

Poor, Pathetic Creature

By C. Jade Wyton

Exhausted after a day of training, Fourteen helps her mother collect bodies to use for necromancy practice and thinks of how she can escape this horrid, abusive home. Her freedom is all that's on her mind.... At least, it is, until she finds something still breathing amongst the corpses.

Contains depictions of animal abuse, child abuse, gore, medical abuse, and death.

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It had been a long, exhausting day, and Fourteen couldn't wait for it to be over.

Mother had been working her hard; her training ceaseless and painful. No sympathy had been given for her falters and failures, and spatters of blood and ash soaked her feathers and fur from where she'd failed to dodge her mother's blows.

*I'm doing this for you.*

Mother's words hung in the air, stabbing at Fourteen worse than the bloody cuts and deep-tissue bruises.

*If you don't grow strong, you will die. Nobody will save you. The world is full of heartless backstabbers. You can't trust anybody. You have to be strong, to protect yourself from the monsters of the world.*

She'd said it like there was a worse monster than herself, and Fourteen had needed to bite her tongue to stop herself from making the retort out loud.

She couldn't say it out loud. Because then Mother would punish her. Take her to her room to lock her inside— And if Mother did that, she would be watching her more closely than she already did.

And then all of Fourteen's careful planning would be ruined.

She had to leave tonight; the food she'd been gathering up and hiding in the bag under her bed wouldn't last much longer. It was already so stale when she'd taken it, it was sure to spoil completely soon.

She'd already missed the last new moon and had to wait an extra month, and she wasn't sure she could survive until her next opportunity to get away. So she couldn't miss this one.

Tonight there would be no moon and a sky cast over by clouds; if she left in the darkest part of midnight, she would be impossible to track with her black pelt.

And she could be free.

This was the same lab she had been born in, after all. Mother had rebuilt it, saying that the chances of the paladins checking the same hiding place twice was slim (and, as it was, she was right. Blathe hadn't shown up for *months*) and they would be safe from their meddling.

But to Fourteen, that meant something else:

Her family —her real family— would be close.

The parts that were used to make her must have come from *somewhere*, after all. And perhaps, if she made her way to town, people would recognise them.

Her face. Or her eyes. Or her pelt.

*Someone* had to know who she had been before this hell.

Even if it had been years, and she was just kissing fifteen, her real parents would still recognise her, right? They *had* to.

‘Fourteen!’ Mother’s voice called, and Fourteen scowled as the lich knocked on the bathroom door. ‘Are you finished dressing your wounds?’

*Fuck off!* she wanted to scream. But, instead she said, in the voice of the woman who cooked their dinners in the kitchen, ‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Then come out,’ Mother told her. ‘Mori has thrown away his failed stock from his personal projects, and we need new cleaners.’

*Failed stock*, Fourteen almost hissed. *Failed stock! They were bodies.*

*Corpses!*

People they’d jumped in the woods and murdered!

The only thing worse than Mori’s personal projects were the ones commissioned by the lich— At least most of Mori’s personal projects were animals and adults, rather than mutilated children!

Fourteen threw aside the cloth she’d been using to wipe the blood from her face, and gave a scoff as she exited the bathroom to follow her mother into the woods; the red sky shining through the gaps in the trees in an eerie aura that made the forest look like it was covered in blood.

She couldn’t wait for the sun to finish setting, so she could escape this horrible place.

*Just a few more hours*, she told herself. *Just wait until after dinner. One more meal with this monster, and then you’ll be free.*

‘Keep up, Fourteen!’ Mother called.

Fourteen scowled, and hurried to keep pace with the lich.

For a gnome with such short legs, that bitch could *move!*

Fourteen followed her mother through the woods for about five minutes, until the smell of rot and blood and chemicals hit her, and she broke through the trees to see that horrid hole in the ground.

*The stink pit*, freshly stocked with the bodies of animals and men that Mori had used for his work.

‘Come on,’ Mother urged, leaping into the pit with a horrible wet *crunch* of the bodies underneath her; bright blue butterflies scattering up from the hole as she did. ‘Let’s see if there’s not at least *one* humanoid in good enough condition to set to work.’

Fourteen’s brow furrowed in disgust as she jumped in the pit after her mother and, with a great amount of disinterest, she kicked at the body of a dog. Another flurry of the butterflies —the coffin angels— lifted from their egg-laying and fled into the air.

‘*Fourteen*,’ Mother’s tone was warning; telling Fourteen to do as she was told and take this seriously, with no room for arguments.

So Fourteen sighed, and pushed aside the dead animals to search for a viable humanoid corpse.

She moved a dead man, and there was a gasp of pain from underneath,

followed by a sob-like cry that sounded like it was half from a goat, and half from a young child.

Mother turned, immediately alert, as Fourteen echoed the gasp and threw the heavy body aside.

‘There’s some-thing!’ Fourteen said in her broken, borrowed voice. And when she heard the sob again, she let out a scream. ‘Mother! Children! Child! Young lady!’

‘Mori didn’t say any of the experiments on the girls failed,’ Mother said, far too calm for the situation as she made her way over. Then, she heard the next cry, and the calm air around her turned to shock, and she grabbed the next body on the pile and yanked it aside. ‘Zaltek! He’s not supposed to have *live* children to work on! Why is it alive?! Fourteen!’

