

KH: Finding Light in the Darkness

By Choco_Chick_87

Submitted: July 3, 2007

Updated: April 21, 2008

When the author's world is connected, she goes on a quest through time with Yuffie and Riku to find her way home. Appearances by the casts of FF7&8. Rated PG just to be safe. For anyone who's ever wanted to travel to other worlds. Comments please!

Provided by Fanart Central.

http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/Choco_Chick_87/46785/KH-Finding-Light-in-Darkness

Chapter 1 - Me, Yu, and Sora	2
Chapter 2 - Connection	5
Chapter 3 - Return to Traverse Town	8
Chapter 4 - Wakey Wakey!	10
Chapter 5 - Meeting Aerith	12
Chapter 6 - Council Meeting	15
Chapter 7 - Shopping!	18
Chapter 8 - Rescue in the Dark	21
Chapter 9 - Riku	25
Chapter 10 - Chances	27
Chapter 11 - More Shopping!	31
Chapter 12 - Gummi Ships and Chocobos	34
Chapter 13 - Same Hearts	37
Chapter 14 - Taking Flight	40
Chapter 15 - Many Meetings	43
Chapter 16 - Time travel and a Moogles	46
Chapter 17 - Hero Again	49
Chapter 18 - Commitments	52
Chapter 19 - Training	55
Chapter 20 - Heartsong	58

1 - Me, Yu, and Sora

Chapter 1

Hello! This is my first fanfic ever, so R&R please, I need all the help- I mean advice- I can get. This is the fifth (and hopefully final!) time I've re-written this thing, so here's the deal for the new format: thoughts are in single quotation marks, and dialogue is in double. Got it? Good. If you've never played Kingdom Hearts, FF9, FF8 or FF7, be warned: This does have some spilers in it! It is set a little before KH2, so I guess you could call it KH 1 3/4. It's based off all the knowledge I've aquired playing the games, visitng adventchildren.net, and reading the KH manga. However, I have not played KH2 and never finished COM, so there may be some bloopers. And before you ask, yes, the main character is me and is partially based off of my life two years ago "partially" being the key word here. It's up to you to guess what parts are real and what is made up. And no, I do not really talk to Yuffie in my head. (I used to be a scitzophrenic, which is what inspired this, oddly enough, but I'm over it now)

Disclaimer: All hail, great Square Enix! (Bows excessively and falls over her own feet) I own none of the characters except myself, so don't sue me please! You wouldn't get very much anyway.

With that aside, on with the story!

~*~*~*~

It was that wonderful day of the week named Friday, and sitting down at the computer, I ran through the same routine I always did after school: click the e-mail shortcut, get online, and start typing.

Hi

I'm terribly excited (in other words, barely restraining myself from shouting for joy) because I have a new game to try out called "Kingdom Hearts." You may have heard of it before, it's pretty popular. What makes it particularly enticing to me is that is produced by two of my favorite companies: Squaresoft (they made Final Fantasy) and Disney Interactive. The result: Disney characters interacting with Manga-looking people, including some FF characters (and Moogles!) Can you imagine Goofy in a battle? Hard to visualize, but possible!

I'm feeling pretty good, at least for today. I hope it lasts through the weekend. I'm transferring to yet another medication. The results can be unpredictable. I just wish that there was a medicine for bad emotions, just like aspirin covers physical pain. Maybe I'll have to invent it myself :)

Kupo!

I clicked "send" and leaned back with a sigh. Ahhh, the weekend. Where would we poor high school students be without you? Time to sleep, send e-mail, and, most importantly, play video games.

Abandoning the computer, I plopped down in front of the TV, eagerly popped in my KH disc and

settled back, my fingers in their familiar places on the controller. A few minutes later, I was deep in the game- so deep that I played for three hours straight. After all, what better way is there to spend time?

The next morning, I woke up, stretched, and felt absolutely no desire to get out of bed. I was feeling relaxed and happy, for once. Sadness had become an all too familiar companion since I had been diagnosed with depression that spring. And let me tell you, it sucks! Pasting a smile on your face every day and automatically responding "I'm fine," every time someone asked how I was doing, no matter how miserable I was. Switching from one medicine to the other, hoping to find some relief from the constant anxiety gnawing away at me, and so on, and so forth. 'Nuff said. I was lucky to have a friend who seemed happy no matter what the circumstances. Speaking of which...

'Morning, Sunshine!' Yuffie chirped, her voice annoyingly loud in my mind.

'Whadda you want?' I griped. (I am NOT a morning person)

'Oh, nothing.... just thought you'd like to meet someone.' I could just visualize her self-satisfied smirk. 'Sora, meet Melanie.'

'What?!' I blurted and sat bolt upright in bed as Yuffie, giggling hysterically at my surprise, prodded a new presence into my not-quite-awake mind.

'Um,... hi,' said the new voice tentatively. 'I'm Sora'. Mistaking my stunned silence for anger, he promptly added, 'Look, this was HER idea!'

'Nonononono, I'm not mad. Well, not at you, anyway,' I added as Yuffie continued to giggle. 'It's just that I don't appreciate being put on the spot this early in the morning.'

'Me either,' Sora agreed. I sent a burst of anger at Yuffie, and, quickly joined by Sora, proceeded with some well-deserved bashing.

Allow me to clarify a few things: First and foremost, I may be depressed, but I am NOT schizophrenic. I am telepathic. There is a difference between talking to voices that don't exist and those that do.

I'm pretty much a passive, shy, quiet kind of girl. I'm pathetic at sports, and I would definitely lose in a fight. I do have some strengths, however. I'm pretty smart, and a typical response I get when showing people my report card is "You little @\$#! How'd you pull that off?" I love music and art, and am talented in both.. As you've probably guessed, I'm also a total game freak. I especially love FFVII and Kingdom Hearts. My fave character? You guessed it- none other than Yuffie.

So, it's really no surprise that we have this... connection. I know, that isn't much of a description, but it's hard to explain. Lemme see...It's almost like being in a chatroom on the 'net. You're just surfing along when you bump into someone, and pretty soon you get talking. Only you don't really hear the words with your ears. When you're reading a story (like this one, for instance,) you "hear" the words, but it's all in your head. It's the same with telepathy. The really neat thing is that you can send emotions as well as words. The phrase "I know how you feel" takes on a whole new meaning. Very intense emotions are easier to broadcast. Which brings me to how I met Yuffie.

I was sitting and staring into space, daydreaming (a pretty common occurrence for me) when I suddenly felt really hurt and angry. It was pretty weird, considering that I wasn't angry, it was more like hearing a fight in the hallway while sitting in class. So, figuratively speaking, I walked out the classroom door to see what was going on. Whoever was feeling so frustrated, she needed to chill. 'Hey, settle down,' I thought. I was surprised to get a thought back.

'Settle down?! After what he said to me...'

'It's okay, just calm down.'

'Why should you care? Then, as realization hit, Who are you anyway?'

A warning to my readers: Do not attempt to make friends with someone who just had a fight with their dad. Introductions are a lot harder that way.

I didn't trust Yuffie any further that I could throw her, and, needless to say, she was pretty freaked out when I told her I knew all about her already. ('A video game?! Are you trying to tell me that you learned all this by playing a video game?!') It took time- a LOT of time- before we finally trusted each other. After all, we're almost total opposites. I even tend to think of her as my alter-ego. But underneath it all, we're both just two teenage girls, with our own hopes and dreams.

~*~*~*~

So, what did you think? Was it any good? A waste of time? Worth a review? Bad enough to flame? Please let me know, reviews make me happy! -ChocoChick87

2 - Connection

Chapter 2

'Take that and that and that and that...' I jabbed at the buttons exuberantly, smelling victory. After several long, hard battles, I thought I finally Sephiroth beat.

'What are you doing?' asked Sora.

'I'm about to win a major battle. Wanna see?' We'd been working on sending images to each other after Yuffie had caught me visualizing my crush. (Another story, don't ask)

'Sure,' Sora replied. I focused on the screen, watching his image and trying to project it to him.

'Wow, coooooool.... I look so...um...blurry?'

'Sorry, I'm having a hard time focusing. How's this?' I concentrated even harder on Sora, forgetting the Sephiroth completely. Big mistake.

WHAM! Sephy teleported behind me and delt a devastating blow, sending my HP into a nosedive. I would've been dead if I hadn't equipped Second Chance.

'Aaaargh! Look what you made me do!' I yelled as I noticed the near-empty HP guage.

'Hey, it's not my fault! You're the one who's half blind!'

'Oh yeah, well you-' I was abruptly snapped back to reality as my little sister (age 13) ran into the room.

"Guesswhatguesswhatguesswhat?! There's a TON of shooting stars outside! You've GOTTA see them!" I sighed and turned off the PS2 as she ran off through the house, repeating the message at the top of her lungs.

In less than five minutes, my family was assembled our large front porch, including all five cats. We (including the cats) were all kicked back in lawn chairs to enjoy the spectacle. Out in the small rural community where we lived, there was no light pollution or tall buildings to obstruct the view. The sky stretched out above our heads, a deep blue backdrop to trillions of glittering points.

"I've never seen so many before. They're so beautiful..." my mom murmured.

"Not as beautiful as you," my dad replied, and proceeded to kiss her in the starlight.

“Eeeeeew, gross! Don’t look!” my little sister yelled, and I began to make gagging noises. Actually, even though they embarrassed me sometimes, I was glad to have parents who loved each other. I had seen too many of my friends have to deal with divorce. Also, it didn’t hurt that they loved me, too.

“Daddy, what makes shooting stars?” my littlest sister (age 9, not to be confused with my little sister) asked.

“Well, when meteors enter the atmosphere, they burn up, creating light.” I could tell she was still confused, so I joked, “Either that, or our world’s been connected and is about to be invaded by the heartless.”

My other sister sighed. “You spend WAAAY too much time playing that game.”

“It’s called Kingdom Hearts. And I do not!”

“Girls, girls, settle down,” My dad coaxed. “It’s time to go inside anyway.”

“Aww, do we have to?” My littlest sister complained.

“Yes. It’s almost your bedtime,” my mom declared. Pouting, the afore-mentioned sister stomped her way into the house, followed by the others. I trailed behind, hoping to catch another glimpse of a shooting star. They had been so awesome...

I spotted something black, with yellow eyes, sitting on the ground in front of me. “Oh, hello Midnight,” I said, and stepped closer to pet the cat between his ears (his favorite spot). Then I stopped, a scream rising in my throat. I could see the figure more clearly now. And it definitely wasn’t a cat.

The scream I had been fighting to suppress escaped from my throat. A shadow?! I had to be hallucinating. Had I forgotten to take my meds? No, it was standing right in front of me, it’s antennae twitching in my direction. My family, hearing the scream, abruptly reversed direction and came pouring back out through the door.

“What’s the matt-” My mom caught her breath as she saw the creature.

“A heartless..” my littlest sister whimpered.

“Don’t move honey,” my dad whispered. “I’ll get it from behind” For a person who had suddenly come face to face with a monster from a video game, he seemed pretty calm. That is, until it turned and launched itself at him.

I screamed again, this time joined my both my sisters. Shadows began appearing from the, er...shadows, crawling across the floor, and then suddenly popping up to attack.

“Get back in the house!” My dad shouted, shoving the shadow off of him. “GET IN THE HOUSE!”

We all scrambled to obey, when suddenly, the house was surrounded by a ribbon of pale green light. It flowed around us, and down the street as far as I could see.

“The lifestream...” I whispered in awe. “Earth’s trying to defend itself!” The shadows shrunk away from the brilliant light, scrambling to get away. As I watched them go, I thought I heard...voices...calling...from the light...so many voices...what where they saying? I stepped closer.

“Who...who are you?” I whispered.

The calling became stronger. In a trance, I reached out to touch the shimmering light. “It feels...warm,” I turned to smile at my family, only to see them staring at me in horror. This snapped out of my dreamlike state. “What?” I demanded.

“Get away from it!” my mom shrieked . I looked at my hand. It was slowly being drawn into the lifestream! It was sucking me up like a vacuum cleaner! I screamed for the third time that evening as the rest of my arm was drawn in. I struggled to pull away, but was pulled in faster. I was surrounded by the glowing energy, being sucked towards a hole in the sky...The voices suddenly changed from beckoning calls to cries of pain. My own voice joined them as I passed through the hole...and then everything went black.

3 - Return to Traverse Town

Chapter 3

Nyuck nyuck nyuck! My turn! If you haven't guessed already, they story has been passed into the capable hands of the great ninja, Yuffie! Seeing as how our resident main character is currently knocked out, I'm taking over this chapter.

Anyways, I was just thinking that things were getting back to normal. I mean, Sora had gotten rid of Ansem, hadn't he? So now I could go back to my old life, right? Wrong-o. I was just settling back into my old routine of getting materia for Wutai- hey, don't gimme that look! I have enough munny/gil to get it honestly now. Besides, once you've been trapped in a world where you don't need materia to cast magic, you kinda start not to rely on it as much anymore.

As I was saying, things were getting back to normal. Which for me, is boooooooring with a capital B. I wanted some action! So I decided to test out my combat skills on a few of the local monsters. As things turned out, I was about to get more than I'd bargained for.

I was heading for the mountains when I saw movement in the corner of my eye. Bingo! I took a battle stance, ready to take on the- heartless?! Ohmigosh, the world's walls musta collapsed or sumthin'! I'd have to tell the others! I ran for home, where I saddled up my best bird and headed for Rocket Town.

Later, as I tethered my chocobo to a post outside Cid's house, I noticed that the backyard was littered with gummi blocks. He'd been tinkering with the Highwind again. The weird thing was, a gummi ship I'd never seen before was docked right next to his. What the heck was going on?

Barging through the door, I asked "Cid, why is there a gummi..." I trailed off as I noticed that there was a second person sitting across the table from him. "Leon?! What are you doing here?!" I tried not to squirm as his eyes found mine. Gosh, he was so hot! "Yuffie, we have trouble." He was so serious that my remaining happiness evaporated. I sat down heavily in the remaining chair to listen.

