

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 59: The Living, The Dead, and The One In between

They gathered in the council room, partly because the deck of the Highwind was now crowded with Icicle Inn evacuees, and partly because Cloud wanted Vincent confined to where he could keep an unobtrusive eye on him at all times. While everyone discussed the update he'd delivered minutes ago, Cloud remained silent and still in one corner of the room, watching his friend. Vincent sat at the rectangular conference table, back straight and hands neatly folded, once again a picture of cool composure to most of the people in the room. But Cloud watched and observed, and saw that the fingers interlaced on the smooth tabletop were pressed so hard against each other that the fingernails were pale and bloodless, and that the upright posture was a product of a stiffened spine and tense shoulders.

The Vincent that now sat at the table was an exact opposite of the one they'd come upon by the ruins of the Icicle Inn lodge just an hour ago. This Vincent was outwardly collected, but Cloud could sense the turmoil that raged within and trembled to get out. The man they'd run into earlier had been almost unrecognizable for his grief-wracked expression, but the words that had tumbled out had been delivered in a calm, lucid manner.

"He's going to kill her...he's going to kill her and there's nothing I can do to stop him."

"Vincent?" Cloud rushed up to his friend and then looked beyond him, but found nothing but more snow and debris. "What do you mean? Where are they? Did you see them?" Tifa had turned pale at Vincent's words and rushed past them, scanning the remains of the building around them, but had found nothing, and indicated so to her husband with a confused shake of her head. Cloud turned back to the man before him and asked again, "Vincent, where are they?"

The dark head shook slowly and he continued in the same, soft voice. "They're gone...he's gone. There wasn't anything I could do...he had a knife to her throat." Turning his head, he peered into the burned shell of a lodge nearby and mentioned, "He can melt away into his surroundings...it's a new form of shield spell, I suppose. One that uses light and shadow to encase the person in darkness. For all I know, he could be in this very building, but..."

As the soft voice trailed off, Cloud found a new concern pushing aside his fear for Marion. Helplessness was not an aspect of Vincent that he'd ever seen, and he found it entirely disturbing. "But what, Vincent?" he ventured hesitantly. He heard the soft shuffle of boots in the snow, gratefully pressed the slender hand that made its way into his, and waited for a reply.

"He's going to kill her," came the response, and Tifa gave an involuntary cry of denial into Cloud's shoulder. Glowing red eyes fixed themselves onto his own, and the blonde man didn't know who to be more afraid for at the moment...Marion and her life, or Vincent and his sanity. "He's going to kill everyone in the world that he possibly can, and then he'll die, too, and take her with him. I couldn't talk to him and I couldn't kill him...I can't threaten him, and now I can't even find him." Cloud shook his head, not knowing what to do or say, looking through all of the phrases that came to mind and finding them all inadequate. We'll get her back? Don't worry; everything will be all right? Vincent had the greatest motivation and abilities as far as retrieving Marion went...if he was brought up short, what could anyone else do?

"What am I going to do?"

The faint, whispering question delivered in a voice that clearly didn't expect an answer. Cloud could still hear it echoing in his mind, despite the murmurs of conversation that swirled around the Highwind's council room. People died all the time, and their families mourned and then went on with their lives. But Vincent had already suffered so greatly, surely the loss of the one woman who had been able to complete him would undo him entirely. Cloud decided grimly that it was no longer just a matter of getting Marion back safely, but quickly as well.

What am I going to do? Good question. What are we all going to do? He lifted his eyes from Vincent and let his gaze wander around the room. Everyone, weary and worn from the day's arduous activities, once again gathered together to

talk out their options and think of new plans. Reeve, ever organized, even though his clothes were now rumpled and torn, was taking notes and frowning at the paper as if it were the cause of all his troubles. "We've got to somehow choose the battlefield. If we can confront this Alpha Project out in the open, preferably a meadow or desert area where there'll be no shadows to hide in, he'll have no choice but to stand his ground and fight," the former executive mused.

Cloud stored that tidbit of strategim away and continued to let his eyes wander. Ineki and the others of his clan conferred quietly by the windows. Barret, who usually volunteered to solve all ills with his gunarm, was now doing his best to immerse himself into the rapid-fire conversation between Yuffie, Tifa, and several of the Cosmo Canyon elders. Catching his eye, Tifa spared a moment to give him a brief, encouraging smile.

One corner of his mouth twitched upwards in acknowledgment and thanks, and he turned inwards once more. Tifa...his support and mainstay, his love and his wife...she'd been one constant in his life, whether she'd been physically there or not. That smile, always ready when she thought he needed it. Her cheer had helped him survive the of his past...the loss of his family and memories, of Zack and then Aeris...

