

Chapter 19: Miraculous Resurrections and Appearances

"Insolent sniveling wretch!" -Amaani Hojo

Cid's head snapped around involuntarily at the sound of the shots, unable to look, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

Then more shots rang out. A lot more shots. Cid's eyes shot open and he spun to find that the soldiers that had been holding them back were on the ground, either moaning in pain or dead.

Suddenly, something prompted him to look up, and his face broke into a wide grin. Josh and Kat were racing toward them, Josh clutching Raven tightly.

"Mommy!" Kat flung herself at Shera's legs and hugged them tightly, crying. Shera spun and dropped into a crouch beside the small girl, looking her over frantically.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, voice cracking suspiciously.

Kat shook her head.

"I..." Shera's voice failed entirely. She held her daughter tightly, rocking back and forth on her heels and stroking the little girl's glossy head.

Cid moved forward in two long strides and gathered Josh and Raven up. He held onto them a moment longer than was necessary, then moved away from Amaani, Keller, and Rawley very swiftly. Shera followed with Kat. Once he judged that they had gone far enough, he passed the pair off to Shera. He heard the screams and gunfire from behind him, and he knew even without turning that open warfare had broken out.

"Get them out of here!" he shouted above the growing battle noise, pointing to the wide-eyed kids. Shera nodded and broke into a run along the path, carrying Raven and herding Josh and Kat in front of her.

Cid went back to scoop up the Venus Gospel from where he had been forced to drop it. As he did so, he took in the situation at a glance. The three men that had been holding the kids were all immobilized. Two of them were dead, with gaping holes in their chests, while Vashar was gasping and clutching the gushing stump that used to be connected to a hand. The six townspeople that had been being guarded had broken free, and were grappling with the soldiers.

They obviously needed reinforcements. Cid punched a fist into the air, and at his signal, townspeople began pouring out of houses, brandishing rusting swords and old guns. Eyes gleaming with a mad battle light, Cid leapt over the bodies of Amaani's soldiers and plunged into the fray. His roar carried above the din. "Hooooooooooooo!"

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Amaani barely even blinked at the howl, and turned to Keller at her side. "Where are these..." She turned her nose up. "Reinforcements coming from?"

"The hou...huh...houses, M....Milady."

"A bunch of angry townspeople pose no threat to me," she said haughtily. "They dared to defy me. Now they will all die!" She paused for a moment, then barked to Keller as she watched the battle, "Find Rya. Bring him to me."

Keller's reedy voice carried surprisingly well as he called two men to him. Several minutes later, they returned, dragging a bleeding, ashen-faced Vashar between them. They threw him at Amaani's feet.

"Please, Lady Hojo, I...I need medical treatment!" Vashar begged, groveling at her feet.

Amaani kicked him imperiously, and he curled into a small ball, trying to ward off her feet. "Insolent sniveling wretch! Answer my questions; then I will heal you."

Vashar's white face nodded.

"Who out of this crowd could tell me where Highwind took the girl, since you don't know?"

Vashar held his arm tightly. "Umm, well, almost anyone here who is over 18 and under 70 is a member of the Highwind crew..."

"Excellent. Keller, don't kill all of them after all." Her face curved in a wicked grin. "Kill most of them."

As Keller barked out orders, Vashar gasped, "Will that be all of your questions, Milady?"

Amaani pondered this, then nodded. "Yes."

Vashar smiled in relief and closed his eyes. "Cure away, Milady."

"As you wish." The large sword was out of its sheath and flashing down before Vashar even realized it was coming. He let out a gurgled scream that was abruptly cut off.

Amaani looked down her nose disdainfully at his fallen body as she resheathed her sword. "Consider yourself cured," she said coldly.

"Keller!" she snapped. Her faithful second-in-command appeared instantaneously at her side.

"Y...y...yes, Mila...a...ady?"

Amaani drew her sword, eyes glittering with the battle light that Keller had seen so many times. "You're in charge." Cool silver gaze raked the chaos in front of her.

"But...Milady-"

Amaani cocked her head to one side dangerously. "You have an objection?" she asked.

She chuckled inwardly at the turmoil racing across his face. Stupid, unimaginative, faithful Keller was as devoted to her as could be. She had known for years that the idiot loved her, worshiping the ground that she walked on, and had used that information several times for her own amusement. She enjoyed to toy with him, as a cat toys with a helpless mouse.

His expression settled upon fawning concern. And he thought she didn't know... "B...be cautious, M...Milady."

She turned to enter the battle, but then spun back around. "Oh, and one more thing." A grin grew on the savage features. "Release the Tanduri." She disappeared into the chaos with a ferocious growl.