"It looks as though the heartless have launched a second attack on this sector. They've managed to break down the world's walls, which were already weak from the first attack, again. Luckily, they won't be able to get to the hearts of the worlds, since Sora has locked them. The problem is, they've started to break into other, un-protected worlds. And some of them have been destroyed. Refugees have been pouring into Traverse Town. I'm going to need your help again."

I shuddered. What must it be like to have no home to come back to? To know you'd never see it again? "Of course we'll help, Leon," I said. "When do we leave?"

~*~*~*~

A few weeks later, I wandered the streets of Traverse Town, trying to sort things out in my mind. So far,

we'd been able to find places for all the newcomers to stay, and Cid's gummi ship business was thriving, but we were running out of space and supplies. Cid had been shipping in things from our homeworld, and we still couldn't keep up with demands. We could only hope that the fourth district would be finished soon. If things worked out, we'd be able to find more homes and grow our own food. Aerith volunteered to be in charge of the agriculture, since she was a great gardener and had a special connection to growing things. I wondered if we'd have enough water to grow rice. The food here took some getting used to...

"Whoa!" My arms windmilled as I tripped over something on the ground. Regaining my balance, I turned around to see what it was.

A teenage girl was sprawled on the ground, eyes closed. "You alright?" I asked, and got no answer. She was still breathing, so she wasn't dead, just knocked out. She needed a better place wake up to, though. I ran off, looking for Leon.

4 - Wakey Wakey!

Chapter 4

There was darkness all around me, so intense I thought I could reach out and touch it. This had to be a bad dream, that was it. I would wake up soon...

"The invasion was a success," a voice cut through the darkness. "The world's inhabitants were totally unprepared."

"That is not what matters." Another voice. Oooh, I wished I would wake up. "Have you found what we're looking for?"

"I believe so." I felt their attention turn to me. I now knew what it was like to be a bug under a microscope. "Observe this one's heart. There is a darkness surrounding it. It seems to be some type of illness." There was a sudden flare of light. I gasped as I saw my heart beaming inside my chest, glowing pink. It was surrounded by a bubble of light- a shield or wall?- which was in turn being poked and probed by tentacles of darkness, seeking a way in.

"An illness of the heart... this could be very useful to our cause. Keep an eye on this one."

Suddenly, I was released from their scrutiny. The darkness pressed in around me, even closer than before, and I lost awareness of everything.

~*~*~*~

Yuffie

Sighing in boredom, I went over my throwing stars once again with the sharpening stone. Was this out-worlder going to sleep forever? This was getting old, and fast. Of course, somebody had to be there when she woke up, to explain things and get her oriented. Since Leon was visiting Cid, and Aerith was busy planning out the agriculture, the task fell to me. I felt so much like a third wheel sometimes. I wanted to get out and DO something, not just sit around waiting on knocked-out refugees.

I took a look at my charge. She seemed about my age and height, with long brown hair, and a delicate build. She sorta looked brainy. Maybe it was the misplaced pencil behind her ear. Suddenly, she twitched and gave a low moan.

I leaned over the bed, and watched as her eyelids began to flutter. "Anybody home?" I inquired. Another moan. "Come, on, I know you're in there." This time, she seemed to go limp and fall back asleep. Not again! I was getting impatient.

~*~*~*~

"Wakey wakey!" a girls voice demanded. Was it time for school already? Gee, I'd been having some

really awful nightmares.

“Oh, go away, Julia,” I groaned, thinking my little sister was bothering me. “Gimme five more minutes.”

“Five more minutes? I’ve been waiting long enough already!” Something was definitely not right. That wasn’t my sister’s voice...

I opened my eyes and sat up, rubbing my forehead. Whoa! This wasn’t my bedroom. Where was I? Suddenly, everything snapped into place. The shooting stars, the heartless, the portal...My world had been connected! As if this wasn’t enough of a shock already, the person I’d been speaking to leaned into my frame of vision. It was a face I knew all too well.

~*~*~*~

Yuffie

Well, she was obviously awake now. I leaned ever further in to look her in the eye. An eye which was bugging out. I knew she would be confused, even scared, but was she supposed to be this freaked out? I wished Aerith was there, she knew how to handle these kinds of things better than I did. I was going to tell her to calm down, but she spoke before I did.

‘Y-Yuffie?!’ she stammered. I was totally freaked out. “How you know my name?” I demanded. She shook her head, still trying to get a grip with it all. ‘Don’t you recognize me?’ “How could I? I’ve never seen you before in my life!” This was really weird, and about to get even weirder, if that was possible.

‘I didn’t say anything!’ she squeaked. “Yes you did, I heard you!” I argued. ‘Look at me,’ she instructed. “I am looking at you!” I pointed out. She sighed in exasperation, then said, ‘Look at my mouth. Are my lips moving?’ Incredibly, they weren’t, and I told her so. Then it hit me. “You’re- You’re telepathic!” ‘You’re missing the point,’ she replied. ‘Don’t you recognize me- my voice?’ I was hit by a load of bricks for the second time in the last fifteen minutes. “Melanie?” I asked incredulously. She nodded, too shaken up to speak. Words didn’t suffice me either. She’d ended up in my world! So expressed my excitement in another, non-verbal way.

~*~*~*~

My first spoken word in the new world was “Uumph!” as my ecstatic ninja friend hurled herself forward and proceeded to squeeze the life out of me. “Can’t...breathe...!” I gaped out as she continued to suffocate me. This had absolutely no effect. Fortunately, I was saved from becoming a human pancake when the door to the room swung open.

5 - Meeting Aerith

Chapter 5

Standing in the doorway were none other than Leon and Aerith, who was looking amused. I had to admit it must have been a pretty funny sight; both of us gaping at the door with Yuffie's arms still firmly fastened around my neck.

"Was that you I heard squealing like a moogles with a new synthesizer?" Aerith asked Yuffie, who (although she would never admit it) was busy drooling over Leon. I pulled her arms off over my head, and she abruptly came back to reality. "No, it must've been Leon." she said sarcastically. Leon narrowed his eyes, then left the room muttering something under his breath.

"What's eating him?" Yuffie asked. Aerith sighed. "Another letter from the king came in with the supplies this morning. Cid swears (I had a feeling this might be literal) that he has no idea where it came from. This one contains some rather...distressing information." She seemed to space out for a minute, probably remembering the "distressing information."

Yuffie, impatient as always, took the opportunity to bring me to Aerith's attention. "We got another one today!" she said grinning and spreading her arms wide to indicate me, as though she were showing off a piece of merchandise on a commercial.

"Oh!" Aerith exclaimed, noticing me for the first time (I had been sitting on the bed in shock up to this point) "And who are you?" she inquired, smiling pleasantly. At the same time I felt a gentle prodding in my mind. I poked back tentatively.

Aerith's normally calm and peaceful demeanor shattered as she jerked back in surprise. "A telepathic?!" she gasped. I nodded, smiling shyly. "Yeah, she's got this talent for talking to people from other worlds." Yuffie said eagerly. Aerith looked bemused, as if trying to figure out whether this was one of the ninja's elaborate hoaxes. "She's a big fan of AVALANCHE, too, and..." Yuffie trailed off, realizing that she'd said too much. This definitely NOT maintaining world order.

"You know about AVALANCHE?" Aerith turned to me, ignoring the embarrassed ninja. I finally managed to find my voice and explained, "It was in a video game." I winced. That sounded so totally lame. "I mean-" I fished for some explanation that would make sense, and yet still be truthful. Aerith sensed my frustration. "Let me help," she said, and I felt the same touch in my mind I'd felt before. Suddenly, memories from the summer before came back as clearly as if they'd been yesterday, surfacing without any effort on my part. I realized Aerith was helping me find the answer to her question. The bombing mission, traveling across continents, fighting monsters, riding chocobos, even Aerith's death, and more... Traverse Town, heartless, Keyblade, then finally the fateful night my own world became connected.

There were a few awkward minutes of silence, then Aerith said in a stunned voice, "It's completely crazy, but you're telling the truth. You really do know everything..."

I was equally stunned. "How did you do that?" I blurted, without thinking.

Aerith laughed softly. "Cetra are gifted in matters of telepathy. Apparently, I've transferred some of it to Yuffie by accident. I'm not sure why you can 'hear' thoughts, though...."

But I had another question. "If....um...you don't mind..." I stammered. "How come you're alive?"

Aerith smiled obligingly. "I came back because I still had a mission to perform. My work isn't finished yet." I figured it wasn't my place to press any further, although I was dying to know what her "mission" was, and the room fell into silence again as we became absorbed in our individual thoughts.

"Wheell..." Yuffie finally said. "It's been a long day for everyone. Whadda ya say we catch some shut-eye?" As there were no objections to this, we collapsed into various beds and I gradually dozed off, feeling the presence of someones mind checking on me every now and then. Thankfully, sleep came without dreams this time.

~*~*~

I woke up the next morning (if you can call it morning in a world where the sun never rises) feeling disoriented. At first I almost panicked, but then memory came back and I examined my surroundings, not having noticed much the night before. Apparently, this was the "Blue Room" of the Traverse Town Hotel. A mural of the ocean had been painted on the walls, with dolphins playing in the waves. (You can see the same design on the back door if you hop over a couple of balconies...) There was even a blue clock with a little dolphin swinging on the pendulum, the only reason I knew it was indeed, morning. I could see Aerith's chest slowly rising and falling with her breathing, and Yuffie was snoring softly (hehehe) so I decided to take a quick look around. Easing off the bed, I tiptoed over to the balcony door and slipped outside.

Everything looked exactly the way I had thought it would, but never had the mundane been so fascinating. I ran my hand along the balcony railing, and gazed at the glittering stars overhead. It was real! I could see it, hear it, reach out and touch it! I was in another world! I laughed out loud, feeling amazed by it all. But I had forgotten that there were some really unpleasant things in Traverse town as well.

With a whooshing sound and a rattling of armor, a heartless abruptly appeared. Several shadows slid across the floor to surround me, then leaped up to attack. I shrieked and kicked at one like a soccer ball, sending it flying over the railing. Using the same tactic, I grabbed one with both hands and sent it over the railing, too, but not before it had given me a few scratches along my arm. I heard the door slam open behind me, and Yuffie and Aerith made quick work of the rest of them.

"Not bad for a first encounter, but next time, bring along a few of these," said Yuffie, tossing me a potion. "You might want to use an actual weapon, too." I watched in fascination (or as much interest as a totally petrified girl could muster) as a green light blossomed around me and the scratches

disappeared. "What, never seen a potion before?" Yuffie teased. "As a matter of fact, no." I replied flatly, not seeing what was so funny. Yuffie was not deterred, however. "You need some training, and fast." she continued. I noticed Aerith hadn't said anything yet, but was looking at me worriedly. More heartless appeared on the neighboring balconies. Yuffie propelled me back through the doorway, and Aerith followed, closing it behind her.

"That was not a normal heartless attack," Aerith declared abruptly. "They don't usually single out targets like that, or attack in that large of numbers."

"So what?" Yuffie said. "Maybe they've gotten stronger for the second invasion or something."

Aerith shook her head. " I don't think so."

"Then what DO you think?" Yuffie demanded.

"Never mind that. Leon's called a meeting, and we can discuss it more there. Your friend should come along so the counsel can find her adequate housing." I was once again propelled through the doorway (which was getting a little annoying) and meekly followed my escorts out of the Hotel.

6 - Council Meeting

Chapter 6

“What is with these things?!?” Yuffie demanded as we barged into the meeting. The trip to the third district had been pretty, shall we say, difficult. The heartless were everywhere! We couldn’t take two steps without being mobbed. (Think of your first time in Traverse Town, Didn’t it seem overwhelming?) Although Yuffie and Aerith could’ve easily fought them off, it would’ve taken too much time, so we resorted to the more basic method: flat-out running. Needless to say, we were fashionably late by the time we reached the small house.

As soon as we made it through the door, I was pinned by stares from all directions; Leon and Cloud with the usual cool glares, Cid with raised eyebrows (from Yuffie’s earlier comment), and a spikey haired, sixteen year-old-

“Sora!” Yuffie exclaimed. “What’re you doing here?”

He smiled, and I felt my knees go weak. “Stirring up trouble, as usual. You’re late, by the way.”

“Yeah, well, you should’ve seen the heartless out there! And we were dragging along a deadweight, too,” she said, and pointed me out, smiling to soften her words. I felt my face go red as Sora’s eyes found mine.

“No way!” he said, grinning even more (if that was possible) “Is it really you?”

“Yeah,” I squeaked as he put a hand on my shoulder, apparently to make sure I was real flesh-and-blood. I was glad he hadn’t pinched my cheeks and stretched out my face, the way he had done to Riku (that was soooo funny!).

“At least he recognized me right off,” I taunted Yuffie.

“Oh yeah? Well-” her retort was cut off by Leon.

“If you don’t mind, we need to get this meeting started.” he stated, and the room fell silent. “We have received a letter from the king, warning us of a new weapon. We don’t know for sure, but it is apparently an illness of the heart that slowly breaks down it’s defenses, opening it to the darkness, and making it more easily taken by the heartless.” He went on to describe the possible consequences if the dark forces got their hands on this weapon, but I was still thinking on his last words. “An illness of the heart...” the same words the voice in my dreams had used. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach as the implications hit me. My hand tightened on the armrest of my chair, making the knuckles go white. ‘What’za matter?’ Yuffie asked. I shook my head. ‘I’ll tell you later.’

“We cannot allow this weapon to be found. There are rumors that it only one world containing this

disease had been connected. We need to pinpoint that world. We must find that weapon before the dark forces do.” Leon was saying.

The irony of the situation was ridiculous. “Excuse me,” I interrupted. “But you already have.” Once again I felt the eerie sensation of having all eyes on me. I gulped, and continued, “I am the weapon.”

Shock erupted. Yuffie slapped her forehead. “Duh! Why didn’t I see it before?!” she exclaimed.

“Well, this explains a lot of things...” Aerith mused as Cid muttered obscenities to no one in particular. Cloud and Leon had fixed me with twin glares, and I suddenly became very interested in the floor. But I wasn’t finished yet.

“I need to get back to my homeworld- to warn them.”

