

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 19: Reach Out and Touch Someone

They dismounted as the path continued on into a hole in the mountainside. On one side of the narrow path, a sheer face of rock towered over their heads, disappearing into the thick clouds that seemed to be held up by the mountains themselves. On the other side, the mountainside was just as steep, but it fell away from them, plummeting down hundreds of feet to be lost in the foggy canyon below. Marion prudently stepped back from the precipice, although she found that a fear of heights was apparently not part of her past.

Too low to allow the party to ride through, the cavern entrance forced the decision to lead their mounts the rest of the way, rather than leave them on the pathway, as Cloud had originally suggested.

"It took me months to breed these chocobos, and I'm not taking any chances with them," Tifa declared, "Just because the mako reactor isn't working anymore doesn't mean that all of the monsters around here just disappeared, you know." Although they had seen no hostile creatures as of yet - it had been as if the monsters knew that this party was armed and dangerous - Cloud conceded the point and took the reins, tugging the smoky bird after him as he ducked into the cave.

Marion blinked a few times, peering around her into the dimness of the cave as her eyes adjusted. As they moved farther away from the light coming in through the cave's entrance, Marion noticed that the walls themselves gave off a faint, cold glow. Examining the craggy surface of the maze of tunnels that they threaded their way through, she found small veins of crystallized mako running through the walls. She ran an experimental hand over the glowing rock, and some small shards crumbled off into her palm. She stopped for a moment, bringing the tiny fragments up to her face to better see them. In their dim light, she saw a faint, misty haze seeping from them, sinking into her skin.

Mako. Spirit Energy. Lifestream. The knowledge of the Ancients contained in the soul of the planet.

An image formed in Marion's mind. Swirling, glittering spirit energy whirled up from a delicate rose, crushed underneath a heavy tractor. The ribbon of lifestream spiraled up from the dying plant in a graceful ribbon, past the machinery that was even now lifting up heavy beams to begin construction of Midgar's upper plate. The rose-energy whirled in the air momentarily, and then fell once more, gliding across the ground like an iridescent snake, seeping into a nearby crack in the ground to join the greater lifestream hidden within the planet. It had merged with the whole, and after a short while, been condensed here with myriad other energies to bring light to this cavern. Someday, it would crumble and dissipate, to join with the source once more, and again find a new place, a new shape, a new life to live. For now, it waited, and shared its knowledge with those who could listen.

Marion shook her head, coming out of the daze she had fallen in to. Looking around her, she saw Cloud and the others far ahead of her. Vincent had stopped and turned, looking back at her curiously. Marion quickly brushed her hand off on her tunic and padded over the rocky floor to where he waited. Ignoring his silent inquiry, she simply fell in by his side and continued on through the tunnels, trying to forget about the rose that had died decades ago.

They seemed to walk for miles, each step becoming simply another in a long chain of steps, the passageways merging one into the next until Marion could not accurately remember how long they had been walking. And then Cloud raised his hand, signaling them to stop. Tethering his chocobo to a slender spire of rock, he looked back and motioned for them to follow him through a narrow cleft in the wall. One by one, the chocobos' reins were secured to various rocks and then left behind as their riders slipped through the jagged opening.

The chamber stood silent, massive rock walls standing patiently, continuing to watch over the shining fountain in their midst as they had for centuries before, and would continue to do so for centuries to come. The fountain itself was a glistening, glowing, living thing, utterly serene and terribly beautiful, standing silent and alone in the shaft of sunlight beaming in through a hole in the vaulted ceiling. A large crystal balanced delicately on a branch of minerals, which rose up out of a miniature pond of spirit energy. Tendrils of misty mako spiraled and tumbled down from the crystal, falling to the

surface of the pond in a light fog before sinking into the waiting lifestream.

