

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 47: Liftoff

Cid scrambled out of his chair as Shera locked away the checklist and nodded. It was time. Ducking through the doorway, Cid walked to the end of the loading platform and waved furiously at the crowd milling a short distance away. Shera sighed inwardly. Everyone was so far away...Cid was going to be waving his arms hours before anyone noticed him.

But after only two seconds, a murmur spread throughout the people gathered at the viewing site, and as the news spread, the crowd hushed immediately. Shera felt tears sting her eyes at the realization of how much this rocket meant to the entire town, not just Cid and herself. All of these people, all their lives and families and welfare...they'd all been taken by Shinra, and had survived. Now, on this beautiful morning, they were all gathered as a group to watch and celebrate the launch of a new rocket, a new dream. This town had taken the dregs that Shinra had thrown at them and created beauty.

She didn't know if it was something in the water, but one characteristic of the citizens of Rocket Town was the ability to endure. The old man who lived in the corner house on the main road was a good example. He'd lived through war and peace, famine and fame...and the construction and near-destruction of two rockets. Throughout all of this, he'd remained serene and accepting, letting the winds of time and change blow as they might around him, and never letting them break him. This morning, she'd seen him at his usual post by his fence, watching the StarChaser-I with the same intense gaze as when he'd watched the Shinra-26.

Audra, her favorite trainee, was an example of the resilience of youth. The hero-worship she lavished on Shera and Cid had mellowed over the past few years into a profound respect tempered by friendship. Shera had, a while back, begun casting around for someone to take her place at Cid's side should something happen to her. Things seemed to happen to her a lot, actually, so the thought was not as morbid as others might initially think. Audra had been the only one to pass - survive might be a better word - Shera's rigorous training and fierce demands for perfection. She was now certainly Shera's most qualified assistant, but she retained her cheerful willingness to do even the most menial tasks, and though her abilities certainly merited a promotion, steadfastly refused, preferring to continue assisting Shera as she could.

All of the townspeople, all of the crew...this rocket wouldn't be standing here, nor she on it, if not for all of their hopes and dreams. Cid owed his dream to more than Shinra's money and research, or her inspections and adjustments. This rocket belonged to the entire population of Rocket Town.

Now that she thought about it, Cid and she were prime examples of endurance as well. He'd endured countless disappointments and failures in his pursuit of space, and she...well, she'd survived, pure and simple. Survived years of verbal abuse as well as two brushes with death. And her unspoken dream had endured within her heart as well...finally realized just recently.

Everyone in Rocket Town had a dream...a dream that endured through the years. Everyone had chosen a star in the sky to pin their hopes on, and now Cid and Shera were going to visit those very stars.

"Listen up!" Cid shouted into the microphone tethered nearby. "Launch is in half an hour. This is what we've been waiting for, people!" The crowd roared and cheered from their gathering place as Cid raised his fist in a triumphant gesture, their shouts and whistles merging into so much static. Shera rolled her eyes at the short, simple announcement. This was Cid Highwind, all right. No long, romantic speeches about touching the stars, or drawn-out platitudes of gratitude to 'all the people.' And of course, in the next moment, he surprised her.

Digging a much-crumpled piece of paper from his jacket pocket, he yelled into the microphone once more, "Hey, shut it! I've got more to say!" Very Highwind, and very effective. They shut it.

"This wouldn't be happening if not for all of ya, and there's a few people I wanna say thanks to right now." Reading from his list, Cid began rattling off a complete list of every single one of the rocket's crew members. Shera stared in surprise as she recognized the names.

"...senior mechanics Kat, Dorothy, Robar, Zel, master mechanics Allen and Tayco, ..."

Had it been only yesterday that she'd admonished him to learn their names? He must have been up all night poring over her personnel files...

"...senior engineers Kei, Lorelai, Amber, Chris, Audra..."

She smiled up at him, and he grinned as he pocketed the list. "And of course, last but not least - despite all the things I've said about her over the years - Master Engineer, Shera." As the people beneath them burst into wild applause, Cid let the mike fall and said, "I'd be dead a few times over if not for you...and so would my dreams...and maybe my heart, too...thanks."

She shook her head, smile hopelessly plastered onto her face now, and replied in a whisper, "Anytime."

