to recount how she got into this mess.

*And all that's left to chart / Is nothing less than your own heart*
-- Dar Williams, "Closer to Me"

When Yuna finally regained consciousness, she found herself lying with both hands draped around a railing, bobbing over the water atop a small piece of what used to be a yacht deck. Something slippery and warm, like wet skin, supported her legs from below. The cold water jerked into her full alertness, and she immediately crawled up on to the deck.

She looked back. It was a dolphin's snout that had been holding her up. "Hey, baby." The dolphin spoke with a Scandinavian accent. "You were sure snoozing away there. Guess that makes you my sleeping beauty, huh? How about a kiss from Prince Franz to help you wake up?" He opened his mouth.

"Uh... no thank you," Yuna said. Rikku would be so proud of her for standing up for herself.

But the thought of Rikku started to bring sense back to Yuna. Now she remembered what was doing out here. She'd been dumped into the sea after a whale had attacked their yacht on the way back to Besaid. Rikku and Rin had been thrown overboard, too, and all three of them were probably stranded in Yevon only knew where. She could only hope her friends had sent out a search team by now or they were completely out of hope. And she didn't like the way this dolphin kept leering at her; it was like he was undressing her with his echolocation. "I was with two others; did you find them?"

"No, but I'm sure one of my pals picked them up," Franz said. "All of us dolphins are friendly, so don't you worry your cute little face."

*Perhaps a little too friendly,* Yuna thought. She sat up. Well, at least Rikku and Rin were safe. If the rescue team arrived quickly enough, maybe she could wait out everything on this little piece of deck ... then again, who knew how long they'd take to find her? No one in the outside world had any clue about the whale attack or where she'd ended up.

Franz continued, "We're regular Good Samaritans, we are ... though the Franz would never turn down a little reward for a rescue." He winked.

"I'm going to need food and water."

"Ooh, sounds like you've got something kinky in mind."

"I meant to eat."

Franz's face folded into the dolphin approximation of a disappointed frown. She now saw that Franz was wearing a T-shirt with a foreign character and the word "SEME." "Well, you're halfway
to the Cactuar Nation. I'll give you a ride. Everyone loves to ride the Franz."

"Um. How about I just sit on this piece of yacht and you push it?"

She gathered up her fishing pole, which floated in the sea beside her like a loyal dog, and then they set off for Bikanel Island with Franz pushing the slab of deck. "So, you didn't tell me," he said as they traveled. "What's a nice girl like you doing adrift in a sea like this?"

"I'm on vacation, appreciating the great outdoors." Yuna, after a moment's hesitation, conceded, "Although I'm starting I think I should have appreciated them through the safety of the Travel Channel. This has been the worst vacation of my life."

Thirty minutes brought them to the shores of a tiny offshoot of Bikanel, where the beaches were sandy and so was everything else. A rustic but reasonably well maintained wooden shack stood in the center of the island, the only sign that it was inhabited. Yuna climbed off her tiny 1/32 of a yacht, glad both to be back on solid ground and to be a little further away from the randy dolphin. "Thank you ... Mr. Franz. Where does everyone live around here?"

"No friends in the area?" He waved a flipper towards the main coast of Bikanel, visible across the water. "Well, the borders of the Cactuar Nation are a league or so in that direction, but there's no here 'cept you and me, babe." He grinned. "The Franz lives in international waters. You wouldn't believe what's legal here."

"Oh. Hmm." She hoped that someone would be able to tell where her friends had come ashore. At this point, all she wanted to do to get out of the unknown wilds and back to some place safe. What a horrible time these past few days had been. She'd hoped a trip away from civilization would help her escape all the ridiculous adventures people forced her into, not land her smack-dab in the middle of one. But it seemed fate had installed a tracking collar on her, and whenever she tried to fight her destiny of being Spira's beloved Lady High Summoner, it shipwrecked her in the middle of the desert. I seem to be born to suffer. It's my lot in life.

Franz climbed out of the water and Yuna saw for the first time that he had legs instead of a tail. While she was trying to figure out what bizarre cross-breeding or genetic experiments might have produced such a fantastical creature, he caught her staring and winked again. "Like what you see?"

"I've never met a talking dolphin before, that's all."

He grinned. "Once you go cetacean, you never go Homo sapiens." Then he realized his libido had gotten ahead of his manners again. "I'm sorry. The Franz never asked your name."

This was unremarkable to Yuna; no one ever needed to ask her name. But now that he mentioned it, his past comments that had attracted no notice at the time came together. He'd only called her a "nice girl," inquired whether she had any friends in the area, apologized for never asking her name ... could it be he sincerely didn't do know who she was? "Er ... you do know who I am, don't you?"

"A hot babe?"

She try to test his knowledge with a little hint. "Er ... I'm a summoner...?" She was shocked; even in Spira's most remote corners, it seemed a given that everyone—yes, even lecherous talking dolphins —would recognize her instantly.

"Don't worry, sweetcheeks, your abilities are a distant third in The Franz's book."

Yeah, I think I can guess what the first two are, her mental commentary track retorted. But she didn't mind that he'd somehow managed to have no clue who she was. News must travel awfully
slowly on remote desert islands if he had truly never heard of the Lady High Summoner, savior of Spira and daughter of Lord Braska, but after being regaled with an unending stream of parades, trophies, statues, she found herself surprised by how appealing the notion was. Here was someone she could talk to without worrying whether the conversation was actually a publicity stunt or a piece of some feud between New Yevon and the Youth League.

Franz pushed open the door to his shack. "Step into my recording studio, baby."

There couldn't be any harm in following him back to his shack, could there? At least she'd have a roof to stay under while she tried to figure out how to reunite with her family. She followed him inside. The interior of the shack was well kept-up, if crowded: Franz might have been a desert island hermit, but he had not abandoned basic societal conventions of cleanliness. "So what are you doing, living all by yourself out here in international waters?"

"Working on my sound collection," he explained. "This little island is a fantastic place to record marine life in their natural habitat. I'm trying to catalogue the calls of all of Spira's denizens of the deep."

"Oh." She was expecting something a lot more perverted than that. How refreshingly sensible.

"Well, that and trying my hand at writing some erotic limericks for my fellow dolphins. They say I have a way with clicks and whistles."

"Yikes." Yuna took the glass of fresh water he offered her and quickly downed it. As much of a perv as this dolphin was, she felt she could trust him. If he truly didn't know she was Spira's beloved High Summoner, he was probably the last person who would try to kidnap her.

"So, want to see my sound collection?"

Franz led her up the wooden stairs to to the shack's second floor. Aside from the bed crammed into the corner, most of it was taken up by Franz's recording studio. Microphones and speakers were piled atop equalizers and shelves upon shelves full of audio spheres. There was hardly a bare spot of shelf or floor visible anywhere. "Not bad, huh? I've got stuff here you could never believe." With a smirk on his face, Franz grabbed one of his audio spheres and stuffed it in the player. He tapped play. "What do you hear in THESE sounds, baby?"

The jumble of long, low tones sounded like nothing in particular to Yuna. "I, er, don't know."

"Whales mating." He winked.

She couldn't believe he was still trying to get into her daisy dukes. "Look, I'm a human being. You're a dolphin. I don't know what you're thinking, but it wouldn't work."

"That's what they all say at first."

Fidgeting, she turned away. "I'm sorry, I really appreciate your rescuing me, but I need to be on my way ... I guess." Now that she'd finally escaped the overbearing pressures of fame, she didn't feel a particular hurry to return to them.

"Well, I'll admit this isn't a four-star shack, but you're welcome to stay with the Franz as long as you like," he said. "But why so mysterious? I ought to at least know who I'm taking in, right? Are you on the run from a dangerous life of debauchery and illicit affairs? You can trust the Franz not to spill the beans."

"I'm High Summoner Yuna, OK?"
This still did not produce even a glimmer of recognition from Franz. Yuna, improbably, was relieved. "So?" he said. "How did you end up adrift at sea, Miss High Summoner Yuna?"

"Well, it's a long story. You might want to pull up a chair. I want to tell you everything."

* * *

One week earlier...

"So, the big two-zero," Rikku gave Yuna a nudge as they passed on the way to the ice cream. "Feel any older?"

"No, but it's not Tuesday yet," Yuna replied with a smile.

Rikku waggled a chastising finger at her. "Now, now. We decided this was going to be your birthday, remember? Today's the surprise party, so I'm calling you twenty."

Yuna frowned. "You told me about this two weeks ago; how can you call it a surprise party?"

"Ah," Rikku said with a knowing wink, "but that's what's surprising about it."

Looking mildly exasperated, Yuna piled ice cream and more birthday cake onto her plate before returning to the table. "We didn't have to go through all of this for your birthday, you know."

"Yeah, 'cause my birthday isn't a national holiday," Rikku said with a touch of resentment.

Yuna still wasn't too sure what to make of all this Yuna Day stuff. As everyone was all too happy to tell her, this celebration was what Spira owed her after the many adventures she'd undertaken in its service: overthrowing the thousand-year oppression of Sin (two years ago); destroying Vegnanun, putting Shuyin to rest, and bringing the Crimson Squad home safe and sound (two months ago); putting down the deadly Moomba Insurrection (one month ago); finding Keepa's lost kitten (yesterday). But, Yuna felt that if Spira really wanted to reward her, they'd give her some time off from being Lady Yuna and let her just spend her birthday with her friends and former guardians.

Rikku got busy stuffing her face. "This is sure great cake, Lulu." Lulu smiled. Brother, who had assiduously followed his videosphere instructions for seafood cake only to discover that Yuna was allergic to shrimp, fumed silently.

Cid burst into Yuna's hut with a wrapped package of moderate size tucked beneath his arm. "Sorry I'm late, Yuna! Yer old uncle Cid's been out tracking down the perfect present for his favorite little niece. What'd I miss?"

"Kimahri broke Lulu's piñata in one hit," Rikku reported, "and Yuna made a wish she won't tell anyone about." She could guess, though, it probably involved the fayth and him. And, for Yunie's sake, she certainly hoped it came true and the fayth finally made good on their promise.

"And there was a song which we're legally obligated not to mention by name," Paine added.

Cid set his package down on the table with the others. "Awright, how 'bout the birthday girl opens her presents?"

But before she touched a single gift, someone pounded on the door, provoking Yuna's dog into a
calvacade of barks. "I'll get that!" Yuna patted Kogoro on the head to calm him and then ran to the door. She poked her head out into the Besaid town square.

It was Shinra. "Hi, Yuna. Sorry I couldn't make it to your surprise party, but the Machine Faction was wondering if you'd be able to attend our Yuna Day celebration in Djose. And, also, there's some type of drake or dragon or such in the foothills, so we were hoping maybe you could —"

"I ... think so."

"No." Rikku leapt up from the table to take over the conversation. "No, she can't. Take care of your drake yourself, poophead."

"Hey, I'm just a kid," Shinra protested before Rikku slammed the door in his face.

Rikku dragged her cousin to the table to open her birthday presents. "Yunie, it's your birthday. You can't keep running everyone else's errands." What was it with these people, anyway? Didn't they understand that their beloved Lady High Summoner was a person, too? The worst part was that, without someone looking over her shoulder, Yuna always let herself get talked into these ridiculous adventures.

Cid kept staring at his gift like a small child who couldn't wait to use the bathroom, so Yuna decided to take the pressure off him and hurry up on it. She neatly removed the tape and folded up the paper before looking into the box. "The new CommSphere 4.0!" she squealed.

Rikku only barely restrained herself from snatching the sphere out of Yuna's hands. "Is this the one with with video conferencing, the music player, and sixty free text messages every month? Ohmigosh," she hyperventilated. "Pops, how you come never get me anything this cool?"

Cid cracked up. "Well, they hadn't invented this when it was your birthday, now, had they? This is straight off the assembly line at Djose Temple!"

"This is amazing. Thanks, Uncle Cid!"

Wakka next slid a long wrapped box down the table to Yuna. "Picked this out myself just for you, ya?" he said as she unwrapped it. "Think you'll really have a great time with it."

Yuna looked at what she had just unwrapped. "A fishing pole."

"Yeah! Thought mebbe you'd like to come out fishing with me an' the boys sometime! I can see us takin' the afternoon off and all going out on a boat so Vidina can get to know his godmother when he gets a little older, ya?"

Paine looked amused. "Is this present for Yuna or for you, Wakka?"

Someone knocked on the door again. Before Rikku could even begin to complain, Yuna was on her feet and opening the door. Shelinda and a cameraman lurked outside like an invading army waiting for a break in the defenses. And they'd found one. "Lady Yuna, Elder Kimahri, I was wondering if I could have a few words from you regarding the Yuna Day dedication of your statue on Mt. Gagazet."

Maechen pushed the telesphere crew out of the way. "Fiends in the Omega Ruins! Lady Yuna, we need your help!"

"There's a bridge out and someone's lost in the mines!"
"Bickson of the Guado Glories has been replaced by a shapeshifting impostor and the real Bickson's locked in the Tower of Crates, which can only be accessed by a sewer!" Beclem declared.

Even Yuna had her limits. Her patience bubbled over and she suddenly shouted, "This is ridiculous! I'm trying to have my birthday party, which I already rescheduled once so I make it to one of your parades! And, Maechen, since when haven't there been fiends in the Omega Ruins?"

At once, the crowd fell into a sullen silence, feeling ashamed for having provoked its hero's wrath. Yuna saw how disappointed they looked and immediately felt guilty. "Well ... I mean ... I guess I can help."

Rikku intervened to prevent any further backsliding. "You heard her. Lady Yuna is busy." She slammed the door, deadbolted it, and refused to listen to the ensuing cavalcade of knocks and questing demands.

"SLACKERS!" Beclem bellowed through the door.

"Honestly, Yunie, you've got to stick up for yourself. You get walked on more than the Highroad. You don't want to spend the rest of your life running errands for people, do you?"

"No." With a sigh, Yuna admitted, "Actually, sometimes I think it would be nice if I could get away to where no one would ever find me except the people I really care about."

"Well, there ya have it!" Cid roared with delight and clapped both girls on the shoulder. "Sounds like a lil' family vacation is in order! Just the four of us, livin' it up with Mother Nature out in the wild blue yonder!"

Rikku groaned. "Po-ops. After that near-sighted shoopuf tried to hibernate on me, you promised that we'd never have to go on another family vacation, remember?"

But, even without all of the people trying to browbeat into her running their errands, Yuna had found herself growing tired with of sleepy little Besaid. Who wanted to live in a town where you had to sail to the next island over just to buy an Elixir, where the Blitzball team had had twenty-six straight losing seasons, where no one had even bothered to paint the town gates any time in the last decade? Spira had so many more exciting places than this. She was young and eager for adventure; she should be out living it up in Luca or Bevelle, not wasting her time in this silly town. "No, I think that sounds fun," she said. "I'd like to get away from Besaid for a while. Have a few more adventures, explore the great big world out there. And, you know, just you and me and Uncle Cid and Brother, so I don't have to be Lady Yuna for everyone."

Meanwhile, Beclem had crawled back in through the window. "Now, to unmask the false Bickson, you'll need to shine on him the Elvaan Mirror of Radiance, which is locked in the Pillar of Kal'dalalobeth on a remote island in Fairy Lake. The Raccoontuars can take you to the island, but first you'll need the Ear Trumpet of Heracles so you can speak to animals..."

Paine rose from her chair and made ready to throw her spoon at the intruder. "Countdown to hurtfest ... 3 ... 2 ..."

"...and to unlock the door in the ruins, you'll need the six orichalcum chess pieces randomly strewn about Spira in treasure chests, but this magical spyglass carved from the bark of the Golden Gaea Tree will indicate the location of..."

Both the magical spyglass and Beclem soon found themselves on the business end of Paine's 9999 HP damage-causing spoon and beat a swift retreat.
"OK," Rikku conceded. "Maybe it is time for a getaway. Raccoontaurs, Pillar of Zippedy-doo-dah, what is this crap?"

Yuna started to waver again. "I don't know, the Ear Trumpet of Heracles; that sounds like it could be pretty handy."

"Oh. My. God," Rikku said. "You are not thinking of going on that stupid quest, are you?" This was even worse than she'd thought. Rikku ran to the table, grabbed the gift she'd brought, and thrust it into her cousin's hands. "I think you need to open my present right now. I found the perfect book for you. You have to read it."

"Oh?" Yuna had no idea how any book could be of such urgency, but she quickly unwrapped the book and looked at the cover. The Power of No, it read.

"It's all about how to stand up to others and stick up for yourself," Rikku explained. "Maybe it will help you with all these people who keep bothering you."

Yuna hesitated. "Well ... I think I'm getting on fine without any self-help books, but thank you."

"Yunie, I really think you need this. C'mon, look at how people keep talking you into doing things you don't really want to do. You've got to learn how to keep from caving in."

"I don't know..."

Rikku pushed the book into Yuna's hands. "Please?"

"Oh, all right."
The Odyssey Begins

Chapter Summary

Yuna and Rikku's adventures into the great outdoors truly begins.

I thought that life was a road
And I wanted to begin it

And so it was that Yuna and Rikku once again found themselves at a familiar campsite on the outskirts of Zanarkand. Hiking out here with Pops and Brother had not improved Rikku's opinion of family vacations, but at least going into temporary hermitage guaranteed them protection from all the Yuna Day fervor and Heroic Quests: Zanarkand had long ago been deserted by the tourism industry, and the once glorious city was now home to nothing besides scores of happily copulating monkeys.

While Cid and Brother pitched the tents and looked for firewood, the two girls idly fed bananas to the monkeys. "Well, there's definitely no star-struck reporters up here," Rikku said. "Just you and me ... and Brother singing offkey campfire songs. I hope I don't get bored."

"Yeah." Yuna still felt a little guilty about skipping out on a holiday that was supposed to be honoring her, but it wasn't like she'd asked for any of the parades or fêtes or behorned Ronso statues. If they really wanted to reward her, they should be willing to give her a little peace and quiet—or at least as much as peace and quiet as she could ever have with Rikku and Brother around.

Rikku stood up. "OK, bored now. How long did I last?"

"About three minutes."

"Dang." She retreated into her tent to hunt for her CommSphere.

Cid returned and, with a mighty grunt, dropped a pile of wood at Yuna's feet. He straightened up and stretched, breathing deeply as he took in the scene around him. "Ah, nothing like the great outdoors, eh, kids? The thrill of adventure, the spectacular views, the air filled with the smell of —" He stopped and sniffed repeatedly. "What is that smell?"

Rikku fled out of the tent. "POPS! One of the monkeys just pooped in my sleeping bag!"

That produced a guffaw from her father. "Well, what'd I tell ya? You never know what'll be next to come out of nature's big bag of surprises."

"Yeah, well, I prefer surprises that have an on/off switch." She glanced over at Yuna, who was now engrossed in her new book. "Hey, Yunie, can I see your new CommSphere?"

"Oh... well, I actually I left it in Besaid. I think we can afford a few days away from the airwaves, don't you? I wanted to enjoy the great outdoors without all the hassle of machina."
Rikku poked her in the side. "Weirdo," she teased. Rikku never left to commune with nature without at least bringing her CommSphere, her musicSphere collection, her portable videoSphere player, no fewer than two telesphere tuners, and a radio.

Cid glared at them. "You just gonna sit on your hands all day, Rikku? 'Cause when you're roughing it, you gotta work for a livin'. If you're not going to help cut the firewood, at least take that stinky tent of yours up to the hot springs to fumigate it. A little mountain air does good for just about everything." He turned and bellowed over his shoulder, "BROTHER! A real man builds his own hatchet from pieces of obsidian instead of bringin' one from home!"

"Oh ... sure, Pops, I guess," Rikku said. Anything was better than sitting around here with nothing to do. "Yunie, you want to come with me?"

Yuna looked up from The Power of No. "OK, whatever you want."

Leaving their male relatives working on the fire, the girls took the trail from the campsite south to Mt. Gagazet. In her backpack, Rikku carried the tent that had doubled as a simian outhouse as well as her numerous electronic devices. The mountain was by now familiar territory for Yuna and Rikku: After numerous trips through on their adventures, they knew every shortcut and quickly made their way up the mountain by zig-zagging through the caves.

"I hope you're not too annoyed by my dragging you out here," Yuna said.

"Of course not. You're the birthday girl; you call the shots. Besides, you know Pops always finds something to gripe at me about me. Last weekend he spend a whole hour snapping at me over CommSphere. I think he was accusing me of having a short attention span, but, to be honest, I kinda lost track of what he was saying."

"OK. Just checking."

"Quit being silly, Yunie. You're, like, the last person who would ever get on my nerves."

When they reached the hot springs, Yuna set down her backpack and started rummaging through the few items she did see fit to take on her trip—assorted snacks, a change of DressSphere, a couple X-Potions in case of emergency—before she found what she was looking for.

Rikku couldn't believe her eyes. "You brought that stupid fishing pole up here?" she said as Yuna unfolded the thing. "Who would leave the fancy CommSphere at home and bring along junk like that?"

"Hey, I thought we could try fishing in the mountain springs," Yuna said. "The Ronso keep some carp in ponds up here, don't they?" She squinted at the water, but it appeared devoid of any life. "It looks like the koi are playing it coy today, though." With that plan foiled, she exchanged the fishing pole for her bathing suit and dived into the springs.

"Last one in the hot springs is a moldy Ether!" Rikku called.

"...I'm already in the springs."

Rikku stamped her foot. "Dangit, why do I always lose?" She sat down on the rocks beside the spring. "Well, you're the birthday girl; as long as you're having fun. Me, I wish I was back home on the Celsius already. Don't you get tired of being away from home all the time on adventures, Yunie?"

Yuna kicked off from the rocks and floated along on her back. "I dunno. I guess I've always
thought of all of Spira as my home, you know? When I was growing up, I could never let myself get too attached to Besaid. I knew I’d have to leave eventually, and I couldn’t have feelings for home distracting me during my pilgrimage. So I try to make every place I visit my home. Everyone probably thinks of me as one of those wandering spirits.” She smiled and looked up at the sky. "Do you?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you call me a wandering spirit?" She craned her neck to look for Rikku and saw her still sitting beside the spring, peering once again into her CommSphere.

Rikku set the sphere aside. "Oh. Huh? Sorry, I was checking my comm-mail; I wasn’t really paying attention."

"Do you really need to look at that every fifteen minutes?"

"I'm keeping up with my World of Earth clan. We're making plans to raid North Dakota." But, feeling guilty, she finally put the sphere away and dived down into the hot springs with Yuna.

They propped open the tent to let in the brisk mountain air while they splashed about in the springs—and Rikku fantasized about leading her squad into downtown Minot. When they figured they’d aired out the tent enough, it was time to head back to camp. Or, at least it was in principle. Both of them knew that Cid would inevitably shanghai them into another Family Game Night upon their return, and they weren't in any particular hurry to get back. Yuna nodded towards a tiny path leading further up the mountain. "What do you say we take the scenic route?"

Rikku looked. Behind a warning sign posted in front, the path wound around the mountain in tight curves. Barely wide enough to walk single-file, it was extremely narrow and covered in ice. She grinned. Ah, something reckless and foolhardy! This was more her speed. "Well, the sign does say, 'DO NOT ENTER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, EVER,' but that's probably just for regular people. We can handle it, right?"

"Definitely." At this point, what could Spira throw at her that she couldn't handle? Besides, it sounded a lot more fun than another game of Mille Bornes with Uncle Cid and Brother.

They stepped over the warning sign and proceeded up the trail, creeping along the ice-covered switchbacks as carefully as possible. As the air grew thinner and the rest of Mt. Gagazet and the Calm Lands unfolded in a spectacular panorama beneath her, Yuna experienced freedom for the first time in the past two months. This was what she loved: out venturing in Spira with her friends, no rules tying her down, and nothing but a tiny strip of ice to keep her from plummeting to a gory demise. At last, she'd escaped all the pressures and hassles of the past few weeks. There was nothing to disturb her up here, not even the sign with a bright red "EXTREME DANGER" and a drawing of Ronso falling to his death, nor the one that proclaimed "BEWARE OF EVIL MAN-EATING YETI."

"You're not worried about these signs, are you?" Rikku asked as they passed "TURN BACK NOW IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE."

"Of course not. What's the worst that could—" Yuna stopped speaking as soon as the cracks began to appear in the ice. They spread all around her, turning the narrow platform into a jigsaw of splintering pieces. She and Rikku both dashed forward, trying to reach the end of the path before it collapsed beneath them.

They didn't make it.
The next thing Yuna knew, she had landed on her rear and was sliding down the side of Mt. Gagazet at an alarming rate. A tree branch whacked her in the face. She glanced over. Rikku was sliding down the mountain, too, essentially unharmed aside from the occasional collision with a protruding rock. Screaming, they bumped and tumbled their way down several sheets of ice before gravity buried them chest-high in a snowdrift.

"Ouch."

Rikku squirmed. "I can't really move right now."

"Uh, me neither."

"OK, if we have to start cutting off body parts to survive, let's start with our toes. Those are pretty easy to re-attach, right?"

But then a clammy and somewhat shaggy hand clamped around Yuna's shoulder, and, before she knew it, she had been yanked free of the snowdrift and set back on her feet. A giant yeti, his shaggy white fur partially covered by his tweed coat, monocle and bowler's hat, stood beside her. "Gadzooks!" he exclaimed upon recognizing her. "Lady High Summoner, this humble businessman is most honored by your presence."

"Uh... thanks," Yuna said. "Can you help my friend?"

"Oh, right. Of course, of course." The yeti still sounded starstruck, but he pulled Rikku free of the snow and set her down beside Yuna. He then bowed and introduced himself with a sweep of his hat. "Arthur Reginald Umaro III."

"Heeeeeyyyy, you're the yeti," Rikku realized. "The sign told us you were evil, though."

"Ah, yes, the ruddy smear campaign of those bloody blue brutes from the other side of the mountain." Arthur Reginald Umaro III jabbed his pipe back into his mouth. "I'm afraid, that while the Ronso indeed indulge a unprecedented fondness for unsubstantiated rumor and hearsay, there reside more than a few kernels of truth amidst all that rubbish about cannibalism. Mt. Gagazet has seen more than its fair share of chaos and destruction thanks to the deplorable antics and general tomfoolery of my son Arthur IV. I'm afraid he's still in those troublesome adolescent years when they just grunt and throw things. Ever since he started keeping company with that ruddy awful moogle character, he's been abominable. Yet I beseech thee not to let a youngster's misdeeds befoul your opinion of the proud sasquatch race; 's no man of honor who would let such a trifle befoul our friendship."

"Uh ... friendship? Do we know you?" Rikku said.

He looked hurt. "Umaro's Frozen Foods? Spira's #2 frozen foodstuff brand?" Never one to resist an opportunity to talk business, he reached into his coat pocket and whipped out a selection of colorful packets. "And now we've been diversifying with new travel-size packages of Instant Flan—just add water! The first few batches went—I daresay—rather wild, but we've tinkered the formula and the latest runs have stopped evolving sentience. Fortune has smiled upon you today, as I never fail to embark from my doorstep without a hearty supply of free samples. And for the Lady High Summoner, I have double." He forced a huge pile of the packets into Yuna's arms. "Homestyle yeti cooking just like Aunt Blarggharagh used to make, now in three traditional flavors: deer carcass, charred adventurer, and Ochu." He inhaled deeply, imagining the aroma of his aunt's dinner table. "Yes, I do love it when a flan comes together."

Rikku's teeth chattered. "Look, this is all very interesting, but I'm approximately twelve seconds
from getting frostbite."

"Yes, of course, very well." He dug their backpacks out of the snow and handed them over. "Would it be too forward of me to invite the Lady High Summoner and her noble guardian back to the Umaro family cave for supper?"

*Of charred deer? I'll pass.* Yuna smiled politely. "We ... uh, really should be getting back to our campsite."

"Capital, capital," he mumbled. "All for the best, I suppose; my presence is requested at a business meeting to discuss our E.C. 4 product line." From his tweed coat, he produced a horn made of polished bone and handed it to Yuna. "But should any trouble befall you on your troubles, Lady High Summoner, simply blow into this horn and one of the yeti tribe will be at your side to aid you immediately. Fare thee well—and should you stumble across my son, tell him his proper place is learning the ropes of the family business, not cavorting about with thugs from Narshe!" He bowed again and tromped off through the snow.

Yuna raised an eyebrow. Uncle Cid was right about at least one thing: There was no telling what would come next from nature's bag of tricks. "Well, I came out here to get away from the ordinary life, and I think we just did."
Kwehyhnms

Chapter Summary

Yuna and Rikku encounter an old friend in an unfamiliar kingdom.

And then at that rest stop when that woman tried to steal my wallet
It felt like an adventure
Isn't that what you could call it?

Their pockets stuffed with packages of Umaro's Instant Flan, Yuna and Rikku hurried down the slope of Mt. Gagazet until they'd escaped the bitter cold. They realized now that their "scenic route" and subsequent plummet had dropped on the other side of the mountain—the Calm Lands side—and far away from their Zanarkand campsite. And after sliding down several stories' worth of ice on their rear, neither of them felt much like walking back, so it was time to ask for a ride.

But when Rikku connected to Cid's CommSphere, it returned only an image of an empty campsite. "HELLOOOO???? Pops? Brother? Where art thou?" With a snort of exasperation, she switched the device off and stuffed it back in her utility belt. "Probably decided it would be a great outdoor experience to try wrestling a Ronso or something." She sat down on a rock. "Well, this sucks." Either they were going to have to hike all the way back over the mountain and try to make it back to Zanarkand while it was still light out, or...

Yuna pointed. "There's a save point; we could pitch our tent."

"I am NOT sleeping in monkey poop, and it's too cold outside."

That left them standing around with no plans to speak of. After Yuna had paced around in a circle three times, she figured that they'd better go somewhere; the longer they dallied, the darker the road there would be. She climbed to the top of a nearby ridge to have a look around. The Calm Lands were, as usual, largely empty save a few wandering fiends, but she could see a couple of lights flickering in the distance to the east. "That must be the old monster arena up ahead. C'mon, I bet Clasko'll let us crash there for the night!"

Relieved that a solution had presented itself so readily, they scrambled across the Calm Lands to the cliffside entrance of the former arena. Yuna poked her head through the archway. The hallway was dim; only a few of the torches that once lit the building still burned. She knocked on the wall. "Clasko? You home?" But judging by the crumbling, cobweb-infested walls and the foul smell adrift in the air, it seemed that either Clasko had not been home in some time or had forsaken all attempts at personal hygiene. She stepped carefully into the building, lifting her leg over a torch that had fallen off its brace on the wall, and called again, "Clasko?"

Rikku cringed as a sudden whiff of chocobo dung and rotting Gysahl Greens invaded her nose. "Yunie, you didn't bring the Febreeze, did you?"

As they proceed further into the ruins, the stench and the disrepair only grew worse. Yuna started to worry. Had something to happened to Clasko? What if he'd caught the bird flu from one of his chocobos?
"HOW DARE YOU SET FOOT IN THE KINGDOM OF KWEHYHNMS, FEATHERLESS ONES?"

A lamp burst into light ahead of them. Beneath the lamp, an enormous Chocobo wearing a bejeweled crown sprawled on a raised throne; before him, with spears cradled under their wings, stood two armor-clad chocobos ... and Clasko.

Clasko beamed. "Remember that wonderful chocobo I found? Well, she had chicobos and they're even more wonderful! Her son's teaching all the chocobos how to talk and creating his own kingdom where chocobos rule over humans instead of the other way around." He sighed. "Chocobos are such amazing creatures ... if only humans could be as noble and as wise."

The chocobo guards banged their spears against the stone floor. "Long live Chow Yun Fat Chocobo the First!"

Rikku folded her arms. "Yeah, well, he doesn't seem to have installed working plumbing in his kingdom yet; he doesn't seem so wonderful to me."

While Chow Yun Fat Chocobo and Clasko had been speaking, two more chocobo guards had moved in behind Yuna and Rikku to block the passage leading outside. Hearing Rikku's insult to their king, they rattled their spears at the intruders and warked menacingly.

