

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 5: Impressions

The PHS shrilled, causing Marion to jump. Vincent gently set her on the floor while retrieving the device with one hand. Walking inside the elevator shaft, he turned and peered upwards, but could see nothing in the utter darkness. Marion waited quietly on the floor, watching his glowing eyes intently, as if afraid that they would suddenly disappear.

Cloud's voice came loud and clear through the PHS. "Vincent? Tifa and I are at the elevator shaft. Can't see anything, though. What do you want us to do?"

"Take the elevator cable hanging in front of you and harness your chocobos to it. I'll create a makeshift swing out of my cloak and attach it to my end. I can float up myself, but I'll need you to reel in Marion," Vincent replied.

"Who's Marion?" asked Cloud. Vincent could see the cable in front of him jiggling as Cloud and Tifa worked far above.

"She's the research subject I found here. The rest of the questions can wait. I want to get her out of here."

A faint murmuring was audible through the PHS as Cloud and Tifa conferred. Cloud came back on, asking, "Wait, one more question. Tifa wants to know if Marion's...uh...if we should toss down the clothes you asked us to bring."

"She has clothes on, Cloud," Vincent explained patiently, "she's just wet. She can change once we're at the top. Are you ready?"

Vincent received an affirmative from Cloud, and pocketed his PHS. He turned to Marion, who was looking at him curiously. "You can fly?" she asked him, one eyebrow peaked.

"It's more like levitating. Another one of my...abilities." Vincent helped her to her feet, then unfurled his cloak from around her. Folding it once into a rough triangle, he attached two of the corners to the frayed end of the cable in the shaft, creating a tiny hammock. Lifting her into his arms once more, he carried her over the debris littering the floor and placed her gently into the swing. Two yanks on the cable signaled his friends above, and the swing started to rise.

Marion grasped the edges of the cloak nervously, watching the floor underneath her slowly fall away. Vincent hovered near her, one hand holding the knotted cable, and his claw braced against the slowly descending wall, keeping them steady.

Finding that watching the walls creep by made the fluttery feeling in her chest worse, Marion turned her eyes to Vincent. He looked back at her, utterly expressionless but for his eyes. Like two coals in the night, they glowed a deep red, but Marion found them comforting...and beautiful. Although she couldn't be sure, for she had no experiences to recall, she felt that his eyes contained warmth and tenderness. And though his appearance might seem menacing, he had been nothing but gentle and kind to her. She stared into his eyes, unable to look away, and hoped inside that the world was indeed very big, so that the promised journey would take a very, very long time.

Cloud peered down the elevator shaft, keeping his end of the cable steady while Tifa coaxed the chocobos across the room. Every few minutes, he wound part of the cable around a nearby post to secure it while Tifa unhooked the birds and brought them back towards the elevator in order to pick up slack.

"I think I see them!" Cloud called to Tifa. "Just a little bit more..." The blond swordsman waved down into the gloom, and was rewarded with a nod from Vincent, glowing eyes like beacons in the darkness. Cloud squinted, but he couldn't make out any details of the figure huddled in Vincent's cloak.

Then her head fell back, and she met Cloud's gaze.

Cloud's own eyes widened in surprise as two brilliant emeralds shone up at him from the darkness of the elevator shaft. He knew his own eyes glowed a faint green in the darkness, but it was nothing like this girl's. With her standing near, he could probably read in the dark. After a moment, she looked away, resting her gaze once more on Vincent, but Cloud continued to observe the new stranger.

Tifa looked back to see Vincent's head hover into view. After leading the chocobos a few feet more, she stopped them and waited as Cloud and Vincent secured the cable and began unloading the mysterious research subject. Tifa un-harnessed the golden birds, patted them down to check for signs of injury or strain, and, finding none, turned back towards the elevator and her waiting friends. Vincent stood with his back towards her, his damp and crumpled cloak slung over one shoulder. Tifa could see a pant leg and a tiny foot beyond him, but nothing else of the stranger that Cloud seemed to be gazing at in fascination.

As she neared, Vincent turned to her and asked,

"Tifa, could I get those clothes from you now?"

"Sure," she replied, reaching behind Cloud to grab her pack. The stranger remained hidden behind Vincent, seemingly shy. Pulling out one of her many tank tops, a skirt, and a soft pair of walking shoes, Tifa went over to Vincent and offered him the requested clothes. He took them without comment and turned to the girl beside him, offering Tifa her first look.

She gasped involuntarily, "Cloud, her eyes! They're even brighter than yours." Cloud turned his eyes from the girl to look at Tifa, eyebrows raised and a small smile on his face as if to say, No kidding. The girl with the blazing eyes tensed and turned to Vincent with apprehension in her fiery gaze, clutching the change of clothes to her chest as if to protect herself with them.

"Vincent?" she asked, "what's wrong with my eyes?"

"Nothing's wrong with them," he replied evenly, shooting a dark look at Tifa, who blushed. "Marion, do you remember what you look like?" Cloud watched her interestedly for her answer. Had her memory been damaged...just like his?

"What I...?" She looked down at herself, two hands, two feet, slim body, and black hair. But the only faces that she could recall in her mind belonged to Aeris and the man that stood before her now. "I...don't know. I don't know what I look like," she replied in a lost voice.

