

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 7: Fireside Chat

Marion stared fascinated into the campfire, entranced by the shifting light and grateful for the chance to rest. Although Vincent had carried her much of the way down the Shinra Headquarters staircase and through the rougher parts of their trek through Midgar, she had been utterly exhausted by the time they finally reached the outer wall of the ruined city. The minutes that she had spent on the ground while Tifa braided her hair had refreshed her somewhat, but she still felt tired and...some other things. A strange gnawing sensation that she concluded was hunger, a fluttering that she thought might be excitement or fear, and strange combination of need and contentment whenever she thought of Vincent.

Vincent. Watching him rested her mind. Every moment now was filled with new impressions, experiences, feelings, and ideas. She wanted to spend the whole afternoon letting the grass tickle her ankles. She wanted to let the wind play with her hair, watching the individual strands dance around her face. She wanted to hover over Tifa's shoulder, smelling the medley of scents coming from the pot. She wanted to listen to the soft chirps and coos of the chocobos as they talked to each other. Everything around her that the others seemed to ignore with ease constantly distracted her with its novelty. Her brain was a constant whirl of thoughts and sensations, and she felt as though she might collapse under the sheer pressure of keeping her mind from exploding.

Except, of course, when she looked into Vincent's eyes. The world around her seemed to fade then, and her mind quieted into a simple contemplation of the man in front of her. He centered her, became her focus point, her anchor. In the vast ocean of sensory information she had awakened to, Vincent had become her safe harbor. Marion's eyes went automatically to him now, where he was quietly conferring with Cloud while setting up a tent for the night. Somewhere in her mind there seemed to be a part that had been set aside for the sole purpose of keeping track of where he was at all times - whether consciously or not, she always knew where he was at the moment.

"Dinner's ready!" called Tifa, bringing everyone's attention around to her. Vincent and Cloud returned to the campfire as she handed out bowls of stew. A metal platter sat near the fire, keeping a pile of rolls warm. "Here you go," she said cheerfully as she placed a bowl and spoon before Marion. Plunking down next to her, she wagged her own spoon at the girl next to her and raised an eyebrow in question.

Marion held her utensil up to the firelight and tilted her head. "Spoon. For eating."

"Right!" said Tifa. "Be careful, the stew's probably really hot, still. You can blow on it to cool it. Oh, and I like dipping my bread in it, too. Try it, it's good." She smiled as Marion cautiously dipped up a tiny portion of the thick stew, puffing careful breaths across the surface. Once in her mouth, the stew was carefully rolled around with her tongue before finally being swallowed.

"It's...warm. And it tastes..." green eyes glowed wonderingly at her, and Tifa asked curiously, "Tastes what? Good? Bad?"

"No," Marion shook her head. "I mean, it tastes. I can taste it. I...I've never tasted anything before. At least that I can remember," she finished softly. Tifa smiled at her and replied, "I keep forgetting that everything's new to you. I'm almost jealous. People get jaded sometimes, and tired of life...you get to experience everything for the first time, like a newborn baby, but with the mind and body of an adult...I heard Vincent tell Cloud he's going to explore the world with you?"

Marion nodded, eyes suddenly soft at the thought of his promise. Tifa paused and then broke off the subject, "Well, I'd better let you keep eating. Try a potato, it's...squishy...when it's cooked." Marion turned back to her bowl, intrigued by the thought of "squishy." Tifa nibbled thoughtfully on the end of her spoon, sneaking quick glances at her dinner companion and the dark, brooding man across the fire from them.