

Painted Black

Chapter Eight

by Junj - satheis@ix.netcom.com

It was chilly. Not cold exactly, but the chill that sometimes entertained an early spring or a late fall morning. Maybe it was enough to make frost form on the dead grass and fallen leaves littering the ground. Who would have taken time to notice that, anyway? On that day. He did recall the sharp wind, though, playing havoc with their clothes, their hair, howling through the treetops and gusting across the sharp cliffs. That had been the last time they saw each other. It ended in blood.

"Midgar," he breathed, looking down at the large metropolis from their high perch on the cliffs surrounding it.

His friend glanced over the edge, unimpressed. "You seen it before, you know," he declared outlandishly. "It's nothing special."

"A city is a city is a city," he replied. "All of them are better than that scum town I come from. Besides, you can't say that when the light strikes the tall buildings just so, it doesn't look like the most majestic haven you have ever seen."

The wind had carried away the response to that. He still wasn't sure what his friend had said to that remark. It could have been anything. Only the wind knew, and it wasn't sharing its secrets any time soon. Because he hadn't heard, he left the subject alone. He didn't want to argue with his friend anymore. They had promised to be with each other, to be mercenaries. Buddies didn't argue with each other like they did. He was beginning to wonder if the promise meant anything more than the lousy doctrines Shinra wrote out on official-looking documents to appease the people of Midgar. They had been arguing a lot. He thought it was stupid. His friend did not.

"Let's go," he said suddenly, breaking the silence. "We can find work in there if there's any to be found. Maybe one of the resistance groups'll want us."

"I doubt it," came the dubious reply. "Nobody'll want us. We're lower than the scum on the bottom of the scum."

He squinted. "No, we're not. We're just as good as everyone else. Hell, we're better."

"What the hell do you mean 'better'?!"

He glanced back at his friend in surprise. "What?"

"Better? Better! He wanted to make us better, you know. Are we better now? After all the crap I went through, does that make us better?!"

"What do you mean?" He was confused. This wasn't making any sense. It never did. "You were the best."

"So what am I now? Huh?! Better? Even if I am better, does that automatically make you better, too?! What did you go through that makes you better?"

"What are you saying?"

"I hate you. I wish you would die."

He hadn't meant that, right? Why did it always come back to this? Either they were inseparable, or they hated each other. Which was it? No, he had never hated his friend. He licked his lips. "No, you don't. You're just saying that. You don't really want that. We're friends, right? Brothers, even."

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

What was he supposed to say? He never knew what to say. He was such a lousy friend. "You were better, I guess. You

always were... better than me.”

“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...”

“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.”

The anger. It was tearing him apart.

“Don’t do this to me...”

“I’m not doing anything! Tell me what I’m doing! What am I doing to you?!”

There were hands around his throat. He wanted to say that. But being unable to breathe, being asphyxiated seemed so trivial next to what the hatred was doing. The rage was killing him. Lack of air, whatever. But that wasn’t why he was dying. It hurt so much. We’re friends, huh, Zack? Yeah...

“Don’t hurt me. I... I can’t... breathe...”

“You deserve it!”

He gasped for breath. There wasn’t enough air. But that didn’t matter. He wanted the world to just disappear. He wanted it to be back like it used to. They were friends since training. And then, it suddenly occurred to him that his friend had always stuck up for him. It was one-sided. He had never done one thing in return. His friend was right. He was always wrong. What a personality flaw.

I deserve it. Kill me, please. “Maybe... I do. But you... you don’t deserve to have my death... on your... hands.”

They turned sharply as shots cut through the air, somehow able to convey the anger of the actions that were transpiring. He felt a shuddering against him, the warm spray of a sticky liquid. Then he was falling, blackness creeping up on the corners of his eyes. He didn’t know what happened then. It didn’t matter. He deserved whatever he got.

The wind had played havoc with them and won.

~*~

Cloud was laying in bed, awake, for what seemed like forever. The room was dark, pale moonlight flitting across the floor from where it peeked through a break in the curtains. That was the only light. The rest of the room was filled with shadows and dark that made everything seem so much colder than it really was. The room itself was warm with heat from the hotel’s furnace, but it was so lonely. He would have given anything to feel Tifa lying there beside him. She wasn’t there. He didn’t know where she had went.

