

*Creekbound*  
*"Step Off the Path"*  
*Pilot*

Written by  
Sandretto Michele

+40 0749 639 321  
sandrettomichele4@gmail.com

EXT. PINEBRIDGE - MORNING

A calm morning in the sleepy town of Pinebridge. The sunrise shines over the streets.

A moving truck is parked in front of one of the houses.

On a street curb near the truck sits MAC (15). His clothes are dusty from travel. He looks around the quiet neighborhood, rows of pines in the distance.

LISA (40), his mom, emerges from the truck, helping a worker move a big box from the truck.

They place the box on the front lawn. Then she sees Mac sitting on the curb.

LISA  
(to the worker) Hey, can you handle  
the rest?

The worker nods.

LISA  
Thanks.

Lisa walks toward Mac.

LISA  
Hey.

Mac looks up, spotting his mom taking a seat on the curb too.

LISA  
How are you holding up?

Mac looks back down at the road.

MAC  
I'm... okay...

LISA  
You don't even believe yourself.

Mac lets out a chuckle.

LISA  
Look, I know it's hard, but since  
me and your father... you know,  
money's been tight.

MAC  
I know.

LISA  
I know you do. I just want you to  
know that... I have this feeling,  
like this time is... different.

Mac looks at his mom.

MAC  
Didn't you say that last time too?

LISA  
Did I?

MAC  
I think so...

LISA  
Yeah I think you're right.

A moment of silence.

LISA  
Hey, look, I was thinking I'd order  
you pizza, what do you think?

MAC  
Order for me? You won't be home?

Lisa gets a look of disappointment on her face.

LISA  
No... I have to be in the hospital  
in about four hours, I'll see how  
much we can unpack by then, you  
don't have to do the rest, we'll  
finish it tomorrow if it's needed,  
or the day after, it's not like  
we're expecting visitors.

MAC  
Yeah.

INT. MAC'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Stacks of boxes crowd the living room.

Mac and Lisa walk in carrying the same big box from earlier.

They set down the box.

Mac takes a look at his new home.

LISA  
What do you think?

MAC  
It's... nice. Smaller than the last  
one.

LISA  
Smaller's not bad. Easier to fill  
with memories.

MAC  
(tired) Yeah... if we stay long  
enough to make any.

Lisa pauses, then sits on some unopened boxes.

LISA  
You know, I counted the other  
night. Do you remember how many  
times we've moved?

MAC  
No... I stopped keeping track.

LISA  
Nine. This makes nine.

MAC  
Nine. Great. Lucky number.

LISA  
(softly) Hey. I know it's been  
hard. I keep saying "this is the  
one", and I mean it every time. But  
this time... I think it really  
might be.

MAC  
(skeptical) Why here?

LISA  
Because it's quiet. Because my new  
job isn't halfway across the state.  
Because maybe you can finally have  
a summer that doesn't end in  
packing cardboard boxes.

Mac looks down.

LISA  
And... because I already made you  
an appointment with a therapist.  
MR. ADLER.

Mac looks up.

MAC  
A therapist?

LISA  
Yeah. Just talk, you know? It's  
been a lot of change.

MAC  
You think I need a therapist?

LISA  
I think you need someone who  
listens. You don't really talk to  
me about what you're feeling, Mac.

MAC  
I'm fine.

LISA  
You say that every time.

Mac hesitates, then sighs, realizing she's right.

MAC  
Okay... maybe I'll go.

LISA  
Good. That's all I ask.

INT. MAC'S HOUSE - MAC'S ROOM - MORNING

Lisa opens the door. Sunlight pours into a small, clean  
bedroom. Dust dances in the light. The sound of cicadas  
buzzes outside.

MAC  
It's bigger than I thought.

LISA  
Told you. Best one yet.

MAC  
It's okay.

LISA  
You can make it yours, maybe move  
the desk?

Lisa leans in the doorway, watching him quietly.

LISA  
You know, you don't have to pretend  
to like it right away.

MAC  
I just... I don't wanna start  
liking something if we're just  
gonna leave again.