“You’re not going anywhere-” Leon started, and I cut him off, feeling incredibly foolish for challenging him, but needing to finish. “If I don’t, my world could be destroyed. I could never forgive myself for that.” Although I felt ashamed by it, I was deliberately pushing his buttons. He couldn’t stop me from going or he would have the guilt of one more destroyed world to deal with.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, during which I continued to examine the floor. (They could really use some new carpet...) Finally, Leon sighed. “You’re right. It would be easier to keep an eye on you here, but I suppose they’d find you anyway. You can go-” I quickly finished my inspection of the floor, and looked up. “-as long as someone in the committee goes with you.” At that statement, Yuffie almost fell off her chair with excitement. ‘Yes! A chance to finally get out of this place! Whoo!’ I heard her thinking. “I’ll go!” she practically yelled. (I swear Leon’s face broke into this look of incredible relief)

“It’s settled, then. Sora, handle things from your end. Make sure the invasion doesn’t get out of control.” Sora nodded, shouldering his keyblade. “We meet again soon. You know when.” There were nods all around, but I could practically feel the question mark hovering over my head. “In the meantime, you had better make some preparations,” he added, looking at Yuffie. (‘Yay! Shopping!’) With that, the meeting was over.

I exited the house, feeling dazed. Leaning against the wall separating me from the Third District square, I gazed vacantly at the fountain. So much had happened in so little time. Where did I go from here? I thought I knew what to do when I had confronted Leon, but now...

“I know how you feel.” I jumped my own height before realizing it was Sora. “I didn’t know what to do when I first came here, either.” He leaned against the wall next to me, causing my heart rate to double in speed. “Don’t worry about it too much. Things’ll work out.”

“Thanks,” I finally managed to croak out.

Yuffie, who had sneaked up from behind, gave me a slap on the back, and I nearly fell over the railing. “Yeah, you can’t fail with me coming along! C’mon, fearless leader, let’s go shopping!” She dashed away, evidently expecting me to follow. Sighing, I stepped away from the wall, when something warm brushed against my hand- another hand. Sora was standing close to me, uncomfortably close.

“Keep in touch, okay?” I nodded mutely, trying to keep from blushing. He flashed me a brilliant grin, and left me standing in front of the small house in total shock. Yuffie burst through the door to Second District just as he reached it. “Are you coming or not?” she demanded. I rolled my eyes, and smiling to myself, followed.

~*~*~*~

Whee! Another chappie finished! This is the part where you push the review button (hint hint). Before you do- traditionally there are three members in a party. But I can't decide who should be the third! Suggestions, anybody?

7 - Shopping!

Chapter 7

A/N: Thanx 2 Nyowpotopop for the idea! I think I'm going to stick with it. As for the rest of you...(menacing glare) you'll just have to live in suspense for now! Mwahahaha!

~*~*~*~

"You do realize I don't have any munny, don't you?" I asked Yuffie as she happily bounced along the street in Second District. The heartless seemed to have given up for the moment, thankfully.

"Hey, don't worry about it." She produced a bulging drawstring bag and jiggled it a few times so I could see the munny inside. "I've just been waiting for an excuse to spend this. This is gonna be so much fun!" I agreed, gazing around at the various shops. I felt like a little kid at Disneyland, seeing all the rides and shops and booths for the first time, full of excitement. I still couldn't believe I was in another world! "I can't either." Yuffie replied, too caught up in her own excitement to realize I hadn't even spoken aloud. "This is our first time being together, right? I mean, it's not like we were exactly apart or anything, but now we're REALLY together." I nodded, examining a moogle who seemed to be just as curious about me as I was about him.

Then I noticed something. "Wait a minute- why are we at the world exit?" I asked.

"The shopping's better on my homeworld- more selection. It's hard to get supplies out here..."

"And how, exactly, are we going to get there? We don't have a ship."

Yuffie stopped mid-stride. "Oh. I guess that's a problem." She grinned sheepishly.

"Why don't we visit Cid?" I suggested. "He'll probably have some ideas."

"Okay, it's better than sitting around scratching our heads." With that, we headed for the accessory shop.

Cid was at his usual post overlooking the alley. "Hiya' Cid!" Yuffie called out as we approached.

"What can I do for you ladies?" he inquired.

"Well, we're kinda in a fix. See, we need to get to other worlds, but we don't have a ship."

Cid snorted. "That's one @\$% of a fix you're in. Dunno what Leon was thinking, sending two inexperienced girls off on some quest with nothin' to go on."

'Inexperienced?!' Yuffie yelled mentally. 'Why, I oughta-'

"I'm sure he had a lot on his mind," I interjected, trying to smooth things over.

"Heh, that's funny, coming from you. But I liked the way you stood up to him back there. You got guts, kid."

Yuffie, finally pacified by this remark, asked, "Well, what about it? You gonna help us or not?"

"Sure I am, if you can learn to be more patient. See, I was workin' on the Highwind, seein' if I could equip it for interworld travel, but I just can't seem to keep things organized. So, if you can get that junk pile into some semblance of order, you're free to keep whatever you want from it. Meet me at the world exit in an hour and I'll let you hitch a ride on one of the cargo ships."

"Sure thing, Gramps!" Yuffie called over her shoulder as we left.

"IT'S CID!" he bellowed back, and Yuffie snickered. "Works every time..."

"So, what're we gonna do for an hour?" I asked as we headed through the door back to Second District.

"Well, there's some stuff we could get while we're still here, I guess. Like clothes, for example," she added as she looked me over.

"What's wrong with these?" I asked, indicating the typical jeans and t-shirt combo.

"You're gonna need stuff that'll give you more freedom of movement in battle. You also happen to stick out a little," she said, tugging on the zipper of my hoodie. "High school orchestra, huh?" she asked, reading the logo. "Pretty spiffy."

"Hey, I spent \$37 on this thing! Hands off!"

And that was how I ended up looking over practically every outfit in the clothing store. We had a hard time agreeing on it. "I am not a stripper, and I don't intend to look like one." I declared after Yuffie suggested a particularly skimpy getup.

"Sure thing, Miss Priss," she retorted. "What about this?" she asked, holding up a long cloak. "Does it cover enough skin for you?"

I snorted. "Whatever happened to the whole 'freedom-of-movement' thing?"

Finally, after several more incidents, I left the shop wearing none of my original clothes besides my tennis shoes. My old hoodie had been replaced with a red jacket that laced up in front, instead of a zipper. It had come with a matching red bandana to keep my hair out of my face. I also had a pair of pants-or were they shorts? with more pockets than anyone in their right mind would wear. The only plus was that they were embroidered with a cute heart logo on the knees. "I go in with flairs, and come out with cargos," I complained. "You'll thank me next time you need a potion," Yuffie had responded.

After that incident, we had just enough time left to scramble to the world exit. We burst through the doors and entered the docking area (think of the one at Disney Castle), where cranes whose arms happened

to end in little cartoon-like hands were busily loading crates and boxes into the cargo ship. It was a huge conglomerate of blocks that seemed to have been thrown together at the last minute, and I had no idea how we were supposed to get on board. "How-?" I started to ask, when one of the hands closed around my waist and hauled me into the air. I saw Cid laughing uproariously as I passed the cockpit, and glanced over my shoulder to see Yuffie dangling upside-down in the grip of another hand, looking furious. By the time we were dumped unceremoniously into the hold, her face had gone red both from anger and the fact that blood was rushing to her head, and I was giggling hysterically.

"Your...face...!" I gasped as she scrambled to her feet. "You should've seen it!"

"Yeah, well when you've been hung upside down by a crane we'll just see how you look."

"Wha-?" I began, but miss motor-mouth interrupted me.

"C'mon, let's head for the cockpit. We should be taking off soon."

~*~*~

Review, I command you! MUAHAHAHA!

Yuffie: -__-;; No more sugar for her...

8 - Rescue in the Dark

Chapter 8

I hurried after Yuffie to the cockpit, passing several loudly humming engines on the way. The humming increased as I hauled myself up the ladder and through the hatch, where Cid was readying the ship for takeoff. "Git yourselves strapped in, we're gonna leave soon."

"Ummm...Cid? There's only one other seat." Yuffie pointed out.

Cid cursed this oversight, while Yuffie and I proceeded to argue over who got the seat first. I claimed it on the basis that it was my first flight, agreeing that Yuffie could have it on the way back. I buckled the harness, and listened to the engines reach a roar, while Yuffie wedged herself between a couple of crates in the hold. Suddenly, I was slammed back into the seat as we rose off the ground. I grabbed the armrests and resisted the urge to yell in excitement. Soon, the ship leveled off and we were streaking through space.

I immediately pasted my face to the window, gazing at the glittering vista of stars spread out before me. Occasionally, asteroids or colorful gummi formations floated by. Cid looked over and guffawed at my open-mouthed excitement. "First time on a gummi ship, eh kid?" I nodded, still staring out the window. "Huh, you gotta few things to learn if yer gonna pilot one. See, interspace ain't no playground."

"P-pilot? Me?" I stammered in surprise. I had hated driver's ed, how was I supposed to manage this?

"Well..." Cid scratched his head. "Yuffie gets airsick on these kinda things. She won't be much use in flying."

I could've slapped myself. How did I forget? "I'd better check on her..." I said, peeling myself away from the window.

"See if you can get her in here. She should listen to this, too." Cid added as I scrambled through the hatch.

Yuffie was huddled between the crates, trying (unsuccessfully) to look like the flight wasn't bothering her in the least. "You know, you don't have to pretend around me. I can see right through it." I reminded her. I was, in fact, starting to feel a little woozy myself as I came in contact with her mind.

"Hmmp! Know-it-all," she teased, but still allowed her shoulders to slump a little.

"You okay?" I asked, cursing my concern (or "softness", as miss battle-hardened Yuffie termed it)

"If I was okay, would I be down here?" she responded.

“That reminds me, Cid wants both of us in the cockpit. Think you can make it?” I asked.

“Can I make it?” she repeated, pretending shock. “You happen to be talking to a certified ninja! Of course I can make it!” She strolled over to the ladder, making a big show of it, and then scrambled into the cockpit while I struggled to hold back laughter. It exploded as I poked my head through the hatch to see Yuffie imitating Cid's driving, who was oblivious to the entire thing. Cid turned his head to look at us, and Yuffie instantly put on an innocent face, which of course only made me laugh harder. “I'm surrounded by @\$%ing crazy people,” Cid muttered, raising an eyebrow.

Once I finally had a hold on myself, the piloting lessons began...and continued throughout the trip. By the time the ship had stopped, I was bored out of my mind- but I did know how to fly. Turning away from my “teacher”, I looked out the window and was stunned to see Hollow Bastion. ‘But...but you live in Wutai!’ I protested silently. ‘Just watch,’ Yuffie instructed, as Cid orbited the world, apparently looking for something. Once we had gone around twice, he declared, “The @\$%ing gate must be closed. We're gonna have to open it.”

‘Gate?’ I thought, confused, as Yuffie propelled me through the doorway to the airlock.

“Step on the transport point,” she instructed, motioning towards the glowing green circle on the floor.

“You mean that save point?” I asked.

“When you're on a ship, it takes you down to the surface of the world you're orbiting. Watch Cid.”

I obediently looked on as Cid stepped into the circle, and disappeared in a swirl of green light. “After you!” Yuffie said cheerfully, and I quickly moved into the light to avoid being shoved into it by my ever-eager friend.

When the light faded, I found myself in the castle library, where Cid was waiting. Once Yuffie had appeared (and nearly knocked me over in the process), he told us to stay in the library while he went on ahead to open the gate.

“Sure you don't need any help?” Yuffie asked. “This place is probably swarming with heartless.”

“Exactly,” Cid replied, “Which is why you should STAY HERE.” With that, he shouldered his spear and marched through the door, leaving a disgruntled Yuffie behind.

“Hey, it's not so bad. We can do a little research while we're here. Maybe we'll find more of Ansem's report.” I started toward the nearest bookshelf, practically drooling at the sight of so many books in one place.

Yuffie shook her head. “Aerith and Belle already looked. They gave what they found to Sora.”

“Well, maybe they missed something,” I said, not to be deterred, and began to search through the

volumes. I had just picked out a particularly interesting-looking one (“States of the Heart: Their Origins and how to Control Them”) when I heard a voice in my head. “Cut it out, Yuffie, I’m trying to concentrate here,” I said, annoyed at being interrupted in my reading.

“That wasn’t me...” came the nervous reply. I set down the book, closed my eyes, and we both “listened” carefully, trying to catch the voice again.

‘Help me...Is anyone out there?...Can you hear me?...It’s so dark....’ The voice was faint, but I could tell it was close.

“We’ve gotta find him! I think he’s somewhere in the castle,” I told Yuffie, who looked at me incredulously.

“Are you sure it’s a guy? Cuz’ I can’t-”

In a rare moment of role reversal, I interrupted her. ‘Where are you?’

‘We’re gonna rescue you!’ Yuffie added.

We both were hit by a rush of relief, and then he said, ‘I’m on the other side...It’s so dark here... please hurry!’ Suddenly, I felt a sense of urgency, almost like something was pulling at me. “Do you feel that?” I asked Yuffie. She nodded. “Lets follow it!”

We left the library, and headed for the floating platform leading to the floor below. Suddenly, I heard a whooshing noise I knew all too well.

“RUN!!” Yuffie screeched, and flung herself over the railing to land cat-like on the floor.

“Wait!” I yelled, trying to escape from the clutches of the several shadows that swarmed around me.

“OhmygoshsorryTHUNDER!” she blurted, and immediately the heartless were zapped. I quickly jumped onto the platform, which was halfway to the ground, and then to the floor. Yuffie then grabbed my hand and proceeded to drag me along at a dead run towards the lift stop.

The next chaotic half hour went by in a blur. I quickly found out just how fast an adrenaline pumped, terrified teenage girl could run. And still, the pulling led us onward and upward until we finally reached the grand hall, stopping at the save point to heal along the way. Cid was bent over one of the control panels at that ringed the platform. He looked up as we dashed up the stairs to it. “What the @\$%?! I told you to stay in the library!” But now we were going too fast to stop, and the pulling was stronger than ever. We knew exactly where the mysterious voice was coming from. Taking the steps two at a time, we plunged into the dark portal.

