

More Than Words

by Junj - satheis@ix.netcom.com

Tifa watched the Highwind tower above her, the airship bobbing gently on unseen currents of air. It was truly an impressive sight to behold, the giant airship looming over her with such grace and majesty that it struck awe into her heart and left her breathless to witness it. The sky behind the massive craft was painted with brilliant bright oranges, iridescent yellows, and blood reds, dimming to deep purples as the eye traveled from the horizon where the sun was slowly sinking into its night-time bed. Pearly wisps of clouds lined the distinct hues like cotton. It was truly beautiful, this sunset, with the cool breezes of night beginning to caress the land. She felt content just to stand on that rocky outcrop, watching the Highwind above her, feeling the soft winds gently blow her hair, watching nature's beautiful show of magnificent colors before her. Even in such a dire situation as this, it comforted and relaxed her. It was relieving to think that no matter what Shinra could do, no matter how horribly Sephiroth could hurt and scar the Planet, the sun would always set and bring such a wonderful sight to the eyes of humanity.

She heard the sound of feet landing with a thud on rocks and turned to the side. Cloud had jumped down from the rope ladder extending from the bow of the Highwind, his strong legs flexing with the effort. He approached her, the wind tickling the wild locks of hair atop his head, a few strands tumbling over his brow. He gave her a weak smile as he neared. "They're all gone," he said, his voice as soft as the wind.

Tifa nodded and rubbed her arms. "Home to see those that matter to them," she added, pushing a strand of her thick, brown hair behind left ear.

Cloud shrugged as he came to stand beside her. "To figure out why they're in this fight." He watched the sunset, his eyes narrowed in thought. Tifa regarded him and couldn't help but stare into those deep blue irises. She smiled despite the momentous and dangerous battle before them. His eyes were so beautiful, the way they glowed so brightly in laughter or mirth or darkened seriously in deep thought or emotion. They had always been beautiful, even before he had been so heavily exposed to Mako. She felt she could stare into them for hours and hours, never growing tired of the view.

"Do you think they'll come back?" she asked, tearing her mind back to the present circumstances. There was a little worry in her voice that she was unable to stifle. Despite how they sometimes irritated her, she had grown quite attached to the band of misfits that had been inexplicably drawn together by fate and this crisis which so utterly held the lives of all those on the Planet in the balance. She had become accustomed to Barret's hard and gruff attitude and Cid's foul mouth, the stench of cigarettes forever clinging to him. She was attached to Red's kind and gentle wisdom and Cait Sith's never depleting stash of optimism. Without Vincent's cold strength and loyalty, she felt incomplete. She missed even Yuffie's annoying whines and gripes. The team had become her family; a bond had forged between them that was deeper than a simple partnership or friendship. Without them, she felt alone.

Well, not completely alone.

Cloud turned to look at her, folding his arms across his well-muscled chest. "I don't know, Tifa," he responded with a tired sigh. "I hope they do. But they have to search within themselves for their reasons for being here. If they can't find those reasons, or it's shallow... I just don't know, Tifa."

She nodded. A pit of loneliness began to swell up inside her, coupled with just a bit of grief and despair. "What do we do, Cloud? We don't have a home. We don't have families to seek comfort and answers from." She was tempted to add "all we have is each other", but faltered, unable to get the words out before her throat constricted with hesitation and quieted her intentions.

He turned back to the sunset, his eyes distant and dark with thoughts he shared with nobody but himself. Tifa wished he would let her understand what troubled him so. "I know why I'm in this fight," Cloud answered softly. He said nothing else. There was silence. All that could be heard was the soft song of the wind, a gentle melody of quiet sadness at the coming night. It filled Tifa with a sense of despondency and melancholy, her mind drifting back to Nibelheim. Nibelheim, the town she had called home for the better part of her life with its pretty flowers and cottages, nice people and warm friendships, good food and love and comfort... Nibelheim, where all of that had disappeared with the crack of insanity and flash of a

hot fire. And her father had been taken from her. Her childhood had all but disappeared that night in the heat of the flames, the stench of the smoke, the screaming of her people, and the pain of her wounds. Everything had changed then. Everything had been ruined. She still missed her bed and the smells of her room at times, her father's soft voice as he sung her to sleep. That mockery Shinra had placed in the ruins of her home hurt more than anything. She looked to Cloud and wondered if he felt the same sense of loss and sorrow when he thought of what had happened five years ago. After all, Nibelheim had been his home, too. His mother had died there. And worse off, he hadn't escaped the hell that Shinra had unleashed like she had. He had been captured by Hojo and forced to endure God knew what at the hands of an evil scientist. If not for that... The pain of it all was still fresh in her mind.

