

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 23: Buy One Shocker, Get One Free

They departed Mideel early the next morning, riding away in the misty quiet while most of the townspeople still slept in their beds. Golden claws slashed at the sandy beach and then crashed into the surf as they headed for the next island. Slender rays of light angled down upon them as the sun rose into the air, bathing everything in a honey-colored hue. Riding side by side, Vincent noticed Marion constantly looking off to their right, sometimes slowing her mount to stare into the depths of the ocean. He nudged his own bird closer to hers and asked, "What's the matter? Do you see something?"

She looked up at him with a thoughtful expression, reining in her chocobo. "I'm not sure. Is there something out that way?" she asked, pointing out towards the horizon, due south from Mideel. Vincent conjured up a mental map and then shook his head. "No, I don't know of any islands further south than this one."

Marion gazed down into the waters lapping at her boots once more. The chocobo was serenely floating on its belly, long legs dangling in the current. With a small nudge of her heels, she signaled her bird to paddle slowly for a few feet, not gaining enough speed to actually rise out of the water. After gazing out at the waves for a minute more, Marion turned back to Vincent and stated, "There's another island out there. Not as large as the one Mideel is on, but much bigger than Cactus Island."

"Are you sure?" Vincent asked. Marion nodded in reply, and then raised her eyebrows questioningly. Without another word, her companion wheeled his chocobo in her direction and they started off at a gallop, kicking up fans of sea spray behind them. After riding well into the afternoon, they finally sighted a small island, roughly twice the size of Round Island, where Cloud had found the Knights of the Round materia. They reined in their golden mounts and examined the island from a distance.

It looked to be a dormant volcano, roughly cone shaped but with a wide skirt of flat land around it, and an outer reef circling the entire island, creating an inner, shallow sea within that sparkled a brilliant turquoise. A thick forest hid the base of the black mountain, and the outer edge of the island was a wide ribbon of sandy beach, with smaller grassy meadows tucked away here and there along the edge of the forest. High up on the mountaintop, Vincent could make out a slender waterfall glistening in the afternoon sunlight. The entire island had an untouched aura about it, wild and alone, beautiful and full of mystery. He found himself looking at Marion, thinking that she and this island shared several qualities.

Marion thought happily to herself that she had actually found something new, a new experience, new sights that she could show to Vincent, unaware that she had already given him gifts beyond measure. Eager to explore this new isle, she caught Vincent's attention and then kicked her chocobo forward towards the reef, picking up speed once she heard the splash of his bird following her.

The island was a treasure trove of color and life, beauty and sound. Vincent and Marion dismounted on the beach and gazed about them in wonder. Marion especially went quite wild with delight, gasps and exclamations escaping her lips every time she saw something new. Wispy clouds hung from the craggy mountaintop like shreds of silk, almost obscuring the top of the waterfall that fell thousands of feet to come crashing down into a small lake halfway down the side of the volcano, only to spill over once more, its final destination hidden in the emerald shadows of the canopy below. Brightly colored birds could be seen flitting in between branches, their light songs carried through the air on a gentle breeze. In the island moat, the birds' oceanic counterparts could be seen gliding lazily through the crystalline waters, a flashing mosaic of red, oranges, greens, and blues. And then Nanaki came bursting out of the forest, running towards them at an incredible speed.

Except that it wasn't Nanaki.

"Marion, run!" shouted Vincent, shoving her roughly out of the way and bringing his pistol up to fire a warning shot across the sand. She stumbled and fell to the beach, the startled chocobos screeching and kicking sand into her face as they shied

from the sudden attack and the startling retort of the Death Penalty, taking Marion's staff and rifle away with them as they fled. Coughing, she scrambled to her feet and blinked her eyes open in time to see the flame-colored animal rake two sets of razor sharp claws across Vincent's chest and then leap away.

He stumbled and fell to his knees, coughing up bright ribbons of blood that splattered and then sank into the sand. He could hear Marion's piercing scream, faint in his ears. Marion...protect Marion. Seeing crimson rivers pulse from between his fingers as he held his hand to his chest, pain and rage welled up in him, and he knew that the Chaos beast was not far away. But he struggled against the transformation, unwilling to kill what might be the only other living member of Nanaki's lost tribe.

The fiery beast before him crouched warily, snarling menacingly with gleaming fangs fully exposed in an awesome display of ferocity. Rippling muscles bunched beneath sleek fur, and Vincent gripped the Death Penalty in one blood-slick hand, claw clenching the gritty sand beneath, praying silently that he would be able to deflect his attacker without any fatal damage done to either of them.

Before either combatant could move another muscle, a shrieking gale suddenly swept down upon the battlefield, leaving Vincent completely untouched while enveloping the feline form within an impenetrable sphere of wind. Vincent watched in amazement as the startled creature was lifted by the compacted tornado and carried swiftly away, around the volcano to the far side of the island.

Weakened from pain and loss of blood, Vincent fell roughly to his side, beginning to lose consciousness. His head rolled to the side, catching sight of Marion's slender figure, arms outstretched and hair flying wildly behind her as she ran to him. The Remove spell that had ended the battle had been much stronger and faster than was usual, which would have been in keeping with Marion's abilities...except that the only Escape materia orbs that Vincent knew of were currently in Yuffie and Cloud's possession.

