

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 25: Nighttime Decision

Vincent watched the play of shadows on the tent wall. The dancing flames fascinated Tenari to no end, and so a large fire had been built and allowed to burn through the night as they all bedded down to rest. Through the slit created by the tent opening, Vincent could make out several shadowy forms curled up in the sand, the small hills and valleys of their silhouettes rising and falling with the deep, comfortable breaths of sleep.

Next to him, a much smaller shade also breathed in the night air with clockwork regularity. Having fallen asleep hours ago, Marion had just begun her nightly unconscious squirming, inching her way across the tent floor in a matter of minutes to come to rest directly by his side. One delicate hand, ghostly pale, crept across the edge of his blanket until it bumped up against a ridge in the material. Finding purchase, her fingers curled around the fold and held tight, much as a child clings to a favorite blanket or doll even when submerged in the deepest of dreams. No nightmares had disturbed her sleep since that first night outside of Midgar, but many times he had peered into her face to find her eyes roving restlessly behind their lids, and small murmurs of an unintelligible conversation escaping from her lips.

Even in her sleep, her expression remained relatively calm, betraying none of the fiercer emotions that played across most people's faces. Except his own, of course. Tifa had been correct when she had noted that Marion's emotions were almost entirely expressed in her eyes alone. The glowing green eyes he now so loved filled with tears and widened in surprise. They softened, glittered, and were downcast by turns, but no frowns creased her forehead, and no smiles curved her lips. She had screamed in fear, but he had yet to hear her laugh, or shout in anger. A comment that Cloud had made crossed his mind.

"Maybe she's taking her cues from you, Vincent...I think she's trying to learn from you."

Carefully smoothing back Marion's sleep-tousled hair with one hand, Vincent mused over her habits. Just as he did, she walked with silent and sure footsteps, able to practically melt into the background when walking about with others. Aside from her curious questions, she seemed to find conversation largely unnecessary. She had picked up how to ride simply by observing him, and had also learned the rudimentary elements of traveling and setting up camp in only one or two days. Small things that he had not thought to tell her, such as needing to check their chocobos' claws for undue wear and how to make sure the tent lines were knotted securely, were picked up regardless through her constant watching.

So Vincent had taught her about walking, talking, traveling, camping, fighting, hunting, and food. But in all their time together, she hadn't learned anything about smiling or laughter. He pulled his hand away from Marion's face and clenched it tight as he realized that the only emotions he had managed to wring from her so far had been painful ones. Fear, uncertainty, and hurt.

He closed his eyes against the night and let his hand rest protectively over hers. She deserved better. She deserved more. They would leave tomorrow, after Ineki and the others returned to their home caverns. Cid and the others would have to make their own introductions; Midgar would wait no longer. She deserved to live a real life, filled with joy as well as sorrow, laughter as well as tears.