

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 38: A Resurrection of Dreams

By the time the Highwind had landed and the party disembarked, the entire population of Mideel had once more gathered around the town-side rim of the lake to speculate on Marion's abrupt arrival. And once again, they avoided those who chased after her.

"That was the same girl that jumped in last time, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, the crazy chick. I hear she glows like a firefly in the dark. And her hair's naturally silver, she only had it dyed last time as a disguise."

"She's Sephiroth's sister!"

"You're an idiot. She's just an ex-Soldier, only now she's an outlaw."

"What did she have in her arms? Looked like a body."

"Think she murdered someone?"

She's a demon, she's a criminal, she's just a girl. These people are here to capture her. She's escaping from justice, from a lab, from an unwanted marriage. She jumped in so she could die. She was holding a body, her baby, her fiancé.

Cid and Vincent waited along the far shore with the rest of the party and crew, one man experiencing déjà vu, and the other a revelation.

Vincent stood silent and tall, a black shadow lit by the glowing lake, just as he had...how long ago? It seemed like ages. The same man, and the same shore, but he no longer buried himself in the headband and cape, nor did he still hold in his chest a bleak, despairing heart. The same girl who had caused and was again causing such worry and care on this shore had also awakened love within him, freeing him from his self-destructive hate and guilt.

But where is she? What is she doing? If I dove in, could I find her? No, could Aeris find her for me? Vincent sighed, shaking his head. Contacting Aeris had been impossible without Marion's aid. Why was that, he wondered, and then shook his head. Now was hardly the time for pondering such questions. They had no options but to wait. At least this time, he knew that she would come back, and to him. But would she return triumphant, or alone? He glanced over at the man standing next to him.

Cid stood perfectly still, gazing out across the lake. Vincent thought that Cid himself seemed in some sort of death-state. After that one piercing cry over Shera's body, Cid had not spoken a single word, made a single noise. His expression was blank, almost slack, as if the mind and spirit within were dead. Not even a single tear had been shed in any outward sign of his inner pain. But if one looked into his eyes, it was all too apparent that the heart within still lived, and lived in agony. Cid had put his life on hold, unwilling to live again until Shera was returned to him. Vincent fervently hoped that Marion would be successful in her miracle, for if not, he predicted that he would lose two friends this day.

Cid felt amazingly calm now, gazing at the glowing green waters. Or perhaps deadened was a better word. The searing pain in his heart was noticeable only as a far off, dull ache, as if he no longer lived in his own body. His mind, too, functioned in a detached manner, noting circumstances in a clinical matter, but not doing any thinking. Time had no meaning; he would wait until Marion returned with Shera, whether it took only one more minute, or one full century. Food, rest, shelter - none of that mattered. He was going to wait for her. He felt no curiosity about what Marion was trying to do; only waiting for the result.

Fortunately, it only took twenty-seven minutes.

Déjà vu swept over Vincent again as the familiar, well-loved face broke the surface of the lake. The spell was broken, however, by the fact that Marion's hair was still a glistening silver, not to mention the fact that she was floundering under the weight of Shera's body. As he waded into the water to help, his wife's head kept bobbing up and then sinking below the surface as she struggled to keep the brunette head above the lapping waves. Finally, she seemed to give up and simply stayed underwater, slowly towing her friend towards shore.

As everyone shouted and pointed, Vincent swam out and gathered Shera into his arms, treading water as Marion popped up once more and coughed. A quick glance revealed healthy, whole skin peeping out between the ragged shreds of her clothing, but her hair was still a singed ruin, and she seemed lifeless still. Marion seemed tired but happy, however, so he tucked their friend close to his chest and began paddling back towards the waiting crowd.

Everyone had gathered close around Cid, but none had stepped any further, respecting his right to be the first to see, to know. The pilot stood in the exact same spot as he had for the last half-hour, still as stone. His eyes were locked onto the form Vincent carried out of the shallows, and his entire being yearned towards her, but somehow, he found that he could not move a single muscle.

She's so still...why isn't she moving? Is she breathing? Her body's all healed up, but her hair...her hair. It's still burnt. Shera...breathe, move, say something...please, Shera...

He watched silently as Marion instructed Vincent to place Shera over his knee and press on her back. An entire river of glowing liquid seemed to issue forth from her lungs. After a few moments, her limp body was turned over and as Vincent propped her up into sitting position, Marion tilted her head back and blew a few experimental breaths into Shera's mouth. One...two...nothing, then a third.

