

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 28: Conversations

Nanaki sighed and flopped down onto his belly, a graceless gesture that he allowed himself only because he was alone and unwatched. A small cloud of dust rose from the rocky ledge at the impact and was carried away by a gentle breeze. He stared with uninterested eyes at the glorious sunset, which colored the ocean horizon with bands of purple, red, and gold. Below him on the beach, his human companions had gathered, probably to discuss what Ineki had revealed to them over a late meal. It would be so easy to leap down and join them. He would be welcomed, no doubt...but for now, he wished for solitude just a fraction more than he longed for companionship and solace.

Angry words, harsh denunciations, bitter arguments...a simple difference of opinion that had split apart two friends, and ultimately, one clan into two. And all over whether their lives should be dedicated - "...have wasted your lives..." - to guarding humans and the knowledge they shared. Nanaki closed his golden eyes as Ineki's voice rang through his head.

"You no doubt are wondering how your father's name is my father's, and how your grandfather's name is mine. A millennium ago, your grandfather Ineki and my father Seto were closer than brothers. Born only days apart, they had grown up together as cubs and drawn closer to each other with every passing year. They were the best of friends as well as leader and co-leader of the Cosmo Clan. At the same time that they inherited leadership of the Clan, the city you know of as Cosmo Canyon had just begun to develop from a rude gathering of tents into a thriving village. Drawn by the peace and serenity of the canyon, many scholars came from afar to gather there in study and contemplation."

"The Cosmo Clan met with and soon befriended the people that gathered there, for they found the humans to be of a scholarly mind, peaceful and intent on learning. As the humans settled the area, the Clan's life began to merge with that of the humans as they shared their intellect and wisdom with the scholars, and were appealed to for protection from the fierce creatures that even then plagued the area. Many of the Clan found places in the homes that were built, living with the humans that they found most to their liking. The Clan and the humans treated one another with respect, but there were those of the Clan who disagreed with the merging of the two peoples."

"You will reduce our Clan to nothing but pampered pets, Ineki! Sleeping away our lives by a fireplace, guarding the master's door, and being rewarded with pats to the head! One day you will awaken from your hearths to find that you have wasted your lives away in slumber, and that the once proud Cosmo Clan ceased to exist the day you set foot into these humans' homes!"

"No, Seto. We have lost nothing of ourselves; we have gained. When have any of our people been ordered out to hunt as if they were mere dogs? When have you seen me creep to Boggaren's door for scraps? Our dignity and pride is intact, and we share freely our knowledge. What slavery is there in helping other children of this Planet?"

"It is the slavery of our minds! It is the slavery of our traditions! You transfer our language to those frail scrolls and adopt the uneducated tongue of these humans. You sleep in their shelters, eat their burnt food, and let them mark you with ornaments in your mane! When was the last night you slept with the stars and wind? When was the last time you ran down your meal and drank the salt blood of the hunt? You are becoming no more than a house cat who speaks, and I will have none of it!"

"Seto, please. Hear me out..."

"I will take my family and those who would keep our identity free of taint and leave this place. Cosmo Canyon is no longer our home..."

"Seto!"

"...and you are no longer my brother!"

"And so Seto took his family and twelve others and left. Not all believed so strongly as Seto, but loyalties within family and friends ran strong, and there were those who followed him simply out of love and respect, hoping that one day the two friends might be reconciled. Humans had scattered civilizations everywhere on the larger continents that the group might have settled in, however, so they swam from island to island, going further and further south, until they found this place. In the past, there was a large, curving chain of islands reaching from the mainland to this island, but one by one, they have all sunken into the sea in the past seven hundred years. By the time I inherited leadership of this Clan at my father's death, the distance between here and the mainland was too far to travel, and so we have remained here, isolated from our kin...of which you are the sole remnant."

