

*The Godslayer went to War*

"This city's lost..."

The Godslayer didn't look up from where she was struggling to bind her bleeding leg.

"Did you hear me? What are we going to do? The rest of their forces will be here within the day. We have a few hours at best."

She tightened the bandage, grunting in pain.

"Commander, what are we going to do?"

She pushed herself to her feet, hands bracing against the wall. It seemed like her leg would hold weight. She turned to the soldier and met his eyes, wide and scared.

"We're going to burn it."

"What?"

"You said it yourself. We can't stop them from taking this city, but we can deny them anything to take. We can save the Capital."

"But... Commander... These are people's homes, businesses. We can't just..."

"Just let them fall into enemy hands and get raided and turned against us? You're right. We can't just let that happen."

"I..."

"The city's already been evacuated. Have the others salvage as much as they can. Start with the apothecaries and alchemists. And when you're done, set the charges."

"These are people's homes..."

"Set the charges."

He did.

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Linette sat up suddenly in her bed. She could feel her hair sticking to the sweat on the contours of her jaw and neck. Her hands were shaking when she absently rubbed her hand over the old scar on her leg. It hurt.

It always did when she had the nightmares.

"Linette?" the covers beside her stirred, and she heard a small yawn.

"Go back to sleep, Nora," she said as she pushed herself up to stand.

"Where are you going?" Nora looked up, blinking twice, her eyes out of focus with sleep.

"Just going for a walk. Go back to sleep," Linette repeated as she reached over to smooth over Nora's hair.

"But-"

"Go back to sleep," Linette leaned over to kiss Nora's forehead.

Nora's pillow caught a few more mumbled arguments. Linette checked and waited to make sure her wife was sleeping before turning to head deeper into the house.

Reminding herself of home was always the first step to driving the nightmares away. The faint scent of fresh baked-bread (the place always smelled of bread, thanks to Nora), all of the wobbling furniture they'd inherited from their old apartment (from before Nora's bakeries took off), the curtains that were a gift from an old friend long since disappeared into the world. She ran her hand down the length of the plush velvet curtains, thinking of her very first sting

operation where these curtains had provided a hiding place from the corrupt city official she had been investigating. When the curtains had showed up on her doorstep the day after he'd been convicted, she had smiled and declined to ask any questions.

She sighed, and turned and walked into her office. She lit the candle waiting for her and settled in at her desk. The stack of paperwork was always larger than it had any right to be, and no matter how many late nights she spent working, it never seemed to run out.

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"They've cut off our retreat!"

"Then we go through." The Godslayer gritted her teeth and hoisted her warhammer up onto her shoulder. She turned to look back over her bleeding, scared soldiers. Of all the skirmishes, this was the worst. They had struggled to hold the gates of the city for days, and now the enemy was scaling the wall to flank them.

"We'll never survive!" someone said.

"We go through," she repeated.

"It's suicide!" another soldier put forward.

The Godslayer stepped forward and met every soldier's eyes in turn.

"Their forces are weak. We *can* push through, but you have to believe it. Some of you may wish to pray. I will not stop you. But I ask you to put your faith into your sword arms and the shield-bearers who stand beside you. We have been through worse and we will get through this. All of us. Together."

But as she turned and led them into the enemy, Linette knew that they would not all make it out. Some of them would die so that the rest might live. She might die. The Godslayer accepted this as her squad of fourteen collided with the enemy.

She did not die, but three of her soldiers did. The Godslayer spoke at their funeral, as she always did, but her mourning waited until she was alone in her office. There, Linette added their names to the list she never showed anyone, the list she recited from memory every night in the flickering candle light.

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"Commander."

The Godslayer looked up from her desk.

"There have been further reports from the North. Our trade routes have been harassed heavily by one of the Warlords of the great Wilds. They call him Kattanz."

"Add more patrols to the routes, with at least one Captain in each."

"Yes, Commander."

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"In war time, all you want is peace. In peacetime, all you want is war. You're a hard woman to please, Linette," the minotaur said, chuckling into his wineglass.

"I just feel so useless chained to that desk. I'm never out in the field unless some threat arises! I'm a glorified retired warhorse, trotted out for celebrations, and a lot of that is thanks to you, Yavu." She scowled, and everyone at the table laughed. Her cheeks reddened.