Shera coughed.

The small crowd by the shore exploded into cheers. Tifa burst into tears as Cloud tried valiantly to hug her to death. Reeve gave an uncharacteristically loud shout while Yuffie - just as uncharacteristically - stood quietly beaming with tears standing in her eyes. Blankets and clothing hastily borrowed from Mideel residents were pressed into waiting hands, for Marion's outfit was still soaked with blood, and Shera's suit hung in charred shreds. Marion carefully tugged a new shirt over her resurrected friend, pulling away the remains of her ruined work clothes from underneath. Under cover of a blanket Vincent politely held up, loose cotton slacks were also added to the ensemble. And Cid took a small step forward.

I'm so tired. Where am I? What's all that noise; it sounds like a party. Where am I? What happened...the tank...the rocket!

Shera's eyes struggled open to find Marion - a silver-haired Marion no less - peering into her face. "Wha...?" she whispered weakly. Marion only smiled and turned to hug Vincent, who almost lost his hold on Shera at the energetic embrace. Shera noted with some alarm that not only had Marion's hair changed color, she seemed to be bleeding to death from the look of her clothes, but neither Marion nor Vincent seemed at all concerned. Speaking of clothes, why was she herself so oddly dressed? Where was her work-suit? Confused and disoriented, Shera shook her head to clear it and then looked around for someone else to question, as Marion and Vincent seemed...preoccupied. Her eyes landed on a familiar pair of brown boots, and winced as an equally familiar pair of knees clad in baggy blue pants landed with a violent thud onto the sand in front of her. Sand? Where the hell was she? Propping herself into a more upright position and scanning around her, she found to her amazement and additional confusion that they were on the shores of Mideel lake, and that most everyone seemed to be absolutely wild with joy about...something. Did she dream the explosion? She'd been right in front of the tank when it blew, but she wasn't injured at all. What in the world?

"Captain, what's happen..." her question faded away into amazement as she looked up. He was almost unrecognizable with the raw emotion in his face. His gruff outer shell had fallen completely away to reveal his inmost heart, hidden even from himself until this fateful morning. Shera almost recoiled from the naked pain and remorse that scarred his features, the strange pleading that shone from his eyes. She shook her head in confusion, not understanding anything but the unease that rose in her heart at Cid's expression. She felt Vincent pull away and turned to watch him and Marion walk towards the crowd gathered a short distance away. No help there, she thought, as she turned back to Cid.

"Captain?" she asked hesitantly, "what happened; what's wrong?" To her eternal amazement, tears filled his eyes and began to stream down his cheeks. My God, what could have gone wrong to make him cry? The explosion, the tank...Oh God, was the rocket destroyed? Was it something I did that made the rocket explode? Heart sinking, she asked in a trembling voice, "The rocket...is it...did I do something wrong?"

Her fearful question wrung a strangled, heart-breaking cry from Cid's throat.

Look at her...I get near her and she immediately thinks I'm going to cuss her out for something she did wrong. Well, why wouldn't she? All I've ever given her were harsh words in return for her hard work and sacrifices. Sacrifices...this is the second time now that she's almost died, and for what? My dreams, my goals. She put her own happiness and dreams, even her very life, second to my ambitions. She truly believes that piece of junk is worth her life. No, not the rocket...me. Look at her...even now, waking up in Mideel with everyone going crazy around her, all she can think of is if the rocket's all right. For me. Not because she cares about the rocket, but because...

Oh, Shera...

"Shera," he whispered brokenly, cradling her face in trembling hands. Clear brown eyes searched his tortured expression wonderingly. She decided to make another attempt at enlightenment. "Captain? What's wrong? Why are you crying?" His mouth opened and then closed once more, his mind unable to express the whirlwind of ideas and emotions within. He bent towards her, forehead touching hers, and struggled to assemble a simple sentence, but failed to speak anything beyond the two simple syllables that made up her name.

I'm crying because I almost lost you. I'm crying because you had to practically die twice in order for me to finally admit to myself how much I love you. I'm crying because I can't believe and won't dare to hope that you love me back. And as for what's wrong...that's everything I've done to hurt you so far. All the times I took my anger out on you, all the times I didn't acknowledge all your hard work, all the times I pushed you away. How do I make up for all that? If I knew how, I'd dedicate the rest of my life to it...

