

Painted Black Chapter Fourteen

“Hey, Cid.”

Cid didn't look up at the speaker, knowing full well who it is. He wasn't sure if he wanted company right now. He was, however, damn sure that he had managed to make a complete and total ass of himself in front of his friends which was why he didn't know if he wanted to put a stiff upper lip into place and pretend that he hadn't. He thought that talking, maybe even explaining, his actions might be better than thinking about them, though. He wasn't sure, but he had the feeling that he was about to find out.

“What are you doing down there?”

She was, of course, asking him why he felt the need to wedge himself down within the tight confines of the engine room of the Highwind. He couldn't very well ignore her now. She had asked him a direct question. He wasn't some kind of kid anymore, where ignoring someone came as a second nature. He wasn't that petty... at least, not yet.

“Thinking,” he replied, finally looking up and filling his gaze with an immodest look at Tifa's bosom as she leaned over the railing innocently. He blushed, biting his lower lip to keep from laughing as he quickly looked away. Not that he didn't like what he saw; he simply felt that it was indecent for him to be checking out Cloud's fiancé.

“About what?” she asked.

She wasn't about to leave him alone, now. Tifa wasn't the type who came for idle chitchat. He knew exactly what she had come to ask him about. If she would only quit dancing around the subject... Well, he wasn't about to explain himself without her specifically asking him first.

“Just evaluating my performance,” he said carefully. Let her figure out exactly what he meant by that. It would probably only lead to more questions, questions he was sure he wouldn't be willing to answer unless someone offered him a couple of shots of the worst whiskey they could find.

She pursed her lips and nodded, having no comment to give, surprising him greatly. They were quiet for awhile, each either content with the silence or waiting for the other to say something. The engine hummed quietly as though it, too, was waiting for one of them to begin speaking. Finally, Tifa swung her legs over the railing and started down the ladder until she dropped to the floor next to him. She sat down beside him, Indian-style, her gaze on the wall that was barely two feet in front of her.

“Cozy place,” she commented. He grunted in response, bracing his feet on the wall as he pushed himself from the slouch he had sagged into previously. They slipped back into silence. Tifa glanced at him, chewing on her lower lip thoughtfully. Finally, she spoke. “Cid?”

“Yeah?” he replied, the response tumbling from his tongue just a little too early to be purely natural. She could tell that he had been waiting for her to say something.

“Don't listen to Red,” she declared, the words rolling off her tongue so easily he thought that she might be asking him to go buy a carton of eggs. He laughed softly, shaking his head. She frowned at him. “No, I'm serious. Red is too damn analytical. If anyone on this team is worthless, it's him.”

Cid glanced at her in surprise. “Ah, c'mon, Tifa. That's not true. Nobody's worthless. You start thinking about people in terms of worth, then you're no better than that shit Shinra was spitting out.”

Tifa nodded slowly, but he was sure that she hadn't been listening to anything he had said. He had a feeling he knew what was on her mind. Hell, if he was in her position, he would probably be thinking about the same thing. Finding Cloud. He

also knew that finding the guy in this town was a lost cause. He couldn't conjure up one person he knew who would even want Cloud much less enough to kidnap him in the middle of the night. All of Cloud's enemies had died with Sephiroth. Cid sometimes wondered if Cloud even had enemies other than Sephiroth.

"Why did you change your mind?" she asked, breaking into his thoughts and bringing him back to the cramped engine room.

"Why did I change my mind?" he mused, though it was more to buy time than to think of an answer. He knew the answer already, had been thinking about it for the past hour or so, wishing that he could change it but well aware that his motives were childish and would stay that way. "I didn't," he finally confessed. Tifa frowned. "I was being petty."

There, he said it. Did he feel better? No. Was it better than thinking about it? No. It was worse. Much, much worse. Now, instead of some horrible secret he could easily keep to himself, it was a public source of shame. How was he supposed to expect any sort of respect from Tifa now? Damn it all to hell. Might as well continue talking.

He sighed. "I was being childish, and I knew it, too." He hoped that she wouldn't ask him why. He didn't know how to answer that. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. "I figured that since Red wouldn't let me go out and play, I'd have to find some way to make it so he couldn't have what he wanted. You know how sometimes you just can't help being stupid. I think that that's the story of my life."

Tifa frowned. "So, the cards..."