They stood quietly, awed by the beauty and majesty of the cavern. Vincent was the first to look away, down to Marion, who stood as silent and still as the walls around them. No, he amended, silent and still as the mako fountain - not moving, but undeniably alive. Her eyes glowed, reflecting the exact color of the mako fountain's crystal, lids opened wide to take in every detail, and lips parted to draw in quick, shallow breaths that somehow seemed to convey a subdued anticipation. Her cheeks were blushed with excitement against her pale skin, and she seemed to Vincent a living sculpture herself, entrancing all who beheld her, just as the mako fountain did.

And then the statue came to life. All heads turned as Marion walked through their midst, heading for the mako fountain. As they watched, she stepped into the shallow pond and knelt, the shining liquid causing the hem of her tunic to blouse out and float across the surface like the petals of some exotic water lily. She sank her hands down into the water in front of her, fingers spread wide, feeling the liquid run between them. A faint green mist began to rise from the water around her, curling together with the mako already falling from the crystal above to cover her in a glowing nimbus. Illuminated by the pale beams of light from above, the mist could be seen entering her mouth through slightly parted lips, and then being exhaled again as she breathed. After only a moment, Marion turned her head to look back at them and whispered,

"She says 'hi.'"

As if on cue, everyone stepped forward, gathering around the tiny pond where Marion knelt and looking into the misted green liquid as if they hoped to see Aeris within its depths. Well, almost everyone. Vincent stared instead at a pair of eyes, glowing equally green and bright. No one knew what to do or say, except Marlene. With all the innocence of her age, she eagerly asked Marion, "Can I talk to the flower lady, too?"

All eyes snapped up, everyone hoping and wondering the same thing. Marion reached out and took Marlene's tiny fingers in her own, and brought them to the surface of the pond. With their fingers linked together in the glowing liquid, Marion instructed, "think about her, form a picture of her in your mind, and try to put that thought in the lifestream. She'll find you, and then you can talk to her, but with your mind, not your voice."

The small head nodded, straight brown hair swinging back and forth across her shoulders. Marlene screwed her eyes shut in fierce concentration, putting amused smiles on many of the adult faces gathered around her. Barret laid one enormous hand protectively on her shoulders, and Reeve smiled at him reassuringly. In the months that Reeve had worked with Barret to restore Corel, the two had become surprisingly good friends. Although one man was a hulking giant who had been the leader of Avalanche, and the other was a quiet and reserved former member of Shinra, the two had found in each other the same love for their fellow humans and respect for the planet that made up the foundation of their principles and ethics. Cementing the relationship had been Marlene's immediate affection for Reeve. Upon meeting him, she had promptly settled herself in his lap and demanded stories, which Reeve supplied quite naturally, much to Barret's surprise. The Cait Sith robot, which had been brought along in a crate, had been unpacked and handed over to Barret's adopted daughter, forever earning "Uncle Reeve" a place in the little girl's heart. Reeve understood the fierce, protective love Barret had for his dead friend's daughter, and shared it as well. He caught Barret's gaze and murmured, "she'll do just fine." His huge friend smiled sheepishly and nodded.

Suddenly Marlene let out a squeal of joy, "Aeris!" she cried. Marion smiled, releasing the chubby fingers and laying her hands in her lap. She prompted the child gently, "you need to talk to her in your mind, Marlene." The round brown eyes popped open to look at her quizzically. "Think of the words you want to say and...sort of push them out towards her," Marion tried to explain. How did one instruct a six-year old in the arts of telepathic conversation via spirit energy?

Her little companion nodded and scrunched her face up once more, clenching her small fists into the pond, and sending thoughts out with all of her might. After only a few moments, a disappointed face turned upwards into hers, and Marlene's plaintive voice said, "I can't find her again."

Marion probed the lifestream around her once more. Aeris was there, waiting. "I can feel that she's there, Marlene." Reaching out her hands, she said, "Let's try it together again." The little girl eagerly grasped her fingers once more and plunged them into the pond, sending sparkling ripples across the surface.

Marion closed her eyes, sinking her own awareness into the glowing pond. She could sense Aeris hovering nearby, but for some reason couldn't pinpoint Marlene's location. She could hear Aeris begin talking, and from the conversation it was apparent that she was talking with Marlene, but...why couldn't she hear the little girl's mind?

