

Midnight at the Prairie Supermart

Whiiirrshhh.

The automatic doors slid open. A rush of cold air blew in past the display of pumpkins and decorative ears of corn, and Peter shivered at his post manning Register Three. He clutched his jacket tight across his chest and threw an irritated glance towards the doors.

Whiiirrshhh.

They slid closed again, and the midnight chill retreated. Peter gave the doors a warning look before returning to the magazine he'd picked up from Register Four.

"Excuse me?"

A man on the early side of middle age stood on the opposite side of the register with a vaguely lost look about him that Peter recognized too well. Nobody came in at this time of night for aimless browsing.

Peter waited for the customer to get on with his request. The customer stared.

"Can I help you?" Peter prompted, after several silent seconds had passed.

The customer gave his head a startled little shake. "Sorry, spaced out," he explained with a somewhat self-conscious laugh. He brandished a pair of navy sweatpants. "Do you have these in a medium?"

Whiiirrrshhh.

Another cold gust of air blew in and the man looked at the automatic doors in alarm. They stood open, waiting for nobody to enter.

"Whatever we have is out on the floor," Peter said, and went back to his magazine. It promised thirty-one frightfully delicious appetizer ideas, and so far he'd only read thirteen.

Whiiirrrshhh.

"Is something wrong with the doors?" Sweatpants asked.

"We're looking into it."

It was the non-answer Management had instructed the night shift to give if any customers noticed something strange. Most of them didn't.

Sweatpants gave him a dubious look, but didn't press the matter. He shot one last suspicious glance towards the doors before ambling away towards Men's Clothing. Peter watched him until he was out of sight, then dropped his magazine and hustled over to the doors.

"Ezekiel, knock it off. It's cold outside," he hissed. "And you're freaking out the customers." He paused. "Well, *customer.*"

A young man in an old-fashioned military uniform sporting an impressive set of sideburns materialized beside him. He pointed accusingly at the doors, gray eyes fixed on the sensor box bolted to the metal frame above them.

"These magic doors have bewitched and bewildered me these many long years," he declared. Ezekiel spoke only in declarations. "I have not found it, but by Jove, I will discover the source of their devilry yet!"

Whiiirrrshhh.

"Do me a favor and save your investigations for July or something, would you?"

Ezekiel had the decency to look chastened and swept his hat from his head apologetically.

"Forgive me, Peter. I do forget about the cold."

Whiiirrrshhh.

The doors slid shut again.

"Thank you."

He did his best to not sound sarcastic and mostly succeeded. Respect was vital when dealing with the denizens of the Prairie Supermart. It was Management's second most important rule for night shift. The first was to clock in only *after* putting your things away in the breakroom, just in case the Thing that Lived Behind the Vending Machine got hungry for something other than prepackaged sandwiches and snacks. There hadn't been an incident in ages, but still. No sense in paying people for not working.

Peter stomped back to Register Three and tried to remember which recipe he'd read last (Ghoulish Goulash, courtesy of Peggy W. of Saint Cloud, Minnesota). He'd barely started on Graveyard Guacamole when he was interrupted again.

"Cleanup on Aisle Seven; cleanup on Aisle Seven," a bored voice announced over the intercom.

Peter glanced at the customer service desk where Barb sat watching him expectantly, intercom mic still in hand. Barb used to be cool, but her recent promotion to shift manager had really gone to her head, and Peter was about at the end of his rope where she was concerned. Some nights he fantasized about slipping her name to the leader of the Wild Hunt over in Sporting Goods, but good judgment got the better of him. Something about permanent solutions to temporary problems: He could always just quit.

Whatever.

Peter lifted his magazine in front of his face so he didn't have to see her watching him. The intercom crackled on again.

"Peter, cleanup on Aisle Seven!"

"Jen's on Grocery tonight!" he protested. Customer Service was close enough that they could talk without the stupid intercom. Barb just liked to hear her own voice over the speakers.

"Jen's doing stock. Cleanup on Aisle Seven!" She hung up the intercom with a flourish of finality and shot him a look that said "*now!*"

How was he supposed to learn how to assemble a hauntingly fun charBOOterie board when he kept getting interrupted every five minutes? Peter huffed and flung his magazine onto the conveyor belt, which whirred to life and eagerly set to doing its job. Before he could stop it, the magazine's back cover caught in the gap between the belt and the scanner's metal frame. Pages crumpled as the conveyor tried its best to deliver its charge. Peter scrambled to free the magazine without ripping anything, but the

damage was done. There was no way Barb would let him put it back on the newsstand in this state.

There goes \$5.99, he thought bitterly, and stalked off to get the mop and a bucket.

Upon arrival at Aisle Seven, he was greeted by the sound of weeping and puddles of thick, red glop that dotted the floor and speckled the merchandise. Broken glass glittered against the tile. Peter ducked just in time to miss a jar of pasta sauce flying towards his head, which shattered and joined its fellows on the floor behind him. A young woman with Gibson Girl hair and an elaborate Edwardian dress let out an angry wail, then sank to the floor and sobbed against a shelf of pickles.

"Hi, Agnes."

