

Gambits - The Widower

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The Widower Katrina made it all the way home before falling apart. She shed her cloak, tossed the bloodied dagger aside, and leaned back against the door, struggling to breathe. Slowly she fell to the floor, then brought her knees up to her chest and buried her face in them and started sobbing. Her aunt eventually grew tired of it and came by to help her to the bathroom and clean her up. Meradith sat her down at the table and asked her, in a stern tone, "What happened to you? Did you get the job done?" She dropped her kind facade when she knew no one else was around. After taking a moment to gather herself, Katrina said, "Yes, he's, he's dead." "Than what's the problem, why are you such a mess?" She couldn't help but cry again. Talking about it made it real, but if she didn't talk Meradith would punish her severely. "William, he was there too." Meradith hissed, "The Beast took you child; when did you become so sloppy? Did he see you?" "I didn't mean to do it; I-I-I couldn't even control myself." "Out with it child!" Meradith demanded, losing all patience with her. "William, I killed him." Out of angered reflex, she slapped Katrina hard across the face. Katrina hardly felt it. "Do you have any idea what you've done?!" Meradith screamed at her. "I ran and he chased me, and after he caught me, I don't know. Something possessed me, I couldn't move of my own will, and my hand and wrist felt like I was tied and being pulled by a puppet on a string. My dagger, I grabbed it and." She broke into tears again. Meradith grabbed her wrists and pulled her sleeves down; she winced in pain. The left wrist was unharmed, but the right one, including the fingers, had a dark purple sore on them, mix of bruising and something else. The other something faded away fast, though, and all that was left was some light bruising. "This can't be possible. He should be dead." Meradith left in a hurry, looking spooked and leaving Katrina all alone to cry in peace. They buried William in a field of tombstones, resting half a day's ride outside the city, next to his father's grave. The graves of the guards were marked with small stone slabs with the name of the guard, and nothing more. The stone slabs were lined in long rows spread evenly across expansive flat grass fields. They only buried the Captains and Commanders out here, but even then the stone slabs stretched out everywhere it seemed. Only a handful of the city guardsmen came out to his funeral, and the rest couldn't be spared. Of those men Katrina only recognized Derren, and the old commander William spoke of, the other men were

dressed in blue. The only other person there was that tavern friend of his, Neil; and of course, a Sage to perform the burial ceremony. The stout curly haired man had dug William's grave with his own hands, insisting it was tradition, and that William requested it of him should he fall in the line of duty. She didn't complain, though, as he did a great job and was three times as fast as any grave digger she had seen. Neil also helped the guards lowering William's casket into the ground. "On this day we bury the body of William Royce," The Grey Sage said, with volume and clarity. Though seemingly young, she had a strange authority to her voice. "And while his body returns to the ground, and the cycle of life, we pray that the Outlander take his soul and guide him to the next world." They got his casket in the ground and Neil grabbed, but a handful of dirt, and sprinkled it over his casket slowly while muttering his own prayers. The Sage continued, "And that the Sage help us remember him for the man he was. And may the Judge bring his killer to Justice." Katrina almost collapsed after that, and she didn't need a reminder of her guilt from a preacher. Perhaps worst of all there was no one there to hold her and make it alright; like William would when she broke apart. If the Judge wanted to smite someone it shouldn't be her, it should be Meradith. After his prayer Neil pushed the dirt into the grave; it was compact together and didn't take him long to fill the hole. When he finished, he got on his hands and knees, and packed the dirt down with his hands; smoothing the area over with his palms. The Sage took her leave afterward and when Neil got up, his clothes covered in dirt, the commander approached the headstone. Jorden pulled an iron dagger from his belt and stabbed it into the ground in front of the headstone. And then he and the other guards took their leave. Neil put a small vial; half buried, next to the dagger, and then he too left. Katrina was alone now and eventually wrapped the Violet Bloom vines around the headstone. The flower had light green vines with small, six pedaled, violet flowers blooming out from them every few inches. When she finished, her strength left her and she cried. She regretted it all; from the very first moment, she met him, to the task Meradith had given her. She kept repeating to herself that he was just her target, and to not get attached, but even the night of the Queen's Ball she found it hard to go through with giving him the love potion. She had the goblet; they were out on the balcony. She could have easily lost her footing and dropped the poisoned wine over the edge. But she knew the price of failure, and back then William was nothing to her. And despite herself, she had fallen for him. His coarse looks had a strange appeal to her eyes, and his strong will was always a challenge for her. He resisted the effects of the potion so much that instead of once a month, she had to give it to him once a week, to keep him enthralled. And even then he still sought out that other woman, it shouldn't make her jealous, but it filled her with rage thinking even though William was hers, he fiercely loved another. But despite that he stayed by her side, they were engaged, but could never be married until he became Lord Commander; otherwise, he was useless to them. So they delayed their marriage, and she rejected his advances, he could have forced her. It would be within his right, after all, they were to be married some day and that was part of a woman's duty, but he gave her space whenever she wanted it, She always thought that when he went off to that whore, he got what she wasn't giving him from another, but once more William surprised her. He had not lain with another woman, not even that one, since being with her. In all the years she rejected him from getting closer to her in bed, he laid with no other

