

The Small Goddess and the War

Many years later as he faced the firing squad Eliot would remember that distant evening when he met the goddess of Pizza delivery.

It was the height of the war and he had been sent out to find medicine. The empty streets were lit only by a pale weak half-moon. Frighteningly it was barely enough light to see the piles of rubble and deep shell craters that could snap his leg or cut him deep. Thankfully it wasn't enough to identify the bodies. The night was silent except for the occasional crack of sniper fire and the far too close boom of artillery.

He had just given up when she arrived.

He couldn't tell what car she drove, just that it was old and poorly maintained and that there was something a little off about the sound of the engine. On its roof was a bright sign that read Something Pizza; the first word was too faded to read properly. The car wove through the rubble as any car would have to do but he noticed that the light from the weak headlights didn't reflect off of any surface and that the car seemed to grow more solid as it approached. He should have been terrified. Strange lights and apparitions were the hallmarks of gods and monsters. Neither were safe. But Eliot in those days had had much of the flight shelled out of him. So instead of hiding or fleeing, he just stood there.

The Goddess pulled up next to him and opened the door to her little car. The smell that poured out was the most incredible thing in the world. It was the smell of every good slice of pizza ever made with just a tinge of divine otherness to make them meld perfectly into an odor that could water the mouth dry. With a little difficulty, the goddess stepped out of the car carrying an insulated bag. She looked like a woman in her early twenties who had stopped caring about her appearance long before the beginning of her shift. There were bags and worry lines around her eyes and she had that strange pallor of someone who works nights, her hair was flat and maybe a little greasy. She wore a stained hoodie with a slice of pizza logo on the chest. But she was also a goddess, if only a very minor one, and the divine beauty of her kind radiated out from her. She looked like someone who had given up on aesthetics but she was pulling it off.

Eliot stared in wonder as she got her balance on the bombed streets and turned her eyes on him. They were the brown of a well-cooked mushroom and full of urgency.

"Hey kid, can you point me to 427 Lostway avenue?" She had a friendly voice marred only by exhaustion and the casual rudeness of the rushed. He almost didn't respond. You weren't supposed to respond to gods but that had been advice from before the war. He didn't think it had survived.

"Uhh 427 is kind of destroyed but I can show you the way in if you want?" She beamed at him and it was a smile that could melt mozzarella.

"Oh, could you? That would be great. I'm already really late with this." She nodded to the insulated bag.

“Yeah sure, of course. It's this way.” Eliot led the goddess through the gutted city. He felt safer walking with her, as though no shrapnel could find him while he was in her presence. They crept through a basement full of the husks of laundry machines and up a mostly intact staircase. They crept through a hotel lobby and finally came up into the bombed-out remains of 427. Her delivery was on the fifth floor so they made their careful way up what was left of the stairs trying to not look down into the empty black abyss that was the bottom of the stairwell. Such places housed the monsters who were born and bred on the edges of human misery and the unknown. They arrived at her delivery.

She had been too late.

The sniper was missing a good part of his head. He would not be needing pizza ever again. Eliot just stared at the man, his eyes as empty as the dead sniper's.

The Goddess of pizza delivery took one look at the dead man and cried out, a harsh terrible sound of grief and shock that went unheard in the bleeding city. Eliot knew the sound. He remembered making it, he remembered what to do. So he took her hand. He gently guided her into another room and sat her down against the wall. She followed him, her face slack with a shock he only vaguely remembered. He squeezed her hand as the old woman had done and started to say the empty thing the adults always said.

“It'll be ok. You're safe here.” His young voice sounded strange and small in the empty shell of what had once been homes but it seemed to help. The rhythm of the words, the tone, the pleasant lies, she raised her head.

“Yeah, yeah, I know I'm protected by the delivery but, but. I've never seen a human like that, so, so broken. I usually get to see your kind happy. Or at least happier having seen me. But I was too late. The addresses were all destroyed, and I was too late.” She sounded so bleak that it touched that little spark of sympathy that perhaps no horror could ever drive from Eliot entirely. Almost without thinking, the little boy hugged the goddess. It was the first time he hugged someone for them. It made him feel very grown-up. She squeezed him back, and when he let go of her, her eyes were wet but she didn't look like giving up anymore.

