

Singer's Druid Practise

By C. Jade Wyton

Singer's spent the entire day training with his mother, Fourteen. It's been relentless; but he knows it's with purpose. Finally, she gives him time for a break, and he gets himself some food and goes to show off the fruits of his labour to his aunt, Wonda.

Contains descriptions of violence, unsanitary food, vomiting, animal death, and cults.

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Singer hit the ground with a heavy *thump* and an annoyed grunt; his animalistic form breaking and his body shifting back into its usual humanoid shape.

He pushed himself up, but just as his hands left the hard cobbled pavement of the castle's courtyard a blast of green-coloured flame skimmed past his ear and he ducked back down; his body changing and shrinking down as he became an animal again. This time, a cat instead of a raccoon.

'Faster!' Fourteen's shout —not her real voice, of course, she never used that when others were around— echoed through the open courtyard as another flame was thrown. 'Change faster! Again! Again!'

Another flame was thrown, and another form was taken.

*Rabbit.*

*Mouse.*

*Deer.*

*Owl.*

Singer changed his form with each command, dodging his mentor's attacks each time.

He knew she wasn't going easy on him; the heat of the fire as it grazed past him told him that. He knew if he let himself be hit it would be a painful experience. And that was enough to make sure he took this training seriously and did as he was told in time.

*Horse.*

*Frog.*

*Crow.*

*Dog.*

Singer kept changing, over and over on command, pushing himself until—

His wildshape wavered, and his hands returned, and he slipped on the stones under his feet and landed in a heap.

Fourteen's fire singed his tail and the smell of burning fur soaked the air. Though, luckily, there was no pain to accompany it as the child lay panting on the ground.

*She'd only gotten his fur, not the skin.*

A pawed foot placed down beside Singer's snout, and the boy looked up to his

half-tabaxi teacher with a scowl.

She watched him for a long, long moment before finally speaking; her borrowed voices spliced into a sentence of conflicting tones and volumes, 'If this was a real FIGHT, you— Would be DEAD.'

'I tried.'

'Try again,' she responded.

'I fucking *tried*,' he repeated, his own voice breaking in frustration. 'I'm *tired*! And I'm *hungry*! Everyone else got lunch! Why didn't you let me eat lunch?!'

'The days you can NOT eat, are the days you are *most* likely to be in DANGER,' Fourteen answered, simply. 'If you only learn to FIGHT while in comfort, then you will NOT be prepared for real FIGHT. And you will LOSE. And you will DIE.'

'I'm tired,' Singer repeated, miserably.

'*I know*,' Fourteen used her hands to speak this time; signing in a way that made it clear to Singer she was addressing him softly. '*But if you do not train to push past it now, while you can fail safely, you will not survive when you face a real attack.*'

'Your training methods *suck*!' Singer complained, pushing himself up to sit.

'*Mother trained me the same way*,' Fourteen told him.

'And look how you turned out!' he shot back.

For a moment, Fourteen hesitated. Then she gave a huff and turned away.

'*Fine*,' she motioned with a hand. '*You are dismissed for the day.*'

'Ugh, *finally*,' Singer groaned, rising to his feet and stumbling for balance. 'I'm going to get something to *eat*!'

Fourteen gave him a short nod as he started back for the castle door.

But, then, the boy paused. And he gave a long sigh as he thought about what Fourteen had said.

She just wanted him to be able to survive in this stupid, disgusting hole. He knew that was why she was pushing him so hard.

So he eyed her, and forced himself to say: 'Thank you, Mother.'

'*Don't call me that*,' Fourteen signed, leaning down to hide her hands from the people around them, so only Singer could see what she said next. '*Do not let me be your mother. Do not love me. If you love me, you will falter. And if you falter, you will fail. And if you fail, you will die. You cannot love me.*'

'I can't help it,' Singer admitted.

'*You cannot love me*,' Fourteen repeated. '*Because you need to be strong.*'

Singer gave a heavy sigh and kicked one of the pebbles at his feet. 'Do you love me, Fourteen?'

