

An Affair of the Heart and Soul

By Meriko

Chapter 1: Buried Treasure

In the pitch-black hallway, silence reigned unchallenged. The only thing that had moved in this underground catacomb in the past months was the ever-sifting dust. Until now. The darkness retreated reluctantly to admit the soft glow of materia. The bright orbs rested in the deathly cold steel of a pistol, struggling against the darkness. A few feet above, twin coals glowed faintly, their ruddy light appearing and disappearing like bloody ghosts as the solitary figure blinked. Clad in deepest black with matching boots and gloves, wrapped from neck to knees in a crimson cloak with a matching headband enveloping his forehead, the man was mysterious at best, dauntingly menacing to most. His glowing eyes and metal-clawed left forearm only added to the dark atmosphere about him.

And yet time had softened the razor edges of Vincent Valentine. Never truly the soulless monster forever removed from the grace of God that he believed himself to be. No longer a cold-blooded murderer, heartless and cruel, friendless and alone. And yet not wholly human, not wholly healed from the wounds of his past. The ice around his heart had thinned and cracked in the year and months spent in the company of his friends, yet there seemed to be shards piercing him that would never melt, never allow him complete humanity. Never allow him entry into the kingdom of heaven, of forgiveness, of love.

He walked down the silent corridor, red cloak swirling behind him and boots grinding softly over cracked tiles, searching for the source of the low humming that had caught his attention. The corridor twisted and branched off, myriad passageways leading to gruesome laboratories and stifling storage closets. None had any electricity, for the Mako reactors had all been destroyed a month ago, when Meteor and Holy battled at Midgar. Vincent was not walking blind, however. The misty green haze emanating from his gun provided enough light for his enhanced eyes to see around him.

Not having a home or purpose to return to once Meteor had been destroyed, he had instead chosen to prowl Midgar, searching through the twisted metal supports and smoldering rubble for useful items and any survivors that had not evacuated the city in time to avoid Meteor. There were pitifully few of the latter. After satisfying himself that there were no more people in the city and distributing the scavenged weapons and materia among his companions, he had returned to further investigate this building - Shinra Headquarters.

He had worked his way up through the building, sometimes using key cards found on Shinra guards' bodies, sometimes using his gun to blast through doors and debris. The library had sparked his interest for a moment, but he found that the information on Hojo's research had been edited and rendered innocuous. He continued his investigation in the lab where Nanaki and Aeris had been rescued. Mutated animals and monstrous creations had lain dead or dying in their cages. The dying were dispatched with a single bullet. This task of mercy completed, Vincent had begun to sort through the chaotic array of crates covering one wall. Glass beakers, plastic tubing and syringes filled the smaller crates. As Vincent moved them aside to get at the others, he discovered a hidden elevator.

With no electricity to power the emergency brakes, the elevator had plummeted to its destruction as Weapon's energy beams demolished the upper floors of the Shinra Tower. Now all that remained in the shaft was a lone cable hanging forlornly from a pulley. It would take countless hours of climbing to reach the bottom. No problem for Vincent Valentine, however. He jumped.

A long fall later, he had floated himself gently to the bottom of the shaft. Carefully treading his way across the shattered elevator to the door, he'd mentally calculated how far he had fallen. He was approximately one-quarter mile underneath Midgar, in what appeared to be Hojo's private research facility.

He came upon another split in the seemingly endless hallway and paused, listening. The humming noise was definitely getting louder as he walked. Choosing a corridor, he continued on and finally came upon a single door with a faded inscription barely visible in the gloom. Vincent brought his face up to the door. The humming was definitely coming from behind it. Closer up, the inscription was legible, but most of the letters had faded away. "Ma..r.....ion - Beta ...ject" Vincent

read. "Matter construction? Mako reaction?" he wondered. "Beta...project, most likely. Does 'Beta' refer to the Midgar Zolom's fiery attack?"

Vincent put a hand to the knob and turned. A cool green light spilled into the dark hallway as the door swung open easily.

He stepped into the room, which was about the size of one of the suites at the Gold Saucer Hotel. In fact, there was someone sleeping at the end of the room. This was no hotel, however, and the occupant was certainly not resting in what could be called a bed. Passing by myriad computers and control panels with only a cursory glance, Vincent approached the figure.

It was a young woman - a girl, really - of about 18 years, with long black hair and almost translucent skin. She had a pale, ethereal beauty, accented by long lashes, a delicate bone structure and pale pink lips. She lay on her back with her hands folded over her stomach, apparently sleeping peacefully. Slender body clothed in a lab coat and black pants, she looked quite normal, but for the fact that she was completely submerged in glowing lifestream. The container in which she slept was no more than an elaborate aquarium standing on top of a metal shelving unit full of electronic equipment.

After watching her breathe in the liquid mako for a few moments more, Vincent turned and let his eyes rove over the rest of the room. A generator hummed quietly in one corner, attached to several banks of batteries. Tubes of light fibers also extended from the generator, leading to pipes, which disappeared into a wall. Upon closer examination, Vincent surmised that they led all the way to the surface, where they undoubtedly collected solar power. Most of the computers were sitting idle, and the control panels did not seem to be performing any functions either. There was only one screen that held changing data, and that simply recorded the girl's heartbeat and other biological functions.

Vincent swept the room, searching for filing cabinets or bookshelves that might contain enlightenment, but found nothing helpful. Hojo had died only recently. Had he not had time to begin his experiments on this girl, other than immersing her in mako? Or was she the finished product, simply waiting for Hojo to wake her? She looked innocent, sleeping there, but perhaps the monster lay within.

