

**Painted Black**  
**Chapter Twelve**

by Junj - satheis@ix.netcom.com

"I can't believe you did that!"

Yuffie frowned and planted her hands on her hips, stopping in front of the door as to offer no escape for Tifa. She had come to the hospital to get Tifa away from that stupid prick Parson, and this was the thanks she got? An accusation! What the hell was wrong with everybody?

"What did I do?" she asked, leaning back against the door to the inside of the Highwind. She was not budging. No way. When Tifa started dishing out the truth, then she would leave. No sooner, no later.

Tifa sighed in exasperation, shaking her head. Her face was cleared of the bruises that had marred the pale flesh. She and her baby had a clean bill of health. Unfortunately, clean bill of health went hand in hand with energy for angry fistfight, and Yuffie had a feeling that that was where this was headed.

"Look, Yuffie, don't play games with me," she declared, her voice low and even. "I am not in the mood. I know you know you told them all about me and Cloud, so you don't have to lie about it."

Yuffie frowned. "I'm not lying about anything! I didn't –"

"Why can't you just admit that you did it?!" she demanded, her voice cracking with emotion. "Why does it have to be like this?! Why do we all have to lie to each other like this is some kind of game? Well, maybe this is a game! You bet Cloud's life. Only, if you win, he's lost, and if you lose, he's lost." Tifa bit her lower lip, feeling her tears threaten to spill over in her eyes once more.

Yuffie sighed, leaning heavily against the wall. "What do you want, Tifa?" she asked softly. "Do you want me to say I spilled the beans? Is that what you want me to say?! I did it, Tifa! I told them! They know everything because I have a big mouth and can't keep a secret! Is that it?!"

Tifa turned away from Yuffie, wiping her eyes with one hand. She didn't know what to say, too tired to talk anymore. And she knew she was wrong. She was being selfish. What did it matter if Yuffie said anything? They were bound to find out sooner or later. So, it had been sooner. What was the big deal with that? She was just being stupid and foolish and that made her cry all the harder.

Yuffie felt a bubble of shame grow inside her, filling her until she thought it would burst. She felt so horrible. She had purposefully made Tifa cry. It hadn't been by accident. She knew exactly what she had said to her. She couldn't know what Tifa was feeling. Well, maybe she did, but only on a small scale. She had felt the pain and hurt that came with the uncertainty when someone you cared for was lost. But she had never loved anyone the way Tifa loved Cloud. She couldn't pretend to know what Tifa was going through.

She took a step forward, reaching out to put a hand on Tifa's shoulder, wishing back the words she had snapped and knowing that there was no way they would go away. "Tifa," she began, hating herself for being so petty as to have the last word. "Tifa, I'm sorry."

Tifa shook her head, her face buried in her hands. What could she say in reply? She had too much to be sorry for and not enough time in her entire life to say all the apologies. Most of them were to Cloud, but there were a great deal for everyone else in their group. She was so childish. If only she could change that, but it was embedded deep in her soul. She always expected everyone to be there for her, but she was never there for anyone else. What type of friend was she?

"It's okay," she muttered, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm being stupid, Yuffie. Maybe I should follow my own advice."

Yuffie frowned. "What was that?"

She smiled thinly. "Maybe I should stop making mountains out of molehills. I'm acting like a child. Next time just slap me

upside the head, or something.”

“I tried that already, remember? It didn’t work.”

Tifa laughed half-heartedly at the memory though she knew that it was no laughing matter. Nothing was very funny anymore, but she had to laugh at something. She had to keep her spirits up if she was going to find Cloud. She would find him. It wasn’t a matter of if, but rather when.

A smile play on Yuffie’s lips as she turned Tifa to the door of the Highwind. “Come on, Tifa. Let’s go rescue Marlene before those two boneheads corrupt her. Red’s got a job I don’t envy.”

She nodded in response, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes. “Neither do I.”

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“Whadya mean that move’s illegal?” Barret growled, staring at the mound of cards in the middle of the table. The game they were playing just didn’t make sense. It was too long and too complicated.

