

CHAPTER 16

When I opened my eyes again I discovered that the trailer was sitting at the bottom of what appeared to be an ocean. The water was relatively clear and we were at the center of a cocoon of light that apparently emanated from the trailer and illuminated an area about the size of a football field around us. Tiny particles swirled past us in the water and a few objects that looked like small barbed arrows flashed by, moving so quickly that I couldn't be certain what they were, or if they were alive. It was like being inside a fishbowl, looking at the world from the point of view of the fish.

There were also a few blobs that seemed to hover in front of us for a few seconds and then slowly drift out of sight. Off in the distance where our light met the darkness I caught momentary glimpses of bizarre shapes and colors that seemed to tentatively explore the light, and then quickly retreat back into the safety of the black void that surrounded us. The sea bottom resembled a series of sand dunes, possibly shaped by the tides. It reminded me of a desert because unlike Earth's oceans there wasn't any evidence of plant life or coral or other living things. Every picture I'd ever seen of Earth's oceans had included fish or other creatures, although I guess it was always possible that some areas of our oceans were as desolate as this at extreme depths.

Hanna pointed toward rock formations off to one side that looked like black icicles extending upwards from the sea floor. "Now that's got to be a hydrothermal vent, just like I predicted. If you look closely you can see what looks like smoke coming out of the tops of some of those rocks. That's caused by seawater that gets very hot when it touches molten rock below the formation, then gushes back out through the top of the vent. Judging by what we know from our own planet, that's a good sign that there could be life forms nearby even though there's definitely no sunlight or oxygen at this depth."

"I wonder if they're here already. Do you get the feeling we're being watched?"

"I can see something moving out there!" she said. "Look over to the left."

"I think you're right. There's definitely some kind of activity."

"Whatever they are, they seem to be keeping their distance for the moment. Perhaps they're shy?"

"Or maybe it's just our imaginations. I mean, if they are alive you'd think they'd be just a little bit curious about the fact that a trailer with two humans inside has suddenly parked itself in the middle of their world."

"Hopefully we're not violating any of their zoning bylaws. You know how people feel about trailer parks," she joked nervously.

"Well, don't look now but here come the neighbors, and they do look curious, to say the least."

The first few creatures seemed to materialize right in front of us like Romulan war birds decloaking. They looked like large, stubby worms with

distinctive heads and tails, and the one that ventured closest to the trailer was bright yellow with orange ruffles running up its back. They all had mouths but no eyes as far as I could tell, and their bodies undulated constantly as if they were swimming against a current to maintain their position. Each had different features and different coloration, although they were generally flat in shape and appeared to be a couple of feet long.

"Are they fish?" I asked.

"Scientists would probably call them extremophiles since they're life forms that are capable of existing in abnormal environments like Europa's. They look like our flatworms," Hanna said. "What beautiful colors they have!"

"They may look like worms but they must be far more sophisticated than that if they can transport themselves from place to place."

"I don't think they can, actually. Keep your eyes on the blob sitting just to the left of that yellow one."

As I watched the object she had pointed at, it suddenly seemed to transform itself into yet another creature resembling a flatworm although this time it was bright red in color with black wavy stripes. It had two black specks on its head that I thought at first might have been eyes although they didn't move or blink. I eventually concluded that they were just markings. Still, as it sat there it seemed to be watching us, although perhaps it was using other senses to investigate our presence. My attention was abruptly diverted to the yellow one beside it after it suddenly changed its color to bright purple.

"Hanna, how the hell did it do that?"

"I'm guessing their skins must be transparent until they actually adopt a color, so that would mean it's the color of their skin that makes them visible to us. Judging by what we just witnessed they also seem to be able to change color at will. On Earth they'd be doing that to mislead predators, perhaps to convince them that they weren't an edible species, but of course that might not be the case on this planet."

"And those blobs we're seeing all around us?"

"My guess is that they're the same creatures, but temporarily colorless and camouflaged. We're probably just seeing glimpses of their internal organs, which may be all that's visible through the transparent skin."

"So they're like chameleons?"

"That's probably the best comparison," she said, "although don't forget, the rules pertaining to life forms would undoubtedly be different here on Europa. Life may have different origins in this environment and it would almost certainly have evolved in its own unique fashion, thanks to the different ecology."

"Do you think they'll respond to music?"

"Who knows? If they're anything like Earth's flatworms they probably don't have any more intelligence than your average insect. They may not be a very appreciative audience."

