

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 21: Wutai

Vincent sighed ruefully, but with amusement sparkling in his eyes. He was never going to get Marion out of this room. They had been met just outside of Wutai by Yuffie, who after helping them to stake out their chocobos had volunteered to show Marion around town. Their first stop had been a small storage shed, which had been taken over by wild cats. Marion had only taken a few seconds to recognize the slinky, furry animals for what they were, and then had immediately settled down to make friends. Selecting a feline at random, she had crouched on the floor and made friendly hissing noises, wiggling her fingers invitingly.

After a few moments, a hugely obese tabby padded over to sniff and snuggle. Her first conquest made, Marion had turned her attentions to a tiny black kitten hissing at her from the top of a cabinet. That had been over an hour ago. She now had the entire room of cats huddled around her, some meowing for attention and the rest purring loud enough to rattle the windows. Yuffie was long gone, having excused herself to go prepare rooms for them. Wutai had built a spacious inn to accommodate the growing number of tourists, but the light-fingered Ninja had insisted that they stay at her place. The reason given was her desire to catch up with an old friend and to further get to know a new one, but Vincent decided to keep their belongings under close watch, just in case.

"Marion," he called. She looked up at him immediately, causing a tortoiseshell kitten to slide ignominiously down off her head. Glittering green eyes brighter than any cat's met his gaze expectantly.

"We should go. It's getting late, and we should pay our respects to Lord Godo before turning in for the night." Without protest, or even yet an acquiescing nod, Marion began to unload her lap. After a few moments of plucking stubborn claws from her tunic, she slowly got up while shaking one last clinging cat off of her leg. She stepped carefully over the milling crowd and joined Vincent in the doorway.

"Who is Lord Godo?" she asked as he led her across the packed dirt streets and wooden bridges to the pagoda.

"He is Yuffie's father, and former Lord of the Pagoda. He is the leader of Wutai in matters of politics, law, and war. The Ninja masters report to him with regards to training as well. Here," Vincent gestured to a glittering, five-story pagoda, "up these steps. He stays on the top floor. Yuffie is actually Lady of the Pagoda now, but she prefers a more active lifestyle than the responsibilities of the position allow, so her father stands in for her."

They made their way up the narrow stairs connecting the simple rooms, with Vincent introducing her to the individual floors' masters as they went. In the smallest, uppermost of the rooms, they found Lord Kisaragi clad in his usual formal robes, chatting comfortably with his only daughter. The portly yet well-muscled Lord held out his arms exuberantly as he caught sight of his guests, "Ah, Vincent! You honor us with a visit! And you must be Marion," he said with a beaming smile, "Yuffie has told me all about you. Come, come, sit down."

Vincent and Marion sat down as requested, settling themselves onto large, flat cushions laid directly on the woven reed floor. Godo chatted inanely at Marion for a while about Wutai's history, exaggerating his accomplishments in the Wutai war, and glorifying the tourism that now supported the town. Yuffie yawned several times, but her father seemed not to notice. Vincent let his mind wander a bit, but found his attention snapped back to the conversation when it suddenly turned towards Marion.

"So," Godo said, leaning towards Marion confidently, "Yuffie tells me you're quite a talented young lady when it comes to materia, hey? Would you be interested in giving away a few secrets? Perhaps you could even demonstrate..." He trailed off as Vincent stood up, silent and suddenly menacing. Yuffie's boredom slipped away and she raised an eyebrow at his behavior.

"My apologies, Lord Godo," a flat voice said, "but it's getting late, and we must be going." Marion blinked a few times, then

unfolded herself from her cushion and stood in a swift, graceful motion. Lord Godo opened his mouth, shut it, and then tried again. "Ah...well. Certainly, you must be tired from your journey. Uh...perhaps we can talk again tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," returned Vincent coolly. He nodded towards the doorway and Marion immediately stepped out in front of him, her shoes making soft crunching noises on the reeds in the sudden silence. As they descended the stairs to the floors below, Yuffie ran down behind them and grabbed Vincent's sleeve.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" the diminutive Ninja demanded in a hissing whisper, "Geez, Vincent, walk out on my Dad right in the middle of a sentence, why don't you?"

