

**Painted Black**  
**Chapter Eleven**

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The world came into focus slowly, painfully so, until Cloud realized where he was. Then, he would have given just about anything to be able to slip back into the blissful ignorance of oblivion. As it was, that was not possible, though he thought that it might be if he closed his eyes real tight as he pounded his head against the floor.

“You up?”

Too late. Cloud wondered if maybe he could pretend that he wasn't awake, that he was still unconscious. It was a hope and only a hope. He had once heard that hope floats. He never quite knew what to make of that statement until now. All his hope seemed to be floating away as though it was a cloud caught in a high wind, whipped at into wispy tendrils until it disappeared completely from view or else condensed further and let loose a torrent of rain onto the earth.

A boot nudged his shoulder, and he decided that his hope was the former. There was no way in hell he thought he could stand much less fight. His head throbbed with every pulsing beat of his heart, and he was vaguely aware of all the other bruises and cuts littering his face and body. The most prominent of all the hurts he could feel was the burning ice that had claimed his right hand. He didn't feel that he could move it at all. It was bound behind his back, the bindings digging painfully into broken bone and flesh. He thought he was lucky that he couldn't see it; he could feel the jagged end of some broken bone cutting through the skin of his hand, seeing it would make the experience ten times worse. He tried to flex his fingers, experimentally, and was rewarded with a barrage of pain so intense that he thought he might cry out. He bit his lip, but a sharp intake of breath betrayed him, so he opened his eyes and confirmed what he had only assumed.

He was in a truck, being carted off to hell.

Cloud glanced up, frowning, his gaze skirted over the figure of a man he didn't know but who was no stranger to him. Hans Aeda. Or so he claimed. He claimed that name among other things. Cloud's father. Right. And squirrels had wings to fly up trees. Cloud grit his teeth, trying to blot out all the pain from his head and hand. He tried to focus on the swaying of the truck, but that only seemed to make him sick with nausea. He thought it might be funny to toss his cookies all over Aeda, but then figured that the humor would only be fleeting while his stay with his so-called “father” would probably be longer than he would have liked.

“So, you are up, you little faker,” Aeda declared, sitting down next to Cloud, his back against the wall of the truck. “I figured you were pretending. You were always good at that.”

Cloud grimaced, sucking in a breath. “How would you know?” he asked, trying to be nonchalant but only succeeding in sounding strained. “You're not my father.”

Aeda shrugged. “No, I'm not. I think I might have liked to have tried raising you. You're an interesting man, Cloud Strife. But, alas, 'tis not so. But just because I'm not your father, doesn't mean I don't do my research on you, Strife. An interesting man always has rumors and tales attached to his name. I just happen to be skilled at knowing the difference between the truth and the lies.”

Cloud ignored the comment. It meant nothing to him, held no information he could store up for later use during an escape. And he was already well aware of the fact that he had rumors attached to his name, some of them were colorful, completely wrong, and hilarious just by their nature while others skittered far too close to the truth for comfort. Rumors were hardly important now. “Who hired you?” he asked, changing the subject.

Aeda grinned toothily, a row of pearly teeth flashing underneath his beard. “Oh, come now, Strife. Who do you think I am? An amateur? I have more experience with this than all the Turks combined. I don't think that that is a safe question for me to answer. At least, not until I get paid. Then I can flap my gums with you, Strife. Maybe at another bar somewhere, eh? I really fooled you, didn't I? Knew all about you.”

Cloud frowned, glancing at Aeda dubiously. "Does it matter?" he asked.

"Of course it matters! I am an artist. Not in the conventional sense of the word, no, but I create elaborate illusions, wheedle my way into others' lives, and then destroy them. All for a fee, of course. This was one of my best works. A shame it was cut short by your... unfortunate accident with Mr. Valentine." Cloud opened his mouth to interrupt, but Aeda cut him off with a raised hand. "Uh! I researched you, Strife. That doesn't mean I stop at the past. I know more about what you did in the last twenty-four hours than you do."

"Well, seeming how I have no idea how long I've been unconscious under your supervision, that would make sense, wouldn't it?" Cloud retorted, his voice thick with cutting sarcasm.

Aeda smiled thinly. "Touché."

