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Gerben strolled through downtown Almelo, the early evening sun casting long shadows across the cobblestone streets. He was a man of medium build, with a gentle demeanor that often went unnoticed amidst the bustling city life. His eyes, a soft shade of brown, observed the world with a quiet curiosity. He was on his way home from work, looking forward to a simple dinner and a good book. The air was filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread from the nearby bakery and the distant chatter of families enjoying the last moments of the day.

As he turned the corner, the tranquility of the scene was abruptly shattered by a booming voice that seemed to shake the very foundations of the buildings. "Hey, you!" It was the Hulk, standing tall and menacing, his green skin glistening with the sweat of his travels. The crowd parted like the Red Sea before Moses, leaving a clear path between Gerben and the hulking figure. The creature's eyes, two piercing orbs of emerald rage, bore into him. The air grew thick with tension as the Hulk took a step closer, his massive form casting an enormous shadow over the trembling mortal.

Gerben swallowed hard, his heart hammering in his chest like a drum in a frantic symphony. He had read about the Hulk in comic books, seen him in movies, but never in his wildest dreams did he imagine he would encounter the creature in real life. The Hulk's question was simple, yet it echoed through the streets like a battle cry: "Where's the ice cream store?" Gerben's mind raced. He knew the place, but was it wise to get too close to a being of such brute strength? Yet, the alternative was unthinkable. He pointed with a shaky hand, his voice a mere whisper, "Two blocks down, on the left."

The Hulk's expression softened slightly, the rage in his eyes fading to a hint of curiosity. He lumbered in the direction Gerben had indicated, the ground trembling with each step. Gerben watched him go, his fear slowly giving way to a strange sense of relief. The Hulk had not smashed him into a pulp; instead, he had asked for directions. As the green giant disappeared from view, Gerben let out a sigh and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. He couldn't help but feel a mix of bewilderment and amusement at the situation.

He had taken only a few steps when he heard the sound of glass shattering. His heart skipped a beat, and he spun around to see the Hulk standing in front of him again, holding a half-eaten ice cream cone in one hand and a crumpled dollar bill in the other. "Ice cream," the Hulk grunted, holding out the dollar bill. "You buy?"

Gerben stared at the outstretched hand, the dollar bill fluttering in the evening breeze like a white flag of surrender. The ice cream vendor, a young woman with trembling hands, looked on in horror. The crowd had not dispersed entirely; they hovered at a

safe distance, watching the unfolding scene with a mix of terror and fascination. Gerben realized that the Hulk had no intention of letting him go. He took the bill, his hand shaking almost as much as the vendor's, and nodded. "Sure, I'll buy you an ice cream," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

The vendor, whose legs seemed to have turned to jelly, managed to produce another cone with three generous scoops of ice cream. The Hulk took it with a gentle nod, his massive hand making the treat look like a mere trifle. He licked the creamy goodness with a look of pure contentment, the epitome of a giant child. Gerben paid the vendor, who took his money with a grateful smile, and he couldn't help but wonder if she was more relieved at being paid or at not being crushed.

The Hulk devoured his ice cream with surprising grace, given his monstrous form. The sight was almost comical, and Gerben found himself fighting back a laugh. As the Hulk finished, he looked up and their eyes met. For a moment, the two of them shared an unspoken understanding. Then, with a nod that seemed to say 'Thank you', the Hulk turned and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Gerben alone with his thoughts and the sticky sweetness of the situation.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Gerben decided it was time to find a quiet spot to sit and process what had just happened. He found a bench around the corner, his legs feeling like jelly as he lowered himself onto it. His heart was still racing, and he took a few deep breaths to calm himself. The world around him had returned to normal, but the encounter had left an indelible mark on his otherwise ordinary day. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had just played a part in a bizarre twist of fate.

