

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 4: New Lives to Live

Vincent paused at the bottom of the elevator shaft, weighing options. Marion, strangely enough, had fallen asleep in his arms, and he was oddly reluctant to wake her. It would be several hours more until Cloud and Tifa arrived, and leaving his charge alone while he explored was not a viable option. He let out a small sigh and hunkered down against a wall, careful not to wake the girl who laid her head so trustingly on his shoulder.

How long had it been since he had held someone? Lucrecia...over 30 years separated him from the memories of their brief passion and the ensuing heartbreak and horror. Over one year since he had discovered her still alive in her icy cave. Eleven months since she had taken her own life. Eleven months in which he had found himself faced with feelings of betrayal, hopelessness and rage, feelings that he had thought long buried. Eleven months in which his heart had roared out of its ashes like a phoenix and rebelled against itself, burning down from rage into resignation, accusations into acceptance, hurt into healing.

Hojo had changed a man into a monster, inside and out, using his scientific abilities as well as the manipulation of the woman Vincent had loved. Lucrecia had not allowed herself to survive the horrors of being re-created by Hojo, but Vincent had. Survived...and would continue to survive. For all that he had been born into the Valentine family 58 years ago, he still retained the body of a 27 year old man - with a few minor alterations, of course.

And though the outward alterations Hojo had made could not be reversed, Vincent's heart had recovered. Long days and nights spent with Cloud and the others, watching them interact, observing them care for and about each other. Allowing them to care for him. Cold pebble in a playful stream he might have been, a part of the team and apart from the team at the same time, but despite himself, the stream had knocked a great many rough edges off of the stone.

Marion...another of Hojo's victims. What secrets did this frail body hide? What lay in her heart? Could she overcome the horrors of being Hojo's captive? Or would she be another Lucrecia? Vincent's arms involuntarily tightened around Marion's body as protectiveness coursed through him, startling in its ferocity. Hojo was dead. Vincent would not allow him to claim another life even from the grave. He would not fail her.

Vincent leaned back against the wall, gazing at the girl in his arms, and wondering at the tenderness she somehow roused in him. She was beautiful, certainly, but so was Tifa. Her vulnerability stirred a protectiveness in him that Aeris' hadn't. Was it because they both had been captives of Hojo? Was it her mystery? Vincent found it unlikely that empathy or curiosity could cause him to feel so strongly about anyone, and yet was helpless to explain why he reacted to her so.

Some time passed in that way and Marion stirred. Her eyes opened, shining in the darkness of the hallway, and she looked around as if trying to remember where she was.

"Good morning," Vincent murmured. Marion's head tracked to his voice automatically, and he realized that her vision was that of a normal person. "Can you see anything?" Vincent asked. He'd gotten so used to his enhanced abilities that he couldn't remember how well ordinary people could see.

She blinked once or twice, and looked around, finally resting her gaze on his face. "I can't see anything except your eyes. It's so dark...I've never...there's so much space." She huddled closer in his arms, shivering.

Vincent ran his hand along her arm reassuringly, and recalled her earlier statement that she had "always been here." Always been in the lab, or always been in the chamber? The hallway in which they sat was no wider than the room she had been trapped in, but had her world been confined to the narrow chamber for the entirety of her memories? Cloud's memories had been fragmented once by mako poisoning. Had this girl's been completely erased?

"Do you have any recollection at all of your life before this place?" he asked.

"No. I don't have memories of anything." She frowned, "Like when you asked me if I could walk. I knew what you meant by 'walk,' but I couldn't remember ever walking. I know words and their meanings, but...I'd never done any of them. I don't have a 'life before this place,' Vincent. I don't have a life at all." She fell silent.

Marion had no past. And what of her future, wondered Vincent. She had no one to go home to, or even a home, for that matter. With no memories, she had no craft or skills with which to make a living. And what of Hojo's experiment? She seemed normal right now, except for her shining eyes, but what about tomorrow, or a year from now?

Should he take her to Nibelheim, where she could stay with Tifa, and learn about chocobos? Cloud perhaps would find research notes of Hojo's in the basement that would prove helpful. She might find Cosmo Canyon fascinating, too, with all of its learning opportunities, and Nanaki might be able to provide insight into her background. There were many places she could stay and be safe, where someone could keep an eye on her as she settled down into a new life.

And he would go on with his...

Vincent craned his head to peer into Marion's face. Although still, she was wide-awake, and returned his glowing gaze questioningly.

"Did Aeris tell you much about the world in general, or just what involved Sephiroth and Jenova?" he asked.

"She told me about Jenova and what happened because of her, but she didn't actually tell me about the world. I know towns and mountains and animals exist, but...I don't know anything about them."

Vincent looked at her intently and asked, "Would you like to?"

Slender eyebrows crooked up, "Would I like to what?"

"Would you like to get to know the world?"

The eyebrows wrinkled together this time, and Vincent saw fear creep into her eyes. "But...the world is...big...isn't it? How would I..."

Vincent interrupted her gently, "I could show it to you."

Surprise replaced the fear in the emerald eyes before him. They searched his own gaze, looking for reassurance that she hadn't misunderstood.

"I could show you the world," Vincent restated, "take you anywhere you want to go, to get to know everything you don't have memories of. You have a life, Marion, you just haven't started living it yet."

Only a few hours old in the world, and utterly alone, Marion had developed a startlingly intense dependence on the mysterious man who had found her. With no experiences and no real knowledge of the planet she lived on, Vincent had unwittingly become her world. "You'll be there...with me?" she asked, breathy voice daring to hope, "You won't leave me alone?"

"I'll be there," Vincent promised, "Do you want that? Do you want to see the world with me?"

"Yes," ...it was barely a whisper, but he heard her entire heart in it, and felt a barely remembered warmth fill his own. He brought his hand up to her neck and cradled her head under his chin. For the first time in decades, Vincent Valentine had someone to live for.