

Painted Black

Chapter Five

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“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?!”

Tifa turned away from Cloud, unable to look at his ire, unable to face him. He was so angry with her, and he had every right to be. There was little she could tell him that would defend her position on the matter. He was a part of the team; he should have been told about Vincent shooting him, should have been told about Vincent’s treachery. Of course, she hadn’t told him because she knew exactly how he would react. And it wasn’t her fault the others had followed her lead.

“Cloud,” Yuffie started, trying very hard to calm him down, to stop his anger. There seemed to be no way of doing that. The small room in the hotel was radiant with his rage. “We thought it would be best, at least until you got better.”

He snorted, shaking his head slowly as though he couldn’t believe his ears. “Got better?! Got better! I’m better now! I was better days ago! And you couldn’t tell me? Come on, people! You know better than that. I even asked how Vincent was, and what was the response I got? He’s fine. Fine! What in the name of everything good made you think that I couldn’t handle it?!”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting just a tad, Cloud?!” Yuffie snapped, glaring at him, her meager attempts at calming him gone with her own anger. “What gives you the right to come here and yell at us because we were worried about you?! You think that if that had been Tifa lying there in the hospital bed with a hole through her, you would’ve told her right away?! Well?”

Cloud frowned. He couldn’t believe this. It was so incredibly stupid. What was Yuffie trying to do? They had been in the wrong. Trying to turn his words against him like this, it made him wonder what side his friends were really on. “That’s entirely different,” he declared, his voice low.

“Is it?”

He ignored her question, ignored her entirely. He didn’t have to put up with this. “Look, I can understand you not telling me right away, but that was three – three – days ago! How long were you planning to keep your bloody pact of silence?! Until the next blue moon? Just what were you waiting for? Spring?”

“We didn’t want to upset you when you were hurt!” Yuffie growled. “What part of you can’t understand that? We were worried that you might hurt yourself further!”

“That’s irrelevant! Who gives a damn if I was hurt or not? You should’ve told me!”

“I give a damn!” Tifa shouted suddenly, choking on unshed tears as she turned back to Cloud. “I care if you’re hurt! And I also know what you would’ve done if I told you! You would’ve gone all gung-ho on us! ‘Let’s go find Vincent!’ ‘We gotta find Vincent!’” She took a breath, steadying herself and forcing herself to continue. “You would’ve hurt yourself more. I don’t think I could’ve done that, Cloud. I think you know that, too. You’re making mountains out of mole hills!”

Red XIII nodded in agreement, his beads clicking together softly with the motion. “You’re blowing this entire thing out of proportion. Does it matter that you didn’t know earlier? What’s important is that you know now. If you knowing earlier could’ve changed any of these events, well, then, it’s too late to think about them now. We can’t change the past, so I suggest we start planning for the future.”

Cloud sighed, sitting down on the edge of the bed in resignation. They were all right. And he knew it, too. He just couldn’t shake the feeling the attack had left clawing at his innards. He was dreading finding Vincent. He had to find his friend, had to figure this thing out, but he couldn’t stop wondering if it was the right thing to do. He could still hear the cold anger in his voice. It’s your turn to suffer. He barely suppressed a shudder. Hadn’t he suffered enough already?

"Something else is bothering you," Tifa said slowly. She didn't remind him of their decision to always talk to each other though he knew that she was hinting at it. He didn't want to talk about it. He never wanted to talk about it. Everything would be a helluva lot simpler if those five years could just be forgotten, erase from memory, gone forever. The world, however, didn't seem content to let it be. Everything always had to come back to those few years. Why not another point in time? Why did it always have to be the same thing over and over? Five bloody years. He shook his head. Damn them.

"How's Cid doing?" he asked, purposefully changing the subject. He would talk about it when he was good and ready. Later. A long time later. Somewhere in the very distant future. Maybe when it didn't seem to matter so much, when it didn't hurt so much. If such a time existed.

Tifa snorted contemptuously, turning away from him and walking from the door, slamming it behind her. He winced with the sound, his head sinking into his hands. He was so stupid. He wanted to hit himself. He just couldn't tell her. She deserved more than anything to know about his past. Why couldn't he ever tell her anything about it? What was wrong with him? He couldn't trust her. He felt so foolish, being unable to trust her like this. How long had they known each other? Forever. And he still couldn't tell her anything important.

Yuffie shook her head, frowning. "You are such a dumb-ass, Cloud," she growled. "Why do you always have to do that?" She didn't wait for an answer, knowing full well that he would have none to give her. Pulling a jacket over her, she yanked the door open and left, following after Tifa.

Red sat on the floor silently for a long time, watching Cloud through his one eye, thinking about the events that had transpired in the past few moments. He didn't understand human behavior sometimes, couldn't see motives, couldn't comprehend their emotions. He could, however, see what had just happened. He stood and slowly padded across the room, nudging Cloud.

"Why can't I do anything right?" he asked, his voice muffled by his hands, sounding extremely pitiful. "Yuffie's right. I am a dumb-ass. I couldn't pour piss out of a boot with the instructions written on the heel."

