

Painted Black

Chapter Two

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"Yo."

Cloud's head snapped up at the deep voice, recognition slowly registering itself into his muddled mind. Barret Wallace was standing there, little Marlene in his arms. Cloud could barely restrain a groan. How could he bring Marlene? he wondered, silently cursing whatever it was that had forced Barret to take the little girl. Why couldn't Elmyra've taken her, Barret? What the hell is wrong with you? Cloud didn't say anything, his mouth open as he thought of something else to say. He couldn't tell Barret that he was an asshole for bringing his daughter with her standing there in front of him. That wasn't very nice. Luckily, he didn't have to say anything.

"Shit, Cloud. Ya know I wouldn't've brought Marlene wit' me, but Elmyra left. I couldn't find a damn person ta take her in," he explained, setting the girl down in a plastic chair next to Cloud. "What the hell happened?"

Cloud shrugged and buried his head into his hands. "Wait until the others come, please. I don't wanna repeat it."

Barret frowned gruffly, shrugged, and sat down next to Marlene. He stretched his feet out in front of him with a yawn. "This had better be good."

Cloud shook his head slowly. "Worth your time, I think. Not good." The corners of his mouth itched downward in a small frown. That had been the understatement of the year. After looking back without the feelings clogging his mind, the situation just seemed to get worse. Why the hell had the Lifestream just appeared out of nowhere? Something had to have caused it, some disturbance within the Planet. And, of course, there was nothing left to cause it. Jenova was gone, Sephiroth was dead, the WEAPONS had been destroyed. Even Shinra had stopped using Mako unless it was an emergency facility without power. There was nothing that could have explained this. Why now? Why suddenly after months of peace? It didn't make any sense. He sighed, exasperated. Then again, few things rarely did in this day and age. Like, why did his father just suddenly have a burst of conscience and have to find his son? That was pure madness. Just complete madness.

"Hey, Cloud."

"Huh?" He glanced up as another familiar voice sprang to his ears, soft – well, softer – and feminine. His eyes found those of Yuffie Kisaragi, coolly arching an eyebrow at her apparent change. She was a lot more like a woman, even in the few months which had passed she seemed to have grown up.

"Ya got any materia?" She winked as he groaned.

"You think people would grow up," he mumbled. He cleared his throat. "Where's Red? I thought he was with you."

She grinned, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "They wouldn't let him in here unless he got himself disinfected first. Pretty funny, eh?"

Cloud attempted to smile, but what he managed was weak to the point of being absolutely pathetic. "Yeah... I guess."

She sat down opposite them, crossing her legs knee to knee, slouching down considerably. "How come the long face, Cloud?" she asked. "I thought reunions were supposed to be happy."

He shook his head. "Not this one."

She leaned forward, uncrossing her legs and leaning on her knees. "There a problem? I thought that a hospital was a strange place to meet. Tifa get hurt or something?"

Barret glanced at her before turning an accusing glare onto Cloud. "Ya ain't been holdin' out on us, have ya? She ain't hurt, right?"

Cloud slowly shook his head. "No... Has anyone talked to Cait – er, Reeve? Or Vincent?"

Yuffie and Barret exchanged glances. "Where the hell is this leading, Cloud?" she asked. "I wanna know why it was you felt the need to get us all here, or don't we have a right to know?"

"How could you say that?!" he snapped angrily. "Of course, you have a right to know what happened. Of course, I'm going to tell you what happened. But, I would prefer it if everyone was here when I said it." He shook his head. It was too painful to repeat.

"Oh, Gawd, Cloud, just tell us already!" She crossed her arms stubbornly, but a grin cracked over her lips, ruining the effect she had wanted. "Patience isn't one of my virtues."

"You seem to lack a great many of those," Red XIII interjected, padding softly up to where the group was sitting. "I have yet to see one virtue grace your sparkling personality."

"That hurts, Red," she whimpered pitifully. "Here I thought after spending all those months with you, you would see the good in me. I have at least one virtue. Humor. Ready? I'm going to display it by tilting my head back and laughing at you."

Red growled as she did just that. He was not sure what he must've looked to them, but a few glances in shining metal doors had shown him a frizzy, damp creature with puffy hair that was out of place on a battle-worn warrior. "Stop laughing," he ordered, "and let's hear what Cloud has to say."

She managed to restrain herself into giggles, but her composure broke with every glance in Red's direction. Cloud narrowed his eyes at her, but then decided that he should just tell them. He had been readying himself for this moment ever since he had picked up the PHS to call them all. He couldn't very well not tell them, now.

"It's about Cid," he started.

