

# Willard's Sentence

By C. Jade Wyton

*Pauline is miserable; her son's father hates her, and treats her so poorly. She tries to reach out to him, but time and time again, he treats her with nothing but disgust and abuse. Seeing this terrible cycle, Pauline's friend, Wonda, makes her promise that this will be the last time she reaches out to Willard.... And when Willard responds the worst he ever has to Pauline's presence, Wonda does what she has to do to protect her friend.*

*A collaboration with my friend, Edith Inkwell.*

***Contains descriptions of abuse, violence, cults, and death.***

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Pauline hadn't gone to dinner. Instead, she'd spent half the evening locked away in her room; sobbing her eyes out after trying, desperately, to talk *any* kind of sense into Willard. But it had gone as it always had.

He'd gotten frustrated with her, when she'd begged him to listen, and had hit her.

So she'd hit him back, of course; digging her claws into the side of his face to draw blood. Though he was bigger than her. And stronger. And he had quickly overpowered her.

She was lucky that Ragtheim had been there to stop him from *actually* hurting her, like last time.... But it hadn't made her feel any better about the situation. Not really. So she'd asked the orcish man if he could take her son for the day. She didn't want Humphrey to see her cry. And she knew that, despite Ragtheim's job being to collect children for God, he wasn't cruel and wouldn't let him get hurt.

Oh, how she hoped her absence at dinner went unnoticed. Though she was sure that it would be discussed. At least by the cooks.... They would poison Willard again. She knew it.

Pauline wiped her eyes, and hoped they wouldn't get themselves in trouble with God, again. Not for this.

A gentle knock then sounded at her door, and she paused as she recognised the sound.

It was not God, but God's daughter, Wonda.

The deep mewling that followed the knock on her door told her that Mr Chess had come in tow with the saint. She must have noticed her absence; which means that God would know, too. Wonda would have talked her mother into letting her bring dinner out of the dining hall. Pauline knew Wonda well enough that she could guess the reason for her visit before the satyr called through the door.

"Pauline?" Wonda's voice was gentle and sympathetic. "Can I come in? I've brought you a bit of dinner to have in your room.... I got permission to do so, so don't worry. But Mr Chess dearly wants your plate for himself, so you may want

to answer quickly— *Mr Chess! No! I have food for you in my pocket, leave the plate alone!*”

Pauline hurriedly wiped her eyes as she heard Wonda shooing the cat away. She walked to the door, making herself as presentable as possible as she did. Though she knew she still looked a mess as she cracked the door to peer out at her friend. Wonda was holding a tray of food —good, fresh food, and a serving of dessert that the cooks had clearly put aside just for her— high above her head to keep it from her companion.

“H... Hi, Wonda,” she greeted, a little less warmth in her tone than was usual as she stepped aside and held the door ajar. “Please. Come in. Thank you.”

Once the door was open, Mr Chess slipped inside to start rubbing affectionately against Pauline’s leg. He purred heavily, in much the same way he would when Wonda was upset and he wanted to help her feel better. Though, he nearly knocked her down in doing so, and Pauline stumbled sideways before finding her balance.

Wonda frowned at the sight of Pauline, and Pauline could read all over the woman’s face that she could tell *exactly* why Pauline hadn’t come to dinner. But she didn’t state it, out loud. Instead, she offered Pauline the plate and ushered Mr Chess aside.

“I got the cooks to let me make you some tea, also,” she said as she held down the tray of food for Pauline to examine. “It’s that kind you really like— The one Fourteen sometimes brings back for me. The flowery one?”

Pauline knew that Wonda had forgotten the exact name of the tea, as the woman took the tray to the Pauline’s reading desk and set it down. And Pauline steeled herself, as she already knew what Wonda was going to say, next:

“What happened?” it was a soft question. Asked in a way that told her Wonda already knew the answer. “I saw the little one with Rags. And I can tell you’re not alright. Is there anything I can do?”

Pauline gave a loud sniff, shutting the door behind Wonda and wiping her eyes again before taking her seat at her desk and sipping miserably at her tea.

She didn’t answer for a moment, instead letting Mr Chess return to rubbing against her leg as she tried to think of how to explain what had happened. She gave the animal a pat, before sighing and giving Wonda a dismissive shrug.

“Willard and I got in another fight,” she said. “I’m... sure you saw his face? If he even went to dinner; I’m not certain that he’d dare risking Egeria trying to feed him nightshade again.”

She poked at her dinner as she spoke, before taking a bite from it.

She gave a flick of her wing, tapping it against her chin to sign a silent *thank you* as she offered her friend a weak, half-hearted smile.

