

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 34: Marry Me

Tifa burst out from the Tiger Lily arms shop, pelted down the stairs, and ran out into the canyon to meet him. "Cloud," she cried happily, "what are you doing here?" He smiled widely at her, his eyes glittering bright in the strong afternoon sunlight, and surprised her by catching her up into a hearty hug. "I was actually on my way to Rocket Town," he explained, "and met up with Vincent and Marion. They'd waited around to tell me that you were all staying here until the day before the test launch, and then we just rode down here together." Tifa craned her head around him to catch sight of her other friends, and Cloud dropped his arms and stepped back, turning to greet the others who had poured out of Cosmo Canyon.

"Everyone come on out!" he shouted, waving his arm in the air, "Marion has something to show you!" Tifa raised an eyebrow curiously, but he didn't see, and so she started towards Vincent and Marion. She stopped after only a few steps, however, arrested by the change in the couple.

They were standing quite close together, which was usual, but there was a slight difference. Before, it had been that Marion had a habit of tagging along after Vincent. Now, his stance and movements were as reactive to Marion's as hers were to him. She would move to un-harness a chocobo, and his eyes would track her. Then, she stepped towards him, and he turned slightly so that his body faced her fully, as if simply waiting for her to walk into his arms. They were only a short distance from the crowd of friends gathered around Cloud, and yet it seemed that they were quite alone, together in some separate atmosphere.

Vincent's lips moved in speech - a few simple sentences, nothing more - and Marion replied to him, only one syllable, it seemed...and then both of them smiled. Tifa was stunned to see the tender, warm expressions on their faces. And then, partially hidden by their chocobos and still in a world of their own, Vincent laid one hand on Marion's cheek and bent to kiss her.

And Tifa suddenly looked away.

But it wasn't embarrassment at witnessing the private moment that caused her to do so. It was a strange, painful wrenching in her heart. She didn't have any time to wonder at it, though, for the couple walked over a moment later and gathered everyone together for some sort of demonstration. Tifa vaguely heard Vincent mention finding something out in the labs, and she went to stand with everyone else, trying to shake off the strange feeling in her heart.

Marion walked a short distance away, and then turned back to face her friends. After a nod from Vincent, she closed her eyes in concentration and then unleashed the full potential of the mako within her.

A golden aura flashed into existence around her as she called up the barrier spell once more, and then a misty green spiraled down from thin air, bounced against the shield, and re-materialized above the gathered crowd instead, revitalizing everyone from within. Her eyes opened, and even through the glittering haze, everyone saw her eyes glow a fiery red as she called down five different Bahamut dragons in quick succession, each circling around her and obliterating nearby boulders with their individual attacks before spiraling up into the heavens once more. Fire blazed up and lightning crackled down, geysers shot forth from a ground cracked by a controlled earthquake, and the water and earth were caught up by a miniature cyclone. And most exhilarating and frightening of all, her eyes reflected both the red-black haze and white ribbons of light that gathered around her as she touched upon the ultimate magics than ran in her veins.

Vincent explained briefly to the stunned party, watching Marion as she worked, "When we returned to Hojo's lab, we discovered some files detailing what Hojo had actually done to her. He took genetic material from various subjects both human and otherwise and created a new person, already an adult, with cellular memories, but no actual experiences. Then he started his experiments with mako. At the most basic level, you could say that Hojo created an elemental out of her. But she's not a fire or poison elemental. It seems that he created a materia elemental by fusing her with every materia he could get his hands on. She's got the strongest abilities for every spell that we know of - and some we don't - and she can

call them at will."

"She's not using materia...she is materia," Reeve said in awe. Yuffie gaped, and then chirped jokingly, "Can I have her?"

Cloud shook his head in resignation at her insatiable lust for materia, and Barret turned to cuss her out, but it was Vincent who tabled the matter.

"No," he stated simply, "she's mine." He ignored the stunned stares of the others, never taking his eyes off of the glowing goddess before him.

The party slowly walked back into Cosmo Canyon's inn as the sun set, painting the canyon with blazing red-gold streaks. Most everyone stayed downstairs in the restaurant, leaving Vincent and Marion alone at the Candle, but Tifa followed Cloud upstairs to their rooms.

"Well, that was...interesting."

Tifa nodded agreement with the understatement. "Who would ever have thought that Vincent would say something like that?" she said wonderingly.

"Huh?" Cloud turned to her with a confused expression. "What are you talking about? I was talking about Marion's abilities."

