

Gambits - The White Pawn IV

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The White Pawn IV Niels tavern was packed, more so than William had ever before seen it. All of the customers were men of the City Watch too. Neil was holding a special memorial for Albert there, with the drinks at half price. Of course, Neil neither knew nor cared the slightest about Albert, but Will had to hand it to him; he knew how to make the best of a bad situation. William was peeved but didn't blame Neil, he had a business to run, and if these men didn't get their drinks here, then it'd probably be somewhere else. What really annoyed him though was that too many of the men were there; mourning Albert's death was an excuse to drink on duty. As if they didn't get enough the night before, he thought. He was one to judge though since he too had come for a drink, maybe several. He moved on from there quickly, time he visited another old friend of his. Molly's Flowers, a peculiar name for a brothel, was a long walk away. Sitting cozily in a corner of Raven Street in the northeastern ward of the city, just a stone's toss from the Eastern gate. It was a second leveled building with the prettiest prostitutes standing out on the front balcony with their bodices only partially laced up. William always went through the back entrance to the building where less would see him, he knew the owner, Molly, well enough. Some years ago a group of unsightly men with lots of coins decided it was time they moved up to a fancier brothel. Their patronage was less than welcome given their foul odor, bad attitudes, and roughness towards the girls. Molly's place had come to expect a certain class of clientele and promptly refused them. Of course, those men took offense to this and tried forcing themselves onto the girls, even threatening to burn the place down. William, who was visiting his friend at the time, snuck out the back and quickly rallied enough nearby guards and snuck back in the way he left with them and cut down the rats. Since then he and the owner, Molly, had a deal that he could come and go through the back entrance as he pleased whenever he wanted to visit his friend. The brothel also started servicing men from the City Watch after that. Molly was in the back room looking over a ledger with her tiny glasses at the tip of her nose. She glanced over to see him coming in and smiled before turning back to the ledger. She was an older woman late into her 60's but had the look of a woman a decade younger than herself. Her auburn hair still shined with health, and her creamy skin had no signs of wrinkles anywhere, she must have been an absolute beauty when she was younger, he had to wonder how someone like her came to own and manage such an establishment. "Captain Royce, how are you this day?" She asked casually, keeping her eyes on the

ledger. "I've been better," he answered. "I heard about the lord commander, grim news indeed." "How did you?..." "The men like to talk with the girls, news can travel quite fast, but I promise you my girls won't spread word about this. But these things have a way of getting out no matter what you do." "So it would seem," William said with annoyance. "Is she here?" "You already know the answer to that, but you're asking if she's busy. She's not, she prefers to take her customers later in the evening, when they're more prone to drink and thus be more generous with their coin. A smart one she is." And yet she still works in a brothel, he thought bitterly. Alayne was a beautiful woman, a year older than himself, straight black hair, sky-blue eyes, and high cheekbones that gave her a unique beauty most women couldn't even try to replicate. She had her own room in the brothel so William could speak with her privately. She hugged him when he entered, and he responded likewise. She smelled like blackberries; it could have just been her perfume, but he loved it. They broke the embrace, and he eyed her head to toe, she had a slim fitting lilac dress with an open slit revealing her smooth thigh. "You look beautiful," he said. "You look distressed," she responded, a bit more blunt than an intended. He let out a sigh then asked, "Can we take a walk?" In answer, she put on her matching slippers, and they left out the back door quickly finding the main road to walk down. Eventually, he said, "The Lord Commander is dead, I found him in a pool of his own blood." "It reminds you of your father's death, you think they're linked? Your father's death and the commander after him?" "I have no evidence of it, but a feeling I can't elude that suggests so. You know I never stopped looking for my father's killer, but I couldn't see any tracks back then." "And now?" "Now there's a thousand paths leading from Albert's death. I've only just begun this investigation, and already I'm loaded with a million questions. And Katrina's father is finally starting to feel well, we may finally get married in a few months, maybe even two." Alayne scoffed at that. They stopped walking, and he faced her, "You think something is wrong with that?" "I think your engagement to her is wrong." He didn't know how to respond to that, and so he kept quiet. And she continued. "You've been engaged to the girl for years now, all waiting for her father's health. You know I always thought it odd that such a rich family can't seem to find the right medicine or white sage to cure her father's illness. I mean if his health was truly that bad the best they could do is prolong his life, in which case he should have given you his blessing as soon as possible so you two could marry." "And how is it you know so much about this sort of stuff anyways?" He asked, almost accusingly. "I was an acolyte to a white Sage for a time, remember? But that was way too boring." "Boring? If I recall you were an acolyte for years, what changed what made you drop out?" "What made you stay with that girl for so long when she delayed your marriage for years? Why not just host the wedding in the gardens of home that way her father could be present? What is it about her that made you stay even when she kept delaying your marriage intentionally? "Did you sleep with her? Was she better than me?" "No one's better than you," He mistakenly muttered under his breath instead of keeping the thought in his head. Alayne heard him and leaned in for a kiss so suddenly. He didn't push her away after the first kiss and instead kissed her back. It felt good, felt right. But when they broke for air he came to his senses and turned from her and ran. He knew it was a bad idea visiting her. Their meetings always ended with such high tension. The last time though they had a giant argument and he wasn't sure if he ever

