

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 37: One Last Look

All around the rocket, engineers and mechanics scurried back and forth in an absolute frenzy of activity. Organizing the chaos was one woman, dressed in a khaki one-piece and a white coat that fluttered behind her like a cape as she ran back and forth, shouting out orders as she did so. Immediate compliance met her at every turn, as well as affectionate grumbling and teasing comments on her obsessive traits.

"Hurry and get those tools put away! The Captain will be here any minute now, and we've got to fire those rockets when he does!"

"Okay, Shera! We'll be ready!" replied all who were within earshot. Thumbs were raised in supportive gestures, and the pony-tailed engineer spared a quick smile for her crew.

"Audra, never mind the tubing; I'll get that. Clean up that grease on the forward stabilizer, will you?"

Glossy black hair was flicked away from a pair of twinkling brown eyes, and a petite head nodded quickly. "Sure thing, Shera. One spit shine, coming up." Long limbs quickly carried Shera and the misplaced tubing away, and Audra shook her head and laughed. "Hey Chris, you think Cid will finally show up?" The man beside her nodded confidently. "Oh yeah, he wouldn't miss this for the world." "Hmm," she replied noncommittally, and then with a glance at the rapidly retreating figure striding across the launch area, laughed once more. "Well, he'd better show up, or these engines won't be the only things exploding around here."

The ant-hill flurry of activity continued for another half-hour or so, and finally the Highwind roared to a stop overhead. "He's here!" screamed a trio of mechanics unnecessarily, and Shera muttered unintelligibly under her breath as she spied an untidy sprawl of tools laid out near one of the fuel tanks. As she stripped off her coat and laid it down on the grass, she mentally compiled a list of nasty things to do to the hapless mechanic who had left his belongings in such a haphazard pile on the ground. With her attention concentrated on picking up the wire cutters and pliers and quickly wiping them off, she never noticed the small tangle of damaged wires behind her throwing a microscopic fireworks display into the damp grass.

Jumping the last few rungs of the rope ladder, Cid landed on the grass with a thud and immediately turned to admire his pride and joy once more. It was even more impressive viewed from the ground, despite the crick that formed in his neck. As Cloud and the others made their way down the ladder - Nanaki and his clan had opted to stay in Cosmo Canyon for the time being in order to continue some obscure research project, but had promised to come for the actual launch - Cid began walking over to the tanks where Shera was busily scrabbling in the grass.

The small crowd of visitors made their way quietly across the meadow from the Highwind, all eyes intent on the gleaming rocket and the white-coated crew members milling around the bottom of it. As they neared, shouted orders became audible, and Cid's mouth quirked up in an involuntary smile at the militaristic tone that Shera adopted when he himself wasn't in direct command of any operation.

"...the gauge on this tank! Run the fuel through to the rocket once, I want to make sure everything's all right!" Pointing emphatically to make her point, Shera turned to the tools before her once more, casting about for a specific item. As Cid and his guests watched, a nearby engineer scrambled over a stack of pipes to a distant control panel and began busily flipping switches.

The tank behind Shera bulged outwards suddenly, the metal groaning eerily, and Cid saw her glance over her shoulder at the sound. All seemed frozen for a moment in horrified anticipation, and then Cid exploded into movement, starting the panic. Everyone around him scattered in fear as he ran towards the waiting bomb and the woman kneeling before it, shouting his throat raw in an instant. "Shera! Get out of the w..."

She looked up at him just as the tank burst, and for one awful, eternal moment, Cid saw her backlit by a billowing cloud of

fire. Her expression was that of mild surprise. Trapped in that hellish second, Cid's vision seemed enhanced, for he could see every detail of her with stark clarity. Her one-piece work suit was stained with oil and grease; battle-scars of long days and nights spent working as a slave to his ambition. Dark smudges cut across one cheek where she had brushed back her hair with stained fingers. In the grass, one hand was fisted over a wrench, the fingernails ragged and torn; a small detail of femininity overlooked in her haste to complete the work he had given her. Her white coat lay on the grass next to her, various tools laid out with her usual precision and orderliness. Above a daintily freckled nose, eyebrows quirked curiously over her warm brown eyes, lips parted slightly as if about to ask him what he wanted...or to apologize to him needlessly, as she had done so many times before. A single lock of hair had fallen across her eyes, and Cid wanted nothing more than to be able to reach out and brush it away.

