

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 30: The Beta Project

After securing the ends to a stout pillar, Vincent casually kicked the rope ladder down the elevator shaft with one booted foot. Their chocobos, tethered to another pillar nearby, dozed happily. Marion peered down into the pitch-black elevator shaft, feeling renewed gratitude to the citizens of Kalm for creating such a ridiculously long ladder for her. Vincent could support her enough so that their landing would not prove dangerous, but her additional weight would prove cumbersome on the way back up. Next to her, Vincent was lowering himself onto the ladder and jumping on it experimentally. Confident that it would not fall, he hauled himself back onto the floor and extended one arm toward her.

"Are you ready?" he asked. Honest as always, Marion immediately replied, "No." Vincent pondered for a moment. Struggling a bit against his habitual reticence, he searched for a means to reassure her. For all his 60 years, this was only the second time Vincent Valentine was involved in a relationship with the fairer sex. And it was the very first time his love had been returned so completely. He was treading unfamiliar grounds with Marion, just as she was with him.

"Well, are you at least in agreement with me on the necessity of what we're going to do?" Marion replied in the affirmative, although clearly still uneasy and afraid.

"And do you love me, and trust me?" he asked next, fully aware of what her answer would be. Still, her earnest and immediate "Yes" set a warm glow in his heart that took him unawares.

His voice suddenly warm and gentle, he continued, "And you know that I love you, and would never do you any harm." Marion nodded solemnly. Holding out his hand once more, Vincent repeated his first question, "Are you ready?" With another nod, Marion stepped into the circle of his arm and nestled her head against his chest, hands fisted in his shirt. Tightening his own arms around her, Vincent stepped forward into the darkness and jumped.

Marion opened her eyes to find Vincent holding a flashlight in his hands. By the pale yellow light thus provided, she discovered that they were floating approximately two inches above a dusty pile of boards and twisted metal panels. The arms around her loosened slightly, and he gently deposited her onto the uneven surface, and then stepped down from the air himself.

Vincent led the way down the short hallway from the elevator, shining the flashlight about him for Marion's benefit. The corridor opened up into a parallel hallway, which in turn led to eight more passageways. After taking a moment to recall the location of Marion's former lodgings, Vincent chose the second passageway from the left and strode down it confidently. Marion followed close behind, her apprehensions momentarily laid to rest by Vincent's words.

After about a half-hour of meandering through the maze of Hojo's private labs, they came upon the door last looked upon many months ago, still ajar with a faint green light spilling into the hallway. Turning to Marion, Vincent suggested, "Since I didn't find anything relevant in this room, we should probably start here, and work our way backwards, checking each room as we go for files and notes. It's likely that there will either be a library of sorts devoted to information storage, or a separate room containing research data specifically for you." The slim figure beside him nodded, and then turned to the nearest door and tugged it open.

Her head peered cautiously into the darkness of the room, long hair fanning out beneath. Vincent shone the flashlight into the room over her head, revealing a cluster of desks and chairs, and papers scattered everywhere, as if a storm had passed through the office. Marion crept into the room and lifted a metal wastebasket up, shaking out all of the papers within and then setting it in the middle of the room. Bright green eyes narrowed for a moment in concentration, and in the next heartbeat, a small fire was burning merrily in the empty trashcan. Vincent clicked the flashlight off while watching Marion adjust the strength of the Fire spell. The flames dimmed a bit, and then flared up over the rim of the can, only to waver once more. Once she had the room lit to her satisfaction, she joined Vincent in rummaging for any clues to the former function of this particular room.

Farther into the rather long room were several rows of filing cabinets, sectioning the rest of the space into narrow rows. Many of the cabinets were in wild disarray, with files and envelopes spilling out of them and onto the floor. Several others were completely empty, their vacant drawers in stacks along one wall. The wall space surrounding the filing cabinets had simple boards attached along their length, which served as writing desks. Pulling a dusty binder from a pile, Vincent idly paged through it, and was mildly surprised to see that they had found what they were looking for. It was logical, he supposed, that it should be located close to where Hojo had kept Marion herself.

Materia Fusion: The Beta Project - Professor Hojo

Notes on the Pre-Experiment Research

Materia Fusion...that was what the door used to say. What was her real name? He glanced up, but Marion was busy riffling through the contents of the desks, and had her back to him. Quickly, he scanned through the pages of the notebook, looking for clues, anything helpful.

...screen candidates for possible attributes and abilities to be applied to the project. Specifically searching for regenerative, healing, resistant, magical, and adaptive traits...

...candidate list finalized...create host body...combining genetic codes from all donors...

Create host body? Then...she didn't have a name; she never did. No name, no parents, nothing.

...cellular memories...

...elemental materia reduced to its liquid form...seed host body with materia...infuse with elemental mako...

This must be how she can call spells without using materia.

...candidates for genetic material donation filed alphabetically by species.

Just then, Marion walked over with a small stack of notebooks. "I found some reports on the experiment. What are you reading?" Pointing out sentences here and there on the page, Vincent explained, "It appears that you aren't someone experimented on by Hojo...you are the experiment. It seems he gathered genetic material from various sources and combined them to create some kind of elemental warrior with magical powers."