Aeris' voice cut through her thoughts, "Marion? What's wrong? I feel confusion and a little bit of fear coming from you." Marion collected her thoughts and reached out for her old friend. "I don't know...Aeris, I can't hear Marlene's voice...I can't even find her. But Marlene can't contact you unless I help her. What's going on?"

There was a slight pause, and then the gentle voice echoed once more through her thoughts, reassurance tinged with the slightest flavor of uncertainty. "I'm not sure, either. It probably has something to do with the experiments you underwent. You and I have lots of practice in this, so perhaps the others need you as a guide. As for why you can't find Marlene..." Aeris paused for a moment, and then sent out a thought directed away from Marion, but still audible in a sort of backwash, "hold on, sweetheart, I'm talking to Marion right now." Another pause, "yes, I know, she can't hear you either. Maybe everyone can only talk to me, not each other."

Marion made an effort to calm herself, unsatisfied with Aeris' answer, but unable to come up with any of her own. "I guess," she replied, and then smiled to herself as the warmth of remembrance and friendship welled up within her. "Oh, Aeris, I've missed you. I miss your voice in my mind. It's different, talking with your mouth; it's so...impersonal. It's harder to tell feelings and intent - most of the time, I have to guess what everyone's really trying to say or express." A soft laugh washed over her, filling Marion with the gentle humor and understanding that her Ancient friend had sent to her. "You're right," Aeris replied, "talking mind to mind is much more intimate. It's a sharing of the heart, really. Too bad the entire world can't converse this way...we would never have plunged our cities into war. And speaking of hearts, I see someone other than myself has first place in yours now. I must say, I'm a little jealous, not to mention surprised at your choice."

Marion rippled a feeling of joy and amusement through the lifestream. She felt so free and comfortable here with Aeris. Nothing to fear or hide, communing heart to heart with her dear friend, sharing thoughts and emotions instantly with a simple touch. "Oh, Aeris, it wasn't a choice at all! It just happened to me. Oh, and he's nothing like you described! Maybe his outer appearance was cold and distant, but that's just a shell or covering, like the cloak he wears. Ever since he found me in the lab, he...I..." Marion gave up trying to form words around her feelings and simply sent out a pulse towards Aeris, filled with her myriad indefinable emotions for Vincent, and laced with simple images and their accompanying feelings. Looking into his eyes, and feeling at peace; holding him and being held, and the glowing warmth that spread throughout her being; riding on a chocobo with him, and the excitement and sense of being protected. Marion felt the reverberation as Aeris received the message. After a silent moment, a wave like a bell ringing washed over her, carrying Aeris' wonder and joy all throughout her in an intimate embrace. "Oh, Marion..." came the soft, smiling whisper, "you're in love with him."

Before Marion could recover from the surprise and realization, someone tugged at her sleeve. Sleeve? What sleeve? Oh, that one...her body. Who wanted her attention? Marion broke contact with Aeris, sending a ripple of Farewell and I'll talk to you again as she returned her mind to her body.

Everyone watched breathlessly as Marlene and Marion sat with linked hands in some wordless communication within the lifestream. Marlene's face was an ever-changing canvas of delight and affection, eyes roving behind tightly shut lids, her head nodding and tilting as she apparently talked to Aeris. Next to her, Marion was as still as a statue, with her head bent over their hands and her long black hair a curtain around her, the ends floating on the surface of the pond. Several minutes passed this way, and then Marlene's tiny forehead creased into a frown. Barret peered into her face in concern, but before he could decide what to do, her eyes snapped open and stared at Marion curiously.

"What's wrong, Baby?" Barret asked in a careful whisper. Marlene ignored her father for the moment, tugging one chubby hand free from the handclasp and pulling insistently on Marion's sleeve. The pale face lifted after a moment, lids blinking as if Marion had just awakened from a nap. "Hmm?" asked Marion, slightly disoriented, "oh, what is it, Marlene?"

