

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 60: For the Sake of Love

Shaking back ruddy bangs from his face, he peered over his shoulder and cursed. His gold chocobo, fast as it might be, was no match for the jet-powered airship, and they would be upon him in a matter of minutes. There was nowhere to run, either. He might have even tried to use the flickering light and shadows of the shimmering green mist to hide in, but that had deserted him - much like his luck - once he'd gained land.

Caught out in the open within a matter of minutes as he finally reached the shores near Midgar, he'd had no choice but to try and gain the ruined city where he might have hidden. Quick the airship might be, but they would lose time in landing. However, the Highwind had circled around and dipped low, spilling out several rusty forms from a hatch that had opened in the belly of the craft. As the airship had pulled up once more, he'd found his approach to Midgar cut off by two score ferocious felines who were even now herding his panicked chocobo even further away from the city.

The spells that he called up through the materia in his armband were of little use as well, for the attacking magic was nullified by shields that the fiery beasts were casting upon themselves as they pursued him. With another violent curse, the fugitive reined in the golden bird and dismounted, dragging Marion's still unconscious body off with a quick jerk. While still a good measure away, one of the pursuing lion-like forms gave a ferocious roar, and the chocobo warked in panic and galloped off, taking with it the packs that were strapped to the saddle. The Alpha Project watched in outraged disbelief as the precious syringes used to keep Marion under control were carried off. With options running short, he called up his protective shield once more and then turned Marion over in his arms. He narrowed his eyes and watched her fluttering eyelids, gauging her slow rise out of the drug-induced slumber, fingers tapping the hilt of his dagger as he waited for his guests to arrive.

And as Fate sometimes decrees, everyone arrived all at once. Ineki and his clan ranged out in a wide circle around the glittering shield just as the Highwind took off once more, having deposited several of its occupants a short distance away from Hojo's last two experiments. As Cloud and his companions ran towards their target, they saw a large black claw rise from the surf and dig into the sandy shore, and by the time they'd closed to within a hundred yards, so had the Onyx Weapon.

And then Marion began to wake up.

Within the glittering dome, the Alpha Project could be seen shaking the semi-conscious girl, his mouth moving as he apparently shouted something into her face. And although the shield and its occupants were still a great distance away from him, with his enhanced vision, Vincent noticed an immediate reaction. Bright green eyes flew open and Marion paled considerably, beginning to tremble and writhe in the iron grip she found herself trapped by. And across the barren plain, Onyx also began to react. Until now, it had been rather passive, only taking several mile-eating steps to hover over the tiny shield with something akin to curiosity. However, as Marion began to evidence fear, the Weapon's protective instincts kicked into place, and the night-dark creature threw its head back and screamed loud enough to shake the ground.

Brandishing the dagger threateningly before her face, the Alpha Project hauled Marion roughly to her feet and pinned her to his chest with one hand. One chance...one chance to escape into the shadows of Midgar. If the Weapon could kill or otherwise occupy his opponents long enough for him to run for shelter...

He had a little more than a half-hour before the last injection would fade completely from her blood. She could be controlled with a Sleep or Stop spell, but he'd have to lower the barrier to work such a complex spell...an open invitation for Death, in this open, unchanging landscape filled with enemies. Yet his control over Marion was based on her inability to focus her magic...trapped within a shield of his own making with a fully alert Beta Project was not the way he intended to depart this accursed Planet. He could counter any attacking spells she might cast while still maintaining the barrier, but how long would he be able to hold out against her companions at the same time?

He had to get to Midgar...he couldn't die just yet...not like this, not while the Planet still seethed with such wretched,

disgusting life forms like some maggot-infested fruit...his mission wasn't complete yet.

With one last shriek of frustration at the bright shield near its feet, Weapon went berserk once more, lashing out with its lengthy arms and raking the earth around it with bolts of lightning from its gaping jaws. The group of adventurers quickly scattered so as not to pose too easy of a target, but many of Cosmo Canyon's Guardians remained in a loose circle around the kidnapper, only moving to avoid a lightning blast now and again. A large circle was quickly formed around Onyx, with the people in front of the creature attacking as necessary with their weapons. Those in back of the creature took advantage of their position to call up spells and summons, which were sometimes dangerous in that they took much concentration and left the spellbinder defenseless for a moment. And circling the towering beast like a silver dragonfly was the Highwind, adding more distractions in the form of missiles to the rescue attempt.

