

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 58: Face To Face

Boots fell silently into the snow piled deep around the burning house, and Vincent turned the corner with a quick step, bringing his pistol up and sighting immediately on the man he found in the alleyway. The man in a lab coat who was surrounded by a bright green shield. Moreover, the man who had Marion suspended in one hand, and a dagger held underneath her chin in the other.

The bullet might ricochet off the shield and fly harmlessly away. Or it might pierce the barrier, but be deflected from its original course, perhaps even striking Marion down. And even if he managed to hit the kidnapper? Well, the man would drop Marion's head right down onto the shimmering blade.

These conclusions were reached in the space of a heartbeat, and the pistol lowered in the next moment. His initial plan discarded, Vincent considered his others options, which were admittedly few. Magic? Not with the barrier in place, and Marion's life held in the balance. His mission's main objective was her safety. The apprehension and punishment of her captor was only a secondary consideration. So for the moment, Vincent simply returned the curious green gaze with a cool crimson one.

As no bullets were let fly, nor any magic called up, the ruddy-haired man smiled and remarked conversationally, "So, it seems Hojo's scions have more in common than good looks." Vincent's eyes narrowed at being categorized with the madmen created by the ruthless scientist, but replied calmly, "And if you use the intelligence available to you, you'll release her to me now."

"And bereft myself of both weapon and shield in one move? I think not," his opponent laughed.

There was an unacknowledged pattern to the dance, and Vincent knew it well. He'd stepped through sweat and tears and then blood to this familiar music. First the probe, the test...a facing off during which strengths and weaknesses were sought out. A few obligatory time wasting remarks to buy precious seconds in which to map out a strategy. And then laying out the situation, to reveal strong cards and cover weak ones...and to always keep one ace up one's sleeve. A dance of words and body language, the shift of an eye, the twitch of a finger, two opponents who met and danced and dueled.

But if one person deviated from the usual pattern, the other sometimes tripped.

So he remained silent, declining to parry with the usual threats or cozens, simply staring into familiarly bright eyes and waiting for the next move. The kidnapper waited expectantly, still suspending Marion over his dagger, still encased in the magical shield. Overhead, the Onyx Weapon shrieked and screamed, and the snowy air carried sounds of gunfire and magic to the two, along with the fainter shouts of battle.

After a few tense moments of mutual silence, during which Marion evinced life only through shallow breaths, her captor cocked his head to the side and asked, "What? No, 'You'll be sorry,' or 'You'll never get away from me'? Aren't you even going to plead for her life?"

And underneath the fisted hand, pale lids fluttered open to reveal unfocused emerald eyes. The drugs in her bloodstream were beginning to fade away, and for once, there was no new needle awaiting her. A small measure of clarity replaced the fear that had consumed her every sense, and she made an effort to reorient herself with time and reality. Eyes that had been clenched shut were forced open, and she bleakly sorted through her most recent memories...impressions and brief flashes of cognizance. Kidnapped...drugged at intervals and...and whispers in her mind...brought to this snowy place and then...frightened...frightened not by the Weapon that loomed overhead, but by the man who held her captive. The blade still glistened mere inches from her face, but it was no longer the object of such stark terror as had held her in its grips moments ago. With each passing second, the hazes cleared just a bit more from her consciousness, and the mindless fear receded as well. Now if only she could remember who she was...it was important, she was sure...

As the enigmatic man made no reply, Marion's captor evidenced irritation in the narrowing of his eyes, but continued casually, "Aren't you even worried about that enormous black creature over there? You can't help your pretty little wife while I've got this shield in place; don't you want to lend your friends a hand?"

A cold stare was the only reply the man received. "No? You don't want to threaten me, you don't want to fight, you don't want to go play with my Weapon...what do you want?" The voice became less casual, and the next question was delivered in a rather peevish tone. "Why don't you just accept the situation and walk away?" Vincent's head turned slightly as if listening intently, and his brows tilted downwards in a slight frown. His crimson eyes seemed to bore into the kidnapper's with increased wariness, and then he finally spoke, his voice measured and even as if testing the conversational waters.

"Because I need her back," Vincent stated calmly, indicating the limp form suspended between the two of them. "So, I'll follow you from now until the end of days. I'll keep after you and I'll kill you unless you give her back to me...right...now."

