

Two Thousand Gil to Become a Hero

An all-new short story about Cloud in his teenage years, by Kazushige Nojima

The “transfer station” was little more than a stretch of meadow. In the predawn darkness, scattered bonfires burned, bathing the clearing in an orange glow. There were no labs or offices, no special facilities—only tall weeds swaying in the lukewarm wind.

Cloud Strife lay as if buried in these weeds, trying to ease the pain in his chest with odd breathing somewhere between gasps and deep exhales. Two hours being rocked in the bed of a truck had left him feeling miserable. He had his motion sickness to thank for that. Not fifteen minutes into the trip, the stomach aches and nausea set in. Throwing up would have made him feel better, but that wasn’t an option. There were other passengers watching. Leon Renard and Joel Rodin were trying to chat with him about something. Leon was fifteen, and Joel looked to be the same age as Cloud. They and everyone else in the truck bed were on their way to Midgar to volunteer for Shinra’s army.

It was Leon who, noticing Cloud’s sorry state, had claimed he must be suffering from motion sickness. But Cloud couldn’t admit he was right. He couldn’t show any sign of weakness to this pair of fellow enlisters. No—he was just tired. The excitement of going to Midgar had kept him up. “Not enough sleep,” he’d rebutted, and then pretended to rest, ignoring the two boys. Better to come off as an overexcited kid than a motion-sick sad sack who couldn’t even manage a conversation.

Gazing up at the night sky’s stars seemed to give him a little relief. Hesitantly, he raised his torso off the ground and surveyed the transfer station. Cloud could make out the truck that had borne him there illuminated by the light of the bonfires. It was a covered van—one of Shinra’s. The sort you sometimes saw going in and out of Nibelheim. They transported day-to-day supplies, personnel to inspect and service important facilities like the reactor and its pipes, and, from time to time, passengers like Cloud. Once at the transfer station, those passengers would await pickup by helicopter, which would convey them and their cargo. The truck driver was a middle-aged officer named Milo Bennett. The helmet and goggles he wore obscured all but the lower half of his face, which was accentuated by a pointed chin. Leaving the village, Cloud had seen his mother deliver a small paper bag to Milo in the driver’s seat. It was probably full of homemade pies. Cloud had been given a similar treat, but it was likely crushed in his backpack by now.

Leon and Joel were deep in conversation directly in front of the truck. They were glancing repeatedly toward another bonfire across the way. Their gaze was directed toward a slight, elderly man. He’d erected a small table and was arranging drinks and other goods atop it, seemingly setting up shop. A chocobo was lounging off to his side. His chocobo, most likely.

Cloud had seen this old man speaking with a young woman when he got off the truck. Where had she gotten to? Glancing around, he spotted her speaking to another man. He was

positioned some distance from the elderly merchant, opposite where Cloud was sitting. Avoiding the bonfires, perhaps. Half his body was shrouded in darkness. He, too, was accompanied by a chocobo. He had his back to the sleeping bird and sat with folded legs, looking up at the woman as he spoke. He wore a black suit that looked out of place in the surrounding meadow. More striking was his pure-white hair, which stuck out from beneath a black hat.

The woman glanced toward Cloud and smiled. Cloud hurriedly looked away. He grabbed his backpack, which he'd been using as a makeshift pillow, and pretended to inspect its contents. He could sense the woman walking toward him.

"Good evening," she said.

Cloud lifted his head. A face appeared as the woman crouched down beside him. A patch of freckles stretched outward from the base of her nose. She looked to be several years older than him—that much he could surmise—and wore a shirt whose neckline plunged to reveal her chest. Feeling uncomfortable, Cloud averted his gaze.

"My name's Emma," the woman said. "Emma Mossvalley. And you are?"

Cloud wanted to be rid of her quickly. He still wasn't feeling a hundred percent.

"Cloud. Cloud Strife."

"You came on that truck, right? So you're from Nibelheim?"

"I am."

Emma gave a satisfied nod. "Your face is awfully pale. Let me guess—motion sickness?"

"No, it's not that."

"Hmm... Ill, then? You're looking to enlist with Shinra, too, right? In that case, you'd better get well soon. If you fail the application exam, you won't be able to take it again for half a year."

"Huh?" That was news to Cloud.

"Though, if it's just a little motion sickness, I think you'll be fine."

"I...did actually get a little sick...on the truck," Cloud reluctantly confessed.