Danny sighed, leaning back in his chair. He had been coerced into teaching Barret how to play, and he would give pretty much anything to anybody if he could take back that decision. “Look, Barret. Marlene gets how to play! It’s simple. Red led with the two of clubs. Therefore, you have to play a club in your hand if possible.”

“But ya don’t want cards. All I got is the king. I play it an’ I get the cards.”

Cid groaned, slapping his forehead. “You don’t want hearts! Hearts, h-e-a-r-t-s! The little, red, round shapes.”

Red grinned. “I think it’s a lost cause.”

“Sure, you only think that because you’ll win if we all give up the game on account of Barret,” Cid reasoned. “No way. This is gonna be the last round. You’re going down, fur ball.”

“And how are you going to manage that?” Marlene asked. “He only has twenty less points than you do.”

“Just you wait.” Cid watched as Barret managed to pick out a card he could play before placing his own down on the pile.

“Ace,” Danny commented. “Living dangerously.”

“How the hell is that living dangerously?” he asked, leaning back as he glanced through his hand. “All I got were a couple of clubs. You can’t play point cards on the first trick, you know.” He frowned slightly as he surveyed his cards. He had been dealt mostly royalty and high cards and had been sure to pass all the low ones. From the lack of clubs in Barret’s and his own hands, he could assume that Marlene and Red had them all. He played the queen of diamonds.

Red watched with growing suspicions as Cid kept the game mainly under his control, passing the deal off to Barret once or twice and then to Marlene. But it came back to him as he played what seemed to be an incredibly stupid move. Red had played the king of spades, knowing full well that the queen was still in someone’s hand. Marlene had played the five of spades, and he couldn’t break suit, so he had to play it. Then Barret, under Danny’s supervision, had tossed in a heart. Cid had played the ace of spades and grabbed the cards, only to dish out the queen of spades the next turn. By now, Red had played all his high cards and was left with hearts and lower, safer cards. But the game had turned into a playing of what you had, and, if you were caught with the deal, you were more than likely stuck with it.

“What are you doing?” Red asked, watching Cid carefully. He glanced at Danny. “Play the queen.”

Danny turned from Barret’s hand to pick up Red’s hand and pick out the queen of hearts, tossing her onto Cid’s card.

“I’m playing a game,” he replied, watching Barret play another heart followed shortly by Marlene’s jack of clubs.

Danny groaned as Cid picked up the pile of cards, grinning. "Oh, shit," he declared as it dawned on him exactly what Cid had been doing. "Damn it. C'mon, Barret, we gotta get the deal from him."

"What?" Marlene asked, as Cid played another high heart. Barret frowned at the king and played a ten while Danny cursed rapidly, trying to recall exactly what had already been played. "I don't get it."

Red's eye narrowed. "I do, and 'oh, shit' is right." He couldn't believe his own stupidity. He had let Cid play him right into this artifice. The game lasting for five more tricks, and Cid kept the lead, the pile of cards he had taken from everyone growing into a deck, plus or minus a few cards.

Danny frowned as the last card was played. "Game," he declared. "Everyone – well, Cid, you may display the point cards."

Cid grinned as he produced all thirteen hearts and the queen of spades. "That's twenty-six on all your funky asses. I win."

"What?" Marlene asked. "What just happened? I missed it."

Cid's smile widened as he collected all the cards. "It's called 'Shooting the Moon,'" he explained. "It was that rule Danny boy basically skipped over. If you manage to get all the point cards, then you get zero points while all the sorry losers grab twenty-six."

"Now, wait a minute," Red said. "You just can't decide to quit when you're winning by six."

"Yeah, I can. I'm the dealer. And besides, Barret went over a hundred. That's it, Red. You lose."

Red smiled. "You cheater."

"You just underestimated my playing abilities. I don't cheat at cards. And besides, it's only cheating if you get caught. If you don't, then you're just really clever."

