

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 61: Alone

Tifa slowly pushed open the bedroom door and peered in. Almost a week later, and he was still sitting in that same chair in the same position. If not for the slow rising and falling of his shoulders and back, she might have thought he was a statue...or dead. An equally motionless figure lay on the bed in front of Vincent's chair, silver hair gleaming softly in the moonlight streaming in through a window. Shaking her head, Tifa slowly withdrew and shut the door once more.

Outside the silent room, her husband and friends had gathered and wept and wondered and whispered. Everyone had stayed several days at Choco Billy's, resting and healing, and answering all of Cid and Shera's amazed inquiries, the first one being a wary, "What did we miss?" upon their arrival five days earlier. For the next three days, they'd talked without rest, murmurs of the conversation seeping through the walls and leaking underneath the door to where Vincent sat in his lonely chair.

The horrifying events of a single day while the StarChaser-I had left the confines of its home. Marion's trial of fear and the terrible truth of her identity. Myriad puzzle pieces of the kidnapper, his identity, and his nebulous plans that when combined, only created a dozen more questions. Their quest to recover Marion, which had involved the dead and living, as well as encompassed the entire Planet. And the miracle that Vincent had wrought through what he considered unforgivable means...

She lay on her back, slender hands folded over her stomach, in the exact same pose as when he had first laid eyes on her. He could recall the untouched quality of her beauty, her night-dark hair floating around her in the glowing green liquid that she had slept in. So much had happened since then...so much had changed. Not a day older in any physical sense despite her silver hair, still her youthful charm had been replaced by a more serene, more mature beauty. Her unique innocence and honesty would be with her always, but she was no longer a wide-eyed infant, taking in the world with completely open arms. He had done that to her. He had stripped away her illusions and replaced them with the worst that humanity could offer her.

He'd awakened her and brought her into the sunlight...and the storm. His student, his companion, his friend, and his charge. And more recently, his wife. Someone to be watched over, cared for, and protected. Certainly he had given her moments of joy and fulfillment, and yet...

What was it like to see the world with new eyes at the side of such a man as he? What was it like to finally gain peace and happiness for a brief moment, only to have it violently snatched from your hands by a madman? What was it like to be protected and cared for all your conscious life, and then suddenly find yourself living in a constant, nightmarish haze with a knife always at your throat?

To have to overcome suspicion and fear everywhere you went, for nothing that you yourself had done? To be so utterly accepting that you fell in love with a killer? And then to find out that you contained within your body the power to shatter the earth? To bear the weight of innocent lives; to cling to life with blood-stained hands; to make the terrible decision to sacrifice your own life - forced into that dark corner by someone utterly insane, by someone who had no idea of the pain and panic in your heart.

What is it like, Marion, to be my wife?

He sat on the edge of a wooden chair, elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped together limply as if in constant prayer. Ruddy eyes were locked on her delicate lids, only leaving their post to make careful rounds of her face, neck, and hands. The rest of her lay hidden beneath cotton sheets, small hills and valleys underneath blue-dyed fabric. He breathed in when she breathed in, and exhaled when she exhaled. His mind wandered in constant, aimless conversation directed at someone who could not hear, and his soul shuddered in silent misery; a shivering child huddled in a dark corner, too afraid to move or speak out, paralyzed by the deaths that always stalked him.

He hadn't once moved from that corner in his soul in the six days since they'd made their weary way to the nearest inn. He who had slept in a coffin for 30 undisturbed years found that when necessary, one could exist in stasis while conscious as well. Rest, food, the complaint of stiffening muscles...all were utterly insignificant when compared to the need to watch over Marion's sleeping form. Breathe in, breath out, breathe in, breathe out...

Wake up, Marion. Come back...

...come back? To what? To who?

...to me. Come back to me.

Look at her, so peaceful, lying there. This is the way it should have been. You should have never woken her up. Let sleeping souls lie, so to speak. She would have continued to sleep away the ages in her chamber, chatting away with Aeris and never knowing anything of pain, of fear, of loss. If not for you, she would never have wept a single tear, shed a drop of blood, voiced a single cry of pain.

I love you, Marion.

And that's reason enough to chain her to your side for the rest of her life with vows of marriage? Your love is reason enough to raise you above your past...you think falling in love with her lifted the curse from your head?

I tried to protect you, Marion. Please believe me, I tried...

...and failed. You tried to wring love from your family, you tried to possess Lucrecia, you tried to stop Hojo. You try and try, Vincent Valentine, but your Fate will not be denied. You have been chosen, that's certain. Chosen as an instrument of Death, a warrior for Pain, a champion for Sorrow. One life dedicated to loving one woman cannot redeem you from your sins...the curse cannot so easily be broken...

...I'm so sorry, Marion. Forgive me...

...for using her? For putting her to the use for which she was created? Hojo's dream of being able to manipulate the powers of the Planet, finally realized in you. Did you grasp the concept? Did you see the genius in his plans? One girl with the ability to destroy entire solar systems running through her veins, at the mercy of the bright yellow crystal that you had in your gun. Remember the look on her face when you cast the command? No one else saw, but you, you with your enhanced vision, your experimental senses. Remember the touch of the magic on her mind? Remember how she fought against the controlling spell? She didn't know it was you...small mercy for one undeserving of such. Brave girl, fighting off the Alpha Project and the instinct of the Weapon...but you used her in the end, didn't you?

According to her original design...