

Painted Black
Chapter Seven

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There she was, towering over even the tallest buildings surrounding her like majestic bird with silver wings glowing in the pale moonlight. She was resting in her normal berth, just a few more blocks away, tall against the black sky and twinkling stars. He would be there shortly, smelling the pleasant aroma of the wood of her decks and the greasy oil in her components, listening to the peaceful lull of her engine as it worked almost silently to keep her innards warm. He would be up on her decks, looking over the quiet town of Junon from her perch on the high landing platform. All he had to do was get there.

Easier said than done.

Cid wrenched his legs into movement, wishing that the cold hadn't numbed them into blocks of ice. Moving just a few feet seemed to take forever, and he was sure that without the prospect of his nice, warm ship to motivate him, he would've collapsed into some alley a long time ago. He had almost done just that countless times before, when the breath inexplicably left his lungs and left him gasping and choking, or when his legs refused to hold his weight any longer and he stumbled to his knees, or when the world twisted sharply around him and forced him to lean against something until the turning stopped playing havoc with him. Sometimes, his feet were like lead weights, refusing to comply with his commands, shuffling along as though they didn't care if he froze out in the streets. Other times, it was as though he was walking on air, his feet never touching the ground, or, if they did, it was so distant that all he could do was stumble blindly until the feeling passed.

Either way, he had to make it to the Highwind. He had no other choice. He had no idea which way he had gone, so going back to the hospital was definitely out of the question. Besides, he had no wish to return to the bloody building, and he wasn't about to admit his mistake in leaving it in the first place. He'd have to drop first. As things were going, he didn't think that that would take as long as he hoped. With a grimace, he realized that he might be dragging his pride through the mud just a tad bit earlier than would suit him.

Damn, his feet were cold.

The hospital slippers seemed to be about as warming as wearing nothing at all, only they soaked up any puddles of slush he inadvertently stumbled into. He would have taken them off, but he figured that it was better to have cold and wet feet than to have cold and cut up feet. The Junon streets and sidewalks really needed some maintenance. He had tripped over countless potholes, stubbed his toes numerous times on loose cobblestones, skirted around numerous areas filled with shattered glass.

He figured it didn't matter much, though. The Highwind's berth was within reach. He could just climb in the ship, crawl into bed, and go to sleep, all warm and comfortable, and who would give a shit if he slept in all day? He was captain there; he didn't have any nurses to wake him up and tell him what to do which was, from his point of view, a very good thing. All he needed to do was go through the next few blocks, a ride in an elevator, a walk across the landing stretch, down the steps, second door to the right, through the hall, last door on the left, five steps to the bed, throw back the covers, and voila! Home sweet home. Of course, he'd have to get there first.

"Cold feet, Highwind?"

He nearly stumbled over his feet in surprise, turning sharply to look back at the sudden speaker. His heart was thundering in his throat, pounding through his ears caused by some inexplicable fear that rooted itself deep within his innards. It wasn't the fear he had known when he was a fighter pilot during the war with Wutai, nor was it the anxiety that came with everyday mishaps. Nervousness. No, it was far deeper than that. He would have turned and fled had not an even deeper curiosity as to why he should feel that way rooted his feet to the ground.

He licked dry lips, clearing his throat. The action almost made him collapse into another spasm of coughing, but he managed to end it before it started. "Yeah," he declared, forcing a false bravado into his tone as he eyed the shadows in

which the man was hiding. "A little."

"I'd imagine." The man stepped out from the dark alley and into the pale moonlight. Cid stepped back involuntarily, afraid of who it was that knew his name and was stalking him. He was surprised to find that it was actually a man he considered his friend. He arched an eyebrow, wondering why that fear hadn't left him yet.

"Vincent," Cid greeted slowly, trying to mask his confusion. Vincent Valentine was the last person he expected to find wandering the streets of Junon. He hadn't even seen the mysterious man since... well, since the last battle with Sephiroth. "What, uh, brings you here?"

Vincent grinned, a shadow of a smile. "Just needed to clear a few things up with Cloud," he stated simply. "And give you a runaway."

"What?"

Vincent didn't explain; he just pulled a young girl from where she was hiding behind him, pushed her a bit toward Cid. She glanced back once before running across the short span of street. Cid knelt down as she wrapped her arms around him, letting loose a sob as she clung to him. He picked her up, grimacing and wondering if he'd be able to hold her for any amount of time. His aching muscles were already protesting, his knees ready to buckle at any moment. He ignored them, smoothing out Marlene's hair.

"What's a matter?" he asked quietly, trying to shift her weight to a less precarious position. God, he was ready to just topple over.

