

The spring air was warm and lively, the sun beating down onto the earth. There was no breeze that day, making the day almost unbearably hot. A few birds flew in the sky, screeching a song no one knows but them.

Aden counts the sparse clouds in the sky from the porch, occasionally reaching for the collar of his shirt to peel the cloth off of his sticky body.

“Aden!” His head turns towards the source of the sound. Muriel, his friend of five years, approached him. Their houses weren’t far from each other, but she was already slick with sweat. She pants as she reaches Aden, fanning herself to no avail.

She beams at him, her smile warming him more than the sunshine. “How are you?”

“Hot.” He replies shortly. He stands up from his perch on the porch. He hops down and walks towards her.

“Are you too hot to hang out with me?” Muriel asks, a mischievous twinkle in her teal eyes that Aden could only assume means trouble.

He eyes her suspiciously. “What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.” She turns and runs towards the street. She glances over her shoulder. “You coming?”

Aden follow reluctantly, jogging to keep up with Muriel. She races him into the woods behind the row of houses, laughing as she takes in the beauty of the day.

Aden jumps over fallen branches, listening to the snapping of twigs and the soft thud of his feet returning to the earth. His lungs burned, and even as he ran as fast as he could, he

could not catch up with Muriel's unrivaled pace. She knew the forest better than anyone in town, as if she had lived there all her life.

Finally, Muriel stops, Aden nearly crashing into her.

"Look!" She points excitedly. Aden looks up into the trees. At first, all he sees is the forest, and the occasional squirrel jumping from branch to branch. Then he makes out the outline of a wooden structure. Vines and branches hugged the frame like an old friend. Time had caused the wood to crack and melt into the scenery. If it had not been for Muriel, Aden could have passed by the structure a hundred times and never would have seen it.

"It's a treehouse." Aden states.

"I know!" Muriel says, a look of excitement painted across her face. "Isn't it great? I was out exploring and then suddenly- BAM! I found this treehouse!" She scurries over to one of the trees closest to the structure. Reaching behind the vines, she unwraps a thick, ancient rope. She let it settle beside the treehouse and then motioned to Aden to follow.

Aden watches her climb uneasily, listening to the wood creak from the pressure. "Is it safe?"

"It hasn't fallen yet, has it?" Muriel disappears into the structure. Hesitantly, Aden makes his way towards the ropes. He took in a long breath of air before making his way up the rope.

The air in the treehouse was oddly cool, with the musty smell of earth settling in the room. The only window was covered by the remains of an old cloth, which had been torn apart by the relentless weather.

Aden turns and notices Muriel has taken out a basket. She takes out a blanket. She settles it onto the wood and then begins to take out other items. The first is a small, messily wrapped object with a silver bow slapped on top, desperately trying to hang on. The second is a box, which she opens to reveal sandwiches and muffins.

“I made these myself.” Muriel says proudly. “Well, I made the sandwiches. Mr. Quentin helped with the muffins, but I wrapped the present by myself.”

‘I can tell.’ Aden thought, his face breaking into a slow smile as he watches his friend set up.

Muriel pats the spot next to her. Aden sits down, brushing away dirt and dust.

“Happy birthday!” Muriel says, handing him a muffin.

“Thanks, Muriel.” His heart swelled. Muriel was the only true friend he had in town. Everyone else turned away. He was different than the rest of them, with his advanced gift of seeing the future. Muriel, who was behind in her studies, never used him like the rest would. She just wanted him. His smile disappeared as a thought came to mind. He turns away from her.

“What’s wrong? Aden?” Muriel asks worriedly, grabbing his shoulder.

“You’re leaving today, aren’t you?” He asks quietly. Mr. Quentin, Muriel’s uncle, got a job in the east. Muriel never told him when they were leaving, trying to keep the thought in the back of their minds, but it was always there, hovering over their heads like an annoying pest.

Muriel sighs. “Yes.” She says quietly, giving his shoulder a tight squeeze before letting her hand fall. “I have to leave this afternoon.” Muriel studies her friend’s face, feeling the urge to

wrap her arms around him, but instead she turns and stares down at the sandwiches. They sit there together, in the stillness of the space, listening to the rustling of branches.

“I’m going to run away.” Muriel shouts suddenly.

Aden jumps, shocked at his friend’s sudden outburst. “What? You can’t! Mr. Quentin would be worried, and where would you go?”

Muriel smiles at him. “Where else? To you.”

Aden laughs shortly. “You don’t want to run away to be with me.”

“Why not? We can live here, where no one could ever find us. We can get jobs in town, too.”

“We are too young for jobs.” Aden points out. “No one want to hire a seven year old.”

“I’m seven and a half.” Muriel huffs, as if that made a difference. “Okay, so maybe not now, but when we’re older, and I can get money, I’m taking the first train, ship, dragon- whatever I can find and I’m coming back for you.” She raises her hand to him, her eyes shining with determination. “That’s a promise!”

