

Painted Black

Chapter Six

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The room was silent.

Except for, of course, the joyous laughter, the murmur of voices, the crackle of a warm fire burning in the hearth. There was the tinkling of ice in glasses and the clatter of forks onto dishes, the popping of a cork out of a bottle of wine and the bellowing orders of cooks every time the swinging door to the kitchen was pushed open by a waitress. None of this was important, though. It all seemed so incredibly far away from the small group eating in the corner that the huge waves of sounds might have been silent. Nobody sitting there really wanted to hear any of it, so it seemed as though the room was quiet with their table at the center of it all, their fighting the cause of it all, and their tension the effect of the fighting. So it didn't really matter if anyone else was chatting comfortably in the warm restaurant of the hotel because they were silent, and, if they weren't talking, it seemed as though the rest of the world really had nothing else to say.

Cloud moved the mess of greens on his plate around unenthusiastically, leaning his head on one hand tiredly as he watched the greenish mush envelope little chunks of meat and potatoes. Tifa was sitting opposite him, but he didn't dare to look at her, regardless of how much he wanted to see her flawless features and glowing face. If he looked up, he was afraid that she would skewer him with an angry glare, or maybe she would've even give his glance so much of a thought. He wasn't so sure what was worse. He hated her not talking to him, but he wasn't sure he wanted to face her ire. So, he tried not to acknowledge her. Having her sitting so close to him wasn't helping him do that.

Yuffie had long since stopped picking at her food, pushing the plate away from her and leaning back in her chair, a frown on her face. Sometimes, when Tifa looked her way, she would glare. When he glanced at her, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as though she was measuring him in her mind. He couldn't stand that type of look. He would grimace and quickly turn his gaze elsewhere, unable to stop wondering what exactly she was thinking of him. It seemed that Yuffie was intent on making her own side in the fight between him and Tifa even though all she had really managed to do as of now was pick a nasty fight between herself and Tifa. He didn't know what to think of that, so he tried not to. The fight probably had a simple reason for being that had absolutely nothing to do with him. At least, that was what he hoped.

Regardless of that, he was beginning to think that the entire situation was so unbelievably stupid it was sad. Adults fighting over nothing, acting like little children squabbling over a toy or the swings at the playground. It was stupid. He said so, breaking the silence. Red glanced at him with a slight nod in agreement. Barret didn't seem to know exactly what to say. Marlene took a sip of her milk, watching Cloud with earnest eyes, thinking that maybe he could end this fight. Tifa crossed her arms stubbornly and looked away. Yuffie frowned and leaned back forward to rest her elbows on the table.

Tifa glared at Cloud, frowning at his comment. "Oh, this is stupid," she snapped. "So stupid. Then why don't you just tell us what it is that's bothering you, if you're so against this argument."

Yuffie's fist pounded down on the table top, rattling the dishes. She shook her head, her expression dark. "That isn't what this argument is about, Tifa, and you know it. You don't want him to tell us what's bothering him. You could care less if any of us knew. You just want him to tell you."

"Is there something wrong with that?" Tifa asked, her voice rising in anger. "Is there something wrong with me being concerned about Cloud?! Is it wrong for me to want him to trust me?!"

Yuffie stood abruptly, leaning forward across the table to glare down at Tifa. "It is when you lie about it." Her voice picked up a mocking tone. "'Ooh, why don't you tell us, Cloud?' 'We all so very concerned about you, Cloud.' Bullshit! What you really mean to say is, 'Cloud, I'm concerned about you. Can we talk about it?' What's wrong with saying that?! Why do you have to bring us into this when you have no knowledge of what we want to do? Why do you do this when you have no intention of telling us anything?! You just need to have one more thing to share secretly between you and him!"

Tifa leaned back in her chair. "You're just jealous."

Yuffie snorted. "Jealous of what?! You and Cloud hardly have a relationship worth being jealous of!"

Tifa was standing then, her face red with anger. "That's not true! You take that back! We have something better than whatever crap you have, at least!"