She sniffled, her hands tight on the cloth of Cloud's too small shirt. She was pulling the back of the shirt up. It was digging into his neck. That was just one more discomfort to add onto a list of too many. She pulled her head off of his shoulder, leaning back to look at him. "I want my daddy," she gasped, wiping her tears away with one knuckle. "I wanna go home."

Cid frowned. "Well, where're you staying? Vin?"

Marlene shook her head before Vincent could open his mouth to answer. "Don't talk to him," she whispered harshly, her eyes welling up with tears once more. "He hurt Cloud. He makes everyone fight. Don't talk to him."

Cid's brow furrowed in confusion. "Huh? What the..."

Vincent shrugged, pulling his red cloak tighter about him. "Just needed to clear a few things up with Cloud," he repeated slowly. His eyes narrowed. "As I said."

"What the hell are ya talking about?"

Vincent didn't respond, shrugging again though whether it was in helplessness or a lack of care for explanation wasn't clear. He merely turned and started walking away back into the shadows. He paused briefly, glancing at Cid over his shoulder expectantly. "You take good care of her, Highwind," he ordered. He flashed a small smile. "I would hate for you to get involved any more than that."

Cid opened his mouth to ask a question, but Vincent was gone before the word even had time to form. He frowned. What the hell had Vincent been talking about? Getting involved with what? He wanted more than anything to just break down into a long string of his favorite curses, to let them roll off of his tongue in a horde of vulgar sentences that would make any sailor blush beet red. Of course, with Marlene clinging to him like a little monkey on a tree, voicing any of those interesting obscenities was out of the question. She had no need to listen to his "potty mouth".

"I'm cold," she declared suddenly, breaking him from his own thoughts.

He grimaced, stamping the warmth back into his feet as he turned and began to walk slowly along again. "Yeah, me, too." That was the understatement of the year. Just about every part of his body had gotten to the point where it was so cold, it actually hurt. It prickled like a hundred tiny stings biting into his flesh, and, where there was no pain, there was only a profound numbness. He sighed, blowing a breath of air into the cold night which quickly crystallized into a fog. "Almost there."

He walked down the block, feeling Marlene's weight heavy in his arms. He didn't think he'd be able to get to the Highwind while carrying her and was appalled by that fact. It was sickening to know that he was, well, weak. Oh, well. He stopped and leaned over, setting Marlene back on the ground.

"How come you can't carry me?" she asked, straightening the wrinkled cloth of her dress. "I hurt my knees. Carry me?"

Cid cringed, but he managed to twist the expression into something that somewhat resembled a grin. "Oh, come on. I'm a decrepit, old man, ya know. My back's going to Heck."

She giggled, just the response he had been looking for. Leave it to a Highwind to turn something into a joke. She grabbed his hand and started pulling him down the street, seemingly oblivious to the cold that she had been complaining about moments before. He shook his head. Was she actually skipping? Maybe she was just glad that she was with him. Or too afraid to know how to act.

It didn't seem to matter any.

"You're so slow!" she declared, pulling him along with all the energy of the young child she was.

"Hey!" His feet plodded to a heavy stop next to her, but he was grinning like a fool. "Stop being so harsh. Give a geezer a break, huh?"

She laughed at him, yanking on his hand. "You're so silly!"

He chuckled softly. In all his years of bearing the brunt of numerous insults, he could never recall being called silly. Asshole, among other less tasteful things, but never silly. It was like calling a scumbag a prince. It seemed somehow suiting that Marlene would be the one to call him that. He didn't think he was silly.

They walked in silence down the street, her small footsteps scraping against the cobblestones with a lively sound, his almost silent in the semi-soggy slippers. It was like that until the end of the block. She seemed to help fuel his legs, to give him the will to keep walking. The dizziness that had plagued him so often before, the fatigue, the light-headedness, they all seemed to be frightened away by the appearance of this little girl. That was unlikely, though. He knew it was something more along the lines of having to be strong for a frightened child. That, in itself, seemed to be silly. The truth wasn't always gloriously intellectual. So what if he felt like acting the fool?

He boosted her up the steep step to the lift onto the landing platform, the Highwind having disappeared from view. He followed suit, stepping up onto the slabs of metal that served as an elevator. He bit back a curse as he stubbed his toe on the bloody apparatus. This was definitely not his day.

"Ready for a ride?" he asked, stepping to the controls. She nodded her head eagerly, smiling as he pushed the button. The elevator jolted into action, starting upward with the creak of rusty hinges. The sound gave way to the slight whir of a motor as the lift slowly made its way upward. A few seconds and another jolt later, they were level with the concrete landing platform which housed every type of plane from the aerobatic Champion to the majestic Highwind. It was the airport, the greatest place for any pilot to ever visit, next to the cockpit, of course.