“What's your name?”

“Ray.”

“I'm Eliot. Uhh could we, could we eat the pizza?” She hesitated for a moment before nodding, smiling, and opening the insulated bag.

They sat and talked and ate pizza. He could never describe that pizza, not till the end of his life. Other than that it had toppings that weren't his favorites and it was perfect in every way.

Food of the gods.

She told him about her life as the eternal delivery driver. Of the brief mornings when she had some time to herself to rest and be something beyond her archetype. She told him of the secret ways she took to deliver her pizza and swore him never to tell anyone.

He told her of the people in the basement, and how they had sent him to look for medicine so he wouldn't see the old woman die. They sat close sharing warmth and Pizza and for a moment while it lasted the words weren't a lie and they really did feel safe.

They finished the pizza.

“Well Eliot I have to go, always another delivery but uh before I do.” She rummaged around in her pocket and pulled out a strip of card stock. It was a rewards card. With six empty spaces and a seventh that read prize! He took it reverently. “Whenever you eat pizza, smear one of the empty squares with tomato sauce. When you smear the final square you can make an order and we can see each other again.”

“I will!” She seemed sad to go but she had the look of the men who left to fight about her. So he didn't ask her to stay, though he wished she would. Before she left, she bent down and kissed him on the cheek. Then in a swirl of oregano and pepper flakes, she was gone. Eliot was left alone in the empty building one hand on his cheek and a little scrap of hope in the other.

He smeared the first box at the refugee camp on the border. He and forty-odd other children sat at long tables eating squares of pizza that barely deserve the name. Eliot thought the children around him looked like siblings. All sitting there wolfing down the sweet stale pizza. They didn't really have similar features, of course, only their eyes looked alike. He took a tiny bit of sauce and marked the first box. The exhausted, kindly woman who ran the camp was telling them that they would be going to better lives in the new world. He wished she believed it.

It was better. He sat at the table of a nice family, next to their children, and ate good home-cooked pizza hot out of the oven. They didn't ask Eliot too many questions and gave him ice cream after dinner. It almost felt like the war was over. But it wasn't, so that night in his new unfamiliar bed set up next to the family's shrine of many, he marked the next box. When he did he was almost sure he felt her lips on his cheek. He fell asleep and dreamed of oregano and pepper flakes.

He marked again during lunch on his first day at the school. The big loud building that made him wince when cubbies closed was full of people who didn't know what happened when you shrieked or yelled or brought attention to yourself. By lunchtime, he had to do the breathing exercises the kind man with the comfortable couch had given him. He only fully calmed when he marked the rewards card, it felt for a brief moment like he was standing next to her again. Certain that the war would not touch him by her side. He looked around at the loud children and their dangerous games and realized it couldn't touch him here either. Not today. After lunch, Eliot's day got better and he listened raptly to a teacher telling them about gods great and small.

Eliot smeared the third box a few years later. He stood in front of his class and told them about meeting the goddess. Showed them the card and smeared the box. Most didn't believe him. But he didn't mind. His friends did, his siblings did and his teacher gave him high marks. He was vague about the war though. Even his friends didn't want to hear about that. The best part of his presentation was, as he finished, he caught just a whiff of every good slice of pizza in the world.

He was at a friend's graduation party and a classmate across from him on a couch was crying about not getting into the university they wanted. Others were hugging each other and wishing heartfelt farewells and toasting the end of an era. He sat on the couch and thought about the

sniper with his head half gone. He smeared the card and stepped out into the night to get some air. He stared off into the dark of the pines and said to her.

"I miss you, I don't belong in their quite peaceful world and I don't want to belong in the war. I miss that feeling of sharing pizza while death pressed in around. It wasn't horror but it also didn't feel like a lie. I miss you." He thought he saw in the distance an old car swerving through the trees.

