

JAMES ESPARZA PRESENTS

WORLD
WITHOUT
END

CLEARANCE

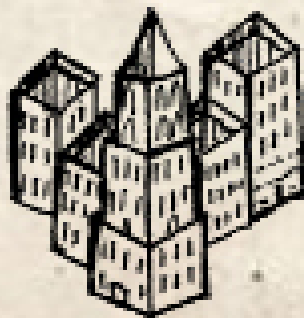
WALERTON
SHELF OF SHADOWS

A SHORT STORY

Desert



Kingdom of Whitlow



WORLD WITHOUT END

A Fantasy/Sci-Fi world full of diverse landscapes and interesting, unique civilizations that strive to exist in a world of both ancient kingdoms and futuristic cities. Technological wonders built decades ago, and mystical creations that live and breathe together in this ever-evolving world of adventure and terror.

These Lands of Light stand as a single bot of illumination on an endless plain of darkness. The kingdoms of light ravaged by war for ages. Countless nations and people vanished, leaving nothing but ruins and bones behind. It was only when the darkness known as the abyss sprang to life, assaulting the single territory of light from all directions, that the three ruling kingdoms were forced to unite their ancient powers and cutting-edge technologies to survive.

Decades passed, yet the ceaseless assault persisted, and an official declaration of war against the darkness itself was made. New borders were drawn, and the kingdoms forged pacts of trade and focused on economy and knowledge. Amidst the chaos of constant warfare, an era of adventure dawned. The three kingdoms opened their borders to one another, trading goods and ideas, while intellectuals and warriors braved the untamed regions of light, confronting rogue factions and fighting against the encroaching darkness.

Working Retail...

A WORLD WITHOUT END SHORT STORY

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

WALERTON SHELFs OF SHADOWS

A SHORT STORY

A young boy, his tousled brown hair catching the early rays of light, slowly blinked his eyes open. The room seemed to brighten with his awakening, a silent symphony of joy beginning to play within him. His heart responded with a quickened tempo, a rhythm of excitement propelling him upward from his bed.

Throwing off the covers, his feet met the refreshing coolness of the floor. Energy surged through him like a river current, urging him to his feet with an infectious enthusiasm. With a determined stride, he made his way to the restroom. He embraced his morning routine, each action purposeful and deliberate. As he readied himself for the day, his anticipation painted a vivid scene of possibilities ahead. The world was beckoning, and he was eager to meet it with an open heart and a spirited resolve.

Water droplets slid down his skin as he stepped out of the shower, a towel snugly cinched around his waist. The bathroom's steam began to dissipate, replaced by the familiar sounds of life beyond its confines. Amid the mundane symphony, a persistent jingle pierced the air, drawing his gaze to the source.

His eyes narrowed as he spotted his phone on the desk across the room, its screen pulsating with urgency. The

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

caller's name flashed in bold letters: "Work." A sigh escaped him

"I'm not answering it," He muttered.

He headed toward the desk, his hand hovered above the device, the digital abyss of responsibilities and obligations awaiting his touch. In an almost comical twist, a single droplet of water from his slicked; hair landed on the phone's screen, triggering the very action he sought to avoid. The phone's ringtone ceased, replaced by the voice of his manager.

He let out an exasperated chuckle, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Sometimes, it seemed, even the universe conspired to have its say.

"Hey Kennedy you hear me?" The voice over the phone called.

Not knowing if he should say anything he stood there frozen in place.

"I can hear you breathing..."

Kennedy picked up the phone, pressing it against his ear. "What is it, it's my day off?"

"I know alright, no one else answered."

"No!"

"Hear me out, we will pay you double."

"I don't wanna."

"What are you five? We will pay you double for a half shift, four hours and you're out of here. Come on, Charles isn't feeling good right now; alright."

"Only four?"

"Only four. I promise."

"Okay, I'll be there in 30 minutes, well 40 minutes I need time to sulk."

His bike rolled along the meandering road, passing by quaint houses with neatly manicured lawns. He relished the sensation of light breaking through the trees to warm his skin. The world seemed to slow down, just for a moment, as

he savored the simple pleasure of the open road.

Eventually, he found himself in front of an unexpected sight, a massive retail store rising from the landscape like a monolith. It was an oddity in this otherwise unassuming town, an eccentric venture by a determined entrepreneur with wild ambitions. The structure's imposing walls seemed out of place against the backdrop of the sleepy surroundings, a testament to the audacity of the human imagination.

Approaching the colossal structure with a mix of reluctance and curiosity, he throttled down his motorbike, its once spirited engine now emitting a low hum. A sense of unease began to creep over him, much like the long shadows stretching across the pavement in the late afternoon sun. Despite the cooling breeze that played with his hair, a thin sheen of sweat formed on his forehead, trickling down his fair skin.

Breathing slowly, he carefully parked his motorbike in a hidden nook next to the massive building. The sleek curves of his bike contrasted with the hard lines of the concrete and metal around him. It felt like he was a tiny dot in a big city painting, his bike a bright color against the gray backdrop. Kennedy swiftly pulled a compact black vest from his bag, sliding it over his shoulders. Its purpose was clear from the bold letters scrawled in white on the back, "Stock Prevention."

He strode across the scorching pavement, urgency in every step, and swiftly passed through the tall glass doors that whooshed open automatically. Above him, the heavy air conditioning units emitted a soft, consistent hum, sending a rush of refreshing coolness over his glistening skin. Inhaling deeply, he welcomed the chilled air into his lungs.

Yet, his moment of relief was short lived as a repetitive tune invaded his ears. The music, carefully selected to match the corporate ambiance, hung in the air like an annoying companion, neither loud enough to be jarring nor soft enough to be ignored. Its lyrics were a distant murmur, a constant reminder of the commercial setting he found himself in.

As he turned his gaze forward, anticipation danced in his eyes. He half expected his fellow Stock Prevention Agent to be stationed there, ready to offer a friendly "Welcome!" to those who entered and a cheerful "Have a good day!" to

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

those departing.

To his surprise, a throng of people had congregated right at the center of the white tiled resell store. An icy hand of dread seemed to squeeze his heart. Among the cluster of individuals, he spotted the familiar visages of his coworkers. Their faces twisted with a mix of apprehension and confusion.

"Get out of the way!" A voice called out from behind Kennedy.

