

CHAPTER 15

"Your mom is one very gutsy lady, you know," Hanna said as we made our way home on foot.

"You mean because of the way she handled her abduction?"

"Well, that too, but I was thinking more about the fact that she was willing to risk everything, including her own life, rather than force you to confront this gift of yours before you were ready. She was trying to buy you more time. Can you imagine how much pressure you'd have been under if she'd simply dumped this machine into your lap one day and told you to go forth and save the universe, or else?"

"No kidding. The fact that I've got to fight these guys scares the hell out of me, but at least I had an opportunity to grow up first, thanks to her."

"She must've made plenty of sacrifices as a single mother," she said. "Maybe it was just a mother's instincts, you know, to protect her firstborn, but it was still a courageous act on her part."

"I've never really taken the time to thank her for everything she's done for me. At least now I'll get a chance to do that, thanks to this ability I've inherited," I said as I unlocked the garage door and stepped inside. "Maybe I'll start with flowers and a card this afternoon, although I guess that sounds kind of lame considering the ordeal she just went through."

"Are you absolutely certain your mom wasn't hallucinating when she told you this relic is some kind of spaceship?" Hanna asked as she walked through the door behind me. "It just looks like a really old Airstream trailer to me."

"Actually it's a Bowlus trailer. They're pretty rare, according to my mother, although we now know it's a lot rarer than she let on, isn't it?"

"Looks like junk to me. Let's open it up and see what's inside."

"I'm not sure exploring this place is such a good idea," I said. "Maybe we should wait till she can give us a guided tour."

"We've got some time to kill and we might as well have a look around. After all, your mom did say you've inherited this so-called space ship, even though it looks more like it belongs in a junkyard. It's yours now, so let's kick the tires and see if it's for real. We'll know soon enough if she was just pulling your leg."

I closed the garage door behind us after flicking a nearby light switch on. The light from a solitary bulb hanging from the rafters reflected off the shiny aluminum skin of the trailer, creating strange light patterns and shadows on the garage walls. It looked like the inverted hull of a boat, with one-foot wide panels curving horizontally from its streamlined tail to its bulbous front, much like the planks of a clinker-built rowboat. There was not a speck of dust to be seen on its surface. There were several oval-shaped windows and the only door was faired into the front end, just behind the trailer hitch, much like a ship's hatch. When I tried to open it, I couldn't. It was locked and we didn't have a key.

"Whatever it is, it certainly has classic lines," I said. "It's similar to the

shape of some of the cars they used to make back in the forties and fifties. Their idea of aerodynamics back then, I suppose. Very cool looking."

"Except that you'd think they'd have the pointy end at the front if they were that interested in aerodynamics. Whatever."

"If there is a spaceship inside this, they sure picked an excellent way to camouflage it."

"Andy, I can't see through these windows because the glass is faded or tinted or something," she said as she cupped her hands around her eyes and tried to see inside the trailer. "There's no way we're going to be able to break into this thing. It's built like a tank. How are we supposed to get inside it without a key?"

"Mom said I could tell it to open up, just like my father used to do. I guess that would depend on how much I've actually inherited of whatever it is that made him so unique. So, how does one go about coaxing an inanimate object to follow commands?"

I tapped on the door to get its attention and then stared in the general direction of the door and asked it to open with what I imagined was an authoritative voice. I felt like an idiot even though nobody else could see or hear us inside the garage. I finally stopped banging on it after a minute when nothing happened.

Hanna was giggling. "Why not *order* it to open? Your voice sounds weak, like you don't believe it'll work."

"Open sesame!" I shouted as I faced the door.

When nothing happened, I shrugged my shoulders. "Hey, it worked in Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."

"Nothing personal, but you're acting like a dork. Maybe you should just concentrate and see if you can send it a telepathic message, the same way you play the theremin. And try not to move your lips."

I did as she suggested and was surprised when the hatch began slowly opening like a bank vault door. The interior was brightly lit, as if someone had been expecting us, although I knew for a fact that the trailer wasn't plugged into any of the wall outlets. Perhaps there was some kind of battery power? I stepped inside, and after checking to make sure it was safe I motioned for Hanna to follow. She didn't need any encouragement.

We found ourselves inside a glass bubble that offered a 360-degree view of the interior of the garage. Incredibly, the compartment we were standing in was many times larger than the exterior of the trailer. I stuck my head out the door to check but nothing else had changed in the garage.

