

# The Bride in the Woods

By C. Jade Wyton

*Fourteen watches her mother save a young girl's life, and a new member is brought into their tiny family.*

***Contains depictions of child abuse / marriage.***

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It was a dark, cold, winter evening, and Fourteen was tired of walking.

Mother had overworked her in training, just a few hours earlier, and now she expected her to *walk* until they found a suitable campsite? And to not even follow the roads!

It was hellish. But she didn't dare say so, out loud.

If she defied her strict mother, she'd be scolded. And she was too tired for that, today.

So instead she kept pressing on, trailing behind the lich with Ashdown at her side, gingerly holding her hand with his own dry, crusty, burnt-up fingers.

It had taken Fourteen a while to get used to him being undead. He looked like an entirely different person... and acted like it, too. It was like the bullet had taken out the evil part of his brain.

Mother suddenly stopped, and Fourteen almost tripped on her as she lifted a hand to motion to the pair behind her.

*Mother had noticed something.*

Fourteen held her breath, twitching her ears... and heard it, too.

Panted sobs, snapping branches, thumping footsteps.

Someone was running through the woods.

Someone was running *directly towards them.*

'We should go!' Mother turned, motioning for the pair to go back the way they came. 'Hurry, now before—'

It was too late; bursting through the underbrush came the source of the sounds, and everyone—including the newcomer—froze in place.

Fourteen stared with wide eyes.

It was a human girl, only about twice her own age, with bright ice-blue hair and pale skin. She was clothed as if she had just been wed, though her frilly white dress was torn at the shoulder and hanging loosely down as a tree-branch scratch ran jagged up the exposed skin, bleeding and staining the fabric. Tears ran down her face, smearing the uncomfortable-looking amount of makeup she wore into long lines that dripped from her chin, and she wore no shoes.

She panted, her breaths coming out wet through the snot that leaked down to her lips, and then gave a mournful cry and collapsed to her knees; falling down to beg at Mother's feet.

'Help me!' she sobbed. 'Please! Please, don't let him take me. Please don't let him—'

*'Joan!'*

It was the furious cry of a man —and older man, at least three times the age of the girl— who quickly broke through the trees and grabbed her by the wrist.

‘You brat! You will do as you’re told!’ he growled, yanking the girl painfully up.

Fourteen saw her mother’s eyes tighten, before the lich crossed her arms and scowled. ‘What in Zalteck’s name do you think you’re doing to that poor creature?’

The man’s angry glare turned up to Mother— And changed from rage to confusion and surprise. Clearly, he hadn’t expected to see two walking corpses and a bird-faced tabaxi child staring at him.

‘I—’ he paused, adjusting his grip on the girl’s arm. Then, his scowl returned. ‘Why don’t you keep to yourself! What I do to my wife is my own business.’

A subtle-but-furious look flashed through the lich’s eyes. Unseen by the man, but recognised by her daughter.

‘Your *wife*?’ hissed Mother, her voice dripping with venom. ‘She looks barely sixteen!’

‘That’s not of your concern, corpse.’

Another flash of anger, and Fourteen felt her tail slip between her legs as she saw her mother take a long, deep breath.

*This wasn’t going to end well.*

‘Girl,’ Mother spoke softly, now; coolly. Though the firm note in her tone was still holding at the edges. ‘What is your name?’

‘J-Joan,’ the girl answered, the name sounding stressed and unnatural and forced on her tongue. Then, when the man yanked on her arm, she flinched and continued, ‘Ward.’

Mother’s eyes tightened again, and the firmness gripped her voice tighter. ‘No. I don’t want to know the name he’s given you. What’s *your* name, girl? Your *real* name.’

‘*Colette Benson*,’ she corrected, her voice barely a whisper as the man scowled down at her.

‘Colette,’ Mother crossed her arms again. ‘Do you want to go with this man?’

Colette shook her head, earning another yank on her arm that made Fourteen cringe.

‘It’s not *her* choice—’

‘ASHDOWN?’ Mother spoke loudly over the man, her authoritative voice cutting him to silence. ‘Ashdown, do you still have your gun?’

The answer she received was not in Ashdown’s raspy, broken voice; but in the horribly familiar *CHA-CLUNK* of his shotgun cocking.

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