Tifa groaned, punching Cloud in the arm, "Hello, Mr. Dense? There was something much more important than magic going on."

"What was more important than that?" he asked, rubbing his arm with an aggrieved expression.

Sighing, Tifa stood face to face with her childhood friend, frustrated that he was so slow to recognize love, whether it was directed at him or not. "Did you see the way he looks at her? When she's not right next to him he's still always aware of where she is, and when she's near, he stands protectively close to her. Cloud, do you realize that in all the years we've known him, we've never seen him smile until today? And it's the same with Marion. The rest of us practically cease to exist for them when they look at each other! They're in love, Cloud!" Tifa wheeled away from him abruptly, stopping to catch her breath after finding herself almost shouting into Cloud's face.

What was wrong with her? She'd been keeping the depth of her feelings for Cloud within herself for years; why should his ignorance bother her so deeply now? Was it because of Vincent and Marion? Was she jealous of what they had? Tifa took a deep breath, trying to steady her aching heartbeats.

Blue-green eyes opened wide, full of confusion at her anger. "Sorry. I guess I've been a little wrapped up in myself," he blurted out, wanting to make amends, but not knowing what was wrong all of a sudden.

Tears filled her eyes and she clenched them shut, unwilling that he should know she was crying. She began to tremble, tired all of a sudden. Tired of waiting, tired of hoping, tired of crying in secret. They were so much to each other, but she wanted even more. The companionship and caring and even the recent caresses and kisses served only to remind her that she really didn't know if he truly loved her. He would have said so by now if he really did...he doesn't love me, not the way I want him to, he never did...he never will...someone help me, she cried silently. Someone help me...

Behind her, Cloud nervously scratched his head, wondering whether or not he should follow up on his earlier statement. This didn't seem like an opportune time to finally reveal his heart to her, but...so many opportunities he'd had to tell her he loved her, ask her to marry him...so many opportunities not taken. His hand brushed against the outline of the delicate ring tucked carefully away in his pocket. He couldn't afford to let this moment pass him by.

What should he say? The old standard, "will you marry me?" No, "Tifa Lockhart, will you marry me?" Maybe, 'will you be

my wife?' He should probably add the all-important "I love you" in there as well. A frown creased his forehead. How about, "I love you, Tifa Lockhart, and I want you to be my wife." He shook his head. Nothing sounded right. Nothing sounded...enough. He started towards Tifa, who still stood silently with her back towards him. He'd waited long enough...too long. He'd just have to say the first words that popped into his mind.

He reached out his hand and touched her arm gently. Startled, she spun around. The practice proposals fled his mind as Cloud saw the tears standing in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Cloud asked anxiously, had he upset her so much? He raised a hand to her cheek and held her face in his palm. "Tifa, why are you crying?"

Caught with her defenses down, completely disarmed by his tender tone, Tifa was helpless to do anything but shake her head in denial and bare her heart. "You don't love me," she whispered, tears overflowing.

...which was the last thing Cloud had expected her to say. While his eyes blinked and his mouth opened and closed in amazement, however, his mind processed several facts out of those four words. Fact: she thinks that I don't love her. This is making her sad, thus, the tears. Therefore...

Before his brain could even complete the realization, Cloud had both hands curled in her hair and his lips pressed to hers with a crushing urgency. Large brown eyes flew wide and then closed as she lost herself in the kiss. Cloud felt her arms wrap around him and hold on tight. He pulled one hand out of her hair and circled it around her tiny waist, drawing her even closer to him, never relinquishing her lips. He'd never been very good with words anyway. Tifa would have to wait just a little longer for her proposal; he needed her to know right now. Not with awkward words, trying to explain in simple syllables the entirety of what he felt for her, that he loved her, needed her, and couldn't live without her. He needed to be able to tell her in a single moment, in a flash of understanding; he needed her to know he was hers.

After what seemed like hours, he released Tifa gently and she drew in a long, shuddering breath. He felt his mouth quirk up in a small smile; he felt in need of air himself. But first things first.

"Marry me."

Not a question, but not commanding, either. Just...simple. It was all very simple, really. Ridiculously simple, after all of these years of silent longing, secret suffering, quiet patience, and faithful love. Waiting for each other to reveal their heart, waiting for the perfect moment, the right words, the sign from above. Tifa didn't quite understand fully what had just happened, but it didn't matter. She didn't need to understand; she just needed to know. She nodded, tears - of joy this time - spilling over her brilliant smile.

"Okay."