

Painted Black

Chapter Four

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"You're supposed to eat it, not mutilate it," Cloud declared, his brow furrowing as a frown formed on his features. "It's good. It's tasty, and it wiggles, and you can squish it between your teeth."

Cid Highwind arched an eyebrow dubiously at the young man. "You're a sick puppy, Cloud. I want my room transferred. Lime tastes like crap." He glared at the misshapen and crushed cubes of Jell-O in the bowl before him. "And it's green. I don't wanna have to see another damn green thing in my entire life."

Cloud looked away, his eyes wandering through the blinds and out the window of the hospital room he was sharing with Cid. It had been three days since he had been shot, three long days of having to put up with people crooning over him and waiting on him, two since Cid had regained his senses, and one during which he had to be a roommate with the pilot. He was beginning to feel very, very sorry for Shera.

"Lime doesn't taste like crap," he stated simply, bringing his mind back to their current conversation. He was also beginning to realize that he couldn't not fight with Cid over these stupid issues. It was probably only to keep his mind off of other things. "It's magically delicious."

Cid snorted and pushed the tray of hospital food and mutilated Jell-O away from him, rolling the cart against the wall. "I like strawberry."

"You would." Cloud sat up in his bed, pushing himself from the comfortable slouch he had been in to a more serious position. "C'mon, Cid. You gotta eat something."

Cid rolled over onto his side, facing away from Cloud and pulling the thin hospital sheets up to his chin. "I don't feel like it."

Cloud crossed his arms over the thin hospital gown he was forced to wear. There was a soft layer of bandages around his chest under it. He didn't see why. He was cured, free to go, perfectly healthy. They wouldn't let him go though; they had to keep him under observation. The doctors were probably just making excuses for him to stay, so they wouldn't have to babysit Cid and his total lack of cooperation. He wanted to go out and be with Tifa, not here watching over a unappreciative, immature whiner. Cloud cringed at his own thoughts. He should be here, watching over Cid. After all, he had let go, he had let Cid fall into the Lifestream. Hell, he had caused Cid to get up in the middle of the night to come pick them up. He had an obligation to be here. He should want to be here, helping the friend he had let down. But he didn't. He wanted to be with Tifa. That was the truth.

"Cid..." he growled, glaring at the blond head that was shrugged deep in the bed. "You ain't gonna get better unless you eat something."

"Who the hell are you?!" he snapped in reply. "My mother?!"

Cloud felt his own anger rising. "She's the last person I'd ever want to be! I hope that she died happy because her entire life with you must've been hell! I mean, dammit Cid! You are the most stubborn, childish, ungrateful, foul-mouthed, arrogant, irritating man ever to walk the face of the Planet!"

Cid shifted uncomfortably under the covers, his back still turned on Cloud as if to make the point that he didn't want to hear what Cloud had to say. "Okay, you've covered all my virtues. I'm listening. Go on."

Cloud wanted to scream. He felt the insatiable need to rip every single one of his hairs from his head. Cid said one thing, acted as though he meant something else, and probably didn't mean either of them, but rather something entirely different. It was irritating to the point of being maddening. It was like that one person who would drum her long fingernails on a conference table or a clipboard while she waited, fully aware that she was irritating everyone present but no less inclined to stop.

"Fine, I'll talk, then, Cid," he declared, "since you're so apt to actually listen to me." He brought his feet up so that he was sitting Indian-style, his arms resting on his knees. "You know, Cid, I don't have to be here." Cid muttered something into his pillow. Cloud ignored it. "I don't have to sit here and listen to you whine about your bloody lime Jell-O, or this stupid hospital gown, or friggin' Doctor Parson! I don't need to do this. I don't want to do this. I could probably have a physical done in fifteen minutes and walk out of here and leave you all by your lonesome. But I haven't because I'm your friend – "

"Wrong!" Cid exclaimed suddenly, cutting through Cloud's words. "Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. Both you and I know that that's not why you're here, so why don't you cut the crap and just admit it?!"

"Admit what?! There isn't anything to admit! Is it some sort of crime to care about you?!"

Cid turned back to him then, his blue eyes wild with anger as he pushed himself into a sitting position. "No, it isn't! It's a crime to care about you, isn't it? Isn't it?!" He raised a hand to stop Cloud from responding. "Don't even say it, Cloud," he said darkly. "Don't even try to lie about this to me. Yeah, you're my friend, Cloud. But when was the last time we saw each other? Two weeks ago? A month? Not a long time, but too long for you, I guess. She's more important than me, so go be with her."

Cloud's face darkened. "How dare you..."

"How dare I what, Cloud?! How dare I tell you the truth? How dare I see through you like glass?" He paused, scrutinizing Cloud carefully with narrowed eyes. "How dare I care about you, huh? How dare I think that what you want to do is more important than what you think I want you to do is."

