

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 54: The Truth is Out There

Cloud and Vincent, as the only two with first-hand knowledge of Hojo's underground labs and the secrets contained therein, had been taken aside to confer with Nanaki and Tenari in the observatory. The others, having all gathered at Cosmo Canyon within hours of each other, now discussed options and possible plans at the Tiger Lily Inn.

Reeve had brought with him a small measure of comfort. "Rather than spreading us out all over the place, I took the initiative to send out my own recruits. That way, we can stay together and think of a way to get Marion back." When asked for an explanation, he replied, "I've sent all the construction crew from Corel to Nibelheim to get Tifa's chocobos. Some will ride out to the Wutai peninsula, while the rest range out to the Northern Continent. I have a lot of friends who moved to Kalm after Midgar was destroyed, and they're on their way to Choco Billy's right now, and they'll cover the Western continent and the outlying islands. And if Ineki and the others don't mind, I'd like to ask them to search this continent. With all those people doing the questioning and searching for us, we can concentrate on tactics."

"Good thinking," Cloud complimented him. "Maybe I should retire and let you lead this group." Reeve had given him a wry smile, but Nanaki commented, "Actually, if you would step in, Reeve, I would appreciate it. I'm going to need Cloud for a while, so if you could lead the others in discussing any ideas, that would be greatly appreciated."

And so they'd parted ways, the bulk of the Cosmo Clan to search for information, Reeve and the gang to pore over options, and Cloud, Vincent, Nanaki, and Tenari to find a hidden truth.

"There have been clues to Marion's identity all along, and we've recognized them, but ultimately come to the wrong conclusions," Nanaki prefaced. "Her lack of memories was written off as memory loss, not memory-less-ness. Her abilities with magic were accepted as a result of Hojo's experiments, but we shouldn't have stopped there...there's a further truth. And her inability to communicate through the lifestream with any of us, although Aeris could contact her with ease..."

"But we couldn't talk to Aeris without contact with her," Vincent mentioned. "What does that mean?"

The ruddy head shook slowly back and forth, "No, Marlene couldn't at first, possibly because of her youth and inability to focus her mind as well as an adult. Marion simply helped her to concentrate, and we all just assumed later that contact with her was necessary. Cloud, you and Tifa were able to find each other in the lifestream; there's no reason to believe you and I couldn't go to Mideel or Nibelheim tomorrow and talk to Aeris ourselves. If Marion was only and simply human, we should have been able to find her through the lifestream."

"Maybe Hojo's experiments changed Marion too much," Cloud began, but was interrupted by Nanaki. "You were subjected to mako experiments as she was, and Vincent has been genetically altered in ways even I cannot fully understand. Yet neither of you experienced any difficulties in talking to Aeris."

Cloud frowned...he'd been able to talk to Tifa in Mideel...why hadn't he thought of that at Nibelheim? Had the ability to talk to Aeris been within his grasp all this time? He shook his head, dispelling the questions...never mind Aeris right now...find Marion. Find Marion. Help Marion. Save Marion.

Unlike the other friend, the other girl...the one you couldn't find in time, or help in time...the one you couldn't save...

Tenari cataloged verbally once more, bringing Cloud mercifully back in focus. "So, we have research notes to the effect that Marion was created, not born, injected with lifestream and fused with materia. Earthquakes at the Northern Crater have been happening roughly in conjunction with certain events in Marion's life when she was put in danger or extremely frightened. Only your friend Aeris can speak with her through lifestream. And as far as Marion herself goes, she can use the power of materia - which is condensed lifestream - without actually using materia. The spells that she calls are infinitely more powerful than those anyone else can call. And she can manipulate lifestream."

Cloud looked back and forth from the two feline forms, frowning. "So what does that add up to?"

Nanaki sighed. "The only conclusion I can come to is a hard one to accept. Everything that Tenari said about Marion marks her as unique but for one thing. One characteristic that she shares with another. Who or what else can only be contacted by Aeris?"

All of the breath left Cloud's lungs in one shocked gasp. As he struggled a breath in, he whispered, "Oh my God..."

"Close," Vincent said grimly, "but not quite."

And before anyone could speak the words that would finally bring reality to the truth, a young man burst through the door and fell to his knees, gasping for breath. As he hung on to one side of the doorway, he held out a wrinkled piece of paper on which a few hastily scribbled lines could be seen. "A m-m-message," he managed, "a message from one of Reeve's outriders!"

The paper was taken, read, and then handed round the room to be read again.

Cloud was the last to read the message, and he took a moment to collect himself as all of the puzzle pieces fell neatly into place. No time for shock, for fear, for doubt. Save Marion...find her, save her first, then you can fall apart. Don't fail this girl...