He kept remembering the past. It was always like that. He couldn’t let go of it. It always came back to the five years of hell he had suffered through. He shook his head, pushing himself from under the covers of the bed. He hadn’t suffered; he knew that now. He hadn’t suffered because he couldn’t take it. A little dunk in some Mako sent him hurling up every meal he had ever eaten. Any of the stupid experiments had made him violently sick. He hardly remembered any of it. He did know Zack had been there the entire time. He put up with everything. Cloud didn’t even remember what Zack had gone through, just what had happened to him. What a lousy friend he was.

He set his feet on the floor, the boards beneath them cold with the winter air. He felt responsible for what happened to Zack. He felt like he had killed his best friend. It hadn’t been his fault, had it? Probably not, but it always seemed that way to him. It was always easiest to blame yourself. He found that he had been taking the easy route for quite some time now. He was weak.

Cloud stood and pulled on his shirt, glancing at the clock. It was unbelievably early in the morning. No one would be up. Except maybe Barret. He was probably still fretting over Marlene. Cloud had told him not to worry about her, that she would be alright. Barret didn't believe him, as was his wont. Nobody believed him.

As an afterthought, he shoved his PHS into his pocket before throwing on his jacket and stuffing his feet into his boots. He didn't know where it was going. He had to think, something that seemed to be increasingly difficult. He didn't know what to focus on; there were too many problems. Which was the worst? The Lifestream, or Vincent, or his past, or Tifa? Tifa was the most important to him, he knew that, but she was hardly important to the well-being of the Planet. He didn't know what to do.

He opened the door to his room and stepped out into the dimly lit hall, closing it behind him. He could just take things as they came, but that was the easy route again. He could try to fix the things that were more immediate, or maybe the things he knew how to fix. He frowned. They hadn't even figured out why the Planet had erupted like that. How was he supposed to know anything?

He trekked down the steps, oblivious to the creaking wood beneath his feet. He hated this hotel. He hated this entire week. Why did everything have to topple over as soon as it was getting to the point where it was perfect? He and Tifa were going to get married, raise their kids with the friends they had made in Kalm. Now, she hated him, she was avoiding him. Maybe if he was in her position, he would do the same. Maybe not. He loved her, and he hated what she was doing to him. He might have deserved it. He didn't know.

He pushed open the back door of the inn and stopped short when he saw her.

She was so beautiful. The moon wove its light through her soft, brown hair, cascading down her shoulders and back like a pristine waterfall of gleaming water, pure and untouched, pooling in a dark pond near her waist. He wanted to just run his hand through that soft waterfall, smell the faint aroma of the lavender soap she used. She was mad at him. He couldn't very well just start running his hands through her hair when she was angry with him. He was likely to get a punch to the gut, or something.

He cleared his throat, softly. "Hey."

She didn't turn to him, still sitting on the edge of the steps leading off into the small expanse that served as a yard for the inn. "Hey," she replied, her tone as empty as his, the word holding no more than its short meaning. He frowned, unsure of what to do.

He sat down beside her, his eyes on the moon in the dark sky, watching the few gray clouds drift across it. It seemed to gaze down sadly at them both, and Cloud thought that if he looked long enough at it, he would see the man who supposedly lived there. He looked so sad, tonight. Cloud glanced at Tifa out of the corner of his eye, watching her soft features in the pale light, the sad reflection of the moon in her eyes. "You want to talk, or something?" he asked finally, breaking the silence between them.

She closed her eyes briefly. "Maybe," she said softly. "I don't know if talking can help us any. We're such flawed people."

"Nobody's perfect," he replied easily.

She chuckled once, shaking her head. "Maybe I should go have my name changed to 'nobody' so we can see if that's really true." She frowned. "We're so imperfect, Cloud. Yuffie's right. I am the most selfish person to walk the face of the Planet." He didn't know what to say other than, "No, you're not."

She looked at him darkly. "I am. All I care about is you and me. If that's not selfish, then I don't know what is."

He swallowed, trying to think. This was why he never talked with anyone. He didn't know what to say. "Well, um, you care about Cid, don't you?"

