

Painted Black

Chapter Ten

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Cid woke with a start, his heart pounding in his chest as he slowly recalled where he was. No hospital, no white-tiled walls, no tubes, no green. He was home, or the closest to home that he'd ever be. He was in his bed, in his room, on his ship. The Highwind was better than home. He couldn't get tired of the scenery with a moving home.

He swung his legs from the bed, knocking the covers to one side as he did so, trying to remember what it was that had woken him from his sleep. He couldn't remember which was nothing knew to him. He couldn't recall a dream he'd had in his entire life, much less a nightmare. The only way he'd ever be able to tell if he had had a nightmare was if he awoke, startled, the only sound in the room his own ragged breathing and the thundering of his heart. He thought that that was rather unfair. His subconscious hid the things that scared him the most from him, let them loose when his guard was down. He at least had a right to know what he was dreaming, didn't he? He stood and stretched and guessed that he didn't.

He quickly got dressed, discarding his blue pajamas and pulling on a pair of khakis and a shirt. He pulled on some socks and shoes, laced up the boots quickly. Finally, he picked up the pants from where they had fallen the night before and dropped them on the shirt he had flung onto the chair. That done, he decided that he was feeling pretty good. Pretty damn good, actually, for a man who had just spent the last week in a hospital for Mako poisoning. Now that he was out of that place, he felt great. Well, not great. Maybe just extremely relieved.

He ran a hand through his disarrayed, too lazy to go find a comb somewhere to straighten it with. Instead, he just pulled his goggles into place, pushing back his overgrown bangs. He needed a haircut, too, but that was another thing he was too lazy to do. He tucked a pack of cigarettes into place before he rubbed the stubble on his chin, a moment of indecision striking him. To shave or not to shave. He almost decided to hell with it, but changed his mind, realizing that if he didn't take the time to shave now, he would probably just end up growing a bloody beard. That wasn't a thing he thought was particularly good. He disappeared into the bathroom. He'd take the time to shave.

Cid sighed as he emerged from the bathroom, short on time he could have spent on surveying his ship. Shaving done, he walked to the door, stopping near it to pull his flight jacket from its peg on the wall. He ran his hand over the soft leather, admiring its perfection even after the years of abuse it had suffered through. It had seen around eight crashes, countless airports, a war, and some twenty-two kills. His hand paused on the patches he had lovingly sewn onto the side. The Forty-second Airborne Division. Silver wings on the collar points. This was a great jacket. He pulled it on over the shirt, zipping it up about halfway before he took his white scarf from the peg, and expertly tied it around his neck, tucking the long ends into the jacket with one hand while he opened the door with the other.

As he walked through the empty halls of the Highwind, his stomach reminded him that he had refused to eat the hospital food and had probably slept through breakfast. Breakfast, brunch, lunch, whatever could wait until after he checked out the operations room. The weather needed to be checked, the ship's systems had to be reviewed, the damage to the hull of the ship from the Lifestream had to be assessed and repaired. There was too much to do without eating. His stomach growled a dissent with his logic, and he changed his mind. The galley, it was.

A short walk brought him there, and he noticed with a frown that it was empty, too. "Where the hell is everybody?" he asked, though only silence and the hum of the Highwind's systems answered him. He shrugged, walking across the galley and into the kitchen. Being a grand ship meant for Shinra's best, the Highwind's kitchen was stocked with everything from simple noodles to caviar. With such a choice of food, he could have had anything. He glanced at the shelves and proceeded to make himself the only thing he could without seriously damaging the kitchen: a peanut butter sandwich. Culinary work wasn't his expertise. He could burn cereal if he tried.

He took a bite of the sandwich, smiling at his gourmet cooking skills as he walked back out the kitchen, through the galley, and into the hall. Even though the peanut butter had had all the little chunks of peanuts in it, it was ten times better than anything that hospital served. Reasonably pleased with himself, he headed up the steps to the operations room, pulling open the door at the end of the small flight of stairs. He was greeted with the familiar sounds of the ship's engines below him and the equally familiar site of the operations room to his right, a catwalk on his left, and the stair case heading up to

the deck beyond them.

Popping the last bit of sandwich into his mouth, he opened the door of the room and sauntered in nonchalantly. He was greeted by a friendly wave from the young man seated in one of the chairs surrounding a conference table. Beside him, playing with what looked to be a moog doll, was Marlene.

Cid grinned and sat down. "Hey, Danny boy. How's it goin'?"

Danny smiled in response. "Ah, pretty good. We got all that damage from the ship repaired days ago, engines are running smoothly, and it's all pretty boring here."

"He took me down to the stables," Marlene declared. "I got to see all the chocobos. Except Cloud's and Tifa's. Where're theirs?"

Cid's grin widened, and he tried to cover it up but failed miserably. "They, uh, got into some trouble and had to sell 'em. Don't worry about it."