He shifted his gaze, catching the sight of a paramedic who deftly sidestepped him. The crowd parted like the sea as two paramedics navigated through, encircling a portly, grey haired man. One that he knew as, Charles.

Time itself seemed to halt as the scene in front of him unfolded in gradual motion. The young boy found himself absorbed into the crowd, inadvertently blocking the path of the medics as they diligently tended to the injured, groaning man. They hastily organized themselves, maneuvering the man onto a stretcher and guiding him out the door. Their faces held an air of unwavering professionalism.

Just as Kennedy's mind tried to make sense of the unfolding scene, a voice shattered his thoughts. Bowrigard Humphrey, commonly known as Bow, the day manager, urgently called out his name. The sound of Bow's voice echoed through the brightly lit space, marked by fluorescent lights overhead.

"We've got a major problem, Charles just had a heart attack right here in the store," Bow Humphrey's voice broke the urgency in the air.

Kennedy's expression shifted from confusion to understanding, a sense of gravity settling over him. "Man, this place is cursed," he muttered, his voice a mix of disbelief and nervousness.

"This isn't the time for jokes," Bowr retorted, his face etched with concern.

Kennedy sighed, the tension in his shoulders evident. "I'm sorry, it's just my way of dealing with stress."

Bow took a steadying breath, his eyes locking onto Kennedy's. "Listen, Kennedy, I need you to do me a favor, a big

one."

Kennedy's eyebrows creased, his curiosity piqued. "What do you need?"

"We're really short staffed right now. You've proven yourself as a reliable worker. I'm asking you to step up and cover the evening shift."

Kennedy's heart pounded in his chest. "The evening shift?"

The words hung in the air, causing a collective reaction from the employees nearby. The phrase carried a weight that everyone could feel, a mix of dread and reluctance. The late evening hours at the store were shrouded in mystery, known only to the managers and department leads. Whispers about the nearby forest added to the mystique. Even now, fresh tales circulated about eerie things that emerged in the late evening. Kennedy never met anyone who even worked that shift before, no one he knew has.

Bow looked around at the surrounding gazes his words brought, "Triple Pay." Were the only words that came out of his mouth. "Just for one night, three shifts pay."

Kennedy's eyes widened at the thought of his bank account getting fatter. "Okay!" Escaped his mouth before his fantasy could dissipate.

"Great!" Bow grabbed Kennedy by the arm. "Let's go to my office we have some things to talk about."

They're foot steps echoed through the halls of the store as their heels smacked against the pearl white tiles, all the way to the office at the back of the store.

"Alright, there's some rules to follow out there, rules a little different from the day shifts." Bow said as he closed the door behind them.

"Like what?"

"Like, no following around potential thieves."

"But that's the only fun part of my job."

"No more of that, not on evening shift. We need you simply to greet everyone who comes through the door, and stick to the front of the store, and let us know over the mic every time someone comes in with a brief description of the cus-

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

tomers. There won't be many of them. I promise."

"Why?"

"Just stick to the front of the store and do those simple things. You'll be out of here by 12 o'clock."

Kennedy rolled his eyes. "Fine but I better not regret this."

The young Stock Control Associate made his way to the front of the store where he began his monotonous job of being a walking talking scarecrow. After four hours of back and forth in an invisible square, answering the same old questions, he finally reached his lunch break.

Seeking refuge in the break room, Kennedy settled into one of the unadorned metal chairs that lined the table. These chairs were pushed neatly under a long table made of sturdy gray plastic, which bore years of use. As he sank into the seat, the familiar faces of the final day shift began to trickle in. Each one wore an expression of fatigue, mingled with an air of uncertainty.

In an orchestrated dance, the exhausted employees converged on the time clock. With practiced efficiency, they punched out, their fingers moving as swiftly as their tired bodies allowed. As his coworkers exchanged parting words with Kennedy, they dispersed, gradually leaving him in solitude. He glanced at the clock, just ten more minutes remained of his fifteen minute break, a fleeting moment he intended to fully relish.

His short break slipped away, like sand through his fingers. Just as he prepared to stand up, the distinct sound of buttons being pressed on the electronic code, protected lock reached his ears. Each beep held significance, representing a press of a specific key, keys he had memorized to their corresponding sounds. "3... 3... 1... 6," Kennedy whispered under his breath.

The weighty metal door creaked, Strangers' faces came into view, three distinct individuals entered the room. They clocked in for their shifts just as Kennedy's break was drawing to a close.

"You the day shift guy?" A tall, dark haired, pale skinned man asked. "Names Vince, this is Shorty and Jim."

"Shorty," fittingly dubbed, seemed to carry the weight of

time on his forehead, creased with wrinkles that spoke of a life rich in experience. Jim responded to his name with a wave, a tall figure radiating energy. His bouncy curls framed a wide smile, accompanied by a row of perfectly white teeth.

Without lingering on pleasantries or bothering to inquire about Kennedy's Jim and Shorty made a beeline for the rack adorned with rows of black Stock Control Vests. Meanwhile, Vince remained in his spot, poised to fire a few more queries in Kennedy's direction.

"So uh, you just covering the front right?"

"Yes. Although I never been on shift with four other Stock Control guys."

"Yeah. Evening shifts and all that. So; you just working the night right?"

"As far as I know, you know how it can be working retail though huh?"

"Yeah, did Bow give you instructions and all that?"

"Instructions? He only told me to stick to the front and don't leave, kinda like the day shift I guess."

"Not like the day shift. Look thats well and good but if anything happens with any of the evening customers, if they need a cart taken or anything. Don't entertain them."

"What?"

"They're freaky in the evening is all. Just leave them be and they will leave you be. Don't forget to great them as friendly as possible when they walk in though, and give a kind goodbye as well. Do that and you'll be alright."

"Should I be worried about something?"

Shorty walked up to Vince before he could answer, he lifted a vest in his direction.

Vince nodded before he answered. "Nothing to worry about, just follow them rules and everything will be fried chicken."

Kennedy replied by giving him a wide eyed quick smile while rising to his feet, "Whatever man. My breaks over."