"As to my name, and your father's...I am gratified to see that both Ineki and my father retained as much affection and respect for each other as they did, naming their firstborn son after their long lost friend. I would have liked to have met your father, Nanaki, but I am equally pleased to meet his son."

His son...Nanaki, son of Seto. Nanaki, who had held a misguided hate and shame of his father for so long in his heart. Who utterly lacks the richness of heritage and tradition of his people due to being orphaned while yet a cub. Who holds the title of Guardian of Cosmo Canyon by default, being the son of his father and the only one of his kind still living.

But not anymore. His heart set free by the truth, his ancestors' traditions waiting to be learned at his kindred's feet, and no longer the last of his people. As he lazily flicked an ear, Nanaki wondered if everyone would be willing to return to his or her homeland. Certainly his neglected Northern Crater research would not suffer from the addition of twenty or more keen minds such as his own. Araku, who was still in isolation, might prove to be problematic. Would the elders at Cosmo Canyon be able to come up with a compound that might ease the constant torment his mind suffered? And should he turn over the Guardianship to Ineki? Surely Ineki was a more fitting choice than he, who was not even an adult yet. And Tenari...

Nanaki rolled over onto his side, relishing the sun-baked warmth of the rock ledge that seeped through his body. He smiled at himself for thinking so of Tenari. He was not even 60 years old, yet. Far too young to be thinking of mates and the like. Craning his head, he peered over the ledge once more. Most of his friends still lingered below, chatting animatedly, and he toyed with the idea of joining them. As if his thoughts had somehow been transmitted through a sea breeze, Cloud suddenly lifted his head to catch Nanaki's gaze, and with a friendly smile, waved at him. The smile changed to a quirked eyebrow and a slight tilt to the head, and with this questioning expression, the upraised hand turned inwards to ask him to join the conversation. After only a slight pause, Nanaki leapt easily off of the ledge and made his way down the rocky path to join his friends.

A few minutes' walk from the others, Barret glowered out at the horizon, seemingly offended by the pristine beauty and grandeur of the beautiful sunset before him. Reeve trotted over the sand after him, concerned by his friend's increasingly sour mood. He mulled over several possibilities in his mind as he approached the burly man, and finally settled upon one likely cause.

"You're worried about Marlene, aren't you?" Reeve guessed. "You don't need to be; Shera knows how to handle her, and they get along great."

Barret grunted noncommittally and continued to glare out at the inoffensive ocean. After a few moments of tapping his fingers against his chin, Reeve snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "I'm an idiot! I totally forgot that I brought Cait's control mechanisms with me! You can use this to check in with Marlene." Digging into his jacket, he rummaged through several hidden pouches in the liner of his jacket before proudly pulling out two gloves and a pair of sunglasses.

He carefully fitted the sunglasses onto his face, making sure that the audio transmitter fell by his right ear. A slender tube with a microphone attached to the end was pulled down from the left ear-piece and positioned by his mouth. Next, he pulled on the light gray gloves, each covered with a fine web of wires. After tugging the fingers tight, he turned the edges over to reveal tiny switches imbedded into the cuffs. These were flicked on, and finally Reeve began to explain.

"I can see what Cait Sith sees through these special sunglasses, and hear with the transmitter. Those two functions are

constant as long as he's powered on, and don't need to be triggered. After turning on the gloves, I can trigger the microphone by pushing down on the left thumb pad, and whatever I say comes out of Cait's body. To stop speaking through him, I just release pressure."

Reeve then held his right hand out in front of him, fingers straight out and palm facing the ground. "Pushing the switch in the left first finger pad activates his motion mode. I can then use my right hand as a floating control mechanism. I keep my hand flat, like this, and whichever way I tilt my hand is the direction he'll move in, always assuming that he's facing the same way I am. If we're in a battle, he'll attack if I make a fist and defend if I tilt my palm 90 degrees back. If I access his menu system by tucking my thumb into my palm like this, then I can view that system in the sunglasses as an overlay on his field of vision. I scroll around and choose commands with the fingers of my right hand. Once I'm done with the menu, I just straighten my thumb again. There are other controls and higher level functions built in, but those are the basics." Reeve pushed the sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and smiled proudly at Barret, only to find the most disgusted expression on the man's face.