Cid jerked his head in a 'come on' gesture, and then climbed back into the rocket. Wiping her misty eyes and still grinning - like an idiot, he would have said - she walked in after him and locked down the door. As the booming of the door echoed in the hallway around her, the reality of the moment was impressed upon her forcefully. They were doing this...they were really going to go to outer space again. Not just a quick flight down from a doomed rocket, but a true visit to the stars they'd dreamed of for so long. Not just hours, but days spent gazing at the vastness of space.

"Hey, Shera, I know that door's a beautiful example of engineering and mechanics and all, but you'd better get your butt in here before we take off." She started and found herself simply standing and staring at the locked door. Blushing, she quickly walked over to the ladder, where Cid's mildly irritated, faintly amused face was framed in the opening above.

He remained outlined in the passageway as she clambered up the rungs, sitting back on his heels next to her as she poked her head through to the control room. As she caught his gaze and opened her mouth to explain why she'd been woolgathering at the door, he said, "I know. Weird, isn't it?" He grinned at her, and she suddenly flushed and mentally calculated her chances of getting him to darken the doors of a church. Not that she'd suddenly found religion, of course...she'd suddenly found a desire - no, two desires - in her heart.

The first? To get married. Not to just anyone, of course. She wanted this guy right here. She was momentarily amazed that she'd been content with so little until now. Since her death, she'd gained his heart, a chair in the rocket, and a new outlook on life. So why wasn't she content with what she had? Well, why the hell not? Not that it wasn't a lot, but she wanted more.

And that brought us to the second desire. Much more simple, much more direct. Having to do with the first desire, and yet completely unrelated in other aspects. It had to do with getting Cid to darken the doorway of her room...and shut the door behind him.

Blushing furiously now, she scabbled her way out of the ladder chute and made her way blindly to her chair. Giving her a curious look, Cid sat in his own seat and they began the preparations for the launch in - to her - merciful silence.

What the hell am I thinking? Shera wondered. And where the hell did these thoughts come from, anyway? As she soothed her churning mind with the comforting ritual of switches, buttons, and dials, she took a few steps back towards rational thought. Well, the thoughts are probably coming from the fact that I'm in love with him, he seems to be in love with me, and I've finally had enough time to get used to all this so that my brain - heart? - could move on to the next step. The fact that I've been extremely single all my life has probably helped.

...if I can get him to marry me, he's going to be very busy for a while...

This untoward thought caused another brush fire blush, and Shera had to bury her face in her hands and make a serious effort to bring her thoughts back into line. She took several deep breaths, and when she surfaced, she found the object of her desires - and embarrassments - peering into her face. "The hell's the matter with you?" he asked in bewilderment.

Still with her hands pressed to her cheeks, she replied, "I'm fine...I'm fine. I just realized something."

"What, you left the kettle on at home?" he asked sarcastically. No, her mind nattered, No, I just realized how much I want you, and how much I want you to marry me, and how I'd love to wake up with you in the mornings...

...and of course, since she couldn't say those things to him, she blurted, "I just realized how much I really do love you."

...and that wasn't what she'd meant to say, although she meant what she said.

It was pretty good for shock value, though. Cid blinked, blinked again, and then said, "Oh," and sank back into his chair and resumed warming up the engines. Shera remained frozen in her chair for a moment, wondering how she might travel back in time a few minutes to slap herself in the face, and then Cid turned to her again and said, "Well...good."

They spent the next ten minutes finalizing all of the launch preparations, and trading quick glances. Cid made several comments under his breath which could be heard perfectly by Shera in their narrow quarters. One was, "Great...she says she loves me, but doesn't 'realize' it until a month later." Her response was to crumple a wad of her notes into a ball and bean him on the head with it. "Weirdo," was followed up by another ball, which he batted away. Every few moments, one of them would pick up a crumpled sphere and nail the other on the head. Giggles and muffled chuckles were soon being traded as well.

Oddly enough, by the time the engines were warmed up and their headphones put on, the little paper missiles had cleared the air, and Shera was relieved to hear her voice steady and serene as she contacted Audra at the control center.

"Audra, we're good to go. Everything ready?" she asked into the headset. A small, cheerful voice came through the earphones, static crackling her voice. "Ready-steady, Sheer! StarChaser-I is hot!" She turned to Cid and gave him a happy smile and a thumbs-up. He nodded and gave the command, pressing a sequence of keys on the board in front of him as he did so.

"Liftoff!"