The smile was not returned. Instead, Wonda gave her a worried, pensive look.

“Mother saw him,” she said to Pauline. “Told him not to come to dinner like that, if he didn’t want to get poisoned again. Didn’t even ask who he got in a fight with this time....”

A pause, as Wonda went quiet and Pauline didn’t know what to say as the satyr leant closer to gently brush the hair from her eyes and examine the bruises along the gargoyle’s face. It was clear she was angry, as her lips pressed to a thin line and her eyes tightened in the smallest, most subtle of glares. Pauline

could almost *feel* her rage at Willard radiating from her. But, despite the hints at her inner-feelings, Wonda still only spoke softly.

“Pauline,” she said, gently. It was that same infliction she used when she would calm the children from tantrums. That soft, loving voice that told them they could speak freely. Though, as she met Pauline’s eye, it grew firmer; making it clear that, while Pauline was not in trouble, she was not free to ignore the question that came. “Did he hit you?”

Pauline heaved a sigh, taking another bite from her food so she could prolong answering. Not that she would avoid it, altogether. She would never disrespect God’s daughter like that! And even more, she would never disrespect her *friend*. She just needed a little more time to brace herself.... And she was glad Wonda waited patiently for her to think.

After a long moment of chewing, much more than she truly needed to chew, Pauline swallowed, and nodded. And then, when she saw Wonda’s nostrils flare, she quickly added: “I got him back, though. And unlike him, I actually broke skin.”

A soft whinny of disgust escaped Wonda as she brought a nearby stool over so she could sit with Pauline. As soon as she had sat, Mr Chess was laying at her hooves and rubbing his face along her leg.

“I’m sorry he’s so cruel to you,” Wonda said, keeping her tone level as she spoke, despite her clear anger at the man. “You don’t deserve it. I don’t understand why mother lets him stay— He never pulls his weight, and he is nothing but cruel to the others of the family.”

Pauline’s breath became laboured, at Wonda’s words, and she put her food down so she could bury her face in her hands in a despaired way.

“*I can’t believe I thought he loved me,*” she mumbled under her breath. “*Franch warned me he was too old.... That he couldn’t have had good intentions.... Why didn’t I listen?*”

“It’s not your fault, what he did!” Wonda was quick to try and reassure her. “He was a wolf in sheep’s clothing for you, as Mother might put it.”

Wonda’s hand found Pauline’s back, and Pauline shivered. Despite considering Wonda a friend, she was still the daughter of God, and Pauline still revered her. She would never dare to be the one to touch her, first. Even when she desperately needed it....

The gargoyle took in a very wet breath, swallowing down the sob that tried to escape her. Then, she sat up straight and let it out in a trembling exhale. “I don’t know why she keeps *any* of Ragtheim’s group around. Besides Ragtheim, himself,” she commented. “Him and Shulush are the only ones who I’ve ever seen show any kind of decency.... And even then, you saw what Shulush did to poor Hayley.”

Her wings drooped at the thought of the scar the woman now bore, and she felt Mr Chess’ head press up and against them in a loving nuzzle. Barely paying attention to the animal, but finding comfort in his presence, she used the wing to stroke him from his nose to his rump.

“It’s true, Rag’s group is all awful,” Wonda’s tail gave an angry twitch, much like Mr Chess’ own did when he noticed it. “But I suppose that is the work of God. It’s difficult for anyone with a soft heart to do— But that’s no excuse to treat you

this way!" the snap was followed by a deep breath, and the gentle taking of Pauline's hands.

"They could at least *pretend* that they hate what they do," she agreed; recalling that horrid laugh she'd heard from Knudfi, the last time he'd returned with God's offering. "Again. Ragtheim and Shulush are the only ones who seem to have any kind of humanity to them... I know Ragtheim cries, after he returns. And I've heard Shulush pray for the children's souls to find peace. But Wade, and Knudfi, and... *Willard*... they...."

Wonda's paws squeezed her hands in a tight, comforting way. A silent signal that she didn't need to finish her thought to be understood. Though, Wonda gave a soft snort at Willard's name. "What were you trying to talk to him about, anyway?"

Pauline shook her head at the question. "I just... wanted him to see sense. He has a son. I can't believe that means *nothing* to him! He can't be so completely heartless that his own flesh and blood is—"

She cut off, turning away and pulling her hands from Wonda so she could wipe her eyes.

"I don't think *anything* means *anything*, to Willard,' Wonda admitted softly. Her ears pinned back and her face contorted into one of concern, and Pauline knew exactly what she was thinking.