"Having trespassed into the kingdom of Kwehyhnms, you are now subject to its laws and customs," Chow Yun Fat Chocobo said. "I hereby assign you a station befitting your ignorant kind: You shall be slaves in the mythril mines of our great empire. Consider yourselves blessed, for very few of your kind have ever received the chance to serve under the enlightened reign of the Yellow Banner."

"Isn't he wonderful?" Clasko beamed as the armored chocobos formed a circle around Yuna and Rikku and began to close in.

"Wait, wait!" Rikku shouted, loud enough to halt the chocobo guards for a moment. "Mr. Fat Chocobo, you can't enslave us. We're not stupid humans; we're smart humans. Try me. The Pythagorean Theorem, doric and ionic columns, every soliloquy from The Taming of the Shoopuf, I know it all."

Chow Yun Fat Chocobo chuckled, not angered but amused by these silly featherless folk who believed their naïve human dabblings to be on par with the great and ancient wisdom of the chocobos. "Very well. If you can answer my riddle, you shall win your freedom. What goes on four legs at dawn, occurs twice in every moment, and catches flies?"

Rikku grinned. "Oh, that's easy, it's - wait, what?"

"What goes on four legs at dawn, occurs twice in every moment, and catches flies?" he repeated, a bit more sternly.

"I think you've mixed up several different riddles there, Mr. Fat Chocobo, see, 'cause it's supposed to be, 'What goes on four legs at dawn, two legs at noon -'"

"That's a different riddle. This one is harder."

"Oh." Rikku and Yuna went into a whispered huddle and conferred in whispers. Their initial conclusion about their chances was not good: Neither of them had the slightest idea about what went on four legs at dawn, occurred twice in every moment, and caught flies.
"You have five minutes to answer," Chow Yun Fat Chocobo announced. While Yuna and Rikku kept talking, the chocobo guards, sure that their chief's challenge would prove the ignorance of these lowly humans, advanced into a tighter circle around the travellers.

Yuna and Rikku at last emerged from the huddle. "Does our answer have to be in the form of a question?" Yuna asked.

"No, but your time has expired. The answer was: a pair of time-traveling Siamese twin outfielders."

"You know, that's just what I was about to say," Rikku said. "Honest."

Less than convinced by this excuse, the chocobos advanced on the stupid humans. "Wait, wait!"

Rikku shouted again, and once again the guards halted. She dropped to her knees. "Please, please, Mr. Fat Chocobo, that one was really hard, but I know we can do better if you give us another riddle. C'mon, just one more? Please?"

Chow Yun Fat Chocobo sighed. "I shall present you with a second riddle, but one that has stymied even Kwehyhnms's greatest scholars. I warn you that you have no hope of solving it. Here is the riddle: What do you get if you cross an elephant and a rhinocerous?"

Rikku and Yuna went back into their whispered conference, but they had even fewer ideas this time. It was not long before Rikku faced the king and gave a defeated shrug. "Hell if I know."

"'Elephino' is indeed correct." The chocobo king shifted on his throne and leaned forward to peer at the featherless ones with a new interest. "You impress me, humans. Perhaps not all you are as dumb as you look in those baggy pants and designer sunglasses of yours."

"But, you know chocobos are still smarter," Clasko chimed in.

The chocobo king nodded. "I keep my word. You shall be set free, under condition that you never again set foot within the boundaries of Kwehyhnms."

"Oh, we won't," Rikku said. Then, under her breath, she added, "because your kingdom smells like poop."

The chocobo guards surrounding Yuna and Rikku lowered their spears. "The decree of the King is the law of Kwehyhnms. You may go."

Even though she'd triumphed purely by dumb luck, Rikku could not help but feel very clever as they marched out of the arena and back into the daylight. She'd shown that stinky bag of feathers and his "superior" chocobos who had the opposable thumbs in this relationship. So much for their supposed ancient wisdom—they were probably all trying to figure out how to recover their national pride after getting the College Bowl smackdown from a 17-year-old human girl. It was not until that she patted her skirt and utility belt that she realized that she, too, had lost something precious in the halls of Kwehyhnms. "Oh no! Yunie, I lost my Garment Grid and my CommSphere! My musicspheres, everything! I must have dropped my carrying case when we were trying to solve those riddles."

Yuna looked over her shoulder at the gateway of the arena. "We can't go back in there," she said. "They'll ask us another riddle and we won't be a lucky a second time."

"Yeah, and it smelled bad." Rikku looked around. "I guess we're screwed, then. We'll have to go down to Bevelle and see if we can borrow someone else's."

As the sun went down beyond the ridges to the west, Yuna looked out on the endless green of the
Calm Lands, dotted with the occasional cliff or theme park attraction. Well, it wasn't all bad. At least she could breathe out here; there was room to walk around without running into someone who wanted her to endorse their new political faction or brand of toothpaste. Heck, even Cid and Brother didn't know where she was. This could be fun. "Hey, it'll be another adventure," she exclaimed with a sudden glee. "A quest to find a CommSphere!"

Rikku stuck out her tongue. "I was hoping to have my adventure on my CommSphere with my World of Earth clan. They're gonna need my level 43 half-Belgian accountant if they want to finish that leadership retreat instance."

"Oh, c'mon, it'll be fun. Like in that old Al Bhed poem about that guy named Odysseus who went on a great big odyssey around the world. What was its name again?"

"Well, I do like being a hero." Rikku started to warm up to the idea. "But, Yunie, you of all people should know no one's allowed go on a Heroic Quest without some kind of magic keepsake they inherited, like Chappu's sword or something."

Yuna shrugged. "Well, I've got Wakka's fishing pole."

Now that Clasko's place had become enemy territory, the closest shelter that either of them could think of was whatever was left of Remiem Temple. They hauled themselves up the cliffs and hiked across the big (but Gilgamesh-free) rope bridge. On the other end of the chasm stood the temple. Since being abandoned by the late Belgemine, the temple appeared to have undergone a number of curious renovations: a half-built rollercoaster wound its way in and out of the temple's upper floors, and motorized bucking chocobos took up positions all around the exterior.

Rikku pounded on the door. "Heeeyy, anyone in there? Summoner coming through!"

Yuna pointed to a sign by the door and read it aloud. "Temple closed for renovation. Coming E.C. 4: 'Den of Whoa' amusement park."

"CLOSED??" Rikku howled. "The temple is closed? Well, maybe that funny dude who runs the chocobo obstacle course is still around." She peered over the side of the cliff.

Yuna pointed again.

"The chocobo track has closed. Coming soon: Monster machina rally.' Oh, for Pete's sake."

Defeated, Rikku sat down in the grass and dangled her feet over the drop to the track, which was already paved over with asphalt and "MALBORO" billboards. "OK, fine. You win. We'll camp out."

Together they set up the tent they'd been airing out at the hot springs. Rikku mentally cursed the stupid monkey who had mistaken her sleeping bag for the men's room. If it hadn't been for that little jerk, they wouldn't be in this mess. Yuna took note of her cousin's pouty expression. "It's been a crummy day, huh?"

"It's been disasterrific. If they raid North Dakota without me, I am going to be SO ticked."

"Don't worry, we'll be home soon enough," Yuna said, having no idea just how erroneous this statement would prove to be.
Penelope

Chapter Summary

On a busy day, Yuna takes time to reflect at "her" pond.

I said, "My friend and I are going on a trip
So we can only stop a minute"

Only moments after lifting her head from the sleeping bag, Yuna remembered everything that had happened yesterday: their bumpy ride down Mt. Gagazet, the yeti, Clasko's deflection to an enemy nation, that foul-tasting Instant Flan for dinner. The day ahead of her exploded with sudden import, transforming into a patchwork of obligations and worries: Did Brother and Uncle Cid know where they were? Where they were going to find a CommSphere? Was Lulu remembering to feed the dog?

Rikku had not forgotten the significance of the day's date. As soon as Yuna stirred, she poked her head back in the tent and flashed a big grin. "Hey, happy real birthday!"

"Thanks." Three years more than she ever expected to have. Though she certainly never regretted overthrowing Yunalesca and Sin, still sometimes she was haunted by the feeling that she did not really deserve this, that her life was running on stoppage time and the universe might justifiably call a halt to it at any minute. Well, better to make good use of what time she did have. She scrambled out of her sleeping bag and dressed. "Ready to begin our big CommSphere quest?"

Sprawled out on the dirt with yesterday's edition of the Ogopogo Examiner—Spira's newspaper of record—spread out in front of her, Rikku did not look so ready for any sort of quest. "Not yet. I'm busy."

"C'mon, we really ought to get in touch with Cid and Brother," Yuna said. "They must be worried sick about us."

Rikku dismissed her family with a wave of her hand. "Oh, poo on them. I'm taking the morning off." She turned back to the paper.

Yuna tried to pry the newspaper away. "C'mon, you can do sudoku later. We need to go."

"NO!" Rikku yanked it back.

And so, inevitably, it came to blows. Yuna yanked on the paper while Rikku clung to it with an Al Bhed death grip. "I only have, like, four squares left to fill!" Rikku shrieked. She elbowed Yuna in the face; Yuna kicked Rikku in the shin. They rolled outside the tent, still scrabbling over the newspaper. The page ripped in half; Rikku fell back and bumped into the tent. It teetered and then tipped off the cliffside, disappearing into the canyon far below.

Yuna and Rikku jumped up, shocked back to their senses. "Why do we lose a tent every single time we camp out?" Yuna wailed.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Rikku said. "Haste makes waste, and when you hurry even more ... well, hastega makes wastega." Sometimes Yunie could be so clueless; good thing there
was a more mature, responsible person like herself along for the adventure.

"All right, all right. This is supposed to be our vacation, so let's stop arguing and make this fun. First, we need to get everything packed up. Then we'll climb down to the Calm Lands, play some mini-games, and try to buy some items from the store. At 11-o'clock, we can practice with some of our Dresspheres until noon, and then we'll make the rush to Bevelle and find someone with a CommSphere who can get us in touch with Uncle Cid."

Rikku rolled her eyes. "And then we have 4th period biology. See, you're doing it again. Come on, Yunie, you were the one talking about how you needed a vacation, right? It's your birthday. Stop trying so hard."

"You're right," Yuna conceded. The Calm Lands ought to stay that way. They took their time packing up what was left of their campsite and then set off for Bevelle at a leisurely pace.

They crossed the rope bridge, descended into the open plains, and headed westwards. As they approached the ridge leading up to Macalania Woods and Bevelle, the relentlessly triumphant sound of Contemporary Yevon Music began emanating louder and louder from a musicsphere somewhere.

When they started up the ridge, they found young Pacce and his fellow Kinderguardians, Hana and Taro, on their knees, working carefully at setting up a line of dominoes. The trail already extended out of Macalania Woods and was beginning to make its way down to the Calm Lands.

"Lady Yuna!" Pacce rose and greeted her with the Yevon prayer. Their musicsphere kept playing. "Happy birthday! What do you think of our work?"

She looked at the trail of dominoes leading out of the forest. "I'm not quite sure I understand."

" Haven't you heard? To commemorate Yuna Day, New Yevon is marking the route of your pilgrimage with dominoes all the way from Luca to Zanarkand. My youth group got assigned the Calm Lands." He looked up to nod towards Mt. Gagazet and what lay beyond. "If we make it all to the way to Zanarkand, we'll make into Rin's new book of Spiran records as the longest domino chain in history. This will be something to commemorate your deeds for millennia to come."

"Millennia?" Rikku scoffed. "You guys, someone's going to bump into this and knock the whole thing down the day after it goes up. Heck, I should do it right now just so you won't get your hopes up." She raised one foot.

"NO! Kinderguardian Defense Formation!" Pacce jumped headfirst at Rikku and rammed his skull into her chest. Hana and Taro tackled her around the legs and dragged her to the ground. Pacce sat on her to hold her down while Hana bit her in the knee and Taro started punching her in the face.

"OK, OK, you can stop!" Rikku shouted. She pushed the kids off her and stood up. "Geez, I'd hate to see your Offense Formation."

"We can show if you'd like!" Pacce said eagerly. "Kinderguard-"

"NO! No, that's okay!"

Now that the threat to his dominoes had disappeared, Pacce immediately settled down. He knelt and resumed his work. He dug a tiny rectangular hole in the ground, inserted one domino into the hole, packed the earth back around it, and then repeated the process. It looked incredibly tedious. "Do you want to help us with the trail?" he asked. "We've got plenty of dominoes you can lay."
Even Yuna was hesitant about agreeing to this mission. "Um... well, I'd, I'd like to, but we really have some urgent business."

"That's right," Rikku said. "Yuna and I have a Heroic Quest to complete."

Yuna nodded. "We're, uh, looking for my uncle so he can pick us up. We got separated. OK, I guess that's not a particularly heroic quest, but do you guys have a CommSphere or should we head into town?"

Pacce shook his head. "I don't believe in carrying machina we don't really need," he said with a hint of condescension. "I mean, why use a CommSphere when you could just send a carrier pigeon or walk hundred of miles through fiend-infested lands to pay your respects in person?"

"Yeah, why do that?" Rikku said.

Hana piped up, "That's right. Maester Isaaru says that even if machina aren't technically against Yevon, if you use them too much, you'll go blind. That's why all you Al Bhed wear goggles, right?"

"Isaaru told you that? I'm going to kick his ass."

"You'll never lay a hand on him! Kinderguardian Defense Form—"

Rikku clamped a hand over Hana's mouth to keep her from biting. "All right, all right, I was just kidding. Settle down." But she was annoyed enough not to let these kids off the hook without a talking-to. She squatted down and put her hands on Pacce and Hana's shoulders. "Tell you what, kids. Maester Rikku has a new youth group lesson for you. Machines are handy time-saving devices that do all the boring, tedious work for us so we can spend more time grinding levels on World of Earth. So the next time you see Isaaru, tell him he should try a little more New and a little less Yu, OK?" She waved a few bills at them. "And, Pacce, I'll give you 500 gil if you promise to give your brother a swift kick in the rear, too."

"Yes, ma'am! Kinderguardian Offense Formation!" Pacce, Taro, and Hana ducked down and wrapped their arms protectively around their faces.

"Wait, that's your offense formation? Curling up into little balls?"

"Yeah," Pacce murmured through his elbow.

"And in your defense formation you all jump on someone and beat the crap out of her? Doesn't that seem a little backwards?"

"Well, the best defense is a good offense, and the best offense is a good defense, right?"

Yuna nodded towards the forest and coughed. Rikku got the message. "Oh ... OK ... Yunie has a really tight schedule, so we'd better keep on with our Heroic Quest."

Pacce was certainly not one to quibble with the wishes of the Lady High Summoner, so the Kinderguardians waved goodbye and returned to their trail-making labor. "Bye, Lady Yuna! Bye, Maester Rikku!"

Since the Kinderguardians didn't have a CommSphere to borrow, their next stop would have to be Bevelle. They followed the road down from the Calm Lands and into Macalania Woods, where the trial continued on towards Bevelle. The Kinderguardians' meticulous handiwork followed them: dominoes, precisely placed at uniform distances from one another, lined the edge of the trail.
Rikku tried to catch her reflection in the glittering trees. "Geez, I think one of those little hellions gave me a black eye."

Every time Yuna passed through here, she always indulged in one stop. It was, she supposed, one of the few anchors weighing her to her past in a life of perpetually venturing forward. "Hey ... do you mind waiting for a second?"

Rikku checked her watch. "OK ... but if you're still set on this schedule of yours, you've only got twelve minutes."

♫

Yuna meandered away from the road of Bevelle, moving among the trees towards a smaller path. No matter how overgrown this trail got, it was seared too strongly into her memory for her to ever forget the way—especially not when someone with an intimate knowledge of her pilgrimage had already marked the way with dominoes. The path soon widened to a cleaning and Yuna came to what she always thought of "her" pond. Their pond.

She whistled at the water, the way he'd shown her, the way she did whenever she came to a shore. But the water was as unreceptive to her call as it always was. "We'll do what we can," Bahamut's fayth had promised her. Since then, Yuna had treated those words like her million-gil check, a certification that something wonderful was just around the corner for her. But what if what the fayth could do turned out to be nothing at all? What if he never came back to her?

And, for once, Yuna found herself wishing she could do something other than hurry into the future. Rikku was right. Why did she rush from adventure to adventure with such insistence? Lulu would have told her that she was pushing herself too hard, that she wasn't thinking enough about her own concerns. But how could she think of herself? For most of her life—until he had come along—she'd lived under the belief that every new place she visited was just another stop to pass through on her march to death, that her life was a job waiting to be done and not anything to be experienced for its own sake. Even now, as much as she loved Spira, so much of it seemed separate from her: a background through which she moved on her latest adventure, not a scene to which she truly belonged.

But, whether she liked it or not, there was no room to slow down. The present never had time for the past; Spira's needs always pushed her forward whether or not he was with her. All she could hope to do was look over her shoulder at all that she was leaving behind.

Rikku, perhaps summoned by the whistles, appeared at the end of the path, her usual ebullience muted by concern. "Yunie, you OK? I mean ... if you want me to go away again, I will ..."

"Nah." Yuna knew that ruminating never solved everything. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"No problem; I finished my sudoku puzzle." She held up the crumpled newspaper. "It was a 'five-star' one, too."

Yuna forced a smile in response. Rikku, however, could tell right away that not everything was all right. She cocked her head, trying to get a bead on what was eating Yuna. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Yuna shook her head as if attempting to scatter her worries. "It's fine; it's just I was ... thinking about him."

"Thinking about who?"
"You know, *him*.

"I don't know, Yunie. Who are we talking about?"

"That guy, remember?"

"Which guy?"

"You-know-who!"

"Lord Voldemort?"

"No! What's-his-face! The star player of the Zanarkand Abes! The newest guardian!"

"Ohhhh. *That* that guy."

"Yeah. Him."

"Okay, I know who you mean now." Then she frowned. "I don't even remember what we were talking about; do you?"

Yuna laughed. "Me neither. Let's get a move on. A Heroic Quest never got finished without some dangerous new lands to venture into."
Chapter Summary

Yuna's bad day continues when she finds a few too many people fighting to claim her as their hero.

I try to act familiar
But they're floating just above the land
And we are all floating

Before Yuna and Rikku even reached the bridge into Bevelle, they could hear the insistent optimism of marching bands, and when they got a little closer, the pompom of a colossal moogle balloon poked over the treetops. The Yuna Day festivities, it seemed, were in full swing.

Yuna bit her lip in frustration. She could really do without people throwing parades for her at every possible opportunity, but she would felt guilty for skipping out on them. Her life meant so much to so many people. It seemed selfish to deny all of them an appearance by their beloved hero just so she cavort about the wilderness with Rikku.

"OK, we'll find someone with a CommSphere, call Pops and Brother, and then let's go hiding until they come to take us back to Zanarkand," Rikku said. "I am not letting anyone talk you into another episode of Celebrity Fear Factor."

As they approached the Highbridge, Yuna carefully positioned herself in hiding behind Rikku. Her apprehension proved to be justified: Both side of the bridge were packed with bleachers full of spectators waiting for the Yuna Day Parade, which was just making the turn into its final leg. A chocobo balloon led the way, followed by a Rin's Travel Agency float, a giant inflatable Blitzball advertising the new Bevelle Bells expansion team, and several breakfast cereal mascots.

Quarantined from the parade-goers by a velvet rope, the trail of dominoes continued up the middle of the Highbridge. The throng of spectators was perhaps outnumbered only by Yuna's face, which adorned nearly everything: balloons, clothing, banners, even a poorly rendered wall mural. "...on second thought, Yunie, you'd probably better hide right now."

But it was too late; someone had already spotted them. "Hey!"

Yuna looked up, expecting a star-struck fan, and was surprised to instead see her identical clone running towards her.

"The line for the Yuna impersonator contest is on 43rd Street, down on the waterfront," her doppelgänger said. "What are you doing here?"

Well, this anonymity came as a welcome surprise. "Oh ... right. Actually, do you have a CommSphere we could borrow? I'm trying to get in touch with my family."

"Yes, you might as well save yourself the humiliation and drop out of the contest right now, dear,"
said the impersonator. "I can assure you that the threepeat is as good as mine. This costume is flawless; my goons stitched it down to the millimeter."

"Oh, geez," Rikku said. "Leblanc?"

"But of course, loves." As she continued to stare at Yuna's outfit, her face hardened into a critical scowl. "How much did you spend on that ghastly wig? 30 gil? Honestly, dear, that might be the worst Yuna costume I've ever seen in all my years of impersonating Yuna."

"I'm not impersonating Yuna. I am Yuna."

Leblanc snorted. "Well, you could certainly do a better job of looking like yourself. If I were Spira's hero, I'd made sure everyone knew about it every chance they got."

Rikku could no longer refrain from commenting. "Yeah, well, that's why you're NOT."

Yuna was so busy bickering with Leblanc that she didn't notice the Spira Channel 5 news vehicle creeping up behind her—not until she was ambushed by Shelinda. "Hello everyone and welcome to a special edition of Shelinda's swingin' report show! I'm standing here live with Lady Yuna, who has just arrived at the Yuna Day Parade in Bevelle." Having overheard most of the conversation, Shelinda knew which Yuna was the real one and thrust her microphone in that direction. "Happy birthday, Lady Yuna!"

Yuna smiled. "Thank you."

Rikku did not have any time for pleasantries. "Have you seen my dad or my brother anywhere around here? We're on vacation but we kinda got separated and—"

"Yuna, so many people look up to you, some so much they even want to dress up and be you," Shelinda said with a nod to Leblanc. "What's it like having so many fans?"

Leblanc choked. "WHAT? I do not look up to her! She looks up to me!"

"No, I don't."

Shelinda shrunk back and froze, as if trying to avert a bear attack. "I-I'm sorry! I just thought that since you were dressed like her..."

"This is an outrage! I demand an immediate retraction, or I will make your name live in infamy forever!" She turned to Yuna. "What's her name?"

Rikku hastily inserted herself into the middle of the group. "Excuse me. Shelinda, all interviews with Yuna must first be cleared with her agent," she said, then leaned closer and added, "That's me. And it's her birthday, so shove off."

A sudden cheer from the crowd alerted them to the arrival of two floats. One was the official Youth League float, on which fifteen or so dancers portraying revolutionary soldiers cavorted around a rendition of a burning temple. Just behind it, on New Yevon's entry, a collection of priests and nuns mimed crushing machina and punching the Al Bhed. "In a spirit of peace and reconciliation," Nooj said from atop his crumbling temple, "Baralai and I would like to begin our Yuna Day celebration plans."

Leblanc stopped bashing Shelinda with a folded fan long enough to look up and exclaim, "Noojie-Woojie is a real peacemaker. Isn't he wonderful?"
Baralai took off his brass knuckles and stepped to the microphone. "New Yevon or Youth League, Machine Faction or Cactuar Nation, we have one hero we can all revere."

Rikku was forced to restrain Leblanc from climbing up on the float.

"And, so, to honor Lady Yuna's pilgrimage to Zanarkand and also her death-defying leap from the Highbridge on Celebrity Fear Factor, New Yevon and the Youth League are proud to put aside their conflicts—"

"You said we could be first," Nooj interrupted. "You said it was going to be 'the Youth League and New Yevon.'"

"I never said that!"

"Yes you did!"

They fell silent and glared at each other until Baralai said, "Next line is yours, Nooj."

"Oh. Right." He coughed. "It's when we agree on what's truly important and stop looking out for only ourselves that can we overcome our limits. And to honor Spira's greatest hero, the Youth League has done just that."

"So has New Yevon," Baralai quickly added. "Later today, pending certification by Rin, together we'll break the world record for the longest unbroken string of dominoes live on national spherevision. But first ... the inaugural Yuna Day Highbridge Three-Legged Race."

Nooj waited until the cheering subsiding before continuing, "Representing the Youth League will be Elma and Lucil, while New Yevon will be championed by Isaaru and Maroda. I guess the church stopped hiding from their toaster ovens long enough to field a team."

"Hey, Nooj, you'd better put down the mic and scram; I hear Howard Stern is looking for his stunt double."

Yuna's attention shifted alongside the crown's to the other end of the Highbridge, where the four runners (sum total: six legs) were waiting for the starter's pistol. Yuna realized that the Highbridge had been set up for a race, with the omnipresent row of dominoes dividing the bridge down the middle into two lanes. A finishing lane was painted on the end near her feet; the two teams waited behind the starting line on the other.

Nooj held his gun aloft and fired. "GO!"

As Elma and Lucil hobbled off to an early lead, Baralai was furious. "Dammit, you said I could fire the gun! I have it in writing!"

The race proved to be remarkably brief. In later eras, historians would debate which team was the first to trip over themselves and fall on the dominoes. The controversial Durai-O'Gudmonsdottr Hypothesis, first advanced in 2138, postulated that the first domino was actually tipped by an alien race plotting to incite a civil war in order to facilitate their invasion of Spira. But whoever actually bumped the dominoes, the effects were imminent. Gravity sent the dominoes falling one after one, toppling the chain all the way from Bevelle to Guadosalam to Luca.

And before they'd even finished falling, the fight broke out. "Is this your mockery of Yevon?" Baralai shouted. "You had this planned all along!"

"I smell a conspiracy," Beclem bellowed from the Youth League float. "You were plotting this
from the beginning to make us look bad!"

The factions swarmed over the security barriers, hurling food, bottles, and chairs at each other. "How dare you mock the Lady Yuna!"

"A set up! Another filthy Yevon scheme! We've been framed!"

Yuna scrambled atop the New Yevon float and grabbed Baralai's microphone. "Please! I'm sure it was just an accident! Everyone calm down! I KNOW THAT YOU'RE HIDING THINGS, USING GENTLE WORDS TO SHELTER ME!"

Leblanc was shoving her way through the Yevonites to reach Noojie-Woojie's float when there was a sudden cry of, "Kinderguardian Defense Formation!" Rikku immediately hauled Leblanc to safety just as Pacce and Hana dived through the crowd. Leblanc shrieked and slapped Rikku's hand away. "HANDS OFF THE COSTUME!"

Yuna sighed. "Or, fine, you can keep fighting, but at least let us borrow a CommSphere first?"

Something exploded. Rikku seized Yuna's ankle and dragged her off the float. "Yunie, we've got to run; these people are bonkers!" Dragging along one real Yuna and one fake Yuna, she kicked, shoved, and bit her way through the crowd.

With the fracas swelling into a full-fledged riot behind them, the group of three dashed up the Highbridge towards the great temple of Bevelle. But, by the time they arrived; the riot had spread there as well. Angry Youth Leaguers hurled a recycling bin through one of the stained glass windows and swarmed into the entry chambers.

"Well, happy birthday, Yunie."

"Eternal Calm, my aunt Sally," Leblanc snorted.

Indeed, it was what Yuna hated most: people fighting over her. Every group in Spira wanted to claim her as one of their own: To New Yevon, she was the greatest Summoner; to the Youth League, the destroyer of the corrupt Yevon church; to the Machine Faction, the liberator of the Al Bhed people. (And to the Leblanc Syndicate ... a cosplay idol?) But, was anyone interested in just plain ol' Yuna?

Some type of spear or halberd flew over their heads and only narrowly avoided giving Rikku a new haircut. That was their cue to flee down the winding passages leading to the temple's innumerable hidden chambers. They kept running, through underground passage after underground passage, until they could no longer hear any of the fighting and arguing.

Yuna squatted and caught her breath. "Whew, I think we lost them." They now stood in a long tube-like passage, probably somewhere deep in the Bevelle underground. The tube ran through a deep expanse of water that surrounded the tube on all sides. Beneath and above them swam a remarkable assortment of sea life: sharks, eels, sahagins.

"Yeah," Rikku panted. "One question, though: Where the hell are we? Via Purifico? Via Infinito? This could be Via Anything."

"I don't know, but it feels familiar. Like I was here a long time ago..."

"Oh? Lenne's memories, huh?"

"Maybe..." Yuna looked around the tube, trying to place where these feelings came from. "Wait,
no. This is part of SeaWorld Bevelle; my father took me here when I was a little girl."

"Oh. I guess that would explain the gift shop, huh?"

"Hey, I bet they have a CommSphere!"

With Leblanc tagging along behind them, Yuna and Rikku hurried to the gift shop just up ahead. Surely there had to be a CommSphere here somewhere that they could use. But as they approached the gift shop, Yuna motioned for them to stop. Inside the gift shop, a band of angry New Yevonites was confronting the Youth League-sympathizing management about the contents of its Yuna Day action figure bin. "We counted six Paines and ten Rikkus and zero Wakkas. No room for the faithful man of Yevon in with your Crusaders and Al Bhed?"

The altercation grew as more partisans from both sides—incensed by the domino debacle and spoiling for a fight—crowded into the gift shop. Their angry shouts melted into a constant roar of aggression. Rikku backed away from the door and was quite distressed when, a moment later, Leblanc rushed right inside and shouted, "To heck with Yuna, where's MY action figure?"

The two angry mobs turned to look at the woman who had just slammed their beloved hero. Their ire quickly turned from each other to the Leblanc Syndicate and seconds later, merged into a single angry mob out for Leblanc's blood.

Yuna and Rikku took off in the opposite direction and almost collided with Shelinda, who had decided that tailing Yuna and Rikku through labyrinthine underground passages was more appealing than facing the wrath of her bosses for losing an interview with the High Summoner. "Lady Yuna! We didn't get a chance to finish our interview. Can you tell me what was going through your head when you jumped off that bridge into shark-infested water?"

"Now's really not a good time," Yuna snapped as they sprinted past her without stopping.

Shelinda tried to keep up with them. "But ... but ..."

Rikku's head turned over her shoulder and fixed Shelinda with an angry glare so powerful it might have been a glarega. "Seriously, Shelinda, knock it off or I'm kicking you out of our World of Earth clan."

"This ends NOW!" Leblanc tried to beat some sense into her foes with a rolled-up poster of Auron. But, surrounded by angry rioters, she backed out of the gift shop and hurried after Yuna and Rikku. "Wait for me!" she panted, her dignity momentarily erased by sheer panic.

The three of them fled out the main entrance of the park, vaulted over the security gates, and escaped into the waterfront—where the Yuna impersonator contest was in full swing. Shelinda emerged from SeaWorld just in time to watch her celebrity guest disappear into a mob of innumerable varieties of Yuna (Summoner Yuna, Songstress Yuna, Discount Clothing Rack Yuna) and her various guardians. Shelinda chased Yuna into the crowd, dodging past an Auron whose cloak did not appear to have been ironed at any point in the past four years. "Excuse me, but which one of you is the real Yuna?"

Yuna shoved Leblanc in Shelinda's direction. "Here she is!"

While the group mobbed Leblanc and her flawless costume, Yuna and Rikku made a run for it. A man who was cosplaying either Kimahri or the Cookie Monster towards them, bellowing, "Group picture! Group picture!" and was on the verge of seizing Yuna around the waist when Rikku stiff-armed him. "Stay away from the summoner, bitch!"
The two cousins emerged from the gauntlet of cardboard weapons and reached the bridge over the bay. "OK, CommSphere ... CommSphere ... gotta be one around here somewhere."

But they were not the only people on the bridge. In response to the riot, the Youth League's collapsing-temple float had disengaged itself from the parade to roam the city in search of backstabbing Yevonites to intimidate. It was currently being pursued by the New Yevon float in a low-speed, three mile per hour chase across the bridge towards Yuna and Rikku. At the same time, another Channel 5 news van came speeding towards them from behind, itself pursued by a hover full of Leblanc Syndicate goons intent on taking revenge for the high crimes and misdemeanors of Spira Channel 5.

Luckily, Yuna had already been in this situation once before—and had not only survived her death-defying stunt but won 100,000 gil for the charity of her choice. She grabbed Rikku around the waist and vaulted from the bridge. As Yuna and Rikku disappeared into the water, the speeding news van failed to stop in time, the floats lumbered forward, and New Yevon, the Youth League, the Leblanc Syndicate, and Channel 5 News were at last brought together in the form of a four-vehicle pileup.

Yuna and Rikku surfaced beside the bridge, two heads bobbing in the sapphire blue of Bevelle Bay. Yuna spit out two baby crabs and shook her head, shocked and disgusted by the day's events. "All we needed a CommSphere! How could everything go so wrong?"