"Oh, to die...how frightening! Hear that?" the Alpha Project whispered to the silvery head in his hand. "He wants to play, too! And he already knows the game." The ruddy hair shivered in the icy wind as he gave a bizarre little laugh, and then gathered Marion into the crook of his elbow, dagger still at the ready. "We'll all have a fun chase around, and then die, okay, Vincent?"

Vincent!

Marion's head snapped up, those two syllables having pulled her from the last shallows of her drug-induced haze. The arm around her loosened in startled reflex at her unexpected motion, and she crumpled to the snowy ground immediately.

"Marion!" Vincent cried out, his feet automatically carrying him to the boundaries of the flickering barrier that encased her, still so frustratingly far from her. His nails scraped along the unyielding shield as he helplessly watched his enemy of enemies reach down to bring her under his control once more.

Marion...my name is Marion.

And with that, her past - what little of it she had - was given back to her. Marion...my name is Marion. Those words, uttered so long ago deep underneath the ruins of Midgar. Her name, given to her by Vincent, her husband. Given to her, along with so much more...love, life, and...the knowledge of the magic in her veins.

Her body would not obey, but her mind was once more her own. Under Vincent's anxious eye, her counterpart in Hojo's mad schemes struggled to subdue her physically while she fought him with the only means available to her. Her gaze flashed bright in a determined face as equally green eyes narrowed in concentration and frustration above her. Each spell she called up was countered with equally strong magic or spells, but the additional strain of maintaining the larger barrier to keep Vincent at bay kept her captor distracted, putting Marion on almost equal footing despite her weakened condition.

As the frantic, glittering battle continued within the larger sphere of glowing green, Vincent paced a semicircle without, growing increasingly distraught. Had he thought he could maintain his composure throughout this ordeal? Had he truly believed that simple calm and experiences as a hired killer would be enough to gain Marion's freedom? She'd recognized his name...she'd opened her eyes and looked up to find him only several feet away, yet here he was, standing helplessly by as she struggled to free herself. With a snarl of frustration, he brought his fist crashing down onto the shield, which of course accomplished nothing at all.

What could he do for Marion?

Nothing.

Vincent turned and glanced around wildly, taking in his surroundings in distracted, disjointed glimpses. Far off, Weapon still screeching and stomping around, its attention focused on the three humans casting powerful spells against it. The Highwind, serene and still, waiting for them beyond a small, snowy hill. And all around, the ruins of another city brought low because of Hojo's experiments.

She was killing these people. Unwilling, unknowing, and unstoppable...Marion was triggering a deadly automatic response from the towering black creature her fear had called up.

And what could he do to stop her?

He turned back to the glowing sphere to find Marion once more pinned against the body of her captor, and instead of a dagger, there was now a silvery needle pressed against her skin. Vincent rushed up to the barrier as the needle was slipped in, and his heart twisted within his chest at the fear that crept back into Marion's expression.

He couldn't hold her, he couldn't help her, he couldn't kill the killer behind the weapon...

"Marion," he cried out desperately, face pressed close to the magical shield. "Marion!" His foe sneered at him through the green-tinged air as the drugs took effect and Marion's control slipped away once more. Teary eyes turned slowly towards her husband, and she met his gaze with eyes that seemed to dim with each passing heartbeat that thundered in his ears. Not even knowing if she could hear him, he called out to her once more, "Please Marion, you have to try...try not to be frightened." Without any sign of recognition, the beloved eyes were extinguished once more, and the silvery head slumped against the kidnapper's shoulder.

"Too late," came a low snarl. Vincent raised his eyes from his wife to his worst enemy. "Too late, too late, too late!" the kidnapper screamed, almost dancing in his rage. His head hung low and his breaths came fast and furious while Vincent simply stared at this childish tantrum through the shield. Sweeping one hand through his ruddy hair, he made an effort to collect himself. "You lose, Valentine," he whispered, and raised the dagger once more.

The blade whistled down through the air and struck its intended target, but to Cloud's dismay, his Ultima sword did little damage. There was yet another gaping rent in the metallic skin of the Weapon, but the multiple wounds he'd just delivered were not deep enough to actually cripple the massive creature in any way. Barret's bullets were just as ineffective, and the two quickly switched back to the materia in their weapons as a first line of attack. Tifa had stayed with the materia throughout their brief engagement with the Onyx Weapon, realizing immediately that her fists would be of little use against the robotic monster.

