

Starlite Cinema

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Reginald Mulrooney had had a tough day. He had bombed his math quiz in first period, forgotten his homework assignment in third period, and gotten bullied by some older kids in fifth period. As such, he was more than happy to see the school day finally come to an end.

And things were looking up.

Way up.

He was walking home with Jenna Anderson, one of the prettiest girls at Heatherwood Middle School.

“Hey, Reg,” she called. “Wait up.”

She caught up to him a second later, with her backpack in one hand. Judging by the size of it, it looked like it was crammed full of books.

“That was pretty cool what you did in History class today,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The way you stood up to Logan and Caleb,” she said. “Those two are so mean. I hate them.”

Reginald nodded. “I’ve never liked them, either,” he said. “And I’ve got enough homework of my own tonight, so I’m definitely not doing theirs.”

Jenna laughed. “It was still pretty brave,” she said. “Those two are pretty intimidating. Especially Caleb. Most kids do whatever he says.”

“Not me,” Reginald said.

He was about to say something more, but he noticed Jenna had become distracted by something in the distance. He turned to see what she was looking at and noticed they had just walked past the Starlite Cinema, an old movie theater that had been closed and boarded up long ago. There was a single, white van parked in its parking lot next to the front entrance.

“That’s strange,” Jenna said. “Is someone renovating the old theater?”

“I’m not certain,” Reginald said. “I heard rumors it was purchased a couple of years ago by Professor Hermann, and he’s been working on it for awhile now, but I haven’t seen much progress. Not on the outside, at least.”

It was true. The outside of the theater, including its old-style marquee, looked like it hadn’t been touched at any time in the past twenty years, maybe longer. What little paint that remained on it was old, faded, and chipping badly.

“Why would Professor Hermann want to buy an old theater?” Jenna asked.

Reginald shrugged. To be honest, he had no idea.

Professor James Hermann was an elderly man, in his mid to late seventies, who was relatively well known around town. Most of the people who knew him considered him a genius, and Reginald had heard stories Professor Hermann had earned doctorate degrees in math, science, and engineering by the time he was twenty-five. He had gone to one of the Ivy League schools, but Reginald couldn’t remember which one. After school, he had worked for years at a large engineering firm in northern California, then spent twenty years as a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, and had retired a few years back so he could begin work on some big ‘project’ of his own. To this day, no one knew what that project was.

“Could this be his big project?” Jenna asked.

“Renovating an old movie theater?” Reginald asked. There was more than a little skepticism in his voice. “Why would a man as brilliant as Professor Hermann want to renovate an old dump like this?”

Jenna hesitated for a second, clearly not knowing what to say, but then a mischievous smile crossed her face.

“Why don’t we find out?” she asked, and turned and headed for the theater’s front door.

“I don’t know about that,” Reginald said as he followed her. “It’s his business. I don’t want to bother him.”

“He won’t mind,” she said. “And if you want we can sneak in. That way, he won’t even know we’re here.”

Reginald was more than a little reluctant, but Jenna had already made her way up to the Starlite’s main entrance, which was next to its ticket booth, so he felt he had no choice but to follow. Unfortunately, the front entrance was locked, so they headed around back and (much to Jenna’s delight) found the rear door was open. Someone, presumably Professor Hermann, had propped the door open with a small piece of wood.

The interior of the theater was as unimpressive as its exterior. The hallway they entered was dark, dusty, and run-down, and a small mouse scurried away as they made their way to the theater’s main lobby. Reginald could tell from the lobby’s high ceiling and fancy chandelier it had once been a marvelous place, but that had been many years ago. Now, everything was dust and cobwebs.

But then something caught their eye. The lobby had four doors, one on each side, that presumably opened into individual theaters, and one of them was open. They entered cautiously, and discovered an environment like none they had seen before. The screen at the front of the room had been taken down, all of the seats had been removed, and the floor had been rebuilt so it was level (and not sloped like in a normal theater). The room’s walls and floor had been painted with some type of material that was extremely shiny and highly reflective. Reginald could see his and Jenna’s reflections the minute they entered the room. But the most interesting part of the room, by far, was its ceiling. Suspended from it was some of the most intricate machinery Reginald had ever seen.