Kennedy surged to his feet and exited the rather unpleasant

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

break room, his fellow coworkers trailing closely behind him like a synchronized procession. An undeniable sensation prickled along his skin as he sensed pairs of eyes fixated on his departing form. Walking past the extensive arrays of discounted garments, he couldn't ignore the dim illumination overhead. Half of the fluorescent bulbs were dormant, casting an eerie ambiance that seemed to emphasize the emptiness. Amidst this silence, with only their footsteps resonating and the distant presence of Bow at the registers, an uncanny stillness enveloped the store.

Kennedy took his position at the front of the store, looking over his shoulder he saw two of the other Stock Prevention Associates scattered about, as Shorty stood along side him at the front.

An uncomfortable hush settled among the men as they lingered within the mostly deserted store, passing nearly thirty minutes in an odd stillness. Just as this silence seemed to stretch on, the sound of automatic doors heralded the arrival of a newcomer. A slight woman entered, her form draped in a delicate silk cloak that concealed her features. Strands of her hair cascaded from the hood, framing her face and trailing down her shoulders. The hood's shadow cast a veil over most of her countenance, leaving only her eyes visible. Fingers deftly danced across the miniature keyboard as she typed with unwavering focus, never once lifting her gaze.

The sight of the mysterious woman caught Kennedy off guard, leaving him momentarily dazed. His thoughts were interrupted by a playful jab to his arm from Shorty, whose voice then broke the silence.

"Welcome to Walergton Resell, thank you for joining us this evening!" He cheerfully greeted before turning his attention to Kennedy, "you got one job here, be kind, customers like that stuff A lot more than you would think."

As the evening progressed, the parade of peculiar individuals continued. A man with an unusually long pair of legs beneath a seemingly halved torso entered, followed by a trio of triplets dressed identically in vivid green, their hushed conversations barely audible. Then, a statuesque woman with elongated arms and an unsettlingly wide smile revealing sharp teeth joined the procession. With each new arrival, Kennedy instinctively offered a courteous greeting, only to be met with a keen, assessing gaze from the visitors.

Shorty shot Kennedy an encouraging grin, silently approving of his friendly salutations. However, Shorty's glances grew more frequent, as he kept an eagle eye on his wrist-watch, ensuring he wouldn't miss the precise timing of his thirty minute break.

"Nice work, kid," he complimented, his tone reassuring. "Keep this up, and you'll survive this place. I'll be back when I'm back. Just hold the fort and do your thing, okay?" With a playful punch to Kennedy's arm, Shorty headed towards the store's rear, leaving Kennedy to manage the door on his own.

Barely five minutes later, the stillness that had settled was shattered by an eerie and almost otherworldly commotion emanating from the back of the store.

Jims voice rang through the radio, "we got a code white in womens underwear requesting backup, not you Kennedy stay put."

"Roger that." Kennedy replied abruptly.

Observing the scene, Kennedy noticed Vincent making his way towards Jim's location. As they converged, Vincent cast a quick sidelong glance in Kennedy's direction before they vanished behind the towering shelves of the store. Within moments, an otherworldly glow emanated from that particular section of the store, casting its radiance over the towering shelves and into the dimly lit corridors. Kennedy instinctively took a cautious step back, while behind him, the insistent hum of the automatic doors once again claimed his focus.

He turned, expecting the sight of an awkward or even dangerous looking individual, but what he was met with was the sight of a young man working man, in some generic retail uniform. "Hi you guys open?" He asked in a kind tone.

"Yes we are, welcome to Walerton Resell sir."

With a friendly smile, the man picked up a basket, and as he did, Kennedy's gaze wandered down the shadowy aisles of the store. The once glowing light had vanished, leaving the place dim again, and worryingly, his fellow coworkers were nowhere in sight. He turned his head to face the relatively normal looking man once again, only to find him

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

gone. He let out a light sigh, "evening shift sucks more than usual..."

Kennedy maintained his monotonous vigil, lingering amidst the dimly illuminated expanse of the store. The handful of customers had gradually melded into the rows of unsold clothes and forgotten accessories, leftovers from larger stores. Amid this subdued atmosphere, the sound of hurried footsteps drew Kennedy's gaze. He pivoted to find Shorty quickly approaching, an almost conspiratorial air about him.

"If anyone asks, I've been here the whole time," Shorty rasped, his voice carrying a hint of secrecy. "My break might have run a little over."

A rustling sound grabbed their focus, originating from the vicinity of the women's underwear section. The duo of men emerged from their enigmatic activities, catching Kennedy's eye. He spotted one of them stowing away a baton-like tool.

Curiosity tinged his voice, "What was that?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Hey, maybe it's time you took a break yourself. You seem a bit jumpy, kin."

Kennedy's heavy exhale carried his weariness, "Sure thing." He glanced down at his aching feet, reluctant to argue even though he knew he had witnessed something unusual. "No need to worry, I won't say a word."

"I knew you'd get it." Shorty said with an agreeable smile.

With a nod of acknowledgment, Kennedy headed toward the break room, eagerly anticipating his well deserved rest. He lowered himself into the rather uncomfortable chair, his fingers propping up his weary head. The events of the evening replayed in his mind like a movie.

As his mind wandered a distant, rhythmic echo, like the muted beat of a drum, caressed the room's corners. Kennedy's head lifted, his gaze sweeping the space, seeking the elusive source of this gentle cadence.

The thump repeated, an repetitive pulse of sound. With a growing sense of curiosity, he pushed himself up from the chair, his footsteps quiet against the floor. Drawing nearer to the wall, the thumps became more pronounced. As if

beckoned by its mysterious rhythm, he stepped closer, his ears attuned to the building crescendo. The noise was coming from the adjacent stock room.

Guided by his growing curiosity, Kennedy treaded softly out of the room and down the short hallway leading to the stock room. His eyes zeroed in on the door, which appeared oddly different with its digital lock disengaged and the panels slightly bent.

“Hello?” He called as he creaked the door open.

The door slipped from Kennedy's grip, unexpectedly swinging open with a force that caught him off guard. Out of the storage room emerged a blur, crashing into him. Together, they tumbled onto the white tile, the impact echoing through the otherwise silent store. Kennedy looked up and saw the familiar face of the otherwise normal looking man. “You!?” Kennedy said.

The stranger quickly regained their footing, a hand clutching a bleeding wound. Kennedy gasped, staggering back in shock at the sight of the blood. Before Kennedy could regain his composure, the man dashed away, vanishing around a nearby corner. The stranger's run was cut short, Vincent's voice echoed from the same direction, causing the man's hasty footsteps to falter.