She thought it was better this way. Pauline knew that was what Wonda thought; they'd caught the man abusing the children before —only twice, though, as the second time he'd hit a child Wonda and Fourteen had taken him aside to 'talk' and he had avoided them ever since— so of course she thought it was better that Willard didn't go near Humphrey....

But Pauline still wanted to *try*....

Wonda gave a low nickering sound, as she shifted her stool closer to Pauline so she could put an arm around her. "I'm sorry," she said. "You don't deserve such cruelty."

"*Thank you*," Pauline breathed. "That means a lot to hear. Especially from you."

She looked to Wonda with a twinkle of reverence in her eyes. She respected the unicorn; more than she even respected God herself. And hearing such kind words from her meant the world to Pauline.

"I just... I wish he would listen," she continued. "It breaks my heart knowing that he... that *I*...."

That he had lied to get what he wanted from her. And that something that had meant everything to her had been *nothing* to him. Just empty words, so he could lay her.... She didn't want to believe it.

Deep down she knew it was true. That what everyone was telling her was correct... but it was too painful to admit, and somehow it was easier to believe that there was *something* good inside of him that she could find and change.

"Perhaps he has too much dirt in his ears," Wonda joked, softly; clearly trying to make Pauline smile. "Maybe if he was to *bathe* more than once every few months, he might listen better."

It earned the weak smile it was hoping to achieve... though no more than that, as Pauline looked away. It was clear Wonda didn't believe in Willard the way

Pauline wanted to. She had overheard Wonda and her mother discussing her. God had muttered to Wonda that Pauline and Willard's relationship was an example of what to avoid— Of what to not tolerate from a man. And Pauline knew that Wonda had taken it to heart. Especially when the woman constantly tried to discourage her from talking to Willard again.

"I'm sorry he's done something so selfish," Wonda's voice turned soft and sympathetic, then. "No one should treat anyone like that. *No one.*"

The tears immediately started again.

Pauline couldn't help it. She tried her hardest not to cry. But before she knew what she was doing, she had buried her face into Wonda and was sobbing; babbling about all of the things that had gone wrong. And Wonda was hugging her close, embracing her without hesitation. Pauline felt the satyr squeeze her tight as she wept, and she knew Wonda was furious for her.

It took Pauline a long time to calm herself. And once she had, all she could do was wipe her eyes and let out a shuddering breath. "I *have* to make him see sense," she mumbled, finally pulling away. "Because otherwise, what was it all *for*? I... I need to talk to him."

She rose to her feet, then paused; looking stunned as her nerves crept up on her.

Swallowing, she looked to Wonda and pulled her wings around herself in a timid motion. "Would you... come with me?"

Wonda stood, and took Pauline's hands again so she could hold them close to her chest. "I will. But only if you promise me: If he doesn't listen this time, you won't try again. I understand that you care, and you want him involved, but... Pauline, I just hate to see you hurting. You know I care for you, you're my *friend*."

Mr Chess gave an agreeable purr as he found his own feet and padded to the door to wait for the women. And as he did, Wonda stood up straighter and adjusted the weapon that hung from her back with a single hand that quickly returned to Pauline's own to squeeze it.

"Do you promise me, Pauline? That if he rejects you, that will be the last of it?"

A shaky breath escaped Pauline as she tensed. Though it was framed with the politeness of a request, she knew it was not one. It was an order, direct and firm, from the Daughter of God. And she would never dare disobey it.... Though, she was grateful that Wonda was giving her one last chance. The satyr was always fair in that way.

"I promise," Pauline whispered. "Thank you, Wonda."

"Alright," Wonda said, softly. "Let's go find the fool before someone kills him."

Pauline nodded, slowly. Then, not quite ready to fully let go of the comforting hand that held her own, she started for the door. Her feet dragged as she dreaded what was to come.

She knew this was her last chance. And she knew, deep down, what Willard's answer was going to be....

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Wonda, unlike her mother might have, made no move to rush Pauline as they

made their way through the halls. She knew how hard this was for the woman. Something inside her could almost *feel* the pain that plagued Pauline's heart. A drowning, dreaded feeling of the inevitable— Of what had to be done.

She still couldn't believe that anyone could be so cruel to someone who loved them so deeply. Sure, she understood the annoyance of being pursued; she had seen her sister struggle with Mills' affections for years, now. But, despite her creative ways of distracting Mills from his pursuit, Fourteen had never played with the man's feelings. She had never lied to Mills, or claimed to like him when she didn't.

Not like Willard had done to poor Pauline.... He was a liar. A liar and a tom cat.

*Foul*, he had heard her mother mutter about the man's behaviour, once.