The lich didn’t need to say more, as Fourteen helped her mother dig through the pile of corpses.

They yanked the last one off together, and then stood back in horror as they saw the crumpled body of a....

A....

Fourteen wasn’t sure *what* she was looking at.

It was deer-like. And horse like. And a little bit goat-like. But clearly not actually any of the three....

Mori had shaved it completely bald, its mane and pelt cleared away as to not hinder the stitching that criss-crossed across its body, slicing over every joint and major organ. The stitches were all tinged yellow at the seams with infection, and a strange, pinkish water-like substance leaked through and dripped out of the creature like off-colour blood.

Even more bruises dappled it; where hands were too rough, and chains had been tied too tight, and —and perhaps the worst one— a pressure sore along its entire left side where it had clearly been held down for far too long, unable to move.

Its eyes were swollen and oozing with puss as it squinted, trying to make out the two women in front of it.

Then the creature moved, skittering backwards in fear, and Fourteen’s gut turned in disgust as it tried to rise on four legs, only to find they were the wrong shape— Long and humanoid, clearly broken and realigned and changed to resemble arms and legs of people. While in motion, Fourteen found her stomach flipped; as it now barely resembled an animal at all in her mind, instead taking on the shape of a tiny, broken toddler.

‘*By Zaltek,*’ the lich breathed, edging slowly towards the creature as it fell and sent a scattering of coffin angels into the air. ‘Oh, you poor thing.... He’s not supposed to be so cruel. What has he *done* to you?’

A large, bloody wound in the creature’s forehead drew Fourteen’s attention as it sparked and sparkled with magic, and she heard her mother gasp.

‘A unicorn?’ Mother said aloud, reaching to touch the child— And drawing back in pain as the magic from the stump of a horn burnt her dead and imperfect flesh. ‘*Oh, you poor, pathetic creature....* He’s cut off your horn....’

The creature gave a bleat-like scream as the lich reached forward again to shoo the flesh-eating butterflies from swarming at its facial injury.

‘Shhh...’ she soothed. Then, she whispered quietly backwards. ‘*Fourteen, hand me my knife. I need to put this poor thing to rest.*’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Fourteen answered, and turned to retrieve her mother’s dropped pack.

‘M... Mo...’

Fourteen froze as she heard the unfamiliar voice, and slowly turned back to watch as her mother covered her mouth in horror.

‘M... Moth...’ the sound was broken, and pathetic, and sad, as it breached the creature’s lips. ‘Moth...er.’

Fourteen saw the lich tense.

‘Mother?’ Fourteen asked, tentatively, as the lich audibly swallowed. ‘Is that... the creature speaking?’

‘Moth...er?’ the unicorn echoed, its confused voice breaking as it edged forward. ‘*Mother?*’

Fourteen had never seen her mother look so haunted.

‘Mother?’ the unicorn asked again. ‘You...?’

A single tear escaped the lich’s unnatural eyes, and her breathing came out as a tremble.

‘Mother?’ Fourteen said, her voice tinged with anxiety.

And the creature’s face lit up, as if in hope. ‘Mother!’ it cried, lunging forward to bury its face into the lich’s chest. ‘Mother! Missed you! Scared! Scared! He hurt! He hurt! *Hurted!* He hurt me!’

A sizzling, burning sound came from where the unicorn’s nub of a horn pressed into the lich— But to Fourteen’s surprise, she didn’t push the creature away as it cried against her.

She was in clear pain, but seemed too stunned to respond to it. Instead she slowly wrapped her hands around the creature and pet it softly.

‘*Shh,*’ she comforted. ‘It’s alright. You’re alright.’

‘*Hurt!*’ it cried again. ‘*Hurt!*’

‘I know,’ the lich comforted. ‘Shh... I know he hurt you. But you’ll be okay, now. I won’t let him hurt you again....’

Fourteen felt a twitch by her eye, as her mother showed this pathetic creature more care in the short moment than she’d ever shown her or Thirteen, and she felt her mind spin with thoughts.

*A distraction!*

This thing would be the perfect distraction for when she ran away, tonight!

Mother would be too busy, cooing over this poor monster, to notice her daughter missing....

But then the creature gave a miserable cry, and Fourteen’s heart panged with ache as she watched it.

It was so small.

So pathetic.

So scared.

So... so much like she had been, that horrible night that Thirteen had left her behind.

*Could she do the same to something so small?*

Fourteen closed her eyes; she could still remember that feeling of terror as her

sister turned away from her, fleeing down the hall to leave her behind to the mercy of their mother's insanity alone....

She couldn't do that. Not to a child so small.

And, so, when the lich picked up the tiny beast and cooed soothing words into its ear, Fourteen didn't argue, or hesitate, or linger behind.

She kept pace with her mother, her hand trailing over the bare, raw, abused skin of the beast in a comforting way.

For the first time in her life, as she stared down at the sobbing little thing in front of her, Fourteen pushed the thoughts of escape to the back of her mind....

This was more important.

—END—

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