Cloud groaned, his head sinking into his hands. This hadn't been what he had had in mind. He had wanted it all just to stop. He hated the fighting. They shouldn't be fighting with each other; they were friends, close friends. Close friends weren't supposed to fight. Besides, they had more important things to deal with. They had to find Vincent. They had to figure out why the Lifestream had spewed forth from the Planet. Cid had to recover completely. Clouds squeezed his eyes shut. What he wouldn't give to have Cid around to straighten everyone out. The guy had a way of getting people to rally together; he was a born leader. Cloud couldn't do that. All he could really do now was sit down and feel like a little kid with adults arguing about him.

"Yo!" Barret's loud voice cut through Tifa and Yuffie's argument, drawing their attention to him. "Jest look here. I don' wanna get kicked outta this place 'cause you two can't keep yer holes shut. This is stupid, end of story. So sit yer asses down, and shut up."

Yuffie glared at Barret, but she sat down quickly, returning to her former position, her elbows on the table. Tifa slowly returned to her seat, a frown etched on her features. She glowered at Yuffie. "You have horrible table manners," she declared, looking pointedly at Yuffie's elbows. The young ninja made no move to change her position.

"You just need to nitpick every damn thing I do, don't you?" she countered, glancing at Cloud's sunken head. "You aren't yelling at Cloud; his table manners are just as bad as mine."

Tifa shook her head. "Leave him out of this."

"Why? Why the hell should I? What right have you to look at my table manners and insult them while you see Cloud's and turn your head? What is with this 'see no evil, hear no evil' attitude you have towards him?" Yuffie stood and started to leave. "He's no bloody saint."

The entire table seemed to stop upon hearing the comment. Cloud didn't really care much about the sting in the words — he had been called things that were much worse in the past — but he turned sharply to Tifa, his breath catching in his throat. Tifa's eyes darkened, the flickering light of the lamps in the room casting long shadows about her face. He tried to catch her attention, tried to tell her to forget it. She wasn't paying any attention to him.

"What did you say?" she asked, her tone cold as ice.

Yuffie sneered at her. "You heard me the first time. I don't think I need to repeat it. And there's no use defending him, either, because it's the truth. The only way to defend yourself against the truth is to lie, and that would be rather unsaintly, don't you think? Don't you think?"

Tifa stood once more, pounding the table as she did so. "You little bitch!"

Yuffie opened her mouth to respond, but her words were cut off by another voice.

"Stop it!"

Tifa and Yuffie turned, simultaneously glancing over to Marlene. The young girl was standing as well, a white napkin clutched in her hand, her small eyes glimmering with tears. "Can't you see?" she asked. "You two are supposed to be friends! You're supposed to help one another, not hurt each other. And you're hurting all of us, too. You're acting like little kids. Just stop it. Stop it!"

Marlene threw the napkin down onto her plate and fled from the dining room, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Barret stood, took a moment to glare at both Yuffie and Tifa, and made a move to follow his daughter. "Marlene! Shit!" He started to run after her, watching as her small stature disappeared among the throng of people milling about the hotel's lobby. When he got to the doors of inn, he stepped through them, blowing a breath of air into the chilly night. She was gone. "Shit."

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She had been wandering alone for what seemed like forever. She had run too far, too fast, without paying attention to where she was going. Now she was lost. She had no idea which way would take her back to the hotel, back to her father, back to Red, back to Cloud, or Cid, or even Yuffie or Tifa. The fighting was even better than this. When they were all fighting, at least she wasn't alone. She was alone now. And it was very dark out. She was alone in the dark. She was scared. She kept close to the road in the street lights, biting back her tears as thoughts of what might be lurking in the shadows came unbidden to her mind. She had heard tales in Midgar of thieves, and muggers, and little rat-like creatures that chewed off children's noses. Sure, this was Junon, but what was to stop Junon's shadows from having the same unnamed horrors concealed within their depths? The shadows all looked the same. Everywhere. They were always the dark pools that covered the alleys, the corners, and the tiny gaps between the streetlights. Those gaps were so black that they seemed to be an endless hole, waiting to suck unsuspecting people into them. Her father had told her of things that sucked in men like that. Maybe the shadows were living. Maybe they were creatures that only came out in the night to prowl the empty streets in hopes of finding someone to fill the emptiness inside of them.