As he sat there, trying to make sense of the absurdity, he heard the soft sound of delicate footsteps approaching. He didn't need to look up to know who it was. The dainty taps and rustle of fabric could only belong to one person. Cinderella, dressed in her iconic blue ball gown, her hair cascading down her back like a golden waterfall, looked every bit the fairy tale princess lost in the modern world. She had a lost expression on her face, one that seemed to be searching for something familiar amidst the concrete jungle.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice as sweet as the ice cream he had just bought for the Hulk. "Could you tell me where I might find the ice cream store?" Gerben's eyes widened. This was turning into a day that would fuel his bedtime stories for years to come. He pointed in the direction of the shop, his mind racing with questions about how these fictional characters had come to life before him. "It's just two blocks down, on the left," he managed to reply, his voice a tad shakier than he would have liked.

Cinderella's eyes lit up, and she gave him a smile that could have melted a glacier. "Thank you so much!" she exclaimed before hurrying off in the direction of the ice

cream store. Gerben watched her go, his thoughts swirling like the soft serve in the Hulk's cone. He couldn't believe his luck—or was it bad luck?—to run into not one, but two legendary figures in one evening. As she disappeared around the corner, he couldn't help but wonder if he had stumbled upon some sort of interdimensional portal or if he had just hit the cosmic jackpot of odd encounters.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned back against the bench, his heart rate slowly returning to normal. The chatter of the city washed over him like a wave, and he felt a strange sense of serenity amidst the chaos. Perhaps this was a sign that the world was more magical than he had ever dared to believe. Or maybe it was all just a wild hallucination brought on by a long day at work and a lack of sleep. Either way, he decided to roll with it. After all, what was the harm in a little magic in an otherwise mundane life?

As Cinderella's footsteps grew faint, Gerben's thoughts drifted to the Hulk. He wondered if the creature was ever lonely, wandering through a world that didn't understand him. Or if he enjoyed the simple pleasures, like ice cream on a summer evening, despite his formidable exterior. A pang of empathy struck him, and he realized that even a monster could crave the comfort of something sweet and cold.

Gerben sat for a while longer, watching the world go by, his mind racing with questions about the nature of reality and the fabric of his universe. The town square began to empty out as families retreated to their homes and the streetlights flickered to life. The scent of blooming flowers filled the air, mingling with the lingering aroma of freshly baked bread. It was a stark contrast to the heavy, metallic scent of fear that had hung over him moments ago.

As he stood to leave, a sense of unease crept back in. What if the Hulk returned, looking for more ice cream or perhaps something else? What if Cinderella's carriage turned into a pumpkin right in the middle of the street, causing a traffic jam? The possibilities were as endless as they were absurd. But he couldn't just sit here all night. With a sigh, he started to walk home, his steps a little lighter than before.

The streets grew quieter with each passing minute, the only sound the occasional distant car or the rustle of leaves in the breeze. Gerben felt a strange kinship with the Hulk, a bond forged in the unlikely quest for a frozen treat. He wondered what the creature's life was like, being feared and misunderstood. It dawned on him that he might be the only one who had ever offered the Hulk something as simple as ice cream.

As he approached his apartment building, he saw a figure sitting on the steps, hunched over and shivering. It was Cinderella, her beautiful gown now stained with melted ice cream and dirt from the streets. Her once gleaming slippers were scuffed

and worn. Gerben's heart went out to her. He couldn't just leave her there, not after the kindness he had shown the Hulk.

"Are you okay?" he asked tentatively. She looked up, her eyes wide with a mix of embarrassment and fear. "I lost my carriage," she whispered, her voice trembling. "My slippers... they don't fit anymore. And I don't know how to get home."

Gerben's heart went out to her. He couldn't leave a princess stranded in the real world, not after he had just helped a giant green monster with his dessert craving. "Come with me," he offered, "I'll help you find a way back to your... uh, castle?"