But he was not allowed.

Time started up again, and Shera felt a wall of hot air rush up behind her, whipping her ponytail out of its ties and making her hair and clothing beat furiously against her body. Before she could even turn, a great hand dealt her a stunning blow, sending her flying through the air. All was a confusing series of impressions. Heat, an incredible, searing heat, and then orange-red-black. A deafening whump! followed by a roaring in her ears, an unbearable flash of pain, and then...nothing.

Cid's cry of warning had been cut off by the explosion, and then the blast had caught him up, flinging him to the ground and knocking the breath from his lungs. Stunned, he struggled to draw breath as a raging column of fire rose to the sky, flaming claws raking the air as if seeking purchase. Just as quickly as it had grown, the fireball sank down once more, most of its fuel consumed in that one titanic explosion. The fire flared and wavered as the rocket's crew members all grabbed extinguishers and beat it down before it could ignite any of the other tanks.

All of the crew members except for two.

Marion opened her eyes a crack and peered out from underneath Vincent's body, which had practically crushed her into the ground as he threw himself onto her to shield her from the blast. Fortunately, they had been a few hundred feet from the tank when it had exploded, and so had escaped the worst of the heat and flames. As Vincent rolled away and helped her to her feet, she saw Cloud brushing cinders and debris off of Tifa, and strangely enough, Reeve providing the same service for a badly shaken Yuffie. Cid seemed to be all right as well, for he was slowly getting up, bracing himself on his hands and knees. No, not standing up...crawling. Marion frowned and squinted. Crawling towards...

Vincent staggered backwards as Marion struck him in the chest with her palms, pushing herself away from him. Tracking her as she sprinted, he found her intended destination and broke into a run as well. Two, four, then ten and more eyes turned towards them as they ran past, and then two, four...suddenly all legs were running towards Cid.

And Shera.

She lay on her back, one arm bent unnaturally underneath her body, the other at an equally awkward angle over her chest. Her legs were sprawled out across the grass, now-bare feet immune to the tickling of the emerald blades. One of her shoes was discovered later that year by an adventurous tree-climber, hanging from a nearby branch by one shoelace. The other shoe was never found.

Cid knelt next to her, trembling hands hovering over her face and shoulders, but unable to bring himself to touch her in case she could still feel, unwilling to add to her pain. Ice-blue eyes roved her body, searching for any sign of life, of hope, but found none. Mahogany lashes, rosy cheeks, pale throat, tanned hands...all were scarred in a frightful mass of red flesh and blackened skin. Her khaki suit was now nothing more than a second skin composed of cinder-fibers and ragged strips of cloth. His mouth opened, but nothing would come but a hoarse out-rushing of air. He drew in shuddering gasps and gently ran a hand through her hair. Brittle, singed strands broke off in his fingers and he drew his hands away in horror, clenching them against his chest and leaning back to raise his grief-wracked face to the clear blue sky.

Every soul within earshot turned cold at the keening wail that rose from Cid's lips. Eagles screamed that way when their wings were broken. Wolves made that sound when their mates died. Aeris heard that sound when the Planet wailed. It was the cry of a heart breaking, and Cid was crying it now.

