

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 50: One Day in Time

At Nibelheim:

Cloud and Tifa were met at the stables by what seemed to be the entire town of Nibelheim. As they handed the reins over to the stable hands, a crowd of neighbors gathered around them, some talking in an excited manner, and others simply standing close with frightened tears in their eyes.

"Congratulations on your marriage, young lady, but I'm afraid the honeymoon's over."

"The Shinra Mansion's burned to the ground, Cloud, just like 9 years ago."

"He just came and walked in like he owned the place, Cloud, and..."

"...no one who followed him into the mansion ever came out again, and oh, Tifa..."

"...when he left, the place exploded into flames!"

Leaving Cloud to try and make sense of the agitated crowd's chatter, Tifa pushed her way through the milling throng and ran into town. The fire had apparently happened several days ago, for there was no smoke, and the smell of the charred structure barely lingered in the breeze. The sight of the ruined mansion, however, brought the memory of almost a decade ago rushing back to her, and she felt tears sting her eyes as if the heat and smoke had returned from the past to scorch her face once again.

Suddenly, a pair of arms whirled her away from the painful scene. Safe in the circle of Cloud's arms, Tifa wept unashamedly. "Who did this?" she sobbed, "Who would do such a thing?"

As he bent his head over hers and tried to still her shaking, Cloud's mind raced forward into the mansion. It had burned once before...then, it was because one of Hojo's experiments had found the truth about himself unbearable, and had set the place afire in his rage against the humanity that had created him. Now...who had followed in Sephiroth's footsteps?

Think, think...who would do this, who would want to hurt them?

He didn't even have to slip into 'leadership mode' anymore...responsibility for those he loved was now as much a part of him as his glowing eyes and wild hair. If nothing else could be said for him, at least Sephiroth had helped to make a true man out of Cloud.

Sephiroth...Hojo's experiment...Hojo's labs all destroyed now, Midgar and Nibelheim. Who...who?

One possibility settled over Cloud's mind like an icy blanket, and he felt the blood drain from his face. Grabbing one wrist, he began dragging Tifa back towards the barn.

"What? What is it?" she asked, rubbing away her tears with the back of her free hand as she ran one step behind him. They gained the entrance of the wooden building and were once again mounted on their chocobos before he answered her. As he hauled his chocobo's head around, he cast a glance her way, and she felt her back tense at the sight of his pale, worried expression.

"I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm right about who set fire to the mansion...he might go after Marion next." Still completely in the dark about who he was talking about, nevertheless Cloud's last words spurred Tifa to haste, and she led the way out of

town - due North to the Forgotten Capital.

At Cosmo Canyon:

Nanaki and Tenari crouched over the carefully written out reports that had been compiled during their visit to Rocket Town. "Seven earthquakes, all at the exact same location at the Northern Crater," Nanaki mused. "The fact that they are so close to the birthplace of the Weapons concerns me."

Tenari flicked an ear while losing herself in thought, and then piped up, "And there have been no threats to the Planet that might cause such a Weapon to be born again?"

"No, nothing. The mako reactors have all been destroyed, as well as the Sister Ray. The Black materia is lost to us as well. There are no doubt minor imbalances across the world, but nothing that would cause the Planet to fear for its existence."

"And that was another thing," he mentioned, "after the double wedding here, Cloud and Tifa told me that they heard the Planet singing, not screaming, in Bugenhagen's observatory. Since we began research on the earthquakes, we've been monitoring the Planet's voice carefully, but there's been not a single sound to indicate that the Planet is in distress. And yet the increasing power of these earthquakes suggests that Weapon is once again being created. I don't relish the idea of finding out exactly what the danger might be only when it has arrived."

His volunteer research companion considered, and then asked, "Perhaps there is a pattern we are unaware of?"

Casting through his memory, Nanaki listed the occurrences of the earthquakes and watched her expression hopefully.

"The most recent - and most powerful - earthquake was recorded on the day after we first met. This one followed close on the heels of another, only two days prior to that."

Tenari mentioned offhandedly, "That was the day Vincent and Marion departed our island. I regretted that they had to leave so soon. I would have enjoyed conversing with all of you as a group."

Nanaki raised an eyebrow and hmm'd. "That's right...they had to go to Midgar, Vincent said. That's where they discovered Marion's origins." A slight pause, and then, "The last four earthquakes were closer to each other than the previous three, so it seemed as if they would reach some kind of peak, ending with a Weapon's birth. However, they stopped completely after the seventh. And again, I can think of nothing that had occurred in that time frame that would be significant."

"When were the third and fourth most recent earthquakes?"

"The sixth earthquake preceded the next by only one day, and the fifth happened three days prior."