Lisa crosses the room, resting her hand on his shoulder.

LISA  
I don't plan on leaving this time.

MAC  
You never plan to.

Lisa opens her mouth, then stops... the honesty hurts, but she knows he's right.

LISA  
Fair point. But... I mean it, Mac,  
this time is different.

Mac nods slightly. He glances toward the window. The sky has darkened. The air grows still for a moment. Then a soft pat-pat-pat of raindrops begins against the glass.

LISA  
(softly) Looks like the weather is  
trying to say something.

MAC  
Yeah, "Don't get comfy."

LISA  
Or maybe "slow down and breathe."

Mac turns to her, uncertain but trying to believe it.

MAC  
I'll try.

Lisa smiles faintly and squeezes his shoulder.

LISA  
That's all you need to do, kiddo.  
Just try.

Thunder rumbles in the distance. Mac's face is reflective, conflicted, a boy caught between hope and hesitation.

EXT. MR. ADLER'S OFFICE - DAY

The rain has stopped. The world glows gold, puddles shimmer in the sun, and the streets of Pinebridge steam softly in the warmth of summer.

Mac rides quietly beside his mom in their car. The windshield wipers squeak one last time before falling still.

LISA  
You'll be fine, okay? Mr. Adler's a  
good listener.

Mac sighs.

MAC  
I know.

LISA

Just... try to talk to him.

MAC

Okay.

Lisa smiles faintly, knowing that's all she can ask. Mac steps out of the car, sunlight touching his face. He squints a little, taking in the smell of wet pavement. For a moment he just stands there, breathing.

INT. MR. ADLER'S OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Cozy, slightly worn mismatched chairs, old magazines, a small side table with a cheap vase of silk flowers. Sunlight slants through the blinds.

ELI (23) steps out of the inner office, door clicking shut behind him. He doesn't notice the outer door opening as Mac enters.

Eli pulls a small voice recorder from his pocket, thumbs it on, and mutters while pacing a tight circle.

ELI

(quiet, into recorder) Session four: Still adjusting. Script beat today... protagonist arrives in a quiet town, expects boredom, finds... something. Write the restlessness, says Adler.

He spins toward the noise of Mac closing the outer door, startles, shoulder clipping the table. The vase tips, then crashes to the floor in a spray of fake petals and ceramic shards.

ELI

Oh... sorry! Didn't hear the door.

MAC

(awkward) No problem. You alright?

Eli crouches, scoops up pieces quickly and pockets the recorder.

ELI

Yeah, yeah. Butterfingers since I got here. New town curse or something.

He gives a quick, sheepish nod and slips out the door.

Mac exhales, glances at the mess, then knocks on the inner office door.

INT. MR. ADLER'S OFFICE - OFFICE - DAY

The office feels alive, plants climb along the window ledge. A fish tank hums slowly near a bookshelf overflowing with psychology journals and half-read novels. The air smells faintly of coffee and rain.

Mr. Adler (41) sits in an old leather chair, notebook balanced on his knee. His desk is cluttered but warm, a framed photo of his family sits beside a ceramic frog.

As Mac enters Mr. Adler looks up from his notes.

MR. ADLER

Come on in, Mac.

MAC

Hey. Uh... someone just smashed a vase in the waiting room.

MR. ADLER

(chuckles, not surprised) Eli? That's the third one this month. Came to town to write he said. Good heart, just needs to watch his elbows... anyway, please sit.

Mac sits on a leather chair.

MR. ADLER

So... Pinebridge, huh? How are you settling in?

MAC

We've been here since this morning. I'm still... figuring out where everything goes.

MR. ADLER

In the house?

MAC

In my head.

MR. ADLER

And how many times did you have to move?

MAC

According to my mom, nine.

MR. ADLER

That's a lot of new beginnings.

MAC

It is. Every time I try, but it feels like it doesn't matter.

MR. ADLER

That's the tricky thing about starting over.

Mac glances at the fish tank. Small orange fish weave through the plants. Sunlight shines across the water.