Silence hung heavy over the room for the most oppressing few moments. It was as if the entire world had decided to stop whatever it was doing and watch as they fought it out. And, now, at the pinnacle of the conflict, it was all waiting, holding a collective breath to see who would say what first. Cloud took a breath and plunged in.

"I let go of you," he commented slowly, his tone very shaky. "I could've had you, you know. I was there, your hand was in mine. And I let go. I have to be here, Cid. You don't understand. I have to pay you back, somehow. I have an obligation to you. Only I can't ever pay that back; I can never give you back your three days; I can never erase the incident from your memory. I let go."

Cid shook his head and laughed softly, falling back into the bed. "Cloud... it never really occurs to you, does it? Maybe the reason I fell had nothing to do with you. How's that? Maybe the reason I fell is because I let go of you."

Cloud frowned and shook his head. "That's absurd."

"Is it?"

Cloud opened his mouth to respond and thought better of it. Cid obviously wasn't thinking straight. The entire notion was completely ridiculous. It was insane. What reason could Cid have possibly had to let go? Cloud was there, on the edge, perfectly capable of pulling him up with ease brought about by years of training for the Shinra army and then SOLDIER. It was stupid. Letting go. Cloud sighed and leaned back in the bed, stretching his legs out before him.

Where was Tifa? She should've been here by now. She should've gotten all the papers sorted out and bills paid and all that other stuff. She should've come here and told Cid that he was talking crazy. He would have listened to her. He always listened to Tifa. According to him, she was more important anyway.

"My throat hurts."

Cloud groaned, the words bringing him back from his thoughts. He rolled his eyes. "Maybe if you hadn't spazzed out on us, then it wouldn't hurt right now. You didn't have to yank that tube out of your mouth, you know. Not to mention the fact

that you were yelling at me a coupla minutes ago. And now, you're complaining. Again."

Cid didn't reply to that, closing his eyes against the slow spinning of the room, suddenly feeling very sick to his stomach and very glad that he hadn't eaten the crap the hospital passed as food.

"Cloud?"

He sighed heavily, wishing that Cid would somehow... go away. That was all. "What?" he asked, forcing a patient note into his voice.

"I wanna go home."

Cloud nodded slowly, glad they had found something to agree on. "Me, too, Cid. Me, too."

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Cloud couldn't hold back a wide grin. He was out of that crappy hospital gown, out of the irritating bed, away from the nurses – well, maybe not totally away from them yet, but he wasn't their patient anymore. He didn't have to put up with their attitudes and their lousy bedside manners, especially that young one with the short black hair. The hospital must have put all the bad nurses on duty just for him. Well, he was leaving, now, so all there was left to do was feel very sorry for Cid.

Cloud pulled his sweater down in a sharp yank, smoothing out all the wrinkles against his broad chest as he walked to the nurses' station. Tifa was standing there, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for her papers to be put through the system. She was there, so unsuspecting. It was irresistible. He plodded up quietly behind her, wrapping his arms around her small frame and rocking her back and forth, his hands over her eyes.

"Guess who," he ordered lightly. She giggled, grabbing his hands and attempting to pull them away. He ignored her attempts, his own chuckles threatening to consume him. "Uh-uh. You haven't guessed yet."

"Cloud!" she gasped, pulling his hands from her face with a laugh. She turned in his arms, pulling his head down to hers for a long kiss. Her tongue explored every feature of his mouth, studying it again even though she knew it so well. When they finally parted, she was giddy and breathless, and her face was flushed from delight.

"Hey, Cloud. How come you never play 'Guess who' with me?" Yuffie asked, leaning forward on the corner of the long desk. Cloud coughed lightly, smiling, his face reddening with laughter. "Well, Yuffie, I like Tifa better."

Yuffie pouted, scuffing her feet on the tiled floor. "That's no fair. You just like her better because she's older than me. I'm going to be eighteen soon, you know."

Cloud shook his head, still smiling widely. "Yuffie, your birthday was last month! You gotta entire year before you turn eighteen."

"Actually, it's the third so that's almost two months ago."

"A little exaggeration, I see," Cloud interjected.

She glared at him, her face darkening. "I got ten months and 17 days until my next birthday. That is not an entire year, Cloud," she replied, placing her hands on her hips. "Anyone can realize that once you do the math."

"Well, Yuffie, while you're doing the math here, Tifa and I will go for a walk." Cloud offered his arm to Tifa, and she took it, entwining her fingers in his. Yuffie didn't look very pleased about the outcome of the conversation.

"What about Cid?" Tifa asked, voicing the question more for show than anything else. She had to be alone with Cloud. They needed to talk about things privately without Yuffie or Red or Barret hanging over their shoulders. And Cid didn't really need supervision by either of them...