A loud purr sounded from behind Wonda, and she turned to see Mr Chess gently butting Pauline's back with his head to encourage her to keep pace with Wonda. She had been lagging behind, since finding Willard was not in his room.

Wonda simply shook her head at the cat. "Since Willard skipped dinner, we may have some luck finding him around the kitchens?"

Pauline sighed in agreement, picking up her pace as Mr Chess urged her along. "If not the kitchens, then the garbage heap by the chicken coop. They sometimes throw the scraps there. When they're not edible enough to cook. I... hope he's in the kitchens."

"Then we can try the kitchens, first," Wonda suggested. "The cooks always have treats for Mr Chess, which may stop him from biting Willard before we have a chance to speak with him.... He does it almost every time the man comes near me."

She gave her large cat a few pets as he moved to walk in step with her. Then she motioned for Pauline to follow, and lead the way through the halls and down to the kitchens. She only paused once, when Pauline fell behind and needed a moment to gather herself. She stood beside her friend with a composed, authoritative look to her. The same perfect display that she always did when outside of private rooms in the castle; just as her mother had taught her.

Several people cast glances to Pauline and her bruises. But seeing Wonda's firm look, they simply passed by without a word.

Then, when they started again, Pauline kept closer to Wonda's side; a grateful sigh escaping her as she stepped close to the satyr's side. Wonda felt their tails brush together, and acknowledged it with a subtle-but-comforting flick.

Finally, they reached the kitchens... and Pauline froze at the door; her fins pressing back and her wings stiffening in anxiety. And Wonda gave her a sympathetic look.

The woman had been able to approach Willard a hundred times before without hesitation. But knowing this was to be the last time was clearly taking its toll on her.

"Are you alright, Pauline?" Wonda asked.

"I wish I hadn't agreed to your terms," Pauline admitted aloud. Her voice was as stiff as her body. "What if he *does* say no?"

"Then you will respect his decision," Wonda told her softly. "And it will be the end of it."

Pauline swallowed, loudly; watching with wide eyes as Mr Chess padded ahead and pawed at the door. He sniffed the door's peg-like handle for a moment before gripping it in his teeth and giving it a firm tug, swinging it open so he could trot inside.

When Pauline didn't move, Wonda put a hand on her arm. "Would you like me to go in first?" she offered.

Pauline nodded and held out her hand; clearly needing the support of Wonda's touch. When it was taken, she trailed a pace behind Wonda as they entered the kitchens....

And, sure enough, they found Willard.

He was leaning against one of the benches, eating a meal of scraps as the cooks glared at him.

Wonda glanced to Pauline so she could read her friend's reaction. It was clear she was confused, if only just for a moment, as she looked between the cooks and the man. As if she couldn't believe they weren't killing each other. But then Pauline's eyes flicked to the corner and she swallowed; giving a polite bow of her head.

Wonda followed Pauline's gaze and was greeted by the sight of her mother, sitting on a stool as she watched Willard eat. She was clearly watching on to make sure Willard was fed *without* the risk of being murdered— Though the glare she was giving him, it seemed she may have been close to simply executing the man, herself.

Unlike Pauline, Wonda was unbothered by the presence of her mother. There was no reason for her to be concerned, so she simply gave her a curtsy and a hello, as Mr Chess flopped over at the lich's feet; knocking her stool back a pace.

The lich seemed unbothered by the cat, though the movement brought her attention to her daughter as she entered the room. Wonda watched as Mr Chess rolled over to display his belly, begging for a scratch, and then turned her attention to Willard.

"Willard, we were wondering if we could speak with you," she greeted, a prim tone to her voice as she addressed the man coolly. With as much respect as she could muster; which was more than he deserved. "You're welcome to keep eating as we do. I know you missed dinner, and wouldn't want you to go hungry."

At first, Willard gave a submissive nod. But then, he caught sight of Pauline, and gave an annoyed scoff.

From the corner of her eye, Wonda saw her mother's glare tighten further. Though they both remained silent as Willard quickly scraped the last of his food from his plate to his mouth, before noisily throwing down his dish to the bench.

He rounded on Pauline, then, and scowled at her. "Run off to complain about me to one of the angels, did you?"

Pauline shook her head, her brow furrowing as she bit her tongue and met Willard's eye with as much defiance as she did nerves.

"She did no such thing, and I will ask that you show Pauline the same respect you do me," Wonda said firmly, looking down the bridge of her snout at him with those big eyes of hers. She fought back the instinct to lower her head in her natural threat display; though she did not like Willard, he was a member of her family. And her mother would disapprove of her showing favouritism without

good cause. “I went to find Pauline and talk to her about the situation you’ve found yourselves in. And now we’ve come to talk to you about it. So, please, won’t you listen?” her tone was kind, but there was a firmness to it that made it clear it was not a request, and he *would* listen.