MR. ADLER

You see them? They swim in circles all day. Small space, same pattern, but they always move forward. They never stop.

MAC

So what, I should just keep swimming?

Mr. Adler smiles.

MR. ADLER

Not exactly. But sometimes you have to step off the path you're used to. Try a different direction.

Mac tilts his head, curious.

MR. ADLER

You don't find new places by staying where it's safe. And sometimes, you have to get lost before you find where you're supposed to be.

MAC

You mean... like actually getting lost.

Mr. Adler chuckles.

MR. ADLER

Maybe. Take a walk, see the town, explore a bit. Don't rush to fit in, just look around. Let the place show you what it is.

MAC

That doesn't sound so bad.

MR. ADLER

It isn't. Pinebridge might surprise you.

Mac nods slowly, thoughtful. He looks out the window, sunlight spilling across the damp streets, the world fresh and glowing after the rain.

EXT. PINEBRIDGE FOREST TRAIL - LATE AFTERNOON

The sky is clear now. The rain has washed everything clean. Golden lights filter through the treetops. Drops of water sparkle on the leaves. The distant sound of the creek hums softly, steady, inviting.

Mac walks along a narrow path, notebook under his arm, sneakers damp from the grass. He moves slowly, taking it all in, the smell of wet earth, the shimmer of sunlight in puddles.

MAC

Step off the path... get lost.

He stops where the paved trail ends and a smaller dirt path winds towards the woods.

MAC

Guess this is as good a place as any.

He steps off the main path and into the trees. The air cools instantly.

Mac finds a fallen log near the creek and sits on it. He opens his notebook and sketches, the bend of the trees, the reflection of sunlight on the current, the way roots twist like veins through the soil.

A small breeze ripples the water. A leaf drifts down and lands on the drawing. He smiles faintly, brushing it away.

MAC

(softly) Not bad, Pinebridge... not bad at all.

Before he can sketch more a sharp whistle echoes through the trees. Mac startles, dropping his pencil.

RILEY (16), confident and easy-going, steps out from behind a tree.

RILEY

That was louder than I meant it to be.

Mac squints up at him, then grabs his pencil off the ground.

MAC

You always announce yourself like that?

RILEY

Only when I spot someone actually using the woods for something cool. You drawing the trail? Out here alone?

Mac closes the sketchbook halfway, protective.

MAC

Yeah. Needed some quiet.

RILEY

Hey, no judgment. Most townies stick to the paved paths, too scared of getting lost or whatever. But you... you're way off the map already.

MAC

I was curious what was hiding off the path.

RILEY

Fair.

He takes a casual step closer, eyes flicking to the sketchbook, not invading but curious. Mac tenses slightly.

RILEY

Mind if I sneak a peek? Looks detailed from here.

MAC

(hesitant) Uh... sure. But don't touch.

Riley leans in just enough, nods appreciatively.

RILEY

You got talent, man... most I can draw is stick man figures... and I struggle with those too.

MAC

Thanks.

Riley takes a step back, then extends a hand, open and friendly.

RILEY

Riley.

Mac shakes it, firm but quick.

MAC

Mac.

RILEY

New around here? Haven't seen you around.

MAC

Moved in this morning. How'd you guess?

RILEY

Figures. Locals don't wander this deep in the woods. Takes guts... or boredom.

MAC

A bit of both... wait, why don't locals wander this far?

RILEY

You catch on quick I see?

MAC

Catch on what?

RILEY

On what we're hiding... oh... you didn't figure out anything did you?

MAC

No, I did not.

RILEY

DARREN told me to be more careful with new people... well... look there's this place... kinda off the grid. Hidden gem some might say.

MAC

Off the grid how? Like a hangout?

RILEY

You could say that...

MAC

Thanks man, but I don't think I'm interested.

RILEY

Okay then... didn't expect that answer... so... this conversation didn't happen then... please?

MAC

What conversation?

RILEY

Thank you! Anyway, don't say I didn't invite you.

