

Christmas at KFC

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Von Calafinwe

*May your dreams bring you peace in the darkness
May you always rise over the rain
May the light from above, always lead you to love
May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you always be brave in the shadows
Till the sun shines upon you again
Hear this prayer in my heart, and we? ll ne? er be apart
May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you hear every song in the forest
And if ever you lose your own way
Hear my voice like a breeze, whisper soft through the trees
May you stay in the arms of the angels*

*May you grow up to stand as a man (up)
With the pride of your family and name
When you lay down your head, or to rest in your bed
May you stay in the arms of the angels
(From 'Lullaby for a Soldier' – The Forest Rangers feat. Maggie Siff)*

Noctis sniffed. He immediately knew something was amiss. Not the typical bad air in the tent after four grown men have slept inside. The air was fresh in his nose, and apparently a bit greasy. He seldom noticed the different scents of air, or at least, he noticed but didn't care. But now...

The prince seemed pretty sure about where he was. And what time it was. He was in the tent, sleeping, in the middle of the night, despite the sunshine outside throwing shadows from the surrounding trees upon the tarpaulin.

He was in his dreams again, actually, a very special one, too. Noctis had this one since a few months. He did not remember, when exactly it started. Or what might have been the cause for it to start. He just knew that it was somehow more important than the other dreams he had.

"Well, it doesn't help to waste time here", he said.

This dream was always weird. On the other hand, the prince was sure that this applied to all dreams. He dressed and left the tent. As usual, Noctis did not find himself at a refuge. He rather stood on the parking lot in front of Old Lestallum's hotel, the sun warmed his cheeks. It was always nice weather in this dream, the young man suddenly realized. Like someone controlling it. The town nearly looked like it always did. The only thing beside the tent, that was different, appeared on the other side of the street, the diner. Where there was usually a humanized crow with green hat, shirt and pants was sitting on a bench in front of the diner chain Crows Nest, there now stood several tables and chairs, where guests were sitting and eating. A diner, Noctis and his friends never heard of.

"Kentucky Fried Chicken..."

The prince would never get used to the red paint of the building. It seemed they just painted over the bricks of the old Crows Nest. They even did not change the interior that much. Only the black and white chess tiled floor had changed into a light brown floor. The benches and chairs were completely the same. What confused Noctis more was that somehow the inside of the restaurant has exceeded, while from the outside the size of the building has not changed. Even after he had several of these dreams, he would not get used to it.

"It's a dream!", he mumbled. "So why care about it?"

He shrugged his shoulders, checked the traffic on the street and passed it, after a yellow car went off. The prince hesitated, before he entered. From outside, the diner seemed pretty busy. But *she* would always take time to...

"To what exactly?"

Noctis knew that this dream was somehow connected to the real world. And that the woman he would meet pretty soon, tried to teach him something.

He opened the door to the diner and was greeted by a thick, greasy smell he perceived earlier and a wall of noise. The diner was pretty busy, almost all tables were occupied with guests. Not that he intended to sit at one of the tables. Some manners never changed, even in dreams. The prince spotted a free bar stool at the counter, nearly at the other end of the room. The whole diner was decorated in a strange way. Green branches were hanging from the ceiling with red ribbons and golden bells attached to them. He has never seen something like this before.

"Hmm."

The young man sat down, took one of the menus and pretended to read. He did not need to wait long.

"The same as always?", she asked. "Twelve pieces bucket meal extra crispy, with three times potato wedges, biscuits and an iced tea?"

Noctis was nearly through the whole menu by now. He always chose another dish. Or rather, he thought he is the one who chose. But somehow she could tell pretty well what he wanted to order. "Are you Gentiana?" he once asked. She just had smiled at him.

"Yes", he said.

"At once!", she said and took her leave to pick up his meal.

The prince put back the menu and watched her silently. She wore the same as always. Red and white striped blouse with a black skirt that went down to her knees. He could not see more of her legs, but assumed that she wore black tights and black shoes. Her long hair were very dark brown and strictly tied together behind a read head band. Her working outfit. Noctis wondered how she would dress in her free time.