"You're the best Commander the Guard has seen in generations. Crime is down; threats are down; training is up. You're doing good work."

"You have to say that. You're the main Council member supporting me."

"I wasn't even on the City Council when you were appointed."

She waved her hand dismissively and everyone laughed again. The conversation moved on and she was left facing her lack of appetite and a growing discomfort. These were her friends. It shouldn't feel like there was a chasm between them.

After some time, she excused herself and found her way to a balcony, letting the chill in the air flow over her face. It helped.

The door opened and closed behind her, and she could hear Yavu's hooves on the stone of the balcony.

"They hate me," she whispered quietly into the night.

"They do not hate you."

"Then they fear me." She didn't look at him, just kept staring forward.

"I was there with you, Linette. I was fighting in that war too. I supported your orders."

"But you didn't have to *give* them, Yavu. It's not the same. You retired into your wealth and political career and no one ever hated you. You don't see a flicker of fear in your recruits' eyes when they meet you. You don't have protests outside your window at night."

"You know the Council lauds your actions in the war. They'll never remove you from your position if that's what you're worried-"

She turned to face him, visibly taken aback. "That's what you think this is about?"

He sighed.

"Maybe you should talk to Januk about this. He is your Lieutenant. Maybe he-"

"There's nothing to talk about," she said, turning back to lean on the railing of the balcony.

Silence existed between them.

"I don't know what I could have done differently. They weren't there, in the field. The city would have fallen... It's so easy to criticize now, to say there must have been another way. The city was in my hands. My soldiers' lives were in my hands. I didn't have time for the luxury of second-guessing."

"I know." Yavu's voice was sad.

"How do I show them? Can I ever?"

"I don't know..."

They remained on the balcony until Nora came looking. She looked at Linette with her soft eyes and put a hand on her arm while Yavu excused himself. Linette could not look at her. Nora looked down and then wrapped her arms around Linette from behind, burying her face in Linette's back.

"I love you," Nora murmured.

Linette closed her eyes and exhaled, putting her hands over Nora's and blinking the tears away from her eyes.

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The Godslayer walked up and down the line, looking over the new recruits. There were two sorts these days, those who could not meet her gaze and those who could not look away. The meek she could deal with; they would shape up or they would leave. But the ones who wanted to challenge her...

Female members of the Guard were fairly commonplace. Female captains were rare. She was the first female commander in almost two hundred years. Many of the young recruits were eager to test their mettle against the great Godslayer, Hammer of the West, Hero of the Southern Wars.

She bested them every time. They went sprawling into the dirt with a few bruised ribs (which didn't trouble them nearly as much as their bruised egos) and looked up at her, some with fear and others with awe. They never knew how Linette's old scars would ache in those moments. They would just see the Godslayer towering above them with her famed warhammer, enchanted by Adom the Wise, Archmage of the Wilds.

Someday she wouldn't best them. Someday one would send her tumbling and they would see that she was Mortal. That would be the day the Godslayer died. Linette wondered when that day would come. She could not tell if it was something she longed for or dreaded.

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"Januk, I'm busy," the Godslayer said when the door opened.

"It's me." Nora had a plate of muffins, which she extended towards Linette.

"I'm sorry, Nora. I really can't. I've just got so much work to do. Maybe once I finish this paperwork." Linette's voice softened, and there was exhaustion in it.

"You need to eat something, love. Please? You skipped lunch. And breakfast. You need food."

"I'll eat something once I finish this. I just don't want to lose my place."

Nora frowned and then stepped forward, setting the plate of muffins on the paperwork.

Linette sighed and looked up. "I will. I promise."

"You're always 'just one more thing' away from a break, Linette. We haven't had any time together since..." her voice trailed off.

"Since the war," Linette finished, looking down at the muffin, off to the pile of paperwork, over to the candle. Anywhere but at Nora.

An awkward silence stretched between them before Nora quirked her head, trying to catch Linette's eyes.

"I know you've been having nightmares."

"I don't want to talk about this, Nora."

"Linette..."

She squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them. "Please, Nora. Not today. I swear to you, I will talk to you about it when I can. I just... can't right now. Please. I have paperwork I need to finish."

