

Painted Black

Part 2: Sibling Rivalry

Chapter Nine

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"You can't stop it."

Her mouth didn't move with the words, but that fact didn't make them any less real. She had spoken them, declared them, uttered the last sentence he ever wanted to hear. She might as well have spoken them. They seemed to echo through the chamber. He didn't know how. She was dead, her body limp and cold against the white marble of the altar, her perfect flesh pearly, her lips blue, her eyes wide and staring. She couldn't see anything anymore. How he envied her.

"Nobody can."

He didn't want to believe her. He hated what she was telling him. How could there be no power to stop what was happening? There was always some power to counteract something else, a careful balance kept in check by the life of the Planet, and the people, and all the animals, and flowers, and trees. He refused to believe that it couldn't be stopped. As long as there were people willing to fight for what they believed, anything was possible. When the last man standing finally fell to his knees, then he would believe her. He was still standing. There was still one man to stop it.

How could she say the things she did anyway? She had no right. She may have been pure and innocent, everything he was not. But pure and innocent didn't have the power to fight against their foes. She had died because of that. He envied her. He hated how he was. He hated how the world was turning out. Why she had died. She, of any of them, deserved to live. And here she was, dying over and over again for their sins, like some forgotten messiah, while the world trudged on in happiness and hatred, alive because she died, alive because she had sacrificed her purity for their dirt. He loved her purity. Anyone would. Or was it love, or the idea of being in love? Love was pure. He was not. He hated it all.

His boot nudged her body, his eyes filling with tears that would never be shed. She didn't twitch, didn't respond. She was dead. This time, she was dead forever. There would be no more prayers cut off by the slice of a blade, no more saving anybody. No one wanted to be saved. That was what the world was coming to, and there was no one to stop it.

He wanted to stop it, but he didn't know how. After all, he was only a man, one of thousands who would prefer to salvage a wretched soul rather than reign in hell. That accounted for little. The balance was tipping, set astray by her death, and he wasn't heavy enough to keep it steady. Sometime later, he supposed he would be, when it didn't matter anymore. That day would be distant, and, even then, he might not be alive or care if he was. After all, people change, but souls rarely did.

Would it be worth it if he could save her?

"You can't stop it."

He didn't even know what he could do.

"Nothing."

What was he up against? What horrors had been released onto the world when the purity was killed? Something had to replace it, some dark things wrenched from Pandora's box and set loose on man. Hate maybe. Fear. He didn't know. There was something. The balances were tipping and not in his favor. And it didn't strike him as particularly favorable that all he had left was hope. Nobody had hope for anything. Hope was empty. What she had had was not. She was dead now. Why did she always bail out when things got too hard? She always left him alone! Him and his friends! And then she would come back in a bloody melodramatic manner, save the world at the last damn second...

Maybe he didn't envy her after all.

Maybe he didn't love her after all.

Maybe he hated her.

His knees sank to the cold floor, falling into the crimson pool of her blood.

“You see, now?”

He saw. He couldn't stop it.

~*~

Green flared before her eyes, and, for a fleeting moment, she thought that she was back there, back in the Lifestream. How she had grown to hate that place. Lifestream. For a place that was supposedly the heart and blood of the Planet, supposedly filled with eternal happiness to whoever was pure enough to embrace it, it took so much more than it could ever give. Lifestream. Life. If she could, she would rename it. Deathstream. It was more suiting.

The green horror filling her eyes, her heart, her soul, her very being. Green running through her, crying in her ears and howling through her soul. She thought she might be ripped apart like she almost had before. But he had been there, called her, glued her pieces together like a little boy who had broken a vase. His voice had sewn her wounds, brought her back from all that pain. One voice in a sea of cries and howls and insults flung with an angry art. It took her a moment to realize that that voice was no longer calling her name. It took a moment longer to realize that the voices were no longer crying in her ears.

Her eyes flung open in a panic.

How fast it all came back to her now. The fight. The pain. Cloud. The panic slowly dissipated. He was alright; she knew it. He always came out of battles somehow unscathed. It was when they weren't fighting that she was afraid for him. He put his guard down sometimes, and he got hurt. He wouldn't get hurt anymore, not with her around him. She would always be sure that he was alright, mentally, physically. He would never feel out of place, not with her, not with their baby.

Their baby.

Oh, God.

She was struggling again, wanting to know, needing to know. What had happened to her baby? Was it alright? During the fight, had it... She was vaguely aware of the sound of her own terrified voice ringing through her ears, shattering the calm that she had felt moments ago. Where was Cloud? Where was Cloud to tell her that she was being silly, to just call her name? He could make everything go away. He was always able to make everything go away, just by saying her name. One word. Tifa.

Where was he?!

Yuffie stumbled back from Tifa, catching a failing hand right in the face. She tripped over Red XIII, who gave a startled yelp, before falling into a cold puddle of snowy water. Her hand rubbed her face in an attempt to ease the numbing pain from the blow. It didn't work. She tried to ignore it as she pushed herself up, glancing around for Red XIII. He had retreated back from the chaos that Tifa was causing, nursing a paw. She grimaced.

“I'm sorry, Red,” she declared, but her voice was lost on the commotion. She didn't care. There would be time for apologies later. Right now, though, the focus of attention was neither Red nor herself. She wanted to believe that it was Tifa, or maybe even Cloud, but she would only be fooling herself. She hated that.

Barret had stopped walking with the gurney as soon as the words had left Tifa's mouth. His face was one of startled anger, and Yuffie cringed at the expression. Tifa had wanted to keep it a secret; she hadn't even told Barret! Yuffie couldn't but wonder if she had even told Cloud about the baby. She quickly forced that from her mind. Tifa would never do such a thing, keep a secret like that. Tifa probably didn't have any secrets. Yuffie frowned. She probably shared everything with Cloud, anyway.

