

Christmas

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Marlene finished opening her last present, sitting excitedly under the tree, her gifts strewn about her. Barret sat beside her; if he could have a bigger smile, his face would not be able to hold it. The rest of the team, even Vincent who very rarely engaged in something so warm and open as Christmas, sat on the two large couches surrounding the tall, beautifully decorated tree.

"Ooh, wow!" Marlene exclaimed as she finally got the wrapping off the gift. It was a porcelain doll of a young girl with long brown locks of straight hair and wide brown eyes, sporting a pretty silk pink jumper and white blouse. It seemed almost an exact copy of the features of the little girl.

Tifa smiled from where she sat on the couch. "It's almost uncanny, isn't it?"

"Holy-" Cid stopped himself at Shera nudge in his ribs. There would be no profanity at this Christmas dinner, both she and Tifa, who had organized and put the entire celebration together, decided. It seemed to take a great deal of Cid's strength, but he bit back his curse. "Where'd you find that?"

Cloud smiled from where he sat cross-legged beside Tifa's legs on the floor. "At the Gold Saucer. Pretty amazing, huh?" His blue eyes were bright as the licking flames of the fire flickered off them.

"Jeez, Spike," Barret said as he took the gift from his daughter and examined it closely. "Whoever made this musta modeled it afta Marlene." He smiled as he set the doll carefully onto the floor. "What do you say, kid?"

Marlene smiled and jumped onto the couch, practically landing on Red who sat beside Tifa. She flung her arms around the woman's neck and hugged her tight. "Thanks, Tifa."

Tifa gave her a gentle squeeze, grinning down at Barret. "You're welcome, Marlene."

The young girl then slid down on the floor and threw herself into Cloud's embrace, who nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. She kissed Cloud on the cheek and hugged him in earnest, thanking him. Cloud wrapped his strong arms around her. "Merry Christmas, Marlene," he said.

She crawled out of his lap and into Barret's, now watching the rest of the guests opening their presents.

Twenty gifts and an hour later, they all sat back, surveying the mess of torn wrapping on the floor, littered with bows and ribbon. Piles of gifts stood next to their recipients. Tifa had just returned with a tray full of tea, coffee, and cookies, which everybody immediately made a grab full. She surveyed the wreckage on the floor of the living room. "Is that all of it?"

"Think so," Cid said, examining a set of tools he had received from Shera.

Red was already skimming through the book Tifa had bought him for Christmas. Yuffie was absolutely ecstatic with her gifts from the entire team consisting of one restore, one revive, and one ice materia (which had nearly cost them 5000 gil). Barret tried on the leather jacket the team had bought them, which proudly read in white on the back AVALANCHE. Vincent was busy polishing the new rifle Cid had found for him. It was, according to Cid, "a damn relic 'cause it belonged to my dad's dad". Reeve sat with his new sunglasses, which, with the snowy, cold weather, he would have no use for any time soon. Cloud had an array of hair products circled around him. Both Barret and Cid had given him enough hair spray and gel to last him a life time, even though they knew he didn't use it. His hair was naturally the way it was. He had slipped the large, warm, woolen red sweater Tifa had bought him over the turtleneck he had been wearing before. Each of them had a ton of gifts, signals of love and friendship, and the close knit family that had grown from the Sephiroth fight.

Tifa began to pick up the wrappers, setting her jaw slightly. Cloud hadn't given her a present. She knew that he had bought her one; he wouldn't forget. Still, all the gifts were open.

"The stockings!" Marlene shouted excitedly, running up to the fireplace where the stockings were hung, made of soft red felt with their names scrawled in showy lettering consisting of green yarn.

Tifa stuffed some of the wrapping shreds into the fire before reaching up and getting Marlene's stocking from her. She proceeded to pass them all out. The gifts in there were revealed, mostly just gag presents, inspiring laughs all around. Tifa continued to clean up, laughing but feeling her spirits sink. It was all gone. He had forgot.

"What's this?" Cloud said with a half smile twisting his lips. He held a slip of pink paper before him as he pulled it out of his stocking. "'Free haircut and styling at Alexa's Salon?'" He looked to the team on the other couch. "Which one of you?" he said, trying to sound malevolent but failing.

"I confess," Yuffie said brightly, "Twas me."

Cloud shook his head and piled that one top of the hairbrush and comb he had also gotten. "Enough hair jokes! I can't help it!"

"We can't help it!" Cid bellowed before they all broke out in laughter at Cloud's expense. The young warrior blushed before tossing a pillow at the couch. The lighter began to die. Cid wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "Ain't that it?"

"Uh-huh," Marlene said. "Tifa didn't open her stocking yet." She pointed to the last hanging stocking, which was thinner than the others, hanging on the far end.

Tifa turned away. She wouldn't cry. How could he forget?

"Come on, Tifa," Red said. "Open it up."

Tifa suddenly wanted to run, to hide, to go some where and cry long and hard. But she didn't. There'd be time for that later. Right now, she needed to be a cheery hostess and friend. She wouldn't ruin the evening.

Tifa turned to face the fireplace, away from the others. She grabbed the stocking gently and stuffed her hand inside it. Her fingers finally found something, way down at the bottom, the only object in the stocking. It was velvety, but hard. She felt her heart leap as she pulled it out.

It was a ring box, a dark, deep red in color.

She gasped and turned around.

The room was silent as Cloud stood from the floor, smiling widely. He stepped closer to her and said softly, "Go on. Open it."

With gentle fingers, she lifted the lid of the box. Inside was a gorgeous ring of pure gold. A large diamond flanked by two smaller rubies was seated in the middle of the ring, glistening in the light. It was beautiful.

Tifa couldn't breathe; she couldn't think. She watched in shocked silence as Cloud, her childhood friend, the man she loved more than life itself, took his hand in hers. Surprising everyone, the room silent, he lowered himself to one knee. "Tifa," he said, looking up into her eyes. "I've loved you as long as I can remember. You've been my best friend forever. When I was hurting, you were always there. I can't count the times you've cared for me, loved me, and I never returned it. Well, this fool has finally come around to see you for the angel that you are. I'd like you to be my angel. You're everything to me, Tifa. I want to be your husband, if you'll take me." Cloud took a deep breath, all time standing still, summoning all his courage.

"Marry me."

Tifa stared down at Cloud, letting her emotions control her, sweeping her in the great flood of love and inexplicable joy she felt right then. She smiled, her eyes tearing. "Of course I'll marry you, Cloud."

Cheers went up around the room as if it had suddenly come alive. Cloud, smiling broadly, stood and gently took the ring from her. He slipped it delicately on her finger and then grasped her hands in both his own. He smiled. "I should have done this a long time ago," he whispered softly as he kissed her, long and hard.

Inside, she was singing.