"Who are you in love with?" the child whispered curiously. Barret and Reeve traded a surprised look. Marlene's whisper didn't carry far enough for anyone else to hear except for the two men crowded around her, and of course Marion.

"What?" she replied blankly.

"Who are you in love with?" Marlene questioned once more. "I heard Aeris say that you were in love with someone, but she didn't mention who, and I wanted to know."

Marion's pink lips fell open and then quickly clamped shut once more. She found herself inexplicably blushing at the child's innocent inquiry. Aeris had said that she was in love with Vincent. Was it true? She felt strangely glad that Vincent was standing a little way behind her, and could not see her face. Barret coughed, embarrassed, but couldn't for the life of him think of a way to turn the conversation. He looked around the pond at the others, who were all looking at them with curiosity obvious in their eyes. "Uh..." Barret began, but then Reeve cut in smoothly. "Who wants to talk to Aeris next?" he asked, scanning the small crowd. As he spoke he plucked Marlene up off of the ground and carried her over to a small boulder nearby, plunking her down and rooting in his pocket for a handkerchief to dry her hands. Marlene drew breath to speak, but was hushed by a narrow look from her "Uncle."

Everyone looked around at each other, all of them eager to speak to their former companion, but unsure of how to proceed. "Well," Cloud said finally, "why don't we just go around in a circle? Barret, looks like you're up next." Grumbling a bit, as he usually did when embarrassed, he took Marion's waiting fingers in his own huge hands and was soon lost in the lifestream. Shuffling her confused thoughts into a convenient corner in her mind to be sorted out later, Marion closed her eyes once more after a quick, grateful glance at Reeve, who smiled quietly in return.

Delicate lids closed over the still-startling green eyes. Reeve watched her still form for a moment longer, and then turned to the youngest member of their current company. "Young lady," he began sternly, "do you know that it's very rude to eavesdrop?" Marlene protested, "But Uncle Reeve, I wanted to know..." Reeve cut in quickly, "It doesn't matter; it's still rude. And it's even worse manners to try and find out in front of everyone. Don't you have secrets that you want to keep to yourself?" A tiny lip pouted out charmingly, "No. I tell them all to Cait." Reeve laughed despite himself, and the lecture ended. He finished drying off her hands and then scooped up the miniature miscreant and walked her back towards the pond, where Yuffie was now sitting - quietly for once - with her hands submerged, fingers linked loosely with Marion's.

Hours passed as everyone took turns talking to Aeris, and then it was Cloud's turn. Vincent would be last, since he had stationed himself a bit away from the circle, standing so that he could watch Marion from over everyone's heads. Reeve stood up from where he had knelt and shook his hands, spraying glowing mako droplets around him. He let loose a sigh, forgiven and at complete peace within himself for the first time in...how long? He gave Marion a grateful smile and turned to join the group of those who had already spoken to Aeris, and were now holding a whispered conversation, most likely sharing what they had talked to their friend about.

Marion watched him walk away, her eyes automatically going past him to the others. Barret and Cid were unusually subdued, and Shera sat nearby with a thoughtful and wondering look on her face. All three contributed only a little to the conversation being held up mostly by Yuffie and Tifa, with little asides from Marlene, who sat comfortably in Tifa's lap. Nanaki sat next to her, tickling Marlene with his fiery tail, and licking the last of the Mako from his paws.

Marion's attention was nudged back to the pond as Cloud sat down on the rim, folding his hands together in his lap and gazing into the shallows. She caught his gaze and held out her hands invitingly. Strong hands wrapped around hers, but didn't dip down to the mako; instead gripping her fingers tightly as Cloud cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Marion, I want to talk to Aeris about...many things, and one of those things is you. Remember that I said I thought I could find out who you are?" Marion nodded. "I want to ask Aeris what happened to Sephiroth's spirit, and to see if she can recognize yours. I want to know if she can find out from your spirit energy where you're from, or what your name is...something like that. Will you help me do that?"

