

Painted Black
Chapter Thirteen

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"Welcome home, son. Welcome home... son. Welcome... home, son." The words rolled off his tongue like a foul oath, repeating in his mind until he felt the insatiable need to hear them again. It was a chant. A chant of lies. He knew they couldn't be true. Home was Nibelheim. He was in Midgar. There, that was a lie. Son... that was a term of endearment. How many times had some old bum called him "son"? Far too many to count. There was nothing behind that word. He was right again.

Cloud wanted more than anything to believe that. He wanted to think that it was only meant to confuse him. His father here? Ha! His father was dead, had been dead for twenty years. Nothing could change that. These crazy men, Aeda or whoever, they could shoot him up with drugs, try to confuse him. He didn't care. He saw right through them and their lies. They could play pretend with themselves, make fools of themselves. He knew he was right. He knew it. His father was dead. Dead! There was no way in hell he was going to think otherwise. His mother had told him so. She was no liar.

He wanted to rub the grimy feeling from his eyes, but his hands were tied down with something. It was too dark to see where he was, but he didn't care. He wasn't going to go anywhere for a long time. Not that he didn't hope for some chance of escape. He just knew there was nowhere to run. He felt as though he had been here before, as though he had tried to escape numerous times to no avail. Maybe he had. Time seemed to be running over itself, wherever he was. Darkness had a way of doing that, stopping time or speeding it up. How would he ever know? He had to know.

"What time is it?" he asked suddenly, listening to his own voice echo through the darkness surrounding him. He peered into it, wishing it away.

Lights flashed on, driving the dark away and briefly blinding him. He sucked in a breath of air, surprised. He blinked away afterimages, as the sound of the rise and fall of soft footsteps filled his ears.

"It's around noon."

Cloud frowned. He hadn't expected the lights to even come on, much less for someone to answer him. It was probably just another tactic to try to confuse him. Yeah, whatever. It wasn't working. He knew exactly what was happening. His father was dead, and he was in the hands of a bunch of lunatics. It wasn't the first time.

"You've been here for almost a day now. I was wondering when you'd come to your senses."

That voice was so familiar. But he didn't want to think about who it could be. He didn't want to know. He licked his lips, trying to crane his neck to see who it was without being terribly obvious about it. He couldn't shake the feeling that he should have been able to identify this person from miles away. The voice should have been enough.

"I don't know where you've been," Cloud began, clearing his throat, "but I've been 'at my senses' for awhile."

The man simply grunted, and Cloud could just imagine the shrug that accompanied it. A white lab coat, pens in the pocket, a plastic identification card clipped to the lapel. Dark wire-frame glasses covering beady eyes, a scant amount of hair covering the balding head of a hunched figure. And, with this mental picture, Cloud knew who this was, recognition bubbling through his mind like a rampant spring. Damn...

"Hojo," he greeted, through his voice lacked any warmth. "I thought you died."

Hojo's head came into view, appearing quite normal for one who had injected himself with a batch of Jenova cells and mutated into a hideous creature. Cloud frowned. The scientist was actually looking good, though he hated to admit that to himself much less anyone else. Hojo smiled his small, sadistic grin, a mere twist of his lips.

"You thought wrong, my boy," he declared. "I am very much alive, indeed. Very much alive."

Cloud closed his eyes against the sight of the man who had destroyed his life. Hojo had died. They had killed him. But, then

again, Jenova had a strange way of resurrecting itself. How were they even supposed to know if that had been Hojo to begin with? There was no way of knowing. There had been no body, no proof. Damn. If Hojo was alive, then he hadn't been dreaming. Welcome home, son. It had been Hojo who uttered those words, who had looked so much like... no, that couldn't be true. It was still as absurd as it had ever been.

"What do you want?" Cloud asked bitterly, opening his eyes to see if he could look beyond the dark glasses. Maybe they weren't the eyes that had glowed so warmly with laughter and smiles. With the glasses concealing them, he would have no way of knowing.

Hojo sighed. "I want to make my family whole again. The loss of a son can be hard on an old man."

Cloud snorted. "Sephiroth's heart was as black as yours is now. The only loss you feel comes from having no Super-SOLDIER to experiment on."

Hojo's face darkened, a frown coming to his lips. "Oh, come now. Every man feels pride for his children. Just because I don't... love my sons doesn't mean I'm not proud of them. I want to be proud of you, too."

There he went again. Cloud frowned, slowly shaking his head. Hojo was a maniac, no doubt about that. He was purely delusional. "My father died twenty years ago," Cloud declared. "He was a great man. You, sir, are not."