"They sold them?!"

Cid's grin faded into a wince. He had obviously not said the right thing. Children were hard to figure out sometimes. "Well, you see, Marlene," he started, trying to think of some way to get out of this mess.

"It's better than having the birds dead," Danny commented.

Cid looked at the younger pilot, startled. He was expecting Marlene to burst into tears, or yell at them, or just run from the room after hearing those words. He felt the undesirable need to just give Danny a punch to the teeth. It proved unnecessary.

Instead of crying, or getting angry, or running, Marlene just nodded in agreement. "True. But when they get new ones, I wanna name them."

"You'll have to talk to them about that," Cid declared, leaning back in his chair. He would never figure out kids. Or maybe he knew how kids acted, and just couldn't figure out Marlene. She was something special. He stretched his arms above his head before pulling the pack of cigarettes from his goggles and pulling a smoke from it. He set it in his mouth and replaced the pack, standing as he did so. "I'm gonna go out to have a smoke. Be back in awhile."

"We'll be here," Danny replied.

Cid nodded and started to walk from the room. He paused at the door, and asked as an afterthought, "Where is everybody? The ship's completely empty."

Danny shrugged. "Most of 'em live in Junon, you know. They went back to their families or bars or something. I don't know."

Cid nodded again, closing the door behind him and pulling a lighter from his pocket. He didn't light up, though. Not in his ship. He didn't want to risk some ash falling into something flammable or delicate. Not that it would. He was just being overprotected. It was only a climb up the steps to the deck. He needed exercise anyway.

His footsteps clunked up the metal staircase heavily. He pulled open the door, and stepped out into the cold. He closed the door behind him, glad to feel the wind tugging at his hair. It didn't seem to be his enemy now, biting into his bones and leeching all his warmth. With the sun gleaming down from a clear blue sky, he decided it was a great day for a smoke. And for flying. The wind would make landings interesting. Maybe Danny could learn something. The flying could come later, though.

He sauntered to the rail of the deck, lighting the cigarette in his mouth and returning the lighter to his pocket. He took a drag off of the cig, glad to feel the warm rush of nicotine he had been deprived of for the past days. He had beaten the hospital's bloody system. They couldn't keep him in that torturous place. He could laugh at them, now.

He blew a breath of smoke into the wind, his gaze wandering across the landing strip. It was covered in patches of ice and snow, planes rocking in the heavier gusts of wind. The wind whistled over the ground, catching the streamers on pitot tube covers and booties and sending them waving in a bright array of orange and red flags. There was even a bright "For sale" banner draped across the propeller of Meyers OTW trainer biplane. He absentmindedly wondered how much the owner was asking for it; it would be nice as an antique. It might even poke a couple of holes in the sky. He took another drag off the cigarette and flicked the ash over the rail.

Off in the distance, a plane started its engine. He rolled the cigarette back and forth in his fingertips, squinting as he tried to locate it. The first hum of a propeller cutting through the air was followed by another, and, a few moments later, Cid located a silver gleam moving down a taxiway to the runway. He turned from the rail and walked across the deck to the other side where he could watch it take off. The silver plane looked like a Lockheed 12A, but he wasn't sure. It didn't matter.

He watched as the plane stopped just short of the runway, doing some last pre-flight checks. He set the cigarette in his mouth and leaned forward on the wooden railing, staring at the plane as though he was a little boy who was about to see the wonders of flight for the first time. The silver plane crawled forward onto the runway where it stopped once more. The hum of the propeller increased in pitch, the blades spinning in a faster blur that was almost undetectable by the eye. Cid grinned as the plane suddenly lurched forward into motion, tearing down the runway until it finally pulled up into the air like a marionette on invisible strings. The plane lurched a bit as it was buffeted by the wind, but the pilot got her flying fairly high in the air before the runway ended below them in the waves gray-blue sea.

Cid made a small salute to the plane's shrinking form. "Happy flying," he declared, taking a drag from the cigarette.

"Holy shit, Cid, you'd think you never seen a take-off before."

Cid choked on the cigarette before turning around quickly and making a feeble attempt to ignore the tickling at the back of his throat. His gaze landed on a trio of people: Barret, Yuffie – who had spoken – and Red. He cleared his throat.

"You just can't deal with the wonders of flying," he responded, clearing his throat again and glancing back to the view of the runway. "I think you lost someone, Barret," he declared, changing the subject. "She's inside."

Barret brightened, visibly relieved and rushed to the door of the ship, nearly yanking it from its hinges in his haste. Cid grimaced. "Careful with the ship," he ordered, but Barret was already inside and unable to hear any comments from the outside. Cid shrugged and set the cigarette in his mouth, smiling briefly at Yuffie and Red. "So, what's up? Where's Tifa and Cloud?"

