

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 17: What Cloud and Tifa's Chocobo Heard

Through the open barn doors, a crystal clear morning was visible, bright blues and greens framed by the dark wood of the doorway, making the landscape seem like a living picture. A brisk morning breeze herded cottony clouds across the azure sky, carrying light birdsong into the barn to compete with the contented coos of the chocobos within. Already the dew on the long meadow grass was being burned away by the sunlight, rising back into the sky on order to fall again the next evening. It was a perfect morning for their trek to Mt. Nibel.

Tifa saddled the black chocobo and led it out into the sunshine with Marion tagging along. A small crowd of people and chocobos sprawled across the grassy corral. Barret was introducing a giggling Marlene to the green chocobo that they would be riding, and his diminutive daughter shrieked in delight as the pastel bird dipped its head down and butted her playfully in the stomach. The other green chocobo was being put through its paces along the fence by Reeve, who had never ridden before, but had picked it up quite quickly. He had discarded the stuffy suit he had customarily worn as an employee of Shinra, and now preferred to clothe himself in dark blue turtlenecks or shirts and black slacks. The two gold chocobos, which were Tifa's pride and joy, stood tethered to the gate, grazing quietly. They would be ridden by Cid, Shera and Yuffie. Shera and Yuffie would share the younger bird, since Cid had already claimed the yearling bird, which he had ridden to victory many times at the Gold Saucer. The pilot himself was enjoying a cigarette in the shade of a tree nearby, while Shera sat on the fence, absently scratching one of the golds behind the ears. Yuffie was ineffectually batting at the other gold, who had scented the Chocobo Lure in her pack, and was trying to nibble through the leather to get at the tempting materia. Nanaki lay in the sunlight outside of the corral, magnificent red fur gleaming in the light as he observed his companions quietly.

The fiery beast lay on his belly, stretched out comfortably much like a cat, although there were definite canine qualities about him as well. Calm and dignified, though quite young by the standards of his people, he gazed quietly at the young girl talking to Tifa. Out of the corner of his eyes, he noted that when the two had appeared, everyone currently outside had also shot quick glances at their newest companion. In the week before, as their old company had arrived singly and in small groups, everyone had a chance to meet this odd girl and get to know her, but her novelty had yet to wear off. Some had added their own skills to her training sessions, and many spent long hours talking to her about their own hometowns, answering all of her questions and asking many of their own. And every single one of them had felt Marion's charming nature and innocence call up the same feelings of love and protectiveness that had prompted Tifa to adopt her so quickly and completely.

Anywhere from 18 to 23 in age, her slender frame and untouched atmosphere made her seem exceedingly young, or perhaps it was only that she seemed so new? A few weeks in the sun had put a faint glow into her cheeks, but she remained untouched by anything remotely resembling a tan. Her skin reminded Nanaki of the tiny white flowers that grew in secluded forests around Cosmo Canyon, delicate ivory petals faintly blushed in the center and impossibly soft to the touch. Her hair was like a river flowing down her back, a swath of the starry night sky cut out and draped over a mortal brow. Her tiny frame was perfectly proportioned, and her graceful limbs make her seem tall, but she would often stand next to Vincent, and the fact that her head barely peeped over his shoulder gave lie to the impression.

Tifa had finished sewing a new outfit for her, and Marion was wearing it for the first time today. Perhaps remembering the black outfit worn when she had attacked Cloud, Marion had insisted on pure white. Skimming along her slender body was a simple tunic and pants suit. The trousers were fitted quite snugly, with tiny slits along the outside of her ankle, and a simple white embroidered trim along the hem. The long-sleeved tunic hung down to mid-thigh, with side slits up to her waist and matching embroidery along the hem, wrists, and square neckline. A thin shirt peeped up from the neckline, rather like Reeve's turtlenecks, but with a shorter collar, so that it did not need to be folded down. A pale brown leather belt hugged her hips, and matching boots had been procured from a shopkeeper. One of Aeris' staffs hung across her back, strangely completing the pretty picture. She fit in quite nicely into their odd company, Nanaki decided. Long-haired and beautiful like Tifa, mysterious and silent as Vincent, even more mako-enhanced and memory-challenged than Cloud, with Yuffie's youthfulness (but none of her kleptomania), and with unique abilities, just like everyone else. She even shared a

common bond with himself, for she had no known family, either. She was alone in the world, and had somehow been adopted into the one group where she would not be viewed as a monster or freak. Nanaki closed his eyes in contentment and began to purr.

