

Small World

Chapter 20: Finding the Cheese

"*That* piece of junk?!" Jack laughed hysterically in response to his friend's declaration.

"Um...David...you do realize those spacecraft aren't designed to go interstellar, right?" Jade pointed out with a sheepish smile.

"Haven't you ever considered that maybe that's just what your government wanted you to think?" David questioned, raising an eyebrow. "The day my homeworld was invaded, the last thing I saw before I wound up on this planet was one of these very same shuttles landing right in front of me."

"*That* was the space ship that attacked your planet?" Jack asked, bewildered. "I kinda thought it would have been a bit, you know... *bigger*."

"Well, yes and no," David began to explain, "The shuttles were just the means the invaders used to land on the surface. Why do you think your space agency spends so many resources to send these shuttles several times a month up to intercept a space station that can accommodate only maybe three or four people?" The grey-furred scientist then typed a few more commands into the keyboard, calling up an image of a large craft consisting of a pinwheel-shaped structure mounted onto the center of a long shaft.

"So...basically you're saying that Babylon 5 rip-off is some sort of... mother ship?" Jack surmised.

"Precisely," David affirmed. "And from the data I gathered off of your stolen device, I have reason to believe that this very craft is hiding in orbit behind your own moon."

"...Okay...so we've found a vessel that can take us back to your home planet in a time-span that's thankfully a lot less less than a quarter of an average human life span..." Jack began, "The only issue NOW is... How the HELL do you plan on actually getting ONBOARD that ship without being shot down from orbit, much less commandeering it and figuring out how to FLY it after having only learned about its existence no more than a few days ago?! Are you going to pilot a shuttle up to it Trojan-Horse-style and then infect the security systems with an outdated computer virus from the mid-nineties?"

David chuckled. "Well, not exactly...but it DOES involve 'commandeering' one of those shuttles. Before we do that, however, we're going to need to access some of this facility's more high-security computer mainframe systems, which I am unfortunately unable to access from this terminal. I can easily enough plot the directions to GET to the shuttles from here, but without the proper security codes, I won't be able to actually fly it without setting off half-a-dozen alarms and lock-down procedures."

"Oh, goody, a side-quest..." Jack muttered sarcastically. "And where by chance might we be able to find a computer terminal with full access to these high-security files?"

"From what I can tell from the crude building-layout presented in this outdated piece of technology, the only terminal with direct access to these higher-systems is located in a room called the 'main office', which appears to be just adjacent to a large laboratory of some kind."

"Ooh, an office connected to a LABORATORY!~ Like THAT doesn't scream at all like a trap set by a bald, cat-stroking megalomaniac with an overly decadent rotating chair..." Jack scowled even more sarcastically.

"...Um...if I may get a word in edgewise here," Jade suddenly piped up, "Perhaps while you guys go looking for that 'computer terminal' of yours, I could make myself useful and scout-out those space shuttles, just to make sure they are in fact where that eight-bit schematic says they should be."

"That's a good idea, Jade," David agreed. "Here, hand me your mobile device and I'll up-link the schematics directly into your GPS data-storage."

"Thanks," she replied, handing David her smart-phone, who soon handed it back to her after inputting the information. "Well, boys, I guess I'll see you in a few minutes," Jade then said, hurrying off in the direction that the new map in her mobile device instructed her to.

"We should get moving too, Jack. We've come too close to afford to get caught now," David urged.

"I know this is probably tempting fate, but..." Jack muttered, reluctantly following his comrade's lead through the twisting corridors, "I wonder what the odds are there actually IS a science-crazed megalomaniac waiting for us in that big, ominous 'office' of yours...?"

"...Hey, Jack, I just had another thought..." David added after a moment, "Whatever DID happen to those two crazy news reporters from Las Vegas that seemed so invested in our affairs, anyway?"

"...Well... This is just brilliant, ISN'T it?"

Looking around her in both shock and frustration at the thick, bulletproof glass walls that had moments before slammed down at both ends of the short hallway they were in, trapping them in place, Veronica turned to her cameraman and snapped, "Well, perhaps if you hadn't made so much NOISE with that oversized MOUTH of yours at every single corner we turned in here, then we MIGHT not have been DISCOVERED so quickly!"

"Well EXCUSE ME princess, but I didn't know that stopping at EVERY SINGLE SECURITY CAMERA we passed by to 'flip the system the bird' was proper stealth protocol, EITHER!" Bill barked in retort.

"You'd better watch that mouth of yours, Bill, or I'll-"

"Do what?! Fire me?! Go head! It hardly matters anymore now since we're both going to end up in Guantanamo Bay after this, if we're LUCKY!"

Just as Veronica appeared to be riling up to literally throttle her employee, a familiar female voice chirped, "Am...I interrupting something?"