"Well, most people aren't as nice as you, Yunie. You gotta keep in mind that we're, like, twenty times as humble as everyone else."

A yacht passed right by them, forcing them to dog-paddle out of its path. Rin peered over the railing from atop the vessel's deck. "Well, if isn't the birthday girl herself!" he exclaimed. "Can we not talk about that right now?"

"Glad you're safe. Cid got real worried about you two when you didn't make it back to your campsite. I guess you just decided to go for a little swim instead, huh?"

"Can we not talk about that, either?"

He crouched down to better speak to them. Yuna and Rikku continued treading water. "I'd offer you a ride back to Zanarkand, but I just sailed into town and I've got to confirm Nooj and Baralai's record-setting chain of dominoes before I do anything else."

"Yeah, uh, you're a little late for that," Rikku said, "although there was definitely some kind of record set today."

"Oh. Well, in that case..." Rin tossed a rope overboard.

By the time they climbed onto Rin's yacht, the riot had mostly quelled itself. The drivers involved in the collision, after exchanging CommSphere numbers, were now on their way to have dinner at a nearby restaurant, where they would end up forging life-long friendships. One of the Youth League dancers and the New Yevon float driver would go on to date, fall in love, marry, and have three beautiful swing-voter children.

Rikku watched them depart and clapped her cousin on the back. "Good work, Yunie. You always know how to bring people together."
Yuna explains how she wound up adrift at sea.

_We passed the stores; we passed the hotels_
_Filled our car with gas and then_
_We drove that night; I saw the moon_

Once she'd had a chance to towel off and change clothes, Yuna felt like she was on vacation again. She'd spent two crazy days enduring the slings, arrows, and computer-guided missiles of outrageous fortune, but chance had finally worked out in her favor. After all, what said "vacation" better than an ocean cruise back to Zanarkand?

"I didn't even know you owned a yacht, Rin," Rikku said, scanning the spotless deck and towering mast.

"Brand new! Just signed the papers last week. Sphere Break was a huge hit, and the Travel Agencies are still doing good business, so I finally had the chance to buy the yacht I've always wanted. No more offices for me now—I'm going to be doing all my work while having adventures on the high seas." He thumped his chest. "I am! A man! Of the sea!"

"Hey, that's great."

"Now the real question is, do you girls have any Spiran Records to add to my book? I'm trying to resolve all the hyperbole—you know, who's REALLY the tallest Spiran? The fastest Chocobo? The angriest bad guy?"

Rikku dropped her backpack on the deck, unzipped it, and took out a large ball of string that had to have been taking up at least half the pack. "Well, I've been working this string collection, but by my calculations I still have a few more yards to go before I'm number one."

From his jacket pocket, Rin produced a spiral notebook and pencil with which he jotted down a few notes. "Largest ball of string, got it. What about the baddest Malboro breath; do you girls know anything about that?" He flipped back to a prior page. "Let's see ... my lead so far says the worst Malboro is named Oscar and its breath is so bad it can put a fully-grown shoopuf into a coma. You ever run into him?"

Rikku and Yuna shook their heads, both rather relieved they had failed to encounter this repugnant monster.

"OK, ultimate weapon? How about that?"

"Well, it's not Ultima Weapon, that's for sure," Rikku said. "That guy was a pansy."

While Rikku and Rin continued discussing the minutiae of Spiran records, Yuna stepped away. She leaned out over the railing and watch the waves pass in an endless blue promenade. Over her shoulder to the east, the last towers and spires of Bevelle faded into the horizon. They had escaped the paved roads and packaged snack foods of the easy life and once again roamed the great wilds.
where no press conferences haunted her. But despite her protests about being perpetually enlisted to save Spira, she was never quite sure what to do with herself when she wasn't being a hero. A mere hour removed from the chaos in Bevelle, she was already feeling restless again.

Rikku sidled up beside her. "Yeah, I'm bored too. I miss *World of Earth.*" She rested her elbows on the railing and propped her head between her hands. "I've been working on grinding dollars to afford that 4-door sedan mount."

"What do you mean, 'grinding dollars'?"

"Um, it's kinda complicated, but basically you go into an office and sit there for a long time."

"This game doesn't sound very fun."

"I've been thinking about quitting, but what else am I gonna do with myself?"

A few seagulls passed overhead. Yuna's imagination molded the clouds into moogles and oglops and jousting knights. With a listless shrug, Rikku turned away. "I suppose I'll try to catch a nap. Wake me up if we get attacked by Kraken." She headed for the cabin. "And in the mean time, don't forget you need to be reading *The Power of No.*"

"If you say so." Yuna actually didn't care to read the book at all, so she tried to divert them to some other activity. "Or we could, uh, fish."

Rikku stopped and looked back. "Fish? Whatever for?"

"I dunno, probably some type of salmon or tuna."

"I meant *why* would we want to fish?"

"Well, what else are we going to do?"

She couldn't argue with that. "Fair enough, but only if you let me use grenades."

Yuna unpacked her new fishing pole—she couldn't believe she'd actually be getting some use out of the thing, but Wakka would be happy to hear about it—and retrieved some bait from inside the yacht. Rin joined her with his own fishing pole and they returned to the deck. Rikku was already raining explosive death upon the seas.

Yuna cast into the ocean. It took only seconds before a tremendous force tugged on the line. "I've got something!" A second tug almost ripped the fishing rod from her hands; she jumped to her feet, braced her feet against the railing, and leaned back with all her might in order to retain control of the rod. "It's a big one, too!"

The rod spun out of her hands and Yuna watched helplessly as it disappeared into the sky. So much for her birthday present. Before the fishing pole had even hit the water, a great blue whale rose from the sea beside the yacht, dousing both Yuna and Rikku in the accompanying spray of water. Yuna gasped. She'd seen whales in books and videospheres, but never actually in person. What an amazing sight! Somehow a *natural* giant animal like this seemed different from the scores of equally large fiends she'd battled. Well, she couldn't feel too bad about losing the pole to something like this. But she also sensed something strange about this whale, something that made her uneasy. It couldn't be ... an Aeon?

"I AM BISMARCK, THE MIGHTY SEA GOD OF SPIRA!"
"Sea god of Spira? I've never heard of any sea god of Spira!"

"I RULE THE SEVEN SEAS WITH AN IRON FLIPPER! MY WRATH CAN DESTROY A NATION! ALL SAILORS SPEAK OF ME WITH GREAT FEAR AND AWE!"

"Oh, poo," Rikku said, "I've been on plenty of sea voyages and not one person has ever mentioned you, Mr. Bismarck. What a lot of baloney. Are you really a sea god?"

To everyone's surprise, Bismarck burst into great heaving sobs. He cried and gasped, tears streaming out of his giant eyes, for close to two minutes before finally speaking again. "You're right, you're right. I'm no sea god; I'm not even a minor deity. Who am I kidding? I'm not cut out for this. If Leviathan were here, he could have had all of you quaking in your Speed Shoes. Me, I couldn't terrify a Little League Blitzball club, let alone a hardened sailor. What kind of legendary monster am I?" He covered his face with his flippers, his sobs coming with renewed force. "I'm such a failure! No one's ever going to be afraid of me!"

"Boy, talk about whale blubber," Rikku muttered.

Feeling rather bad for him now, Yuna gingerly reached over the railing and patted Bismarck's back. "There, there, Mr. Bismarck. I'm sure you're a plenty terrifying Aeon ... sea god ... whatever."

"You don't understand! I try so hard to look like all those ferocious sea serpents at SeaWorld Bevelle, but every time I get upset, I start stress-eating, and then I just take the first thing I see and shove it in my mouth."

The one silent moment that followed was just enough for Yuna to realize they were in serious trouble. Then the panic set in at the same instant Bismarck opened his cavernous mouth and dived towards the yacht. Rikku screamed. In a single gulp, Bismarck gobbled them up and, to Rin's substantial horror, crushed the rigging with the sides of his mouth. Yuna ducked and covered her head to shield herself from the falling yacht debris. The bow of the yacht tipped forward into Bismarck's mouth. Gravity did the rest and sent them hurtling down his throat. Yuna reached out with one hand to grab onto the railing as the yacht careened its way to Bismarck's stomach.

At last the yacht landed in the lining of Bismarck's stomach, immediately sinking up to the deck into some dark red goop. Yuna and Rikku lay gasping for breath on the bridge. Rin had dropped to his knees, almost as distraught as Bismarck, gasping, "My yacht! My poor yacht! Marooned inside a whale!"

Rikku examined their surroundings. "Maroon? I guess ... I would have just called it red, myself."

Bismarck realized what he had done and broke down. "I did it again!" he howled through his tears, his voice echoed through the massive stomach. "I'm so sorry, you guys; I just wasn't thinking! I swallowed Link last Wednesday and now a yacht!" He thrashed about in the sea, causing the yacht to rock back and forth in his stomach. Yuna's knuckles lost their color as she clung to the railing.

Rikku looked to her comrades. "Yunie, you didn't happen to bring any ipecac, did you?" She paced the remnants of the yacht, seeking inspiration. How could she get the whale to cough them up before they were all digested—or worse? "Bismarck! Stick your flipper in your throat!" she shouted up the digestive tract.

His sobs continued unabated.

"I don't think he's listening. Do we have a Plan Number Two?" Rin asked.

"No," Rikku said, "that's disgusting." Wait. Disgusting! That was it! "Bismarck! Think of the
grossest thing you can imagine, like the bathroom in a Rin's Travel Agency, or Grand Maester Mika naked and covered in hot grits! Or, or ... or Spira's worst Malboro, with breath that smells like rotten eggs dipped in tendakraut!"

"Hey," Rin said, hurt.

The sobs broke off, to be replaced by a grunt of disgust and heaving coughs. "Yeah, that's the ticket! OK, now imagine yourself eating deer carcass-flavored Instant Flan! In a temple that smells like chocobo poop!"

Bismarck retched. Yuna again found herself hanging onto the yacht for dear life as they were catapulted back up his throat and out his mouth. Launched free of the whale, the yacht arced gracefully over the ocean and made a gradual pitch forward in the air, turning upside down and scattering its passengers. The surface of the water rushed towards Yuna as she plummeted. She hit the water, banged her head on a floating piece of non-biodegradable plastic, and everything went dark.
Having finished her story of how she ended up on Franz's island, Yuna must decide whether to stay or go.

And the cliffs are the same as in the magazines I have at home
And the tall grass reminds me of the same dreams I have at home

"...and so that's how I ended up adrift at sea."

It was now ten days after Yuna had washed up near Franz's island, close to two weeks since she'd slipped away from Besaid. Yuna had been recounting her adventures to "the Franz" in sporadic episodes as they went about their daily routine: Yuna would sit on the shore and try to catch the day's dinner with her fishing pole while Franz trolled the seas with his microphones in pursuit of the rare Bikanel giant squid. ("Lots of tentacles," he said with a wink.) When the sun came down, they would head inside to eat—Yuna would continue her tales of adventure at the table—and Franz would review the sounds he'd collected that day.

It was a calm life and a pleasant one, aside from Franz's daily attempts to seduce her with recordings of various sea creatures mating. All, to date, were unsuccessful, but that didn't keep him from trying. "Did you know that in the seahorse, it's the male who becomes pregnant?" he said one evening. "That's incredibly unusual ... although I hear it's pretty common in the human bishounen, too."

"I, er..." It was impressive that he knew so much about sea life, but she couldn't fathom how anyone how anyone could possibly find these aquatic mating rituals to be "hott." The exception, it seemed, was Franz's girlfriend, who, over the course of their conversations, Yuna had learned was busy in medical school. Too bad she wasn't here to listen to Franz's biology lectures in Yuna's place.

"Sorry," she apologized aloud for her thoughts. "I'm in a bad mood." The day's fishing had not gone well: she'd hauled up only a yummy fish, a boot, and a talking fish salesman answering to the name of "Manilo." And to top things off, Franz had failed to record any of Manilo's mating calls before he swam off in search of more lucrative markets. She was starting to worry that she'd overfished the shore since she'd been confined to such a tiny radius. What she needed was an actual fishing boat like they had in Besaid, either one of the wooden simple ones she'd grown up watching or a new machina-powered model. She wouldn't be surprised if Wakka were out on one right at this moment, kicking back with the rest of the Aurochs and trying to give little Vidina his sea legs.

Funny, wasn't it? She'd finally managed to escape from Besaid to a place where no one knew her, yet all she ended up thinking of was her silly little island back at Spira's southern butt end. Even when she was on the other side of the world, Besaid traveled with her and colored her thoughts and feelings with Aurochs-colored glasses. Home, she realized, wasn't just a place you lived in, but a place that lived in you. And while she liked Luca and Bevelle and Macalania, they did not cast the same spell over her. She did not feel compelled to compare Franz's studio to Bevelle's machina, had not adopted any of Kilika's local slang, but the spirit of Besaid was always with her. And the more she thought of the island, the stupider it seemed to turn her back on it. Cid and Brother ... Lulu and
Wakka ... they all must be worried sick about her! What was she doing living in the desert with some perverted dolphin?

"Franz," Yuna said after they'd finished dinner, "thank you for all your hospitality, but I really think I should getting back to my family and friends. Do you maybe have some kind of distress signal in your sound collection I could use? To get someone to pick me up?"

"The Franz will give it a look tomorrow," he said.

But when she woke the next morning, Franz was lying asleep in his bed, skin deathly pale and a thermometer shoved in his mouth. Atop the sheets sat a hastily-scrawled note: "VRY ILL. PLZ CATCH MORE FSH. SRRY 4 BAD HANDWR. I DONT HAVE FINGRS - F."

And, just like that, she was now even more alone. In a surreal daze, Yuna went out to the shore with the fishing pole, but she could barely muster up the mental energy to walk, let alone fish. How could she tend to a sick dolphin, feed both of them, and maintain the shack all while keeping herself sane? She'd read a book once where a guy had survived in the wilderness with only a hatchet and non-cavity-fighting toothpaste, so things could be worse. But living on a tiny abandoned island with a sick dolphin, catching fish for him? People had attempted suicide over less than that!

And so she did the only thing she knew to do when she stood on the seashore, when she felt alone and abandoned: She whistled to the sea. And again. And again. When the waves gave her nothing, she tried a few more times. There was little reason to expect that there was anything else out there that would respond if it hadn't so far, least of all him, but like a headless chocobo exercising all its running options before finally giving up the ghost, she had to exhaust every possibility before gave in. She whistled a last, desperate time and then, with nothing else to do, sat down in the sand, enveloped her head in her hands, and bawled.

"...I miss you."

This was why summoners always had guardians. Heroic Quests weren't meant to be undertaken by one's lonesome. You were supposed to have traveling companions, sidekicks, old friends, trusted advisors: the Philoshoper's Stones that transmuted the sorrows and injustices of the world into life-giving memories and mirth. (Rikku and Rin and Uncle Cid must still be looking her, of course, but who knew if they could ever find her on a tiny island in international waters?) Yuna knew, of course, how to smile through grief for the benefit for the people of Spira. As long as someone else depended on her for safety or sanity, she could keep her head up. But, out here, who besides an unconscious dolphin cared if she smiled or wept? Was there any reason not to give into despair? She brushed her tears aside and whistled again. She had to get off this island. This wasn't her home. If this was what it meant to escape Yuna Day, her life and fame, New Yevon and the Youth League ... well, she'd take the parade any day.

"Yuna?"

_There is a God_, Yuna thought before she even looked to see who it was.

"Dona? Ohmigosh ... I haven't seen you since, uh, _Celebrity Fear Factor._"

Dona brought her small motorboat up to the beach. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?"
"I'm on the worst vacation of my life," Yuna said. "I need my guardians back."

"Yeah, me too," Dona said. "It hurts everywhere Bartschella touched me ... although the needles probably have something to do with that."

"Oh, did you break up with him again?"

"No, no, not Barthello," Dona said. "I'm talking about Bartschella—the cactuar, remember? I can't believe keep letting that heartless bitch jab her thorns into my heart. Every time she says she's changed, she's just toying with my emotions. I wonder if she'd even give me the time of day if it weren't for my money. I mean, I'm not saying she's a gold digger, but she did drug me, imprison me in underground ruins, and force me to sign over the rights to my bank account."

"That's probably not a good sign."

Dona shook her head. "And like the fool I was, I thought it was love. But the finally I realized that the only reason I kept seeing the sun and the moon whenever we kissed is that there's mescaline in her saliva. So I slapped on a Ribbon and high-tailed it out of there." She looked around the barren island at which she now found herself. "Do you think I should call the sheriff on her?"

Yuna shook her head. "You can't; we're in international waters."

"That's what I was afraid of." She looked over her shoulder at Bikanel Island. "I guess I should try to bring her in myself, but I'm terrified of ever seeing one of those little green devils again."

"How am I ever going to explain this to Barthello?"

Yuna saw only one course of action. "OK, I'll go in your place."

"Would you? I was hoping I wouldn't have to wallow in self-pity much too much to convince you."

"I don't mind."

Yuna climbed in the motorboat and Dona drove her over to Bikanel proper. "I can't bear to face another cactuar ever again," Dona said. "You're on your own from here."

And so, Ribbon tied securely around her wrist, Yuna ventured off. She followed Dona's directions to the ruins of Home, where Bartschella had taken up residence. Though Gippal and the Machine Faction had pillaged most anything with value, some of the rubble and broken machina still lay piled up in the valley that had once been taken up by the grand dream of the Al Bhed. Though Yuna had only visited Home once before its self-immolation—and had been in captivity at that time—this place still held a special significance for her. She was, after all, half Al Bhed. Before Sin and Old Yevon came tumbling down, Home had represented everything half of her family had struggled to achieve: a chance for the Al Bhed to stop wandering an unfriendly world and find solace with their own kind. Though they had been once again scattered by the insurmountable walls of geography, for a time people—her mother, her aunt and uncle, and her cousins among them—had made this place their escape from all the forces that tore people apart.

She climbed carefully down the steep slope of the valley. From the arrangement of the warped metal and torn-apart foundations, she could still vaguely make out the plan of the building that had once stood there: one wing of Home here, another there. As she ventured towards the center of the building, she found the stairs down to the bomb-proof Summoner's Sanctum in the basement still intact. If anyone lived in the ruins, that seemed the most hospitable spot.
Yuna ventured down the plain metal stairs into the rectangular chamber below. There she found Rin and Rikku, looking physically healthy but not doing so well in the "connected to reality" department. "Cid, what a wonderful job you've done with the rebuilding," Rin said, trying to seat himself in a chair that didn't actually exist.

"Why, yes, I am Spira's top-ranked sudoku solver."

Even if they weren't terribly coherent, Yuna was mostly relieved to see that her friends had made it to land safely—and that they'd found each other again. She waved her hands in Rikku's face and, when that failed to bring her friend out of her hallucinations, tried shaking her. "Rikku! Rikku, you've been drugged! Vision quest time is over. Wake up!"

"No, you can't borrow my ball of string, Yunie. Don't be jealous just because I'm famous for once, you big fat jerk."

As Rikku kept up the imaginary argument, Yuna turned away and conceded temporary defeat. She knew not to take Rikku's comments personally when there were obviously other sinister forces at work. "Maybe it's mescaline," she mused. A quick Remedy probably would have done the trick, of course, but she'd lost all her supplies when she washed up on Franz's island.

A cactuar slid down the stairs and began speaking under the assumption that she was addressing only her prisoners, "And with your generous contribution of another 200,000 gil, we'll be able to finish the second fl—oh, hello, there." She set down her tiny, cactuar-sized briefcase of money. "I'm running a pledge drive to put Home back together. You look like a lovely lady of some means. Want to toss in a gil or two ... or maybe three hundred thousand?"

Yuna had come prepared for a confrontation and wasn't going to waste time on chit-chat. "Bartschella, I know what you're doing. Have you forgotten that you're supposed to be a Gatekeeper protecting the Cactuar Nation? What if another monster like Angra Mainyu appears, and you're still here kidnapping people and hanging out with cactuars from the wrong side of the Highroad? What would Marnela say?"

Bartschella didn't see much use in trying to dispute the nature of her activities, only their justification. "You think you and your epidermis know what it's like trying to make it in Spira when you're two feet tall?" she spat. She opened up her briefcase and waved a stack of bills at Yuna. "Ancient mumbo-jumbo ain't going to get the Cactuar Nation any respect. This world, it's all about the Lady Yocuns."

"Don't be silly. Money won't buy you everything, and when you die, you're going to lose it all anyway ... or at least half of it. Not all that glitters is gold, you know."

"Yeah, some of it's PLATINUM!" She raised one tiny arm and flashed a bracelet at Yuna. Even in the dim light of the basement, the innumerable facets of the bracelet gleamed in the light. "100% pure crystal, beeyotch. I think it's got some kind of ancient demon imprisoned in it. Just bought it the other day. I'm moving up in the world. Now I want my mythril grills."

"Uh ... cactuars don't even have teeth, do they?"

"See? See what I'm talking about? It ain't easy bein' green. Humans always telling you what you can't do, when they turn around and do it themselves." She tipped over the briefcase for Yuna's inspection. "But you guys can't argue with this."

Yuna wasn't buying any of Bartschella's argument. "Don't be silly. Humans find plenty of ways to make a honest living, like opening a restaurant or committing stock fraud. I think that if you join
with the other cactuars, you could really make something big, too. Maybe you could start a business together."

"Oh yeah?" Bartschella lovingly fondled her crystal bracelet. "I tried all that already. International trade? I could only ever sell anything for half what I paid for it. Landscaping? I live in a friggin' desert! Until I got this little operation going, life kept giving me lemons."

Yuna snapped her fingers. "Well, there you go! Lemonade stand."

"Huh?"

"It's hot out here in the desert, right? I bet a lemonade stand would do great business."

_That's a terrible idea_, Bartschella thought. "That's a great idea," she said aloud. She leaned closer to Yuna and fluttered her eyelashes. "Maybe we could get something started, just you and me. What do you say?"

Yuna winked back. "I think I might be able to live with that."

As her needly hand ran up Yuna's leg, Bartschella was already mentally celebrating another successful capture. These humans were so easy to seduce. "Really?"

"Really." And so, for the first and last time in her life, Yuna—after first checking to make sure her Ribbon was tied tight around her wrist—awkwardly squatted and kissed a cactuar. _This is going to make for one crazy story if we ever get back to civilization_, she thought.

When Yuna saw neither the sun nor the moon nor insects crawling up her arm, Bartschella's leer of triumph quickly turned to confusion and then panic. Her victim was not as easy to fleece as she'd expected. As Yuna made a grab of her, Bartschella sprung between Yuna's arms and landed on the floor. And cactuars, even when confused, were expert runners. Bartschella was out of the ruins and scrabbling up the side of the valley before Yuna even realized what happened. Leaving Rikku and Rin to their delusions, she sprinted after the fleeing cactuar.

The chase led up the valley and back to the beach, where Dona waited in her motorboat. At the first sight of the small green creature speeding towards her, Dona gave a cry of terror and cowered behind a piece of driftwood. Yuna arrived just in time to see Bartschella spring onto the motorboat and drive away. In an act of desperation, Yuna cast her fishing pole with a mighty swing and caught her hook on the back of the boat. Ten seconds later, she had invented the sport of wakeboarding.

As Yuna was painfully dragged face-first through the water, Bartschella looked over the railing. "Fine, we'll make a deal," she chirped. "You let me keep the boat, I give you back your friends."

Yuna raised her head from the water. "This isn't even my boat; I can't do that!"

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't."

"No, you can't."
"Yes, I can," Yuna said. "WAIT! Hold on! I didn't mean that!"

But it was too late. Bartschella tossed her medicine cabinet key over the railing and unhooked Yuna's fishing pole, dropping her into the water. The motorboat sped off towards the horizon. "See ya, fleshy!"

Grumbling, Yuna gathered up her balance and her dignity and trudged out of the surf. She returned to ruins of Home, where she unlocked Bartschella's medicine cabinet and took out a couple of Remedies. "Here, Rikku; drink this. It's, er, a magic potion to make you even better at sudoku."

As soon as Rikku sipped the Remedy, she snapped out of her hallucinations. "YUNA!" she shouted. "There was a cactuar around here! Did you see her? She was trying to steal my World of Earth account. I hate those dollar-sellers!"

"Yeah. She's gone. And you've been here a week, so I'm afraid your account might be toast."

"Dangit, I'm going to miss ol' Dave."

*What is with fantasy games and these ridiculous names?* thought Yuna.

After curing Rin, Yuna explained everything that had happened, including a sheepish admission that she'd been cohabiting with a libidinous dolphin. Her conclusion was grim: Since Bartschella had made off with the motorboat, they were, in fact, marooned (not red).

"Great," Rin said after hearing the story. "Now I'm finally stranded on a desert island, and I didn't bring any of those albums with me."

"Wait, then Home is ... " Rikku surveyed the twisted girders and crumbling stones. "... still just a pile of rubble. There was no rebuilding."

Yuna nodded sadly.

Rikku sat down in the desert. "Well, poopy. Whenever we find a place to belong, the world takes it away again. It's not fair."

Yuna put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know, I know," she said. "But you always find a new place, right?"

"Well said." Rin jabbed his hands into his pockets. "I don't know about you girls, but I'm ready to get home."

"I've ... got a dolphin to take care of." But now that her panic about being left alone had subsided, Yuna grew suspicious of Franz's sudden illness. He'd seemed perfectly healthy last night. Could his sudden turn for the worse have something to do with the fact that she'd told him she wanted to get off the island?

And so, when they had waded back to Franz's island, she sent Rin to knock on the cabin door in her place. Sure enough, Franz answered it looking as healthy (and lecherous) as ever. And even Yuna wasn't naïve enough to believe that he'd recovered his health *that* quickly. She sprung out of hiding. "Uh-huh. Real sick, huh?"

Franz, caught in his ruse, hung his head. "The Franz knew you wanted to leave, but I figured
maybe I could get you to stick around if I took sick. It gets pretty lonely when I'm out here recording sounds all by my lonesome."

"Well ... yeah, you're right. I do want to leave. I've realized this isn't my home. I need to get back to where I really belong." Though intent on rejoining her real friends and family, Yuna certainly wasn't without sympathy for Franz. Seahorse mating rituals aside, he'd been a gallant host, and she imagined life on a deserted island did get rather rough.

"If you want to go, I can't stop you, but..." He winked. "You know dolphins have prehensile wangs, right? Just in case that factors into your decision."

"I didn't, but it doesn't."

"Besides, Yunie already HAS a love interest," Rikku cut in. Yuna had never mentioned him to Franz just because it so awkward to talk about. But these days, she was accustomed enough to thinking of him as missing that the sudden mention of him didn't upset her. "Yeah. I do."

"A Prince Charming for our Sleeping Beauty?" Franz winked. "Maybe he's been by the Franz's island, too. What's his name?"

"I, er..."

"You don't know his name?" Franz looked amused. "And you say I'm the one always trying to leap into bed."

"NO! It's not like that at all! It's just he's, well ... the newest guardian, you know?"

Franz gave her a blank look.

Yuna gave up with a shake of her head. "I'm sorry. It's complicated."

"Well, it's the Franz's fault you got stuck here for so long, so let me give you a little flipper on the way home to this mysterious guardian of yours." He scanned one of his shelves of audio spheres, located the one he was looking for, and passed it to Yuna. "I can't carry all of you to the mainland, but here's the distress signal you were looking for."

"Thanks," said Yuna. "I'm sorry I can't stay."

He shrugged. Despite losing his latest companion, he still maintained cheerful smile, though perhaps that was just because his dolphin DNA had more or less permanently affixed such an expression to his face. "That's okay; the Franz couldn't get Elijah Wood to stick around, either. But that's okay; there's always auto-erotic asphyxiation for those lonely nights. I guess it's just me and my six-pack ring tonight."

If Yuna needed any further motivation to leave, that was it. She tossed the straps of her backpack over her shoulder and placed one foot outside the door. "Well, uh, have fun."

Franz waved his flipper. "So long and thanks for all the fish, Yuna." He shoved his headphones over his head, cranked up the mopey music, and resumed his life alone.

And, so, leaving behind one bummed-out dolphin listening to Radiohead, Yuna and Rikku resumed their quest to get back to Besaid. With Rin and Dona in tow, they crossed Franz's island to its eastern shore, where they hoped a passing ship might pick them up. Yuna set the audio sphere
down on the beach and switched it on, only to discover that it was not a distress signal.

It was a recording of whales mating.

Before Yuna could shut it off, Bismarck erupted from the water. "HEY GUYS! Did someone call me?"

Yuna did feel bad that Bismarck was struggling with his self-esteem so much, so she tried to be friendly and ignore the fact that he'd recently eaten her. "Hi, Bismarck."

"Guess what? I'm starting a new life today. I don't have to read magazines to tell me what a scary sea monster looks like. I'm me, and if society can't accept me, that's their problem."

"That's, that's great."

"Oh, who am I kidding?" Bismarck produced some magazine photos of Leviathan that he'd cut out of back issues of Ultra Game Players and waved the pictures at the girls. "Look! See Leviathan? See how FEROCIOUS he looks? He swallowed Rydia whole and he still has this amazing figure. I wish I could have jaws like that."

"But that's a sea serpent," Yuna said. "You can't compare yourself to him; he's a completely different species."

That seemed to get through to him, but not in the way she'd intended. "You're right. I'll never be as scary as Leviathan." Bismarck ceased his sobs and raised his head. "I'm going to beach myself right here, and either I'll terrify somebody or die trying!"

"No!" Yuna gasped. "Bismarck, don't do anything rash! I'm sure there's already someone out there who's utterly petrified of you! I mean, it might be a statue, but still!"

In defiance of her pleas, Bismarck hurled himself out of the water and onto the shore. "Huh? How you like me now? Are you scared yet? Holding down the Run button?"

Yuna looked about in a panic. Great, just great. They couldn't just leave him here, but how in the world could they push a whale back into the ocean just by themselves?

Rikku was having the same thoughts. She started for the dunes. "Maybe there's some machina in the desert, like a crane or something."

Bismarck laughed with bitter self-mockery. "See, I'm so big and awkward you can't even push me back into the water," he said. "I bet if Emerald Weapon beached himself, you could push him back into the water."

"The cactuars!" Yuna suddenly recalled. "Rikku, Franz said the Cactuar Nation is nearby!"

Rikku stopped at the top of a dune. "Oh, you know how hard those guys always are to pin down, Yunie. They're like 1,000 needles in a haystack."

"I'll go," Dona said. "I know those cactuars, and I can't run forever from what I did. I've got to face my fears." She sprinted off into the dunes.

Meanwhile, Rin kept on an eye on the whale sobbing on the beach. "We need to keep him hydrated."

Yuna nodded. "Right." She and Rikku started casting Water spells on Bismarck to keep him from
drying out. "Hang on, Bismarck. You'll pull through this."

"Oh, just leave me to rot away," Bismarck moaned. "Someday I'll die and decay into a skeleton and then I'll be an actual scary monster and—what's that for?" Rin had been circling Bismarck's beached body and snapping his sphere-camera.

"My book of Spiran records," Rin said. "'Lamest monster.'"

"Waaaahh!" He thrashed miserably about miserably on the sand with a sudden change of heart. "Put me back! Put me back in the water! I can't go in the book as Spira's lamest monster! I need to go level up!"

Dona's motorboat pulled back up. At first, Yuna thought she had been unsuccessful in recruiting aid, but then she saw the flying carpet hovering overhead with a battalion of chirping cactuars on board. Bartschella and the other Cacutar Gatekeepers poured down from the carpet like a thorny green waterfall and surrounded Bismarck.

Yuna gingerly patted Bismarck's side. "OK, Bismarck, hang tight; we'll have you back in the water in no time." She was just starting to worry how a bunch of foot-and-a-half cacti were going to save a giant whale when the little creatures started piling on each others' backs. And then, one secret cactuar spell later, Jumbo Cactuar stood before them, towering several stories high.

While Rin snapped another picture ("Largest Cactuar"), and Yuna fretted whether their savior had enough joints for the job, Jumbo Cactuar shuffled across the beach. It awkwardly squatted and pushed Bismarck back into the ocean. He tumbled into the water with a great splash. "Hooray! I'm alive!" Bismarck exclaimed. "Time to turn over a new leaf for real this time. From here on out, it's healthy plankton eating and a scary Richard Nixon mask for me."

