

Cloud No. 9

by Junj - satheis@ix.netcom.com

Turn the ugly light off, God,
wanna feel the night.
Everyday it shines down on me;
don't you think that I see?
Don't you think that I see
what it's all about?
Hard to look the other way
while the world passes me by.
And everyone is trying to bum me out.

It's a pretty big world, God,
and I am awful small.
Everyday they rain down on me,
flower in a hailstorm.
Flower in a hailstorm,
I'm living for the draught.
I could throw it back at them,
but then I play their game.
Everyone is trying to bum me out.

When I came into this world they slapped me.
And everyday since then I'm slapped again.
Tomorrow's king: an unsightly coward.
You see, I know I'm gonna win.

Turn the ugly light off, God,
don't wanna see my face.
Everyday it will betray me;
don't you think that I know?
Don't you think that I know
what they're talking about?
If they step on me tonight,
they're gonna pay someday.
Everyone is trying to bum me out.

—Eels, Flower

—

It was up today.

The list. The small sheet of flimsy paper that everyone had been dying to look at for months, striving to have their name typed neatly on it, working their asses off to get here to look upon that list. It was the final judgment. It was the only thing that told them whether they had worked away for nothing or had received one of the highest honors in the army. One little piece of paper made and broke man after man.

Of course, he needn't worry about such things. He knew what was going to be written there.

Strife, Cloud, SOLDIER 1st Class.

But he had to look anyway. If only for the sense of pride the neat name on the piece of paper would give him, if only to rub it into all the unfortunates who hadn't made it. He had worked hard for this moment, this brief point in time where he

could glance at his name in black and white and receive his new uniform and flaunt its fine colors to all the plain, old soldiers. He had worked hard enough to have finally made something of himself, and he was going to let it swell his head. If only for a moment.

He waited until a hole presented itself and then strategically squirmed his way to the front row where the view of the list was clear. His smile was wide with pride because he knew he was on that list. He had ranked first in all of the training courses, thought he had done well on the psyche test. His name was there. Oh, yes, his name was there.

Rosenthorne.

Ruward.

Stravinsky.

Tennin.

His jaw clenched involuntarily, his eyes wandering over the list once more. He had skipped it, was all. In a rush, he had skipped over it somehow. It was there. It had to be there.

Rosenthorne.

Ruward.

Stravinsky.

Tennin.

It wasn't there. It was all just a cruel trick on him. He had been first, goddamnit! He had been bloody first in sword techniques, shooting, hand-to-hand combat, even in friggin' mathematics. It had to be a mistake, a typo, a stupid, lazy son of a bitch who hadn't typed it right. It was a mistake. There was no other explanation for it. He turned to leave, to straighten this entire thing out.

He shoved through the crowd with a grim determination. As soon as this entire mess was cleared up, he would be in SOLDIER. He would rise in the ranks, be Sephiroth's friend, impress Tifa. He wasn't a screw-up; he wasn't a failure.

"Hey, Strife!"

Cloud frowned and turned around, his mission stalled. The man who had called him was Charlie Ruward, an asshole if he had ever saw one. The last thing he needed to deal with now was Charlie Ruward. The guy was a born button pusher. He saw a weak spot, an opening, and exploited it.

"What do you want, dipstick?" he growled, crossing his arms over the blue breasted uniform he was wearing.

"I was going to congratulate you on your total failure to make it into SOLDIER," Ruward declared haughtily, his brown eyes sparkling with a laughter he shared with his two buddies. Cloud didn't know them. He didn't care who they were.

"Well, thanks, then," he snapped, turning to leave. "I hope you're still wearing that smug smile when I get myself promoted over you."

Ruward frowned. "You ain't never gonna make it into SOLDIER. You're too stupid. Your attitude is detestable, your intelligence questionable, your motives a little more than shady." He leaned closer, somehow looming over the taller Cloud. "You know why you didn't make it into SOLDIER? Huh?" He paused. "You gotta screw loose somewhere up..." He

jabbed a finger into Cloud's forehead. "Here."

Cloud blinked as Ruward pulled his hands away, leaning back to laugh heartily with his friends. He ground his teeth. "And just what are you insinuating?" he asked coldly, clenching his fists.

Ruward cleared his throat. "It's fairly simple, you see. You failed your psyche test miserably. I mean, here's passing." He held his hand level with his eye. "Here's you." He stamped his foot on the ground. "One of these days, you're gonna pop your spiky lid, and someone will have to shoot you down. And then Dr. Hojo will open your ugly melon to see just what makes you tick."

"What did you say?" he asked softly, the menace thick in his voice.

Ruward leaned forward again. "You're a failure, a menace. Someone oughtta take you out and have you put to sleep like the rabid dog you are."