"This doesn't make sense at all," I said as I stood just inside the door and turned to the left, then to the right "How the hell can the inside of an object be larger than the outside dimensions? According to what we can see of the insides of this thing it's way too big to fit inside the garage."

"You're right, what we're seeing shouldn't be possible," she replied as she pointed to a spiral ramp that seemed to lead to a basement level. "I looked underneath this thing as we walked in the door and all that's under the trailer is a couple of flat tires and an axle. Maybe this is some kind of sophisticated illusion?"

"Anything we can touch can't be an illusion, can it?"

She stepped outside, ducked down and peered under the trailer again, then poked her head back inside the trailer. "From the inside it looks as if there should be a basement but from the outside it's clear there can't be one. I have to believe what I see with my own eyes so I guess it must be real all right. Awesome! I'm willing to concede now that your mother wasn't exaggerating when she told us about your spaceman father."

"Exactly. If this thing is for real then my father must be as well."

"Let's explore what's down here," she said as she started down the ramp without waiting for my reply.

The scene that awaited us below the floor level was mind-boggling. It looked like a Thomas Kinkade painting as interpreted by Picasso. The space appeared to be the size of several football fields although it could have been even bigger because its boundaries were indistinct in the dim light. There was a beautiful thatched-roof cottage in the middle, surrounded by lush forests, colorful gardens and small ponds.

The fundamentals of the property were familiar and readily identifiable but the shapes and colors were unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was intriguing and welcoming at the same time, and I could immediately envision myself living there for the rest of my life. It was as if a tiny piece of the countryside from a different planet, or a different time, had been magically transported to a huge cave under the garage, but of course that couldn't be possible. However, as we walked further we soon found ourselves standing in the middle of it, touching and smelling the various plants and shrubs that surrounded the cottage, and it certainly seemed real enough.

"A great place for a vacation in outer space," said Hanna in an awestruck voice. "Can you believe this is actually happening?"

There was no door at the entryway to the cottage so we walked in and explored the different rooms. Again, everything seemed vaguely comfortable and familiar, but still very different from what I was accustomed to. There was even a long, narrow swimming pool along one wall which looked perfect for doing laps. I stuck one finger in the water and discovered that the temperature was just the way I like it. Swimming was one of the few athletic activities I enjoyed so it made me feel even more at home.

As we made our way back up to the main level, Hanna pointed to what looked like yet another room off to one side but I decided we didn't have enough time to explore it. I was ready to leave the trailer but Hanna obviously had other plans.

"Andy, I think we should see how this spaceship performs before we get ready for the prom. How about a quick flight around the neighborhood?"

"I think maybe it's best that we wait till we know more about how it works, don't you? Mom said they'd flown it to Europe on their honeymoon, so maybe we'll get there eventually ourselves. No need to rush this, is there?"

"That wasn't Europe she was talking about, you idiot," Hanna said with a laugh. "She said they'd been to Europa, which is one of Jupiter's moons. There's a slight difference, you know."

"Ah, well, I'm not sure you heard her correctly but I guess it doesn't matter anyway. I don't know how to operate this ship and I think we should take it one step at a time. What if we took a wrong turn and got ourselves

lost? We could spend the rest of our lives wandering through space.”

“That’s crap and you know it! I’ve been interested in space all my life and I know my way around the solar system as well as anyone. Besides, your mom said the space ship would do exactly what you told it to do. That means if we got lost for some reason, we could just order it to take us home and we’d eventually find ourselves back where we started. Your father wouldn’t have left it here for you if he hadn’t thought you could handle it. I mean, it’s not like you can take a Driver’s Ed course and get your learner’s permit for one of these babies.”

“But didn’t mom say she had important things she had to tell us before we left?”

“She probably wanted to tell you to pack plenty of clean underwear. You know what your mother’s like. I really don’t think that’s going to be a problem. From what we just saw below, my bet is that this ship could probably provide us with everything we need for a long trip. After all, it’s not like we can pack a few groceries and a road map in order to prepare for interplanetary space travel, is it?”

“All of which she can tell us about when we see her later tonight.”

“Andy, come on! Where’s your sense of adventure? If this actually works as advertised it’s gonna be the ultimate thrill ride!”