"Yeah, but sometimes appearances can be deceiving. Look at how the red one seems to be exploring the exterior of the trailer. Makes you wonder how smart they really are, although I guess he could just be acting instinctively like our earthworms when they crawl onto the sidewalk

whenever it rains.”

“Maybe he’s just looking for food,” Hanna said as we watched it circumnavigate the trailer slowly and methodically. The rest of the creatures seemed to be keeping their distance, allowing this one to check us out first.

“If this machine can withstand the hazards of space travel, I guess we can safely assume we’re not in any danger from hungry flatworms. Maybe this one is some kind of leader. Wonder what he thinks of us showing up in his neighborhood, unannounced?”

“Remember, we weren’t the first ones here,” Hanna said. “I’m sure your parents didn’t just sit on the surface when they visited Europa. Like us, they probably couldn’t resist spending some time exploring the oceans, so if the locals have even the most basic level of intelligence, as well as the ability to communicate, then perhaps these guys have already heard legends about the last visit.”

“And if these creatures have the ability to communicate, then my father would probably have treated them to a concert. It’ll be interesting to see how they respond to my music. I think I should give it a try.”

“Yeah, why not? If Prince Charles can make his flowers grow better by talking to them, you should be able to at least get our flatworm friends up dancing.”

After playing just a few seconds I began to notice a gradual increase in the number of flatworms congregating around the trailer. They began materializing right before our eyes, lighting up like Christmas tree lights, their bodies mimicking every conceivable color as well as a few I had never seen before. Soon thousands of the luminous creatures had surrounded the trailer, swaying and undulating in unison like Olympic athletes in a synchronized swimming event. It was the most incredible thing I’d ever seen, and I marveled at their beauty as I continued to play.

“They’re definitely impressed,” Hanna said, laughing. “Think we should put a guitar case outside and see if we can make some money off them?”

I made a conscious effort to inject my warm feelings for them into my music, hoping that somehow they would respond in kind. As the tempo of the song slowed and mellowed, I saw their gyrations gradually begin to slow as well. They began to change color simultaneously at that point and soon they were all giving off the same green glow as the theremin. I now understood what rock musicians at a concert must feel like as they look out over a sea of lit candles and realize how much the audience enjoys their music.

As I finished the song and stretched my fingers out to relax them, I stared at the creatures, wondering whether or not they were, in effect, applauding my efforts.

“I don’t hear them speaking, but you know what, for a while there I actually thought I could comprehend what they were feeling as I played. It’s not just the green color they’ve all adapted, or the swimming in unison. On some level I think they were actually communicating with me, maybe just to say they liked what I was doing. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just my imagination.”

I was about to play another song but stopped when I noticed a sudden change in the demeanor of my audience. They seemed restless at first, wary

almost, as if they were sensing danger, and I could see their color gradually changing from green to a variety of florescent reddish-tinges.

I looked around to see what was bothering the creatures and it was Hanna who first noticed the inky-black tendrils that had begun to infiltrate the area around us like the two-dimensional silhouette of an octopus. The flatworms seemed to be looking around as well, and soon their attention was riveted to the approaching blackness.

They hesitated just a second and then abruptly began to disappear like city lights in a power failure. All I could see was the vague shapes of their internal organs as their skins reverted to invisibility and they began to swim away from the trailer. Soon there was nothing to see but the light from our trailer, and even that began to fade as hundreds of the dark ribbons moved toward us and gradually began enveloping the trailer like octopus tentacles. We watched as one of the creatures that had been slower than the others was caught in the blackness before it could escape. It looked like it was paralyzed instantly on contact with the darkness, although I sensed that it was still alive. It was gradually absorbed by the inky fluids and drifted out of sight.

"Don't panic, but is that music from a horror movie I'm hearing?" she asked.

I'd been listening to the music as it played quietly in the background ever since the blackness first appeared, but now it was growing louder and more intrusive. It was the most profoundly frightening sound I'd ever heard, similar in nature to the music that had been stalking me at various times over the last few days. As it grew in intensity I began to get an overwhelming sense of foreboding. It was the kind of score composers create when they want to prepare a movie audience in a horror film for something sudden and horrible that's about to happen.

By now whatever it was that was enveloping us had totally blocked our view of Europa's ocean, extinguishing the light that had illuminated the area around us. Although I felt confident that the blackness couldn't hurt us inside the trailer, it suddenly occurred to me that the danger might lie elsewhere.

