

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 36: Stars

High above the Canyon, Tifa snuggled comfortably into Cloud's arms, reveling in the warmth of his body as a cool breeze swept by them both. Leaning back against the door to the observatory, they waited patiently for the stars to appear, reminiscing in the pleasingly random way that profoundly happy people do sometimes.

"You know, we never really celebrated the fact that we saved the Planet...this morning and afternoon was the first time we all got together just to have fun," Tifa mused. Interrupting his admiration of the glittering gold on her fingers, Cloud replied with a laugh, "If I never see Barret dance again, I die a happy man." "Well, if I never have to dance with Barret again, I'll die a happy woman! My poor toes..." Tifa laughed at the memory, and then picked up another. "Did you see Vincent and Marion?" A chuckle, and then, "Yeah...I don't think they made eye contact with a single other person the entire time. No one even thought of asking Marion to dance."

Sighing happily, Tifa commented, "The sunset is so beautiful. I could stay like this forever." Laughing softly into her shining hair, Cloud teased, "I thought you wanted to sun yourself on Ineki's island forever. Now you want to live in Cosmo Canyon?"

She laughed at herself along with him, and then replied, "You know what it is? I just love being held by you. Wherever I am when you've got your arms around me; that's heaven." As a matter of course, several lingering kisses were exchanged at this tender revelation, and then Cloud had a miniature epiphany of his own.

"I think I just figured something out. When I joined Avalanche, I'd figured I'd make Midgar my new home, since it seemed a good place to find jobs. But when we left, I didn't look back. And I thought I could never go back to Nibelheim, since I knew that it was a fake, built by Shinra. But after Meteor, we went back, and I settled back into my old house pretty easily. I just figured I adjusted well, but that wasn't it at all." Cloud fell silent, ruminating for a bit, and Tifa finally prompted, "Well, what was it, then?"

"You," Cloud replied. "I settled down wherever I found you. Nibelheim burned to the ground, and you were gone. Then I found you in Midgar, and when we left, you came with us. And now, you're back in Nibelheim. It's the same thing, I guess...my heaven is wherever you are, too."

Half an hour of tickling kisses and adoring gazes later, night began to creep along the sky, bringing with it the first few stars. Now settled comfortably on Cloud's lap, Tifa pointed them out with one hand, happily noting how her new ring sparkled in the sunset. "Remember the first time we watched stars together?" she asked.

"Yeah," Cloud said absently, tickling her neck with the ends of her hair. Dropping the strands, he wrapped his arms around her, shifting her a bit so that she faced him. "I'm going to join Soldier," he stated.

Smiling at the now-sweet memory, Tifa responded, "Will you be in the newspapers?"

"Maybe." The aquamarine eyes glowed softly in the evening light as he locked gazes with her. A bit startled at the intensity of his gaze, Tifa searched his eyes wonderingly, the light smile gone for the moment. "I hope so. I hope I'll be strong and brave and famous, and I hope you'll see my name in the papers and be proud of me. I hope someday I'll be worthy of you."

Her lips fell open in a sweetly amazed smile, and her eyes dimmed with remembered tears as she replied, "I hope you come back. I hope you'll be safe, and that you won't forget me. I hope someday I'll see you again, and I can tell you how much you've come to mean to me."

He brought one hand up to caress her face, running tender fingers over her cheek and brow. A faint tinge of regret showed in his eyes. "We've wasted a lot of time, haven't we, Tifa?" She smiled cheerfully and said, "It's okay. We have the rest of our lives to make up for it."

The slightly mournful atmosphere dissipated immediately, and Cloud said with a grin, "Speaking of which..." Tifa yelped in surprise as Cloud suddenly stood up, scooping her into his arms as he did so. Eyebrows raised over twinkling blue eyes, he asked, "Sorry, did I scare you?"

"No," she replied immediately, wrapping her arms around his neck, and then commented, "you surprised me, though. This is a new you, I think. You've never been so..." She trailed off, searching for a single word to encompass the subtle changes in his demeanor. Not just simple happiness and love, but an additional...something...more profound. While she tried out different words in her head - bold? No... - he ended up supplying an answer.