She turned away from him and walked along the outcrop, stepping on the furrows of green grass. She stopped on the opposite edge, taking in a deep breath of air. The tiny specks of stars were just becoming visible in the rapidly darkening sky. The heavens above were filled with minuscule crystals, the peaceful twinkling lightening her heart. The burning heat of Meteor was off in the distance, the sky an angry and inflamed red about the burning ball. It was edging ever closer and closer to the Planet, suspended by weakening forces, tethered to the atmosphere by waning bonds. It would not be long now. Tifa refused to acknowledge its presence, unwilling to let its pressing destruction bring any more foreboding to her heart. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about Nibelheim, about Aeris, about Sephiroth or Meteor. For a moment, she just wanted to be at peace.

"Tifa?"

Cloud's tentative voice filtered into her ears and caused her heart to leap in her chest. The sound of his voice always did that to her, quickening her heartbeat, filling her with warmth that was otherwise unaccounted for. She opened her eyes but did not turn to face him. "What?"

He made no move to step closer. "This is gonna sound silly, I know..." He faltered for a moment, obviously struggling for the right words. Tifa's interest and curiosity was aroused. "When I was in the Lifestream, I thought I heard you calling me. I heard your voice somehow... Were you calling to me?"

She turned to look at him, shocked. "Yeah, I was." She could remember it all clearly, the sick green surrounding her, engulfing and enveloping her like a thick, suffocating shroud, the sound of the Planet crying filling her ears, a million voices wailing in pain... It was the most horrifying experience she had ever endured. She ran but there was no escape, the voices overcoming her, screaming in her ears. Somehow, above it all, though, she began to hear Cloud's voice, his strong tones blotting out the agony of the other howls. She had cried out to him, hoping to find him, to reach him somehow and have him protect her as he always did whether she wanted it or not... Right then, she would have given the world to see his face. "I thought I heard you calling me, too. Like you were beckoning me or looking for me. I felt like I could find you."

She watched him turn back to the sunset, his hands dropping to his sides. She loved to watch the way his muscles, brought on by years of heavy swordplay and fighting, rippled, longed to feel them under her touch. She loved the way his hair quivered in the breeze, wished to feel its thick, soft strands between her fingers. She gazed at him wistfully, yearning that he should turn around and allow her to gaze upon his handsome face, the eyes that gleamed so brightly, the high cheek bones, the full lips she longed to kiss...

"Tifa?"

She shook her head to clear it of her lustful needs. Blushing profoundly, she looked away bashfully, embarrassed. "Sorry," she said, smiling. "My mind was elsewhere."

He grinned and that action in itself was enough to make her heart flutter. She couldn't help but wonder if he felt the same way about her, if he was holding inside all these emotions she felt, bottling them up constantly instead of acting upon them. She wished to God that she could see inside his heart and explore him, all of him, even the parts that she didn't understand or see, the parts he himself were fearful of. He had once told the team that there were parts of him that he didn't understand. She wished she could see it all, no matter what it was, and help him deal with whatever demons remained locked away in his soul, those demons which he drew on painfully and assaulted his sleep with hellish nightmares, those demons that whispered voices in his head, plaguing him so much that he lost himself in the maelstrom

of violent thoughts. She wished she could find him as she had in the Lifestream, not whatever ruined and terrified insanity Hojo had reduced part of him to through torture and experimentation. But most of all, she wished she could understand where she stood in his heart compared to Aeris.

But she would most likely never know unless she confessed her love to him. She had tried it once before, at the Gold Saucer, but had been unable to get the words out. Explaining to your childhood friend that you loved him was no easy task. She just wished she could spit the words out, that her timing would be perfect and she wouldn't be nervous or sound like some love-struck floozie... And more than that, she wished to hear his accompanying "I love you, too" after. The words meant so much to her. She had waited so long to hear them from herself and from him. She had to build up her confidence and courage and tell him if she was ever to hear them. But if he did love Aeris...