Ruward's face was right there. The anger was enough to make him do it. He knew he shouldn't, but it was far too tempting just to leave the bastard be. Besides, they couldn't do anything now that they hadn't done already. His dreams were squashed; he might as well send his career down the crapper, too.

His fist connected with the underside of Ruward's jaw, and his teeth clacked together loudly as he fell back to the ground with a noisy thud. Cloud didn't know why he did it. It had been a stupid idea. Ruward wasn't just another cadet anymore. He was a 1st Class SOLDIER, he was a superior regardless of the fact that he was a stupid jerk. He had just signed his death warrant. No more army, no more SOLDIER, no more pride. Nothing to send back to his mother and his friend to say that he was doing well. But there'd be newspaper clippings, all right. Of his court martial.

The two friends were charging him now.

Might as well make the best of the situation. Hitting one guy was enough to get him kicked out of the army. Three would just be sport. He let the nearest one run by him, pounding him to the ground with one blow to the small of his back. The other stopped near him, uncertain, and Cloud took out his feet with a neat sweep. The man fell back over the crumpled body of his comrade, rolling off of the body but unwilling to stand and face Cloud's wrath.

The MPs came then.

They swarmed on the scene, taking him down in their age-old way. Stomach, knee, shoulder. It was done in quick succession. The first to stop a criminal, the second to make him fall, and the third to make sure he'd stay down. The blows were hard and fast and not unexpected, but Cloud felt no pain. The hurt didn't matter now. He couldn't save Tifa now.

He was a failure. That hurt more than any whack with a billy club. He let them harshly cuff his hands behind his back, watching with detached interest as the three men he had fought, picked themselves off of the ground. Ruward had murder in his eyes. The others were oblivious of him. That was how it should be, anyway. Just anger and ignorance. That's what SOLDIER picked in their men. He smiled grimly as he was pulled to his feet.

It was a good thing he hadn't made it into SOLDIER. Being in the ranks of their stupid men was only a slap in the face.

~*~

The cell smelled like something had been left within it to rot. Well, he didn't know if it was the cell or not. The drunken bastard in the cell next to him smelled like something had crawled up his ass and died. It was pungent, disgusting, and, if not for his iron stomach, would have made him toss his lunch a long time ago.

The fact that he could stand this stagnant place didn't, of course, mean that he wanted to stay here. Far from it. He wasn't doing anything that occupied his mind, and when he had nothing to do, he was forced to think or else grow crazy. And no

matter how hard he tried to conjure up the memory of the beautiful starlit evenings at Nibelheim or the smiling face of his mother, he could only see the list. It was huge in his mind, each letter carefully scrawled in black ink, large and official looking.

And his name wasn't on it.

He saw the same four names, but they always skipped over Strife. It should have been there. Even if SOLDIER was filled with stupid people, that was okay. The world was full of stupid people. He lived in the world. How come he couldn't be in SOLDIER? Hadn't he pretended to be ignorant well enough? Had they seen some sort of intelligence in him that would scare all those idiots? They couldn't all be idiots. Sephiroth was in SOLDIER. He was no moron.

He was obviously not at fault here. It was the system. The system had failed.

Yeah, just keep telling that to yourself, Strife. Maybe one day it'll be true. He groaned and rolled over on the lumpy mattress of a bed. God, he wanted it to be true. His mind could cling to the truth all it wanted, but he would make his own truths. It was better that way. He could fit in with all the SOLDIERS that way. He wouldn't be a failure.

But that was what he was: a failure.

No amount of lying or truth-bending or forgetting could change that. It was far too prominent in his past. If he forgot all the little instances, he wouldn't have a past. He'd be nobody instead of a failure. Even a screw-up was somebody.

His mind flitted back to Nibelheim, the list forgotten. He would come back to that whenever the feeling that he was a mistake aroused again. He always came back to everything. But Nibelheim was where he was now, forget the cell, the lumpy mattress, the putrid stench, the drunk vomiting in the corner. It was Nibelheim he saw in front of his eyes. Nibelheim.

It was a pretty little town was what his mother had told him. A pretty little remote place where she could raise him with the entire town's help. A neighborly place where everyone knew each other by name, and the children played merrily together in the cobblestone streets. He wasn't sure what made him hate the place. It was paradise. Harsh winters that made a man grateful for a warm hearth and a loving family. Warm summers filled with fishing and swimming and scouting the mountains. It was the loveliest town in the world, his mother said. He could never understand why he hated it.