“Hey there pal you're bleeding on my floor. The cleaning lady won't like that.”

Kennedy's ears caught the echo of a fierce scuffle erupting from the nearby corner. The crazed sounds of Vincent grappling with the stranger immobilized Kennedy, making him stay put. From that corner emerged a swift moving shadow, closely pursued by the running, normal looking man, whose momentum failed him, causing him to crash onto the floor, leaving behind a grisly splatter of blood. Vincent emerged, wearing a triumphant expression, his gaze shifted from Kennedy on the floor to the open storage room door.

“Why is that door open? Vincent said with a look of stern warning written across his face.

Kenny was stunned, unable to find the words his gaze shifted to the storage room. A shiver ran down Kennedy's spine at the eerie sight that unfolded before him. The discolored and uninviting surface of the storage room wall held

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

an unexpected surprise, a concealed trap door sat wide open. The wall had transformed, a portion of it slid aside to expose a cavity.

Like something from a forgotten tale. A single, ancient; looking book rested within the mysterious chamber, situated on an ornate altar. The air was heavy with the inexplicable symbols that encircled the altar and were etched onto the walls, an enigmatic language from another time. And there, encased in now broken glass, the book lay, a relic of some forgotten knowledge or hidden power.

Rapid footsteps echoed through the store, drawing nearer from the entrance. In a matter of seconds, the rest of the Stock Control Agents converged near the stock room, their faces a mixture of astonishment and anxiety.

"It bit me, it bit me!" The wounded man on the floor cried.

All eyes shifted to him as Kennedy rose to his feet. "That guy bumped into me, he was in the room!"

"The room," a voice repeated, out of the chamber, its tone deep, screechy, and unmistakably inhuman. The words seemed to pierce through the air, sending a shiver down Kennedy's spine. "What was that?" he stammered

A quiet hush settled around them. The man on the floor continued to curse, but his words were like distant echoes. All attention was locked onto the opened chamber, a dark aura enveloping it.

A creeping sound drew closer to the entrance, causing Vincent to glance at Kennedy, a commanding stare that ordered him to stand behind them.

"What's happening?" Bow's voice crackled over their radios.

As Kennedy took refuge behind his colleagues, the three men readied an array of strange and unseen equipment, their eyes trained on the advancing sound at the entrance. Each of them pulled out a small baton-like device, which extended into a shock type weapon, its metallic surface glinting faintly in the dim light.

"We got a breach in the stock room." Shorty replied to Bow.

"Understood locking down, you boys know what to do." Bow replied as he reached behind the counter and pulled out a

shotgun along side a box of ammo. "It's time to cha cha."

The cries of the wounded man were drowned out by the sudden crash of heavy duty security doors, slamming shut with a resounding roar, sealing off the alternate exits. The noise triggered a rush among the strange late night customers, who dashed toward the front door in a flurry of fear. Their panicked footsteps filled the air with a chorus of animalistic sounds, a chilling echo of their distress.

In that hidden chamber, a low, growl accompanied the stirring sounds. From the darkness emerged an elongated, bony arm, with patches of charred muscle clinging to it. The arm extended, its burnt and gnarled fingers curling around the edges of the doorway. With a deliberate pull, the mangled figure emerged from the shadows into the dim light of the store. Before them stood an unholy creature, its body a mix of bone and scorched flesh, draped in the tatters of a burnt dress and matching hat.

A surge of unfamiliar fear gripped Kennedy. "That's... that's a..."

"A zombie; kid." Shorty replied.

"Not just any zombie!" Jim chimed in. "That's a class-A Dealy."

"A Dealy?" Kennedy asked, his voice tinged with dread.

"There are more than 400 known types of zombies. Dealy's are the undead who used to be obsessed with materialistic things. They're drawn to cheap stuff, like what we have in our clearance section," Jim explained in a casual tone. He turned to Kennedy, authority in his eyes. "Quick, find me the cheapest piece of junk that's on sale!"

Caught in a moment of shock, Kennedy hesitated. Shorty rolled his eyes and swiftly grabbed a discounted dog toy nearby. "Here!" he exclaimed, shoving it toward Jim.

Kennedy's heart raced, his breath caught in a mix of terror and fascination, as he watched the bizarre interaction unfold before his eyes. The Dealy, its charred form contrasting with the bright plastic toy, fixated its hollow gaze on the item, its skeletal fingers twitching almost as if it remembered the sensation of holding something in its hand.

Shorty's eyes flicked between the Dealy, Jim, and Kennedy,

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

his annoyance barely concealed. "C'mon, Jim," he muttered. "Lure it away already."

Jim took a cautious step back, still holding the toy as if it were the key to his survival. "Yeah, you like that, huh? It's a real steal," he continued, inching backwards. The Dealy, its attention unwavering, began to follow him.

"Deeeaaal..." The Dealy's moan slithered through the air, a ghostly whisper carrying the weight of its past desires.

Vincent swiftly moved into action, his weapon poised with a sense of purpose. He strategically positioned himself behind the Dealy and lifted his baton, with a swift motion, he brought the weapon down. The metallic end of his baton striking the creature's charred flesh with a resounding thud.

The Dealy's cry rang through the air, a guttural sound that seemed to reverberate within Kennedy's chest. The creature writhed in pain, its once aggressive demeanor giving way to a tormented agony. The brilliance of the light cast grotesque shadows on the walls, adding a surreal and almost dream-like quality to the scene.

As the light faded, the hallway plunged back into dimness, the Dealy's pained cry diminishing into silence. The scene was jarring, leaving Kennedy momentarily disoriented. A mixture of fear and awe coursing through his veins as the charred body hit the floor.

Vince turned his gaze towards Shorty, his eyes seeking an answer. "Well?" he inquired, a mixture of urgency and curiosity lacing his tone.

"Oh!" Shorty exclaimed, his brows shooting up in realization.

Without wasting another moment, Shorty hurried over to the fallen, grotesque form. With deft movements, he positioned a bright yellow caution sign near the lifeless creature, his actions brisk and purposeful. Once the sign was in place, he turned back to face Kennedy, a casual shrug accompanying his words. "Legal purposes." Shorty's light smile shifted to a frown as his attention focused on the wounded man. "Did you just piss yourself?"