Aeris...they'd come together in Zack's hometown to strategize just as they were doing now. They'd exerted their minds and pushed their bodies to the limit in their fight to save her from herself and yet she'd still died. Cloud gave himself a mental shake and savagely told himself to concentrate on the matter at hand...think about how to save Marion, not about Aeris...not about the one they'd lost...

...but not entirely, he realized. She was still alive, in a way...she'd called up Lifestream to help them, and they'd been able to talk to her through Marion...

...no, wait...not through Marion...

...what had Nanaki said?

"...there's no reason to believe you and I couldn't go to Mideel or Nibelheim tomorrow and talk to Aeris ourselves..."

Cloud leaped up from his slouch in the corner and slapped his forehead, almost relishing the stinging pain as partial penance for his ineptitude. "I'm an idiot!" he cried, earning him strange looks from everyone.

"What? Why?" asked Tifa succinctly, from across the table.

He shook his head as if to clear his mind and replied, "All this time Marion's been missing, I kept thinking of Aeris. It just...reminded me, I guess...trying to save a friend. But at the same time, I tried to not think about Aeris because it made me feel guilty. We couldn't save her from Sephiroth, and I felt that I should be concentrating on Marion."

Tifa thought about his words for a moment, and then asked patiently, "So why does that make you an idiot?"

Before answering her, Cloud gesture to Reeve and snapped out, "Tell the pilot on duty to turn us towards Nibelheim, and fast!" The dark-haired man immediately jumped up and ran out, and Cloud turned back to his wife and said, "I'm an idiot because all this time I've been trying not to think about Aeris...and she's the one person who can find Marion for us."

It took them one emotionally charged hour to race to Nibelheim, and an additional half-hour for Cloud to take the gold choco from the Highwind up the rocky paths to the Mt. Nibel reactor. Tifa had fretted at the lack of her chocobos from the stables, but none of the outriders that Reeve had deployed to Wutai had returned as of yet...and none of the ones he'd sent to the Northern Continent would ever return. After jumping on to the chocobo's back, he'd held out a hand to her, but she'd urged him to go on alone. With only an instant of hesitation, he'd nodded and kicked his mount into an all-out sprint...one extra rider would just slow them down that much more, and time was of the utmost importance.

He gained the familiar cavern and dismounted, pulling and tugging the golden bird into the darkness after him. Loose rocks and the dimness of the twisting corridors tripped him up time and again, but he hurried on, heedless of the cuts and bruises he was picking up. The time he sensed that he'd lost urged him on...he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of this earlier...

...God, don't let this be the deciding factor between Marion's life or death...

A faint light shimmered ahead, and he finally burst into the silent sanctuary where he'd last been able to talk to the Flower Girl of Midgar. Taking a deep breath and steadying his mind, he fell to his knees by the mako fountain and plunged his hands deep into the glimmering pond.

Green...beautiful glittering green...

"Cloud!" Aeris shouted into his head, startling him with the strength of her message, "Thank God you came. Something's wrong with Marion!"

"I know, I know...that's why we're here," he began, but was immediately interrupted by Aeris's voice, now pushing the edge of frantic.

"Is she sick or injured? Did something happen to her? Did you bring her with you?"

"Slow down," protested Cloud. "We don't know where she is, Aeris. She was kidnapped." After a short pause in which worry pulsed from Aeris' presence in agitated waves, Cloud asked, "How did you know something was wrong?"

"The Planet has some kind of connection with her...I'm not sure how. It's not like how I can try to listen to the Planet, it's more like they're aware of each other at a sub-conscious level...and the Planet started screaming again recently. When I tried to find out what was wrong, I got back images of Marion, and a message that she's lost, somehow. The link between them has been broken."

"I tried to call to her like I used to when she was in Hojo's lab. I didn't think it would work, since she isn't in contact with any lifestream, but I was able to reach her for just a moment."

Because she is lifestream...thought Cloud, but filed away the fact for later. Right now, he wanted to hear what Aeris had been able to do.

"She's hurting, Cloud. I don't know if she's sick or has a head injury or what, but she doesn't have full control over her own mind anymore. It took me so long just to get her attention, and when I finally did, she couldn't even send me a thought...and then she went blank, like...like she went into a coma or something. Somewhere deeper than sleep, where I can't get to her anymore."

Aeris shook away the concern that tried to weigh her down and continued, her voice tense with frustration and fear. "But aside from what's happening to Marion and the existence of this...this awareness that the Planet has of her, what I can't figure out is why the Planet feels so threatened by the danger to Marion. Cloud, the Planet is so distraught that it's calling up Weapon again! You have to find Marion, Cloud. You have to stop Weapon from being born."

"...it's too late," Cloud said to her horror. "There's a new Weapon already tearing up everything in sight. It's black, so we're calling it the Onyx Weapon. When Hojo created Marion, somehow he infused her not just with lifestream, but a portion of the Planet's soul or awareness. That's why Weapon is trying to save her, but because the kidnapper's using Marion as a hostage, there's nothing that it can do. He's using Marion as bait and as a shield, and it makes the Weapon go crazy whenever it's confronted with the impossibility of killing the kidnapper and saving Marion at the same time."

