

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 35: To Love, Honor and Cherish

"And will you, Cloud, take Tifa to be your wife; to love, honor, and cherish her through sickness and health, poverty and riches, struggles and ease? Will you comfort and protect her with your own body and life, giving her complete loyalty and faithfulness until the Planet calls you home? If so, swear now upon the lifestream within you that you give of yourself utterly to her; your mind to commune, your body to protect, your heart to love, and your soul to share."

"I swear it," Cloud stated firmly, his steady voice belying the nervousness he felt through every particle of his being. His trembling hands betrayed him, however, and Tifa tightened her own fingers around his, smiling radiantly up at him, joy lighting up her eyes. He returned the smile, still overwhelmed by the fact that his lifelong love had just moments ago sworn herself to him. "I swear it," she had responded softly to the Elder, voice warm and gentle, full of a new confidence and serenity.

They stood with hands linked by the Candle, the ever-burning flame adding its light to the faint promise of a sunrise. All around the fire-topped altar, their friends gathered in celebration of the marriage, some wiping away tears, some with beaming smiles, and some with gravely solemn expressions. Tenari and the others of Nanaki's new clan had gathered close, all of them curious about what customs were observed by humans in the matters of mating. Cloud cast his eyes out over the crowd, noting random images as they impressed themselves upon him. Barret, doing his best not to get emotional, and hiding it badly. He'd hugged Tifa fiercely just an hour ago, gruffly telling her to be happy, and nearly broke Cloud's shoulder blade with a hearty clap on the back. Tenari, craning her head forward and still examining the tiny details of Tifa's dress with interest. Cid looked vaguely bored, and Reeve had his I'm-attending-a-solemn-occasion expression pasted onto his face. And little Marlene, standing by the foot of the shallow steps, clutched her basket of flowers importantly and beamed at all and sundry, nearly dancing in her anticipation of the moment she would be called upon to toss blossoms upon him and his wife.

His wife...

Cloud turned his eyes once more to the vision before him, and the crowd around him faded away, the Elder's voice becoming no more than a whisper in the wind. Tall and beautiful, in a pure white dress that skimmed its way down her long limbs, she seemed to him an angel, a beam of sunlight in a forest, a candle flame glowing in the dim pre-dawn light. Her hair was swept back from her face with tiny golden pins, and clusters of small white flowers blossomed in a crown on her head. Her graceful neck and shoulders rose from a wide, bowed neckline trimmed with delicate gold-embroidered ribbon. Matching trim decorated the cap sleeves and flowing hem that rippled gently above her ankles in the breeze.

The dress had been a gift from the women of Cosmo Canyon, the loving work of an entire day and night spend stitching and hemming so that the bride might be appropriately attired for this, her day of days. Easier to clothe had been Cloud himself, now dressed in a white shirt and black pants.

Standing before him in her simple dress, she was perfection itself, and Cloud felt a glow of love, pride, and wonder well up within him. His wife. To live with, to love, to hold in his arms for the rest of his life. The mere thought was overwhelming, and he felt his eyes mist over. He blinked the threatening tears away, and once his vision cleared, he found that the dark eyes he loved so well were now about to spill over in response to the emotion he'd let through. His mouth twitched upwards in a shaky smile, and he untangled one hand from hers to catch the tears that dropped like shining diamonds from her eyelashes.

A gentle hand tapped him on the arm once, and then twice. Cloud pulled his eyes away from Tifa to find that the Elder had finished his soliloquy, and was looking at him expectantly. Blushing, Cloud returned a helpless expression, and was rewarded with an understanding smile and a whispered prompt, "The rings?"

"Oh, yeah...sorry," he whispered back, digging in one pocket for the precious circles. They were produced after only a moment, during which Tifa recovered enough to giggle quietly at the frantic search for the rings. With a lopsided grin,

Cloud deposited a plain circle of gold into Tifa's palm, keeping the double-band of gold mounted with a quintet of diamonds in his own hand. Two tiny diamonds at the ends, another two set at an angle to the first ones, and then a brilliant star shining in the middle. A shining symbol of his dreams made real. It was real...this was really happening.