The handful of summoned entities they'd called up in the past half hour didn't seem to be having enough of an effect to make this a decisive battle, however. As each spell took effect and then faded away, Onyx only staggered or was stunned for the space of a minute or two, and then resumed its screaming rampage. Icicle Inn was now nothing more than rubble, with all of its inhabitants either dead or evacuated, and Onyx concentrated its efforts on stomping on the three remaining humans who were pelting it with so many powerful spells.

However, with the Weapon half again as large as the Diamond had been, with much thicker armor, the summon spells were more of a distraction than a deadly attack to the creature. The three combatants ran from crumbled building to shattered tree, seeking temporary refuge in hiding between summons from the massive feet and claws that sought them out.

Tifa let loose her final Knights of the Round spell and then gathered close to her husband and long-time friend as the Weapon was temporarily sucked down into the ground, shaking her head as she swallowed the contents of another ether. "I'm getting pretty drained, and the thing's not even limping yet," she mentioned worriedly. "We're going to run out of ethers before Onyx goes down."

"Yeah, and then what are we gonna do?" Barret growled. Cloud shook his head. What could they do? The inhabitants of the town had been evacuated and the city itself was beyond saving...should they simply retreat and let the berserked Weapon stomp on the ashes as it pleased? And yet...throughout all their history together, this little band of warriors had never backed down from a fight. They'd battled against insurmountable odds and pressed on until their enemy was defeated or departed from the scene. And Marion...what of her? Where was she? Barret, Tifa, and he had to give their full attention to the Weapon they were trying to down, and the others were still escorting the last of the residents to the airship, with no one having sighted Vincent, Marion, or the Alpha Project.

"We keep fighting," Cloud decided firmly. With no idea of where the kidnapper was, and therefore no means to engage

him and aid Vincent, the best way they could help the Valentines would be to keep the Weapon from becoming an additional player in the twisted game fate was playing with Marion's life. Barret and Tifa nodded immediately, albeit with grim expressions on their faces that acknowledged the possibility that this fight might demand more of them than any before.

But in the next instant, their determination was proved to be unnecessary. The earth cracked open and a slightly battered Weapon heaved itself out of the shuddering ground. An additional array of wounds were visible on its armor, courtesy of Tifa's Knights, but as before, the Onyx Weapon seemed to be fully functional. The three warriors jumped up from the low crouch they'd been in and readied the next barrage of spells, but Cloud put out an arm in a silent gesture that stopped the summons from being released.

Before them, the black monstrosity had fallen silent, its infuriated shrieks stilled for the moment. It straightened itself and then cast about, cocking its head now and again as if searching for something, or listening for a certain sound. One step was taken, bringing the creature a full hundred yards closer to the three, and then another was taken in the opposite direction. Back and forth, the creature shifted in place, still sweeping the area with its bright red orbs and resembling nothing more than a lost child, undecided on which way to run in search of his parents.

After a minute of watching the seemingly confused Weapon, Barret murmured in equal confusion, "What the hell?" Before Cloud could voice his concerned opinion, their towering target abruptly began walked away, heading towards the vast, open plains of ice. Its stride was not purposeful, but aimless and meandering. The ruby eyes still swept the landscape as Onyx wandered out of Icicle Inn and began wandering to and fro, searching for who knew what.

"Well," Tifa commented with surprise, "I guess that's it for now." Turning to face Cloud, she asked, "Should we follow it?"

The blonde man shook his head decisively and then furrowed his brow in concern. "Reeve said that Vincent thinks Weapon's reacting to Marion's fear, and that the Alpha Project keeps her unconscious when he doesn't need her. If Onyx just suddenly stopped going berserk and then wandered off like that..."

"...so, it doesn't sense that she's afraid anymore?" Tifa suggested. Barret nodded and then added, "That means that either the 'napper doped Marion up again, or..." and shrugged, not knowing what any other reason might be. Cloud and Tifa, however, followed his sentence to another conclusion. For Marion's link to the Weapon to be so suddenly cut off...she was either rendered unconscious...or dead.

"We have to find Vincent," Cloud said simply, determined not to voice his fears. He wasn't sure if finding their enigmatic friend would shed any further light on what was going on, but Cloud felt that the situation was constantly slipping out of his control. At least in their desperate race to save the Planet and catch up with Aeris, they'd had a definite grasp of their enemy's motives and actions...now, they were stumbling after the man, practically blind.

...and if they hadn't been able to save Aeris, what were Marion's chances now?

Cloud shook his head briskly and took Tifa lightly by the arm. Nodding to Barret, he said, "Come on, let's spread out and look for him."