Red chuckled as Cid shuffled the deck of cards. Barret frowned. "Ya ain't thinkin' a putting me through that hell again, are ya?" he asked. "I ain't playing. No way."

Cid sighed. "We could always play Crazy Eights or something easy." He smiled. "Just for you."

"Shut up."

The door opened to the operations room, and Yuffie filed in, frowning. "Boys, play nice, now. Don't make me have to separate you and send you both to the corner to think about what you've done."

"That was harsh," Cid commented dryly, setting the deck of cards onto the table. He leaned back in his chair, pushing the front two legs off of the floor and balancing on the back two. "And uncalled for."

Yuffie shrugged as she held the door open for Tifa. The other woman stepped into the room and closed the door behind her before sitting down at the table. Yuffie followed suit, sitting next to her and leaning her elbows on the table. Tifa smiled grimly.

"Well, now that we're all here, we can start," she declared, tapping her fingers on the table. Barret glanced at her, pursing his lips as though he was about to say something but thought better of it. "The way I see it," she began, "we have one course of action. We have to find Cloud."

Cid cleared his throat, dropping the chair back onto all four legs as he leaned forward, playing with the top card on the deck. The room was quiet, all of the members of the team fidgeting uncomfortably in the uneasy silence. Barret glanced at Cid who had found the intricate pattern on the back of the cards to be overly interesting. Red was looking around the room as though he was looking for some way of escaping. Yuffie frowned.

"Well?" she asked, pulling her elbows off the table and glancing at Tifa, uncertainty in her eyes. "Isn't anyone going to say something? An agreement? 'Hoo rah?'"

Cid lifted a hand, leaning back in his chair. "Yeah," he said, his interest in the deck of cards forgotten. "But don't get your hopes up, 'cause this is no agreement." Tifa sighed heavily, crossing her arms angrily. "Now, hear me out, here, Tifa."

She raised her hands in a quick, angry gesture. "Does it look like I'm interrupting you?" she snapped.

Cid didn't immediately respond to that, chewing the inside of his lower lip thoughtfully. Finally, he said, "Just listen. The way I see it, doing that is an incredibly stupid idea. In the grand scheme of things, Cloud's disappearance is relatively unimportant."

"Unimportant?!" Tifa exclaimed, standing. "I'll tell you what's unimportant!"

"Tifa," Cid warned. "You're not listening to me."

"Maybe I don't want to hear it," she growled.

Cid frowned. "Then, you can shut up and not listen. At this point, Tifa, I don't really give a damn what you want to do. Not that I'm insensitive to your position. Don't get me wrong. Even foul-mouthed pilots have a love at some point in their lives. I just don't think that finding Cloud is gonna lead us to why the Planet's getting all wonky."

Tifa's face darkened. "And why does that take precedence over Cloud?"

There was silence in the room, then, followed shortly by a heavy sigh. Cid crossed his arms over his chest, looking calmly across the table to Tifa. "You tell me," he said.

Tifa bit her lower lip, fully aware of what Cid wanted her to say. She knew he was right. The Planet was more important than Cloud. There were thousands and thousands of people who would be affected by anything the Planet did. Cloud was one man against hundreds of little children who had whole lives ahead of them. She slowly shook her head. She couldn't measure her life's love against the lives of the rest of the world. Nobody could do that.

"It's the right thing to do," Cid stated plainly, his voice showing no emotion.

"Then why does every part of me scream that it's wrong?" she asked. "Everything I know tells me that Cloud is more important than any stupid Planet. What difference does it make if I live forever when I can't be with him?"

"I don't know."

"Look, Tifa," Danny interjected, licking his lips. "I'm no expert on the subject. Hell, I didn't even know any of you until just a coupla weeks ago. But..." He paused, trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. "But, Cid's right. People out there depend on you because they're too chicken, or too bitter, or too oppressed to fight for themselves. If you don't save them, no one will. Not even themselves. I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't think I can live knowing that I could've helped them but didn't. I know that I'm not part of this team, but I'd fly y'all to the ends of the world if it meant that I could give someone a chance for happiness."