"I thought so! I see a lot of folks come through here, so I'd know. Here, drink this."

Emma held out a bottle of clear liquid. "It's water from up north. Best there is."

"No, I'm okay."

"You haven't even eaten, though, have you? You should at least have something to drink. Go on. Get hydrated and lie down till the helicopter comes."

"Really, I'm fine," Cloud said, refusing her offer once again.

Emma let out a small sigh. "The hopelessly stubborn type, huh? You've got nothing to prove to me, you know. And that grouchy attitude—I'm sure it's because you're feeling sick. They won't let you on the helicopter like that."

"I've got my boarding pass."

"Sure. But it's up to the pilot whether to let you board or not. Passengers who don't look up for the ride can and will be left behind. You could always catch a ride on the next flight after, but you'll have to pony up. The pilot has to be willing to take on an unscheduled load. You got enough gil for that?"

“How much?”

“Couldn’t tell you. Depends how much the pilot’s looking for.”

“No. I mean the water. What’s it cost?” Listening to Emma rattle off a list of his insecurities wasn’t worth the suffering. Easier to buy the water and be shot of her.

“Let’s call it a gift from me to you. To celebrate the start of your new journey.” Emma shot a glance at the elderly man. “Just don’t tell gramps over there.”

“No. I want to pay,” said Cloud. He opened his backpack and began fishing around for his wallet.

“Oh? Then let’s make it list price. A hundred and fifty gil.”

Cloud’s hand stopped searching. “Pretty expensive.”

“Yup. So how about you just take it? That way, it’s as good as free.”

“But there’s no reason I should. We’ve never met before.”

“Ever heard of an act of kindness?” said Emma, and thrust the bottle into Cloud’s hands before springing to her feet. “Well, back to my rounds.” And with a wave goodbye, she hurried away toward Leon and Joel.

An officer then approached, as if he’d been waiting for Emma to leave. It was the driver, Milo.

“How you feelin’? Perked up a bit?”

“Not really. Still in the dumps... Is it that obvious? That I got sick from riding on the truck, I mean.”

“Obvious? Oh, I see. That lady check in on you, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, sure. I noticed. Been in this business a real long time.”

“Military logistics?”

“That’s the job title, but I’m not actually with the military anymore. Shinra contracts me to do runs around the area. The fatigues are just to make me look more legit. Even got a weapon in the cabin. Sometimes thugs try to get a taste of the goods,” Milo explained, taking off his helmet. “Real equipment, real truck. But the guy drivin’ it’s just a phony.”

The face beneath the helmet looked surprisingly young. Milo had a scar on his cheek that looked like it had been left by a burn.

“I used to be a genuine soldier, but... Well, who cares about my story? You got any questions—about the army or Midgar or anything like that—just ask away. I’ll tell you whatever I know.”

Cloud felt puzzled, unsure of Milo’s intentions. The man seemed to guess his confusion.

“That kind mother of yours gave me some pies and a little gratuity. Told me to keep an eye on you and show you the ropes when I got the time.”

Cloud didn’t know she’d given him money as well as pies. The news made him feel unbearably ashamed. “Oh... I didn’t know,” he said.

“Nothin’ like a mother’s love.”

“I suppose.”

“Let’s see... Anything else I can do? Oh. You got money?”

This question again. First Emma, now Milo. “A little,” said Cloud.

“Money’s a big deal. Life in the army can be pretty comfortable if you’ve got the gil. Somethin’ to keep in mind.”

“Will do.”

“What are you guys talking about? Don’t go leaving us out!” In the blink of an eye, Leon had sidled up to them. Joel and Emma stood behind.

“The ins and outs of survivin’ the service,” Milo replied. “I’m a seasoned vet, after all.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing about life in Midgar,” Emma chimed in.

“Overstimulatin’, if you ask me. Temptations at every turn. It’s enough to make your head spin. The whole city reeks of iron, and not so much as a flower sproutin’ from the ground. It’s a tough place to hack it for country folk.”

“Huh... What a let down. But I’d still like to go some day.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m an expert on the place. Spent most of my days on duty in camps.”

“Hey, Cloud,” Leon cut in. “What’d he teach you? It’s cheating if you’re the only one who knows.”

“Cheating?” Cloud said brusquely.

“Cheating, huh?” Milo snorted. “Cloud’s mother gave me a generous tip. I’d say he earned it fair and square.”

