

From Blanc LaBelle and the Troll's Daughter

By Nicholas Westbrook

“Can you come clean up aisle 16?”

“What?” Matt asked. He was only three hours into his shift stocking the shelves and it already felt like eight. With all the restaurants closed down again, the pandemic had increased store traffic to the point that keeping the shelves from going bare felt like a full-time job without Matt's other duties. Still, most people ignored him and he preferred that to listening to someone's latest conspiracy theory in response to the store's mask policy. The only reason Matt took these shifts was so he wouldn't need to talk with customers like this girl.

“There's a mess in aisle 16,” the girl urged. Her long, blonde hair was tied up into a messy bun to keep the strands out of her emerald green eyes. She looked about sixteen, but if they went to the same school, Matt didn't recognize her from any of his classes. She was wearing a bright yellow raincoat, a floral t-shirt, jeans, and water-logged sneakers. Matt wasn't sure if he'd heard her correctly or not with the thick, cloth mask hiding her mouth.

Matt sighed and ran a hand over his curly, dark hair. He was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt under his wrinkled, dark green work apron. He had always been a skinny kid with a round face and dark brown eyes. When he spoke in the store, it was with the practiced grace of someone who'd been working in retail for too long. “Yeah,” Matt sighed, “we don't have an aisle 16.”

“I think you should check again,” the girl said, a little firmer. “Let me show you.”

“I have to—”

“Please,” she pleaded. “You need to see this.”

Something about the urgency in her voice surprised Matt and he decided to follow her rather than endlessly stack the cans to his right. He tugged his cotton mask a little further up his nose and walked a few steps behind her. Why she'd chosen him to handle the current problem made no sense. Even if the store had an aisle 16, Matt was sure that someone else was closer that could handle it just as well. Still, he followed the girl to the mysterious aisle when his curiosity eclipsed his irritation.

Once bottles of soda and bags of chips flanked them on either side of aisle 15, the girl finally stopped walking. Checking both ends of the aisle, she held a finger over her mask to shush him. Her eyebrows raised to ask for Matt to be quiet and he nodded to accept her request.

“I know there’s no aisle 16,” she whispered.

“Oh good, you can read numbers,” Matt rolled his eyes.

“But I do need your help.”

The girl pulled off her mask. Her eyes were normal enough, but the lower half of her face startled Matt. Her nose was flat and broad like the gorilla Matt had seen at the zoo when he was eleven. Her mouth was punctuated by two sharp teeth protruding up from her lower jaw. Each tusk was as long and thick as the last knuckle of Matt’s pinky.

“Please don’t panic!” The strange girl urged, pulling her mask back over her face. Matt could still see the outline of her tusks, but anyone who didn’t know wouldn’t give her masked face a second look. “If you do, they’ll find me for sure.”

“I—you—you’re—”

“Half,” the girl said, looking over her shoulder. “Half-troll, I mean. On my mother’s side. Be glad I only inherited her teeth and not her temper. I need your help.”

“What are you? What do you mean troll?”

“Look,” she urged, “What’s important is that I’m not going to hurt you. My name is Mira.”

“Mira,” Matt exhaled. “Okay, so why are you here? Shouldn’t you be under a bridge or something?”

“That’s offensive stereotyping!” Mira snapped. She relaxed her clenched fist and Matt could hear her slowly exhale through her mask. “Look, everyone is wearing a mask these days, so I figured it would be a perfect time to come above ground for something important. Vampires and elves come up all the time, but this has been my first chance to ever go up to the Above.”

“There are vampires and elves? I’ve never seen one.”

“Maybe you just never knew? Some folk have all the luck.”

“Why do you need me?”

“I need help getting across town. There’s someone very important I need to find.”

“Can’t I just...give you bus fare and forget you were here?”

“I’m afraid that won’t work.”

“I don’t know, I’m very good at forgetting things.”

“They’re looking for people like me on buses. Please, I need your help.” Mira paused and read his name tag. “I’m begging you, Matt. I need help.”

“Who’s looking for you?”

“Go take a peek at the main doors. There are two men in black windbreakers by the exit. They’re not shopping, just looking around.”

Matt walked down to the end of the aisle. At both of the automatic doors, there was a man stationed in a black windbreaker and a disposable white mask. One was wearing dark sunglasses, but Matt could see the other man’s eyes scanning people’s faces as they walked out the door. The man without glasses turned towards him and Matt frantically ducked behind the aisle display. After he checked again to ensure the men weren’t charging to get him, Matt rushed back to Mira.

“Those guys are after you? Why?”

“Because I’m half-troll. Their whole organization hunts and kills people like me. Please, Matt, I need help. If I’m caught, they’ll kill me and dissect me. Maybe not in that order either.”

“Okay, what do you want me to do?”

“Do you have a car?” Mira asked. “Can you take me out of here and drive me across town?”

“What about my boss?”

“Say you’re feeling sick. They’d have to send you home, right?”

“Yeah, but I could get fired if I’m caught ditching.”

“Look, do this for me and you can have all my money.”

“Trolls have money?”

“Half-troll,” Mira corrected, glaring, “and, yeah. I have a little saved up. The guy I’m looking for might offer you more. I know it’s a big request, but I’m out of options that don’t involve me getting experimented on.”

Matt looked over his shoulder again, paranoid. Mira was in real danger, he could see that. There were risks: losing his job, getting mixed up in something sinister, getting himself hurt. He thought for a moment about what to do. Matt knew she didn’t have any other options. In the end, he chose to help Mira because she had asked him for it. “Okay,” Matt whispered. “Follow me.”