

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 11: Night Falls in Nibelheim

"All tucked in?" Tifa asked, poking her head into her bedroom. She saw Marion's dark head pop up off of the pillow, eyes bright in the dimness. Tifa walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled down at her guest. "Just wanted to make sure you're comfy; first time in a real bed and all. My father used to check in on me at night, and it always made me feel cared for. If I was still awake, he'd tell me bedtime stories, too."

"Will you tell me one?" asked Marion.

"Okay," agreed Tifa, pleased at the shy request. "Let's see...I'll tell you my favorite. It's a folk tale about two people named Ilysm and Ilya."

"There were originally many Bahamuts, not just the three we can summon. They all lived out in space, century after century, one to each galaxy, and each had their special summon that they could be called through. The years passed, and a rogue comet tore through a small galaxy, destroying many of the constellations within it, and killing the star dragon that lived in it as well. When a Bahamut died, the star system that it lived in suffered. Planets would sometimes explode, or wobble out of place and become comets, falling through the sky. Other galaxies near the one that was damaged experienced the backlash of the death. Soon, a wave of unbalance spread throughout the universe, slowly causing other Bahamuts to sicken or die."

"None of the other Bahamuts could leave their galaxies to try and repair all of the damage by themselves, plus if they left, their own galaxies would suffer. So they caused two stars to be born, born as human souls, and then waited a short time for them to grow up so that they could take up their destinies to save the universe."

"Those two stars were born into a girl named Ilysm and a boy named Ilya. From the moment they were born, their families knew that they were special. Their eyes and hair were black as the night sky, but twinkled and sparkled when you weren't looking at them directly. Their skin was pale and perfect, and glowed softly like the moon. The two families lived in the same town, and so Ilysm and Ilya grew up together, loved by everyone who knew them, and learning to love each other as well."

"They were about 15, and deeply in love, when a Bahamut appeared before them. Neither of them had summon materia, so they were very frightened. No one had ever heard of Bahamut appearing just like that. The dragon bowed before them, and told Ilysm and Ilya that they were actually children of Bahamut, stars that had been reborn as souls, and that they had a very special duty as such."

"He told the two lovers that they had the ability to transform into star dragons, and that they needed to fly a certain course around the universe, repairing damaged planets and bringing wayward comets back to their home constellations. If they couldn't stop the spreading damage, soon the universe would become unstable and be destroyed."

"The two star children agreed to the task, and Bahamut showed them the paths that each had to take in the skies. Ilysm and Ilya found that they would be completely separated, for they would have to fly in a circular, spiraling pattern, but across the universe from each other. They were devastated, but knew that they had no choice. Ilya vowed to Ilysm that he would never, ever forget her or stop loving her, no matter how long they were separated. Ilysm cried and held on to him, sobbing that she would never leave him, except that she loved him so absolutely that she couldn't let the universe he lived in be destroyed."

"Bahamut was stunned, and touched at the same time. For all that they were his children, they had grown up as human, and had human emotions and needs. The dragons simply hadn't thought of that when they had caused these two to be born. Not willing to separate the two lovers for eternity, Bahamut told them that every time they completed a circuit of the universe, they could stop their journey for a time and return to their home planet and be reborn into human form once

more. Then, they could find each other and live a life together. When that life came to a close, they would once more journey across the universe, keeping the galaxies safe, waiting for the next lifetime they could live together."

Tifa sighed, tearful as always when she thought of the love and devotion the two starry souls had for each other.

"Does the story make you sad?" Marion asked, one hand reaching towards Tifa's eyes. Tifa considered, wanting to explain as fully as she could to this girl, so new to all emotions.

"I think I get emotional because...I feel empathy for them. I know...what it is to love someone, and so I can imagine the loss they feel when they have to be separated. When I imagine it in my mind, I can feel it in my heart at the same time. I feel the pain and loneliness, mixed in with hope and love, and it fills my heart up, and makes me want to cry a little," Tifa ended, hoping that she wasn't confusing Marion.

Emerald eyes swept the bedroom floor aimlessly for a moment, then tracked back to Tifa. "What does it feel like? How do you know you love?" she asked. "I think I've figured out happy and scared, but they're a little bit different each time I feel them. How will I know love?"

Tifa leaned back, arms braced behind her, making a bridge over Marion's bent knees. "Phew. That's a tough one. There's all different kinds of love, just like you're finding out that there's different kinds of happiness." Tifa paused, thinking. "There's love between husbands and wives, parents and children, friends, lovers, companions...almost any kind of relationship has some love in it, I think."

"I loved my parents. They took care of me, and loved me. I felt safe when they were there, and missed them when they weren't. I love my friends, too. We traveled together, and fought in battles together. We look out for each other, and help each other when we're in trouble." Dark brown eyes shifted away from Marion's gaze, "I love someone...I want to be near him all of the time. I love talking to him, working with him, looking at him...just being with him. When he's happy, I'm happy. When he's upset, I feel upset, too. If he ever...went away, a piece of my heart - a large piece - would die, I think. I want to keep him safe, and I want to be protected by him. In description, it's pretty much like loving your friends, but...it's immeasurably more powerful. It can consume people. It can save lives, and destroy hearts. That's love, Marion."

There was a long pause, which Tifa used to settle her heart down, while Marion seemed lost in thought. "Tifa," she finally ventured, "are we friends?"

Tifa's face lit up in the moonlight streaming in from her bedroom window. "Of course," she smiled.

Marion nodded into her pillow, "Good." Tifa laughed softly and ruffled the girl's hair gently. "Good night, Marion. Sleep tight."