Red chuckled at the analogy, but he soon sobered, bringing his thoughts back to the current situation. "That's not true, Cloud. You know that. You're not stupid, and I know you do the right things, Cloud." He paused, fighting for the right words. "It's just that... Well, you just have troubles communicating with people, is all. After being along all your childhood, I think that that is perfectly understandable."

It was Cloud's turn to laugh lightly. "Trouble communicating? That's the understatement of the year." He sighed, his mind wandering to Tifa. "Red, how am I supposed to tell Tifa that I... I can't even... It's too hard to even say the words to you, Red. What am I supposed to do?" He shook his head, rubbing his brow. "I can't tell her anything. Why can't I, Red? What's wrong with me?"

Red cocked his head to one side, finding the question completely absurd. "Nothing's wrong with you, Cloud. You just aren't ready yet, I think. You have obviously had a traumatizing time that you find hard to discuss. We all have parts of ourselves we are uncomfortable divulging. Tifa knows this. I think she will understand. Just give her some time to cool down and recover a bit of her composure."

He nodded slowly. "Thanks, Red," he declared absentmindedly as he stood and left the room. He needed to be alone right now. He had to think, had to clear his mind and soul of all the things that had happened, of everything he had just remembered. He tread softly down the steps of the inn, exited out the back door and into the chill of the January air. He would sort everything out for himself first, then he could tell her. He could tell everyone. They all had a right to know about this. He stepped down off of the stoop in the back of the inn and into the alleys. With his feet splashing through slushy puddles, he started walking.

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"Tifa, wait!"

Tifa didn't turn back to Yuffie, didn't wait for the younger woman. She didn't need this right now. She just needed to think by herself. It seemed frighteningly obvious that Cloud didn't want to be serious. He couldn't tell her anything. What kind of relationship could they have if they couldn't even speak with each other about all the important things in their pasts? They would never be able to talk to one another, to let the other know of all the horrors they had been through. They could never do anything together with that on the horizon. It would start with them not telling each other everything. Then, they wouldn't be able to trust each other. Then, everything would be a lie.

She didn't want something like that. She wanted so much to be with Cloud her entire life, to spend all her time with him, to love him. She wanted him to want that, too. To think that such a stupid thing as not being able to speak with each other was preventing them from having that dream and actually having some degree of happiness in life was frightening. What if this thing that they never spoke about drove them apart? What if by some chance, he would tell her something that she didn't want to hear? She didn't want their relationship to be over. She couldn't handle that.

Yuffie grabbed her arm, yanking her back sharply, stopping her flight from the hotel and pulling her away from her thoughts. "You can't run from everything, Tifa," she said quietly, pushing her against the wall and holding her there. She leaned in close to Tifa, her eyes cold. "You have to face this, Tifa."

Tifa shook her head, feeling tears building up in her eyes again, feeling anger boil her blood. "Go away, Yuffie," she growled. She didn't need the ninja brat to tell her what to do. "When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you. I can find all my answers by myself, thank you very much. I don't need your help."

Yuffie shook her head, frowning. "Yes, you do. You don't have to be alone in this, you know. You don't have to be out there all by yourself. You have people you can rely on. You're not all alone. You have me. You have your friends. You have Cloud."

She frowned, her anger breaking as she pushed Yuffie away. "You're so naïve! I don't have Cloud! I don't have anyone! Nobody understands anything! It's always like this! People always say they understand, but how can they?! They don't know me, they don't feel my pain, know my troubles! They can't understand! Nobody can."

"Then help us to understand! Help us help you!" Yuffie ordered. Her eyes narrowed. "But you don't want that, do you? You don't want anybody to understand! You like being alone! You want to make everything that much harder so that the only thing on anybody's mind is you! You're the final line. Everything has to be about you! You and Cloud. You are always bitching about how you and Cloud never share anything! When was the last time you and he sat down alone and actually talked about what happened five years ago?! Huh?! When was the last time you specifically asked him to tell you what happened so that you could help him?! Let me help you, Tifa! Never. You have never talked about it."

Tifa blinked back the tears, her chin quivering. "You're such a liar! You don't know anything!"

Yuffie's eyes narrowed. "It's true, though, isn't it?" she asked quietly. "You're just too chicken to admit it to yourself, Tifa."

"You don't understand anything."

"Don't I? I think I do," she declared, her tone ice. "I think you're the one who has the clouded judgment here. I think you know that I'm right, that everything has to be about you." Yuffie felt her throat constrict with the words, felt the hurt that she had bottled up throughout the months they had fought Sephiroth together. They had fought that entire time together. How much of it had been for her? How much of the fighting had been for anything else? Tifa could do anything she wanted. And she did, and that hurt. Yuffie bit her lower lip. "Do you know how much that hurts? That everything has to be you. You, you, you, you! God, you're so selfish."

Tifa slapped Yuffie with a howl of anger, numb to the sting that bit into her fingers. The sound echoed through the empty hall for what seemed like an eternity before Tifa turned and fled, tears streaming from her eyes, sobs threatening to consume her. Yuffie watched her go, breathing heavily with her rage, rubbing away the hurt from her cheek and not feeling one bit sorry for her actions.