Yuffie cracked up, sputtering into laughs. "That old man! What's he gone and done? Passed out from dizziness 'cause he was rockin' on his porch swing too fast?" Her laughter gobbled up whatever she was going to say, earning her a reproachful look from both Cloud and Red. Marlene giggled, too, and Barret shushed her with a hard glance.

Cloud wrung his hands in front of him, glaring at Yuffie with anger borne of his inability to do anything about the situation. And there was her insistent giggling and outright riotous laughter. "No, Yuffie, it is a little more serious than that." He swallowed, pushing the lump in his throat down. "Cid fell into the Lifestream," he said quietly, suddenly becoming very interested in the tiling on the floor. "And he's dying."

All it took was three words, and the entire world seemed to just stop. Seconds ticked by, yet time itself seemed to have stopped, leaving them to sit in absolute stillness as the words sunk into their brains, or slammed into their minds, or merely resounding in their ears, whispering again and again. And, then, time seemed to get back in its place, pushing them all back into action. Cloud's head sunk into his hands, and he rubbed his face wearily for what seemed like the hundredth time that hour. Red swallowed heavily, his one eye somber with the realization of just what message it was that Cloud was giving them.

"Shit." Barret took a shaky breath, ripping his eyes from Cloud and dragging Marlene into his arms in a huge bear hug as she began quietly crying. Yuffie looked away from them, her laughter dead in her throat. There was nothing much left to snigger at. The world wasn't so funny anymore.

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Parson, Richard, M.D.

Tifa found herself staring at that little tag on his left breast pocket again. It seemed to be the only safe place to look. The man's face was too young, freckled and sprinkled with acne that was only accentuated by carrot-red hair parted sloppily on one side of his head. He didn't look like a doctor. He dressed like doctor only if one paid the blue jeans and sneakers underneath his lab coat no heed. But, the white starched coat itself, accompanied neatly by that little pin and a couple of red pens sticking from that pocket seemed to reassure her that this kid was indeed a bona fide medical doctor. At least he sounded like a doctor.

She had been sitting in the small hospital room for some time now, watching the kid doctor run some tests over Cid's prone body, listening to the steady beep of the heart monitor, the steady swish of a respirator. She thought that it might have had some sort of reassuring, soothing effect. Cid was alive; he was going to stay that way. However, every moment she spent in that room seemed to dull her spirits, every little breath of air exiting the damn machine seemed to drag them through the mud. It just didn't seem fair that she should have to sit in there and listen to it and hear the stupid doctor give a report. Especially now when the rest of her friends, who had crept in from the hall, were staring at her and the doctor like they were raving lunatics.

"You have to be kidding," Red XIII declared, perhaps a little too hasty to be a genuine rebuttal of Parson's words. The nervousness and uncertainty tumbling from his tongue seemed to make it sound more like a fervent dream or a hopeful wish that this was all just some lame practical joke sprung on them all.

The doctor shook his head slowly, his mop of hair flopping back and forth as though the movement had a little more aggression put into it than it appeared. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Nanaki," he declared solemnly. "It's a policy of the hospital."

Tifa opened her mouth in protest, but no sound issued forth. What could she say to that? What could she say about anything anymore? It was all decided, now. There was no way in hell she could live with it, but there was no say in the matter; the decision had already been made and not by any of them.

"What a crock of crap," Yuffie declared haughtily, planting her hands on her hips. "That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. It's absurd!"

Parson shrugged. "I don't think so. If the mind has already died, I see no reason in keeping the body alive. It would be a waste of time, money, and effort. With something as severe as this, I'm afraid the two outcomes are people either recover or never do. Right now, I believe this is an example of the latter case. I'm sorry."

"The hell you are!" Tifa snapped, her voice breaking with all the penned up emotions swirling in her soul. Her hand covered her mouth in shame as she realized just what she had said, tears burning in her eyes. How could she just bite his head off like that? The man had been trying to help. It wasn't his fault the hospital had bloody doctrines and policies that the brass pushed on all the doctors.

Parson smiled thinly. "Obviously, I am not as hurt as you are by the current outcome of the situation. It's totally understandable. If I was in your position, I would most undoubtedly be yelling at me, as well. However, that does not mean I can step lightly away from this subject. To put it bluntly, Mr. Highwind is now categorized as brain dead. The Lifestream poisoned him to the point where he can no longer function at all. Unless he shows some response to outside stimuli within the next twenty-four hours, I'm afraid we'll have to turn the machines off."

