

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 20: On the Road Again

"But why do I have to ride my own chocobo?" Marion asked plaintively, unhappy with the new traveling arrangement. The fact that she was shivering slightly in the crisp morning breeze added to the appearance of misery, making it very hard for Vincent to stand firm to his decision.

He gave a small sigh. After myriad delays - most of them protests by Tifa, who had apparently tied her apron strings a bit tight - they were finally ready to begin the promised journey, but ran into a small disagreement over the fact that he had decided that Marion should have her own chocobo. His own preference was also to have her ride in his arms, but practicality forced the issue. "Because, Marion, if something happens, I want you to be able to ride to safety, with or without me. Besides, you wanted to learn about everything, right? This is just one more experience for you to collect." He folded his arms under his billowing cloak and gazed at her patiently.

Tossing him an injured look over her shoulder, Marion gripped the saddle rim, snuggled her left foot into the stirrup, and hauled herself up. Flopping onto the saddle on her stomach at first, she soon managed to squirm into a sitting position. Her chocobo cropped grass peacefully, seemingly bored with the practice. Vincent strode over, intending to instruct her in how to guide the great bird with the reins and certain signals. Before he could reach her, however, she gathered up the long leather reins and made a short, chirping sound. The gold chocobo cocked its head and then started off at a walk. With various subtle pressures of the legs and manipulation of the reins, Marion guided the chocobo in a large figure eight, going from a walk to a trot to almost a full gallop. Vincent watched as she shifted naturally in the saddle, looking as if she been riding for years instead of seconds. Cheeks pink in the wind and the sunrise blushing her white clothing, she seemed a living rose. Her long hair streaming behind her like a banner, and her eyes sparkling bright, Vincent thought she looked more free and alive now than in all the days she had spent in and about Nibelheim. In simple clothing, with no jewelry or makeup, still she was enveloped in an undeniable aura of beauty, just as sunrises and mountain streams needed no man-made embellishments to awe and delight. She reigned in right in front of her traveling companion and looked down into his ruddy eyes, pleased at the surprise and admiration she found therein.

"Who taught you how to ride so well?" he asked, and raised his eyebrows at her reply. "You did," she stated simply. "I watched what you did while you let me ride with you. If I ride well, it's only because you're a good rider, too." Vincent nodded in acknowledgement and turned to his own golden bird, which was standing sedately to the side. Vaulting into the saddle, he nudged his bird to her side and asked, "Where do you want to go?" She tilted her head in a questioning gesture. "Well, what's that way?" she asked after a moment of consideration, gesturing westward.

"After a grassy plain, we'll hit the ocean. If we cross, we can visit the Wutai area and then head south to explore some of the islands in the southern sea. We can head east towards the crater where the Temple of the Ancients used to be, and Mideel, then swing north and see the eastern continent. I think we can skip Midgar, though," he added gently. Marion nodded, a shadow falling across her face at the thought of the ruined city where she had been kept prisoner. "If we keep going north, we'll cross the ocean again, and then hit the northern continent. We can see Bone Village, and then circle the continent, visiting the Forgotten Capital, the Northern Crater, Icicle Inn, and some other places on the way. Then, we'll be heading south again, and you can see the rest of this continent. We can head straight down at first, and hit Corel and the Gold Saucer, then northwest to Cosmo Canyon and then back here, where we started.

"That's a lot," began Marion, but Vincent kept talking. "That's not all of it, either. There's the Chocobo Sage's home, Frog Forest and Round Island, the inventor's house, plus there's an old man who sleeps in a cave who can accurately describe your battle experiences, and another man who lives underneath a train track near Corel, not to mention all the other caverns where we found unique materia. And that's only the beginning. The cities and caves and forests only make up a small portion of the world, Marion. There are rivers and valleys, plains and mountains that I haven't even been to yet, not to mention all of the outlying islands surrounding the continents. And in Junon we might be able to borrow the submarine, and I can show you a whole separate world, underneath the water." He paused, considering the young woman before him. His next words dragged reluctantly from his mouth, but something compelled him to give Marion another choice. "This journey will take a long time, Marion. You have friends here, as well as a home. Tifa would let you stay with her, and you

could make a life here, and be safe and happy. Adventure never comes alone; there are always dangers to face when traveling. I will do my best to protect you, but...something may happen. Do you still want to go?"