"Bismarck, maybe you could flag down a ship for us," Yuna said. "We're directionally challenged. Lost."

He smacked his tail against the water like a dog wagging its tail. "Oh! Oh! Why don't you just ride on the back of your old pal Bismarck? I can carry you to the mainland; that'll be even quicker!"

Rikku whispered in her ear, "The power of no, Yunie."

"Come on, I know I've caused you a lot of trouble, so let me make it up to you. Please?"

"All right," Yuna said.

Rikku shook her cousin violently. "Yunie, did you forget he tried to eat us?"

"I'm tired and I want to get back to civilization. I'd take a ride from a behemoth at this point."

And so all four of them—Yuna, Rikku, Rin, and Dona—climbed on Bismarck's back. When Rikku had finally seated herself—with some obvious reluctance—on his back, he pushed away from shore. Behind them, beneath the afternoon sun, the Cactuars waved goodbye as best they could with their limited points of articulation.

Yuna unzipped her backpack and offered the group her remaining snacks. "Jerky?"

"Nah, seems like a smooth ride so far!" Rikku said. "This isn't so bad after all."

Now that Bismarck had discovered someone at least willing to tolerate his list of woes, he had quickly grown attached to his rescuers. And though Yuna and Rikku tried not to lead him on by
actually conversing with him, he seemed to have already decided that they must be interested in every detail of his life. "You know, Yojimbo and I were gonna do the South Seas Diet together. I came up with it myself. I mean, pirates were pretty terrifying, right? Well, they didn't eat fruit, so I figured if we could stop eating fruit, we could be as terrifying as they were. But then Yojimbo backed out, because he didn't want to get scurvy. Yeah, whatever."

"Mm-hmm."

"I mean, I know I'm never going to be one of those real scary, optional superboss guys. I'm not asking to be an Ozma or an Omega Weapon, y'know? I just want to be one of those medium terrifying monsters, the kind who smacks you around a few times until you check GameFAQs to find his elemental weaknesses. And you know what pisses me off? Atomos isn't any scarier than that, and Carbuncle never says anything bad about him, but he always calls me 'Free Willy' every time he sees me, like I don't have an actual name. Guess what, you shiny green turd? Everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you. Say, where are we going, anyway?"

Yuna, too, had to think for a moment. "Um ..." She squinted at the land appearing on the horizon. It was white and shining like ice—Lake Macalania, definitely. "Just keep heading straight. I'm sure Uncle Cid can pick us up from O'aka's."

"OK! You know, it's really great hanging out with guys. I mean, a lot of people don't even bother trying to understand me, but, you guys and me, I think we have a real bond. I should give you my Summon Materia so we can stay in touch. I mean, I'd just like having someone around to remind me I'm not as needy as people say I am, you know? Totally sorry about eating you, by the way."

Rikku lowered her voice. "I take it back. When can we change whales?"
Despite O'aka and Wantz's hospitality, Yuna and Rikku can't resist another adventure.

Snug at last in O'aka's shop on the ice of Macalania, Yuna dug into a delicious, warm, syrup-drenched pancake. Finally, they were on their way back to civilization. Bismarck had delivered them back to the mainland, O'aka had offered them a late-night snack, and the rest of her family lay just an airship ride away. This horrendous vacation didn't seem so bad now.

At Rikku's prodding, Yuna opened up *The Power of No* again while her cousin busied herself with the sudoku puzzle in the day's *Examiner*. Rin, meanwhile, took the opportunity to talk business with O'aka. "This location was never much of a profit-maker," he said. "I'm surprised you guys have found a way to turn this place around."

"Well, out here on the frigid ice, our hot cakes have been selling like ... like ... I'm having trouble completing this analogy. But we've been raking in the gil."

Wantz stepped out of the office in the back with a report from the CommSphere. "Cid's not picking up right now, but you guys can stay here as long as you need."

Yuna sipped on the hot chocolate that O'aka had brought her. "That's great," she said. "You have no idea how crazy the past two weeks have been. Thank you so much."

"One thing, though," O'aka said.

"Yeah?"

"Whatever you do, don't release the Forbidden Seal in the Forbidden Box in our Forbidden Basement, or a demonic power will annihilate us all. You can eat all the food you want, sleep in our beds, tear up me garden, play catch with the antique vases, have sex with our significant others, just don't open the Forbidden Box. That's forbidden. Can we trust you on that?"

"Sure." Rikku was aware even as she spoke that this was the most insincere thing she had ever said in her life.

Yuna, too, was certainly not above the occasional bout of mischief. As soon as O'aka disappeared into his office and closed the door, her eyes lit up. "Well," she said, "I think I know what we're doing."

Rikku put down her mug. "Seriously! I was all set to spend a nice relaxing evening doing sudoku, but I now just want to open that box."

Dona frowned. "I suppose I'm not one to talk after the trouble I got myself into on Bikanel, but maybe that box is Forbidden for a reason."
That comment only earned an eyeroll from Rikku. "Oh, puh-leeze. Half of everything is Forbidden these days! It's just rules, rules, rules all the time." She stood up. "C'mon, Yunie, let's go before O'aka gets back."

Yuna and Rikku would stand for no further discussion of their planned adventure, so, before O'aka returned, they tip-toed across the store to the stairwell in the back. Through an open doorway, plain wooden planks lead down on a straight incline further than they could see. Frost glittered on the earthen walls. Now that they were no longer forced into thrilling escapades but, in fact, had been specifically told not to have them, Yuna and Rikku had quickly rediscovered their love of adventure. They clattered down the steps towards the basement as fast as possible and could only barely manage to silence their giggling enough to avoid tipping off O'aka and Wantz.

Some distance down the stairs, they encountered a wooden door set into a small landing off to one side of the stairwell. "You think this is it?" Yuna said.

"Nah, if there's a Forbidden Basement, it's gotta be at the very bottom."

And indeed it was. Several minutes of stair-climbing later, they finally reached the bottom. The stairs culminated in another small landing, beyond which lay a black stone door. In the stone, carved images of cruel demons and ferocious dragons warred amongst ruined cities and hellfire, while a knocker made from a human skull dangled from the handle. Overhead, a wood sign written in chocobo's blood proclaimed, "FORBIDDEN DOOR TO FORBIDDEN BASEMENT - EMPLOYEES ONLY."

"Yeah, this is it," Rikku said.

Although forbidden, the door was not actually locked, and so Yuna and Rikku marched right inside. The basement itself was much less fearsome than its portal; it looked like an ordinary storeroom with stacks of crates and other merchandise piled up in the corners. Amongst the boxes of Rambaldi artifacts, cases of weapons-grade plutonium, and the Ark of the Covenant, Yuna located a wooden crate on which O'aka had spray-painted "FORBIDDEN BOX W/ FORBIDDEN SEAL." Grinning, she pried open the lid.

The Forbidden Seal barked.

Rikku clapped her hands in delight. "Aw, he's cute! Why did they have to forbid him?"

The Forbidden Seal answered this question by, with a single smack of its fin, catapulting Yuna across the room and sending her crashing into the stone wall. She slumped to the ground, dazed. The Seal conjured up a fireball, which he balanced on the tip of his nose. "Ha, ha, look at that!" Rikku cried. She was not laughing so much a moment later, however, when she had third-degree burns all over her left arm.

It was at this point that Yuna and Rikku finally realized that the Seal was going to deliver a Forbidden Beatdown if they did not fight back. Rikku attacked first; she grabbed a small crate and hurled it at the Seal. The Seal nimbly leaned forward on its front flippers and used its tail to swat the box out of the air, then retaliated with a barrage of magic attacks. Yuna stopped, dropped, and rolled as the Seal's fire breath spread through the Forbidden Basement. This didn't look good: The Seal was casting Ultima all over the place, and they didn't even have their Garment Grids with them! She searched the room for another means of attack ... and then her hand fell on the yeti horn.
Meanwhile, the situation was just as grim upstairs. Rin and Dona were considerably alarmed—if not necessarily surprised—when the entire building shook and fire shot out of the Forbidden Stairway. Rin scrambled to take off his jacket and tried to smother the flames with it, but they still spread, setting the walls and furniture ablaze. Things only became more chaotic when a low tone sounded from somewhere below, and, shortly thereafter, Arthur Reginald Umaro IV smashed through the front door with his bone club, bellowed a mighty "URRRGAAAAAA!", and barrelled down the stairs.

By this time, the building was clearly a lost cause; the fire had spread everywhere and pieces of the ceiling were breaking off and falling into the inferno. Yuna, Rikku, and the yeti raced back out of the Forbidden Stairway, dashing for the lives as the stairwell crumbled beneath them, and collapsed on the dirt outside.

As Umaro lumbered off into the wilderness, the travelers surveyed the destruction they caused. The fires, having exhausted their supply of building parts, were dying down, but the building had been effectively razed. Two walls and the ceiling were gone, what had been the eatery now looked like a minefield, and most of the boxes of merchandise were crushed or incinerated. The ceiling of Forbidden Stairway had caved in, leaving the contents of the basement poking out half-buried from the rubble. Rin could not help but be grimly impressed by the Seal's handiwork. He whistled. "So much for raking in the gil."

O'aka and Wantz climbed out from behind the remaining half of the east wall. Both were too gobsmacked to even look angry. "Where is the Seal? Where is the Seal?" O'aka cried. "Is it still loose?"

"No, Mr. Umaro managed to club it unconscious, and then Rikku locked it inside the Ark of the Covenant."

"Yeah, good thing you remembered that yeti horn," Rikku said.

"Oh, that was a horn," Dona said. "I was about to suggest you guys cut back on the Thai food."

As his terror subsided, O'aka assessed the damage to the store, trying to find at least one thing that was salvageable, something he could feel relieved had worked out in his favor. "I can't believe you did that, mate! I specifically told you not to go in that basement and not to open that box because it would annihilate everything, and then you went did just that. What were you thinking?"

"I don't think we were," Rikku said.

"Look at all our merchandise! Look what he did to the store! This was my life! You played with fire and I got burned!"

"We're sorry?" Yuna said.

"Sorry? Sorry doesn't begin to cover this, mate. Several million gil in damages might cover this." Now O'aka's temper was rising. He kicked the Forbidden Box aside and scowled at them. "I'm so disappointed in you. I don't want to see any of you again until you've paid me back for everything you destroyed today. This has to be one of the worst disasters in history."

Rin coughed. "I'd just like to clarify that title's not official until I confirm it."

Through all the carnage, the Forbidden Box had remained undamaged. Rikku now peered inside. "Wait! I think there's still something at the bottom of this box!"

Yuna brightened. "Hope?"
"Actually, it's a sticky note saying, 'You idiot.'" Rikku sighed. "I guess we kinda deserve that one, huh?"

"Probably." Yuna's spirits sank again. She wasn't used to feeling this guilty about her actions. Usually, she was the one saving other people's lives, not the jerk who ruined said lives in the first place.

O'aka waved his hands, trying to shoo them towards the woods. "Just bugger off, will ya? And ye can forget about any help getting home. Far as I'm concerned, a bunch o' nongs like you don't deserve a place t' live since ye just burned mine down. Serves ye right."

And so the party members were all rather depressed as they set off across the ice for Macalania Woods. "Honestly, Yuna," Dona said, "I'm starting to wonder how you ever made it to Zanarkand."

She had to parry this unjustified attack. "I'm just having a bad week, okay? ...A bad couple weeks, I guess." She reviewed their encounters on her fingers. Swallowed by a whale, seduced by a dolphin, viciously beaten by a seal ... it seemed like every marine mammal in Spira was out to get them. If manatees weren't merely a fiction of drunken Spiran sailors who were actually looking at a mermaid, she would have expected to be ambushed by one of those next.

"I can't believe we owe money to O'aka," Rikku pouted. "Aren't you rich, Dona? Maybe you can foot the bill."

"I had nothing to do with this. I was upstairs reading the Examiner the whole time."

"And I hardly have money to burn," Rin said. "I'm buying myself a new yacht."

Keeping alongside the trail of collapsed dominoes—which, it seemed, no one had yet bothered to clean up—they hurried towards the woods to get out of the cold before they made camp. The past few months had not been kind to Macalania; its decay had not merely continued but had in fact hastened. Deprived of Shiva's power, the trees withered and thinned, turning large sections of the area into more of a forested plain than the dense woods it had once been. The dying landscape seemed to suit Yuna's mood: If nothing else was working out, why should the woods?

They reached what was left of the forest and set up camp at the first save sphere they reached. "Honestly," Yuna said, "I don't know why we don't just take one of these with us instead of hunting for one every night." She hefted up the sphere and tucked it under one arm. "Look, they're not even that heavy."

"I'm pretty sure that tampering with the save point system is a federal offense, Yuna," Rin said.

"Oh. Right." Yuna set the sphere back down and sat down. She knew she was acting selfish for moping around. What happened was her fault; she didn't have any reason to complain. Time to look on the bright side again. She clapped her hands together. "OK, you know what? Forget about the Seal; this is what we went on vacation for! Come on, out on the road in our own little corner of Spira, not burdened down by material possessions, nary a sign of life in sight but the chirping of the birds."

"Don't be ridiculous. You sound like Pops, we're all burdened with backpacks full of instant flan, and those 'bird calls' are the alarm on someone's hover." Rikku pointed.

Yuna looked. The trees on the right side of the road soon thinned, to be filled beyond by a parking
lot and an under-construction New Yevon megatemple. A few hovercraft were parked outside, and one of them was flashing and shrieking bloody murder. (Yuna thought she had heard a similar sound on Franz's tape of porpoise mating.) Two Machine Faction scooters shot by in front of her. On a billboard, Smokey the Behemoth proclaimed that only she could prevent forest fires. She frowned. "Where did the woods go?"

"Oh, right, this is another one of Pops's housing developments."

Yuna raised her eyebrows, expecting further elaboration.

"C'mon, Yunie, people want bigger houses now!" Rikku said as if it were ridiculous she even had to explain this. "Sin's gone; cities aren't being destroyed. A house is something you can keep for your life. There's stuff to do instead of just waiting to die. People are finally able to watch their kids grow up. Grandkids, even. So, don't worry, Yuna. I'm sure, net, you're still up several thousand houses."

And then it's Dona, of all people, who placed a comforting hand on the shoulder of the person who had allowed them to bring their children not into a world of fear and imminent death, but one of promise and opportunity. "You done good, Yuna."

"...yeah."
Sirens
Chapter Summary

While treasure-hunting on the Thunder Plains, Yuna struggles to make her voice heard.

This is not a romance with the road

Yuna had not shaken her cloud of gloom by the time they began the next day's journey across the Thunder Plains. It seemed like all she'd been doing lately was causing trouble for people. She'd disappointed Franz, burned O'aka's store to the ground, and made Cid and Brother hunt all over Spira for her. She couldn't shake the feeling that today would only bring about another debacle. And while Rikku had long since outgrown her fear of thunder, the party had a new phobia to endure as well: Dona would shriek and cover her eyes every time they passed one of the Cactuar stones.

It was during one such incident, while Dona had her hands over her face, that she nearly walked right into the two Ronso cubs sheltered beneath one of the lightning towers. "Oh ... hi, Lian! Hi, Ayde!" Yuna called.

"Lady Yuna!" Excited to see her, they rose and stood smartly at attention. "Lian and Ayde not know if Lady Yuna still lost in mountains. Ronso fear Yuna and Rikku abducted by terrible yeti monster."

"What? We're fine ... more or less," Yuna said. "And the Umaros are good people. They rescued us twice now."

She ended that justification feeling less than confident in it; Lian and Ayde's expressions had changed to scowls well before she had finished speaking. This explanation did not sit well with them. "Yeti no friend of Ronso Tribe," Ayde grumbled. "Garik say that yeti part of Guado plot to take over sacred mountain. Guado want destroy Ronso lifestyle with fiends and verb conjugations."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," Rikku said. "The Umaros aren't working for the Guado ... not that there's anything wrong with that." She thrust the Umaros' bone horn at the Ronso cubs. "Look, don't take our word on it. This is the magical yeti bone horn gizmo or whatever. Before you guys keep spreading your ridiculous conspiracy theories, you should deal this a mighty blow back on Gagazet and let the yeti tell Garik in person just where to cram it. I can't believe that any of you are still on that Guado stuff. What a load of crap. Anyway, what's up? It's good to see you guys!"

Lian bowed his head, an expression of solemn duty on his face. "Lian and Ayde are on a Heroic Quest."

"Hey, us too. More or less."

"You're not still trying to fix Kimahri's horn, are you?" Yuna said. "You know he's happy with it the way he is, and all the Ronso respect him no matter what he looks like."

Lian shook his head. "Lian and Ayde on new mission for Kimahri this time. Lian and Ayde are
geocaching."

"Geo-what?"

"Elder Kimahri leave treasure chest in remote place and give hint to sphere hunters. Then everyone try to find it. Elder say good way for Ronso to learn about Spira outside mountain."

"Ohhhh, so that's why all those chests are lying around the wilderness!" Rikku exclaimed.

"I've found that chests are often in dead ends, if that helps at all," Rin cut in.

Lian began rifling through the sack hanging at his waist. "Lian and Ayde have already looked everywhere. Maybe Lady Yuna can help us with map."

Rikku whispered to Yuna, "Two letter word, starts with 'N.'"

Yuna shrugged. "OK, if it won't take too long. We're trying to get home."

Rikku slapped her forehead. "Honestly, Yunie, if you keep this up, you're gonna get thrown right out of phyla Chordata."

But Yuna, still feeling guilty over what had happened to O'aka, wanted to do something nice for someone. And while Rikku normally kept would-be quest-givers at a sizable distance, she had to agree that they might owe the world at least one more errand. Besides, Lian and Ayde were good kids or cubs or whatever you called them.

Lian produced a cloth map and passed it to Yuna. "All we have is this treasure map and a secret clue that Elder Kimahri gave us."

"If it's about catching flies and time-traveling outfielders, the answer is 'Elefino.'"

"No, that was the other riddle, remember?"

"Whatever."

In any case, the secret clue concerned neither any space-time anomalies in Candlestick Park nor the intricacies of pachyderm biology, at least not as far as they could tell. Actually, they couldn't make much of the clue at all: it was a string of gibberish letters, separated into short groups as if they were actual words but frequently devoid of vowels. Above the secret clue, a map sketched out a section of the Thunder Plains between two rock formations. "Hey, that's right where the Travel Agency is," Rin said. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

"But Lian and Ayde already search there many times."

Yuna, Rikku, Rin, and Dona gathered in a huddle around the map, peering at the code from their respective angles and trying to tune out the frequent bursts of thunder enough to think. "Well, it's obviously some kind of code," Rin mused aloud. "Maybe he just substituted one letter for another."

Rikku yanked the paper out of Yuna's hand. "Yeah, this should be easy," she said. Her finger traced its way along the letters. "Yeah! Look, I think it's Al Bhed. See, you just have to change the letters. ACM might be 'dra,' which means 'the,' and QMARMMMS could be 'padfaah,' which means 'between.'"

"I was thinking about changing the letters too, but I think it's actually regular Spiran," Dona said. "If the letter 'B' is actually an 'I', this word over here is probably 'pillar.'"
Rikku's finger jabbed at the code. "No, look, it's just Al Bhed with the letters changed. That word is actually 'bemmyn,' the Al Bhed word for 'pillar.'"

"No, it's got to be Spiran. I bet ACM is 'the' and if you change all the M to an 'e'..."

"OK, well, either way, it looks like you need to check around the pillar by the Travel Agency." Yuna handed the map back to Lian and Ayde. "Does that help you guys?"

Lian nodded. "Lian and Ayde already check pillar, but maybe need to dig more. Treasure chest might be deep underground." He saluted and the two Ronso cubs scurried off in pursuit of their buried treasure.

Rin put a reassuring hand on Yuna's shoulder. "Well, there's your good deed for the day. Stop being so hard on yourself, Yuna; everyone knows you're a nice person."

But Yuna was still feeling rather down about herself and did not appreciate being so pigeonholed. "I'm not nice! I burnt down O'aka's store and ... and one time when I was little I told Lulu I wished she'd move to the moon!"

Dona smirked. "Yeah, better watch that mouth of yours, Yuna."

Yuna maintained a grumpy silence as they walked on. Let's see them call me "nice" now. The trail of dominoes continued on across the Thunder Plains, leading the party in the direction of the local branch of Rin's Travel Agency. Yuna started to feel a little better. This vacation certainly hadn't gone the way she'd planned, but at least it would be over soon: Rin assured her that the Travel Agency had a CommSphere she could use to call her family. And things couldn't go wrong again, could they?

Yuna covered her ears as the low growling sound around them increased in volume. "Boy, the thunder is sure loud today."

"That's not thunder; I think that's actually a rock song."

"Oh, right," Rin said. "I forgot to warn you guys about that."

Rin's Thunder Plains Travel Agency had been freshly painted in alternate shades of neon green and black for the second annual Thunder Plains Xtreme Hopscotch Challenge. Banners proclaiming Mountain Dewprism's sponsorship of the event hung outside, while thunderously loud rock music—louder than the actual thunder—assaulted their ears from from inside. On the playing fields surrounding the building, Spirans sprung on one foot from hopscotch square to hopscotch square while dodging the lightning bolts besieging them from above. "Seven hundred and three! Seven hundred and four!"

"Oh, it looks like they've upgraded," Yuna said. She paused to watch the contestants. "Hmm... usually when we play one of these games, we win some type of useful prize; maybe we should enter. Rin, what's the record?"

He checked his notepad. "Twenty-two thousand and eighty-four."

"OK, never mind."

Inside the travel agency, the cacophony was even more xtreme. The band of black mages had cranked the sound system up to the max, causing the entire building to vibrate with each one of their bass chords. "DON'T! YOU! GIVE UP ON IT!"
Yuna put her hands over her ears. "I CAN'T EVEN HEAR MYSELF THINK," she shouted over the din.

"THAT'S WHAT MAKES IT XTREME," Rin explained.

A bemused smile crossed Dona's face as she perused the racks of souvenirs positioned at the entrance. "HEY, YUNA, ALL YUNA DAY MERCHANDISE IS NOW HALF-OFF. ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT A BOBBLE-HEADED DOLL OF YOURSELF? OR ANOTHER MOOGLE COSTUME?"

"QUITE SURE, THANKS."

"HOW ABOUT THIS STUFFED SIN PLUSHIE? I BET LULU WOULD LOVE THIS."

"GO, INTO THE SAND AND THE DUST..."

Yuna finally resorted to stuffing wax in her ears just so she could concentrate on the task at hand. She was supposed to be getting them home! Her hand located the last few gil of change in her pocket and fed it into the coin-op CommSphere. Cid, backgrounded by the Celsius, appeared on the screen. "UNCLE CID! CAN YOU HEAR ME? I KNOW IT'S PRETTY LOUD IN HERE."

Cid spoke something, but, not trained in lip-reading, Yuna was completely unable to make it out through all the noise.

"RIKKU AND I ARE ON THE THUNDER PLAINS; CAN YOU COME PICK US UP?"

Cid cupped a hand to his ear.

Yuna bellowed as loud as she could, "WE'RE ON THE THUNDER PLAINS; PICK US UP."

Cid repeated the hand-to-ear gesture and then shrugged. On the verge of despair, Yuna looked about for assistance. "RIN, CAN'T YOU MAKE THESE PEOPLE STOP? I MEAN, IT'S YOUR STORE!"

"NO, IT'S ACTUALLY IT'S THEIR STORE," Rin said.

"WHAT?"

"THAT'S MY SLOGAN. 'IT'S YOUR STORE.' I DON'T MAKE THE BIG DECISIONS—OUR VALUED SHOPPERS DO. THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT, YOU KNOW."

"FINE, BE THAT WAY."

The CommSphere chimed and switched off, having consumed the last of Yuna's meager financial resources. She grimaced and looked to Rikku. What were they going to do? Trek on to Guadosalam and find another CommSphere there? That wouldn't be the end of the world, but every time she finally thought this crazy vacation would be over...

But before they could formulate any more extensive plans, the back wall of the Travel Agency, behind the stage where the band was playing, shook heavily. Yuna would have written it off to the bass system except that a giant yeti fist punched through seconds later. A few more blows broke a great opening in the wall, and in crashed Arthur Reginald Umaro IV, grunting and bashing holes in the furniture left and right. The two Ronso cubs who had summoned him raced in through the Travel Agency's newly created rear entrance, pleading for mercy. "Umaro! No! Stop!" they pleaded.
"Whoa, EXTREME!!" the bassist exclaimed as Umaro's fist pummeled one of the light fixtures into pieces.

"I see you and your new yeti pai are getting along, uh, smashingly," Rikku said.

"Lian and Ayde drop yeti horn running from fiend. Now Umaro no listen to anyone!" The two Ronso cubs stood helplessly at the back of the stage. They might have big by the standards of human children, but even they were no match for an adolescent yeti. Lian looked pleadingly to Yuna under the generally warranted assumption that Yuna could solve just about every problem.

Umaro turned his attention to the stage, where the band, energized by this thrilling new addition to their stage show, was rocking harder than ever. "LOOK OUT!" Ayde shouted as Umaro rushed on stage. The drummer flung himself out of the yeti's path. All whirling fists and flying spittle, Umaro turned his wrath to the drum kit, savagely banging his fists against the instruments. Delirious with excitement, the band launched into the best performances of their career as they fought to keep up with the wild rhythms of their xtreme new drummer.

The crowd exploded with delight. This was an amazing show! As the ecstatic cheers inside the Travel Agency grew, the remaining hopscotchers hurried in from outside to join the ecstatic mass. Tables were upturned, drinks splashed all over, fans jumped up and hung from the chandelier. No one was left sitting.

The audience roared its approval as Umaro yanked the Stratocaster from the guitarist's shaky hands. He banged out a couple chords before smashing the guitar into the amplifier, flinging the battered instrument against the wall, and then stepping on it, pioneering a move that, in later years, would be shamelessly stolen by some amateur hack named Pete Townshend.

"Arthur Reginald Umaro IV! Please stop that!" Yuna tried to make herself heard over the crowd. "Your father's going to be very unhappy if you keep breaking things!"

Umaro seized the other guitar and set it on fire. The audience screamed itself hoarse. Every sphere camera in the house was flashing. Videosphere recorders held aloft by waving hands were capturing shaky, out-of-focus footage that would be treasured by rock enthusiasts for decades to come. Spira's first mosh pit formed in front of the stage. Umaro bit the head off a bat.

"Ronso need Umaro look for geocaching treasure!" Lian called. "Lian and Ayde command Umaro stop!"

"Ronso no have sacred horn of yeti tribe!" Umaro roared into the microphone. "Umaro only take order from Mog!"

Yuna could already see where this was leading.

Lian shrugged apologetically. "Yeti pal fine until Lian and Ayde lose magic horn."

"HORNLESS! HORNLESS!" Umaro chanted. He returned to pounding on the drums before setting the bass guitar on fire. The crowd went berserk.

From the back of the crowd, Rikku hurled a bobbleheaded Yuna doll at Umaro. "Hey! Cut that out!"

The projectile bounced off Umaro's shoulder. He roared with fury and leapt forward from the stage. Thirty pairs of hands shot up to catch his fall. While Umaro crowd-surfed, the band seized what was left of their instruments and resumed rocking in a euphoric crescendo.
But Yuna, with a despairing sigh, knew it had fallen on her to put a stop to Umaro's rampage. The universe just had it in for her, didn't it? She might have abolished the Final Summoning and put Shuyin's vengeful spirit to a long-awaited rest, but sometimes even she couldn't fight fate. And so, she trooped over to the merchandise and hauled one of the moogle costumes off the rack. *Why do I always get stuck wearing this?*

By the time Yuna had gotten herself into the humiliating costume, Umaro had run out of musical instruments to destroy and lumbered back outside to demolish the hopscotch court. Yuna found him ripping one of the thunder-catching pillars from the ground. "Hi, Umaro, kupo!" Yuna squeaked. "This is your pal Mog! I command you to listen to obey the Ronso, kupo!"

Fortunately, Umaro had undiagnosed nearsightedness and was perfectly happy to believe that this was indeed his moogle pal from Narshe. He carelessly dropped the pillar and raised one shaggy arm in an estimation of a salute. "Ungh!"

Everything calmed down from that point. Umaro ceased his rampage and, in accordance with his orders, shuffled back to his Ronso buddies. Most of the crowd filed out of the Travel Agency, secure in the knowledge that they had just watched rock'n'roll history being made. The band, well aware they could never top Umaro's performance, hung up their instruments for good and got day jobs in a bank. Yuna, alas, had exhausted her supply of coins and could not take advantage of the silence to call her uncle again.

Rin exhaled. "Well, that was thrilling. And the royalties from that video should buy me a whole *fleet* of yachts!"


"I should warn you guys that the acorn fell pretty far from the tree in that case."

Dona nodded towards the lightning pillar uprooted by Umaro. "Speaking of things falling from the tree..."

The pillar now lay on its side after being thrown to the ground. One end of the pillar, which had been the top, culminated in a wider platform. The top side of this platform would have been impossible to see below, but now that the pillar had fallen down, they could see that atop it was affixed a treasure chest. "The geocache!" Lian and Ayde exclaimed. "No wonder we no see it before!"

"What's in it? What's in it? What's in it?" Hyperventilating with excitement, Rikku bounced around like she had suddenly been set to turbo mode. "Ooh, I wonder if it's the hookshot!"

Lian and Ayde retrieved the chest from the pillar. Yuna and her friends crowded around to watch as the two Ronso pried open the chest in unison. Rikku gasped in awe, then shut her mouth when she realized the contents were not so wondrous after all. Not counting a few cobwebs, the chest contained only a few pieces of string, an old pair of shoes, some yogurt past its pull date, and a lowly Potion.

"Dangit, I wanted the hookshot."

Lian and Ayde gave each other high-fives. "LIAN AND AYDE FOUND THE TREASURE!"

Dona laughed. "You call *that* a treasure? I've found more valuable things in my kitchen drawer ... even before that manipulative whore Bartschella ripped me off."
"I'll buy the string off you guys," Rikku whispered, then explained, "I'm trying to set a Spiran record."

But the meager rewards did not damper the enthusiasm of Lian and Ayde, who both still looked they had won the Bevelle lottery. "Chest not so good, but real treasure is adventure," Lian explained. "And Lian and Ayde have new yeti friend."

"Well, I've always thought the Ronso can learn a lot from their enemies," Yuna said.

"Thanks, Yuna and Rikku!" Ayde agreed. "None of this happen without you! You guys the best!"

"Ungha," grunted Umaro, who was busy mentally composing a double-disc rock opera about a race of mole people defending their planet from the robots of the Galactic Mining Company.

Rikku had at first blanched at the Ronsos' trite words of praise, but now found herself seeing truth in them. Okay, so they'd screwed once up with O'aka, but she and Yuna were helping people out all the time! "You know what, Yunie? I think these guys are right. We're actually pretty awesome. I mean, sure, that treasure sucked, but who else could have found it but us? And, like, only you would have figured out how to calm Umaro down."

"Yeah, you're right," Yuna said, finally stepping out of her hot, stuffy moogle suit. "Fate has spoken and it's not going to let me stop being nice even if I wanted to. I don't know what I was thinking. No matter how moogle suits I get forced into, we're going to be good guys for life."

Lian shook his head. "Yuna and Rikku aren't just good," he said. "Yuna and Rikku are GRRRRRRRRRRR-EAT!"
In Guadosalam, Yuna learns that her adventure is far from over.

"How was your trip to Bevelle, Milady? You were certainly gone for a while." Logos greeted them at the entrance to Guadosalam.

"Huh?" Yuna stared at Ormi and Logos for almost a full minute before she realized they must have thought her to be Leblanc masquerading as Yuna. "I'm not—"

Rikku stepped on Yuna's foot to silence her. "First place again! Man, those other Yuna impersonators just can't compare!"

Yuna finally realized what Rikku already had: This would be a fantastic opportunity to infiltrate the lair of her frequent nemesis. "Uh, that's right! I'm just bringing these new recruits in for training!" She clapped her hands on Rin and Dona's shoulders.