Cloud shrugged as he started walking down the hall to the elevators, pulling Tifa along on his arm. "Ah, let him be. Twiddling with the bed adjuster and complaining finally wore him out. Thank God for exhaustion."

Tifa smacked him playfully on the shoulder. "Cloud! That isn't nice. You aren't supposed to wish maladies onto your friends."

He smiled in reply. "You spend a coupla days with him and see if you don't want him to drop from fatigue."

"I have spent a coupla days with him, thank you very much, Cloud."

He raised his eyebrows in mock accusation, slamming his palm down on the button. "And when was I going to be informed of this fact? Just when were you with him, Miss Lockhart?"

She smiled. "When you were sick in Mideel. I spent lotsa time with him."

"Oh! So now the truth comes out." He nudged her as the elevator doors opened, and they stepped inside. "You just wait until he's sick. It doesn't work until then."

Tifa nodded as the doors closed, shutting them off from all the noise of the hospital halls and all other people. Well, they were alone now, so now what? She couldn't think of one thing to say, or how to say it, or anything at all. She was so nervous to bring up the topic, something that struck her as rather odd. After all, why should she be nervous? There was no reason for it. Unless, of course, he didn't think they should get married. But he wouldn't think that. What was she thinking? He would never say "no".

"What do you want to do, Tifa?" he asked suddenly, snagging her away from her thoughts and pulling her back to the current situation. She glanced at him, torn. She was glad he had brought it up, but she didn't want to hear what she thought; she already knew that. She wanted to know what he wanted to do. She couldn't just ask him.

"We could go get something to eat," she blurted, cringing at the words before they even left her mouth. What made her say that? That was the stupidest thing she had ever said to him. She expected him to laugh at her.

He didn't. "Sure, we could do that, but I didn't mean the immediate future." The elevator jolted to a stop, and the doors opened. Cloud stepped through, holding them for Tifa as she followed. He shrugged deeper into his sweater as they walked through the front doors of the hospital and out into the January chill. He turned back to her. "I meant about our kid."

She grinned weakly. "Well, I dunno, Cloud... What do you think?"

Cloud barely restrained a wince. He hadn't wanted the question thrown back at him like that. That was unfair. He brought the subject up, so she should have to answer first. That's how the game went. Unfortunately for him, that wasn't how Tifa was playing it. He frowned. What if she didn't want to get married? What if she didn't want a family? What the hell was he supposed to do? He wanted to say the right thing, but he didn't know what was right. Well, he thought he knew, but he wasn't sure, and he didn't want to sound like an idiot to her.

"Um... well." He closed his eyes briefly, trying to think. "We can, uh, consider our choices here for a moment."

Tifa glanced at him, feeling his attitude mirror her own. He doesn't know what to say, either, she thought, frowning slightly. What kind of relationship is this? We can't even talk to each other! She knew there was a very logical explanation to that. But she could think about that later. "Okay."

He seemed to want her to say more, but he didn't wait for anything else. "Well, as I see it, we can do one of two things," he said slowly, glancing at her for guidance. Nothing. "We can settle down and have a family, or we can not."

She stopped abruptly, her breath catching in her throat. "What do you mean 'we can not'?" she asked. "Cloud! I'd never do that!"

He blinked, confused. "What are you talking about?" He ran a hand through his hair. "You don't wanna wait a little while to have a family? Until this thing blows over or whatever. You're ready for it?"

She snorted, shaking her head. Half of her was silently rejoicing, the other half slightly angry. He wanted a family, he hadn't meant anything with what he had said, he hadn't even thought of getting rid of their child. That was good. They both had similar wants but to think that they weren't ready to have a family was absurd.

"You had better be kidding, Cloud," she declared. "Regardless of whether or not I want to be ready for it – and this goes for you, too – we have to be ready for it. We made a mistake, and now we have to face the consequences of that mistake. Those consequences may be good or bad, but we have to deal with them. Not later. Now."

He nodded silently, thinking over what she had said. Of course, she was right. He had known that, too, before she had even said anything. He had been hoping that she would reply in that manner. This was one of the few moments in his life during which he could stand having her angry with him. He deserved it. Every little speck of rage.

"That's what I thought," he said finally. "I just wanted so bad for you to want that, too." He was silent for a moment, watching her carefully with sparkling blue eyes, watching as her breath crystallized in front of her perfect lips, knowing full well that this was the person with which he wanted to spend his entire life.

Tifa smiled, feeling a bit foolish. After all, Cloud was Cloud, and she knew that he would probably back her up on any issue that was important to her. There was nothing else to be said about the subject; they were in total agreement. She grinned sheepishly. "I didn't want you to not agree with me, either."