"The cards were stacked," he declared, letting his head fall back against the machinery. "You don't honestly think that I'd let luck decide that one, do you? Of course not. Heaven forbid that I should lose."

She sighed and shook her head. "So, we just babysit Marlene while they go off. Sounds like fun."

He grunted in response. "Doesn't it?"

She didn't say anything, her mind racing with newly thought possibilities. She stole a sideways look at him, pursing her lips. She wasn't sure if he'd be willing to go along with her idea. If he didn't, well, then she'd just have to go and find Cloud by herself. He couldn't stop her.

"You know, Cid," she started, stretching her hands out before her. "We could always forget babysitting and look for Cloud."

He shrugged. "I don't care. I just don't think we'll find him. So, we'll shirk our responsibility, let the rest of the team down, and end up with nothing. That's why I haven't changed my mind, Tifa. I think it's a bloody waste of time."

She grinned. "Not if we knew who kidnapped him."

"And who was that?" he wondered aloud, bitterness lacing his words. "Vincent? Damn it, Tifa, don't give me any of that crap 'cause it sure as hell wasn't him."

"I know. I was there, remember? I know who it was."

"And knowing's gonna make it any easier? I doubt it."

She shrugged helplessly. "It'll be better than not knowing. Come on, Cid! We can find him without them. Then who'll be right? We will." I will. "Who'll be worthless?"

"Who'll be dead?" Cid countered, rubbing his eyes. "You gotta think, Tifa, that these guys were able to take you down with Cloud. I'm just an old guy with a stick. If we find them, then what?"

Tifa sighed, shaking her head. "I don't know, okay?! But," she added, "but we didn't know what we were going to do after we found Sephiroth, either. We played that by ear. Look how well that turned out."

Cid snorted. "Yeah, look at that. I got news for you, sunshine; we didn't save the world. We had nothing to do with that." "It's not like we didn't do anything to help, though. Damn it, why do you have to be so negative? You're the one who supposed to give the pep talk, not me."

"How am I supposed to give a pep talk in something I don't believe in, Tifa?" he asked, exasperated. He pushed himself to his feet and stretched. "Is finding Cloud the most important thing in the world? Sure, it is. To you. This and the Sephiroth thing are totally different. There's no way in hell we're ever going to find Cloud. They could be on the bloody moon for all we know."

Tifa didn't respond, watching him with dark eyes. She couldn't believe this. Everyone was against Cloud and her. Nobody wanted them to be together. Nobody would help her find him. If that was the way it was, then so be it. She could and would find him on her own, though she longed for help. She stood, grabbing hold on the ladder with one hand as she did so. She turned back to him, glaring angrily. "I guess this is what kind of friends Cloud has. He was better off back in Nibelheim."

Cid inhaled sharply, her words cutting through him with all the pain of a real blade. And he knew she was right. Just because finding Cloud was a lost cause, did that mean they shouldn't even look? Of course not. But he was no sucker for lost causes. One couldn't always follow his heart. Things had to be thought out, ranked by importance. Saving millions was more important than one life... sure, it sounded real nice, but if that person was the only one you could love, if that person was Shera...

"Wait," Cid declared, his voice rising over the soft hum of the engines. "Wait." He shook his head, closing his eyes. He couldn't be doing this, not again. He was no hero; it had taken him a long time to realize that, and, yet, here he was, an incorrigible pretender. "I'll come."

Tifa glanced back at him from her perch on the ladder. "You sure?" she asked, eyeing him warily.

He flashed her the briefest of smiles, pushing a cocky note into his tone. "Move out."

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Danny sighed as he leaned back against the wooden hull of the stables within the belly of the Highwind. Currently, there were only four chocobos scratching around in the straw, and scratching around in the straw seemed to be the only thing they were ever going to do. They had been there for a little over an hour, now, and still not one change in the action. Just scratch, scratch, scratch. It was boring. He decided that he could never understand the attraction to these overgrown chickens, but, then again, he wasn't a little girl.

"Don't you ever get enough?" he asked, glancing down at his boots as he shoved his hands into his pockets. Maybe she would get the hint and say she wanted to go. He was beginning to hate this babysitting job. "They aren't very exciting, you know."

Marlene stared at him with a frown painted on her features. "Neither is a zillion year old airplane with a bird's nest in it," she countered sharply. "You seem to hang around those an awful lot. Pilots are such geeks. You'd all probably install bathrooms in your hangars and call it 'home'."