Instead of the swirling panorama of colors I expected, there was darkness- and a strangely familiar looking set of doors. Slumped against the doors was- Riku! We came to a screeching halt in front of him, and suddenly the black, spongy floor began to bulge under our feet. “Hurry!” Riku gasped. “The heartless...they’re coming!” He staggered forward, almost too weak to stand, as the bulges grew

glowing, yellow eyes. Yuffie wasted no time in pulling one of his arms around her shoulders. I quickly took the other arm, and all three of us stumbled toward the light where Yuffie and I had originally entered. The bulges began to take on the more recognizable shapes of darksides, causing my heart rate to rocket. Just a little farther...! If we could only make it a little farther! And then we were through, skidding across the marble floor to come to a stop in front of Cid. Behind us, the portal flared with energy, then disappeared in a flash of darkness. Yuffie disengaged herself to grab her sides and catch her breath, leaving me to support Riku.. This turned out to be a bad idea. He went fully unconscious, and his dead weight caused us both to go crashing unceremoniously onto the floor.

9 - Riku

Chapter 9

~Yuffie~

There was a thud behind me, and I stopped panting long enough to look over my shoulder and see what had made it. Melanie, her face turning red from embarrassment and lack of oxygen, was trying to squirm out from under the silver-haired boy, who was apparently unconscious. (Her thoughts were somewhere along the lines of 'having too much physical contact!' Hehehe!) Cid, expressing his opinion of the situation in rather colorful language, tried to help her out from under him. I dragged the boy off her, and Cid in turn dragged her over to the railing, where she sat, gasping for breath. Smirking, I hauled the boy over to the railing and propped him against it, deliberately resting his head on her shoulder. "There," I declared between breaths. "Are...we...comfortable?" I had the satisfaction of seeing her face go even redder (if that was possible) as I plopped down next to her. We both continued to huff and puff as Cid looked on, bemused. "So..." he finally said. "Where'd your little friend come from?" I took the liberty of explaining, as Melanie was still in shock from my little trick. By the time I finished, Cid was shaking his head. "This is @\$% nuts!" Then giving me a sidelong look, he asked, "Why'd you never tell me you could read minds?"

Later, on the cargo ship, Melanie watched in fascination as we flew through the gateway, which Cid had turned on and was now shimmering above the towers of the castle. The unconscious boy, who she had told me was named Riku, was strapped into the emergency co-pilot seat. I had, however, been tempted to take the seat myself, leaving her to be a human pillow for him during takeoff.

"So...this is why you told Sora this was your home, right?" she asked

"Yeah." I answered. "Our homeworld and Squalls are both past that gate. We ended up in Hollow Bastion after the first invasion, and couldn't find out how to get back. The gate had been closed..." I trailed off, remembering. "We made our way to Traverse Town after that."

"Hmm..." She nodded, satisfied, and continued to gaze out the window as we passed through the gate and emerged in a different sector of interspace. Suddenly, Riku gave a low moan and before I could blink she was standing next to him.

"What're we gonna do with him?" I wanted to know.

"I dunno. Maybe we should wait until he wakes up and see what he has to say for himself," she said, bending over to look at his face. "I think he might be coming around..." She continued to look at him (a bit longer than necessary, in my opinion) and finally sighed. "I really can't tell. Maybe we should contact Sora in the meantime."

"Why Sora? Why not tell Aerith so she can pass it on to Leon? He does happen to be the leader of the committee, you know," I questioned.

“Well, Riku happens to be Sora’s best friend.” She declared flatly.
I went into shock. “Sora’s best friend?! No way! I thought he was trapped in Kingdom Hearts!”

“Exactly. The portal led us to Kingdom Hearts. But why?” She became absorbed in thought again (an all too common occurrence) when Cid cleared his throat. “Couldn’t help overhearing...If you want my opinion, I think it was because I’d already turned on the gate when you two came tearing through there like Cerberus was after you. Maybe it switched the portal, too.”

“Yeah, that might be it,” Melanie agreed, and then said, “We’d better tell Sora.” She smiled. “He’ll be so excited!” She sat down right there on the floor of the cockpit, leaned back against the wall, and closed her eyes. I eagerly sat down next to her and she reached out with her mind.

‘Sora? Are you there?’ she asked. I could tell she was practically bursting to tell him the news. ‘Hi! What’s going on?’ Sora found us quickly. ‘You seem excited...I thought that was Yuffie’s job?’ he teased.

Before I could make a suitable comeback, she blurted ‘You’re never gonna believe this! We found Riku!!’

Sora nearly had cardiac arrest. ‘REALLY?! Where? How? When? Is he okay?’

‘One thing at a time!’ she laughed. He was regaled by the full story, with interjections from both of us. (I was, however, conveniently interrupted when we got to the part where Riku collapsed on her.) After what seemed like forever, we signed off. ‘Remember what I said,’ Sora called after us. ‘Keep in touch!’

“What was that supposed to mean?” I asked.

She blushed for what had to be the millionth time that day. “Oh, nothing.” “Uh-huh,” I said skeptically. “That was a pretty big ‘nothing.’”

“We’re coming in for a landing,” Cid interrupted us. “You’d better finish whatever mind-reading voodoo stuff you’re doing and get secured.” With that, we scrambled down into the hold to wedge ourselves between crates to Melanie’s silent protests of ‘Voodoo?!’ I clutched at my stomach and braced myself for the necessary evil of landing.

~*~*~*~

Sorry about the short chapter. (Insert usual plea for reviews here) I want to know what you think, even if all you do is ask what I was on when I wrote this.

Yuffie: It was CANDY!!! (stuffs face with Nerds) Hehehehehe!!!!

C.C. -_-;;

10 - Chances

Chapter 10

~Melanie~

We touched down in the field out back of Cid's house (you know, where the rocket used to be). Cid managed to get Riku out of the ship, with me hovering over him like a vulture. Yuffie didn't fail to notice this, and proceeded to make mental comments about "eye candy" and so forth. I so was busy complaining about this, I didn't watch where I was going. Which was how I ended up sprawled on the grass, gazing up into a face not unlike my own, complete with glasses (Although I usually wear contacts, sometimes I'm too lazy to put them in.)

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry!" she said nervously as I got to my feet.

"That's okay, I should've been watching where I was going." I reassured her.

Cid passed by carrying Riku and muttering obscenities under his breath. "Get me some @\$% tea, woman, don't just stand there!" he yelled over his shoulder as he went through the door.

"Well well well, someone's in a bad mood." Yuffie commented as she sauntered up.

"Oh, hello Yuffie," Shera said. "Would you like some tea, too?"

"No thanks, I'm feeling kinda sick...you know," Yuffie jerked her thumb at the gummi ship.

"Me, too," I said, not wanting to embarrass Shera by pointing out that I didn't like tea.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I haven't even introduced myself," Shera said, flustered. "My name is Sher-"

She was cut off by Cid shouting, "Hurry up with that @\$% tea!!"

Once everyone was comfortably settled around the kitchen table, with Cid (somewhat) pacified by the tea, we discussed our plans. "I gonna head over to Junon to deliver the supplies. Are you two coming with?"

Yuffie made a face. "No, thanks! I'm not getting back on a gummi ship that soon. I'll take the chocobo."

My face lit up. "A chocobo?! Really?!!"

Yuffie laughed. "I guess she's not coming either, Cid." Then, turning to me, "Come on, he's out back. I'll show you."

She pushed her chair back from the table. Cid also got up to leave, leaving an empty tea mug behind. He was out the door, and I was about to follow when I remembered something.

"I'll be there in a minute," I told Yuffie, who shrugged and followed Cid outside. "Shera, could you do something for me?" I asked.

Shera looked up from the mug she'd been cleaning. "What is it?"

"You know that boy?" She nodded. "His name is Riku. If he wakes up, tell him that we'll be back by tomorrow." I turned to leave, then added, "Tell him not to worry, the darkness can't get him now." Shera looked puzzled, but reassured me that she'd take care of him. I went into the living room, to check on him, where he was sprawled on a couch, still knocked out. I'd been so worried about him after I'd finished playing Kingdom Hearts. How could anyone survive the darkness for that long? It looked like he'd be okay now. His chest was slowly rising and falling with his breath. I took it as a good sign, then left to join Yuffie.

I found her in the back yard, feeding the chocobo. It wasn't tied up, since the yard was fenced in, and once it caught sight of me trotted over to investigate. "Hello, birdie," I said, holding out a hand to him. I was a little nervous- that beak was sharp looking!- but to my surprise he presented his head to be scratched, just like any garden variety parakeet. I willingly obliged, stroking the glossy feathers. I couldn't help but notice that they were gold, the rarest color of all.

"Wow, you're some bird!" I told him.

"Wa-a-a-rk!" it crooned happily.

Yuffie, having caught up with the curious bird by now, told me, "Yeah, Cloud went on a chocobo breeding stint once, but you know that already." She began to pet the chocobo too, who seemed to be in his idea of heaven. "Tweety sort of belongs collectively to all of us, but Barret takes care of him."

"Barret?" I asked incredulously, thinking of the strong, gun-armed black man. "He doesn't really seem the chocobo-raising type."

Yuffie giggled. "Tweety is Marlene's pet," she explained. "We gave him to her after he retired from racing, for her birthday. They live with Elmyra (Aerith's foster mother, for those with short memories) in Kalm now, so they have plenty of room for him."

"I see," I said, picturing the small, rural town in my mind. Abruptly, a picture of Marlene gallivanting around on Tweety's back popped into my head, courtesy of Yuffie. We both burst into laughter as she added a frantic Barret running after them, waving his gun-arm and shouting for them to come back. Yuffie's laughter was cut off as she caught sight of something behind me. A slow grin spread across her face and she whispered, "Eye candy at twelve o'clock."

I spun around so fast I nearly tripped, and was paralyzed by a pair of aqua eyes. I struggled not to blush in my embarrassment, and stammered "H-hello," I was answered by an equally quiet version of the greeting. I then stared at the ground, Riku stared at me, and Yuffie stared at both of us, mentally

urging me, 'Say something!' I tried, I really did, but my mind just kinda...came up empty. So Yuffie finally filled in, shaking her head at both of us.

"You're up early," she said in a deliberately cheerful manner. "How're you feeling?"

"All right," he claimed, then, more hesitantly said, "I'd like to talk with you,"

"Okay," Yuffie chirped, and we trailed him back into the house, leaving a disappointed Tweety behind.

I sat down in an armchair across from the couch where Riku had placed himself. Yuffie, determined not to be deprived of another opportunity to tease me, squeezed right in next to me, pushing me off balance and embarrassing me (again). 'You need to lighten up,' she told me as I tried to squirm into a more comfortable position.

"So..." she began, (since I still couldn't get my brain to function properly) "you're Sora's best friend, huh?"

"You know Sora?" Riku asked, surprised.

Yuffie nodded, "Yeah, we're friends of his. He's told us about you"

I could see he had about a million questions, but so did I. Eventually I couldn't stand it anymore and asked, "How did you know we were...in a position to help you?" I finished awkwardly.

"King Mickey said that someone was coming, before he left." Riku seemed to be staring into space.

"He left?" I blurted, shocked.

"He said there were some deeds that he needed to do. I didn't want him to go, I was getting so weak..." I wasn't surprised. Ansem himself had said in one of his reports that the body was too frail to endure pure darkness. "He told me not to worry, that someone would come for me." King Mickey sure knew a lot, I decided.

"So, then you started calling for us?" Yuffie asked.

"You heard that?" Riku was surprised. "I wasn't saying anything aloud."

"Well, duh, we heard you! We even told you we were coming!" Yuffie snorted.

'He was barely conscious, I'm surprised he can remember anything,' I scolded her mentally. Then I explained to Riku, "We sort of heard you in our heads,"

Yuffie tapped the side of my head for emphasis, nearly giving me a concussion in the process. "It's called telepathy," she corrected. I lapsed into silence, not knowing what else to say. Even Yuffie seemed to have given up on making Riku more talkative. The only sound was the clinking of dishes in

the kitchen, where Shera was cleaning up.

“Well...” Riku finally broke the silence, “I just wanted to thank you.”

“Anytime!” said Yuffie. “We’re just always going around yanking people out of dark portals.” I rolled my eyes. The sarcasm seemed to have gone right over Riku’s head, however (either that or he was deliberately ignoring it).

“You told that lady to tell me I was safe from the darkness now,” he murmured, looking at the floor. “Well, I’m not. I’ll never be, not after being shut behind that door.” He looked up and pinned me with those eyes again. “They’ll be looking for me.”

It was my turn to look at the floor. “That’s all right,” I said. “They’re looking for me, too.” “What?!” Yuffie and Riku exclaimed at the same time. “Before I woke up in Traverse Town, I had a dream.” I began. “There were two voices. One said that I had an illness of the heart. The other said that I could be useful, and to keep an eye on me.” I sighed, and finished, “They want to take it from me and infest other people, so the heartless can take their hearts more easily.”

“B-but,” Yuffie stammered.

“You heard what Leon said!” I said in frustration, my voice louder than I had meant it to be. “He might as well have told me ‘Tough luck kid. Hope you die sooner than later!’”

“Leon might seem uncaring, but I know he thinks you have a chance.” Yuffie said, squeezing even closer (if that was possible) to comfort me.

“She’s right,” Riku said causing up both to look up in surprise. “You do have a chance. If your heart is strong enough, and you hold on to your memories, and to the light, you’ll make it.” He was looking at me again, but this time I didn’t look away. “That’s how I survived.”

“Then,” I said, without dropping my gaze, “you have a chance, too.” I could’ve looked at his eyes forever, but Yuffie completely ruined the moment, by interjecting “Are you two gonna have a staring contest, or are we gonna get moving?” I blushed and immediately looked away, and Riku, amazingly, laughed.

11 - More Shopping!

Chapter 11

A/N: For those who have never played FF7, Junon is a military post next to the sea. The Shinra are- rather, were- a totalitarian government, overthrown by Cloud, Aerith, Yuffie and co. Hyper is an item that cures sadness status in battle.

