

Christmas in Nibelheim

(A Short Final Fantasy VII Fanfiction)

The snow had been falling for days, hiding everything around under its smooth, white layer, which was already piling up so high that even Barret was sinking into it up to his knees and could only struggle forward with great effort. House roofs groaned under the weight of the glittering mass and the fir trees struggled in vain with every breath of wind to shake off some of their unaccustomed load.

It was late afternoon on December 24 and Nibelheim resembled a winter desert. But cut off from the outside world, they had gathered to spend Christmas together. Everyone had come and was now sitting closely crowded around the fireplace of the old ShinRa mansion, which Cloud and Tifa had lovingly restored, listening to each other's stories as they waited for Christmas morning.

Yuffie lay stretched out on her stomach with her eyes closed, tenderly cuddling Nanaki behind the ear. A bright red Santa hat sat a little crooked on her head, the pom-pom of which she regularly flung backwards when it had once again - inexplicably - strayed into her face. Nanaki, lying next to her, had his healthy eye open just a crack and was watching this little game with amusement; while he kept nudging Yuffie's hat pom-pom forward with his tail. Every now and then his pleasant growl revealed how much he enjoyed the young ninja's caresses.

On Nanaki's other side, Marlene squatted, warming her hands on a steaming cup of cocoa. She peered over her shoulder again and again into the large living room, where, under a beautifully decorated Christmas tree, the note of a particularly large package in Barret's scrawly handwriting displayed her name. She would have loved to pounce on it right now and open the golden bow.

Right next to Marlene, Cid knelt on a large cushion and talked animatedly with Vincent, who had just told those in attendance what was going on in Midgar and what was left of the once huge city. Indeed, that was where he had been until that morning.

He felt partly responsible for the destruction there and was anxious to give back to those who had made their escape all their possessions that were still intact. He was still quite secretive, but everyone had noticed how well this new task suited him.

When Cid praised him for his dedication, a bashful smile even stole onto his lips and he didn't hide his eyes behind his long hair like before, but turned his head to the slim person in suit and exactly shaved beard, who sat silently next to him, and smiled at him. "It's thanks to Reeve that we found the old lady's chest!" he said emphatically, letting his hand land on that of his seatmate as if by accident.

Cid grinned broadly and remained silent. But his gaze wandered a little wistfully over to the large, mechanical mog and the crowned kitten sitting on it, standing still and rigid, like an ice statue in a corner. It would take a while before he got used to the fact that "Cait Sith" no longer existed and that he now had to make do with the former ShinRa employee Reeve, who had been assisting Vincent with his work in Midgar and had thus stealthily infiltrated the conspiratorial community.

Not that Cid had said anything against it. Especially not since his girlfriend Shera had explained to him in a serious tone of voice that he had nothing to do with it, and that they could all be glad that Vincent had not completely withdrawn from them. And if his sweetheart ever raised her voice, he preferred to remain silent.

Cid deeply inhaled the last puff of his cigarette and then carelessly stubbed it out in a crowded ashtray that, in addition to his cigarettes smoked down to the filter, contained Barret's cigar butts and also countless stubs that had already been extinguished after one puff. There could hardly be a clearer sign of nervousness in Cid's eyes. Wasting precious puffs

At that moment the heavy entrance door was pushed open and Barret stepped into the hall, swirled by snowflakes. In his arms he held countless piles of logs. Marlene ran to meet her father and clung to his leg. "When do I get to open it? Tell me! When?" she begged.

"Not Marlene, Dad's almost done," grumbled the giant as he hopped on his other leg, trying to shake off his clingy monkey. "Where are the others?"

"Chrm," Yuffie harrumphed with feigned seriousness on her face.

"Ah ..." Barret smiled. "Well, they sure picked the right day!"

He dropped the wood into a basket next to the fireplace. Then he pulled the thick flake-covered coat off his shoulders and dropped down on the floor next to his daughter. She squeezed his muscular arm and handed him her cup of cocoa. "I'm making myself a new one," she said, "You need to get warm."

"What a luxury," opined Cid, bellowing into the silence of the empty house, "Shera, dearest! I want a child, too!"

"I'll bring you some new cocoa, too," Marlene beamed, glad for so much attention. "Anyone else want some?"

"Here please," announced Yuffie, rising sleepily. Nanaki let out an unwilling grumble after his massage was interrupted. "Wait, I'll come with you, then we'll cook more for everyone."

