

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 63:

She dismounted outside the circle of icy spray that the waterfall kicked up, nearly stumbling on still-unsteady limbs. Her heart clenched in her breast as she slipped behind the wall of water hiding Lucrecia's cavern, her fear sharper than the liquid needles that slashed at her skin. Echoes of her footsteps rang off of the frozen floor as she approached the silent figure kneeling before the throne set in the furthest wall. The glittering dais was a cold altar; its silver and blue forever stained by the despair and death that had seeped into it for years upon years. The Death Penalty lay upon it, one more promised offering to Loss, a sacrifice waiting to be made to Futility. Forgiveness was not to be found in this lonely place.

Fifty feet away from where she stood, in the shadowed recesses of the cavern, Vincent closed his eyes, obeying a sudden impulsive fear of catching a glimpse of his unannounced visitor. Marion...he knew it from the light footsteps echoing across the icy walls. He knew it from the faint breeze that carried the fragrance of her hair to him. And he knew it simply because she was Marion, and he loved her.

He loved her so much...

Sitting on his chair by her bed just last night, it had taken every ounce of his self-control not to reach out his hand and run his fingers down her pale cheek. He'd wanted so desperately to press her hand, to smooth her hair, to lie next to her and curl himself around her sleeping form. Every fiber of his being yearned to touch and hold, to possess and be possessed in turn...the desperate desire for comfort and shelter. And something just as desperate had forced him to stand up and slip silently through the open window, melting away into the shadows of a moonless night without even a backward glance at his soul still lying quietly on the bed.

He loved her so much that he couldn't bear the sight of himself in her presence.

He didn't turn or even lift his head, only spoke softly to her in a deadened voice that wrung sudden tears from her eyes.

"Leave me. Leave this place and don't ever return." A whisper, faint as a ghost. "I didn't want you to see this."

"Why, Vincent? Why are you doing this?"

Why? Oh God, why? Why didn't he just get up and walk to her and let her take him into her arms? Why couldn't he let her take him from this place and then build a new life together, leaving the past and his pistol to rot in this chilling cave? Why shouldn't he bury his bloodstained hands in her hair, hide his murderous heart in her arms, let her eyes and her smile outshine his shadows?

...because he loved her.

He loved her so much...

He loved her so much that he couldn't bear to hurt her anymore.

Lids clenched tight over stinging eyes and his entire body tensed against itself, muscles locked down against the urge to spring up and run into the arms that he knew would be waiting. His heart cried out to her with pleas to be forgiven, to be saved from himself, but his lips remained sealed. So many sins to be repaid, so many wrongs to be absolved of...who could pay for all that he had done? He wouldn't - he couldn't - burden her with the task of redeeming his soul. An impossible task that she would gladly take on...he couldn't ask it of her.

After a long, aching pause during which he regained some control over the turmoil within, he replied, "I'm just as much a weapon as the creature you summoned up, but I am not an agent of the Planet. I am a weapon for Death. All of the people who died at my hand are witness against me, as well as Sephiroth's victims and now the innocents who died in Weapon's

rampages. I brought you out of a peaceful sleep and dragged you into danger for my own selfish desires, and again my heart led me to become a threat to the world. Fate uses me time and again to bring about destruction, and I will not allow anyone else to suffer because of me...especially you. It ends here."

Marion felt her heart cry out within her, the pain almost unbearable. Still with his back turned, he once again gave the impossible command. "Leave me." Instead, Marion took slow, careful steps towards him. If he should succeed in this desperate mission, there wouldn't be time or energy enough to get him to Mideel for the same miracle she had worked for Shera. And Shera's wounds had been simple broken bones and burned skin. If he shot himself in the head, could she repair the damage? He had reflexes that were the envy of the world, and she knew that any spells she tried to cast wouldn't take effect soon enough to prevent him from pulling the trigger. In his utter despair, any threats she made would be equally useless. But she was damned if she was going to let Vincent kill himself before her very eyes.

He listened to the soft footfalls making their way ever closer, and felt a faint, unspoken hope rise unchecked in his heart. Automatically, he struggled against it, for how could he possibly be saved from himself? And yet his heart longed still for one last glimpse of her face, to feel just one last time the silkiness of her skin. Memory called up the taste of her lips and the feel of her delicate frame in his arms, and he knew that to look into her eyes would be to completely undo his self-control. And so he remained still, and did not turn his head, and would not open his eyes.

"You're partly right, Vincent," a soft voice spoke from near his left shoulder, "although in a very twisted way. You did find me, you did wake me up, and you did bring me out into the world. But Vincent, you were also the one who saved me, the one who gave me my humanity and heart, the one who kept me from using Weapon against all of the people on this planet." She circled around and dropped to her knees before her husband, "Someone, someday, would have found me if you hadn't. Anyone could have woken me up, but you were the only one who could have given me this heart, this love. You saved everyone with your love for me."

The clear, well-loved voice was so near. He could hear the catching breaths she drew in, and taste the faint salt in the air from her evaporating tears. Surely to look upon her face was a gift he didn't deserve, but oh, he loved her so much...

The crimson eyes she so loved were dim with despair and guilt, but a faint spark of hope still lived within; there was a tiny corner of his heart that still reached for redemption, and she had to find it. "Vincent, hear me," she begged, love and tears overflowing in her eyes, "your gift to me, your heart, your love was the only thing I had to hold on to. The only part of me that was wholly Marion - your Marion. The Planet-soul within me blindly used Weapon to protect me, but it was my heart that was able to turn Weapon away from murdering everyone."

"I would have killed every single person on this planet if not for you. I would have been the culmination of all of Hojo's twisted schemes and Sephiroth's mad desires without your love. I couldn't have survived this without you. And I won't live without you now." Her voice was quiet and intense all at once, and she stared into his eyes intently, needing desperately for him to hear her, to understand.

"Vincent, if you do this, you kill me, too," she whispered. "Please, Vincent, come back to me."

They knelt there in Lucrecia's icy cave for an eternity; hope and despair, redemption and condemnation, life and death locked together in a battle for Vincent's soul. Had he almost destroyed the world, or had he saved it? Could anything he had done atone for all of the countless sins that had come before?

Or was that what forgiveness was for?

Vincent shuddered, his whole body suddenly wracked with an overwhelming exhaustion, as if he had been carrying an enormous burden his entire life that he had just now noticed. Would he continue to drag his past behind him, struggling for an endless lifetime to repay an infinite debt? He looked deep into the luminous eyes before him.

"I love you so much, Marion," he breathed, voice almost lost in the echoing cavern.

He loved her so much...

"I love you too," she smiled, lips trembling. Vincent closed his eyes and sighed, feeling the exhaustion slip away, replaced

by an unfamiliar lightness in his soul.

He loved her so much...

...and she loved him in return.

And it was enough...it was more than enough. Love could overcome hate, and one act of forgiveness and acceptance was enough to wipe out an entire lifetime of sin. The last sliver of ice cracked and dislodged from his heart.

Eyes still closed, he leaned forward to rest his head on Marion's shoulder and murmured,

"I'm tired. Let's go home."

She wrapped her arms around him tightly, relief and joy welling up from her heart in an overwhelming flood. She smiled into his hair, deciding to keep her most recent secret for a little while longer. In his current emotional state, the revelation might very well stop his heart. Her news could wait. For now, she simply held him, keeping him safe in her arms as she kept their children safe within her womb.

The End