

HAUNTING FASHION

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“Hello? This is the right manor, isn’t it?”

The fashion designer, Korwa, was quite confused. She had recently received invitation to a fashion show at this very address and had even requested the crew of the Grandcypher fly her there and wait for her return, but upon arriving she’d found what she could only describe as an abandoned mansion.

It was the type of setting you might hear about in any tale of horror. Old and dusty, sheets strewn all about the furniture. She might have assumed the place hadn’t been visited in decades until now if not for the footprints that worked through the dust of the floor. They looked *fresh* as well. This left the Erune at a crossroads: follow the footsteps or get the *hell* out of there, and she was definitely leaning towards the latter.

“HYAAAAAAA!?! HELP! GYAAAAAAAARGH!”

Plans could change though, and a woman’s voice screaming out for help farther into the estate certainly forced her hand towards ‘*investigate the building*’. That second screech had almost sounded *inhuman*. Her Erune ears twitched in a panic. Should she go back and get the captain and Lyria? No, it would take too much time and that scream implied an emergency. She had no choice but to press forward if it meant she could potentially save a life, and so Korwa began to give chase after the footprints in the dust below.

“Help is coming!” The fashionista called into the darkness, uncertain of whether or not the source of the scream could hear her. At worst, the one causing the scream might have and they may have had their sights

set on *her*. It was a risk she had to take, and she was capable of holding her own in a fight if need be. If anything, she counted her hopes on the Grandcypher's crew being suspect of the venue if they didn't notice anyone else arrive. She kicked herself for, in hindsight, that should have been the first sign that something was amiss.

But following the scream inevitably brought her to a dead end of all places. The footsteps just stopped at the end of a hallway lined with a plethora of portraits. Fanciful caricatures of men and women that had, perhaps, lived within this building at some point. It was unsettling, but it almost felt as if they were observing her as she looked around in a panic.

In fact, she eventually caught a pair of eyes moving.

Now, she wasn't unfamiliar with the workings of ghosts. Ferry, an Erune girl aboard the Grandcypher, was a ghost herself. But she didn't have any ill-intentions. And if what was watching her was, as she suspected, a ghost themselves, considering the scream there was no guarantee an absence of hostility from them. **"Who's there? Are you a ghost? A monster?"** There was no certainty she would even get a response and it certainly didn't feel like she might receive one. Instead, the eyes on all of the paintings in the hallway locked on her at once. *Crap.*

Intuition was now telling her that retreat was the best option, and since she stood at the end of a doorless hallway she could proceed no further anyways since the footprints just stopped, but the moment she turned around... Korwa found herself staring at the same scenery she had before. The painting that had been in front of her before she'd turned around was in front of her again, and turning around once more she found a completely different hallway.

But this one was different. Unlike the first, which had been lined with paintings this one was lined with mannequins, all dolled up in fashions that seemed a little antiquated for what were considered modern trends. All of the mannequin heads, though? They were turned to look directly at Korwa at the hall's end. **"Crap... I can only go forward, huh?"**

With no shortage of caution the seamstress began to move down the new hallway, fully aware that this was a trap of some sort. What were the chances those mannequins would jump at and grab her as she passed them? Although as she passed the first it did no such thing, even if the glass eyes did follow her. No... surely the next would jump? The first was just to take her off guard.

A faint, golden glow had begun to radiate from the woman's eyes as she proceeded, the fact that the trap was not what she was expecting not so

much as even crossing her mind. Following the conventions of horror stories one of these spooky mannequins would absolutely lurch at her. Yet as she passed the second? No such prophecy came to pass. Once again, only its head slowly turned to watch her as she continued.

“What do you want with me!?” Korwa called out to the mansion once more. Again, no verbal response. Instead she was wracked with a chill, the temperature of her body dropping with a distinctive quickness that left her shivering as she moved to the next mannequin. For some reason every step she took was beginning to feel stiffer, more difficult, and even breath more burdened. The shortness of breath came but as she struggled to inhale she wasn’t exactly met with the panic a body would produce when it couldn’t breathe.

By the time she’d reached the third mannequin she was almost labored to even step forward. **“What’s... going... o-o-o-on!?”** Difficulty speaking was not born from the cold she was feeling, and in fact that cold was numbing as she continued to press on. But it wasn’t as if she was feeling warmth instead, it was more like she was feeling...

Nothing.

She stuttered because her lips were rattling together, and as they did they began to clack as if they were made of a solid material. It came with a dryness of mouth, for no matter how she tried she couldn’t seem to produce saliva any longer; or so much as wiggle her tongue. Before long her breathing avenues had ended up clogged by something, and her fading heartbeat suggested in imminent death. But death never came. **“Aaaaa!?”** The only noise she could make was a bemoaned groan as she passed the third mannequin, in the process raising a hand to her mouth to try and touch her lips in hopes of making sense of whatever was going on.

But once again she paused. The sudden movement to her hand before her face saw all of the fingernails peel off, scales fluttering to the creaking floorboards below. **“AA...?”** Korwa rolled her hands over even though that action in itself was a struggle. It was like every time she moved her body now there was some resistance, and things snapped back to the position they were in before if she wasn’t forceful enough. All in all it gave each of her movements a *creepy, jerky stutter*.

The Erune pushed through this unusual condition because what she saw of herself was just that unsettling. Her skin was as pale as a ghost’s might be and that was actually the *lesser* of her concerns all things considered. It was her joints. Or, at least, the places where her joints should have been. The space in these areas had sagged, darkened, and in places looked as if it had pilled away entirely.

