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Painted Black
Sins of the Father
Chapter One

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There she was.

She was so pretty, kneeling there, praying there, her eyes closed to the light that shimmered on her beautifully pale skin. She was perfect, so simplistic in her loveliness that she was more appealing than any woman he had ever looked upon. So pure. So wretchedly pure. No amount of corruption could ever tarnish her soul. It was sickening yet sweet, the taste of overripe strawberries on a warm summer day. And as he gazed at her flawless features, locked comfortably in prayer, he found himself hating the only woman he ever loved.

Her eyes opened.

Emerald on blue.

She smiled.

And, then, she died.

A man came swooping down, black cape fluttering in silver hair, the wings of Lucifer, the wings of death. He took a step forward, his hand outstretched as though he wanted to stop it all from happening. Why would he do that? It was happening now, like it should. The glimmer of the blade as it flashed in cerulean light, the pleasing sound that rang through the air as it slid through her abdomen and into the beautiful floor below, the gleeful silence that followed. He took in a breath of the crisp air that was already filling with the stench of death. Yes, this was what happened back then. This was what should always happen, over and over. She died. She died. She dies!

The sword was ripped from her, spilling her blood onto the pedestal, the small orb falling from her hair and hitting the floor. It shattered.

He started laughing. His voiced reverberated through the large chamber, filling the silence with its maniacal rhythms. It was inappropriate, he knew. It was wrong. It was so dreadfully wrong that it was the only thing he could do and keep good conscience. He hugged at his sides, wheezing with his laughter, his innards aching from the ferocity of it all. It was so wrong. He was down on his knees now, laughing insanely as her blood leaked from her body and ran over the sides of the pedestal, flowed freely down into the water below like a tiny waterfall. Oh, the fool girl! She was dead now!

He laughed.

And laughed.

And finally, he had no more breath to do that, either. He looked up from where he was kneeling, hugging his sides because he thought he might die now, too. Tears were streaming down his eyes, not the warm ones of humor, not that hot ones of wrath or fury or anger. They were cold, so cold they could have been icicles frozen over his cheeks. Sorrow. No, not for the girl, never for her. How could she have done this to him? Oh, God, how could she have done to him? She bailed out, that bitch! That fucking bitch! How could she have done this?

His eyes found those of the man.

Blue on emerald.

The man smirked then.

And from that moment on, he knew he was falling into hell.

~*~

He opened his eyes slowly and gasped. The bright white lights streamed around him, blinding him briefly until they adjusted to the overly lit hall. Confusion furrowed his brow for what seemed like eternity as he waded through the muddled mesh of words and sounds and thoughts that were currently residing inside his head. And when he had separated them back into some sort of intelligible order, he suddenly wished he hadn't.

Oh, God...

The events of... what was it? Hours? A day? No, it felt like minutes. It felt like the entire thing had transpired moments ago, seconds ago. Every minute detail... he had remembered it all with such alarming clarity for someone known for renouncing memories. Why was that? His mind was intent on hurting him so much. He could make up something to fill in all the empty spaces he supposed, but he would know them to be lies. How could he lie when one of his best friends was as good as dead? He wouldn't do that; he couldn't. Not after everything that had happened. Not after the past few hours or maybe the entire day that had wasted away while he sat in this uncomfortable chair underneath the glaring lights. He could still see everything if he looked hard enough. The musty lights of Junon, poorly lit roads. The bland features of that man he had never known, walking up to him, starting it all.

Are you Cloud Strife?

Yeah...

I'm your father.

Shit! What was he supposed to say to that? "My, dad, you look just like you did twenty years ago"? "Gee, dad, good to see you again"? He didn't know what he could've said then. He had never known his father, never saw him, only heard rumors and stories and – most decidedly – fairy tales about what a great man his father had been. His father didn't look great. His father was a bum, dressed in clean yet shabby clothes, oily hair, a beard over a weathered face. He was just another man who had wandered the world for years, earning his wages with hard work and squandering his money on a couple of shots of gin and a slut on his knee. And he was supposed to say, "Hi, dad, welcome back"? How did that work out?

