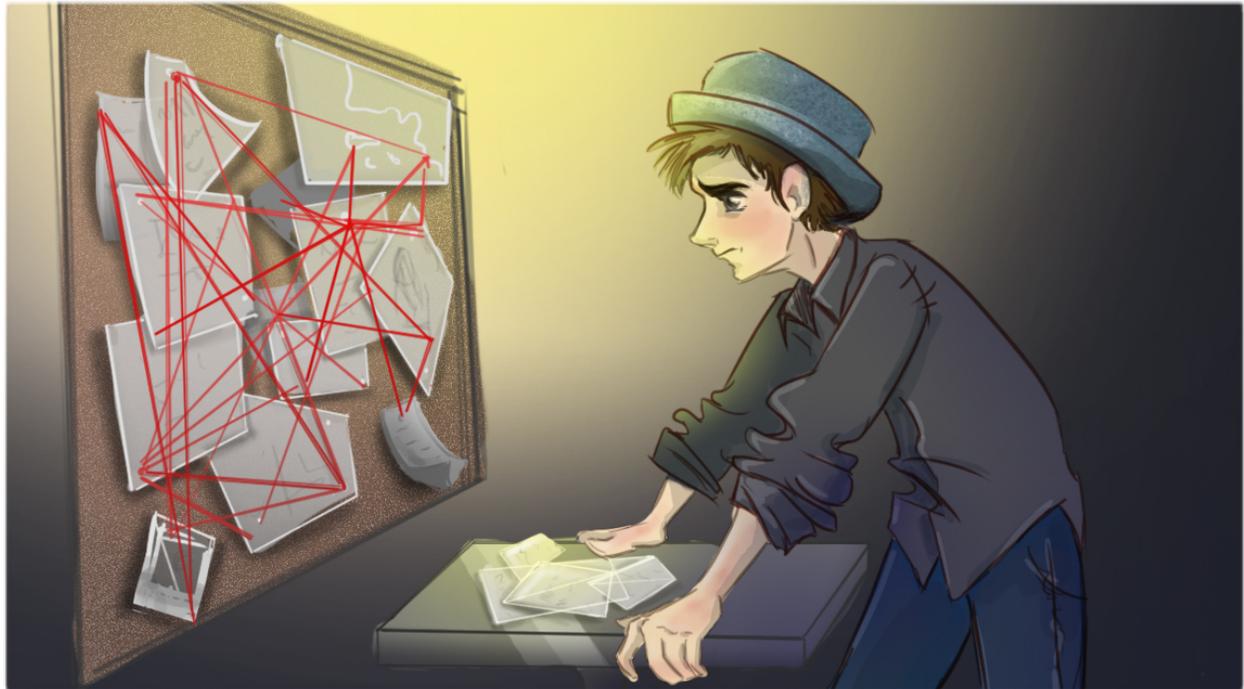


CHAPTER 21

Hidden Wonders



Wallaby grunted as he hopped off of the bike and approached the familiar warehouse. A feeling of nostalgia gripped him as he recalled the first time Mr. Azam had taken him and Stevin there. That seemed a lifetime ago.

It had been three weeks since he had last visited. *Sumner probably misses me.* The less-than-monstrous monster had truly made a home of the place, though Wallaby suspected him to eventually go mad from cabin fever. *One of these days, that fur ball won't be here anymore.*

Walking inside the warehouse, Wallaby remembered why he had come there in the first place, despite his true wish to stay home. *This is the only place I haven't checked yet. Stevin must be here.* He could avoid his old friend no longer, and sure enough, Stevin stood near the center-right area of the warehouse, his hands resting on a table met by a large bulletin board covered in paper and string. *He's been busy these last few months.*

“Stevin? Hey, man,” Wallaby greeted him modestly.

Stevin did not reply. Instead, he remained fixated on whatever rested before him on the table.

“It's me. I guess that's obvious. How's everything going over here? Are you alright?”

