

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 24: Introductions

Ineki nodded towards the others waiting nearby, the morning sunlight revealing his coat to be the same ruddy hue as Nanaki's, although his mane was much darker, and hung loose past his shoulders. "Vincent Valentine and Marion of the Gift, this is my mate, Kokone, and my daughter, Tenari." Two more feline forms stepped forward and made simple yet elegant bows. Marion looked them over with interest, noting the subtle differences between the two. Both females were of a slightly lighter shade than Ineki, and had shorter manes. Tenari was markedly slimmer through the chest and flank than her mother, and Marion surmised that she was not yet full grown. Ineki continued with the introductions, "and this is Makote and Komi, Araku's parents." A powerful form stepped forward, his coat a deeper, rustier red than Nanaki's had been. His mate, colored a gentle ochre hue, seemed almost delicate in comparison, although sleekly muscled like all her people. "My apologies for my son's behavior. We ask your forgiveness and understanding," the father stated. Mindful of the formal tone, Vincent replied calmly, "Your apology is accepted. We understand, and hold no ill feelings."

Ineki nodded, pleased, and with formal introductions dispensed with, started in on the real conversation. "There are many more of us here who have stayed behind in the caverns we call home, but of us all, there are none living here who have seen humans with their own eyes. Our fathers passed down much information of the world, but we have no actual experiences of it outside of the boundaries of this island. Since we have had no visitors here for over a thousand years, we would be grateful if you could tell us of the world, and how it is that you have come here."

Amazed at the length of time that this clan had lived in complete isolation, Vincent struggled to collect his thoughts for an instant before launching into his story. As the sun rose over the glittering sand, Vincent quickly detailed the newer cities and towns that had sprung up in the last millennium and the older ones that had changed. The advent of mountain-, river-, and ocean-crossing chocobos was mentioned and then expanded upon, as well as other forms of transportation such as automobiles, hovercraft, and airships. In brief sentences, he sketched in Shinra's history interwoven with his own checkered past, of being woken from his long sleep to join in a quest to save the Planet from Sephiroth's schemes and the adventures that followed. Aeris' sacrifice, their brief brush with outer space, Cloud and Tifa's journey in the lifestream, the violent birthing of the five Weapons, and the Jenova project with its horrific twists and turns; all were explained to the best of Vincent's abilities.

"...as we watched from the deck of the Highwind, Meteor and Holy clashed directly above Midgar. They seemed to be at a stalemate, and frankly, we all wondered if they would remain locked together forever. We had an unknown ace up our sleeve, however, which was Aeris. She hadn't fully returned to the planet as we had thought, but remained suspended in the main river of lifestream within the planet. Her half-Cetra abilities allowed her to communicate with the planet's soul, and to ask for its help. Fortunately for us, her call was answered. Tendrils of lifestream poured out from all over the world to gather at Midgar and aid Holy in destroying Meteor. When Meteor imploded under the force, the concussion and light were overwhelming. When the light dimmed and our eyes refocused, Meteor, Holy, and the lifestream were all gone, and Midgar had been razed to the ground."

Marion listened as intently as the members of the Island Clan to Vincent's fascinating monologue. Aeris had filled her in on recent history, certainly, but it had been from her own unique perspective and flavored with her opinions and prejudices, and so it was quite another experience to hear the fantastic tale from Vincent's lips. He had been sparing with the details of his personal life before falling into Hojo's hands, but Marion could tell that it had not been a regular childhood or happy youth. It was sobering and strangely lonely to realize the obvious; that while she had slept unawares in her glowing chamber, life and death and all that occurred in between had been taking place in the lives of those she now considered her family. All of the hurts she hadn't been there to heal, all the pain she hadn't been able to assuage, the laughter she hadn't shared, and the adventures she had not been a part of; all this made her feel a pang of loneliness.

Finished with the tale of Jenova, Vincent continued on with his most recent history, beginning with the discovery of Marion in the underground lab, detailing the discovery of her abilities and the ensuing unanswered questions, and finishing with their discovery of this island. He discreetly omitted Araku's attack, ending instead with a brief commentary about how

agreeable it was to meet new friends.

When Vincent finished with his in-depth history, his voice quite raspy, Ineki queried, "The one you call Nanaki, do you know..." but he was interrupted gently by his mate, Kokone. "Ineki, the sun is high in the sky and this one is tired of speaking. Let us hunt while he rests, and perhaps he will be ready to answer your questions later on."