Agnes sobbed harder in greeting. Agnes was always sobbing.

"What's with the marinara?" Peter asked. Agnes didn't answer, but glared and gestured angrily at something just behind Peter's left shoulder. He turned to find a tall figure with six wings and probably hundreds of eyes (or close enough; Peter had never taken the time to count and thought it would be rude to ask) hovering near the soy sauce.

Lawn and Garden was full of resin figures of angels — all chubby, winged babies or serene, beautiful women — which missed the mark by a wide, *wide* margin. But then, Peter supposed, they would probably sell a lot fewer garden statues if the portrayals on offer were accurate. Real angels were not something you'd want to find peeking out from the azaleas.

"What did you do to her?" he demanded. The seraph shrugged.

"I merely observed that her betrothed was taking his time," they answered. Peter pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Machi," he groaned, exasperated. Machidiel got too much enjoyment out of needling the other denizens of the Prairie Supermart. The arrival (or not, as it happened) of Matthew, Agnes' long-lost fiancé, was a sore spot, and everyone knew it. The name *Matthew* itself had become taboo after Agnes saw Matthew Cohen's name tag and became so upset she blew the circuit breaker. Management insisted he go by Patrick after that.

Agnes looked up from the pickle shelf, her eyes blazing and pale cheeks gleaming with tears.

"You said he abandoned me!" she accused, before dissolving into another round of sobs. "Matthew asked me to wait for him. I promised!"

Peter bit his lip.

"Well, it has been a hundred and twenty years... give or take," he said. This was the wrong thing to say, though. Agnes turned her glare on him, and he ducked to avoid a large jar of baby kosher dills she sent hurtling towards his head. Several more jars levitated threateningly from their shelves. "But I'm sure he'll be here any day now!" Peter added hastily.

A throat cleared somewhere behind him.

"Excuse me?" asked a polite voice. Peter slowly pivoted, reluctantly taking his eyes off of Agnes and her jars. It was Sweatpants, shopping basket in tow next to the end cap. His eyes flicked between Peter, the mess, and the hovering jars.

"Can I help you?" Peter asked, summoning all the breezy nonchalance he could muster.

"I'm looking for marshmallows?"

"Aisle Four."

Sweatpants offered his thanks and shuffled off with one last quizzical look at the scene.

Peter steeled himself and resumed his attempts at mediation.

"Could you put the pickles down, Agnes?" he asked gently.

Agnes's shoulders slumped. She let the levitating jars drop, and Peter's stomach dropped with them as they shattered and mixed with the marinara on the tile.

"Perhaps—" began the seraph behind him, but Peter cut them off. They had done enough damage.

"Machidiel, you are banished to Automotive for the rest of the night," he proclaimed.

Technically, Machi wasn't obligated to follow commands from mortals, but Peter figured they must have had a deal with Management, because they usually did what he asked.

Proclamations of banishment were more of a time-out than a meaningful consequence, of course, but at least it got them out of Peter's hair for a minute.

"I was just trying to help," they grumbled, but they flew off towards Automotive anyway.

"Hey, Agnes," Peter began cautiously, once the seraph had left. "Would you mind giving me a hand with the—"

A handful of glass shards levitated threateningly, and Peter raised his hands in surrender. "Never mind! Never mind. I've got it. You just worry about... you."

The shards fell back to the ground with a harmless tinkling sound. Agnes resumed her sobbing at the end of the aisle, and Peter breathed a heavy sigh before kneeling to pick up the larger bits of broken jars. He surveyed the mess and realized he had come woefully unprepared. He pressed the button on his walkie-talkie and radioed channel five.

"Can someone bring me some towels?" he asked. "Please?"

Ezekiel appeared several minutes later, a stack of towels hovering in front of him. Peter was surprised to see him all the way over in Grocery. He typically didn't stray too far from the front of the store and his nemeses, the automatic doors.

"From Barbara," Ezekiel declared, and presented the towels to Peter with a salute. "Is there anything else you require?"

What he *required* was some damned peace and quiet and the luxury of not functioning as a supernatural babysitter for twenty minutes. Other people didn't have to work in these conditions. Other people had normal jobs. Other people got to make it through an entire shift without cleaning up the aftermath of ghostly temper tantrums. But Peter didn't say that. He sighed instead, resigned to his lot.

"No, that's all. Thanks for the towels."

Behind him, Agnes let out another loud wail. Ezekiel craned his neck and looked past Peter's shoulder, watching the scene at the end of the aisle with bemused interest.

"Who is the weeping woman?" he asked.

"That's Agnes. She's always like that."

"For whom does she weep?"

Peter hesitated.

"Ah—I think she was supposed to run off with some guy, but he never showed up... I don't know, man. It's not really my story to tell." He scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. True, Agnes had been dead for over a century, but telling Ezekiel her whole deal still felt like gossip.

"The villain!" Ezekiel gasped. "A man who will not keep his promises is no man at all. And such a lovely creature! I would never have led her so astray."

A light flicked on in Peter's brain.

"You know," he said. "It might be nice for her to have someone to talk to. Someone reliable, of strong moral character."