A long hesitation hung in the air, before she leant in and spoke in a voice that she rarely used; low, deep, feminine. Beautiful, with a half-sung note to it. Her real voice. '*Singer*,' she whispered. '*You know I can't answer that.*'

'Why not?' Singer growled, tears of frustration coming to his eyes. 'Why can't you answer it?'

'*Because if I do, you will want to love me*,' she told him. '*And whatever happens, no matter what, you cannot let yourself love me.*'

*Too late*, Singer thought, biting his tongue.

Fourteen brushed a strand of fur from Singer's eyes, and he thought she might

have known what he was thinking, before she rose to her feet and crossed her arms.

‘Tell Franch THAT he is to FEED you— Meal! NOT just snack,’ Fourteen said loudly; her voice becoming that spliced-up mix of borrowed tones and inflections again. ‘If he does NOT cook for you, I will cook him. From inside, to OUTSIDE.’

‘Yes, M...’ Singer bit back the word. ‘Yes, Fourteen.’

Fourteen gave another nod, and stepped past Singer with long, confident strides. She made her way back to the castle as the young boy rocked on his heels and heaved a sigh.

The sigh was echoed from his left, and he cut his eyes at the blue-haired woman who lay on her back in the empty garden bed against the castle wall. Ratrick sat on her stomach, using her as a chair as he gnawed on a half-plucked dead chicken.

‘Don’t make fun of me, Leena!’ Singer grumbled.

‘Why not?’ Leena replied, giving him a cheeky grin. ‘It’s so easy.’

‘I’ll turn into a bear and chase you again,’ Singer warned. ‘And I *will* catch you this time. And then I’ll *eat* you!’

A shit-eating snicker escaped Ratrick, muffled by his mouthful of bone and organs, before he licked his lips and grinned. ‘Yer really are Fourteen’s kid, ain’t ye?’

Singer just shrugged.

‘Hey, Singer,’ Leena motioned for the boy to approach her. ‘Come here.’

Singer rolled his eyes and, despite not really wanting to, made his way over to Leena.

She immediately smacked him in the nose.

Not hard; not painful.

But *annoying*.

So he smacked her back, and she cackled and shielded her face as he did it again. And again.

‘It’s *not* funny!’ Singer growled. ‘Stop *laughing* at me!’

‘Nah, it is funny,’ Ratrick told him, taking another bite of his chicken before offering it to the child. ‘Yer just hungry, boy. Have something to eat and yer’ll feel better.’

Singer turned his nose up at the feather-covered, blood-oozing lump of torn flesh. ‘*Yeah*,’ he drawled. ‘I was about to go to the kitchens.’

‘Need company?’ Leena asked.

‘Not from *you*,’ Singer replied.

Leena blew a raspberry, then eyed Ratrick’s lunch with a disgusted look. ‘Does that thing actually taste *good* to you, or...?’

Ratrick just shrugged and offered the chicken to Leena; who looked like she was seriously considering trying it— So Singer hurried away so he wouldn’t have to watch her throw up.

He made his way to the kitchens, where the cooks were just finishing washing dishes.

‘Franch?’ he said, approaching the monkey-like man who stood atop a stool to reach the sink. He gently tugged the man’s tail to get his attention; being careful not to throw him off balance as he did. ‘Fourteen said you have to feed me. A

meal, not a snack.'

Franch gave a frustrated sigh and muttered under his breath; '*Don't feed the kid, feed the kid, make up your damn mind*— Hey there, Singer!' voice turning cheerful, Franch leapt from the stool and pet Singer between the ears. 'Sure, I can get you something.'

'You don't sound happy about it.'

'I'm not,' Franch admitted as he kicked his stool over to the pantry. 'But that's not *your* fault. You have to eat.'