"These blacks and greens will do just as well as the gold chocobos for the mountain trip." Tifa turned to Marion and continued, "we'll have to double up again, since I've only got two each of the ones that can cross mountains. I guess that's a good thing, though, since you're not used to riding yet, and the mountains can get pretty treacherous." Marion nodded in acquiescence, turning her gaze as Vincent walked out of the stable behind them, leading the other black chocobo.

She walked over to him, the edges of the white tunic that she wore flapping against her legs. The black pantsuit had been thrown away. Aeris' Wizard Staff hung to the side from a loop in her slender leather belt, suspended diagonally across her back and reaching down to her ankles. As she walked, she kept her right hand down at her side, keeping the rod from tilting and tripping her. She glanced down at the tip of the staff, the materia winking back the sunlight mockingly.

She had been afraid to touch any materia after the incident in the valley, but Cloud and the others had wanted to better understand what was happening, and so they had gathered outside of the town at noon the same day. She had called upon the materia already in her staff, curing herself and then the entire party with her Restore materia and an All. She then proceeded to set a small bush on fire. Everything as normal. Vincent, who had been standing beside her, then pulled a new Bolt from his pistol and dropped it in her palm. She had stood still for a while, keeping her mind carefully blank - afraid to activate the crystal. Then Vincent's hand had closed over hers, enclosing both the materia and her fingers in his own, looking into her frightened eyes with reassurance in his own. Marion had felt some of the fear slip away, and with her eyes still focused on Vincent, she had awakened the power of the orb in her hand.

The low-level Bolt should have only been able to call down slender threads of lightning, just enough to inflict painful burns and nerve damage - nothing deadly unless you were a cat. As she had released the magic coursing through her body with her mind, a twisting cable of pure energy came plummeting down from the clear blue sky, splitting the tree she had targeted cleanly down the middle and deafening everyone nearby with the tremendous crash of thunder that followed.

Vincent had then scooped up the Bolt from her hand and replaced it with a sparkling purple orb. She'd looked into it curiously, and then up at Vincent once more, feeling his fingers tilt her chin upwards. Still gazing up into his eyes, she had released the attacking magic and found herself spinning away from him and swinging her staff in an arch before her, causing a branch to break away from the ruined tree that she had once more focused on. But the tree had been 50 feet away from her. "That was a Long Range materia," Vincent had explained, and after a long pause, "I had you use it because of something Cloud mentioned to me. Your eyes seem to glow the same color as the materia you use, but only when you're in direct contact with it."

Marion sighed at the memory as she trod across the grass to where Vincent waited with the black chocobo. They had all talked for hours over lunch and then continued on until dinnertime, but no conclusions had been reached, except that it probably had to do with the higher levels of mako that had been introduced into her body. They didn't know why she could use materia simply by holding in her bare hands, or how she could enhance the power of materia when it was in contact with her skin, or why her eyes glowed the same color as the crystals when she used them so. They only knew that no one else in the world could do what she had done.

She looked at the materia glinting in the staff. They had given her both healing and attacking materia, just in case, but told her to stay in the back and leave all of the fighting to them. If she kept her hands off of the materia they reacted to her normally, and she hadn't actually lost control of the magic; it was just infinitely more powerful, but she was still wary of the multi-colored jewels.

As she reached him, Vincent knelt on one knee beside the chocobo and put out his hand. Resting her palm in his, Marion put one dainty foot onto his bent knee and vaulted herself onto the waiting bird. Although comfortable while Vincent was there with her, Marion had not completely gotten over her nervousness around the large birds during their trek from Midgar to Nibelheim, and it had become their habit to continue to ride as they had started; with Marion perched in front, and the reins held by Vincent. As Vincent prepared to haul himself up behind her, she twisted the staff around in its loop so that it rested alongside the chocobo, held loosely in her hand like a lance.

Tifa mounted her chocobo and waved to everyone else to get ready, the materia in her Premium Heart sparkling like emeralds and rubies. There was a flurry of activity as packs were attached to saddles and a few people scrambled to catch their birds. Wheeling her mount around towards town, she rode slowly across the weathered cobblestones to where Cloud was locking up the houses, his crystalline Ultima sword strapped to his back. Hearing the bird's claws clicking across the square, he turned and smiled up at his long-time neighbor. She returned the smile, extending a hand to help him up. He swung up behind her easily, taking the reins and chirruping to the chocobo, trotting them out of town and across the valley floor where he and Marion had battled just the other day, the other five chocobos and their riders following closely.