Ignoring her for the moment, Vincent spoke instead to Marion, who was looking up at them curiously from a few steps below. "Go downstairs and wait for me outside." She immediately turned and padded the rest of the way down. As she turned into the fourth floor, Vincent finally addressed the impatient Ninja tapping her foot on the step above his, her hand still clenched around his sleeve as if he might flee from her questioning.

"She's not a road show, Yuffie. I didn't bring her across the ocean just to satisfy your curiosity and let you gather more materia secrets."

Yuffie tossed her head disgustedly, flipping her short black hair away from her face. "What are you, her father? 'Go downstairs,'" she mimicked, "'wait for me outside' and let me protect you from the evil Kisaragis. She's a grown woman; she can take care of herself. She doesn't need you to answer for her, Vincent. How do you know she wouldn't want to show us how..." She stopped suddenly as Vincent shook her hand off fiercely and grabbed the offending wrist in an iron grip. She winced at the pain, and then her eyes flew wide open as Vincent spoke only inches from her face, his low voice almost a growl.

"She is not a grown woman and she can not take care of herself. Marion's only a month old as far as living goes, and until she can take care of herself, I am going to protect her from everything that could threaten her, including your greed if need be. She awoke in Hojo's lab just a few weeks ago - a prisoner in some sick experiment; what makes you think she wants to be examined and questioned about abilities that she doesn't even understand?"

He flung her wrist away from him and descended the rest of the stairway, a silent shadowy presence that left behind an extremely confused Ninja. Yuffie shook her head in amazement as she rubbed the blood back into her wrist. Was it her imagination, or had Vincent actually shown some emotion? Some emotions of her own made themselves known in her heart, and the young materia-hunter felt her cheeks flush as she considered how uncaring of Marion's feelings she had been in her curiosity.

The lust for materia that she had always cheerfully considered a hereditary and undeniable part of her nature had slowly seemed more and more a shameful obsession in the last months of her journey with Cloud and the others. She had joined them with the sole intent of robbing them blind, and ended up committing herself to their purpose. She had been exposed to selfless sacrifices, undying loyalties, and countless other eye-openers that had been missing from her shallow world.

Regrettably, she had completely relapsed once in Wutai, but Vincent's words - and more, his actions; his unthinking protectiveness of Marion - brought the feeling home to her once more. There were more important things in life than materia. More important things than anything material, in fact. They were things that couldn't be counted or stolen, and they were what had saved the world. Love, sacrifice, courage, and determination. She might be the owner of the largest mastered materia collection in the world with much fame from being one of the heroes who destroyed Sephiroth, but the slender young woman standing in the shadowy stairwell suddenly felt quite poor and alone.

Yuffie Kisaragi, full-fledged Ninja at only 20 years old, Lady of the Pagoda and one of the saviors of the planet, was finally beginning to grow up.

Early the next morning, Yuffie continued the previous day's tour. She took Vincent and Marion on a winding hike through the serpentine trails winding in and around the carved mountain that was Da Chao, watching with proprietary pride as Marion drank in the spectacular views with awe. Back in town, her guests were treated to refreshments at the Turtle's

Paradise restaurant, and then taken on a quick window-shopping spree through the stores.

"And here's the weapon shop," Yuffie said, gesturing grandly to the doorway. "We've got tons of stuff, not just Ninja gear. We have the hardest working smiths in the world, I bet. It's not easy to keep an army outfitted, even in peaceful times." She continued to chat cheerfully about the various pikes, swords, and staffs lined up against one wall until she noticed that Marion had turned away, her attention apparently caught up by something other than Yuffie's weapons lecture. Yuffie peered over one slender shoulder to track her gaze, and found her looking up at a long rifle mounted on the far wall. Vincent looked up as well, noticing the slender weapon for the first time.