"That stings me deeply, my boy."

"Good."

"My own son hates his father," Hojo moaned, leaning heavily on the bed to which Cloud was bound. His face clouded over in what could have been despair.

"I am not your son," Cloud ordained, forcing strength into his voice though he was unsure of the truth in his words. "My mother said that my father died when I was young. She has never lied to me. If she said that, then that's the truth. I hope you don't take it personally when I say I'm more inclined to believe her than I am to believe you."

Hojo shrugged, his expression unchanged by the bite in Cloud's words. "Think what you like," he said, a wane smile on his face. "After all, I can imagine that you would simply... want to follow in your father's footsteps as any well brought up son would do." He turned and then walked away from Cloud, his hands clasped at the small of his back. "You have no parents of whom you are aware."

Cloud frowned, following each of Hojo's movements with suspicious eyes. "That's a lie. My mother raised me in Nibelheim. You killed her. Remember? Or did your 'freak accident' with Jenova cause you to forget?"

"O contraire, I remember it quite clearly. Only I don't readily recall killing her myself. I think that may have been caused by one of my sons."

Hojo's rebuttal was met with a sharp, bitter laugh. Cloud shook his head, breaking his gaze away from Hojo. "You killed her – no, the entire town – the moment you laid eyes on the Mt. Nibel Reactor."

" 'What twisted webs we weave when first we learn to deceive,' " Hojo recited, walking around the room. "And deceiving yourself is the most twisted folly of them all. If you want to believe that I killed your so-called 'mother' at Nibelheim, well, there is little I can do to stop that. I can't make you see the truth for yourself. You've got to open your own eyes, boy."

Cloud snorted. "I don't know what you're talking about. I know what I've seen. I've experienced the truth, sir. I've seen it. I recognize it, and I don't think I need your help."

The scientist barked a laugh, the sound cracking the tranquility within the room, if only for a moment. "You clearly do not understand, boy. What you recognize – what you know – as truth is only a well-constructed lie told to you for the purpose of letting you grow up as a 'normal' child. The mother you know is not your mother. The father she made for you is a lie. I am your father. No amount of lies can change that."

"I don't believe it. My mother lived in Nibelheim all her life."

Hojo shook his head. "No... your mother lived, and probably still does live, here in Midgar. She is a whore I screwed for a couple of gil. Did you hear that, Cloud? Did you understand that, son? I fucked your mother in the backseat of a ratty POS. Even scientists need to have a good time once in awhile."

Cloud squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to hear this. It couldn't be true. His mother had raised him in Nibelheim, the little mountain town that everybody forgot about. His mother said that she had never been to Midgar. His mother said that his father had been killed in the war with Wutai; she even had a Silver Star to show how great a hero he'd been. "That's not true. I'm not going to listen to you."

"Oh, you aren't. Why? Because you know it's true, right?" Hojo cracked his knuckles, leaning against the table to look down at Cloud. "Of course, you know it's true. You've always had your doubts about your father and justifiably, I might add. I've been a horrible father to you. If only I had known then what I know now, I could still have all of my sons. We could be a family. I'm such a horrible father to you, I know that now. Let's try again. Let's be a family again."

Cloud shook his head, opening icy eyes to gaze coldly at Hojo. "We were never a family. We will never be a family. You're not my father. Get the hell out of my sight."

"Soon, you will see. You will see, and you will understand. You are my last chance, my only hope."

"Piss off."

Hojo nodded slowly. "As you wish. I will return, son. You think about that."

"Whatever," Cloud growled, anger thick on his tongue. He had a feeling, though, that he would be thinking about Hojo's words quite a bit. He didn't want to believe that they were true and realized that the more he thought about them, the more true they would become. But he didn't seem to have much else to do, anyway.

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"Mom?"

"What, honey?"

"Mom, what's a bastard?"

She turned away from the stove when he said that, mild brown eyes filled with concern and maybe a little anger. He hoped he hadn't said something wrong again. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately, and he felt like he would die with each occurrence. He hated it when she wasn't pleased with him. He needed her to be pleased with him.

"Where did you hear that word?" she asked gently, though her expression seemed forced into placidity.

He shuffled his feet, glancing away from her and looking to the floor. He didn't feel that he could meet her gaze, not with that expression on her face. He thought she was angry. "Nowhere," he said, uncertainty crawling into his tone. She shook her head. "Did someone call you that?"

