

The Garden

By C. Jade Wyton

Ashdown, regretting the terrible actions of his past, tries to make life a little easier for the young unicorn child he cares for, by convincing her mother to give her a garden.

Contains mentions of death and abuse.

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Doctor Ashdown was a man filled with regrets.  
Once he had been a man of science.  
A man of curiosity. And questions. And answers.  
Now he was a walking corpse.

And that was not a metaphor: Ashdown had killed himself roughly thirty years ago after a string of his illegal experiments had been discovered by a group of adventurers.

He had realised, in that moment, that there were only two options left for him; face the law, or face the lich....

He should have faced the law. He was an idiot to think killing himself would keep him from the lich's punishment. But in the moment he had been so scared he couldn't think straight.

He was a terrible coward who didn't want to face the consequences of the horrors he had inflicted on others, but... at least he was nothing like the new head of the lab the lich had found: Mori.

A horrid man who delighted in tearing the animals he experimented on apart while they still breathed.

Ashdown took comfort knowing that at least *he* had always had the sense to kill his experiments before dissecting them....

And Ashdown was glad that, after the first group of children Mori had tortured failed to come to life, he had been able to convince the followers who brought the children in for the experiments to kill them before the handover.

Mori was fuming about it. Talked about wasted time and resources for hours— That killing them preemptively meant he had to rush to utilise their bodies, and he lost precious time with them.

But the lich had told him to stop complaining; she preferred the quiet and, despite the children being killed under her instruction, she didn't enjoy the sounds of their screams or their crying.

It was perhaps the first bit of mercy Ashdown had ever seen from her; which he had then been able to use to encourage her treatment of her daughter, Fourteen, into something a little more ethical.

He knew there was no repentance for the evils he had done. That there was no way to make up for the horrors he had inflicted upon the world. Or that poor little girl.

But he had thought, perhaps, if he could at least make Fourteen's life a little

bit better than it was cursed to be, the gods would realise he was sorry.

And then, when Fourteen had grown older and Wonda had been brought into the family, Ashdown had quietly put his focus into carefully convincing the lich to fulfil the girl's basic needs.

He always had to justify it scientifically, of course— He had to justify that giving the girl more food would give her more energy to focus, which would mean less wild and uncontrolled magic. Or that giving her toys to play with would help her cognitive development by encouraging her hand-eye coordination, attention span, and memory. Or that she *needed* a window to let in sunlight, or her physical health would suffer.

He wasn't sure anyone understood what he had been doing.... He had to be so careful and submissive in his suggestions, as to not upset the lich, that the changes came about slow enough most people didn't even acknowledge them.

Though this time, as he desperately tried to justify himself to the lich, he wondered if she hadn't caught on.

'Why would I bother wasting my resources on something as frivolous as the garden?' the lich's lips twisted in a scowl as Ashdown signed to her. 'It's hard enough to keep the family fed, without wasting fertiliser! Besides, Wonda is not an animal! She can live inside, like the child she is!'

*'Even as a person, unicorns are compelled to live in woodland,'* Ashdown explained, his gloved hands aching with every motion. Though, it hurt less than attempting to talk with the half of the face he still had. *'You remember when we were staying in the west? By the Screaming Woods? And she kept trying to walk out of the mansion to see the trees?'*

The lich snorted in acknowledgement. It had been a trying four months where they had lived by a magical forest and her daughter had been possessed by a deep instinct to go and hide within it. Eventually, though, it had ended with the seasonal removal of her magical horn which had thusly cut off the magical tug she felt from the woods.

Then that man Blathe had shown up and driven them away *again*....

*'The castle is a good shelter from the paladins, but its windows give a full view of the surrounding woods,'* Ashdown explained. *'When Wonda's horn starts to grow she is going to be compelled to seek shelter within the trees. Growing a garden within the walls will give her somewhere safe to fulfil her natural urges.'*

The lich's eyes tightened, and she glared at Ashdown. 'She must learn to control her urges.'

*'Yes, I understand. But relapses are inevitable,'* Ashdown reminded her. *'And as she gets closer to adolescence she is going to have hormonal influxes that make self-control harder. It is just natural— Of people. Think of teenage boys and how little control they have of their urges.'*

He hurriedly added the last bit as the lich glared through him.

'She is not a teenage boy,' the lich said, slowly. 'She is my daughter.'

'Yes,' Ashdown signed, carefully. *'But I still believe a garden would benefit her.'*

The lich's glare changed, then, into a cool, unimpressed look. And she straightened up and crossed her arms. 'You've been talking back a lot, lately,' she observed.

*'I apologise,' Ashdown signed, swallowing down the lump of anxiety that tried to escape his throat. 'It is not my intention to disrespect you. I only want what is best for the family.'*

The lich gave him another long, long look before turning away and making for the door. *'I don't care for the garden, but if you want to waste your own time growing it, I won't stop you.'*

*'Thank... you,' Ashdown replied out loud; his voice straining with effort.*

The lich didn't reply as her body vanished in a cloud of dust that slipped silently under the crack of the door.

And Ashdown let out a relieved breath.

*That had gone better than he had expected.*

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