“What is it?” Reginald asked.

“I don’t know,” Jenna said. “Is it some type of camera?”

They jumped as a voice answered her question.

“In a way,” it said.

Reginald and Jenna turned and saw an elderly man standing in one corner of the room, at the top of a tall ladder, adjusting some settings on one of the pieces of machinery.

At first, Reginald didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to get in trouble for trespassing, so at first he was tempted to turn and run, but at the same time, the man’s voice didn’t sound upset or threatening at all.

“Are you Professor Hermann?” he asked. Although he had heard a lot about Professor Hermann over the years, he had never met him in person.

“I am,” he asked. “And who are you?”

“I’m Reginald Mulrooney,” he said. “And this is Jenna Anderson.”

“Jenna Anderson,” Professor Hermann said with a smile. “You wouldn’t be Frank Anderson’s daughter, would you?”

Jenna smiled. “Actually,” she said, “I am.”

“Delightful,” Professor Hermann said. “I knew your father. He was a student of mine back at the university. A delightful young man. Very bright indeed.”

At that, Professor Hermann finished what he was doing and climbed down. As he did, he came better into view, and they got a better look at him. He was a small, wiry man, approximately

5'4" tall, with fluffy, graying hair that seemed to go in every direction at once. In many ways, he reminded Reginald of Albert Einstein. He wore a long, dirty overcoat that looked like it hadn't been washed in years.

"We're sorry, Professor Hermann," he said. "We saw someone was working in here, and we were curious what was going on. We didn't mean to intrude."

"Nonsense," Professor Hermann responded. "You're not intruding at all. Actually, you're exactly what I need."

"Need?" Jenna asked.

"I need some opinions," Professor Hermann said. "I've been working on this theater for nearly two years now, mostly by myself, and I've almost got it done. Well, this room at least, and one more. I'll work on the lobby, ticket booth, and the exterior later, when I get all of this stuff done. But anyway, I need some input. I need some people, preferably young people like you, to tell me what you think."

"Of what?" Jenna asked.

"Of this," Professor Hermann said.

He reached into one of his pockets and removed a device that looked like an oversized television remote controller, one of the really fancy ones with a touch screen on the front. He pushed a series of buttons and the most amazing thing happened.

There was a bright flash of light, and the room transformed.

In every way.

They had once been standing in the middle of a nearly empty room in the middle of a renovated theater. A second later, they were standing on a small, wooden bridge in the middle of a Japanese garden filled with some of the prettiest trees, flowers, and ponds Reginald had ever seen.

He rubbed his eyes. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Beside him, Jenna was doing exactly the same.

Professor Hermann laughed. He had been watching them carefully, and clearly he was enjoying their reaction.

"How is this possible?" Reginald asked. "You changed the whole room. And it looks so real."

"It wasn't easy," Professor Hermann said. "It's taken me my whole life, plus most of my savings, to make this room a reality. And the others, there are four total here in the Starlite, but only two are operational so far. I'll show them to you later. Anyway, everything you see around you is a hologram."

"A hologram?" Jenna asked. Apparently, she had never heard the word before.

"A three-dimensional image," Professor Hermann explained. "They're created by the machinery you saw in the ceiling."

Reginald reached down and tapped the railing on the bridge. "Sir," he said. "This hologram is solid. How is that possible?"

Professor Hermann smiled. "The projectors that create the holograms are very complex. They use every trick I've been able to develop over the years: light projection, image manipulation, and matter replication, just to name a few. It's taken me an entire life of study to be able to build these projectors."

Jenna was as amazed as Reginald. "Sir," she said. "I feel a breeze. And it's a lot warmer in here than when we first entered the room."