“A tip. So they’re both cheaters—him *and* his mom.” Leon practically spat the words. Cloud jumped to his feet and glared at him.

“Now, now,” Emma broke in, lightly patting Cloud’s shoulders in an attempt to pacify him.

“Sit back down, Cloud,” said Milo. “I know how tough things can be at your age, but if you let yourself get riled up that easily, you’re gonna have real problems down the line.” He turned to Leon. “And that goes for you, too. You can’t go throwin’ out insults like that. No faster way to get picked out and torn apart by your COs. You wanna get by in the military, you gotta know how to nod and smile and say ‘yes, sir.’ You gotta read the room and be a good team player. You gotta be sharp as a tack, and nothin’ less. Show-offs and sore thumbs get sent to the front lines. Is that what you wanna be? Monster bait?” Milo scratched a finger at the scar on his cheek.

“Don’t tell me that,” Leon pouted. “Here I was thinking the Shinra army’s a place for people with passion.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be jaded in no time.”

“I’m not just gonna be an ordinary trooper, though.” Joel, who had been silent till then, opened his mouth to speak. “I’m gonna be a SOLDIER.”

Cloud looked at Joel with surprise. He had the same ambition—to be a SOLDIER, not just a run-of-the-mill officer. He’d had no intention of declaring so here, but he was nonetheless filled with defeat now that someone else had beaten him to the punch.

“That’s incredible!” said Emma, her eyes wide with amazement.

“A SOLDIER, eh?” Milo sounded unimpressed. “I get it. Just can’t help wantin’ to be like Sephiroth, the great war hero. The army’s packed with kids like you. But tell me, do you even know what a SOLDIER is?”

“A special fighter with combat capabilities way beyond those of an ordinary person. They’re part of a program that functions independently from the army, and get sent out to solve all sorts of crises.”

“Oh, you know your stuff. And what about becoming a SOLDIER? What exactly is the process?”

Cloud, of course, didn’t know the answer to this. He glanced sidelong at Joel to see him biting his lower lip. Evidently he didn’t know, either. And he clearly hated that fact. *Just like me*, Cloud thought. He felt ashamed.

“Teach me,” Cloud said. “How do you become a SOLDIER?” He threw himself into the question, trying to escape the feeling of humiliation.

“Oh? You’re shooting for SOLDIER, too, huh?” Milo said, surprised.

“Mhm,” said Cloud.

“Well, I can give you a general idea. First, you have to take the physical exam for anyone who wants to be an officer. This assesses health, fitness, eyesight, hearing, and so on. There’s also a written test. That’s the easy part. Then, once you’ve passed and joined the service, you’ll have to go through boot camp. That’ll take you three months minimum. After that, you’ll have to rack up a year of experience out on assignment. That includes drills as well as active combat. Finally, if you manage to survive that, you’ll be able to take the SOLDIER aptitude test.”

“There’s an aptitude test?” asked Joel with a sideways look at Cloud.

“Of course there is. SOLDIERs are expected to excel in every respect—combat skills, physical fitness, mental fortitude. A disease or disability will take you out of the running stat.” Milo looked at Cloud. “Motion sickness *could* be a problem.”

“Right.”

“Think about it. You don’t want anyone who can’t function at a hundred percent the second they step onto the battlefield. I’d say that’s true for all combatants—not just SOLDIERs.”

Joel patted Cloud on the back as if to console him.

“Apologies. That was out of line,” said Milo, and he sounded sincerely sorry. “When you join the army, you’ll travel all over by land, sea, and air. I’m sure you’ll get used to it. Just try your best.”

“There’s something I heard once...” Emma’s voice trailed off. “Is it true that to become a SOLDIER, you have to undergo some special surgery?”

Milo stared at Emma. After a few moments, he nodded. “So I’ve been told.”

Cloud felt his heart begin to thump loudly. Surgery? No one had ever said anything about that. “What kind of surgery?” He couldn’t refrain from asking.

“I know a lot of things about SOLDIERs, but when it comes to the human enhancement stuff, even I’m in the dark. There’s all sorts of rumors, though. Some say they’re injected with

medicine made special by Research and Development, or implanted with the cells of some mysterious monster.”

Cloud wavered between excitement over the secrets of SOLDIER and fear of what the surgery might entail.

“So, if you get that surgery, then you become a SOLDIER?” Emma was conducting quite the interrogation.

