

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 12: Nightcap

Tifa padded softly down the stairs in her childhood home, bare feet hardly making any noise in the hush of the night. Cloud and Vincent waited for her in the kitchen, having decided to hold an impromptu conference earlier in the day, when they had finally arrived in Nibelheim.

"That took a while," Cloud commented. "Was she okay?"

Tifa nodded, smiling softly, heart still oddly tender at Marion's innocent question. "She wanted me to tell her a bedtime story, so I told the Ilysm and Ilya one to her. And then she wanted to know if we were friends. She's very innocent, and she has a sweet nature. You can't help but love her." At that, she found herself involuntarily glancing at Vincent, influenced by her campfire impressions, but his features remained unreadable as usual. That made her think of something else as well, and she mentioned it to the others as she gathered cups for tea.

"You know, I haven't seen her smile or frown or anything like that yet. Her emotions are all in her eyes. I smile at her all the time, and I know she's been happy and scared and all that since we found her, but she just doesn't use expressions...she just...looks at you, like her heart is in her eyes."

Cloud shrugged her comments away, "It may seem strange to you, since you're so naturally cheerful, but I don't think it's anything you need to worry about. I certainly don't walk around with a smile pasted on my face all the time." He paused, considering. "Maybe she's taking her cues from you, Vincent," he said, gesturing with his chin at his companion, who looked at him curiously. "Have you noticed that she walks almost as quietly as you do now? She was so wobbly and weak when we found her, but now she can even sneak up on me. I think she's trying to learn from you. That's probably why she stares at you all the time, and follows you around."

Vincent looked into the steaming teacup that Tifa had placed in front of him. "Perhaps."

Tifa dragged a chair out for herself, laughing. "It's a good thing she wasn't found by Cid, then. She'd be smoking a pack a day and cursing all of us out right now."

She folded her hands around her teacup and replaced her amusement with a more serious tone. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well," Cloud began practically, "we feed her three times daily, let her sleep at night, and toughen her up during the day." Then he added, "And we keep an eye on her."

Her maternal instinct roused by Marion's innocence and defenselessness, Tifa found herself suddenly afraid for the mysterious girl they had adopted into their company. "Who knows what Hojo did to her? We have no idea what to expect. She may remain completely normal for the rest of her life, or I might find Jenova sleeping in my bed tomorrow morning." Tifa looked up from her tea to Vincent, asking, "Did you find anything in the lab like notes or files on her?"

Vincent shook his head. "There was nothing in the room itself, just monitors and control panels, but they weren't active. After I woke her, I didn't have the opportunity to look for a separate library or research room for information."

A spiky blonde head shook decisively, "There's nothing we can do right now, short of setting off for Midgar again and ransacking the lab. And who knows, maybe we won't find anything anyway. The mako bath could simply have been a preparatory step. Hojo might have died before he was able to start in on her. I say we just watch over her like we've been doing the past few days." Cloud shrugged, "and who knows, maybe her memory will return after a while. She must have been in there for a long time," he said thoughtfully, "her eyes glow so brightly, and her memory has been completely

erased. I'm amazed that she's so healthy."

"And there's another weird thing," Tifa interjected, "she doesn't have a single memory, but the knowledge is there. She recognizes spoons and fish and mountains when she sees them, and she immediately understands what you say, but it's like she can't dig up things by herself. Someone or something has to prompt her. Who knows, maybe we won't have to train her to fight after all; we'll just have to...remind her, or something."

"Speaking of which, what should we train her in? I can teach her hand-to-hand combat, but she's so frail, I think she should have a weapon and materia." Tifa looked at her companions inquiringly.

"I can teach her how to use materia, but as far as sword-fighting goes...again, she's a little too weak. Same goes for those huge spears Cid uses, and Barret's guns. Yuffie's shirikens take a lot of Ninja training to use, and I'm pretty sure she doesn't have knowledge of that. That leaves pistols...and staffs."