"The basics?!" Barret half-shouted. "All that complicated crap just to move that fur-ball around and you call it the basics?! And how the hell am I supposed to get my hands into those dinky gloves you got on there?" The hulking giant glowered down at Reeve, who gave quick glances at his friend's meaty fingers and his own slender digits.

"Well," Reeve began lamely, "I guess these gloves wouldn't fit you very well. Umm...you could still wear the sunglasses, and then just hold down the speaker button without putting the gloves on, though," he offered hopefully. "Uh...I'll move Cait around and find Marlene first, then hand it over to you so you can talk."

Glaring at Reeve, Barret silently mulled over this suggestion, and finally consented rather ungraciously. Reeve gave one last cautious glance at his friend before triggering the robotic cat's motion controls. Gloved hands twitching and tilting minutely, he carefully manipulated Cait Sith from leagues away.

Far away in Rocket Town, the tiny black cat perched daintily atop the stuffed Mog twitched once, and then suddenly became animated. Glittering green eyes darting around to check on its surroundings and tiny paws pummeling the obese stuffed toy into action, Cait Sith picked up his megaphone and directed the Mog to carry him out of Shera's bedroom.

A while later, Cid strolled by along the beach, contentedly smoking a cigarette. He had taken to roving the shore alone, using these isolated walks in order to indulge in his nicotine habit without offending anyone's nose. Momentarily arrested by the strange sight of Barret clutching a glove in one hand and conversing with thin air while wearing sunglasses two sizes too small, he called out to Reeve, "The hell you doin'?"

Reeve laughed in his quiet way and commented, "It does look strange, doesn't it? He's talking to Marlene through Cait. We just wanted to check in with her, see if she's being nice to Auntie Shera." Cid neared and eavesdropped along with Reeve.

"No, you can't go into outer space," Barret was saying. "Whaddaya mean, 'why?' 'Cause I said so! Huh? Oh, hi Shera. It's me...jus' talkin' to Marlene, here. Hey! Put me down! No, it's me, Barret!"

Shooting a dark look at Reeve - who was snorting into his hand in laughter - over the edge of his sunglasses, Barret continued, "No problem, Shera. Thanks. Yeah, he's here...hmm?...okay. Okay. Hold on, Reeve's gotta do the moving part." Pulling the sunglasses off, he handed them to Reeve and said, "Shera wants the furball to go to the launch pad so she can show Cid somethin' long-distance." Reeve raised curious eyebrows and quickly pulled on the gloves and sunglasses. With quick twitches of the hand, he had Cait Sith follow a very amused and excited Shera to the launch pad, Marlene in tow.

While Reeve manipulated the robot, Barret relayed the last bit of his conversation with Shera to Cid. "So soon?" Cid asked in surprise, "How in the world did Shera manage that? The rocket shouldn't be ready for another three months or so, according to the schedule I left her."

While Cid began to grumble about the probability of quality being sacrificed for time, Reeve suddenly twitched a few fingers, manipulating Cait Sith's vision controls, and then murmured, "Wow..." After a moment, he pulled the sunglasses back down with one finger and said, "It's beautiful, Cid. Shera says that they're hoping to do a test launch in ten days, and

that the real launch is scheduled to happen in exactly 21 days. Here, take a look." Pulling off the sunglasses, he handed them over to Cid.

The pilot's eyes narrowed as he quietly repeated, "21 days..." Reeve gave him a curious look. Catching the silent question, Cid shook his head and commented offhandedly, "That's my birthday." Reeve's eyes widened in surprise, but he wisely refrained from making any sort of comment with regards to the probability that it wasn't coincidence that Shera had pushed up the launch date to coincide with Cid's birth date. "Oh," he replied lamely, earning him a flat look from the pilot. He gave a quiet sigh of relief as Cid pulled on the sunglasses.