Aden stares at his friend’s hand, her pinkie raised and waiting. He wasn’t sure. In that moment, he wanted to believe that it was possible, but could he really trust that she would come back? He looks at his friend, taking in her features as if it were the first time he was seeing her. Her raven hair was raised into a ponytail, which had come undone from the running. The loose ends stuck to her face from the sweat. Her eyes gleamed with a promise, and in that moment he knew that his friend truly believed she would come back, and so he raised his hand and wrapped his pinkie around hers.

“I’ll be waiting.”

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That night, Aden could hardly sleep, he remembers the moment she stepped onto the train. He remembers waving goodbye as it flew into the sky. He does not remember much after that. He was quiet on the way home.

A knock on his door draws him away from his thoughts. His mom is standing at the door, her face flushed with exhaustion.

“It’s time for bed.” She says, gliding over to him and tucking him in. She plants a kiss on his head, brushing back the few strands of hair that fell on his face.

“Tsk.” She muttered. “I need to get you a haircut.” She turns to head out the door when she notices something on his nightstand. A small package with a silver bow. She picks it up and examines it carefully.

“Muriel gave it to me.” Aden says.

“Oh.” Is his mother’s reply as she sets it back on the table. She says “goodnight” to him again before turning off the lights and shutting the door. Aden falls asleep almost instantly.

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The first thing he sees is fog. He can feel the earth beneath his feet, the grass tickling his ankles. He walks forwards against his will. The fog begins to thin out. He is able to see the outline of the end of the ground.

‘A cliff.’ Aden thought. Dread washed over him as his feet continued to move him closer to the edge. ‘Please stop.’ He begs. He stops a breath away from the edge. He peers over the cliff, the sight of the rocks below making him dizzy. He began to hear voices swirling around him, though he could not make out what they were saying. He saw, beyond the rocks, shadows in the shapes of people huddled together.

“Hello?” He calls. The shadows cannot hear him.

Suddenly, Aden feels a force against his back, trying to push him towards the rocks below.

His heart skips a beat. He then realizes that he did not move. He then feels the hands again, pushing him towards the open air. The voices grew louder.

“Stop it!” He wanted to scream, but he had lost his voice. He notices that one of the shadows began to take shape. It grew hair as dark as the night. The rest of the features were blurry, but the teal eyes were unmistakable.

“Muriel?” Aden whispers. It couldn’t be. The girl across the space was older, but he could not mistake the familiar face of his friend. She was looking across the space to where he was, but she wasn’t looking at him, but at something beyond him that he couldn’t see. “Muriel!”

“Hey buddy! Wake up!”

Aden jerks awake, his head pushed back against something rough and leathery. He squirms as a hand slaps on his mouth, muffling his scream.

“I wouldn’t scream too loud if I were you.” The gruff voice says, pulling the boy towards a corner of the bedroom beside the window.

Aden looks up at the source of the voice. He was a man, possibly in his late twenties. His features were as rough as his voice. A long, jagged scar runs from his ear towards his chin, pink against his tanned face. His hair was long and knotted, tied back loosely in a ponytail. It reminded Aden of Muriel from earlier. The thought of her calmed him.

The man looks outside quickly, his shoulders tense, as if he were ready to attack. He growls, muttering words Aden had never heard before.

Then he heard a shriek. The inhuman sound made his skin crawl. There was a light that flashed across the sky, blinding Aden for a moment. The noise continued for a while. Then the only sound was the man's heavy breaths. Aden whimpers, squirming under the stranger's grasp.

"Hey, hey, hey." The man says in a voice that was supposed to sound gentle and soothing but instead came out strained and gruff. "It's alright, buddy. I'm not gonna hurt you."

Suddenly, the bedroom door opens. The man pushes Aden behind him. He grabs a gun in a blur of motion and aims it at the door.

A girl, somewhere in her teens, aims a wand at the man, her eyes stern and shining gold in the darkness of the room.

The man lowers his gun with a sigh. "Gods, Liza. You scared me. I nearly shot you."

Liza lowers her wand. "Colt? What are you still doing here? I thought you were supposed to leave with the truck."

Colt crossed his arms. "I could ask the same about you."

Liza waved off the statement. She notices Aden, huddled in the corner, wide-eyed and frightened. She motions towards him with her wand. "Who's the kid? Is he yours?"

Colt laughs. "Nah. The kid is too cute to be mine. No, I found him asleep in bed, which is odd given all the noise."

Liza gives Aden one last glance before marching to the window. She peers outside. "I think they left." She states. "I think, if we hurry, we can reach the edge of town and head towards the city."

"If that hasn't already been run over by these beasts." Colt mutters. He shakes his head. "We won't make it, Liz. Not with the kid or you."

"Well what are we supposed to do?" Liza shouts, raising her hands in the air, exasperated. She runs a hand through her untamed mass of hair the color of fire, frustrated. "They'll search for anybody they can get their hands on. We need to leave and find somewhere to hide."

Somewhere to hide... the treehouse popped into the front of Aden's mind.

"The...the treehouse." Aden whispers.

Colt turns at the sound of his voice. "What did you say?" He kneels down in front of Aden, holding him by his shoulders. "It's okay, buddy. Speak up."

"The treehouse." Aden repeats. "There's a treehouse in the woods. It isn't far. We can make it if we run."