Marion twisted her body around to look behind her, and Cloud realized that Vincent had approached - his silent footfalls and shadowy presence unnoticed by the ex-Soldier. He and Marion gazed at each other for a long moment, and Cloud began to wonder if Vincent was going to say something or if Marion was silently pleading for help, but Marion suddenly turned back to him and plunged their hands deep into the pond, startling him. Marion already had her head bowed and

her eyes tightly shut, and after a moment of hesitation - and a quick glance upwards at Vincent, who was still watching Marion - Cloud also closed his eyes and reached out into the lifestream.

"Think about her, form a picture of her in your mind, and try to put that thought in the lifestream. She'll find you, and then you can talk to her, but with your mind, not your voice."

Aeris...

"Hi, Cloud." The well-remembered voice rang through his mind, bringing with it a flood of memories and emotions that reduced the stoic mercenary to a helpless, naked honesty.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," he whispered into the lifestream. Guilt and remorse, pain and loss, anger and doubt all flooded from him in a wave. "I never meant for you to get hurt, Aeris. I didn't want you to die."

What came back to him were not words, but everything else. A clear image of Aeris, happy and alive within the lifestream, individual strands of spirit energy swirling around her; the sound of her laughter and the eerie, ethereal voice of the planet joined together in song; a breath of scent containing flowers and grass and a fresh spring breeze; the sensation of soft arms wrapping around him in a hug; a shower of emotions that washed over and through him in a glorious mixture of love, understanding, sympathy, and forgiveness.

And then her soft, gentle voice, "It's okay, it's all right. There's nothing to forgive, Cloud."

His overwhelming anguish was momentarily damped by amazement. Nothing to forgive? Images flew from him in an unchecked tide...falling through the roof of the church to crush her treasured flowers; standing helplessly by as Barret shattered the glass specimen tank she had been trapped in; unable to fulfill his duties as her bodyguard time and again...and the brutal beating he'd given her in the Temple crater. And the memory that haunted his nightmares...his sword whistling through the air to stop only inches from her slender neck as she knelt there...knelt there in front of him as he watched - paralyzed first by magic and then by horror - watched a black-cloaked shadow fall across her. He could still hear the ringing of steel against stone as the Masamune slid through her body and struck the marble altar, cold silvery sparks flying upwards from the blade, a mocking echo of the light that fled her eyes.

Marion felt the reflection of what Aeris had sent out to Cloud and hoped fervently that it would be enough to erase the guilt that she guessed plagued his heart. She couldn't sense Cloud, just as all the others had been invisible to her, and she to them. A few three-way conversations had taken place, though, with Aeris as mediator. Tifa's jumble of affection, protectiveness, curiosity, and a microscopic tinge of jealousy that she had tried to hide had been filtered through Aeris and given to her. Reeve's remorse at being part of the corporation that was responsible for her memory loss had been shared as well, and her forgiveness had been merged with Aeris' and returned to him. Marlene's innocent soul; Barret's hidden tenderness; Cid's simple and pure heart; Shera's quiet loyalty...she knew them all better now through the minutes spent with Aeris than she could have in months and years of every day living.

Her attention was caught by Aeris' voice. "No, his spirit energy has already been...recycled, I guess you can call it. But no, I can't tell you who she is, either. I can only tell you who she isn't."

Marion sent a questioning thought towards Aeris. "Sorry, Marion. We didn't mean to leave you out. Cloud wanted to know who you are, but...I can't tell you that. I'm sorry." Marion wondered if she meant that she couldn't tell, or she didn't want to, but Aeris didn't respond to the silent inquiry. "He also wants to know where Sephiroth's spirit is, but I'm not sure I should tell him. I'll show you, and you can decide later on, okay? Here." An image formed in Marion's mind, and if she had been in her body, her jaw would have dropped. Marion decided she definitely would have to tell Cloud someday, but probably not right away. Aeris caught the ripple of that thought and laughed, "I know, it's rather surprising, isn't it? I think it's a good idea, though."