"Yes, of course," Ineki replied graciously. "Tenari, stay with our guests," he commanded to his daughter, and then, with a nod of the head, gathered the rest of his people to form a hunting party. The four adults bounded away into the forest, silent and surefooted.

Vincent and Marion remained seated on the sand for a moment, unsure of what to do. Tenari also remained quite still, glancing at the strangers occasionally, but making no conversation. After a few slightly uncomfortable minutes, Marion stood up, brushed some sand off of her pants, and began to rummage through the pile of satchels and packs that had been neatly stacked next to the dead fireplace. Their chocobos had been unburdened and staked out on a nearby patch of grass to graze early this morning by Vincent, as Marion packed away their sleeping rolls and tent. Finding what she had been digging for, Marion straightened and walked over to where Tenari was, folding herself down onto the sand right in front of the lion-like form.

She held up a brush and asked, "May I?" Tenari sniffed the wood and bristle implement curiously, and then queried, "What is this?" Running her fingers along the stiff bristles, Marion explained, "It is called a brush, and is used by humans to...groom. When I was first found, a woman brushed my hair and plaited it in an overture of friendship. I found it enjoyable." Tenari considered and nodded. "It is appropriate," she said.

Vincent watched with something akin to awe as Marion deftly brushed out Tenari's reddish-brown mane, gently teasing out tangles and picking out small vegetative material that had worked their way into the strands. Nanaki had always been very conscious of his dignity, and did not allow caresses of the sort that pets enjoyed, feeling it beneath him. These highly intelligent creatures that they had met last night seemed just as dignified and prideful, yet it seemed Tenari was no more proof against Marion's innocent charm than he himself had been.

Tenari felt a purr beginning to tickle in her throat as she sat with her eyes closed in the warm sunlight, enjoying Marion's ministrations. Recalling some of her dignity, she cleared her throat and conversed with the strange girl instead. "I groom myself every morning, but there are some places I cannot reach, and even my mother cannot get all of the small burrs out all of the time. This brush is an interesting thing, and your hands are careful and clever." Marion thanked her, gave the silky mane a few last strokes, and then sat plucking the loose hairs from the brush, letting the sea breeze carry the golden strands away. She then brushed out her own river of hair, having neglected her usual morning grooming session in favor of beginning the introductions to Ineki and the others.

Vincent watched Tenari watch Marion as the slender form got up and walked past. He assumed Marion was going to return to the packs, and so was slightly startled when he felt a cool hand tug his headband off and begin to run gentle fingers through his hair. He fully intended to let Marion know he was capable of brushing his own hair, but found himself relaxing into the tickling caresses of her fingers instead. After a quick finger-comb, the brush was run through his long black hair, removing the small particles of sand that had blown in.

Tenari let her thoughts meander a bit as Marion turned her attention to Vincent. Of all of the knowledge passed down generation to generation about humans, the main facts that had been foremost in Tenari's mind was that humans were generally unintelligent and easily swayed by emotion, with individual thought often suffocated by a herd mentality. The violent altercations mentioned in their history seemed to outweigh the advances and knowledge of their civilization as a whole. Even in the recent histories that the one called Vincent had outlined, humans had made exceedingly harmful decisions; one man going so far as to try to destroy this world for his own gain. However, Vincent had also told of valiant warriors, noble sacrifices, and guardians of the planet. Watching these two unwilling emissaries from the outside world, Tenari was forced to reevaluate her mental image of what humans were. Certainly not the clumsy, simple-minded creatures that she had been thinking of.

Marion and Vincent conversed intelligently enough, and were well mannered and fairly quick to pick up on simple cues as

far as behavior went. Although they did not seem very strong or fast, Tenari was sure that Marion's gift and the weapons they had with them made up for what they lacked in natural hunting abilities. Vastly different in appearance from any creature she was familiar with, still they moved with a pleasing grace and were quite attractive when one got used to their unusual features. Tenari found a strong desire to meet more of these unusual humans welling up within her, fueled by her natural curiosity.

She continued to watch the two as she had all morning, noting the way they remained aware of the other at all times. She thought over the way they had worked together this morning in harmony, and the female's ministrations to her mate as she groomed him were quite touching. Tenari recalled the fierce protectiveness that Marion had evinced the night before when Ineki had first led the group to the campsite. Bent over Vincent's still form and carefully wrapping a new spell around him, she had started to her feet at their appearance, placing herself between the man and the visitors. Alone and weaponless, yet she had faced them all with nothing but the magic coursing in her veins, her amazing green eyes blazing in the darkness. When they had not attacked, but instead stayed quietly at a distance, a golden aura blazed into existence around her body as she called up a kind of shield around the campsite.

