

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 46: Launches, Love, and Leftovers

"Third time's a charm," Cid muttered under his breath as he strapped himself into the captain's chair. Shera popped her head over the back of his chair and hmm'd inquisitively. "Well," Cid explained, "the first time I tried launching a rocket, you almost got yourself killed in the process. The second time, you did die, and I almost got killed...by you. I figure we're either gonna make it back home safe, or we'll both die this time."

Shera laughed at him gaily, earning her a scathing look, which she blithely ignored. "You don't need luck or charms, Cid. You've got the best engineer in all of Rocket Town here to make sure you don't blow anything up...including yourself!" Only a vague snort from the cockpit graced her comments, but she noticed him relax back into his chair. With a little smile still playing about her lips, Shera turned back to the instrument panel to continue noting readings into her journal.

"Batteries...charged and operational," she murmured, flicking a switch on and off with the tip of her pen. "Filters...gas working at 100%, air working at 98% alpha cycle...hmm." A few more notes to herself, and then she moved on. "Oxygen tanks...100%."

...thank God. She could still remember fighting back the fear and panic while she worked against the countdown to ensure that her Captain would return safely. Return to a Planet that no longer housed her body, of course, since she would burn to death once the rockets were fired. The dials and wires of the faulty oxygen tank had grown blurry and she'd had to stop to scrape a sleeve across her eyes now and then. What others had viewed as an unthinkingly selfless act of courage and devotion had in reality been 10 of the most frightening minutes of her life.

Don't think, don't think, just fix the tank. Red wire, green wire, copper joint...five minutes left until the launch. Rubber insulator sleeves on each connector, and a plastic cap...3/4 turn counter clockwise...safe, keep him safe...one minute left, Oh God, keep him safe for me. She screwed down the last cap and connected the meter with trembling fingers, tears mingling with sweat as she waited to die.

...and then I chewed her out for it, didn't I? Cid rubbed a tired hand over his face at the painful memory. She was down there sacrificing her life because of the slim possibility - not even a sure bet - that the tank might burst and jeopardize the flight. I turned on that intercom and cussed her out because she was willing to die for me, and I wasn't going to let her die for me. It would've been murder.

But his hands hadn't immediately slammed down upon the abort button. Instead, they'd clutched his head as if to still the whirling thoughts within. The unspoken, unacknowledged thoughts. Shera, willing to die, and telling him so. The long-awaited flight into outer space beckoned, and with Shera's voice echoing in his ears, he'd hesitated. Thirty seconds, twenty...and then he'd brought his fist down onto the control panel.

"Cid aborted the launch, of course," Vincent explained to Marion, "but it caused a great deal of strain between the two. The harsh manner in which he treated her only grew worse in his anger, and guilt made Shera accept his treatment as just punishment for what she viewed as her greatest mistake." Marion listened intently, for although she had gotten most of the history of her friends from Aeris, Vincent always seemed to have an extra insight or two to provide. For all Aeris' caring and compassion, Vincent with his silent, watchful ways seemed to have a far keener vision into people's souls. "Watching them now," he continued, "I believe that Cid's seeming anger and disappointment at the failed launch was actually his unexpressed fear of the choice that was forced upon him. For a brief instant, he held in his hand a willing martyr and his longtime dream of space, and I think that he might have hesitated to abort just a moment too long for the comfort of his soul."

Marion fell to the silent contemplation of his words, and they continued walking to a large, grassy area outside of town which had been officially declared a safe zone from which to watch the main event of the day. Motion caught her eye, and she looked up to find Tifa waving at her energetically. Marion glanced up at Vincent, received a small smile and nod, and then quickened her pace to join Tifa. From the outside, the glance, smile, and nod seemed rather like a girl asking her

father for permission to go and play, but the reality was far removed. They didn't have telepathy, but Marion and Vincent had been and would continue to converse without words more clearly than most people could communicate verbally.

The words, "I'm going to go talk to Tifa," couldn't carry with them everything else that Marion said with her eyes. The simple happiness she still felt at the fact that she had friends and her joy in being able to walk off, knowing that Vincent would always be there to return to. The quick yet lingering glances, the way they turned their bodies towards each other as if to guard the precious space between them, all of it summed up as infinite ways to tell each other that they loved each other.