Logos indicated the other member of the party with a curt nod. "What's Rikku doing here?"

"Yeah, well ... after talking to the Boss, I couldn't resist changing allegiances," Rikku said. "I mean, sure, the Gullwings saved Spira, and the Machine Faction's doing big business, and the Youth League rebuilt Kilika, but the Leblanc Syndicate ... the Leblanc Syndicate, uh ..."

"...has skin-tight uniforms," suggested Yuna.

"...has skin-tight uniforms."

"Heheheheheh," Ormi chortled. "Yeah, and like you always say, you're just one disfiguring skin condition away from being Spira's number one heroine, right, Boss?"

"Yes. Disfiguring skin condition. That is ... what I always say." Hesitating, Yuna realized she needed to put on a more convincing Leblanc act. "All right ... goons, march!" She immediately set off at a furious pace down the bark-covered road, calling over her shoulder, "Hurry it up! I don't want to see any slacking!"

Dona, Rikku, and Rin scrambled to catch up. Ormi and Logos, who had substantially more experience obeying Leblanc's whims, were already jogging along just beside her. Panting and exerting every bit of energy she had, Dona at last managed to catch up with Yuna. "I hope you're not expecting me to goose-step, too," she gasped.

"Silence, minion! Where there's a heel, there's a way."

"Well, this is certainly a side of you I hadn't seen before."
Yuna frogmarched her henchmen to Chateau Leblanc, a route that took them past Leblanc's various endowments to the city of Guadosalam: the Leblanc School of the Massage Arts, Rue Leblanc, Leblanc Memorial Park ("She's not even dead," Rikku whispered as they passed), and the future site of Leblanc International Airport. Yuna stopped at the gates and pointed to Rikku. "New recruits must recite the, uh, oath of loyalty in my chamber. I mean my chambre." She recalled Leblanc's affectations at the last second.

"An oath of loyalty now?" Logos looked amused. "Tell me you didn't try to write it in iambic pentameter."

"I'll have none of that from you!" Yuna huffed.

Yuna led Rikku inside, leaving Rin and Dona to their own devices. They waved to the Syndicate's receptionist, who jumped and tried to hide her sandwich under the desk. "I wasn't eating anything on your new carpet, Milady! I'm sorry! I'm working hard! Please don't give me the heel!"

Yuna flashed her a friendly smile. Maybe while everyone still believed her to be Leblanc, she could make a few changes around the Syndicate. The poor goons deserved a vacation they probably weren't getting, and the horrendous shag carpeting certainly needed to go.

None of the goons were troubled to see Yuna's visage passing them in the hall. On the contrary, they all froze and saluted as she passed without even considering that this might not be their boss in disguise. *Yikes, she must do this a lot,* Yuna thought.

As soon as the girls were safe upstairs in Leblanc's "chambre," Yuna bolted the door and they collapsed in giggles on the floor. "Haha, good work, Leblanc," Rikku said.

"Thanks," Yuna said. "It's a relief to not have everyone asking me to find their lost kitten."

"Tell me about it! So what's the plan ... Milady?"

Yuna sat up. "Well, I thought we'd get something to eat and then we can see about calling home."

"Oh, geez, yeah," Rikku said. "Real food again." She was practically salivating already, imagining plates full of actual meals before her. "I never want to eat instant flan again. Especially not the deer carcass flavor."

Yuna rose. Since the last time she'd been in the bedroom—when she had been the massager, not the massagee—Leblanc had peppered her dwelling with even more over-the-top accoutrements: a closet so extensive it spanned the back wall of the room, phoenix down pillows and 900-thread count sheets on the bed, and, hanging over said bed, a painting of dogs playing Triple Triad. None of them were the same color as any of the other furniture. "Wow. That's the second biggest closet I've ever seen."

"No kidding; you could hide a shoopuf in that thing," Rikku swung the closet door open and poked her head in. "Hello? Anyone in here? Mr. Tumnus?"

Yuna flopped down on the four-poster bed. As ugly as the room was, after a week on the floor of Franz's shack and several days on the road, a nap in a real bed sounded awfully appealing. In fact, it was all she could do to keep herself from falling asleep right on the spot.

"She's still got a copy of your Songstress dress, I see." Rikku was still in the closet, perusing all of the outfits on the rack. "And your White Mage dress ... and your Alchemist suit ... and your Warrior pants ... okay, this is pretty creepy."
With a content sigh, Yuna lay her head back on the phoenix down pillows. Unfortunately, this brought the garish painting directly into view. "I'm not sure what Rin has to say about it, but I'm pretty sure that's the ugliest painting in all of Spira." She was stupefied by Leblanc's appalling lack of both taste and financial prudence. How could she actually want this junk in her room?

"Maybe it's a symbol of how much she hates you."

Yuna could not stand looking at the thing another minute, so she climbed up on the bed and yanked the painting off its hook ... only to reveal a safe built into the wall. She grinned. "Well, look what I found." But right away she started to have second thoughts. "No, we really shouldn't," she said, turning away. "Look what happened the last time our fingers pried open what they weren't supposed to."

"Ooh, good point; maybe we could use the money to pay back O'aka." Rikku actually did not seem to catch the point at all.

"But what if there's another seal in here? The last one almost bit my hand clean off." This was a dangerous road to be starting down; if she didn't watch herself, she'd probably keep getting into deeper and deeper trouble.

Rikku climbed up onto the bed to examine the safe. "Come on, aren't you curious?" She squinted at the combination lock. "Let's see ... Leblanc's probably dumb enough to use something obvious as the combination. Do you know her birthday?"

"Beats me."

"Wait, I've got it." She spun the dial a few times and then swung the safe door open. "November 7th. Presto."

"That's my birthday."

"Exactly."

The safe's contents included Leblanc's rainy day fund—a pile of mythril ingots—as well a small Ziploc bag containing what appeared to be several strands of Nooj's hair. They were still counting up the ingots when Logos rapped on the door. "Would you like your massage now, Milady?"

"Oh! Right!" Well, this job certainly had a few perks not associated with the Gullwings. "Um ... in a bit. I'm ... I'm having some private time with Noojie-Woojie." I want to shoot myself in the face.

"Yes, Milady."

She heard him walking away and immediately started to feel guilty. These poor goons, doing their boss's bidding from sunup to sundown! She forced herself to sit up and clapped her hands together. "Wait! On second thought, I'm treating you to lunch. We're holding a syndicate-wide picnic."

"I'm afraid you can't fool me that easily, Milady," Logos said through the door. "I'm still paying off the bill for the caviar you handed me at the last office party."

"And I'm handing out bonuses," Yuna quickly added. "I'll see you in the lobby in fifteen minutes."

Now that her masquerade was growing more elaborate, she raided Leblanc's voluminous closet in search of a proper disguise. While Rikku stuffed a couple of the mythril bricks in her pockets, Yuna donned Leblanc's favorite pink dress and fit a blonde wig over her hair. "How do I look?" she said with a glance in the mirror.
"Garish and horrible."

"Good, I think we're set, then!"

In her best swagger, she proceeded down the stairs to the lobby, where, per her command, Logos awaited her with Ormi. The Syndicate's receptionist was down on her knees, picking crumbs out of the carpet.

But, Yuna had forgotten one important piece of her disguise. "Hey, Boss," said Ormi, "why is one of your eyes green?"

"It's always been that way, you fool!" Yuna hastily tried to cover her tracks. "Didn't you know I'm part Al Bhed? Well, I am! Let's, uh, hear it for miscegnation!"

Ormi chortled. "Heheheh. That's when you throw someone out the window, right?"

Yuna was relieved he was moron enough not to consider the matter further.

They were approached by two goons in uniforms that didn't really fit. It took Yuna a moment to realize that they were actually Rin and Dona. "A Syndicate picnic, eh?" Rin said. "Where are we going?"

"Actually, we were hoping you could tell us that, Mr. Travel Agent."

"Well, a couple roots up from you, there's a great traditional Guado restaurant I always recommend. We could sample a little of the local cuisine—bark sandwiches, roasted caterpillars, that sort of thing. And they have fantastic flower wine last time I checked, too. The vintage is Year 7 of Braska's Calm."

"Yeah," said Rikku, "or we could just get some pizza or something."

Yuna considered these options. She could take advantage of the opportunity to explore the fascinating world around her and partake of faraway cities' immense ability to produce bizarre, disgusting food. Or she could help herself to a hearty plate of trans fat. Well, that was an easy call. "Let's go with the pizza."

Rin looked skeptical. "I thought you guys were going on a Heroic Quest to explore the unknown wilds outside Besaid."

"Yes, well, you can take the summoner out of Besaid, but you can't take the Besaid out of the summoner. I'm getting pretty sick of the unknown wilds, to be honest."

Rikku scurried off to order their pizza. The rest of the Syndicate, now including Rin and Dona among its ranks, filed to the fields just outside Guadosalam to start setting up their picnic blankets. While Ormi and Logos went to retrieve Leblanc's gun-equipped snakes from their cages—"just in case those meddling Dullwings show up"—Yuna made small talk with the goons and hoped that not knowing their names very well wouldn't blow her cover. But her poor knowledge of their names proved to be a problem, however, as Leblanc didn't know their names at all. "Tessa, was it?"

"Did I do something wrong? I'm sorry! Please don't fire me!"

Rikku hadn't returned with the pizza yet, so the goons milled around in the fields. After weeks of punishing workloads and mandatory overtime, none of them really knew what else to do and seemed rather uncomfortable with the time off. This had to be Leblanc's latest tactic to keep them on their toes, they decided. Just when they'd finally gotten to slavishly serving her, she put them all
on edge again by being nice. Truly, they could never comprehend their boss's whims.

Yuna wasn't having much fun either. She was already getting cold in Leblanc's dress, and while she thought running Syndicate for a day might be an entertaining diversion, truth be told, watching people cower before her was awfully depressing. Who wanted to be the person that everyone tried to get away from? Well, Leblanc did, apparently, but ... Yuna was glad she didn't have Leblanc's life.

Dona nudged Yuna. "Hey, that's your airship, right?"

She looked up. The Celsius was circling over the road from Guadosalam. Her heart leapt. Saved at last! The rest of the Gullwings must have figured out where their missing comrades had ended up. To think that an airship on which she'd lived for months could now suddenly seem like a miraculous lifeline from heaven. She raced at full speed up to the vehicle just as Paine appeared in the airlock.

Perhaps if Yuna had remembered whom she was disguised as, there might have been a chance for events to transpire differently. But, alas, she was so desperate to get on board and fly home that she jumped forward without thinking. "Paine! Thank goodness you -"

"Leblanc, Rikku's disappeared. We were wondering if you know anything about what might have happened to her. Yuna's really upset."

"I am —"

Ormì jogged up, dragging a cage full of snakes. "Sniper Vipers are malnourished and thirsting for Gullwing blood, Boss! Let's see Yuna show up and try to mess with us now, huh?"

"— never telling you what I did with her."

A second figure appeared in the airlock: a nearly flawless replica of Yuna. Even Yuna, who knew perfectly well who the real Yuna was, was almost taken in. "Well, if won't cooperate with us," said Yuna's doppelgänger, "we'll have to show you what happens to anyone who messes with the Dullwings. Er, I mean the Gullwings. Bring on the harmfest, Paine!"

"You mean hurtfest?"

"Right, that."

Yuna was still too shocked at what was going on to muster an appropriate defense of her true identity.

"Hand over Rikku!" Paine shouted. Weapons drawn, she and the fake Yuna rushed down the boarding ramp. Yuna backed away. She certainly had no desire to attack Paine, though she started to reconsider this after Paine hurled a rock of not-insignificant size at Yuna's head. "Ow!" Yuna squealed.

The assembled goons abandoned their lunches and obligingly sauntered forward to engage in what they already knew would be another losing battle. Yuna turned to see Paine grappling with Ormi and wasn't sure who she was supposed to be rooting for. Dona and Rin didn't seem too sure, either, and carefully backed away from the growing melee.

Not-Yuna pushed her way past the goons, proclaiming, "If Leblanc won't cooperate, we'll just have to confiscate all of the mythril in her safe! Er, if she happens to have any, that is. Just a guess."

Paine strode alongside her fake leader, clobbering goons with her sword to clear a path.
The real Yuna ran after them. "Guys! Guys! That's Leblanc! I'm Yuna!"

Paine glanced over her shoulder. "Yeah, nice try, Leblanc."

"What? No!"

Brother and Buddy, equipped with Machine Faction grenade launchers, raced out of the airship. Ormi let loose the Viper Snipers of war. Leblanc's snakes slithered out of the cages and sprayed the picnic ground and the side of Celsius with their implanted machine guns. As bullets flew indiscriminately, the goons beat a swift retreat out of harm's way.

"The Boss probably knew they were coming!" one lamented. "This was just a set-up to get us to fight them!"

"Some picnic! More like a human shield!"

The ravenous Viper Snipers, however, showed no sign of fatigue and continued blasting away at Syndicate goon and Gullwing alike. Soon the battlefield was dominated by writing snakes unleashing **A HAIL OF GUNFIRE** in all directions. As the bullets ricocheted off trees and battered the Celsius, Yuna dived into a bush for cover. "Sorry, boss!" Ormi shouted. "I think they got a little TOO hungry!"

Brother chased after the goons, kicking aside snakes. He seized one goon by his uniform and dragged him to the ground, bellowing, "You've kidnapped Rikku, haven't you?"

"Behind you!" Paine called as a Viper Sniper snuck up behind Brother. She hacked it in half before it fired.

Logos took aim at one of the Viper Snipers and shot it with his pistol before the assault of the other vipers forced him to hide behind a tree. Seeing the viper army advance up the ramp and into the Celsius, Paine abandoned her pursuit of the goons. She rushed back to the airship, slashing some snakes and kicking others aside. "I've had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking airship!"

"Fall back! Fall back! Back to Besaid!" Brother cried.

"But the mythril ingots—" Leblanc started to protest. Buddy seized her and dragged back towards the airship.

"Don't worry, Yuna, we'll get 'em back later," he said. "And Rikku, too."

The Gullwings rushed back onto the Celsius and slammed the airlock shut. As the airship lifted off, Yuna climbed out of the brush and rushed after it. "Paine! Brother! Buddy! Wait up; I'm the real Yuna! Rikku isn't kidnapped!" She watched with helpless frustration as her ticket back home lifted off into the sky with the wrong Yuna on board.

Defeated, she sat down in the dirt. While Ormi tried to round up all the snakes behind the cover of his giant shield, Logos strode up beside Yuna. "Doesn't look like they bought the ruse, Milady, but for the record, I think your Yuna impersonation has never been better."

"Thanks ... I think."

Logos nodded towards the angry mass that was just now returning from its retreat off the battlefield. "It appears the goons are revolting, however. And they're rebelling against you."
The goons were in a uproar. "C'mon, Boss, stop playing tricks on us!" one of the goons said as they stormed back inside. "If we're going to fight the Dullwings, just say so!"

"This is the last vacation we let you talk us into! Sorry, Boss, but I liked you better when you were bossy and self-centered!" They stormed back into Guadosalam.

Yuna threw up her hands in despair. To the Farplane Abyss with all of it. "IT'S NOT MY FAULT!" she shouted. She looked over to Dona. "...was this my fault?"

"Not really."

But, despite Dona's assurances, this felt like it was partially her fault. Leblanc had taken advantage of the real Yuna's disappearance into the wilderness, and now the poor Gullwings were working for the wrong sphere hunter. Great. "Back to Besaid Island," Brother had said their destination was. Whatever Leblanc planned to do when she got there, Yuna didn't want it to happen. She needed to get back to the island more than ever. But what was she going to now that her airship had taken off without her and her archnemesis had assumed her identity?

Rikku staggered out the front gates of Guadosalam, overloaded with a stack of pizza boxes and pop bottles that extended about two feet above her head. "Pizza's here! Sorry I took so long; the pizza place doesn't normally take mythril ingots ... wait, where did everyone go?" She set down the boxes and scanned the road, now bearing no trace of the conflict save for a few bullet-studded trees and some dead snakes.

It would be easy to flip out at Rikku for not being present to vouch for her non-kidnapping, but there was no way that anyone of them could have predicted that they'd be ambushed in the time it took to pick up a few pizzas. After checking to make sure that Ormi and Logos were out of earshot, she explained, "Rikku, I've just had my identity stolen. Spira now has a High Summoner with a fake accent, and I managed to have landed us out on the streets again." She sighed. "Hero, summoner, useless bum. That's what I want on my tombstone."

"Oh," Rikku said. "I actually got you flan and pineapple 'cause I thought that's what's you like." She opened one of the boxes. "Ewww, I didn't order one with anchovies, did you, Yunie?"

Yuna gratefully took the pizza and a can of pop. At least after two weeks of wandering in the wilderness, they had decent junk food again. But, as always seemed to be the case, just when she finally thought she was about to reach the finish line, it was once again cruelly jerked away. Now she had one more mission before she could rest her weary feet: Somehow she was going to have to get back to Besaid and prove to the Gullwings that she was the real Yuna.

"Anyway, sucks about Leblanc," Rikku said. She looked over at the stack of boxes. "On the bright side, I guess we have a year's supply of pizza all to ourselves now."

Ormi returned with the Viper Sniper cage. "Well, I think I've got all of the snakes rounded up and locked away. Those Dullwings are the worst, huh, Boss?"

After being on the receiving end of Paine's hurtfest, Yuna couldn't argue too much with him. Did Paine have any respect points they could take away? "Yeah," she said. "That's why I'm going back to Besaid to ... er, do something to them. I guess we'll have to catch a ship from Luca to get there."

"That's a good plan," Dona said. "But before we should leave, we should pay our respects at the Farplane."

"Okay." Yuna nodded her assessment.
Rikku, however, indicated her displeasure with a roll of her eyes. "You mean pay your respects at the Guado’s stupid laser light show. It’s not the Farplane, okay? It’s just in your head. Rin agrees with me; right, Rin?"

"I can’t criticize any attraction that brings in that many tourists," Rin demurred. "And they spend so much on votive candles and ouija boards."

Their minds set on visiting the Farplane, Yuna and Dona insistently marched up the path to the gates back into Guadosalam. Rikku trailed along for lack of anything better to do, but kept up her commentary track. "Do you want your horoscope, too? Ooh, let’s see ... I think your lucky color is mauve. You will meet someone with an A, E, I, O, or U in their name. A Serpentarius will give you a hickey."

"It’s important to me, OK?"

Rikku eventually ran out of quips and retreated outside to play Sphere Break with Rin. Yuna and Dona continued up the bark-encrusted trail to the Farplane. "I’m not sure whether I want to see him or not," Yuna said quietly as they passed through the gateway.

Dona looked puzzled. "Who? Seymour?"

"NO! Not Seymour. What's-his-face! You remember him, right? Blonde hair, Blitzball shorts, sword..."

"Oh, him 'him.' Wasn't he the star player of the Zanarkand Abes?"

Yuna was truly uncertain about whether she hoped "the newest guardian" would appear. It would make her happy to see him again, but were he on the Farplane, then she would know for sure that he was dead and not waiting in some unexplored corner of Spira where she might yet find him. But her doubts were made irrelevant when it was Auron's image that appeared to her instead.

Sir Auron! She was glad to see him. He, too, would have been a welcome guardian to have along; he probably could have pounded some honesty into Leblanc back there, or at least kept the goons in line.

Dona spoke, "If you pour a libation, you might be able to speak with him."

"Really?" Yuna had never heard of this, but, after being excommunicated, she probably hadn’t devoted as much attention the lore of Yevon as Dona had.

"The liquid of the living can loose the tongues of the dead, or so the saying goes. I know that travellers often bring wine to the Farplane in hopes of speaking with their departed loved ones."

"Well, I didn't order the wine, but..." Yuna poured out some of her pop on the memorial.

Auron’s image jerked into sudden animation, his limbs all shaking and twitching. "H-h-h-hello, Y-Yuna."

"Sir Auron!" Yuna gasped. Who would have thought that pop could raise the dead? "You look ... animated."

Auron nodded. "I'm k-kind of w-w-wound up; I have a b-bad reaction to c-c-c-caffeine!!!!" With his twitching arm, he attempted to tap his sake jug and ended up pounding it about ten times. "U-u-usually one uses w-wi-wine, Yuna!!!"
"I didn't have any; I'm sorry," Yuna said.

"At l-l-l-east it was-s-s-n't Red Bu-Bu-Bu-Bull!" His head kept nodding as he spoke, and his good eye blinked violently.

"Sir Auron, someone's impersonating me. How can I get my name back?"

"Y-you need to .... t-trap .... mo-monster—" Auron's image dimmed and pyreflies circled around him. His head slumped forward, as if he was beginning to fall back into the long, deep sleep of death.

"You're breaking up; I can't hear you." She dumped the rest of the pop on the ground.

That woke him up. His head jerked back up and he shouted out, "You're going to the M-Moonflow and you're going to Djose and Mushroom Rock and the Mi'ihen Highroad and L-Luca and then you're going to Besaid to take back the island, YEAH! That is to say ... I f-f-foresee many more t-travels in your f-future!!!!" He sighed. "Curses, I'm w-w-wired!!!!"

More travels? Years after Yunalesca, her life still seemed to consist of one pilgrimage after another. Whatever Heroic Deeds she might accomplish, Spira always found another unmet need, another mission to throw at her. There was always one more hill to climb, one more journey to undertake, and miles to go before she crashed on the couch. She wondered whether one day she might yet accomplish everything demanded of her and go to sleep without a to-do list still running through her head. Oh, well. Even if it meant pilgrimages from now until she was 80, she had no intention of abandoning the people she loved in their hour of need—or, as it seemed to be turning out, an entire week of need. She did want to be home. But until then...

"Sp-Sp-Spira needs you, Y-Yuna!!!"

She nodded. "I understand."

"I m-m-m-must return to Hades now!!" Auron's leg kicked out violently. "N-n-next time, p-p-pour me a f-f-f-forty instead, okay?" He vanished into a cloud of pyreflies. Yuna sighed. She felt bad for putting him through that, but at least she knew what lay ahead of her now.

Dona returned from the other side of the cliff, where, with the assistance of Leblanc's wine cellar, she had been speaking with her less-caffeinated sister. "Thank you," Yuna said to Dona. "I'm glad I was able to speak with Sir Auron again."

They headed outside to where Rikku and Rin were waiting with the two remaining goons. During Yuna's absence, Rikku had been boxing up and organizing the month's worth of leftover pizza. "Hey, we're going to have some added muscle," Rikku announced with a nod towards Ormi and Logos. "I promised them free pizza if they helped us get to Besaid."

"Yeah, that pizza was good," Ormi said. "I'll even pull the rickshaw again for some of that stuff."

"Pull the rickshaw?" Yuna suddenly wanted to hug them for their loyalty, no matter how misguided it was. "No, no. No rickshaw."

Dona continued down the trail from Guadosalam to stand with them. "I need to get back to Kilika so I can apologize to Barthello, so I might as well tag along as far as Luca."
They looked over at the last potential member of the party. Rin shrugged. "I'm starting to discover that the best to find Spira's most superlative things might just be to follow you girls around. It seems like adventure is never away from you two."

Yuna wasn't too thrilled to admit it, but he had to be right about that. She gathered up her pack and faced the wilderness, the trail to the Moonflow, and her next adventure.

"Well," she said, "I guess the road beckons again."
Intermission

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, among the Gullwings...

Coincidentally, at the very moment that Yuna had been attempting to convince Ormi and Logos that she was Leblanc pretending to be Yuna, Leblanc was trying to convince Paine that she was Yuna pretending to be Leblanc. This endeavor proved to be somewhat difficult, as Leblanc's perceptions of what life as Yuna was like only rarely coincided with reality. "Who told YOU you could fly the airship?" she raged as she dragged Buddy legs-first out of the pilot's seat. "That's my chair!"

Yuna had, in fact, never sat in the chair in question.

None of the Gullwings were really sure what had gotten into Yuna, so they did not put up a fight. "So, gang, time to have some more wacky Gullwing adventures, huh?" she declared as she fumbled at the controls. "I don't remember how to go faster; what do I do to go faster?"

Buddy gently directed her attention to the throttle.

Cruising across Spira, Leblanc recounted her new identity's greatest hits collection. Finally, she had the record of heroic exploits and universal adoration she'd always dreamed of. Did it really matter if it was in someone else's name? "Hey, guys, remember that time I jumped off the roof in Bevelle right into my helicopter?"

Paine peered over the back of the chair. "You jumped onto an Aeon, and if you don't veer left in the approximately the next twenty seconds, we're going to hit Djose Temple."

They hit the temple.

As the airship jolted to a halt amidst the sounds of crunching metal beneath them, Leblanc sputtered. "You didn't see that!" Unfortunately, the collision proved rather difficult to ignore, especially when the floor spat out a blast of steam and the lights went out in the cockpit. Ruffled, she protested further, "I would have done fine if I hadn't been distracted by all you back-seat pilots! I don't recall authorizing anyone to leave their stations! Punch back in before I give you ... the heel!"

"Geez, Yuna, how about cooling down?" Buddy said. "I know you're upset, but we need to concentrate on finding Rikku. Want us to handle things for a while?"

"Fine, then," Leblanc huffed as she stormed for the elevator. "Sorry for raining on your perfect flight school parade, Maverick. I'll be in my 'chambre' waiting for my massage. Don't forget!"

"Not it," Buddy quickly called.

"Yesh, I believabibble it ish Mish Paine'sh turn," Barkeep spoke up.

Brother sprung up. "I shall give Yuna the best massage of all time!" While the other Gullwings found "Yuna's" recent erratic behavior troubling, Brother considered it his long overdue lucky
twist of fate. He was only too happy to indulge Yuna's sudden desire for daily massages, even if she kept inexplicably mumbling about Nooj through all of them.

"Wait a second," Paine said. "I know only one person who pronounces 'chambre' like that, and it's not Yuna."

Leblanc, in a rare of moment in foresight and good sense, had actually prepared an alibi. She reversed course and marched back down from the elevator. "Yeah. I'm, er, working on my Leblanc impersonation so we can infiltrate the Syndicate."

"Hey, good thinking."

*These Dullwings wouldn't understand subtlety if it were written in all caps,* Leblanc congratulated herself. "We've got to get to the bottom of Leblanc's plans," she said. "I'm sure she knows what happened to that missing Al Bhed girl."

"You mean Rikku?"

Leblanc snapped her fingers. "Right, right, Rikku, that was her name. But, see, I'm pretending I'm Leblanc, so I have to act like I don't know her name."

Paine raised an eyebrow. "Wow, you're sure getting into this whole Leblanc thing."

"I've got to be convincing; there's no flies on the Syndicate. The Gullwings might only be able to outsmart them at the top of our game."

"They're not that smart, Yuna ... actually, they're pretty stupid."

"NO, THEY'RE NOT!"

Taken aback at first, Paine quickly rationalized this unusual behavior. "Well, I suppose being defensive is pretty key to acting like Leblanc. All right, suit yourself."
A fork in the Moonflow tests Yuna and Rikku's friendship.

I thought we'd show that friendship could be stronger than the crossroads devil
But I thought I heard the tollman saying,
"I'll take that thing you got from praying"

The next day, Yuna and her friends set out from Guadosalam accompanied by Logos and Ormi, who were still under the impression they were on an undercover mission with their boss. Equipped with Auron's words and a nearly limitless supply of leftover pizza, Yuna felt ready for a fresh start. They might have another journey to make, but they'd handle this one the right way. And, they wouldn't be eating flan all the time.

Their adventure along the trail of dominoes did not last long, however, before they encountered a new obstacle. "Ze shoopuf is under ze weazzer wiz ze shleeping shickness," the Hypello on duty at the Moonflow with a sad shake of his head. "It waz breazzed on by ze Malboro. Zere is no way across the ribibiver."

Rikku laughed. "Hey, say that again."

"Ze shoopuf is under ze weazzer with ze shleeping shickness?"

"Tee hee hee."

"Well, there isn't another one?" asked Yuna. "Like a shoopuf undershtudy?"

The Hypello's head jerked into another miserable shake. "It ish imposhibibble, Mish Leblanc. When ze one shoopuf getsh shick, ze whole shtable catchez ze shickness."

That sounded pretty final, but what were they supposed to do now? "We need to get home!" Yuna protested. "I mean, uh, we need to invade the headquarters of those annoying Dullwings!"

"Zere will be a new shoopuf arribibbing from ze Bevelle zoo tomorrow afternoon."

"No, that's too late!"

Logos stepped up beside Yuna to speak directly into her ear. "Might I suggest, Milady, that we requisition your last-resort raft? The one you keep in the shack to the west?"

"Oh! Yes! Of course!" As excited as she was to hear about this, she couldn't let on that she didn't already know about it. It was a good thing Leblanc didn't quite have it all together herself, or Yuna's follies would have quickly exposed her. "I was about to suggest that. You lead the way there. There might be dangerous snakes in the forest or ... or, uh, Ents."

A short distance into the forest, to the west of the Highroad, a run-down shack abutted the Moonflow. Yuna unlocked the chain-link fence with Leblanc's key ring, and they retrieved the last-resort raft from the shack. It was six yards square and consisted of a metal platform held aloft
by pontoons. They carried it back to the shoopuf dock.

The whole group—Yuna, Rikku, Rin, Dona, Ormi, Logos, and the Syndicate's Hypello guide—climbed aboard, luggage in hand. The Hypello passed out oars to everyone except his "Boss," who surprised by the Syndicate by immediately taking Logos's oar. "Oh, I don't mind rowing," she said. "Take a break."

"I daresay, Milady, you haven't been reading *The Power of Yes*, have you? You don't want the Syndicate to think you've been taking lessons from the Gullwings, do you?" He passed the oar back to her and firmly pressed it into her hands.

The Hypello pushed the raft into the water and they pulled away from the shore. As soon as the raft hit the water, something metal began clanking from beneath their platform, as if a part wasn't attached properly or was about to fall apart. *No wonder this is a last-resort raft.*

They started off up the Moonflow towards Djose Temple. The padding went extremely slowly; Yuna churned her arms over and over only to see the scenery creep by slower than she could have imagined possible. This was awful! They'd be stuck out here on the river for hours, and she hated to think about what Leblanc was putting the Gullwings through in the mean time. Why couldn't the shoopuf have just been healthy?

Rikku was even more bored. "Heeeey, I know! Let's play a 'guess the place' game. I'll think of a place, and you have to guess what it is."

"Okay! Um ... is it a city?"

"No."

"Is it a river?"

"Yeah."

"The Moonflow?"

Rikku shrugged in defeat. "*You're too good, Yunie.*"

Yuna continued to haul on her paddle with all her strength—which was about 163 points' worth, or 183 with a Power Wrist equipped—but the raft still barely budged. It was only then that she looked around and realized that the Hypello and Ormi sat facing the rest of the group and were hence paddling in the opposite direction. "Wait a second! You're going the wrong way! You're paddling downstream; we're supposed to be going *upstream!*"

"Yesh, thish raft iz very tough to operatabbble," the Hypello mumbled. "We do tend to have a few minor d-difficulties."

"Minor difficulties?" Dona snorted. "You're going completely the wrong direction!"

"Don't worry; we'll get there."

The Hypello continued hauling away with his oar, and the raft inch ed westwards through the forests of Guadosalam. In a confused, angry chorus, the passengers tried in vain to get through to him. "We're going the *wrong way!*" Rikku shouted.

"We don't sheem to be going anywhere," the Hypello observed. "Let me observabibble my map." He set down his oar and took out a map of the region from his gear.
While the Hypello was reviewing his directions, one of the pontoons disengaged with a loud clunk, floated away from the raft, and disappeared down the river with the passengers looking on in horror. Rikku covered her face. "Oh my God. This is the worst vacation ever. I'm going to cut open Leblanc's forehead with a roofing shingle."

Yuna dipped her feet in the water, took a deep breath, and counted to thirty so as to resist screaming. "I wish we were back in Besaid," she said. "Once we're back home, I'm never leaving again. What were we ever thinking traipsing off to Zanarkand without CommSpheres or maps?"

"You tell me, Yunie," Rikku said. "You tell me."