Riley turns, starting down a faint, overgrown trail between ferns. He glances back with an easy grin.

Mac looks at him leaving, he pauses for a second.

MAC  
(under his breath, sarcastic) Step  
off the path he said.

Mac exhales, tucks his sketchbook under his arm. Curiosity wins. He gets up, and starts following Riley.

Riley glances back.

RILEY  
Ah, I see my convincing nature  
worked.

The two start together along the overgrown trail.

EXT. OVERGROWN TRAIL - LATE AFTERNOON

As they walk, the woods get thicker, the path gets more and more overgrown.

They pass by some moss, then suddenly the moss glows faintly.

The glow is soft at first, pulsating like a heartbeat. Emerald green, almost alive.

A single drop of water lands on it, and the glow flickers, spreading faintly across nearby roots before fading again into shadow.

Neither of them notice.

The woods grow thicker and thicker, sunlight dims.

MAC  
Are you sure you're not taking me  
to get murdered?

RILEY  
I can't promise anything.

MAC  
(sarcastic) That's reassuring.

RILEY  
We're close. Don't freak out when  
you see it.

MAC  
Why would I freak out?

RILEY

The last kid I brought here said  
the same thing.

Mac sees some sunlight peep through the leaves. Suddenly  
Riley turns around, blocking the sunlight.

RILEY

Are you ready?

MAC

Ready to wha...

Mac doesn't get to finish his word before he sees it: "The  
Tree House Complex"

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - ENTRANCE - LATE AFTERNOON

Mac is awestruck.

Dozens of closely interconnected tree houses, kids and teens  
wandering the bridges, some hauling crates, some trading at  
the local store, some playing cards.

The place is booming with personality.

MAC

This is... unreal.

RILEY

Welcome to The Tree House Complex!  
Trademark pending.

Mac is frozen in shock.

RILEY

Mac... are you alive?

Mac is still frozen.

RILEY

No like really... MAC!

Mac finally snaps out of it.

MAC

Yeah... just... I don't know how to  
react.

RILEY

Want to take a tour?

MAC

Yeah, obviously!

RILEY  
Good, then follow me!

Riley steps onto a wooden bridge leading upward toward a wooden platform, Mac quickly follows.

RILEY  
Everyone here does their part, I  
know it doesn't look like it...

Riley looks at some kids fighting with water balloons, Mac's view quickly follows.

RILEY  
(screaming at kids) Hey didn't  
Darren say to clean his office  
after you trashed it yesterday!

The kids ignore Riley.

MAC  
Yeah, I'm sure they'll get right to  
it.

RILEY  
Doesn't matter I'll just tell  
Darren... oh right... Darren... so  
I forgot to tell you about him,  
he's like the leader around here,  
he got elected last year, he's...  
how do I say this... really in the  
leader mindset recently.

MAC  
(sarcastic) Ah, he sounds  
wonderful.

Mac glances down. A sign made of planks reads: "PAT'S PLACE  
- TRADE AND SUPPLY." A few teens are lined up, exchanging  
mostly acorns as a currency.

MAC  
You actually run stores here?

RILEY  
Yeah, PAT runs the store since he  
was eight, can't imagine how hard is  
running an acorn economy at that  
age, he collaborates closely with  
the "Runner Platform."

MAC  
Runner platform?

RILEY

Yeah, they run between other camps and factions and trade our stuff for their stuff, though recently the pirates have been kinda dry with their offerings.

MAC

Pirates?!

RILEY

Yeah did you think we're the only camp around? The woods of Pinebridge are full of other factions.

MAC

Like?

RILEY

Well as you've heard, the pirates, though they don't really do pirate stuff, they're set up on a huge ridge not too far away from here. Then there's the... oh wait... this must feel like way too much exposition for you.

MAC

Not really, after moving so much you kinda get used to exposition.

RILEY

Moving so much? How many times have you moved?

MAC

Nine.

RILEY

NINE?

MAC

Yeah.

RILEY

You saw like... half the country?

MAC

Not even close.

RILEY

Yeah, I was never good with geography.