"Oh, that? We don't make rifles; there's no one here who uses them. That's a relic of the Wutai war. One of Shinra's generals fell here, and the rifle was kept as kind of a trophy. I think my father tried to learn to use it, but it's a very sensitive weapon. Hard to aim true, and all that. Probably one of those specialty weapons, like that Venus Gospel thing Cid uses." Marion turned to Yuffie, eyes strangely intense yet unreadable.

"May I see it?" she asked quietly. Yuffie raised an eyebrow, but was quick to comply, her shame from last night still nagging at her heart. Standing on tiptoe on top of a crate, she lifted the rifle from the wooden pegs it rested on, bringing down two shoulder belts that had hung there as well. She noticed a small jingling sound coming from the container pouches in the belt, but turned them over without indulging her curiosity. "Here you go," she said to Marion, handing over the leather belts and rifle carefully.

As her friends watched curiously, Marion ran a careful hand up the shiny wood stock and glistening barrel, hearing the sibilant whisper of her skin across the weapon. Running her fingers along the underside of the barrel, she found a long wooden piece with eight depressions for materia, linked into four pairs. After exploring the gun for a few moments more, she turned abruptly on her heel and strode out of the store purposefully, Vincent and Yuffie close behind her. Once out in the sunlight, she walked halfway towards the pagoda and stopped, facing the thin forest of slender young pines across from her on the other side of a small stream.

Vincent and Yuffie watched with a strange sense of anticipation as Marion shrugged the leather straps onto her left shoulder and passed her head through them, causing the belts to fall across her body diagonally. Opening one of the square pockets worked into the leather, she brought out a handful of golden bullets. She rolled them in her left hand for a moment, jiggling them into a straight, orderly line while the rifle lay slung casually in her right elbow. Suddenly her hand clenched over the bullets and she brought the rifle up before her face. Her hands a blur, she swiftly loaded bullet after bullet into the rifle's chamber, locking each one in with a practiced tug and twist of a lever. In only three seconds, all of the bullets had been chambered. The weapon was brought up to her right shoulder, and facing across the stream, Marion began firing in rapid succession, unloading all of the bullets in a blink of the eye. Pink lips puckered and blew the thin blue smoke away from her eyes as she twirled the rifle around her wrist, letting the stock fall snugly into her elbow once more. The weapon familiar and strange all at once, Marion lifted her eyes to her audience, a little bit of anxiety waiting in her heart as she wondered what Yuffie's reaction would be. At least this time she hadn't injured anyone, she thought with a pang, remembering Cloud's shock and pain.

Yuffie trotted up behind Marion, gazing over her shoulder wonderingly. She could see no prey downed, or tree limbs broken. "What were you shooting at?" she asked wonderingly. Instead of answering, Marion took a quick step back and then leaped across the stream, landing softly on the other side much like one of the cats she had befriended. Yuffie and Vincent followed after her once more, and she led them to a single tree, growing a little ways apart from the forest. Beginning at eye level and reaching all the way down to the ground was a perfectly straight line of bullet holes.

Yuffie's jaw dropped as she saw the line, and it dropped even further when she turned and saw how far away they were from the stream. "Marion," she breathed, "I'd say you were trained by Shinra's best generals, but you're way too young...what in the world..." she trailed off, catching Vincent's eyes. More questions that Marion didn't have the answers to. Yuffie shook her head, her bangs shadowing her downcast eyes. "Well, it doesn't matter," she continued, smiling impishly at the girl beside her, "so, do you want me to gift wrap the rifle, or you wanna just take it with you?" Relieved at Yuffie's quick acceptance of this new oddity of hers, and grateful for the generous gift, Marion could only gaze at Yuffie with gratitude in her eyes and say simply, "Thank you."

Yuffie's cheeks flushed with embarrassment and she replied, "Aw, it's nothing. That old rifle would have just collected dust in the shop, anyway." Feeling rather pleased with herself, the young Ninja led her friends back to town, wondering if she could nudge the conversation to the point where she might find out if the eight linked slots on the rifle meant that it had no materia growth rate.