“That’s right. Once you get the surgery, you’re a SOLDIER. But whether you can rise through the ranks after that is another matter. The program’s divided into three classes: First, Second, and Third. First is on top, with only a handful of prime operatives. Making it to Second is a huge feat in and of itself. Most SOLDIERs never make it past Third. Besides, you’re more than likely to—” Milo cut his sentence short. “Well, just try your best. Even in Third, you’ll still be making big bucks, and no one can say you’re not elite.” Mike gave Cloud’s shoulder a sharp pat and donned his helmet once again. “Copter should be here in thirty. Make sure you’re well rested.”

“Got it,” Leon and Joel replied in unison.

Milo gave a satisfied nod and walked off toward the truck.

“Hey...” said Emma, watching Milo’s retreating figure. “You ever heard of the Turks?” Cloud, of course, had not.

“The Turks?”

“They scout for SOLDIERs.”

“Scout?”

“You know. They find people with potential to turn into SOLDIERs. And if they really want someone, they’ll kidnap them and force them to join.”

“Like, force them to get surgery?” Leon frowned. “That’s illegal.”

“But think about it. Skipping all the exams and training Milo mentioned and going straight to SOLDIER? It’s like a dream come true for anyone wanting to join.”

“Come on, Emma,” said Joel, lowering his voice for some reason. “How do you even know stuff like that?”

“I...” Emma’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I heard it from that guy over there.” Moving only her eyes, Emma shifted her gaze to the man in the black suit. He was still leaning with his back to the chocobo, seemingly uninterested in anything going on around him. “That guy in black... He’s actually a Turk.”

“What!?”

“He travels all over the place looking for SOLDIER candidates. Must be doing it now.”

“Why all the whispering?”

“Because he’s scary. What if he kidnaps someone?”

“I kind of wanna hear what he has to say, though. Don’t you?” said Joel, entreating Cloud.

Cloud began quietly walking toward the man.

“Hold up,” Joel called, running after him. Emma and Leon followed. Cloud picked up his pace and hastened toward the man, not to be beaten by Joel.

The man looked up at his new visitors, sweeping aside the bangs peeking from beneath his hat. He had strange eyes. Their color was neither blue nor green but something in between, and there seemed to be a pattern about the pupils.

“I’ve no interest in you lot,” the man said.

“But we haven’t said anything, sir,” Joel countered rather diffidently.

“Let me guess. You heard about the work I’m doing. Well, it’s true. I’m a Turk. And I’m searching for SOLDIER candidates. But that means men and women one step shy of perfection. You, on the other hand...” the man chuckled, “are but children, greener than the grass in this meadow.”

“But Sephiroth’s been a hero ever since he was a kid,” Joel replied, unwilling to give up.

“And? He’s the pinnacle of SOLDIER. Don’t lump yourself together with him.” The man rose as he said this. He had a large frame. “But I do respect your spirit—your hopes and dreams. More than anything else, those will see you through to victory in life. I’d like to support you in that endeavor. So if you’re truly serious, I suppose I could make some arrangements.”

“What do you mean by...” Cloud began to ask, but Joel stepped forward beside him.

“Yes, please. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Emma nudged Cloud in the back, and he hurried to follow suit. “I will, too.”

The man nodded and grasped Cloud’s chin with a large hand, moving it up and down and left and right. “Not bad. Well-suited to a hero.” And then, looking at Joel, “You’ll rise high on your own merits.”

“That’s all I desire, sir,” said Joel.

“And what about you two back there?” asked the man, directing his gaze at Leon and Emma. Leon shook his head from side to side, while Emma tilted her palms in front of her chest and muttered a polite refusal.

“You need to get dangerous surgery to become a SOLDIER, isn’t that right?” Leon asked abruptly.

“You do. But only after you’ve passed the officer training and aptitude test, as well as the preoperative exam.”

Cloud bristled. Another new condition. How many hurdles would he have to clear?

“A preoperative exam... What does that involve?” asked Joel.

“We inject you with a chemical compound to ascertain whether you can withstand the SOLDIER surgery. In advance of the foreign substance we’ll be introducing to your body. Rejection would spell death.”

“Yikes,” murmured Emma.

“What do you mean a foreign substance?” Joel pressed.

“That, I’m afraid,” the man began, holding an index finger to his lips, “is a secret.”

Suddenly he brought his hands together with a clap.

