

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 15: Word Games

They sat at the table, four silent figures, each with their own private fears, none of them knowing what to think or say. Tifa, heart aching for her friends, both new and old, refusing to believe that their most recent companion could be anything but a helpless girl. Cloud, near panic at the thought of the return of his enemy, hoping against hope that his first conclusion was wrong. Vincent, grimly determined to stand by the girl, neither supposing nor caring what she might be. And Marion herself, clinging to Vincent's assurances as a storm-driven boat to a pier, afraid and yet desperate to know the truth about herself but not knowing where to look.

Tifa bit her lip and looked at Cloud. She wanted to break the uneasy silence, and especially wanted to reassure Marion that they didn't think of her as a monster or threat, and that they would stand by her, but couldn't speak for Cloud, only for herself. Fearing that such a supportive statement from her might provoke denial from him, she kept silent and pleaded with him with her eyes.

Catching her gaze, the ex-Soldier glanced down at the table, ashamed that he would so quickly desert someone they had adopted into their company. But the wounds on his psyche and heart would not heal as quickly as his physical ones and the thought of Sephiroth even now caused his heart to pound and sweat to bead on his forehead. Sephiroth had been a respected general once, but had been driven mad by the knowledge of his origins. Alone and aloof, with no one to turn to in his pain and confusion, he had become the monster that plagued Cloud's dreaming mind. If Sephiroth had caring friends and loved ones to support him, to take some of the weight off of his shoulders, would he have not gone mad? The pale figure in front of him now was certainly no warrior, simply a scared little girl...with friends to help her through troubles of the mind and heart, as well as the body. He himself was proof that the original materials did not necessarily dictate what a person would ultimately become. Who was he to rip that same chance from this girl - the chance to add up to more than the sum of her past?

Cloud stood up from the table and walked around to where Marion sat, plucking the Restore materia from Tifa's glove as he passed her. Three sets of eyes followed him warily, unsure of his intent. Kneeling down by Marion, he gently untied the bloodstained strip of cloth from her arm and then concentrated his mind on the glowing orb in his hand. A gentle green light sparkled above Marion's head, slowly winding its way down her body, and she watched fascinated as her wound knit itself together before her very eyes.

"Cure..." she whispered. Cloud nodded. "So you know that spell," he said, more of a statement than a question. Steeling himself, he looked straight into her eyes and apologized, "I'm sorry for what I said about who you were. I was wrong. You are who you are, and no one else. Your past doesn't matter. What matters is only that you are Marion, and that we are your friends." He paused, and then held out his hand to be shaken. "Forgive me?" Marion misunderstood the simple gesture, however, and leaned forward to hug him instead.

Brushing aside his surprise for the moment, Cloud returned the embrace, closing his eyes and feeling a simple, accepting warmth steal over him. In the days since her discovery, Marion had stuck close to Vincent or been taken care of by Tifa, and had actually never had any contact with him until today. He found that in the face of her innocence, his own emotional defenses were unnecessary...and he relaxed. The simple hug lasted only a moment, and then he resumed his seat once more, gently setting the materia rolling across the table corner to Tifa, who smiled at him warmly in relief.

Remembering her recognition of the cure spell, Cloud turned to Tifa with a new idea in his mind. "Do you remember how you said that Marion remembered things once she was prompted, and that she'd recognize things once she saw them?" Tifa nodded, replying, "Just like the cure spell you just showed her. What about it?"

"What about a word game?" he asked, "I say a word, and she blurts out the first thing it makes her think of. I'll start off with simple every day things, and then toss in a few key words. We might be able to get a clue or two about her past. What do you think?" he asked his companions, looking back and forth from Tifa to Vincent. Marion did the same, curiosity apparent

in her eyes.

"It could work," Tifa decided, and across the table, Vincent simply nodded.

Cloud gave Marion an inquiring look, and she nodded her head once decisively.

"Cup," he said. She replied instantly, "drink," then "tea."

"Table." "Wood."

"Chocobo." "Fast...feathers."

"Weapon." Cloud almost expected her to mention the Masamune, but instead, "defender." Defender? Not defense or sword? Cloud decided to repeat her word back at her.

"Defender?" "Protect the planet." Cloud saw Tifa and Vincent trade startled glances across his field of vision. Not a weapon to hold in the hand; she was talking about Weapons such as Emerald and Diamond.

"Hojo." "Experiment."

"Experiment." "Lifestream."

"Lifestream?" "Soul."

"Soul?" "Planet." Cloud frowned, not sure how Hojo had led to Planet. He tried again.

"Cetra." "Guardians...helpers."

"Aeris." "Staying...watching...helping." Another questioning frown. He decided to try more names.

"Tifa." "Smiles." Tifa, of course, smiled. Marion added, "kind, friend."

"Cloud." "You." The brunette beside him giggled softly, and Cloud found his mouth curving upwards despite himself. Marion tried again, "blue eyes, blonde hair...swords and spirit."

Cloud raised an eyebrow, and then continued. "Vincent." Tifa's head popped up, giggles hushed.

Marion's mouth opened, and then closed. She looked up at the man who had rescued her, brought her into the world, and stood by her at all times. He returned her gaze, wondering and waiting for her reply. What simple words could possibly encompass the entirety of what he was to her? What was he? He was...everything. "I...don't know...words for that," she concluded lamely, unsure of exactly what she meant herself.

Cloud found himself embarrassed for some reason, and decided to try a different tack.

"Jenova." "Mother." Tifa caught her breath, and felt Cloud stiffen. Did she mean Jenova was her mother?

"Mother?" "Sephiroth....mind-mother...death." He relaxed once more.

"Sephiroth?" "Dead...returned to the planet." Return to the planet...a murky, half-formed idea surfaced in his mind.

"Marion, has Aeris also returned to the planet? Has she found her Promised Land?" he asked. Sensing that the word game was over, Marion replied normally, "No. She stayed...suspended...in the lifestream, wanting to watch over you and help you

if she could. She can...call upon the spirit energy of those who have returned to the planet; they answer her and rise to the surface - that's what you saw happen when Meteor and Holy collided."

"They answer her," he repeated, "so she knows who they are? She can talk to everyone?"

Marion gazed thoughtfully into her teacup. "It's not talking like you and I are talking. It's more...recognition of intent and awareness. And not all of the spirit energy came from people. Some used to be trees or animals; even monsters...but yes, she knows who they are."

Cloud found himself leaning over the table, intent on Marion's eyes. He sat back in his chair, noting the curious gazes of his friends.

"I think I know how to find out who Marion is, and to confirm that she's not S...someone else." He saw with gratitude that the others ignored the stutter and gamely went on. With a careful glance at Vincent that Marion didn't understand, he asked her, "Marion, there's a mako fountain in Mt. Nibel. Would you be willing to contact Aeris for us? I want to talk to her."

Her eyes widened. Was there lifestream so readily accessible in the world? She nodded eagerly, a feeling of homesickness rushing over her at the thought of her friend.