

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 62: Whispers in a Dream

Utter dark turned slowly to a ruddy haze, and by the time she'd floated to the top of her formless dreams, the warm hues were recognized as watery sunlight against her lids. Turning her head on a downy pillow, reveling in the sensation of cotton against her cheek, she drew in a deep breath and opened her eyes a tiny crack. She was in a small bedroom, quaint and quiet as only inns in the countryside can be. Plain wooden walls, cotton curtains at the single window, and charmingly simple furniture, all sturdy and solid and comfortingly so. A soft cheeping and cooing could be heard coming in through the partially open window which framed a small corral, placing her in Choco Billy's ranch and inn. Everything was bathed in an apricot glow from the glowing sun peeping its face over the horizon, and time seemed to have stopped for the moment, lulled into sleep by the peacefulness of the morning.

She'd been hearing voices in her dreams for...well, for however long she'd been hearing them. Now, in the timeless drowse of an early morning awakening, she struggled the bits and pieces together, the well-loved voices telling her a story almost too distant and bizarre to be believed.

"Here, Vincent, you take her."

"I can't...my arm is broken as well as most of my ribs, and I used the entirety of my magic to cast that shield."

"Tifa?"

"Yes, here...use this. We've got to get to an inn, Cloud...everyone's in rough shape."

"Vincent? How did you do that, by the way? No one can sustain a shield spell for that long, much less at that strength, except maybe Marion."

"Exactly...I didn't use the Shield materia...I used Manipulate."

"Manipulate? You mean...she can be used to cast spells like materia?"

"Yes. I used her...just like Hojo had dreamed. The powers of the Planet harnessed by one man's manipulations..."

"Vincent..."

"You saved her life, Vincent, and no one's ever going to use her again...let it lie."

"Poor Marion, poor thing...what are we going to do?"

"Come on, Tifa. Didn't I promise you this would be the end of it? We won't let anything else happen..."

"...and if anything does, I trust you to simply kill the next person who looks cross-eyed at her."

"You trust 'us?' What about you, Vincent?"

"...I have other things to do."

"Amen to that. Here, all healed? Take your wife, Vincent. And as soon as she wakes up, get started on all those things...get a house somewhere or move into my place, settle down for once in your life, have a million kids, all that stuff."

...

"How is she?"

"Still sleeping."

"Tifa talked to the doctors and I went up to Nibelheim again...and they say it's just sleep, nothing more. Aeris says that Marion's mind is healing itself...she can't talk to her, but she can touch her somehow, and she says that Marion will be fine."

"..."

"Vincent? Get some rest, okay? I can watch over her just as well as you."

"...perhaps later."

"Or not at all? Never mind, Vincent, never mind. She'll want to see you when she wakes up anyway."

...

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

"I'm so sorry, Marion."

"Forgive me."

Her eyes sharpened and cleared from the last silky mists of sleep. The last words she'd heard...Vincent's voice. The ragged, despairing tone she'd only heard echoes of before, now voiced in full. The guilt, the hopelessness...forgive him? Breath catching in her throat, she struggled from the bed, weakened muscles sluggish and awkward. She found herself clothed in unfamiliar garb, over-large shirt and pants tangling around her limbs. The light cotton blankets seemed to weigh her down like soaked wool, and she fought against both bedding and tears of frustration for several minutes.

When she'd finally thrown off the covers, she sat trembling on the edge of the bed for a moment, wondering at her weakness. Focusing her mind, she centered her inner vision on her own life force and brought the shimmering green expanse of her spirit into view. She'd done so for Shera in the days after her resurrection, to check her health by this unique method. The coil of lifestream that she now ran mental fingers through seemed healthy, although a bit frail in general. Marion felt a small measure of relief, and then a prick of curiosity at the two shimmering threads that she found interwoven into her own.

...and she'd seen this before...this interweaving of a smaller, brighter thread through a larger one.

Nearly blind from the sudden fear and shock, she stumbled to her feet and made her way to the bedroom door, flinging it open with such force that it rebounded against the wall and struck her as she tried to stagger through. With a faint cry, she fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs and fabric, and watched helplessly as the two people in the adjoining room leapt to their feet to crowd around her.

Gentle arms gathered her up and she was swiftly deposited onto a chair. She struggled to form words, but found her throat dry and unresponsive. After a few frantic minutes in which Cloud and Tifa hovered with worried expressions, she managed a croaking question. "Where is Vincent?" The couple before her exchanged puzzled glances, and Cloud quickly stepped into the bedroom from which she'd appeared so startlingly. To his wife, he stated in an incredulous voice, "Tifa, he's gone. Did you see him leave?" She shook her head in reply and then turned her attention back to Marion.

Smoothing back wild strands of silver from the flushed face, she asked gently, "Are you okay, Marion? You've been sleeping off your little adventure for seven days now." Marion shrugged this piece of trivia off and rasped, "Where is he? When did he leave?" Tifa shrugged helplessly and recalled, "He was there last night when I checked in on you...he hasn't left your side since Cloud brought you out of that crater. I don't know, Marion."

The pale face before her was momentarily obscured in trembling palms, and Tifa telegraphed her worries to her husband over the silvery head. "Marion," he called to her gently, patting one shoulder with a careful hand. "Marion, you need to rest...you're extremely weak. I'm sure Vincent will come back right away..."

"No," she immediately cried, voice high and thin, "no, I have to find him," and she fluttered white hands against Tifa's restraining ones, frail doves beating helplessly against the golden bars of a cage. "You're not going anywhere, Marion," Tifa chided as lightly as she could manage. Marion's seeming irrationality and panic were infectious, and her self-appointed older sister fought against the fear rising in her own heart. "Cloud," Tifa said, and he nodded and bent to carry Marion back to her bed.

"NO!" Marion cried out loudly, and in the space of a heartbeat, both Tifa and Cloud found themselves bound tightly in a Stop spell. Helpless and afraid now for Marion's safety, they watched from the corners of their eyes as she staggered across the room to the doorway beyond, and out into the glowing red sunrise.

The crisp air bit into her lungs and made her gasp painfully as she struggled onto one of the stabled golds. She didn't bother with saddle or reins but simply clung to the bird's neck and urged it outside with little kicks of her bare feet. Once she'd gained the open prairie surrounding the ranch, she sat upright, bracing herself against her mount's back with locked elbows.

Where?

Where would guilt drive him? She raked her mind across the myriad conversations that she'd had with Aeris in the days - weeks? months? - that she'd slept away in her mako chamber, recalling everything she could about Vincent's past...

So many places he could be...so many places he wouldn't have gone to.

Not to Midgar where he'd worked as a Turk. Not to Nibelheim, where he'd been loved and discarded and altered. Not to the Forgotten Capital where they'd laid Aeris to rest. Not to any of their friends' home towns...

Where? Where would he go to pay his debt, to try and earn forgiveness? Where could he go to be alone with his demons?

Choking back a sob, Marion turned the chocobo away from the rising sun and ran towards the shadows.