

The Witch's New Poppet

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Miranda kicked up dirt, leaves, and mud, shoved brambles and branches from her face, and tore through the forest as if all the demons of the earth ran behind her. The opposite, though, was the truth: she chased the witch, who was already dripping crimson life from her body. The ground fell away from the hunter, but she took a deft leap into the air and soared through the last line of trees, coming to a rolling stop on a cracked gray parking lot.

The witch flew on her broomstick ahead of her, arms and legs gripping the pole for dear and mortal life. She fell as she reached the blackened building that the parking lot served, rolling less than gracefully to the door. The witch staggered up, one arm tightly holding onto her belly while the other lit up and flung open double steel doors as if they were paper. She took one glance back to Miranda; the huntress saw the glinting terror in the witch's eyes, and then ran into the pitch darkness inside.

Miranda took strong steps across the parking lot, and prepared herself for what may be inside. She checked that her knives were still with her: one in her right boot, the other at her side. Her amulet hung around her neck, and the charm bracelet around her wrist. The huntress came to the building. A few stories tall, it was almost a cube sitting in the middle of a square lot. Small, elevated windows and the saw-tooth roof would have been the only entryway for natural light: at least, in the daytime.

Miranda was of average height, accentuated a little by low heels on her brown boots. She wore tight, but thick jeans that could protect her from the many cuts and burns she might receive while fighting. The same applied to her tan leather jacket, now worn and dulled from a number of fights with things worse than witches. It wasn't prudent, but the hunter kept her deep red hair long, with a light curl at the brim of her neck.

She stepped, warily, but without fear, into the building and whispered "*Selenas Luminas*" A white-blue light bloomed from one of her bracelet charms and gave her light to see in the grim building. Catwalks and offices ran around the upper floors, but the bulk of the building was filled by gray and brown machines and their accompanying conveyor belts. There was an open paddock ahead of her, a space where mechanics could easily get to many of the machines if something were to go wrong.

The witch was close to one of these machines, a boxy brown thing with a single conveyor running through it. She was leaning on it, panting heavily. The witch had thought it would be cute to dress the part on this Halloween night, a time when most of her sisters were resting and feasting.

She wore a pointy black cap with a tuft of green at its base, a black cloak that fell a little past her knees, and an off the shoulder green dress with cut sleeves. The witch had deep almond-shaped eyes and a lush brown skin. Once neat hair rolled down to her back, now tangled from wind. She looked at Miranda weakly.

The hunter kept a strong gaze on her, "You couldn't have surrendered an hour ago?"

The witch smiled and wiped a bit of unseemly blood from her mouth. "You think I've surrendered?" She cackled and her laugh echoed through the factory. She didn't speak or gesture, but Miranda felt that enjoyable sense of butterflies in her stomach that signaled some form of magic energy had just swept past her. The amulet around her neck also glowed lightly at the mana's presence, and the huntress reached for her weapon.

Before her hand could grip the knife, however, a thin black string deftly wrapped around her right wrist. She quickly jerked her body and deftly dodge another string coming for her other arm, but didn't move in time

to get her legs out of the way for another set of strings that took control of her ankles. Miranda was hoisted into the air from her limbs, but fought and struggled against them. She saw the witch holding her hands out before her, jerking at phantom strings, trying to puppeteer the huntress. She wobbled on unsteady legs, and the huntress grabbed at one of the black strings around her ankle. With a supernaturally strong jerk she tore the string from its source and two limbs were freed from the string's tyranny.

"Play Along!" The witch shouted, a tiny whimper of pain following close after. She furiously shook the invisible strings and Miranda was shaken up above. But the skilled Huntress had a knife in hand and was already cutting the string from her other leg. The green witch swung her arms and the huntress was flying through the air. But one string was cut, and the one around her last arm followed soon after. The huntress now started to the ground, and she smiled lightly when she saw she was heading straight for the one soft landing in the entire building: the stuffing storage bin. It was open topped and large, and the huntress easily fell into the soft white material.

Buried halfway in the stuffing, Miranda pulled herself toward the edge where she could climb out and finish the wicked witch. Faintly, she heard a mechanical rumble move through the building. Lights started to come on and conveyors started to move. The stuffing that held her started to spin; very slowly at first, and Miranda reached the edge of the steel cylinder easily. Her fingers gripped the cold metal, and then . . . were pulled away. She didn't feel any pain or twinge, just nothing. She looked in shock and saw her hand, and most of that arm was fluffy and white. Across the expansive building she heard a cackle.

"No!" The huntress cried, using her other hand to reach for the protective ward around her neck. But she felt only her bare skin. "No, no, no!" She looked down, and gasped when she saw that both arms and now her breasts fluff into stuffing. The cotton of her hand and the cotton of her body wove together, and she had no muscles. The pull of the machine beneath her started to pull the huntress into the pool of cotton. She kicked and squirmed, useless efforts as her body dissolved into the mass of white.

Now, the weight of her heavy jacket and jeans pulled on Miranda's consciousness, pulling what remained of her body down into the bin. She craned her neck to the sky and saw the witch upon her broomstick twiddling her fingers down, a smile across her face and no wound on her body. The huntress took a meaningless breath and descended into the stuffing.

She couldn't fight the sinking, swirling pull of whatever lay deeper in the bin. She didn't know what it was or how it worked, only knew that she was sinking like an anchor had been tied to her ankles. Inescapably, it pulled her down from the bright top layers of cotton down through the dark and black bowels of the machine. She became aware of a loud vacuum sound from below her. It started and consumed her entire senses, and then stopped after a few seconds. Then came a mechanical thud, and the vacuum came again.

Miranda knew the witch's plan; she knew it since her body dissolved into its current state, but that constant chorus made it clear what would become of her. She knew she was close to the bottom, but was still shocked when the vacuum came on once again, shaking her consciousness and deafening her hearing. She felt a sudden tug where she thought her back should be and was pulled down through a thin tube, the stuffing she thought of as her body being pulled down in an unnatural, twisted way. And then, she filled up again.

No longer was she drowning in a pool of stuffing, she felt like she was in a room to close in, or like a concrete prison had been poured around her. It choked her and held her so that no inch of her form could move. Miranda felt the way she was jerked along what she knew was a conveyor, and felt a series of stitches sewed into her prison. She pushed and squirmed more now, even though she was completely sealed in a personal prison, not even able to see. Miranda wanted to burst from her body and expand to her full form, but grew too tired before she could even move a finger.

And just when the Huntress came to terms with her constraints, something pressed down around what she thought was her belly, pushing senses that once belonged to her stomach up into her chest. The jerky movements stopped, and she felt a light rhythmic beat pulse from whatever gripped her. Miranda heard

something, and felt it vibrate through her body.

"Caa oou heaa ee?" A halo of white started to pierce through Miranda's vision. Shapes started to resolve themselves and Miranda looked up to the almost concerned face of the witch.

"This is the price one pays for interfering in my affairs." The witch wagged a stern finger at Miranda, who could hardly call herself a huntress now. She didn't know what she was, aside from a plaything made of stuffing, but she didn't suppose it mattered now. She did know that she wouldn't scream or wouldn't cry, knowing that the witch would take joy and power from that. She kept her mind simple and blank so that the witch could take no power from her mind.

Miranda never realized her mistake. She kept her mind as silent as possible while the witch went on her way with the doll. Too silent in fact, and all the memories and traits of Miranda simply dissolved into the stuffing, just as her body did. All that was left was a witch doll made to be the splitting image of her owner.