

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 27: Anticipation

Nanaki stood on the upper deck of the Highwind, leaning against the railing and straining to catch sight of the island Marion had discovered. Although he'd been fully engrossed in a new research project just days before, Vincent's phone call had turned the fascinating puzzle into nothing more than an irritating distraction. Every fiber of his being now yearned towards the unknown clan; his entire body thrummed with excitement and anticipation, his nose scented the wind, his eyes scanned the horizon, and his mind whirled with questions. How many of them were there? How had they come to be isolated from the rest of the world, and for how long? Did they have any ties to Cosmo Canyon? What were their names? What did they look like?

Quiet footsteps alerted Nanaki to Cloud's presence, and he turned his head to find his friend gazing down at him with a small smile on his face. The calm, happy expression pleased Nanaki, for he knew that next to Vincent, Cloud was certainly their most introspective and brooding member. To find him with such an easy smile was a treat. Cloud hunkered down on the deck with his back to the railing, the wind whipping his already unruly hair into a wild tangle of blonde spikes. Tifa joined them after a few silent moments, curling her legs underneath her as she sat across from Cloud, and leaning into the wind so that her ponytail blew back from her body like a writhing snake.

Cloud tilted his head back and closed his eyes, enjoying the wind that ran brisk fingers through his hair and rippled around his bare arms like an invisible river. Little moments like these gave him a sense of peace. Moments like when he and Tifa stargazed from the well, or when they rode her chocobos out into the valley, just the two of them. Time seemed to slow then, and the world around them faded into the background, leaving them alone with nature and each other. All of the constant worries and wonders about daily life quieted down in his mind, leaving him a simple and pure peace. It was in these quiet moments that he felt closest to Tifa, as if their hearts could converse now that the clamor of daily life had hushed.

He opened his eyes to find her already smiling softly at him, and his own smile widened in return. God, how he loved her. With one last, lopsided grin, he turned to Nanaki and understated, "Excited?"

A short snort was the only reply he received for a while, and the keen yellow eyes roamed the horizon that slipped by as the Highwind cut through the afternoon air. "Grandfather said once that I might find my life's mate in my travels. I didn't really pay attention to his comment at the time, though. Just think, if not for Marion, I might have spent the rest of my days studying and guarding the Canyon, never knowing that I wasn't alone in the world."

"You were never really alone, you know," commented Tifa. "You had Bugenhagen and all the people of Cosmo Canyon, not to mention us."

Nanaki nodded in acknowledgment and thanks, and continued thoughtfully. "You are all like family to me, but think of it. What if you were the only human on this planet? You might have friends and people who would take you into their family, but no matter where you went, one inescapable fact remains: you are different."

Tifa and Cloud's eyes met once more as they both thought over their own lives. Their families had been taken from them in a fiery tragedy, but they still had each other. And Nanaki was right; no matter how alone and bereft they might have felt, still they had the reassurance of community, of race. Since he had been a cub, Nanaki had thought himself utterly alone in the world, with not one other member of his race to share in his long life. The people he thought of as friends and family would all age and die as he entered adulthood. Even their great-grandchildren would not survive to stand by his deathbed. Perhaps only Aeris would have been able to share his pain of being the last of his people. The last Cetra, the last of the Guardians. The first to mark their eternal loss.

Moved by the chilling loneliness of that thought, Cloud found his hand reaching out towards Tifa. Her fingers met and tangled in his. Fingers brushing lightly against each other, pulses felt running under their skin, warmth transmitted through

the contact...nothing more than a simple handclasp, yet enough to chase the strange loneliness away. His earlier cheer subdued now, he gazed thoughtfully at the wooden decking and ran his thumb along the delicate knuckles clasped in his hand. Long, slender fingers; well-muscled hand; smooth skin with a handful of tiny battle scars running across the knuckles. And hopefully, someday, a matching pair of thin gold bands on the ring finger. The warmth of the gold would look well on her creamy skin. A few mastered All materia snatched back from Yuffie would pay for a glittering diamond as well. He could imagine the rings on her finger well enough, but as far as how to get them there...