Still, he ignored Wallaby. Though Stevin did stand upright and put a finger to his chin. To Wallaby, that did not count as a response.

Mr. Sumner poked Wallaby on the shoulder. “You probably don't want to bother him, mate. Stevin's in one of his ‘concentration moods.’ He insists I play the quiet game with him.”

Wallaby smiled. “Good to see you, Mr. Sumner. Sorry I've been away for so long.”

“Oh, no, I understand completely,” he said swaying in the air. “You're a busy guy with busy business. Too busy to visit your old friends.”

Right. Time here is obviously well spent. “Believe me, Sumner. I'd be here more often if I didn't have to check in with Sadie so often.”

“Is she enjoying her new job, then?”

“It’s...look, I really need to speak with Stevin.” *Is he mad at me? Why is he so focused after all this time?*

Truthfully, Stevin hadn’t let up since they returned home. Not one moment went by that Stevin even took off that bowler hat. *He smells awful. If his teachers knew this was how he was spending his leave of absence, they’d force him to return to classes tomorrow.* But Wallaby didn’t feel cruel enough to let such a thing happen. *Everyone grieves their own way. He probably still thinks we can save her.*

At that moment, something peculiar caught his eye. *Is that?* He moved further to examine the drawing placed on the bulletin board.

“Stevin, is that the cottage? From Scotland?”

Immediately, Stevin replied, “One of them. There’s plenty.”

“So, he does speak.”

“So, no one else listens.”

“I’m assuming you’re back to rethinking the cipher Mary left for us.”

“No, I’m not assuming anything anymore. And Mary left no cipher for us.”

What? I was there. “The oracle said it belonged to Mary.”

“It said nothing. The book only appeared to be in her possession. Someone else placed it there to lead us away from her.”

Nonsense. Stevin’s finally losing his mind. “Forgive me for assuming, but I’m assuming you have a good reason, or at least some evidence, for this theory?”

“Evidence is imperfect. But reason is flawless. When you come across evidence or clues that are perfect, it’s safer to conclude that it’s not real.”

There was a subtle change in how Stevin spoke these words. It was the longest he’d spoke with Wallaby in the five months since they returned to San Francisco. *I don’t like this*, Wallaby decided. Yet he resumed his investigation of Stevin’s board. It was filled with snapshots of their adventures through time.

“Stevin, I’m a little worried. I understand why you’re so obsessed, but eventually, you have to let this go. You made it, no, *we* made it back alive somehow. We almost became as lost as Mary, but we’re OK now. So, can we just end this?”

Shockingly, Stevin laughed. “Why would I quit when I’m so close to wrapping this story up?”

Wallaby stared at him, blankly.

“He makes a good point,” Sumner chimed in.

No one asked you, Wallaby didn’t dare say. “Stevin, you’re starting to really worry me. I want to take you home and have a chat with your dad. It’s about time you fill him in on what’s been going on.”

Stevin exhaled. “Great! Come on, then.” He turned from the table with a paper in his hand and grabbed Wallaby’s arm, forcing him to walk together.

“Wait, what? Where are we going?”

“You too, Sumner. We’ll pick Sadie up on the way.” He turned his gaze to Wallaby. “Brilliant timing, by the way.”

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Sadie adjusted the tag dangling on her chest with frustration. It never wanted to stay clipped on, causing her frequent annoyance. A man bumped into her.

“Oh, excuse me, miss,” he said politely, waiting for a response.

Sadie glared at the man until he finally walked away, timid from her indifference.

I could crush any one of these peasants, she ruminated, letting her face scowl by comparison. Someone else approached her. It was a boy who walked as if he thought himself a man. He was covered in acne and had thick, blonde hair.



“Sadie, I see you’re getting along with our customers again,” he said with an insufferable and sarcastic tone. The boy before her was dressed as she was, though with more pins on his polo.

“I have no time for one of your soliloquies, Marty,” she pounced, still trying to adjust her name tag.

“I see. Well, Sadie, if you ever want to be assistant manager, like me, then you need to start *interacting* with the customers. Not just the pets.”