"We don't even know if this threat is for real," Yuffie declared, frowning. "You're getting gung-ho on something that, as far as I know, is a rumor."

"Ah, get off it," Barret growled. "Lifestream jest don' pop outta the Planet without a reason."

"I know that!" Yuffie snapped. "Maybe it was just going on a walk. How the hell are we supposed to know? Maybe it felt like knocking the Highwind out of the skies! There isn't some grudge the Lifestream has against you, right, Cid?"

"I didn't spit in it at Mideel if that's what you mean," Cid replied coldly. An angry look dared her to say more. She merely gulped and looked away.

"No, that's... not... really what I meant?"

"Bite me."

"Look, people," Red declared, drawing their attention to him. "This is getting us nowhere. We're also on a limited time schedule. The more time we spend fighting here, the less time we have to figure out why the Planet's messed up or to find Cloud for that matter."

The group was quiet as Red's impeccable logic settled into them. He was once again the one member of the group who could keep his cool. It seemed as though he was the only one who could bring them back from petty squabbling to the issues at hand. He received more than one silent "thank you" for doing so.

"Well, Red, whaddya think?" Barret asked, tapping his large fingers on the smooth surface of the table.

Red glanced at everyone at the table. "In a nutshell, I think we should break the team up."

Tifa brightened. "That's a great idea! Half of us can stay here to look for Cloud while the other half figures out what's up with the Lifestream!"

Red managed a small frown, his gaze wandering to Cid. The pilot's head had sunk to the table, resting in the crook of his arm, his eyes closed. If not for his hand silently tapping the top card on the deck, Red would have sworn that he wasn't awake, much less listening. He licked his lips. "No, Tifa, I didn't mean that."

Yuffie's gaze traveled from Red to Cid to Marlene and then back again. She groaned. "Red..." she whined, a grimace on her face. "You aren't suggesting what I think you are. No way."

Barret frowned. "What?"

"Are you dense, Barret?" Cid mumbled, his words muffled by the leather of his jacket.

"Hell, no, foo'," Barret growled. "I jes think that ya should stop this crap and say somethin' solid."

"I'm saying that the people who stay here will stay because they're not fit to come with us," Red declared.

"I feel fine," Cid muttered.

"Yeah, right. You just keep telling yourself that, then," Yuffie said. "You sure don't look fine."

"Besides," Red interjected, "we have no way of knowing whether or not you'll remain 'fine'. All we have to go on is Cloud, and he was exposed to high doses of Mako before falling into the Lifestream."

"So, wait." Tifa crossed her arms. "You're telling me that the people who stay behind can't do anything."

"Um... yeah, basically."

"I completely object to this," she declared. "I'm going to stay behind. There's no way you can change my mind, Red. I'm going to find Cloud. I don't care what any of you say."

Yuffie frowned. "Oh, come on, Tifa," she said darkly. "Stop being so selfish. They'll be plenty of time for you to find Cloud. I bet this Lifestream thing is nothing. We'll be back in a matter of days."

"Days that could mean Cloud's life. The longer we wait, the farther away we'll be from finding him. He could be long gone by the time we even start looking."

"Yeah, but –"

"But what?!"

"But nothing," Cid declared, straightening and shaking a fuzzy feeling inside his head. "Look, Tifa's a grown woman; let her

do what she wants.”

“Oh, it’s you, who shot her down moments before this,” Yuffie announced, shaking her head, exasperated. “Speak, then, man. Bless us with your alarming revelations.”

Cid glowered at her. “It seems as though I am now out of this equation, anyway, since it was decided by all of you that I shouldn’t be included on this excursion. Fine, whatever. I really don’t give a shit. But let Tifa do what she wants. You can’t decide everything for everyone.”

“Tifa’s vital to this team,” Red argued. “Her skills are invaluable to us. I hate to say it, Cid, but you’re basically worthless – ”

“Thanks a lot.”