Cloud didn't respond, watching Aeda warily. The small smile stretching across his lips seemed to hold no malignant force behind it, but Aeda had appeared to be an innocent old man at first, merely seeking his son. It had been a work of art, that charade, regardless of whether or Cloud wanted to accept it. The elaborate façade Aeda had set up, the warm smile he must have practiced for years, the glow that wallowed in his eyes when he laughed a friendly chuckle, all of that paralleled an artist's most prized piece of work. Cloud's eyes darkened. Con-artist wasn't just a clever name after all.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, finally, watching as the smile that had graced Aeda's lips disappear back into his beard.

Aeda sighed, stood, his head brushing the ceiling, and turned to look out of the solitary window in the truck. Light filtered through its grimy surface, gleaming on the blond strands of hair it captured. Cloud thought that he was going to answer the question lest he risk not getting paid by whoever had hired him. He surprised Cloud, though, glancing over his shoulder to meet Cloud's gaze.

"No harm in telling you that," he answered, finally breaking the silence. "You'd have found out sooner or later, I suppose. We'll be there shortly."

Cloud craned his neck as Aeda stepped from view, wishing he knew where the man had walked. With Aeda standing somewhere behind him, it was a lost cause, so Cloud let his head fall back to the floor and expected something to lunge at him. He drew in a deep breath. "That didn't answer my question," he declared, attempting to make the words sound more like a rebuttal than the desperate remark that it was. "Where?"

Aeda sauntered back into view, shrugging. "Nowhere you haven't seen from the top to bottom. Nothing special about it, you know. It's just some slums and a coupla three plates patched over 'em. Course, the plates were destroyed, don't serve much purpose now."

"Midgar," Cloud breathed, suddenly wishing that he hadn't asked the question. Midgar was a city of horrors to him, the beginning to every problem he had ever come up against. Everything could be chased back to either Midgar, or Nibelheim, or both, but Midgar was by far the more scummy of the two. And trips to Midgar were always far more horrendous.

Aeda had continued speaking, though, but so deep in his own thoughts, Cloud hadn't noticed. His ears perked up as he forced his mind from the past. He needed to think about the present now, and the immediate future. Reminiscing would not help him escape from this situation.

"But a city is a city is a city," Aeda remarked. "They're all alike, but far better than the hole your grew up in, huh?" He cracked another smile, though this one was far more rueful than before. "Until you grow up in the city. Then you see how lucky you really are. Too bad one can only grow old once, eh, Strife?"

Cloud nodded in agreement absentmindedly as Aeda went on to discuss the crime, dirt, and oppression that wallowed in the city, but Cloud wasn't listening to his monologue. He wasn't interested in all of that. He couldn't care less about it. It

didn't concern him. What he wanted – no, needed – to know was who was paying Aeda and why. Only then could he formulate a plan to escape, if escape was indeed possible. Though the Aeda was functioning, he doubted that it was.

“Well, Strife, we're getting pretty close now, and I wouldn't take to kindly for you to run off on me during the exchange,” he declared. He bent over and grabbed Cloud's arm. Cloud had a moment during which he thought of struggling, but a flash of pain from his hand steered him away from that course of action. “Sorry to do this to you, Strife, but it's the only way. It'll only hurt a sec.”

Aeda's words rang true. There was only a prick of pain that could barely be felt in his arm. He recognized what it was, but he didn't care, for it was followed by a blissful emptiness as he drifted off into oblivion.

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The sun beat down mercilessly on him, filling his eyes with its brightness even though he was sure they were closed. There was nothing to stop the relentless torrent of light, no shady limbs, not even a scrap of cloth. It would just fill his eyes until he blinked away the horrid bright of the illumination and made an attempt to roll over onto his side. The attempt failed miserably, for he was being held down by something, something he couldn't open his eyes to see.

He did so anyway and saw red.

His hands, stained red. Blood. Sticky over them, crusted there, black red, dark red. Oh, God... His eyes widened in shock and fear, for he knew he wasn't hurt. It couldn't be his blood. He would have known. The blood would have been warm. He knew not how long he was laying there, staring at his hands, knowing what had happened and refusing to accept it.

