

CHAPTER 27

The Wilderness Explorer



The sun finally disappeared, signaling the end of Robert's shift. He hit the autopilot and let Badger strap in to his seat, giving him full control of The Phantasm.

"Don't mess with anything, mole rat," Robert instructed as he placed the dark glasses back onto his face. He no longer needed to see the sky with unfiltered eyes.

Badger shuffled in his seat for a moment to get a feel for the machine. This made Robert recall the mutated boy's fidgety nature, as described by Badger's case file. The young man, if you could call him

that, was the nephew of the Underminer, one of his father's greatest foes. Since his defeat nearly fifty years ago, his young brother's child, Badger, had been turned over to the university by his parents. Rather than let him ascend the ranks of the mole people and become a full-fledged Underminer, they decided to trade him to Pixar University in exchange for raw materials. Robert assumed these materials would be used to construct new machines for their small society beneath the Earth's surface, which would allow for a more peaceful relationship with the people of the surface.

It was genius on the part of the university's dean, though still troubling in Robert's mind. The mole people only ever went to the surface to steal resources for building their machines, so trades were a common thing for both factions. This was the first time, however, that they had sent one of their own to the university. When Robert asked why Badger was chosen, Rey told him frankly that it warranted a large supply of materials in return. Despite his off-putting looks, Badger was a mastermind inventor and handler of tech, making it strange that they were so quick to give him up. Now, he was steering the Phantasm. Robert had few qualms about letting him fly the ship for a few hours, though his trust in the boy hadn't grown an inch since meeting him, regardless. He knew the boy was capable enough.

As he approached the common room, Robert could hear a muffled conversation between Rey and Petit. He paused for a moment near the door to listen undetected. Only a small part of him felt guilty. Both girls were playing cards on the dining table. Possibly a variation of

Bridge, though Robert knew little of fun and games. He was more interested in what they had to say while he wasn't around. *I'll just peek ever slightly around this corner*, he told himself.

"I'm sure you'll get another chance," Rey said softly as she placed a card face down on the table. "Paris is a cesspit for the unimaginable."

The look on Petit's face didn't change. "Imagine that," she said curtly and with her eyes piercing the cards furiously. "As long as I'm taking orders from the university, I won't get a chance. Finding Bomb would take days, even with our resources."

Bomb? It took Robert a moment, but he then remembered Petit's file. She was a super-fan of Bomb Voyage, an international assassin his godfather had helped foil many years ago. He had since gone into hiding somewhere in France, and rumor had it that the university still monitored his activities carefully, even as an old man. It actually surprised Robert that Petit hadn't mentioned her appointed mentor when they had started the mission in Paris.

"Even Unforgivables get vacations, Petit." Rey twirled a card around her fingers indecisively. "Perhaps you'll get your chance after a mission in London. You must be a great swimmer."

Petit chuckled quietly at that. Then she looked Rey in the eye. "Badger keeps calling you by another code name. One that I'm not familiar with. Is he crazy, or is your old name 'Mirage?'"

The silence was thick, but Rey certainly knew the question had been asked. But as her voice was about to let out a response, a red light flashed above them. The alarm shrieked loudly, startling everyone,

especially Robert. He stumbled out of the hallway and was noticed at once by Rey and Petit. Robert could see the suspicion in Petit's eyes.

He ignored it and pointed his thumb back down the hallway. "The cockpit."

That was all he needed to say. Petit and Rey arose and followed him to where Badger was holding the throttle of the Phantasm with a firm grip.

"What's happening?" Robert asked sharply.

Badger pointed forward, leading everyone's eyes to a spot in the horizon. Their faces were blanketed in the most extreme form of fear and awe.

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London is crowded this time of day, the man thought. He straightened his tie and walked straight to the watchtower, known as Big Ben. Faces passed by him, but no one noticed the tall, slender man stepping briskly through the crowd as if he was invisible and made of air. Dusk would be in a few hours, so Randall could feel the force of men and women scrambling to get home as quickly as possible. You're all just a bunch of ants on an island, he thought.

Finally, Randall walked through a door leading to the inside of the clock, stories above the ground. In the corner of the large, mechanical

room, he saw a makeshift bed housing a plump man appearing, and smelling, to be homeless.

“Get up, Al.”

The man rolled over and winced before realizing who was speaking to him. “Randall!” he panicked. Quickly, Al threw off his sheets and tried to wipe the dirt from his clothes as Randall paced the room for a bit, patiently.

“Sorry, sir. I would have cleaned up if I knew you were coming today.”

“No need to apologize, tinkerer.” Randall stopped to admire the contours of the gears above them. “You actually obeyed orders. Unlike that Hero you were with. Where is she?”

The gulping sound from Al’s throat made the room echo. “She went to France as planned. Apparently, Sadie’s death messed up Logan’s directive. She said she has to find a door that will take her to BnL. That way, she said, a directive can be switched on before Stevin Parker finds Mary.”