"Not a bad idea," he said thoughtfully, a jesting tone in his voice. He grinned. "Don't stereotype me, young lady. You just haven't had any good experiences with flying. You probably get airsick, don't you?"

"I do not," she said forcefully.

“Ever been upside down in an airplane?”

“No.”

“Then, you’ve never been flying,” he stated simply. “You have led a sheltered life, my child. Maybe, if you’re nice to me, I’ll take you flying upside down.”

Marlene stuck her tongue out at him. “I wouldn’t want to go flying with you. You’d probably crash, or something.”

Danny did his best to look taken aback, but a smile broke through his expression. “Ah, come on, I would not. Not unless you asked me to, anyway. I am an experienced pilot; I have flown to the ends of the world and would take you there if you merely asked.”

“You would do anything I asked?” she tested, smiling broadly.

He knelt down next to her, crossing his hands over his heart. “Anything, fair maiden.”

Marlene giggled. “Go away, then.”

Danny fell backward melodramatically, a moan escaping his lips. “Ah, your words wound me.”

Marlene laughed as she stepped over him and ran to the door. He scrambled to his feet as she left the room, her laughter echoing through the stables. “Hey!” he called, running after her. “Where do you think you’re going?” She didn’t respond to his call, so he groaned and started after her. It was going to be a long day.

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“Are you sure we shouldn’t wait until dark?” Tifa asked, watching Cid from her perch on the bed. He had disappeared within the confines of a small closet, cursing liberally as he searched for whatever items he felt they would need.

“What difference does it make?” he countered, emerging to toss a bag of gil at her. “They know we’re gonna leave anyway. If we go now, we have more time to look. Besides, I was never one for slipping out at night. I always got caught sneaking back in.”

Tifa laughed lightly as she dropped the small bag of money into the satchel on her lap. “They can’t stop us, I guess. It’s not like they’re our parents.”

Cid grunted noncommittally, his hand pausing as he reached for the Venus Gospel. He paused over it, frowned a bit at the ostentatious carving down its long, elegant shaft. It’s huge blade glinted wickedly sharp in the dim lighting, a deep silver reflecting everything as perfectly as a mirror. Such a pretty weapon was bound to catch more than a hungry glance. It would be a liability to take a weapon for which thief would gut his mother. His hand closed over the well worn shaft of his old, simple spear. No one would want a piece of crap like that, and it hadn’t failed him... yet.

“You got everything, yet?” Tifa asked impatiently, breaking into his thoughts and pulling him from the closet. He shot a glance at her that looked like it could and would break cement.

“Patience is a goddamn virtue,” he reminded her dryly. “Didn’t you learn that in karate school, or something?”

“It’s not a virtue now,” she replied, her tone curt as she tried to keep herself from snapping at him. She was getting angry waiting for him. Whoever said that women were slow in getting ready to leave somewhere was obviously a man. “Cloud could be dying out there.”

Cid reached down to pick up the second pack, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he did so. He paused as his hand closed over the leather strap. "I don't think so," he declared suddenly, picking the bag and its contents from the floor. He headed to the door without glancing back at Tifa. "You ready to take a trip into that freezing hellhole?"

"Of course I am. It wasn't me who was taking three years to get a bunch of junk we probably won't need." She picked up her satchel and slung it over her shoulder with a groan. "Bloody hell, Cid! What did you put in here? The kitchen sink?" He grinned as he glanced back at her. "Nope. It wouldn't fit. 'Sides, I hate plumbing." He opened the door and stepped out into the hall confidently. Tifa followed him at a more timid pace, glancing down the hall before she stepped through the portal. Cid laughed. "What are you afraid of? The boogey man? Listen up, Tifa. There ain't no one on this ship who's gonna tell me what to do."

She nodded before she shoved past him and started down the hall, forcing a bravado into her gait that she did not feel. Cid frowned and followed her, walking down the hall as he had hundreds – maybe even thousands – of times before. The wooden planks shifted under his feet as they always had, but he couldn't help but feel as though this was the last time they would. The feeling made him nervous, anxious, and he decided that he didn't like it. One bit. It reminded him of when he had been walking through the empty streets of Junon, cold and wet. It reminded him of Vincent surprising him. He had told himself that he was being childish back then, and he tried to remind himself of that fact now. It didn't lessen the feeling, didn't make it go away. He had not felt so anxious in his entire life, at least that portion which he could recall, and he definitely did not like it.