Too bad he wasn't in the mood for sharing some old flying tales. All he wanted was to be able to make it across the strip of concrete to where the Highwind was floating lightly in the air. He was too close now to be shot down by a few hundred feet of empty space. Screw the heavy blasts of wind that blew strongly across the land, sending red tags flapping and rocking

the planes back and forth. That wasn't going to stop him now. He ran one hand through his hair, grabbing Marlene's small fingers with his other.

"C'mon," he declared, starting across the landing strip. The wind could make him as cold as it wanted. He was going to be out of the cold anyway. The colder he was now, the warmer he'd feel later when he was inside the airship. Yep, Highwind, he thought with a frown. There's some twisted logic.

A few minutes later, they were next to the ship, standing on the small flight of steps that led up to a small doorway on the side of the Highwind. Cid shook his head ruefully as the wind buffeted the decks of the ship. The ship that could be landed on a dime, if the right pilot was at its controls. Right now, the dime would have to be ten miles wide. He had crashed with better looking results than that. "What a crappy landing," he growled, pounding on the closed door of the ship. "Danny! Let us in, you good-for-nothin'!" No response. Cid pounded again. "Danny!! Don't make me break this door down! I hate it when I hafta hurt my baby!"

There was a muffled response from inside the ship, followed shortly by a slamming door, a crash, and grumbling. Cid couldn't refrain from grinning as the door whipped open to reveal a disheveled, sleepy-eyed wanton for a pilot. "What the hell dya want?" he mumbled, knuckling his eyes to clear his vision. He blinked a few times, a startled expression forming on his young features. "Cap?!"

"Yo," Cid greeted solemnly. "Let us in, ya stupid bugger. It's cold out here."

Danny sketched a quick salute, moving from the doorway with an air of uncertainty around him. Cid pushed Marlene through the door first before following closely after, shutting the door with his foot.

"How the... What...?" Danny sputtered. "I thought you were in the hospital, or something!"

Cid shrugged. "Not for me, Danny boy. Take care of Marlene, huh? And practice your landings, will ya? You're making me look bad here, kid. You couldn't park your ass in a chair."

Danny nodded slowly. "I'll, uh, take that as a compliment, I guess." He winced as Cid's hand slapped into the back of his head. He rubbed the spot, trying to straighten his hair in the process. He grimaced. "Or not. Lemme just take Marlene, then. Where do you want to go?" he asked her, leading her off down the hall.

"How about to bed, you fool?!" Cid called after them, kicking the cold slippers from his feet. The floor boards of the Highwind were warmer than they were anyway. Shaking his head, he forced himself to turn down the narrow hall and start down the flight of stairs, traveling deeper into the heart of the airship. It certainly was nice to be back in warmth. Unfortunately, his freezing body didn't quite realize that it was warm yet, so he was forced to carry on in the prickly pain and numbness.

He hand traced the wall. Second door to the right. He twisted the knob with a quick jerk. The door opened silently. He closed it slowly and softly, glad to hear the click as it resettled in its frame almost soundlessly. It was good to know his ship was still functioning.

He started down this hall, his footsteps silent. There were no creaky floorboards. Only the soft hum of the engine, the silent stream of warm air through ventilation shafts. He loved this ship. Slowly counting off the doors as he walked which was completely unnecessary. Last door on the left. He gaze landed on the door at the end of the corridor, the captain's quarters. That was a room likely to be forever left unoccupied. He may have been the captain of this vessel, but he was a pilot first.

His hand found the golden doorknob of the last door on the left; it was glowing quietly in soft yellow light. The Highwind was as comfortable as any hotel. Who really gave a rat's ass if Yuffie couldn't stand to be on it more than was absolutely necessary? He would've lived on this ship if he could. He twisted the doorknob and opened the portal to the room, stepping through it. He closed the door silently behind him, dousing the room in darkness. He flipped a switch he knew was on the wall, turning on the lamp bolted to a desk on one wall of the room. The desk was, in turn, bolted to the floor. So was everything else in the room. One had to make sure nothing would break in one of those tight maneuvers.

He peeled Cloud's funky fitting shirt from him, pulling it over his head and tossing it haphazardly on a chair. Next to go were the horridly tight pants. They missed their mark and hit the floor in a heap. He shrugged, rubbing his hands together. He was still cold! He hated the feeling. He had known cold in Rocket Town, had visited the Nibel Mountains on a dozen of occasions. It even grew cold when he had lived in Midgar. Hell, he had gone snowboarding on the northern continent. Nothing to compare to this, though. He was inside, in the middle of a warm ship, and he was still freezing. He had to clench his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering.

Blinking away the fuzziness that was creeping in at the corners of his vision, he moved slowly across the room to another door. He pulled that one toward him to reveal a private bathroom. It had originally been connected to the captain's quarters, but he was the captain, after all. Who was going to tell him that he shouldn't have the privilege to use a private bathroom when the rest of the crew had to share? There were times when he loved being the boss.