She saw her mother straighten up as she watched her daughter address the man’s disrespect; a small, subtle nod of encouragement was given as Wonda’s eyes flicked over, and Wonda knew her mother approved of her actions. It was just as she had been taught: Be assertive. Firm. Polite but with no give. And it was clear that, even more than Wonda herself, the lich wanted this issue between the pair resolved. And it was *also* clear that—as she sat back in silence, simply watching on without engaging further— she was giving Wonda the trust to handle the situation however she saw most fit.

Willard, on the other hand, held back a scowl as the cooks all quietly muttered under their breaths at him. Egeria gripped one of the kitchen knives tight as Willard rolled his eyes, but placed it back down when the lich’s lip twitched at her.

A long, pregnant pause filled the kitchen after that, as Willard glared at Pauline. Then, when nothing was said, he spit on the floor and huffed, “*Well?* I’m listening.”

Wonda nodded at his acknowledgement. She didn’t like his tone, but showed no falter in her cool gaze. No sign of weakness, just as her mother and Fourteen had always taught her.

“Thank you, Willard,” she said before turning to Pauline. She gave the woman a soft, reassuring smile as she placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m right here. Go on.”

She let her hand fall as she stepped away to give the pair space to speak.

Pauline hesitated, which seemed to surprise Willard as he raised his brow and made an almost-sarcastic hand motion for her to *go on*. It was clearly a disrespectful motion, urging her to just get the conversation over and done with, and Wonda saw Franch put out a hand to stop Egeria from picking up her knife again.

“Willard, I... I don’t understand why you won’t just *listen* to me,” Pauline managed, her tone desperate. “After all you said, about how you cared about me... how you thought I was beautiful.... I *can’t* believe you were lying to me. I just.... It was just... so *real!* It *had* to have been real! I can’t believe you felt *nothing* in those moments, because— If you did then— Then—“

Wonda said nothing as Pauline spoke, letting her pour her heart out to Willard. She simply kept her focus on the man, watching him closely for his reaction. Though as the woman continued to beg Willard just rolled his eyes and glanced to the lich. He winced at her unreadable look before his eyes shifted to Wonda and tightened in annoyance.

It was as if he was silently asking: *Why would you subject me to this?*

Wonda simply stared back, her graceful demeanour refusing to waver as she flicked an ear towards Pauline in a quiet reminder of who his attention should have been on.

Pauline’s voice broke, then, and she sounded like she might break down in tears again. The cooks all stiffened, shifting in place anxiously as Wonda’s cat-like



look turned to Pauline with concern. She pet her friend on the back, gently encouraging her, and then eyed her mother again.

The lich was stroking Mr Chess' ears as he lay his head in her lap; his own gaze filled with an unknown intelligence that seemed to be asking the lich her opinion on the matter in front of them.... And the lich's response to it was a curt hum of dissatisfaction as Willard sneered at Pauline's trembling plea.

Though she said nothing, it was clear she was displeased with the way that Willard scoffed at Pauline's attempt to speak with him. And the look only grew darker as Pauline began to openly sob.

But each sentence from the young woman only made the man's scowl deepen.

It felt like hours, as Pauline begged Willard to consider her and their son—just to *consider* them— though, in reality, it was only a few minutes.

But things came to a head when Pauline reached out for him, trying to take his hand in her own, and his anger boiled over.

He grabbed her wrist, twisting it behind her back viciously, and everyone in the room gave a gasp of surprise and horror as Pauline cried out in pain.

"I am so fucking *sick* of you!" he shouted as he threw her to the ground.

He reached for his sword at the same time Egeria reached for her knife, and he drew it from its scabbard to point at Pauline as Egeria's own weapon slipped from her hands in her rush and clattered to the floor.

"Do I have to actually *hurt* you, to get it through that stone-thick skull of yours?!" he snapped, raising the sword above his head. "I don't care for you! I have *never* cared for you! And I will *never* care for that mutant little brat *you* call a son!"

"Willard, please— I know you don't mean it—"

"Do I have to *kill* you to get some fucking peace?!" he was shouting, now, as he swung his sword. It hit the hard slab floor, only missing Pauline by a hair's length as she skittered backwards. "BECAUSE I WILL, IF THAT'S WHAT I HAVE TO FUCKING DO!"

He lifted his sword again as the cooks all but fell over each other in their effort to rush forward and stop him.

