

An Affair of the Heart and Soul

By Meriko

Chapter 22: By the Shore

After a month in Wutai spent polishing Marion's fighting skills on monster-raids up Da Chao, Vincent and Marion departed with one less mastered materia, one more newly born materia, a rifle, two belts full of bullets, and several daggers which the arms master had created as a gift. Vincent suspected that the gift would have been a prelude to an overture of more than friendship had Marion come visiting alone. As things were, the smitten smith had to content himself with looking and sighing while Vincent gave him dark looks out of the corner of his eye. Marion herself had been completely oblivious, adding to the smith's misery, but giving Vincent food for thought.

Aeris had told him to fall in love with Marion, to care for her and about her, not realizing that her words were largely unnecessary as Vincent's heart had already taken the initiative - much to his surprise. Marion's simple attachment to him had made his guardianship and devotion all the easier, for there were no obstacles for him to overcome, other than the ones in his own heart. However, the advent of the arms master's affection - although unnoticed by Marion - had made Vincent realize that Marion hadn't actively picked him as her companion. She'd had no choice in the matter, for he had been alone when he had awakened her and offered to show her the world. For all that she had acclimated herself to living with and around other people, still she was completely ignorant of certain things. Vincent wondered uneasily if she realized that he was not her only option, and what the result might be if she knew.

They fell into an easy pattern of traveling; rising early in the morning and riding the chocobos at an easy trot, stopping at noon in some shady spot, and riding on again after lunch until late afternoon, when they made camp once more. Whenever monsters appeared to attack them, they ran the chocobos a short distance away, dismounted, and stepped forward to meet the enemy. Tifa's chocobos were trained not to stray when their reins dragged on the ground, and would only run if threatened directly, returning to find their riders when the danger had passed. Most of the creatures were dispatched with Vincent's pistol or spells from Marion's staff. Her rifle and deadly accuracy came in handy when they hunted meat for dinner. And when a lone enemy attacked, she practiced on the doomed creature with her staff or daggers while Vincent cast protective spells, just in case.

There had been one memorable occasion in which Vincent had allowed the Chaos beast to awaken, when two dragons had attacked at the same time. On the heels of his amazement at the unheard of double-attack had been his dread at what Marion's reaction would be to his transformation. To his utter amazement, she had accepted his metamorphosis into the raging purple-hued demon with no more fear or disgust than if he'd simply used a different kind of bullet in his pistol. When he'd hesitatingly questioned her, she'd actually looked puzzled, unable to understand why anything he did might frighten or repel her. Aeris had mentioned that Vincent was able to transform into different creatures. This was simply another aspect of the man she loved, neither frightening nor repulsive, simply...Vincent.

At night, they sat companionably by the fire for an hour or two and then retired to their individual sleeping rolls. Invariably, when morning came, Vincent would awaken to find that Marion had shifted a few feet in her sleep so that she lay curled up right next to him, often with one small hand tangled up in his blanket or sleeve, whichever she had encountered first. And just as invariably, Vincent would feel a pang at the thought that she might ever choose another and leave him. Although Cloud and the other were his loyal friends, they were well aware of his oddities and abilities - if questioned as to whom Vincent was, they would likely catalog such items as glowing eyes, transformations, and a shadowy past. To Marion, he was only and simply Vincent. Who else was there in the world with whom he could interact so naturally, speaking and acting as he wished, trusting fully in their acceptance? Pushing the thought away, he would wake her gently and they would start another leg of their journey.

The days passed swiftly in this manner, as Vincent and Marion covered more and more terrain, each day bringing new sights and information to the young woman. Nothing was too small or insignificant for her notice. The grassy plains and glittering waves that seemed to Vincent an unending stretch of identical panels of green or blue were to Marion entire worlds packed full of individual discoveries awaiting her notice. Flowers in different stages of bloom fascinated her, as well as the different textures to be found in the pebbles lining the crater floor where the Temple of the Ancients used to be.