"I've never been so confident? I've never been sure that you loved me, Tifa. I was secure in my fighting skills, the leadership of Avalanche got easier as time went by, and you helped me find out who I really was, but you yourself...I'd rather resurrect Sephiroth than have to feel that kind of doubt again." Eyes bright with emotion, Tifa rested her head on his shoulder and reassured him, "Don't worry; neither of those things are going to happen. Sephiroth is dead, and I'll never stop loving you, so...there."

Laughing, Cloud stepped into the observatory with Tifa held tight in his arms, and shut the door against the night. Setting her down with exquisite care on the bed, he knelt before her in a touching attitude of adoration and simply gazed at her for a long moment. Carefully brushing long strands of her hair over her shoulder, he murmured, "I can't believe you're real."

She opened her mouth to reply in kind, but snapped her head up instead as a strange voice echoed throughout the observatory. Cloud tilted his head to catch the subdued sound, and then frowned up at his bride. "What in the world was that?" he asked.

"I don't know." Tifa stood up and climbed up the ladder nearby to Bugenhagen's research lab upstairs, being very careful not to tear her precious dress in the process. As she poked her head up through the top floor, catching sight of the complicated machinery that the old man had built, another echoing voice sounded in the room. Cloud hauled himself up after her and asked, "Is it the Planet again?"

"Yes, but...it's different. The last time we heard the Planet's voice, it was crying out in pain." The voice appeared for the third time, and in the small round room, it seemed to swirl across the walls and around their heads. As they listened intently, the voice swelled into a chord, different notes and harmonies carried by the same voice, the same tone. Not by any means loud, the sound still filled their minds and echoed in their hearts, a melody of sweet harmony and joy. "It's singing," whispered Tifa in amazement. "The Planet is singing."

"What does that mean?" asked Cloud wonderingly. "Who knows?" Tifa laughed softly, "Maybe there's a new island being born somewhere or something like that. We're its children, too...maybe it's happy for us." The newlyweds stood together in the tiny room, listening to the ethereal voice of the Planet ring through their hearts. As another note faded away, Cloud finally peered into his bride's face and asked casually, "Go back down?" Just as casually, Tifa nodded, and they headed back for the ladder.

Cloud stepped carefully down the first few rungs, and then looked back up to find Tifa peering down at him. "You nervous?" he asked softly. Large brown eyes glanced around for a moment, considering, and then she replied, "Nope. Just so excited and scared that my hands have started to shake and my stomach feels a little queasy." A short, breathy laugh followed, and she held her hands up to reveal two sets of trembling fingers. "See?"

He laughed, an easy, carefree sound that he made too rarely, and caught one of her hands in his own. Bringing it down to his heart, he said, "Well, good, because I'm not nervous either." Tifa smiled and shook her head at the rapid heartbeat and chilled, shaky fingers that gave lie to his words. "Well," she ventured, "we've learned to fight monsters, raise chocobos, and destroy entire cities together...I'm sure love can't be that much harder."

Still holding her hand, Cloud gave her another slightly mischievous look and replied, "I'm sure we'll do just fine. We're both intuitive as well as quick learners...and besides, I can always ask Barret for advice." Blushing furiously at the thought, Tifa snatched her hand away and said emphatically, "You most certainly will not!" The blue eyes laughed up at her and his left hand beckoned, gold ring sparkling from his fingers. "Come on down, Tifa. No kissing and telling, I promise."

A quick scampering down the rungs, and she was in his arms once more, slightly breathless. "So," she asked, "what now?" His shoulders shrugged underneath white fabric. "From the top, I suppose," he said, and gave her a quick peck on the forehead, making her giggle. Humor was quickly banished by desire as his lips made their way past her temples and cheek and nibbled softly at her ear. Strong arms held her tight, and she relaxed into the hands that caressed her arms and back.

As her mind seemed to detach itself from reality, she found the rest of herself responding quite easily and naturally to his advances. Her arms explored the fascinating curves of his muscles underneath the thin fabric of his shirt as she returned his increasingly passionate kisses, and her body arched against his, fitting perfectly as if they'd been made with each other in mind. She gathered her scattered thoughts together just enough to whisper breathlessly, "You're right...very intuitive."