Though Wonda was the first to act.

The movements were so swift, almost no one saw them. But the end result was the same as Willard's sword clattered to the ground and a different blade drew blood.

The knife lodged in Willard's shoulder, near to the hilt, and from the positioning, it was clear to all in the room who had thrown it.

A spark of magic lit up the dim room, like a fire-starter cracked together, and Wonda lowered her head to stare at Willard. Her eyes had changed; wide and white, her pupils small as slits as she stared at the man with a furious wrath.

"How dare you," her lips curled back to reveal her mismatched incisors and flat teeth. A mouth that, now bared, looked less like that of an animal of prey, and more like that of an otherworldly predator. "HOW DARE YOU!"

Willard stumbled back as she advanced on him, but he only managed a step before she yanked her knife from his shoulder with a motion that sent a trail of blood scattering in an arc across the room. Wonda barely noticed as the droplets fell at her mother's feet; she was too distracted by the man in front of her. That

vicious, heartless man.

“No one laid a *hand* on you!” she hissed. “We came to you —civilly and rationally— and you DARE LAY A HAND ON HER?!”

The sound of scraping metal, a blade being drawn, echoed under her shout. But it was no sword.

*He would never learn, Wonda knew. He had just proven he would never learn. He would only hurt her again. And hurt her son.*

But no more.

Never. Again.

“Let’s see you lay a hand on *me*—“ the motion was even quicker than the last, and then Willard’s arm lay next to his sword. “—*When you’ve got nothing to hit with.*”

It was clear that *everybody* in the room —save for, perhaps, Mr Chess, who rushed to scoop up Willard’s severed arm and run away with it— was stunned by Wonda’s sudden act of violence.

Willard gave a shout, stumbling back as his arm began to bleed profusely, and he turned to this lich. His eyes were pleading for help, but she simply narrowed her own at him.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” she commented. “Not to disrespect your family. Now look at the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into.”

The cooks all watched with wide eyes— Except for Strilleburg, as her coyote-skulled face had no eyes to stare wide with. Instead, she collapsed onto all fours, trembling and yipping like a wild animal holding back from lunging, as she frothed at the mouth in her excitement at Willard’s pain.

Meanwhile Wonda was silent, seemingly stunned as she watched the results of her moment of madness. Her horn still sparkled and zapped with emotions, but she narrowed her eyes at Willard as blood gushed from his wound.

*“So that’s what you look like,”* she whispered. *“When you do care about something.”*

“Help me!” Willard cried, taking an unsteady step towards the lich. “God! Please! I’ve been loyal to you! Save me!”

The lich simply looked to her daughter, ignoring the pleading man in front of her. “Wonda? You began this, I will not end it for you. So tell us: what is his fate to be?”

Willard turned to her, panting heavily in his fear, and she met his eye. For the first time in her life, her eyes were cold for someone other than Mori. She wrinkled her snout at him before picking up a nearby dishtowel and wiping the blood from her scythe.

She cleaned her weapon calmly, slowly, as if she had plenty of time to kill.

“You have done more harm than you have done good,” she finally stated. “You hit the people meant to be your family; the one person who ever showed you an ounce of concern,” she looked back up to him, her glare only growing more intense as she spoke her order: “You will do this family better a corpse than a man, Willard. Now lay down and *die.*”

Willard gave a pathetic whimper, and began to hyperventilate in his panic. He bled profusely from his wound as he gripped it tight, and he made to run—

But Strilleburg lunged at him, grabbing his ankle within her teeth and

shaking him. *Shaking* and *shaking* and *shaking* him until his ankle was a shredded mess of viscera and bone. She then gave an inhuman screech and arched her back, her tail and body fluffing out as she screamed at him.

“SHE GAVE YOUR ORDER, WILLARD! NOW! YOU LAY DOWN! AND YOU DIE!”

Wonda watched in silence as Strilleburg held Willard down. Watching the man writhe as he lay on the floor bleeding brought her no joy... but it brought her no displeasure, either.

At least not until she eyed Pauline.

The woman was still on the ground where she'd been thrown, though now the rest of the cooks had taken to her side to comfort her as she stared at Willard in panic and fear and confusion.

Then, the lich finally rose from her chair, and Wonda's shoulders fell slack as the woman reached her side. Instinctively, as she'd been taught, Wonda crouched down to be addressed.

“*You made the right choice,*” the lich told her daughter, quietly. Her voice was barely audible over the sounds of Willard's screams and Strilleburg's barked-out orders. “*Protecting the most innocent members of your family.... I'm proud of you.*”

Wonda was tired, but she knew better than to show it, and refused to let her regal posture fall beyond her slack shoulders.