After several days of running between islands, she became adept at deciphering currents and wave patterns, and predicting exactly where a wave would break, making a sort of game out of it by guiding her chocobo in front of the wave and jumping over the spray as the crest shattered.

As they neared Mideel, Marion grew more and more agitated. Vincent finally decided that though it was early in the afternoon, they would stop and make camp. There were vicious monsters roaming the southern islands, and he didn't want to be attacked while she was in such an inattentive state. He turned to her, only to find that she had stopped her chocobo. Her face was lifted to the wind, and she seemed to be...scenting something? Vincent frowned, and guided his chocobo over to where she stood.

"Marion?"

Suddenly her look of concentration dissolved into one of recognition and joy. "Aeris!" she cried, and kicked her chocobo into a dead run...straight towards Mideel.

Vincent pursued her as fast as he could, but unfortunately, he had given her the faster mount, in case they had to run from an enemy. He now regretted his earlier decision as he watched Marion's chocobo steadily pull farther and farther ahead of his.

Minutes later, Vincent reined in just outside of the makeshift town that had sprung up around the lifestream lake. He leaped off of his mount and ran into the town just in time to see a slim white figure dive headfirst into the glowing lake.

"Marion, NO!" Vincent shouted, but too late. She was gone.

The inhabitants of Mideel milled around the edge of the lake, whispering questions and suppositions about the girl who had thrown herself into the lifestream. Many thought of suicide, some offered theories of insanity, and a few even declared it was a bet. None, though, however curious, ventured to ask the man who paced the far shore in the gathering dusk.

Vincent walked along the edge of the lake, glowing gaze searching the emerald waters for some sign of Marion's return.

Fool, a long-silenced voice sneered, bitterness and hate thick within it. You should have realized that she'd recognize the smell of lifestream. You should have foreseen that she'd want to talk to Aeris again. Aeris was the only friend she had for years, what makes you think that just because she has you now that she wouldn't need anyone else?

...just because she has you. Has you, a monster, one of Hojo's freaks. A former assassin, a killer even now. What makes you think she wants to spend the rest of her life with you?

Vincent stopped pacing and stood motionless, staring with unseeing eyes into the lake. She's on an adventure now, but she'll want what others have. She'll want to get married, have children, have someone to grow old with. In 50 years, you'll still be 27. What makes you think she'll want you to hang around, watching her age?

She'll leave you. Just like she did right now. She'll leave you. Just like Lucrecia. And you'll be alone again...forever.

Bright green liquid bubbled up and frothed in a glittering shower as Marion burst through the surface. Blinking eyes that seemed to burn brighter than ever, she gave a quick cough, bringing mako up from her lungs. Whipping her black hair from her face, she scanned the shore, noticing the townspeople for the first time. Spotting Vincent's silent form, she started paddling over towards him.

As she reached the shore, Vincent reached down a hand and helped her out onto dry ground. She looked up into his face, eyes all aglow, happy and eager to tell him about her conversation with Aeris. The words died on her lips as she met his gaze. Even when the rest of his face had been expressionless, his eyes had always held tenderness for her, but now...now they were filled with something different. Concern, perhaps...definitely a touch of fear. Whatever else his gaze held, it was...cold. Her heart barely daring to beat, she ventured, "Vincent?"

Although he had been looking at her this whole time, her words seemed to make him actually notice her. "All you all right?" he asked. A concerned question in a flat voice.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied. Was it fear for her that made him so distant? She rushed on, hoping to reassure him, anything to get her Vincent back. "I lived in lifestream before, after all, there's nothing that could happen to..."

"Good," he interrupted curtly. "Get a room at the inn and change into dry clothes, get some food if you're hungry." He handed her their gil pouch, then turned and walked away.

The pouch dropped from her nerveless hands, small coins jingling together. "Wait! Where are you going?" she cried, voice high and suddenly frightened.

Vincent kept walking, not even turning his head as he replied, "I need to be alone for a while."