Singer wasn't sure what to say, as Franch began preparing his food. All he could do was bite back the retort he had thought up— He knew, from watching Willard's constant battle with the kitchen, that disrespecting the cooks was a *bad* move.

'How does it feel, to be one of the chosen few?'

The question took Singer by surprise, and the mapach boy looked up at the hadozee man with wide eyes. 'Huh?'

'Hand-picked by the daughter of God,' Franch clarified. 'And not just to be her apprentice; to be her *son*! Grandson of God.... I can't even imagine the honour of it!'

*It didn't feel like an honour; it felt like a whole lot of painful work!*

Singer bit back the comment as Franch, arms full of ingredients, kicked over his stool to one of the counters and began preparing, cutting, and slicing.

'What's that?' Singer asked, peering up so the tip of his snout just barely peeked over the bench-top. 'And what's that?'

'Zucchini,' Franch answered. 'And spinach.'

'Are they fresh?' Singer made a face, scrunching up his snout and showing his teeth in displeasure. 'They don't look fresh.'

'Fresher than the tomato,' Franch answered. 'But not as fresh as they could be. Nobody's gone for supplies in almost a month.'

'Maybe I *should* have taken Ratrick's chicken,' Singer mumbled.

'Oh, *no*,' Franch matched Singer's expression. 'Kid. If you learn anything, let it be this: *never* accept food from Ratrick. He didn't even kill that thing; he *found* it dead in the coop. I tried to talk him out of eating it, but he insisted he didn't care *what* he caught from it.'

'Gross,' was all Singer could say.

'Mm,' Franch hummed, moving his work over to the stove. He didn't say anything else, as he fried up the handful of vegetables and then toasted four long pieces of bread; making two sandwiches that he wrapped in wax-coated paper to keep them together.

Singer took the sandwich that was handed to him and bit into it.

It didn't taste the best; though that clearly wasn't Franch's fault. The bread was stale and the vegetables old, and still the man had somehow made a meal that could be stomached out of what little he had.

'Could you take the second one to Wonda?' Franch asked. 'She missed lunch to help God with errands.'

'Mm-sure,' Singer said into his food.

*It felt so good to eat, after how intense Fourteen's training had been!*

He took Wonda's sandwich under an arm and, still digging into his own food,

started out of the kitchen.

He ate as he walked, dressings and oils leaking over his hands with each bite, and by the time he had made his way to the back side of the castle, he was finished with his food; hands licked clean and the wax-coated paper half-eaten so as not to waste the juices that had soaked into it.

But he was still hungry. So, as he stepped into the overgrown garden that filled the back half of the castle's yard, he unwrapped Wonda's sandwich and took a big bite of that, too.

And another, as he searched for her.

Two more bites.

One more....

He heard the distinctive sound of Leena throwing up, and followed it through the bushes.

'Wonda!' he called through another mouthful. 'Wonda!'

'Over here, Singer,' was the reply.

The soft voice of the unicorn satyr sent shivers through Singer's skin that made his fur puff out on end, and it took all of his effort to make it lay flat again as he approached his....

*Aunt?*

Wonda was his aunt, wasn't she?

He took another bite of her sandwich as he broke through the trees and found her sitting in a patch of flowers; her hand tenderly petting Leena's back as the woman gagged and heaved and spat on the ground. Sun sparkled down on Wonda's light tan fur, dappling her with patches of shadow that gave her a mystical look.

If it weren't for Leena emptying the last of her stomach contents, it would have been a storybook scene.

'You tried Ratrick's chicken, huh?' Singer said as he took another bite of Wonda's sandwich. 'You know, for an adult, you're not very smart.'

'*Singer*,' Wonda said, her tone soft but warning.

'No, he's right,' Leena wheezed. 'I don't know *what* I was thinking!'

'Mm,' Wonda sighed through her nose, petting Leena again before eyeing Singer. 'Is everything alright, Singer?'

'Franch said to give this to you,' he said, taking one last bite before holding the sandwich out to Wonda.