~*~*~*~

“Are you sure he can carry all of us?” I asked, looking doubtfully at Tweety as Yuffie slipped reins over his head.

Yuffie looked affronted. “Are you kidding?! This is a prize racing chocobo!” As though to affirm this, Tweety warked and bobbed his head enthusiastically, as Yuffie struggled to put the reins on him. “Cut that out, you crazy bird!” she scolded, somehow managing to secure the reins and swing herself onto his back. “All aboard!” she grinned and reached out a hand to help me up.

I scrambled up, only to realize that I would be sandwiched between her and Riku. ‘You did that on purpose!’ I complained as Riku climbed up behind me.

‘Yes, I am the mistress of all evil!’ she cackled, imitating Malificent. ‘Muahaha! What devious scheme shall I carry out next? How about THIS?’ She dug her heels into Tweety’s sides with a yell, and the bird bolted forward at a dead run. Which, for a racing chocobo is pretty fast. I let out a yelp and latched onto Yuffie to keep from falling off. Riku did exactly the same thing, i.e. held onto the person in front of him, which caused the said person to: a) become very embarrassed and b) blush. I swore I’d done more blushing in the past two hours than I’d done in my entire lifetime. Yet, in spite of this fact, (or maybe because of it) the trip was very enjoyable.

Yuffie and I excitedly pointed out different landmarks to Riku as we circled the mountains (he didn’t seem to have much to say, probably due to the fact he was getting mouthfuls of my hair about every two seconds). Nieblhiem, tucked away at the base of the mountains, the red sandstone cliffs of Cosmo Canyon, the ruined reactor at Gongaga, even the glittering tiers of the Golden saucer- I saw them all (In other words, I gaped like an awe-struck tourist). I wished for a camera about a million times- the blocky looking representations on the world map are laughable once you’ve seen the real thing. And the speed! Your average chocobo can run as fast as a car. We actually kicked up a salty spray as we skimmed across the ocean, making me laugh in sheer delight. All too soon, we had reached Junon.

Leaving Tweety in a grassy field just outside the sea port, we entered town and took the elevator to the second level. I caught a glimpse of Cid on the airplane/gummiship dock, which was swarming with people loading and unloading the planes/ships. Although Shinra Inc. had basically collapsed just a year ago, it looked as though the economy was getting back on it’s feet with the help of inter-world trading. We left the airplane path and entered the main street, which looked very different without the Sister Ray looming overhead. People bustled up and down the street, buying, selling, and trading. We were part of

the buying category.

Our first stop was at the item shop, where we loaded up on potions. Actually, it was Yuffie who wheedled the shopkeeper, with Riku looking on in mild interest, while I listlessly leaned on the counter, trying to shake my light-headedness. I had blamed it on the long trip at first (it had taken up most of the day) but when I started to really feel down, I knew it was really medication withdrawals. 'I hate being sad,' I thought to myself, watching Yuffie shell out gil. 'I wish I was more like her; cheerful, full of energy, maybe even hyper...That's it!' 'Hey, Yuffs,' I thought, trying to act casual. 'Think we could add a couple of hypers to the package?'

She cocked an eyebrow and silently asked, 'What for? We won't be staying on this world for long.'

'As sort of a substitute medication, you know...' I pushed.

'Oooooooh, I get it!' She then turned to the clerk. "Could we get some hypers with that?" It was the clerk's turn to raise an eyebrow. "We're experimenting with our limit breaks," Yuffie lied, laughing nervously. "Whatever you say..." she replied dubiously.

"Thanks a lot for that," I told Yuffie as we left the shop.

"Hey, no problem. After all, you wouldn't exactly be in the best fighting condition without it."

Riku, who had been listening without comment up to this point, finally broke in (his curiosity must have been killing him). "Without what?"

"Some medicine. My disease can be treated." I explained shortly. I didn't really want to discuss it, but Riku had more questions.

"Then why are you worried? They can't use it against you if it's been treated, right?"

"'Treated' is not the same as 'cured.' There is no medication that gets rid of it completely. I'm not even sure these hypers will work." I said flatly.

"Oh," Riku said just as flatly.

There was silence for a few moments. Finally, Yuffie declared "You two are sooo boring," and we walked along without saying anything until we reached the weapons store.

"So, what can I get for you, Riku?" Yuffie inquired as we examined a rack of various swords hanging from the wall.

"I'm already equipped," he replied, drawing his wingblade to demonstrate.

"Ooooh, I've never seen anything like this," Yuffie bent closer to examine the weapon as I turned away from the swords, sighing. Most of them looked too heavy for me to wield. But I definitely wasn't going to take on the heartless with nothing but my bare hands. 'Our party doesn't have a mage yet,' I

mused, looking over some staves. I picked one up and swung it experimentally a few times, then put it back in place. I didn't know what I was looking for, exactly, but this wasn't it. Suddenly, another staff caught my eye. Well, at least I thought it was a staff... It was a hollow metallic cylinder engraved with swirling designs, and had holes running down the side, just like...

"A flute?!" Yuffie exclaimed incredulously. "What're you gonna do, blow all the heartless away?" she laughed. The shopkeeper, who had been watching quietly up to this point stepped forward to take the thing from my hands. "Actually, music is a very useful way to channel magic," he explained. "I've seen some of the natives from Gaia use these, though I'm not sure how to do it myself." He handed the flute back to me, and said, "I'll make you a deal. If you can figure out how to use this thing, it's on the house. Nobody seemed interested in it anyway, until you came along." He walked away, leaving me to examine the weapon/instrument.

The sun was setting as we left the shop, and I was beginning to feel the effects of the day. I yawned, causing Yuffie, then Riku to follow suit. "We should find an inn," Yuffie muttered. A few minutes later Yuffie had spent the last of her gil on a room, and we collapsed gratefully into bed.

12 - Gummi Ships and Chocobos

Chapter 12

The next morning, I watched Yuffie try to load up Tweety with supplies while I tried to figure out the flute and balance on a boulder at the same time- "try" being the key word in both sentences, since neither of us were having success. Tweety wouldn't hold still, and I was still trying to conjure up memories of the Jr. High concert band, where I'd played the flute. I carefully fitted my fingers over what I hoped were the right holes, and played a few notes. Eventually, I picked out a scale, and practiced it for a while to refresh my memory. Yuffie had given up by this point and, sighing in exasperation, sat down on the rock next to me.

"Any luck?" she asked.

"A little..." I said cautiously. "I haven't picked out any songs, though."

"Here," she said, giving me a hyper. "Maybe it'll inspire you or something." She laid back on the boulder with her hands tucked behind her head. I drank the hyper- which, not surprisingly, tasted sugary- and suddenly felt decidedly better. "Hmmm, not bad!" I commented, and put the flute to my lips again. I worked out the most cheery song I could think of at the moment- the chocobo song- slowly, one note at a time at first, then as I got the hang of it, more quickly and smoothly.

Suddenly, Riku shouted, "Look!" Tweety, who had been running around the field, was now headed full speed for us. Yuffie screeched in surprise and I almost dropped my flute as he came to a stop directly in front of me. He cocked his head at me and crooned. "I- I think he likes your music..." Riku said as the bird began to poke at the flute. I picked it up and started to play again. Tweety watched attentively, crooning along to the music. Not only that, but when Yuffie scrambled off the boulder to make a second attempt at loading him, he held perfectly still.

In a few minutes we were all mounted, feeling a little stunned. (Guess who got stuck in the middle- again!) The trip passed quietly, with only the occasional comment from Yuffie, and even she gave up on trying to make conversation after a while.

Back at Cid's house once again, we all stared in puzzlement at the plie of gummi blocks that dominated the field out back. "And he expects us to organize them?" Yuffie wanted to know.

"Maybe we could do it by shape..." Riku trailed off.

"The most useful thing would be to do it by function." We jumped in surprise as Shera walked up behind us.

"Yeah, that would be useful- if we knew the functions, which we don't," Yuffie stated bluntly.

"It's really very simple," Shera explained. "This one, for example, serves as amour..."

And so it went. Shera would pick out a block, and the rest of us would scamper off to find the rest of the blocks that looked like it. It must've looked pretty silly, but it also must've worked, because in what seemed like no time at all, the large pile had disappeared. In its place were several decidedly smaller piles.

I was surveying our work with satisfaction when the peaceful, quiet afternoon was shattered. "Holy @\$%!" Cid exclaimed, catching sight of the piles. "Didn't expect ya to finish that quickly..."

"We had help," I explained, pointing at Shera.

"Heh, I don't believe it! Shera finishing a job that fast?" He paused. "Well, she does do things the right way. Now I can get back to work!" He happily began to rummage through the piles, looking for something. "Here it is!" he announced triumphantly, holding up a piece of armor. Everyone gaped.

"Armor? B-but, Captain, those were the most common kinds of blocks!" Shera protested.

Cid gave her a look that plainly stated she didn't know what she was talking about. "Look at the @#\$% shape!" he said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. It was an unusual shape, as though some wacko with no sense of geometry had designed it. But before I could get a closer look, Cid was scrambling up the scaffolding surrounding the Highwind. He clicked the block into place, and dusted off his hands. "There! It's finished."

"Finished?!" Yuffie screeched. "You had us organize all those blocks so you could find just ONE?!!"

"Yeah, that's about right." Cid stated calmly. "Just don't forget what I promised you."

"Oh yeah..." Yuffie became visibly calmer. "Our own ship..." Turning to the piles of blocks, she grinned. (Her sudden mood changes were beginning to scare me...) "Well, what're we waiting for? Let's build ourselves a ship!"

"Errm, Yuffie?" I asked. "Do you have any idea how to build a gummi ship?"

"Well, it can't be that hard," she said, ransacking the piles. "All you gotta do is put them together, right?" She grabbed two blocks and jammed them together haphazardly. "See, they stick to each-" the blocks came apart in her hands, "other." Riku snickered.

Once again, Shera came to the rescue. "You're going to need a blueprint, first. Let's go inside and map it out on the computer."

And that was exactly what we did for the rest of the evening. Which, according to Yuffie, was majorly boring, and according to me, majorly interesting. By the time Shera and I were finished, she had been reduced to dozing on the couch. Riku, however, watched the whole process with his usual stoical silence. It freaked me out a little, but still didn't keep that not-entirely-unpleasant squirmy feeling away. I wondered if it ever would.

With the ship finished and Yuffie still asleep, I went outside to examine mine and Shera's handiwork. I'd messed around with the spray paint a little, so that the ship actually had a uniform color instead of looking like a patchwork quilt. I couldn't believe I'd be traveling to other worlds in this thing. The sun had set, and looking up at the sky, I was amazed at how many stars there were. How was I supposed to find my home? Home... It was painful to even think about it. Suddenly, I couldn't take the sadness any longer. I let the tears run freely down my cheeks.

A rustling noise behind me made me jump. I jerked around to come face-to-beak with Tweety, who was looking for another scratch. "I just get so tired of holding it back..." I told the bird, stroking his head, "but you wouldn't know about that, would you?" I was surprised when a voice replied, 'But I do...' I looked around, hastily trying to wipe my tears away, but there was no one in the field besides me and the chocobo. "I'm hearing things," I muttered to the bird. "I'd better go to bed." Looking around one last time, I left Tweety behind in the darkness.

~*~*~*~

Mwahaha! The plot thickens! (Measures the plot, which is about as thick as a piece of paper) Ahem! Well... (hides the plot) Review Please!!! Thank you Blue Notebook and Nyowpotopop for being my victim-faithful audience! (Gives them Sora plushies)

13 - Same Hearts

Chapter 16

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for... (drumroll) Riku speaks!!

~Riku~

I turned away from the window, hoping she hadn't seen me. It was weird, the way she had looked around, as though she had heard my thoughts. But then, the girls claimed they could. I sighed. Listening in on people wasn't something I normally did, but if I was going to be traveling with them, I felt justified in trying to figure them out. And these two definitely needed to be figured out.

The first one...what was her name? Yuffie? She was annoying. The constant chatter, the mischievous grin, as though she knew a secret you didn't...It was enough to drive anyone nuts. I honestly didn't know why the other girl- Melanie? -stuck around her. The contrast between them was huge. She was generally quiet, and when she did talk, she actually had something intelligent to say. Her smile came easily, but it was halfhearted. Like mine. We both carried a burden.

I looked back out the window. She was standing up now, angrily brushing away tears as she strode toward the ship. She had been crying? I wished I could too, but my pride wouldn't let me. What if someone saw? I winced guiltily, realizing that was exactly what I'd been doing to her. She didn't like people to see her cry either. Wait a minute- how did I know that? Ugh. My thoughts were making no sense. I decided to call it a night.

I was halfway to the couch before I remembered that Yuffie occupied it. That left me with one other choice. The scientist lady had built two bunks into the ship, so that while one of us drove the ship, the others could rest. I headed out the door, but not before making sure Melanie was nowhere in sight.

I heard sniffing as I poked my head through the hatch. It hadn't occurred to me she'd be in here. Feeling foolish, I turned to leave, but was stopped when she asked, "Is someone there?" "It's me, Riku," I said, turning to face her. "Oh, hi!" That same fake smile was plastered on her face, hiding the fact she'd been crying a minute before. It matched the one I wore. Shaking my head at my thoughts, I climbed into the bunk above her. Lying on my back, I let the smile fade. I decided as long as we were both awake, I'd ask her about a few things that had been bothering me.

"So...you guys said you could read minds, right?" There was a quiet laugh from the bunk below.

"Not exactly. It only works with a few people. I can't just walk up to someone and tell what they're thinking. They have to 'send' their thoughts to me. Sort of like a letter."

"So, what I was doing back there was 'sending'?"

"Must've been. Otherwise I wouldn't have heard you... You know, 'received' your letter."

“Do you think...” I was almost afraid to say it, “I could ‘receive’ too?” “Probably,” she said, then more cautiously suggested, “You never know unless you try.”

“Would you...?” I didn’t know how to finish, but she understood anyway.

“Sure.”