Tifa swallowed, suddenly loving the sounds she had so dreadfully hated moments before. How one little sentence, said so easily and quickly, could change her mind so drastically. The rhythmic swish, the slow, steady beep. They were music her ears. Without them, she thought she might as well be deaf. There was no other sound she would long to hear more. "God, that's so unfair," she declared, sinking sullenly into the single chair. Cloud set his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it compassionately.

Parson's gray eyes narrowed. "No, it really isn't," he said darkly, before turning heel and walking from the small, crowded room. The door clicked shut behind him, medical charts clattering softly in the plastic bin attached to the wooden surface.

The silence was oppressing as the machines ticked away time. No one said anything for a long time, each residing moodily in their own thoughts.

"What a prick," Yuffie said, finally breaking the silence that was draped tightly over them. "Fair, my ass. Let's see how fair he thinks it is when he's the one sitting here with his old man lying on that bed."

Cloud glanced at the young girl, a small smile on his lips despite the current situation. "I thought Godo was your old man," he declared lightly. She glanced at him sharply, squashing whatever humor he may have found in her words.

"Godo's just my father," she muttered darkly. She didn't elaborate further, just looked down at Cid's pallid face. Her gaze wandered over his pale features, drawn to look deeply at his blank blue eyes. She almost shuddered, almost ripped her eyes away, but she wanted so badly just to see what he saw at that moment. She wanted just one glimpse, one tiny glance. Wherever he was looking, it was far better than the disgustingly pure white ceiling of the hospital. "Hey, old man, wake up," she ordered quietly.

He didn't respond. Just a small breath of air answered as the respirator moved again. She slapped his cheeks, careful of the blue tubing shoved into his mouth. "Wake up." Nothing. "I'm going let Shera on the Highwind," she threatened. "I'm going to let her tinker around with it." Still nothing. There was no flash of recognition in his eyes, no angry scowl burning at his features, nothing. Yuffie closed her eyes against the tears building up within them. "Damn it! Wake up! Wake up!"

She slumped to the ground in defeat, her head sinking down to rest on the edge of the bed. Silent sobs wracked her body, choking her until she thought she might die, too. "You dirty, old bastard. Wake up. Get up."

Cloud took a step forward, but he stopped mid-stride. Tifa was holding his hand tightly, slowly shaking her head. It was clear what she meant, but he didn't like it. He frowned at her. Yuffie didn't want to kneel there and cry her eyes dry; she needed someone to comfort her. Was that jealousy that kept Tifa's grasp on his hand so tight? He snorted. No. No way. That was probably the most foolish thing he had ever thought. She would never be so petty, not when she knew that he clearly loved her. That was stupid.

Red sighed, nudging Yuffie's shoulder with his warm nose. She turned and wrapped her arms around him, pulling his shaggy body close to her, crying into the soft fur covering his shoulder. He smacked his lips, started to say something, then thought better of it, resting his head comfortably on her shoulder, wishing for once that he had the adequate appendages to pull her into an embrace of his own.

"Oh, Red," she whispered, squeezing him tightly. "It's so unfair. He doesn't deserve this. No one does." He didn't respond, unable to find the words to do so. He gazed up wistfully, his one eye watching hopefully for some sort of movement from the bed, some sort of motion that would break all the silly policies the hospital held, a promise that Cid was still alive, that he wasn't destined for death at the hands of cold hospital procedure. His eye narrowed as he thought he saw Cid's hand twitch nervously, a deft movement as though he wanted to pull down the hammer of a revolver. Red's eye narrowed, looking carefully over the hand, slowly shaking his head ruefully. There was no movement there. His mind was playing tricks on him now.

"Life isn't fair, so there's no use crying over it."

Yuffie's sob caught in her throat as she tore herself away from Red and glanced over to where a man stood in the doorway. He had opened it silently; there was no telling how long he had stood there, watching the entire scene unfold before him with coolly indifferent eyes. It didn't matter how long he had been there. He had the nerve to just come in and trample all over her emotions like they were perfect blades of grass in a park that, when the fencing was taken down, little children often cut across as a shortcut. He made her feel so bad about her actions then that she vowed never to cry in front of anyone ever again. He was so cold, so inconsiderate. "Asshole," she muttered.

Cloud ignored her mumbling and her quick attempts to wipe her red eyes free of tears, nodding to the man in the door. "Vincent. You got the message then, I guess." Cloud had tried to contact him, finally leaving a short message on his PHS after getting no response for quite a long time. To see Vincent had actually come was quite a surprise.