I don't expect you to remember me. Damn straight he didn't remember him. The bastard was probably hightailing before he even saw his son. And I don't expect you or your mother to forgive me. Well, that was relief. He wouldn't have that on his shoulders. But I couldn't live with myself knowing that I had never seen my son. I couldn't die without making the choice to see you, if only for this once.

They had talked, then. They had sat in a bloody bar and talked. For a long time they had done that. Not speaking about anything that really mattered, just talking. Neither shared his past with the other, and there had been long periods of time in which no one spoke. And, then he had gotten up to take a piss and hadn't returned to his son. Which suited Cloud just fine. He had sat at the bar for awhile, finishing his last mug of beer, dropped a couple three gil pieces onto the wooden surface, and walked out. It was as easy as that. Here and then gone.

Unfortunately, Tifa didn't quite share his beliefs.

He could still hear her, even now, her voice ringing through the shabby hotel room they had rented. Cloud! He had wanted to say some snide remark in response to that. That might not have been such a good idea now that he thought about it. They were close, so extremely close that he had no reason not to call Tifa when he had found his father wandering the streets of Junon. He knew he hurt her. It was always like that. He never meant to; he was just a lousy guy he guessed.

So, he had said to her.

Cloud... that's not what I meant.

Isn't it? I'm irresponsible! I shut myself off to you the moment something comes up that has the minute possibility of hurting me! Why do I do that to you?

I... I just want to know when something comes up that hurts you. I want you to trust... I want you to trust me! She'd started crying then. Oh, he hated it when she cried. It was the worst when she didn't really cry. There were just tears, no sobs, no choking, just tiny rivulets of water flowing from her beautiful eyes. It made him feel horrible, like he was the worst man to ever walk the face of the earth. He made her cry. How could he do that?

I'm sorry.

No, I'm being silly. You trust me. You confide in me. We all have little secrets we have to hide from each other regardless of how close we are. There was something left unsaid. He didn't push it.

Some things I guess are better left unsaid. He hadn't intended for her to hear that. Then she was in his arms.

Maybe.

Silence.

Cloud?

Mmm?

I'm pregnant.

That had shocked him. Said so casually as though they had been talking about the weather. It was just a change of the topic. He must have sputtered something stupid out then. He didn't quite know what it was. All he knew was that the indistinguishable mass of words and sounds that had spewed forth from his lips communicated more pride and joy and happiness he had ever felt. There was a word he didn't use often: happiness. Well, he had started to use it more freely since she spoke that.

He was happy – or had been anyway – because she was there, loving, in his arms, beautiful and sweet. And he knew that she would always be there. They shared more than any two people he knew. Shared more pain and loneliness. And now, now, they were happy. He didn't think there were two people who deserved it more. He prided himself on being pretty modest, too, when things finally counted. Tifa certainly deserved any happiness she could get her hands on, and, if he happened to be part of that equation, then, well, that was good for him and for her. He could imagine spending the rest of his life with her and his unborn child and hopefully more children after that. Yeah, he could care for her forever.

Cloud glanced wistfully at the clock on the wall of the hospital, watching the hands tick by slowly, his mind still in the past. What had happened next was a different type of memory, one of a growing number that he knew he would cherish forever. It was too perfect to be grouped in with the rest of the garbage that came before and all the solemn crap that had followed. He would lock it away in his heart to share with only Tifa and, on occasion, his own self. What that memory contained was too sacred for just random thoughts, anyway.

But, then, of course, as all things go, so did this one. And it didn't go cheaply, either. Why the hell did they have a kerosene lamp on the damn nightstand anyway? What lame ass had put it there? Probably just the innkeeper looking for a quick buck. He had earned it alright, out of Cloud's pocket. After they had inadvertently knocked it off the table and sent the entire inn into flames, it had taken everything they owned short of the clothes on their backs to satisfy the pissy bastard.

There went another moment, down the drain. Well, the kisses had been sweet and the intimacy they had once again shared with each other had been well worth the two lousy chocobos and thirteen hundred gil. It was after that moment that he didn't want to remember anything.

What the hell had they been thinking?

It's three o'clock in the fuckin' morning! What the hell do you want?!

Hey, it's me. Cloud.

Oh... There was a long pause, a racket on the other end. Well? What the hell is it already?