Prompted by the Elder, he carefully slipped the bands onto the ring finger of Tifa's left hand and repeated the final set of vows.

"I give you this ring, the visible symbol of our marriage, as a promise of my love for so long as I live. I will have you and you alone to be my wife, as I will be your husband, and no one will ever come between us...I love you, Tifa." She smiled at the last improvisation, and sliding the gold band onto his own left hand, repeated her vows. "...and I love you, Cloud," she ended quietly, tears once again escaping despite herself.

Brilliant smiles now outshining the rings on their fingers, Tifa and Cloud stepped quietly to the side as another couple took their place at the head of the Candle's stone steps.

Marion's dress was almost identical to Tifa's, except that the ribbon trimming the fabric was embroidered with silver thread. As the sun's rays crept further along the curve of the Planet, light pink and gold rays painted her dress with the gentle pastels of a blushing rose. Part of her hair was combed back from her face and tied at the back of her neck with a long, white ribbon, with a cluster of flowers at the bow. The morning breeze ruffled the shorter tendrils of her hair along one cheek, and Vincent brushed them aside in a tender gesture that brought fresh tears to the eyes of their friends.

"They look pretty happy," whispered Cloud to his bride. Tifa sighed and sniffed, resting her head against his shoulder, and replied softly, "They look peaceful. I'm happy for Marion, of course, but...it's something else to see Vincent like that. He's almost unrecognizable."

And indeed, there might have been many who would not have known him. Not a single trace remained to be seen of the shadowy, mysterious killer of yesteryear. He was dressed simply in a white shirt and black pants as Cloud was, and his hair blew freely in the wind, revealing a face filled with tenderness and love for the slender girl before him. In contrast to the suppressed excitement and emotion of Cloud and Tifa, this new couple now reciting their vows seemed steeped in an atmosphere of calm and rest. Their linked hands and soft voices remained steady, and no small gestures revealed any restlessness or nerves.

"I swear it," replied Vincent, smiling quietly as Marion echoed his words in the next minute. He felt none of the nervous excitement or tense anticipation that plagued most grooms, for to him, this was just a formality, nothing more. Words spoken in front of an Elder, with witnesses to confirm and celebrate. A silvery ring to be placed on the hand of a woman who outshone the very stars. Vows and promises that his soul had sworn so long ago. He and Marion were already married, as far as he was concerned. The words, the ring, the ceremony...none of it caused them to be any more in love, to be any more committed to each other. Just as nothing could come between them now, neither was there anything that could bring them closer to each other than they already were.

And although Marion hadn't thought it through in such a detailed way, her heart was fully in agreement. She stood quietly, repeating what needed to be repeated, placing the simple platinum band on Vincent's finger when prompted to do so, and didn't hear a single word that the elder spoke. All of her attention was wrapped up in the man before her, who held her hands in his own and smiled down at her as if he would never stop.

"I give you this ring, the visible symbol of our marriage, as a promise of my love for so long as I live. I will have you and you alone to be my husband, as I will be your wife, and no one will ever come between us."

The Elder smiled beatifically at them, and was completely ignored. Nonplussed, he tossed a quick look over his shoulder to gauge the rising of the sun, and then quickly ushered Cloud and Tifa back towards the top of the stairs. After quickly positioning the two couples so that they would stand in the first rays of the new sun that were beginning to pour through the Canyon, he raised his voice so that everyone gathered around the Candle could hear, and closed the ceremony.

"As you now stand in the light of a new day, so do you stand at the threshold of a new life together with your spouse. Cloud Strife, you stand here in the presence of the Elders of Cosmo Canyon as the husband of Tifa. And you are now Tifa Strife, wife to this man. Vincent Valentine, you stand here in the presence of the Elders of Cosmo Canyon as the husband of

Marion. And you are now Marion Valentine, wife to this man. As the sun warms you, the air refreshes you, and the earth sustains you, so are you now charged to be for each other, caring for the other as the Planet cares for you both. May you all live blessed."

The Elder then gestured to the two men standing before him, and a wild cheer arose from the crowd as Cloud and Vincent both bent and kissed their brides in the golden dawn.