Which led to her joints themselves becoming exposed, and while she could hardly imagine what a human's joints looked like uncovered, Korwa could certainly fathom they *didn't* look like this. She had actually seen joints like these plenty of times... on the mannequins she often dressed up in her designs.

'*Am I becoming a mannequin!?*', since she was unable to articulate anything her thoughts were all she had, and even those had begun to feel distant. Almost as if they were a dream, and this entire situation was a nightmare. One could say, with how much of a struggle it was becoming to so much as take another step forward, it was as if she were merely a puppeteer pulling the strings of her own body.

The same joint indentations had become widespread, her cold flesh hardening to fiberglass while stilled blood had drained away. Whether it was her ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, or shoulders - it all looked incredibly artificial. Even more so as the nipples upon her breasts smoothed into the creamy color of hardened tits and any remaining holes, such as her pussy, filled in. Her ass crack was even sealed together to leave the caricature of a woman's rump in its place.

Yet her mouth remained functional as she lurched past the final mannequin and into an open space lined with plenty of them. Except these mannequins? They were approaching her. "AAAAAA!?" Korwa couldn't even figure out how she was making noise now. The back of her throat was closed even if she could open her mouth, and her body produced no air. The sounds she were making were far more *haunting*.

The closest one grabbed the front of her dress and tore it open, her fiberglass shell lurching forward from the force as additional mannequins pawed at the rest of her attire. As she was stripped naked it became clear there was no definition in her body to speak of, for all was smooth as if crafted by the hands of a loving artisan.

Even her hair had lost its natural luster, silver locks synthetic. Her hearing had grown blurred, and in turn she was left completely deaf once another pair of mannequin hands snatched the Erune ears from atop her head as if they were little more than animal ear accessories. A pair of human ears *had* carved themselves out on the sides of her head, but they didn't function. They were merely decoration.

Korwa could no longer hear the sound of her own ghastly wails, nor the clacking of mannequin limbs against her body as the light began to fade from her eyes. Her consciousness struggled against a still cloud of darkness, and slowly she felt the control being wrestled from her body as golden eyes turned to empty glass.

Her inanimate form, stripped clean of her clothing, ended up finding a stillness as well. For something had appeared before her. An existence. A shadow of a life that had once been. It was a young girl that floated there, wearing very expensive clothing. **“Do you like it? I designed it myself! You should feel blessed to be soon wearing my many fashions you know.”**

Despite the inability to hear, the ghost’s words came to her as if she were whispering directly into her mind. Korwa was confused, and she felt like she’d seen a picture of this child before. Had she not been a fashion designer prodigy? Only for her life to be snuffed out too early when bandits had raided her mansion. This mansion?

The ghost snapped her fingers, and once she had Korwa suddenly found her right eye obscured. She could not feel weight to realize she had been instantaneously dressed. Silver hair pulled into twin pigtails, a black eyepatch across her right eye. Not to mention the elaborate, gothic lolita dress she had been clad in that bore some resemblance to a maid’s attire. Well, if maids wore combat stilettos **“AAAAAAA!?”** Korwa called out, but once again could not hear her own cries.

“My, it seems you still have some will to resist my influence? Everyone else succumbed so quickly. But this is fine. I need a feisty personality to fulfill a special role. More treasure hunters have been clawing up my estate as of late, so I needed more mannequin servants. That’s why I put out that invitation: other designers make the best mannequins!” The child reached a hand out, extending her finger to Korwa’s forehead. **“Still, I can’t risk you being disobedient particularly if I want to make you the first member of my guard, so a little rewiring is needed.”**

The Korwa mannequin let out another wail as the finger dug into her ‘brain’. While she’d managed to hold onto her sense of self, the moment the finger was plunged into her empty shell, it acted like a bomb that instantly obliterated everything she had been so desperately trying to preserve. In fact once the finger had been removed she couldn’t really ‘remember’ anything.

It was more like, the only thoughts she had were commands to be followed. PROTECT THE MISTRESS. GUARD HER MANSION. KILL INTRUDERS.

That was all that was left, and that was all that was needed.

No, there was something else.

The order to kill resonated with her more strongly than anything. What now counted as her 'mind' ran rampant with an uncontrollable bloodlust that would set her off to kill anything of flesh and blood that dare enter her mistress' abode. Her mistress had seemingly disappeared as well, leaving her newest mannequin with naught but a knife and her instructions. And so she lurched on, each movement of her body stiff and cold.

“Korwa was supposed to come back last night, but she still hasn't. I hope nothing bad happened.” The next morning Gran had entered the manor from the front gate. It had been unlocked and no one seemed to be home, and based on the state of the lobby he couldn't have imagined a fashion show had occurred here. He'd been set on his decision to explore, but looking at things now perhaps he should have fetched more of the crew to help?

**THUMP... THUMP... THUMP...
THUMPTHUMPTHUMPTHUMP!**

The sound of footsteps charging at the room from an adjoining hall brought Gran to attention, drawing his blade in preparation for there was nothing natural about the accompanying sounds. Each step came with an inhuman creaking, and it times it sounded like it was a beast crawling on all floors.

But then it lurched from the shadows. A mannequin dressed like a combat maid with silver hair and golden eyes, brandishing a knife as it jumped for Gran's throat from a crouched position. It was too fast, like it had been animated as if for this moment! He didn't have time to move away in time, so it was inevitable that the blade would find his throat.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

That haunting scream of the mannequin guard was the only thing that lingered in the aftermath.