She walked over one such gap, expecting to fall into endless oblivion. Her shoes hit hard cement as she hurried through the darkness to the next pool of light. It could just be that this shadow wasn't particularly hungry that night. She wasn't going to bet her luck on the next one. The next one might want a young girl to eat. Maybe this first one had just been sleeping. She didn't want to go on to the next one. If she could stay underneath this street lamp all night, she would, but it was cold, and her fingers were freezing. She wanted to go home where her daddy could build up a big fire or turn on the heat, and all the lights could be turned on to chase away every shadow in every corner of every room, and she wouldn't have to worry about the creatures coming to get her because her daddy would be there to keep her safe.

She was stupid for running away, end of story. She stumbled, her shoe catching on a crack in the sidewalk, and she fell. Her knees scraped painfully against the hard ground, the cold air stinging the wound. Her tears broke free from her eyes, and she started crying as she pulled her legs in front of her and sat down. Little droplets of blood stained her white tights red, and the force from the fall had ripped holes into the thin material. She felt so helpless now. All she wanted to do was to sit there and let the cold just take her away, so she wouldn't have to worry about the shadows coming to claim her.

A man was standing on the edge of the light. Her breath caught in her throat. Was this a shadow-creature coming to eat her? He stepped closer to her, his face dirty, his hands grimy, his hair oily and hanging in filthy clumps. His clothing was tattered; it seemed to be the only possessions he owned. He wandered deeper into the light of the lamp, his dark eyes catching the luminescence and glittering with an almost wicked gleam. This was a shadow-creature. It had to be. It was one of those men who would wander the streets of Midgar at night searching for people they could take away. She stood and backed away, straightening her dress.

"Why are you crying, little girl?" he asked. His voice was soft, like the pale moonlight that would shine down through the cracks in the plates sometimes and strike the patches of grass that grew beneath the holes. It was a trap, she was sure. It was a trap to lead her into trusting the dark wraith. She would not fall for it. She would not be taken away from her father and all her "aunts" and "uncles". She would put up with their fighting and yelling and screaming if only it meant that she wouldn't have to deal with having no one. She didn't want to be like this shadow. She didn't want to wander the streets alone in the cold and kidnap little girls so that she wouldn't be alone. She wouldn't fall for this trap, not now, not ever.

"Go away," she ordered, her voice cracking and betraying her fear. She would be strong. Like Tifa.

The man stepped back a pace, holding his arms open in a gesture to prove that he was unarmed. It meant nothing to her. He might as well have been opening his arms in a threatening posture that would consume her in the dark depths in his ragged clothes. "Are you lost, little girl?" he queried, bushy eyebrows knitting together in concern. "Maybe I can help you

get back to your mother.”

She shook her head fervently, walking back until she was touching the icy metal of the lamp’s post. “I don’t have a mother,” she declared, her tone voicing the strength that she didn’t feel. “I don’t need your help. Leave me alone!”

He didn’t leave her alone, walking toward her with a slight limp, his arms flopping down to his sides. He stopped in front of her, dropping to his knees so that he was level with her gaze. “Come now, little girl. I ain’t gonna hurt you. I just want to help. Where are you from, little girl?”

She would’ve given anything to just fall into his embrace and let him take her back to the warm hotel room. She wanted to do that, she wanted to let this crazy old man protect her and bring her home. She couldn’t, though. She couldn’t trust this man. He was a stranger. He could still very well be one of those shadows that ate the little children in all the stories and tales and rumors. How would she ever know until it was too late?

“Ah, there, there, child. I ain’t gonna hurt you,” he repeated. “I’ll take you back to your daddy then. You say you don’t have a mother? Well, I’m sure your daddy’s right and worried about you, little girl. Where are you from?”

She had trouble following his words. It was like he skipped from topic to topic, adding sentences that meant nothing to her while speaking of things that would help her. She didn’t know how to listen to this man. She didn’t want to listen to him. Surely, everything he said was a lie. He didn’t really want to help her; he just wanted to use her, or steal her, or do something horrible to her back in the shadows. It was like one of those stories that had always been in the news in Midgar, one of those stories that her daddy would shake his head at before turning off the television in disgust.

“Go away,” she said, her chin quivering. She didn’t like this. Her gaze found the shadows that were flickering across the ground behind the man. They were reaching out from the alleys, coming to get her. She was so afraid that they would get her, and take her away, and eat her. Just like this man was going to take her away. She didn’t want to leave. Where was her daddy?