“ – because we have another pilot,” he continued, unfazed by Cid’s acidic remark. “Danny can fly us to Cosmo Canyon or wherever else we need to go. We don’t have anybody to replace Tifa.”

“Why do you need me?” she asked, frowning. “It’s not like I know a helluva lot more than any of you about the Lifestream.” “You’ve been inside it.”

“So has Cid. Besides, that was months ago.”

Red growled. “We can’t take Cid,” he rumbled through clenched teeth.

“Why the hell not?”

“You’re staring to piss me off, Tifa,” Red fumed, his eye cold with anger. “Just look at him. He’s obviously not fit to be sitting here much less running around after Lifestream.”

“Goddamnit, Red! I am fine! Who made you a bloody doctor?!” Cid asked angrily, his voice shaking.

“If he says that he’s fine, take his word on it,” Tifa demanded. “I think he’d know more on the subject than you would!”

“Stop bashing Red,” Yuffie ordered. “He’s the only one around here who’s getting stuff done. Everyone else is doing less than crap!”

Yuffie’s comments sent the entire group into unintelligible bickering. Barret watched for a few moments, not amused by the events. A team of people that had been to the far ends of the world together was being broken apart by a stupid question of staying behind. No matter how much any of them denied it, they were all at fault.

“Yo!” Barret shouted, cutting everyone off with the frustration of his yell. “This stops! We ain’t getting shit done by arguing!”

Cid inhaled sharply and winced before finally nodding. “Fine, fine. You’re right, Barret. After all, I’m worthless anyway, so anything I say means less than my ass.” Red opened his mouth to respond, but Cid continued, paying him no heed. “I got an idea. We can solve this.”

“How?” Yuffie asked, snorting. “Draw straws?”

Cid shook his head. “I’ll play Red a hand of Black Jack. I win, and Tifa does what she wants. Red wins, she goes.” He glanced to Tifa for her assent. She frowned but waved him on.

“Alright, Cid,” Red declared. “I’ll play you. One hand.”

Cid nodded as he dealt out the hand. Red frowned as his cards were revealed. A two and a three. Cid glanced at his own card – the ace of spades – before using it to flip the one on the table over. “Black jack, Red. House wins.”

"Now, wait just a minute," Red ordered. Cid pushed himself from the table, starting to the door.

"No waiting, Red," he said, yanking the door open. "You lose. Tifa does what she wants."

"Best two out of three," he suggested, jumping down from his chair. "Come on."

Cid glanced back at the red animal. "Fuck off."

"Cid!" Barret yelled, anger in his eyes as he made a feeble attempt to cover Marlene's ears. She shook his hand away, frowning. "Don' talk like dat around Marlene."

The pilot merely waved them all off with an angry gesture before slamming the door behind him. It rattled in its frame, shocking all of those present into silence. They were quiet for a long time, sharing surprised glances with each other. Danny let out a low whistle.

"Wow," he breathed. "You really pissed him off, Red."

Red stared disbelieving at the closed door, his mouth moving with words that would not form. What could he say?

"How would you like it if someone called you worthless?" Marlene asked, her young face scrunched into a frown.

Red's jaw moved up and down for a while before he finally managed to blurt out, "It's true, though."

Tifa shook her head. "Go to hell, Red," she stated before standing and walking to the door. She paused at it, her hand on the knob. "And I'm staying." She wrenched the door open and walked out.

Red didn't respond, sitting back on his hind legs, confused. He didn't know what to say, if there was anything to say. He had just succeeded in making two very good friends into two very angry enemies. No one had said those words to him before, and, coming from friends, it made him question his own judgment. Was it wrong to put Cid's safety above solving this mystery? No, he didn't think so. Was he wrong to force Tifa away from her love to start on a wild goose chase for the Planet's sake? He wasn't so sure. Was Cid worthless? He hadn't meant it to sound like that. It just came out that way.

Yuffie cleared her throat, bringing Red back from his thoughts to reality. "Well, that went well," she declared, sarcasm dripping off her tongue.

Barret frowned. "Shit."