

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 32: The Alpha Project

A voice called out from the hallway, just as Vincent caught a shadow falling through the door, accompanied by a pale yellow flashlight beam.

"Hellooo?"

Vincent jumped out of the chair, almost tossing Marion to the floor. He un-holstered the Death Penalty with one hand, whirling an off-balance Marion behind him with the other. The shadow loomed large in the doorway, and a head poked into view. In a renewed passion to keep safe his most treasured companion, Vincent nearly put a bullet right in between Cloud's eyes.

Sighing, he holstered his pistol and gave Marion a reassuring pat to the shoulder. Taking the gesture as a request for her to sit down, she nestled herself into the seat and leaned out to see their visitor. Vincent walked towards the door, asking, "What are you doing here, Cloud?"

"I thought I'd stop by and see if you needed any help," Cloud shrugged, waving absently to Marion. "Thank goodness you left that ladder there; I was afraid I'd have to climb that cable all the way down. I didn't find anything interesting in Marion's room, so I thought I'd wander around and try to find you guys. What are you doing all the way over here?"

Vincent frowned and asked, "What are you talking about? I found Marion in the room next door."

Cloud shook his head in confusion. "Well, I found another room back there that looks pretty much like you'd described it when we first met Marion, except that it had a mako chamber like the one I was kept in, instead of a fish tank type of thing. I figured I'd found Marion's room, and started looking for you guys. Took me a while, though," he grimaced. "The other room was at the end of the far left corridor. Who knows, maybe there's one at the end of each of those hallways."

Vincent bowed his head in thought while Cloud stood patiently by. Finally, with one last glance at Marion, who had brightened her Fire spell a bit and resumed sorting papers, he motioned Cloud out into the hallway.

Keeping his voice hushed, Vincent said, "I didn't tell her, but I found a reference to 'the Alpha Project' in Hojo's notes. Marion was referred to as 'the Beta Project.' Perhaps the room you found housed the first subject. Was there anyone in the mako chamber?"

The blonde head shook decisively. "No, there wasn't. In fact, the door to the chamber was broken off, and there were sticky puddles everywhere. That's what really made me think it was Marion's room...I thought you'd broken the door off when you'd rescued her." Vincent's mouth tightened into a thin line of worry. Before Cloud could ask what was wrong, his friend whirled around and stalked back into the office.

She looked up as he re-entered the room, and felt a tiny prickle of fear as she caught his tense posture. As he neared her, stepping past the dim light of the fire, his expression did nothing to soothe her sudden anxiety. "What is it?" she asked, as he finally reached her.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Cloud and I are going to explore one more hallway." At this, she stood up, intending to accompany him, but he stopped her with his next words, "No, I want you to stay here." Marion sat back down slowly, and looked up at him with eyes both questioning and pleading. Vincent sighed softly, struggling with the desire to keep her with him, and the equally strong need to keep her safe. If her counterpart in Hojo's experiments had somehow escaped, who knew where that person -or monster - was, and if they were dangerous or not? Moreover, should the Alpha project be more in the vein of Hojo's usual accomplishments, the sight of such a potentially twisted and monstrous creation might

disturb her, being that she herself was a creation of the psychotic professor.

Lifting his hand to caress her cheek, he repeated softly, "I want you to stay here. Put up a barrier if you need to, and wait for us to return. We're just going to look for something." Unhooking his PHS from his belt, he handed it to Marion and continued, "Call Cloud on this if you need us." The dark head nodded in acquiescence, and Vincent turned and walked back towards the door. As he reached the entrance, his shadowy silhouette suddenly leapt into stark relief as a new light source flared up behind him. Whirling around, he saw Marion seated quietly on her chair, glowing bright gold as she called up the barrier spell first used on Ineki's island. He nodded to her once, received a nod in reply, and then stepped out into the hallway where Cloud waited for him.

"Let's go."

At the end of the first corridor was a hallway almost identical to the one Marion had slept in. An uneasy déjà vu swept over Vincent as he approached the door marked, "G..etic Adapt...on - Alp.. Pr...ct." Alpha Project, certainly, and...Genetic Adaptation? The room beyond was almost identical to the second one a corridor away, with a solar powered generator, walls full of computers and control panels, and the same, eerie pale green glow. Instead of Marion's glass tank, there was an empty mako chamber exactly like the ones in the Shinra Mansion basement. As Cloud had stated, the door had been ripped from its hinges and lay broken on the floor. A thin pool of mako still glowed in the bottom of the chamber, and in puddles on the floor.

No, not puddles...footprints. Footprints that roved all over the room, seemingly at random. Larger puddles here and there where the subject had stopped for a moment to examine a control panel or data screen. Heart beating a bit faster, Vincent turned from the room and walked over to where the office would be. Cloud followed wordlessly and shone the flashlight through the partially open door.