The shield at first had been a solid dome of light, but had flickered and faded until it was only a transparent sheen. After caring for the sleeping man, the glowing girl had stationed herself along the shield where she could keep an eye on her visitors, but shied away when Ineki approached. He had cautioned everyone away, not wanting to spook the nervous girl, and waited until an opportunity presented itself for conversation. When he had startled them later on, the man, although obviously still pained from his injuries, had immediately moved to protect the girl, who relinquished her role as guardian to him quite naturally. They were the best kind of mates, Tenari decided. Ones who cared for and protected each other, whose minds and talents balanced out well, and whose personalities complimented each other. Such mates made the best parents as well, often bringing up children who would be the pride of the clan.

As Marion finished brushing out Vincent's hair, Tenari commented quietly, "You are well mated. Do you have any young?"

Slender fingers were arrested in the process of plucking long dark strands from the brush. Marion wanted desperately to seek a cue in Vincent's expression, but unfortunately for her, he had his back to her still. "I...don't have any children," replied Marion hesitantly. "And..."

"We are not mated," finished Vincent, choking off the "yet" that had wanted to attach itself to the sentence. A twitch of a frown crossed his face, but fortunately for him, Marion was behind him, and could not see. Her uncanny powers of observation and her habit of gazing at him caused him to be even more circumspect about showing emotion on his face, but Tenari's question had caught him off guard. He had hope, certainly, but would not allow it to grow. He knew in his heart that if he asked Marion, she would say yes. But with him as the only option, her choice would be no choice at all, and perhaps regretted later when she had a chance to live an ordinary life amongst ordinary people. He would have to wait, and bury hope in the meantime.

Tenari read in their faces and bodies what they would not say to each other with words. It seemed strange to her, for among her people, love and intentions and matings were handled rather matter-of-factly, but then, heart did not rule the mind as it seemed to with these humans. If two of her people were in love, then they announced their intentions. If their parents were agreeable as well - which was usually the case - they were mated. If one's intentions were rejected, then life went on as usual. Life made more sense when the mind ruled the heart. Greed, lust, anger, revenge...all these passions were the ruin of humans. Tenari wondered at the power of the purer passions of love, courage, and faith to overcome their darker cousins.

To Vincent's response, Tenari simply nodded, and the conversation died abruptly. Providentially, at this awkward moment, the hunting party returned. Ineki, Kokone, and Makote each carried a plump deer in their jaws, dragging them by the necks through the forest. Komi had three ground fowl by the wings, and Marion noted with amusement that a few wing feathers kept tickling her nose. She snuffed and wrinkled her snout in irritation, dropping the fowl on a grassy spot with relief. The deer were also piled together, and Ineki approached Vincent once more.

"We were unsure what your tastes were, and so have brought back both meat and fowl. If you prefer lighter fare, Tenari is an excellent swimmer and can herd fish to be caught." Tenari flattened her ears at the thought of sea salt crusting in her

fur, but held her tongue in case her guests had a hankering for seafood. Vincent replied quickly, "No, what you have brought is fine. Thank you for the food." He considered the piles of prey lying before him. "Humans customarily cook their food before consuming it. Do you prefer your food raw, or shall we prepare all of the meat?"

Marion caught Tenari's ears flicking upwards again and her head rising up just a fraction. Seemingly unaware of his daughter's eagerness and interest, Ineki considered thoughtfully. "We are accustomed to eating our prey raw. It would take time, and is not necessary for you to prepare food for us in such a fashion," he replied. Marion saw the ears droop a tiny bit, and the muzzle curve in a slight pout. "But, if you do not mind the effort, I would surely not mind eating cooked meat. In fact, my daughter has not ever had cooked food, and she is always eager for new things."

With that, Vincent fell to quartering the deer, and Marion began dressing the birds. Ineki and the rest of the hunting party chose to rest in the shade, but Tenari hovered between the two humans, watching their use of their hands and knives with interest and asking questions now and again. Vincent wondered silently what humorous mood had induced God to elect him of all people as Teacher of All Things to People Unfamiliar with the World. Not that he minded. He would gladly have given up anything asked for the experience of being Marion's friend and companion, and finding this lost tribe would be the greatest of gifts to Nanaki. When they began talking once more, he would have to bring up the possibility of a meeting between this lost tribe and its lonely cousin.

