

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 49: Interlude – The Calm Before the Storm

They gathered outside of Rocket Town to say their good-byes, promising to return in order to celebrate the StarChaser-I's homecoming.

"We really should get together like this more often, you know," commented Tifa. "Letters and phone calls just aren't enough. We're practically family now."

"Well then, how about family reunions once a year?" suggested Reeve brightly. Tifa wrinkled her nose in reply and said, "Just once a year? You must be kidding. We should celebrate birthdays, instead. That way, we'd see each other at least every few months, depending on when everyone was born. Cloud and I are August and May," she offered.

"December," said Barret.

"Mine's November!" piped Yuffie. Reeve raised his hand and said, "April for me."

"I believe Cid and Shera are February and July, and I was born in October, but Marion was never 'born,' so to speak, so she has no birth date."

"Neither do I know my date of birth," commented Nanaki.

"Weeeeelll...how about you just use Bugenhagen's birthday? And Marion, what about the day Vincent found you?"

Nanaki nodded, and replied, "That would give us a January birthday, then." Marion shook her head and began, "I don't know when..." but Vincent cut in decidedly with, "October fourth." Tifa grinned and then mourned, "Darn, I was hoping it'd be March, June, or September...then we'd only be missing two months."

Cloud raised a skeptical eyebrow and asked, "You want us to run all over the world 9 months out of every 12 to have birthday parties?" His wife pouted charmingly and argued, "It's not that bad...I can breed enough chocos to give everyone a gold, and then travel won't be bad at all. Besides, like I said, we're all family...we shouldn't lose touch."

Everyone felt the truth of her statement. Each of them except Marion had lost someone dear to them, and to Shinra or Sephiroth directly - another common tie that bound them together. Cloud and Tifa had lost their families to the flames. Barret had lost his wife, and later on, his best friend. Nanaki had not only watched his grandfather pass away this past year, but had lost a good deal of his own life to Hojo. Yuffie's mother had not survived the Wutai War. Vincent had almost too many losses to count, and it was only through a miracle that he had such happiness now.

And they had all lost Aeris.

It was quickly agreed upon that they would gather together to celebrate birthdays at each person's home town. In October there were two birthdays, but it presented no difficulties, for it was Vincent and Marion who shared the month, although where they would set up housekeeping had not yet been settled. Cloud had offered the use of his house, since he would be moving in with Tifa upon their return to Nibelheim, but Vincent had declined for the time being, wanting to finish his world tour with Marion first, before settling on a more or less permanent address.

They parted ways, each taking a chocobo or buggy, with Ineki and his clan simply setting off on foot - or paws, as it was. They waved to each other until out of sight, with the breeze fresh in their faces and the skies clear overhead, and the promise to return to Rocket Town in one week's time lingering on their lips.

A promise that they would not be able to keep.

The horrors of the past year would soon come to revisit them in terrifying form, and once again a young girl would find herself at the end of a blade, a madman would emerge bent on destroying the world, and the Planet would birth a Weapon to protect itself.

...all because of what a man named Hojo had wrought...