Aeris let the words sink in, and then realized, "The Onyx Weapon is the gun, Marion's the trigger, and the kidnapper is using them both to destroy everything."

"Yes. We followed Weapon to where they were, but the kidnapper can vanish, somehow...he just folds himself into the shadows. We have to track him down and force a fight out in the open where he can't disappear. But we can't find them, Aeris, and we can't just wait for him to target another city. You have to help us!"

"How?" she asked helplessly. "The Planet doesn't even know where she is...what can I do?"

"The Planet doesn't think and reason like you and I do, Aeris. If it did, don't you think it would have sent the lifestream to aid Holy on its own? You had to think of it, and you had to ask...and the Planet replied. I want you to do the same thing again, but instead of gathering the lifestream in one place, I need you to ask the Planet to spread it out."

"Spread it..?" Aeris began to ask.

"Yes, spread it out all over the world. Marion's out there somewhere, Aeris. We just have to find her."

He sat at the edge of the tiny fountain, watching and waiting, hoping and praying. All was silent and still in the luminous cavern, and he felt some of the peace and serenity of the place seep into his soul, and accepted it gladly. Pale lids closed over aquamarine eyes, and he took in a deep breath, feeling his heartbeat slow a fraction and some of the anxiety seep away.

When he opened his eyes once more, a thick green mist had obscured the crystalline pond. He turned his head to find slender tendrils of the same emerald energy seeping up through the ground, as if he were sitting on top of an underground hot spring that was sending up wisps of steam. Centering his mind once more, he probed around in the thick liquid for Aeris' presence.

"Is it working?" he questioned, sending his thoughts out in a concentrated pulse.

"I think so," Aeris replied hesitantly. "I can't find Marion yet, but I can sense Tifa and the others just down the mountain...give me a minute; this Planet's huge."

"He can't have traveled too far yet...sweep the Northern Continent first, then make your way South." Surprisingly, Aeris laughed at him. "'Make my way South?' Cloud, I'm within the Planet, there is no North or South for me anymore...there's just...there."

"Oh," he replied lamely, not knowing exactly what she was saying, and not wanting to distract her any further, either.

The Alpha Project shifted Marion slightly across his lap, making sure his precious weapon and hostage in one didn't fall off of the golden bird he'd appropriated from one of the riders that had raced into Bone Village. The bird was well-trained and mannered, and had stayed put while he'd entertained himself at Icicle Inn...and now was taking him across the vast ocean to his next target, Midgar. Now that he knew the little experiment he's inherited from Hojo worked, the labs where he'd been created were his primary target. And after Midgar, perhaps that disgusting resort town, Costa del Sol. No matter the order, actually...he would destroy them all. "Smash smash," he laughed gleefully, "all gone, no more. Fun, isn't it?" he asked the limp bundle thrown across the saddle. Cocking his head, he checked her pulse and calculated that she'd need another injection in about an hour...five hours after that, he'd let her wake up and they'd bring another town back down to the ground from whence it had risen.

With a slightly puzzled frown, he squinted into the distance, where it seemed a low fog had gathered on the coast. But fog generally burned away during the noon hour...and it usually wasn't a bright, glittering green. His chocobo suddenly warked and shied, stumbling through the crest of a few waves. The Alpha Project reined his mount in and then turned to see what had spooked the bird. A thick tendril of green mist snaked across the surface of the ocean, twining its way towards them. Sweeping the horizon behind him, he found several more strands of Lifestream looping through the tops of the waves. What the hell? He frowned and kicked his chocobo back into a gallop, slowly distancing himself from the coils of Lifestream that seemed to be pursuing him.

Cloud stood up, and with one last smile at the mako fountain, turned and ran back towards the entrance of the cavern. Lifestream continued to spiral upwards from the ground as he raced back down the twisting mountain paths, coils and snake of the misty green energy rising up to twine around him and then dissipate into a thin fog. By the time he reached the Highwind, everyone was hip deep in swirling spirit energy. Tifa fairly dragged him from the saddle and momentarily chased away his cares and concerns with an enthusiastic kiss.

"She did it!" Tifa beamed excitedly, and then swept her arm out to encompass the valley in which they stood. "Look at this!" All around them, in the valley where they'd first gotten a taste of Marion's capabilities, the soul of the Planet poured out from the grass and dirt, creeping up the mountains and twining around their bodies as if exploring. Grabbing his shirt

and shaking him impatiently, Tifa asked, "So did she find them?"

He nodded and began herding everyone back towards the Highwind. Catching the eye of one of the piloting crew, he shouted up, "Midgar!"