

AFTER Iutycyr Tower, they all resolved to stay in contact: life wasn't right without the Gullwings. Yuna returned to Besaid, hearing nothing from the others until Rikku called on the CommSphere and announced that both she and Paine would be paying her a visit. It was just a day-long stop, and a wonderful one: she showed them around the island, and felt properly alive in a way she hadn't since she last disembarked the Celsius. Rikku was still Rikku, and Paine was – lighter. Energised by Rikku's company, it seemed. Yuna returned to her quiet life with a pang of nostalgia.



After that, the visits became regular, and Yuna couldn't help noticing how close her two friends seemed to be: just the briefest touch here and there – when Paine stumbled on the footpath to the beach, they both instinctively reached out to stop her falling, but Rikku got there first and held on, with confidence, a little longer than she really needed to. And Paine met her gaze and smiled in a way that Yuna suddenly felt like an intruder for having witnessed; and as they walked back to the village, Yuna thought: am I lonely? Must I be, even now?



“Paine, you’re always so clumsy,” said Rikku authoritatively. “I’ll have to hold your hand to make sure you don’t trip again.”

“It must be the shoes, I suppose,” said Yuna, looking down at them. It was well established that Paine had a history of wearing unsuitable footwear – unsuitable everything, really, but the same went for Rikku, and the terrain on Besaid Island was especially rocky. Nonetheless, Yuna felt as if she was being excluded from some kind of private joke, and the feeling intensified when she looked down towards Rikku’s and Paine’s slender hands, tightly clasped together with intertwined fingers.



Yuna had assumed Rikku and Paine lived separately now: Rikku still on the Celsius, perhaps, and Paine elsewhere. But she realised from the things they talked about that they must be spending much more time together than they spent with her. She couldn’t help worrying. Did the two of them like each other so much more than they liked her – were their visits to her just a duty? Paine seemed happier than in their sphere hunting days, and Yuna wondered if the two of them had somehow switched roles without ever discussing it. She was the tortured, aloof one now.



The Celsius had malfunctioned somewhere near Besaid, as Yuna understood it from Rikku's retelling: the upshot of it was that the two of them would be around for a few days this time. They were happy to sleep on the ship, but Yuna had mats available in her hut, and it had been so long since she had fallen asleep to the gentle sounds of another's breathing.

Still, it was odd sleeping in company, and she found herself waking in the night to discover a deserted mat beside her, and, before too long, a whispered voice: "Shh, you'll wake Yunie!"



"It was your fault," came the reply. "I can't help it."

"Oh, Paine, excuses, excuses! You need to learn to control yourself!"

"Easier said than done."

She sounded controlled enough, Yuna thought, but then there was a small, sharp gasp, and a brief moan, and the sound of Rikku's voice again, teasing affectionately: "You like that?"

"You know I like that," said Paine, her voice low and harsh.

Yuna was surprised by a sudden sadness. Rikku and Paine, she now understood, were lovers: that explained the way they

had been acting. But it reminded her, again, of her own solitude.



She rose for breakfast, and tried not to stare at the two of them already sitting at the table, sharing a moment of quiet understanding.

“Sleep well?” said Paine, dropping Rikku’s gaze.

“OK,” Yuna replied. She looked between them. “I thought we weren’t going to keep any more secrets.”

“Sorry, Yunie,” said Rikku. “We thought you might be jealous.”

Yuna considered. “I am.” She looked down at the floor. “I am. I thought – all three of us –”

Nobody interrupted; she cut herself off.

“Oh,” said Rikku eventually.

“It can be like that if you want,” said Paine, matter-of-fact as always.



They had discussed it, apparently: YRP wasn’t the same with one part missing, despite the closeness of the others. Rikku had been doubtful; Paine had suggested asking Yuna,

but of course, that was easier said than done. But Yuna had resolved to learn from those who had gone before her, and live without regrets. That was how she found herself sharing her bed in Besaid with both of her companions, teasing her hand through Paine's hair and observing the flush on her normally pale face as Rikku reached over from Paine's other side to caress her back – alone no more.