He didn't respond. She was angry now. He shouldn't have asked her. She was mad at him again. She was always angry. He wanted to go into his room and lock the door and cry where no one could see him. But the frame on his door was twisted so the door didn't close, and the lock was broken. He wanted to run away.

"Was it one of those boys?"

Yes...

He didn't dare say anything. She was getting angrier.

"How dare they say such a thing to my little boy!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees so she could see him eye to eye.

He knew it. He had known it all along, ever since that boy had said it. A bastard was something bad. Intentionally or not, he had said a bad word in front of his mom. No wonder she was angry. And, then, she would find out that he hit the kid who called him that. He didn't know what it meant, but the way it had been said sounded mean, like an insult. So, bam! He'd hit that boy, and he had meant it.

He started crying. "Mom, I got into a fight," he declared, his voice cracking as the tears streamed down his face. "He was making fun of me, and then he said that his pa had said that you were a... a slut and that I was a bastard, and then I... then I hit him." He ran out of breath and gulped in a lungful of air that turned into choked tears.

His mother grabbed him into her arms, pulling him close to her. He was engulfed by her warm scent, the aroma of the kitchen tickling his nostrils. He was so secure in her arms. Then, he knew that she wasn't mad at him. She was angry about something else. He had been sure that the fighting would make her mad.

"It's okay, honey," she whispered, her hand rubbing his back compassionately. Her hands rustled the cloth softly as they moved across it in circular motions. "Don't worry about the fighting."

"I only wanted him to stop calling you names," he said, sniffing.

She pushed him back away from her, and she looked at him straight in the eyes. "You did the right thing. Sometimes, you can't help fighting. But you shouldn't let those boys hurt you like that. You shouldn't fight with them."

He wiped his eyes, ignoring the long streak of wet tears he left on the back of his hand. A moment of silence passed before she collected him in her arms again, picking him off of the ground. Any other time, he would've complained about being too old for such things, but now he didn't care. He knew he was too old for this, but that didn't matter. He felt safe from the boys' taunts in his mother's arms. Their words couldn't hurt him here.

"Mom?"

"Mmm?" She was rocking him. He liked it.

"Am I a bastard?"

She stopped rocking back and forth, suddenly tense beneath. "Of course not," she declared with enough confidence to ensure him that it was the truth tenfold. He still wasn't sure what a bastard was, but he knew he wasn't one, contrary to what was apparently popular opinion. "Your father was a great man, a real hero. I've shown you his merits. He died fighting for those boys' freedom. If they can appreciate that only by insulting you and me, then they aren't worth fighting against. What they say or do doesn't mean anything. It's how you react to them that matters."

He shifted his weight. "What do you mean?"

"You'll understand someday," she replied, though her answer did little more than confuse him further. He didn't understand his mother sometimes. "You're getting too big for this," she added, immediately changing the subject. He knew the conversation was over. "Or maybe I'm getting to old."

She set him on the floor, and he let go of her blouse, unwinding his hands from the soft fabric. She wiped away one of the remaining tears from his cheek with her thumb before she stood, patted him on the head, and turned back to her cooking. "Why don't you go wash up, Cloud?" she asked, giving the pot on the stove a quick stir. "Dinner will be ready soon."

He knew that he had been dismissed by his mother. Any chance he had had of learning what "bastard" meant were now gone. He walked from the kitchen and started down the hall to the bathroom. He would figure it out. Later.

"How did Dad die, Ma?"

"He was killed, Cloud. In a war you don't remember."

He wasn't satisfied with that. "I know that. You've told me that for fourteen years, now. I want to hear about the war. Tell me about Dad."

She sighed. "He was a corporal, in the infantry. He knew he was going to be shipped for the war, but we were married anyway. We were in love. Two weeks later, he left for Wutai." She wiped a tear from her eye. "It was the last time I saw him."

"How did he die?"

"I don't know."

He chuckled. "How could you not know, Ma? They musta told you."

"I assume it was in some major battle. We never heard anything about the war. All I ever got was a colonel knocking on my door with a flimsy medal and a letter preaching condolences. That's more than most people got. Your father was a hero. He saved his company. You should be proud."

"I am."

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"Ma, I'm going to sign up."

She had not reacted well to that.

"How can you do this to me?" she demanded, tears forming in her eyes. "After your father was killed fighting for Shinra, you come to me and tell me that you're signing up? Why don't you just bury me now?"

He groaned. "Ah, Ma, it ain't so bad. I'll sign up for a four-year tour. I have to do something with my life, Ma. I'm going crazy just staying here. I need to go out and make some friends."

