

The Baker and the Widow

Part of the Bloodstone Bestiary

There was a Baker who owned a small shop in a small village on the edge of a small gray creek that fed into a small, slow-moving river. There was nothing special about this Baker or his shop. Nor was there anything special about the village or the creek, nor the river that it fed. The village was a simple place, off the beaten path, but large enough to have built a community of families. It was a small friendly place, not known for danger or excitement – and there was little that happened that would throw off the routine of the place.

That was until the Smith got sick. A healthy man who supplied the town with all its iron needs, the Smith came down with an illness rather suddenly. He had recently married, and his new wife tended to him dutifully. Being that she wasn't from the town originally, though, rumors were quick to spread as they do in small communities. She was a stranger, and as she wasn't one of them, she couldn't be trusted.

As the Smith grew weaker, the rumors only grew more vicious. The Baker heard rumors of her in his shop; she was a poisoner, her goal was to take his wealth, or she only came here to spread illness. None of this was true, he knew. No one else grew sick, despite the Smith's Apprentice and family visiting to assist her in taking care of the ailing man. The Smith was no rich man, and frankly, the Baker had seen her coin from the city more often than the Smith's trade since they wed. As for poisoning her husband, that just felt like a stretch made up by frightened minds.

Eventually, at the edge of winter, the Smith passed away. Like so many in the village, the Smith would find his final resting place in the town cemetery. The once strong man had withered away, and his family wept. His Widow was inconsolable, though. While she tried to appear strong, she could not do it. She wept at his graveside for days and nights, only coaxed into leaving his side when tiredness overtook her, and the Smith's family was able to carry her back home. Then she disappeared into their home. The Smith's family left for their own homes to prepare for the depth of winter.

The Widow rarely left their home, but the rumors stopped for a time. She gave the Smithy's shops and all its contents over to the Apprentice, keeping only their home for herself. There she stayed alone for the season, only ever venturing out to purchase much-needed food and drink. She was a broken woman in those days. Her once beautiful smile and bright eyes had faded to a distant and unmoving stare. There was a nothingness that had taken her husband from her, and her eyes had locked onto it. She barely spoke, whispers only answering questions pressed to her, and once she had what she needed, she would return to her home.

For that first winter, the Baker believed that she would die of heartbreak. She could not have taken care of herself in a way that any would survive. The chimney of her home rarely smoked despite the cold, the food she bought was a bare minimum, and she abandoned all hope of socializing. He couldn't let that happen. He took it upon himself to visit from time to time, to bring her fresh bread, and to check on her. She rarely spoke to him for more than a moment. She would greet him at the door and

pay him for the bread. When he asked if she was okay, if she needed anything, she would shake her head and go back into the building.

This habit became a routine through even the spring, until one day she seemed in better spirits. She met him at the door, and for the first time, he saw a small smile on her lips. She spoke to him and told him that the Amarant was blooming. It had been her husband's favorite flower, she explained. The Baker just returned the smile, knowing for the first time she might recover.

As the summer continued, she tended to her Amarant around the house. She began to act more like she once had. He still chose to drop by and see her from time to time to check up on her. As fall approached, she even ventured out into the village and brought him much of her harvested grain from her gardens. They traded amicably, and he then watched from afar as she turned the fields behind the old house into a small farm. She tended it with a couple of the other widows of the town. She worked with diligence and purpose that he hadn't seen of her since before her husband had died, and it warmed his heart to see.

Through winter, he baked bread and took it to her as he had the previous year, though it was a bit rarer an event. She would greet him with some excitement. They would speak for a short time, most often about the bread and how he was finding ways to use the grain of the Amarant to extend the wheat supplies he had. By spring, it was clear the two had become friends.

In the summer, when the Amarant bloomed, she would come to the Baker with fresh stocks. Now with hectares of the plant growing in her home, she had more than just seeds to share. The two began to dream up new recipes and treats with the plant. It made his shop a rather popular stop in the village, almost overnight. While the new bread became rapidly popular in the village, it came with rumors of the Widow and Baker.

Others had noticed their friendship. Others noticed them working together at odd times. Others noticed the way the Widow smiled more when the Baker was around. Rumors swirled of an affair, an affair that did not exist and that the Baker had never sought. Though as the rumors reached him, as people asked how long he and she had been falling for one another, he realized something. The rumors had found a truth that he hadn't been able to admit.

For nearly two years, he had visited her often. She had become one of his closest friends. Her smile filled him with warmth, and he felt more comfortable and calmer around her. The rumors, he realized, were true. He had been falling for her in the past years. There was a pang of guilt that came along with that realization. It was a sort of sense of betrayal to the memory of the Smith. It was a feeling that at first he could not shake off.