“Hmmm,” Randall postured. He stroked his chin. “She could be betraying us. In order to find a door that will take her forward in time, Logan must have a magician. And the only one in France that I know of is that blonde, round one traveling with the imposter Sadie.”

Sweat fell from Al’s face. “Huh, I never thought of that.” He paused for a moment to think. “But I doubt it,” he waved to Randall. “Logan’s main directive is to obey BnL orders, and if she did that, she would have come with me here to the safe house. Where it’s safe.”

THE PIXAR DETECTIVE

“Not necessarily,” Randall replied. “This clocktower won’t be a safe house for much longer. Miles Axelrod will eventually take it over, along with the rest of England.”

“But not for long, right?” Al asked, confused. “BnL will run everything. Axelrod is just an oil tycoon. He can’t possibly...”

“Maybe *he* won’t secure this place. But his car will.” Randall clapped. “Now! Back to business. Where is the tracer we gave you to track Stevin Parker?”

“Right here,” Al answered as he reached for a phone showing the monster’s location. “I placed it inside of his necklace when I helped Cara build it. I couldn’t get it on any of Stevin’s things.”

“That’ll do just fine,” Randall smiled. “You’ve been very helpful, Al. Following protocol, working undercover...I’d say you’ve more than proven your worth to our illustrious organization.”

For a moment, that made Al smile. But his grin evaporated when Randall snapped his fingers. Another figure entered the door. It was



Cochran, who was accompanied by several men with blank expressions and wires coming out of their forearms.

“Randall, are those...Cynetics? Where did you get them?!”

The tall man gave Al a smirk. “Let’s say I borrowed them from someone who no longer needs such...luxuries.”

The Cynetics grabbed Al and carried him away from both Cochran and Randall. He shouted, “The anomalies, Randall! *You’re causing too many anomalies!*” The door slammed behind them.

Good, Randall thought. He turned to Cochran. “We’re going to France.”

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His eyes opened slowly. Mary knew they were reaching for her face first, then the window.

“It’s nearly dusk,” she told him.

Russell tried to get up, but Mary slowed him. He relented. “I’ve been out that long, huh?”

She smiled and motioned for him to lay back down. “You need to rest, Russ. That android beat you pretty bad. I was almost impressed.”

That didn’t amuse him, she knew, but Russell still laughed. Mary could see that the pain was leaving him — a testament to his resilience. Russell’s face was badly bruised from the android’s punches, but it was his gut that Mary feared for the most. The android’s most critical strike was at Russell’s core. When she had first examined his injuries,

she had to make sure his lungs hadn't collapsed. Thankfully, he was still the sturdy scout she had known for years.

"You look so different," she told him softly. "Has it been that long since we saw each other?"

Russell smirked. "You know as well as I do that the eggs made me this old. But I guess I did put in the effort for working this body out myself. It helps when you're on the run."

She looked at him coyly and applied some ointment to a scrape on his arm. "What else has happened these last few months? I know my parents must think me dead." Her words were sweet like honey, putting Russell at ease.

"Yes, though not everyone has given up on finding you, Mary. Your friend, Stevin Parker, has been looking everywhere for you."

That surprised her. "How do you know that? You've never met any of my friends..."

"Honestly," he replied evenly, "I didn't know you had *any* friends until Stevin came looking for me with the blonde kid."

"Blonde kid? Do you mean Wallaby?"

"Yeah, that's the one. He doesn't have what I'd call a memorable face."

Mary shook her head in disbelief. "What do you mean they came looking for me? How do they even know about you?"

His eyes looked to the corner of the room. "Parker found your diary and deciphered it. He figured out what your codes meant about the hidden wonders, and he somehow managed to track me down."

“Let me guess. Fenton’s?”

Russell rolled his eyes at that. “Your friend is relentless. I saw him take on the son of Frozone and one of the mole people. And somehow he teamed up with a super who isn’t with the university.”

The words felt impossible to understand. All Mary could do was muster, “What?” Her thoughts were too clouded to organized. *Stevin did that?* She kept repeating over and over in her head. Finally, she gripped Russell’s arm and asked, “Why isn’t he with you anymore?”

“I told you before. I came here to escape the university, not help Stevin find you. He’s still in Paris for all I know. And you know I would have come looking for you myself if I had known you’d been abducted. But your house, or what was left of it, was surrounded by magic, so I just assumed you didn’t want to be found. Don’t worry, you’re family is alright.”

Mary wanted to believe him. She owed him. It was her fault that the university was after him, and he knew it. It had been his decision, and for all he knew, she was merely trying to escape in case someone figured it out.

“Th-thank you,” she said to him.

Surprised, he responded, “For what?”

“For protecting me.”

“I’d do anything for you, Mary.”