“There, now. You’ve come to your senses, yes? SOLDIERs are beings a world away from you. There’s nothing wrong with being an ordinary officer. You won’t go hungry. And you’ll have plenty of money to send home. Isn’t that enough? Go on back and wait for your helicopter.”

“Um...” Emma began probingly. “Just out of curiosity, what was that you said earlier? About making arrangements?”

“I would have introduced you to Director Lazard. He’s the head of the SOLDIER program. With that connection, you’d be able to skip ahead to the preoperative examination. There’d be no need to spend months puttering around as an officer. Of course, if you failed the test, that would be the end of it. But better that than countless days spent cherishing a false hope.”

Emma and Leon nodded in agreement.

“However,” the man continued, looking from Cloud to Joel, “there *is* a fee. Two thousand gil per person. It requires effort, after all. From several adults, including myself. That’s the cost of our labor. At the same time, it proves your determination to become a SOLDIER, paying a high price like that.”

“Two thousand... That’s so much money,” Emma sulked. “Who could afford it?” Then turning to Cloud and Joel, “At least you guys can give up, now.”

“Hmph,” the man snorted. “I guess our conversation’s over. Off you go, then.” With that, the man in the black suit lowered himself onto the grass and resumed sitting with his back to the chocobo. The bird opened its eyes for a moment, then closed them again.

“Two thousand my ass,” said Leon.

“Seriously,” Emma agreed.

“He must have been bluffing, asking for that much.”

Cloud was growing flustered as the pair chattered behind him. He’d just realized he left his backpack behind. But when he reached the spot he’d marked, his luggage was nowhere to be found. Glancing around, he saw Emma making for the shop as Joel and Leon headed toward the truck.

Cloud closed his eyes and tried to think back to the moment Emma handed him the water. Which way was the truck facing? How far had he been from the bonfires? Where was the old vendor positioned? The man in the black suit? He opened his eyes and checked that he was standing in the right place. Yes, it was all as he remembered. His luggage had to be here somewhere.

And yet he couldn’t find it.

Could someone have taken it? If so, they must have snatched it while he was talking with the man in the black suit. Who was more suspicious—Milo the truck driver or the elderly shopkeep?

You shouldn’t be so quick to doubt people.

His mother’s voice sounded in his head. Cloud inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

I'm only gonna ask him a question, he thought, excusing himself to no one in particular, and began walking toward the old man.

"Huh?" he said after just three paces. His backpack was lying on the ground in front of him.

Seated in the grass, Cloud rummaged through the contents of his backpack. It contained a parcel of crushed pies, two days' change of clothes, and his wallet. The last, a leather pouch too crude to be considered a real wallet, was said to have been used by his late father. Inside it was two thousand gil.

"Take this with you," his mother had said, handing him the leather pouch. "There's two thousand gil in there. Spend it carefully, okay?"

"Mom. The army takes care of everything—traveling expenses, food, even a change of clothes once we get there. It was written in the circular, remember? I know you saw it."

"I did, but this is different. This is for other things."

"I don't need it," Cloud said, pushing the pouch back into her hands.

"You know, your father used to say something," his mother said, her voice growing softer. "He'd say, 'With two thousand gil, I could go anywhere I want and get rid of anything that's bothering me.' That's why whenever we saved up nearly two thousand gil, I'd secretly go out and spend it."

"Is that right?"

"But your father's been gone so long now. I guess I finally let my guard down." For a moment, his mother's face faltered. "Take it. It's the least I can do."

Dawn seemed to be creeping in. The silhouettes of the mountains that ringed the transfer station loomed surprisingly close. Bonfires continued to burn in the meadow, flickering in the halfnight between night and morning.

Cloud sat with his backpack clutched to his chest, nibbling at a crushed pie.

I'm not gonna spend this money. I'll just hold onto it.

Cloud recalled the vow he'd made to himself when he left the village. But a few hours later, that oath had already begun to waver. With one quick handshake, these two thousand gil could make his dream a reality. The path to becoming a SOLDIER, as revealed to him in this meadow, was much more winding than he had ever imagined. Even if he succeeded in becoming an officer, he'd still have to suffer through three months of boot camp and a year of drills and combat in the field. Those months seemed like an eternity to Cloud. And beyond that eternity lay the aptitude test and preoperative exam. If he failed to pass even one of them, he'd lose his chance to become a SOLDIER.