The attention of everyone shifted to the man sprawled on

the ground, a shameful dampness staining his pants and spreading onto the floor beneath him. Vincent hurried over to the bleeding, piss covered individual and stood over him.

Vincent's voice was a mixture of frustration and concern. "Seriously, how did you get into that room? And how did you even find out about it?" He gestured with his weapon, its metallic tang mixed with the lingering scent of charred flesh. "Look at your injuries, these will be fatal without care."

Before he could utter a word, a chilling echo escaped the chamber, a haunting whisper of "Deals." Once again, all eyes turned towards the hidden passage as a chorus of voices erupted, repeating the word "Deals!" A group of charred Dealys, each adorned in different garments, emerged from within.

"What do we do? We can't customer service them all!" Shorty said.

"They're Dealys, they don't attack when offered good customer service, everyone greet like your life depended on it, no swift movements!"

Vincent reached for his radio and whispered, "We got a Dealy infestation breaking out, we're stuck on greeting duty."

The men spread out like a group of well practiced performers, each striking a pose and delivering their own, over the top greetings to the deal loving zombies. Kennedy felt oddly comfortable with their almost comically exaggerated actions. The creatures shuffled past in a horde, responding with synchronized nods to the absurdly cheerful welcomes. Everyone short of the wounded man on the floor.

He lay there, his voice stitching together a tapestry of curses and spine chilling cries that reverberated throughout the store. The zombies circled him, their demeanor morphing from curiosity to a sinister hunger. "Oh, I must speak to your manager, immediately!" a Dealys voice wailed, "is this any way to treat a customer!" Another cried. Their unearthly cries joining his in a disconcerting harmony. Then, like a curtain call, they lunged, a horde of darkness descending upon him. His agonized screams interwove with their fiendish chorus.

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

The staff members found themselves in a gruesome situation, a disturbing scene unfolding behind them. They clung to their roles, forcing cheerful smiles while their insides churned with a mix of disgust and dread.

The ghastly horde of Dealys shuffled past, their attention now fixated on either snatching deals or potential victims. As the unsettling parade moved deeper into the store, the employees seized the opportunity, practically sprinting into the nearby break room. Inside, a collective exhale of relief was almost audible.

"Why are there zombies crawling out of nowhere?!" Kennedy exclaimed, unable to contain his shock.

"Lower your voice, these creatures hate noise," Shorty cautioned, glancing around nervously.

"Listen up, they aren't coming from the walls," Vincent clarified. "That book, the one in the hidden chamber, it was sealed with a powerful consecration. That jerk out there, the thief, must've broken it. Probably set up by some other idiot who knows about the book. But nobody's supposed to know about that damn book."

Kennedy dragged a chair over and plopped into it. "I don't get any of this... What's even happening?" He dropped his head into his hands, his muttering mixing with random thoughts that slipped from his lips.

"Okay; calm down guy, you're okay." Vincent turned and motioned towards Jim, "Jimbo's going to explain the low down and it's all going to make sense." Using his forceful strength, Vince pushed Jim forward before going to the door and pressing his ear up against it.

Jim shrugged his shoulders with a look on his face that read, "lets wing it."

"I Guess this means you're in. Welcome to the evening shift, you probably heard of the many legends surrounding the forest and other Freelands? Well most of them are real, more than real' they have to be dealt with. Found that out the hard way when a platoon of soldiers was nearly wiped out just trying to get to a place."

Kennedy lifted his hand as if asking to speak, before he could get his chance Jim continued on in his constant slur

of words.

“The incident changed the game on how things are done around the Freelands. All dangerous beasts, and sometimes entity’s, or relics must be secured and dealt with. That’s where we come in! Stock Control in the evening shift aren’t here to keep people from taking stuff out, we are here to keep an undead teleporting relic in.”

Kennedy once again raised a finger but remained frozen as Jim returned to his default big smile while preparing to allow him to speak, something told Kennedy it wouldn't matter what he had to say. He let out a light sigh as his shoulders slumped to the ground, “Continue...”

“Very well. The thug outside broke the ward and now zombies are pouring out of the book, being called by some unknown force somewhere. A broken consecration with bring other undead for sure!”

Kennedy tilted his head sideways and softly laid it down on the hard table. The sound of Vincent’s shoes could be felt vibrating through the shallow table as he came over to check on them.

“so, you tell him about the zombies?”

“Not yet, we were just getting to that when I broke him. I told him everything else though.”

“What do you mean everything else?”

“You know, why we are here, what we are guarding, all that good stuff.”

“You idiot! When I said give him the down low I meant to tell him the basics, you broke the guy with all that crazy info, look at him!”

The two stared at Kennedy who was slightly drooling. “He’s taking it better than I did, I will give him that.” Jim said.

Kennedy jolted back to life as Shorty poured a cold glass of water down his back, causing the boy to shiver. Vincent sat across from him, his youthful face etched with seriousness.

"Ken, I know this is messed up, but something even worse is on the horizon. We need your help to prevent the absolute worst thing in Walerton's history. We can't let those zombies escape this store."

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

Kenned replied with a swift. "No, I can't!"

"I'm sorry kid, but you are." Vince replied with a tone of sympathy accented with fear. "You will have the safest job, all you got to do is hold on to this box of stuff." He pointed down to the right of him, "You and I will fix the protective consecration while Shorty and Jim do their best to slow the shopping horde from reaching the registers. Once it's fixed we move on to phase two. We can worry about that when it's time. Simple huh?" He clapped his hands together, giving Kennedy a false smile.

The only words to escape Kennedy's mouth were, "I get paid minimum wage for this."

Shorty sat next to him and put a hand on his co-workers shoulder, "look kid, we all got our part to do. We're going to be together all the way through, you're not alone."

Kenned slowly nodded as he realized they were not going to accept no for an answer. "If we do this, I'm getting tomorrow off..."

Vince shrugged. "Bow handles the schedules, take it up with him. Speaking of Bow..." He swiftly unclipped his radio from his belt and radioed in. "Bow, how's it looking out there?"

Bow's voice crackled through the radio. "Three of those things tried to join the checkout queue, but I knifed them in the back. I can't keep this up indefinitely. If any of these Dealys stumble upon bodies without yellow warning signs, we're in for trouble."

"Copy that. We'll clean and sweet."

"Make it quick..."