"There's a filing cabinet referenced here...it holds a list of everyone considered for the experiment." Laying the binder down on the desk, Vincent walked deeper into the room, glancing quickly at the long rows of filing cabinets until he found the one he was looking for. Opening the top drawer, he found tall stacks of paper rather than the folders he had been expecting. He reached in and lifted out the first stack, only to find that it was connected to the next. He set the first stack on a nearby desk and carefully pulled out the second stack, trying his best not to rip the closely printed sheets apart. The second stack was in turn connected to a third, and then the drawer was empty. Peering at the label on the drawer, he was surprised to read, "Candidates by Classification: A~H." The middle drawer was labeled, "Candidates by Classification: I~Q." And of course, the list terminated with the letter "Z" in the bottom drawer.

Marion walked over, peering at the weighty stacks of paper curiously. "What is all this?" she asked. With not a little amazement at the scope of the experiment, Vincent gestured to the filing cabinet and replied, "The list of candidates fills this entire filing cabinet. Apparently Hojo wanted to make sure he considered all the options."

As Marion hovered, Vincent began paging through the top layer of paper, orienting himself with the data.

ID#: 0000345

Label: Flower Prong

Classification: Acanthus mutation
Possible Applications: Photosynthesis. [reject]

...and on the next page,

ID#: 0160012
Label: Flap Beat
Classification: Accipiter mutation
Possible Applications: None. [reject]

ID#: 0143577
Label: Needle Kiss
Classification: Accipiter mutation
Possible Applications: Lightning elemental. [reject]

...and pages and pages to go, each with closely printed rows of data on every form of life to be found on this planet. Every form of life...

Vincent paused for a moment, and then grabbed several inches of paper, skipping forward and searching for a specific listing.

There. Snuggled in between Cetacean and Chaetognath...Cetra.

ID#: 0023567
Label: Ifalna Ghast
Classification: Cetra
Possible Applications: Healing ability, protective ability, regenerative ability, unproven resonance with lifestream, unproven communications ability with planet. Apply to Beta project. [accept]

ID#: 1065548
Label: Aeris Gainsborough
Classification: Cetra/Human hybrid
Possible Applications: Weaker version of ID#0023567. [reject]

"It looks like Aeris was right about your abilities with the lifestream," he mentioned, still scanning the miles of paper in his hands. "It says here that Ifalna is one of the donors." When no reply was forthcoming, he lifted his head to find Marion standing a little ways away now, arms wrapped tight around herself as if trying to hold her body together. "Marion?" he called softly. The pale head shook slowly, long dark strands floating like silk around her.

"Not a donor. Not Ifalna, not any of these people. No one would willingly submit to this." She looked around her in fear and distaste, and then gave herself a little shake. Setting her expression into one of resigned determination, she placed herself gingerly on a chair and began paging through the stack of notebooks that she had brought over.

Steeling himself, Vincent set aside the first stack of papers and then searched through the next for another possibility.

ID#: 0000001
Label: Jenova
Classification: Jenova
Possible Applications: Transformation, increased strength/abilities, moderate telepathic links possible with cell-implantation, minimal regeneration of cells, ability of cells to survive apart from the main body. Research possibility of achieving results without using the original Jenova host. Reference Sephiroth for possible control issues. [accept/reject undecided]

Vincent sighed, but not in either resignation or relief. The Jenova host had been destroyed, and so there was no danger of mind control or madness, but if there were Jenova cells within Marion's body...the possibilities were endless. Cloud had been injected with the alien cells, and so they were not an actual part of him. The invading cells had merely been receptors for the mind control exercised by Jenova and her scion, Sephiroth. They would not be passed down to Cloud's children, and they took no part in determining who he was - his genetic makeup. Marion, however, was an entirely different experiment. Her body had been created from a horrifying blend of myriad life forms, both human and monster, plant and animal, Cetra and...Jenova?

Placing the pages carefully back into an orderly stack, he returned to the first set of papers to peruse the human candidates, wondering who else had been considered as worthy of this sick experiment. He turned the large stack upside down and began paging through the stack backwards, as it ended with the letter H.

...and several pages into the list of human candidates, he found the following entry.

ID#: 0018615

Label: Vincent Valentine

Classification: Human

Possible Applications: Apply results from the Valentine project to Alpha project. Applications include longevity, levitation, enhanced senses, and transformation. Apply longevity result to Beta project as well. [accept]

Aside from the shock of finding that he himself had played an unwilling part in Marion's creation was the revelation of a second subject...or rather, a first. Alpha project? Alpha and Beta...so Marion was project #2. Who or what was project #1?

"Vincent?" Marion called, interrupting his thoughts. "These notebooks are reports on the experiment's progression, and this last one seems to be the summary. I found a page summarizing the human candidates for the Beta p...for me." As Vincent walked over, she began to read out loud from her chair, huddled over the notebook.

"Here's a list of Shinra employees. 'Soldiers: no candidates found. Corporate staff: one candidate found and rejected,'" she fell silent and scanned down the page, but found nothing further on who the person had been. Her eyes caught on a particular paragraph, and she continued in a carefully neutral voice.