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Slicing, hacking, stabbing; Cid cut a swathe through the sea of dark-uniformed men. Soldier after soldier fell to the Venus Gospel as Cid searched for Amaani. Suddenly, she was there, twirling her great sword. "Prepare to die, mere mortal," she

said, white eyes glinting and smile full of teeth.

"Not happenin' today, Whitey," Cid retorted, barely keeping his fury in check. Nodding back toward the way that she had come from, he added, "Though 'm glad to see you took the time to take out the trash."

"Ah, you mean Rya. He was a cheeky bastard, as are you." With that parting shot, Amaani leapt at him. And so the battle began.

Cid knew immediately that he was in the presence of a true master of the art of the sword. The long, double-edged sword flew through the air with frightening swiftness and the lean woman ducked in and out of his range infuriatingly. But Cid knew he was no pushover himself. He was a master of his weapon, and most certainly was not afraid to use it.

Thrust, parry, block. The sound of metal striking metal rang above the chaos as the two battled. While the Masamune was busy blocking Cid's lance, the pilot stuck out a foot, caught the woman in the stomach, and gave her a shove. Amaani went down, but as Cid raised the Venus Gospel for one final blow, a dark figure plowed into him from the side.

Cid looked up from his new place on the ground to find one of Amaani's soldiers and Amaani herself standing over him. He winced. It felt like the soldier had broken several of his ribs.

He spat at her in derision. "Couldn't fuckin' fight me yourself, could ya?"

Amaani kicked him viciously in the ribs, and Cid doubled up in pain. "Be silent, insolent human!"

Cid glowered and gasped out painfully, "Why don't you just shut the hell up, bitch?"

She kicked him again and again, and Cid bit his lip until the blood dripped from his mouth.

Suddenly, gunshots rang out. The soldiers that had been standing in a circle around Cid and Amaani thudded to the ground beside the pilot, eyes wide open and staring. Amaani gave a startled growl and bounded away.

Cid raised his head to find Shera running to him, gun still smoking. She extended a hand to him, and he was up in a flash, albeit painfully.

"The kids?" he asked, scooping up the Venus Gospel.

"They're safe with friends," Shera replied, coolly reloading the gun.

"Amaani?"

The clip came into place with a resounding click, and Shera's brown eyes swept the battlefield. One eyebrow lifted as she said, "Preoccupied."

To Cid's utter shock, as he followed Shera's gaze he found none other than Cloud Strife battling Amaani a little ways off, swinging the large Ragnarok with a deceptive ease.

Cid frowned. "Hey, weren't we holding the Ragnarok for 'im?"

His wife shrugged. "I guess he must have stopped by the house and grabbed it."

"What the hell is he doing here?" Cid had to ask.

Shera smiled ruefully. "If I knew the answer to that, I'd tell you."

Cid winced at a sudden twinge from his ribs, but asked, "So how're our people doin'?"

Shera looked away for a moment. "Not well. We lost many."

And looking around, Cid saw that she was right. Shattered bodies lay everywhere. His throat locked in grief for a moment, then he shook his head. There'll be a time for mournin' later...

"Come on, Cid," Shera said, tugging at his arm. "I know you're mad at Cloud for what he said and did when he left three years ago, and I know we don't know why he's here, but Amaani doesn't fight fair, and he could use our help."

The two went running across the town square that had turned into a slaughtering ground, leaping across bodies and trying to ignore the overpowering stench of death. They failed.

Suddenly, a loud growling noise began. Cid froze, putting a hand on Shera's arm to stop her as a large, gray-furred beast rose from where it had been lying in wait in front of them. It was about the size of a mountain lion, and had a thick black mane to match that impression. Savage yellow eyes were focused on the pair, and a blue flame danced at the end of the tail. Sharp teeth and claws were being shown off, and the muscles rippling under the gray hide spoke of immense strength. Tattoos and old battle scars adorned the creature's body.

"...Red," was all that Cid could think of to say for a moment.

Then the beast spoke. "I have been told by my lady that you have caused her great grievances, humans. I shall enjoy destroying you for her." The voice was gravelly and low, but unmistakably female.

Cid held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa. You look like you're part of the race that a friend of mine is from. Are you from Cosmo Canyon?"

The great beast looked like she was frowning. "Is this friend of yours...alive?"

"Yeah," Cid replied, slowly backing off and pushing Shera behind him.

She apparently noticed, giving a loud snarl. "Stop moving, humans."

They immediately stopped.

"He can't be from Cosmo Canyon." She shook her head, mane ruffling.

"But he is." Cid could feel sweat gathering on his forehead. If she decided to 'destroy them,' they wouldn't have a chance.