Putting the radio down, he looked across the table, "boy's its time to earn that minimum wage."

Vince led the way, his knuckles whitening around the grip of the electric baton. Shorty followed, weariness etched on his weathered face, a wistful grin breaking the facade of fatigue. Jim overshadowed Shorty, his imposing stature almost bulldozing the shorter man out of the room. Kennedy, carrying the box, treaded carefully in the footsteps of these seasoned Stock Control Associates.

The Dealys had made their way halfway into the sprawling retail store. They leisurely wandered down the aisles, scouring each section in their pursuit of deals. In the midst of this strange sight, their voices carried a continuous stream of complaints, on every trivial issue one would find in such a place. Kennedy's grip on the bulky box faltered as the cacophonous chorus of grievances and gasps from the Dealy horde assailed his ears.

Vince firmly gripped Kennedy's arm, his voice urgent. "Stick close to me. We're getting away from those creatures and heading into the chamber, got it?" Without waiting for an answer, he guided Kennedy into the stock room and through the concealed entrance.

The boy stumbled into dimly lit chamber. Cryptic symbols adorned ancient stone walls. At the room's center, an altar crafted from a combination of wood and stone loomed. On this altar lay a book, its pages revealed beneath a shattered glass casing. Kennedy's curiosity tugged at him, urging him to explore the contents of the box he cradled. He carefully examined the jumble of tools and unfamiliar items, each telling a different story. Among these, his eyes were drawn to a replacement glass. Its surface marred with cryptic etchings.

"Alright Kennedy, just hand me what I ask for and we'll all go home to regret another shift."

Kennedy took in a deep breath and began to exhale as he took many small steps towards Vince, where he knelt beside him and placed the box down. "What are we doing?"

"Saving the lands of light, you're a hero already," he said, a sly grin on his face. "And you're getting paid double for your trouble." He pointed towards the box. "Hand me that wrench, good... Now, pass me those screws, thanks... Okay, take that handgun and watch my back while I work here."

"What?" Kennedy's confusion was evident.

"Don't tell me they removed handgun training from orientation again?"

"Orientation was online. I sat there for two hours watching videos."

"What a country. Just give me the gun, then. Take that

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

spare wrench and throw it if anything comes our way."

"What if I miss?"

"Then run towards it and face it like a man, Kennedy. I'm trying to concentrate here!"

His outburst carried his words beyond the chamber and into the corridors of the resale store. "What's that, kids talking nonsense and goofing off in the bathroom again?" slurred an undead, charred man. He spoke with a faint whisp, his broken and missing teeth hindering his speech.

The Dealy took a few steps forward, meticulously examining every price tag as he passed. "Whos... There..." he mumbled.

"Oh, I'm just a cheerful worker, sir, here to tend to and highlight our wonderful deals," Jim's voice echoed from the shadows. "Take a look at this fantastic deal on doggie toys." The shifty character lifted his hand and squeaked a toy twice.

"Doggie toys? I don't have a dog, but I sure do like toys," the Dealy responded, swaying as he moved, his charred legs producing a scraping sound as they brushed against each other.

"Right this way, sir," Jim said, his perfect white teeth the only visible thing in the darkness. He led the zombie through the maze of clothing racks, quickly circling the fumbling creature.

"And so it must be done," Jim quipped, bringing the baton down on the back of the zombie's head. Its charred remains thudded to the ground. Another flash of bright light erupted from a distant baton across the store; Shorty was out there doing his part to cull the horde.

"What was that sound?" a Dealy called out from somewhere near the horde.

"Oh, nothing, ma'am," Jim replied calmly. "But if you'd like to inspect this isolated dark area yourself, be my guest." His grin echoed from the shadows.

Vincent stood before the ancient stone altar, a sense of responsibility weighing on his shoulders. The shattered glass cover that once protected the sacred book was now a mere

heap of shards at his feet. He carefully retrieved a pristine glass pane from his toolkit, specially marked with intricate symbols etched with precision. This glass was unique; it provided an additional layer of protection against accidental damage to the book. As he gently placed the glass onto the altar, he couldn't help but mutter, "I hope this wasn't the crystal ball section of the manual."

With a practical mindset, Vincent began the process of restoration. He lit a bundle of sage, its fragrant smoke spiraling upward and filling the chamber with a pleasant aroma. He thought, "Well, if nothing else, the bookshelf might be the best-smelling place in the store now." While he didn't necessarily believe in the mystical properties of sage, he had read that it could help clear the air of impurities, and that was what he needed right now. He carefully cleaned up the shattered glass, making sure to dispose of it safely, and then double-checked the hinges and latch that held the glass cover in place. Everything needed to be secure to prevent further accidents.

As he completed the final step, meticulously aligning the glass cover with the hinges, Vincent couldn't help but crack a dry smile. He thought, "If this were a movie, there'd be dramatic music right about now." With a satisfying click, the cover settled into place. The altar looked as good as new, and the book was once again protected. Vincent took a step back, surveying his work.

"Is that it?" Kennedy asked.

"Yeah what were you expecting?"

"Well you made it sound like a real big chore and all that."

"We work retail kid, everything's a big chore."

Kennedy sighed, though before a word could escape his mouth, the sound of something making a scratch like noise made its way towards them. Vincent instantly recognized it as a Dealy by that screechy noise its legs released as it walked forward. "Hey, is anyone in there?" The creature said as it wobbled inside the chamber. "You...I made a mess in the mens room, you will need to clean that up. I'd advice you get right to it." It spoke in its unnatural tone.

Kennedy was stunned, the sound of the zombie and its completely natural words and terrible meaning. Vincent

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

stood up and approached the zombie to keep it from the glass container. "Yes sir, we will clean that up immediately."

The zombie shifted its gaze past Vince and locked its lifeless, empty eye sockets onto Kennedy. "I wasn't talking to you, son. I was talking to him." It raised a bony, three-fingered hand, pointing a gnarled digit directly at Kennedy. "Him, clean it..."

Kennedy stood frozen, gripped by a dark trance. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the creature's empty sockets as an overwhelming fear coursed through his veins.

"He's otherwise indisposed at this moment," Vincent replied.

The Dealy glanced at Kennedy and then back to Vincent. "I think he's some kind of slacker."

"No, sir, no slackers here!"

"You're getting loud, kid. I hate loud noises."