One night near harvest, the two had met to exchange one last batch of the Amarant seeds before winter. When she arrived, they set to work in roasting them in his shop and chatted about the harvests and upcoming festivals. Small things, those that require no deep conversation, they were those that could fill the air and keep him from admitting anything deeper.

Still, he found himself glancing at her. He found himself watching her when she wasn't looking. She was beautiful. She always had been. These past years, though, as they grew closer and closer, he knew he noticed more and more. The way her smiles wrinkled the edge of lips, and seemed to even to reach to her eyes, the way she constantly readjusted her hair to keep it in place, the warmth of color in

her skin from working with her plants, she never seemed to appear to him different than she had the first time they spoke as beautiful as ever – all of it must have entered his mind many times before. Now, it was stuck there, gnawing at him. But that night, she caught him staring.

She asked why he stared, and her nerves caused her to brush her hair away from her face.

The Baker paused. He hesitated a moment. The flickering light of the fires of his kilns baking away filled the room with the smell of soon to be fresh flour, and in that moment of seeing her in the light of a fire, he could not stop himself. He admitted that she was beautiful, that he found himself falling for her.

She now hesitated and gave a weak smile. Her voice whispered a short thanks, but there was a quaking there, a palpable unease. Then she said the words the Baker feared she would. She admitted she was not ready for a new lover, and with the sentiment, she ended the night. She stood up to leave. But, in a moment of weakness, the Baker reached out and caught her hand. Her hand was warm, much as his was. Both were nervous. The Baker admitted that he needed her to know his feelings, but he had no desire to betray her feelings for her husband.

The Widow waited a moment before answering. Her hand gave a squeeze before she pulled away. She spoke that now she knew his feelings. With that, she left.

Winter fell, and the Baker felt that he had ruined something great. Each evening, it ate away at him. He would sit and watch the fires of his bakery, and he regretted ever saying anything to her. Then, he would wonder if it was anything but lust that had driven him. Midwinter, he decided to apologize again.

From time to time, he would visit her home and drop off some fresh bread. She would greet him at the door and accept kindly. When the topic began to fall from his lips, though, she would end it and reenter the home. She shut him out night after night, time after time.

Finally, one night the snow fell hard, and he stood at her door. He offered her bread when she greeted him, as always. She accepted, and he asked her if she would let him say his piece one last time.

She protested, she refused, but she slipped up in her refusal. For a split second, a single word slipped out and revealed her truth to the Baker. She felt the same way. She could not, though. She would not let herself fall in love with him.

There the two stood silently as the snow fell, watching one another quietly. Neither spoke a word. Finally, the Widow apologized. She asked the Baker not to return, and she closed the door.

The Baker took a long walk back to his shop. There, crestfallen, he threw himself into his work. The snowstorm continued to build up around the village, but with his heartbroken, he paid little attention to that. Travel in the village stopped for a time. He gave in to despair, and one night the snow piled high on his home and ice packed against the chimney. When the warmth of the kilns melted just enough, there was a small collapse. Thatch fell from the ceiling to the fires. The villagers were not able to react quickly. The night was dark, the village covered with high snow, and no one noticed the building slowly catch aflame.

No one except the Widow.

The Baker awoke in the night to the flames, cutting him off from any escape. On the second story, above the source of the fires, he felt himself burning. The fires reached him in his bedroom, the heat of the fires lighting the walls and raising from the stairwell. He coughed, unable to breathe. He knew this was the end, and he was afraid.

Then, in the fires, he saw her – the Widow.

She stood at the top of the stairs, flame jumping around her form. The fire had burned away her clothes, and the Baker saw her truly for the first time. She stepped toward him. Her form was untouched by the fire. Time then was slow. Despite the fire, he felt cold. He could barely keep his eyes open as she approached, his life force dwindling as his lungs desperately sought a breath in the smoke-filled room. When she reached him, she leaned in, placed her lips against his. He felt nothing else. A moment of bliss and then silence.

He awoke in her home, days later. The fire had taken from him much of his strength. His strength would never return, and slowly but surely, the Baker faded away. Still, the two had one more year together. For that last year of his life, he lived with the Widow. The rumors swirled once again; the two were lovers, the Widow had set the fire, the Widow had walked through fire to save him, she stood unburned – some were true, no doubt. Yet, the two were happy, for those short seasons, and when the Baker finally died, the Widow was inconsolable. She lived there for another year or two before she left the village.

The Amarant still grows there as an ever-present reminder of the Widow's love, renewed each season. All through the lands, the same story will be whispered by superstitious townsfolk. Many villages have a small home with Amarant growing in its garden – and with some there lie a single lonely grave, tear-stained by the cursed Widow that like her favorite plant, is made new with each fallen love.