

It was colder than ever before. There had been reports of heavy snowfall occurring this winter season, but seeing over *ten* feet of snow in several areas surprised many people. Jokes about how Neo Earth was going back into an ice age spread like wildfire.

Despite the chill, life moved on during the holiday season. Centuries after the Grand Shift, the season of Christmas was still widely celebrated. Although the religion it was associated with had come and gone, people were still decorating their homes in red, blue, and green. It had become the season of giving in a greater sense than all those years ago.

At this moment, Anne didn't need to worry about the chilliness outside. She had herself wrapped up in a warm, fuzzy blanket. Combining that with her fur, the ticked tabby couldn't even feel the freezing weather. Though her alarm was off that morning, she still woke up around nine. A loud noise jumped out of her mouth, sounding like a yawn and a meow mixed. Slowly, the feline stretched and got up from the bed.

For once, she also wasn't acting as a surrogate. After helping a couple with their triplets, she decided not to carry any more children until the coming year. That was two months ago, and the time she spent helping others with her body accumulated to make Anne quite soft and fluffy. Of course, that was something a particular jaguar *loved* about her.

Initially, she was still wary of Chris' advances, though she had come to appreciate the jaguar's presence. While helping couples have children was a good thing, she felt *defeated* many times after a few births. She needed the money to take care of her twin stars too. Because of this, she kept pushing forward.

When June had rolled along, she had been 'forced' to relax for the triplets' sake. At that time, she wasn't *quite* sure what to do for the half month she had to herself. Meeting him at that time was a breath of fresh air. He took her mind off worrying over the little things, even if she knew that Diana could watch over Markus and Thomas well. Ending their first meeting with a kiss and a tease made her blush that evening.

Anne went to the park almost every day after that. While she had given him his number, it didn't compare to seeing Chris in person. Having someone to talk to about other things allowed the ticked tabby to relax and unwind.

Eventually, he wormed his way into her heat. At first, she simply thought that he was 'kind of cute' while they talked. Plus, she had been concerned about her sons when they first met. It didn't take long

for him to break down her walls. Thinking back on it, though, her ‘walls’ weren’t that tall. She quickly saw him as more than a friend after the lion-dragon couple saw their triplets. It was their first ‘proper’ date one November afternoon. In his eyes, they had been dating ever since she came to meet him again. Of course, the feline giggled at how he stammered with his words back then, but she didn’t refuse it either. For her, however, that one afternoon cemented their relationship.

And now she had woken up thinking about him again. Of course, the first thing she did was check up on her two sons. To her surprise, however, she found *neither* of them in their bedroom. Naturally, that made her slightly concerned. Even if she was still in her pajamas, she went to the other rooms in her house.

Luckily, though, she heard Markus shouting in the living room. As she rushed toward them, she *bumped* into a black mass. Rubbing her nose, Anne looked up to see Marshall inside her house.

“O-Oh, it’s you, Marshall! Sorry about that, ouch. I was checking on Mark and Tom.”

“Nah, it’s alright. I just came to give a little something to your boys. Nothing too special.”

“Really? You didn’t need to, you know.”

“Considering ol’ Mark? I felt like I did, honestly. It’s the least I can do.”

While she kept talking with the towering rat, both of her sons were holding *big* boxes inside of their paws, the wrapping colored in their favorite colors. Mark loved pink, and Tom was obsessed with purple. They were happy with their gifts, even if they weren’t open. The ticked tabby sighed with relief as she looked on.

“Still, it’s good to see you again, Marshall. Was the snow any trouble, though? I heard this was the highest snowfall in years, and the blizzard might worsen.”

“It wasn’t, honestly. I got through quite well. You only had a few feet of snow in front of your house.”

Hearing this, Anne breathed out again in relief. It was good enough that Marshall got through the snow safely. Since he was here, though, she wondered if he didn’t mind staying for a little bit.

Unsurprisingly, though, he needed to head back to check on Maria. Even if the girl was now seventeen, he was in the same situation as the feline. Apart from close friends, they didn't have anyone else to help raise their children. Because she understood this, she didn't push the issue.

"Of course, you *have* to eat something before you go! At least that would be fine, right?"

"... Fine."

Seeing his approval, she quickly went back to her bedroom to change out of her pajamas. Even if he was a long-time friend of hers, it was still embarrassing to have him see her in her sleepwear. Fortunately, she didn't take too long to find a suitable 'home' dress. Afterward, she went into the kitchen to cook for all four people. Anne was also hungry at this point, and she assumed that her sons were as well.

During the next half hour, the ticked tabby had cooked at least seven eggs and eight strips of bacon. With a few slices of bread and some tea, she carried everything to her dining room, Markus and Thomas already waiting. As for the rat, he had been standing this whole time. She didn't know of this, though, and the boys didn't mention it either.

The next moments were spent in silence, though the atmosphere wasn't tense. Everyone ate neatly at this point. If Marshall's daughter were here, it would have felt like a complete family to any passers-by.

After the meal, Anne sent her friend on his way, watching him go through the snow. Knowing that he *also* dealt with the loss of his wife, she wondered how he seemed even stronger than before, other than having Maria bring him happiness.

Even though they could have opened up their gifts, Markus and Thomas decided to do so *after* cleaning up. Seeing this nearly brought tears to her eyes, but she couldn't tell her twin stars otherwise.

"Alright, alright! My little boys, you can open them up now. We have the rest of the day upon us, after all."

Thomas ended up being the first of the brothers to open their gifts. She half-expected for them to rip through the wrapping paper, but it didn't happen. Inside the box was one of the newer game consoles. Behind his glasses, she could see his eyes were shining brightly.

As for Markus, he opened his gift right afterward. Instead of a gaming console, his present was a figurine of the show he loved watching. Considering his wide smile, Anne could tell he loved his gift too.

“W-Where did he even get these...”

Joy followed her shock while she wrapped her two sons in her arms. Afterward, the feline mother celebrated the rest of the day with her twin stars. Another surprise visit came in the form of Diana, her tigress friend. Despite the heavy snowfall, she arrived with her daughters and husband. Naturally, the ticked tabby pulled the tiger-lion couple into her house so that they could enjoy themselves.

Their older girls played with her sons while she got to hold their recent triplets. The tigress wasn’t expecting another cub either, but the look in her eyes at her husband told Anne that it might happen soon.

Since she was very close to Diana, the tigress stayed the night. Only after nine did the family of nine leave her house, promising to visit again soon. After they left, the feline put Markus and Thomas to bed. The poor things had their energy *drained* at this point. It reminded her of when they were only six years old.

With that finished, Anne quietly relaxed in the living room after cleaning the place. While she sat on the couch, though, there was a sudden call on her phone. When she saw who called, her face beamed.

“Hi, Anne.”

“Hi there, Chris.”

The message was so simple, but it felt so right.

“Happy Holidays to you.”

“Y-Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too.”

After they talked for a few more minutes, she ended the call. While the snow was still falling outside, ticked tabby’s heart felt warm...