"I can clean it," Kennedy blurted out, capturing both Vincent's and the Dealy's attention.

"Well, isn't that nice?" The Dealy replied, his tone surprisingly cheerful.

Vincent nodded, and as Kennedy tried to stand up, he clumsily kicked over the box of tools, creating a cacophony as items clattered across the ancient floor.

"I hate loud noises!" the Dealy screeched.

"Sorry, pal." Vince kicked the creature in its weakened chest, The Dealy tumbled backward, its fragile frame shattering into two separate parts.

"That's discrimination," the zombie grumbled as it pulled itself along with its two hands, its disconnected legs still kicked erratically.

"I'll inform the manager," Vincent declared, a mischievous smile tugging at his lips as he retrieved his baton and held it high.

The intense, searing light from his baton flooded out of the chamber and spilled into the dimly lit halls of the retail

store. Shorty, Jim, and all the remaining Dealys couldn't help but take notice of the chaotic spectacle, where blinding flashes of light were accompanied by a bundle of noise. For a brief moment, after the dazzling display subsided, a dark stillness descended upon the scene. Both Dealys and Stock Associates alike froze in place, their heads cocked towards the chamber doorway. Shorty found himself standing beside a Dealy he had intended to slay, while Jim had created a small fortress from the bodies of over ten "serviced" Dealys.

"What was that?" One Dealy said.

"I don't know." Another replied.

Twenty Dealys still lingered, not a massive horde, but certainly enough to be menacing, especially given their agitated state. They were rapidly shedding any vestiges of humanity they might have had. These creatures began to emit guttural growls and hisses, interspersed with random questions that gradually lost all connection to the initial incident. Soon, their utterances devolved into an incomprehensible uproar of horrific sounds that only the undead could produce.

Jim and Shorty stood there, stunned by the unfolding chaos. Bow, however, reacted swiftly. He sprinted forward, a knife gripped tightly in his hand, and leaped into the air. With a forceful strike, he plunged the blade into a Dealy's head, bringing it down as he landed. The thud of his body hitting the ground snapped Shorty and Jim out of their stupor. They both lunged into the fray, shouting as they swung their weapons at the Dealys, attempting to draw their attention.

From within the chamber the unfolding chaos could be heard. "That's a really bad sign. We need to leave now!" Vincent urged. But before they could make a break for it, a voice echoed through the radio.

"Vince, ten of them are pouring into the hallway leading to the chamber. Close the door now!"

He couldn't tell whose voice it was, but didn't matter, because it was already too late. The many shadows of Dealys could be seen slithering toward the chamber door. Vince turned to face Kennedy, picked up a wrench, and placed it into the trembling boy's hand. "I'm sorry. It's fight or die,

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

my friend."

Kennedy looked down at the makeshift weapon in hand.

"Aim for the head; you won't kill them with one hit using that thing. It will stun them, though. We can't let them break the new consecration... Are you listening to me?"

Kennedy met his gaze, his eyes brimming with apprehension.

"We cannot let them shatter the glass, okay?"

He reluctantly nodded, offering Vince the same fake smile he reserved for customers. In the corner of his eye he saw the first of the Dealys slowly being their entrance into the chamber.

"Kennedy, look at me...Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good!" Vince swiftly pivoted and swung his baton, striking the first Dealy's head. "One down, nine to go, Ken!" Dealys began to pour into the chamber, in moments Vincent was surrounded by three of them.

Kennedy watched in shock; as Vincent courageously battled against the trio of Dealys. They clawed and scratched at him, their jagged limbs tore through the air, aiming to maim and bleed. For a fleeting moment, the chaos around him seemed to fade, as if he had slipped into another dimension, the horrific sounds of the undead reduced to a distant murmur, his heart slowed as it grew loud in his ears. The illusion of safety was shattered in the next heartbeat when Vincent's anguished cries pierced the chamber.

The harsh grip of reality yanked Kennedy back to the grim truth. Vincent was now on his knees, ensnared by the fallen Dealys. One of the grotesque creatures clamped its teeth into Vincent's shoulder, while another gnashed at his legs. Panic surged within Kennedy, drowning out his shock and disbelief.

Vincent's gaze locked onto Kennedy's amidst the encircling Dealys. "Fight..." He mustered the last of his strength, hurtling himself forward, sending a Dealy soaring across the chamber. Vincent lunged toward Kennedy, throwing his

baton at the boys feet. He felt the clawing of a Dealy tearing at his ankles like a small dog. Enraged, Vincent turned and grasped the beast's withered skull and yelled aloud as he began to squish, "Can I help, ma'am?!"

With rage-fueled strength, Vincent crushed the fragile skull beneath his hands, a surge of energy coursing through him. He leaped to his feet and hurled the nearest Dealy into a trio that seemed to provoke the enraged man. The three of them shattered under the force of their own kind. However, as the energy had surged into his body, it quickly dissipated.

Vincent turned and punched through the soft flesh of yet another Dealy, only to be pounced on by two others. One sank its teeth deep into his shoulder, while a crippled Dealy bit into his ankle, bringing him down once more.

Agonizing pain coursed through the man, and just as he felt all light fading, a searing, blinding light shot into the corner of his eye. The familiar scent of charred Dealy flesh filled his nostrils, and he heard the crackling sound of their burning bodies. A faint smile crossed his face as he sensed the arrival of an enraged yet fearful Kennedy

The weight on his body seemed to diminish as Kennedy swung the baton like a madman. His strikes landed with brutal force on the Dealys, shattering their ribs and sending their bodies hurtling through the air. They often broke into two upon impact, the sickening thud of their landing echoing through the chamber.

Vincent, lying there with a triumphant smile on his face, couldn't help but be drawn to the sealed book. It remained untouched amidst the carnage, its pages undisturbed even as Kennedy's frenzied assault on the Dealys continued. As the remaining Dealys fell Kennedy's adrenaline fueled rage slowly subsided, he found himself shocked at his own doings, looking at the weapon in his hands, covered in charred flesh and aged remains of what was once the interior of men and women, those things that lived before their undead rise. He fell to his knees as a heavy shame fell upon his shoulders.