"Strange," Tenari mused, "The sixth earthquake, then, would have happened the day Vincent and Marion were attacked by Araku." She found herself being stared at most impolitely by Nanaki, who had an uncomfortable frown creasing his brow. "What is it?" she asked.

Without answering, he glanced away and then craned his head off to the side a bit in a gesture that she recognized as his 'thinking pose.' She'd teased him before on picking up such a human trait, but refrained from doing so now. The unease in his eyes had disturbed her, and she didn't want to interrupt his thoughts.

After only a moment of reflection, Nanaki spoke once more, his voice tinged with both discovery and doubt. "The earthquakes started on the day Vincent found Marion..."

"What does that have to do..." Tenari began to ask, and then trailed off in disbelief as she caught up with his conclusion. "Nanaki, you are mistaken. No matter what this Hojo might have done in creating her, surely..."

"...but what if it is possible?..."

Despite her protests of disbelief, Tenari faced the possibility full in the face, and replied, "Then we either kill her quickly and gently or tell her the truth of what she is and face the consequences of her reaction. And as dangerous as the second option might be, I am not inclined towards the first."

"Gather your parents together for me," Nanaki requested, "and tell them where we're going and why. They may have insights to offer."

"And where are we going?" asked Tenari practically, even as she walked out the door.

"The Forgotten Capital...where Marion is."

In the Lifestream:

Aeris watched the shimmering dance of spirits around her with thoughtful eyes. Should she go to her Promised Land now? She knew that her parents would be waiting for her there with her other few, precious loved ones. Souls disconnected from their spirit energy, awareness sent to the Promised Land once their Lifestream had been returned to the greater river of Life. A beautiful land of rest and rejoicing, reunion and communion with the Planet even for those not Cetra.

She smiled as the Planet resumed its soft, sibilant song. For a while now, the Planet had been singing occasionally, as if it were unable to contain its pleasure and must express itself somehow. As the gentle ringing flowed through her mind, Aeris wondered at the difference in the Planet's screams and songs. While Sephiroth had been bringing Meteor closer and closer, eerie shrieks and wails had vibrated through the trembling Planet, not actually loud in any physical sense, yet almost unbearable in its intensity and multiple pitches.

In contrast, the songs and murmurs that swelled in her mind's ears were meltingly tender and soft, countless voices in incredible harmony like a thousand chimes in the wind, their harsher tinkling muted by distance. The sound seemed to her like a lullaby crooned to an infant, a love song dedicated to one's true passion...

...to see her mother again, to find Zack once more...

And yet...

She was reluctant to let go of her final ties with those she had left behind. Cloud and Tifa together at last, Barret and little Marlene, dear misunderstood Reeve and all the others...and Marion. Marion, her cherished friend, so unique even among their varied company. While interacting with Marion, she'd felt her Cetra heritage dominant within her, and so cherished their friendship for its uniqueness. Perhaps it was their time spent communicating through the lifestream. Perhaps it was because she'd never known Marion in life, whereas with the others she'd led a highly 'human' life, running around and fighting and getting hurt and healed. All the battles, all the pain...

Everything was so peaceful now...perhaps she was no longer needed as their unofficial guardian angel. She'd done her duty as a Cetra by protecting the Planet. She had earned her rest, her Promised Land.

Perhaps...

She gasped in pain as the Planet's song turned to a piercing shriek, a dagger in her mind. Her mind shrank back from the agonizing assault, and then she consciously tried to reach out, to connect to her home. The shrieks continued, and all Aeris could receive were harsh, confusing emotions and images. What she interpreted from the Planet's unique language was converted by her own understanding into words she could understand, emotions she'd felt in her own life, and images that she had stored in her mind. Sometimes the messages were clear...and sometimes they made no sense at all.

WHERE?

Confusion...something unprecedented had shocked her...the unknown frightened her.

LOST.

The person was gone...no trace, no clues...an empty hole appeared in her heart, where she hadn't even known there had been something filling it before.

FIND!

Where was it? She had to find it, she needed it, wanted it, had to have it...where?

And overlaid over all of the frightening screams and impressions and emotions was a ghostly image of Marion's bright green eyes.

At Gaea's Cliff:

The old man stared up at the forbidding cliffs with a fond expression on his face. "You old death trap, you just get colder and older each year," he chided. Bending with some effort due to the bulk of clothing he had to layer on in order to survive the freezing winds, he laid a cheerful bouquet of silk flowers at the base of the cliff. This was a largely fruitless task that he accomplished every year, for within a minute, the constantly driving snow had covered the bouquet entirely, much as it had his friend's body so many years ago this very day. And yet he still came, year after year, to bring this token to his friend's grave.