to satisfy his needs. When the clouds in the sky darkened, Katrina took her leave of the grave. It was only a week after William's death that Meradith had begun her plans on how to use Katrina next. Though Katrina expected, she had begun planning things since the funeral. As Katrina prepared their breakfast, Meradith spoke of her plans. "Well I know Kara wanted the commander of the City Watch, but I doubt the lifespan of that old coot, and I don't know who they will replace him with after he dies." Katrina said nothing, only focused on the breakfast, and the tea. "It's not like house Redthorn couldn't just bribe the next lord commander, they have ten times the gold for it and so much more. You, on the other hand, you're too fine of a crafted jewel to be wasted on such a trivial conquest. No, what would really impress them is if I can marry you off to a king's guard. "Imagine dear; our own knight that close to the king and queen. I hear Ser Erquin is unmarried, a man of his age should take a wife, and it's not against their code and several older king's guards had taken wives while still in service. It's not like any man can refuse you, though, not when we're done with them." Katrina bit her lip, struggling to hold back her rage. Just a little longer, she thought. She finished the tea first and set down Meradith's cup down in front of her, taking a couple of steps back. "It's about time," Meradith grunted. She let it cool a minute, "Well, at least, you're also great in the kitchen. If the seduction thing doesn't turn out, we can always put you in the kitchens, and there's a lot we could do from in there. Which reminds me," She turned to look at Katrina. "Has your late fiancé ever fucked you?" She had a vulgar look of lust in her eyes that made Katrina lose what little appetite she had. "No, I kept him waiting until we were married, and he respected that." "That's a shame," she teased. "He had a strange handsomeness to him, like something between rugged and fierce. I would have let him give me a poke or two when he got bored of you." Katrina rolled her eyes and went back to the kitchen, speaking as she went. "Your tea is getting cold." Meradith looked at her skeptically before she disappeared behind her. Then she picked up her tea and took a deep drink from it. She smirked, and then gulped the rest down. "Dear niece, poison doesn't work on me. You ought to know that by now, but you hid it well this time; your aggressive attitude to get me to drink the tea gave you away, however." "That was just the distraction," Katrina said, grabbing Meradith suddenly by the hair. She then put the sharp of the blade to her throat and ran it across. Blood sprayed over the table and chairs, and Katrina dropped the knife, she was free at long last. All along it was that easy, and she couldn't believe it. She didn't need some grand scheme to get rid of her aunt, didn't need some heroic knight to rescue her either. All she needed was a sharp blade, and the courage to go through with it. She lost her heroic knight, but somehow that gave her the courage to move forward, to do things she only dreamed about before, as idle fantasies to pass the time. After setting Meradith down on the floor, Katrina stared at her. Her glamour spell was gone and her unsightly true face appeared. Her teeth were crooked; her nose was three times too big for anyone and had warts on it. The rest of her face had bad acne scars all over it from her younger years. She was truly as hideous as her heart. Katrina always knew Meradith resented her for her beauty. She went to her bedroom and sat at the end with her back resting against the bed frame, her knees tucked up under her chin. Now what? She wondered. She couldn't go home, and her parents were dead. And her real Aunt would use her as a pawn, again, while Meradith was really her cousin, but crueler and more cunning than her mother.

Her aunt Hildra, Meradith's mother, became her godmother when her parents died when she was five. She couldn't even remember them. Hildra had sent Meradith away to some warlock when she was young. She saw Meradith only once before she returned to take her away after she turned eleven. Though Meradith was worse, Hildra wouldn't be much better, at 15 and escaped her cousin and went back home. Hildra tried marrying her off to some oaf lord in the Greenlands, regardless of her feelings. Fortunately for her, the oaf had died in a jousting match before they could get engaged. She then ran away from there too, when Hildra set out to engage her to someone else after that unfortunate accident with the first nobleman. This new one was worse, though, he was smarter, but more aggressive and tried to put his hands all over her when no one was looking. She grabbed a serving tray and smacked him away with it, and then ran. Meradith found her again not long after that, brought her back home long enough for Hildra to scold her, and then gave Meradith custody of her. Of course, by then she was legally a woman, and could do whatever she wanted, and go wherever. But that didn't stop Meradith from enslaving her, and torturing her with her dark magics. She didn't know where she would go just yet but she was free now and decided she needed some rest, just a little. She closed her eyes for a few moments. It was dark when Katrina woke, she must have been asleep all day. There was a light, so dim she didn't notice at first, at the end of the room, it brightened a little more when she started moving. She could see a dark silhouette outline of a person, holding something that seemed to gleam when it moved, but nothing more. "Don't move," The silhouette called out to her. "Who are you? Katrina asked, squinting her eyes trying to see better. She went to get out of bed when the snap of wire sounded, and an arrow pierced the frame right next to her head. At least, she thought it was an arrow. She touched it to make sure, could feel the shaft and the feathers, it was indeed an arrow. Meanwhile, the silhouetted person reloaded the crossbow and aimed it at her, "I told you not to move," She said more aggressively. Katrina couldn't make out the figure, but now that she was awake, she recognized the voice to be female. "Who are you, and what the hell do you want!?" She shouted enraged and confused. "I'll be asking the questions around here. William Royce, you murdered him, why?" Katrina's anger grew, "I did not murder him." She snarled. "You were engaged, he loved you. No, he didn't love you, how could he, you're a stranger in his life. You gave him a love potion to ensnare him, but he didn't love you. Is that why you murdered him? Because you knew he could never, would never, love you?" What does she know? What the hell does she know!? I did love him! "What the hell do you know?" Katrina bellowed in rage, tears streaming down her face. "I loved him, more than I had the right to. But gods be damned if I'm a liar, for I did love him." "Is that why you murdered him?" The stranger in the dark taunted. Katrina rose to her feet, "I did not murder him!" The bowstring snapped and the arrow flew straight into its intended target.