Tifa stared at Cloud wonderingly, curiosity piqued by the long sigh that unraveled from his lips as he toyed with her hand. Such a demonstration of affection such as holding hands - and in front of Nanaki, no less - was unusual. In the past several months, Cloud had fallen into these silent reveries more and more often. He asked for her help in sorting Hojo's research notes less often, and when she did visit him in the gloomy office, he seemed to have made little or no progress from the last time she had popped in. Although he spent just as much time with her, many nights the conversation would fade off, and they would spend a silent evening simply gazing at the stars or the fireplace, often falling asleep together on the couch. All of this silence might have made Tifa afraid that she was boring him or that he was becoming weary of her company, except for the exponential increase in these uncharacteristic shows of affection. For almost every silent spell he wrapped himself in, there seemed to be a concurrent caress. The goodnight kisses on her cheek or brow were now a nightly ritual rather than an occasional occurrence, and couch-sessions were usually spent with an arm wrapped around her shoulders. And to add to the complicated nature of their relationship, although he was certainly more affectionate and bold while they were alone, during the day or while out in public, Cloud remained his usual, casual self. Friends, neighbors, training partner - nothing more. All this added up to a very confused and hesitant Tifa Lockhart.

While he was silently brooding about...whatever, she felt intrusive and reluctant to pry. They talked over everything in the world, but there were obviously still things that he preferred to mull over on his own. And in those precious moments when she lay her head against his shoulder as he played with the ends of her hair, she felt utterly cared for and dared to dream of love. But during everyday life, with the humdrum circle of meals, chocobos, shopping, and training excursions, she put both fear and hope on hold, slipping back into the well-worn role of best friend.

Unless something changes within a year or so, I'm going to develop a split personality, she decided.

"There it is!" shouted Nanaki, betraying his excitement with the exuberance in his voice. He turned to his companions, eyes all aglitter and not the least bit embarrassed at his outburst. Cloud and Tifa smiled back at him, his enthusiasm infectious. They scanned the horizon, but the island was as yet still invisible to their inferior human eyes. Leaving Nanaki to peer into the distance, Cloud and Tifa raced down into the hull to inform the rest of their party of the sighting.

After circling the island a few times, a cluster of rusty shapes was spotted waiting on the northernmost beach. Cid carefully maneuvered the Highwind onto a small meadow nearby and then released four anchors to steady the ship on the uneven ground. Nanaki paced impatiently as Cid kicked the rope ladder over the edge. Inwardly mortified at the graceless procedure, the fiery beast carefully lowered himself halfway down the ladder and jumped the rest of the way, landing solidly onto the grass. He moved out of the way so as not to impede his friends, and turned to find five of his people - his people! - running easily towards them.

In the lead was a powerful male, long mane and powerful limbs adding to the commanding air he had about him. Nothing less than instant respect would suffice to greet this one. As they approached, Nanaki stepped forward deliberately and bowed his head in greeting.

"I am Nanaki, Guardian of Cosmo Canyon as was my father, Seto, and his father, Ineki. I am honored to greet the clan of this island, and hope that we may come to know one another as friends and family."

A ripple of emotion - surprise? recognition? - moved through the five individuals gathered before him. After a moment, the clan leader moved forward from his group one step and inclined his head slightly in return. "I am Ineki, Leader of the Island Clan, as was my father before me, Seto. The lost clan is pleased to meet their lost kin."

This time, it was Nanaki and the humans who had clustered around him who started in surprise. Surely this was no coincidence of common names. Everyone watched Nanaki intently, as if hoping for a cue, but he had none to give his

friends. Separated from the memories of his parents by many years, and orphaned while only a cub, he had no practical experience from which to draw. Instinct and his natural politeness would have to suffice in the meantime. Fortunately, Ineki took the lead and began speaking once more, introducing Nanaki and his - to them - unusual friends to the group whom Vincent and Marion had met only days ago.