"'Generals: seven candidates found, five accepted,'" read Marion, "'Yuki'ie of Wutai; Teddeson of Junon; and Lauren, Michiyel, and...Sephiroth of Midgar.' Sephiroth..." There was a rather significant pause, and then Marion gamely read on. Vincent placed one hand on her shoulder, a tiny gesture of support and reassurance.

"'In addition to cellular memories and enhanced cerebral function, the Beta project has been seeded with all materia known and infused with mako. Special fusion techniques applied to Elemental materia should give the Beta project the ability to utilize the power of the materia contained within.' Well, now we know how I can call up those spells," she added.

"'In conclusion, I have created the ultimate mako warrior, with enhanced mental abilities and inherent magical powers. Cellular memories from our best generals have been passed down, although it remains to be seen if these memories will be active or dormant upon awakening the Beta project. With the application of knowledge gained through past experiments, I am confident that the Beta project will have enough resistant and regenerative traits that it will...never...die.'" Her voice trailed off into a whisper and she fell silent.

Hearing her words, Vincent finally realized what he had read just a minute ago in his candidate summary.

Apply results from the Valentine project...Apply longevity results to Beta project...

Marion would live just as long a life as he would. Vincent found himself with a blazing hope in his heart, a brilliant star suddenly born in the darkness. She would live forever, for all intents and purposes, as would he. They loved each other...was happiness once more within his reach? He was brought abruptly back down to earth by Marion's shrill scream of denial.

"No!" Marion screamed, hands clenched against her head. "I don't want to live forever! Why? Why me?!" Vincent reached for her, arms outstretched, but she backed away. Flat against the wall, she stared at Vincent, pupils black and bottomless in horrified realization. "I'll live forever, and you'll grow old and die..." she whispered. And then, in a flat, dead voice that chilled Vincent's heart, "You're going to leave me."

"Marion, no..." Vincent tried to calm her but was cut off as she started screaming again, impossible to comfort in her hysteria.

"No? No what? You'll leave me! I know you, Vincent, you won't want me to watch you age and die, you'll leave me and I'll never see you again!" Marion babbled, driven almost to insanity in her fear, her voice rising to a shriek. "You'll leave me, you'll leave me, you..."

Her voice was cut off abruptly as Vincent finally got a hold of her and held her to him, muffling her cries in his shoulder. Marion struggled in his arms, trying to get away, but he had pinned her to the wall with his own body. Tiny fists beat ineffectually at his chest for a minute, then held on to him as if for dear life as she collapsed in his embrace, sobbing wildly.

Vincent held her tight, stroking her hair and murmuring softly to her as she wailed her sorrow and fear. He felt his heart breaking for her, and struggled within himself for calm. When her cries had died down somewhat, he stepped away from the wall, bringing her with him. He lifted her tear-streaked face up with his hands and said gently, "I won't leave you."

"Vincent..."

He silenced her swiftly, pressing his lips to hers, not wanting to hear her broken voice, so despairing, so scared. Fiercely, hungrily he kissed her, desperate to comfort her, to explain why she needn't cry, but too overcome at the moment to do anything but this. She responded in kind, all her kisses silent, hopeless prayers that she need not lose him, never be without him. They stood together for a hundred thousand kisses, not wanting the moment to end, not wanting anything but each other.

Vincent lifted his head the tiniest fraction and waited until Marion's eyes opened to meet his. Glittering green met smoldering garnet, and for a moment, they communed silently.

"I won't leave you," he repeated, his lips brushing lightly over hers as he spoke. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes as she shook her head, black hair tumbling wildly around her. "Marion!" Vincent said, more harshly than he had intended. The thought that she might begin crying again pierced his heart, crumbling his self-control. Her eyes widened at his tone, and the tears were blinked away in surprise.

"Marion, no," Vincent said softly. "Don't cry, don't cry anymore, please. I won't leave you alone, I promise. I'm not going to age, I'm not going to die, I'm not going to leave you." Her eyes searched his as he spoke, not understanding, not believing.

Vincent drew in a steadying breath. "Marion, it's been almost 60 years since I was born." Green eyes flew wide, and Vincent felt a faint smile touch his face at the incredulous expression on her face.

"I was 27 when Hojo re-created me. My hair and nails grow, I get tired and hungry, I hurt and I heal, but Marion, I don't get sick, and I don't age."

She wanted desperately to believe him, wanted it with all her being. "If that's true...if that's true, why didn't you tell me before?"

Vincent closed his eyes. Fear crept back into Marion's heart, icy claws paralyzing her. God, let it be true, she prayed. His lashes lifted and he met her gaze once more, a rueful smile curving his lips.

"I didn't tell you because I was afraid you'd leave me."

Her overwrought mind took a moment to process his words, and then a short, breathy laugh of relief escaped her. He found himself chuckling in response, and soon they were holding each other tight and laughing like escapees from a lunatic asylum...which wasn't too far off of the mark. Lunatics, no, but escapees certainly. They had broken free from their individual prisons of fear, loneliness, and heartache to find each other waiting with arms open wide.