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - SALOON PLATFORM - LATE AFTERNOON

They reach the saloon platform, it's crowded, kids running around, and teens enjoying some shade under some leaves.

Riley points to the saloon.

RILEY

That's where Darren is staying,  
since those kids kinda destroyed  
his place yesterday.

MAC

The saloon?

RILEY

Yeah, it's kinda spacious you know?

The two walk inside.

INT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - SALOON - LATE AFTERNOON

Inside, the place feels alive, people ordering from the bar, others playing card games, some just talking.

A tiny wooden horse statue sits on the bar counter.

At the far corner of the saloon sits Darren (16), the corner is crowded with maps all over, Darren himself is looking at a map of the woods.

RILEY

There he is. The boss.

MAC

He doesn't look that scary.

RILEY

Give it a minute.

Riley leads Mac forward. Darren looks up, eyes narrowing slightly.

DARREN

Who's this?

RILEY

New kid. Found him sketching by the  
creek. Thought he should see the  
place.

DARREN

You thought?

RILEY

He's alright, Darren. Just curious.

Darren studies Mac, long silent. Mac shifts under his gaze.

DARREN

You from town?

MAC

Yeah. Moved in today.

DARREN

You tell anyone you came out here?

MAC

No. Just my mom.

DARREN

And what'd you tell her?

MAC

That I was exploring.

Darren leans back, crossing his arms.

DARREN

Exploring's fine. Just don't get lost where you shouldn't.

RILEY

Come on, give him a break. He's new, not a spy.

Darren smiles slightly.

DARREN

We said that about the last one.

MAC

I'm not really looking to stay. I just wanted to see the place.

Darren watches him. Not convinced.

MAC

We move around a lot. It's easier if you don't get too comfortable. Guess you never really know how long something's gonna last.

Darren's fingers tighten on the edge of the map. Just for a second.

He smooths it out.

DARREN

Fair. But if you're here tonight,  
you're either useful or you're  
gone.

Mac looks up.

DARREN

We need an extra set of eyes on the  
watch loft. Nothing heroic. Just  
stay awake and don't panic.

MAC

And if I don't?

DARREN

Then you leave before dark.

Darren meets Mac's eyes.

DARREN

Either way, what you saw out  
here... stays out here.

RILEY

He won't say anything.

DARREN

If you don't stay, you don't talk.  
If you do... same rule.

Mac nods. Not agreeing yet. Just understanding.

MAC

Okay.

DARREN

Riley. Show him the layout.

RILEY

Okay... oh and by the way, those  
kids from yesterday don't want to  
clean your office.

DARREN

I'll handle them.

The two leave the saloon.

Darren sits there for a second, staring at nothing, thinking  
of Mac's words: "Guess you never really know how long  
something's gonna last."

He pulls out a small, worn photo.

In the photo sits a young Darren and his brother ETHAN.

He studies it. His jaw tightens.

He slips the photo back in his pocket, and starts heading out the saloon.

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - SALOON PLATFORM - LATE AFTERNOON

Darren walks out the saloon doors, just as Pat is walking by.

DARREN

Hey Pat, could you get me some brooms?

PAT

Uh... yeah sure, can I ask why, though?

DARREN

Remember what happened yesterday in my office?

PAT

Oh, right, yeah, I'll be right back.

DARREN

Take them to my office please.

PAT

Sure!

Darren starts along a bridge that leads to where the kids were last seen.

Riley and Mac squeeze through the crowded platform, until they reach a bridge leading upward to "The Sunset Platform."

RILEY

So that's Darren, not as scary once you know him. Don't touch his maps though, or he'll bite your hand off.

MAC

Noted.

MAC

This place... it's like a real town.

RILEY

Yeah. Built by us, run by us. We look out for each other.

MAC  
You really live out here? All of  
you?

RILEY  
Some go home at night. Some don't  
have homes to go back to.

Mac glances at the saloon, just as, through the window, a  
faint green light flickers.

MAC  
Riley... what was that?

RILEY  
What was what?