Raising his head from her neck, he cast his eyes about for a moment, as if searching for a reply, and then simply smiled and nodded. In one quick motion, he bent and picked her up and set her on the bed once more. Tifa snuggled back into the coverlet as he settled himself over her, propping himself up on one elbow. Hovering his face an inch or two above hers, he whispered in a husky voice, "I love you." Wearing a heartbreakingly happy smile, Tifa replied, "Me too," and reached up to capture his lips once more.

And as they continued their long dreamed-of lessons, high above them in the little room the Planet continued to sing.

The setting sun blazed a fiery red as it finally sank over the glittering ocean, a slender river of stars glowing in the deep purple of the oncoming night sky. The rough canyon walls towering behind them threw the light off of its crimson-streaked surface, glowing a magnificent rainbow of warm hues. The Valentines stood on the grassy plain an hour's ride outside of Cosmo Canyon, letting the sea breeze run gentle fingers through their hair, enjoying the soft sound of breaking waves on the nearby shore, and marveling at the sunset. They stood blissfully unaware of time and the cares of the world, with a long white cloak that someone had presented to Marion wrapped snugly around their shoulders. When the sun finally dipped below the horizon, dimming the skies to a deep velvet peppered with stars, Vincent looked over at his new bride, humbleness and pride jumbled together in a confusing yet joyous swell in his heart.

"Would you like to go back now?" he asked, with a meaningful smile.

"No." she replied almost absently.

Vincent gave her a searching look. She didn't seem nervous or afraid. The afternoon's excitement still showed in her sparkling eyes and flushed cheek, and she looked quite blissfully happy. "What are you thinking about, Marion?" Vincent asked softly.

"Hmm?" she faced him, noting his questioning look. "Oh, I didn't mean no like...no. I meant," she paused, her eyes roving as she mentally searched for words. A small shake of the head, and then she looked around them and continued. "I meant here. I want it to be here," she met his gaze once more, "On the grass, in the wind, under the stars."

Amusement joined passion, desire, and tenderness in Vincent's heart. "Right here?" Vincent asked, turning her to face him and drawing her close. "Marion, it's going to get very cold during the night."

Marion smiled up at him, trusting, excited, loving and loved. "Not exactly on this spot, but there's a very nice glade of saplings over there. And I'm sure you'll keep me warm."

Marion found in him a tender lover, a patient teacher and gentle partner. Within his heart there lay a fierce passion she had only caught glimpses of, yet she found that even at its most fiery blaze, it never scorched her, only sparked her own desire. The vast world that he had shown her with all of its wonders - did it even compare with what he taught her when the world consisted only of the two of them? The tenderness and softness of his lips, the warmth and comfort of his body, and the controlled strength and safety found in his arms...nothing compared.

Vincent held in his arms a heartbreakingly trusting bride full of faith and love. There was no fear, no inhibition, no doubt. She had given herself over to him completely; heart, mind, body, and soul. He could completely lose himself in his desire and she would meet him spark for spark, passion for passion.

Two people so equally matched, so well balanced, so perfect for each other - it only happened once in a million lifetimes,

and it had happened for them. Ilysm and Ilya had found each other once more.

Morning sunlight discovered the couple wrapped together in Marion's cloak, slumbering peacefully among the emerald shadows of the sheltering glade. One garnet eye opened, examined the scenery, and then was joined by its neighbor. Vincent blinked the last of his sleepiness away and propped himself up on one elbow, careful not to wake his bride. She slept with her entire body cuddled up against his, back against his chest. Vincent ran a gentle hand along her body and smiled. She had been right. He'd kept her quite warm.

Vincent lay back down and wrapped a careful arm around Marion, using his other arm as a pillow for his head. He and Marion were truly meant for each other. No, he amended, they had been created for each other. How blissfully ironic, that what was once his most burdensome curse was now his greatest gift. The unending string of days filled with loneliness and remorse that had once stretched before him was now an adventure to be lived to the end of time with a woman he loved. Vincent pressed a reverent kiss to Marion's cheek, and for the first time in history, someone blessed the name of Hojo.