

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 10: Saddle Up! Move Out!

"Grab the reins in your left hand, and then put both hands on either side of the saddle, like this," Tifa demonstrated. "Then, put your left foot in this stirrup here, and boost yourself up. Just swing your other leg over the saddle and sit down. See? Easy." Tifa turned to Marion with a triumphant smile, only to find the other girl staring up at her with an extremely dubious look on her face. Cloud was packing their remaining gear onto the other chocobo, and Vincent stood nearby, watching silently.

Patting the neck of her patient mount, Tifa tried to reassure her. "These birds were bred and raised by me; they're very tame, and won't run off or try to toss you, I promise. If you can just swing up behind me here, you can ride double with me, and if you hold on to my waist you won't fall off. I'll guide the chocobo for you and everything." Tifa held out her hand invitingly, sliding her foot out of the stirrup so that Marion could use it. Just then, Vincent vaulted up onto the other chocobo and kicked it over to where Marion stood trying to build up the courage to approach Tifa's golden bird. Blinking her eyes in surprise, Tifa watched as he leaned out of the saddle and simply grabbed Marion around the waist and lifted her up to his lap. She clung to him in startlement, eyes darting from his face to the bird to the ground, which seemed very far below her now. Vincent leveled a cool gaze at Tifa. "Shall we go?"

He guided the bird in a large circle around their campsite, gradually urging the chocobo faster until it was trotting, and then slowing down once more to a walk, all the while watching Marion's face. Her lips were slightly tucked inward and pressed together as she watched the landscape flow by, and her eyes looked about her avidly. As they slowed down, she looked up at him, eyes sparkling with excitement. He lifted his eyebrows inquiringly, and she stated solemnly, "I like it."

"Good," he replied simply. "We'll get two of these gold chocobos from Tifa to travel with when we leave Nibelheim." Vincent turned their mount so that it faced the distant ocean and began the trek to Cloud and Tifa's hometown.

Tifa clutched her reins with suddenly sweaty palms. Marion's riding with Vincent, so that means...

Cloud appeared with a backpack slung across one shoulder, and swung up behind her on the chocobo, settling himself comfortably behind her. Close behind her. The saddles hadn't been made with two people in mind, and so it was a bit of a squeeze, but she certainly wasn't going to suggest that she ride on his lap to save space. His arms circled her waist, with his hands folded together comfortably in her lap.

"Uh...want the reins?" Tifa asked, hoping to occupy his hands. "Nah," came the complacent reply, "you go ahead." Tifa sent up a hopeful prayer that he wouldn't notice how tense she was - fat chance, the way his entire body seemed to be pressed up against hers - and chirruped to her chocobo, setting off for the coastline, and Nibelheim far beyond.