MAC  
Nothing. Must've been the lanterns.

Riley looks at the sky.

RILEY  
Oh, perfect, just in time.

MAC  
What?

RILEY  
Follow me!

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - THE SUNSET PLATFORM - SUNSET

Riley leads Mac onto the highest platform, high up in the  
trees, perfect for overlooking the sunset.

The platform is also crowded with people wanting to see the  
sunset.

RILEY  
Every time the sky is clear we come  
up here, the sunset is perfectly  
visible from up here, though watch  
your step, recently some boards  
have been feeling loose... I should  
notify the repair platform.

MAC  
It's... beautiful.

RILEY  
Yeah. For a few minutes, it feels  
like time stops.

Mac spots a less crowded area of the platform near the railing.

MAC

Look, I think we'll actually be able to breathe there.

RILEY

You go take us a spot, I'll go get us something to drink.

MAC

Got it!

Mac walks toward the edge, leaning toward the wooden railing. The view stretches endlessly, forest, and the interesting visual of a dried out lake far out.

ROBIN (15) sits a few feet away, sketching the horizon. She looks up and glances politely.

ROBIN

You're new.

MAC

Just got here.

Robin spots Mac's sketchbook.

ROBIN

You draw too?

MAC

Yeah. Helps me think. Or not think, I guess.

ROBIN

Same. I like to draw the edge of things, stuff people don't really notice. Trees at dusk, reflections in water, broken windows. They always tell better stories than faces do.

MAC

That's... really specific.

ROBIN

I've got a lot of time to notice things.

She goes back to her sketch, the forest, the lake, the faint shimmer of the creek below them. Mac watches for a second, then gestures toward her drawing.

MAC

That's really good. You've got the shadows perfect.

ROBIN

Thanks. It's easier when you've seen enough sunsets to know how fast they disappear.

MAC

You talk like you've been here forever.

ROBIN

Maybe I have. Maybe I haven't.

A small silence. The golden light hits her face as the wind shifts. There's something mysterious in her tone, not cold, but careful.

MAC

You live here?

ROBIN

Not exactly. I spend time between here and somewhere else. Trade runs mostly.

MAC

Trade runs?

ROBIN

I bring stuff from outside, tools, batteries, stuff others need. Let's just say I know a few people who don't exactly follow the complex rules.

MAC

So like the pirates?

ROBIN

Gussed correctly.

MAC

So, you work with both sides?

ROBIN

Sometimes. Doesn't mean I belong to either.

MAC

That sounds lonely.

ROBIN

It's quieter that way.

Mac looks at her, then back out at the setting sun, pink light filtering through the trees. For a moment neither of them speaks. The quiet feels natural.

MAC

Maybe quiet isn't always bad.

Robin smiles softly.

ROBIN

Maybe not.

Riley returns, holding two cups of something fizzy.

RILEY

You two bonding or staring  
dramatically in the sunset?

MAC

Both.

ROBIN

Mostly the dramatic part.

They laugh, short, genuine, the tension broken. Riley hands Mac a cup. They all turn to watch the sun behind the forest.

As the sky deepens to purple, the crowd starts to drift away. Riley nods towards a loose plank at the back of the deck.

RILEY

Come on. I'll show you something.

Mac follows, giving Robin one last look. She gives a small, knowing nod, turning back to her sketch.

INT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - THE SECRET PLACE - DUSK

The sunlight fades to a dim violet glow through the cracks above. Dust floats lazily in the air as Mac follows Riley down a narrow ladder. Their footsteps echo softly against old wood.

MAC

You're sure this is safe?

RILEY

Define safe.

MAC

Stable. Not about to collapse and  
kill us.

RILEY

(laughing) Then no. But that's part  
of the fun.

They step down onto the hidden lower deck. The Secret Place. It's small, half-covered in vines, with broken boards and carved initials everywhere. A few old lantern hooks hang from the ceiling, long rusted over.

MAC

This is... incredible. It's like a whole other world under here.

RILEY

Yeah. Nobody else knows about it. Not even Darren.