"You wouldn't recognize me", she answered.

"You're reading my thought's again?", he asked absently.

"As always."

This mysterious woman smiled again. What was more striking about her appearance, were the deep eyes that seemed to contain a whole universe. That woman had an angel like aura to her. Instead of focusing on the topic, Noctis decided to try his extra crispy chicken first. It was very tender, but the crisp coating mainly crumbled down onto the tray. He mumbled but did not say anything. After all, she was not the one responsible for the dishes.

"How is your journey proceeding?", she asked.

Noctis had stopped to wonder a long time ago. The diner was full with people and many of them wanted to order. But she always remained, where he was, ignoring the other guests completely. To his amazement, even the other employees did not say anything about it. It seemed that she did not notice her in the first place.

"Must be quite hard, trusting this weird person blindly", she continued.

The prince put down his first chicken leg. It was gnawed clean.

"You talking about Ardyn?"

She just smiled. They faced each other silently for a whole minute.

"I know you're Gentiana!", Noctis then claimed.

Her smile grew broader.

"Gentiana is guarding Lady Lunafreya right now. The young lady is guest of Altissia's first secretary, Camelia Claustra."

He was unsure whether to believe her or not. For a simple diner waitress, she knew a lot. Or at least, she pretended to know a lot. Instead of answering, he ate two potato wedges. The smile of the woman in front of him faded a bit.

"You will go to Altissia, too."

"That's the plan", he said with full mouth.

"You will experience hardship there...", she kept on.

Noctis threw the second chicken leg onto the tray.

"What for?", he burst up. It was his first time to flare up like this in this dream. He did not understand, why he reacted this way.

"It is just a dream, isn't it?"

Instead of answering, she moved her head slightly.

"The first step is always the hardest one to take", she replied.

He felt her touch on his cheek, although she did not move.

"What for?", he asked again.

"It's your destiny."

"That's not what I mean."

It was the first time he gained the upper hand.

"Who are you?"

"Someone who tries to help you."

The prince focused on her eyes. She did not blink for a long time.

"Don't get lost in the stars", she advised him after five minutes.

Noctis sighed and sat down.

"Is it again about this ascension thing?"

"Always."

The prince continued to eat. The woman returned to her smile.

"I hope you are not angry with me."

"How come?"

He did not get a reply. Instead, she watched him eat. The young man did not care and slowly finished his meal.

"What is all this about?", he asked again, after he had cleaned his mouth.

The woman followed his glance.

"The branches and bows?"

Noctis nodded.

"It's called Christmas, where I come from", she explained.

"And where do you come from?", he wanted to know.

Just smiling. The young man was sure that he would have killed everyone else by now for a behaviour like this. Not that smiling was negative in general. But someone who smiled nearly the whole time without giving useful answers, was annoying. Especially, if it remind him of someone he did not trust. Ardyn was likewise smiling.

"Christmas is a religious feast, where the whole family comes together to celebrate the birth of our Lord."

"Mhm."

Noctis was not sure, how to react. But before he could respond in any way, the woman continued.

"However, it turned out to be more about commercial the last few years."

She seemed sad.

"And this Lord... What does he stand for?"

The woman raised her head.

"Oh, Noctis!", she answered. "You would be surprised. He came as a present to us."

"So it's about presents?"

"In one way or another, yes."

He just shook his head.

"I guess you lost me again", he mumbled.

"Ascension is a present."

"Ah. And how do I fit into all that?"

She smiled again.

"Noctis, did you just forget everything, I thought you before?"

"How can I forget something, I never quite understood?", he countered.

"Ah, but you don't need to understand it now..."

He nearly threw his arms up into the air. Why exactly was she saying that with Gladio's voice? The prince rolled his eyes. It only could mean that he was waking up.

"... Noctis...", someone said from far away.

The smiling face of the woman in front of him started to fade away. She knew perfectly well that he was leaving her. "We'll meet again..." her lips said. He could not hear her voice. His senses were drifting into reality. Only a bright light remained, where her face has been minutes before. The prince opened his eyes.

"Damn...!", he mumbled, when he realised Gladio's worried face above him.

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