

Fourteen's Gift

By C. Jade Wyton

Fourteen returns home from a trip outside of Weltaron with her sister's birthday gift.

Contains mentions of cults, child abuse, violence, death, and medical malpractice.

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The first time Mori had cut off Wonda's horn, Fourteen had locked herself in her wardrobe so Mother wouldn't see her cry.

The fourth time he had cut off her horn Fourteen had stood paralysed in the laboratory doorway, unable to move as her sister screamed and cried and bled from her face down to the unwashed concrete floor; trickles of red streaking lines down her cheeks into her eyes and corners of her mouth.

It was the first time since losing Thirteen that Fourteen had been truly disturbed by the sight of blood, and so the fifth time Mori had tried to perform the brutal amputation Fourteen had broken his arm in three places and the procedure had to be put off until he'd recovered.

Mother had been furious about it; enough so that she's broken Fourteen's own arm and screamed at her for hours on end about her disobedience.

Fourteen hadn't cried about her arm. It wasn't the first time she'd been wounded. And it hadn't been unexpected; it may have been unusual for Mother to cause her children physical harm (outside of accidents during training, of course) but she wasn't above drawing blood if she was disobeyed. And it was nothing compared to the agony of the time her mother had taken control of her body to fight the adventurers that had stolen Thirteen from her....

So Fourteen had barely noticed the pain. And she hadn't cried about it.

Wonda had cried, though. Those heartbreaking little sister tears that Fourteen hated so much.

Mother hated them, too. She called them unbecoming of a pretty face, and a sign of weakness, and manipulative, and ordered Wonda to stop and behave herself.

It had only made Wonda cry more and, in a fit of frustration at the unicorn's unstable magic sparking dangerously at her, Mother had locked the girl in her room for the eight weeks it took Mori's arm to mend.

Fourteen had decided then, as her sister was dragged from her room to the lab in tears, that she hated her mother.

She hated her mother more than she hated anyone else in the entire world—Except maybe Mori himself.

Though she could never express it.

No. Mother would punish her if she did. Perhaps even kill her. And while Fourteen didn't fear death—even at sixteen, she wasn't scared of dying—she knew that needed to be there for Wonda.

She was new to the world; a fresh soul in the body of a three year old. She couldn't be left to face Mother alone.

So Fourteen bit her tongue.

And Fourteen lived.

And Fourteen tried to make her sister feel loved.

And now it was Wonda's twentieth birthday....

Fourteen came to a stop at the city gates, staring up to the watchtower where she knew Blathe was on duty.

*Anything to get his putrid little half-soul out of being at the celebration....*

Fourteen clicked her beak in anger.

There had once been a time when Blathe had wanted to protect her and her sisters. Where he'd risked his life in attempts to rescue them from this hell.

She'd never expected him to switch sides.

Though, from what she could sense when she gazed in at his heart... he hadn't made that decision completely on his own.

Whoever had placed that cursed creature in his chest was powerful, indeed. And he was right to be scared of them coming back to claim him.

Though she had no sympathy for the man.

Non whatsoever.

Not anymore.

And if he decided to upset Wonda *today*, of all days, Fourteen would reach into his arse and de-giblet him just like Egg did the turkey she was preparing for Wonda's dinner tonight.

Fourteen tightened her eyes, then; knowing that Blathe had seen her but had made no move to open the gate.

In a puff of green she vanished off her horse's back and landed furiously in front of the man, who flinched and quickly hurried to do his job.

He wound the large crank, visibly sweating as Fourteen walked in pace at his side until the gate was fully open and Fourteen's horse and companions (two women whom Wonda said had once been kind to her) made their way into the city.

Fourteen waited until they were safely within the city walls before teleporting back down, appearing to the side of her mount so as not to spook it.

She stroked the horse's mane gently before retrieving a parcel from its saddle bag; a carefully wrapped gift.

It was a circlet. Made from the finest silver and embedded with over a hundred tiny-but-perfectly-cut pink diamonds that swirled into a beautiful pattern over the forehead, with a centrepiece of pink quartz. A crystal famous for its healing properties, carefully placed so it would hide Wonda's wound and—hopefully—ease some of her pain.

Fourteen had commissioned it almost three years ago; visiting the jeweller frequently to check on the progress.