Wonda looked at the half-eaten sandwich for a moment before smiling and accepting it.

He hadn't expected Wonda to *smile* as she took the food.

He'd figured she wouldn't have punished him (that was why he'd done it; he knew if he'd done that to someone else like her mother, the reaction would have been a lot worse!) but he hadn't expected a *smile*! He'd thought it would have been some other reaction. *Any* other reaction....

'Sit down with us, Singer,' she told him, petting the soft flowers at her side.

'Yeah, c'mon, sit!' Leena laughed, tears and snot still trailing down her face as she pet the same spot Wonda had. 'Little mongrel.'

'*Leena*,' Wonda warned.

'Bitch,' Singer sniffed as he plopped down.

‘Singer!’

‘Her, not you!’ Singer defended.

‘That’s not—’ Wonda cut off with a sigh as Singer flopped over and rested his head in her lap.

She pet his ears softly with one hand as he picked several flowers and began to make them into a chain, and then shook her head before turning to speak with Leena.

It wasn’t anything Singer was interested in; just their usual weird girl talk. So he continued making flower chains; taking his aunt’s tail as he did, so that he could wrap them around and up it.

He could hear Wonda eating as she spoke —something her mother would *not* have been happy to hear— and quietly wished that he’d taken longer to find her, so that he could have eaten more of her sandwich....

Just as he thought it, the last of the sandwich was offered to him. It was only a few bites, but he took them with a greedy fervour that smeared sauce over the fur of his snout. And then he ate the paper, too.

‘Fourteen had you working very hard today, didn’t she?’ Wonda asked.

‘Yeah,’ Singer replied as he licked his fingers. Then, he shifted so he could show Wonda his tail. ‘She even burnt some of my fur off!’

‘Oh!’ Wonda examined his tail; brushing through the singed fur to make sure he wasn’t hurt. ‘You poor thing....’

‘I’m fine,’ he gave a grumble and pulled his tail away. ‘I’m tough, unlike you. So I can take it.’

A glance that Singer couldn’t read was cast between the two women. And he felt himself spike up in annoyance as he saw Leena grin.

‘I *am* tough!’ he spat.

‘We didn’t say you weren’t,’ Wonda reassured, her hands finding his ears again so she could massage them. ‘You’re *very* tough. If you weren’t, Fourteen wouldn’t be pushing you so hard.’

Singer felt himself leaning into Wonda’s hands and, though he blushed in embarrassment, he couldn’t bring himself to pull away from the loving touch.

He tried *very* hard not to close his eyes or chitter out a purr. But Wonda’s fingers moved from his ears down to his neck, finding a knot of tension, and he couldn’t help but do both as she eased it away.

It was only when he heard Wonda laugh at one of her friend’s jokes that Singer pulled out of her grip. He turned, rolling on the ground so he could aim his feet at her face, and kicked out at her. She dodged, his toes narrowly missing the tip of her snout, and then she swept his feet down into her lap so he couldn’t do it again.

She didn’t even look down at him as she continued joking with Leena, and Singer felt a red-hot jealousy burning in his chest that he had to swallow down before he could speak.

‘Aunt Wonda?’ he blurted; finally getting the unicorn to look down at him.

‘Yes, Singer?’

‘Do you want to see the spell I’ve been practising?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ Wonda answered.

‘Okay— Leena!’ he pointed to Wonda’s friend as he stood up. ‘I’ll need your

help!’

‘It won’t hurt, will it?’ Leena asked, scrunching up her face.

‘No, it won’t hurt,’ Singer told her. ‘But I gotta cast it on someone and we don’t have any animals or corpses here to practise on!’

‘We have the coffin angels,’ Wonda pointed out, scooping one of the butterfly-like creatures into a hand and holding it out to Singer.

‘Yeah but it’s *harder* when they that small,’ he complained.

‘That sounds like an excuse to me!’ Leena snorted. ‘It is going to hurt, isn’t it!’