Barret smiled after the two girls then turned to Vincent. "How much longer will it take?"

Vincent shrugged his shoulders.

"It's very different," Reeve replied in his place. "You can never tell for sure beforehand ..."

Nervously, Barret drummed his big hands on the small table, bouncing the ashtray and a small cookie plate up and down.

After Yuffie and Marlene returned with the fresh cocoa, the group snuggled back against the fireplace and there was a comfortable silence.

Yuffie had rejoined Nanaki, who was now snoring devoutly. Marlene still looked strained at her package under the tree, which she would not be allowed to open until the next morning. Wasn't that an injustice? What if someone came and stole her surprise?

Barret gazed out the window and watched the falling flakes while listening to the crackling of the burning wood. Vincent stared dreamily into the leaping flames, humming a soft tune.

Reeve would have given anything to be able to read his mind now. But he knew better than to interrupt Vincent at such moments, and so he tried to do the same as the

others and simply remain silent while he watched Cid, who continued to sip his cocoa and smoke one cigarette after another.

In the midst of this idyllic silence, a loud sharp scream suddenly broke out.

Everyone winced and Vincent jumped to his feet as quickly as if he had been bitten by a were-rat.

Loud door slamming sounded, followed by hasty foot stomping.

Everyone present in the fireplace room now straightened up and stared, spellbound, at the door in the hallway at the top of the stairs that led to the upper bedrooms.

Eternities seemed to pass until it was finally pushed open and a very disheveled-looking Johnny stepped into the doorway with his face smeared with blood. A short time later, an exhausted Shera also appeared behind him.

"Tell us, tell us!" squeaked Yuffie excitedly.

Shera beamed all over and stormed down the stairs, where Cid embraced her. "It's here," she exclaimed. "Wait a minute, they're coming. Hah, guys, it is so cute!"

Now Shera was assailed with questions, but she persistently shook her head and said only, "Wait and see!"

Johnny, too, squatted unusually still by the fireplace and smiled to himself.

"Daddy!" Marlene bounced around excitedly. "I want to see it, please!"

Barret grinned. "Think it over, little girl," his bass voice growled. "Either the packages, or ..."

"I want to see it!"

Everyone laughed, even Reeve forgot his shyness and joined in.

Johnny cleared his throat. "Give them a few more minutes, Marlene."

"That's easy for you to say. You've already seen it!" the girl complained and stood sulkily by the window.

"But he's right" said Barret. "Come on, you may already choose one of your packages and open it already now for once."

Halfway reconciled with this prospect, Marlene was about to sneak into the next room when they heard footsteps again from the upper floor.

Nanaki yelped excitedly and Shera squeezed Cid's arm so tightly that he dropped his cigarette on Yuffie, who immediately began to jump back and forth, squealing and screaming, until her screaming was supported by another delicate little voice. Immediately silence reigned in the hall, only Yuffie quickly shook the ember from her body and stomped it out.

Slowly the door opened again and Cloud stepped out, a bundle of white sheets in his arms and a beatific smile on his face. He carefully descended the stairs and had barely reached the bottom when everyone curiously approached.

"A girl," he said in an occupied voice. "It's a girl."

"Hold it deeper! I want to see it too!" whispered Marlene.

Cloud got down on one knee and gently flipped the sheet back from the child in his arms.

A collective "Oooohh!" rang out, followed by exclamations of, "How cute!" "Can I hold it?" "It's the cutest child I've ever seen!"

Cloud smiled, still drunk with happiness, and passed his newborn daughter to Barret. "Wait a minute!" And he skipped up the steps, only to return a moment later with Tifa in his arms. He carefully led his beloved to the seat cushions and helped her lie down on them, while he took the child from Barret again and placed it in the mother's arms.

"A picture for the gods, isn't it?" whispered Shera softly as she looked at the young family.

Cid nodded.

Nanaki now cautiously crept closer and lightly stroked the child's cheek with his tongue.

Tifa laughed. "That's right, let her get used to it right away!"

"So, what should she be called now?" asked Reeve.

Cloud and Tifa looked at each other and while he brushed a long strand of hair from her face, she replied, "Aerith So that from this year on we can always all celebrate Christmas together. So that from now on there will never be a name missing from our ranks."



Merry Christmas and a happy winter season to all of you!

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