wanted to see her again after that. "You can do way better than laying on your back with your legs spread for a living," He argued with her. "And you are still chasing your father's killer. Even as it ruined your life, you can't let it go, William. And that's your problem, his death will consume you. You'll never be happy unless you let go of your father." "And are you happy with this life? Huh, letting any man with enough coin ride you like a horse." "This is different, I made a choice." "Yeah well you chose wrong!" "I chose wrong?" She asked baffled by the question. "William you're the one who made all the wrong choices. You were supposed to come back for me years ago, but you never did. So I came to you, tired of waiting. But when I got here you said it'd just be a few months, but it had been years. I had to move on." "Well, I think it's time I moved on as well. I'm getting married!" The announcement of it stunned them both more than anything. Alayne sat on her bed and cast her face down, away from him. "What's her name?" She said so lightly he had to strain himself to hear. "Katrina Danmur, we met at the Queens Ball." "I hope she makes you happy. Now get out of my room William." "You deserve better than this." "I said go!" He left in a huff, taking a long walk through the city, even past nightfall. Gods be damned Alayne it should have been you at the ball that night. Stubborn wench, she had come to terms with what she was, he hadn't. Somewhere inside he knew it was because he still loved her. That's why he berated her, that's why they fought. William sat quietly in the parlor room gathering his thoughts while, the recently widowed, Claudia Hathen poured them both some tea. Her hands were shaking so much that half the tea from the kettle found its way onto the floor. She hardly seemed to notice though as she returned the kettle to the kitchen and sat in her seat staring tensely at him. The poor woman was a wreck after her husband's death, her brown hair was tied into a tangled bun with split ends everywhere. And her eyes were red from crying, he shouldn't burden her, but he needed answers. Ones maybe only she could provide. He took a sip of his tea and Claudia gulped down half her cup in response. He never much liked tea but drank it now as a courtesy. He cleared his throat awkwardly and set down the cup, "Mrs. Hathen I know all of this must be very difficult for you, and I want you to know that I am doing everything in my power to find your husband's killer. But I need your help." "I don't know what I can tell you. I'm a simple housewife who knows nothing." "You might know more than you think. Did your husband have any unusual meetings with any strangers lately?" Claudia went to take another drink from her tea before realizing her cup was empty. She quickly rushed back to the kitchen to pour herself another cup and offered William more. He refused, and she took notice at last of the tea she accidentally poured onto the floor and table. She was gone a while finding a towel to clean it up. Growing impatient William asked her again while she worked if Albert had any suspicious visitors recently. "I don't remember many visitors of late besides yourself," was her quick answer. She finished wiping the mess and was off again before William could ask her anything more. This time, he hollered his question to her, tired of waiting, "Was Albert perhaps scared of something? Or really tense lately?" Her response was, "I'm sorry I can't hear you. I'll be back in a moment." When she finally returned, he continued his questions, "Has he perhaps mentioned someone to you that had him on edge? Or was he acting strange around the house, around his kids?" She grabbed her cup with both hands, but they were shaking so bad the tea was bouncing out of the cup. He knew it wasn't from the cold as the hearth

had a few large logs burning in it, and it was so warm in there William was almost sweating. "Mrs. Hathen your hands are trembling, what's wrong?" "What's wrong?" She set her cup down and started fidgeting in her chair. "You want to know what is wrong?" Her tone turned hostile. "You know what I want to know, is where were you and the other guards when my husband was murdered? You're supposed to look out for each other so why didn't you?" He let out a slow breath before answering. "I assure you I intend to get to the bottom of that too." "Then why are you questioning me? Why not question your men first?" "I was hoping you would perhaps be able to shed some more light on a few things about your husband. Things that may help me in my questioning of the other guards." Claudia looked like she was about to either burst into tears or throw her cup at him. He was prepared for the latter. Before she could decide the door burst open and Brendon, her son, shambled in. He was a man of seventeen, and lanky; taking more after his mother. Seeing William, more accurately seeing his uniform, he sneered at him and demanded to know what he was doing there. His words were slurred, and his steps were wobbly, he was mad drunk. William rose, and Brendon made a pathetic lunge at him; despite the several feet between them. Brendon tripped over himself and crashed into the table, tumbling to the ground. He struggled to sit up while Claudia rushed over to him, to calm him. "It's your fault!" He bellowed. "My dad did everything asked of him." William grabbed Brendon by his shirt and hoisted him up to his feet. "Who are you talking about?" Claudia stepped between them, "Brendon no!" She pleaded. "Be silent please." Brendon pushed her aside and took a swing at William. He dodged it easily, and Brendon tumbled to the floor again. He started to weep after that. "He did everything they say. So why'd he die huh? He kept his mouth shut! We kept our mouths shut too so why!?" Claudia was back at her son's side, trying to shut him up rather than comfort him. "Brendon please, they won't give her back if you keep acting like this." She then turned to William, her eyes were wet with tears, "Captain it's time you left." He hesitated, and she screamed! "Get out of my house!" He left quietly and could hear them both weeping. His heart went out to them both. Only when he was out of the door did he realize Albert Hathen had two children: his daughter was missing.