

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 18: What Vincent and Marion's Chocobo Heard

Marion snuggled into Vincent's arms, his cloak wrapped comfortably around them both, taking the bite out of the crisp morning air. Their chocobo picked its way daintily up the uneven paths, surefooted and steady. Marion ran a hand over the dark, velvety feathers. Although Tifa had called these black chocobos, Marion thought that gray would have been a more accurate color description. The feathers had a faint sheen over them that reflected even the tiniest ray of light, making them seem much lighter than they really were. Their chocobo's feathers were not half as dark as Vincent's hair, or her own, for that matter.

She pulled herself away from Vincent, shifting in his arms so that she could look up into his face. Curiously, she held up a lock of her own hair against his, comparing the hues. "Your hair is black just like mine, but it's...different. A different black. Are there different types of everything?" Vincent unconsciously mimicked Cloud, wrapping the reins loosely around his claw in order to free up his hand. He brought his arm up to run his fingers through Marion's long hair. "Your hair is a deeper, more intense black than my own. And yes, there are different types of almost anything. Different color chocobos, different shades of colors," he replied, resting his arm around the tiny waist before him. Marion tacked on, "and different types of love, too."

"Love?" Vincent asked casually. Why had she brought that up? "Mm-hmm," Marion nodded, "Tifa said there's lots. She said there's at least a little love in any relationship - husbands, wives, parents, children, friends, companions, and lovers. Tifa's my friend - she said so," she said confidently, and then, "do you think Cloud is?"

"He is now, and he will always be. He's loyal, just as Tifa is. Everyone has gotten to know you in the past few days and they all like you. They are all your friends now," Vincent said. Marion looked thoughtful. "I have friends, but not parents or children or any of the others. I think Tifa might be trying to be my mother, though. She does mother things for me...or maybe they're friend things." She continued to mentally nibble at these musings, and then turned her face to Vincent once more, "What are you?"

"What am I?" returned Vincent, not quite sure what she was asking. Marion's gaze was intense, eyes wide and searching. "You're my friend, but not like Tifa and Cloud. You're...more, I think."

Vincent simply returned her gaze for a moment, thinking to himself. Well, Marion, I'm a 27 year old man who was born about 60 years ago, with a claw for a left hand, glowing red eyes, and several monsters living inside of him because of what a man named Hojo did. I can float, I can see in the dark, oh, and I'm very, very good at killing because I used to be a Turk. I just appointed myself your personal protector two weeks ago and I plan on taking you around the world because...

Because what? He thought back to the morning when he had found Marion. In only a few hours, she had managed to bring forth empathy and protectiveness from his heart - the heart that he had thought completely bound in ice. Had it been only that she was also a victim of the same mad scientist as he had been? Rather than dropping her off somewhere to be taken care of, he had appointed himself her guardian. Had he simply been taking responsibility for finding her?

Images from the past fortnight flitted through Vincent's mind. Cradling Marion in the gloomy corridor as she slept in his arms. Reassuring her anxieties. Soothing her as she struggled with nightmares that first night on the outside. Comforting her hurts. Chasing away the monsters that stalked them on the way to Nibelheim. Protecting her. Healing the injuries she sustained during her training. Standing with her, next to her, behind her, returning those looks, letting her be silent when she wanted, and answering all of her questions when she asked. Watching her. Watching her sleep, eat, sit, stand, walk, talk. Constantly watching over her, thinking of her, because...

Why?

Because.

What?

I'm falling in love with her.

'You're my friend, but not like Tifa and Cloud. You're...more, I think. What are you?'

What am I? Outwardly, Vincent remained calm, but his eyes betrayed him. Emotions long forgotten welled up within him, catching him off guard, twisting his heart. What am I? I'm a monster, one of Hojo's creations, a murderer and assassin by trade and by nature. And I'm falling in love with a girl almost ten years younger than I am - over forty years younger, in truth. What am I, Marion? What am I to you?

At first she wasn't sure if he was going to answer her. He simply looked at her, and she waited expectantly, wanting to know how he would classify their relationship. She knew what they weren't - they obviously weren't family, and neither were they married or lovers. Friends and companions, yes, but it was a different kind of friend, a different kind of companion than either Cloud or Tifa, or any of the others, and she wanted to know the difference. As they rode on in silence, however, something unfamiliar crept into his eyes. He seemed to be searching her gaze for...something, and not finding it. She tilted her head wonderingly. So much emotion...and mingled in was something very like fear. Concerned, with fear beginning to prickle at her own heart, she clutched at his shirt with her suddenly cold hands. Her voice small and high, she called his name questioningly.

"Vincent?" His eyes blinked, re-focusing themselves. He shook his head quickly and then replied in a soft voice, "I'm sorry, my thoughts...wandered." He sighed, and then continued, "as for your question about what I am...I am here for you, always."

Marion considered, and apparently decided that the answer pleased her, for she nodded and nestled back into his arms. But her head quickly popped up again after only a moment, and she asked, "What am I? Tifa's my friend and I'm hers. You are here for me; what am I for you?"

Myriad suggestions clamored in Vincent's suddenly unruly mind - heart? - but they were none that he would voice to her.

Be my loyal friend, my constant companion, my faithful love. Live for me, die for me. Dedicate yourself to me, heart and soul, body and mind, and I will do the same with you.

"What do you want to be?" he asked instead.

The pale forehead bowed in contemplation, long lashes temporarily shadowing her brilliant green eyes. What did she want to be? She wanted to stand by his side, sit at his feet, and rest in his arms. Her ears hungered for the sound of his voice, yet she would have been content if he had never spoken to her again, as long as she could gaze into his eyes. So, what did she want to be? She wanted to be everything for him - the man who had given her a new life, a new world. She wanted to be his friend, his companion, she wanted to help him in all things, to learn at his feet, to travel at his side. She wanted so much, and yet it all boiled down to a single, simple thing. She wanted to be his. But how to tell him so? And would he want that? Vincent, so self-reliant, so capable and calm - why would he want to tie himself to someone, anyone, especially a completely unknowledgeable and dependent person such as herself? But perhaps he wouldn't mind simply her presence at his side...?

"I want to be with you, always." She looked up at him, earnest and completely serious. The icy hand that tortured and twisted at Vincent's heart loosened at her words, and he pulled her to him with his free hand so that she wouldn't see the utter relief and love he was sure showed in his eyes.

"I have no objections," he said softly into her hair. He felt her arms tighten around his waist as she burrowed her face into his chest. They rode on in silence, each wondering at the new emotions stirring in their hearts, neither daring to speak any more for fear of what their words might reveal.