

**An Affair of the Heart and Soul**  
**By Meriko**

**Chapter 41: Letting Go of Her Past**

She stared with dull eyes at the towering metal supports and the gleaming rocket they held upright. No more moss-covered, rusting beams or drunkenly tilting ship. The crew had grumbled, but she had held them to the schedule, and a good four months before the engine test was scheduled to occur, the supports had been repaired and cleaned from top to bottom. This rocket launch had not been a grudging effort for Shinra; this one was for Cid, and it had to be perfect. Her eyes watered, and she shut her eyes tight for a moment.

Shouldn't look at the sunlight glinting off the metal...it could damage my eyes, and then who'd read the instrument panels and make sure everything was running right?

Never mind that the morning light was weak and watery, and that looking into sunlight usually didn't cause a strange, yearning pain in one's heart. She opened her lids once more and cast around her at the empty launch pad. The silence of the place wrenched at her heart. It was like a playground after an earthquake, a church after a fire; too silent, too still, and with none of the people that gave the place life.

There's that tree we cut down because it blocked the view from the house. All these tools lying around...I'll have to scold the guys again. One lecture a month, and then they're usually pretty good about cleaning up after themselves.

Shera bent her knees and gathered up the scattered implements, relishing the feel of the cool metal in her hands, the brisk breeze that always swept in from the coast, the smell of oil and sweat and sun-baked metal. This was what she knew, what she loved. This was her life.

Good, all the tools are put away where they belong. I wonder where the lock for this tool chest is...oh, there, in the grass. Whirl the dial to make sure it doesn't pop open accidentally. The combination...Cid's birth date. Not too far away now. The universe all wrapped up in a shiny rocket...what a birthday present that would have been...

She walked out of the sunlight and into the misty shadow of the rocket, laying her forehead against the cool metal. Two weeks of resting and recuperating had given her the urge for activity, but at the same time rendered her weak and easily fatigued.

So tired...so sick and tired.

Tired because she had been inactive for two weeks, and then had exploded into action this morning. Even this short walk to the launch pad while Cid's back had been turned caused her knees to tremble and her breath to catch in her throat.

And sick. Sick because of the constant uncertainty and fear. The fear that gnawed mercilessly at her heart, causing an incessant nausea. Her heartbeat raced and skittered at the slightest provocation, and the oily tide of fear would rise up into an irresistible panic every time her mind brushed against the future. Nothing was the same. Everything that she knew, loved, and depended upon had changed in the brief half-hour during which Marion had renewed her life.

After the first flush of celebration at her return to the land of the living, the crew had slowly become distant, eyeing her warily from the corner of their eyes, and only making polite small talk when approached. They and the townspeople seemed to regard her as someone special; someone set apart. Not someone to be buddies with, or to chat with about the latest news. Did they think that she no longer ate and slept and breathed like everyone else? Did being resurrected mean you weren't completely human anymore?

And the Captain. The Captain, not her Captain, as she usually phrased it in her mind. Her Captain would have booted her out of her sickbed the very morning after Mideel - verbally, of course; he'd never so much as laid a hand on her - and probably raged at the delays her death had caused all the way to the launch pad. There probably would have been a whole new set of insults, such as "Looks like Marion didn't manage to regenerate any speed in your lazy body," or perhaps simply,

"You sure you're not still dead? 'Cause a freakin' corpse could have had that filter fixed by now!"

He would have shouted at her and insulted her, run her ragged all day and then expected the usual home-cooked meal when they went home, but he never hit her, never insulted the actual results she produced. She was always at the top of the list for important repairs, always the one to be put in charge when he was away. He trusted her with all the aspects of daily life, of living together under the one roof. He cleaned his plate every meal, never smoked in her room, and always met her gaze straight on. Her Captain.

But who was the man with the tortured blue eyes? Who had held her so tenderly in Mideel, had burned his fingers trying to cook meals for her, had sat by her bed and stroked her hair when he thought she had been asleep? She had glimpsed her Captain out of the window shouting orders to the crew, but the man who walked into the house, the man who appeared when they were alone...he was a stranger.

A tear escaped from her closed lids and trickled down one cheek, running up against the rocket and then continuing down the cold metal. Shera sniffed and pulled her face away, automatically reaching for a rag to wipe away the moisture with. But of course, her work suit and coat had been burned up. The cotton shirt and slacks she now wore had no deep pockets for tools, no absorbent rags hanging from the belt. She stood for a moment with her hands suspended by her side, not knowing what to do with them. Pushed off balance by the strange confusion, she nervously ran a hand through her hair. Her shorn hair. Somehow, the simple fact that even she was no longer the same broke her down completely.

She crumpled in the sheltering shade and wept. The breeze ruffled her short curls, the grass received her bitter tears, and the rocket stood over her silently as she let the pain and panic and pressure all rise up unchecked to claim her. She gave in to the heartbreak and fear, crying as simply and wholeheartedly as a child, letting the tears wash away all the confusion and unease that had collected in her soul. After what seemed like hours, her tears abated and her breathing calmed, interrupted only occasionally by hitching sobs. She lay in the grass, watching the green blades sway in front of her eyes, and tracked a cloud's slow progress across the afternoon sky, feeling completely drained and oddly at peace. Closing her eyes and curling up on her side, she let out a tired sigh and fell asleep in the rocket's shadow.