"Hanna, we've got to get out of here before we get trapped, if we aren't already. That blackness that's moving in on us might be trying to anchor the trailer to the ocean floor permanently."

"Hang on a second," she said impatiently. "Maybe we should find out what's behind this first. It's possible they're just trying to scare us off, and if that's the case, well, I think we should just call their bluff and see what they do next."

The music was growing more ominous by the second. "I'm beginning to think that's not a good idea. We can always come back another time, you know."

"No need to panic, Andy. So far we haven't seen anything that really scares me, although that music is more than a little creepy. Let's wait and see what happens next."

"I don't know about this..."

"We are safe inside this thing, aren't we?" Hanna asked nervously as the trailer started to rock slightly. That immediately got our attention

because up to that point we hadn't experienced any instability at all. I looked at Hanna, who jabbed her index finger vigorously in the direction of the surface above us. I closed my eyes again and mentally ordered the spacecraft to return to our garage. We arrived there before I even had a chance to finish the thought. As I exited the trailer I knelt down and kissed the concrete floor.

"Hanna, are you gonna try to tell me you weren't scared when this thing started to rock?"

She gave me a playful kick in the rear as I closed the trailer door behind me. "I felt safe right up till the point it started moving, and that was enough for me. Still, I wasn't really all that scared, to be perfectly honest."

"Well, I sure was. The music was the worst for me," I said. "The louder it got, the more frightened I was."

"Okay, I admit the music was starting to get to me, but we still made it home."

"Jeez, that wasn't an oil spill drifting down from the surface, you know. I could sense the presence of some kind of life form as the blackness approached, so I didn't need the theremin to tell me we were in trouble. The blackness that wrapped itself around us, and the music associated with it, reminded me of the first time I saw a genuinely scary movie, only this time I know for sure that the villain is the real deal."

"Slow down! First of all, we managed to get away from them just by leaving the planet. That means they aren't totally omnipotent. Secondly, don't sell yourself short. If they want to fight you we'll just have to find a way for you to beat them."

We sat down beside the trailer in a couple of old lawn chairs and talked for almost an hour about what we'd just encountered on Europa. My ears were still ringing from the loud music directed at us back on the icy moon, and I was feeling very frustrated as I tried unsuccessfully to convince her that I was the wrong man for the job. She wasn't having any of that and actually began mocking me. I was about to say something really stupid when I heard a noise outside the garage. It was my mother, accompanied by Professor Howard, who held the door open for her. As she walked into the garage, she looked like she'd never been sick a day in her life although I could see that she was anxious about something.

"I realized after you two left that I should have been clearer when I warned you not to do anything foolish," she said as she rested her hand against the trailer. "Please tell me you two didn't take it for a ride."

I looked over at Hanna, but she wouldn't return my stare. Neither of us responded to her question.

My mother rolled her eyes upwards, and paused for a second before speaking. "Did you by any chance encounter the Disruptors?"

"Sort of, yes," I said sheepishly, "but it wasn't any big deal. Really."

"I knew it! You went to Europa, didn't you?"

"It was my idea, so please don't blame this on Andy," Hanna said.

"No, it's my fault," my mother said. "I knew I should have warned you about what might happen if you played around with that thing. Are you sure you're both okay?"

"We had a bit of a scare but we're fine now," said Hanna.

"It was nothing we couldn't handle," I said. "While we were under the ice we came across some kind of black substance floating in the ocean that seemed to want to attach itself to the trailer. I'm assuming it was the Disruptors, introducing themselves. We bailed out of there in a big hurry to avoid getting trapped and that was the end of it."

"You went to Europa? In that trailer?" Hanna's father said incredulously. "That's the Europa near Jupiter you're talking about? What were you thinking?"

Hanna and I took turns relating the story of our trip. My mother listened patiently, but Professor Howard interrupted us repeatedly with questions. He sounded skeptical at first but by the time we finished he seemed to believe us.

"Andy, your mother's right. You probably shouldn't have gone but I have to admit I'd love to have been along for the ride! Would you by any chance have room for another passenger on the next trip?"

"Before they go anywhere again," my mother said, "I've got to brief them on what they can expect to encounter out there."

"Dad, you're going to love it! It's the ultimate amusement park ride."

Hanna cocked her head to one side as if she was trying to listen to a sound that was almost too faint to detect. "Hang on a second. Can you hear that?"

"Now that's not normal." Professor Howard said ominously.

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[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)