It was *supposed* to be a gift for her eighteenth birthday, but the intrinsic work had taken longer than was expected.

Despite the amount of work the price was more than fair; the resurrection of the jeweller's teenage son had been easy-but-exhausting. Luckily he wasn't too-long dead and there was minimal rotting; nothing that couldn't be fixed with

magic.

The only imperfection in Fourteen's work was that the boy would remain ageless; as most reborns did. But the family didn't seem to care. They had been grateful and returned the labour well.

And now Fourteen had the perfect gift for Wonda's twentieth birthday.

'*Take the horses to the stables,*' Fourteen signed; almost dropping the parcel as she did. She decided then to play it safe and speak aloud instead; using her mother's voice for the words as she spliced together an order full of differing tones and inflections. 'Feed HIM! Brush your hair! Remember, Wonda— It is very important. Dinner— Smile— Or ELSE! I will *not* be disobeyed! Wonda! Smile! Tonight! Or ELSE!'

The women nodded, hurriedly, understanding the order perfectly:

Care for the horses, clean yourselves up, and make your way to Wonda's birthday celebration. Make sure Wonda has fun tonight.

*Or else.*

Fourteen snorted as the pair quickly dismounted their horses and led the mounts to the stables.

She knew that threats and intimidation wasn't really necessary against these two... but she enjoyed seeing them scramble around and bump into each other.

A small chuckle escaped Fourteen as one of the women tripped and fell into the mud, and the other let out a dismayed cry as she was hit with the splash.

'Ain't that rare?' came a voice, and Fourteen's grin fell into an cool scowl as she turned to face the half-naked ratfolk, Ratrick. He grinned wickedly, baring what few teeth he had left. 'What a blessing, to hear the daughter of God laughing. And with Wonda nowhere in sight, no less!'

'Fuck you!' Fourteen hissed, using Blathe's voice to insult the disgusting little man in front of her as he took a drag of his cigar. 'Go get the horse. In you— ARSE!'

'Fucking horses ain't my thing, yer already aware of that,' Ratrick gave a sniff. Then, he pointed to the parcel. 'That a gift fer Wonda?'

Fourteen gave a curt nod.

'Hm. Well. Yer want to keep away from the north-facing courtyard, then,' Ratrick advised, turning and starting for the watchtower stairs. 'Leena and Mills are practising some pretty nasty spells. Already blew up a tree. Wouldn't want whatever it is yer got the kid to get wrecked. Would ye, girly?'

Fourteen gave a huff, mimicking the sound of her horse when it was frustrated, before sighing and borrowing Wonda's voice: 'Thank you.'

'Eh. Don't thank me. I just ain't real fancy on scrubbing the splattered remains of Leena's corpse from the castle wall,' Ratrick retorted. 'Not like that rotten man ye did away with last year.... I ain't saying he didn't *deserve* it, way he treated that poor kid, but it just goes to show that hot little temper of yer's ain't to be trifled with.'

Fourteen clicked her beak, ignoring Ratrick's last comment as she made for the castle.

She'd *love* to let her temper loose on Ratrick again— Destroy more than just his teeth this time. Rip him apart piece by piece until there was nothing left!

But she got the sickening feeling he'd *enjoy* it. And that made her skin crawl

in a way that meant she could never quite get enough fury in her to just lash out and kill him.

At least he was kind enough to Wonda, she supposed. More-so than Blathe or Mori.

Fourteen pushed down her anger at the two men and headed inside; ignoring the greeting from the posted guard as she walked past him for the stairs.

It was two flights up before she reached the entrance to the tower Mother had chosen for Wonda's room. And then another 219 steps exactly to the top where Wonda slept.

It was the most beautiful room in the entire castle. Sickeningly so.

Like a doll house.

Fourteen tried not to scowl as she made her way inside without knocking and stepped up to her sister's bed.

Wonda was asleep on top of her blankets, dressed in her best dress with an open book dropped clumsily by her side.

Fourteen removed the book, dog-earring the page it was open on before placing it on the bedside table and moving to sit on the edge of the bed.

*You are all that has ever mattered*, Fourteen thought; gently brushing aside her sister's hair to examine the nub of a horn that was starting to grow back.

