

Ben the Beetle

By C. Jade Wyton

Ben is a beetle, smarter than average, and very very large. He's been waiting patiently for the return of Maggie and Edmund, his two wonderful owners who, one day, simply didn't come home. As he waits, he uses what small amount of intelligence he has to contemplate his life.

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Ben was a beetle.

But not just any beetle.

Ben was a giant mountain fire beetle.

A very rare subspecies of fire beetle with a very rare growth pattern.

That pattern being, unlike most beetles that grew as grubs, became beetles, and then died shortly thereafter; Ben was more like a lobster, and had no expected expiration date, except for when he got too large to sustain himself properly.

It was an interesting difference. While most giant fire beetles grubbed large and came out at their full size, giant *mountain* fire beetles grubbed very small, no larger than a gold coin, and then once they beetled they would continue to grow, moulting their exoskeleton every month to two years (depending on their age).

Now Ben, when he had been captured as newly-shed from pupa, had been mistaken for a mini Maztikan fire beetle because of his size. Thinking he was a rare invasive species, he had been traded and sold across the Sword Coast for two years before finding himself in a beautifully dark basement. It was a relief, after heat lamps and bright lights; something Maztikan beetles adored, but mountain beetles heavily disliked.

He recalled from that time a comfortable little jar, filled with leafs and sticks and dirt. And the fabric of a dress, and soft fur and careful hands that handled him gentler than he had ever been handled by previous owners.

He had thought, at first, that his new name was "Birthday Gift." Though he had soon realised several things shared that title and his new name was actually "Ben."

He had liked his jar a lot. And even though it had been over thirty years since Maggie had first put him in it, and he had now outgrown it (and the three terrariums he had since gotten), he still had a fond liking for those times he had been carried in that little girl's pocket.

Now that little girl was a big girl, just like he was a big boy, and she called him a "free range" beetle. He liked this a lot; he was allowed to wander the entire house as he pleased. And he *did* please! He wandered all over the place, exploring his owners' treasures and nibbling on the houseplants to taste them.

He had also discovered a fun game, as far as his little beetle brain could process; creeping into the toilet when Edmund was in there and chewing on the toilet paper until the man pet him on the head and turned him around towards the door again.

But it had been a long time since Edmund had been to the toilet.

It had been a long time since Edmund had been in the house.

Ben wondered where he was.

The last time he had seen Edmund, the man had been leaving the house with Maggie. And while it wasn't unusual for Maggie to leave on long trips like this, Edmund was always home in time for dinner.

Now though, it was their friend Gayle that came over to feed everyone. Gayle and that fun little boy, Stelios.

Ben liked Stelios. All the bugs in the house did. He was a careful boy who respected each and every one of them. And he kept to the routine, and followed all their care sheets as meticulously as Maggie had written them.

He even understood to leave the spiders in the corners alone; not many guests understood that, and got scared of them. But Stelios understood that this was *their* house, too, and let them be.

In fact, the only things he *didn't* understand were to separate the new beetles out of pupa into sex, so that they didn't breed (a mistake he would soon discover would lead to a larger collection), and that if the stove was used for pancakes, Ben was supposed to get mini-pancakes filled with blueberries.

But that wasn't on his care sheet —it was just a treat— and so Ben had been gently removed from the kitchen breakfast table whenever he'd climbed it.

He missed Edmund's pancakes.

He missed Edmund.

Where *was* Edmund?

Where was *Maggie*?

Ben couldn't help but wonder.

He didn't have the biggest brain in his head; most bugs didn't have very big brains. But the brain of a giant mountain fire beetle was still bigger than most bug brains... big enough that Ben recognised something was different.

So, with as much intelligence as he could muster, he had placed himself firmly on Edmund's bed and waited for the man to return; refusing to move or wander around for three days straight. He still ate, if food was brought to him, but he did not leave the bed as he waited for the other members of his colony.

In fact, when Gayle had tried to pick him up —something she had done many times over the years— he did something he had never done to her before, and opened his elytra, spread his wings, and gave a loud and angry *BUZZ* of warning so that she put him back down.

She had been surprised that Ben had the capacity to throw a tantrum; though Stelios was just fascinated with it, and sat with Ben for a while, gently patting his little beetle head and speaking to him in a reassuring tone.

It was the morning of the fourth day on Maggie's bed, when the front door open and many footsteps tiredly trudged in.

A yammering feminine voice was muffled through the wall the entire time the strange-sounding group put down their things in the main room. It wasn't Maggie. It was too young and high-pitched to be Maggie. But it reminded Ben of Maggie.

Then! Then, there she was!

'We can rest for the day, and head back out tomorrow. Make yourselves

comfortable.'