MAC

You never told him?

RILEY

He's got enough on his mind. And some things are better kept quiet.

Mac walks slowly around, running his fingers along the carvings. One symbol catches his eye. A tree with spiraling roots.

MAC

What's this?

RILEY

I found that the first time I came down. It's on a few beams around here.

MAC

Looks...old. Older than everything else.

RILEY

Yeah. This whole level feels different. It feels ancient, like it was built before the complex.

MAC

Maybe it was. Maybe whoever made this place... started it.

RILEY

(quietly) Maybe. Or maybe the forest made it.

Mac gives a small laugh but looks at the carvings, thoughtful.

MAC

You really come down here alone?

RILEY

Sometimes. When it gets really loud up there. When everyone is shouting or arguing about guard shifts or food runs. Down here, it's just... quiet.

MAC

Yeah. I get that.

RILEY

You do?

MAC

When we move somewhere new, my mom always says "it's a fresh start."

Riley sits against a beam, listening quietly.

MAC

But every time I unpack my stuff, it just feels emptier. Like the more we start over, the less of me there is left.

RILEY

That's rough, man.

MAC

It's fine. Just... I don't know. I guess I wanted this place to be different.

RILEY

You picked a good forest for that.

MAC

Yeah?

RILEY

Yeah. There's something about Pinebridge. You'll see. The forest... it listens.

Mac laughs softly.

MAC

You sound like my therapist.

RILEY

You've got a therapist?

MAC

Yeah. Mr. Adler. He told me sometimes you have to step off the path, even if you don't know where it leads.

RILEY

(smiling) Guess you took his advice literally.

MAC

Guess I did.

A moment of quiet passes. They both look around the place, the carved walls, the dangling vines swaying gently. The forest hums gently outside, the sound of distant frogs and rustling branches.

RILEY

You know... if you want, this could be our spot.

MAC

Our spot?

RILEY

Yeah. Nobody else comes down here. We can fix it up, maybe hang a lantern, clean the boards. A place to breathe.

Mac smiles slightly.

MAC

A Secret Place.

RILEY

Exactly. Just between us.

MAC

Deal.

They bump fists sealing the pact. A soft wind passes through the cracks, making the vines sway. The faintest green shimmer pulses from a patch of moss near the far corner, neither of them notices.

MAC

You ever wonder how stuff like this gets forgotten? I mean, someone built it. Someone cared enough to carve all of this.

RILEY

Maybe they left it behind on purpose. Maybe not everything's meant to be found again.

MAC

Yeah... or maybe it was waiting for someone to come back.

Riley looks at him for a long moment, then smiles.

RILEY

You think like a storyteller.

MAC

You think like a ghost hunter.

They both laugh quietly. Above, muffled voices echo faintly from the main platform as others start heading back for the night.

RILEY

Come on. We should head up before Darren starts wondering.

MAC

Right.

Mac lingers a moment, looking around the space one more time.

MAC

...Yeah. I think I'll stay tonight.

RILEY

Good.

They climb the ladder back to the surface, their footsteps creaking softly.

As the two leave, the weird carvings start glowing faintly in the dim light, catching a brief emerald glint.

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - WATCH TOWER - NIGHT

The forest is alive with sound, crickets, frogs, the rustle of wind through the branches. Lanterns flicker across the Complex, painting soft circles of gold in the dark.

Mac sits on the edge of the Watch Loft, flashlight in hand. The beam cuts across the trees below, catching glimpses of movement, leaves, insects, nothing more.

Riley climbs up the ladder, yawning.

RILEY

You good up there?

MAC

Yeah. Just me and the forest.

RILEY

That's how it always starts. Then the forest starts talking back.

Mac laughs.

MAC

I'll take my chances.

RILEY

Wake me if you hear anything weird.

MAC

What counts as weird?

RILEY

You'll know.

Riley heads down. Mac sits for a moment, shining his light across the canopy. The glow bouncing off the rope bridges and railings. The night feels heavy but calm. He relaxes slightly, leaning back against a post.