Aeris' next thought flowed away from Marion, "Hmm? No, I'm not going to tell you. But I'll make up for it. Want to know where Zack was reborn to?" A slight pause, and then, "I found him as soon as I could. The planet had sent him to a new life as a boy again. Maybe it wanted him to live a long life; the life he didn't get to finish before...here, I'll show you both." Two

images pulsed out, and Marion caught one of them. A young boy, almost nine years old, scampered energetically around the wooden frame of a house being built. A man in his late twenties ran after him and scooped the boy up into the air, laughing up into his face. Father and son shared the same sandy brown hair, laughing blue eyes, and deep affection for each other. The image faded away.

"Of course he doesn't look like Zack, Cloud. His body wasn't reborn; it's his spirit. He won't have any memories of his former life, just like you don't remember being a butterfly...I'm kidding, Cloud - calm down."

Cloud and Aeris began conversing about Zack and past happenings in Midgar. Marion tuned out the echoes of their conversation and explored the lifestream with interest. While unconscious in the underground lab, she had only wanted to talk to her friend; she had never expressed any interest in the lifestream itself, and Aeris had never volunteered to show her around. Now, with her curiosity and adventuresome spirit fed daily by her new friends, she found herself wanting to know more about the glowing energy that she had been imbued with.

Her field of vision was not defined by how far her eyes could see or how much she could turn her head, for she was not seeing with her body; she was seeing with her mind. It was slightly disconcerting to be able to see in all directions, as if her ability to see were contained in a glass globe, from which she could view her surroundings in all directions, all at once. The lifestream swirled around her, varicolored ribbons and swirls of shining energy constantly moving and twisting as if a great finger was stirring it. Remembering the rose's memories trapped in the crystallized mako, she singled out a nearby strand and centered her mind on it, reaching out mentally to touch and feel and know.

This was another rose. Marion felt earth bind her roots and sunlight warm her leaves as life coursed through her in a succession of days and nights, summers and winters, from a seed to a withered stalk. Children ravaged her stems for pretty blossoms, snails curled up under her foliage, and bees gossiped in her petals. The sights and sensations faded as the memories ran out, and Marion found herself once more suspended in the lifestream, with Aeris and Cloud's voices a low hum nearby.

Another rose...had she unconsciously picked out another rose because she had been thinking of one? Or had the spirit been drawn to her mind? Wanting to test out whether it had been coincidence or not, Marion concentrated on a mental image of the chocobo she and Vincent had ridden, and then watched the strands around her carefully. After a few heartbeats, several glistening swaths of spirit seemed to stop their random movements and move deliberately closer to her.

She chose the closest and concentrated on it, watching in amazement as it sped towards her and drowned her in another life lived long ago. This chocobo had lived a short, violent life. Hatched out in the snowy plains of the Northern continent, it had only been a scant week old when a wolf had run it down and dined upon its fragile body. From very far away, Marion could hear her mental cry of anguish merge with the shriek of the wild bird as the wolf's jaws closed upon its neck.

...marion...

Blood ran down her chest, staining the pale yellow feathers a gory crimson. Her claws scrabbled weakly at the ice in a futile attempt to escape the ravaging beast.

Marion.

Darkness enveloped her mercifully as the wolf began to tear at her quivering flesh, the pain warring with the void, life slowly giving way to death.

"Marion!"

Aeris' shout burst through her consciousness like a fist through glass, and Marion once again opened her mental vision to the lifestream. A frantic mass of concern and uncertainty had gathered around her as Aeris fought to regain contact with her most unique of friends.

"Marion, my God, where were you?" Aeris asked, fear making her voice jagged and sharp along Marion's senses. "...it's okay, Cloud. She's...returned. Go back now; I want to talk to her alone."

Marion scanned around her, but the glittering stream of mako seemed once again nothing more than a river around her, instead of individual strands and spirits and souls. "What...happened?" she thought towards Aeris.