A double-handful of forms that didn't even make up one of the Weapon's claws in weight, yet with magic and tactics, they were able to distract and damage the Weapon so that it simply stood in one place, twisting around and firing down lightning at whatever caught its eye.

Marion gazed out at her distant friends with unseeing eyes, not quite alert, not quite aware...yet. The chemicals flowing through her continued to be absorbed and disintegrated by her body, and she slowly but surely rose to the surface of consciousness. With each passing heartbeat, she regained more of her mind, more control over her body. Uncontrolled whimpers of fear became more and more subdued as she began to wonder why she was so unnaturally afraid of the dagger when it hadn't yet been used to injure her greatly. She also began to struggle against the arm that had her trapped, finally realizing that it wasn't the dagger she needed to fear, but the hand that held it.

The Alpha Project struggled with his reviving captive, cursing the loss of the precious syringes over and over. Setting the chill blade directly against her throat, he snarled, "Be still!" Whether she simply didn't hear him in her drugged state, or whether her need to escape overrode her fear of injury, no one knew...but she continued to writhe in his grasp and with one particularly violent twist, slid her own throat along the edge of the dagger. A sharp, icy pain cut through the receding fog in her mind, and as the shallow wound spattered red down the front of her tunic, she screamed out her hurt and panic. Everyone whipped around at the shrill sound, and at the sight of Marion's blood tracing crimson lines down her delicate throat, Cloud's nebulous fears were realized as Vincent finally snapped.

No longer Marion's husband, worried sick for her safety and only wanting to have her in his arms once more. No longer a cool, collected Turk, on a mission to regain a hostage using his skills and experiences. No longer Vincent Valentine, in fact, with recently regained emotions and humanity...

...no longer human...

The air around him seemed to shimmer and in an instant, the Chaos Beast had appeared. The man who'd thrown his head back in an anguished scream was replaced by an enormous demon, mouth thrown wide to let loose a horrific roar of rage that rivaled the screeches of the Onyx Weapon for sheer intensity. Still engaging the Weapon, his companions turned back to the battle at hand, with a few worried glances over their shoulders. Both the occupants of the green-tinged shield stopped cold at the sound, one in surprise and the other in recognition. Groggy but with her mind clearer every moment, Marion ceased her struggles as she finally stepped into her present reality with both feet.

Vincent!

She watched the Chaos Beast rise into the air on velvety purple wings and then dive towards them, murder apparent in every tensed muscle and gleaming fang...and most especially in the glittering eyes. Behind the shadowy demon, she caught sight of the Highwind - crippled by a well-aimed burst of lightning - slowly making its way to the ground. Her eyes darted about in confusion as she tried to put together all of the images her brain was receiving into a recognizable picture. It was almost as if she'd been hurled back in time to the first days she'd spent out of the laboratory...unused to her senses, every sight and sound had clamored for her attention and confused her within a whirlwind of impressions.

Cloud and Tifa, running about with their weapons flying and spells glimmering in the air around them. Tenari limping badly, blood pouring from a hideous gash in her leg and a glittering spell winding its way down her body. The Weapon, hurling columns of lightning from its mouth and flailing its limbs in an attempt to crush the tiny beings that gathered around it,

holding it at bay despite their insignificant size. And Vincent...Vincent, rushing towards them at incredible speed. A thousand yards, then closer...half the distance away now...

...and the pale glimmer of the shield around her dropped suddenly as her kidnapper readied a new spell. A blinding sphere of flame shot forth from where she stood, turning the air around her into a shimmering lake of heat and searing her lungs as she gasped. The fireball headed straight for the raging demon, but the shadowy form never wavered from its course. In a blind fury, with instinct holding sway over thought, and emotion ruling over logic, the Chaos Beast simply plunged headlong at his target...and into the fire.

The spell and the shadow collided with an incredible impact, and she watched in disbelief as the fireball exploded and knocked the winged creature out of the skies. Injured beyond repair, the Chaos Beast shimmered and receded even as it flew through the air, once again taking its place within the mind of its host. Shock cleared the final hazes from Marion's mind as she tracked Vincent's flight with stunned eyes, and a horrified sob wrenched its way out of her throat as she saw him land with a bone-crunching thud at the far end of the meadow.