Marion considered their lunch for a moment, and then set up five good-sized fires in a circular pattern. After picking through the edge of the forest, she returned to the circles of stone with several large branches. Two forked branches were set on either side of four of the fires, and a long, straight branch was denuded of its bark and set in front of the fire to be used as a skewer. The three birds she had prepared were seasoned and spitted on one branch, leaving three fires for Vincent to use. Over the fifth hearth, she set up a pyramid of branches and hung a large pot over it to heat water. Gathering their water supply, she emptied it all into the pot, and then looked towards Tenari, hefting the leather bags up questioningly. "Can you show me to a river where I can fill these?"

"Of course," came the immediate reply. "It's not far; just follow me." Marion stepped after the tawny animal, relinquishing two of the water bags to Tenari's care after some insistence. Leather bags slung around her neck, Tenari continued her many questions as she led Marion to the stream. Four pairs of yellow and one pair of glowing red eyes followed them as they disappeared into the forest. A murmured conversation picked up once more among the furry members, and Kokone actually settled down for a nap. Vincent, however, continued to track their unseen progress through the forest for a while, watching the tops of the trees as birds were startled out of their perches by the chatting of the unusual pair.

No need to tell her to be careful - she walked with a ferocious friend, and had powerful magic at her command. No need to tell her to return soon - she rarely wandered from his side unless necessary and always came back to him as soon as she could. No need for him to hover over her, either - she was by now an experienced traveler, knowing how to set up camp, hunt, cook, fight, and defend herself. She had found this island on her own, defended him and healed him, set up camp while he was unconscious, and made close friends with Tenari in an impossibly short time. No need for him at all, was there?

His vow in Mideel to never leave her seemed foolish now. She didn't need him to be her guardian anymore. She had become almost entirely self-sufficient; this inexperienced girl whom he had vowed to protect and teach had instead assumed the role of protector on this leg of their journey. She had also made friends and admirers in Wutai, after the townspeople had gotten over their awe and fear of her glittering eyes and strange abilities; did she really need him as a traveling companion anymore? If they parted ways now, he was sure she could find someone more suitable to travel with. Or settle down with.

His vow had been entirely selfish. It served Marion not at all, only his desire to be around her. And why torture himself? He was entirely wrong for her, even aside from his perennial youth. She, an untouched innocent, beautiful and gifted. And what was he? A monstrous murderer, twisted and cold. Had he thought he could start over and lead a new and normal life with her? He was only the dark shadow that dogged her, never touched by the light that surrounded her.

But he wouldn't leave her. Not yet. Not until they could find out what secrets lay hidden in her body, what nightmare Hojo might have subjected her to. There was yet one service he could provide, one need he might fulfill in her life, one way he

could be of use to her. Only he could truly understand what it was to be altered beyond humanity by the twisted scientist who had ruined so many lives. If changes awaited Marion, he could comfort her better than anyone else, help her to survive, teach her to overcome them. And if nothing worse than magic ran in her veins, well then...she could lead a normal life. His promise to be there for her always had contained an unspoken caveat. He would be there for her always, when she needed him. She had needed his help, comfort, and protection untold times before, but now...

...could he leave her? Could he bear to tear himself away from the only source of light in his life? The only sun to warm his heart?

Coward.

He would likely lose her soon enough to time or circumstance. Let him steal as much happiness as he could from her while he was allowed. Time enough later to pay for his selfishness. Time enough...

Komi watched through sleepy eyes as Vincent finished butchering the deer, and began skewering the roasts over the fires Marion had lit. As the man walked around the camp, bringing jars and packets from the packs to the fires, cleaning up the remains of the deer and birds, and various other tasks, he seemed outwardly as calm and inscrutable as ever. But something had changed. The keen yellow eyes saw the minute changes in the man's demeanor, and something else. Komi had always had a special sight and extra sense. She often wondered guiltily if her strange ability had something to do with Araku's erratic behavior - if something in her had affected the young one she had carried and borne. She sighed inwardly and turned her attention to the man once more.

As Tenari had escorted the girl into the forest, the ruddy eyes had followed them intently. As he continued to work, a dark shadow seemed to coalesce around his form, darkening his expression and weighing on his shoulders. Araku had such a cloud about him, Komi thought to herself, but his was red. A spirit of rage and restlessness had been about her son since he had been born, and could not be dispersed by the love and guidance of his parents or the discipline and teachings of the clan. This man's shadow was black. A darker, colder rage and despair haunted this one. It faded and could be fought in the light of the girl, which Komi found almost blinding, but it did not entirely disappear. Komi shuddered slightly at the cold, bleak color and wondered if Vincent knew of the shadow he carried, or if he realized where his salvation lay.