With the Hypello busy checking his map instead of paddling, the raft had finally started to move the direction Yuna and Rikku actually wanted to go: upstream. But they must have gotten far off course along the way; Yuna, despite her frequent travels across the Moonflow, did not recognize any of the scenery around them. Meanwhile, the Hypello soon concluded that, "We're on the right track," and resumed paddling downstream. A Machine Faction motorboat sped out of the morning fog and swerved at the last moment to avoid hitting them. Apparently untroubled by the near collision, the Hypello continued trying to paddle the wrong way. "Boy, lotsh of bad�avigatorsh out here, yes?"

Rikku hit him over the head with her paddle and knocked him out. "One less now," she muttered.

"I would have given him the Heel a long time ago," Logos said. "Getting soft, Milady?"

"I suppose."

Finally, they were on their way upstream. The fog, however, was headed that way too, and no sooner had they reached full speed than did they find themselves unable to see more than a few feet in any direction. Rin sighed. "Looks like we've run into the infamous Misty Bend. I've heard the fog around the Moonflow can get pretty bad in some parts. We'll have to be very careful not to miss the temple."

"Great." Rikku climbed up on Yuna's shoulders to look around. "Okay, I don't think we're to Djose. Keep rowing, guys."

Despite Rikku's lookout efforts, the fog grew even more difficult to navigate. Soon, it was thick enough that they could barely see from one side of the raft to the other. Yuna picked up the raft's CommSphere and tried to radio the rest of the Syndicate. "Hello? Anyone there? We're in Misty Bend and it's, uh, full of mist. Send help." But the CommSphere's screen returned only static from the haze around them.

"We've got to pull into shore," Rin said. He pulled the raft up to the bank of the Moonflow and gently brought it to a stop on a sandy patch. "It's too dangerous rowing through this. I already lost my yacht on this trip..."

Yuna stood up. "All right. I'll take have a look around to see if I can figure out where we are." What was one more mission when they were already on a Heroic Quest? She stepped off the raft onto the far shore of the river. "Rikku, you coming?"

"Sure." Rikku had just been breaking out the leftover pizza, but she boxed it up again, stowed her unfinished sudoku under the toolbox, and hopped onto the shore. Almost immediately inland from the river, the trees closed intro a thick forest, which continued as far as they could see. "Boy, I don't see the dominoes around here at all. We must be way off the track."
"Well, if we just follow the Moonflow east, we should find the road to Djose, right?"

Rikku frowned. "Djose is actually way south from the Moonflow, Yunie; we should probably go that way."

"Southeast, then?" Yuna suggested. She started to march into the brush ahead of them.

Rikku raced after her. "Seriously, Yunie, all we have to do is go straight south and we'll hit the Djose Highroad."

Yuna stopped. After everything that had happened over these past few weeks, she just wanted this dumb adventure to be over, and she didn't have the patience for any more obstructions. "No, Rikku. I went through here on my pilgrimage; I know the way."

Rikku folded her arms. "You know, when I gave you that book, I didn't want you to start saying no to me." She hopped up on a rock and scanned the area. "Trust me; I learned how to do this in Moogle Scouts. You have to, um, triangulate the sun and the angle of Mt. Gagazet and, uh... I think there should be a stream here. Where did it go?"

"Great, we're lost."

"You're lost," Rikku said. "I know exactly where we are, and we should go south." She set off with the sunlight to her right, hoping that this would force Yuna to tag along. But when Yuna refused to budge, Rikku abandoned this venture and returned to the rock.

"If we go south," Yuna said, "we'll be marching right into the wilderness, where there's fiends and no trails and probably some colony of rabid raccoons. Let's stick to following the Moonflow."

That was the straw that broke the chocobo's back. Rikku had had it. "Why are you always telling me what to do? Just because you're the legendary hero doesn't mean other people's opinions don't count, you know. I'm so sick of you acting like the bigshot leader all the time."

"Rikku, you've been complaining non-stop since we left on vacation. Just cool it, OK?"

"Yeah, well, you know what, Yunie? This whole stupid trip is your fault. If you'd brought your CommSphere, we could have sent Pops a free text message as soon as we got lost and right now we'd be eating real food while Leblanc was still back in Guadosalam waiting for her massage. Instead, you had to go and be Miss In-Touch-with-Nature. I hope you and all your magical squirrel pals are happy."

"Look, there's no point blaming each other; we're in this together."

"Yeah, in this together because you were a poop-head. Why don't you go back to Guadosalam and have more ridiculous imaginary conversations with dead people? I'm going on to Besaid by myself, and I'm not telling Brother and Buddy where to find you, either. Hmph." She marched off into the brush without even a glance over her shoulder.

Yuna stamped her foot. "Rikku!" she called.

But Rikku had already made up her mind. Everything was Yunie's fault and she was so sick of putting up with her cousin's crap. She stormed southward, shoving aside tree branches and kicking rabid raccoons, following what she was certain was the correct route to Djose Temple.

It was only several hours later, after she'd burned off all her frustration, when she realized that, while not everyone who wandered was lost, she certainly was. She was supposed to have reached
the Highroad hours ago, and here she was with nothing but trees in all directions. She could see neither Waffle House nor sign of civilization anywhere. And hadn't she already passed by that stump twice now?

There was only one course of action. She took her precious string collection out of her utility belt. She hated to risk parting with her chance at fleeting celebrity and a paltry cash reward, but she didn't think she was getting out without some extra assistance. She began laying the string on the ground as she marched forward. It hurt to watch her piece of rare behemoth-gnawed rope fall into the dirt—she remembered picking that one up in the Omega Ruins—but at least now she knew where she was going.

After ten minutes of walking straight ahead, she was stunned to find herself again staring at the first piece of string she'd set down. It was then that it finally hit her: This wasn't an ordinary, laws-of-geometry-obeying forest she was wandering through. This was a Lost Woods.

Well, that settled it. There was no getting out of this non-Euclidean hell until a rescue team showed up with flares and a strategy guide. She sat down on an uncomfortable rock, picked up a stick, and started sketching herself a sudoku puzzle in the dirt. After she completed that one, she started another one that carried her into the evening.

She was just starting to wonder where she was going to sleep that night and how long her supply of Spongebob Squarepants fruit snacks would hold out—she'd left all the pizza on the raft—when the ground shuddered with the force of a sudden impact.

"FEE FI FO FED, I SMELL THE BLOOD OF AN AL BHED!"

Rikku sprung up. It was a monster! A monster was out to get her! Her head darted back and forth, searching for any sign of the direction from which this threat was coming. The ground shook again.

"FUM FO FI FEE, I HAVE TEN MILLION HP."

Amongst the trees a large light appeared several feets off the ground, swaying back and forth and steadily moving towards her.

Rikku screamed and fled. How was she was going to get away, especially in a Lost Woods where everything was connected together funny? Maybe she could climb a tree. But what if it was some kind of flying ghost or Wizard of Baaj-type monkey monster that could snatch her right out of the air? No, better stick to the ground and run as fast as she could.

"FO FEE FI FAX, I'M IMMUNE TO ALL STATUS ATTACKS."

She heard branches crashing down and looked over her shoulder. Amongst the fallen trees marched a giant Tonberry, slashing trunks down with single swipes of its tremendous knife. The creature swung its lantern as it marched, casting portions of the forest into sudden light and then into darkness again.

As she stumbled up to the banks of the Moonflow, Rikku gave up on escape—you could never run from these sorts of enemies, anyway—and resolved to fight. But at three times her size and armed with a colossal knife, this Tonberry could float like a butterfly and sting like a howitzer.

"FI FEE FO FINE, I'M LEVEL ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE."

Out of the woods rushed Yuna astride a chocobo. She vaulted from the chocobo's back and, clutching the fishing pole in one hand, seized the folds of the Tonberry's robe with the other. Ten feet above the ground, she swayed back and forth as the Tonberry marched through the forest. Her
feet swung back and forth as she struggled to plant them on the Tonberry's side and attain a firmer position. "Rikku! Where do I stab this guy? Have you found any weakpoints?"

"Uh... if he opens his mouth and there's a glowing spot inside, try hitting that."

The Tonberry seemed to know what they were thinking. "FO FI FEE FICE, I RESIST FIRE, THUNDER, AND ICE."

Yuna scrambled further up the Tonberry's back, stopping every so often to jab at it with her fishing pole. None of her blows penetrated the Tonberry's leather-like skin or even seemed to irk the beast in the slightest. Maybe if they could just keep him talking long enough, she thought, he'd spill the dirt about his Achilles' heel. This guy did seem pretty talkative for a Tonberry. In fact, she couldn't remember ever hearing a Tonberry speak before, Paine notwithstanding. (And Paine didn't do it that much, either.)

"FO FI FUM FEE, EVEN KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND WON'T KILL ME."

Rikku hurled a rock at the Tonberry's head. "Oh, shut your trap, you big green dummy."

That was enough to jog Yuna's memory. Auron's words came back to her. "Trap the monster! That's it!" She slid down the Tonberry's back to the ground and went about her new plan of attack. While Rikku distracted the Tonberry, Yuna took the fishing line off Wakka's fishing pole and tied it around the trunk of one tree, then another. The girls then gathered behind their trap, waving their arms and taunting the monster. "Hey, come get us, Mr. Jolly Green Giant!"

"Your mother wears Genji Gloves!"

"Tonberry? More like Dingleberry!"

"Nice pug nose you have there!"

Blind to the cord stretched between the trees, the enraged Tonberry rushed them. Just as they'd intended, it tripped over the fishing line and toppled forward. Yuna and Rikku sprung to the side. The monster crashed facefirst to the ground between them. It did not move.

Yuna gathered up the fishing rod and surveyed her handiwork. "Well? Any rare drops?"

But then the Tonberry stirred again and started to rise. Taking the first action that came to mind, Yuna and Rikku hurled themselves on top of the beast to pin it to the ground. One gigantic green arm reached for the lantern; Rikku shifted her weight to pin the arm and kicked the lantern out of reach.

Stymied, the Tonberry twitched and disappeared into a haze of light, to be replaced seconds later by a masked man. Before the girls could adjust their grip, the man wriggled free and stumbled to his feet.

"I am your most fearsome nemesis!" the masked man declared. "Tremble before me, for I can read your minds!" He pivoted and pointed his finger at Yuna. "You! Yuna, is it? I can see into what you are thinking at this very minute. You're wishing you were back in Besaid ... you miss That Guy ... you like Castlevania ... you hope no one ever finds out that you actually thought the dolphin's accent was pretty sexy."

Yuna turned red. "What! That's not true at all! You lie!"

He turned to Rikku. "And you! Your deepest thoughts are ... uh, searching ... searching ... searching
But while he was still concentrating, Rikku hit him with her left hook and shoved him to the ground. "Gullwing Defense Formation!" she shouted. The girls jumped on top of him again.

The masked man disappeared into another flash of light, this time to be replaced by a black mage. Yuna and Rikku kept sitting on him. "Whatever kind of shapeshifting monster you are, we're not scared," Rikku said. "We've already beat up way tougher bad guys like Yunalesca and Yu Yevon, so if you think you can intimidate us, you're dead wrong."

"Yu Yevon wasn't tough," Yuna protested. "We couldn't die during that fight, remember?"

"Shhh! I'm trying to scare him!"

But the creature seemed to have gotten the message anyway. Defeated, it stopped squirming and cycled through a Dark Knight, a fur-draped berserker, and a samurai until at last Yuna and Rikku found themselves sitting on a familiar long-haired man in blue robes. Yuna looked down. "Isaaru? Is that you again?"

Isaaru sighed. "I suppose 'no' wouldn't be a very good answer, would it?"

Rikku was not so intimidated by this "creature" now; in fact, she thought it deserved a good telling-off. But at least this meant Rin hadn't blown his chance to photograph the Tallest Tonberry. "So, where did you end up with our Mascot Dressphere?"

"I bought it from some woman in Besaid selling discount Dresspheres. I just thought it would be fun to try out. Can you stop sitting on me?"

Rikku stood up and allowed Isaaru to rise, but she was still rather cross. "You scared me half to death. I thought you were going to eat me. That already happened to us once this vacation, you know."

"Isaaru, I know you didn't mean any harm," Yuna said, "but we had to get that Psychic Dressphere specially imported. Can we have it back?"

Isaaru looked disappointed, but he knew didn't have any justification for keeping stolen goods and so offered up his Garment Grid. Rikku took it. "Heeeeyyyyy ... it's Paine's Font of Power grid. With the serial number scratched off." She gave an irritated snort.

Looking guilty, Isaaru fished in the pocket of his robes and produced a second Garment Grid. "And I'd bought this one for Maroda, but if it's yours..."

Was there anything of hers that Leblanc wouldn't try to get her hands on? But Yuna was happy to have the Grids back. At least now if they encountered any more ex-Summoners-cum-giant-monsters, they'd be well equipped. Of course, with Dona already in their entourage, the possibility of that happening seemed pretty low, but you never knew what kind of trickery Father Zuke might get up to.

Now that the monster threat had ended, Rikku seated herself again. "How did you know I was here, Yunie? I thought you were going south."

"I know, but Rin told me there was a Lost Woods this way, so I came back. I was worried about
Rikku felt the terrible guilt of receiving kindness she did not believe her actions merited. "Oh, Yunie, you're the best," she said with a shamefaced gaze down at her toes. "I'm sorry for being such a jerk to you. You're right at least 40% of the time."

Yuna hugged her. "It's okay. That's what friends are for. I don't know where I'd be without you. You got us out of Bismarck's stomach, right?"

Rikku looked at the assorted pieces of string criss-crossing the forest floor. "Yeah ... but how do we get out of here?"

Isaaru coughed. "You have to go east until you find the tree with two falcons in it, then double-back to the mossy rock. Turn around three times, touch your ear, and then follow the stumps to Dead Muppet's Bend. Take a right from there, and you'll get back to the river."

"You had to use the Ear Trumpet of Heracles to talk to the owls for directions," he added in a whisper.

"Oh, really?" Yuna turned to Rikku. "See, I told you we should have gotten that ear trumpet."

"Now, I gave you two back your Garment Grids and told you how to get out of the forest, so please don't press charges, OK?" Isaaru said.

"Sure, all right."

Rikku rolled her eyes. "Frailty, thy name is Yuna."

But Rikku wasn't inclined to hold a grudge, either, after Isaaru's directions led them out of the lost woods. The trail from the Fozzy-shaped skeleton led them directly down to the bank of the Moonflow. Free of the fog they'd encountered further up the river, the river here looked calm and clear. And, at their feet, a trail of fallen dominoes lined the riverbank. They were back on the correct road. Yuna stretched out her arms behind her back. "We made it!"

"I'm really starting to be glad for those dominoes." Rikku sat down on the bank to rest. She tapped her heels idly against the dirt and gazed down into the water. With night falling, it was hard to see too well, but she thought the river bed upstream held some collapsed pillars from that sunken city, the one Wakka had once accused of using too many machina and invoking Sin's wrath. "Heeeyyyy ... isn't this about where I ambushed you on your pilgrimage?" She grinned. "Remember? I grabbed you with my submersible machina. Yanked you right off the shoopuf."

"That hurt," Yuna said with a laugh. "But memories, like the Guados' disgusting flower wine, improved with age and became treasured emblems of a life well lived. She was glad these disasters happened to her; adventuring would be so dull if they didn't."

"And then I held you underwater while Wakka and what's-his-face beat the crap out of me. Good times."

"When you say 'what's-his-face,' you mean that guy?"

"If I by 'that guy,' you mean the newest guardian a.k.a. the star player of the Zanarkand Abes, then yes," Rikku said. "And then on the other side, that was where I became one of your guardians! The newest newest guardian."

"What I mostly remember about the Moonflow was riding ze shoopuf back and forth across the river trying to sell all those tickets for Tobli. Boy, did he have a lot of errands for us."
Rikku laughed. "Hey, that one was worth it. I got to rock out on stage."

"I think he made us fend off bandits, too. Wasn't that how we got one of our Dresspheres?"

"Yep, pretty sure."

Rikku fell silent for a moment, struck by how much history lived in just this one place. Funny how it was always her and Yuna. She could pick practically any place in Spira and think of five different stories about what they'd done there. What had she been thinking, running off to try to explore the forest all alone? An adventure wasn't an adventure unless she and Cousin Yunie were raising hell together. "Gosh," she said, "it seems like the fun never stops on the Moonflow."

Yuna sat down beside her. "Yeah. And don't forget 'disappeared into Lost Woods, fought Isaaru in a Tonberry suit,'" she added with a smile.

"And sat on him." Rikku grinned.

While Yuna and Rikku reminisced, the raft advanced into view with Dona, Ormi, and Logos rowing hard. Rin stood in the center of the vessel and continually checked their position against both the Hypello's map and a hand-drawn one of his own design. Upon seeing their leaders, he had the crew bring the raft to shore beside them. "Guess what, Yuna? I scouted around some more on the river. I know where we are now."

"And...?"

He jerked a thumb towards the last light of the sun. "The temple's back to the west."

"West?" Yuna and Rikku both exclaimed.

"Yep. Looks like we actually followed the Moonflow a little too far and overshot the Temple. That's why we couldn't find it; we'll have to turn around and go back the way we came."

The girls looked at each other. "Okay, I was wrong."

"Well, so was I."

"I was MORE wrong, 'cause I said east."

"You were NOT. I was just as wrong as —"

Rin waved his hands. "Ladies, ladies. Let's not start that again, shall we? It's a long way to Djose Temple and we'd best be on our way."

"You're right," Rikku said. She hooked her arm around Yuna's neck. "No more arguing. Best friends forever, right, Yunie?"

"Best friends forever."
Cyclops

Chapter Summary

Yuna discovers that her impostor reached Djose Temple before she did—and wreaked havoc in the process.

We're running just a little late
But we're on way

When they finally arrived at Djose Temple the next day, half the roof was missing, smoke was pouring out of a second story window, and three armored hovers were parked in a semi-circle around the front gate. After another minor disaster in the morning—their tent had somehow fallen in the river—this was not what Yuna wanted to see. "This doesn't bode well," she murmured as they threaded their way through the hovers. Then again, she'd never really heard of anything boding successfully. She gestured towards Ormi and Logos and whispered to Dona, "Can you stay here with Tweedledum and Tweedledee? I think that I might have to go in as myself here."

Yuna used her Garment Grid to shift back to her normal clothes just as Nhadala emerged from the front door. Yuna, Rikku, and Rin immediately ambushed her with her questions. "Er ... I wasn't just here, was I?" Yuna said.

Evidently she had been. "You've got a lot of nerve, coming back here after what you did yesterday!" Nhadala snapped. "What more do you want from us?"

"Oh, I was, was I? I'm sorry we didn't make it here before I did. Where did I go?"

"Pardon me?"

Yuna realized she must be making very little sense and realized an explanation was in order. She glanced over her shoulder. Ormi and Logos were busy bickering over who was on massage duty, so she was safe in revealing her true identity. "Don't tell those two guys about it, but Leblanc's going around masquerading as me. So whatever I did, it wasn't really me; it was Leblanc."

"Aha." Nhadala handed Yuna the day's edition of the Ogopogo Examiner. "Does that explain this, too?"

Yuna stared at the headline. "YUNA DECLARES MONTH-LONG HOLIDAY HONORING HERSELF - Taxes raised, ground broken for massage parlor on 6th day of martial law in Besaid."

"I don't believe it," she gasped. "Who does she think she is?"

"You, apparently."

"Well, she isn't doing a very good job at it," Yuna huffed. She took the paper and waved it at Rikku. "Look at this!"

"Yeah, I see. Is there a sudoku in that paper? Can I do it?"

Yuna snorted and handed the paper over.
Rikku opened it. "Ooh, this one's 'VERY HARD.'" She grinned. "I think I'm up to it."

Some charred shingles fell at their feet. Yuna craned her head up at the temple's unexpected new sunroof. "So what did Leblanc do here? Or do I even want to know?"

"Well, everything went down yesterday just after I flew in from Bikanel. I was supposed to be reporting to Gippal on the parts we'd dug up for our latest experiment."

"This sounds ominous already," Rin said. "I heard your last experiment chainsawed the Creator just to watch Him go to pieces."

"This one's an impenetrable security system; it wasn't supposed to be anything dangerous! But, truth be told, things had been going so badly with the digging, I'd actually been planning on requesting a transfer to a completely different project. I've been bitten by a Zu twice in the last month, and Benzo was seduced by some cactuar and ran off with all of our cash on hand. She lives across the border, too, so we can't touch her.

"Anyway, when I get to the temple, there's an entire airship jammed awkwardly where half the roof used to be. At first I think we're being invaded, right? So I race inside and the temple is in lockdown. See, when we first bought the place, we kept the whole Cloister of Trials intact in case we ever needed it to lock someone out of the temple. First good thing to come out of Yevon.

"Gippal comes out of his office and tells me that they'd trapped the invaders on the second floor, in the Cloister. We figure it's either common thieves or tax collectors, but we check the security cameras and, lo and behold, it's Yuna and Paine. Of course, I figure Yuna would solve the Cloister puzzles lickety-split, having been through the temple once before, but, no, she's looking completely helpless and confused. I guess we probably should have made the connection right then, especially once she started complaining that all the signs were written 'in Jibber-Jabber.'

"She spends all of thirty seconds grabbing spheres and randomly stuffing them back into the alcoves and looking pretty pissed about the whole thing before she gives up. 'I don't know how to do this!' she shouts, throws down her spheres, and kicks over the sphere pedestal. It breaks one of the electric lines running through the floor. Sparks start shooting everywhere and the elevator starts going up and down randomly. 'PAINE! Stop this crazy thing!' she shouts.

"Well, keeping them locked in the Cloister seemed less important than making sure the whole temple didn't burn down in an electrical fire, so we power off the Cloister and rush inside. Buddy and Brother show up about this time with their usual pitch, but we pretty much ignore them. I mean, friendly neighborhood Gullwings? More like neighborhood total assholes, really.

"Paine tries to apologize to us and says, 'Yuna isn't usually this stupid,' and Yuna starts screaming at her and ran off up the stairs. Of course, she'd just taken off half our roof, so we weren't about to let her off the hook without at least getting her insurance. Gippal and I turn the whole temple upside-down looking for her. We peek behind all the furniture, open every secret compartment, check every cardboard box. No sign of her anywhere. Eventually, I quit the search because I need to use the restroom. Now, that was the one room we hadn't checked, because we figured only a complete idiot would think of a hiding place as obvious as a bathroom stall, right? Well, sure enough, someone's locked herself into in the middle stall and is sobbing hysterically. 'Who's there?' I call.

"'Nobody! Go away!'

"Somehow, that wasn't too convincing. 'I guess if Nobody's in there, then it's OK for me to open the door.' I kick the stall open and there's Spira's idol bawling into a roll of toilet paper. As I said,
I'd been having a rough time of things lately, too, so I felt pretty sympathetic and without thinking about it, I hand her some of the paper I was carrying around so she can blow her nose.

"But I guess she was embarassed, because the second she sees it's me, she flips out. 'Why does everyone keep chasing me?' she yells. 'I'm the High Summoner; aren't you supposed to worship me?' She flings the toilet paper in my face and runs out of the bathroom. And she's halfway to the stairs before I realize the paper I gave her was the blueprints for the new experiment. I try to stop her, yelling, 'Stop! Wait! I need that back!' Of course, as soon as she realizes she has something valuable, she takes off. Gippal chases after her, and that's when Leblanc squirts the most horrid perfume I've ever smelled right into his good eye. The swelling still hasn't subsided."

"Oh my," Yuna gasped. "Is he going to be OK?"

"Well, when the swelling, temporary blindness, and painful urination subside, he should be fine. In the mean time, we were contemplating a lawsuit against the manufacturer until we realized it was actually one of our own designs. Let me tell you, that stuff may have been tested on moombas, but it is not safe for people. Not to mention it's probably the worst-smelling stuff in all of Spira."

Rin jotted something down in his notebook.

Nhadala nodded towards a Machine Faction tech sprawled out in a hammock. "And that guy was chasing her too, but he stepped on a live wire and almost got electrocuted."

Yuna's heart leapt several stories. "That guy?"

"Yunie, she just means that random guy, not that guy," Rikku said. "He's not a guardian, and if he was ever on the Zanarkand Abes, he was probably a bench-warmer."

"Oh." Well, she couldn't have expected him to really be here. Silly her.

Nhadala gave Yuna a strange look but continued the story. "I chase after Leblanc, of course, but she flies back to her airship and flies off. Doesn't even leave a note. Meanwhile, the temple is going to need months' worth of repairs, Gippal's out of commission, and our blueprints are gone. Can you believe that's the second invention we've lost in as many weeks? Last Tuesday, some pink rat eloped with our robot dog prototype."

"And so not only did she rip off you guys, she put all the blame on ME," Yuna fumed, fists clenched. "Poopie. If only we'd made it here yesterday, we could have knocked some sense into Paine."

"So what does this impenetrable security system of yours do, anyway?" Rikku asked.

"It's top-secret. I could tell you, but then I'd have to punch you in the forearm."

"I could live with that."

"The good news, though," Nhadala said, "is that the blueprints are written in 'Jibber-Jabber,' so she might not be able to read them enough to do anything with them ... but she does have Brother and Buddy with her, so who knows?"

Rikku shook her head to dispel any concern. "Consider all your blueprints as good as retrieved, Nhadala. As soon as we catch up with Leblanc, Rin and I will show her some Al Bhed justice and get 'em back for you. Think nothing of it."

Nhadala gave her an encouraging nod. "Good. Kick some spleen for us, Rikku," she said. "Win one
for the Gippal."
Laestrygonians

Chapter Summary

A near-death experience on Mushroom Rock Road leads to several changes of heart.

_It thought we'd be joking, having long talks on late night driving_

_But you drive so bad I lost my patience_

_So pass the chips and turn the station_

The machina-littered rooms of Djose Temple were not ideal accommodations, but they were certainly more comfortable than another night on the road watching their tent be burnt, carried off by a giant bird, rolled up into a katamari, or otherwise lost after a single use. Yuna only allowed herself a short afternoon nap before urging her companions on. If Leblanc was really inflicting her martial law and terrible aesthetic sense on Besaid, they needed to get back as soon as possible. Sleep could wait until after they'd ensured that Besaid Temple didn't get painted pink.

🎵

In the early evening, they restocked their supply of food and tents and set off in two hovers offered by Nhadala. Yuna, Rikku, and Dona rode in the first while Rin and the goons took the rear in the other. Under Yuna's command, they drove south at top speed.

In curve after domino-lined curve of empty road and rock formations, the Djose Highroad wound down the seaside cliffs that looked out over the eastern seas. It was perhaps not the most exciting travel, but at least they couldn't get lost here. The wind blasted in Yuna's face and stirred her clothes and hair as the radio sang. She grinned. They were making good time at last. With these hovers, the rest of their Heroic Quest should be fast and painless.

"Hey, wanna play 'Guess the Place' again?"

"The Djose Highroad."

Rikku banged her fist against the dash. "Dangit, you didn't even have to ask any questions that time!"

As the sun drifted down behind the high cliffs to the west, the Highroad soon grew dark. Yuna and Rin switched on their headlights and plowed on. After so many mishaps and misdirections already, Yuna figured she'd rather endure another day or two of hard travel than delay her return to Besaid any further. And so the hovers sped on through the darkened road. "Gosh, are we ever getting a break, uh, Boss?" Rikku asked.

"Maybe we can stop in at the Youth League when we get to Mushroom Rock. We're making such good time, though, I hate to stop."

Ormì grunted. "Yeah, Rikku, we don't do things like you used to in the Dullwings. We do all the real work; the Dullwings just follow us."

Rikku found herself afflicted with a sudden coughing fit.
Two thirds of the way to Mushroom Rock, Yuna and Rikku heard a loud thunk behind them, followed by silence replacing the whirr of Rin's hover engines. It seemed the hover had stopped. Yuna circled her own hover around and stopped so they could check on their companions. "What happened?"

"We hit something." Rin climbed out of his hover and walked a circle around it, searching for problems. The source of the trouble wasn't hard to spot: a suspiciously floral scented moomba had gotten sucked into one of the hover engines. Rin extracted the dead animal and turned the ignition again. Nothing happened. "Hmm, the little guy must have done some damage getting sucked in. I could probably fix it if our noble leader doesn't mind a brief stop."

"Fine with me," Dona said. "I could use a rest anyway."

"I'm pretty sure that 'our noble leader' means Yunie, Dona," Rikku said.

Luckily, the Machine Faction's hovers came equipped with toolboxes. While Rikku and Rin set about trying to repair the broken engine, the rest of the party set up camp by the side of the road. Supplies were not an issue: They still had plenty of what they'd taken from Leblanc's, and Nhadala had given them even more. Logos turned out to be something of an experienced cook, and, while he set about preparing their late dinner, Yuna pulled a book out of her pack. "Are you reading The Power of No?" Rikku asked over her shoulder.


"Boss, I know you said the Syndicate needs to—" Ormi cleared his throat and repeated Leblanc's words "—conduct business with the honor and excellence suiting its elite standing in Spira,' but will you let us tell campfire stories?"

Yuna's patience with Heroic Quests had worn as thin as Bismarck's pictures of Leviathan, but she still wanted to wring out whatever fun could be still had from this abortive vacation. And what said "family vacation" more than sitting around a fire telling stories? "Sure, why not?"

Ormi's huge face creased in a grin of delight. "Really? OK ... this story is called The Gust of Araguay Woods."

Logos rolled his eyes. "Ormi likes to tell 'gust' stories. I apologize in advance."

Ormi hunched over the fire and intoned in a low voice, "One time, there was a breeze that blew through the woods, and it knocked a porcupine flat on its back. Uh ... the end, I guess."

"Spooky," Dona said.

This jogged Rikku's memory. She dropped her wrench on Rin's foot and hurried over to the campsite. "Oh, that's right! I packed stuff to make s'mores when we left for vacation and then totally forgot about 'em." She unzipped her backpack, yanked out the graham crackers and chocolate, and then came up empty-handed after that. "Poopie. I think the whale binged on my marshmallows."

"That's OK."

"Yeah, but we've got a big battle coming up. It's time to start carbo loading." She rummaged through the rest of her food supplies and finally found some bananas left over from Zanarkand. "Hmm, bananas. I hope these don't have monkey drool on them."

The headlights of another hover, moving in slow sweeps back and forth across the road, appeared
in the distance to the north. Hoping for some assistance in fixing the hover, Rin jogged back towards them, calling out in Al Bhed. That conversation lasted only briefly, however, before he came racing back towards the camp. "They're debt collectors! RUN!"

"Yuna!" she heard O'aka shout. "I'm not giving up on that four million gil you owe me!"

They all dashed for the one hover that was still working. Rin and Rikku sprung into the front seat, leaving Dona, Yuna, and Logos to cram into the back. Ormi came jogging up as Rin turned the ignition. He made a flying leap onto the back of the hover and clung on for dear life while Rin floored the gas pedal. Meanwhile, heedless to the warnings of Smokey the Behemoth, the fire had been left blazing and quickly spread to the tent, reducing it to ashes.

"Bloody 'ell!" Wantz bellowed. "If it's a chase you get, it's a chase you'll get!" The debt collectors' hover kicked into high speeds, racing southwards down the Highroad.

"This is a brand-new Machine Faction Teioh!" one of the Al Bhed debt collectors shouted. "You'll never outspeed us!"

Rikku finally looked concerned about something. "I'm a minor, so that means I'm not actually responsible for paying anything, right?" she squeaked, nervously chewing one of her bananas.

Yuna located the on-board CommSphere and sent out a distress call. "Uh ... calling any goons in the Djose Highroad area!" she shouted. "Please help? I mean ... I demand assistance immediately or I'm giving you the heel!"

Dona watched behind them. Their pursuers were indeed making up the distance—and at an alarming rate. "Rin, they're gaining on us."

"Don't worry; I can lose 'em." He took a sharp turn to the right, putting them on Mushroom Rock Road. The road swerved between lumpy rocks and geysers. Hoping to shake the debt collectors, Rin took the most dangerous route possible, cutting each corner as closely as possible and avoiding several geyser blasts by the narrowest of distances. But their pursuers stayed on target behind them, an insistent pair of headlights swooping between the rocks and chasms.

