

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 29: A Parting

Five days later, everyone from the Island clan gathered together with their guests at the large, circular plateau that served as their meeting place to discuss their journey to the mainland on the humans' airship. All were seated comfortably on the ground in random groups, chatting quietly in between listening to the main conversation going on between Ineki and Cloud.

"Not all of us will be joining you," Ineki said, addressing his comments to the tall blonde man whom he had mentally marked out at the leader of their varied company. Cloud had been slightly uncomfortable with the responsibility of being the head liaison to these people, but the role of default leader had over the years become more natural to him, and he acquitted himself well. "Makote and Komi have elected to stay here with their son. Makote's brothers and sister will remain here with them as well, so you need not worry for their safety."

Cloud began to protest, but was interrupted gently by Ineki. "It is best for everyone, including Araku, that he remain isolated from others. However, he cannot be allowed to roam free and alone, and in any case, Komi would not be separated from her son for the world."

"Perhaps," conceded Nanaki, who sat next to Cloud, "but his parents and relatives are all his elders. What will happen when they have all gone?"

Ineki shook his head sorrowfully. "The cloud that Komi sees around her son deepens every day. He will not outlive his parents."

Tifa frowned, upset by the forced isolation of her newfound friends and the tragic reason. "So after he dies, they'll just live out here by themselves?"

"No," came a voice from behind. She twisted around to find Cid standing behind her. "I'll drop by here every few months or so to see how they're doing. When...well, if they ever want, they can hitch a ride back with me."

As Tifa stared in surprise, Ineki considered and then bowed his head towards the gruff pilot in thanks. "We would be grateful." Cid only shrugged in reply and then stalked off, ostensibly to find a secluded spot where he might sneak a cigarette without offending anyone's sensitive nose. Tifa smiled after him. For all his foul language and habits, Cid's rough exterior held a simple and pure heart within, which only Shera had been able to see at first glance.

Cid and Shera...now there was a strange relationship, Tifa mused. Tifa's problems were actually run-of-the-mill when you thought over them. She was in love with a good friend, and wasn't sure if the feelings were returned, end of story. Shera, however, had an entirely different level of complexity to deal with. She worked with and for Cid, but neither as his equal or subordinate, simply a cohort. She lived with him, cooked and cleaned for him, but had no standing as either wife or lover, or designation as maid or helpmeet. She gave her "Captain" complete loyalty and commitment, sacrificing her personal life to his professional one, and got nothing in return but verbal abuse. Tifa wondered that Shera hadn't taken a wrench to Cid's head by now...or did things pass between the two that Tifa was not aware of? She hoped so, for from her point of view, Shera certainly lived a thankless life.

Tifa turned her head and mind back to the current conversation to find that it had turned to the more mundane topic of flight logistics. It was decided that they would leave in two days time, at first light. Tifa let loose a small sigh, picked herself up off the ground and slowly wandered off. The holiday was over.

Hands laced behind her back, she strolled aimlessly partway down the stone steps and then picked a random boulder on which to sun herself. Closing her eyes against the late afternoon sun, she drew her legs close and rested her head on her

knees. What a week, Tifa thought to herself, feeling regret at the thought of leaving the island coupled with a warm glow at the memories she'd acquired here. New friends in her heart, new scenery engraved in her mind, and one rather baffling occurrence...

"It's so peaceful here."

She looked up at the beloved face and drank in the serenity of his expression. His eyes were lit up by the early morning light, and a cool breeze ruffled his blonde hair with invisible fingers. There were so few times she'd seen such a relaxed, peaceful air about him that he seemed almost a being apart from the real world. 'This is what he'll look like in the lifestream...after this life is over, he'll have this look of peace all the time,' she thought to herself, admiring the handsome lines of her guardian angel's face as he in turn admired the sun rising over the horizon.

She nestled a bit deeper into the curve of his arm, which had been slung casually over her shoulder, and to his idle comment she replied aloud, "I wish I could stop time right now, just for this island, and stay here forever." She felt the body she leaned against shift slightly, and glanced up to find him peering curiously into her face. Tifa felt a slow blush creep up her face at the proximity and intensity of those glittering blue eyes, and tucked her head back down. "What?" she asked, hoping that the casual tone she adopted sounded natural to him.

She missed the quick frown that passed over his face, and the twinge of uncertainty in his look. Behind her, his hand clenched into a tight fist, the pulse thrumming faster through his wrist, but she didn't see. All she noticed was the faint catch in his voice as he asked, "Would you?" but it was enough to make her look up once more.

