

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 2: Nibelheim Interlude

Tifa pulled a clean shirt over her head and kicked her discarded clothes into a nearby hamper, wrinkling her nose. For all their charm, chocobos certainly could stink up a barn when they wanted to. She ran a quick hand through her chestnut hair, the ends tickling the backs of her knees. Smoothing her top and skirt over her stunning figure, she gave herself a quick once-over to make sure nothing was amiss. Satisfied at her appearance, she ran downstairs to the kitchen, mentally poring over her recipes for something she hadn't made since her return to Nibelheim. Their return to Nibelheim.

She and Cloud had their meals together, worked together in the mansion basement together, and spent all of their free time together, but as of yet, they still lived in their separate houses, and most importantly - to Tifa - kept their feelings locked away in their separate hearts.

Feelings. Tifa knew what hers were, and Cloud had possibly figured them out as well, but Tifa still had no definite idea of how Cloud felt about her. They had something, certainly. There was an unspoken pact of some sort between them. They either spent their time together or completely alone, never attempting to interact with the other townspeople on more than a superficial level. And they could talk to each other about everything...almost everything. The time they spent together in the lifestream had knocked down many barriers. Cloud freely spoke of his doubts and fears, things he hid from others because he saw them as weaknesses. Tifa could unburden herself of her pain and rages, and he never turned from her. As immersed as he could become in his research, he was never too busy to help her out at the stable, and she returned the favor whenever he needed assistance in the basement. And as much as they could talk the night away, so could they spend the evening simply sitting in silence, watching the stars. They were comfortable and close...so much so that it seemed they had reached a perfect understanding, and were content to simply live and be in love. Except that she had never heard him say it. And so she lived, loved, and hoped.

The shrill ring of the PHS snapped her abruptly out of her musings, and she automatically reached for the device at her waist. "Hello?"

"This is Vincent. I've discovered a research subject in a lab underneath Midgar. I need help getting back to the surface. Do you or Cloud have time?"

"Wha..." Tifa shook the last of the cobwebs from her mind, processing Vincent's characteristically brief message. "Um, sure, no problem. The gold chocobos aren't rented out right now, so we should be able to be there by...tomorrow morning, if we leave right now. Where in Midgar are you?"

"Go to the first floor of Hojo's lab, where we found Jenova's body. You'll see an elevator shaft. Call me when you get there." returned Vincent. "Bring the chocobos inside with you. And Tifa, I'll need a set of clothes from you." Click. Tifa sighed. If Vincent ever made small talk, she'd die of shock. Shrugging, Tifa ran over to the Shinra mansion to let Cloud know that their days of adventuring were not yet over.

She clattered down the worn plank steps to the basement, mahogany hair streaming out behind her, and almost ran into Cloud as he walked out of the adjoining cave.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Cloud, grabbing her arms to steady her. "Hey there, I was just going to come up and see if you wanted help with dinner."

"Actually, we have plans for dinner on the road now," replied Tifa. As they walked back up the spiral staircase, she filled him in on Vincent's message. "I told Vincent we could be there by morning. The golds are well rested, and should be able to sprint most of the way. I just assumed you'd say yes, since he's our friend, and it's also a chance to find out more about Hojo's research. Was that okay?"

Cloud looked a bit surprised at the question. "Of course it's okay. You know me, and I trust your decisions. Come on - let's get ready. I'll get the materia and weapons. Why don't you pack some provisions?"

Cloud stepped into his house and dug underneath his bed for the large wooden box he kept there. Reeling off the combination on the padlock, he removed his Ultima weapon, a Wizard bracelet, a Minerva band and two ribbons, and then pored over his stash of materia. Selecting several, he poured them into his pocket to be divided between Tifa and himself later.

Over at Tifa's, he found her stuffing backpacks full of bread, cheese, salted meats and vegetables. Her Premium Heart was already snug on her hand. Next to her backpack lay a bundle of clothes and two pairs of footwear.

"What's this for?" Cloud asked, poking at the clothing. "We're just going on a day trip, right?"

"Vincent asked me to bring extra clothes. I don't know, maybe the 'research subject' he found is a woman." Tifa paused, frowning, "A naked woman? Hmm. In any case, I'm sure it's not because he's developed a penchant for wearing women's clothing...like someone else I know," she added with a sly grin.

Cloud smiled and shook his head, blonde spikes waving like the spines of some ridiculous porcupine, "Gosh, you sacrifice your personal pride to go rescue your best friend and what do you get? Eternal gratitude? Noooo...you get branded as a transvestite for the rest of your life."

Tifa laughed and shouldered her backpack, tossing Cloud's over the table to him. Best friend...would she ever be more?

Oblivious to her inner thoughts, Cloud was divvying up the materia. "Okay, you get Phoenix, Alexander, Restore, two All's, Fire, Ice, and an Enemy Skill. I get Ultima, Life, Esuna, two All's, Bolt, Demi, and the other Enemy Skill. That should be good. Midgar doesn't have too many monsters left anyway, but, better safe than dead." Cloud fitted the glowing orbs into his sword and bracelet. "Besides, Yuffie's been ticked lately that we're all being so peaceful. Sometimes I wonder if she just thinks of us as slaves who were put here by the Planet just to master materia for her...help me with the ribbon?" he asked Tifa. She finished equipping her own materia and the band he had given her and walked over to tie the fabric strip around his left wrist. Her own ribbon was already tied into her hair.

As Tifa fussed over his wrist, Cloud let the smile fall from his face. Thoughtfully, he gazed at the beautiful woman before him. More and more, his days in the basement were spent thinking of her, instead of studying Hojo's notes. The crisis for the planet was over, and they had settled down comfortably in Nibelheim, and had things to do that filled their days. He didn't suffer from boredom or discontent, and yet he didn't want his life to continue on exactly as it was right now. He wanted...something else, something to change, something...more. He wanted Tifa.

He had her friendship and her admiration. She was his loyal companion, reliable neighbor, and best friend since they were children. And he knew that she cared for him, perhaps even loved him, but she seemed content with their life...their life as neighbors and friends.

He wanted more than a neighbor, more than a friend. He wanted her at his side, not next door. He wanted to hold her close at night and wake to her face in the morning. He wanted her to be his. And he wanted to be hers. But he was unsure of how a proposal of marriage would be received, and afraid of shattering the peaceful relationship they had now. And so he lived, loved, and waited.

Preparations finished, they locked up Tifa's house and took the two gold chocobos from her stable. After some quick and unnecessary instructions to the hired hands, Tifa nodded to Cloud. They were off.