

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 52: Facts and Knowledge

Nanaki and Tenari peered into the dusk to find Cloud and Tifa riding weary chocobos towards them. Nanaki set his teeth as he took in Cloud's grim expression and the fretful worry apparent in Tifa's posture. Urging himself to greater speed, he soon skidded to a halt next to one of the dilapidated shell houses where Cloud and Tifa has dismounted. Without preamble, he asked quietly, "Where is Marion?"

Cloud sighed as if the weight of the world was - once more - upon his shoulders. "We don't know. We found the shell house where Vincent and Marion had left their packs...and this was on the floor." He reached for Tifa, and she held out her right hand to reveal Marion's ring, still faintly stained with blood. Cloud had slipped the ring into a pocket, but Tifa had immediately dug it out and slipped it onto her finger, stating determinedly, "I'll wear it until we find her...that way, it won't get lost." He'd nodded after a moment of thought. A ring found and pocketed was simply an item, possibly to be lost or forgotten, or to be put away or discarded should the owner...not be found. But a ring worn on the finger, to be given back to a friend...the assumption was that the friend would be found and the ring restored to its rightful owner.

They would find Marion.

"There was a line written in her...in blood, on the base of one wall. It said, 'I have her.' And we saw Vincent, well, his Chaos transformation actually, flying away from the Capital. He's probably gone Chaos from anger...or fear, and is looking for her." He indicated the PHS tucked into his belt and said, "I've called everyone else, but no one knows any more than we do, which is that Marion is missing and probably injured, and that Vincent is flying around out there somewhere looking for her...and her kidnapper."

At that last word, the one that finally gave shape and definition to the darkness that had taken their friend, Tifa suddenly felt the strain of the past several hours catch up to her, and she began to tremble. Who? Who would have done this? They'd been at a dead run from Nibelheim all the way here, and there hadn't been any opportunity for her to ask Cloud about his theory on the matter. What was the connection between the fire and the kidnapping? And now, with his answer about to be revealed, she suddenly didn't want to know. She was afraid to know...she'd borne up bravely under countless losses and trials, her cheerful smile and optimism failing her only occasionally, but this new situation seemed to her even more tragic than anything she'd witnessed - or experienced - in her life.

Shinra had marked them as outlaws and hunted them through various agents, repeatedly attempting to take their lives...but that had been the windfall of their actions. They'd blown up reactors, killed countless Soldiers, stolen or destroyed Shinra property, and single-handedly brought down the greatest company ever to rear its ugly head over the citizens of Midgar.

Sephiroth had destroyed Nibelheim in his insanity, and yet it had been an insanity wrought by his experiences in Nibelheim. The town had sold property to Shinra and closed its eyes to the experiments being conducted high in the mountains, and deep beneath their feet. There had been responsibility shared, however far removed.

But what had Marion to account for? Since her discovery, she'd befriended them all, dealt with monsters, been the catalyst for Shera's resurrection and Cid's realization of his heart, discovered Nanaki's lost kin, and last but certainly not least, brought Vincent from out of the shadows he'd buried himself in.

What had Marion done?

Nothing.

And that was why Tifa bit her lip against the tears. Because of all the blows life had dealt her and her friends, this was the most unfair. That Vincent should finally find love and life once more, only to have it torn away. That Marion should have to learn the horrors that life could mete out in such a brutal manner.

A soft touch brushed against her knee, and as she brought herself back to reality with a quick shake of the head, she found Tenari looking up at her with a sympathetic gaze. Tifa crouched down and impulsively buried her face into her friend's neck, finding solace in hiding her tears, and comfort in the silent understanding her friend offered. Tenari accepted the hug calmly, remembering something she and Nanaki had discussed not long ago. These were such a jumble of frailties...limited strength and speed, short life spans, and inferior intelligence. And yet what she saw as their greatest weaknesses - their emotions and the tendency to be ruled by them - had been described to her by Nanaki as being their greatest strength as well. It was love and courage and faithfulness that had saved the world they lived in...and it was those same things that would now save Marion. From her kidnapper, and - Tenari hoped fervently - from herself. Whatever news Cloud was about to reveal to Nanaki and her, well...they had news of their own to impart.

"When I met up with Vincent and Marion in Midgar, I stumbled across a lab nearly identical to the one Marion had been kept in. Vincent and I explored, and we found that Marion is actually the second generation in this experiment of Hojo's. The first subject was rejected as being unstable, or something like that, and then Marion was created," Cloud explained. "We didn't see anyone else while we were down there, and I guess we just assumed that the Alpha Project had escaped the lab and then died of starvation or something."

"But?" Nanaki prompted. Cloud sighed and continued, "But...now I think we were wrong. Vincent was worried that the Alpha Project had gone nuts just like Sephiroth...the research libraries for the two projects, Alpha and Beta, had been torn through like the Nibelheim Mansion basement. He thought the Alpha Project might want to harm Marion...just for revenge, I guess, since she was the perfect project, and the other was a reject. And if he escaped Midgar somehow..."

"When Tifa and I got home, the mansion had been burned to the ground. It fits in with the whole vengeful nut-job idea. Hojo got a lot of the ideas he applied to the Alpha Project and Marion from his time there, after all. So we came here, and unfortunately, it looks like my theory is right."

Tenari protested a bit, "But the two events could be unrelated. Marion's captor does not necessarily have to be this Alpha Project you refer to. It may be a person or persons who hold a grudge against you for some unknown reason. You are, after all, well-known for your deeds."

"Maybe," Cloud conceded. "But either way, I'm worried about the kidnapping. There wasn't any kind of ransom note...just the phrase, 'I have her.' What if the kidnapper doesn't want to kill her or get a ransom for her? What if he knows about her abilities and wants to use her?"

Tifa lifted her face from Tenari's shoulder and asked, "Use her? How?" She received only grim looks in reply, and realized the truth that had given them all those hopeless looks. They didn't know. For all the facts and theories and suppositions, they didn't know anything remotely useful.

They didn't know who had taken her, and they didn't know where she was. They didn't know what was going to happen to her, or why. The only knew that whatever the kidnapper's purpose, it was surely evil.

And they didn't know what to do about it.

So they stood in the deepening shadows for a moment, each of them with thoughts racing, wondering what step to take next and fighting against the fear that it would be the wrong one.