The children jeered at him. The adults ignored him. He had no friends to play with, but somehow that really didn't matter much. He was always off in the mountains anyway, or in the large fields away from the little piece of heaven. He hated the town. It was as though it was his casket, his murderer, just waiting to suffocate him, squeeze the life from him with its humble brick cottages and whitewashed walls.

Maybe if he had had friends, the walls wouldn't come tumbling down at him. But he had never been good at making friends. Moving around too much was what did him in, or so his mother would argue to her fellow tea-making women. He was always too isolated from everyone to make friends. He thought it was just because he couldn't stand them. Their irritating, childish ways, their cruelty to one another, their ignorant minds, it was all just a joke with them. And so he ran off each day to escape their stupid games.

Or maybe because loneliness wasn't so bad when you were alone.

He rolled over onto his side, ignoring the lumps that shifted beneath him. He had to pee. The metal... thing that served as a urinal was decidedly disgusting, surrounded by stinky wetness that was undoubtedly from all those drunks who had missed the mark. Then there was the vomit in the corner next to it. He rolled onto his back, reverting to his original position. He could hold it.

His eyes wandered down the gray, concrete wall, tracing scratch marks and flaws in it. He was probably one of those flaws in the grand scheme of things. An imperfection. What was it his father had so blatantly put it before running out on him

and his mother? A mistake. If flaws could be counted as that, sure, he was a mistake. And it was moments like these, sitting in a swill-hole, wallowing in filth, that made that statement ring as true as could be. A failure and a mistake. They went hand in hand.

Maybe if he hadn't been a mistake he could've had friends. Maybe if he hadn't been a failure, he could've kept those friends. But he even let Tifa fall through his fingertips when he had been right there to save her. Damn scraped knees. He should have died there on that mountain all those years ago. It would have saved him the trouble of living through the hell that followed it. According to popular opinion, not only was he a failure and a mistake, he was a screw-up, too. The little incident went over well with the citizens of that pretty little town. They'd never forget it, nor would they forgive him.

He couldn't forget it. It was always foremost on his mind. He owed Tifa something. She needed his protection somehow. He had to be there for her to catch her if she fell again, or to save her should she ever need it.

But how could he do that if he couldn't even make it into SOLDIER?

He groaned. They were all right when they flunked him out of everything and laughed at him and made fun of his woes. He didn't deserve anything more. He couldn't make it onto one, simple list. Unless, of course, the list was for washouts. He'd be Number One, then. The only thing he could succeed at: failing. Well, that was better than failing everything.

The door clattered open. Zack stepped through it. He was decked out in the uniform of a SOLDIER which he had newly acquired. Cloud glanced at him bitterly. Zack was the only friend he had been able to make here in Midgar. They had gone through Basic Training and then the SOLDIER training together. It was somehow suiting that Zack should have made it into SOLDIER. Zack always had everything. He always succeeded.

"Hey, Cloud," he greeted, standing resolutely near the door. "You shoulda made it, you know."

Cloud shrugged as best he could from where he was lying down. "Nah... SOLDIER just wasn't for me, I guess." He tried to make the words flow easily, but they sounded far too strained to his ears. Zack didn't respond to that, shuffling his feet uncertainly. He could hear the trace of bitterness in Cloud's tone, the resentment towards the uniform on his back. And, for a moment, Zack didn't know what to do.

He cleared his throat. "You're, uh, clear to go," he said finally.

Cloud swung his feet around, sitting up on the mattress. "Bout bloody time."

"And we have a mission," he declared, trying to brighten the mood. "Without all those other jerks. I specifically requested you 'cause I know you're good at fighting and everything. Better than me, anyway. And I knew you'd like to see Sephiroth. He's leading this trip. It takes you back to Nibelheim. I knew it was your hometown and all. Thought it might be good for you."

Zack was babbling. But one word stuck out from the rest like a fox in a hen house. Nibelheim. Cloud couldn't think of enough curses to portray the utter despair that name brought with it. He couldn't go back to that lovely hovel of a town. Paradise wasn't a place for failures. He wanted to throttle Zack for even thinking of such a thing. He wanted to scream, to beg the brass to let him off, to jump from the Shinra Towers, so he could get out of going back there.

"That's okay," he said. He stood up, surprised at how easily those words had come from his mouth. "Nibelheim it is."

He walked passed Zack, closing his eyes against the memories of that pretty village in the mountains. He didn't need to see that place, so high up in the clouds, dazzling in the bright sun. It was heaven, utopia, paradise. It was the one place where everything was right no matter how twisted it was.

Unless, of course, he was there.

Because in terms of happiness and angelic bliss, his life was everything but that. Paradise. Leave that for the birds. He stepped out of the cell block and into a harshly lit hallway. Nibelheim was heaven. But one man's heaven is another man's hell.

And he was off to see Satan.