

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 26: Fear and Reassurance

Shading her eyes against the morning sun, Marion gazed after the five sinuous forms melting away into the forest as Vincent chatted on the PHS behind her. After a light breakfast, Ineki had gathered the welcoming party together and made a brief farewell. Tenari had surprised everyone, herself included, with her effusive good-byes to Marion. A massive paw had brought Marion's head forward for a rasping kiss up her chin and across one cheek. The caress was returned by way of a heartfelt hug. While she cuddled with her most unique of friends, Marion noted Vincent and Ineki wander off several paces to hold a private conversation. She had no opportunity to ask the topic, however, for Vincent immediately began to dial as Ineki walked away.

Vincent snapped shut the PHS and pocketed it, turning to update her. "Cid is going to pick up everyone in the Highwind and then fly here. The Highwind should land in four or five days. I gave him directions as well as general coordinates, so they should find this place easily enough even though we won't be here to guide them."

Marion looked at him blankly. "Why aren't we going to be here? Where are we going?"

"Midgar," he stated with finality. "We have to go back to the lab where I found you. We have to know."

Marion shook her head in protest, stark fear in her eyes. "No! I don't ever want to go back there!" she cried. "Vincent, please, don't make me go back...I don't want to know what he did...what's inside me...what I am..." She trailed off, begging with her eyes. Vincent held her gaze and spoke firmly, realizing her fear, but needing her to understand.

"Marion, we have to know. We have to find out what he did to you, why you can do what you do. We have to know if there's something more than just the spells. What if there's some other change, some other ability waiting in your body? I need to know, Marion." His tone changed from forceful persuasion to an almost helpless pleading. "I need to know. Not because I'm afraid of what Hojo may have done to you, but because I want to be able to keep you safe, help you get through whatever might happen."

She trembled before him, still afraid, still un-assured. "Vincent," she faltered, "will you...what if I'm..."

"You are Marion. You will always be Marion to me, no matter what." He shook his head, "Look at me. I've got red eyes and a claw, I can float in the air, and I transform into different beasts. Marion, do you think that anything Hojo could have done to you would make me turn away from you?"

"You can't know that, you don't know what he did to me, you don't know," she cried. He grabbed her by the arms, shaking her gently.

"I don't know and I don't care. Marion, what can I say to convince you..."

What could he say? What could he possibly say to reassure her that he wouldn't desert her, wouldn't abandon her?

She may be able to take care of herself, but she's deathly afraid of being alone. Look at her; she's so scared of herself, of me leaving her. She has no idea, no real idea that I...

...that you what?

He had dedicated himself to her in the darkened hallway of Hojo's lab, but he hadn't told her so. He had realized the full extent of his love for her and vowed never to leave her after her return from the lifestream in Mideel, but she wasn't aware of it. He traveled with her on a journey across continents, protected her and taught her, cared for her and comforted her,

but how was she to know that it was out of love, and not obligation or adventure?

No wonder she was afraid.

He had decided at Mideel not to reveal his feelings until she'd had a chance to live among others, away from his constant presence, in order to give her a fair chance to decide if she wanted him. He threw that decision into the wind. If she loved him, she loved him. If she didn't, she didn't. Perhaps the words would be regretted later, but so be it. What she needed now was reassurance, and what she needed, Vincent would give her, if he was able. And he was.

For how many years had he thought he'd never say these words again...

"I love you."

Her body turned to stone in his grasp, and her eyes remained locked on his for an eternity, stunned wide. And then, a weak breath, barely audible.

"What?"

"I love you, Marion, very much." Vincent paused, searching her eyes, and then asked quietly, "do you think you could learn to love me?"

Tears overflowed in her eyes and joy in her heart as she answered him in a trembling whisper, "I already do."

Marion watched in amazement as a sudden transformation occurred in Vincent's face. His entire being seemed suffused with a new light...what was it?

He was smiling.

She found her hand moving towards his face of its own volition, fingertips hesitatingly caressing his cheek, thumb running under the curve of his lips. "Vincent," she whispered, "you're...smiling." The smile widened.

"So are you," he replied softly, just as enchanted as she. "In fact, you smiled first." Her face went through an almost comical procession of surprise, confusion, wonder, and joy, culminating in another blissful smile.

Vincent took a step closer so that she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. "You've learned so much since we began this journey," he said to her, still smiling that glorious smile. "You know how to ride, fight, cook, set up camp, use potions and weapons...you've learned to cry and you've learned to love. Now you know that you're loved in return, and you've learned to smile."

Vincent brought his hands up from her arms, claw tangling gently in her hair, fingers dancing across her cheek to rest behind her ear. "One more thing I want to teach you..." he whispered, and lowered his face to hers.