

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 16: Crash Course

Vincent had insisted on further training before taking Marion up to the forbidding mountains, although Cloud had been confident that they could protect her themselves, and had only wanted to wait until the others from their former party had arrived. And so Marion had been put through one week of arduous exercises and practice with several of Aeris' staffs while every day, more strangers - more new friends - arrived in Nibelheim. She had spent the week making a conscious effort to learn with both her mind and her body, never letting her muscles remember and recall for her completely. And then Cloud announced that after a day or so of materia training, the eleven of them would go to the mako fountain.

Tifa stayed at the house that day, since it only took one person to train in materia, enlisting everyone else's help in preparing supplies for their upcoming trip. Cloud clicked a new Restore materia into Marion's staff since it could be used to train her without any disastrous consequences such as a summon or mastered Fire might cause. He went over the basics of materia use with her, explaining how certain weapons and armor had special slots to hold materia which would allow the user to call upon the powers contained in the innocuous-looking crystals. For all his eagerness to set off to the mako fountain, Marion found him to be a patient instructor, going over every detail with her until she was confident of it. She focused her mind as he had told her, centering her awareness on the green globe in her staff. A mental image of the healing spell appeared in her mind as she made contact with the materia, and then she released the spell, a sort of letting go with her mind. A familiar sparkling green light appeared over her head and wound itself down her body, healing the small bruises she had picked up while training. She looked up to find Cloud giving her a cheerful thumbs-up.

After taking her through some more single-materia spells to make sure she was comfortable with the technique, Cloud then set up several wooden targets across the grassy plain that had become their training field. Handing her one All and a new Fire materia, he instructed her to place them in the linked slots of her staff so that he could show her how to use supportive materia. "When you find the spell forming in your mind, you'll see that the image will be multiplied in your mind for as many enemies or allies as you have in front of you. With a little focus, you'll be able to choose whether you want to use the All ability or just the single spell. Try to set those posts on fire," he said, pointing at the wooden targets set a little ways away.

She examined the materia rolling around in her palm closely, fascinated by the cool blue and bright green reflecting onto her skin, looking deep into the shining centers of the glowing orbs. And then she felt the spell forming, but not just in her mind - it was building up throughout her entire body, tingling up from her toes to the tips of her fingers to the roots of her hair. The magic welled up within her and seemed to fill her to bursting, pressing outwards against the boundaries of her mind. Frightened - Cloud had said materia could not be activated unless equipped - she reacted automatically, mentally shoving the spell away from her body.

The wooden targets did not catch on fire. They exploded. In unison, a rippling shock wave of heat burst out from each of the targets in a ring, followed almost immediately by the appearance of fireballs that expanded from nothing to 15 feet in diameter in a single moment. Cloud threw himself on top of Marion, knocking them both down as the heat wave reached them, bending the grass in its path down to the ground in rippling streams. The air roared past them, whipping at their hair and clothing and turning the cool, calm morning into a raging storm. Charred splinters - all that remained of the stout wooden posts - fell in a smoldering rain around them, small embers singeing their skin and clothing.

Cloud shook his head, dazed, and then looked up. His head rang with the sound of the explosions, and a high-pitched shrill sounded in his ears. Looking down at the shaking girl beneath him, he realized that the shrilling in his ears was Marion. She cowered down in the grass, hands brought up to her head, stopping her screams only to draw quick, hitching breaths. He gathered her up in his arms, brushing burnt fragments and embers off of her hair and clothing. "Marion," he shouted into her face, "stop! We're okay!" He gave her a quick shake as she continued to scream, making her head snap back. Her voice was cut off immediately, and he stared at her, wide-eyed in shock and fear. He stared right back at her...

..at her bright blue eyes.

As he sat back in amazement, hands still gripping her shoulders, he saw the blue fade slowly as if the color were draining away into her pupils, and her usual mako-green eyes reappeared before him. She trembled in his grasp, not realizing that there had been a change in her features, only frightened at the knowledge that something...something she had done...had gone terribly wrong. Recovering from the initial shock, Cloud pulled her close, automatically trying to soothe her. As he made shushing noises and ran his hand along her back comfortingly, he looked around at the valley. Aside from the targets, nothing had been burnt or otherwise damaged. They were half an hour's walk from the town as well, and it seemed the shock wave had not reached that far, since no one was running out to see what had happened.

Marion's trembling subsided, and she stirred in his arms, pulling away. "Can you stand?" Cloud asked. She nodded, and he stood up, quickly brushed himself off, and then helped her up. One hand at the small of her back to steady her, he led her back to town.