“Then that’s where we go.” Liza says. Colt lifts himself off the ground. He extends a hand to Aden. Hesitant, Aden reaches for the man’s hand, then pulls it away abruptly.

“Wait. Where’s my mom?” Aden asks, panic rising into his voice. He had been groggy from sleep, but now that his mind had cleared he began to worry. Thoughts swirled around in his head.

Colt and Liza exchanged looks. They were torn between telling the young child the truth or protecting him. Liza was the one to speak up first.

“She went with our group to the city.” Liza shot him her best reassuring smile. It was strained, as if she had never smiled before.

A crash came from outside, startling them.

“It’s time to go, buddy.” Colt says, lifting Aden onto his shoulders with a grunt. Aden wraps his arms around the man’s neck. He refused to look outside as a shrill cry echoes in the air.

Liza led the way, her wand steady and ready to attack. Colt followed, but then Aden tugged at the hairs on the back of Colt’s neck to get his attention and he stopped.

“What is it, buddy?” There is a blinding flash of light followed by another shriek.

Aden points to his dresser, where the bag with the silver bow lay. “I need that.”

Colt sighs, then turns and grabs the bag. He stuffs it into his pocket. “I’ll give it back when we get to that treehouse of yours, okay?”

“Okay.” Aden whispers. He locks his hands together as Colt rushes out of the room and down the stairs. Colt opens the front door. He stops by the patio steps.

“Crap.” Colt mutters, along with a string of curses that Aden had heard him say earlier.

Aden gathers up enough courage to look up. His blood runs cold at the sight.

A beast lets out a high pitched shriek that causes Aden’s ears to ring. It growls and drags its decaying form into a low crouch. The beast reminded Aden of a large wolf, but the beast before him was much deadlier. Its eyes bled red as they glared across the street. Liza stood there, wand in hand.

The beast let out another shriek and then pounced. It sped to her faster than Aden could blink. Before he could register what was happening, the beast was on top of her, its fangs bared.

Liza held it back by its shoulder, her jaw clenched as she pushed it back.

“Anytime now, Colt!” She yelled. The beast fell back on its haunches, swinging a claw towards her. It hit its mark, tossing her to the side. Aden watched as her wand clattered uselessly to the ground. The beast shrieked again, lowering itself for another attack. Liza held her bloodied arm, biting her tongue to stop from screaming in pain.

Colt raises his gun from its holster, and in one swift motion he aims it at the beast and pulls the trigger. A blinding light surged out of the weapon. The beast let out a cry as the light fell upon its back. As the light fizzled away, Aden saw dust fall to the ground. The area was silent except for Colt’s heavy breathing and Liza’s cry as she registers the pain in her arm. Colt rushes over to her. He tries to reach out for her, but she swats him away. Even through the pain, her eyes shine with a strength Aden never knew existed. He admired her for that.

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They made it to the treehouse as the first rays of sunlight began to make their way over the horizon. The structure was small, the space barely holding them in. Colt had to keep his head bent to keep from hitting the ceiling, and even then the hairs on his head scraped the roof. Aden had made himself small and went towards the window, watching the leaves blow in the breeze.

“The beasts will be gone by noon if they haven’t left already.” Colt says, taking his gun apart as he spoke. Aden watched in wonder as Colt removed a wand from the barrel of the gun.

“Then we will leave soon. Hopefully we will be able to reach the city.” Liza says. She touched the wound on her arm gingerly, drawing back as it burnt at her touch.

They wouldn’t tell Aden much. All he knew was that someone had attacked their town that night, with beasts he had never heard of. His hands clenched into fists. Whoever they were, Aden hated them more than he ever felt before.

“Get some rest, buddy.” Colt says, ruffling his hair in an almost affectionate way. “Who knows when you’ll be able to again.”

Aden nodded quietly, moving towards the corner of the treehouse furthest away from them. He turned to face the wall, listening to their quiet murmuring. He grabbed the bag Muriel had given him. The silver bow had fallen off somewhere along the way. Aden held the bag close to him, then began to gently tear the paper away.

It was a small box, with a small, folded piece of paper planted on top. He removed the paper and carefully began to unfold it.

‘For when I’m away.’ It read in sloppy letters that Aden immediately recognized as Muriel’s handwriting. ‘I hope to see you soon. Muriel.’

Tears began to form in his eyes. He blinked, forcing them back as he placed the paper in his pocket and opened the box.

Inside was a beaded bracelet. There were beads of every color smashed together on the string. Four of the beads read his name in tiny, cursive letters. He traced the beads over carefully before slipping the bracelet around his wrist.

The dream he had earlier came to mind. Was it a vision? He had never had one in a dream before, but Muriel's face was unmistakable. Did that mean they would meet again?

Aden glances down at the bracelet, his other hand rubbing over each bead. He glanced back over at Liza and Colt, then back at the bracelet. A new look began to form in his eyes, a look of determination and strength that scared yet excited him.

"No matter what it takes." He swore to himself, hoping wherever Muriel was she could hear him. "We will see each other again."

Somewhere in the distance, the howls of the last beast tore through the morning air. Then there was only silence.