"You ruined our store, Yuna!" O'aka yelled. "Don't think I'm gonna let you off the hook this easily!"

As the two hovers weaved through Mushroom Rock, O'aka, Wantz, and the two Al Bhed debt collectors kept up a furious barrage of projectiles, hurling whatever they could get their hands on—grenades, boulders, Koopa shells—at Yuna's vehicle. Perched on the back of the hover, Ormi deflected the weapons with his massive shield.

Rikku glanced back over her shoulder. The debt collectors' hover had adopted an unusual driving pattern, jumping up and down as it zig-zagged back and forth across the road. "Oh no," she gasped. "They're snaking. Hurry, Rin!"

Rin turned parallel to the edge of a cliff. Just behind them, the debt collectors' hover hopped around the corner like a motorized rabbit, skidded slightly, and resumed its back-and-forth course, swerving from the high cliff walls on one side to the precipice on the other and back. They were now a substantial distance up the heights of Mushroom Rock, and Yuna was beginning to think it was a mistake to turn in here. While she'd mostly lost her sense of direction amongst all the hairpin turns that Rin was making, she knew they were only getting further from the Highroad. They hadn't lost the debt collectors, and they were only navigating into tighter and more dangerous quarters—was this really such a good idea?
Crouched low in his seat to avoid the shrapnel flying all around him, Logos tried to fire off a few pistol shots at the debt collectors' hover, but their constant hopping back and forth made them almost impossible to hit.

"If they get the blue shell, we're done for!" Hyperventilating with worry, Rikku shoved the rest of the banana down her throat and tossed the peel away. "You know, that banana tasted fine after all."

Two seconds later, O'aka's hover hit the peel. It spun out so fast that the abrupt stop launched the two debt collectors from the front seat and flung them over the cliffside to their demise.

Wantz shrieked. "Oh my God, they killed Biggs and Wedge! YOU BASTARDS!"

Rin swung unperturbed into the next curve. "Hey, that was NOT defensive driving those two guys were practicing; it's their own fault!" He could tell from the churning of the engine behind them that they were still being pursued; O'aka had grabbed the wheel and continued "snaking" after Yuna and Rikku.

But Yuna would have no more of it. It was one thing to flee debt collection; it was another to get people killed in the process. "Those poor men were just doing their job and now they're dead because of us! This is ridiculous; we're turning ourselves in right now." She lunged forward and got one hand on the steering wheel, enough to jerk the hover sideways and nearly crash it into a boulder.

"NO!" Rikku slapped her own hand on the wheel and jerked the hover back onto the road. "I'm not going to spend the rest of my precious youth in the desert digging up Azi Dahaka coins!"

The adventurers' hover ricocheted all over the place as the battle for the steering wheel commenced. Yuna tried to grab on long enough to bring the hover in for a stop; Rin and Rikku fought to keep it on course. They careened between rocks, barely managing to stay on the road, as the wheel changed hands back and forth. Dona ducked down in the back seat and covered her neck as a grenade flew overhead.

"We have to stop!" Yuna insisted, pulling on the steering wheel. The hover turned perpendicular to its previous course, spinning so sharply that one side dragged in the dirt. They were still spinning when O'aka and Wantz's hover, still barreling forward at full speed, slammed into theirs. Both hovers careened forward onto the sharp downward bank of a cliff. Rin pounded the brakes. The hovers, completely out of control at this point, kept sliding towards the precipice at alarming speed.

As their hover barreled down the cliff, Yuna's crew sprung from their seats and onto O'aka's hover above them. Moments later, the now-empty hover slid over the edge and dropped into a sharp ravine filled with jagged rocks. Meanwhile, the added weight on O'aka's hover finally caused its runners to sink into the dirt, halting its decline just seconds from a fall.

Its front half tipping into empty air, its back half still lodged in the rock, the hover wobbled on the cliffside. "Why do you have to say 'no' at all the wrong times, Yunie?"

Dona attempted to delicately disembark, first swinging one leg out towards the ground. But as soon as she did, the change in balance caused the hover to lurch even further forward, and she quickly withdrew her limb. The group, their feud temporarily forgotten, all stared dumbly at the empty air ahead of them and the sharp rocks far, far below. There was nothing to say.

Rikku was having difficulty resigning herself to her apparently imminent demise. She'd never even finished her string collection! "I don't suppose you can make Valefor swoop in and catch us as we
fall this time, can you, Yunie?"

It was worth a try. "Please, Valefor!" Yuna prayed. "Can you hear me? I'm sorry to call on you again, but Fayth! Wondrous Mambo God! Lakitu! If anyone's listening, we need help!"

In a less-than-impressive puff of smoke, a small gray-and-white cat materialized, lying on his back atop a nearby rock. He continued playing with his ball-and-paddle set for half a minute before his sudden jump across time and space even made any impression on him. "Huh?" He jerked his head up and tried to make sense of his brand new surroundings. "Holy shit, did someone summon me?"

"Please! Help!" Yuna cried.

"I dunno. I'm a busy guy. What's in it for me?"

Rikku forgot her mortal peril long enough to be outraged. "What kind of two-bit summon is this?"

"I'm Cait Sith, an ambassador of peace and justice from the Esper Dimension. Who the heck did you think you were getting, Tom Bombadil?" He marched over the edge of the cliff. "And, I might add, beggars can't usually be choosers. I think this is what they call a 'seller's market.'"

"I summoned you; you have to obey me!"

"Ever read Faust, lady?" But while Cait might have been irked at being disturbed, he wasn't so callous as to let eight people fall over a cliff in a hover. "All right, I'll bill you guys later," he grumbled. He produced a megaphone from the folds of his cape and shouted "MOOGLE!" into it. A giant moogle robot came lumbering up the road. Under Cait's direction, it seized the hover and dragged it back onto level ground.

Ormi flopped off the trunk. "Boy, that was a close call," he said to Logos. "That pit down there had humongous jaggies."

"They're called stalagmites, you moron."

Cait Sith coughed and held out his hand behind his back.

Yuna stared at him. "I'm not giving you a tip."

"Speaking of tips, you'd be skewered on one of them down there right now if it wasn't for me, so how's about a little earned gratuity, huh?"

"You are the rudest summon spell I've ever had the displeasure of casting."

"Take it up with Bahamut," Cait Sith said with a shrug. But this comment triggered a memory in him and he clasped his paws to his face in horror. "OH SHIT! That's right! I was on emo patrol. Bahamut's gonna bite me." He looked around. "Have you chicks seen any whales lately?"

"Don't remind me," Rikku said with a shudder.

"Well, I'm looking for one. He's blue. And not at all scary looking, but I'm not supposed to say that part around him. He escaped from the Esper Dimension a couple weeks ago, and we're all really worried about him. Dude was pretty upset, I hear. Just breaching all over the place. I was supposed to be watching him to keep his spirits up, but..." He looked down at the ball-and-paddle in his hand.

Dona smirked. "Not that worried, apparently."
"Answers to the name of Bismarck?" Yuna guessed.

"Yeah. You know him, huh? I really need to find the dude. Can I come with you until I run into him?"

She shrugged. "The more, the merrier, I suppose."

Yuna looked over to O'aka, expecting another sermon on the damage her latest exploits had caused. But he had been staring at Cait Sith with a horrified sudden awareness. "Is that what I sound like?"

"What, with the anal-retentive money-grubbing?" Rikku said. "Kinda."

O'aka shook his head, disgusted with himself. That wasn't what he wanted to be. Rin put a hand on his shoulder. "Cheer up, O'aka. Money isn't everything ..."

"That's easier to say when you're not broke, mate," O'aka said. But he wasn't really going to argue the point and continued, "You're right, though. No bill is worth leading our friends on death-defying chases." He sighed. "I guess it's back to the poorhouse for us."

"And if the poorhouse doesn't work out, you can always stay on my next yacht!"

The sun was starting to come up. Dona waved from the side of the cliff. "There's a path down to the Highroad from here."

The party, now including Cait Sith, proceeded down the path, taking turns riding in the one remaining hover they had. As they passed what had been the staging area for Operation Mi'ihen, they spotted the trail of fallen pilgrimage dominoes. *Good, this means we're back on track,* Yuna thought.

Their black brick road brought them to one end of the length of ravine they'd been dangling over. At this end, the gap between the cliffs had been sealed by a thick mythril-plated metal barrier. Yuna stepped a little closer and saw that the barrier was actually a closed gateway, which, like a pair of double doors, could be swung open to allow access to the ravine. A sign hung from a pole atop the gate. "NOTE TO ADVENTURERS: DO NOT OPEN GATE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, EVER," it read. "HORRIBLE UNSENT GHOSTS ROAMING INSIDE. SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION MAY RESULT."

Rikku looked at Yuna. Yuna looked at Rikku.

"Nahhhhhhhhhhhhh."
Lotus Eaters

Chapter Summary

At a concert, Yuna loses her patience with the great outdoors.

But you just can't spend a lifetime on the road

Their hover journey ended the following afternoon at the north end of the Mi'ihen Highroad, where a mass of young people, many of them in various stages of undress and caked in mud, filled the entire road from one side to the other and impeded their further progress. At first glance, the crowd did not even appear to be doing anything besides milling about and obstructing the entrance to the road, but a more careful scrutiny revealed a wooden stage at one side of the gateway and a band of musicians on which at least a few of the people were fixated.

Rin banged repeatedly on the horn. "Hey! Hover coming through!"

"Heeeyy, maaan," Calli spoke up from the crowd. "That is so NOT cool. Do you have any idea what the CO₂ output of those hovers is like? You're totally harshing my mellow."

"We're sorry about that," Yuna said. "How can we help, uh, un-harsh your mellow?"

Calli, who did not appear entirely sober, continued swaying to the long-winded jam session emanating from the stage. She seemed not to have heard Yuna at all. "I mean, like, it's people like you and all your technology that make the Highroad such an unsafe place for chocobos, y'know? I think we should, like, totally learn to live in peace with nature, you dig?" She held out a bag of flowers. "Wanna do some lotus petals with me? It'll, like, free your mind."

"Er, no thanks." Yuna stared at the array of dreadlocks, bare chests, and prayer flags on display and furrowed her brow. What in the world is going on here?

Like a pinball on a particularly dirt-encrusted table, Tobli pushed and shoved his way out of the patchouli-scented throng. "Rikku! What most terrifically terrific timing! You haven't seen Lady Yuna, have you?"

"Uh... nope." Yuna ducked down in the back seat and covered her face with her Leblanc fan.

Tobli jumped up and down with frustration. "Cursed curses! I was hoping that she might grace our stage with mellifluous voice and prodigious talent." He gestured with one wing to the stage, where the former temple band was currently playing. "Yunapalooza was so successfully successful that I've put together a new concert ... Yunastock!"

"Oh, dear," Yuna said under her breath.

A thin white rabbit staggered by in front of them, declaring, "Oh, man, I'm so stoned, it's like I'm Palom and Porom." He giggled.
"You're sure none of you would like to get up there and sing?" Tobli lowered his voice to a whisper. "I think these people are all too blitzed out of their gourds to care what you sound like."

"No," said Yuna.

"Yes," said Rikku.

Yuna stared at her cousin. Rikku whispered in her ear, "You've got to go up there and sing, Yunie. Come on!"

"What? I thought you wanted me to say 'no' to people!"

"Not this person, Yunie! Look, Leblanc would jump at the chance for attention, so if you pass this up, those two guys —" she indicated Ormi and Logos "— are going to figure out who you really are! You're going to have be pretend to be Leblanc pretending to be you."

"This is getting awfully confusing," Yuna said, but she complied with the advice. With her Garment Grid, she changed out of her Leblanc costume and into her Songstress garb.

Ormi chortled. "Wow, you're her spitting image now, Boss. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you really are Yuna."

I can't believe he's this dense, Yuna thought. She was really started to feel sorry for the goons; was it really their fault they were so easy to take advantage of? No wonder Leblanc kept them on board.

While Yuna weaved her way through the crowd to the stage, Rikku and the others merged with the crowd. Calli kept swaying to the extended drum solo. "Rikku, Lady Dona, aren't these guys amazing? I've been following them all the way from the Calm Lands. Best thing since the Grateful Unsent broke up. They just, like, jam. I love it. Vibri, are you diggin' this as much as I am?"

The white rabbit emerged from the crowd again and nodded his assent. "Yeah, it's awesome. It's, like, I'm HIGH. And we're on the HIGHROAD. This is the HIGHROAD and we're HIGH!" He giggled. "I'm HIGH on the HIGHROAD."

"We get it," Dona said.

"The HIGHROAD." Vibri giggled some more.

Yuna had just climbed up on the stage when, behind her, a small voice shouted out, "Dude, I used to have a band; can I play too?" This was apparently a rhetorical question, for Cait Sith immediately sprung up to the stage, bounding along the shoulders of the concertgoers. He landed next to Yuna and snatched the guitar away from one of the temple players. "Time for my big comeback. I hope someone is recording bootleg video for posterity."

Yuna tapped her microphone to verify it was working. "Uh ... hi." She hadn't come equipped with a setlist, but she didn't really need one—these events all ended up the same anyway. "You guys want '1000 Words,' right?"

"Do you know 'Big Yellow Joint'?"

"We like bands that, like, jam. No pop garbage."

"Freebird!"

"Oh ... okay." Jamming, huh? She looked around for inspiration. Ormi and Logos stood in the
crowd, watching the person whom they believed to be their boss masquerading as Yuna. Cait Sith was attempting to tune his guitar and failing miserably at it. Rin and Dona had taken the opportunity to slink off into the woods, where the scent of patchouli did not lay so heavily over the land. Rikku had purchased a paper from an Ogpogo Examiner vending machine and turned directly to the puzzle page. "Oh! OK ... this is a new song I wrote called, um, 'Sudoku da ne.'"

While Yuna kept talking, Cait Sith plugged in his (still out-of-tune) guitar and, without waiting for any cue, interrupted her with a power chord. He grabbed the microphone stand and tilted it down to his level. "Hello, Mi’ihen Highroad! Are you ready to ROCK?" he shouted. His hands banged out some more random chords. "Blue, blue, blue, green!"

Yuna, who was not so ready to rock, snatched the mic out of its stand to halt his performance. "I'm sorry, my band started playing the wrong song."

Paws on his tiny hips, Cait Sith faced her down. "Hey, you heard the mudmen. They wanted us to, 'like, jam.'"

"Yeah!" someone in the audience shouted. "Let the dude play his song!"

"Fascist!"

"You know who else didn't jam? Yu Yevon!"

Yuna sighed and, with a shrug of her shoulders, handed the mic back to Cait Sith. She couldn't believe people had enjoyed that cacophony, but who was she to tell them what they wanted? She nodded her consent for Cait Sith to continue. He was only a few off-time bars into "Blue and Green," however, when the crowd grew unruly again. "Don't go electric, you sellout!" someone shouted. "Keep the music real!"

"Down with machina!" Calli yelled. "Chocobos, not hovers!"

"Nature bats last!"

"Free Mumia! Tippecanoe and Tyler too!"

The crowd started tossing mud, beads, and dominoes at the band and everyone else in the general vicinity. And after three weeks of misadventures on the road, the last thing Yuna wanted to hear was a lecture on the virtues of nature. While the temple band cowered behind their instruments, she strode up and took the mic. "This is ridiculous!" she shouted, loud enough to temporarily silence the crowd. "I've spent the past three weeks on the road and now you're telling me I should appreciate nature even more? Have you even seen what it's like out there? It's uncomfortable and boring and monkeys do their business in your sleeping bag. I'm sick of Heroic Quests; put me on the road more travelled and give me back my own bed and free text messaging!"

The mob, displeased with this little speech, renewed its bombardment. Cait Sith passed a clipboard to Yuna. "Here's a list of my available services and their associated fees. I could try casting Sleep on all of them; I could use my special confusion attack ..."

Rin emerged from the woods with a sack of bottles. "Come one, come all!" he called. "Get your Rin's All-Natural Homeopathic Herbal Remedies over here! Forget your Echo Screens and Soft Potions and cure your status conditions the way Mother Nature intended with the ten-thousand-year-old secret lore of the Guado!" Then, in a lower voice he added, "Results may vary. Consult a White Mage before use. People who are pregnant, nursing, or undead should not take Rin's All-Natural Homeopathic Herbal Remedy. If rectal bleeding results, discontinue use and scream like a
Their attention diverted, the concert-goers all rushed (without consulting a White Mage) to be the first to purchase Rin's herbal remedies. Yuna, relieved to be rid of her new adversaries but still shaking her head at their ridiculous demands, climbed down from the stage and went to rejoin her friends. Maybe now they could make their way on to Luca.

Rikku finished her sudoku and stuffed the paper in her pack. "So, what is your amazing homeopathic remedy?"

Rin shrugged. "Beats me, I just dug it out of the ground. I hope it actually works."

Rikku squinted at the bottles. "Actually, I think that's poison ivy."

"Oops."

Calli gaped at the large red rash appearing on her thigh. "Oh, wow, it's totally bringing out my inner fire chakra. This is amazing."
You're my road buddy
But I'm lonesome all the time

One trip across the Highroad—during which their tents had been trampled by wild chocobos—later, Yuna arrived in Luca more desperate than ever to get back to what she now conceded was her home. It seemed like something had gone wrong on every single leg of their journey. Now that she stood on the last threshold, with only the ocean separating her from Besaid Island, couldn't something go right for once? Couldn't they just hop on a ship and sail home?

It was thus with great disappointment but very little surprise that she discovered the city of Luca to be less than its usual bustling hub of commerce. In fact, it seemed downright desolate; for once, no ships criss-crossed the harbor, half the shops sat shuttered or otherwise empty, and the citizens seemed to be going about their business in depressed half-time. She sent Dona to investigate.

Meanwhile, the rest of them went to the sports bar where she'd met Biran and Yenke several years ago, now home of—among other Blitzball memorabilia—a collection of three hundred Goers pennants, a ball signed by Nuvy Ronso, and part of Giera Guado's toenail.

Ormi immediately went to work. He grabbed several patrons directly in front of them and hurled them out the window. "HEY! Make way for the Leblanc Syndicate or I miscegnate you!"

Logos leaned over to Yuna and whispered, "Perhaps it's time to inform Ormi of whom he's been working for these past few days, Yuna."

For a second, she was horrified that her identity had been compromised—there was clearly no use in trying to talk her way out of this. Then she realized that the goons posed no threat if Logos had been following her even knowing she wasn't Leblanc. "Oh. You knew?" Fire burned in her cheeks. She felt terribly stupid for believing she'd pulled one over on them.

"Yes, well, Ormi may be a little ... slow, but you made it obvious before we left Guadosalam."

One sweep of Ormi's arm across a table sent plates clattering, beer spilling, and angry customers fleeing. "You wanna get the heel? The Boss needs her space, so move it!"

"Ormi," Yuna said. "Um. I have a confession to make. I'm not quite the woman you think I am."

"Listen, Boss, it don't matter to me whether you have a Lolo or a Lala down there," Ormi said as he pulled the chair out from under a visiting Guado.

"No, what I'm trying to say is, I'm not Leblanc. I'm Yuna. Your boss is impersonating me, so I had to impersonate her."

"Huh?" Ormi finally stopped his rampage. "My brain hurts now."

Logos intervened quickly to head off any belligerence. "You should realize, however," he said,
"that you and I are both out of a job so long as Milady has the entire population of Besaid working for her, so it behooves us as well to see Yuna get her name back."

"So you can go back to your old job of making my life miserable," Yuna surmised.

"Precisely."

She sighed.

Ormi finally finished processing all of this and assented. "Makes sense. I'm tired of all these crummy adventures, anyway. I can't wait 'til we're home."

"Well, I certainly understand that," Yuna conceded.

Dona entered, looking unhappy, and sat down at the table Ormi had cleared. "The news isn't good, Yuna. Word on the street is you've purchased every ship in the harbor and have been charging outrageous shipping fees on everything. On top of that, everyone's afraid that some kind of ghost ship is going to get them if they leave the harbor."

"I didn't purchase any ships."

"You know what I mean."

This frustrated Rikku enough that she actually pushed aside her sudoku puzzle. "What are we gonna do?" she exclaimed. "We're so close; we can't get stuck now."

"We might be able to ford the water in our hovers," Rin said. "Or we could pull the engines out and row them across the sea."

"As long as we're fantasizing, we might as well swim," Dona countered.

"Don't be ridiculous. We'd actually have a chance rowing the hovers."

Dona shrugged and nodded towards Yuna and Rikku. "They've got their Dresspheres back now, you know. With magic, we might even be able to just walk across."

Yuna stood up. "No, this is silly. I don't want to get involved in a row vs. wade debate. I'm sure I can find someone with a ship to take us to Besaid." She proceeded out to dock and stopped the first person she ran across.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for sailors; have you seen any?"

"I was a sailor," the man said quickly, as if to suggest this was a topic he did not wish to discuss.

"How about I lure you out of retirement? I need to get to Besaid and I'll pay whatever it takes."

"Shhh!" The man lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. "Don't you know how dangerous it is to leave the harbor these days? The seas are haunted, patrolled by a terrible vessel filled with the Unsent spirits of those who should have perished long ago."

"A ghost ship?"

"More or less."

"What do you mean, 'more or less'?"

"Well, it's more of a canoe sort of situation, actually."
"A canoe?" Yuna exclaimed. "All of Spira's renowned sailors are quaking in their boots because of a canoe?"

Indeed they were. Even Yaibal, who had docked his Youth League warship in town before learning of the apparition menacing the seas, swore he would go nowhere near the dread waters of the Ghost Canoe. "I-if you'd heard the stories, you w-wouldn't be s-sailing out there, either," he said when Yuna tried to recruit him.

"What if I told you this was to help out Lady Yuna?"

He shook his head. "The same Lady Yuna who robbed Djose Temple and hoards Spira's precious history within her sphere vaults?" he said bitterly. "I don't think so. See if I ever celebrate her birthday again."

After failing to convince a single captain to take her on board, Yuna sat down on the way to the Highroad. This was so frustrating. Not only was she hungry, tired, and still a sea voyage away from home, her identity had been usurped by a woman who didn't even know how to spell "chamber." She knew if she could only still be Yuna, someone would have helped her by now. Surely there would have been at least one sailor volunteering to escort an ex-High Summoner, or some merchant who would at least loan her a boat after she completed some quest to rescue his pet goat. Accustomed to all the attendant privileges of being a Legendary Hero, she was still shocked to realize how much less she had as a random nobody—or, worse, Leblanc—with no reputation or credibility. Had she really started out this misadventure wanting to get away from all that? Well, she'd gotten what she'd wished for, and what a fine kettle of healthy plankton it had turned out to be.

She gazed down at her feet. It appeared she'd finally reached the beginning of the domino trail, the trail of fallen blocks coming to a halt at the railing against which she leaned. Well, that made sense; they couldn't really track her original pilgrimage back across the ocean. She just hoped her current quest wouldn't be stymied here. Actually ... hadn't it been at this very ledge where she and You-Know-Who had tried to put a smile on their faces before they set off on the Highroad? She needed that old spirit of hers. Whether she liked it or not, Spira still depended on its Lady High Summoner, and even when said Lady High Summoner was traveling incognito across Spira with nothing but a fishing pole, she had to put on her game face. She forced herself to laugh. It would all be okay. She'd survived plenty worse and she'd find a way to triumph over this obstacle too. "Ha. Hahahaha. Ha, ha. Haha."

Alarmed at the sight of her cousin staring vacantly into space and laughing at nothing, Rikku ran over to the ledge. "Yunie, what in the heck? Are you okay?"

"Oh, sorry." Yuna turned bright red. "I was just trying to think what he'd do."

"Who, Yaibal?"

"No, not Yaibal! You know ... him."

"Ohhh. What's-his-face? Star guardian? Youngest player?"

"Yes. That guy."

"Right. Gotcha." She adjusted her headband. "So ... any bright ideas?"

"Not really."

The water beneath their lookout point stirred. Accompanied by a now-familiar groan of despair, the
waves broke and revealed what was allegedly Spira's Lamest Monster, Bismarck. "Hey, guys," Bismarck said. "I smell leftover pizza."

Cait Sith tore down the street. "DUDE! There you are! I've been looking all over for you ... sorta."

"Oh, hullo." Bismarck could not have sounded less enthusiastic if he were partially comatose. "I suppose you've come to tell me just how much everyone in the Esper Dimension misses me and how worried they are about their completely non-frightening friend Bismarck, who only gets summoned when Leviathan is on holiday."

"Uh, I guess so. How goes it, my perpetually depressed friend?"

"Terribly," Bismarck said. "I'm not scary and no one ever summons me."

"I ... I summon you!" Yuna said. "I have a job for you!"

"How about you try that sometime when I'm not already here?" Bismarck moaned. "But, OK, what do you want? I'll probably screw it up, of course. I'm no good; you have to accept that. I'm no good at all." He started with a few sniffs that soon blossomed, once again, into great sobs.

"Dammit, dude, don't start crying again!" Cait Sith howled. But it was too late; Bismarck had already tuned out everything but his own misery. Cait futilely hurled a pebble at Bismarck, shrugged his shoulders in defeat, and turned back to the group. "Now what are we going to do?"

Yuna mustered up all her sweetness and good will. "Bismarck, please don't cry. We need your help! No one will take us to Besaid Island because they're afraid of the Ghost Canoe, but I bet they'll reconsider if we could have the, er, great and fearsome sea god of Spira along to protect us."

Bismarck lifted his tear-stained face. "You're making fun of me, aren't you? I'm not the sea god of Spira; I'm a useless waste of Magicite who's never amounted to anything besides teaching a few people Raise."

"No! I mean it!" Okay, maybe he wasn't all that great and fearsome, but it was worth a try, wasn't it?

"Well, I suppose." As he psyched himself up into something approaching confidence, he began to swim in ever quicker circles, his enthusiasm growing. "You're right. I can do this. I'm tough and strong and scary just like Leviathan. Any Ghost Canoe tries to mess with the mighty Bismarck and —BAM!—I'll bash 'em in half just like Odin does."

Assured that he would be protected by Spira's mighty, terrifying sea god, Yaibal finally consented to transport them to Besaid—with a little additional persuasion by "Leblanc," who threatened to report him to Meyvn Noojie-Woojie if he did not comply.

They set sail with Bismarck swimming off starboard. Yuna stood on the deck and stretched. Now things were moving. They'd banish this Ghost Canoe back to the Farplane, sail onto Besaid, send Leblanc packing ... and then this horrid vacation would be over. The finish line was in sight, and fate had rejoined her side. With the ship plowing through the sea at maximum speed and the sky clear before her, she felt guaranteed of victory; she was sure now that she could match whatever further obstacles Spira hurled at her.

About an hour out of Luca, a slight fog descended, tinting the blue expanses ahead of them with gray. "This fog is giving me the creeps," Yaibal muttered. "What if the Ghost Canoe is real?"

"The sea god of Spira will protect you!" Bismarck had thoroughly gotten into his role as the ship's
protector. "None can withstand the wrath of Bismarck, right, guys?"

"Well, my yacht certainly couldn't," Rin said.

Then, floating in the fog, they saw the Ghost Canoe. It was an ordinary wooden canoe, being paddled by Seymour, Neclord the vampire, and Dr. Wily. "SURPRISE!" they shouted. "We're still not dead yet!"

Yaibal screamed and turned the ship around. "Seymour!" Yuna shouted. She rushed to the railing and fired off a round of gunshots, but Seymour had already armored himself with a Protect spell. He began chanting a spell of his own. Yuna fired some more—futilely, as the ship had already pulled back out of range. "Yaibal! Turn around! We have to fight!"

Dona raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe this."

"Seriously," Rikku said. "I thought vampires couldn't cross running water."

Yaibal started to turn back towards the canoe again. Yuna crouched beneath the rail for cover and resumed fire on Seymour as Rikku hurled one of her grenades at the canoe. The grenade was in mid-air when Seymour launched his Aero spell; it blew the grenade aside and sent Yuna and Rikku flying across the deck and into the opposite rail. Panic-stricken, Yaibal immediately reversed course yet again.

Bismarck rose from the water. "RAR! COWER BEFORE THE SEA GOD, MORTALS!"

"I said turn around!" Yuna yelled at Yaibal. "We're not going back to Luca!" She sprinted back across the deck to fire her guns at the canoe.

"Oh my gosh," Bismarck thought aloud, "that canoe looks like a giant Twinkie." His gargantuan face contorted with sudden conflict. Had Seymour or Neclord had any idea of the foe they were facing, they would have realized that now was the time to panic. Instead, they were caught completely unaware when Bismarck sprung at the canoe, mouth gaping, and snapped it in half with a single bite. The occupants plunged into the water; Bismarck gobbled down one half of the canoe and immediately went for the other.

While her Unsent foes bobbed helplessly in the water, Yuna scrambled to performing the Sending. She didn't have her staff with her, so she grabbed the fishing pole instead and twirled around on the deck. Seymour and Neclord erupted into a cloud of pyreflies, banished once again from the mortal plane. Then, amidst the colorful haze, Dr. Wily's flying saucer descended from the sky. Wily hauled himself out of the water, into the vessel, and blasted off. "You haven't seen the last of me, Megaman!" he declared, cackling with evil glee.

"I'm not Megaman!" Yuna shouted at the retreating saucer to no avail.

"We did it!" Rikku cried. In a single leap, she sprung over to Yuna and caught her up in a hug. "Besaid Island, here we come!"

Bismarck, however, was inconsolable. "I can't believe I ate the whole canoe," he groaned. "I've probably ruined my entire diet."

"No, you were great! You're the scariest monster in all of Spira!" Yuna said. It was true. He actually had saved them.

"I'm serious, you guys. How many net carbs are in a ghost canoe?"
Yaibal had calmed himself as soon as the Ghost Canoe had been reduced to splinters. "The seas are safe again! Full speed ahead!"

The warship's engines roared back to life. They were free, Yuna thought. Not only had they conquered the last trial remaining on the road home, they'd restored peace of mind to Luca's lily-livered sailors. All that lay between her and Besaid now was this empty span of sea. On the other side lay everything that she had once tried to escape but now longed to see again: Lulu and Wakka, the lovably incompetent Aurochs, her own warm bed, and a long overdue confrontation with the woman who had usurped her identity and turned it into a hot pink reign of terror.

Two small pink dinghys patrolled the Besaid harbor. Seeing a warship suddenly bearing down on them at full speed, they arranged themselves in front of it in an attempt to halt it. Yaibal, however, did not halt. The destroyer smashed through both dinghys, pulverizing them into splinters, and cruised straight through to an easy landing at the dock. Yuna jumped down to the beach.

They were back.
Ithaca

Chapter Summary

Home at last, Yuna confronts the woman who stole her identity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And there's something I finally faced
I finally think I come from some place

As soon as they'd unloaded everything from the ship, Yuna knelt and kissed the beach. This proved to an ill-advised move, as she found immediately found herself trying to spit out all the sand.

Yaibal returned to the ship to continue on to his original mission to Kilika. Meanwhile, the rest of the team assembled to discuss strategy. "The Examiner said the island's under martial law, right?" Rikku said. "Maybe we should go in completely incognito."

"I'm not wearing the moogle suit."

"Okay, I was just brainstorming."

"Who's there?" someone called from the jungle.

The group immediately fell silent. Cait Sith crawled into a log to hide. Ormi and Logos ducked away behind a rock, unsure whether it would be a good or bad thing if their boss's new underlings recognized them. Rin and Rikku hustled to take up positions on either side of the path in from the jungle. Yuna started to follow them until Dona pulled her into her hiding place behind a cliff. "You'd better hide."

As soon as the two patrolmen stepped out of the jungle, Rin and Rikku trained their guns on them. It was Datto and Jassu, wearing flowery pink bucket-shaped helmets and armed with spiked Blitzballs. "Freeze!" both groups shouted.

In the awkward pause that followed, Rikku lowered her gun and chuckled nervously. "Uh, hi, guys."

Rin, too, felt a little ashamed of ambushing a patrol so woefully underprepared. "Oh, this is just embarrassing. The red carpet has dentures."