“That’s easy for you to say. You stole your dad’s car when you were just old enough to see through the windshield, and look at the trouble you got into when the cops pulled you over. I’m thinking a joyride in somebody else’s space ship could be a lot more dangerous for us if something goes wrong.”

“Ah, lighten up! It’s not like the cops are going to pull us over. It’s a space ship, for crying out loud! It’s your space ship, in fact. You’re the captain now and you can do whatever you want to with it. I say we do a little exploring.”

I laughed out loud. “You figure we can travel to Europa, do some sightseeing and still make it back in time for dinner?”

“Who knows? Let’s at least give it a try. If it looks like it’ll take too long we can always change course for something closer, like the moon, take a quick look around and then head back early. Just think of the stories we’ll be able to tell everyone at the prom.”

“If we don’t get ourselves killed in the process,” I grumbled. “This is not a good idea.”

I’d long ago given up on ever winning an argument with Hanna so I decided that it would be easiest just to do as I was told. There were no control panels anywhere in sight and for a moment I was at a loss as to what to do next.

“It’s probably the same deal as opening the trailer door,” Hanna said. “Just tell it what you want it to do, but make sure you close the door first, just in case it actually works!”

As the door closed I considered waiting a few seconds, then claiming that my attempt to take off hadn’t been successful in order to buy myself some time to think about the wisdom of space travel inside a decrepit old trailer. However, that would mean telling her a lie, which I didn’t want to do.

Even worse, I suspected that she would know I was lying somehow, and I really didn't want to find out what that would mean to our relationship. I closed my eyes and silently ordered the trailer to take us to Europa. Please.

The next thing I knew, Hanna was yelling incoherently in my ear as she clutched at my arm, causing me to open my eyes with a start. I took a quick look above us and then hurriedly closed my eyes again.

"Where are we?" I asked breathlessly, hoping that I hadn't really seen what I thought I'd just seen.

Understandably she was momentarily speechless although she continued to make a nervous sound that was a cross between hyperventilation and awe. My quick glimpse of the skyline above us hadn't quite made sense at first, which was why I had chosen to close my eyes again.

We appeared to have landed in the middle of an Arctic ice flow except for one major difference: through the clear ceiling of the trailer I could see what looked like a huge ball made of chocolate-colored marble cake hanging over our heads, blotting out the sky I would normally have expected to see. It was massive and it dominated the entire horizon, so much so that the sight of it was disorientating and more than a little frightening. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before, and it took me several seconds to make some sense of it. I finally concluded that it must be a planet, which is exactly what I'd expect to encounter if we'd somehow been transported to Europa, or some place similar to it. But was it real?

I opened my eyes again and was immediately struck by the sensation that this huge object was about to fall on us, crushing our trailer into dust. It was difficult to keep it in perspective because unlike my recollection of what the moon looked like from my back yard, this object was so massive that it almost seemed near enough to touch. As I stared at it I could see movement on the surface that was reminiscent of photos I'd seen taken from spacecraft of Earth's surface, which also appeared to be in constant motion due to changes in the weather.

"You did say you wanted to visit Europa, didn't you?" I said.
"Remember, this was your idea."

"Yeah, but I honestly didn't think you'd actually be able to make it happen. A normal space craft would take three years to get here. According to my watch, our trip was almost instantaneous. If this is Europa, how could we get here this fast?"

"Pretty incredible journey we just made, if in fact we're actually parked on Europa now. It doesn't seem possible, but here we are."

"I guess we must be on Europa," Hanna said. "Where else could it be? If you look up you can't miss that planet sitting just over our heads. I've seen dozens of pictures of Jupiter but never in my wildest dreams did I expect to get this close to it. It's the real thing. No doubt about it."

"Oh, it seems genuine enough, alright. I'm just wondering if this isn't some kind of illusion. There's a theory that many alien abductions actually take place in the minds of the victims. In other words, they honestly believe they've been abducted and poked and prodded by horrible-looking aliens, and they experience all the sensations as if they were actually happening,

but it turns out they're still lying in their beds, unconscious, throughout the entire experience."

"In other words, it's the same as having a nightmare?"

"Except that some of the experts still claim that these victims are actually being abducted, even though physically they haven't moved an inch from their beds. According to that theory, the abduction somehow takes place in another dimension, or on a different plane, although the alien abductors still manage to carry out their experiments, or whatever it is they're doing to their victims. It's like these incidents are a form of alien virtual reality which is real for them, and almost but not quite real for their victims."