"I just want to thank you," he said after a brief pause. "For everything you've done for me. Without you, I..."

"Shh," she said, stepping up closer to him. "I know." And she did understand, more than anyone, how grateful he was for the friends that he had. They had trusted him through thick and thin, placing their loyalty in him as a leader despite his problems with his memory, despite the fact Sephiroth used him as a pawn. Even after he had inadvertently given the Black Materia to Sephiroth, they had allowed him to lead them. Without their silent confidence, he would have cracked and lost himself.

She stood beside him, watching as the last burst of color painted the sky. Purposefully, she pressed her hand close to his, her fingers brushing his knuckles. For a moment, she stood stiffly beside him. Cloud was the only person in the world who could simultaneously make her so uncomfortable that she shook with nervousness and yet so relaxed that she felt all tension leave her muscles. She wasn't sure if he'd reject this small invasion of his personal space. Watching the sunset with little attention, she glanced out of the corner of her eyes to see the expression on his face. If he had noticed her hand inching ever closer to his, he didn't show it, his face placid with thought and peace. She stood sternly for a few more moments, unsure of whether or not to move on but unwilling to back away. Finally, she summoned up all her strength and gently wound her fingers through his. She prayed to God that he wouldn't notice how clammy and sweaty her skin was.

His fingers, much to her surprise, tightened ever so slightly about hers. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he remarked with an almost dreamy expression on his face. Tifa's heart was thundering, her head soaring in the clouds, her soul filled with ecstasy. A half grin tugged on his lips gently. "I can remember climbing up in the Nibel Mountains as a kid and just sitting there for hours, watching the sunset. Mom never wanted me to go up there. She said it was too dangerous. I thought it was worth the danger for a sight like this." He gave a heavy sigh. "It gives me some comfort to think that no matter what, Sephiroth can't destroy the sunset. He can't control the heavens. Maybe he can control us..." he trailed off, his tone filled with shame and hurt. "Me... but he can never destroy the sunset."

Tifa nodded. She suddenly felt the urge to understand more of his childhood, his mention of the Nibel Mountains bringing back her own memories. "Cloud," she began in a soft, non-threatening tone, "why did you always want to be so alone?"

Cloud didn't answer immediately, staring at the sunset. He let out a long breath through his upper lip, the force of the air ruffling his hair. "I didn't think you'd want me around," he said softly after a moment. Tifa felt a little part of her cry deep down inside in shame over leading him to believe that. "You had all the other boys crooning over you all the time. What did you need me for, anyway?"

Tifa shook her head, some of her hair coming loose from the bind in the back with the movement. The strands caught on the breeze and wavered, gleaming in the waning sun. "I needed you," she whispered. "You were always welcome."

"Nah," Cloud said with an indifferent shrug that clearly masked a lot of resentment and bitterness. "The other kids didn't want me around. A lot more went on, Tifa, when you weren't around." Her face fell as she realized what he meant. The other boys would never dare exclude or pick on him when she was around. Of course not; they all wanted to impress her and show what perfect gentlemen they were. But when she wasn't there, Cloud had been picked on and beat on and hurt... and for stupid, childish reasons, too. Because he was small. Because he had a "girlie" name. Because his father had been a loser and walked out on his mother and him. And that had only fueled the resentment he had already felt for the other children. Now she understood what he meant when he spoke of how disgusted he was with the other kids and

stupid things they said and did and laughed at, their silly ignorance.

She bowed her head. "I'm so sorry, Cloud," she said softly, knowing in her soul that that was not enough.

His fingers gently squeezed hers. "It wasn't your fault, Tifa," he declared. "I was just the kid who got picked on by everybody, the little runt. There's one in every town. When... before what happened, I didn't ever think... I could face what a failure I was. I hated myself for so many reasons when I was a kid. I hated myself for making my father go, and making my mother worry. I hated myself because I was too small to stand up to the other kids. I hated myself for hating them. Most of all, I hated myself because I wasn't there to save you."