Tifa's mind tuned out the scraping of their mount's claws as the chocobo hauled them up the rocky paths to the mako fountain in Mt. Nibel. Cloud was quite cheerful and excited at the idea of talking to Aeris once again, as was everyone else. Except for Vincent, of course, who remained his usual inscrutable self. And Tifa? She was a tightly compressed ball of various emotions. Glad to know Aeris was well, and happy to be able to talk to her once more, yet afraid that she might find out that Cloud's feeling for the Ancient went far beyond friendship, and the too-familiar jealousy that had been resurrected recently. She had struggled with it during their camp out in Midgar, and then successfully wrestled it down by the time they had reached Nibelheim. Her own protectiveness and affection for Marion had helped to soothe her heart, as well as the fact that Cloud seemed content to let Vincent and Tifa look after the girl, keeping himself at an observatory distance. The quick, simple hug over a week ago in her kitchen, however, had caused the jealousy to flare up again suddenly. Just as quickly, she had stamped it out, ashamed of her envious heart. But the stamping seemed to have left a small, aching bruise.

"What's the matter?" a voice asked right in her ear. Tifa was startled out of her reverie to find Cloud craning his head over her left shoulder. "What?" she asked blankly. "Well, you just sighed as if we were going to the Northern Crater to fight Sephiroth again," he replied. "Come on, cheer up. Don't you want to talk to Aeris?"

Tifa dropped her head, staring at her hands, which were folded in her lap. What would she say to her? Hi, Aeris, sorry you're dead but I need some advice about Cloud? What did you talk about on your date at the Gold Saucer? Did you love him? Did he - does he - love you? And what would Cloud say to her? His feelings of guilt over her death had been mostly resolved after the death of Sephiroth and the banishing of Meteor, but what of his other feelings?

"Yeah," she replied softly, "I'm just not sure what to say to her...I mean, she's gone, and then we find out we can still talk to her even though she's dead...what do I say?" Cloud sighed, breath warm on her neck, "I'm not absolutely sure myself, but...I do need to apologize to her; tell her I'm sorry I let her get killed." Tifa twisted in the saddle, drawing breath to protest, but he stilled her with a quick squeeze around her waist, "Yeah, I know, Tifa. I wasn't in control of myself, and that there wasn't anything I could have done differently. You showed me that and I'm grateful...but...I still need to tell her. What do you call it? Closure?"

Her pulse seemed to quicken with each word he spoke, his breath sending small puffs of air into her ear. Cloud had the reins wrapped around one fist now, and still had his arms wrapped around her in a comfortable embrace. God, don't let me faint off this choco, she prayed, eyeing the steep cliffs on either side of the narrow mountain path. "Do you miss her?" What had possessed her to ask that?

"Yeah. I guess we all do, but...it's easier now. It sounds strange, but it turned out for the best. Marion said that Aeris called the lifestream - I guess like we summon - to help Holy. She wouldn't have been able to do that if she hadn't died, so it's almost like it had to happen...fate, you know? That realization helped me, too. I wish she hadn't died, but if one of us had to be killed...well, I guess it had to be her. Her death didn't end up being meaningless, like anyone else's would have been. Her sacrifice ended up saving us all." Cloud trailed off and she felt him shift in the saddle behind her, twisting around for a moment as if scanning the trail around them.

To her everlasting surprise, Cloud's arms tightened around her ever so gently, and he laid his chin on her shoulder. "Glad it wasn't you," he whispered. He pressed his lips to her bare shoulder in what might have been a kiss, or simply ducking out of the wind that blew down the trail.

Cloud had turned in the saddle to glance behind them, basically to check and see if anyone was watching. The others

seemed engrossing in their own conversations or the view, taking advantage of the fact that the chocobos were trained to follow any paths that presented themselves without constant direction from their rider. A fact that he himself was taking advantage of, among other things. He'd sent a silent prayer of thanksgiving upwards when he found that they didn't have enough chocobos for everyone to ride singly. Unable to find the necessary boldness within himself to make any overt physical moves on the love of his life other than occasional hugs goodnight, doubling up on chocobos presented the opportunity of a lifetime as far as he was concerned. Also, with constant guiding unnecessary, he found that he could simply hold the reins in one hand and let the chocobo have its head, freeing his arms up quite nicely. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to hold Tifa, and she didn't seem to object.

After his whispered comment, she sat rigid in his arms, silent as a statue. Cloud wondered miserably if she was made uncomfortable by his overtures, and was on the verge of pulling back when she laid her hands over his own and returned his words in a voice he had to strain to hear, "Glad it wasn't you, too." Cloud smiled, and clasped her fingers in his own. They rode on in silence, content for the moment only to be near each other, the trembling hope and faith in each other's love that they held in their hearts one beat stronger.