Expecting to be rounding up another band of pesky vandals or perfume thieves, Datto and Jassu were shocked to find themselves up against actual adventurers. "Rikku? What are you doing here? Do you have your Pink Book?"

"Uh, I used to have a diary that was pink?"

Jassu sighed and opened the spiral notebook tucked under his arm. "Besaid Island Civil Code #17a: All residents and visitors must carry the words of the Great Beautiful Hero on their person at all times. Violators shall be punished with the heel."
"Oh, that's ridiculous." If Rikku was supposed to be intimidated, she was actually merely exasperated. "What are you guys doing? Does Wakka know that you're out here playing highway bandits? Honestly."

Jassu and Datto exchanged nervous looks. "Well ... Yuna said we're not really supposed to talk to Wakka. I don't understand, either. I thought they were friends."

"Yeah, because that's not Yunie ordering you around, you noodleheads. Duhhhh!" She called over her shoulder, "Yuna, come out!"

Yuna stepped out from her hiding place. "Hi, Jassu. Hi, Datto. Sorry I've been gone so long."

This shocked them. "The other Yuna never calls us by our names, you know."

"Yeah, I'm not sure she even knows them, actually."

They lowered their Blitzballs and hesitated. It was obvious they preferred this Yuna to the one in the temple, but they seemed unsure whether or not they were allowed to like her. Their two days of training in the Pink Guard hadn't prepared them for this.

"Oh, come on." Rikku couldn't believe this was even an issue of debate. "The Yuna that actually acts like the Yuna you know is the real Yuna, OK? The one that's been bullying you around is the fake Yuna. Besides, Yunie has way more fashion sense than to dress you in those hideous helmets."

Datto tried to look inconspicuous about removing the helmet from his head. "Right, well ... you'd better go ahead." He sounded a little disappointed that he wasn't going to be able to arrest anyone, after all.

"You might be in for a bit of a shock when you get to town, though," Jassu cautioned.

But no amount of warnings could have prepared Yuna for what she saw in the village. Giant portraits of Yuna leading bands of beaming children had been hung from every roof of every house. In the center of town, a newly erected statue depicted Yuna vanquishing Yu Yevon and extolled the virtues of Five-Way Yuna Thought from a plaque on its base. Across the square, a crew of painters was busy turning Besaid Temple pink. Rikku cringed. "Well, there goes the neighborhood. I think I'm gonna puke."

The entire scene came as one giant insult to Yuna's self-image. "I can't believe anyone actually believes I'd do this," she huffed. "What kind of person do they think I am? Look, she had the town gates painted purple! What sane person would ever...?"

"Yunie, you always used to complain that no one ever bothered to paint those gates, remember?"

"But that doesn't mean she should be able to—SHE SOLD MY HOUSE!"

It was true. A real estate sign, now stamped "SOLD," had been posted outside Yuna's hut, and the furniture all moved outside for a yard sale. At that very moment, a couple was haggling over the price of her sofa. "OK, that's it. No more Miss Nice High Summoner."

Rikku rolled her eyes. "Right, that'll be the day."
They found Lulu and Wakka's hut in somewhat better condition, though still in disrepair: Someone had torn up all the plumbing in the yard, perhaps because the building did not display the portrait of Yuna and her grade-school followers in the customary position over the door. Yuna tried the front door; it was locked, and, from the feel of it, deadbolted as well. When knocking yielded no results either, she went around the side, picked up a pebble, and tossed it at the window. Lulu's head appeared at the portal. "Oh, Yuna. Thank goodness you finally got here." She quickly went to open the door.

Yuna hugged her. Though in a normal month she would have walked through these doors many times, she now felt like she was striding through the Pearly Gates themselves. After weeks of smelly tents and Leblanc's gaudy manor, this was the first place that felt like home, like it was inhabited by someone who cared about her and not another political faction or would-be kidnapper. Here, with a pot of cider brewing on the stove, Vidina sleeping in his crib, and tapestries hanging on the walls, she finally saw her surroundings as the warm embrace of a treasured friend rather than hostile ground. She dropped her pack just inside the door and staggered to the couch. It felt like she couldn't have walked a single step more.

"'ey, Yuna!" Wakka called from the back. "What took you so long?"

"I'll tell you later, when you're sitting down. I must say, though, I did get a lot of use of that fishing pole you gave me."

"Yeah? Like I said you would! Mebbe we can get some more use out of it later once everything's back to normal, ya?"

The rest of the crew—Rikku, Rin, Dona, Ormi, and Logos—filed inside the hut. There wasn't room in the small home to seat them all, but they sat on the floor or sprawled out across the rugs, anything to get them off their feet. Wakka apologized for the lack of sustenance available—fortunately, Yuna's group still had plenty of leftover pizza—and offered them all cider and some of Lulu's cookies. "Brought a whole party along, did you? Coulda used you folks a little earlier. That Leblanc woman's sending this place to the Farplane in a handbasket faster and faster every day. Actually makes me nostalgic for when we had Beclem running things, ya?"

Yuna leaned into the cushions and closed her eyes. It would have been so easy to sink into sleep right here, but she knew she still had plenty of work left. "How bad is it? Lay it on me."

"Well, you probably already ran into her redecorating work and her sudden interest in the real estate business," Lulu said. "Besides that, she's raised taxes five times to pay for her the renovations on her mansion. I'm afraid the Temple is now the royal palace of"—Lulu rolled her eyes—"Yuna, the first Empress of Besaid."

Rikku nearly choked on a gingerbread moogle.

"What about Paine and the rest of the Gullwings? What happened to them?" She knew they couldn't have believed the charade this long.

"Haven't seem 'em in days. Leblanc probably has them polishing the mythril or giving her massages."

Yuna covered her face. "I don't believe this. This is like a nightmare, except without giant woks chasing me."

"Well, don't take it too hard," Lulu said. "She hasn't done any real harm, aside from spending two-thirds of our GDP on aromatherapy. I wouldn't call it a reign of terror so much as a reign of
moderate anxiety."

"That's right," Wakka said. "Everyone knows that's not really Yuna up there telling 'em to bring her frankincense and myrrh for her birthday; they're just too tired to argue about it. As soon as the real Yuna shows up, they'll give that fake her walking papers faster than you can say 'Lavitz Slambert.'"

"The only trouble is," Lulu took over, "Leblanc's got everyone convinced that Spira is filled with imposter Yunas trying to make a gil off the High Summoner's name. So we'll have to figure out how to convince everyone that you're the real Yuna and not another fake."

Yuna got up and started to pace the hut, stepping over luggage and Dona's prostrate body, stopping to quietly drape a cloth over Lulu's Cactuar doll and hide it from Dona's view. "So ... maybe we should just grab Leblanc and force her to come clean. Do we know anything about what she's done to the Temple?"

"Well, I got so angry when she sold your house to Nooj that Lu and I decided to run her out of town ourselves. You hear Keepa's supposed to be the Temple guard, ya? Well, you know I like the guy, but he lets through as many visitors as he does Blitzballs, I'm afraid. So we got inside, but that was as far as we made it. There's some kind of machina lock on all the doors we couldn't disarm. Looks like Al Bhed work."

"Was it a block puzzle? We're good at block puzzles, right, Yunie?"

Rin stroked his chin. "The impenetrable Machine Faction security system that she stole, I'm sure."

"This is silly." Dona raised her head. "No one's ever going to mistake Leblanc for the real Yuna if we put them head-to-head. Can't we just get everyone on the island together somehow and have our two 'Yunas' go head-to-head?"

Lulu's lips formed into an amused smile. "That won't be hard," she said. "Every morning at 6:30, the whole island gathers outside the temple to read the poetry we wrote singing her praises."

"You wrote poetry?"

"We didn't, which is why we haven't had running water in three days."

Yuna stopped pacing. "Okay, here's my plan." She hadn't noticed herself slipping back into the role of the beloved hero handing out advice and solving everyone's problems, but it felt so comfortable she could hardly keep herself from doing so. "I'm worried about Paine and the Gullwings. Rikku and I are going to sneak into the Temple and figure out what happened to them. Lulu, Wakka, Rin, Dona, the rest of you guys spread the word that the real Yuna is on her way back and that it's time to run the 'Great Beautiful Hero' out of town. We'll confront her at the poetry session tomorrow. How does that sound?" She turned to Leblanc's two followers. "You guys still intent on helping me clear my name?"

Logos was polishing his pistol. "We're out of a job until we drag our boss back to Guadosalam," he said with a nod of assent.

"OK, just making sure you weren't planning on ditching me or shooting me in the back if this operation goes awry."

"To be honest, your operations tend to go awry a lot less often than the Syndicate's," Logos said. "It's been a pleasure."

"What about me?" said Cait Sith.
Yuna stared at him. "Wait, you're still here?"

He held up his cheap, imitation-Genji pocket watch. "And racking up the billable hours!"

"I'm not paying you anything!"

Cait Sith could have not looked more flabbergasted by this flagrantly uncivilized coarseness. "Listen, lady, I don't know what kind of small-town summons you've been conjuring, but Cait P. Sith, Esquire, does not work for free."

"OK, fine, go away."

Cait Sith scowled and folded his arms. "Make me."

Yuna threw up her hands in defeat. This wasn't worth arguing about. "All right, you can come with us."

"If you insist."

Yuna and Rikku organized their infiltration gear while the rest of the team, glad to be off their feet, lounged around the house and enjoyed their cider and cookies. Cait Sith took one of Lulu's dolls off the shelf. "Is this bootleg merchandise? I don't remember authorizing this."

Yuna picked up her pack. "So ... in through the sewers, Rikku?"

Her cousin shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

"I mean, no way are my cheeks this big; I look like I just had a root canal."

Yuna snapped her fingers. "Okay, then, let's go." She waved goodbye to Lulu and the others, trusting that her friends could complete their half of the mission. Then, under cover of darkness, she, Rikku, and Cait Sith left to infiltrate Leblanc's new palace. By now, the sky had grown almost entirely dark. Rikku turned on a machina flashlight, and they crept away from the hut.

The silence was soon interrupted by Yuna's dog, Kogoro, barking and wagging his tail as he rushed to his master's ankle. Or, at least, he rushed as fast as he could given his current attire. Someone—and Yuna had a pretty good idea who—had forced Kogoro into a fluffy bonnet, sweaters, and knit booties, all in an equally garish pink, and affixed a similarly awful bow to his tail. Yuna knelt and hugged him. "Oh, you poor thing." She quickly undid the bonnet, yanked off the sweater and bow, and gave her poor, patient dog a hug. This called for tarring, possibly also feathering.

Accompanied by Kogoro, they proceeded to the manhole behind the item shop. Rikku pried open the lid and down they climbed. "You know, just once, I was hoping to go on a Heroic Quest without having to crawl through the sewers," she muttered.

Thanks to the small size of Besaid, however, the sewers were mercifully devoid of labyrinthine passages and Redrum. Instead, there were merely a few short passages leaning out to the island's farthest reaches. "Huh," Cait Sith said. "I thought sewers were supposed to be filled with rats and garbage and ninja turtles, but it's actually pretty quiet down here."

"Yeah, a little TOO quiet."

"I hope Leblanc isn't setting us up," Yuna said. "What if this is all part of her crazy high-tech security system?"
But the sewers remained silent save the occasional drip and splashing of their shoes as they made their way through the muck. At a point Yuna and Rikku both estimated should be directly underneath the temple, they found a rusty ladder leading up. "OK," Yuna whispered, "I'm going to check it out. Stay here and don't make a peep. If I don't come back right away, get Lulu."

Taking each step slowly to avoid making any noise, Yuna inched up the ladder until she could push aside the grating at the top. She continued into the darkness above. Only a few moments later, her head poked back down. "We're good," she hissed. "I'm in the Cloister of Trials up here."

"YAY! Go Yunie!"

"Shhhhhhh!"

"Sorry."

Rikku took Kogoro in her arms and she and Cait Sith shimmied up into Besaid's Cloister of Trials. Yuna wrapped some cloth around her palms. "OK, time to push some crates."

But the Cloister was mostly empty and, as far as they could see, so far untouched by Leblanc's redecorators. All the good stuff must be somewhere else, they concluded. They didn't know where to search first, so Yuna decided to investigate what Leblanc had done to the Chamber of the Fayth. They soon discovered that Leblanc had kept the sliding walls that once defended the Fayth but had removed all the niches for spheres. Instead, a series of three identical floor panels stood before the door.

"Hmm, there's three switches," Yuna said. "I wonder what happens if we stand on them all at once."

They did. The door opened.

"That was her impenetrable security system?"

Rikku laughed. "You know, that almost makes me feel sorry for her. Almost."

Yuna crept into the Chamber of the Fayth and silently closed the door behind them. Leblanc seemed to have no use for the Fayth or for Spira's traditions, as the room had been converted into her treasure store. Her amassed wealth, in the form of gold coins, briefcases full of gil, and various rare spheres and jewelry, had been piled Scrooge McDuck-style across the back half of the room. "Money!" Rikku's face lit up briefly before her conscience caught up with her eyes. "Oh, good. This will probably buy a new shop so we can pay poor O'aka back."

"And me." Cait Sith whipped out a calculator. "Don't forget, you owe me ... let's see, 177,890 for services rendered, 12,300 in Ether expenses, 5% surcharge on all last-minute rescues ... comes to 617,820 gil."

"No, it doesn't."

"I never said I'd pay you anything!" Yuna had had enough. She waved her hands to shoo him away. "That's it. I de-summon you. Be a good kitty; go home. We don't want you any more."

"Fine. I don't know why I'm wasting my valuable time on freeloaders like you, anyway. Thanks for making collectivism a failed system, jerks." He vanished in another half-hearted puff of smoke.

"Yunie, wait!" Rikku shouted, but it was too late to halt Cait's departure.
"What?"

She pointed. "Didn't we need three people to open that door?"

"Oh, poopie."

They were trapped.

"You could, uh, try summoning him again."

Yuna folded her arms. "Only as a last resort."

"If we wait that long, we'll have to pay the surcharge."

Terribly disappointed by her own stupidity, Yuna sunk against the wall of the Chamber, but she soon recovered her motivation—if they wasted too much time here, they wouldn't catch up with Leblanc at the poetry session—and resumed looking for a way out. Her first inclination was to try placing Kogoro on the third switch, but he wasn't big enough to trigger it. Resigned, she sighed and got to examining the door. It was clear that the three-switch mechanism must have merely been some kind of emergency override; the real impenetrable security system appeared to revolve around a complicated nine-by-nine grid of numbers and empty squares carved into the door. Maybe she had to arrange the numbers somehow. Or maybe they were clues to some kind of code or password...

She waved her hands at the door. "Uh... open sesame! JUSTIN BAILEY ------ ------! Erau qssi dlro weht!"

Rikku peered over Yuna's shoulder at the grid of numbers. "Ohhhh, this is easy! I know how to do this!"

Forty-five minutes later, Rikku had sudoku-ed their way to freedom.

Back in the Cloister of Trials, Kogoro's barking led them to one of the former treasure alcoves. Leblanc had converted it into a makeshift prison, having chained Paine to a table of Precious Memories dolls. "Dr. P!"

"Good of you girls to finally drop in," Paine said.

"It's been real difficult getting back," Yuna said by way of apology. "I'm glad you didn't spend the whole time thinking Leblanc was me."

"I got suspicious around the time she put the bonnet on your dog." She narrowed her eyes. "You are the real Yuna, right? Or is Leblanc just getting smarter?"

"Yes, I'm the real Yuna, and you hit me with a ROCK."

"Fair enough."

Rikku sprung Paine from her manacles. They fanned out across the Cloister of Trials and located the other Gullwings and Cid. Once they'd freed all of Leblanc's captives, they hurried to the main room of the temple. As befitting its current owner's tastes, it had been horribly overdecorated with pink shag carpeting and more murals of Yuna. Paine retrieved her sword from a pile of jeweled chocobo figurines, limited-edition commemorative plates, and other assorted baubles that Leblanc had yet to find a ill-suited location for. "Let the hurtstravaganza begin."
Yuna checked the time on the garishly overdecorated grandfather clock that was crammed into a random corner of the foyer. "Come on, we're late! The poetry session's already started!" She hoped that Dona and Lulu hadn't run into trouble confronting Leblanc without the promised appearance of the real High Summoner.

She used her Garment Grid to change back into her real appearance and they raced out the front door. Outside the temple, where dawn had broken, the citizenry of Besaid had gathered in a roughly square cluster facing the temple. At a podium before them, Leblanc, disguised as the spitting image of Summoner Yuna, stood before a giant screen playing an ancient Zanarkand videosphere. She rambled on to the crowd, explaining that her duties as High Summoner required the immediate confiscation of any historical videospheres they owned. One woman guilty brought forth a recording of the celebration of Braska's Calm.

Yuna hardly needed more reasons to be angry at Leblanc, but this abuse of Spira's history—and her father's legacy—incensed her. She raced across the temple grounds with Rikku and Paine right behind her. "That belongs in a MUSEUM!"

Leblanc whirled. "So do you! I mean, uh, see how all these fake Yunas are trying to tell everyone what to do?"

Yuna, Rikku, and Paine surrounded the podium. "Fun time's up," Paine said. "You've played Mayor-for-a-Week, now back off the podium and let the real Yuna have her geta back."

A confused murmur zig-zagged through the crowd. Who was the real Yuna here? Or were they both fakes?

Leblanc tried to regain control of her subjects. She cleared her throat and spoke into her microphone, "Now, I know that Leblanc's ingenious plots have gotten the better of me on numerous occasions, and I have to respect her craftiness and leadership...

Rikku's eyes rolled. "Oh, please, SPARE us."

"...but I'm sure I can prove to you all that I'm the real Yuna. An impostor like the one over there—" she nodded to the fake Yuna "—probably doesn't know, for instance, that my favorite number is 232, or that I had a bug collection for two days when I was seven years old."

*How obsessed is she to know all this about me?* Yuna might sometimes have wanted to be someone other than herself, but never one particular person, and never so creepily earnestly.

"Okay, then," Paine said, and turned to the false Yuna. "I believe you're the real Yuna." The real Yuna gasped, horrified at this betrayal, and would have seriously clocked Paine had not she not been restrained by Rikku, who knew that there was more afoot than it seemed. "But just to prove it," Paine continued, "can you help me run these miscreants out of town?" She gestured towards Yuna's group.

Leblanc snorted. "Like that's my job. I'm busy, Paine; can't you do it yourself?"

"Come on, please?"

"No."

Paine suddenly thrust an accusing finger at Leblanc. "Then I know you're the fake Yuna, because the real Yuna lets herself get cajoled into anything for her friends." She grinned and looked over at the real one. "Right, Yuna?"
Yuna sighed, but smiled. At least her friends knew how to identify her. "I suppose."

"Yeah!" Wakka said. "We got you now, ya dirty sneak!"

Dona strode forward and put her hand on Yuna's shoulder. "I've been with her the past two weeks, and, trust me, this is the real Yuna, fishing pole and all."

The crowd was all on her side now. Like nervous fans becoming euphoric as soon as that game-winning Blitzball goal was scored, they transformed in an instant. Leblanc's spell was broken, Besaid was back the way they wanted it, and someone needed to answer for the past two weeks. "I should have known Lady Yuna would never confiscate our family heirlooms!"

"Wait, whose massages have I been paying for??"

"Yuna, I'm sorry I bought your bookcases!" Letty of the Aurochs waved to the real Yuna from the crowd. "You can have them back!"

Leblanc transformed back into her own clothes. "Fine! What makes you think I'd want to waste my time being you? I was going to reveal myself soon anyway; I was getting sick of having to look at your face in the mirror every morning. And afternoon. And evening."

"Oh, baloney," Rikku said. "You could never get tired of thinking about Yunie; you spend all your time you spend trying to be her."

This comment hit perhaps a little too close to home. Her dignity tarnished to the point of outrage, Leblanc stamped her foot and waved her fan at her goons. "Come on! Stop lollygagging! Let's teach the Dullwings a lesson they'll never forget!"

Ormi sighed and half-heartedly lobbed his shield at Rikku. Logos whipped out his pistol. Yuna gaped at them. "Come on, you don't have to listen to her! I'm starting to like you guys!"

"Milady's orders, you understand." Logos fired at the group. Rikku activated her Garment Grid. She switched into Berserker mode, vaulted over his line of fire, and immediately disarmed him with a quick punch. Meanwhile, a quick swing of Paine's sword deflected Leblanc's thrown fan. Growling with frustration, Ormi charged. Paine grabbed the dazed Logos and threw him into his buddy, toppling them both. Yuna paused to bonk Ormi over the head with her fishing rod and then went after Leblanc.

Leblanc backed away. "Fine, you don't need to flip out like that! If it matters that much to you, I can comprise, sheesh. We'll rule Besaid Island together, as empress and sidekick."

"Say 'no,' Yunie."

"No." Yuna stepped forward again. The angry mob of Besaid citizens, who seemed to be just waiting for an excuse to break out the pitchforks and Frankenstein torches, followed.

Leblanc grew increasingly nervous. "Well, I'm uh, sure we can resolve this without any unnecessary violence."

"Me too," Yuna said. Then she wound up and socked Leblanc in the jaw, hard enough to knock her off her feet. "But that was necessary violence. Now scram."

Leblanc sprung up and, conceding temporary defeat, fled for the falls. Ormi and Logos hurried after her. "Next time, Dullwings!" she vowed as they fled. "Next time!" She did not manage even the minor dignity of a fleet escape; in her haste, she stumbled and had to be supported by her ever-
loyal goons. Embarrassed, she pushed them away and huffed, "AHEM! There's SAND on my heels!"

Rikku was not inclined to let their nemesis off the hook this easily. She raced after Leblanc, shouting, "You wish you were Yunie, don't you? Come on, you do! Admit it!"

Rikku had chased Leblanc all the way up the hill outside the town when, without warning, Dr. Wily's flying saucer descended from the sky. Leblanc and her goons leaped inside. "Looks like you've failed again, Megaman!" Dr. Wily chortled. "HA HA HA!" He wiggled his eyebrows and took off.

"I told you, I'M NOT MEGAMAN!" Yuna watched the flying saucer disappear into the clouds and, with a sigh, shook her head. They'd just helped Logos and Ormi get their jobs, and already she was being shot at by them again. Yet, somehow it was actually a relief. Leblanc and her goons harassing her, Rikku and Paine fending them off, the people of Besaid cheering on their High Summoner ... at last, everything was finally back to normal.

Rikku sagged against a tree. "Whew, I'm glad that whole mess is taken care of. Maybe now we can take a vacation."

"A vacation? Are you kidding me? We just got back from a vacation, and it's been the worst three weeks of my life!"

This struck Rikku as a sudden revelation, and she looked at Yuna with sudden attentiveness. "You're right," she concluded after a moment's reflection. "I think I'm going to go find a job in a cubicle now."

"And I've got a Model 4.0 CommSphere I believe I need to finish setting up."

Lulu nodded towards her house. "Yeah, we buried it in our backyard for you so Leblanc wouldn't find it."

Yuna grinned. "You're the best." Instant access to a friend the next time she needed a rescue. Sixty free text messages a month. Sweet, modern convenience. Why did she ever doubt it?

Rikku watched Yuna dig up the CommSphere. "That reminds me, I should check up on my World of Earth clan. Although ... to be honest, I think I'm gonna quit. Hanging out with you is way more fun."

Yuna looked up. "I'm not sure this was what I'd call fun."

"That's true," Rikku mused, "I did lose my string collection." She pouted, holding up her hands a few feet apart. "I was only this far away from the Spiran record, you know."

"Don't worry," Rin said. "I've come up with a new category in my book for you ladies: Worst vacation of all time."

Yuna could hardly argue with him about that. She'd been buried in a snowdrift, captured by chocobos, swallowed by a whale, flirted with by a dolphin, assaulted by a demonic seal, ambushed by a man in a giant Tonberry suit, dangled over a cliff, rioted against by hippies, menaced by the Unsent, and impersonated by her archnemesis. This was one of those vacations you took time off from. "Yes, I definitely think there's a lesson to be learned from all this."
"Yeah," Rikku said, "Syndicate goons are bad news."

"Heroic Quests are overrated. I'm never leaving Besaid again."

Dona didn't believe that for a second. "Never?"

"Well, at least not for a month ... or maybe three weeks. Or I suppose if someone really, really needed my help..."

Paine jerked her thumb towards the crowd, which had filed back into the town square with its eyes on Yuna. "Speaking of help, I think your people are waiting for a few words from their High Summoner."

"Speech! Speech!" Rin called.

If the past few weeks had taught her anything, it was that being the High Summoner maybe wasn't such a bad deal, after all. Yuna ambled up to the podium that had been last occupied by her doppelgänger. "Good morning, everyone. I hope I haven't caused you too much trouble."

The burst of cheers indicated that she hadn't.

"When I snuck out of Besaid a couple of weeks ago, I thought it was just another place for me to leave behind when I moved onto something else. I was tired of being High Summoner Yuna, and I was tired of living in a tiny town on a tiny island. Especially one that hadn't had a winning Blitzball season in twenty-six years." Everyone laughed, Wakka and the Aurochs hardest of all.

"It took three weeks of traveling in the wilderness, subsisting off instant flan and fighting to get my identity back from the woman who stole it, to make me realize how much I have here. They say the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence. Well, let me tell you: I've been over to the other side and I can tell you it's practically gray over there. Besaid Island is the place to be."

Another round of cheers.

"It sounds like everyone here has had a rough couple weeks too. Now that the real Yuna is back, I'm refunding everyone whose tax money went to moisturizing cream, and you can all recycle your Pink Books ... although, after everything I've been through, I can't say I wouldn't mind a massage." This brought more laughter from the crowd.

"I know this wouldn't have happened if I hadn't disappeared on you, so I'm going to do everything I can to fix things up around here. We'll start with your houses and then work on the temple. Things might be a little crazy now, but I want you all to know that we can make Besaid Island better than ever—and if we all work together, maybe we can finally get those town gates painted an attractive color.

"And ... I'm glad to be home."

* * *

Three weeks later...

"Sometimes I still can't believe that it's really you there, you know? I know the Fayth can work miracles, but I still wake up every morning amazed they could work miracles for us. I wasn't sure they'd be able to bring you back."

"Hey, think how I feel. One moment I'm falling off the airship onto the Farplane and then suddenly
I'm alive and well in Besaid."
"Haha. I think both of us have had some pretty amazing adventures."
"Well, I'm not going anywhere now."
"I know."
"I love you, Yuna."
"I love you too."
"Yuna, how come you never say my name? You're not pretending I'm someone else, are you?"
"I..."
"Come on, can't you say my name at least once in a while?"
"Uh..."
"JUST SAY MY NAME! WHAT'S MY NAME?"
"Um, um, the star player of the Zanarkand Abes! The newest guardian! THAT GUY!"
"...I don't think you're ready for my jelly."

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
- T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

Chapter End Notes

**YUNA & RIKKU'S EXCELLENT PILGRIMAGE**

*Chow Yun Fat Chocobo created by:* Arpad Korossy & Nich Maragos

*Franz the Dolphin appears courtesy:* Andrea Hartmann

*Yuna appears by arrangement with:* Rikku's Talent Management Agency

*Accidental plotline inspiration:* LeaAndrea Johnson

*Yuna and Rikku's wardrobe by:* Tetsu Tsukamoto

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This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any actual persons, places, or events is purely coincidental. All celebrity voices are impersonated ... with stunning accuracy.

Based on the games by Square Enix, Capcom, NanaOn-Sha, Konami, and Nintendo. Used without permission.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Everything that happened after the pilgrimage.

BECLEM personally located all six orichalcum chess pieces, obtained the Elvaan Mirror of Radiance, and unmasked the impostor Bickson, only to find his heroic deeds overshadowed by the unmasking of the impostor Yuna that very same day.

CID has not yet been disabused of his love of camping in uninhabitable wastelands and wrestling Ronsos, but was at least willing to throw the next game of Mille Bournes to his favorite niece.

CLASKO is currently brushing up on his Al Bhed in hopes of becoming Kwehyhnms's first ambassador to the Cactuar Nation.

The self-defense class that PACCE, HANA, AND TARO taught for their youth group came to an abrupt end with the hospitalization of the entire youth group.

Her World of Earth clan having been dissolved by Rikku, SHELINDA auctioned off her character and used the proceeds to repair her news van.

Putting aside their past disagreements, BARALAI and NOOJ formed the Baralai-Nooj Commission to investigate the culprit responsible for toppling their dominoes. The Commission dissolved thirty minutes later when one of its members discovered that it was not named the Nooj-Baralai Commission.

BARTSCHELLA got more than she bargained for after attempting to seduce the dolphin that wandered into her secret lair. She is currently contemplating a career change to "New Yevon nun" and never wants to hear about blowholes again.

FRANZ THE DOLPHIN has yet to track down any giant squids, but did add the mating call of the cactuar to his ever-growing collection. His girlfriend's adventures in medical school will be chronicled in a future fanfic.

O'AKA XXIII AND WANTZ managed to recoup their losses by selling the Forbidden Seal to SeaWorld Bevelle. Two days later, the park mysteriously burned to the ground.

ARTHUR REGINALD UMARO III acquired a grudging new respect for his son's business sense when the Umaro Experience's debut musicsphere topped the charts, selling over 400,000 copies in its first week.

ARTHUR REGINALD UMARO IV demolished several offices after Rolling Stone awarded only two stars to Ziggy Moleman vs. the Mining Machine.

LIAN AND AYDE RONSO hit the big time when Kimahri's next geocache contained no fewer
than five rusty nails.

**LEBLANC** and **DR. WILY** are sure to achieve victory next time. Really.

**ORMI** and **LOGOS** unionized the goons to try to bargain for higher wages, better weapons, and a yearly vacation to the Calm Lands, but eventually settled for stairs in their house.

From beyond the grave, **AURON** assisted Rin and Shinra in pioneering the process of decaffeination.

The leftover caffeine was used to wake up the **SHOOPUF STABLE** from their shleeping shickness.

**ISAARU** parlayed his penchant for dressing up in costumes and scaring people into a career as a "Cast Member" at the new Den of Whoa haunted house.

After the first bite of Umoro's Instant Flan, **BISMARCK** finally found the motivation to swear off desserts forever.

After the third bite from a Zu, **NHADALA** finally found the motivation to swear off deserts forever.

Upon regaining his sight, **GIPPAL** canceled the Machine Faction's perfume line and devoted all personnel to developing an even more impenetrable security system known as "Project: Word Scramble."

Despite their apparent deaths, **BIGGS AND WEDGE** will inevitably return in a future fanfic only to face another grisly demise.

**CALLI** had probably eaten a few too many lotus petals when she attempted to develop a more environmentally friendly "hybrid" hover powered by her fire chakra.

At Isaaru's haunted house, **YAIBAL** was scared out of his wits by another Ghost Canoe and canceled his planned appearance on *Celebrity Fear Factor*.

To give his next reincarnation a fresh start, **SEYMOUR** changed his name to Blur Guado.

**THE AUROCHS** went on to play in their twenty-seventh consecutive losing season. Yuna attended every game.

Yuna was only too happy to go on a fishing trip with **WAKKA** after he helped move all her furniture back into her hut.

Although **LULU** appreciated the plush Sin doll that Yuna and Rikku brought her as a souvenir, it was only a matter of days before Plush Sin was vanquished by Plush Onion Knight.

After reuniting with Barthello, **DONA** followed Rikku's suggestion and camped out on the Thunder Plains for two weeks to overcome her fear of cactuars. Her success allowed her to triumph on the next episode of *Celebrity Fear Factor*.

**RIN** published the first edition of *Rin's Book of Spiran Records* and was forced to immediately add a new category to the second edition: Fastest Selling Book. He currently resides on his new armor-plated yacht.
YUNA, RIKKU, AND PAINE figured they deserved a real vacation and took a trip to Disneyland:

As usual, it didn't take long before trouble found them.

THE STAR PLAYER OF THE ZANARKAND ABES embarked on a journey of his own to Baron to locate the only person who could help him...

CAIT P. SITH, ESQUIRE, will next appear in:

CID WARS V: A GOOD DAY TO CID WARS

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