The flashlight flickers once, then dies.

MAC

Great.

He taps it. Nothing. Shakes it. Still nothing. The darkness creeps in around him, deeper, thicker. Somewhere far off an owl hoots.

Mac sighs and heads down the ladder.

INT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - PAT'S STORE - NIGHT

The store is dimly lit by a single hanging bulb. Shelves made of crates hold scavenged goods, flashlights, batteries, snacks, rope, cans of soda.

MAC

Pat? You around?

No answer.

Mac moves behind the counter, searching through a box of batteries. His flashlight dangles from his hand.

Behind him, a faint creak, wood shifting. He freezes.

MAC

Riley?

Silence. Then, another sound. A soft scrape, like a shoe on wood.

Mac turns slowly. Nothing there. He exhales, a nervous laugh.

MAC

Okay... chill out. You're fine.

He finds a new pack of batteries, rips it open. As he loads one into the flashlight a hand suddenly clamps over his mouth.

Mac's eyes go wide. Another arm grabs his shoulders, dragging him backwards into the shadows.

Muffled struggle. A voice hisses near his ear, low, rough, teenage.

JACE (17) and LUKE (16) step out of the shadows

JACE

Shh... we're not here to hurt you.

The voice is rough, older.

LUKE

Well, he's new.

JACE

They'd be putting anyone on guard  
duty these days.

They drag him to a chair, tying his wrists. Then they put  
tape over his mouth.

JACE

Listen kid, I know this seems  
targeted, but you just ended up in  
the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mac glares, breathing hard through his nose.

JACE

I'm not going to try to explain to  
you what's going on, but I'm just  
going to say, don't trust everyone  
around, they might seem safe, but  
you never know what secrets they're  
hiding.

Mac is scared.

JACE

Want to stop worrying about someone  
stabbing you in the back? Join  
us... join the Outcasts, plus we'll  
tell you our secret... and I  
promise...

Jace leans close to Mac's ear.

JACE

It's... special...

LUKE

Okay man, take a step back, you'll  
have him faint.

Jace backs up.

JACE

Okay then, sorry for getting too  
personal there. Anyway, where did  
the boss say it was hidden?

LUKE

The saloon I think.

JACE

Yeah.

They haul Mac up, and leave the store.

INT. THE SALOON - NIGHT

The saloon is empty, compared to how it was earlier today.

Jace and Luke enter carrying Mac's chair.

They place him in the middle of the saloon.

LUKE

I can't believe we weren't spotted.

JACE

Man, the complex security has  
fallen from grace.

Jace's eyes lock onto one of Darren's maps hanging from the wall.

He approaches it.

JACE

Hey, kid wanna see something cool?

He moves the map out of the way, revealing an old door in the wall.

LUKE

How long has this been hidden, I  
wonder?

They open the door. A gust of cool air rushes out, carrying the smell of damp earth.

Mac doesn't see what the door was hiding.

Jace and Luke go down a staircase, Mac can hear their footsteps going under the saloon.

Until... he hears nothing.

Silence.

Suddenly under the floorboards of the saloon, an emerald green light starts glowing faintly at first, but then it ramps up, glowing brighter and brighter.

The dust clamped to the saloon floorboards suddenly starts slowly floating in the air, just as streaks of emerald green light pierce through the floorboards, illuminating the dust particles.

Mac stands in the glow. The light illuminates his face, still, stunned.

A tear rolls down his cheek. It catches the green light as it falls.

His eyes grow wider and wider, until... It stops, the dust falls back on the floorboards, the light starts dimming.

Mac sits there processing what just happened.

Not long after Jace and Luke walk up the stairs back into the saloon.

They say nothing, they just walk past Mac, as they leave Mac notices the same emerald glow coming from Jace's backpack.

The two exit the saloon, leaving Mac to be found in the morning.

Mac's breathing slows down, his eyes return back to normal.

He uses his tongue to push the tape away from his mouth, prying it off.

MAC

(shaken) What just happened...

CUT TO BLACK