He went into the shop around the corner from his first apartment and smeared the next box with a slice he bought as soon as he heard the news. The shop owner barely paid attention to him and tried to give him too much change. The man was staring at the TV. The solemn woman on the screen was announcing again and again that the war was coming to this country now. Eliot could barely eat the slice but he knew that the war meant hunger so he ate, and laid out his plans.

He smeared the second to last box on the night he left for the front lines. He had spoken excitedly to his neighbors about the joys of pizza that afternoon. Sure enough, they ordered some that night. Their daughter was going to the war in the morning. She would be taking the same train as him.

It was the perfect night, a family's last together, the kind no goddess worth her toppings would turn down. Eliot waited outside his neighbor's house and sure enough, she came. Her old car was swerving and creaking. She got out and brought the pizza to the door. His neighbors took the pizza and paid her. They never once noticed what she was but the pizza she brought would still be the best they had ever eaten together.

He was waiting by her car when she turned. He was her age now and a little taller. It was strange because in all his memories she was more than a head taller than him.

"Hey Ray, long time." She looked almost surprised for a moment before her face broke into a smile.

"Eliot. Is it time to order your pizza now my priest?" She said it almost formally like a great god as though he couldn't see the smile that played around her marinara lips and the strand of hair that hung over her left eye like cheese from a hot slice.

"Priest? Is that what I am?"

"Of course, you hold my sign and you make offerings to it. You even spread my word."

"Well I haven't been much of a priest, one school presentation and convincing a few people to order." her smile widened her teeth as white as fresh mozzarella.

"Well, I'm not much of a goddess. Besides you're my only priest so it's not like I have a lot to compare you to." They hugged.

"Ray, I, I had a question for you. When you were in the war. When we first met, were you in danger? Could you have been caught and killed? I've heard stories about gods who've picked sides in the war being... Well, gods are not as durable as we once believed."

"No, not while I'm delivering. The gods who were killed stepped outside their roles. If the god of a beautiful park tries to save someone who is outside the borders of their park they are just another creature of flesh and spirit and are as easily slain. But as long as I am on a delivery I cannot be harmed. At least not by any mortal weapon."

"I see then I have to give this back to you." with a heavy heart he held out the pizza rewards card. "I'm heading back to the war. I won't let what happened to my first home happen here. I'm worried that in my fear and in my weakness I might try to use this. To call you to help me as a last resort, so I wanted to give it back." For the second time in his life, Eliot saw tears like spots of grease in the goddess's eyes.

"Thank you, but, but I want you to keep it. I might not be able to offer you rescue or protection but in your worst moments. In your last moments, I want to do what I do best. I want to offer you comfort and a moment of respite from the cares of the world. What else can pizza delivery do?" She took his hand and cupped it back around the rewards card. Then she leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Farewell my priest, until we meet again." She vanished in a puff of parmesan cheese and garlic powder. He stared after her and touched his lips. They still tasted of pizza.

Months later his captors had given Eliot a last meal. It was their mistake. He stood before the men who were joking and laughing and loading the guns they would use to kill him, and he smeared a little fleck of tomato sauce on the last square. He finally ordered his pizza. He was ready for his last comfort before the end.

But no gentle touch or whispered kindness came to him. No taste of cheese or basil touched his bruised lips. Instead, with a shriek of misaligned brakes, the old pizza car crashed through Eliot's would-be executioners and came to a sliding stop before him. Ray Jumped out of the car, her hoodie even more stained, her hair disheveled. A wild reckless look in her mushroom eyes. She drew from her belt a pizza roller that hummed and spun on its own. Before he could object she cut him free with two neat slices from her roller. Placing her own life and divinity in mortal peril with each cut.

Her's was the first face he saw when the blindfold came off. It was as welcome as the smell of pizza after a long hard week. Then she opened the door of her car for him.

He took one last look at the gray walls that had been his latest prison so like the empty burning city he had never entirely left in his heart. Then without further hesitation, Eliot went with Ray The Goddess of Pizza Delivery.