“I do not *interact* with the animals,” she replied as she walked over to a fish tank and examined its contents. “And they are not pets. Not yet, at least. They are profound, respectable creatures under my supervision.”

The boy, clearly younger than her both in wits and physicality, crossed his arms and chuckled. “I admire your enthusiasm, Sadie. You have that spunk that brings the store to life. And of course, we all appreciate it. Just for *future reference*, remember to smile and treat each customer exactly how you would want to treat yourself—er, well the animals you love so dearly. In fact, here comes one right now!”

Sadie turned her head to see familiar faces stepping through the door to the shop. *Finally. Stevin and Wallaby are here to summon me away from this boredom.*

“I know these ones, Marty. Please leave us in isolation.”

Puzzled, Marty walked away, though keeping his eyes on Sadie and her approaching friends.

Stevin had his hands in the pockets of a new trench coat, and his face was noticeably calmer than she remembered from his last visit. *He seems less anxious, she realized. My chance to settle this life debt may have finally come at last.*

“Good to see you,” Stevin said to her gently. He mouth turned to a smirk as he spoke the words.

“This is excellent. My chance to settle my life debt to you has finally come, correct?”

Wallaby shuffled in place. “I’m not so sure, Sadie. It looks like—”

“It looks like your time here,” Stevin interrupted, “is at an end for now. We are finishing this investigation, and I require your particular...bravado.”

Sadie grinned. *After five months, I’d hope we’re about to finish this. We’re lucky BnL hasn’t come looking for us. Well, they’re the lucky ones, I suppose.*

She had thought it strange that BnL never sought them out after the incident at the resort. Either Shelby thought them dead from the lava or still lost somewhere in space with Gnome. To Sadie, it mattered little. When next she would meet Shelby Forthright, she would end him. *There’s nowhere for that man to run when I find him. Not even ‘his’ Sadie can stop me.* The memory of “dark” Sadie haunted her at night. Not out of fear, but out of a desire to settle their identity crisis.

“Enough standing around. Where are we going?” Sadie demanded of Stevin with conviction. “Was it not you who said we are *unable* to travel through time without causing an anomaly?”

“Indeed, time travel is not an option for now. At least anywhere *we* want to go. If Wallaby uses his powers to take us to, say, the Hexagon to rescue Alec before he was transformed into a rabbit, we will be going to a time when our bodies exist in two places at once. This anomaly would surely bring Shelby and his enforcers down on us. Instead, we’re going somewhere Shelby wouldn’t even think to look. But it’s not somewhere in time.”

Wallaby groaned. “Say again?”

“Come on, Sumner is waiting in the car.” Stevin gripped his keys and motioned for Sadie to follow him.

She replied by ripping off her tag and tossing it near the register.

“Marty, I’m going on a sabbatical. Please work on my behalf and prevent this decision from having any negative consequences. I would still enjoy employment here once my obligations with this detective have been fulfilled.”

He stared at her and gulped. “Sadie, I don’t know if—”

But before he could finish his sentence, the door shut.

Sadie followed them to Stevin’s car, a blue corvette with just enough seats to accommodate them all. She stole the front seat from Wallaby with little resistance. As she sat in the seat, she couldn’t help but feel envious. *I don’t understand why I couldn’t get a Driver’s Permission License when Stevin did. I can maneuver through ‘no-man’s land’ as a cheetah at 60mph. All he can do is look through a foolish, circular glass.*

Wallaby sighed as the car turned on and left the parking lot. “Stevin, you never mentioned anything about going on a trip in our own timeline. First, your parents—and mine—are going to flip out if we just disappear. Second, we have no money or means of getting there!”

Stevin didn’t take his eyes off the road. “I remember a time when you would have done anything to find Mary. Now you’re just finding excuses.”

“Well, it would be easier if you’d clue me in once in a while. Ever since we got back, you’ve been impossible to talk to.”