It took a moment for Cid's eyes to refocus themselves, and when they did, he found that Cait Sith was lying flat on its back to give the best view of the rocket and its towering supports. The sun was just beginning to set in Rocket Town, bathing the silvery rocket in warm golden-red hues. Unlike the drunkenly leaning, piecemeal Shinra-26, this machine was a sleek silver bullet just waiting to be shot into the heavens. The battered supports covered with mossy growth were also nowhere to be seen. Instead, sturdy metal towers rose from the four corners of the launch pad, each of them perfectly squared, perfectly placed...perfect. There was none of the evidence of a rushed job that he had been grumbling about. Every rivet, every plate, every beam...all of it was placed with the precision and care that he had come to expect from Shera. Nothing that he'd ever left to her was completed with anything less than meticulous precision.

You've really outdone yourself this time, Shera...

"Thank you, Captain," her voice replied in his ear, and he started, realizing that he'd actually spoken the words aloud. He shot a look at Reeve, who still had the gloves on. Releasing the microphone button, he gave an innocent smile that fooled not a single person and said lightly, "Oops." Holding out his hand impatiently, Cid growled, "Gimme that." Reeve complied, and whispered quick instructions on how to trigger the microphone. Snatching the gray glove away, Cid stalked off a few paces and with a last glare over his shoulder, began talking to Shera once more.

"All right, what did you leave out? How'd you get it done so quick?" he asked. Her reply was small and tinny in his ear, but he could hear her just fine. She was crouched over the robot, her face looming large in the sunglasses, but even without the glasses, he would have been able to sense her nervous excitement. It was the way her voice pitched higher sometimes; the slight trembling in her words. Every time he inspected her work, she held in her pose a certain pride and confidence, but at the same time, an undercurrent of tension. She twiddled her fingers in an agitated manner as he concluded, "You left out the communications system, didn't you?"

"I didn't leave anything out, Captain. Everything you specified in your timeline has been completed. We're just ahead of schedule."

"And I suppose that all the rivets will just fall right out when I shut the door, am I right?"

"No, Captain. Everything's been fitted and placed very carefully. This rocket could make ten trips into space and back and not need any repairs. In fact, I've made some modifications to the re-entry sequence and landing gear. I thought that the safety margins were..."

"You thought?" Cid interrupted, "Since when do you get to make changes to my rocket just because you had a thought? The rocket I designed is plenty safe, Shera. You're too cautious."

"I'm not too cautious!" she retorted immediately, and then bit her lip and turned away from the stuffed Mog. With a sigh, she faced him once more but with downcast eyes, and continued quietly, "I'm just making sure you come back in one piece."

She felt ridiculous talking to a stuffed Mog with a cat perched on its head. And even more ludicrous was hearing her Captain's grouchy voice berating her through the megaphone clutched in one silky black paw. After that one unexpected sentence of praise, he had been his usual harsh self...this wasn't going the way she'd hoped. His birthday was less than a month away, and he'd made a vague promise to return from his extended visit to Corel by then. But the phone call a week ago, saying he was going to some far off island with everyone...everyone but her...well, and Marlene...the test launch was

in ten days, and he wouldn't even be here to see the engines fired up. A full month spent double-shifting the crew, working fifteen hour days herself, and now she was stuck here babysitting Marlene and watching his birthday slowly creep closer with no sign of her Captain on the horizon. His voice brought her abruptly back from her musings.

"Yeah, well, don't think I'm going to let you test those engines by yourself. I'll gather everyone up and be back within ten days, so don't you go test-launching nothing 'til I get there!"

Click.

Shera rocked back on her feet, sitting herself down on the grass by the now silent Cait Sith. Hugging her knees to her chest, she smiled softly to herself. Her Captain was coming home...