He smiled back, feeling his face redden with embarrassment and maybe a little bit of shame. "I guess we ought to just tell each other what we think, huh? Save us a lotta trouble."

"Yeah," she replied absentmindedly, "we should."

Cloud wrapped his arm around her thin shoulders, pulling her close to him. "How 'bout we go get something to eat, now? Hospital food is as tasty as plastic, only the plastic can be chewed."

Tifa laughed as he gave her a good squeeze before they started walking along. "There's a passable restaurant around the corner," she said. "It's not as good as what the Seventh Heaven used to have."

Cloud shrugged. "Nothing is."

"Thanks for the compliment."

He shook his head, grinning at her. "Your meals? Nah, I've had better dog food than that. I was talking about Marlene's scrumptious cooking."

She pushed him away with another laugh, making him stumble off of the curb of the sidewalk into a slushy puddle. "Cloud! You'd better get used to my cooking if we're gonna have a family together."

He pulled his sopping boot from the puddle, shaking the chilly water from it. He kicked the boot against the curb, knocking little chunks of muddy ice from it as he did so. He heard Tifa laugh at him, slowly calming herself to a few giggles and then nothing. He frowned, stepping back up onto the sidewalk, sending a mock glare in her direction.

It was then that he realized that she wasn't even smiling.

He felt two emotions simultaneously seize him, colliding into each other, each trying to gain the upper hand in intensity. Fear. Confusion. Tifa was being held at gunpoint by... Vincent? What the hell was going on? He didn't have any time to ask; he could only watch, stunned, as Vincent pushed her away, slamming her into the wall and starting to run. Time seemed to slow down as the man barreled towards him, anger etched in every feature.

He had no time to react as Vincent rammed into him, pushing him off the sidewalk, and sending them both down onto the street with a splash and a thud. The air left Cloud's lungs, and he had no time to regain his breath before it was squeezed from him again, a cold metal biting into his neck.

He forced his eyes open, staring into the cold anger deep in Vincent's red eyes. He had seen that anger before; he could remember it clearly now. How long ago had that been? A year? Memories that he had forgotten, pushed away... they were all here, returned to haunt him with their vividness. Five years of hate, and love, and rage. The anger – oh, he had been so angry. They both had.

"I hate you," Vincent declared darkly, wrapping his clawed hand tighter around Cloud's neck, squeezing the life from him.

It was happening again.

I hate you. I wish you would die.

No, you don't. You're just saying that. You don't really want that. We're friends, right? Brothers, even.

"I always did," he continued. "I always will."

I'm not just saying it. It's true. I hate you.

"You always had everything. He liked you the most."

How come he never does this to you?! All you ever got was a dunk in some Mako! Why didn't he do this to you?!

You were better, I guess. You always were... better than me.

"You never suffered."

That's crap! Better than you, my ass! I went through Hell for you! I paid your dues! I kept you safe! And this is all I get, huh?! A lousy, ungrateful punk! A brother?! We'll never be brothers.

No...

"It's your turn to suffer."

No what?! That's not true?! Oh, it's the truth, alright. That's the bloody truth! We aren't brothers. I hate you. I hate the way you always got everything, the way you never had to hurt, the way that you never give me anything back. I keep giving to you, and I never get one damn thing in return. Brother.

Don't do this to me...

"There is nothing more contemptible in man than the cruelty of his brother."

I'm not doing anything! Tell me what I'm doing! What am I doing to you?!

Don't hurt me. I... I can't... breathe...

You deserve it!

"You'll find I can be very cruel."

Cloud gasped for breath, unable to get any air into his lungs, slowly feeling the world disappear behind the shadowy veils of his eyes. It had been cool that day though a biting wind played havoc with them.

Maybe... I do. But you... you don't deserve to have my death... on your... hands.

A sharp turn. Shots. Nothing.

Cloud took a gulping breath, sucking in the sickly sweet air of Junon as though he could never have enough. He immediately broke down into a fit of coughing, the cold chilling his lungs as he fought for air. He blinked the obscurity from his eyes, bringing the world back into focus as he gasped for breath after breath, filling his lungs.

Tifa was kneeling over him, blood slowly flowing down her face from a cut on her brow, concern in her eyes. "Cloud..."

He tried to sit up, to look for Vincent, but he couldn't, falling back onto the ground in a fit of coughing. The world spun nauseating circles around him, so he closed his eyes against it, waiting for it all to end. He just wanted peace. He just wanted to figure out what had gone wrong. Maybe he could fix it. He hadn't been able to back then. He probably couldn't now.

The memories could haunt him now, but Vincent was gone. There would be no peace, no fixing, nothing until he would come back. And the possibility of that happening was very, very slim.