Once more, the world around Kennedy seemed to slip away. His limbs became immovable, as if weighed down by an immense force. His vision blurred, and he struggled to

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

keep his eyes open as the sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the chamber. Summoning the last reserves of his strength, he managed to turn his head and catch a glimpse of his fellow coworkers rushing into the room. It was a fleeting sight, for darkness overtook his vision just as they arrived.

Kennedy's eyes flew open as a sudden, icy cascade of water struck his skin. He jolted upright, finding himself on the worn-out break room table, assaulted by that all-too-familiar unpleasant smell. "I... I died," he mumbled, disoriented.

"Not quite yet, kid," Shorty's reassuring voice came from his left. "You're still alive, and your shift officially ended half an hour ago."

Taking in his surroundings, Kennedy saw Jim to his right and Shorty to his left. The memories of the recent events came flooding back, but amidst the chaos, a sinking feeling of guilt gnawed at him. He couldn't believe he was still at work, well past the end of his shift. That feeling was soon overtaken by the thought of Vincent, who was absent. "Wheres Vince?"

Jim gave him a sad shrug, that large smile of his halfheartedly worn. "He's alive, but not looking too good. He's on the way to the hospital."

Shorty didn't say a thing, his eyes met the ground and refused to lift.

"Come on, lets go home." Jim continued.

The three of them slipped out quietly, bearing the weight of the recent horrors on their shoulders. As they made their way towards the exit, Kennedy couldn't help but observe the pristine environment, accompanied by the droning sound of the industrial floor cleaner in the background.

The noise of the cleaner grew more pronounced as they walked, and Kennedy cast his gaze across the store. There, he spotted a small group of cleaning ladies going about their usual routines, but something struck him as odd. The large, tightly bundled trash bags they were collecting seemed rather suspicious.

Noticing his suspicious Jim said, "They got their job we got ours, jobs over Ken."

Kennedy nodded, quickening his pace without taking a moment to pause. The rhythmic sounds of the cash registers filled his ears, and he turned his head to see Bow, diligently closing each of them for the night. Determinedly, Kennedy approached his manager.

"Hey," he began, catching Bow's attention, "I want the shift."

Bow rolled his eyes, as if anticipating this request. "No, you don't, and before you explain, what happened to Vince was not your fault."

Despite what anyone said, the evening's events weighed heavily on Kennedy's conscience. "I want the shift," he reiterated.

Bow, considering the dire staffing situation with Charles incapacitated due to a heart attack and Vince absent after the night's ordeal, "No, you don't." repeating himself with a touch of vulnerability. Kennedy's question hung in the air, met by a moment of silence. Bow sighed as he contemplated. "You know, that wasn't the worst of it. Are you absolutely sure about this?"

Without hesitation, Kennedy nodded firmly. "Absolutely sure."

Their eyes locked, a shared sense of seriousness passing between them. "Fine," Bow relented, "you can shadow me, and if you survive the weekend, you're in, and yes, I do mean survive."

The notion briefly made Kennedy consider stepping back, but he held his ground. "Alright, sounds good."

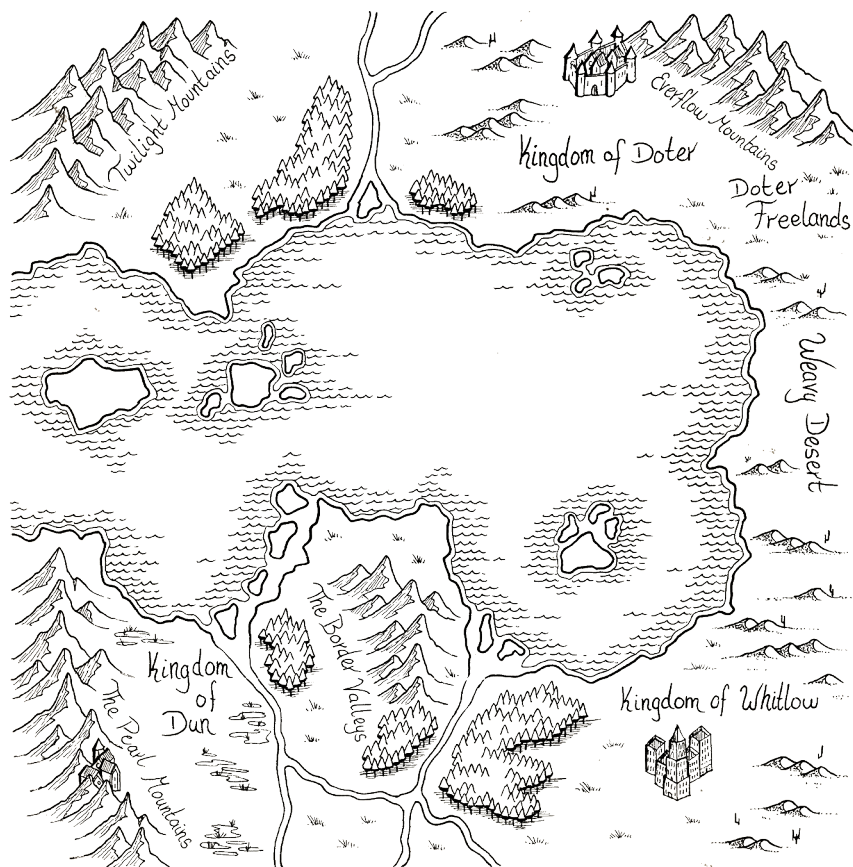
"We'll see," Bow responded. "Get some rest, Kennedy. You're on the evening shift now."

Bowrigard slouched back in his chair, observing his staff members as they filed out of the store for the remainder of the evening. Relief washed over him; he had a substantial amount of work left to address after the nightmarish event. However, an unsettling feeling lingered. He couldn't shake the thought that, with the book left unprotected for so long, a variety of dark entities might have made their way through. He clung to the hope that only the zombies had taken notice, though deep down, he knew he was mistaken.

WALERTON: SHELFs OF SHADOWS

His gaze shifted to the vacant store aisles, where the cleaning ladies went about their work. Amid the dimness of the resell Walerton shelves, something seemed to be watching back.

MAP OF THE LANDS OF LIGHT



Thank You For Reading!

Thank you, all readers, for taking the time out of your busy lives for yet another journey into the world without end. This story was quite a frustration to get out as most electronic equipment decided to falter at the last minute; nonetheless, here we are.

Thank each of you.

Worldwithoutendlore.substack.com

Worldwithoutendlore.com