"I don't get it," she said. "Are they leaving their bodies behind while their souls travel through space? Are these incidents happening inside the abductees' minds, or the abductor's? You're saying the abductions actually happen, but in the same sense they don't."

"What I'm saying is we may believe we're on Europa but in fact we're still parked safely inside our garage. Although we may actually be seeing and experiencing the reality of Europa, perhaps we aren't really there."

"Neat idea, especially since if we are actually sitting on Europa's surface right now we should theoretically already be dead from being exposed to the massive radiation Jupiter puts out," she said, grinning. "Of course we could always open the trailer door and find out whether or not your theory is correct."

"Don't even think about it! Let's assume for the sake of argument that we are, in fact, sitting on the surface of a very inhospitable planet. Since it looks like the real deal, and I don't intend to step outside and have a look around, that seems to be a reasonable assumption. I think the trailer must be designed to protect us somehow from threats like radiation, which would make sense since it's obviously designed to transport people safely through space."

"So if we're actually here on Europa, then the trailer is all that's keeping us alive," she said. "And if we're still inside your garage?"

"Then the most we have to fear is whatever our imagination might spring on us. In that case, maybe we could control what we're experiencing and transform it into a dream instead of a nightmare. Either way, it appears we're safe for the moment."

"Then I guess it doesn't matter which theory is correct, does it?" she said, "I'm thinking we might as well take advantage of our time here and have a good look around before we head back. I bet there are plenty of scientists who'd kill for the opportunity to spend five minutes where we are right now. And by the way, Europa is a moon, not a planet."

We both stared silently at the scenery that surrounded us. The lighting was good, although there seemed to be a slightly reddish glow coming from the surface. Off in the distance there were jagged ridges and various other low formations that didn't look anything like the pictures I remembered seeing of the surface of Earth's moon.

"You'll notice there aren't any rocks around here," she said.

"Or dirt, or dust, or craters, for that matter. That doesn't make sense."

"Ah, but it does when you consider the conventional wisdom about Europa's geology. You remember that picture I sent your mom? That was taken by the Galileo spacecraft as it did a flyby. According to scientists, the data from that mission indicated that the entire surface of the planet probably consisted of ice. What we're seeing right now obviously confirms that. I hope one day I'll be able to tell them in person that they were right."

"So if we're sitting on top of an ice flow, does that mean there's an ocean somewhere below us?"

"That's the theory," she replied. "I don't know what evidence they based that on, but the consensus was that there's a layer of ice on the surface that may be up to three miles thick. It probably covers an ocean that's thousands of feet deep, complete with tides driven by Jupiter's gravity. Not exactly a place where you'd want to spend your honeymoon. Wonder why your mom ended up here with her mysterious alien lover?"

"If there's water, doesn't that mean there's a good possibility that there could be creatures of some kind living in the depths below us?"

"Actually, there might be because the ocean, if there is one, could potentially be sheltered from Jupiter's radiation by the thick ice. From what I've read, the best guess is that there may be a number of different life forms in this ocean just like they've found in Arctic waters, but they probably aren't very sophisticated."

"So how do they survive without air and nutrients then?" I asked.

"There may be hydrothermal vents on the seafloor. We know they can support life on Earth because we've documented the process, although so far nobody has been able to identify a potential oxygen source on Europa. So yeah, there are probably creatures of some sort living below the ice, and we could be the first humans to meet them."

"Except for my mother, of course," I said.

"If there are life forms, then perhaps they would enjoy listening to your music while we're here. Maybe that's why your mother and father chose Europa."

"That would fit with her description of what my father did for a living, wouldn't it? Maybe I'm supposed to travel to places like this to give concerts. This could be fun. Maybe even more fun than our trip to the old folk's home," I joked.

"Andy, it sounds to me like I've finally lit a fire under you and you're ready to do something adventurous for the first time since I've known you. Cool! I hope I'm not pushing you too hard but it just doesn't seem right to pass up an opportunity like this, especially since we're here already. If you'd rather not, well, I'll understand. Really."

"No reason why we shouldn't give it a try. If nothing else it'll be an interesting story for your blog."

She smiled and gave me the thumbs up, so I closed my eyes and ordered the ship to take us below the ice.

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