

# Strung-Up

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A Ye Olde Toys Story

*Do not worry, living one*

*for any spell may be undone.*

*Wait some time and try to find*

*a way back to your own kind.*

The little boy pulled at Danielle's arm, trying to make her move faster to the old toy store. His parents trailed behind them, strolling arm in arm.

"Danni! Hurry up! I wanna play with the toys!"

But Danielle kept her relaxed pace and resisted her demonic little cousin's pull, waiting until he wasn't trying to run before letting him go. As soon as she did, he rushed into the toy store.

"Slow down! And don't break anything before I get there!"

Disappointed, Eddie complied nonetheless.

"Danni, we're going to pop into Walden's for a few minutes. Keep an eye on Eddie." Danielle gave her Aunt and Uncle a thumbs up before following their son.

The store was a neat place to go to, even for Danni, now nineteen years old. The lights were bright, but all the shelves were made from a dark wood that lowered the light in the shop. These shelves were carved with interesting designs, usually representing whatever was on that aisle. An old fashioned Model-T on the toy car aisle; a ballerina on the doll aisle, and so on. But what made Ye Old Toys so neat was their selection of old toys. Hot Wheels, Transformers, and Barbies sat next to old-fashioned Jack-in-the-Boxes and other simple wind-ups that seemed one of a kind.

One of those old-looking toys caught Danielle's eyes. It was a marionette theater that sat in the middle of the store on a wooden table. Investigating the box, she saw the drama and comedy masks carved into the corners on the box, which was nearly four feet long and two feet tall. The left side had a hidden door for a dressing room closet, and the top was open to the theater below.

Danni knelt and looked inside the theater, smiling at its only occupant: a peasant girl with a knee length skirt and white tights, a puffy-sleeved blouse with red corset tied laces. Her darkish blonde hair was tied into a braid around her head and her eyes were a vibrant blue. Danielle picked up the marionette's handles. She noticed a crank on the theater's side, and when she turned it, a music box began to play tinny music. As Danni made the marionette dance, she imagined walking down a medieval village street, greeting passersby on her way to the baker's for bread . . .

"Hello, Nathaniel." She nodded to the smithy, who grunted a small response. William was on the common, talking loudly with his many friends. As Danni walked, she continued to stare at him. The boy in lederhosen saw her looking, causing Danielle to blush and look away. Just in time, too, as a pack of five year old kids barreled around her, almost knocking her into the fountain. Quickly recovering, Danni looked back at William, who gave her a sympathetic laugh. Danni replied with a curtsy before turning toward the Baker's shop.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Baker."

"Afternoon, Danni? The sun's two hours from setting," The baker said as he put another loaf into the oven.

"Well, if it's not night or morning, then it must be the afternoon. Anyway, I'm here for two loaves."

"Good, because I only have two fresh loaves ready. Free of charge, too . . . if your mother can finish my sweater soon."

"I'll inform her as soon as I can," Danielle said, taking the bread bag from him.

"Is that Danielle I hear?" Someone called from the back.

"I'm here, Mrs. Baker."

The old woman came out to the front. "It's so good to see you, Danielle." She gave the girl twin kisses on the cheek. "I've got something very important to discuss with you. Seeing as how you're almost a woman yourself now, I was wondering if you still want me to bake you cookies for when you come over?"

"I always want cookies, Mrs. Baker."

"Good, that's settled then." The woman said, handing Danni a sugar cookie.

"Thank you, Mrs. Baker. Well, I'm off to home now, goodbye."

"Oh no, you don't, you're off to see that boy you've been looking at for months now."

"I haven't an idea what you're talking about." Danni said as she began to open the door. But Mrs. Baker hurried, too, and turned Danielle to the commons. With a quick tap to her behind, Danni walked toward William. Unfortunately, she had just gotten to the grass when Princess Marielle reached William's side and lightly pecked him on the cheek. Danni hung her head and turned to return home, not looking to Mrs. Baker, who undoubtedly still watched.

Barely had she moved two steps when something yanked on her arms, and her legs, too, and she suddenly splayed out as if hanging from strings with handles high in the heavens. Danni tried desperately to

move; tried desperately to figure out what was happening. She looked to her friends for comfort, but they too had all stopped moving. And then the invisible strings tied to Danni yanked her high into the sky.

The dream world fell away and Danni tried to gasp as she looked around a giant world. She hung in the air what seemed like tens of feet, high above a wooden theater built just for marionettes. But what further disturbed Danni was that when she looked at her arms, she saw thin black strings tied to them, and that her body was itself made from wood. She was a puppet, she realized, the very puppet she had been playing with before her dream of peasant life. It was as if her mind had tumbled down the strings to inhabit that wooden body and give it life.

She spun in the air and came face to face with a brown haired boy that Danni immediately recognized. But he didn't recognize her and after a moment's admiration, Eddie lowered her back into the theater.

Danni's strings pulled on her limbs, and Danni had no choice but to obey them and obey the boy playing with her. The marionette could barely see what was going on around her, the world was moving much too fast as she was spun, pulled, and twisted against the backdrop of the village that had seemed so real to her.

She wanted to stop.

And then it all stopped with a voice, "Eddie!" His mother called, and the boy let go of Danni's handle. The energy he gave to her evaporated, the great wooden handle fell behind the marionette it controlled, and she flopped to the ground, sitting sideways with limp arms and splayed legs. Danni looked out to the toy shop from inside her theater; at all the toys on shelves, all waiting to be bought, and wondered how many of them were like her.

Danielle wanted to get out of this wooden body and cut the black strings that now seemed to run her life. But she never did. How could she? Never could she move without the hands of an owner around her handle. And no one who played with her had an inkling she was human. Used to be human. It took her months, but Danielle eventually realized she was now a marionette, and that was all she would ever be.