The dense cloud of Aeris' concern loosened around her, replaced by a gentler protectiveness and caring. "I don't know, Marion. I was talking to Cloud, and all of a sudden, your presence seemed to fade. You seemed to be...distant, somehow, but you came back strong again, so I didn't mind it at first. You faded a second time, but this time, it felt like you were...dissipating, or something like that. I tried to find you, but you were only partly there. Other strands of the lifestream had somehow merged with yours, it seemed like. Marion, what were you doing?"

"I...I wasn't doing..." Marion faltered, "I didn't mean to do anything. I just wanted to explore, I guess." She slowly related her experience with the mako fragments containing memories of a rose, and her subsequent contacts with the individual lifestream strands, feeling that she had somehow violated a rule or code.

Reassurance poured over her as Aeris reached out to her once more. "You didn't do anything wrong, Marion, so you can stop feeling guilty about this. I just didn't think anyone else but a Cetra could manipulate the lifestream. And even I can't actually experience the lives remembered here, I can only sense a vague memory of them. Perhaps Hojo injected you with Cetra cells? Mine, or perhaps my mother's, since she was a full Cetra?"

"Are you saying I'm an Ancient, too?" Marion asked incredulously. Her friend replied doubtfully, "No, I know you're human...I can feel the difference. But perhaps you have some Cetra within you; just enough to give you certain abilities. Cloud said you have some kind of resonance with materia?"

Marion sent her images of the days spent in the valley, beginning with her frightening fight with Cloud and ending with the ruined tree and Vincent's revelation to her about her eyes. Silence reigned in the glowing river for several moments while Marion opened her heart to Aeris, allowing her friend to fully know and understand all of her fears, hopes, and experiences, and to comfort and soothe her at the same time. They communed that way for a while, and then Aeris asked, "Could I talk to Vincent now?" Marion sent an affirmative and returned to herself.

Vincent sat as silent and still as Marion, breathing in time with her shallow breaths and waiting for her to return. Return to her body, return to the present, return to him. The slight back before him shuddered in a deep breath, and Marion came back. He quickly knelt by her and automatically palmed the trembling hand she held out towards him. Careful not to accidentally scratch her, he ran his metallic left hand down her cheek, brushing away some errant strands of hair. "You look tired," he commented. She rested in his concerned gaze for a moment, and then tugged his hand towards the pond. "She wants to talk to you," she said. Shifting his hand so that their fingers interlaced, he sank their clasped hands and his mind into the lifestream.

Glowing green surrounded him, as if he were a tiny drop in an ocean the exact color of Marion's eyes. Although he knew that the others had been unsuccessful in contacting Marion directly, he found himself probing around him for her presence.

"Hey, you're supposed to be looking for me," said an amused voice through his mind. A wave broke over and around him, carrying a familiar laugh and overtones of friendship in the backwash.

"My apologies," he responded quietly. "I'm glad you're well." The laugh rippled by him again. "Oh, Vincent, still so distant and cool even here in the very soul of the planet? Some things never change, do they?" A weighted pause, and then Aeris continued in a more serious tone, "but some things do change."

The next communication he received from the Ancient didn't diffuse around him, but instead was delivered much like a psychic bullet, compact and with no backwash to dissipate into the lifestream. "Hear me with your heart, Vincent, the one you've kept locked away for so long," Aeris said quickly, "Marion is special in a way no one else was, is, or ever will be. I

don't know exactly how or why, but I do know that she has within her the power to change the world if she wants to...or is forced to. You've been chosen, Vincent."

"Chosen for what? What are you talking about?" He felt Aeris' presence rush forward to gather up and smother his question as well as the concern he felt emanating from him. Another bullet was shot forward.

"Protect her as I protected the planet; as if she were the only thing holding the universe together. Show her the world we live in and love, show her all the good in the world and keep her safe from the bad. Teach her to live life to the fullest and learn to live it yourself while you're at it. In her hands, she holds the humanity and heart you thought you lost. And Vincent..."

