

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 56: Missions of Mercy and Mayhem

"Hurry!" Cloud shouted needlessly over his shoulder, once again leaning over the railing as if the additional pressure of his body against the metal might speed their flight. "What about parachuting in again?" Tifa asked, almost prancing in her impatience as the ship veered slightly away from town in order to land far enough away to avoid Weapon's notice. "It'll take us so long to run into town...everyone might be dead by then!"

Biting his lip, Cloud shook his head in the negative. "No good. We'd be the perfect targets for Weapon if we just floated in like that, and I can't think of any other options." All around the deck, the airship's crew were now leaning precariously over the edge, searching for the closest possible landing spot. Two were selected, and after a five-second conference, the pilot banked the ship sharply to the left and skirted the edge of Icicle Inn, heading for a smooth patch of snow at the base of one of the mountains surrounding the ravaged town.

Further down the airship's railing, another figure watched the mayhem below, and it was to this person that Cloud now turned his attention. Just as he'd nurtured vague, unformed fears for Cid when Shera had nearly died, now he found himself afraid for Vincent. Although he'd be hard pressed to define what, exactly, he was afraid of. Perhaps it was that he'd gotten used to the recent changes in his friend, and now found Vincent's return to a silent enigma disturbing. And as before, when the man had been so solitary and aloof, it was nearly impossible to predict what was going on behind those glowing red eyes.

What was Vincent thinking? What ideas and plans were being formed in that mind of his? What fears and worries were kept hidden in his heart? What was his next step? How would he react to his first sight of Marion and her captor? Who had he become? Was he still what they thought of as 'Marion's Vincent,' or had he reverted to the ex-Turk they'd first encountered? Or was this an entirely new man? The unofficial leader of Marion's rescue team continued to watch him from afar, as if prolonged staring might slowly reveal new insights into his friend. Feeling that this was neither the time nor place to approach him, and yet uneasy with his ignorance of one of his teammates, Cloud simply stood back and wondered.

And as it is with most mysteries, the truth was quite simple in comparison to the possibilities wondered at by those who are in the dark, so to speak. There were no complicated thoughts streaming through Vincent's mind. All emotions had been tucked neatly away into a dark corner, where they would not get in the way, and instinct, reflexes, and experience were waiting at the ready. As combatants only bring their armor and weapons to a fight, so had Vincent stripped his heart, mind, and body down to the bare essentials.

He scanned the destruction far beneath him minutely, keen eyes passing over bodies and rubble with equal disinterest, pausing only when catching sight of a length of pale hair and then moving on when confirming that the person was not the one he was seeking. He frowned as the ship began to pull away from town, dipping slightly towards its destination. Where was she?

Flames rippled up through broken homes and poured out into the streets, igniting the rubble scattered every which way by the Weapon's mighty claws. The heat thrashed against the bitterly cold air, casting bizarre shadows and lighting the chaos with an eerie orange glow. And there, in the shadow of a partially destroyed building, gleamed a steady yellow light. Faint, flickering...a sickly greenish tinge to the glow that came not from fire, but from magic.

Much to the startlement of the blonde mercenary watching him, Vincent placed one hand on the chill metal railing and vaulted easily into the freezing embrace of a ten thousand foot free fall.

As Vincent hurtled downwards into the waiting chaos, Barret let loose a stream of curses that did not end until the airship had landed. With a fatalistic glance at the rest of his companions who were alternating between staring open-mouthed at Vincent's seemingly suicidal descent and urging the pilots to even greater recklessness and speed, Cloud sighed and placed his head in his hands, finding a momentary respite in blindness. Tifa placed one hand on his shoulder and peered into his

face worriedly, but when his head lifted, she found a wry smile dancing across his features.

She automatically returned the expression but commented, "I'm not finding any of this funny. What are you smiling about?" The blonde head next to her shook slightly, and he replied, "Nothing, really. I was just thinking that Vincent continually surprises me, but then I told myself that I should have realized he wouldn't want to wait for the ship to land, or for us to catch up with him." Remembering Cid's struggles to dive off of the Highwind after Shera and Marion, Tifa nodded in agreement. "It just struck me as funny, is all," Cloud continued, "that as mysterious as Vincent can get, I actually know him pretty well now. He's going to hit the ground running and he's going to go straight for Marion's kidnapper - I'm assuming he spotted them - and there's nothing that's going to distract him from that. I'll bet you that Weapon could step on his head and he wouldn't notice."