"Do you have a mirror in your pack?" Cloud asked the brunette beside him.

Tifa shook her head, long hair swinging behind her, "No, I don't have anything like that with me." She studied the girl before her, still embarrassed at her outburst, and wanting to make up for it somehow. "You're very beautiful," she said hesitantly. "Your black hair sets off your skin very nicely, and you've got great cheekbones, too. Small pink lips, long eyelashes, and...green eyes." Tifa smiled, "I'm sorry about what I said; I didn't mean to startle you. Your eyes are lovely, and they glow like Cloud's, just a little brighter." Looking around at the foursome they made, Tifa laughed, "Actually, I'm the only one here whose eyes don't glow. I guess I'm the odd one out right now."

Marion looked at Tifa carefully, unsure if the stunning brunette was being truthful or just kind. Beauty...although Marion could not remember ever seeing any other woman other than the one before her now, she recognized immediately that Tifa certainly qualified as gorgeous. She had warm, dark brown hair and matching eyes set in lightly tanned skin that covered exquisite proportions. Tall and slender, with generous curves in just the right places, still strength and power competed with femininity. Sleek muscles stretched over strong bones, giving the impression of a wild feline. And this goddess had said that Marion was beautiful? She almost looked up at Vincent to ask if it was true, but found herself inexplicably reluctant. It seemed...irrelevant, considering her situation.

She glanced instead at Cloud, finding nothing to contradict Tifa's statement in his expression. Quickly raking her eyes over

the tall stranger, she wondered that he and Vincent were so dissimilar in appearance. Was the rest of the world populated with such a variety of people? Wild blonde hair sprouted from his head in long spikes on the top and sides, framing his brilliant blue-green eyes. He was clothed in a midnight-blue shirt and pants, well-muscled arms bare to the wrist, where fingerless leather gloves protected his hands. Even standing quite still as he was now, thick boots planted firmly on the floor, he seemed to her a live wire, electric current running through him and waiting impatiently to be released in action. Vincent, on the other hand, could easily melt into the shadows even as he moved in his purposeful gait. Cloud was light and color, while Vincent was shadow and darkness.

And what was she?

She hadn't ever thought about her appearance until now. In fact, she hadn't been thinking at all unless prompted to. Vincent was more right than he knew...she hadn't started living yet. She was simply reacting to her environment, like a plant tracking the sun.

She had reacted to Vincent's gentleness and kindness with immediate trust, simply because of his presence. Although her trust had been well given, perhaps she should make more deliberate decisions? Quick glances at Cloud revealed the same open curiosity and friendliness that Tifa evinced. These were Vincent's friends...and she trusted Vincent.

"Well," continued Tifa, "why don't we go over behind those crates and get you out of those damp clothes?" She held out her hand invitingly, and was pleasantly surprised when the girl reached out her hand in return.

The two women walked slowly around the crates, Marion's steps becoming slowly steadier. Once out of sight of the others, Marion set down the clothes Vincent had handed her and began the processing of changing.

She tried to figure out how to take the lab coat off.

Like everything else, changing was new to her, although not a new concept. She knew what it was, and the basic mechanics of it...she was simply unfamiliar with the actual doing. Tifa watched as the girl before her looked herself up and down, running careful fingers over the material, stopping when she found irregularities in the fabric such as seams, pockets, and buttons. After she had completed her tactile examination, Tifa found that she couldn't contain her curiosity.

"Do you know how to take the coat off?" she asked. Marion looked up at her, and then back at the front of her lab coat. Tugging at a button, she replied, "I undo these, right?" At Tifa's encouraging nod, she fiddled with the slippery round of plastic, pulling it free after only a moment. One button successfully undone, Marion found the rest quite easy. She shrugged her tiny shoulders out of the coat and let it fall to the ground. Tifa held out a white tank top for her, and after a quick glance at Tifa's own top to make sure that she put it on correctly, Marion slid it over her head and pulled it down around her waist. Pants and skirt were exchanged next, and shoes were slipped on after a brief tutorial on how to tell left from right.

Tifa described a slow circle around Marion, tucking the tank top into the skirt as she went. Marion waited quietly under her ministrations as Tifa chatted, wanting to make friends with this unusual stranger.

"You're so tiny, my clothes are almost big on you. We'll have to fatten you up once we get you home. But don't worry, I won't let you get chubby. I'll teach you how to fight, and that will be good exercise. Cloud will tell you, I'm a really good cook. I used to own a bar, you know...well, actually, you don't know..."

"I know," Marion shyly interrupted. Tifa's head popped up, surprised. "Did Vincent tell you?" The former Turk didn't seem like the type chitchat about the past, even if it was someone else's.

Marion shook her head, dark hair tangling around her shoulders. "No. Aeris told me."

"You knew Aeris?" Tifa asked wide-eyed, "Did you meet her while she was in Hojo's lab?"

Another shake of the head, and a hesitant reply. "No. I've been sleeping in lifestream. I talk to her there."

"You girls done yet?" Cloud's voice asked from just around the crates. Tifa shut her mouth against a hundred questions and straightened up. Slipping her hand into Marion's once more, she smiled and said, "Let's go; the guys are waiting."