

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 53: Purpose and Action

The Chaos Beast landed unnoticed with a weary thud onto the hard, packed earth and stumbled to its knees. Snarling with frustration and exhaustion, scoring the ground with sharp claws, it grudgingly gave way to the beckoning, welcoming void. Rest...rest now, and maybe hunt again later. Rest...

Vincent shuddered and opened his eyes to find himself back at the crossroads leading to the Forgotten Capital. He'd transformed around mid-morning, and now found himself hidden in velvety twilight. Stars peppered the night sky overhead, their shimmering white light seeming to mock him from their places high above the world and its cares. Stars...they'd watched the stars come out on their wedding night.

Tears pooled in his eyes, blurring the evening sky into a muddy darkness. Vincent savagely wiped the tears away and shook his head. Fear and panic had caused him to waste precious hours this afternoon and evening. He wouldn't let sorrow get in the way now. Marion had brought him the gift of his heart, his humanity, but he would lock it away once more...lock it away until he could afford it. Her husband, wracked with grief and fear as he had been, was useless to her now. Now, she needed Vincent the Turk, Hojo's experiment...the worst of what he'd become would be used to save the best of what she'd made of him. For Marion, his lover, his wife - for the woman who had brought joy and laughter back into his days - he would once again become the cold, unfeeling assassin of yesteryear. Ice would once again bind his heart, and he would be left with only his intellect, experiences, and abilities, and with these, he would save her.

Love would send him out on a mission, and a Turk never failed to carry out orders.

He assessed the situation while scanning the area for possible clues missed earlier. One discovery noted - the two gold chocobos he and Marion had been riding could be seen deep in the shrubbery a few hundred feet away. Between leafy branches, he caught sight of golden feathers, ruddy blood, and ivory splinters of bone. Not merely dead...slaughtered. The kidnapper, then, was someone with enough magic or strength to subdue and kill two fully grown, healthy chocobos...as well as a tendency towards violence and gore.

To the panicked voice that had not been fully silenced yet, he noted that the writing on the wall had read, "I have her." This meant that the kidnapper's goal was not simple slaughter, but ransom, coercion, or to somehow use Marion's abilities for his own purposes. In any case, Marion would be kept alive, at the very least. The fear subsided into a wary waiting, and Vincent firmly turned his attention back to the situation at hand.

First things first. He needed his gun.

Turning resolutely on one boot heel, he strode down the path towards the shell house where their belongings had been stored.

What else?

What would help him find Marion? Call everyone and have them range out on chocobos to search all the towns and forests and caverns in the world? Potentially useful, but no guarantee of finding them in time to prevent...whatever it was that the kidnapper was going to do.

In the midst of his musings, he caught sight of four familiar figures. Apparently deep in thought, he'd approached to within a hundred feet of them before Tenari finally noticed his footsteps. She turned immediately, bringing everyone's attention round to their friend, and asked, "Did you find Marion?"

Rather than a simple yes or no, Vincent replied, "She has been kidnapped by an unknown person. I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to find them in the surrounding area. There have been no ransom requests or threats. The only plan I have at the moment is to have all of you range out on Tifa's chocobos to question people in every city, town, and village and

search the continents for clues. But first, I'd like to gather everyone together. The more minds focused on this situation, the better. Any questions?"

Several flitted through the minds of his friends, but remained unspoken. One question that remained rather unformed and wordless was Tifa's shock at his appearance. Although his clothing was different, he seemed to Tifa like the Vincent Valentine that she'd first met in the Nibelheim mansion...cold, menacing, and seething with a quiet passion. That Vincent had lived only to revenge himself...preferably on Hojo's body. He'd been solitary and brooding, keeping to the shadows and feeding on his need for vengeance and his guilt at crimes long past.

Where had Marion's Vincent gone?

But of course, she didn't ask. In fact, none of them spoke at first, probably in the same surprise at Vincent's abrupt change - or regression - into this brusque, businesslike man. Finally, Nanaki ventured a question, and it was one that was able to penetrate the wall of ice Vincent had constructed, to shake him just a little off-balance.

"Vincent, do you know what Marion is?"

"What...she is?" repeated Vincent, confused by the question. "Yes," Nanaki said, "what she is, not who. I know you were able to discover how Hojo created her and imbued her with such powerful magic, but did you find out exactly what she is?" To Vincent's mute shake of the head, Nanaki replied, "Then I may be able to shed light on...the situation. I agree that we should all gather, and I believe Cosmo Canyon would be a central enough location. In any case, I will need my notes."

"Cosmo Canyon, then," Cloud decided. "Vincent, where are your chocobos?"

"Dead," Vincent stated flatly. Taking one second to recover, Cloud then nodded slowly and suggested, "Well, ride one of ours, then. Tifa and I will double up." Vincent silently walked past them towards the waiting birds, and Cloud gathered everyone with a quick glance around their little circle. "Let's get moving."