

An Affair of the Heart and Soul
By Meriko

Chapter 48: Twinkle, Twinkle

They stood in companionable silence in the viewing bay, the only room in the ship not cluttered with instruments and supplies, with the only window on the ship larger than a cat-door. It was here that they would take their meals - once Shera got over her queasiness at the artificial gravity - at a little table bolted down to the floor, which took up the bulk of the room's space.

The StarChaser-I would earn its name on its maiden voyage; the auto-pilot was currently taking them on an intercept course with a tiny asteroid making its way toward the Planet. No Meteor this...their galactic visitor was hardly the size of a materia, and would burn to cinders before it even got within a mile of the ground. The only reason it had been spotted at all was its magnificent cloak of blue-white gases that enveloped it and trailed behind it in a shimmering veil.

Cid wanted to see it up close, and follow it home. He said that the chance to study the asteroid up close, perhaps take samples of the tail debris and gas was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He said that the knowledge they gained from its flight pattern and the manner in which it burned up on entry into the atmosphere would be invaluable to future rockets. But really, he wanted to race the burning stone home. Shera laughed, teased him about his childish impulses, and concealed her eagerness at his plan with difficulty.

But the chase was not for a while, yet. For the next day and a half, they would make a bee-line for the asteroid, and stargaze as they pleased. And so they spent their free time in the viewing bay, taking pictures, making maps, noting planetary oddities, and...just looking.

"I know they're each enormous planets, but when I see them glittering so beautifully it makes me want to pluck one from the sky and take it home with me," Shera mused. "That must sound strange, but..." and she sighed, fulfillment and longing both somehow captured in that quiet breath.

Cid smiled at the thought. His own yearning for the sky might be simply described as a desire to reach out and touch the stars. "It's not strange at all," he replied. Hands shoved deep into his pockets, he leaned against the window embrasure and asked, "What would you do with it?"

Eyes locked on infinity, Shera only hum'd vaguely. "What would you do with it?" Cid persisted, "the star that you took home, I mean."

"Oh, well...I wouldn't lock it up for safe keeping or anything like that. I'd want to keep it with me all the time. Maybe wear it on a necklace..." She smiled dreamily at the image of a brilliant star hanging from a silver chain, not really paying attention as Cid suggested, "Or a ring?"

"Hmm? Oh, that would be nice, too. Then I could just look down at my hands and see it all the time, sparkling all silver and blue and green..." Spotting a particularly bright planet, she pointed it out to Cid and said with a childish excitement, "...like that one!"

"What about this one?"

She turned her head, eyes all aglow with excitement and joy, to find his hand hovering by her shoulder. But he wasn't pointing out the window - palm up and fingers loosely curled, his first finger was fixed directly at her. Resting daintily on the tip of his finger lay a brilliant blue-white star mounted on a circle of silvery metal, glittering in the light of its grander cousins. She gasped at the fiery slivers that danced from the diamond with even the tiniest motion of Cid's hand. Sea green, blood red, sun gold, and the very blue of Cid's eyes...all were captured in the heart of the stone that he held out to her.

Tearing her eyes away from the miniature star, she looked up to find Cid smiling crookedly at her. "Well?" he prompted,

"what about it?" Eyes flickering back and forth from the brilliant spark that shone from his fingertip to the merrily twinkling blue eyes, Shera struggled against shock and incredulity to regain command of her language skills. Finally she managed weakly, "For me?"

The blue eyes rolled and she was brought a little ways back to reality by his rather inappropriate yet very Highwind reply, "No, you moron, I want to marry Yuffie. Yes, it's for you." Whatever spirit she might have regained at the infuriating word 'moron' was immediately squelched by the other m-word he had used.

"Marry?" she repeated blankly. She was alarmed to see both the merriment and scathing sarcasm drop from his face to be replaced by a deadly serious expression, and dropped her eyes to the ring once more to avoid his gaze.

"Yes, marry. To put this ring on your finger and go through a little ceremony where we promise to love each other for the rest of our lives no matter what happens. To make you Shera Highwind. To make you my wife."