Panic gripped her then. He hadn't left her to herself since they had first met...was he leaving? Was he leaving her?

"You're coming back, right? You'll come back for me - you won't leave me here?!"

He stopped and turned...and nodded. Vincent walked off into the darkness.

When he had seen her head break the surface of the lake, he had wanted to dive in himself and meet her. He'd wanted to crush his mouth to hers, hold her so tightly that she wouldn't be able to breathe, keep her close to him for the rest of her life. The impulse to run her out into the nighttime meadow and take her, make her his own, had flashed through his body. Was that love? Or was that protectiveness, possessiveness, his own selfish need for companionship? The need to have, to possess, to control. Did he want her to love him, or did he simply need her to belong to him? Where was the line - what was the difference?

And what of Marion's heart? She had sounded so frightened at the thought that he would leave her. Or was it that she just didn't want to be left alone? Vincent sighed. He had been her constant companion since she had awakened in Hojo's lab, much of the time her only companion. It was only natural that she would develop an attachment. It didn't mean she loved him.

He would show her the world as promised. He would introduce her to civilizations, inform her of their history, continue her training in fighting and hunting, show her how to travel...and keep her to himself, just for a little while longer.

But after they had completed the journey, he would take her to a populous city somewhere. Maybe back to Nibelheim, where she already had friends. Perhaps she could stay with Tifa. Somewhere where she could meet other people, make other friends...make her decision. Decide whether the bond she had with Vincent was truly love...or not.

He would tell her then. Would tell her that no matter how little his appearance and abilities bothered her, how much his heart had regained humanity and emotion, there was one thing that would always stand between them. Eternity.

A soft "wark" pulled him from his despairing reverie. The two gold chocobos they had ridden to Mideel had found him. He mounted his own bird, and led the other back to the lake. Back to Mideel, back to Marion.

He tethered the birds outside of the inn and inquired about a room for the night. Finding that Marion had not reserved a room yet, he strode through the town, looking for her. One of the residents, bolder than the others, ventured to speak to the forbidding stranger.

"Hey mister," he called out nervously, "if you're looking for that girl you were chasing, she's still at the far shore. Just thought you might want to know," he added hurriedly, and scooted back to his house.

He saw her sitting on the ground where he had left her, pale clothing dyed green by the glow of the lake. She had her head buried in her arms, with her legs drawn up against her body. The lake lapped softly around her ankles, licking up the drops of itself that fell from her clothes and the tendrils of her hair. As he silently approached along the shore, he noted the gil pouch spilled out on the ground. Still clad in her wet tunic and pants, with her hair plastered about her, she was the perfect picture of misery.

He was still a good fifty feet away when he noticed her shaking. She was breathing irregularly, in catching, gasping breaths. Vincent quickened his pace...had she sickened, sitting in the night air in her damp clothes? Was this lifestream different from the kind she had slept in? Had it poisoned her somehow? Then he heard it.

She was crying.

Marion had never cried before, but now that she had started, she found that she couldn't stop. After Vincent had disappeared into the gloom, her knees had buckled and she had collapsed to the ground, shaking. Drawing her knees up to her chest, she had hugged herself, trying to still her trembling. He would come back, he said he would. He'd come back. But here's the catch, ladies and gentlemen: in order to come back, first that person has to leave you.

Hot tears spilled from her eyes, startling her. Like most things such as sleeping, eating, and walking, Marion somehow knew what crying was; she simply didn't have any recollection of ever having done it. So Marion wept, not knowing how to stop, and not caring that she couldn't.

Choking sobs tore from her lungs, a searing pain eating at her heart. What did it matter that she didn't have a past? Who cared what secrets lay trapped in her body and mind, how many monsters attacked them, or how many people stared at her fiery eyes? Nothing had caused this heartache, this pain, these tears, because Vincent had always been there with her, comforting her, protecting her, supporting her. And now he wasn't here.

...and suddenly, he was.

