

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 42: And Embracing Her Future

She opened her eyes to find that the sun had tracked its way down the sky during her nap, and now nestled itself comfortably down on the horizon, bathing her surroundings in a soft, warm red-gold patina. She dreamily watched the soft chocolate shadows and glowing golden highlights play over her hands, which were curled in the grass before her face. Beautiful...there were still beautiful things in life. The sun still rose and set every day; not everything had changed. She sighed, closing her eyes once more, and rolled over on to her back.

"'Bout time you woke up," said a familiar gruff voice.

Shera bolted upright, sending a spike of pain through her head at the sudden change in altitude. Clutching her temples, she squinted through bleary eyes to find Cid standing in the grass not two feet from her. Boots planted firmly in the grass and a cigarette clenched in his teeth, he stood staring up at the rocket and its supports as they gleamed in the sunset. He shot a quick glance her way, and then resumed his silent inspection of the rocket.

Rubbing the last grains of sleep from her eyes, Shera shifted in the grass so that she faced slightly away from him. It had been late morning when she had fallen asleep, and it was at least dinner time now. How long had he been standing there? A discrete inspection of the patch of grass he was standing on revealed a thick blanket of cigarette butts, as well as a flattened patch of grass where he had apparently been sitting for some time...and ripping up grass by the roots, it also seemed. Darting glances revealed nothing in his expression. Was he waiting for an apology? Fat chance, Captain. Was he going to yell at her? Well, she could yell back now. Apparently Death gave you a real impatience with the trivial things that Life could overlook with ease.

Tense with anticipation, Shera nearly jumped out of her skin when Cid suddenly spoke. "I won't apologize for what I said this morning, and I don't expect you to apologize for trying to kill me, either. With everything that's happened between us, words really don't mean jack anymore, do they?" Shera remained silent and still, nervously beheading grass blades with one hand. After a slight pause, Cid continued, "But I still need to talk to you, 'cause words are all I've got to give you right now. I can't take back all the things I've said to you, and I can't undo the changes that've happened in me...or you, for that matter." He shook his head in disbelief and muttered, "if I never get reamed out by you again, it'll be too soon. You took ten years outta me this morning."

An inelegant snort greeted this statement. "Yeah, well you've provided me with a few shockers, too." She lifted her head slowly, and brown eyes cautiously met blue.

"We're not the same people we were a month ago," he continued, "but I'm still Cid, and you're still...you."

In the midst of her intent listening, Shera noticed that he had taken her at her word this morning, and avoided saying her name...as well as a certain other topic. She found the gesture ridiculously touching, and fought to keep her expression carefully neutral.

"I still want to fly this hunk of junk into outer space, and I still need your help to do it. And as far as the house goes, you'll still live there, and if you don't cook, we'll both starve, but..." Cid trailed off and bought some time for his thoughts to marshal themselves by stubbing out one cigarette and carefully lighting another. "...but I want some things to change." One eyebrow quirked over a brown iris, clearly asking for elaboration.

Cid continued, trying to pick his words carefully, wanting her to understand clearly what he felt. "It's not enough anymore that you know you're important to me. I need you to know that I know you're important to me, too." He turned on one heel to face her fully. "But don't think I won't get on you if I catch you slacking off, hear?" Shera smiled a lopsided smile and hmph'd softly. Cid grinned in reply and then continued with a quiet smile on his face, rambling casually now as if this wasn't one of the most important conversations of his life.

"The tank needs to be replaced, of course. Get a small crew together for special safety inspections on a weekly basis...and the rocket itself...there'll need to be some renovations before we launch. I want to add another seat in the cockpit for my copilot." He carefully ignored the blank stare Shera sent him and continued on. "We'll have to rip out the existing chair to make room, and probably remodel the control panel a bit, too. That autopilot system you put in for Heidegger will be pretty handy, so we'll keep that..."

"Wait," Shera interrupted, "back up." Cid cocked an eyebrow at her innocently. "What?"

She frowned at him, clearly irritated at his feigned ignorance, but unable to contain her curiosity long enough to pick a fight about it. "Copilot?" she asked incredulously, "you're taking someone with you?"

Cid pinched the cigarette out of his mouth and threw it to the ground where it smoldered for a moment and then went out under his boot. Keeping his eyes on the butt now ground into the dirt, he nodded in reply. He heard a soft puff of breath - perhaps a sorrowful sigh, perhaps a hopeful gasp - and then, ever so faintly, "Who?"

Trying to keep the hope and fear out of his own voice and expression, he schooled his features into one of mild irritation and turned to her once more. The Captain wouldn't have dreamed of letting anyone in on his selfish dream. The broken man who wept by the shores of Mideel would have gotten down on his knees to beg her to share in this adventure. And this Cid Highwind? "I'm taking you, dummy."

Shera's chin fell sharply and would have bounced off her chest and hit the dirt had it not been securely attached to her face. She snapped it shut and flushed at the amused expression that smiled down at her. He was taking her. Her. Wait, dummy? Prior to the accident, the meek engineer would have swallowed the "dummy" and wept in thankfulness for the honor of being his copilot. This morning, she most likely would have thrown the offer back in his face and tried to rip his lips off. And now?

Tears standing in her eyes, she launched herself off of the ground and flew upwards into a pair of very startled arms. Cid involuntarily jerked away for a moment, in the back of his mind still wary of a surprise attack. Finding himself with a sweet and trembling armful, however, he relaxed and wrapped his arms around her. Rubbing his cheek into her soft curls and reveling in the sensation, he asked quietly, "Did you mean it this morning when you told me never to say a certain thing to you ever again?"

She laughed and hiccuped in his arms and he felt her shake her head in the negative. "No," she murmured into his jacket, "I guess not, but I don't think I'm stable enough to hear it again for at least a few days. You can say my name, though."

He chuckled into her hair and replied, "Thanks...Shera." The soft syllables of her name fell quietly from his lips, and Shera found her eyes brimming over. It sounded so natural and right now. What had been so wrong between them all these years?

Cid found himself wondering much the same thing. He had found it a struggle to refrain from calling her by name, and now fought against the ridiculous urge to simply whisper her name to her over and over again. He gave in slightly and said her name softly once more, and then continued, "and I'll make sure not to even think about mentioning 'it' for at least a week. Wouldn't want to set off another transformation or anything."

"I was pretty awful, wasn't I?"

"You would have scared Vincent's Chaos beast away." Shera laughed once more, her giggles and snorts muffled in the fabric of his jacket. She trailed off into a long, quavering sigh.

"Well, at least I didn't turn purple."

"Mmm...all I need. A grape-flavored maniac running around Rocket Town firing teapots at everyone."

The inane chitchat continued on this way for an hour or so as twilight deepened around them, with Cid and Shera carefully dancing around each other conversationally, arms holding each other fast.