He'd explain the situation very carefully, trying to keep the actual cause of the fire under guard. He was rewarded with laughter. He could remember that laughter. It was last he'd ever heard. He wasn't expecting to hear any more soon. That laughter was the best sound he'd ever heard. It stung his heart to think he might never hear it again.

Thanks a lot. He'd been jesting. They both were. Funny how something as dangerous as burning down an entire building could be seen as funny.

I'll come and getcha. That had decided it. Four, well, five really, words that seemed so insignificant, immeasurable against the huge conversation they had had before those five words had been spoken. Who would have thought? He hadn't. Nobody had. This was what they got for being blind.

Being blind... They weren't blind. Who would've thought that any of this could happen in the span of only a few hours. The immense ship landing smoothly, picking them up, the crew greeting them with wide smiles that were a dead give-away to just how much they had been told about the incident. Then he was there, grabbing Cloud's hand with his own, shaking it once before dragging the younger man into a friendly, backslapping embrace.

Welcome aboard, Spike.

I thought you would shoot me for getting you up so early.

It's good to see the damn dawn once in awhile. That had brought a smile to their faces. Going off to see the damn dawn. The last damn dawn in a long while, the first damn dawn in a good, long time. When had been the last time a coupla buddies had sat up to watch the dawn coming over the Nibel Mountains with a six pack to share between them? It had been too long, that was for sure. So, the trip to Kalm had been spent talking about that, reminiscing, and hearing the new news regardless of whether it was good or bad. Cloud didn't say anything about Tifa being pregnant, yet. She didn't, either. It was something that needed to be said at the right moment. Then didn't seem to be it.

Too bad there hadn't been a later.

Goddamn it!

What?! He could still see it, hear it. The ground had growled, the rocks and strata ripped apart by an inconceivable force. And then the green. He had almost shut his eyes to it. How he was sick of seeing green. Green eyes. Green drowning. Bloody Lifestream could kiss his ass. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it was about to do that. It spewed up for a good long while, eating away the rocks and vegetation until it had formed a good sized pool.

I thought this crap was over!

There was no response to that. The ship had been pummeled hard, then, with a torrent of up and down drafts tearing at it. The occupants had been jostled, the sound of screeching metal and splintering wood filling their ears, greenish light filling

their eyes. Tifa was holding onto something, clutching at it as though it were a lifeline to safety. Cloud had a handful of the railing into his grasp. But, oh, no, he had to go save the ship.

Damn fool pilot!

They were slammed back as the ship was sent forward with a jerk before starting to sail smoothly through the air. And they had all let their guard down for an endless moment. It had seemed safe. God, they were all so stupid.

He could still feel the horrible sway of the deck beneath his feet as though he had still been on it, still feel the jerking as the rail was ripped from his hands. He'd slammed into a console only to feel a flash of pain as his head was clipped by a passing boot. He still could feel that terror thundering in his heart. The fear of loss, the fear of losing just one more person to the antics of the Planet. He couldn't stand one more.

No!

The shattering of wood rang in his ears, mingling with his own cry. He had hooked his foot underneath the console, reached out for his friend in a perhaps futile action that was mainly borne from a life where losing people hurt so much he couldn't bear it. How appropriate that he should've found something with that lunge, grabbed onto the flesh of the man he was going to save.

They had stared at each other for what seemed like eternity, then, one hand locked in a life-giving handshake. He had reached down with his other to grab something else. There was nothing else to grab.

Take my hand. Had that been an order? It had sounded like it. Maybe he wasn't the only one with an authority problem. Take it, damn it!

But he hadn't. Why? Goddamn it, why?! What was the fool thinking? As his fingers slipped through the leather glove, what the hell had he been thinking? He hadn't been frozen with fear, just... Cloud didn't know. All he knew was that all he had now was a bloody glove. And one more friend that had been taken from him. Maybe not in body, but in mind and spirit. And all he deserved was a bloody glove?! Was that it?

Well, it was shoved into his pocket now, sitting there as a constant reminder that just down the hall there was a dying man who had been pulled from the Lifestream, pulled from the Lifestream because he hadn't been able to save him in time. I guess I am a failure.

So all he could do was wait, looking dismally at the clock – it was night, a day had passed – and hoping that the rest of his friends would show up soon, so he and Tifa wouldn't have to sit in solitude while Cid Highwind was slowly taken away.