This isn't happening. It can't possibly be happening; not like this. Not Shera. People die; people die every day, but not like this. One minute healthy and whole, the next second broken and burned. She didn't even have a last minute of consciousness to say goodbye in. When you die, you're supposed to have a few moments in which to think over your life, your happiest moments, and all your regrets. And people are supposed to be able to tell you they'll miss you and...and...how much you mean to them; that they love you, they love you so much. Shera...and they're sorry. Oh God, how sorry they are for all the things they've said to you; all the times they forgot to say thank you, and all the times they lashed out at you for no reason. Shera...oh my God, Shera...so sorry, so sorry for everything I've done to you...

Marion reached them first, biting back her own cries, swallowing her tears. Time enough for that later if she could not save Shera. Time enough to grieve, time enough to feel guilt. Now, she was needed. She knelt near her friend's body and began to center her mind, unleashing a rain of healing magic, desperately trying to knit bones, regenerate skin, create fresh blood. As powerful as her magic was, there was little effect. Noticing everyone gathering near to touch and exclaim, she whipped her head around and snapped, "Stay back!" Involuntary steps back were taken immediately at her commanding tone. Apologies could wait until later, too. She focused on Shera once more, and sighed in relief as an inner vision took over and she found Shera's lifestream still swirling feebly within her body. But the relief turned to horror as she saw the pale green mist begin to seep into the ground, leaking slowly away from its damaged home. No wonder her magic failed...you couldn't heal the dead. Even an enhanced Life spell would be useless at this moment; the damage was too great, the thick coil of escaped lifestream too large to trap.

Cloud flinched at Marion's cry, "No!" Was Shera dead? Tifa trembled against him at the sight of their friend's charred features, too shocked to cry. All around, friends, neighbors, and co-workers gathered around, wanting to offer help, but incapable of anything more than exclamations of horror and denial.

Marion turned away from Shera to grab Cid by the shoulders and shout in his face, "Fly me to Nibel...no, not enough...Mideel! She's still alive, I have to try to save her, but I can't do it here! Cid!" His eyes focused on her slowly, grief numbing his heart to anything other than the fact that Shera lay before him, for all intents and purposes - dead. He looked from Marion to Shera, and then glanced across the field to the Highwind and nodded slowly. Hoping that he had heard and understood, Marion turned to her husband.

"Vincent, take Shera to the ship." He nodded, not needing an explanation, and scooped up his awkward burden, taking long strides toward the Highwind. Marion ran after him, glancing back only to make sure that Cid was following.

They raced across the field, followed by a crowd of people - a mass race against Death. Shera cradled gently in his arms, Vincent half-climbed, half-floated up to the deck and laid her gently onto the wooden floor. Marion allowed her friends and the Highwind's crew aboard, and then pulled up the rope ladder, leaving a frustrated and frantic crowd of townspeople below.

"Get to Mideel!" she barked at the pilots and crew. Without waiting for confirming orders from Cid, everyone raced to their posts, desperate to save their most cherished engineer and friend. Cid had repositioned himself at Shera's side, still silent. Vincent gazed at him in silent wonder and remembered pain. Had he been this broken, this destroyed when Lucrecia had died? No, he admitted. He had loved her, certainly, but time and circumstance had widened the already vast gulf between them. Lucrecia had not been part and particle of his heart and soul as Marion now was, as Cid had - too late? - discovered Shera was to him. Vincent laid a comforting hand on the pilot's shoulder, and was not surprised that the gesture was ignored. Vincent felt a stab of pain for his friend, and fervently hoped that the woman now running towards them would be able to pull off whatever miracle she was attempting.

She knelt on the opposite side of their fallen friend as the ship shuddered and tilted, lifting up into the air and pointing south. The air rushed past them as the Highwind cut through the air, engines screaming below decks. Slender white hands gathered Shera up tenderly as Marion cradled her like a child in her arms. The lifestream within was already half gone, leaving Shera cold and breathless, but not quite dead. Not quite. Marion closed her eyes and drew a deep breath into her own lungs, unsure if she could accomplish what she intended to do, not even knowing if the Planet would allow it, but unable to give up her friend.

