

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

**Chapter 45: The Long Way Around, And A Shortcut**

Cid glanced around, his arms full of charts and sky maps. His gaze lighted upon one slender figure, a short ways off. "Hey you!" he yelled, "Engineer with the black hair!" A petite head glanced his way, and the girl came trotting over immediately through the grass, still wet from the morning's dew.

"Her name's Audra," whispered Shera in his ear. "I know that," he growled back. Dumping his load of papers into the engineer's hastily upraised arms, Cid said, "Debra, get these star charts rolled up and organized according to proximity to the sun." Audra nodded, and with a wry smile began to walk away, carefully balancing the chaotic jumble in her arms.

"Audra!" Shera hissed.

"Yeah, Audrey...thanks," Cid called after the departing figure. Shera rolled her eyes and then leveled an exasperated look at him, all the more effective because she was of an equal height. "Cid, these people work their fingers to the bones for you without a single complaint...the least you could do is remember their names."

"Yeah, well at least I didn't just call her 'yo dummy' or anything," grumbled the Captain, much like a surly teenager rebuked by his mother. He began pondering the wisdom of reminding Shera that she'd promised those red cats of Nanaki's a tour of the rocket when her next comment brought him up short.

"You mean like the names you used to call me?" asked Shera pointedly, receiving a wince in reply.

A pained expression on his face, Cid ran one hand over his face and then turned to face her fully. "Look, I promised not to cuss you out anymore, right? Why d'ya have to keep bringing it up? Geez, Shera, let it go." To his surprise, she laughed softly and said, "Because, Cid, I like to see that guilty look on your face. It proves that you really do feel sorry for it all."

Shaggy blonde eyebrows pulled down over his blue eyes. "What, you mean you still don't believe me? You hafta tease some proof out of me?"

A small smile appeared, lopsided and somehow tinged with more sorrow than joy, and Cid suddenly had the impulse to pull her to him for a bruising kiss...except that the entire crew would be watching, and he still wasn't sure about how she'd react to the overture. He certainly didn't want to risk a black eye - or a worse injury - this close to the launch. Broken jaws didn't heal overnight, that was for sure, and tomorrow was the big day. His musings were interrupted by Shera's next words.

"You care about me...I'm pretty secure about that," she said, "and I know you're sorry for, well, everything. But you don't say anything about it anymore. After that morning at the launch pad, it was like you'd gotten the words out, and that was it - you didn't need to say it ever again. I guess I tease you for reassurance."

Barely keeping up with her thoughts, Cid echoed, "Reassurance?" What did she want? Flowers and cards everyday? He wasn't the mushy type, and she should know that better than anyone.

"Reassurance that you still love me...that it wasn't a lie, or just a feeling brought on by excitement and strain. Reassurance that you meant it for every day, not just when you thought I might have died."

And here again was the Shera of old. Still crouched behind the newly assertive, outspoken, direct Shera was a trembling engineer, always seeking his approval, his favor...and now his love. Seeking, finding, but not sure.

So what did she want from him? Not flowers and cards, then...nothing so trite. Proof. Something to convince her that he loved her. Not just the years awaiting them in which he could build up some kind of track record in her heart, but something more concrete...tangible...something for her to hold on to every day as a visible reminder of his heart's promise.

Cid sighed quietly, making her look up at him. Big brown eyes; windows wide open at the moment to let him in to her secret heart. Vulnerability and wonder, courage to face tomorrow, with hope and fear intermingled. He'd have to think this one over...but in the meantime...

He stepped forward and wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her close. Keeping a careful eye on her expression - on the lookout for warning signals of impending death or dismemberment - he tilted his head and kissed her lightly on the lips. Surprise, wonder...no anger, that was good. Ignoring the piercing whistles and cheers that immediately danced across the afternoon air, Cid kept his eyes and attention trained on the face before him and whispered, "I do love you. Any time you start thinking I don't love you anymore, you don't need to tease a reaction outta me. You just ask."

Shera nodded her head in short, jerky movements and said faintly, "'kay." He nodded in satisfaction and, unwrapping his arm from around her, stepped away and began rounding up the cat-callers for a blistering lecture on minding your own business.