A crash jolted him back into reality. Darkness had moved over the sun was gone, but the light was there, flashing, filling his eyes with white brightness until he could only see the afterimages of all the flashes gone by. Something was holding him down, he couldn't see his hands anymore. Were they still stained red with blood? He tried to look, tried to see, but all there was, was a flash of light filled his eyes, an explosion filling his ears. He pushed away what was holding him down, unable to see anything in the darkness. One thought filled his mind. He needed to get away from this place. What had he done? Oh, damn, he was going to hell, he knew it. He had caused this. He had hurt his friend. Zack, where am I? He couldn't remember, could barely remember anything at all.

There were the lights, moving by his sight, rapidly replacing one another as he was moved. He was moving? No, he could not be. He was lying down. The world was moving around him, faster and faster, the light blaring in his eyes, silence weighing down on his ears. And he couldn't move, tied down with fear and something a little more tangible cutting into his wrists and ankles, across his chest. His breath was short, but not from that. Oh, no, he could have dealt with some little restraints. But his chest could not breath in quickly enough to relieve the cold weight that seemed to bear down upon it, the feeling of dread overcame him as he turned the lumpy mass that had been laying on him over. He didn't want to see it; he knew what it was. He had to make sure.

Make sure? How stupid was that? He knew. He needed to accept. He couldn't. He had to see first. And then what? Would he accept it then? He let loose a strangled sob that emanated from deep within his chest a barrage of chuckles emerged and spewed forth, rolling off his tongue and through his lips. He didn't know where that came from. It was certainly no laughing matter, the situation he was currently in. He didn't understand it. But he heard it. The chuckles weren't borne from humorous mirth or joy or happiness. He had heard them before, in the voice of his friend. They were the edgy chortles that accompanied fear and this dread that overcame him, like he knew what was coming, but couldn't put a finger on it. Déjà vu. He had done this all before at a different time somewhere deep within the past that he would sometimes hide from himself. Could he trust that past, his remembrance of events, himself? He didn't know.

He couldn't earn his friend's body was before him. Leaves and dirt were matted with his blood, sticking in clumps to where the red liquid had dried into some sadist's glue. The light flashed again, and he could see the face clearly now. The eyes were wide open in shock and alarm, glassy and distant, the life having left it long ago. Above the right eye was a gaping wound from the exit of a bullet as it had ripped through the head. Maybe that had killed his friend, the hole where crimson blood was dried and dark with dirt, where chips of skull and bits of brain hung from it by threads of tissue. But the

eyes were blank, the face forever locked in an expression of anger and surprise and even a bit of relief. He had earned the relief. He deserved to move onto another world, another life. If the only way he could attain that was through death, then that was how it was.

It had been decided that he couldn't trust the past any more than he could trust his own senses. Everything was confused. He was sure that he knew what was happening, but he couldn't pick apart what wasn't. It was all too real. The laughter, the cries, the flashes of light. He was moving. It wasn't the world that spun around him in a disorientated blur of motion. He was moving away from the past into the present, or the future. He wasn't sure if either of those were preferable, but he didn't seem to have a choice. But that damn light was shining in his eyes again, and he wanted to close them but found he couldn't. He wondered if they were already closed, but he couldn't tell which was strange.

They should've blocked out the light flashed again, but he didn't want to see his friend's face again. The horror that would haunt him in the upcoming years, always coming back to haunt him in the night. He should have seen it the first time. He knew he had seen it quite clearly from the first flash of lightning. He had to look again? What was wrong with him? That expression tore into his mind with every heartbeat that ticked the moments away. The eyes wide and staring, dark in the cold night, wide in surprise, glassy in death. The hole in his head meant nothing. The sightless gaze drove him mad. Those eyes had been filled with laughter and friendship and hurt and anger.

God, the anger had been better than this. The anger had made him feel. All he had now was emptiness. He was alone.

He thought he might crumble underneath the weight of solitude; the silence was oppressing. But, then, the sky broke, thundering cracking through the air as though it was a sharp hand brought against the flesh of a pugnacious child. Rain spewed forth from the sky in sheets, drenching him to the bone. The cold rain seemed to wash away all the confusion and pain, and he knew what he had to do. Remember Zack, who had given him so much. Too much, far too much pain exploded in his mind as he tried to break free.

Why?