“*I could have handled it better,*” she whispered back. “*But thank you, Mother. I didn't mean for it to end like this, but— I couldn't let him keep hurting our family. Not when we've taken care of him. Even for all the poisonings.... And Pauline....*”

She looked at her friend, her ears pinning back. Her one wish was that she had sent Pauline out before doing this; but that hadn't been possible.

The lich nodded, following Wonda's eyes to the gargoyle on the floor. “She will need comfort, in the coming days. It's not easy seeing someone you care for die. Even if you will be better off for it.”

It was clear her words came from experience, as she heaved a sigh. Then, she smothered a humoured look as Strilleburg sat on top of Willard to keep him down. It was clear that, unlike Wonda, her mother *was* finding pleasure in the man's torment. Though she tried her best to hide it and act reserved.

It was then that the noises outside the kitchen became audible, and it was apparent that people had heard the commotion and seen Mr Chess running around with a severed arm, and were coming to find out what had happened.

The rest of the cooks all helped Pauline to her feet, and as they did, Pauline's terrified gaze moved from Willard to Wonda. She stood trembling, with her fins folded down and her wings hanging limp, looking at Wonda like she was a complete stranger.

Wonda's strength finally broke when she saw Pauline look at her, and her eyes turned back to a gentle expression, filled with fear, as she rose to her full height.

*What had she done?*

“Pauline, I'm so sorry—“

Before she had the chance to apologise, the kitchen was flooded with onlookers and gawkers; people asking what had happened and gasping at the

blood.

Pauline stumbled out of the kitchen as the crowd poured in, and the cooks hurriedly followed her.

Wonda wrung her paws as her friend vanished, and looked to her mother.

“It—” she took a deep breath, before composing herself again to the stern-but-gentle attitude expected of her. Though, unlike usual, she wasn’t smiling. “It seems I have a mess to clean up, even if you say it was the right thing to do.”

“Yes, it appears you still have quite a bit of work ahead of you,” the lich agreed. Then, she motioned for Wonda to crouch again, so she could whisper in her ear. *“Pauline, while she will benefit the most from this, will also be the most hurt. You understand? Everyone hated Willard, but her. You will be praised for this by everyone except the one you were seeking praise from. Do not be resentful of her for it. She cannot help how she feels. Give her time to understand that what you did was for the best....”*

Wonda nodded. She knew her mother was right, and it *did* help to hear it from someone she held in such high regard. *“I imaged as such. I shall leave her be, for now. She’s going to need time.”*

*“Yes. Now, address the room; explain your decision, so that nobody doubts your authority or reasoning.”*

Wonda wished she could give her mother a hug —she wished she could bury her face into her chest for comfort— but she knew she couldn’t. Not with so many on-lookers. Not when she had work to do.

She waited only long enough to know that Pauline wouldn’t hear her, before standing up straight and composing herself; finally stopping her horn from sparking.

Stepping forward in the crowd to gather everyone’s attention, Wonda raised her voice to speak over the crowd as it fell into an obedient hush.

“ATTENTION! Earlier, I approached Willard with the hope of resolving a—“ she thought on her words for a moment. *“Disagreement.* He responded with violence, cruelty, and disrespect. I know that many of you have also been bothered or hurt by Willard’s on-goings....”

She looked down at him, as he looked back with wide, pleading eyes.

*Still alive, eh? Resilient.*

But it didn’t matter, now.

Wonda looked back to the crowd and continued.

“But today, he threatened to take the *life* of a member of our *family*. Of someone who has been nothing but kind to the children; who goes out of her way to care for them beyond her duties. And I decided his attitude shall not stand anymore! I have decided the punishment is his death,” she glared down at Willard again, as he gave a fearful cry. “He will not be revived. He will be buried in the gardens, and he will become food for the coffin angels. His loyalty and service will be remembered, but his cruel heart has deemed him *unworthy* of resurrection.”

A small collective gasp (and several happy mutters and chuckles) echoed through the family as Wonda finished her speech.

There was a moment of quiet, before Strilleburg rose to her feet and grabbed

Willard by the legs.

"To the garden with you then, huh!" she chirped, clearly all too happy to bury the man before he had even died. And several other members of the family made to help her; hefting the almost-unconscious man up by his remaining limbs and carrying him out to be disposed of.

And Wonda watched them go without a word, keeping alert to the rest of her family for their reactions to her actions.

The only members of the crowd who watched on without anything other than relief were the men who had worked with Willard... Knudfi, Wade, and Shulush.

