

## RATCHET RETAIL by Kevin A.M. Lewis

So there I was. Nineteen, sharp cut, resume in hand, sitting in the manager's office for my first job interview. The manager leaned against the desk adjacent to the security monitor, his arms folded, studying me through crossed eyes and spectacles. He seemed to really like the cut of my jib. I had the perfect build for someone who should lift heavy boxes. The prevalent blackness of my skin must have made him feel doubly comfortable. Beside him sat a short, stocky woman without an expression. She stared at me as if... Well, I have no clue. As if I was there. She was the assistant manager. After the pleasantries, the routine questions, and the scheduling, I was hired and ready to box-lift my way to stardom. I rose, shook the manager's hand, and turned to leave. "Hey, wait," said the manager. I paused with my hand on the doorknob to look back at him. I briefly noted that the assistant manager now wore a Cheshyre-cat sort of grin. "Now that you're hired, you're going to see a few...changes...around the store," the manager said. "What do you mean?" I asked. I idiotically, unwittingly asked. "You'll see. People who pass through retail stores as customers only ever see products and aisles. But to us, the employees, we see the reality. The mazes. The jungles. Most people quit at aisle eleven. You? I think you'll do fine." "Okayyy," I said, not sure what else to, and then turned the knob and exited the safe haven that was the manager's office. What the--? was my immediate thought upon exiting the office. The place previously known as "Asile 11: Pet Food and Pet Appliances," was now a jungle--literally, a jungle--full of foliage and vines and crawling with wildlife. Thick, lush trees lined my path. The heat was unthinkable; the smells were a tapestry. So this is what the manager meant. Well, I'm not quitting because of this. I found a nearby cutlass and sliced my way through, seeking the refuge of the center aisle that ran through the others. The world of Aisle 11 swam past through the gaps in the leaves on my left side; it was a world of shrieking monkeys loping through trees, trumpeting elephants sipping water at a lake, lions chasing legions of zebras through a savannah, and vultures swooping down on corpses in a wasteland. All the while, on my right side, I saw shelves of pet goods hidden under the foliage, their corresponding sales signs hidden beneath overgrowth. Christ, how are customers supposed to find what they're looking for in this? I wondered. Finally, after about twenty minutes, I made it to a wall of bushes with light on the other side. With a few good wacks I severed a path and tumbled out of the aisle into the one opposite it: "Aisle 5: Shampoo and Hair Conditioning." The smell of dung and pissy wilderness was replaced by that of an Herbal Essences-stained carpet. I power-walked to the front of the store. Maybe this was all a dream. Maybe I was just imagining that I would have to work in these conditions. Surely a simple retail job wouldn't entail venturing to foreign places or hunting down for-sale items in overgrowth? I made it to the front of the store and paused again. It turned out retail involved much worse. The front of the store had a row of three cash registers facing aisles four through six. Only one employee stood at the middle register. Her line of customers? It ran past aisle six and straight into aisle ten, the last aisle at the front. And lo; the line consisted of

very few humans. Behind the old lady at the counter, bears and gargoyles stared at the ceiling or flicked through the pages of their circulars. A fairy in a tutu hovered in place, staring longingly at Kiera Knightley in one of the magazines on display. At the end of the line that I could see, a dark knight sat atop his evil steed, his basket of items--including toilet paper and Snapple--slung comfortably over the crook of his arm. Though I could only guess where they came from, I understood full and well that these were the kinds of cretins I would be serving. There were other cretins I would have to work with too. There was a two-flight staircase leading to the second floor next to the last register and opposite aisles seven through ten. Two employees leaned on the banister sucking queer brown lollipops and then testing each other with breathalyzers. One of them caught my eye. I motioned to the line. The employee looked at the line, then slapped the other employee's arm and motioned to it too. I then blinked, and they both vanished into thin air. "What do you mean it's not on sale?" I turned to find a commotion starting up between the old lady and the cashier. "I mean it's not on sale," the cashier, a young woman with heavy-lidded eyes, said droningly. "It is on sale! The sign said--" "It's not on sale. That's what the computer says." The pair continued their litany for a brief eternity, then finally the old lady's face turned beet red and she drew a brick from her purse and threw it at the cashier. The cashier suddenly had a shield. I don't know where it came from, she just had it. And a sword. She blocked the brick with her shield, then swung her sword wildly and aimlessly. What had seemed to be an old lady sprouted wings and launched into the air, breathing fire down on the cashier. I slipped past the commotion and ran for dear life. I entered civilization--a city street, with human crowds and human automobiles darting past--but from that day forward, my view of the world was never quite the same.

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