The same silent chaos greeted them. Papers were scattered everywhere, and drawers stuck out of the desks and filing cabinets. Along one wall, stacks of binders and reports lay in drunken piles like bodies gathered for burial. Shining the light back and forth from one mess to the next, Cloud commented quietly, "Reminds me of the mansion basement."

The Shinra Mansion. Where Sephiroth had gone from book to book, report to report, trying to discover his past. Pulling books from the shelves, making unorganized piles of discarded information, raging against a past that he could not change. Slowly creeping closer to insanity, and then going on a murderous rampage to seek vengeance against humanity. And now this room...the same disorganization that was so uncharacteristic of Hojo. The same chaos as the room Marion now sat in.

Vincent's eyes fell upon one report by his feet, the two halves torn apart and lying askew as if they had been thrown against the wall. Bending over, he picked up the pages and scanned them quickly, with Cloud peering curiously over his shoulder.

...traits from Sephiroth, Teddeson...aggressiveness factor has been exponentially increased...

...early trials indicate problematic...tampering with its memory proved disastrous...flashbacks and outbursts...keep in stasis for further experimentation...

...the Alpha Project was designed to be my ultimate offensive soldier...discard as a failure, as...perfected in the Beta Project...

Vincent dropped the report back to the ground, mind racing. Cloud frowned in concern, asking, "Vincent? What's going on?" Not that he expected a reply, of course. But the glowing red eyes turned to him, and to Cloud's surprise, Vincent explained in a halting voice, "You said the disarray reminded you of Sephiroth. What if you're right? What if the Alpha Project somehow escaped and ransacked this place for clues to its past? This report classified it as a failure in comparison with Marion. What if it read that, and..."

Shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts, Vincent suddenly pushed past Cloud and ran down the hallway.

What if the Alpha Project read that?

And just like Sephiroth, what if the Alpha Project wanted revenge?

And what if the Alpha Project was still here?

Hearing the stomping of boots down the tiled hallway, Marion let the barrier dissipate and trotted lightly over to the door, nearly colliding with Vincent. She involuntarily let out a short squeal of surprise which was cut off rather abruptly as strong arms caught her up and squeezed her tightly. "Mmph!" she said into his shirt. Uninterested in the reason, she accepted the fierce embrace readily, and snuggled her head into the hollow of his neck, making a throaty noise of contentment.

Behind Vincent, Cloud stood with slack jaw and wide eyes. He'd been surprised, certainly, that Vincent had bothered to open up and explain his fears about the Alpha Project, but this took the cake...and Marion seemed to be purring? With a deep sigh, Vincent finally released his willing captive, and in the same instant seemed to realize that Cloud was watching them. With a quick glance into the room, he stated in a rather business-like tone, "We're leaving." Marion immediately ran back into the office, and as Vincent watched over her from the doorway, gathered up the flashlight and PHS, and canceled the Fire spell.

Walking back out into the corridor, Marion turned on the flashlight and fell in with the rapid pace set by Vincent and Cloud. By the way the two men kept careful watch on their surroundings, Marion half expected another unannounced visitor, but they met no one on the way to the surface.

They wandered back into the sunlight and let their chocobos graze for a moment, the three golden birds bright against the dreary landscape. Cloud took the opportunity to fill Vincent in on the reason the island visit had been cut short.

"Everyone was planning on leaving the island yesterday and going to Rocket Town after dropping off Nanaki and the rest of his people at Cosmo Canyon. If you sprint the chocobos half the time, you'll be there in plenty of time for the test launch," Cloud surmised.

Vincent nodded, and then asked, "May I ask where you are going?" Cloud replied in an off-hand manner, "Just a few errands. Some things I've been wanting to do for a long time, now." Vincent nodded and dropped the line of inquiry, but it was picked up once more by Marion. "Will you be there for the test launch?"

Cloud scratched his head and replied, "I'm not sure how long I'll be gone...Tifa's going to go back to Nibelheim after the test launch, and I told her I'd meet her there in about two weeks. But I'd been figuring that finding you guys and helping out might take a week or more, so I may make it after all. Who knows?"

The conversation petered off, and the friends caught their chocobos and parted, all three of them eager to be away, and for different reasons. Vincent wanted nothing more than to spirit Marion away from the potential danger of this place, and the knowledge that might prove threatening to her peace of mind. Marion, still uncomfortable with the place where she had been created and then held captive, wanted simply to put this place behind her, and was also eager to see her friends once more, as well as the rocket. And Cloud needed to fulfill a dream.