So many precious hours wasted in Gongaga...hours spent in a dark void of nightmares and visions while Aeris was walking resolutely towards her death...

But Marion's time had not yet run out.

New Weapon born. Black, larger than Diamond, wandering Northern Continent as if searching for something. No action taken yet. No news of Marion. Awaiting instruction.

Raising his head from the scrap of paper, he looked each of his three friends in the eyes and voiced the conclusions he'd reached, praying that he might be wrong somehow and yet sure that he was right. He collected reluctant nods from everyone, and then nodded decisively to himself. "I'll raise Rocket Town and find someone to fly the Highwind here. It's our best bet to catch up with this thing. If we're right about...all of this, then it may lead us straight to Marion. Nanaki and Tenari, if you could see the elders about getting some supplies together...we may be on the road for a while. And Vincent, go tell everyone..." Cloud searched for an appropriate phrase and then simply concluded, "tell them everything, and then tell them to get ready to fight."

They were all gathered around several square tables which had been shoved together to create a conference table of sorts. The kind of table upon which companies were founded, cities were created, and wars were fought and won. As many as would fit were hunched over the table, writing furiously, and the others peered over their shoulders, gesturing and talking just as fast as the others could write. All information had been shared and discussed, and now they worked with desperate haste to form plans from the scant information available. At one point, someone - Yuffie, perhaps - had remarked softly, "Poor Marion." And Reeve had grimly commented, "We should have expected this, I suppose. No one that Hojo touched ever escaped tragedy." At this, there had been several growled comments from Barret, something about an 'evil genius' prefaced with several curse words.

"Hojo was a child," a voice stated firmly. All heads popped up from the table to stare at Vincent, who had suddenly appeared in the doorway. "An utterly ignorant child," he continued, "playing with pebbles and somehow creating a mountain. He created an empty shell of a woman's body using genetic material gathered from countless men and monsters, seeded her with materia, and infused her with mako, never knowing what the final, ultimate result would be. He wasn't creating an elemental warrior with all the powers of materia; he was blind, we all were. And now we will all pay the price of our ignorance..."

Reeve's forehead creased with worry. Vincent's words were creating an undercurrent of unease and fear in the room. Everyone was wearing the same uncomfortable expression, and kept sending questioning glances towards each other...all

but Nanaki, Tenari, and Cloud, who were conspicuously absent. Reeve sighed; it looked like he had been elected to ask the question.

"Vincent, what are you talking about? What did Hojo do to Marion?"

Vincent smiled, cynicism twisting the expression into one of pain and bitterness. "Not just mako condensed into materia in a human body, or an injection of the lifestream into a vein; she is lifestream. A part of the whole, given a body and a mind and an awareness. For the first time since this planet was created, it is living among the life it supports, understanding itself from a whole new perspective. She is the conscious life force of the planet we're standing on...and the worst part of it is, she doesn't have a clue."

"How could that be?" whispered Tifa, shaking her head in denial. "She's just a girl...I know she can use magic without materia but that doesn't mean she's...what, the Planet? It's impossible!"

"Not possible? It's the only possible explanation," returned Vincent, voice ragged with raw emotion, almost as stunning as the news he had brought them. "It's been staring us in the face this whole time. She can call spells that are too powerful to be captured in a little globe of materia. Lifestream behaves as if it's an extension of her own will - because it is. And we thought that she was the only one who could contact Aeris in the lifestream. We had it backwards. Aeris is the only one who can talk to her, because only the Cetra could talk to the planet."

Struggling for control, Vincent closed his eyes and continued, "I took her on a journey to discover the world. I exposed her to danger, dragged her back to Midgar where she almost went insane from fear, and broke her heart time and again in my ignorance. And now she's in the hands of a man who's going to use her to destroy everything in sight."

Reeve shook his head, not understanding. "Vincent, what are you talking about? What's happening to Marion?"

"Her kidnapper is going to use her as a weapon."

Reeve frowned and protested, "Marion would never use her magic to kill, no matter what."

Vincent shook his head. "She doesn't have to use her magic. Since I left Nibelheim, there have been several earthquakes at the Northern Crater. They've happened each time she felt threatened," Vincent's voice dropped, "or when I scared her...and now her very life is in danger. The planet feels what she feels." Vincent met each person's eyes one by one, stressing his last sentence word by word. "The planet feels that its life is being threatened."

"Weapon," Reeve whispered in the sudden silence.

Vincent nodded once and then gathered everyone's gaze. "We're going to the Northern Continent to follow the Weapon. If its goal is Marion's safety, then our best option is simply to follow it. It may have some sort of link to the Planet, and thus to Marion, that will help it to locate her." He turned his head at the sound of footsteps to find Cloud walking into the inn.