You’re the one who’s impossible to listen to, Sadie almost said. She had learned to keep her mouth shut during the affairs of others, however, thanks to her time with Stevin’s family. They had graciously let her stay with the Parkers all this time, mostly thanks to Stevin’s revelation that his father nearly used him as bait for monsters when he was a child. Still, she wondered if his parents knew the full story of their travels and where she truly came from. Stevin had been vague on that subject, choosing not to share the details of how he convinced them to let her stay. She had been so scared of leaving, she didn’t dare question it.

After some arguing, Wallaby conceded. “Fine, can you at least tell us where we’re going?”

Sumner crawled to Stevin’s shoulder. “It would be good to know, mate. Promise we won’t ask too many questions.”

“I can’t say no to you, Sumner,” Stevin smirked. “We’re headed to Oakland.”

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They're on the move.

The other Sadie raised her wrist to her mouth. “Logan, the imposter and the detective have reunited. They’re headed toward somewhere outside the hot zone.”

A voice crackled from the other side. “Al and I are en route. What is their direction?”

“East.”

Sadie put her wrist down as the blue corvette turned the corner. *That imposter still calls herself Sadie. Soon, she will find no solace in such a name.* For a moment, she considered alerting BnL to the situation. Surely, Shelby would be interested to know that Stevin was up to something.

A thought made her pause. *Shelby said not to alert him until Stevin came upon a lead to finding Mary. And our stealth is a higher priority than his awareness. For now, we'll see if Stevin is truly moving ahead with the investigation.* Her thoughts were like a flurry, constantly wondering if she could hold herself back from engaging them. Months of watching the imposter “be” her had caused her incredible torment.

A voice came in from her wrist. “Sadie, you there?”

“Yes, Al.”

“Thanks for not engaging. I know it must have been difficult, but we’re on our way! Are you sure you don’t know where they’re headed exactly?”

“They spoke little.” *It’s almost like the detective is on to us.*

“That’s OK. We’ll pick you up in 30 seconds.”

“They won’t get away this time,” she said impulsively. Her face darkened. “This time, they don’t have the advantage of equal numbers or surprise. Together, Logan and I will easily overpower them and send them where they belong.”

“I understand,” Al said breathlessly. “You sound scary, which is good. Just keep it to yourself, though.”

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Stevin stepped out of the corvette, which he had parked just outside of a place no one expected to be taken.

“Why are we at an ice cream parlor?” Wallaby asked as he scrambled out of the backseat.

Sumner followed him out. “Yes, I believe you banned me from ice cream twice already, Stevin. And this was a long drive for a cone.”

“We’re not here for the treats, guys. There’s something else.”

They followed Stevin as he walked toward the back of the ice cream parlor, revealing a basement level with one door and no windows.

“How fitting,” he said quickly, stepping forward without waiting for them.

The building was not very inviting, but it was clear that whatever lay inside was mostly empty. Though any indication as to what it was used for was unfortunately clouded by the smell of exhaust from the ice cream machines operating just above them. They filled Stevin’s nostrils as he opened the door and entered the hidden area of the parlor.

Inside, the space was open and filled with chairs. A bar lay stretched before them, with only one person sitting at it. The entire place was empty except for him and the woman drying spoons in the corner.

“Is this an ice cream *bar*?” Wallaby asked, scratching his head.

“So I’ve heard,” muttered Stevin. With his hands in his trench coat, he walked up to the older man sitting on the stool.

He could tell that the man was tall, even while sitting. He was very muscular, and had broad shoulders expanding the size of his chest and arms. The man had thick, black hair that fell over his eyes, and he wore a green button-down shirt with short sleeves. Oddly, the man was wearing matching shorts.

Stevin approached him casually. “Hello, Kevin. I had a feeling we’d catch you here.”

The man said nothing as he pushed an empty glass that had once been filled with milk mixed with ice cream.

“Another,” he beckoned to the waitress drying spoons.



This didn't amuse Stevin.

"We came a long way, Kevin. Do you mind?"

Still, he was silent.