Marion turned her heads towards Nibelheim, peaceful and quiet in the early morning light. Safety, friends, and warmth waited there for her. Tifa's frequent smiles and caring, Cloud's patient lessons and conversation; simple days of training and talking, helping and being helped. A tiny world of comfort within the greater one of unknowns. But one thing was no longer in Nibelheim, and it was the one thing she would not live without, if she had a choice. She wheeled her chocobo in a tight semi-circle, facing herself towards the western coast, and looked over her shoulder. "Only if you want to go with me." In answer, Vincent kicked his mount into an easy canter, and they set off, two dark-haired mysteries on golden chocobos - one to discover the world for the first time, and the other to see it with new eyes.

It took them the better part of the day to reach the western shore from Nibelheim, and they camped on the beach in the late afternoon while the sinking sun set the entire beach ablaze. Although they had set up camp several times on the trip from Midgar, Marion had not actually taken part in the process before. After several hours spent carefully walking Marion through the process of setting up a tent, making a campfire, and currying and staking out the chocobos, Vincent set about preparing a simple meal. Having rummaged through one of the packs, Vincent went to the fire with a frying pan, strips of meat, a sack of vegetables, two small jars, and a knife cradled in his arms. Marion hovered by his elbow as he set the meat to frying after sprinkling some salt and spices over the thin strips. Taking the knife, he deftly cut several large green pods into bite-sized pieces, dropping them directly into the pan. "I didn't know you knew how to cook," commented Marion. Finishing off the legumes, he wiped the knife off and turned his attention to her, replying, "You have to know certain things in order to travel. I couldn't live on grass and vegetables the way the chocobos do. And traveling food is relatively simple. You either fry, boil, or roast. If a fire is unavailable, dry rations or raw fruits and vegetables will suffice."

Marion nodded and gazed out over the fire to where a low moon was now spilling a great track of silver across the ocean. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but rippling water to the west. "Vincent?" Marion asked, "how long will it take us to reach Wutai?" He considered for a moment, and then said, "It shouldn't take more than a single day's riding. The strip of land Wutai is on isn't too far from this coast. Why?"

"I was just wondering. What if a trip across the water took longer than a day? You wouldn't be able to camp anywhere."

"There aren't many places that you'd need to go that would take longer than a day to ride to, except maybe Round Island. Chocobos float high in the water even when they're stopped, so you could nap comfortably when you're too tired to keep riding. The bird would let you know if there was any danger; they're nervous. And as for meals, it would be travel rations and water until you reached your destination."

Marion nodded and subsided into a thoughtful silence, staring with sleepy eyes into the fire. A simple but delicious meal was shared shortly thereafter, and by the time the moon had fully risen, Marion had fallen asleep, curled comfortably next to Vincent with her head on his knee.

Her living pillow was quite wide awake, and thoughtful. He had never been one for unnecessary conversation, and to him, not much qualified as necessary other than warnings of imminent death. Even more unlike him were shows of affection and physical contact. In fact, every instance he could recall of reaching out to touch someone was usually followed by a recollection of physical harm - usually to the other person. Looking over the past few weeks, he found himself spending much of his time talking to Marion - usually answering her simple questions - and saw scenes in his mind's eye that qualified as quite tender. Even this evening he had explained in detail how various ropes and stakes transformed a simple canvas into a tent, and found it quite natural that Marion should sit close beside him after dinner and cuddle up to him when she felt sleepy.

How had this happened? A haughty, prideful voice declared disgustedly that he was making himself ridiculous over a mere slip of a girl, but another, more practical voice replied that Vincent Valentine was instead behaving like a normal human being for the first time in decades. Dignity and heart engaged in a brief spat, and in the end, Vincent gathered Marion up and carried her to the tent. Tucking a blanket around her oblivious form, he pressed a kiss to her hair and decided that it would be nice to be normal for a while.