He stepped into the room, walked the couple of paces to the shower, and turned the water on. When he found a temperature to his liking — which was to say hot — he just sat down and let the water flow over him, letting the warm spray leak into his chilled bones and chase away the cold inside of him. He closed his eyes, felt the prickly chill in his hands and feet slowly dissipate. He must have fallen asleep then. The next thing he realized was that the water was becoming tepid and the pressure was falling down to less and less of a spray and more of a weak trickle. He grimaced, leaned forward, and turned the handles to the shower sharply, cutting off the stream of water.

He fell back, the tile wall behind him cool against his bare flesh. He had no energy to get up and get into bed. If that wasn't pathetic, he didn't know what was. Finally, he forced his aching joints to stand. He leaned against the wall for a moment, letting the water drip off of him in tiny rivulets, trying to shake off the sudden feeling of black invading his vision. In a few moments, it was gone, and goose flesh rose on his skin as he stepped from the shower, yanking a towel from the rack. He wiped the water off him quickly, wrapped the towel around him, and walked from the bathroom back into his room.

It was still slightly cold in his room which wasn't too surprising. He always left a fan on in there. Otherwise, it got too hot and stuffy. He considered shutting it off. He didn't, pulling open the top drawer in his small bureau and sifting through it until he found some pajamas. No boxers for him tonight. He pulled on a pair of silky, dark blue bottoms, grateful that they fit a helluva lot better than Cloud's pants. Running a hand through his wet hair, he dropped the towel on the top of the bureau before sliding his arms into the sleeves of the pajama top. He buttoned it up quickly, smoothing it out over his chest and glancing at the light blue embroidery on the left pocket. CH. Shera had given him these pajamas. That, by far, made them one of the best things he owned. Discounting the Highwind, of course.

He plopped down on the bed, suddenly very tired. He wished Shera was there. He eyed the PHS sitting on the nightstand next to the bed. It was late. Maybe Shera was up, though, working. She worked late often enough. He smiled. She was slow enough to make a six hour job last two days. He glanced at her picture next to it. He could call her now. She was probably still working.

He picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory.

"Welcome to Shinra, Incorporated. Please press one for administration, two for research, three for legal resources, four for biological science, five for biochemical science, six for aeronautics and aerospace, seven for weapons development, eight for the Junon Hydroelectric Corporation, nine for civilian services, or please enter a three-digit extension now."

Cid grimaced, glanced at the numbers on the PHS and keyed in Shera's extension. Extension 275. He hated these automated things. It would be a great deal easier to get anything done if he could deal with real people.

"I'm sorry, the extension you have entered is no longer in service. Please try again. Welcome to Shinra, Incorporated. Please press one for administration..."

He cursed angrily as he listened to the recording again. He pressed the three numbers again, this time more careful to enter the correct ones. He chewed on the inside of his lower lip as he waited for the number to process.

"I'm sorry..."

"Goddamn it!" he growled, frowning at the phone in his hand. Make him do this the hard way. His finger slammed down

on the six key.

“Welcome to the aeronautic and aerospace department of Shinra, Incorporated. If you wish to speak with the administrative portion of this department, please press one now. If you wish to speak with the research portion of this department, please press two now. If you wish to speak with technical support, please press three now. If you wish to speak with civilian services and/or educational services, please press four now. If you wish to speak with a specific employee within this department, please press five now.”

Cid frowned as he pressed the five button, bringing the phone back up to his ear. He hated this stupid company.

“Please enter an extension.”

275.

“I’m sorry, the extension you have entered is no longer in service...”

Cid stood and barely resisted the urge to throw the PHS across the room. “Damn it! I want to speak to Shera! Shera Morris! M-O-R-R-I-S!”

“If you wish to speak with civilian...”

“Fuck you! Lousy piece of shit!” He finger slammed down on the end key, and he felt the need to just break something. Breaking the phone was out of the question; it was too expensive. And his ship... no way. He absentmindedly kicked a foot against the leg of the nightstand, sucking in huge gulps of air to calm himself. At least he wasn’t about to start coughing up a lung or something. That seemed to have passed with the cold.

He tried to think of what to do, glancing at the clock. It was two in the morning. That made it three in Midgar. He frowned. She probably was asleep anyway. He sighed, setting the phone back on the nightstand and crossing his arms. He was tired, but he wasn’t sleepy. He had this insatiable need to do something. He didn’t know what he could do. There wasn’t anything. It was too early, he was decidedly — though he could deny it all he wanted — sick, and he was pretty much helpless to the entire situation before he figured out what was going on anyway. Well, there was one thing he could do.

He picked up the phone and dialed another number.