Taking one of her trembling hands in his own, he placed the ring in her palm and curled her fingers around it. His work-roughened fingers chafed the back of her hand restlessly, and in that small gesture Shera suddenly realized how nervous he was. Gathering up a shred of courage, she lifted her eyes once more and met his intense gaze. Emotion sparkled from his blue eyes, but it no longer frightened her. This wasn't the Captain, or even yet her Captain...this was Cid. Cid Highwind, pilot and mechanic, nicotine-addict and warrior...loud-mouthed, rude, and inconsiderate at times, but possessed of a dreamer's soul, and capable of tenderness to melt one's heart. And this man who stood before her now, gazing hopefully into her eyes; she had in her the power to reduce him to abject misery or raise him up in transfiguring joy. All because he loved her. He loved her. Cid loved her.

Unable to read her expression, Cid lowered his eyes to the less threatening view of their hands, suddenly not as sure of himself as he had been. He chewed on his lower lip for a moment while marshalling his thoughts, and then spoke once more, all traces of humor and hope, confidence and strength gone for the moment. "I know this can't make up for all the years I treated you so bad, but...I promise...I promise, Shera, that in all the years to come..." his voice trailed off for a moment, and he gazed out the window helplessly, as if seeking guidance from the planets he had so longed to visit. "I promise that you'll never doubt that I love you...more than anything."

She gently pulled her hand from his, and he glanced down to see her deposit the ring back into his hand. His head jerked up in disbelief, heart momentarily stilled by the thought - she doesn't want the ring; she doesn't want to marry me - and met her eyes. Hope was renewed at the loving expression and the brilliant smile that she wore, and he glanced down once more to find her left hand extended expectantly. The ring was slipped on with hands that trembled only slightly, and then they stood silent for a while, both admiring the star shining so brightly from her fingers.

Finally, with a satisfied sigh, Shera stepped closer to him and snuggled into his ready arms. He gave a slight chuckle and said, "You really are a complete idiot, Shera." Before she could even wonder at this unromantic statement, he continued softly, "...why d'ya wanna marry a bum like me?" She smiled into his jacket and then lifted her head and replied, "Because I am smart, talented, pretty, and nice...and opposites attract." Brilliant blue eyes flew wide and he suddenly burst out laughing, bending her backwards in his arms as he doubled over, one arm around her waist and the other clutching his stomach. Shera squealed in surprise and grabbed his neck to try and pull herself upright, only to send them both toppling to the floor.

She wasn't sure, but she thought it had happened when she tried for the second time to push herself off of the floor - and him - with her palms flat on the cool metal. Her face had hovered for a moment over his, both of them laughing like idiots, and suddenly he'd knocked one of her elbows aside and caught her as she fell. One hand grabbing her arm, the other behind her head, and then he'd kissed her.

A bump on the head from knocking into an access panel, scratchy stubble rasping the skin from her chin, and an extremely cold, exceedingly hard metal floor. But there were also forceful lips pressed against hers, strong arms holding her captive as surely as his kiss, and an indescribable warmth stealing throughout her body from every contact point where their bodies met.

They tangled together on the floor, stargazing forgotten for the moment, pausing only to catch a breath now and again. Tears welled up in her eyes as she became not a little overwhelmed, and they were either kissed off or rasped away with

one thumb across her cheek. Sometime later, they found themselves laughing for no reason, faces buried in each other's necks and hair, and she felt his chest tremble beneath her hand, heart beating furiously within its cage. And one vivid moment where, in their eagerness for each other, their teeth clicked together with startling force and she pulled back with wide eyes, running the tip of her tongue across her teeth to see if she was missing anything. She stopped breathing then, her mouth still parted slightly, dental mishap forgotten as his intense blue eyes locked onto hers from where he lay on the floor.

Propped up on one elbow, he paralyzed her with those eyes. She might as well have been a dragon's prey. A flicker of...something, sparked in his eyes. Realizing the effect he was having on her yet unable to actually pull his eyes away - equally entranced by the sight of her as well as the remembrance of her skin against his - he pushed himself up off the floor and reached for her. She made a soft, whimpering sound as he wrapped his arms around her and touched his lips to her neck; part helplessness, part surrender, part need. And when she circled his neck with her arms and pulled him down to the floor once more, this time it was on purpose.