Aeris. Tifa dropped her eyes to her teacup once more. How often did Cloud think of her? Had she not died, would Cloud have settled into this peaceful existence at Nibelheim with Tifa, or...or something else? And now Marion was here; Marion, with her knowledge of Aeris, her green eyes, hair that Tifa had braided, naive charm and defenselessness that echoed those of their Ancient friend. "Marion could use Aeris' staffs," Tifa said quietly, still contemplating her tea, "I'm sure Aeris wouldn't mind...in fact, Marion could even ask her for permission."

"What?" asked Cloud, one eyebrow cocked at Tifa. "Ask who?"

Vincent nodded, "That's another thing I didn't get a chance to tell you in Midgar," he said, looking at Cloud, "I assume Marion told Tifa herself, but...while she was immersed in the mako, she was able to talk to Aeris."

The relative silence of the night was abruptly shattered as Cloud stood up, his chair scraping across the floor and falling back to crash to the ground, teacups rattling and spilling over onto the table as his hip smacked into the edge of the wooden surface. Eyebrows knit together over intense blue irises as he met his friends' eyes. Glancing slowly back and forth from Tifa to Vincent, he said slowly, "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

Tifa backed her own chair up and went to the sink to get a towel, unwilling and unable to meet his piercing gaze. Because, Cloud, I love you. I didn't tell Marion, but love makes us selfish and scared, too. Love can create heroes and legends, but it can also make you a coward and a liar.

Behind her at the table, Vincent was replying in his usual, inscrutable tone, "That's why we're sitting here; to talk about Marion. What would you have done if you'd known earlier, Cloud? Dragged her first thing to the reactor in the Nibel mountains and dumped her into the mako fountain so she could make a long-distance call for you?" Vincent slowly stood up, a soft menacing undertone in his voice making Tifa whirl around in surprise, and Cloud back up a step. "Hear me, Cloud. I won't let you use her. Whatever abilities and powers she may have, neither you nor anyone else is going to use that girl for their own needs or desires. I freed her from Hojo's grip; she's not going to fall into someone else's...not while I live."

Astounded, Cloud could only return Vincent's intense gaze at first. He opened his mouth several times, but words failed him as he stared back at his friend. Was this the same Vincent Valentine he had come to know - the man who seemed made of ice and darkness, who never let anyone into his heart? He nodded finally. "You're right. I'm sorry, I just got...worked up at the thought of being able to talk...to her. We'll train Marion up, and then I'll ask her, not a command or threat, no strings attached. I'll ask her to talk to Aeris for me - we can use the trip to Mt. Nibel as a training expedition - would that be alright?"

Vincent sat back down, ashamed now of his loss of control. "Of course," he replied, keeping his eyes on the table, "I would comply with your request myself, were I able. I simply want Marion to be able to live her own life, free from Hojo's schemes - from anyone's schemes." He lifted his ruddy eyes to meet Cloud's. "I apologize for my...outburst."

"Not at all," Cloud smiled, retrieving his chair and giving Vincent a lopsided grin, "in fact, it's surprisingly pleasant to see

emotion from you. Even if it's murder, directed at me!" he laughed.

Friends...thought Vincent, as he watched Tifa wipe up the puddles of tea on the table, friends like these, that's what Marion needs. Friends who will accept her, care for her, love her simply and purely. Am I the right person to take her on her journey? he wondered. With my own selfish motives, my own dark heart wanting to be with her pure, unsullied one...Vincent shook his head at himself, pushing his thoughts aside to be dealt with later. He turned his attention back to Cloud, who had engaged Tifa in conversation once more.

"So, she can start out with the lighter staffs, and work her way up as she gets used to them. The best thing, I think, would be to cram the Princess Guard with plenty of materia, healing as well as attacking, and then give her a ribbon and a Minerva band with some independent materia, like HP and MP plus, and maybe an Enemy Skill. We'll call the others tomorrow; they'll want to hear from Aeris, too. It shouldn't take more than a week for them all to get here...that should be enough time for Marion to learn the basics. Besides, even if she's completely helpless, she'll have all of us to protect her."

Tifa and Vincent nodded agreement. "Okay then," Cloud said, "let's get some sleep. 'Night, Tifa. We'll be over in the morning," he said in parting, as he and Vincent walked out to spend the night at his home. She stood in her doorway and waved them off, then turned and shut the door on the darkness.