

Small World

Chapter 19: Rats in a Maze

Beneath the NASA Headquarters grounds in Houston...

After climbing down the ladder inside the secret hatch, the trio of fugitives stepped down into a long, dimly lit corridor. Furry paws touching down onto the well-polished, white porcelain-tiled floor, Jack muttered sarcastically, "Why are top-secret evil facilities always filled with dim, flickering fluorescent lights?"

"It's quiet... too quiet... Why do I get the feeling that isn't a good sign...?" Jade murmured as she leapt down from the ladder after Jack and David.

"That's what *I* said, remember?" Jack grumbled.

"It doesn't matter," David urged. "We've come too far to turn back now. Our answers have to be somewhere in this building, so the only way to go is forward."

With that, Jade, David and Jack began cautiously traversing through the corridors of the foreboding, top-secret facility.

Meanwhile, elsewhere inside the underground laboratory...

"I undershtand completely, Mishter Jeffershon. Do not vworry, I ashure you, by the time anyone takes notice of our operations, it vill already be too late." Placing the small rectangular device he held in his hand back down onto his desk, Doctor Stein turned to look at one of his monitor screens. Seeing the image displayed of two short, furry creatures and a young human woman running down a hallway, the white-haired scientist remarked to himself with a sinister smile, "Ah, sho, I shee zee ratsh have made it into my maze! Let ush shee if zey are crafty enough to find zee cheese..."

"Pick up the pace back there, Bill! I can't very well deliver to the public the coverage they deserve if my cameraman can't even pull his own weight, now can I?" Veronica pressured impatiently as she sprinted down the winding corridors of the base.

"Easy for you to say..." Bill huffed in exhaustion as he feebly struggled to keep up with his employer, "when you're not lugging thirty pounds of equipment on your back..."

Halting for a moment to catch his breath, Bill inquired flatly, "How do you even know where you're going in here? This place is built like a flipping labyrinth!"

Slowing her pace slightly to allow her comrade to catch up, Veronica simply replied confidently, "You're just going to have to trust me on this one, Bill. Let's just say, I have a hunch..."

"Oh, how wondrous!" Bill exclaimed sarcastically with an exasperated expression, as he began jogging after the news reporter once again, "It's not like any of your hunches have ever lead us neck deep into trouble before, oh wise and mighty leader!"

"Tread carefully with your words, follower, lest they reflect in your paycheck next month..." Veronica mocked in response with a sly smirk, glaring back intently at her employee.

"Sorry, my lady..." Bill apologized meekly, hanging his head in defeat.

Meanwhile, back outside on the NASA Headquarters grounds...

In the silence of the brisk night-time air, a jet black sedan slowed to a stop on the side of the road next to the large, grassy fields of the NASA Headquarters grounds. Stepping out of the vehicle, Lieutenant Heralds and Corporal Calvin began calmly scanning their eyes over their surroundings. Quickly spotting a pink Volkswagen Beetle and a white news van parked nearby, Heralds retrieved a small rectangular device from his black coat's pocket, and spoke into it, "Sir, it appears the subjects are already here, along with that news reporter from Las Vegas."

"Yes, I am well aware of this fact, lieutenant," the icy, bureaucratic voice of Agent Jefferson replied.

Raising an eyebrow slightly in surprise, Heralds asked somewhat awkwardly, "So... what are your orders then, Sir?"

"Stand by until further notice," Jefferson instructed. "Another subordinate of mine is currently dealing with our little pest problem. If his plan fails, you two will be my personal reassurance."

"Understood, Sir..." Heralds acknowledged with a hint of reluctance in his tone. Depositing the communication device back into his pocket, the brunet agent slowly turned to his red-headed partner with a look of unease beginning to show on his face.

Meanwhile, back inside the underground facility...

After several minutes of following David at a brisk pace through the twists and turns of the dank, concrete-walled hallways of the top-secret installation, Jack asked his grey-furred companion with a hint of sarcasm in his tone, "I assume you have some sort of idea where we're going, right?"

"The data files on your storage device contained a map of the basic layout of this base, which I memorized on the way to this city," David explained, "But the files were missing some key bits of information. In order to fill in those gaps, I need to access the nearest computer terminal, which should be right about...here."

Halting on the spot, David turned to face a slightly discoloured portion of the wall next to him, and tapped it with his paw lightly. Moments later, the discoloured panel on the wall slid away, revealing behind it a small display screen and a keyboard mounted inside a closet-sized compartment.

As David got to work typing on the keyboard, Jade wondered out loud, "Who would want to hide a computer inside a wall?"

"Either someone who doesn't want it to be found, or someone who *does*," Jack concluded with a slight frown.

"And is that an 86-DOS?" Jade asked in disbelief. "I didn't even know anyone used those anymore..."

"They don't," Jack responded flatly. "I have a feeling this place is a lot older than we may have previously thought..."

At that moment, David piped up, "Ah! Here we go!"

"What is it, kid?" Jack asked curiously.

Peering over David's shoulder at the screen, and seeing on it an image of a sleek, rocket-shaped craft with a pair of short wings on either side at the base, Jade commented, "It looks like of those newer model space shuttles NASA has been using to carry astronauts up to the International Space Station."

Turning to his two comrades with a confident grin, David informed, "This, my friends, is our ride home."