He could see the gears turning in Ezekiel's head. Peter shrugged and grabbed the mop. "Just a thought," he said.

"One's burdens are easier to bear when one has a companion with whom to share their weight," Ezekiel agreed.

After some contemplation, he seemed to reach a decision and strode over to where Agnes sat morosely contemplating the broken jars and pickled vegetables littering the floor around her.

"Madam," he began. He removed his hat and held it over his heart. "I beg you to forgive my boldness, if you might allow me to make your acquaintance?"

Agnes blinked up at him but gave no answer. Ezekiel soldiered on.

"I am Captain Ezekiel Nelson, of the Second Illinois Cavalry Regiment." He bowed low and offered her his hand. Agnes accepted with a small, watery smile, and Ezekiel helped her to her feet.

"Agnes Williams," she said. "Charmed, Captain Nelson."

"Miss Williams. Enchanted to meet you." Ezekiel kissed her hand, and Peter thought he saw Agnes blush through her tears. "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Produce section? They possess the richest abundance of the most exotic fruits. Have you heard of such a thing as the *banana*?"

Agnes giggled, and the two spirits glided off to tour the produce together. Ezekiel gave Peter a wink and a thumbs up as they left, and Peter grinned in spite of himself. He'd

taught him that not long after starting on nights. Ezekiel was a good egg, Peter thought, as far as ghosts went. He turned his attention back to Aisle Seven, heaved one more long-suffering sigh, then set to clearing the mess in peace.

Two hours and many towels later, Aisle Seven was returned to its pre-Agnes state, and Peter entered the break room as a conquering hero. Barb was sitting at a table flipping through Peter's magazine and drinking a diet soda.

"Well?"

"Good as new. Got some marinara shrinkage, though. And I had to banish Machidiel to Automotive for the night."

Barb frowned.

"And they went?"

Peter nodded.

"Weird. I can never get them to do anything."

Huh.

"Well, at least we have someone they'll listen to." Barb closed the magazine and collected her things. "Make sure you're back in fifteen."

The door closed behind her, and the break room held its breath for a beat until she disappeared around the corner at the end of the hall. A noise like a mountain lion purring into a vocoder rumbled behind him, softly at first then slowly growing louder. Peter grabbed his bag from his locker and pulled out the two sandwiches he'd brought from home. He took a bite of one and set the other on the ground. A thin, scaly tentacle slid out from behind the vending machine, tentatively probing the floor until it found its quarry. The purring intensified, and it coiled around the sandwich and pulled it under,

then reemerged to give him a thumbs up, or as close to one as a tentacle could manage. Peter wondered if anyone else ever brought snacks for the Thing.

Probably not.

Peter settled back to enjoy his sandwich and finish his magazine. Behind the vending machine, the Thing munched its own sandwich in companionable silence until the timer on Peter's phone chimed the end of his fifteen minutes. Right on cue, Barb's voice crackled through the intercom.

"Peter to Register Three."

At least he got to finish all thirty-one recipes.

He found Sweatpants waiting next to a small pile of items at Register Three.

"You're still here?" Peter asked. He'd expected the incident in Aisle Seven to scare him off.

Sweatpants just smiled and waved something maroon at him.

"I found a medium in a different color!"

"Oh. Good."

Peter logged back into the register and scanned the first item (a single can of probiotic soda). Next were the pants, a bag of marshmallows, and a box set of *Little House on the Prairie* on DVD. It was a motley collection, but Peter wasn't here to judge.

"Insomnia," Sweatpants offered.

"Sorry?"

"Insomnia," he repeated. "I can't sleep sometimes, so I figure, might as well do some shopping while the store's empty, right?"

Empty.

Peter swallowed a laugh.

Years ago, when he had first started on nights, the shift manager at the time had sat him down and explained that for the most part, night shift wouldn't be any different from his last job, except for one very important caveat.

First thing to know, she'd said, is there are two separate planes. Dimensions, universes — whatever.

For the most part, they stayed separate. There were places, though, where the boundary between the two was thinner, and inhabitants of one plane could leak into the other.

Places like the plot of land where, decades ago, Management had decided to build the Prairie Supermart.

Second thing is: these guys were here first.

Ezekiel and Agnes and all the others had been here before the store was a glimmer in Management's collective eye, and when the store's walls went up, they stayed where they were. They became part of the store, and Management themselves became something they had never expected. There were consequences, after all, to building in places like this.

Peter scanned the next item.

There were only a couple hours now before the end of his shift, when the store's inhabitants would retreat to the Other side until tomorrow night. This side was too noisy for their liking during the day. He thought of Ezekiel and Agnes and wondered how they were getting on in Produce. He wanted to know what Ezekiel thought of the pineapples. He'd need to check on Machi before he left, too. Hopefully they'd thought about what they'd done. (They probably hadn't.)

"Bet it's nice and quiet working nights," Sweatpants continued. "Does it ever get lonely, though? Being here all alone?"

As if anyone could ever be alone here, Peter thought fondly.

"It's not so bad. Why, you looking for a job?" He scanned the last item and grinned.

"We're hiring."