"All but I perished in the attack by the tribe of the Gi years ago!" Her tail lashed furiously.

Shera looked around. "Then, umm, who are all of those black creatures like you?"

Cid followed her gaze to find more animals of the same species as Red, attacking townspeople.

"They are not from Cosmo Canyon. They are merely from a laboratory. And they do not speak in your human language."

"Well, my friend does," Cid said stubbornly.

The beast's eyes met his blue eyes steadily for a moment, making him squirm, then she asked, "What is his name?"

"Red Th-" Cid began.

Shera cut him off. "Nanaki. Nanaki, son of Seto."

The names had an immediate effect, as the gray-furred animal staggered back as if she had been struck. "N...Nanaki?!" Her fur bristled.

Cid glanced sidelong at Shera, as if to say 'oh shit'. "...Yeah."

When she looked up to them, her eyes were full of tears. "He was my closest friend when we were small! Can you take me to him?"

Cid breathed an inner sigh of relief. They were friends. Good... "After all this is over, probably." Cid kept a ready hand on the Venus Gospel, just in case.

"I believe...I believe Lady Hojo was wrong," the beast said, sounding troubled. "Perhaps all humans aren't bad..." She appeared to think for a moment, then nodded resolutely. "I shall join your side. If Nanaki is on it, I know it is the right side to be on."

Still feeling suspicious that she would turn traitor this easily, Cid devised a small test. "If you're really on our side, call off the lab rats," he said, referring to the black ones like her.

She threw her head back and gave a long, mournful howl. Across the battlefield, ebony colored Tanduri raised their heads and bounded off, toward the black airship.

Ragged cheers arose from the townspeople, and Shera smiled at the gray beast. "Thank you. Now, what's your name?"

"Rahilah," came the answer. "And you are Cid and Shera Highwind."

Shera nodded. "That's right. Rahilah, would you do one more thing, so we can be sure that you're telling the truth about helping us?"

Rahilah nodded. "What do you require?"

"Come with us and help us help a friend," Shera said.

"Of course," Rahilah replied, giving a small smile. "Anything for friends of Nanaki."

The titanic struggle went on as Cid, Shera, and Rahilah approached, Rahilah loping along in front of them easily. "Are we sure we want to trust her?" Cid asked skeptically.

"This is a test, Cid. If she'll go directly against Amaani, we know we can trust her fairly well. Either way, we'll watch her carefully. I mean, what else can we do? Would you like to be the one to tell Red that we found another of his race, a friend of his, no less, and then we just let her go?" Shera asked, not looking so sure herself.

"You're right," Cid said. He smiled briefly. "As usual."

Shera grinned. "Usual? You mean always."

A moment later, Cid had a thought after looking ahead. "Why isn't Cloud being swamped by soldiers?" he asked.

Shera glanced at him sideways. "You'll see in a minute."

"Hey, how do you know?"

She smiled slightly. "I ran into them."

Cid looked at her with a puzzled frown. "Who-"

They got closer right at that moment, and Cid got his answer. Gunshots were ringing out as black-clad warriors tried to come to their lady's aid. Three people; two men and one woman; were stationed in a loose circle around the two combatants, shooting down anyone who tried to interfere.

Cid blinked as he recognized all three of them. "It's Az and the other two Turks! What the hell is goin' on!?"

Shera shook her head. "Later, Cid. Explanations can wait 'til later."

As they dashed up, Azrael noticed them, and his face sagged in relief. "Thank Typhoon you two are all right! I lost sight of you." Then his face twisted in shock. "Cid, behind you!" He leveled his shotgun at Rahilah.

Cid held up a hand. "No, no! She's a friend, Az."

Az lowered the gun. "Shit. Sorry 'bout that."

"It is forgiven," replied Rahilah, making Azrael stare in shock.

"It talks?!"

"Yes, Az, she talks," corrected Shera.

"What can we do to help, Az?" Cid asked, not wanting to waste any more time.

"Station yourselves between Rude and Elena and kill anyone who tries to interfere with Cloud and Amaani," Azrael replied, finishing reloading his shotgun in time to shoot down one particularly close soldier.

Shera and Rahilah hurried off, but Cid paused for a moment. "Az?"

His friend turned to look at him for a moment. "Yeah?"

"You saved Josh and Kat, didn't ya?"

Azrael nodded briefly. "Yeah."

Blue eyes met brown. "Thank you." The two simple words carried a large amount of emotion.

Az smiled. "No need to thank me. Now go help your wife and...the...uh...lion!" The command was said in a joking tone of voice, so Cid merely smiled back and jogged over to Shera and Rahilah. I owe you more than ever for this, Az.