Yuffie didn't respond, grabbing Cid's shoulder and ushering him to the door of the Highwind. He pulled his arm free and stopped, grabbing the cigarette from his mouth after a final drag before he brought his foot up and crushed it on the heel of his boot, putting it out. He dropped the remains of it into a small trash can near the door. "What's this about?"

"We gotta talk."

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Cid drummed his fingers absentmindedly on the table top, his gaze moving from Red to Yuffie and back to Red again. His mind was racing with the information they had just given him, wandering with the possibilities of who and done it and why. He stopped his fingers, laying his palm flat on the table.

"So, is there anything else to this, or is that it?" he asked. Cloud was missing. Tifa had been beaten up. Cloud beating Tifa?

No, that wasn't right. Where had that come from? That was impossible.

Red sighed. "There's more."

Cid groaned. "You're kidding. Alright, shoot."

"Vincent," Yuffie supplied, watching Cid's face carefully for any sort of reaction. Much to her disappointment, there were none as he looked back at her with an almost deadpan expression.

"Can we try to answer with sentences that have more than one word?" he asked. "That means absolutely nothing to me."

Red grinned, his lips cracking open to reveal pearly teeth, but a glance from Yuffie sent him into a more serious mood. He licked his lips. "When you were in the hospital, Vincent arrived just before you woke up." He paused, waiting for an addition from Cid. There wasn't one. "He shot Cloud. We think he might be the one who hurt Tifa."

Cid raised an eyebrow in question but said nothing. Yuffie looked at him exasperated. "And you're not the least bit surprised? He was our bloody friend!" she exclaimed.

"Look, Yuffie. Vin brought Marlene to me." He ignored the glance they shared with each other, plowing on with his story. "She said some crap about him hurting Cloud. I didn't get it then, but I didn't give it much thought. It makes sense now."

"Wait a second," Yuffie ordered. "You said he brought Marlene to you? What the hell?! Why would he do that after all the trouble he went through to shoot Cloud? That doesn't make any sense."

"Hey, he said he didn't want me to get involved. I gotta assume that goes for all of us. Whatever this is, it's between him and Cloud."

Red frowned, squinting his one eye as he glanced at the light. "So we should ignore it. I don't think that's an option we can take."

Cid shook his head. "No, I ain't saying that. I'm only presenting the facts as I see them."

"But why would Vincent attack Tifa?" Yuffie asked. "Maybe Barret knows. Where'd that lump go?"

"We don't know that it was Vin who attacked Cloud," Cid said. "We don't know anything. We gotta wait for Tifa, or someone who knows what's going on."

"Cid, you just destroyed all our ideas on this," Yuffie growled.

He frowned. "Look, I'm not destroying anything. All I'm saying is that the only way we're going to figure this thing out is if we talk to Vin or Cloud, neither of which seem to be here right now."

Red nodded. "Alright. So, what do you want to do about the Lifestream?"

"Why's it all up to me?" Cid asked. Lifestream. He hated that word now. It brought with it a horrible connotation. Cloud had called it "green drowning" once. Now, he knew why. "I know less than shit about the Lifestream. That's your department. I take care of transportation. You want to fly to the ends of the world? Fine. I'll hook you up with a charter. You need a flight to visit your grandmother in Bone Village? No problem. Hop on board. The Lifestream is not my piece of pie, Red. You know that. You take care of it."

"So you get to go after the bad guys while I get the drudgery?" He laughed, his eye twinkling with mirth. "Where's the fun in that?"

“Come on, Red. There’s some fun in crunching numbers and listening to the Planet scream, or whatever it is you do when the Lifestream gets all wonky.” Cid stood and stretched his limbs. “Let’s go find Barret.” He started to the door and opened it to hold while Red and then Yuffie walked out.

Yuffie stopped outside the doorway. “Hey, old man.”

The door clicked closed behind the pilot as he walked out of the room. “Yeah?”

“Tifa’s pregnant.”

He shrugged. “Good for her and Cloud, then.”

She smiled in response. “Don’t you care that she didn’t tell you?”

He glanced at her, watching her out of the corner of his eyes. “No. She would have told me sooner or later. Besides, it’s not any of my damn business anyway. They can do whatever they want. That’s between her and Cloud.”

Yuffie grinned before she skipped down the corridor. “Thank you, Cid!”

He frowned as she disappeared behind a corner, confusion lining his brow. The confusion vanished as quickly as the young ninja had, though, replaced with the thought of Vincent fighting Cloud. He had a feeling that Vincent wasn’t responsible for Cloud’s disappearance; he knew that Vincent had had nothing to do with that. After all, if Vincent was with Marlene on the other side of Junon, how could he? But he couldn’t shake this feeling of immense dread that settled in his stomach each time he thought of Cloud and Vincent against each other. There was something deeper there beyond a mere disagreement, but Cid didn’t know what. All he did know was that it couldn’t be good.