

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 13: A Familiar Figure

Tifa rubbed her grainy eyes and blinked against the early morning sunlight filtering in through her parents' bedroom window. She groaned at the exhaustion that seemed to weight down her body. Lack of sleep was a definite killer, she decided. She had spent much of the night wide awake, going from the old fear about Cloud's possible love for Aeris to a new fear that Marion might find a place in his heart, occasionally berating herself for never having the courage to express her love for him herself. She sighed, rolling her face into her pillow. How many times would she do this to herself? How long before something finally drove her to gamble on the chance that he could - did - love her?

Tifa rolled out of bed and shuffled over to her own bedroom where Marion still slept peacefully, not having metamorphosed into a Jenova creature during the night. Rummaging through her bureau, Tifa pulled out some clean clothes for herself and Marion - the usual tank top and skirt for herself, which she found the most comfortable and easy to maneuver in, and a black pantsuit for Marion, which would help to protect her arms and legs better than anything else Tifa owned. She wasn't sure how much they'd be able to teach her today, but training was never gentle, even when learning defensive techniques.

She turned to find Marion blinking sleepy green eyes at her from the nest of blankets she had burrowed into.

"Good morning," Tifa smiled, and walked over to the bed with the pantsuit. "Here's some clothes for you. I'm going to start breakfast. I'll be downstairs if you need me." Tifa headed for the stairs as Marion unraveled herself from the bedclothes and began getting dressed.

Marion combed through her hair with the brush that Tifa had left on her desk the evening before. The waves from the braid adopted for traveling comfort had been smoothed out in the shower yesterday, and once more her hair flowed straight down her back in an ebony river. She picked up the clothing Tifa had left her and held it up, concentrating on the make and material. Zipper up the front...a belt hanging from loops around the waist. Okay. She carefully snuggled a bare foot into one of the legs, and then the other foot followed suit. No, now it was on backwards. Stepping out, she tried again after turning the garment around. Good, her legs are covered. Now what? One arm into a sleeve, and shrug it over the shoulder. She found her other arm automatically behind her back, reaching for the other armhole. Had she worn something like this before? She was zipped up and buckling the belt with ease before she could answer her own question. Riding the chocobo with Vincent had been a learning experience. This had been one of the remembering kind. Her body knew some things better than her mind could remember, and she was learning to give her own body free reign when she felt the impulse of 'I've done this before.' Today she would find out if her body remembered battle.

She started towards the bedroom door and found that Tifa had also set out a pair of black boots. Picking up the soft leather footgear, Marion fitted one onto her foot and stamped the floor a couple of times to settle it snugly. She did the same with the other foot and looked her feet over. The folded tops came up to her calves, and fit like a second skin all the way down to the ground. Well-worn, the boots were flexible and quite easy to move around in. She crept softly down the stairs to the kitchen, long hair streaming behind her.

After a light breakfast, Cloud led the others out behind Nibelheim, to the sheltered valley nestled between two mountain ranges. A heavy fog misted the valley, for the morning sun had not yet peaked over the mountains, touching only the town and the surrounding plains. The foursome gathered on the dewy grass, excitement tangible in the air around them.

Cloud handed Marion a light metal staff. "Here you go. We'll just test things out today, see if your body remembers anything. Even though you don't have memories, if you've practiced and fought before, your muscles might naturally know what to do." He placed both of her hands on the rod, shoulder-width apart, and with her palms facing opposite directions. "We'll try some defensive techniques first, and train you in fighting later. A good defense is necessary in order to learn to fight."

"Okay, stand with your feet apart so you're firmly planted on the ground. You want to keep a good balance at all times," he instructed. I'll come at you with this sword, and you try to block me, or knock it away, okay? Don't worry, I won't hurt you," he reassured her, drawing a wooden practice sword from the scabbard strapped to his back.

As Tifa and Vincent watched nearby, Cloud dropped into a fighting stance, knees bent and feet wide apart. He stepped lightly towards Marion, swinging his sword slowly in an overhand movement towards her head. "Bring the staff up!" he barked. Marion automatically complied, raising the staff in her clenched hands, stopping the sword a few inches from her upturned face. "Good!" Cloud smiled at her, "Now I'll come at your legs. Brace the staff against the ground to protect yourself." The long metal pole dipped down, and the wooden blade clanged harmlessly against it. The impact jarred the pole somewhat, causing it to skid across the ground. Marion started, but did not release her grip. She adjusted her hands and looked up at her instructor with determination set in her eyes.