Cinderella nodded gratefully, and together they walked through the quiet streets, the cobblestones cool under their feet. Her eyes widened with wonder at the modern sights, the neon lights and the occasional car passing by. Gerben felt a peculiar mix of protectiveness and bewilderment. He had read the fairy tale countless times as a child, but never imagined he would be part of it.

As they strolled, they talked about their worlds. Cinderella spoke of the ball and her stepmother's cruelty, her voice filled with a bitterness that seemed out of place in her otherwise ethereal demeanor. Gerben listened, sharing his own stories of the mundane struggles of office life and his love for science fiction. Somehow, their worlds didn't seem so different—both were filled with moments of joy and despair, just wrapped in different packaging.

They eventually arrived at the outskirts of the city, where the buildings grew sparse and the cobblestone gave way to a dirt path leading into the woods. Cinderella's eyes lit up with recognition. "This is where the pumpkin patch was!" she exclaimed, pointing to a clearing in the distance. "My carriage will be here soon."

Gerben looked skeptical but decided not to burst her bubble. "Well, I suppose I'll wait with you until it arrives," he said, leaning against a lamppost. The moon had risen high in the sky, casting a soft glow over the area. They stood in silence for a few moments, listening to the crickets and the occasional hoot of an owl.

As they waited, a peculiar sensation washed over him—like a cool breeze brushing against his skin, raising goosebumps. He looked around, expecting to see something strange, but the only thing out of place was Cinderella herself. He shrugged it off as nerves from the day's events.

The silence was broken by the distant sound of a clock chiming midnight. Cinderella gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "No, no, no!" she murmured, her eyes wide with panic. The air around her began to shimmer, and the delicate fabric of her dress

started to change, transforming into ragged threads. Her skin grew paler, and she began to shrink before his very eyes.

Gerben watched in astonishment as the fairy tale before him unfolded in reverse. The beautiful gown morphed into a tattered maid's uniform, and Cinderella's perfect features grew plain and tired. Her hair lost its luster, and the glow of magic that had surrounded her faded away, leaving a young woman who looked as if she had walked straight out of a Dickens novel.

"Maybe it is time to say goodbye," Gerben said.

Cinderella looked at him with tears in her eyes, nodded, and took a step back. "Thank you for your kindness," she whispered, and before he could respond, she disappeared into the night, leaving behind only the faint scent of a forgotten enchantment.

Gerben stood there, the reality of the situation sinking in. What was happening? Were fairy tales real? He glanced around, half-expecting to see more characters popping out of storybooks, but the street remained eerily empty. With a shake of his head, he decided to head home, eager to put the day behind him.

As he walked, the adrenaline from his encounters with the Hulk and Cinderella began to wear off. His thoughts grew heavy with the weight of what he had just witnessed. He had seen two legendary figures in one evening, and somehow, he had managed to help them both. The absurdity of it all was almost too much to comprehend.

When he reached his apartment, he found his cat, Whiskers, waiting for him by the door, purring and rubbing against his legs. The familiar comfort of his pet grounded him, reminding him that amidst the chaos, some things remained constant. He stepped inside, locking the door behind him, and collapsed onto the couch, his mind racing.

Whiskers jumped up beside him, and he stroked the cat absently, contemplating the events of the evening. He had to rethink what mysteries were.

Gerben's apartment was a sanctuary of order and predictability. The neatly arranged bookshelves, the hum of the refrigerator, and the soft glow of the lamp all whispered comfort into his ears. He couldn't help but feel like he had just woken up from a particularly vivid dream. Yet, the stickiness of the melted ice cream on his shoes and the lingering scent of Cinderella's perfume clung to him like a stubborn memory.

He sat in the quiet living room, the TV flickering with the evening news, but he couldn't focus on the mundane reality it presented. Instead, his mind was a whirlwind of questions. How did they get here? What did they want? Was he going to see more

of them? He looked down at Whiskers, who purred contentedly, oblivious to the craziness of the evening. Most likely, Whiskers had the answer to all this. But he could not understand cat language.