

“CLOUD. Cloud.”

He was already awake, but he let himself remain unresponsive while she approached him. When she pulled the blanket away, though, it was difficult to keep pretending. He let his eyes open and Tifa slowly came into focus.

She was looking at him in the same way she always did now, her brow creased with doubt. “We need to get going,” she said, in the slow, quiet voice she had begun to use with him. “You have to get dressed, OK?” She showed no surprise that his sleep had been feigned.

It was an effort to speak, especially first thing, but he managed it. “Just give me a few minutes,” he mumbled, his tongue heavy, like lead.

Her worried expression was unrelenting. “Five minutes. Then I’m coming up again.” She left without looking back at him.

Cloud rolled onto his side, knowing he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep. He needed to relieve himself and he could feel the slow, dull headache that had been troubling him for days and that not even an elixir could cure – he’d taken two last night to no avail. He watched as the clock ticked on for five minutes, and then seven – Tifa had clearly been calling his bluff. Eventually, he managed to pull himself up, then to put his feet on the floor, then to stand. He pulled on his clothes mechanically, making sure to stretch his gloves as tight as possible to hide his forearms.

He made his way down the stairs, treading each step with both feet. Tifa and Barret were sitting at the table, their breakfast plates scraped clean. They were talking in low, urgent voices, and stopped abruptly as he entered; as he'd suspected, they were talking about him again. When Cloud neared the table, Barret stood abruptly and headed towards the window, not meeting his eyes. Cloud let himself drop into the seat he had just vacated. His sword clanged against the back of the chair.

“Have some breakfast,” said Tifa.

“I’m not hungry,” he replied.

She had clearly been expecting that response, the same one he had been giving for some time. “You need to keep your strength up for fighting,” she insisted, and made her way to the reception desk to request some food for him. In her absence, Cloud glanced towards Barret behind him; the older man was drumming his fingers impatiently against the wall. No doubt he had counted on leaving this place two hours ago – if only Cloud had managed to get himself together.

Tifa returned with a bowl of porridge and a false smile. “Here,” she said, pushing the bowl towards him. “We can head on once you’re done.”

Cloud began to eat. It was tasteless mulch. He lifted spoonfuls to his mouth and chewed, again, again, again. The fake expression dropped from Tifa’s face and she watched him with undisguised concern. He felt full after three mouthfuls, but he

diligently made his way through the porridge, letting his hand lift the spoon into his mouth like a machine. He could hear Barret tapping on the wall behind him.

There was still a little left, but Tifa had clearly had enough of waiting, and she headed off into the adjoining room to pay the bill. Cloud pushed the almost-finished bowl to the side, out of his line of sight. As he did so, Barret walked to the other end of the table, and slammed his fist onto it.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Strife,” he growled.

Cloud was at a loss to answer. His headache had grown more insistent.

“Lord knows I’ve got no patience with you, but she’s trying her best, at least,” Barret continued. “And you’re – you’re breaking her heart, damn it. She’s crying herself to sleep every night because of your ungrateful ass.”

As if Cloud didn’t know that. As if he didn’t hear the muffled sounds of Tifa’s sobs at each inn they stayed at, while he burrowed under his own blanket and wished he would never have to come out.

“You don’t deserve her,” Barret concluded.

“I know I don’t,” Cloud replied. “You should both go on without me.” He had been thinking as much for days.

“I fucking wish we could, Strife. But there ain’t much chance of her agreeing to that. We just gotta get you to get your act together.” He reached out and gave Cloud’s arm a rough shake.

The touch of skin against Cloud's own was like a thousand needles. Rage burned within him, baseless anger the like of which he hadn't felt for months. He sprang up from his chair, pulled the Buster Sword from its sheath, and held it aloft, the tip inches from Barret's chin. At the same time, Barret parried, lifting his gun-hand to point at Cloud's face. He looked into Cloud's eyes, his features twisted in pure fury.

"You're fucking crazy," he hissed.

Cloud stared back at him until he became vaguely aware of Tifa entering, shouting at both of them, grabbing Barret by the arm and pulling him away from Cloud: she was saying something about responsibility and provocation and other things that increased the pain in Cloud's head. She looked at him; he turned away.

"Wait outside. We'll be there soon," she was saying to Barret. He seemed to be about to protest, but stomped out, with a look of disgust in Cloud's general direction.

There was silence, and then Tifa said, in the special patient voice she had adopted for Cloud, "Tell me what we can do to help you."

"I'm fine," he lied.

"Cloud." She sounded desperate. "You're – you're sick. We care about you, we want to get you through this. I just need to know how to help."

There was no advice he could give her. He shook his head.

She sighed, and it was as if a veil came down between them. The emotion in her voice gave way to something that seemed almost like boredom. “Sure. Save the fighting for monsters. I’ll see you outside.”

Cloud watched as she walked out briskly. He hated her and he hated himself. He wished he could go back upstairs and crawl into bed, but like every other morning, he slowly followed Tifa into the harsh daylight.

They were both standing right outside the inn. Tifa’s eyes were red, Barret’s were cold. “Where next, Strife?” the latter asked gruffly.

“West,” Cloud replied, and without waiting for a response, turned to head out of the village, ready for another day of relentless battles, the only activity that made him feel alive.