"You bitch," she breathed. "You deserved it."

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No smoking.

It was driving him crazy. He would give anything to be able to take just one of his favorite cigs, light up right then and there, take a long drag, and just blow it into that damn sign. It had to sit there, so perfectly white on the clean walls, red circle with a line slashed through a cigarette, black letters that taunted him. Rules were always made to be broken. Unfortunately, he couldn't break this one. There was no way he could smoke in here. They had made sure of that. They'd taken all his smokes away. The bastards.

He hated it here. Everything was boring. Even when Barret and Marlene had been with him a few moments before, he had still been bored out of his mind. He hated being sick. He felt like crap, but he didn't have the patience to lay around all day and get better. He was horrible when he was sick, and he knew it. He couldn't help himself. When he was bored, he complained or started counting lights. There weren't enough lights in the hospital room to keep a two year old occupied. He could count the number of lights on one hand. And now there was no one to complain to, either.

Cid pushed himself into a sitting position, glancing out the open door and into the deserted hall. He couldn't very well stay here. He was going crazy doing nothing. He was tired of sleeping. And no one would let him get out of bed much less go anywhere. The television mounted on the wall didn't even work.

He pulled the blankets off of him, setting them aside. No one would miss him much. Picking through the wires hooking him up to various monitor things, he pulled them off, setting them aside as he swung his legs around to the side of the bed. He pushed himself off of the bed, wincing as his bare feet came in contact with the cold tiles of the floor. Slowly straightening, he took a step from the bed and nearly fell. He forced his knees to lock, keeping him standing through the stumble. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

He took a deep breath, pulling the back of the hospital gown together with one hand as he slowly walked to the door. He glanced down one end. Nobody. Just a long corridor ending in a window. No way out, either. He turned his gaze down the other way and pulled his head back into his room sharply. There was an entire slew of nurses down there just waiting for him to try and sneak past them.

"Damn it," he muttered, leaning back against the wall, sighing. How was he ever going to get out of there? He sighed, looking around the room. There was a tiny bathroom off to one end, a couple of chairs and a small table near the window where a pile of neatly folded clothes were sitting. The two beds were on one end of the room. There wasn't much to help him. Pushing himself from the wall, he strode across the room to the window, wondering how many floors he had below him. Maybe he could jump it...

His eyes locked on a small sign posted on the window. Fire escape. He glanced out of it, his gaze landing on the metal staircase. He smiled. He was lucky alright. Now, just to climb out of the window. He was almost out of this boring hell and back in action. Screw Mako poisoning. Nothing could keep a Highwind down.

He pulled the pile of clothes from the table, glancing at them and noticing, quite to his dismay that they were Cloud's. That kid didn't need his stuff here; the lucky bastard had left earlier this morning. He shrugged and started pulling them on, wincing at the tightness of the slacks around his waist. "Damn it, Cloud," he breathed. "Why the hell you gotta be so skinny? Telling me to eat that crappy hospital food."

He unfolded the shirt, frowning at the hole through the fabric before discarding the hospital gown and pulling it over his head. The shirt had to be, of course, the wrong size too. It flopped over his shoulders and down his arms with sleeves that were just a little bit too long, collecting unnaturally at his waist so that he had to pull it down over the pants. The kid had to have all his clothes tailored. It was the only explanation. Nobody made sizes like these.

Cid pushed up his sleeves and glanced around for a pair of shoes, boots, anything. There wasn't anything that he could see except a pair of regulation hospital slippers. He shrugged, stuffed his bare feet into them, and turned to the window,

finding the release on it. He flipped the handle and pushed the window out before climbing onto the fire escape, nearly losing his slipper in the process. He closed the window as best he could from the outside and straightened.

The first thing that struck him was that it was cold. Very cold.

He sucked in a deep breath of the chilling air, choked on it, and ended up doubled over as he fought for breath. He coughed until his lungs ached, his throat burning, and all he could think was that he was going to suffocate on a fire escape. Every time he seemed to regain just enough of his composure to take a shaky breath, he lost it again in another bout of coughing. He took a deep breath, his eyes watering, and held it, fighting against the tickling in his throat until finally he couldn't hold it any longer. He let it out, gasping for breath, and wiping the tears from his eyes. He coughed once more and cleared his throat, spitting over the rail of the fire escape. He dragged his hand across his mouth and grimaced at the bloody froth that came away on his fingertips. He had to get out of there.

Ignoring his cold hands and feet, he started down the fire escape to the alley below him, pausing every now and then to let a bout of nausea pass or force away the weakness he felt in his knees or pull at the uncomfortable fitting pants. Finally, he reached the last ladder, and he grabbed it and held onto it as it fell to the ground. The jar it made when it stopped was almost enough for him to lose his grasp, but he held onto it firmly as it stopped.

Stepping off, he stamped some warmth back into his feet and tucked his freezing hands underneath his armpits. He would go to the one place in Junon where he knew he wouldn't need any gil to pay for anything. He could just find it, and change into something that actually fit him, and sit back and get warm. Just the thought of it fueled his legs, and he started walking. The Highwind was berthed somewhere in the city, and he was going to find it.