She knew he meant it. His eyes lingered on hers for a moment as old memories came rushing back.

He gave a sigh and looked away from her. “I wish I was my real age again.”

It wasn't hard for Mary to remember. When she first met him, Mary quickly understood something strange about him. He was constantly aging, especially after returning from trips to the falls. Only a year ago, they realized that merely being around the bird of Paradise Falls accelerates your age and maturity. But that wasn't all.

“The eggs made you older,” Mary started. “Maybe they'll reverse your age, too.”

Russell looked at her again. “No. Charles Muntz did that, and it made him mad. I read the journal he left behind on the Spirit of Adventure. When he ate the bird's eggs, it made him younger, but it also drove him insane.”

“You know don't for sure that the eggs are what caused that...”

“What would you have me do, Mary? You took the eggs to Paradise Falls for a reason. To protect them. If I ate them, it would make this entire ordeal pointless.”

“Does the university still think you ate those eggs already?”

His body tensed up. “Yes. They call me the ‘poacher’ now. Even though they're the ones who had Kevin and his babies locked up for years.” He gazed upon her face again. “Thanks to you, the university no longer has the eggs. And thanks to me, they'll never try to find them again. They've surely hatched by now, and I like to think something's taking care of them over there. Those birds are tough birds.”

Mary smiled again.

He touched her cheek. “We need to escape, Mary. That old witch abducted you, didn’t she? You don’t look like someone with freedom.”

Shaking her head didn’t feel right. “Escape isn’t possible, Russell. She’s powerful. The minute she thinks we’re up to something, she can cast a spell on the ship or who knows what else. And she found me once already. I don’t think there’s anywhere safe for me to be, except for here. For now.”

“You’re wrong, Mary! I saw what you did to the android back there. That woman isn’t the only person on this island with power, and if she’s holding you against your will, then—”

“Then I should be smart,” she interrupted. “I don’t yet know what the woman truly wants. Before I can even think about escape, I need to know why. Besides, we’re not in any immediate danger. Belle hasn’t harmed you, so you’re pretty lucky.”

It was strange, actually. Belle had been mostly indifferent to Russell since the end of the battle. Mary couldn’t even recall the woman ever speaking to him.

The door opened suddenly, just as Mary was about to speak again. The witch stood there, solemnly, as if she had been expecting to see something exciting.

“How is he?” the witch asked coldly.

Before answering, Mary looked at Russell for a moment, wondering what the correct answer was. “He’ll be fine, Princess Belle. As long as I keep looking after him.”

“Good,” she said without hesitating. “Come, come.” The witch then turned and waved Mary to come with her. Mary looked at Russell and shrugged before exiting the cottage.

They walked for a few minutes toward a clearing near the great tree’s reservoir. It was a darkish blue now that dusk had finally settled in, masking the unease in Mary’s face. She had been silent during the entire walk, unsure of what to say. Part of her ached to learn of the power she had wielded against the android. Another part wanted to ask what had become of him. Mary had been too distracted by Russell’s injuries to notice what the witch had done with their foe.

Before Mary could come up with something to say, the witch broke the silence. “This island used to be hundreds of times larger than it is now. Did I ever tell you that, little dear?”

She looked at the witch and bit her lip. “You did.”

“It even had a volcano at one point. Oh, well that was years ago, I suppose. I can’t keep track of geography anymore these days. Were you saying something, little dear?”

“What? No, you were speaking—”

“Ah, yes, well it’s OK to forget. But I’m sure you know why I’ve brought you to this spot.”

“Is it because of my powers? Because what happened with the android before was a total accident. And since we’re not doing much around here, could you at least—”

“That boy who showed up here is a dark omen, little dear. More will follow, and sooner than you think. Do you believe I can protect this place?”

“You’ve shown that you can, but I don’t think you really need to. This place is off the map.”

“Yes! There it is! That’s it right there! Ah, you truly are my little dear. So poignant. Let’s get started.”

Mary put her palm to her face in frustration. *Started? What is this old witch talking about?*

The witch stepped away from Mary and spread her feet, as if to meditate. She closed her eyes and then opened just one to look at Mary straight ahead of her. “You’ll know true bravery when you wield *unlimited power!*” she started with a whisper and then shouted.

The witch’s arms rose in the air, and the ground with it. The hard earth beneath their feet quaked and pushed against Mary’s feet. It was unlike anything she had ever felt. Several trees in the distance crumbled. Mary spotted a massive wave wiping out the cliffs to the north of them. It took thirty seconds for Mary to realize the ground was no longer surrounded by water. They were rising in the air, and the clouds were rapidly approaching them.

“I don’t want this!” Mary screamed, unsure of what else to say. “I want no part of this!”

“Soon, neither of us will!” the witch cackled uncontrollably.

The last thing Mary saw before falling to her feet was a jet just beyond the horizon.

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