He reached out, grabbed her arm. “Come on, little girl. You don’t really want me to go away. I’ll find your daddy.”

She struggled against him, trying to pull her arm from his grasp. He was hurting her. “Go away! I don’t need your help! Leave me alone!”

The shadows were growing larger, laughing at her, reaching out to grab her, to take her away from her daddy, from her home. She yanked her arm from the old man, turning her wrist to break his hold. He let go. She stumbled back, falling on her rump. He was walking to her again, his face blurry through her tears, his mouth moving with words that she could no longer hear.

“Wait, little girl.”

He was reaching for her once more, but she was already scurrying away from him, turning around to launch herself in a run down the street to the next lamp. And then she was through that one, and running to the next one. And the next one, running from the shadows only to be met by more. Fear fueled her legs, kept her fleeing from the dark though she gasped for air between her sobs. She wanted more than anything to just be able to sit down and forget about everything. She wanted everything to be all right again, but, because she couldn’t stop running, she feared that it would never be that way again. Everyone would always be fighting against each other, the shadows would always meet her at the other side of the street lamp. She would never be safe again.

With a wordless cry, she launched herself around a corner, her eyes squeezed tightly against the cold wind that bit into her face and froze the tears running down her cheeks. She just wanted to go home, but now she realized that the probability of that happening was very slim. Nobody even cared that she was out here, or else they would have come looking to take her home. She might as well be by herself, wandering the cold darkness alone since nobody cared enough to stop her.

Somebody grabbed her, yanking her to a halt.

She didn't open her eyes, her fists pounding into soft cloth and flesh as she struggled and shrieked, her voice carrying through the cold night. "Leave me alone!" she cried, over and over until her voice was too hoarse to even manage that and her throat was too sore to even sob aloud anymore. She wriggled futilely, trying to escape from the grip that held her. But, it was to no avail, and what seemed like hours later, she was too tired to struggle. She slowly opened her eyes, fearing that all she would see were the shadows and that she had been caught by their trickery.

Her mouth opened in horror, and she fought to escape with a renewed strength. He was kneeling down next to her, holding her shoulders in his grasp, tight enough to hold, not to hurt her. But that didn't matter. He might have been hurting her anyway since he had hurt so many others. What was he doing?

"Let me go," she panted, her movements finally stopping as she realized that she could never escape from him. "Let me go!"

He shook his head. "No." He picked her up, settling her over his shoulder. He was oblivious to the pounding of her fists against his red cloak. "You'll freeze to death out here," he explained. "I would hate that to happen. I'll take you to someone."

She shook her head. "Why should you?!" she demanded, her voice full of hurt and fear. "You hurt Cloud!"

He looked at her sharply, his face contorting with conflicting emotions. He opened his mouth to speak, couldn't decide what to say. Finally, he said, "That was only because I had to." He frowned as he started walking. "I wanted to stop this," he murmured, closing his eyes. He shuddered darkly. "He deserved to live, though. If only to have his turn."

She frowned. "Set me down," she ordered though her tone lacked any authority. "I don't want to be helped by you. All you do is hurt people."

He stiffened at that remark. "That is not true," he muttered darkly. "And, even if it is, then it is only because I was hurt first. It's someone else's turn, now. It isn't mine anymore. So, if you'll stop being so stubborn, I will take you to a place where you will be safe."

"I'll never be safe with you," she whispered. "You're as bad as the shadows. I hate you! You make everyone hate each other. You made them fight! I don't want to be with you!"

He shifted her weight as he stepped off the sidewalk and onto the road. "Well, then, you won't be with me. I said I was going to take you to someone, not somewhere. And don't worry about who; I know you'll be fine with him."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Give me one reason why I should trust you. My daddy told me not to trust strangers."

He chuckled. "My dear Marlene, I am hardly a stranger. Would I ever do anything to hurt a pretty young lady such as yourself?"

She wasn't sure what to say to that, how to answer it. She didn't know the answer to his question. Days before, she had thought that he would not have done anything to harm Cloud. So, as he walked along the streets of Junon, all she could do was think about the question and fear what the answer might be.