Very carefully, very gently, her mind touched mine. The feeling was familiar, and I realized that this was what I’d been doing inadvertently all along. As the connection became stronger, I could feel her dominating sadness, and she felt mine. She gasped, and tried to break off the connection. It didn’t work entirely, because I could still feel her embarrassment at having her true feelings revealed. And underneath the embarrassment, realization. “You... You’re sad, too,” she finally said, still reeling from the experience, just like I was. “I’m sorry, I should never have suggested it, you’re probably so embarrassed-” What I did next was totally impulsive. Leaning over the side of my bunk, I reached down to cover her mouth with my hand.. “It’s okay,” I told her. “It’s okay. Actually,” I said more slowly, “It’s kind of nice to know someone understands me.” She removed my hand from her mouth, but didn’t let it go. She just held it, and smiled. I smiled, too, and this time, both smiles were for real.

~*~*~*~

“Wakey wakey!” a voice demanded. I groaned. Not that annoying girl again! I opened my eyes and tried to put on some semblance of wakefulness. I could just imagine what sort of tricks she would play to get me up if I didn’t. What actually happened was even worse.

Yuffie bounded into the room, and her mouth abruptly fell open as she looked at something just below me. I tried to see what she was gaping at and groaned again. My hand still held Melanie’s. I had, apparently, fallen asleep that way. I heard her groan too when she realized what was going on, and she jerked her hand away, but not before Yuffie started chanting in an annoying sing-song voice, “Melanie has a booooyfriend, Melanie has a bo-” “Shaddup,” she growled, stuffing her head under her pillow and blushing. “It’s not what it looks like. We were just talking and...” She sighed in exasperation, as Yuffie continued to chant. ‘It’s okay,’ I said mentally ‘Just ignore her,’ and received a burst of happy surprise in return. ‘You’re sending!’

‘Wow, the mute boy speaks!’ Yuffie joined in the mental conversation, which (thankfully) made her stop chanting. ‘Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. I taught him how to send thoughts last night.’ Yuffie stayed quiet while she explained, conveniently leaving out any embarrassing parts. But even that didn’t work. “Sending doesn’t usually require physical contact, does it?” Yuffie commented, and Melanie protested, “We were only holding hands!” blushing the whole time. Shaking my head, I followed them outside.

~*~*~*~

C.C.: Pointless fluff, I know. But it was cute, wasn’t it? I bet you laughed at least once while reading this.

Yuffie: Yeah, or else they went and puked in the toilet!

C.C.: (blushes) We were only holding hands!

14 - Taking Flight

Chapter 14

~Melanie~

I made my way back to the house, still blushing. Why, WHY did Yuffie have to make such a big deal out of it? Okay, so I'd never had a boyfriend before, due to my extreme shyness around guys. But that didn't mean she had to taunt me about it. The worst thing, or maybe the best, was that Riku didn't seem to mind her teasing at all. Which of course, only made me blush more.

I was so lost in thought that I was caught completely off guard by a low growling voice saying, "Hello, Yuffie." Puzzled, I looked around, trying to find out where the voice was coming from. I noticed Riku looking totally shocked, his only facial expression thus far (besides that gorgeous smile- did I just say that?!) I followed his line of sight to a large, fierce-looking orange creature standing in front of our group.

"Hi'ya Red!" Yuffie exclaimed, greeting the big cat with one of her trademark bear-hugs.

"It- it talks!" Riku stammered.

"Please, do not be alarmed. My name is Nanaki. Pleased to meet you." Nanaki sat back on his haunches and held out a front paw. Stunned, I reached out and shook it, repeating "Pleased to meet you."

"He's really not as fierce as he looks," said another voice, this time from behind our party. I turned around to see a woman in a black mini-skirt, long hair falling almost to her knees, smiling at our confusion. "Tifa!" Yuffie yelled, barreling into her.

"Hold your chocobos, I wanna see the brat, too." A large, black, gun-armed man crushed Yuffie in a super-sized version of her bear hug. "You bin takin' good care of my bird?" Barret growled.

"Yeah, he's out back. I bet Marlene will be happy to see him" Yuffie grinned.

"Happiness is a fleeting thing," a scarlet-robed man whose eyes matched his cape declared in a deep monotone.

"Lighten up, Vinnie. You're ruining the mood!" a toy cat on a stuffed mog retorted through a large megaphone. I gaped at the gathering like an awe-struck fan suddenly meeting her favorite stars (wait a minute, I WAS an awe-struck fan suddenly meeting my favorite stars!). I was going to serious sensory overload by now, and it was about to get even worse.

"Well, looks like the whole @\$%ing motley crew is here." Cid declared. I noticed he was sporting his flying goggles, and wondered why. "We're all goin' to Traverse Town on the Highwind." he revealed.

My jaw dropped. "What?!?!" Yuffie screeched. "How come nobody told me about this?!"

"Well, it was supposed to be a surprise...dinna count on you comin' here on a quest with your little friends, so you'll have to come with us." Cid scratched the back of his head, looking sheepish. "But I bet Cloud'll be surprised to see us. Can't wait to see the look on his @\$% spiky face!"

'Spiky face...?' Yuffie wondered. I was about to reply with a sarcastic comment along the lines of 'What is he smoking?' when Cid turned to me. "As long as you're heading for Traverse Town, you can fly as an honor guard. H#%, why not? We deserve an honor guard. Well, better get 'er warmed up!" Chuckling, Cid boarded his beloved ship.

"Ugh, I can't believe I'm gonna be riding that thing again!" Yuffie complained, eyeing the Highwind with apprehension.

"Airsickness," I replied to Riku's inquiring look. Then, to Yuffie, "Well, it IS your guy's reunion. Besides it'll be better than riding the gummi ship. More room, you know..."

She sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I know the drill: Move around-"

"Stay nervous-" I continued,

"And never, EVER read!" Yuffie finished. "Cloud actually did have some good ideas once in a while..." "Maybe we could look around before takeoff..." I suggested hopefully. Yuffie snorted. "Hmmp! Just talk to Cid. I'm sure he'll be more than willing to show off his precious ship!" It may have been sarcastic, but I took the advice literally.

We scrambled aboard, startling Cid, who then demanded to know what the @\$% we were doing on his ship. Pulling a Yuffie-style move, I batted my eyes and informed him that I was admiring it. The next thing I knew, we were on the grand tour. Cid was as eager to show off the ship as I was to see it- everything from the bridge to the conference room to the chocobo stables to the deck- and I drooled over every inch of it. I mean, come on! What FFVII fan hasn't wanted to see the Highwind?

All too soon, it was time for take-off. I reluctantly headed for the Excalibur (Riku's name for it, not mine. I kinda like Raganorok myself) and was treated to the sight of the Highwind taking off- much better than any CGI you've ever seen, I can guarantee you. The Excalibur followed like a tag-along puppy, piloted by Riku, who left me (and my itchy trigger finger) to the battle station. I was champing at the bit and ready to go, but I was about to get more than I bargained for.

I was scanning to gummi formations that passed us when a fleet of heartless ships shot into our path, cutting us off from the Highwind. Being an expert Kingdom Hearts player, taking them down was no problem. At least, not until another group came in from the back... and the right...and the left... "We're surrounded!" I cried, stating the obvious. Frantically punching buttons on the radio while trying to blast as many heartless as I could at the same time, I gasped "Highwind, this is the Excalibur! Do you read? We've been surrounded!"

Cid's voice crackled to life, barely audible over the lazer fire. "Holy @\$%! That's one \$#@% of a situation you're in. Get those @\$%ing missles online!" he yelled at a random crew member. "Hang

tight, Excalibur. We're gonna blast the @\$% outa them heartless as soon as we're turned around!"

"Turned around?!" I shrieked to no one in particular as the transmission was cut off. "They can't do it fast enough!" The Highwind's considerable bulk didn't exactly allow for fast maneuvering, and I watched it creeping around in desperation.

Meanwhile, Yuffie was going ballistic, babbling things like, 'You can't die, you just got here! I won't let you die, you hear?!' Riku's thoughts were equally chaotic, but he kept the ship on course.

"They keep coming!" Riku gasped, swerving to avoid yet another fleet that seemed to burst out of nowhere. "Dunno if we can make it..." As if to confirm his words, the alarm went off, indicating just how much longer we had to keep our hearts. I kept shooting, determined not to go down without a fight, and in my panic-filled haze, thought I saw a dragon flying toward us...

"I really am dying, aren't I?" I said brokenly. "I'm seeing things..."

"A dragon..."muttered Riku, and I stared in shock, first at him, then back at the apparently real dragon.

"You see it too?" I asked.

"Yeah...a dragon. Or is it a ship?" For the first time I noticed the metallic red sheen of the dragons hide, and the fact that it had rockets instead of wings- and also a couple of machine-gun like weapons mounted on the shoulders, which were firing a mile a minute, wiping out heartless right and left. In the time it took me to realize all this, the firing suddenly stopped, leaving an eerie silence filled only with the charred remains of heartless ships.

The radio crackled with Cid's voice. "This is the Highwind. We hail you and thank you for your aid. Otherwise-" Cid took a deep breath, and suddenly broke with the formality. "Our friends back there would have been in deep @\$%." I didn't think anything could shock at this point, but the next transmission left me paralyzed.

"Highwind, this is the Raganorok. We are glad to be of assistance." The voice of the teenage girl on the other end suddenly became uncertain. "Can you tell us where we are?"

~*~*~*~

Mwahahaha! SeeD to the rescue! And you thought I would only drag AVALANCHE into this. No one is safe from my schemes!

15 - Many Meetings

Chapter 15

It was a very strange group that made the trip back to Traverse Town: A flying mix of gummi and airship, what looked like a brightly colored Easter egg, and a huge metal dragon. I wondered what Squ- Leon would have to say about this. Not to mention how Cloud would react to seeing his companions again. And then, there were two best friends to reunite. I had a feeling this would be a very interesting meeting.

I staggered out of the Excalibur, still not fully recovered for my near-death (or heart-removing) experience, only to be hit by a human missile. "I thought they had you..." Yuffie gasped into my shoulder as I struggled not to fall over. Then, suddenly furious, she punched the afore-mentioned shoulder and shrieked, "Don't you EVER do that to me again, do you hear?!"

"I'm sure she can hear," Riku said dryly, "as well as everyone within ten miles of here." Indeed, everyone in the docking area was staring at us, and Tifa was smothering laughter. I was about to use my staring-at-the-floor tactic when the hissing of hydraulics attracted my attention.

Everyone turned to watch as a ramp slowly descended from the Raganorok's belly. My mind was reeling. This wasn't possible- but then again, I wouldn't have thought Traverse Town even existed until a few days ago. I kept my eyes glued to the ramp as it finally touched ground. One by one, four people emerged, all teenagers: A blond boy with a tattoo covering half of his face, a girl dressed all in pink, carrying a whip, a gun-toting cowboy, and finally, a raven-haired girl who smiled and waved as she came down the ramp.

'Rinoa...' I mentally named her. 'Squall's sweetheart.'

'No way!' Yuffie replied. 'He's really missed her...the way he talked about her... So, this is what she looks like...' I thought I felt a brief flash of jealousy from her, but it was gone as quickly as it came.

While her companions huddled near the Raganorok, looking uncertain, Rinoa marched right up to the AVALANCHE members and chirped, "Hi! Which one of you is the captian?"

"I'm the captian," Cid replied. "Thanks again fer' your help."

"No prob'," Rinoa said in her cheery voice. How anyone could be so up-beat after fighting off so many heartless was beyond me.

"So, did you guys lose your world, too?" Cid asked gruffly.

"Well..." For the first time, Rinoa seemed unsure of what to say. "I remember it being destroyed, I think... But it's back now, so that couldn't have happened, right? Except..." She sighed, a surprisingly sad sound. "The heartless are back, and two of our friends are gone. We've been looking for them..."

Cid looked sympathetic. "I think we can answer some of your questions at the Council Meeting. We should let Leon know another world's been connected."

I chewed my lower lip in nervous anticipation. I knew which two friends Rinoa was talking about. I felt guilty, as though somehow the knowledge made it my fault. But, if I did tell her... well, that wouldn't exactly help the World Order, would it?

The small house would have been much too crowded with so many people inside, so instead everyone waited at the first district café while Cid went to find Leon. It seemed like forever before they arrived, Cloud and Aerith in tow.

The reaction was amazing. Leon and Cloud wore almost identical expressions of wide-eyed disbelief, mouths hanging partially open. Aerith, on the other hand, squealed excitedly and nearly leaped onto her friends. While AVALANCHE exchanged their greetings in the background, (complete with back-slapping, bear hugs, and more excited squealing) Le- oh shoot, we all know what his real name is- Squall quickly turned away with slumped shoulders, bringing a hand to his face and covering it. He was however, too slow for the observant Rinoa.

"Squall?" she whispered in awe. "Is it really you?" Squall began to walk away, but she darted in front of him and forced his hand away from his face. It was her turn to experience wide-eyed disbelief as she looked into the scarred face of the twenty-five year old man whom she had known at seventeen. "B-but... how?" The others had joined Rinoa by now. "Oh man..." Zell trailed off. Quistis gasped, and Irvine shook his head. "Time compression..." Squall muttered. He tried to pull away again, but Rinoa flung herself on him in a hug. The embrace spoke of sorrow, of too much time spent waiting, wondering whether the other was still alive. It took awhile, but eventually, Squall hugged her back, a shuddering sob running through his body. Then, he finally pulled himself away. Just in time, too...

"Sorry guys! I didn't know we were meeting here and it took me awhile to find..." Sora stopped short when he caught sight of the rest of the crowd in the café. "Who are these people?" I laughed out loud at his puzzlement, causing him to turn in my direction... and the direction of the person sitting next to me.

"RIKU!!!" Sora yelled, putting a good three exclamation points into it and hurling himself at his friend with so much enthusiasm that he knocked the chair completely over. I was gaping for breath between bouts of laughter by now (I'm easily amused, if you can't tell). "You're alive!!!" Sora exclaimed, scrambling to his feet and helping Riku do the same.

'And kicking," Riku grinned.

"You can send!!!" Sora stated the obvious once again.

"Thanks to her," Riku waved a hand at me, and I was stunned as Sora gave me a hug, too (minus knocking over the chair this time).

