

An Affair of the Heart and Soul

By Meriko

Chapter 9: The First Morning

Marion drifted slowly out of her deep sleep, becoming conscious of the world around her in bits and pieces. Usually, when she became conscious, it was simply a process of opening her eyes, finding herself floating in her chamber, and then closing them again, hoping to sleep and dream or receive a pulse from Aeris as an invitation to talk. Now, her body felt heavy, and it took great effort just to open her eyelids. She raised her head and blinked against the pale morning sun filtering in through the tent flap. Morning sun? Morning, afternoon, evening...she wasn't used to the passing of time, either. In her mako-filled chamber, time had been meaningless. She could have been sleeping for mere days or endless decades...it was all the same to her.

She glanced around, still feeling disoriented. She was inside a tent, and there were some discarded blankets around her. To her right, Cloud lay spread-eagled on his back, making some very odd noises. Snoring; that was it. Snoring, and therefore sleeping, just as she had been. Sleeping...oh, that was right. The previous night's memories returned to her waking mind.

After sampling the various items to be found in her bowl, she had found herself experiencing a slight discomfort. With only a small portion of her meal consumed, Marion had found herself...full. Tifa's assurance that enough air and exercise would give her an appetite made her curious about how much food she was expected to eat. The evening had passed pleasantly, with Tifa making plans for their return to Nibelheim, and Cloud and Vincent sitting across from them, engaged in their own conversation. Night deepened, and Marion found herself with her head laid sleepily across her bent knees, eyes growing steadily heavier. Sleepiness was new to her as well...in the lifestream, she had been almost constantly sleeping, never getting tired, never needing rest. Tifa had led her to the tent and introduced Marion to the experience of being tucked in. Warm, full, and tired, Marion had curled up in the blankets and promptly fallen asleep after one last look at Vincent's silhouette.

Vincent...where was he? Marion poked her head out of the tent and looked around. The campfire had been rebuilt, and Tifa was busy cooking again. Morning meal...breakfast? Still no sign of Vincent. She got to her feet, wobbling a little, and walked over to Tifa, who greeted her with a cheerful "Good morning!" and a friendly laugh.

"I'll have to take out that braid and comb out your hair. You're all rumpled." Marion brought the braid around her side and examined it. Sure enough, locks of hair had escaped during the night and were now tangling wildly out of the formerly neat braid.

"Where's Vincent?" she asked Tifa as the self-appointed cook began rummaging in a pack for a brush.

"Oh, he was gone when I woke up." Tifa replied. "Don't worry, though, he disappears like that sometimes. He'll be back soon," she added quickly, as Marion's cheeks blanched parchment-white at the news.

In a matter of minutes, Tifa had unraveled the braid, and had Marion's silky black hair brushed out. A night of being braided had put a glorious wave into the jet-black locks, and Tifa decided against re-weaving it, sweeping back some of the hair and tying it off in the back instead. She had barely finished when Cloud shambled out of the tent, one hand running through the wild blonde spikes on his head. He smiled at the charming pair and commented to Marion, "Looks like you've been adopted. Now Tifa gets to raise a daughter as well as chocobo chicks."

He was ignored, however, as Vincent strode into view. Marion jumped up and made a beeline for him, leaving Tifa smiling ruefully at Cloud, "Yeah, I may be her new 'mommy' but Vincent's the one she imprinted on."

"Imprinted?"

Tifa nodded. "Mm-hmm. You know how the chicks will follow around the first chocobo they see after they've hatched? It's

called imprinting. They think that the first moving thing they see is their mother. Vincent's the first person she saw when she woke up, and she seems to follow him around, so that's why I said that."

Cloud fixed her with an amused look. "So, you're saying she thinks Vincent is her mother?"

"Yes, Cloud, she thinks Vincent is her mother," Tifa returned, dripping sarcasm. "Why do I even talk to you? Come on, help me pack up the tent. Breakfast will be ready soon and then we can get going."