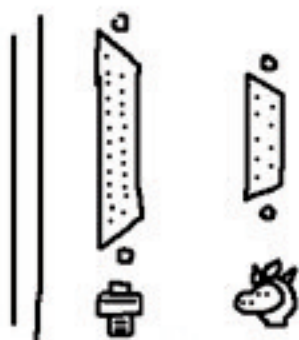




Serial of Wend



Serial of Wend



Serial of Wend



Cereal of Wend

SERIAL OF WEND

Dinoleaf

Preface

Serial of Wend is a working title for a Crop and Claw novella. This allows us to put a full novel together over time, forming a complete story. Once complete, physical print will be made. This allows us to pace the writing and give chances for open feedback. If you so wish, you can find contact information and more about Crop and Claw at <https://cropandclaw.com>.

Copyright © 2026 Dinoleaf

All rights reserved.

ISBN:

ISBN-13:

1

It was a pleasant morning like any other for Wend. Unfortunately, it was looking to be a miserable night.

A shrill voice sliced through the quiet cavern. As the voice approached his jail cell, Wend brought his head up and slinked his lean body from the gate. A few strong, hooded bipedal dragons brought in a big, orange chameleon with dark ridges along her back. They wrestled her into his prison cave and shut the gate behind her.

Her curled tail dove into a pile of straw. She seemed light on possessions, with just a bandanna around the neck and a headband on the center ridge on her head. Her tail whipped around behind the guards as she was dragged in. She pulled her head up, hollering vulgarities at the guards, before turned to meet his eyes.

The chameleon scanned him with skepticism. "So, you with them?"

"Do these cuffs suggest that?" He directed his snout down to his chained talons.

"Oh, my bad. The cloak fits in with the crowd here."

Wend felt strange with how she was reading him. His scales were blue, but mostly hid by his cloak of leafy green colors. A single leaf stuck out from the top of his hood, which covered anything that wasn't his lean snout. She seemed to linger on his wings, which were relatively small and frail compared to most dragons of his form. The same could be said about his whole body.

Perhaps she could read his discomfort as he gulped. Wend was the first to break the gaze, having enough to be distressed over today.

"What'd they throw you here for?" she finally asked.

"Haven't gotten them to tell me. Caught me at a bad time back in my den not far from here. You?"

"Not important. Sniffed out by arbora. Nasty plants, those things are."

Wend frowned. "Oh, it was just these dragons in my case. I'd rather have the arbora. They must've not liked you."

"Thanks. You're no help. Name's Glist. If I get us out, can you fight? What can you do? You don't exactly look..."

Like a fighter, Wend appended in his mind. He saved her the trouble finishing the sentence. "I've got magic, but these braces gut my abilities."

"Let me see." Glist took a talon and inspected the braces. They were metallic with a faint violet coloration, cold to the touch. She turned them, knocked them, tapped them, and then shrugged. "No idea," she finally said.

"I'm useless then," he sighed, dropping his talons to the stone floor. "Unless I find a friend of mine, at least. He's locked up somewhere else. You sound confident. What's your plan to get out, anyways?"

"Through the cell door." Glist's tail whipped out of the straw it had fallen into, revealing an elaborate, metal key. It looked like a misshapen, beastly face with ruby eyes. "Whoever put this much effort into this key must have made it important. A bit elaborate for my taste."

Wend thought back to how much she was struggling with the guards. "So all that wrestling and yelling was a diversion from your sleight of tail?"

"Um, sure. Yeah, that's all it was." Glist brought the key to the door and brought it in. The key made a light clinking sound, but wouldn't turn. She brought her hand and turned harder, but the key refused to budge.

"Oh, wrong key. So much for that," She said with a frustrated growl.

Never get myself excited, thought Wend. "I've already sifted through the straw and leaves for burrows. Unless you have another idea, we're probably waiting for their boss."

"Their boss? I wouldn't mind locking their boss in here, finding the key, and throwing it away."

"She's out, apparently." Wend brought himself up, brushing his side against the gritty rock walls to get some stuck straw off his cloak. "Really, I'm surprised they threw someone else in here with me."

The chameleon nudged at the gating, then climbed her whole body onto the door. "Ah. There we go." Wend felt as if he missed something obvious. She climbed herself down and felt at the hinges binding the

gate to the stone. "They must be poor mechanics," she said. Wend couldn't help but notice an air of smugness emitting from her as she started tinkering with the edges of the gate.

He had been left here for at least a few distressing hours. By the time he had given up forcing a way out, a complete stranger was dropped in. A complete stranger who, within minutes, already seemed like she had an idea of what to do without hesitation. He rested himself onto the cold, sandy floor and watched, wondering how long she would keep trying before she'd inevitably figure out there's no way out.

His train of thought was interrupted when she pulled out some bent pieces of metal. She gripped the cell gate's frame and, with a gentle tug, the entire thing came out with minimal noise.

