

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 6: Into the Sunlight

The late afternoon sun found a strange little party gathered outside of the Sector 7 gate of Midgar. Two identical golden birds, two young women with long dark hair and matching clothes, and two men whose appearances could not possibly be more different. They stood in pairs, a dry wind puffing up small dust clouds from the barren, desolate plains surrounding the ruined city.

"Well, if you're going to take her all over the world, you'll want golds, and only Tifa breeds those, so you'll have to come back with us anyway," Cloud finished. He had already cited the need to purchase supplies and gear as well as the necessity of building up Marion's strength, and training her in basic fighting and defensive techniques.

"Very well," Vincent conceded. He knew Cloud was right, and forced himself to accept his hospitable offer. Satisfied that he had settled the debate about whether Vincent would bring Marion to Nibelheim for an extended stay, Cloud turned and walked over to where Tifa was amusing herself by braiding Marion's long hair.

Vincent silently berated himself for his selfishness. It wasn't his solitary nature that made him reluctant, as Cloud thought. It was an unreasoning and yet undeniable desire to keep Marion to himself, to be her only companion, to be her entire world. The worst kind of selfishness. By taking her straight away on their journey, he would have exposed her to uncountable dangers while she was still trying to master the art of walking. Still weak from her long sleep, she would have been utterly defenseless.

It was his heart again. Had he learned nothing from his past? Lucrecia had run from his passion, Hojo had destroyed him in his rage. Nothing he loved had survived. His family, his first love, all gone. Now he would throw this frail girl into the world with only himself as protection...and he would kill her, too.

Vincent shook his head. No, he wouldn't. The curse would be broken - no longer would his emotions lead the ones he loved into danger, into death. Time had healed the wounds from an older life, and he was ready to begin a new one. Vincent would lead Marion on a journey to discover the secrets of the world around them, and she would unknowingly lead him on a journey to discover the heart within.

Rising to the surface of his solemn musings, Vincent deliberately cleared his mind of all melancholy thoughts and went to join the others. The two chocobos were resting with their heads on each other's backs, cheeping softly in some avian communion. Nearby, Tifa was tying off Marion's now-braided hair with the ribbon she had appropriated from Cloud's wrist and chattering away again. Marion sat quietly in front of Tifa, apparently enjoying the simple attentions of the brunette. Cloud stood over them, scanning the horizon. All in all, a restful scene, thought Vincent. How many peaceful moments like this had he missed in all of his solitary broodings? How many times had he kept himself apart, feeling like an intruder, an outsider? Even now, though Tifa had marked herself as the oddball of the foursome with her un-glowing eyes, he knew that his was still the most remarkable appearance, and he hesitated to join the picturesque scene.

Tifa finished with the ribbon and straightened up, smiling proudly at her handiwork. "There! Now your hair won't be flying all over the place in the wind. It looks really good on you, Marion. I'll braid your hair any time you want, just let me know." After receiving quiet thanks from the girl she was beginning to think of as a younger, adopted sister, Tifa turned to Cloud and asked,

"What are you looking for, or at?" She looked out across the plain as well, thinking that perhaps he could see monsters on the horizon.

"Nothing, really. Just thinking that we should just camp here tonight, instead of staying at the inn at Kalm. I was scanning around for a good campsite."

Tifa looked at him, one eyebrow raised, "Why wouldn't we go to Kalm? It's not night yet, and we could make it if we left right now."

Her childhood friend shook his blonde head decidedly. Peering over his shoulder to see if Marion was listening, he continued quietly, "Look at her, she's completely tired out. Vincent told me some things while you were helping her to change. She's been sleeping in a mako chamber for a long time now, years maybe. She's got no memories of anything at all, so she wouldn't even know how to ride a chocobo. She's probably strung out right now, not to mention physically weak. We'll make camp right over there," he decided, pointing at a small patch of grassy plain, "and let her rest. We can teach her to ride tomorrow morning - we'll have to double up - and make our way slowly back to Nibelheim."

Tifa nodded. Cloud was right; Marion wasn't one of their regular companions, battle-hardened and used to the every day trials of traveling. They would all have to adjust their usual way of life while Marion learned how to live an every day one. Tifa thought of Aeris with a pang in her heart. Cloud had been protective of her, too. Her vulnerability and innocence were mirrored in this new girl. And when Cloud learned that Marion knew - knows? - Aeris, he'll want to talk to her about it...spend time with her... Tifa shook her head violently, wanting to dispel her unruly thoughts. Ashamed of her jealousy, unable to confront Cloud directly about her feelings, and equally unable to feel animosity towards Marion, Tifa felt a familiar discomfort squeeze her heart.

Marion patted her hair curiously. Aeris' hair had been in a sort of braid as well, but had been tied into a ponytail high on her head. Tifa had gathered Marion's thick hair at the nape of her neck and started the braid there, ending it with a simple bow, with a tail of loose hair flowing just past her waist. Although she didn't have bangs like Tifa or Aeris, still her hair was not of uniform length, and shorter tendrils waved loose around her face. She pulled some of those tendrils across her eyes, peering through them, and spotted Vincent walking towards her.

As Vincent paused to take in the view, Marion carefully picked herself up off of the ground, still getting to know her own limbs. She found herself walking straight towards her rescuer, drawn to him, almost. Not thinking about whether he wanted her company and not caring, either...simply needing to be close to him, within his presence. Marion, with no memories and no pre-conceived notions of how to think and act, simply lived as her heart dictated the moment, naturally and without any layers of motive or forethought. Born or created by Hojo who knew how long ago, with the body of an 18 year old, still Marion was emotionally only one day old, but learning fast.

He watched as the slender vision approached him, her expression solemn as usual, brilliant eyes that focused on his own. It was almost uncanny, the way she always found his gaze. But then, she probably didn't realize that she was staring, he thought. She was utterly new to the world. She reached him after several more dainty steps and stood next to him, silent and content. He returned her stare for a long while, searching her eyes. Utterly guileless and open, the windows to her soul were flung wide open. She didn't yet know that there would be storms and thieves against whom she would need to shut the blinds. What was it like to live so naturally, so simply? To let life flow around you and carry you along, always trusting, always open. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he shifted his gaze to find Cloud waving at him to come over. He looked back at Marion and nodded his head towards the others. She turned her head, catching sight of Cloud, and fell in step beside Vincent as they walked back.