The blonde swordsman continued to attack her lightly, issuing instructions as he did. Awkward and nervous at first, within 20 minutes Marion was much more confident, blocking his strokes easily. Cloud stopped prompting her, and the pace of his attacks increased as Tifa and Vincent watched in awe, amazed that Marion was picking up the techniques so quickly. Tifa murmured to Vincent, "Well, at least we know she's done some fighting before." Marion matched her opponent for another 5 moves, mist and sweat beading on her forehead, and then he suddenly lunged at her, knocking the staff out of her hands and causing her to fall heavily to the ground. Cloud twirled the wooden sword and stuck it in its scabbard in a now-automatic gesture, then bent to help Marion up. Tifa started towards them, fully intending to stop the practice and give Cloud a scathing commentary on how not to train inexperienced girls. Before she could reach her, however, Marion had sprung up, ignoring Cloud's hand, snatched up the staff and stood ready once more.

Cloud gave her an admiring look, and then drew his sword and came after her again. But this time, something was different.

Marion knocked the sword to the side, deflecting the blow. Then, in one fluid motion, her entire stance changed. Her right foot slid forward and her left turned outward, bracing her body. Her left hand slid down the staff until it was only inches from the end, and her right hand opened, the staff braced against her fingers and supported by the thumb. Her head lowered, brilliant eyes narrowing as they focused on her opponent. Cloud had no time to wonder at the change, for she suddenly charged him, misty air parting in swirls as she swung the staff forward at his head. He brought his sword up, blocking the attack. Once, twice, and again, and again. The girl before him slowly forced him back a step, and then another as the staff in her hands whirled constantly, striking at his arms, face, legs, and midsection. Cloud forgot that this was practice, forgot that this was Marion, forgot everything as the heat of the battle claimed him. He studied his opponent, looking for weak spots, wondering in the back of his mind; where have I seen this style before? Both combatants became completely engrossed in the battle as their audience of two watched in wonder at the sudden transformation.

"Well, now we know she's done a lot of fighting before..." said Tifa weakly.

Bringing his sword up and around from below, Cloud attempted to knock the staff out of Marion's hands once more. However, she angled her weapon away from the stroke and he ended up slashing the sword across her forearm instead. Black fabric ripped away, fibers and blood spraying up and falling to the wet meadow grass. "Marion!" he gasped, horrified at the realization of what he'd done, and reached for her with his free hand, lowering his sword. Mistake.

Her right hand dropped away completely and her left swung around her side, staff gripped by one end. The gleaming metal rod whistled through the air, slashing him across the chest, bruising skin and muscle underneath. Again the staff raked at him, this time from the opposite angle, and then he saw her draw her arm back, and lunge. The tip of the staff punched him directly in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him and throwing him violently to the ground. He clutched at his midsection weakly, gasping for breath. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tifa run towards them, followed closely by Vincent. If that had been a blade, it would have gone right through me, he thought weakly, as he looked up at Marion.

If that had been a blade...

She stood above him, straight and tall in her black suit, boots planted firmly in the grass, long dark hair highlighted silver in the mist, flowing gently behind her in a breeze. Time seemed to slow, and Cloud watched in growing horror and disbelief as

she brought her left hand up from her side, drawing a graceful arc with the staff. The staff lifted up above her left shoulder and then dipped downwards, across her, and then rose once more above her right side, falling across her again to describe a perfect figure-8 in the air before her. The metal rod shone and swished across her body to be clasped once more in two hands as she brought her fists together at her right hip.

As if she had just sheathed a sword.

Her body was her own again. She had started out tense and awkward, trying to learn as best she could to defend herself. As the minutes passed, she felt the impulse to relinquish control from her mind to her body, and so she did, curious to know what her muscles remembered. Her body moved easily then, almost instinctively knowing how to block Cloud's moves. And then she had fallen. In quick succession, there had been surprise, determination, pain, and then a hot, angry taste in her mouth. Her arms and legs moved of their own accord, recalling and reacting faster than her mind could think. Moments later, she had found herself standing - victorious? - over Cloud, arms moving easily, naturally, sheathing her weapon in her right hand. Frightened at the loss of control, and nauseated by what she had done to Cloud, she dropped the staff onto the grass and hugged herself, trying to stop the sudden trembling.

Tifa and Vincent reached them then, both automatically running to the one they cared for most. Tifa concentrated on the Restore materia she had in her glove, healing Cloud's wounds, while Vincent tended to the gash on Marion's arm, tearing a strip from his cloak to staunch the bleeding.

"What am I?" Marion asked, wincing at the whimpering, frightened sound of her voice.

"Cloud, no!" Tifa shouted, but it was too late. He had already whispered the name.

"Sephiroth..."

Marion collapsed into Vincent's arms in a dead faint.