She was jolted from her reverie by Barret's sharp words.

“What the hell was she talkin’ about?!” he demanded, his eyes cold and accusing. “What baby?!”

Yuffie’s frown deepened, her own anger seeping into the expression. She was sick and tired of automatically accused for every little trivial thing, be it a lost materia orb or a friggin’ baby. What did it matter if Tifa was pregnant? It was none of their business, anyway. Anything that had to do with the baby was between Tifa and Cloud. Yuffie started walking away from the hospital, licking her lips and noticing the iron taste of blood in her mouth. She scrubbed at her bleeding nose angrily.

“Why do you always assume that I know all the answers, Barret?” she growled. “I don’t know anything more than you do, you big oaf!”

Red cocked his head to one side. “Well, one would assume that you and Tifa would talk about – ”

“Damn it, no!” Barret interrupted, his angry voice shaking the crisp air. “I know when ya lie! I’m no foo’! Ya ain’t giving it to us straight, Yuffie!”

“Oh, so you’re some guru, now!” Yuffie snapped. “What difference does it make if I knew about this beforehand? We all know about it now!”

“Yeah, it makes a difference. Ya had an obligation to tell us. We deserve to know!”

“The hell we do! It’s Tifa’s and Cloud’s business, not ours. Do I demand to know everything about your personal life? I know virtually nothing about you! What if you decided to get married to some wench from Gongaga? Would I demand her picture and her stats? I don’t think so.”

“That’s different. I’d told y’all.” Barret shifted his feet uncomfortably. “But that ain’t the point!”

Yuffie crossed her arms. “But it is the point. You would have told us. So, if Tifa wanted us to know, she would’ve told us! See? She didn’t want us to know. She wanted to keep it a secret. Between her and Cloud.”

Barret didn’t respond, glaring at Yuffie with enough burning rage to melt the Planet’s icecaps and fully aware that he had nothing on which to use it. Yuffie was right, and he was wrong, and he knew it. Knowing it didn’t make him like the idea any more. His brow furrowed. “Did ya know about it?”

Yuffie stared at him, fire lighting her eyes. “No.”

He nodded slowly, still watching her with rekindled suspicion. He was above questioning her word, though. He could and would trust her. She had helped them save the Planet. A fleeting thought of Vincent entered his mind, and he quickly banished it. He didn’t want to think about that now. Vincent was a mysterious man with equally mysterious problems. He knew Yuffie’s problems; she was a thief and a brat, end of story.

“If you two are done having a staring contest, can we move onto more important things?” Red asked, tearing their attention away from each other. He was sitting calmly on the sidewalk, sunlight streaming down on his red fur and the biting wind whipping through his mane. Yuffie grimaced. He had probably listened to the entire conversation.

“More important things being?” she asked.

“Number one on the list, I believe, is Cloud’s current whereabouts,” he supplied, watching them coolly. “Followed shortly by Cid’s current whereabouts.”

“He’s in there,” Yuffie replied smoothly, shaking a hand at the hospital.

Red did his best impression of a frown, shaking his head. “Nope.”

“Whaddya mean?” Barret asked, frustration growing in his voice once more.

Red sighed. "It's quite simple, actually. While you two were squabbling, I took a moment to converse with Dr. Parson, who appears quite agitated that his favorite case has disappeared."

"Huh?"

"Out the window, I believe," Red supplied, stretching as he got to his feet. "Apparently, he stole Cloud's clothes. I dunno."

Yuffie barked a laugh. "I'd pay to see the old man in Cloud's clothes. That would be a site to behold!"

"Indeed, it would. However, we should try to find either Cloud or Cid, preferably both."

Barret cut off Red with a wave of his hand. "So, wait just a damn minute. You're tellin' me that we're missing three people, we gotta maniac runnin' 'round tryin' ta kill Cloud, and a pregnant woman in a hospital. Shit."

Red considered what Barret said for a moment, his eye glinting in the sun. "Yeah, that would be about it. If you're talking about the immediate problems. The moment you start thinking long term, you have to factor in all the fluctuations within the Lifestream. I think that would have to be written down in our list of problems, as well. We can't very well leave the people of the Planet at the mercy of the Lifestream. Something is causing it, and we should find out what."

"Damn," Barret moaned, rubbing his head thoughtfully. "Alright," he started, "first –"

Yuffie cut him off. "First, we find Cid. When we find him, we can go from there."

"Who made you leader?" Barret demanded hotly. Yuffie was starting to irritate him. He felt the growing need to sock her upside her head.

"I did," she said coldly, ignoring his anger and pointedly directing her attention to Red XIII. "We don't know what happened to Cloud. At least we know where Cid is."

"Oh, and where is that?"

She shoved her hands into her pockets, searched around for something, and pulled out a tissue. She wiped at her upper lip and nose as she began to walk away, dabbing the blood away with the skill of one used to cleaning a bloody nose. When she was satisfied with the results, she crumpled up the tissue and tossed it into a passing garbage can.

Barret and Red followed after her reluctantly. Barret frowned. "Ya haven't answered my question."

She stopped, turning back to them. "Oh, come on, you can't tell me that you don't know the one and only place Cid would ever try to find in this rotten city."

Red nodded slowly, chuckling softly. "Trying to find it and getting there are two entirely different things."

Yuffie shrugged, turning around to begin walking again. "He'll show up there. You couldn't keep that man from his ship if you tacky-glued his head to a cement block and dumped him in the middle of the ocean. Let's go."