What happens if I don't pass?

Maybe giving up on his dream and serving as a trooper wouldn't be so bad. Maybe the uneventful life Milo had described was pleasant enough once you got used to it. But Cloud was too young to imagine life in the long term.

I've got no idea.

I don't wanna end up like Milo, though.

Yeah. Definitely not.

I guess I do wanna be a SOLDIER.

But the thought of surgery freaks me out...

And just what kind of surgery was it? To the best of Cloud's knowledge, surgery involved sewing shut wounds and cutting out organs—things you did to treat injury or illness—not implanting foreign substances in people's bodies. What sort of an operation was that? The thought of slicing open someone's abdomen and shoving a thumb-sized monster inside their guts was enough to make him sick.

"Change of schedule, everyone." Milo's voice echoed across the dawn clearing. "Copter'll be here in five minutes. Prepare for departure and gather in front of the truck."

Something stirred in the corner of Cloud's vision. It was Joel. He was jogging over to the man in the black suit. Cloud scrambled to his feet and squinted at the scene. He watched Joel crouch down beside the man and show him a handful of bare coins. The man removed his hat and held it out to Joel upside-down before saying something. A smile spread across Joel's face. He dumped the money in the hat, and the man spoke again. Joel nodded eagerly. Finally, they shook hands.

Joel shot Cloud a thumbs up as he made his way to the truck. Just then, a violent but rhythmic chopping sounded from far away. The helicopter had arrived.

"Cloud!" Emma's voice rang out. "You don't wanna have any regrets later! Think this through!" But before Emma could finish, Cloud had begun walking toward the man in black. He didn't want it to seem like he was hurrying to get even with Joel, or that he was doing something because Emma gave him a nudge. This was his decision. To become a SOLDIER, he'd do whatever it took. If there was a path, he'd walk it. If there was a door, he'd open it.

After all, hadn't he declared as much to Tifa? This was his choice, and his alone. He would become exceptional. A SOLDIER. A hero. Someone special to Tifa.

The man with the strange eyes stared at Cloud as he dropped his backpack, withdrew his wallet, and took out the money.

"Two thousand gil, right?"

The man said something, but it was drowned out by the sound of the descending helicopter.

"What?"

The man took the two thousand gil with a snatching motion and brought his mouth to Cloud's ear. "After enlisting, wait half a month. Director Lazard will call for you personally. He'll ask if you're truly ready to become a SOLDIER. What happens next is up to you. And remember, not a word about this to anyone."

The wind and roar kicked up by the landing helicopter enveloped the transfer station.

Cloud sat in his room in the Midgar army barracks, mending a tear in his uniform. The threads had been fraying ever since it was issued. Uniforms like these often became tight as the teenaged recruits who wore them grew up. For that reason, the outfits provided were almost all recycled. If he bribed the person in charge, he could probably get a new set, but Cloud had no money to speak of. What Milo had said was true: a little gil can go a long way in improving your quality of life in the military.

Nearly a month had passed since Cloud had arrived in Midgar, but he'd heard nothing from Director Lazard, whose call he anticipated more eagerly than his paycheck.

Joel was training in Junon. There'd been no news of him becoming a SOLDIER, either. Leon, meanwhile, had failed the aptitude test, and hadn't been able to join the service. Apparently he was now living in the slums.

Cloud cursed as the needle pierced his fingertip. Until a month ago, he hadn't so much as touched a sewing kit. He thought about his mother doing needlework late at night. He'd sent her only one postcard so far, to announce he'd successfully made it into the army.

A knock sounded at the door. It opened to reveal a woman in a black suit. A Turk. Here to deliver his long-awaited invitation from Director Lazard?

"Cloud Strife?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, unable to contain the excitement in his voice.

"I'd like your cooperation investigating an incident."

"Okay..."

Apparently he wasn't being summoned. But what was this about an incident? Cloud felt perplexed.

"Do you know a man by the name of Ross Leafdale?"

Ross Leafdale. He'd never heard the name.

"No, ma'am."

"About a month ago. The transfer station. Concession stand. Ring any bells?"

Cloud thought back to the transfer station, recalling the scene. Had there been a concession stand?... "Oh," he said. "The old man?"

"That's the one. Mr. Ross Leafdale is the caretaker of that transfer station. He mows the grass and builds the bonfires at night. Makes a bit of money with his concession stand, though he's technically not allowed to."