Strong arms wrapped around her, lifting her up off the ground into an embrace. He crouched over her, braced on one knee, holding her to him and breathing her name into her ear.

Her mouth trembled, wanting to ask him why he'd been so cold, to find out what she'd done, to promise that she would never do so again. Her heart cried out for his forgiveness for whatever she'd done to make him turn away. She wanted to beg him unashamedly never to leave her, not even for a moment. Overcome by a whirlwind of grief, abandonment, relief and need, she could do nothing but cling to him with all her remaining strength and silently plead with him to stay with her always.

Vincent's heart tore as she clung to him, her breath coming in gasps between pitiful sobs. He gathered her body to his, cradling her head where it rested against his neck, murmuring her name over and over. He did love her, with his entire being he loved her, and he promised himself then and there that he would never leave her. Even if she turned away from him, even if she chose another, he would stay close, watching over her, guarding her. And when she died, he would guard her grave, waiting for the day when he might join the planet and find her again in the lifestream.

And so they remained on the shore as night deepened around them, neither able to find words, neither able to do anything but hold on to the one they loved, and hope that they would not soon be separated.

Marion let the towel fall from her hands, emotionally and physically drained. Her damp hair tangled around her, beads of liquid still clinging to the ends. Shrugging into the soft white nightdress that she slept in, she stepped out of the bathroom and walked past the beds toward the corner where Vincent was sitting, his cloak draped over one arm of the chair. His usual headband lay puddled on the nightstand. Clad entirely in black, he seemed to melt into the shadowy corner but for his glowing eyes.

He watched wordlessly as she silently glided across the floor to his chair, a slip of a ghost in the moonlight spilling in from the window. She stopped before him, seeming hesitant and shy. Pale and wan, she seemed an ethereal being, her fatigue

somehow adding to her beauty instead of detracting from it. Vincent broke eye contact and glanced out the window instead at the cold diamonds scattered across the velvet sky. "You must be tired," he said softly, "you should rest."

Marion didn't move toward the bed as suggested. Able to cook simple meals and set up a basic camp, adept at hunting and tracking, unequalled in materia use and marksmanship, still there were many things neglected in her education. She knew nothing of the subtleties of women, of flirting or coyness. She knew no games to play, nor any lies to act out. She only knew to do as her heart dictated, and to live reactively to Vincent. Tired as she was, still the empty bed held no charm for her. Curling her legs underneath her, she sat down on the carpet by Vincent's chair and laid her head on his knee, resting her sore heart in his presence.

All was silent for a moment, and then she heard Vincent give a short sigh. His knee shifted beneath her, and she jerked her head up, her heart stuttering to a faster beat against her rib cage. Was he still angry with her? Did he not even want her near anymore? She looked up to see him swoop down upon her and lift her up off of the floor, walking towards the closest bed. He bent over the coverlet to set her down, and her arms involuntarily tightened around his neck, not wanting him to let her go.

A pause, and then he sat her on the bed, gently prying her arms from around him. With one arm propping himself up as he leaned over her, he set the pillows up against the headboard, creating a small, cottony hillside. Turning his garnet eyes to hers, he made a quick nodding motion towards her, gesturing with his chin. "Scoot over," he said, settling himself on the edge of the mattress. Marion scooted.

Leaning back against the pillows, Vincent reached behind Marion and gathered up the far edge of the coverlet, furling it around her shoulders and gathering both the blanket and her body up to his chest. She snuggled down quite comfortably in his arms, hands fisted in his shirt and slender legs tangled in one of his. Vincent rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"Go to sleep, Marion," he whispered, "I'll be right here." I'll always be here, he continued silently. In a year or so, when our journey is over, I'll still be by your side. And in ten years, even if you've settled down into a new life with a new love and family of your own, I'll still watch over you. And in a hundred years, when you're gone, I'll still love you. Vincent shut his mind against the overwhelming desire and pain that bruised his heart and held the now-sleeping girl tight, a wordless, formless prayer dying unspoken on his lips.