

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 14: In the Face of Fear

She awoke where she had lost consciousness; in his arms once more, being carried across the cobblestones to Tifa's house. How many times already had she relaxed into this embrace, been comforted, supported, carried? Gratitude rushed over her, momentarily blanketing the fear and horror rising within her. She nestled her head under his chin, burrowing into his cape and wishing she could stay there forever...never look into Cloud's eyes again, never watch Tifa's head turn away from her. A sharp pain stabbed into her heart, and Marion tightened her grip around Vincent's shoulder, moaning softly at the hurt.

Finding her awake and obviously distressed, Vincent turned away from Tifa's door and went instead to the well in the center of town. Kneeling in the shade of the ancient well, he settled Marion on his knee and gently pried her arms from around him. Her eyes were sharp and clear, glittering with the pain in her heart that she didn't know how to express. Vincent held her trembling fingers tight in his own hand, pressing them to his chest. His claw remained circled around her waist as he said quietly, "It will be all right."

Marion neither denied it nor disbelieved him. She had no reason to, no experiences yet of deception, no memories of failed reassurances. She only had Vincent.

And Vincent said that it would be all right.

She nodded, and reached out her arms once more, wrapping them around Vincent's neck. He stayed frozen for a moment, unsure, and then returned the embrace. They had held each other like this before, certainly, but it had always been when he was carrying her - but for that first night, and for that, she had been asleep. This was the first time she had actually hugged him - not simply holding on to him, but holding him. They stayed that way for a moment, and then he gathered her up once more, and resumed his course towards Tifa's house.

Tifa watched from a slit in the curtains as Vincent walked towards the well with Marion. "He's talking to her right now, but they'll be here in a minute," she reported to Cloud. She turned to see him still sitting at the kitchen table, staring blankly at the bare wood. Her heart ached to see the stark fear in his eyes. His former superior and hero; his sworn enemy; the murderer responsible for the deaths of his family and neighbors, best friend, and Aeris; the one who had manipulated Cloud and toyed with his mind; the madman who in his plan to become God had tried to destroy the entire planet...Sephiroth.

"He's dead, Cloud," Tifa stated firmly. "We killed him, he is dead, he is not coming back."

His reply came in a flat, emotionless voice. "You saw her. If that staff had been the Masamune, she would have run me clean through. Her speed and technique; that gesture at the end...it's him. Not just a clone; I couldn't have mimicked him so perfectly...it's him, Tifa..." he trailed off, hands fisting tightly on the tabletop, jaw clenched.

"She is not Sephiroth!" Tifa cried, hurting to see Cloud so afraid, rejoicing to know that she was the only one to whom he bared himself, denying that the man who had taken so much from them could possibly reach out from the grave to harm them. "She's one of Hojo's victims, just like you; she's our friend, Cloud, and we have to help her."

He looked up then, something very like shock and betrayal in his expression. "She's nothing like me!" he shouted, standing up from his chair. "She's not our friend; she's one of Hojo's monsters - he used her to bring Sephiroth back and I'm not going to help her do anything! I don't want her living here with you; who knows what she'll do? We have to..."

He was abruptly cut off as Tifa jumped across the floor to him and slapped him across the face, snapping his head to the side and making him stagger back. "Don't you dare...don't you dare say another word," she whispered, a tear escaping and

flying down her cheek. Her voice hitched in her throat as she continued, "Cloud, I know you're scared, I know what Sephiroth did to you, but he is dead. And as scared as you may be, Marion is even more frightened, and she doesn't have anyone except for us and we are not going to abandon her."

Cloud's face turned back towards her, but his eyes focused over her shoulder. Tifa turned to see Vincent setting Marion down in the doorway. The slender girl certainly didn't look very menacing at the moment, hiding her face in the folds of Vincent's cloak. Tifa wondered bleakly how much of their conversation had been overheard.

Marion refused to meet anyone's eyes except for Vincent, who at the moment was locking stares with Cloud, both men's expressions carefully blank. Tifa sighed, wiping her eyes and turning to the sink as she said, "Who wants tea?" Not that she expected an answer.