Mother would order it cut, soon. And Fourteen would have to sit and bite her tongue as Mori dug into her sister's flesh and forcefully ripped out a very beautiful and pure part of her.

*Again.*

'Wooooonda', Fourteen whispered; making the word into a song-like tone so it came out in her true voice. A voice reserved only for Wonda's ears. 'Wonda, my most beloved! *Beeaaaaauuuutiful* sister! The sky is orange and everyone is preparing! Oh, they prepare for tonight! For you!'

Wonda took a deep-but-gentle breath, rousing from her slumber as Fourteen gave a melodic hum.

'Fourteen...? Did I fall asleep?' Wonda asked, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. 'Aw.... Mother's going to be mad at me. I was supposed to be downstairs *before* the sun started to set.'

Fourteen chuckled, pecking a kiss on Wonda's cheek and putting the gift in her lap so she could sign with her hands freely; '*Let her be mad. It is your birthday. Not hers.*'

It was Wonda who laughed this time; her whinny-like giggle cutting short as she realised the parcel Fourteen had deposited on her had a ribbon attached.

'Oh! Is this for me?' she asked, her face lighting up as Fourteen nodded. 'Thank you! Ah! What is it?'

Fourteen knew she didn't have to answer as Wonda began to pick at the packaging; her paw-like hands somehow seeming both clumsy and precise at the same time.

When she got to the circlet her eyes sparkled as brightly as the stones and her jaw dropped in shock at the exquisite item before her.

'Wow!' she exclaimed. 'This is beautiful! Where did you get this?'

'*Had it made*,' Fourteen signed. '*Special for you!*'

'Wow...' Wonda gave a breathless chuckle. Then, she turned the circlet the

right way and placed it gently over her head. 'It fits perfectly!'

*'I made sure it would,'* Fourteen signed, before reaching over to help Wonda style her curls around the decorative metal.

She turned it gently so the centrepiece was in place and felt herself give an approving nod at the results.

*Perhaps it could also hide how long her horn was getting from—*

'Mother!' Wonda exclaimed, flinching as the door creaked open. 'I-I'm so sorry! I know you wanted me downstairs. But I fell asleep! Which I know is *no* excuse—'

'Enough,' Mother said, and Fourteen turned to see she had lifted a hand to quiet Wonda. 'I don't mind if you fail. As long as you're not *disobeying* me.... Did you at least *try* to obey me?'

'I did, Mother,' Wonda said, earnestly. 'I promise I did.'

'Then I am not angry with you,' said Mother. 'Not today, at least.... But don't let it happen again.'

'I won't, Mother.'

'Good.'

Fourteen had to hold her breath to keep her feathers lying flat as Mother approached the bed.

There was nothing she wanted more, in that moment, than to lunge forward to pry her mother's head from its body and use it as a kick-ball out in the courtyard.

How *dare* she look at Wonda like she'd done something wrong!

'That's very pretty,' she said, softly. 'Did Fourteen give this to you?'

*She wanted to dig her fingers into her mother's eyes and gouge them out. She didn't have the right to look at the gift Wonda had been given!*

Wonda nodded; then stopped and held still so her mother could reach out and examine the centrepiece—

'Ow!' Mother pulled her hand back as a searing hiss sounded and her fingers steamed. *'Hmph....'*

Wonda shrunk down as her mother examined the hot burns left on her hand, and Fourteen tensed, gripping the blanket tight to keep herself from reacting.

'Your horn is getting long,' Mother pointed out, coolly.

Wonda visibly swallowed, anxiety flashing in her eyes as her mother rubbed her fingers together to remove the colourful glitter-like substance that had been left by Wonda's spark of magic.

'Well...' Mother paused for a long moment... before turning for the door.

'There's no time for it now. We will worry about your horn *another* day, won't we? Come along, my daughters! Dinner is almost ready and you want to be in your places the table *before* the rest of the family enter the hall.'

Wonda let out her breath, and Fourteen pushed the fantasy of removing her mother's skin with a potato peeler aside; instead rising to her feet and offering her sister her hand.

*'Come! I heard they have been preparing a whole roast boar for you,'* she signed, eyeing Mother to make sure the woman wouldn't read her hands as she made a promise that she knew would make her furious. *'If we get there before it is cut up, I will animate it and have it attack Mori!'*

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