Professor Hermann smiled. "Climate control," he said. "I wanted the entire experience to be as realistic as possible, so I built and installed an extremely complex heating system throughout

the room, with fans to create a breeze and everything. And the best part is I can control everything with this remote, or from the main control booth upstairs.”

“Control booth?” Reginald asked.

“Yes,” Professor Hermann said. “It’s the location of the main computer system that runs this whole thing. The operating system alone took me nearly six months to design.”

Jenna was unable to contain her excitement any longer. She rushed from the bridge, knelt by the side of the pond, and dipped her hand into the water.

“Amazing,” she said. “It feels just like real water.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Professor Hermann said. “This theater is my big plan to revolutionize the entertainment world as we know it. Nobody will want to go to movies anymore after they see this place. Why would you want to watch a movie when you can experience one instead?”

“What do you mean?” Reginald asked.

“Do you like martial arts movies?” Professor Hermann asked.

“A little,” Reginald responded.

“Then tell me what you think of this.”

He pushed a series of buttons, there was a bright flash of light, and a group of men materialized (seemingly out of nowhere) on the far side of the room. They were dressed in ornate, Asian armor and resembled Japanese samurai. The tallest of the men ran up to Reginald, bowed deeply, and said something in Japanese. Reginald, who had no idea what to do, looked at him with a blank expression on his face.

“Whoops,” Professor Hermann said, then pushed a button on his controller. “Maybe that’s a little too realistic,” he said.

The man repeated himself. This time, his words were in English.

“Your majesty,” he said. “Tanaka’s forces have entered the city and begun their invasion. What are your orders?”

“My orders?” Reginald asked.

“Yes, your highness,” the man said. “Should we continue to defend the city, or should we begin an organized retreat?”

Reginald didn’t know what to do. To be honest, he had no idea what the man was talking about. He turned to Professor Hermann for advice.

“Your forces are much stronger than Tanaka’s,” Professor Hermann said. “You’ll prevail. Tell him to continue to defend the city.”

Somewhat hesitantly, and still not knowing exactly what was going on, Reginald turned back to the samurai. “Defend the city,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” the man said. He bowed, drew his katana from his belt, and rushed away. The rest of the samurai followed him.

“You can make humans?” Reginald asked.

“Of course not,” Professor Hermann said. “Not real ones, anyway. Those men were all holographic images, but of course very complex ones. They’re part of an interactive adventure involving the invasion of their city. If you’d wanted, you could have accompanied them and taken part in the battle.”

“A battle?” Reginald asked.

“Oh yeah,” Professor Hermann said. “It’s part of this program. Over the years, I’ve made several. This is my ancient Far East program. It was one of the first ones I ever wrote, so it’s not quite as complex as some of them, but it’s still pretty good, if I say so myself. It started as

just this garden, but then I added the Imperial Palace, then the surrounding city, and then a story involving an invasion by an evil sorcerer named Katashi Tanaka.”

“And you have others?” Reginald asked.

“Several,” Professor Hermann said. “There’s a pirate program, a western, a sci-fi, and my newest one has dinosaurs.”

“Dinosaurs?” Jenna asked. “I love dinosaurs.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Professor Hermann asked. “I’d love to get your feedback. Would you like to try it?”

“You bet I would,” Jenna said.

Her eyes were wide with interest.

Professor Hermann smiled. Clearly, this was exactly the reaction he had wanted. He pushed several buttons on his controller, and there was a brief, blinding flash of light. When the flash subsided, the entire room had transformed around them. The Japanese garden was gone, and it had been replaced with a lush, green, prehistoric jungle filled with trees and giant ferns. A fine coat of perspiration formed on Reginald’s brow as the temperature of the room increased and it filled with humidity. In the distance, he could hear the rustling of leaves and the babbling of flowing water.

“Look at that,” Jenna said. There was complete amazement and awe in her voice. She pointed to one side.

Standing not too far from her, grazing in a shallow stream, were two enormous, gray creatures, dinosaurs of some type.

“Styracosaurus,” she said with a smile.

Reginald’s jaw fell open.