"This is my mate, Kokone, and my daughter, Tenari. And this is Makote and Komi, who share the burdens of leadership with me." Individuals stepped forward and made polite bows as they were introduced, and then Ineki paused and glanced meaningfully at Nanaki's companions.

Nanaki turned his head and nodded to each of his waiting friends, introducing them in turn. "May I present to you Cloud Strife and Tifa Lockhart of Nibelheim, Barret Wallace and Reeve of Corel, Cid Highwind of Rocket Town, and Yuffie Kisaragi of Wutai." Everyone made some sort of gesture, either nodding or stepping forward for a moment to be acknowledged in turn. Nanaki scanned their surroundings discretely and then continued, "I believe you have already met two others of our company, Vincent Valentine and Marion?"

"Yes, we have," replied Ineki. "They had urgent business to attend to in Midgar, and so departed four days ago, leaving with us their affection and regrets that they could not meet you here." Noting the sun dipping down in the sky, he continued, "We would be pleased if you would return with us to the eastern side of the island where the rest of our clan awaits your arrival. We offer you our hospitality for as long as you wish to stay on our island."

Nanaki felt a new excitement rise up within him. Even more of his people were yet to be met. And this mystery of shared names; was this clan tied to his own past in some way? Ineki's pride and dignity stirred echoes of his father's memory, and Nanaki felt in some way that to come to know these people would bring him closer to the parents he had lost. And Tenari? The first young female of his own people he had ever laid eyes on; would she be the life's mate that Bugenhagen had predicted? Only time would tell. Nanaki nodded in acknowledgment and answered, "We would be honored."

They threaded their way along the edge of the forest, since walking across the sand would have slowed them down, and the path through the forest was unsuitable for such a large group of people. Nanaki walked in front with Ineki, both conversing quietly. Kokone and the others of the Island Clan followed close behind, eyes intent on their lost cousin, taking in oddities such as his tattoos, beaded and trimmed mane, and feathered headdress. Behind them walked the two-footed members of the company, all gazing about them in awe at the perfect island paradise they had come to.

Cloud was in the lead, eyes soft and distant as he trailed after their hosts on autopilot. He took in the idyllic scenery with a slightly bemused expression on his face, feeling the same relaxing sense of peace steal over him as when Marion had given him that quick hug so long ago in Tifa's kitchen. It was the same peace that came over him whenever he found himself surrounded by the glory of nature, the simple beauty of the planet. He gave a contented sigh, not noticing the curious look Tifa was giving him. She walked on his right, long legs able to keep up with his strides easily. Noticing that he had fallen into one of his reveries again, she smiled to herself and continued to match strides with him, taking a childish pleasure in simply walking by his side in such a pleasant surrounding.

Directly behind them, Yuffie could be heard pestering Barret with inane chatter and irritatingly irrelevant questions. Cid was matching Barret's disgusted expression scowl for scowl, since his hankering for a cigarette had given him a headache. As a cursory nod towards the altar of friendship, Cid refrained from lighting up around Nanaki, who had an extremely sensitive nose and a marked dislike for the smell of tobacco. Now, as they trod through the grassy dunes to the caverns sighted off in the distance, he realized that he would have to completely abstain from his favorite bad habit for the entire duration of their stay on this island, populated as it was with these keen-nosed creatures. Trailing along at the end of the line was Reeve, strolling casually with his hands clasped behind his back, seemingly lost in contemplation of the glittering beach that scrolled slowly by.

After about an hour's hike, they reached a break in the forest where it seemed as if the mountainside had softened in the sun and oozed its way toward the sea, only to be frozen into place halfway to its destination. Boulders and craggy outcroppings jutted out from the gradual slope here and there, but a smooth series of steps was visible through the center. As Ineki mounted the first of these steps, he turned to Nanaki and said, "Welcome to our home."