"Cloud--"

He looked at her quickly, not giving her a chance to continue. "It was never them, though. It was me. I think I can see that now. I was always afraid, when I was living in that lie, to look at the past, actually look at it 'cause I knew this was there, and I didn't want to have to deal with it. But now... it wasn't so bad, accepting what I was. I was a little runt that got picked on. But that doesn't mean I have to be ashamed of it. I am ashamed of how I acted, but not of what I was."

Tifa felt her own shame bubble in her blood for every moment she had ignored little Cloud Strife for some other boy. But she was surprised, deeply so, that he had so quickly come to grips with his life. In the Lifestream, she had discovered the mess of memories and lies and pain that had been Cloud Strife. It had been a mixture of his own shameful illusions, Mako poisoned memories of torture in Hojo's hold, and Sephiroth's control. Digging through all of that to find him, the true Cloud Strife, hadn't been easy for either of them. But she was amazed that he had accepted his memories for truth so quickly. There were still a lot of unanswered questions; an unaccounted five years still remained a hole in his memory, punctuated by flashes and nightmares. But they had made great progress towards untangling the knot that was his life.

She smiled as she leaned her head on his shoulder. What the other boys would think of the little runt now.

There was a moment of silence. The sun was gone now, leaving only a few strokes of color in the dark lavender sky. The Highwind's lights provided gentle illumination that gradually became more and more visible as the sun's rays faded from the skies. "It's so peaceful," Tifa said softly.

Cloud only grunted a small response. The wind picked up a bit, bringing a small breath of cold air. Tifa hugged herself closer to the warmth of his skin as her own gooseflesh prickled in the chill. A thought occurred to her, then. One that did not please her at all, sending her spirits crashing. "That might have been the last sunset we'll ever see," she said softly.

Cloud pulled away from her then, turning to face her. "It won't be, Tifa. Not if we can stop Sephiroth," he said resolutely, a promise of victory in his voice. She felt his assurance inflate her spirits a bit, but she did not share his optimism.

"Cloud," she said gently, "what if the others don't return?" The full direness of the situation hit her with cold fear. "It'll just be the two of us against Sephiroth. We won't have anything. Yuffie even took most of the ma--"

He shook his head and grabbed her hands resolutely, his thumbs caressing her knuckles. His touch electrified her. "Tifa, that's not true." He stepped closer. "We have each other. And that's enough for me."

Now was her chance. She saw it before her, in the innocence glint in his eyes, which had darkened almost the shade of the night sky. He was standing so close to her that she thought she could hear him breathe. She suddenly could no longer hold it in. The words were building in her throat with such pressure, she felt that if she didn't let them out she would just burst. The world closed around her. It was all gone. All that remained was she and Cloud. All she could see were the depthless pools of his eyes. God, his eyes were beautiful.

Everything seemed to hold still. She opened her mouth without thinking. "Cloud, I--"

"Shh," he whispered softly, placing a gentle forefinger over her lips. He gave her a small smile. "I know." He delicately took

her slim hand, her slender fingers curved over his. He pressed her palm to his chest, over his heart. She could feel it beat, her fingers tingling. "I know here."

She stared at her hand on his chest, feeling her own heart beat in time with his. The sensation sent ecstasy rippling through her body in great waves. Gently, he latched his fingers beneath her chin and tipped her face up to his. She barely had the moment to draw a breath before his lips sealed hers in a passionate kiss. Tifa was flying, soaring as she slid her arms around his neck. Strong hands encircled her waist, pulling her closer until her body melded with his.

They stood there for a long moment in the darkness, basking in each other's presence, lips to lips, heart to heart. He broke the kiss, pulling back to look into her eyes. He smiled widely as he planted a light kiss on her cheek. Then his lips trailed a soft line down to her neck.

Tifa decided she must have been dreaming; it was too good to be true. She licked suddenly dry lips hesitantly. She could still taste him. "Cloud."

"Mmm?" His breath was warm against her skin, exciting her senses, as he delicately kissed the nape of her neck. Her entire body was alive with thrilling pleasure, pounding with her heart. But she wouldn't let it control her, take her, until she was sure.