Cid sat almost in a catatonic state, unable to speak in his grief and shock. Intense blue eyes were locked onto Shera's seared lids, begging her silently to live. Next to him, Vincent watched with an increasingly concerned expression as Marion seemed to age and fade before his very eyes. Her skin, already delicate, seemed somehow to bruise and pale at the same

time, tightening slightly across her cheekbones. The quiet energy and spirit that always pervaded her being dimmed as candlelight does before the wick gutters out. There were gasps from Cloud and the others, who had crept close to watch, as streaks of silver crawled through Marion's formerly jet-black hair.

"What in the world is she doing?" asked Tifa, "she looks like she's...dying." Vincent spoke to Yuffie instead of replying. "Yuffie, try using the Restore on both of them. I think she's using her own life to sustain Shera until we can get to Mideel." A bright green orb was quickly dug up and used. Some color came back into Marion's cheeks, but quickly faded once more. A quick shuffling, and then everyone who had one brought out their healing materia, from Restore to Full Cure to Phoenix. Using them in quick succession, with ethers distributed by those who were not working any spells, they were able to bring Marion back to a state resembling normal, although there was no change in Shera.

Except that she was breathing once more. Between glowing spells, everyone exclaimed softly as they noticed Shera breathing in time with Marion's slow, careful breaths. Blood bubbled up from her lips and from jagged cracks in her skin, but she was certainly more alive than she had been a few moments ago. All eyes were transfixed by the chilling sight of one woman trading half her life away to save a friend. As the minutes ticked away, Marion's tunic became soaked with Shera's blood and her own skin became paler in contrast. The healing spells could no longer hold back completely the havoc she was wreaking on her own body, and her skin shaded to a pale, deathly gray, her hair almost completely silvered. Breath followed shallow breath as emerald and ruby spells transformed the air around them while in the background, engineers and pilots wrung every last ounce of speed they could out of the Highwind. The spells and hopes were sustained for the next hour as Marion breathed for Shera, sharing her own spirit energy and fighting to hold onto the last shreds of Shera's as it struggled to slip away.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she slowly lost ground in the battle. She was forced to give up more and more of her own spirit simply to keep Shera breathing. If this went on for more than another five minutes or so, both of them would die. Forcing her eyes open with great effort, she managed to get a few words out while maintaining her mental focus. "How...long...Mideel?" she gasped. Turning, Vincent could see the shining lake on the horizon. "Five minutes to get there. Three more to land, and two or three to get you two to the lake." Marion's wan features twitched in some strange kind of pain, but she clenched her eyes shut before Vincent could ask her anything.

Hitching Shera higher in her arms, Marion began to slowly scrape her way across the deck. Arms quickly surrounded her and lifted her into the air as Vincent carried her and her burden to the rail where the ladder was, assuming that she wanted to get as ready as possible for the descent. He stood her gently on her feet and turned to see Cid walking woodenly towards them. Vincent's heart pounded in his chest, fear for Marion's safety warring with the need to save Shera. He had guessed what she was doing to keep Shera alive, but what did she intend to do once at Mideel? Pump Shera full of new lifestream? Was it even possible? He had choked several times on the urge to stop Marion's efforts, but Cid's presence killed the words on his lips. How could he ask Marion to let Shera die when confronted with that horrible expression?

"We're here!" shouted the lead pilot, stopping the ship above the glittering lake, searching frantically for the closest possible landing spot. As the Highwind hovered, Marion's vision began to dim. Forced into a decision, she disconnected her link to Shera's spirit. As the bond was abruptly severed, Marion staggered back against the railing as if she had been struck. Cid and Vincent both snapped their heads up at Marion's cry, just in time to see her arch backwards and topple over the edge of the ship.

They raced to the rail, only to see a tiny speck disappear into the glowing waters below. Cid tried to throw himself in after them, but was forcibly restrained by Vincent. Cloud and Barret came to his assistance, and the struggling pilot was finally subdued as the ship dipped down to land.