So entangled in his thoughts, he bumped into Tifa, finally realizing with a jolt that she had stopped walking. She glanced back at him sharply, an angry remark just waiting to spill forth from her lips. She managed to restrain herself, however, merely frowning as she watched two people running down the hall to them. He had a feeling that somehow she thought that this was all his fault. He also had a feeling that she was somehow right.

"Hiya, Cap!"

Cid winced as Danny came to a stop in front of them, running a hand through his disarrayed hair, breathless and rosy from the exertion of following a young girl around the entire ship. Cid had a thousand different curses on his tongue, ready to be aimed straight at Danny. Unfortunately, the other person made him hold back all of them.

"Whatcha doing?" Marlene asked, her face just as red as Danny's.

Tifa looked like she had a nice lie ready for her response, but Cid spoke first. "We're leaving," he declared. "There's nothing for us to contribute here. They got a pilot, and Tifa can make her own choice."

"Ah, c'mon, Cap," Danny said, finally catching his breath. "You're ten times the better pilot than me. You just can't bum out on us."

"Why not? Red's already got my retirement home picked out for me, you know. There's nothing more to be said on the subject. We're leaving, plain and simple. You all can fly to the ends of the world and chase after some wonky Lifestream. I don't give a rat's ass. But you don't have to take me with you."

"I don't wanna go, either," Marlene added, grabbing Tifa's hand. Tifa sighed and glanced at Cid, a frown tightening her lips. "You can't go with them, Marlene," Danny explained, kneeling down to look at her eye to eye. "It's too dangerous. Who knows what thugs are out there? Cloud must have tons of enemies by now."

Marlene's face clouded over with anger. "Everyone is always telling me it's too dangerous! Cloud is my friend, too! If it's too dangerous for me, then why isn't it too dangerous for anyone else? Besides, I heard Red and you guys talking. What you are doing isn't exactly safe, either."

Danny straightened, smoothing a wrinkle in his slacks. "Remind me never to fight with a kid, huh?"

Cid smiled thinly. "Marlene goes with us, then," he declared suddenly, startling everyone present.

"Are you crazy?" Tifa asked, her eyes wide with shock. "She'd only be..."

"A hindrance, right, Tifa?" He shrugged. "I think I'd rather have her slowing us down than them. Cloud is going to be around for a long time. The Planet won't. 'Sides, I got ten that says we'll end up in Midgar before we find him."

Tifa's frown deepened, but she didn't say anything. Cid was grateful for that. He didn't think he could handle having her yelling at him, as well. The way he saw it, taking Marlene was purely logical. They could take her to Midgar and drop her off with Elmyra or Shera. He also felt that it was his responsibility to watch over Marlene. After all, the original plan had been to leave him here with her, and, even though he had loathed that idea when it was first constructed, it did make sense.

Obviously, Danny didn't see the logic in his ideas at all. "You are crazy, Cap" was all he said. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks, leaning back against the wooden wall of the hallway as he watched them both. His gaze shifted from Cid and Tifa to Marlene and back again. "Shit."

"You know I'm right," Cid said slowly.

Danny grinned weakly. "The Captain is always right." His face clouded over as he thought, trying to come to any conclusion about the situation. Barret had clearly made it his responsibility to watch over Marlene while they were on the Highwind. Did that mean that he was obligated to betray his captain by immediately informing the others about the whereabouts of Marlene? Or was his loyalty to Cid more important because he had sworn that first?

Cid closed his eyes wearily. "Look, Danny, I don't care if you tell Barret. Hell, I don't care if you tell any of them. Just be a pal and let me get a head start, huh? And trust me."

Danny nodded, leaning further back into the wall as Cid and the others walked by him. His eyes locked with Cid's one last time before the group disappeared around the corner, heading straight for the deck of the ship. The blue eyes of the Captain glinted with hopefulness before they turned away from him.

Danny slid to the floor of the hall, his thoughts jumbled in his head with neither rhyme nor reason to their patterns. He had never been so torn. He had no idea what was right, as if he was locked in a sinking ship and couldn't find which way was up.

Just be a pal...

Sure thing.

And let me get a head start.

No problem.