Tifa raised an eyebrow at the mental imagery provided, and mentioned dubiously, "I don't know, Cloud. I think I'd notice if I were smushed flat by that thing." Still smiling crookedly, Cloud contradicted, "Nope. Any one of us could be lying in front of him, bleeding to death with monsters at our throat, and he'd probably just step right over us. Not because he doesn't care, but because he just wouldn't notice. One thing about Vincent, he's painfully single-minded. He joined us to avenge himself on Hojo, and then existed only to atone for his past, and now he's living for Marion."

Stepping away from the railing and guiding Tifa towards the ladder where everyone had now gathered, he concluded, "The kidnapper doesn't stand a chance."

Cloud's confidence and bizarre cheer had faded by the time the party gained Icicle Inn, however. In fact, their destination could not even be given that name anymore, for the former snowy resort was now nothing more than a burning rubbish heap. As the neared the flames, Cloud shouted out over his shoulder, "Tifa, Barret, you're with me! We've got to turn Weapon away from here! Reeve, evacuate everyone you can. And everyone keep an eye out for Vincent - where he is, they will be too!"

And with that, they entered the maelstrom. Weapon's shrieks rent the air and they were buffeted both by icy winds and searing flares as they spread out across the ruins. The freezing air was laced with the stinging odor of burning wood and the coppery tang of fresh blood, and in the middle of the jostle of panicked people with the screams of the dying ringing in his ears, Reeve experienced an ill-timed epiphany.

He'd never really been in a battle before.

Fighting alongside Cloud and the others through the body of Cait Sith and watching Shinra troops fight from his office monitor had been no preparation at all for the carnage he was witnessing with his very own eyes. Cloud, Tifa, even sprightly little Yuffie were all battle-hardened warriors who'd killed hundreds of monsters and even people in the past year. He'd come to consider himself a part of their band, but by existing as Cait Sith, all he'd really been doing was playing the world's most interactive video game.

He was jostled from his despairing realization - literally - by the abrupt collision of a young woman into his body. He automatically caught her up in his arms and steadied her, taking in her disheveled appearance from the burns on her cheek to her bloodied, bare feet in one quick glance. The sight of her suddenly took him back to Midgar, on the eve of its destruction. There'd been young men and women such as this in the upper plate as well...living out their lives in ignorant bliss, not knowing the darkness that they walked over or the death that awaited them in the sky. Living blessed and unknowing, happy and uncaring, until fate brought them from the mountaintop to the depths of the valley in one cruel moment.

He'd never been in a battle, but he'd been through countless crises.

Grabbing her by one shoulder, he yelled over the roar of the flames and the screeching cries of the Weapon, "Get to the airship!" and pointed in the direction he'd just come from. Spotting the safe haven behind him, she nodded and immediately tore away from him, weaving her way through the debris with fear-inspired agility. Reeve turned and called out to his friend, "Nanaki!" He and several others of his people came speeding over, and Reeve asked, "You're all much stronger and faster than we are...could you search the remaining structures for anyone who might be trapped or injured?" "Done," came the quick reply, and the search and rescue team was deployed.

He sprinted over to where a half dozen more of Icicle Inn's residents had huddled behind some fallen beams, grabbing a startled Yuffie on the way. Shoving the Enemy Skill materia he'd brought into the ninja's hand, he directed, "Use the shielding spells in that and get these people out of here!" and began pulling fear-numbed survivors from their hiding place and shoving them towards her. Transparent shields and bolstering defensive spells were quickly cast and then the diminutive brunette began herding her charges out through a narrow gap in the charred remains of a lodge.

Snapping a Shield materia into the band on his wrist, Reeve continued to stride from one flaming pile of debris to the next, searching out survivors and sending them off to safety with a word of encouragement and a quick spell. The City Management Executive was once again in charge.

As the pitifully few survivors were evacuated, Cloud, Tifa, and Barret ran towards the Onyx Weapon, casting what protective and supportive magic they could on the way. "This thing's huge!" Cloud shouted, "Don't waste any time attacking it directly - let's see how much damage we can do with summons!" Digging in a pocket and exchanging some of the golden orbs in his armband for crimson ones, the tall blonde man dodged debris with confident strides and closed upon the immense black-hued creature that loomed tall above him and his companions.

A short distance away, Vincent's boots came to a soft, crunching halt in the snow as he turned a corner and came face to face with the shimmering orb of magic that had caught his eye from the deck of the Highwind.