"The Highwind is on its way. Everyone gear up and meet at the entrance to Cosmo Canyon in half an hour," he stated firmly.

The tense, silent room burst into motion and sound. Papers were gathered up in a rustling storm and quick instructions were rapped out as everyone rushed to make the most of the remaining 30 minutes allotted to them. Vincent watched as Reeve quickly organized the chaos, splitting people into task groups. Those who needed to change or equip themselves were dispatched to their rooms. Half of those who remained were directed to gather the plans they'd written down and to pore over the elders' library for any maps of the Northern Continent. Everyone else was given the task of collecting materia and weapons, and dividing them up as necessary among those who would fight.

The former Turk nodded to himself, satisfied for the moment. They had new knowledge, they had a plan, and they had the manpower to carry out any objectives. Cloud would lead them, Reeve would keep them organized, and everyone would give their all to gain Marion's safety.

The wildcards were the kidnapper and the Weapon...and ironically enough, Marion. Who knew how far the kidnapper could be pushed and pursued? What did he want? Simple destruction or something else, some hidden motive, some

sinister master plan? And the Weapon. Created to protect the Planet...but in this case, the Planet was hidden in the body of a young woman...what would the Weapon do?

...and what would Marion's reaction be when she found out what powers lay within her? Denial? Fear? Rejection?

...or a self-destructive guilt?

His musings were abruptly interrupted by the entrance of the same young man who had brought them his hastily scribbled note earlier. This time, he still held his PHS unit in one trembling hand, and from his ghastly face, Vincent surmised that the news he brought would be much worse than before.

"Bone Village...they're at Bone Village," he gasped. "He...they...they're all dead! All of Reeve's friends, the excavators...I heard them...on the PHS, he was screaming..." The man moaned and buried his face in one hand as if to block the recent memories, falling to his knees in the doorway. Reeve, who had remained behind in the inn, turned pale but strode resolutely towards the messenger. Gently taking one hand in his, he helped the man to his feet and then spoke quietly, "Terrin, right? Come on, stand up. We don't have time for that now. Tell me what happened."

Gulping down some air, the young man made a visible effort to calm himself and then said, "He called me just a minute ago. Verden, I think his name was...Weapon had suddenly stopped wandering and was making a beeline for Bone Village, just walking through everything in its path, trees, rivers, mountains...so everyone called each other and they rode for the site. They didn't make it in time...Weapon was destroying everything in sight by the time they arrived. Verden, he tried to help people run away, but...no one made it. He was...he was helping some people onto his choco when he called...and then...and then he..." Shaking his head, Terren stopped his report and looked up at Reeve helplessly.

"They're all dead," he whispered. The dark eyes before him closed, and when they opened once more, the hint of tears were gone, replaced by a spark of anger. "Not for nothing, though," Reeve ground out. "I'll make sure of that."

A quiet voice spoke up behind them, and the two men turned to find Vincent standing nearby in the shadows. "Did anyone see her?"

Reeve spared a moment to frown at Vincent's words. Mentally poring over the past several hours of conversation, he realized that in all that time, Marion's name had not once passed Vincent's lips. It was always, 'she' or 'her.' For all his seeming calm and cool, this one detail revealed the depth of his fear. He couldn't even speak her name in case it caused him to lose the tenuous grip he had on his self-control...

Terrin gathered his thoughts and then nodded. "Yeah, yeah they did. Verden said that the kidnapper was walking around the site like nothing was going on, dragging Marion around with him. He had some kind of barrier spell, but they said he didn't even need it. The Weapon just ignored them."

"Dragging?" Reeve interrupted.

"Dragging," the young man repeated. "She wasn't tied up or anything, but she was stumbling around like she was drunk or something."

"...or drugged," commented Vincent. "He's probably keeping her barely conscious so that she can't focus enough to use her magic."

Reeve furrowed his brow in thought and then asked, "Why wouldn't he just knock her out completely and then just dangle her like bait in front of the Weapon? Wouldn't that work just as well?"

Vincent shook his head. "Most likely, she needs to be aware enough to be afraid, or the Weapon won't be provoked into trying to protect her."

"But then, why would Weapon kill everyone else, and leave the kidnapper unharmed?" Reeve asked, his voice tinged with a bit of frustration.

Terrin's head bounced back and forth on his neck as he glanced from Vincent to Reeve and back again, trying to understand their conversation. Before he could gain an answer to this last question, a loud roaring sound suddenly surged into hearing. The three men stepped out of the inn to see the Highwind set itself down almost daintily just outside the city and immediately begin to pour out her crew, who swarmed up the staircase like so many ants.

"We're about to go find out," answered Vincent. "Let's go."