Vincent considered calling one of the others on the PHS, but they were all busy returning to their old lives, or building new ones. Cloud and Tifa had returned to Nibelheim. Although the Shinra actors were long gone, several adventurous refugees from Midgar had traveled across the ocean, looking for a new life on a new continent, and Nibelheim was once again a busy little town. Cloud spent most of his time in the Shinra mansion, poring over the books and research notes in the basement. Tifa, when not busy helping Cloud, had built a chocobo ranch just outside of the town and had bred up a respectable flock of green, blue, black, and gold chocobos. Barret, after a tearful reunion (on Marlene's part) with his daughter, set off for Corel, hoping to help rebuild the once prosperous mining town. Surprisingly, Reeve had offered to go with him, explaining that his experience as head of City Development in Midgar qualified him to be an immense help in rebuilding Corel. Even more surprisingly, Barret had agreed. Yuffie, now Lady of the Pagoda, returned to Wutai to rejuvenate her tourist-trap hometown, almost staggering under the weight of the mastered materia that the others had given her. She continued to train as a Ninja, and made monthly rounds of everyone's homes, ostensibly to visit, but really to see if they had mastered any more of the precious glowing orbs. Cid and Shera were probably arguing at this very moment while building a new rocket. Well, Cid would be cursing, and Shera would be talking logically to him. And Nanaki, his competitor for oddest-member-of-their-group, had returned to Cosmo Canyon to take his place as Guardian, and to continue to study the mysteries of the universe.

Vincent held his gun at the ready. Should this girl prove to be dangerous, he felt confident that the Death Penalty could handle her. Besides, he always had the Chaos beast to call upon, should it prove necessary. Taking another look at the frail girl trapped inside the tank, he decided that it would not.

Crouching down, he studied the various buttons and dials underneath the Mako tank. Death Penalty still held in his right hand, he used his clawed left hand to manipulate the controls. With a low whir, the walls of the tank lowered themselves into the stand as the shimmering liquid drained away. Vincent stood over the girl as her body slowly became exposed to the air, searching for signs of consciousness.

The mako drained away from her face, and as her chest fell in another breath, more of the lifestream drained out from

between her parted lips. She breathed in again, this time drawing in air. And choked.

Vincent watched, a small frown creasing his brow as the mako in her lungs bubbled and was expelled, causing her to cough and retch. Eyes still closed, the girl's body began to shudder and convulse as air and lifestream interchanged. Quickly, Vincent holstered the Death Penalty and tilted her so that she lay on her side, his arms around her so that she would not fall off of the table.

After a few minutes more, the coughing subsided. He could feel her back pressed against his chest - she seemed to be breathing the air more easily now. Still holding her to him, he peered into her face, using his right hand to lift away the strands of hair plastered to her cheek. Delicate eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened to reveal her eyes.

Her blazing green mako eyes.

Vincent's own ruddy eyes widened. Cloud's blue eyes glowed aquamarine with a faint green sheen, and Sephiroth's had been even brighter, but they were mere fireflies compared to the searing starfire of this girl's eyes.

She stirred, gazing blankly around, and finally noticed the man in whose arms she lay. Fear blanched her already pale face, and she struggled weakly, whimpering softly and trying to squirm away from him.

He kept a firm grip on her while trying to calm her down, afraid that she might injure herself in trying to flee. "It's all right," he soothed, "I'm not here to hurt you."

A few moments more of fruitless struggle, and she quieted. Vincent carefully propped her up into a sitting position on the table, and then stood before her, still holding her forearms in case she decided to bolt. He decided it was unlikely, however, seeing that their brief struggle had tired her out. Who knows how long she's been sleeping, thought Vincent.

Her head hung limply as she caught her breath, wet tendrils clinging to her neck and shoulders. He watched as her eyes roved over her apparent captor, pausing on his claw, and then venturing upwards to stare at his face. Concentration competed with fear on her face as she locked gazes with Vincent. Although his features remained expressionless as always, inside he felt uneasy.

She looked and acted like an ordinary, human girl...an ordinary human girl who's been kidnapped and immersed in mako for a while, at least. With his glowing red eyes and a claw instead of a left forearm, he must seem like one of Hojo's monsters to her...which he was. Vincent began to regret not calling in one of the others. At least she would have found herself rescued by people, instead of waking up in the arms of a nightmarish creature.

Vincent took in a deep breath, and was about to introduce and explain himself when she beat him to it.

"Vincent?" she asked, her voice hesitant. Her eyes were still locked on his, and she saw surprise and acknowledgement in their depths.

"How do you know my name?" Vincent asked quietly.

Clearing her throat, the girl replied, "Aeris. Aeris described you to me." She looked around her at the table. Some small puddles of mako still remained on the surface, and she pulled her arm out of his grasp and ran her fingers through them. "I can't hear her anymore," she whispered, and Vincent heard loss and sorrow in her voice.

A conclusion quickly skipped across Vincent's mind. "You could talk to Aeris while you were sleeping in the lifestream?"

The mystery before him nodded her head. "She told me...all sorts of things. About how she died, and how she didn't return to the planet so she could use the lifestream to help Holy. About her friends, and how they helped her save this planet." She held up her hand, watching the mako dribble through her fingers.

Vincent suddenly realized that the girl was still sopping wet with the emerald liquid. He let go of her other arm and stepped back, removing his cloak. He silently furled the cape around her shoulders. He had a hundred thousand questions, but this was neither the time nor place. She needed dry clothes and food, and neither could be found in this underground maze. He wouldn't be able to carry the girl all the way up the elevator shaft, and she looked much too frail and weak to climb up herself. Pulling the PHS out of his pocket, he dialed Tifa. With their gold chocobos, Cloud and his neighbor were his best bet for quick assistance.