A large chunk of packed snow fell with a thunk at his feet, and he looked up, frowning slightly. As he peered into the snow flurries at the series of ledges above, more and more icy missiles were dropped down upon him. Suddenly, a large icicle came whistling down to embed itself into the ground not two feet from where he stood. Face ashen, the man abruptly whirled around and began to run back down the hill to the relative safety of his cabin.

He'd gained only a few feet when the trembling started, and by the time he'd gone a hundred feet, he'd been thrown to the ground several times by the sudden earthquake. Face down in the chilly blanket covering the Planet, he struggled to at least get to his hands and knees so that he might crawl, but a sudden roaring scream overhead made him flatten into the snow as tightly as he could. The scream was something that might have been made by a Phoenix or Roc - and by the loudness, one only ten feet above him - and he instinctively cowered down, although logically, he knew that the heat-loving birds would never venture this far North.

Trembling now in the aftershocks of the earthquake, he carefully turned his head upwards to see if Death might be swooping down upon him, chilling temperatures or no chilling temperatures. The scream that had sounded so loud and near had actually come from a creature flying hundreds of feet in the air above him, but he shuddered not so much at the realization of the power of that voice, but at the sight of a Weapon flying overhead once more.

At the Forgotten Capital:

Vincent popped his head into the shell house where he'd left her and called out, "Marion?" He heard neither reply nor padding of eager footsteps, and frowned. Ignoring the strange unease that suddenly bloomed within his chest - she'd never not been around, now that he thought about it - he stepped inside and looked around the tiny house. Blankets had been shaken out and arranged neatly on one bed, but of Marion herself, there was no sign. Placing their saddlebags onto the floor, he turned to leave the spiraling shelter and retrace his footsteps to where their chocobos had been tethered, thinking that she might have gone out to meet him, and that he'd simply missed seeing her on the way back.

His boot struck a tiny object and he paused, tracking the sparkling item as it ricocheted off of one wall and then came right back to rest in front of him like a faithful pet. A delicate, platinum, bloodstained pet.

As if in a dream, he watched his hand slowly close over the silvery circle and bring it up to his face. His palm opened slowly to reveal Marion's wedding ring, tarnished with slick globes of blood. Blood...more on the floor, visible now that he was staring right at it. Tiny drops...one, two...and a thin scrawl of it barely visible on the dark wood of the wall. Tiny loops and lines of crimson that made up the words,

I have her

Vincent tore out of the shell house and skidded to a halt on the gravel pathway just outside. Not sighting anything out of the ordinary in his first, raking glance across the surrounding landscape, he took a deep breath and then listened intently. Nothing. His enhanced hearing picked up the rustling of the surrounding forest, the hollow sound of a breeze roaming through the shell houses. But there were no boot steps crunching over gravel, no low hum of a hovercraft, no roaring of engines...no muffled breaths underneath a restraining hand, no sounds of struggle or...or...

The air suddenly rushed from his lungs in a ragged, tearing breath and then he stood gasping in the middle of the road as if being throttled. And he was, truth be told. And the truth that was now strangling him with terror was that Marion was gone, and he had no idea why, where, or how she'd been taken...or by whom.

...or what was going to happen to her...

Still struggling for breath through a suddenly too-narrow throat, he turned first one way, and then another. Every impulse for action was immediately cancelled by another. Should he go North to search for her? His foot twitched, but stilled as he thought, But what if she's being taken South? Call Cid...no, he's on the rocket. Can someone else fly the Highwind to look for her? No, call Cloud...all of us on chocobos to search. And while I'm on the PHS, what's happening to her? Just go, go...find her, find her...where are you, Marion? Oh God, where are you?

Paralyzed by fear and indecision, Vincent sensed the seconds ticking by and grew increasingly panicked, which ironically immobilized him further. An assassin with reflexes and cunning that were the envy of the world, an experiment of Hojo's whose instincts and speed were superhuman...and now a man so afraid of taking a step in the wrong direction that he couldn't even move.

And then an image intruded, of a slender body lying lifeless on the ground, crimson blood spilled everywhere, and green eyes closed forever.

His next breath caught in his throat and then wrenched its way out in a horrible scream, Vincent's voice rising in pitch and falling in tone at the same time as his mind finally gave way to the horror and opened the door to the Chaos beast. Merciful metamorphosis that obliterated Vincent's human consciousness and operated on pure instinct and need. Vincent Valentine's heartache and panic was submerged into a void, and the Chaos beast took to flight, on a savage hunt for one familiar and one unknown. The familiar would be found and secured, and the unknown would be torn limb from limb, skin from flesh, tissue from bone, with the pieces scattered as far and wide as he pleased.

A pleased growl rumbled from the Chaos Beast's throat as its mind lingered for a moment on the thought.