

An Affair of the Heart and Soul

By Meriko

Chapter 33: Waiting

He wearily dragged himself up into the saddle, earning an annoyed warble from the chocobo as it was pulled a bit off balance by the ungraceful mounting. "Sorry," Cloud apologized, giving the golden neck a quick pat. Sighing, he ran a tired hand through his hair, and took a moment to catch his breath. He wondered which had been more exhausting; climbing up Gaea's cliff in sub-zero temperatures, or arguing some materia out of Godo while refusing to tell him why he needed them. After checking one last time to make sure that the four pale blue orbs in his golden armlet were indeed mastered - he wouldn't put anything past Yuffie's father - he grabbed up the reins and sprinted the chocobo in a southeasterly direction.

The goldsmiths at Wutai had been more than happy to offer their services for free to the hero who had defeated the hated General Sephiroth, but if he'd let them know what he wanted, it would have been the same as if he'd given the request straight to the inquisitive Lord Godo and by extension, his daughter. As much as the young ninja had matured in the past several months, Cloud wasn't about to entrust her with such a secret. Besides, there was a specific artisan he had in mind for this project. A solitary man who filled his days not with friends and family, but with inspired creativity and practiced craftsmanship. The same man who had created the Princess Guard and who could also work such items such as Mythril and Gold armlets would find no challenge in the simple request Cloud had.

But first, he needed to go to Corel, where the miners had recently discovered a small diamond mine.

And in the same forge that melted iron for tools, the gold armlet was refined into a shimmering lump of pure gold.

And later, on the lonely peninsula northeast of Gongaga, the Inventor shooed him out of the house so that he could work in peace.

Cloud paced the nearby shore, impatience apparent in every jerky step. The soft murmur of the waves had no power to calm him, and the gentle sea breeze soothed him not at all. Gnawing on his lower lip and running a damp palm through his hair every few minutes, he would have fit perfectly into any hospital lobby. Finally, he planted his boots into the sand and firmly told himself to calm down. What was wrong with him, anyway?

He'd waited this long already; what was another hour or two? What was another day, another week? He'd wanted to be noticed by the diminutive brunette before approaching her. He'd wanted to wait until he was a Soldier before presenting himself to the adorable neighbor as a worthy friend. And he'd wanted to wait until he was sure of her heart before proposing. And so he'd waited days, months, years...never sure, never confident enough of her love.

He'd waited too long. What had he been waiting for, really? A message from God, writing in the sky that Tifa definitely returned his feelings? Some sure sign...proof that his patience wasn't in vain? And what if Tifa was in turn waiting for him? How long could he expect her to wait? She had to love him...she had to. He couldn't bear to think of any other possibility anymore. He had to tell her, had to know...had to make his dream come true. No more waiting for a sure bet...he'd have to take some things on faith, and pray that they were true.

He turned away from the water and looked back towards the house, and saw the Inventor hopping up and down, waving frantically at him, a small spark of white and gold glittering from one hand.