He didn't know why; he didn't even know where he was. But he knew he had to get out of there. He didn't want to travel from the past to the future or the present because they were all the same. They were different representations of the same thing, the same events. Take and don't give. Even when there was nothing left, when he had taken away everything from his friends, he asked for more. What kind of a selfish person was he? To take and never give. The emptiness inside him could never be filled because it was a bottomless pit always asking for and begging for and taking and nothing would ever escape it. Not even the glaring light in his eyes could not fill the hole that filled his heart and soul.

He struggled against the restraints again, and the pain returned, hot and white, burning in his hand closed around the massive hilt of the sword, pulling it free from where it was covered in mud and slime. The rain has already drenched the world, the body, his body. He would never ask for anything from his friend again. He had taken too much, and he had to pay the price for his failure to give in return. This was what he deserved. You don't deserve to have my death on your hands. So it would be the other way around, huh?

Well, he deserved it alright, he knew. He hadn't taken enough, had he? Why not take his bloody life, too?! His hand tightened around the hilt, and he hefted it into the air with the ease of one who has had too many free hours to fill with practice. The edge gleamed wickedly in the light from another flash. He knew what he had to do. Death to the Shinra. Death to all their immoral lies and fooleries. Forget the thundering of his own heart in his ears, forget the aching pain in his muscles, the bloody nausea and sickness that came from the poison that was now flowing through his veins. He could get above all that. He had to avenge this death with the rage of an angel descending from the heavens, and he was the angriest of all. It was time to give a little bit of this back.

The lightning flashed, gleaming from the edge of the sword with the wicked glint of power, blinding his eyes were open, and he could see. The light was there, but it was being blocked by the round shape of a face, and it wasn't so overpowering as it had been. The head blocked the worst of it, covered the glare. He would have been grateful if he hadn't recognized those eyes. He knew those eyes. They were filled with a familiar expression, insane anger. The same shape, soft ovals that could hold the warmest smiles in their depths.

“Zack?”

Are we gonna make it? Together, I mean.

Sure we are. We aren't friends, Cloud. We're brothers until death. We'll make it together. It's not far, now.

To where? Where are we running to? What're we running from?

We aren't running from anything, Cloud. We're going to meet fate, and if fate says we get our revenge, then so be it. If fate thinks we're fools... well, I hear fate protects fools.

“Wrong again.”

What?

Come on. You can't say you didn't want him dead, too. Look what he's done to you. Sit down, Cloud. You're sick.

I can make it.

No, you can't. Not if you keep this up. Just quit being so stubborn, dammit! Sit down! SIT!!

His hands were shaking. What was wrong with him? He was trembling, his hands tightening into fists. He could feel the pain with each movement, but it was overshadowed by a deeper emotion. Fear? Shit, no! What was it? Dread? Hate? He didn't know, and that scared him the most. He wanted more than anything to run and hide like the coward he was, but he couldn't break free. His hands clenched into fists and tightened around the hilt of the sword, clutching it with a white-knuckled grip. He shuddered. Why had his friend always been so mad? Angry or not, insane or not, he was going to get revenge for Zack and for himself. This blade would be red with the blood of the Shinra, the streets of Midgar would be filled with it, the children would play in the puddles as though life was some kind of foolish game. Well, he had fate on his side. Fate and a sword. That was all he needed to gut them all like the selfish pigs they were. He would beat this poison and get to Midgar where he would personally string Hojo up by his entrails and leave him hanging from his own torturous apparatus for everyone to see. This is what happens when you mess with fate and a sword. Then, he would throw the body away, and the rats could take Hojo's face. Hojo's face. The eyes that could glow so merrily in Hojo's face? No! It was wrong. It couldn't be right. Hojo had killed him on that cliff so long ago. Hojo had died and taken all his sadistic glee with him. The eyes that would twinkle with a smile in Hojo's face? It was impossible! Absurd, even. That... that was wrong. It was backwards. He wanted him dead! He couldn't fight the eyes he knew, not when they belonged on his side. It was ass backwards. Zack would never... couldn't... it was wrong! How could that be? Fear twisted Cloud's innards until he thought he might retch from the feelings overwhelming him.

We're friends, right?

We aren't friends, Cloud.

Brothers, even.

We're brothers.

Until death.

Until death.

No!

“Welcome home. Son.”