Knudfi and Wade both cast Wonda nervous glances before slowly retreating out of the room; leaving behind Sulush, who watched with an unreadable expression as Willard was carried away. He licked his lips and finally glanced to Wonda and, after giving her a polite bow, he quietly followed in the direction that Willard had been taken.

As the crowd started to thin, and only as few members of the family remained, Wonda let herself deflate and let out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

"You did good," the lich commented as she pet her daughter on the leg. "I'm proud of you. You made a choice, and you followed through. And, you benefited the family.... Ah. *Hello*, Fourteen. Nice of you to finally join us."

Fourteen entered the kitchen as her mother spoke. Her sharp eyes scanned the room... and then opened wide in surprise as one of the few remaining members of the family quickly whispered in her ear.

She turned to Wonda with a shocked expression and signed, "*You did this?!*"

Wonda nodded, solemnly. "I didn't want to," her voice was soft. "But he threatened to kill Pauline. I would not just stand back and watch her suffer any longer. It was a... a rash decision. But it was mine. And I'm standing by it."

Fourteen immediately strode over, throwing her arms around her sister and hugging her so tight it made it hard for Wonda to breathe.

And Wonda froze for a long moment.

She never froze when hugged. But this time, she could feel the world caving in.

"*I didn't want to do it— I-I didn't mean to do it,*" she whispered softly to her sister. She clung to her now as she did when she was little, burying her face into Fourteen's fluffy shoulder as she felt herself start to shake.

She did what she had to.

*She did what she had to.*

"*I had to,*" she breathed. "*I had to— He was doing to kill her.*"

Wordlessly, Fourteen scooped Wonda into her arms, holding her effortlessly like a child, and turned to their mother. The two women stared at each other for a long, long moment, before the lich gave a permissive nod.

There was a crackle of magic, and a sickening spinning sensation accompanied by a bright green flash of magic, and then suddenly Wonda and her sister were in Wonda's bedroom.

Fourteen lay Wonda down in her bed, gently tucking her under the blankets before sitting beside her. They stared at each other quietly, before Fourteen raised her hands to sign.

"*The first life you take is the hardest, but at least you chose yours well, and*

*you can have no doubt it was the right thing to do,” she adjusted Wonda’s blankets again. “Try and get some sleep. It will help.... Would you like me to stay with you?”*

*The first life you take.*

The words weighed on her.

She was silent as Fourteen made her comfortable.... Though at that question, she began to tremble, and the tears began to fall. She reached up and clung to her sister like a child, sobbing.

“Why did I do it?!” she cried. “He deserved it! He deserved it, he deserved it— But Pauline —the way she looked at me— what if she hates me?!”

Her body shook with sobs as her regal look melted away to reveal the blubbing child underneath, and she hiccuped and sniffled as Fourteen pulled her close to her chest.

“I only wanted to help them talk!” Wonda continued. “I even got Pauline to promise to give up if he rejected her! But then he hit her— And he drew his sword on her— And I threw the knife— I just wanted him to stop hurting everyone!”

A loud, heavy sigh escaped Fourteen as her embrace around Wonda tightened. And then she spoke softly; her real voice coming through as she whispered into Wonda’s ear:

*“Sometimes, the only way to keep someone you love safe is to make them hate you. It’s a hard choice: to decide whether you wish more for their safety, or for their love...”* she pressed the bridge of her nose into Wonda in a kiss. *“You did the right thing. You offered a peaceful solution. It’s not your fault he didn’t take it.”*

Carefully, now, Fourteen lay down with Wonda; slipping under the blanket with her so they could cuddle close. Then she began to hum a calming tune, which soon turned into a deep, soulful lullaby.

Wonda continued to sob as she clung to her sister, letting all of the emotions pour from her body until there was nothing left to cry. The tears mixed with the blood on her paws, but as Fourteen began to rock her, she didn’t think about the fact she hadn’t cleaned herself up. The deep, metallic smell didn’t phase her as, in the moment, the familiar motion overtook her. It was just like when she was a child, and would have bad dreams— Fourteen would lay with her, singing gently as she rocked her back to sleep....

She moved closer to her sister, snuggling her head into the crook of Fourteen’s neck. She cried until no more sobs would come, and the tears that rolled from her eyes began to dry.

Then, her breathing eased, becoming even and level, and little whinny-like mutters slipped from her lips. Her tail curled up around her and, though her mind relaxed, her body continued to tremble. She was still in shock from the horrible fight. But she knew, tonight, as she was held tight in her sisters arms, that she was safe. So she didn’t fight the exhaustion that followed the adrenaline, and let sleep take her.

—END—

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