Nora stood in silence for a moment before moving to wrap her arms around Linette. She held her for a few seconds before releasing her and lifting up the plate of muffins.

"If you don't come out in an hour, I'm bringing them back," she chastised quietly. She made it to the door before Linette spoke.

"Nora?"

Nora stopped and looked back.

"Thank you."

"Always."

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Linette stood in the ruin of the town she had ordered burned, the ash settling on her boots. She crossed the threshold into the skeleton of a house. She felt like a ghost, wandering through the charred remnants of a life.

A year and a half had passed, but they had only just started the rebuilding process. Scaffolds could be seen here and there around important buildings -- the Guard outpost, the Apothecary, the mage's tower -- but most of it was still in burned out ruins.

She wandered aimlessly through the house of the family she had never known. She ran her hands along their walls and paused at the blackened picture frames. Unable to make out the pictures within, she wondered, not for the first time, what the people who had once lived here looked like. She wondered if they were among the protesters who stood outside of the Guard headquarters.

In a crumbling bookshelf, she found a book left mostly untouched by the destruction around it. She carefully removed it from the shelf and began flipping through it.

It clearly belonged to a herbalist and detailed various properties of the plants found in the surrounding wilds. It was filled with clippings and notes in the margin, made by a variety of hands. The pages seemed worn and weathered, with some ink seeming much older than the rest.

A pang went through her and she set it back on the shelf.

Would they come back for it? She had to hope they would.

"Commander!"

The Godslayer turned, straightening and absently brushing the ash off of her breeches.

"Report."

"Well, we've repaired the damage to the outer walls to prevent any further looting or raiding. We've posted guards along the exterior walls and our outpost here should be able to house the retinue that are manning them, as you ordered."

"Thank you." The Godslayer nodded curtly.

Januk lingered, shifting his weight back and forth from one leg to the other.

"Yes?"

"Well, it's just... are you sure this is the best use of resources? Guarding a burned out husk of an outer town?"

"I will not have scavengers picking at the carcass. We will rebuild. Yavu is already working to push the bill through the Council to further the process."

"But in the meantime..."

"Dismissed, Captain."

"Linette..."

"Dismissed."

Januk sighed and shook his head. "As you say, Commander."

He walked away, leaving the Godslayer alone amongst the ashes.

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The door to her office opened.

"I am busy," the Godslayer said without looking up.

"I must speak with you," Yavu's voice was strained. "You know Warlord Kattanz has been harassing our supply lines for months. They've all but cut us off."

"I'm doing the best I can, Yavu. My people are not omniscient and the nomads disappear into the wilds as fast as they appear." Irritation crawled into her voice.

"It's not... that. Linette, Kattanz has traveled even further south. His warband is massive. We think he's united several of the disparate tribes. We believe he's going to attack the Capital."

A chill ran down Linette's back. The Godslayer looked up.

"And?"

"And we're declaring it a time of war. The Council has voted to give the Guard full wartime privileges. You are, officially, a General once more."

Her hands tightened into fists. A tight pain began to spread through her chest and her heart suddenly began to race. Breathing was difficult.

But none of it showed. She only nodded.

"I will make the changes necessary immediately. Tell the Council that we will be ready by the time Kattanz reaches us."

"Linette..." Yavu's voice cracked. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't want this."

"Do you need anything else?" the Godslayer asked quietly. "There is much I must do to prepare."

He sighed and shook his head. "No. No, nothing. I will leave you to your work."

And he did.

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Linette sat up suddenly in her bed. She could feel her hair sticking to the sweat on the contours of her jaw and neck. Her hands were shaking when she absently rubbed her hand over the old scar on her leg. It hurt.

It always did when she had the nightmares.

But this time, it wasn't a nightmare. She knew that when she looked over and saw the bed beside her empty. Nora would be in the bakeries, already beginning extra work to help support the war effort.

She pushed herself to her feet. She did not walk the house or touch the curtains or remind herself of her life and her world here. Instead, she donned her armor and double-checked her equipment. The leather was clean, the metal polished. It fit as if she had been born to wear it.

Her hand closed around the Warhammer and hefted it up onto her shoulder.

The Godslayer went to war.

