

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 55: Weapons of War and Peace

Cloud stood once more at the prow of the Highwind, letting the massive airship rush him through the vast skies towards a battle for the life of a friend. How many times would this happen to him? How many times would he find himself with hands gripping the railing white-knuckled, ears tearing in the wind, heart racing with a desperate fear for one he loved?

Aeris, taking delicate steps down the crystal stairway towards her doom. Shera, bloodied and barely alive in Marion's arms. And now, Marion herself, in the arms of her predecessor.

How many more times would this vessel of exploration and discovery be used as a ferry towards the darkness, the unknown?

A slender hand insinuated itself into one of his, insistently dislodging the death-grip he had on the freezing cold railing and disrupting his dark musings. Tifa joined him at the front of the ship, and apparently in his despairing thoughts as well, for she commented quietly, "I wonder if we'll ever be able to lead a normal life." Cloud remained silent, having no comforting platitudes to offer her at the moment. "I thought that after we defeated Sephiroth, everyone would be able to pick up their lives again," she continued. "We were all so happy; everything seemed perfect and now this..." Tifa looked searchingly into his eyes and bit her lip. "Cloud, I'm scared," she whispered after a moment, her voice small and trembling, as if confessing a horrible sin.

He took her into his arms and held her tight, murmuring into her hair, "Don't worry. We'll get her back." The head he cradled underneath his chin shook slowly and then lifted to meet his gaze once more. "No," Tifa said, "I'm not talking about being afraid for Marion, although I am. I'm scared of...I'm scared of being scared, I guess. I'm...I'm almost afraid of life now. It never stops, Cloud," she went on, her voice picking up speed as the fears and words tumbled out, "something is always waiting for us, waiting to hurt us or someone we love. Our parents, our friends, most of Avalanche, Aeris...we keep losing people and it's not to time or illnesses...life keeps taking them away from us and I don't know how many more people I can stand to lose - I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this..." Her voice shook with emotion and she stopped, lifting her hands to her mouth as if to hold back the tide of fear and emotional exhaustion that had been spilling out. She gave a quick glance back at the crew members who were engrossed in maneuvering the ship and took sanctuary in Cloud's silhouette, not wanting to expose this moment of weakness to their eyes.

She was gathered up into tender arms once more, and she shut her eyes tight, wanting to lose herself in the comfort and safety that his love offered her. Softly, so softly that his voice was almost lost in the wind, she heard, "Not much longer, I promise. I promise, Tifa," he repeated gently as she sighed in wordless disbelief of his words. "We'll find Marion and take care of her kidnapper and that will be the end of it. No more of Hojo's schemes, no more threats to the Planet, no more killing and dying and losing and winning at the same time." He shifted his hands from caressing her back to lifting her head, and locked eyes with her to drive his words home. "We'll go home and raise chocobos and have kids if you want. I'll put away my sword and we'll lock up all our materia, and the next time we bring them out, it'll be to chop down trees or play marbles with the kids. Just one more fight, Tifa, and then it'll be all over. I promise." Despite herself, a smile played across her lips at the thought of tiny mop-headed versions of themselves cracking their multi-million gil collection of materia together in play, and their future father returned the smile warmly.

"There you go," he encouraged, "there's that smile that kept us going when we were down. You're the fighting spirit behind me, Tifa. I need you; I need you so much. Not just to be my wife and my friend...I need you here," and he raised one hand and tapped on his chest. "You never give up," Cloud smiled, "I bet you don't even know how to spell the word surrender." She managed a laugh and replied, "Sure I do. F, I, G, H, T." He grinned and nodded, then continued more seriously, "We'll get through this. We'll be strong and brave while Marion needs us to be, because we have each other. If you ever feel that you can't go on, it'll be because you just gave me all your courage and strength. As much as I rely on your spirit, Tifa, I can carry you for a while, too, you know. You don't have to be brave all the time."

Grateful for this precious moment, this breather between the punches that life was dealing them, she gathered up the

strength and determination that seemed to seep back into her with his words and smiled brightly up at her husband. "I know," she affirmed. "I'm just a little tired, but I'll be all right. And I know that you're here for me, and that helps more than anything." As she gazed up at him, his eyes drifted from her face to a point off to the right of her head and then narrowed in concern. She started to turn her head to see what he was staring at, but he pressed her head to his chest once more and held her tightly.

"No, don't look," he cautioned. "We still have a few minutes before we can do anything about it. Just...rest up for a minute." Horrified curiosity urged her to struggle out of the embrace, but she firmly ignored it and took Cloud's advice, resting her heart in his love and presence. And when they finally neared Icicle Inn, and she turned to watch their destination draw closer, she experienced a heartfelt moment of gratitude for the additional comfort, for she was surely going to need it.

The Planet's all-encompassing Voice commanded Protection. From every blade of grass and drop of river water came the choral Voice, demanding the elimination of the Threat. And yet here before Weapon's very senses was another Planet, more Planet, different/same Planet?...so small...so impossibly small. But unmistakably the Voice. And yet there were no commands issued in this tiny Planet's Voice...only a sharp, stark shrieking fear embedded in a vast sea of confusion and need. A need for a specific human, which Weapon didn't understand, and a need to be away, which Weapon categorized as an impossibility for Planets and only created more confusion. And over and through all of the confusion and needing and suffering was that piercing sensation of fear.

Fear. Fear of injury, fear of suffering, and fear of death. Fear of the blade pressing a sharp line of pain into her neck, and fear of the human holding the blade...and therefore, that human was the Threat.

And yet to crush the Threat underneath a massive claw would be to silence the thin, shrill Voice that clamored mindlessly for help. And to sear the Threat with a blast of lightning would be to burn the tiny Planet that must be Protected.

Driven by the imperative command of the Planet's voice to find and remove the threat to Life, yet prevented from obeying, Weapon simply went berserk. Unable to destroy the one human who held the Planet hostage, the massive creature - creation - turned instead on the rest of the race.

And those on the deck of the Highwind watched the shadowy Weapon destroy Icicle Inn from a helpless distance.

People fled in panic as sharp black claws sliced through the air and their homes with equal ease. Entire families were wiped out as massive columns of lightning poured forth from a gaping maw. Weapon's feet crushed buildings, its claws rent the pavement, and blistering electricity mowed down everything - and everyone - in its path.

Icicle Inn was reduced to rubble.

The towering black creature threw its head back and screamed in frustration.

A young woman slumped to the ground, heart pounding in fear and mind fogged with chemicals.

The man standing over her laughed.