...for me. He came for me, to free me, to have me back. All of this...this fighting, this pain, this destruction. Vincent...the Highwind...all these lives. They're sacrificing everything to get me back. This is their love for me, the full price of my worth...

The shimmering black Weapon threw its head back in an ear-splitting screech, and then raked a semi-circle of earth around it with a searing blast of lightning from its gaping mouth. The resulting earthquake threw everyone to the ground, including Marion and her captor. Unnoticed and alone at the far end of the battlegrounds, Vincent groaned and rolled onto his back, groping for his pistol and the materia contained therein with broken, bloody hands.

Her thoughts clearing, Marion took in the destruction around her, combined it with fragments of her most recent memories, and came to the most terrible realizations ever to break a heart. Images and voices echoed faintly in her mind as the tears began to fall.

"...afraid to die, my little Angel of Death?"

The fleeting impressions that were given to her through the hazes of pain and fear...the flames licking at homes...the nauseating smell of burning flesh...the screams and the heat and the pain, the pain...

"...please Marion, you have to try...try not to be frightened..."

Why had her captor continually frightened her and yet left her unharmed? Why had Vincent tried to convince her not to be afraid? Why had a Weapon been born? Why had the shadowy creature constantly pursued them and yet never lifted a single claw to harm them...to harm her?

"...afraid of pain, afraid of dying a slow, lingering death? Be afraid, be afraid little one..."

Her lack of memories, the fact that she'd been created and not born, her unique abilities...

She lifted her grief-wracked face to lock eyes with her Weapon.

Come here, come here... I know what you are, now; my Weapon, my Soul's Cry...I know who I am...come here, my Defender, my Protector...

The Onyx Weapon suddenly ceased its frenzied attack, straightening up to its full height and simply staring at the miniscule human that was its charge. As Cloud waved the others off to a safe distance, the Weapon cocked its head and gave a strangely plaintive shriek, taking two massive steps and coming to rest directly in front of its tiny Caller.

That's a good one, good, good...come here, come to me...I won't let them pay my ransom, pay this price...I won't let you kill anymore...I won't let him use us anymore...we won't be his unwilling Weapons...

The wind knocked out of him from the sudden impact with the ground, the Alpha Project shakily got to his feet. He blindly grabbed for Marion's arm, and then whirled around in shock as he realized in whose shadow they stood. The fear quickly left his face, however, and with a sneer, he pulled Marion towards him, using her as a shield against the massive creature. Weapon screamed, but did not back away. A frown creased the kidnapper's forehead. Glancing at Marion, he found her fully alert and focused on the Onyx Weapon. Grabbing his knife from the grass where it had fallen, he set the blade to her neck once more and snarled, "Back it off! Back it off or I'll slit your throat wide open!"

You can't hurt me any more, you can't scare me into killing...I won't be used as a Weapon, your Weapon...not against these people...willing to give their lives for mine, for the sake of love...what would I not give in the name of the same god?

The towering black creature shifted in its stance, almost like an impatient child...or an indecisive adult. Marion never took her eyes off of its glowing red orbs, and even as the knife bit deeper into her flesh, she raised her arms as if to embrace the biomechanical creature, threw her head back, and screamed.

...for love...

As Cloud and the others watched in horrified disbelief, the Weapon echoed her movements and cry, and then spewed forth a blinding beam of energy from its mouth, enveloping her and her captor in a pillar of lightning fifty feet thick.

"No!" Cloud shouted, shaking off restraining hands to sprint towards the Weapon.

Not again...not another innocent sacrificed to a madman...because we couldn't get to her in time, because we couldn't save her, because we couldn't stop her...not another sacrifice; not like this...

The blast faded away, and closing its mouth, Weapon gazed at the small crater before it, silent and still.

The fear was gone...no more shrieking, needing, mindless fear.

Cocking its head slightly, the creature gave a crooning cry and then flew away.

The Planet...so small, so impossibly small...no more tiny Voice, commanding and yet not commanding.

Back to the Northern Crater.

No more Threat, no more command.

Back to sleep.

No more Voice.