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem," I replied, trying (unsuccessfully) not to blush, which caused Riku to go into a laughing fit of his own.

“Don’t I get a hug, too?” he asked jokingly.

“Fine,” I pretended to be angry. “You’re just as bad as Yuffie,” I muttered, mock anger completely failing me as we hugged, still shaking with laughter.

16 - Time travel and a Moogle

Chapter 16

A loud blast caused me to jerk and go stiff as a board in Riku's arms. Apparently, Squall's military training had kicked in and he had decided to take charge of our little meeting. When shouting hadn't worked, he had fired his gunblade several times into the air, which sure as heck got our attention...and caused all other the other patrons to leave.

The parties settled down in their respective groups: the SeeD's in one corner, AVALANCHE in another. Riku and Sora sat down next to each other, and I picked out a chair near them that was also conveniently placed on the outskirts of the AVALANCHE group...and Yuffie. Still, I felt like an outsider, not really fitting in anywhere. Why was I here? I was no hero. In fact, I was more likely to be a nuisance than anything else- a weapon to be kept out of the hands of darkness at all costs.

Finally, something Squall said brought me out of my reverie. "The SeeD have brought us a new gummi block. Apparently, the King himself gave it to Headmaster Cid with orders that it be placed only into the right hands. Those hands belong to the weapon."

A collective gasp ran through the crowd and I nearly fell out of my chair. "Me?!" I squeaked. "Why me?"

"It's the only way you'll find your world," Squall said. "Apparently, you're going to have to travel through time to get there." I felt my knees go weak, very weak. *Time travel?* "This is a time-travel gummi. It will allow you to travel to different periods in a world's history. Use it carefully." He dropped the tiny object into my hands. I stared at its colorful facets and wished that there was some way, any other way, to get home. Every sci-fi novel I had ever read involving time-travel had left my head reeling in confusion.

"Our worlds lie on different planes of existence," Squall continued as I retreated to my seat, "and those planes intersect at different points, allowing for warp holes and gates."

'Oh great,' I thought, 'Not only do I have to deal with time travel, but geometry, too. This is just peachy.'

"The weapon and her companions, however," Squall continued, as I wished he would quit referring to me in that particular way, "will travel in a straight line connecting the time periods of her world." I felt a bit better thinking about the 'straight line' bit. That sounded simple enough. "There is one drawback." He turned to me. "You will lose the gummi each time you use it, since it can't exist in two places at one time. So, you will have to re-locate it in each time period." My spirits dropped back down again, and I decided I'd had just about enough of this time-travel stuff. "If you are successful," he gave me a look that indicated I'd darn well better be, "You will be returned to the time period you came from. Do you understand?" I nodded numbly, feeling more depressed than ever. "Now, if there are no other matters, this meeting is dismissed." He nodded to Cloud, and AVALANCHE immediately left the cafe and moved into the main square, chatting animatedly. I took the opportunity to slink from my chair, passing through their outskirts and heading, unnoticed, to second district. I needed some time in the hotel to think things over- alone.

Just as I was about to open the door, I heard Riku's mental call of 'Where are you?!' Sora cut him off. 'Headed for the Hotel, I'll bet. Don't worry, Donald and Goofy will be there to back her up if anything happens.' Relieved, I took the convenient opportunity to pretend I hadn't heard them and slip through the door.

The first thing I heard were high-pitched squeals. Peering over the top of the wall, I saw a ring of heartless surrounding a moogle, darting in one at a time to take swipes at the creature as it sat helpless in the middle of them. It obviously didn't have much longer, judging by its squeals and the fact it was defenseless. That was about to change.

Screaming out all my pent-up frustration and despair, I flung myself over the wall and started beating at the shadows with my flute. Crack! I made a satisfying connection with the back of one's skull and it disappeared in a puff of inky smoke, the trapped heart rising into the heavens. Suddenly another battle cry split the darkness. "Charge!" Lightning hit the cobbles around me, frying most of the heartless on the spot. The ones that weren't electrocuted were soon beat away by a shield.

"Gawrsh, are you all right miss?" Goofy inquired in worried tones.

Panting, I nodded. "I think so. But the moogle needs help."

"No problem," Donald quacked. Green light blossomed from the end of his staff, and the moogle sat up, shaking its head.

"What happened, kupo?" the tiny creature squeaked.

"This here lady just saved your life," Goofy explained. "It was awful brave of her, hyuck!"

I blushed. "I couldn't have done it without you guys."

"Oh, it was nothing," Donald waved his hand as though brushing it all away.

"Where're you headed?" Goofy asked.

"Just to the hotel." Then, remembering the moogle, I asked, "What about you?"

"I'm going with you," it declared.

"All right. Can you walk?"

"I'm not sure, kupo..."

"Would you mind if I carried you..?"

"No, kupo," it replied weakly. I scooped it up and cradled it to my chest, careful not to touch the pom-pom. The fur felt soft and silky, and the creature peered up at me with eyes that I could barely see, glittering behind almost-closed lids. With Donald and Goffy as escorts, we made it safely to the hotel, where I tucked the moogle securely into a bed in the blue room.

"Are you sure you don't need any more help, miss?" Goofy asked as I made sure the moogle was comfortable.

"No, thanks." I smiled. "Thanks for everything." I put out a hand to shake and laughed when they both stuck out their arms eagerly. After saying good night, I closed the door and went to check on the moogle.

Surprisingly, it wasn't asleep. It was staring at me with those shining eyes again. As I removed my jacket and shoes, I asked, "What were you doing in second district, anyway?"

"Looking for you, kupo," it declared.

17 - Hero Again

Chapter 17

"Explain this to me again." I was roaming the main hall of the hotel, looking at the instruments displayed there. Apparently, the art exhibit had been replaced with a music exhibit. I eagerly scanned it, hoping to find some information about my flute.

"I heard that you and your friends are going on a quest. I wanted to come along. Please take me with you, kupo!"

"But why?"

"All my friends want me to be a mail carrier, or a card trader, or a synthesizer. But I want to be a record-keeper, kupo! All the best moogles keep records of quests and adventures, kupo! I thought it would be the perfect opportunity." I remembered the moogles who had done all the game-saving in FFX. Apparently they were record-keepers. And this moogle looked definitely Gaian. Not at all like the ones here in Traverse town. The wings were bigger, and his nose didn't take up half his face.

"Well, I wouldn't mind having you along, but I'd have to ask my friends first...." I trailed off, wondering if Riku would stay with the group. He could go off with Sora, if he wanted. There was really no reason for him to stick with us. I sat down heavily on the piano bench belonging to an elegant old upright placed at the very end of the hallway, near the receptionist's desk. I would really miss him.

"You mean the silver-haired boy, kupo?"

I nearly fell off the bench. "You're telepathic?!"

"What did you think pom-poms were for, kupo? Decoration?" The moogle shook his head. "That's why we never let anyone touch them, except our mates."

"Oh." I was stunned. "Well, if Riku and Yuffie agree, you're in,...I'm sorry, I don't even know your name."

"Mogruko." The moogle smiled.

"I'm Melanie" I smiled back.

We lapsed into contemplative silence for a while. I looked up the hall. Checked the left wall again. No flutes. Checked the right wall again. No flutes. So much for that.

"The best person to see about that would be Lady Eiko," Mogruko suggested. "If any one would know, she would."

I nodded. "I suppose you're right. I was hoping to avoid a side trip, though..."

It was Mogruko's turn to be stunned. "You know Lady Eiko?"

"Not personally..." I sighed. "It's a long story."

Seeing that I really didn't want to explain it at the moment, Mogruko yawned and said, "Well, I think I'll go to bed. Thanks for everything, kupo." He looked at me with glittering eyes for a moment, then trotted away to the blue room.

I sighed. Alone at last. My companions were too preoccupied to contact me mentally or otherwise. I could think things over. But nothing came to mind. Turning around on the bench, I decided a little music wouldn't hurt my thinking process. It seemed like forever since I had laid hands on a piano. I began to play "Holding My Thoughts in My Heart" from FFVII, my favorite piece thus far. It contained bits of the main Highwind Theme here and there, but was mostly just contemplative and gentle. Slowly, I drew out the last chord and let the final note fade into silence.

"Very nice." I jumped so hard my knees nearly hit the bottom of the keyboard. That voice...I slowly turned around to meet Cloud's mako-eyed gaze.

"T-thank you," I stuttered.

"It sounds familiar..." He murmured. Suddenly- flash! An image of another upright, and a younger Cloud sitting entranced as Tifa played, 'Do, rei me ti, la...' Flash! The image was gone. I looked up to see Cloud clutching at his head. He quickly let go in embarrassment. "I'm assuming you saw that too?" Cloud asked. Cool as ice. Completely typical of the ex-SOLDIER. I nodded mutely. "Due to Jenova's cells, I am capable of telepathic activity now and then." His lips quirked slightly in what might have been a smile. "It just tends to be a bit... painful."

"I noticed," I said dryly. Having an alien being's cells in your body was painful enough. Making contact through those cells...I couldn't imagine. I remembered that in FFVII, all of Cloud's flashbacks had caused him to collapse, or even lose consciousness. But the influence of Jenova's cells had never turned him to evil. Sure, he'd had weak moments, but who doesn't? He was my hero- the bishie among bishies- until I played Kingdom Hearts. Now I was terrified of him.

After the initial contact, Cloud's mind was still with mine. He winced mentally, though nothing showed on his face. "I was desperate...you have to understand. I had nowhere else to turn." He should have been smarter, I thought. How could he expect good things to come from joining with evil? "But Hades promised me...that bastard..."

My throat was tight with fear, and images of Cloud's buster sword were very much on my mind, but I asked anyway: "You wouldn't have really killed Sora, would you?"

"I don't know...I don't know..." he murmured, close to tears now. "At that moment, it was like being pinned between two stones. I had been contracted to kill him, I had killed before, but somehow, I just couldn't do it. That moment of hesitation was all Cerebrus needed, luckily,"

"Yeah..." I remembered the huge, three-headed dog knocking the buster sword clean out of Cloud's hands.

"I don't know how I feel so far..." Cloud was in earnest agony now, it was starting to show on his features.

"But you still had some light, even then..." I said, answering both our dilemmas. "You said you just couldn't do it."

"Yes..." Cloud's head lifted a little.

"And you're back with Aerith now," I finished with finality. "You have your light."

There was no doubt about it, he was smiling now- a rarity, since his normal facial expression was one of non-expression (quite the oxy-moron, no? But then again, we all know that Cloud's just one messed-up guy XD)

"So...am I your hero again,?" He asked, still smiling.

Surprisingly, I didn't blush. I even had the courage to look him straight in the eye and tell him, "Yes."

"Good. Now, maybe I can forgive myself." With that, he left the hallway and made his way to the red room. I decided I'd been up long enough and sacked out in the blue room. But in that strange state between sleep and wakefulness, when your mind is just drifting, I picked up on some pretty interesting things.

18 - Commitments

Chapter 18

~Riku~

The walkway of Third District was, for once, peaceful, as we slowly walked along it, remembering. I could almost hear the waves, feel the sun on my face, see the horizon stretching away to what seemed infinite distances. Sora walked beside me. I was surprised at how he had changed. I wished we could go back to being the innocent teens we had once been. But life had not chosen that course.

There was one memory I treasured in particular...a cinnamon-haired girl with violet eyes smiled at me from the depths of my mind. I had tried so hard to save her heart...when what I had really done was take her to the very people who would abuse it. I had failed her. But there was that one promise between me and Sora..."Take care of her."

"I did my best, Riku. She's safe on Destiny Islands, now. Probably thinking of us as we speak." Sora tried to comfort me. But I couldn't stop blaming myself. How could I have been so blind? I'd even fought against my own best friend to make it come about; bonded with the very maker of the Heartless.

"Listen Riku," Sora grabbed me by both shoulders and turned me to face him. "I've told you, I forgive you. Can't you forgive yourself?" I tried turning away but he was stronger than I suspected. "You can even come with us. I'm sure Donald and Goofy would welcome you." He held my eyes with his.

I looked away. "I'm sorry, Sora, I can't. I think..." I looked up at the stars, hoping the answers were somewhere out there. "I think I need to choose my own path, this time. There can only be one Keyblade Master, you know."

The silence hung heavy between us now.

Finally I said, "I should get back to the hotel."

"When do you leave?"

"I'm not sure."

"I go tomorrow. I need to find out where this second invasion is coming from." Sora shouldered his keyblade with a sigh. Then, putting it away, threw his arms around me. "Take care of yourself, Riku." His tears were hot on my cheek.

I couldn't reply. I was fighting tears of my own.

~Yuffie~

"There's been rumors that Sephiroth is alive again." Barret was blunt.

Cloud nodded. "I've been searching for him on my own, but I could only find him once."

Tifa was sceptical. "Once? What do you mean once?"

"Exactly that. He came to me, taunted me, and I fought him..."

"Let me guess," Said Red XIII. "You don't remember the rest."

Cloud nodded mutely.

Tifa pressed onward. "The cases of star-scar syndrome are multiplying back at home. Cloud, you need to come with us! If Sephiroth is anywhere in this system, we'll find him and fight him together! Then, maybe, the children will be safe."

This statement was followed by a roar of agreement. I said nothing. I knew very well that Sephiroth and Jenova were the most likely candidates for causing star-scar syndrome, and I wanted to go with my friends, but there was another world at stake besides my own. Another friend that needed my support.

"Um, guys? I kinda need to bring something up here..." The din quieted.

"What is it?" Aerith asked gently.

"I'm assigned to go with the Weapon, remember?"

"Hmmppph. She don't look too dangerous to me," Barret grunted. There was a smattering of laughter.

I played it up. "Exactly! I'm going along as her bodyguard, see?"

"@#\$% Yuffie, we were supposed to go as a group! That's what this whole trip was for!" Barret pounded the table in frustration.

"But I can come back after the whole thing and fight with you guys! I asked Leon about it and he said that once the points were connected, they could be traversed backward as well as forwards. And the beauty of it is, you guys won't even miss me! I'll reappear the same moment I leave." 'That is, if I survive...' I added privately.