A cold nose nudged her gently, and she turned in time to receive a caressing lick full on the cheek. She wiped away the kiss in mock irritation and smiled up at her mate. "What do you want, Makote?" He stretched and lay down next to her, pillowing his head on his paws and replying in a carefully nonchalant voice, "Nothing. I just happened to see you watching the man as you watch our son."

Komi sighed and burrowed her head into his mane. "He carries a burden as does our son, but it is...darker, colder - I'm not certain how to describe it, but it chills my heart to look into its depths. He's no danger to others as Araku is, only to himself. Together, I'm sure that he and the girl could easily overcome what demons he carries, but I do not even know if they are aware of them." Makote regarded his mate with mild surprise. "I'm curious that you can even see the spirit of humans. There aren't any other creatures on this island that you can sense."

"I think it is only those with a certain level of complexity. Simple creatures such as fish and birds have no cares such as love or hate, honor or betrayal. There is only instinct and action, raw emotions in reaction to circumstance. It is likely that humans are the only others aside from our people who have such spirits." Komi sighed, whispering, "the greatest of gifts, and yet the most dangerous. I wonder how these two will fare." Makote set his chin on her head, gathering her closer to him. "You are an excellent mother, always watchful and caring for all that cross your path. I am honored as your mate because of it. However, you know that it is not your place to reveal a future path for them. They must weave their own fate."

"I know," she replied ruefully, "I was only wondering. But while they are here, it is my prerogative as a mated female to watch over them and care for them all I wish, regardless of what they decide to do once they return to the mainland." Makote chuckled in amusement and huffed, "As you wish, Mother." Komi smiled and closed her eyes, relaxing in the shade and the comforting presence of her mate.

The deer meat and birds were roasting well, dripping oily globes of fat onto the flames below and sending tantalizing tendrils of smoke into the breeze. Marion's pot seemed to be boiling merrily, and Vincent wondered what she had intended to make. Rice? Stew? Vegetables? He scanned the campsite quickly, and his eyes fell upon a sack that had been taken out of their supply pack. Reaching down, he lifted the cloth bag and hefted it experimentally in his hands. Rice, then. Returning to the pot, he eyeballed the water and then decided to dump about half of the bag's contents in.

Just at that moment, Marion and Tenari reappeared out of the shadowy woods, each with two dripping water bags slung around their necks and shoulders. In addition, Marion had removed her belt and now held the front of her tunic out as if it were an apron she wanted to shake out. After dumping their water supply in a shady spot, she trotted up to Vincent while Tenari turned to her parents, and he peered curiously into her arms. Filling her makeshift apron was a strange assortment of herbs, flowers, fruits, and berries.

"Oh, good," Marion commented as she saw the sack still in his hand, "you started the rice already. Tenari showed me all kinds of edible plants on the way to the stream. It worked out well, since I was able to wash everything off in the water. I should have brought an empty pack with me; there's so much available." With that, she began plucking various items out of her tunic and tossing them into the pot of rice. Vincent raised an eyebrow as she threw in flowers as well as herbs. Snagging a startlingly bright yellow blossom, he held it up to his nose, sniffing curiously. The flower gave off a mild aroma strangely reminiscent of a cooked carrot.

"What's this for?" he asked, dangling the blossom in front of Marion. "Tenari says it has many healing properties in the petals and pollen. I ate one, and it tasted kind of tangy, so I thought I'd throw some in to liven up the rice."

Vincent frowned, "You ate one? Marion, what if it's only healing for the people of this clan? It could have been poisonous to humans."

"But..." Marion fidgeted under his intense stare, "it didn't feel poisonous." When Vincent's mild anger and concern turned to confusion, she continued, trying to explain. "I...can control lifestream, call it to me and hold it. And also see the life that it lives, or lived. Aeris said Hojo might have put cells from her mother in me, since I can do more with the lifestream than she can, and she's only half Cetra." She pulled the yellow flower from Vincent's fingers and twirled it slowly. "If I concentrate on something, I can...know it. So, I could feel that this flower wasn't poisonous."

Vincent watched silently as she flicked the blossom into the pot and walked away, dumping the rest of the tunic-full of food into a large bowl that she pulled from a pack.

If I concentrate on something, I can know it...see the life that it lives, or lived.

What would she see if she focused on me? Vincent wondered. One more thing to face. If she chooses to stay with me - chooses me - then she should know what she's getting herself into. If I asked her to look into me, my heart, she'd see...