‘It’s not an excuse!’ Singer pressed. ‘It’s easier with a person, than a bug!’

Wonda shook her head. ‘Use the coffin angel, please.’

It was too firm a statement for the “please” to actually mean anything. And so Singer huffed as he grabbed the coffin angel —pinching it gently on the body between his thumb and forefinger— and held it out.

‘Are you watching, Wonda?’ he checked.

‘I’m watching,’ she confirmed.

‘Cos you have to look at me and not Leena!’

‘I’m not looking at Leena,’ it came out as a chuckle. ‘I promise I’m looking at you and not her.’

‘Okay!’ Singer nodded, adjusting the bug in his grip as it fluttered helplessly.

‘Okay, you gotta watch *closely*! Okay? Look at the moth—’

‘Butterfly.’

‘Look at the butterfly,’ he corrected. ‘And....’

He paused, taking a moment to look over at Wonda, who cocked her head and chuckled.

‘I’m watching,’ she reassured. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘I can’t do it completely from memory, yet,’ he admitted. ‘I need a reference.’

‘Reference?’ Wonda echoed.

Singer didn’t explain; instead, he took a deep breath and cast his spell, a green light glowing around the coffin angel as he released it into the air again.

He glanced to Wonda to make sure she was watching the bug as it took flight.

It fluttered around for a moment before—

It exploded, popping like a tiny balloon filled with bug-guts and green magic powder.

Wonda’s eyes went wide.

‘Oh, that’s not meant to happen,’ Singer commented, feeling himself blush.

‘But uh. Sometimes it does.’

Leena gave an offended squawk. ‘And you still asked *me* to volunteer?!’

‘Can I try again?’ he asked, ignoring Leena as she gave him a severe look. ‘I can get it right this time!’

Wonda, after a moment of hesitation, scooped another coffin angel into her hand. ‘Alright. *One* more try.’

‘Thank you!’ Singer exclaimed, grabbing the bug and stepping back. ‘Okay. I think I used too much magic too fast, last time. So I gotta go slower.... You’re still watching?’

‘Yes, I’m still...’ Wonda trailed off as the spell worked properly, this time, and the coffin angel grew and contorted and crumpled to the ground in a heaping of light-brown fur and purple hair.

‘Oi, what the fuck!’ Leena blurted, skittering backwards in surprise.

The no-longer coffin angel sat up, blinking with its new green eyes as it looked around.

Wonda looked too stunned to move, as the changed creature slowly rose on two trembling legs.

‘That’s... *me*?’ she breathed. ‘You turned it into me?!’

‘I *said* I needed a reference!’ Singer huffed. ‘Usually I turn them into Fourteen. So this one might look a little weird cos I haven’t had much practise making other people, yet.’

‘Polymorph?’ Leena blurted. ‘How are you using *polymorph*?! You’re only, what, six?!’

‘*Ten*,’ Singer huffed. Then he looked to Wonda, and felt his ears press back nervously as she stared at the changed creature in front of her. ‘You don’t like it?’ he asked, his voice so miserable it caused her to look away from the creature and pull her nephew close.

‘No, no, I don’t... *hate* it,’ Wonda commented, looking back at the Not-Wonda creature. ‘It just took me by surprise is all—’

Not-Wonda leapt up as if trying to take flight, and then flopped uselessly onto the ground and flailed about.

‘It still only has a butterfly brain,’ Singer explained. ‘It’s not *actually* a person. It just looks like one.’

‘Oh....’

Not-Wonda stood back up, stumbling for a moment as it looked around.

Then, its eyes rolled into the back of its head and it fell sideways; its form shrinking as it turned back into a tiny blue butterfly and landed, very clearly dead, in the grass.

‘Yeah, sometimes they die after,’ Singer shrugged. ‘Fourteen says that means I need to practise more.’

‘And *again*,’ Leena’s offended voice cut into the air. ‘You wanted to use *me* for this?!’

—END—

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