"She has a point..." Aerith came to my aid once again. "Besides, we have to remember that this is all part of a larger war: The war against the Heartless. By letting Yuffie go, we're letteng her do her part." Brilliant. I couldn't have said it any better myself.

"Well, I guess it's settled then. See you all in the morning!" I said brightly to cover my nervousness, and then skedaddled to the hotel before Barret could change his mind.

~Rinoa~

"Why did you come?" Squall's voice echoed through the underground cave.

"I've told you." I sighed. "King Mickey gave Headmaster Cid direct orders to send the gummi with us when we went to look for our friends. I had no idea it had anything to do with your 'Weapon' problem."

"So..." Squall set aside his gunblade. "The Ellone Machiene no longer works?"

I shook my head. "They took it from the Ellone Machiene. That was it's most vital component."

"Then... you can stop calling me Squall." I started to protest but he cut me off. "The Squall you knew was a seventeen year old boy. What you see now is my future self. I have nothing in between. I lost eight years to time compression! Eight years, Rinoa! And I still couldn't save my home! That's why I've had to start over as Leon. Squall is gone."

I was crying now. In between my sobs I said, "It wasn't your fault the Heartless came when they did. You tried, Squall! And that's what counts!"

"It's LEON!" His shout rang off the cavern walls. Then he collapsed to the floor, sobbing. "I'm Leon...Leon..."

I sat down next to him and forced him to look at me. Using the powers of telepathy that came with being a sorceress, I told him, 'You can change your name, but you can't change what's inside, Squall Leonheart. You are you. And I love you. That hasn't changed either.' Then I did what I had longed to do for so long: Kissed him.

A/N: Hope I didn't confuse you too badly there. Read this if you want to understand, but be warned it contains spoilers. In the new FFVII movie, Advent Children, the children of Midgar are being affected by a mysterious disease better known as 'star-scar syndrome'. A new group of villains (presumably Sephiroth clones) is searching for their "Mother," aka Jenova, and Sephiroth's voice comes to Cloud saying, "I will no longer be just a memory." Also, if you've seen the Showdown of Fate: Cloud vs. Sephiroth video (from the Final Mix) you'll notice that they never actually show who wins. I am assuming Cloud had one of his seizures or Sephiroth simply bailed (That's what he does if you actually manage to defeat him in KH)

I took some liberties with the Squall/Rinoa thing, assuming that the Heartless struck during time compression and somehow messed up his age, then he discovered that his planet was destroyed. Obviously, it's back now (since Sora defeated Ansem in KH) but he still feels guilty about it.

Please let me know if there are any inaccuracies or if something doesn't fit right. I've tried to do my homework here, but I'm probably going to make some mistakes. Thanks!

19 - Training

Chapter 19

~Melanie~

I woke up feeling dozy and warm. As soon as I yawned and attempted to stretch, I realised why. I bumped into something firm and warm. A body. *Someone was in the bed with me.*

I bolted upright and snatched for my flute, thinking Riku was trying to get fresh with me, and suddenly found my hand pinned behind my back. "Let go of me you per-" I hissed. Yuffie interrupted me with "It's me, you idiot! The other beds were all full. And you snore."

"Oh," I said sheepishly. It was true (I'm not talking about the snoring here). Riku, who was sitting on the side of his bed to put his shoes on, smiled. "You'd better get used to it, Yuffie. With Mogruko coming along, we'll all be sharing bunks."

"He's coming?" I asked. Three heads nodded. "We decided last night, but we didn't want to wake you; you just look so precious when you're asleep," Yuffie grinned.

"Gee, thanks," I retorted.

Riku, who was definitely having problems hiding his amusement, added, "Moogles are well known for thier healing abilities, and his record keeping could be quite useful. Besides that, his telepathy is stronger than ours, so he can help us stay in touch."

"Great! We have all our supplies, and the crew's been decided, so we can finally leave," I got up off the bed, only to be pulled back down by Yuffie. "Hold your chocobos, girl. You've done pretty well for a beginner, but if you dont get some serious training you'll be heartless fodder in no time."

Although I resented it with every fiber of my being, I knew she was right. Finally, I sighed and nodded. "So, what do we do about that?"

"I hear that one of the *Raganorok's* crew is an instructor in the martial arts," Riku stated.

I nodded. "Quistis Treppe. She's one of the best, on her world anyway. She trains a variety of students, but I don't know if she's ever seen a floutist before." I ran my hands over the flute, smiling wryly.

"I guess we'll just have to find out, huh?" Yuffie put her hands over mine, stopping thier nervous movement.

"Yup." With that, we left the hotel.

~*~*~*~

"A flute?" Quistis inquired skeptically

"Yes" I replied, feeling uncomfortable. I was standing in the middle of Second District, in front of the fountain, where Quistis had determined there would be enough room for practice sparring. Riku and Yuffie watched from the sidelines.

"I suppose," Quistis said thoughtfully, "It could be used like a short staff." She eyed my weapon again. "A very short staff. But considering your strength ('Or lack thereof,' I thought) and the type of weapon, you'd be better off using magic."

"Magic?" I was intrigued.

"Yes. It is an energy source found in every living thing, even the very earth beneath your feet. You'll have to learn how to draw it to use it."

"Draw?" It seemed all I could do was ask questions.

"Taking it from its source. Sort of like sucking it out of things, you know."

"Right," Finally, I understood something.

"I guess that's where we'll start then. Let's see if you can draw fire; it's a pretty basic spell."

"Okay, how do I do that?"

"Well, you have to find the fire first. Think of the fires down in the planet's core, underground. Pull them up into you."

I closed my eyes and imagined the rivers of lava miles below me, imagined the heat, imagined fire.

"Got it? Now, choose a target."

"There aren't any heartless around," I pointed out.

"Then I'll stand in."

"You?! But I don't want to hurt you!" I protested

"Don't worry, I've done this plenty of times," she reassured me. "You probably won't be able to hurt me very badly anyway." Seeing my look of doubt, she added, "Just pretend I'm a heartless."

I gave her a small smile. "Okay." Then I closed my eyes, and drew fire again. The magic filled me up, starting from my toes and traveling up to my head. It felt like tingling static moving over my body. My muscles contracted. I continued until I could hold no more and my body was vibrating with the power. I opened my eyes, focused on Quistis, pointed my flute at her and shouted, "Fire!"

The resulting explosion threw us both backwards. Somewhere in the background I heard Yuffie screech in surprise. Stunned, I opened my eyes to find I was sitting on my backside (which was very sore). Quistis was getting shakily to her feet. After recovering her balance she took a potion.

"Well, that was a bit more powerful than I expected," she understated. "Apparently your flute amplifies magic you've drawn, or you just overdrew."

"I think I overdrew," I said sheepishly, but inside I was wondering about the flute. Surely that blast had been more than beginners luck?

"That can be very dangerous," warned Quistis. "If you try to handle too much magic at once, it can consume you. We need to work on your self control. You know what that means."

"More practice," I sighed.

~*~*~*~

Over the next few weeks, that was exactly what I did. I learned to handle magic more effectively, as well as being able to draw a number of useful spells. Not that my physical education was neglected. I learned to use my flute as a short staff, and had regular sparring matches with Quistis, and my companions. Mogruko stood by to heal us, but I was still feeling extremely sore and bruised by the end of each day.

Soon it would be time to leave. Our first stop would be Gaia, where I aimed to unravel more of the mystery surrounding my flute. Quistis said she had never seen anyone pick up on magic so quickly before, but I knew I couldn't just be me doing all the work. There was definitely something special about this weapon.

20 - Heartsong

Chaper 20

Author's note: This takes place after the end of FF9, so everythings set about two years after the game, making Garnet and Zidane rulers of Alexandria, and Eiko adopted heir of Regent Cid of Lindblum. The Genomes are still living with the Black Mages, and the nations are recovering from the recent war and destruction brought on by Kuja's influence.

~*~*~*~

-Melanie-

We stood surrounded by our friends at the world exit, saying our final goodbyes. There were hugs and good-luck wishes all around. The quest wouldn't be an easy one, and it weighed heavily on everyones mind.

As I was telling Aeris goodbye, she slipped something over my neck. "Mogruko and I convinced the moogles to take on a new synthesising project," she smiled "This should help to keep the darkness away from your heart." I looked down to see a shimmering sliver neclace with a heart-shaped pendant hanging from it. I threw my arms around her. "Thank you. You have know idea how much this means..." I chocked off.

"And Quistis..." ('I'm not going to cry,' I told myself sternly).

"Take care of yourself, now that you know how," she smiled. I hugged her to.

"Well, we'd better be going," said a reluctant Yuffie.

"You'd better be back within five minutes, like you promised!" yelled Cid.

"Sure thing, gramps!"

"IT'S CID!" he roared.

I dragged myself reuctantly into the ship, knowing that unlike Yuffie, I wouldn't be back in five minutes. I wouldn't be coming back ever. This was the last time I would see these brave adverturers- my heroes (I sent that thought to Cloud in particular).

All too soon the roar of the engines overtook thier cheering, and I plastered my face to the canopy to watch them fade from sight.

~*~*~*~

The flight to Hollow Bastion was long and uneventful. I sat next to Yuffie on our bunk, deep in thought. What caused the powerful spurts of magic? Was it really the flute? What would Eiko have to say about it? Would I ever figure this-

Poke

I flinched, then turned to glare at Yuffie. "Don't do that."

"You're such a worry wort. Besides, you deserved it."

"Am not. And what did I ever do to you?"

"Well, that was for practicing that fire spell on me."

Poke

Flinch "Cut it out!"

"And the ice spell..."

Poke

Flinch "Quit it!"

"And lightning..."

Poke

Flinch My body tingled. "I said STOP!"

And she did. She sat motionless as a statue. I waved a hand in front of her face and she remained frozen. "Whoops...I drew without realising it....I really need to know more about this flute!" I sighed in frustration. Then closing my eyes, I drew and commanded "Dispell!" That was one that Quittis insisted absolutely necessary I learn after seeing my aptitude for status-inducing spells.

"Why you little-!" Yuffie tackled me as soon as she was free to move again.

"It was an accident!" I cried, freeing her off with my flute. "Maybe I should have left you that way!"

At that moment the door to the cabin was flung open. "What's going on in here?" Riku demanded, with Mogruko hovering over his shoulder. Then seeing that I was pinned by Yuffie, he yanked her off and hauled me to my feet. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I struggled not to blush.

"Oh sure, be all gentlemanly to *her!*" snapped Yuffie. Then abruptly changing her tone, she added, "You must be pretty sweet on her, huh?"

That was it. Blushing red all over, I turned in the doorway.

"Yuffie?"

"What?"

"STOP!"

~*~*~*~

We docked at the monstrous Lindblum Castle, which was almost a city in and of itself, with Mogruko directing the process. He had, apparently, been to the castle before to ask about becoming a record-keeper, but there had been no vacancies. Now we followed him down the red-carpeted, paneled hallways to the heavy wooden throne-room doors.

"What is your business here?" demanded one of the guards.

"We seek an audience with the Lady Eiko," Mogruko said.

"She is speaking with the Regent at the moment, you will have to wait."

"But this is a matter of great urgency!" I blurted.

"You must wait," the guard repeated

'But I can't control my flute!' I yelled mentally 'What do you want me to do, sit around until I accidentally destroy myself or my friends with a OD of magic?!

Suddenly the doors opened. "Let them in," said a purple-haired eight-year old with a single horn, like a unicorn, on her forehead.

"But Lady Eiko, your talk with the regent-

"Daddy can wait. These guys need my help."

As we followed Eiko into the Throne Room, I couldn't help asking 'Did you hear me?'

'Of course I did. What do you think this horn is for?'

"Eiko, I already told you, the Black mages cannot be assimilated into the community yet. The people still fear them. Besides, they look too much like the Heartless-" Regent Cid finally noticed our entrance. "Who are you?"

This time Yuffie nudged me forward. "It's your flute, after all," she reminded me. "We are

travelers from a distant world, Regent." I began. "I seek an audience with you and your daughter on a matter of great urgency. An illness of the heart has been discovered, which would cause the heartless to take over it more quickly. We are trying to combat this new weapon, but we need your daughter's help."

"Can I talk alone with them Daddy, please? It'll only take a minute." Eiko batted her eyelashes.

"I suppose so, Eiko." Then he turned to us. "I thank you for your warning. I will see to it that my people are prepared. Now, I have other matters to attend to.." He exited the room.

"Good, now we can get down to business!" Eiko said with satisfaction. "Tell me everything."

"Well, I-"

"Not that way silly! Kneel in front of me."

"Okay, but why-?"

"Shhhh. Hold still." She bent forward until her horn touched my forehead. "Now we can really talk"

It was similar to what happened with Aeris. Apparently, Summoners were gifted in matters to telepathy, too. It took next to no time for her to find out about our intended quest and the problems I was having with my flute.

She straightened up with a sigh. "Wow, that is really a problem. Can I see the flute?"

I handed it to her. She gasped."The Heartsong..."

"The Heartsong?" I repeated.

She nodded solemnly. "That's what your flute is called. It was made by the Summoners long ago. It's supposed to give the player the desires of their heart. That's why it was only given to those with pure hearts. It wouldn't play for any others." She looked at me quizzically. "Can you play it?"

"Yes. Once I wanted our chocobo to calm down, and I played a song without thinking. The bird calmed down instantly."

"But you're not a Summoner. I wonder why it plays for you? Anyway, that's why you have a hard time with it; the Summoners could handle a lot more magic than regular humans, so it draws a lot of magic. Your heart's desires are very strong, too, so it will draw even more magic for those. You need to learn to control your desires, that's the only way; unless you want to be fried by magic."

"Maybe you'd better take it Eiko. It's probably too powerful for me to handle..."

"Weren't you listening to what I said? The flute chooses who plays it. It chose you. There's gotta

be a reason you have it. So keep it. I think you'll need it."

I stood up. "Thank you for your time, Eiko."

"Sure, no problem! Good luck with your quest!" She surprised me by darting forward and hugging me around the waist.

~*~*~*~

Armed with this new knowledge, we set off again. Our destination this time: My home.