*Maggie!*

Her voice came through over the other, that didn't seem *capable* of quietening down enough to let her speak uninterrupted (though nobody seemed bothered).

Ben lifted himself up on his scratchy thin legs, alert for his owner. And when the bedroom door opened he spread his wings and took to the air; flying at full speed into her arms and almost knocking her down as she stumbled backwards and gave a happy squeal that was echoed by her companions' frightened screams.

'Ben! I missed you too!' she exclaimed, hefting the bug up into the air with surprising ease for his large size, and holding him out for Edmund to pet on the head. 'Have you been sad without us? I'm so sorry we were gone for so long!'

'That thing is *huge!*' the yammering voice exclaimed, and a young goblin—only about the same age as Maggie had been, when she'd first put Ben in her pocket and fled her old orphanage home—stepped to Maggie's side to peer up at Ben. She flinched when Maggie crouched down, but after a moment of hesitation, she reached out and pet Ben carefully between his antenna. 'Oh, you know, you're not so bad.... You're just like a big kitten, aren't you? He doesn't bite, does he?'

'Rarely on skin, though I'd watch your clothes,' Edmund chuckled, leaning down to tap Ben's back affectionately, before straightening up and turning to the rest of the group; two young tabaxi men, and a tanuki boy no older than twelve, none of whom Ben recognised. 'Come on, I'll make us all something to eat.'

The little boy's ears perked up and he immediately began to follow Edmund to the kitchen. He was slowly trailed by the men, who kept casting nervous glances at Ben.

'What kind of beetle is he?' the goblin asked. 'I've never seen a bug this big before! The biggest I've ever found was... about this?' she balled her hand into a fist, to show Maggie the size she meant.

'Ben's a giant mountain fire beetle!' Maggie answered, matching the goblin's energy. 'Though, I didn't know that, when I was little. Everyone thought he was a mini Maztikan fire beetle— But giant mountain fire beetles are actually from here in Faerûn! But up more north than we are now in the Sword Coast, in the Rauvin Mountains!'

'Wow, I've never heard of those before!' the goblin replied. 'Is he hard to look after?'

'No, he's the easiest, *aren't you Ben?*' Maggie turned Ben around in her arms again so she could nuzzle into his face with her own, and then lifted him up. 'And even if you weren't easy, you'd still be worth it!'

Ben peered down happily at Maggie as he was held up effortlessly in the air. He'd missed this.

Then, Maggie stood up, and pulled Ben against her chest, and he hooked his feet into her shirt to hold on tight to her.

She pecked a kiss onto his carapace, and then he felt her take a deep breath before she looked around the terrariums in the house and sighed. 'Uh... Astrid, could I have a moment alone? Edmund's making food, you can go eat.'

'Oh? Um, okay,' clearly picking up Maggie's sudden change in mood, the goblin, Astrid, nodded and backed away. 'Are you alright?'

'Yeah, I just want to talk to... them,' she motioned with a wing to the

terrariums that filled the room, a sheepish tone to her voice. ‘Say a proper goodbye....’

Astrid gave a small, sympathetic *oh* and made for the kitchen.

And Maggie pecked another kiss onto Ben before starting to step from terrarium to terrarium, examining the results of Stelios’ wonderful husbandry.

‘Okay, everyone,’ she said, her tone soft but her voice loud enough to be heard by the entire room. ‘I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye. I didn’t mean to; I know it can’t have been easy to have everything suddenly change....’

The beetle collection, all being beetles, didn’t respond, and continued rooting around in their substrates and chewing their leafs.

‘I’ve spoken to Stelios, the boy who’s been looking after all of you, and... and I don’t want you to feel like this is happening because I don’t love you, because I love you all a *lot!* But I spoke to Stelios, and because he’s doing such a good job, and I can’t stay here, and don’t know when I’ll be coming back again, and I don’t want you all to be alone, he’s going to look after you from now on. I’m giving you all to him, to keep— Except for you, Ben,’ she quickly added, planting another kiss onto Ben’s back. ‘You can come with me. I think you’ll like where we’re going, but it’s too cold for the rest of you. You’d all be uncomfortable. So I’m leaving you here, with Stelios. He likes you all a lot and has done a very good job looking after you, so I know you’ll be alright. I hope you’re not upset about this....’

The beetles, being beetles, didn’t seem to mind.

Maggie let out a long breath, and relaxed a little bit. ‘You’re all so understanding, thank you....’

Her nose turned to the air, then, and she sniffed. And just as she did, Edmund called out through the house, just as he always did when he made breakfast:

‘Maggie! Ben! Pancakes are ready!’

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