She shook her head. "No. Maybe I did, but the moment you were hurt, I didn't. I'm a horrible person."

His brow furrowed. "No, you're not. Maybe it isn't because you're selfish. I always thought you were selfless. You always want to make sure that I'm okay." He didn't understand it. "You keep giving everything to me, Tifa. Maybe you don't have anything else to give to Cid, or Yuffie, or Barret. That makes me the luckiest man alive. You care so much about me. I've had that only once before. It seems as though both times I just screw it up. Can you believe that I've done so much taking, I don't know how to give?"

She didn't say anything. He probably said the wrong things again. He was like that. He hated talking. He always screwed up, regardless of how hard he tried to say the right things. He didn't know how to woo woman, he guessed. She was probably really mad at him, now.

"You're a liar," she said softly, though the words were ineffective in that they were followed by a giggle. "This is so funny, for some reason. One of those things that you know shouldn't be funny but end up being hilarious. Here we are, two people who view themselves as bloody selfish fools, and look at each other as selfless saints."

He chuckled, a small smile playing on his lips. "Saints we are not, my dear Tifa."

"I know," she replied, her laughter gone. "We'll never be that. We can't be that."

"I happen to believe there is no such thing," he declared suddenly, leaning back on his elbows. "Everyone has flaws."

"Guess we all gotta stick together then, huh, Cloud?" She didn't wait for a response. "You don't need to tell me anything," she added. "What happened five years ago is between you and the past. I don't need to know."

He didn't want to talk about it. He saw how strained her words were. She was forcing herself to say them. He hated himself. "Walk with me, Tifa?" he asked, pushing himself to his feet and holding his hand out to her. She took it, hoisting herself up. Then, they started walking. She was clinging to his arm, though he doubted it was for warmth or support. Maybe she wasn't as mad as he thought she was.

They walked in silence for awhile, making their way down the ragged streets of Junon, avoiding the slush puddles that formed in potholes and sinkholes. He wasn't about to step in once of those again. "Tifa," he said slowly, breaking the quiet. "I love you... I mean it, from the bottom of my heart. I don't want to hurt you, but I... I just can't talk about it."

She didn't say anything.

"I want you to understand that it isn't because I like keeping secrets. It's just that... I have to deal with this myself, first." How could he say what he wanted? "I don't want you to have to face these memories that I can't even face myself." Was that it? Yeah, he thought so. He hated the way they sounded. It was like a flat note in the middle of a beautiful symphony. He frowned. I'll tell you, sooner or later, he thought bitterly. When it doesn't matter anymore. It hurts me to think this, to say this, to know this. I want to share it. I can't even face a damn memory on my own. I'm so weak. It's pathetic.

He glanced at her. She was looking at him strangely, and he realized that he had spoken aloud. The blood drained from his face, and he looked away quickly. He was such an idiot. Speaking with Tifa about this had just been a big mistake.

"You're not weak," she said finally, drawing his attention back to her. "Let me help you. You don't have to be alone."

He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to see her anymore. She was so beautiful. He was a horrible man. "I don't want to hurt you, Tifa," he declared softly. "I'm sorry."

She was wrapping her delicate arms around him, then, holding him in her soft embrace. She rocked back and forth. This was his dream, to be with her like this, forever. She was so close. He had been through times when no one cared about him, when one kind word would've meant more to him than all the shallow compliments that had been flung in his face. He loved her. She would never give him a shallow compliment. Her love was sweeter than that. He would give anything to be with her forever.

"How touching."

Cloud broke away from Tifa abruptly, pulling back to glare at the man who had broken their romantic interlude. His eyes narrowed in anger at the mocking grin on the man's face, a man he easily recognized. Blonde hair, grimy beard, shabby clothes. Aeda. His alleged father. Father or not, Cloud was going to kill this bastard.

"What the hell do you want?" he snapped. "Why can't you just leave me the hell alone? I don't know you, I don't want to know you. piss off."

"Nice to see you, too," he greeted. "Miss Lockhart, looking lovely as usual."

"Look here, Aeda," Cloud growled. "I don't give a rat's ass who you are. As far as I know, my father was some devastatingly handsome soldier who fought in the Wutai war and was killed on some secret mission to save an entire battalion of Shinra troops. You are not my father. So why don't you take your bloody games and shove 'em where the sun don't shine?"