Turning her attention away from her trembling intern to glare at the voice's source. "You! From the convention! I KNEW you had to be in on this conspiracy somehow!"

"For YOUR information," the girl replied, "My two friends you keep chasing all over the damn continent and I just happen to be trying to STOP this whole 'conspiracy', you YOU TWO just kept making things WORSE! Now I WAS going to rescue you before you made that comment, but NOW..."

"No, wait! She didn't mean i-PMMPFF!"

Clapping a firm hand over her cameraman's mouth, Veronica demanded, "Oh? And what makes you think we can trust YOU?! For all we know you could just be a double agent leading those two space-cases right into a trap, just like you did US!"

"...Look. I'm on a VERY tight schedule here, and I don't have time to play the 'how do we know you're not [part of the system]' game with you. You can either let me break you out of here and help us finish our mission, or you can stay here for the REAL bad guys to come and pick you up."

Pausing a few moments to ponder her options, Veronica released her hold on her struggling companion, and conceded, "Fine. But if we end up getting drafted into some kind of secret military human-experimentation program, my lawyers or going to sue!"

Rolling her eyes in annoyance, the young woman reached into her purse and withdrew from it a small, pill-shaped device with a spring wrapped around the center and depressed on end of it on the glass, causing it to instantly shatter into thousands of tiny pieces.

"H-how did do do that...?" Bill asked, astonished.

"Oh, it's just a little tool I saw used on Mythbusters once to escape sinking cars. I never leave home without one."

Clearly somewhat impressed as well, Veronica asked, "...When this is all over and done with...would you like a job?"

"I'll think about it," the girl replied smugly. "But for now, we have OTHER work to do. Come on."

Exchanging a brief, hesitant glance, the two television journalists hurried after their rescuer further into the complex.

"...Wow. That...is a BIG, scary door..." Jack remarked, looking up at the towering, heavily riveted and rust-stained pair of steel double-doors in front of him. "Why is it that

an ALREADY scary-sounding 'evil hideout office' has to have an even SCARIER looking entrance to it? Did all of the people who designed this place get their architecture from old first-person-shooter games or something?"

"Who cares? We're almost home-free!" David dismissed, stepping towards the doors. "All we need to do now is-whaAAH!"

Before the nerdy Ferren could even finish his sentence, the doors suddenly swung open, while simultaneously the floor-panel they were standing on flipped up beneath them, tossing the pair face-forward into the room. As the two furry critters skidded to a stop a couple meters away from the now re-shut door, an ominous slow-clap echoed in their ears.

"Vhell done, my furry little tesht subjects. Vherry vhell done. I musht admit, I did not zhink you vwould get zsiss far. But you have provhen yourshelves too be VERY good lab vhrats indeed!"

"...Why the HELL am I somehow always RIGHT?" Jack groaned, forcing himself up off the floor.

"If it's any consolation..." David replied, looking up towards the messy-haired, lab-coat-clad human sitting behind a large desk at the other end of the room, "You did at least get ONE thing wrong... He isn't bald..."

Flexing the kinks out of his arm and neck muscles from the Loony Toons-style 'trap' he had just been subjected to, Jack spat at the mad German scientist, "Alright, Doctor Clichésano, you've had your 'fun', whatever the hell it was, but it's game over. We've pretty much figured out the sham you and Agent Smitherson have cooked up, and in no more than a few hours so will the rest of the nine billion people on this planet. You've LOST."

"Oh, on zhee contrary, Mishter Shpader. I believe you are about to find zhat zhee game hash jusht begun!"

"And what makes you think THAT?" David snarled. "In case you haven't noticed, my friend here was an adeptly trained soldier with over twenty earth-years of combat experience...AND he has a loaded GUN. So unless you have some sort of death-ray-machine in your pocket, I think you're outmatched."

"Good one," Jack complimented, raising his thumb.

"Ah, but of course you do. I vhas avhare of your friend'z skillz long before you avhrived here," the scientist gloated. "Vherfore, I had come up vwith a contingency plan." Withdrawing a small remote control-looking object from his lab coat pocket, he continued, "I VHAS originally just going to extract the vremainder uhv her parts to aid in my experiments...but in light uhv the two uhv yourz reshent meddling, I have dishcovered a new, much more VALUABLE ushe for her... Conshider it, a little insheranshe polishy..." The scientist then depressed one of the buttons on the remote, causing a large panel in the wall just to the right of his desk to slowly open up, revealing behind it a struggling, crying brown-and-cream furred Ferren slightly shorter than David

with several clearly visible surgery scars all over their body, strapped vertically into some sort of cylindrical glass tube and a thick gag of duct tape firmly wrapped around their muzzle.

Eyes suddenly widening in apprehension and alarm at this display, David shrieked, "ROSE!"