

Small World

Chapter 18: Houston, We Have a Problem

"So, now that we're in Houston, what exactly are we looking for next?" Jade inquired as she cautiously drove her vehicle through the dimly illuminated streets of the city.

"Well, if the data I read on that storage device was correct, the facility we're looking for should be about a quarter of a kilometer, or a sixth of a mile, west of the NASA Headquarters building," David answered.

After touching the screen on a small, rectangular device mounted to the center of her windshield a couple of times, Jade mentioned, "It doesn't show up on the GPS."

"No, I didn't imagine it would," David remarked. "Trust me, it's there. It has to be."

"Or it could be a trap," Jack quipped sarcastically with a cocky, lopsided smirk. "Either way."

"Only one way to find out," Jade concluded, quickly steering her car to the right around a sharp corner, causing the tires to emit a high-pitch squeal.

Meanwhile, inside the white Las Vegas News van a short distance behind the Volkswagen Beetle, the news reporter Veronica Wells watched with a devious smirk as the pink car ahead of her abruptly swerved around the corner. "Follow them," she instructed her assistant sharply.

"Yes, ma'am..." the cameraman agreed somewhat reluctantly as he carefully turned the car around the corner after their quarry.

A few minutes later, the small car carrying the three fugitives drove by a large sign on the side of the road that read, '*National Aeronautics and Space Administration Research Center*'.

After a few more seconds of silence passed, Jack commented, "I don't like this... It's too quiet..."

"What do you mean? Isn't that a good thing?" David inquired.

"What I mean is," Jack began, "if the government is really hiding something big here, shouldn't this place be swarming with security? This much silence in such a situation can mean only one of two things. Either there's nothing vitally secret here at all, or somebody *wants* us to be here..."

At that moment, the car slowed to a stop at the side of the road next to a large, grassy field. "Well, this is the spot, guys," Jade informed. "Now, are you positively sure this is where that top-secret map said to go? Just like it showed on the GPS, all I see here is a big empty field."

"Well, you wouldn't expect they would put something so confidential just out in the open where everyone can see it, would you?" David remarked, unbuckling his seatbelt and stepping out of the car. "The facility has to be underground. Now, there must be some kind of trap-door or something hidden underneath the grass in this field somewhere..."

In response to this, Jack inquired in a deadpan tone, "Are you telling us...that the next step in our plan basically requires us to manually search every square meter of this field until we find a trap-door of some sort that we're not even sure exists? All the while as the very government organization we're trying to sabotage is likely closing in on us as we speak?"

"Yeah. You have a better idea?" David replied bluntly.

After a long, uncomfortable pause, Jack let out an exasperated sigh, and muttered under his breath, "Let's get started..."

A short distance away, Veronica and her cameraman observed from behind a large bush on the other side of the road as the two furry creatures and the human girl began meticulously scouring the grassy field before them. "Bill, get the camera ready, and set us up to stream live directly to my website," the blonde news reporter whispered to her employee, "The footage we get here will change the course of human history!"

After a few more minutes of fruitless searching passed, Jack stood up from his crouched position on the ground to shake the dirt and grass of his paws, before

complaining, "Bright idea, David... *Really* bright idea... Remind me again why I'm still taking strategic advice from you..."

Taking a moment to peer up at the starry night sky, Jade commented, "At this rate, the sun will be up before we have half of this field covered."

"Come on, guys!" David attempted to encourage, rising to his feet and brushing himself off, "This could be our only chance to get back our lives! Or at least, what's left of them... I think we can assume we all know what the alternative is." At that moment, as he took a small step forward, the Ferren scientist heard a soft metallic '*clank*' sound underneath his foot. Eyes widening in apprehension, David hastily dropped back down to his knees and began clawing at the grassy turf beneath his paws. A few seconds later, upon uncovering what appeared to be a small metal hatch concealed within the dirt, David cheered victoriously, "Eureka!"

Portable camcorder in hand, the cameraman, Bill, began counting down in a hushed whisper, "On in five... four... three... two..."

As soon as Bill gestured the signal, Veronica began speaking quietly into her hand-held microphone, "This is Veronica Wells of Las Vegas News streaming to you live from the NASA Headquarters grounds in Houston, Texas. Ladies and gentlemen, what you see before you are two bipedal, highly intelligent, large rodent-like creatures and a young girl entering what appears to be a secret access-way hidden beneath an open field on NASA grounds. Many of you may find this hard to believe, but I personally am convinced that the two strange creatures are in fact visitors from outer space. Where exactly in the known universe these aliens come from, what their objective on our planet is, or even where this secret passageway leads, are all as of yet still to be determined. But there's one thing I can tell you for certain. This has been one small excursion for your favourite news reporter, and the beginning one momentous journey of discovery for all humankind."

Meanwhile, inside the Area Unknown military base...

Agent Jefferson was sitting at the desk in his office, sipping at a cup of a steaming, charcoal-coloured beverage. Just then, another pale-skinned man clad in a black government-issue suit burst through the door with a flat, rectangular device held out in front of him. Abruptly shoving the device in front of Jefferson's face, the man exclaimed urgent, "Sir, I think you'd better take a look at this!"

Displayed on the device's screen was an image of two short, furry creatures and a young human girl climbing down into a small hatch in the middle of a dimly lit field. Accompanying the video was the narration of a quiet yet energetic female voice.

After a few moments of staring at the display in emotionless silence, Jefferson picked up a smaller rectangular device from the edge of his desk, and spoke into it coldly, "Houston, we have a problem."