Aeda chuckled. "That would be rather difficult. Physically impossible."

"Blow it out your ass," Tifa declared haughtily.

He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Miss Lockhart seems to be getting a little feisty, eh, Strife?"

Cloud bristled. "Leave us alone. I'd hate to have to take more drastic measures to drive my point home."

Aeda's grin disappeared. "Drastic measures, my boy?" He shook his head. "I don't think so. But, you are right about one thing: I'm not your father. I am, however, getting some good money out of this, so you can come along nicely, or I'll be forced to take those drastic measures myself."

"What are you talking about?" Cloud asked, eyeing the surrounding darkness warily.

"Now, come on, Strife, don't be stupid, here. I just take the money and do the job, no questions asked. A seasoned mercenary such as yourself should know that. Asking questions gets you killed."

Cloud frowned. "So you're just going to kidnap us all by yourself? You got something else coming."

Aeda smiled wickedly. "Ah, but you see, you're wrong about two things, Strife. One, I'm not all by myself. Even a bounty hunter needs friends."

A grimace replaced Cloud's frown as a group of men slowly emerged from the shadows in the streets, circling around them with feral expressions on their faces borne from lust for the amount of money they were no doubt promised. Cloud grit his teeth, trying to keep all the men within his sight. It was an impossible task.

He cleared his throat. "So what's the other thing then?" he asked, keeping his voice level as though he was asking about the weather. He had a feeling what the answer might be.

Aeda's smile widened. "I have no use for Miss Lockhart, Strife. It's you I want." He glanced at the nearest man. "Get him." On his words, all hell broke loose.

Cloud was taken down almost immediately, a fist slamming into his cheek. He stumbled backward, taken by surprise, and tripped over one of those slushy potholes. The air exited his lungs in a whoosh, and he felt a jab of pain in his side as he rolled over to avoid a kick to the face. He knew what that was. He kicked out at the nearest assailant and heard a satisfying grunt of pain as his large boot connected with the attacker's gut. Worming through the chaos, he managed to get clear of the mob, crawling to one side and reaching into his pocket to retrieve the PHS. He smiled gratefully as he discovered that he had not destroyed the phone in his fall, his thumb moving to press the auto dial button near the top.

He never got to hit the button.

A foot lashed out, knocking the phone from his hand with a vicious crack. He let loose a cry of pain, sure he felt something

break in his hand. The phone skittered off into the darkness, disappearing from view. With that phone went his hope. Even with Tifa's fighting skill, they could do nothing against such overwhelming odds. He wished he had a sword, any sword, even that cheesy piece of metal the Gold Saucer gave out as a prize. He would've given any amount of gil to have one.

He stood only to be assaulted again. A fist slammed into his gut, making him stumble forward, gasping for breath. That was followed by a sharp uppercut that rammed into his jaw. His teeth clacked together violently, biting into the soft of his lip. Blood splattered from his mouth as he fell back, the world coming in and out of focus.

The grizzled, yellow-haired man loomed over him, a smile on his face. All Cloud could think about was Tifa. Where she was, if she was hurt. If she was hurt, he would kill every last one of the bastards. Every last one. Aeda grinned down at him. "Easiest catch of the season, boys," he declared. "And to think this is Cloud Strife."

There was some laughter at that. Cloud grew angry. He lashed out one last time, catching Aeda's groin with the heel of his boot. The laughter cut off abruptly, and Cloud allowed himself a small self-satisfied grin as Aeda clutched at his manhood, his face red behind all that dirt. Cloud tried to push himself to a sitting position, looking frantically for Tifa. Where was she? Aeda punched him in the nose. He felt the blood running over his lips, not the pain. God, where was Tifa?

"You little shit," Aeda gasped, grabbing Cloud by the hair. "You'll pay for that."

He felt a force slam into the side of his head, then nothing. The world slowly faded to black, and all he could think about was Tifa. He couldn't have failed her again. What had happened to her? Did she get away? He hoped that she had gotten away, but he knew she would never leave him. His hope spluttered out as he fought to keep consciousness. He thought he heard that phone ringing.

End Part One