"Yes?"

"Fall in love with her. It shouldn't be too hard."

Marion waited curiously in the green expanse, wondering why she couldn't hear any echoes of Aeris' conversation with Vincent. She could sense vibrations when words were sent out, but they were muffled and unintelligible. Shrugging mentally, she simply waited, and mused on the bomb Aeris had dropped on her a while ago. Temporarily forgotten in the wake of reliving the memories of the rose and chocobo, now the declaration that she was in love with Vincent arose and clamored for her attention. She recalled Tifa's words when asked how to recognize love:

"I love someone...I want to be near him all of the time. I love talking to him, working with him, looking at him...just being with him. When he's happy, I'm happy. When he's upset, I feel upset, too. If he ever...went away, a piece of my heart - a large piece - would die, I think. I want to keep him safe, and I want to be protected by him. In description, it's pretty much like loving your friends, but...it's immeasurably more powerful. It can consume people. It can save lives, and destroy hearts. That's love, Marion."

"...that's love, Marion."

"Oh, Marion, you're in love with him."

"I love him..."

Aeris felt Marion's realization come rushing through the lifestream and smiled. Turning back to Vincent, who had fallen quite speechless, she said softly, "Bye, Vincent. Remember what I said." Gathering herself, she pushed Vincent away from her, back to his body, and focused on Marion once more.

"I told you," she whispered mischievously. Weaving love and caring and friendship all around her stunned friend, Aeris spoke once more before sending Marion back as well. "Not just love, Marion, but trust and loyalty and faith. Give up your entire heart to him. Bye-bye, Marion. Come talk to me again some time."

Her mind settled back into her body, and she gradually became aware of her surroundings once more. The lifestream lapped gently around her waist and her clothes rubbed across her skin as she took a deep breath. Her head tilted back and long strands of hair brushed past her cheeks to rest against her shoulders. Vincent's fingers were still entangled in hers. She opened her eyes and tracked up from their hands to his face, and found him already gazing at her. Her curiosity about the conversation he had with Aeris popped into her mind once more, and she found herself asking, "What was Aeris talking to you about? I couldn't hear her after a while."

Vincent recalled Aeris' words, shook his head slightly, and replied quietly, "Nothing I didn't already know. Come on, let's go." He stood up and extended a hand to Marion, who gripped it tightly and hauled herself out of the pond, splattering mako around her in a gentle rain. "Hmm," she mused, wringing her tunic out and looking at the wrinkled result.

Seeing that their conversation was done, the others wandered over to where Vincent and Marion stood, he silent and still,

and she in a puddle. Tifa grimaced at Marion's sopping outfit. "Darn it, I wish I'd thought of bringing spare clothes. I didn't know you were going to go swimming, Marion." The brunette craned her neck around to glance at the others inquiringly, "Anyone have any spare clothes in their packs?" Most everyone shook his or her head, but Reeve suddenly turned and trotted back towards the entrance to the cave. He returned shortly, proudly waving a dark bundle. He walked over to Marion and unfurled a midnight blue shirt, holding it up to her to gauge her size. "Well, I must say, you're tiny. But this will do for now. I've got a belt to go along with the pants, so hopefully they won't fall right off of you when you walk. Sorry, no shoes, though." Reeve handed the clothes off to Marion, who quietly thanked him and disappeared beyond an outcropping of rock to change. Turning, he found himself face to face with Barret, who was giving him a strange look. "What?" Reeve asked defensively.

"You brought extra clothes? What the hell for?" Barret demanded incredulously.

"What? I don't like to walk around in dirty clothes, that's all. If something happened, I wanted to be able to change." Barret chuckled and shook his head, turning to join Cloud and the others as they started back towards the entrance. Marion had reappeared and was lagging near the end of the group as Tifa rolled up the sleeves and cuffed the pants so that she didn't look quite so much like a little girl in her father's clothing. Tailoring finished, they scooted through the split in the wall, and left the chamber silent and alone once more.