

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 51: Waking Into the Nightmare

She struggled back to the surface of consciousness, slowly becoming aware of her body once more. Bone pressed through skin against a hard surface at temple and cheek, hip and knee. The weight of her flesh settled upon her once more, bringing shape and definition to her previously free-floating mind. Her heart pumped blood through her body, pulse thrumming near the surface in the curve of her neck. The heavy cloth had been removed from around her, replaced only by a rough blindfold of the same material, but her hands were still bound together. Lungs drew in breath, partially open mouth helping to scent the air. Dusty, cold, and then the acrid stench of madness.

She moaned against the pain that motion caused as she struggled to lift herself from the ground, groggily trying to escape from the fetid smell of her captor's breath. Memories of the past nightmarish hours tagged along with the smell...

She'd been folding blankets while waiting for Vincent to return with the saddlebags when a sharp pain had suddenly made her slap one hand to her neck in startlement. She'd pulled away bloody fingers, and a tiny, feathered needle oozing amber liquid from its point. Her head had immediately begun to spin, and her thought had scattered like so many doves, not to be gathered in one place for a long while. And then he'd sprung out of nowhere, screaming and raising a knife to strike her down, and she'd known then that she was going to die. The dart had done its work just as the knife had come ripping down through the air towards her chest, and she'd fallen unconscious before the blade could tear into her flesh...

She struggled to lock away the memory, fear bubbling up in her until she could feel a scream tickling the back of her throat. Her arms tensed at her sides as if she could press the screams back down into the lungs through sheer force. Through her fear and grogginess, a portion of her mind noted that there was no searing pain of a fresh wound, or dull ache of a healed one...the knife had not touched her.

She who had for most of her waking moments known affection from the people around her now had to face an entirely new entity. Just as she'd known what smiles were, but had to experience them to truly know, now she was about to learn what cruelty was. Who was he? Why had he swung at her if not to kill her? What was he going to do with her? What...what would happen to her...

She began to tremble, and from all of her frightened questions came a single, insistent need. Vincent. The thought of him - the remembrance of the safety of his arms - contrasted too sharply with her present reality, and a soft whimper of pain and panic escaped her throat.

"Ah, my precious treasure is awake," said a voice, the voice, a strange, childish glee apparent in the tone. It was the sound of a goblin snickering, the humorless chuckle of Hojo's scheming mind, and the chilling laughter that haunted Cloud's dreams. It was cold, calculating madness.

Fear lending her strength, she scrabbled blindly away from the voice across a rough wooden floor, although where she thought she could run to, she couldn't say. Bound, blindfolded, and barely conscious, there was no possible way to escape, but it would have been equally impossible for her to simply sit and wait...for whatever he intended to do.

"No, no," the voice chided, "where do you think you're going, my vengeance?" A hand circled her arm, almost gentle, but with a menacing promise within, like steel under silk. A cold sliver of pain shot up her arm as a needle was slipped into her wrist. She squirmed away from the pain with another pitiful whimper, and then cried out as the grip around her arm tightened and twisted.

"Now be a good girl," the voice admonished gently, cruel contrast to the fingers twisting her flesh. She subsided, wincing as she felt the injection burn through her veins. "There now, all better. Now you can float away, my little angel. My apologies, but I must keep that little brain of yours dozy while you're my guest. It wouldn't do for you to set me on fire, now, would it? Such bad manners," he chuckled. Marion struggled to concentrate on his words, but it became increasingly difficult. The drug that traced fiery fingers through her body also seemed to be sending a smoky haze through her mind, rendering her

only barely conscious, unable to focus. She vaguely noticed the iron grip release her, and then her mind darkened once more as she fell back to the floor.