Fine, be that way. Stevin took his hands out of his pockets and sat on the stool next to Kevin. He tilted his head to the others, letting them know to hang back near the tables. They obeyed, silently.

"I'll have a strawberry," Stevin said to the waitress.

She nodded and went to the back.

"So, it was easier than I thought to find you," observed Stevin. "Every day, you come here. Without fail. You're quite the man of routine."

Kevin turned his head slowly to face Stevin. "You know *nothing* about me."

“Heh, I guess that’s a little true. Although, I do know you’re Kevin Sohn.”

“So are a lot of people.”

“Not really. That name’s not very common. Regardless, I know why you come here.”

Kevin looked away. “Screw off.”

Not just yet, thought Stevin.

The waitress arrived with two milkshakes. She placed them in front of both patrons. “Anything else I can get you?” she asked Stevin.

“I’m fine, thanks.” *Now get out of here.*

As she walked away, Stevin took the milkshake and stirred the straw. “It must be difficult being you. Knowing you’re responsible for the disappearance of an innocent girl.”

Kevin shot a hard look at Stevin and then sprang from his seat. He grabbed the stool and aimed it at him. “Don’t make me,” he threatened.

Upon this, Sadie leapt from her seat, ready to tackle the man. But Stevin arose and put his hand out to calm her.

“I know you didn’t mean it, Kevin. But I also know you’ve been a tad lazy. Instead of fixing your mistake, you’ve been wallowing in pity for months. Not efficient if you ask me.”

“I’m warning you, kid. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Always the adrenaline junkie. So tell me. What did Mary give to you? In the exchange, I mean.”

“How do you—”

“I won’t ask again. This is important. Why did you agree to help her?”

Kevin lowered the stool. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s impossible. You can’t know.”

“Can’t I? Mary had to get her doors *somehow*. And she couldn’t have traveled in time without them. And you’re the only one who could have helped her. She mentions you quite a bit in her journal, albeit not directly.”

“You know about Australia?”

“Yes, yes. I know all about the trips. I know she used you to get time travel doors that would let her go to the monster world. It lasted quite a while before she finally disappeared. So what did you get in return? That’s the one thing I can’t figure out.”

Kevin sat on the stool and covered his face. “I just wanted to go back. I wanted her to take me back in time. That was the deal.”

“Strange. You don’t strike me as the sort to regret much.”

Wallaby finally spoke up from behind them. “What’s going on, Stevin? What do you mean this guy helped Mary?”

“It’s simple. Kevin here is an explorer. He knows the whereabouts of the most magic-infused locations on Earth. Mary called them *Hidden Wonders*. With his help, Mary was able to craft time travel doors without Alec knowing about them.”

“You think Mary was traveling in time before she was captured?”

“I’ve known that since Sydney. That monster we encountered was the owner of the purple hair. Mary came across him in her travels.

The hair was there, not because he captured her, but because it had been there for some time.”

“Are you saying her captor *wasn't* a monster, then?”

“Nope. Her captor was a magician, like her. Someone who wasn't a big fan of her escapades through time.”

Wallaby stepped backward and put his hands to his hair. “That's why Randall was after her. Someone got to Mary before BnL. Was that person trying to protect her?”

“Not at first. Jessie told us that the captor nearly attacked Mary. But something about Mary stopped the captor from doing so. And Kevin, here, is going to help us find out why.”

“I'm not a part of this,” Kevin dismissed. “I don't know who took her or why. So let me finish this milkshake in peace.”

Stevin grabbed the glass and tossed it behind him. It shattered. “Sorry, Kevin. No time for ice cream. We need you to tell us where you got those doors. All of them.”

He raised his eyebrows. “They're all over the world. Even if I told you, it would take you months, even years, to find them.”

“Then you'll take us.”

“No.”

“You will. Because we can take you back.”

Kevin looked up at Stevin from his stool. He bent his eyebrows and stood up. “Fine. But we're taking my dirigible.”

THE PIXAR DETECTIVE

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