"Cloud, what about Aeris?" she asked, tentatively. Although it was pretty obvious that he had feelings for her from what had just happened, she still did not want to intrude upon any love or affection he held for Aeris in his heart. She didn't want to be a burden.

He pulled away from her. His face softened. "Tifa," he said, shaking his head. "Aeris... was a good friend and wonderful person. We wouldn't be where we are now if not for her sacrifice." He shook his head. "I... loved her like a sister. At first I thought it might have been more, but I knew every time I looked at you I was wrong. You told me how much you loved me with every look you gave me. I could see it in your beautiful eyes." His hand pushed her bangs from her eyes, stroking the silking strands. Her hands ran down the broad expanse of his shoulders and down his back to encircle about his waist. "I was a jerk for ignoring you this long. Can you ever forgive me?"

She only smiled. How could he ever think that he had wronged her? Her only response was to kiss him hard, pressing her lips against his. She explored his mouth hotly, her hands pulling his shirt from his pants, untucking the thick fabric. Her soft fingers slid up under it, caressing his warm skin, running her hands up to his shoulder blades. She could feel his strong muscles flex and ripple under her touch.

She gave herself to him with soft abandon, knowing it would all be different now. Nothing else mattered any longer. No longer would she have to hide her love and keep her want for him to herself, locking it deep down inside and keeping it tame. She knew now what was inside him. She knew he loved her. Never any doubt crossed her mind ever again. It was more than words. It was his heart.

~*~

The dawn washed over the land with the holy illumination of the sun. Its gentle rays washed across everything, coating it with ethereal gold. The sky brightened as the sun peeked her head over the top of the horizon, as if peering tentatively to inspect the new day. Once she decided to make her appearance, she chased away the black of night, weakening it to dark and deep blues. The stars and moon faded slowly with the coming of day, and the world awoke itself to the morning.

Cloud carefully cracked open one eye and then the other, slowly taking in his surroundings with blurry focus. The sweet smells of morning dew, that freshness that clings to the air and energizes the body, filled his nostrils. He took great deep breaths, filling himself with the pure air. He had never felt so relaxed, every muscle in his body limp and at ease. He had no want to lift any limb, no need to move. He felt something in his arms, unaccustomed warmth at his side. Opening his eyes wider, he looked down.

Tifa lay beside him, one arm sprawled across his chest, her head beneath his chin. Her lean body curled alongside his,

wrapping him in her sweet warmth. Her long hair was spread about her like a chocolate river on the grass. She smelled of soft flowers. He took another breath, filling his lungs with her soft feminine scent. She was so soft and delicate in his arms, cuddling against him. Nothing could ever make him want to let her go. Nothing could ever make him hurt her.

The sun washed over him as he sunk his head back down to the grass. The memories from the night before filled him with a sense of pride and fulfillment he couldn't ever recall feeling until that moment. A complete and utter sense of content made his gentle tiredness begin to overtake him. Sleep made his eyelids close again and his limbs relax, all notion of movement fleeing his satisfied and weary body.

Sephiroth.

He opened his eyes at his mind's last ditch effort to get his body into action. Yes, it was all still there. The world was still in danger. Meteor, he could see as he turned his face to the left, was still falling towards the Planet, threatening all life upon it. The Highwind still loomed over him, beckoning him into action. It was all still there, despite the pleasure and love and completion he had felt last night. The problems hadn't gone away. They had to get up and face them.

"Tifa," he said softly, lifting his head a bit to look at her. He shook her delicately. He didn't want to wake her, but he knew that he must. Today was the day they were to face Sephiroth. "Tifa, wake up." She gave a small moan. Cloud smiled. "It's dawn."

Her lush lips pulled into a smile. She nuzzled her cheek onto his chest, not opening her eyes, and snuggled closer to him. "It's too early," she whined softly. "Let me sleep..."

The sound of her voice was like music to him. How could he deny her that when they might be very well facing their death that day? Gingerly, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Just a little longer," he agreed, feeling his own tiredness retake him. All thoughts of Sephiroth were gone from his mind as he closed his eyes against the coming of the day. For the first time he could recall, he was completely and utterly happy. He felt complete, at ease with life. The Meteor could plunge into the Planet for all he cared right then. He had Tifa, and that was all that mattered.

The rest could wait.