These and other related thoughts were turning around in Marion's mind, for as Tifa led her around the milling crowd to a picnic spot that had been reserved for them, she asked, "Tifa, remember my first night at your house?" The brunette tossed a smile over her shoulder and replied, "Sure I do. Why, do you want another fairy tale?" Amusement sparkled in eyes as bright a green as the grass around them, although only a faint smile graced her lips. Tifa noted this and mentally filed away this new observation: although Marion and Vincent were far more expressive now, still their smiles and laughter seemed reserved mainly for each other.

"Not right now, although I'd like to hear more someday," Marion continued, "I was remembering how you'd told me about different types of love. The love that a mother had for her children, and the love between friends and lovers..." Gazing around at the townspeople and rocket crew, Tifa and Marion saw various examples. "I was thinking that any time someone loves another person, it's a different, new type of love. Not just when the relationship definition is different."

They reached a large blanket that had been spread out on the grass, and Tifa plopped down and patted a space next to her invitingly. Marion obligingly folded herself onto the quilt, and as Tifa prompted, "Go on," continued with her musings. "You and Cloud, Vincent and I...we're both married couples, but the way we love each other is different. It's the same with Cid and Shera, and that young woman over there...Audra, I think, and Chris. We're all...couples, but we don't all love each other the same way."

"You're right, but...what made you think of that?" Tifa asked, rummaging around in a large basket as she spoke. Shaking her head at an offer of something to drink, Marion replied, "Vincent was just telling me about the first launch, and it made me think of Cid and Shera's relationship...and then I started thinking about everyone else, too. I just noticed, I guess."

Tifa's curiosity has been piqued, and she found herself wanting to look into Marion's mind as she had when they'd first met. Many months after their introduction, Marion still seemed new and mysterious in many ways. "What exactly did you notice, Marion?"

"Well, Cid doesn't go out of his way to spend time with Shera, but she has a high place in his regard. He's her best advocate, and it's almost all unconscious. They're always together - on the launch pad, in the house, at the mechanic's table - but they're hardly ever standing together. And Shera used to take what she could get from Cid with regards to affection, but now she actively seeks him out and makes him see her. She still doesn't know that he watches her all the time...she thinks she has to fight for his attention. On the other hand, Cloud looks at you all the time...half of the time as if he thinks he's dreaming, and the other half of the time, he's sure of you, and he looks proud and happy, like that father over there with his family. And you look like you're dreaming all the time, but you know you're not going to wake up. The way you love each other is completely different from Cid and Shera, but you all love each other, just the same." Tifa smiled and blushed, not a little amazed at Marion's insightful comments. "What about you and Vincent?" she asked.

"Well, I think Vincent loves me in a way that's protective. He watches over me and wants me near, because he wants to keep me safe, and never lose me. There's a little bit of fear behind his love...a fear of losing me somehow." Marion's face was thoughtful, and her eyes roved back and forth a bit as if reading a screen only she could see. "And I love him...I can't even explain why I love him so completely, I just do. Because he's not just the person that matters the most in my world, but because he's practically the whole world for me. I could live the rest of my life in a box, if only I had him. It's like...that puppy over there," she pointed, "That little girl could kick that dog or pet him, he wouldn't care, so long as he could be with her. And the puppy doesn't care if she's tall or short or ugly...he just needs her."

"Well," Tifa said decidedly, "if Vincent loves you protectively, you certainly love him acceptingly. I can't think of another woman on this planet who could have done what you did, Marion." The silvery head tilted to the side, the sunlight giving it a buttery golden patina. "What did I do? Accept him? So have you all, as his friends."

Tifa smiled with happiness - for herself, for her friends, and for the simple, blissful fact that she was happy. "You not only accepted Vincent for who he is, you saw him, Marion. You looked at him from the very first and saw only Vincent. I'm only guessing, but I think he needed that. Someone who could look at him and not even see his red eyes or his claw. Someone who he could be Vincent with...not a Turk or an experiment...just Vincent. It's different from the way we accepted him as a friend, Marion. You never acknowledged that you were accepting his differences or abilities...you never even saw them."

They fell to a companionable silence while the crowd buzzed around them. Spotting their husbands walking over, Tifa made an effort to shake off the rather serious mood their conversation had put them in and began pulling an enormous picnic out of her basket. "Speaking of love, Marion...you're going to absolutely adore the sandwiches I made. Shera gave me leftover roast from last night's dinner, and I baked some bread yesterday, too." She pulled a plastic-wrapped packet from the picnic basket and offered it to Marion.

Cloud and Vincent traded confused looks as they walked up in time to see Marion take a sandwich from Tifa, say solemnly, "I accept," and have Tifa burst out laughing as if Marion had said something funny.