Vincent's eye narrowed thoughtfully. "Yeah." He stepped into the room with just a small rustle of cloth, his gaze wandering around the room, landing briefly on Marlene with almost a glimmer of regret twinkling within it. He didn't ask what had happened, he didn't seem curious in the situation itself. It was almost as though he really didn't care why it was Yuffie was crying, or Barret was oddly silent, or Marlene's chin was quivering with unshed tears. And, for a brief moment, Cloud felt an odd sense of anger claiming him.

Vincent had no right to be there if he couldn't respect all their feelings. This wasn't a place for dispassionate men to step in and mock all the hurt and pain that was seeping through the room like a tangible force in the air. Regardless of how Vincent had helped them defeat Sephiroth, regardless of how they had grown to become friends, Cloud suddenly wished that Vincent hadn't shown up, that he hadn't gotten the message, that he had gone back to the damn coffin from which he'd dragged himself. And, then, shame overcame his rage, and he realized that he was being foolish again. Funny how the moment a problem presented itself in his life, he would immediately begin to show his worst traits, his character flaws. He would begin nitpicking every action, looking for a good reason behind it. He frowned. Maybe it was because then he wouldn't have to blame himself for what happened; he could just keep his attention on blaming someone else for doing something stupid.

He was the only one at fault. It was always like that. He was a failure. Vincent... Vincent could do whatever he wanted; he had his reasons for doing so. Maybe he did care, but he didn't want to show it. Maybe he didn't know how to show it. Maybe he had just slipped into his isolation mode again. There weren't any maybes for Cloud. There wasn't any reason why he had let go of Cid. There were only ifs. If he had tried harder. If he had been quicker. If this. If that. But ifs were things that could only change the past, and the past was something nobody could change.

Vincent sighed heavily, bringing Cloud back to the present, forcing him to push his guilt back into his mind. Vincent was standing in front of all the machinery, looking at the monitor, watching the little peaks form as Cid's heart peak. He glanced down at the pilot briefly, a small smile playing on his lips, his cheeks brushing the high collar of his red cloak. Cid didn't seem to respond outwardly to his presence, still motionless on the bed. Vincent leaned closer.

"How was the Lifestream?" he asked, his voice a soft slurring of words that were low enough to be heard only by himself and Cid, if the pilot could hear anything. He didn't get the exact reaction he had thought he would.

Cloud gave a startled cry as Cid's still body suddenly sprang to life.

Cid's hand shot out reflexively, catching on the blue tubing draped over him and ripping it from his mouth with a sputtering choke. Eyes wild and frantic, he knocked Vincent from him, catching the other man off guard and knocking him over the machines. Vincent toppled over backwards, pulling everything with him, wires and tubes. Bloody froth spluttered over his lips as the tubing scraped his throat, pulling completely free of his mouth with a vicious yank.

Cloud was there, then. He couldn't remember moving the few paces or making his way over the destroyed machines, just getting there. His large hand grabbed Cid's flailing arm, forcing it down onto the bed, trying to avoid getting a smack to the face. He glanced up and saw Barret on the other side, pushing the IV out of his way as he caught Cid's other arm. Cid struggled to get away from them, seemingly oblivious to who they were, not recognizing them as friends. It scared the hell out of Cloud, that he knew.

"Cid, Cid!"

Someone said that. Cloud wasn't quite sure who. Then, "Does that count as a response to an outward stimuli?" He shook his head, trying to clear the foggiest that had come over his brain in the past few moments. Time seemed to have slowed down, everything was going too slow, or maybe it was going too fast. He couldn't tell. Cid stopped struggling against him. Cloud looked down.

Cid's eyes were very blue at that moment, the soft fluorescent light shimmering within their depths. They glimmered wickedly with Mako, from the Lifestream. But what caught Cloud's gaze was the expression deep within them, almost as though they were trying to analyze him, or relate to him, or tell him something. There was nothing really to say, though, so

they stared at each other for a long time, the only sounds in Cloud's ears were Cid's raspy breathing and his own heart thundering in his mind. You lose, it seemed to say. You lose. You lose. You lose. How silly. Cid's eyes widened.

"Cloud!"

His thoughts were ripped from him as a gunshot cut through his senses, ringing loudly in his ears. He didn't feel the pain, only felt something rip through him, saw his blood splatter out the front of his body. His gaze landed on the shattered window, the hole where the bullet had slammed through it, breaking the glass. He looked down at the crimson soaking into the purple cloth of his shirt. Still no pain.

He slid to the ground, the floor cold beneath him, the iciness seeping through his clothing. He closed his eyes as his cheek rested on the cool tiling, oblivious as his own blood smeared onto his face from where it was pooling. He was vaguely aware of a rustle of frantic movement around him, calls for help, crying. He could only pay attention to one thing clearly, though. You lose. You lose.

You lose.