She would see a cold man in a blue suit drawing his pay by kidnapping and murdering, a discarded lover raging against himself, and a monster living in a man's body. The young father he had shot in the back on his first mission, the anger and fear in Lucrecia's eyes as she shook his hand away, and the Chaos beast that lived in his mind. Could the love he bore Marion outweigh his sins? Would it be enough? Could she accept his heart and forgive the rest?

And this was assuming that she truly loved him, and would continue to do so even when given an entire world of other options. He shook his head slightly and sighed. First things first, and forget the rest. For now, he would live in the moment as Marion did, leaving tomorrow and its problems for someone else to gnaw on. Firmly pushing his hopes and dreams, fears and doubts to the bottom of his mind, he left the cook fires and, kneeling by her side, began helping Marion sort the spoils of her hike.

"The big red and orange berries go in that bowl over there with those pale green...mini-apples, I guess, and these squishy pods should be opened up, and the juice poured into this jar," she instructed, her voice strangely subdued. "All the larger pink fruits I want to save for breakfast. They're very mild and sweet, and should taste good mixed in with oatmeal." He nodded and fell to sorting fruit without comment. They worked in silence, picking out errant leaves that had fallen in, with

Marion popping a stray berry into her mouth now and again. Marion wondered if Vincent was still upset with her for eating that flower, or if this was just his usual silence. After a few quick glances, she came to some kind of decision and held up an orange-blushed berry in front of Vincent's mouth.

He glanced from the plump red berry to Marion's shimmering eyes, noting her hesitant, slightly pleading look. Not just a berry then, but a peace offering and silent question as well. Flashing crimson eyes softened as he realized anew how much she could be affected by his seeming indifference or anger. He plucked the fruit from her fingers and popped it into his mouth, munching it down quickly. Eyes turned down to the items he was sorting, he said quietly, "I'm wasn't angry with you, Marion. Only concerned."

No reply greeted this statement but a soft shuffling of feet in the sand, and then she was right there next to him. Two slender arms circled his elbow as her head rested against his shoulder. As in Mideel, at a loss to express herself, she chose instead to seek comfort in his physical presence. His left arm held captive, Vincent idly finished sorting the fruit with his right hand, unaware that several barriers that he had put up in his heart were even now slowly toppling under the gentle weight of Marion's hands.

"That was an excellent meal. You have our thanks for the novelty," said Ineki, licking his chops a few hours later. Vincent nodded acknowledgment and gazed out over the impromptu picnic scene with wry amazement. Three full-grown deer, an equal number of plump ground hens, a large pot of steaming rice, and a salad of sorts with a light, fruity dressing had been demolished. All that was left of the feast were bones and small piles of berries dusted with sugar that Marion had handed out in bowls made of curled leaves peeled from a nearby tree. And even the berries were currently being lipped up daintily by their unusual dinner guests and would soon be gone.

Seeing that everyone had eaten their fill, Marion began wrapping the remains of the meal in the long, rubbery leaves that she had used as plates and stacked them into a neat pile beyond the ring of cook-fires, intending to bury them later on. The campsite made neat again, Vincent picked up their earlier conversation where they had left off.

"You had asked me about Nanaki," he said, addressing his comments to the leader as he sensed was appropriate. "He is the only one of his kind that I know of, aside from your clan. He has taken his father's place as Guardian of Cosmo Canyon, and I am sure that he would like to come here and meet you. In fact, I'm sure that all of our companions would, for they all love and respect Nanaki, and would most likely want to share in his happiness at discovering that he is not, after all, alone."

Ineki nodded his massive head. "We are also eager to meet with this lost kin of ours." He paused and his gaze fell upon the chocobos grazing nearby. "Will he also come here on those birds of yours? The chain of islands connecting our home to the mainland have long since sunken into the sea, and the distance is impossible to swim."

"Ah, no," replied Vincent after struggling with the mental image of Nanaki trying to ride a chocobo. "I'm sure that Cid will be willing to fly everyone here in the Highwind; the airship I mentioned this morning."

"I would be interested in seeing this airship. And you will contact your friends on this PHS device you had mentioned?" Ineki asked. When Vincent nodded in reply, Ineki glanced at the rest of his companions, gathering slight nods before continuing. "Then we would be grateful if you would invite your companions to the island. We will camp with you one night more, and then return to our caverns to gather the rest of our clan together. If you will inform us of when your friends will arrive, we will arrange to meet them here, on this beach."

Vincent stopped to consider time needed for packing, pick-ups, and flight time. "They can be here in five days," he decided.