"Would I what?" she asked. Still with the slight frown bending his brow, he reiterated, "Would you, if you could? Stop time, I mean. Stay here forever..."

...with you? Stay here in this moment, watching the sunrise in your eyes, listening to the sound of your breathing merge with the whispering of the ocean? I'd give anything...absolutely anything. Shaken by the sudden yearning she felt, Tifa looked around her for a moment, taking in the beauty and serenity of this island paradise. After lingering glances at the mountain, forest, beach, and ocean, she turned back to him and nodded. "I really think I would. Life's been so...full. I've had my family taken from me and my home burned to the ground, I've joined an underground resistance group and helped to save the world, I've been underwater, in the lifestream, and 30,000 feet in the air. Even after we defeated Sephiroth, there have been little adventures and worries...I think there's a part of me that would really like to just sit here on this rock and let the world fade away."

Tifa sighed at the memory. The scenery and peaceful mood had been such an influence on her heart and mind that she'd almost found the courage to finally tell him how much she loved him. As she continued to look into his eyes and search her mind for words, he'd suddenly murmured in a very determined voice,

"I've got to go to Wutai."

She blinked several times and then finally said, "What?" His eyes blinked wide in response, and he sat up straight, "Huh? Oh! Sorry, I didn't realize I'd said it out loud...I, uh...just thought of something I need...to do...in Wutai on the way home." And then, inexplicably, he blushed.

Tifa groaned and rolled her head in her arms. The serenity of the moment had been abruptly shattered, and the impulse to reveal her feelings had also fled the scene, leaving her a bit scattered. After an awkward pause, Cloud had suggested that it might be time for breakfast, and that they return to the caverns. And so they had. The rest of the day had been uneventful, but for the fact that Cloud seemed to be in one of his introspective moods once more. What in the world had reminded him of an errand he had to run in Wutai? Or had that just been one of the lamest excuses in the world...an excuse he'd grabbed out of the thin air because he'd guessed what she'd been about to say and wanted to interrupt her?

Would anything be different when they returned to Nibelheim...or when he returned from his side trip to Wutai? Was he finally realizing how she truly felt about him...and also realizing that he didn't want her? The courage and hope she'd felt that morning was nowhere to be found, and she fought against the tears that stung her eyes. She'd fought Jenova and

Sephiroth and countless monsters...but in the face of rejection, she found that she was as helpless as a newborn. Her bravery, optimism and endurance that others had relied upon during their journey to save the world had found its source in Cloud's presence and her hope in their love. But what resources did she have to draw upon when she was fighting for Cloud himself? Be strong, she chided herself, wiping her eyes. Crying never helped anything...but it did make you feel better sometimes.

"Tifa?"

She twisted around to find Cloud walked down the steps towards her. Her heart ached at the sight of him. His lean silhouette, hilariously spiky hair, and glowing eyes...the confident stride that had developed in the last year as leadership and responsibilities had settled themselves more comfortably on his shoulders...every cherished aspect of him that she held in her heart now threatened to crush her. How she wanted him...

Not trusting her voice, she merely raised her eyebrows and looked up at him expectantly.

"Everyone's packing up now," he said, crouching down near her with a serious expression. "I'm going to take the new gold from the Highwind's stable and leave right away...it looks like it's old enough to handle the trip. I want to check in on Vincent and Marion on the way to Wutai, and I don't feel like waiting around until we all leave. I'm not sure why they had to go to Midgar so suddenly, but it makes me nervous, somehow. I...just wanted to let you know." He dropped his eyes to the ground, flicking a small pebble around with one finger.

We've ridden double before...you could have asked me to go with you. What do you have to do in Wutai that's so important? And why haven't you told me what it is? Or is the errand not even in Wutai? I wish I could read your mind, Cloud...

She nodded in response, and then added quietly, "Take care of yourself." He nodded as well. "I should be home in two weeks at the latest." His hand sent the pebble tumbling down the rest of the stairs, and then he looked up and suddenly grabbed at her fingers. "Tifa? Wait for me, okay?" Her head started to nod automatically even as she wondered what he meant - of course she'd be waiting for him in Nibelheim - but she didn't get to complete the gesture. The hand circling her own tugged her towards him and he leaned forward and gave her a swift kiss full on the lips...

...and a strange look...and then a glimpse of his back as he turned and ran down the stairs to the beach, and out of sight around the edge of the forest. Stunned, Tifa simply sat back and watched him go. After a few moments, she found herself debating whether to laugh or cry, and she pondered it for so long that she lost the desire to do either. She dazedly walked back to camp and went to bed, and dared to dream in her sleep what she couldn't bring herself to believe while awake.