"Yes, I remember."

"Your name appeared in testimony given by this Mr. Leafdale."

"I see," said Cloud. He couldn't see where the conversation was going at all, and that made him uneasy.

The Turk took a photo from a binder she was holding and held it out to Cloud. It showed a slightly soiled woman's face. Something about it made him feel uneasy. Perhaps it was the fact the woman's eyes were closed.

"You know this dead woman, do you not? Tell me her name."

Dead!? No. Being a rookie was no excuse to be upset by a corpse. Officers should be made of sterner stuff. He looked at it again. At last he noticed the freckles on the woman's face.

"I recognize her. Emma. Don't remember her last name." He couldn't take his eyes off the picture. "The woman from the concession stand."

The Turk gave a satisfied nod.

"According to Mr. Leafdale, this woman showed up three days before you passed through the transfer station and offered to help him with his work. Though she struck him as shady, Mr. Leafdale accepted her offer on account of his old age and the increasing difficulty of his duties. Now, how about this one?"

The woman held out a second photograph. This one showed a man's face. His eyes were closed as well. Another corpse.

"Oh!" This time he knew immediately. The pure white hair strewn about the man's forehead was instantly recognizable. "He was also at the transfer station. I guess I never asked his name. But he said he was a member of the Turks."

"You didn't ask his name!?" The woman stared at Cloud's face.

"No, ma'am."

"And yet you gave him your money?"

"... Yes ma'am."

"'I'll make you a SOLDIER.' Is that what he told you?"

"Those weren't his exact words, but yes, basically."

The woman nodded vigorously.

"How did they die, though? I mean... What was the incident?"

"To answer your first question: they died because I killed them."

Cloud looked at the woman in stunned amazement.

"Look at this," the woman said, and held out yet another photo.

Cloud braced himself for another dead body, but this time it was different—a picture of a man and a woman in what appeared to be Midgar's slums. They were seated in a diner, eating at a table across from one another. The smiling woman was Emma; the man had white hair—and wore a black suit.

"They were father and daughter. The man's name was Pepper Rhodes. Mint Rhodes was the daughter. Emma was her pseudonym. They were a pair of con artists who went around posing as Turks. They'd find gullible marks with money and swindle them with promises of becoming a SOLDIER or meeting the President."

And I was one of those marks. He'd guessed it the moment he saw the photo of Emma—of Mint—lying dead. That call from Director Lazard would never come, and he'd never get his two thousand gil back.

"I tried to apprehend them, but they both ran away, so I shot them dead. It wasn't my intention, but that's how things turned out. Which is why we have no confession. There's always a possibility they were falsely accused. The company doesn't care one way or the other, but personally it's been making me uneasy. Too murky for my liking. That's why I wanted to find

someone who could testify they were conned by these two. Thanks to you, I don't have to be tortured by a guilty conscience."

The woman gave another satisfied nod and turned away from Cloud, but quickly turned back.

"How much did you pay them?"

"Two thousand gil."

"Sheesh," the woman said, giving Cloud a gentle punch in the chest. "You dummy."

Cloud was waiting for the elevator on the ground floor of Shinra's corporate headquarters. Together with the other new recruits his age, he was there to attend a seminar on mako energy.

"It's Director Lazard," someone whispered. Cloud looked around and spotted the director crossing the lobby toward the main entrance. He was accompanied by a group of men and women in black suits—Turks. One of them was the woman who had visited him at the barracks.

"Director Lazard!" one of the recruits called out.

The director stopped walking.

Then another recruit raised his hand and shouted, "I'm aiming to become a SOLDIER! Please look out for me, sir!" Tension gripped the floor at the recruit's tactless words. But to everyone's surprise...

"Keep at it, then," Lazard said with a smile. "I'll look forward to having you."

Cloud's eyes met with the Turk waiting patiently behind the director. But the woman's expression didn't change at all, and she followed the director as he set off again.

The elevator arrived. Cloud kept his eyes on Director Lazard's entourage as his fellow officers filed onto the lift.

Guess she's already forgotten about me.

"Hurry up and get on," someone said.

"Right. Coming," Cloud answered, turning back to the elevator. It was packed with officers wearing the exact same uniform and helmet as him. Dread suddenly filled his chest. *Will I ever become someone special?*

"What's the hold up? Come on!"

There was no other choice. Cloud stepped into the crowd of new recruits—a crowd of nobodies.