Vincent coughed weakly as she fell to her knees at his side, sobbing his name. She caught his bloody hand to her breast and shut her eyes tightly as she quickly cast a healing spell around him. His vision darkened and he felt his mind detaching even as she worked, but not enough to keep him from noticing that her staff was nowhere to be seen, and to feel that there was no materia clenched in the hands wrapped tightly around his own. He struggled to remain awake, but unconsciousness claimed him as his body tried to complete with rest the healing process that Marion had somehow begun.

When he finally awoke, the moon was high in the sky, stained a pale yellow. Wincing against the soreness in his body, he rolled over onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow, trying to get his bearings. He lay on his sleeping roll, with his cloak rolled up to be used as a pillow. God only knew how Marion had managed to drag him onto the blanket...perhaps she had rolled him over. The tattered shirt was gone, replaced by a spare from his packs. He felt underneath the material at his chest to find that the wound had been completely healed, leaving not even the faintest of scars. He looked over a cheerfully burning campfire to see that the chocobos had been retrieved, and stood close by, shifting nervously.

No wonder they were nervous, he thought, as he saw the glittering dome of pale yellow light that enclosed them as if a bowl had been overturned onto the campsite. Marion sat serenely on the other side of the campfire, legs folded neatly underneath her, and hands clasped together in her lap. Her entire body glowed with a soft golden light as she apparently maintained a constant barrier spell. She was turned away from him, and so he couldn't see her eyes, but from the small movements of her head, she appeared to be tracking something outside of the barrier. Narrowing his eyes to block out some of the wavering light, he could barely make out a shadowy figure walking a small arc back and forth in front of where Marion sat. He raised his body to a sitting position, grunting at the effort it cost his weakened muscles, and her head turned at the sound. She breathed a long sigh of relief and stood up to join him. A cool white hand brushed back his hair and chased a few stray grains of sand from his shirt. "How do you feel?" she whispered.

"I'm fine, thanks to you," he replied. "Thanks to the spells you cast," he added. She looked down, avoiding his gaze, the golden haze around her shimmering as she moved. Her head shook slowly as she said, "I don't know how, but...the stronger spells were never in the materia I used...they're inside me. I needed to protect you, but without killing...whoever it is. I needed to heal you, and then protect you while you slept. It's...frighteningly easy. And I'm learning to control the...strength, I guess...of the spells. When I need something, I can feel the spell forming in my body almost automatically."

She looked up at the glowing dome around them. "I've kept this barrier up constantly for hours now, and I don't feel the least bit drained." Gold-green eyes fixed on his, naked fear shining in their depths. "Vincent, I'm scared. What am I?"

A low, rumbling voice spoke from behind him, "You are gifted." Vincent reacted immediately, scooping an exceedingly startled Marion up and leaping away from the voice, even though the barrier still held. He turned, Death Penalty once more un-holstered and in his hand, to find a black nose pressed up against the shimmering dome and two feline eyes boring into his own.

"Put the gun away, Dark One," the voice growled, "neither of you will be harmed. This afternoon's attack was a mistake, and you have my apologies and regret. Araku is young, and hotheaded. He will be punished accordingly." Vincent slowly returned his gun to his belt, all the while keeping his eyes locked on the yellow ones staring at him through the barrier.

The eyes blinked and shifted towards Marion, who sat half hidden by Vincent's body, which was placed protectively in front of her. "Remove the barrier, Gifted One. You are under my protection. There are none on this island who defy me; you will be safe." Marion glanced at Vincent for guidance. After he gave her a quick nod, she released the spell. The glowing aura around her flickered and then went out as if a candle had been blown out by a gust of wind. The dome around them faded at the same time, revealing a large, lion-like form sitting nearby. Vincent counted off four more silhouettes farther off, now sitting quietly outside the circle of light the fire threw off.

Behind them, the chocobos warked nervously, tense at the nearness of the creature so like the one who had attacked earlier in the day. Before they could run off, Marion frowned in concentration and quickly wove a sleep spell around them. The two golden birds stumbled sleepily to the ground and were soon snoozing peacefully, heads tucked under their wings.

"Impressive," commented the fiery creature. "Did you also heal your mate's wounds with your gift?"

Marion nodded, unsure if she should correct the creature's assumption that she and Vincent were...mates. Vincent remained silent on the subject as well, so she decided to leave it be.

He noted the female's hesitation before nodding, and the increased tension in the air when he called them mates. So, not mated yet, he decided, but certainly intended. The piercing eyes considered the two humans for a moment, noting their glowing eyes and the man's claw, and then he spoke once more. "I am Ineki, second generation of the Island Clan, and leader of my people."

"I am Vincent Valentine," the man stated. Then, he shifted so that the girl was no longer hidden in his shadow. Placing one arm behind her back, he continued, "and this is Marion."

Ineki nodded, his dark mane falling about his jaw. "I welcome you to the island, Vincent Valentine, and Marion of the Gift. It is late. My people and I will sleep near your camp, if you permit, and we will talk once more in the morning. Again, I promise your safety."

The one called Vincent nodded. Ineki closed his eyes and inclined his head toward the two, and then padded softly across the sand to the others, informing them that they would stay the rest of the night nearby, and be introduced in the morning. Curiosity was evident in their eyes, especially those of his daughter's, but he ignored them and curled up in the sand, mulling over the newcomers and wondering how anyone had managed to find this island after over 1,000 years of isolation.