A vague thought concerning 'the rest of his life' began to form, but it was such an alien idea that he wasn't even able to wrap words around it. He shook his head in defeat and gathered Shera close, whispering her name into her hair and rocking her in his arms as he continued to weep softly.

Shera's mind went completely blank with shock. Forget the fact that they were halfway across the world from where they should be. Everyone's celebrating something, maybe Marion's amazing hair color, fine. There was an explosion ten feet from her and she doesn't have any burns - whatever. What power of amazement did anything hold compared to the fact that Cid was holding her ever so gently and crying as if he was a child? Awkwardly, she wrapped a careful arm around his back, and with her other hand, stroked his hair soothingly. Cid's tears were all the more surprising and moving because of his usual gruffness, and Shera found her own eyes filling in response. She managed to whisper, "Captain?" once more, and then found herself choking up. Unable now to question or comfort, she gave up her curiosity and held him tight, overwhelmed by the heart laid open before her.

Vincent looked over his shoulder for a moment, letting his eyes rest on the couple huddled near the shore. Marion had not only saved Shera, but also returned Cid to the land of the living, and perhaps accomplished a miracle just as awesome as the gift of life. A gift of the heart. Turning back to the milling crowd of celebrants gathered around Marion, he tapped his wife on the shoulder and asked the question of the day. "How did you do that?" The press of people around them immediately silenced in anticipation of the answer.

Marion smiled up at him, still holding the borrowed clothes in one arm, not having been given any opportunity yet to change. Above her bloodstained tunic and pale cheeks, her green eyes glittered tired but brilliant. "Remember when we had that first meal with Ineki and the others? I told you that I could call lifestream, like Aeris can, but with more control and depth. Shera's lifestream was leaking away, because her body was too damaged to hold her spirit. I can't heal a dead person, but I also couldn't hold her spirit back and heal her at the same time. My body only has limited resources, so I had to take her to where there was enough energy for me to do both at the same time without killing myself." There was a

small shudder at the remembered battle, and then a perplexed frown. "For some reason, I couldn't restore her hair, though. I think because hair isn't alive, it's just the roots. She'll just have to wait for it to grow out again."

Vincent ran a hand through her silvered locks. "You, too, it looks like." Marion frown smoothed out slightly to an expression of regret. "I don't know if my hair will grow back black. Shera's hair was burnt, but I was able to regenerate all her cells so that her hair will come back as it was, but I just aged. I was able to regain most of the life I lost on the ship, but there's a good chance I'll have this silver hair for the rest of my life." Marion turned her head to glance at Cid and Shera, her frown turning into a gentle smile. "It was worth it, though. Don't you think?" she asked Vincent. He bent to press a kiss into the shining hair, murmuring softly, "It's beautiful."

Before her, Cloud was shaking his head and smiling. "It's a good thing your hair didn't look like that when Vincent first found you. I'd have had a much harder time getting over the resemblance."

At that comment, Tifa looked over their friend once more, noting details. Slender, athletic form and perfect features; mako eyes and long, silver hair; un-challenged abilities with both materia and weapons; all of these were characteristics that had been shared by Sephiroth. But the differences? Marion was undeniably a woman, and quite sane, thank you very much. The perfect, almost ethereal features were gentle and calming, where Sephiroth's expression has been that of a chilling madness. Her eyes and heart were full of love and compassion, loyalty and hope. She lived in harmony with the world around her; people and animals alike were drawn to her and immediately welcomed into her heart. And where Sephiroth's blade had ended Aeris' life, Marion had nearly sacrificed her own existence to save Shera's. Where Sephiroth had been a destroyer, Marion brought life.

Letting out a happy sigh, Tifa shook her head at her husband and said, "There's absolutely no resemblance at all." Raising an eyebrow, Cloud tossed a puzzled look at the brunette by his side and then gazed thoughtfully at Marion. After a moment of contemplation, he apparently reached the same conclusions as Tifa had, for he suddenly laughed and recanted his earlier statement.

"You're right. She's nothing at all like Sephiroth." Still laughing, he suddenly pulled Marion towards him for a hearty hug. Marion let out a happy squeal as Tifa, Vincent, and then everyone gathered around her for a group hug.