"If you hadn't isolated yourself here –"

"Look, Ma!" he insisted. "I'm perfectly capable of making decisions for myself. I'm old enough to enlist, and I'm going to do it with your support or without it."

"You don't understand anything."

"I do too!"

"I told you that fighting against the other children here was not the answer. I told you that you shouldn't lower yourself."

His hands dropped to his side. "It ain't like that, Ma."

"You're signing up to prove to them that you're better than they are. That's what it's like."

He shook his head. "If you really must know, I'm signing up to improve myself. And..."

"And?"

"There's this girl. I want to show her that I can be as good as Sephiroth. I want to be that good. I want everyone who calls

me a screw-up or thinks I'm nothing... I want them to see something when they look at me. I want them to think, 'That's Cloud, what a guy. I knew him.' Or, 'I want to be like Cloud when I grow up.' I want to be something. That's why."

His mother hadn't replied to that. She turned away from him, and he had the feeling that she was trying to stop her tears. Silence reigned sovereign over them for what seemed like forever. Finally, she said, "Promise me you'll write."

"Of course."

"And promise me that you'll come visit. And that you behave yourself. I don't want you knocking up some nice girl. Don't try to defend your position, Cloud. I know soldiers. You promise me that if you do, you'll marry her, and you'll stay with her until death."

"Sure."

"Promise me!"

The bite in his mother's words startled him. He was bombarded with feelings. Confusion. Was this who my father was? Some drunken soldier who couldn't keep to himself? And hurt. He had hurt his mother again. Shame. Anger at her for not seeing his side of things. And anger at himself for his anger at her. He thought that he should reconsider his decision. Maybe being a soldier was a bad idea; it was tearing his mother apart. He thought that maybe he should stay home, in Nibelheim, with his mother.

"I promise."

"Go, then. Before I change my mind."

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It all made perfect sense. All the pieces falling together into one coherent picture that he couldn't stand to look at. He was afraid that it would destroy his sight as he knew it would destroy his life. He didn't want to see it, but he knew it was far too important to ignore. He could've ignored the fact that his father had been a drunken slob that screwed some girl on his night off. He could've overlooked that. Hell, he thought that he might have been able to overlook Hojo being his father.

If not for the fact that Hojo was alive.

And, then, of course, there was the fact that if Hojo was his father, he wasn't an only child. He could definitely not ignore that. He was related to the very evil he had been struggling to destroy? Which sadist had thought that up? It was probably Fate. Fate had a way of twisting things around for a laugh. His own brother had desecrated his town, his mother, his life. His brother had nearly destroyed the world. And he was supposed to live with that?

God, what if he had known earlier? Would he have tried to stop it?

He didn't know. He was afraid that the answer would be no. And, if it wasn't, would he have been able to kill his own brother? He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think about anything anymore. He couldn't stand his own thoughts. Everything he knew, everything he had ever known was wrong. How was he supposed to deal with that? Simply go on with his normal life? Hardly.

And Tifa... would Tifa still love him? Even if she knew what he was? Could she stand being in love with the man with a brother who had almost sundered the world and a father who was a freak and a bloody sadist? He could hardly stand himself. The idea of being part of such a twisted family almost made him sick.

Father...

Goddamn you.

Why couldn't you stay dead? Take your Silver Star, Father. I don't need it. Why couldn't you stay drunk? Find another

where, Father. Find some morals, Father. Why did you come back? Leave me alone. Let me be. I'm tired of you. I'm tired of hearing about what a hero you are, a great man. Where were you when I needed a father? For twenty years, I listened to Mother.

Am I a bastard? Yes.

Of course not. You're father was a great man, a real hero. Wrong.

Tell me about Dad. You don't want to know.

He was a corporal, in the infantry. No.

I don't want you knocking up some nice girl, Cloud. Too late.

You promise me that if you do, you'll marry her, and you'll stay with her until death. If she'll still take me.

Promise me! You stupid bastard.

I promise. Promises, promises. They were so hard for him to keep. Tifa wouldn't want him. She loved him, or at least he hoped she did. He was afraid that she wouldn't love him anymore. After all, he belonged to a family of crackpots. How would he know if he was going to pop his lid? Like father, like son, the saying went. He was starting to hate that saying.

So, all it took was one event, huh? I've often wondered about that. A bunch of lies and then, one day, the truth, and everything's not so great anymore. Get away from me, Tifa. I can't marry you.

I can't live with you when I want to die.

I can't trust you when I lie.

I can't love you when I hate myself.

I can't love you.

I can't love...

I can't.

And, of everything I've ever lost, I think I'll miss you the most.