"What? How?" Wend asked.

"These aren't door hinges. They're mistakes." Glist laid the door to the wall and made her way into the room.

Starting to feel like a mistake myself, thought Wend. He brought himself up and poked his head outside the cell. Imprisoned in the narrow cave, he could not see much of the room. Now, he could see a dim fire pit and some stray debris. Another prison cell was in the room, but it appeared to have been repurposed into a storage room for a bunch of metallic junk.

"Can't say I'd do much better," Wend mused, seeing the shoddy exterior to the cell gating. It appeared much less stable from this side. He had considered breaking his way out, but thought he was too weak to move metal and stone, and even if he did, it would have certainly caused a ruckus.

Glist tilted her head out of the cell's room. Wend stood onto his hind legs to get a look from behind. As they slipped their way out, Wend scanned the area to refresh his sense of where they were. Glowing mushrooms and torches were scattered about, with some sunlight shimmering in from far above.



The air was damp with the streams and rivers flowing through the tunnels and rooms. A cave system with tunnels leading to further unseen chambers laid about, with some pathways being entirely made of twisted, thick bark above them. A faint anxious feeling overcame him as to how exposed they were without any idea if they were being watched in turn.

Wend's eyes had adapted to the dim lighting. He could make out the vines with vicious thorns coating the edges of the walkways. They seemed to be climbing from the streams of water below. An unfortunate dragon with no wings would have a miserable time climbing back up, even with thick scales.

Or myself, he thought with his wings barely reaching down his body. His mood sank when he remembered his chains may interfere with climbing. While he could walk on his four legs, he couldn't separate his talons too far, and had to take care to not let the chains drag along the floor and ring out to the rest of the cave system.

Glist slowly inched the door open, trying to avoid noise. "Alright. Some of these rooms are wide open spaces. We're going to have to be stealthy."

"You? Stealthy? With scales that bright, a forest dweller would think they're fleeing a wildfire."

"I'm a chameleon. I can camouflage anytime I want," Glist said, the tip of her orange face dimming to a earthy cavern backdrop.

"Can't you do it faster?"

"Chameleons aren't naturally magical!" Glist remarked, her voice pitching up with a hint of annoyance. "We're trying to escape a cultist hideout. I don't need the extra pressure." She turned back to scan a possible route. "I think I remember the way out. Are you good?"

Foggy impressions came to Wend's mind. "Not particularly. I was tossed down here in a daze."

"One more problem to worry about then. Come on. I'll stay up to the wall, you stay low and cover me until I'm all blended in and we can switch."

The duo crept their way along the side of a dark wall. In their short time observing, dragons seemed to keep to their own caverns. A few appeared to be carrying vials of chemicals around, others parchment and scrolls. Wend thought he saw one of the dragons who had locked him up. The dragon's head craned around their chamber, as if he was looking for someone, only to pull back and continue reading some kind of book.

His ears caught some mild chatter, though he couldn't understand the details. The cavern walls carried echoes of voices from the chambers, but it all muddled together as everyone seemed to mumble or otherwise spoke quietly. Glist would repeatedly pull at his talon with her tail whenever he would unknowingly stop to eavesdrop.

Glist had become far darker and blended into the dark brown

coloration of the ground. As they approached a small stream, she slipped the key into a door, only to find the key once again didn't work. "What a pain. I'm gonna have to pick this the old fashioned way," she whispered.

Wend kept watch while she lock-picked the door. He noticed some serpentine naga dragons were brewing some sort of concoction across the nearby river pathway. Anxiety kept chipping at his mind, and he had to wrestle away the visions in his mind of their eyes locking onto him and calling out to the guards.

He turned back to Glist to see she had squeezed her entire tongue into the door's lock. The lock clicked open and she retracted it. "Staring is rude," she said as she nudged the door open.

Glist slipped into the room. Wend noted her deftness. He wasn't very dexterous, but his frame was so thin that he could fit in through the barely opened door gap without drawing it further open. She barely nudged the door shut and slid the deadbolt shut. "Right, out of sight for a moment. The tunnel here should lead towards the exit."

Wend turned away from the door to survey the room. The air was thick with an incense Wend could not identify, but felt as if he had been around it before. A faint, glowing fire illuminated the room. Various piles of pillows were laid in holes in the ground. "Beds, must be a place to sleep," he whispered.

His suspicion was confirmed when he brought his talon down to the ground, stepping on a blanket. The blanket flew up, a startling scream of pain rising with it, as the dragon whose tail he just stepped on turned to face them.

The dragon brandished a metallic scepter, tipped with a red gemstone. He was bipedal with a thick tail and feathered wings. A few leather belts with a kit of tools were wrapped around his chest and side. He bounced onto his tail, swinging the scepter in his grip. A disorienting wave washed over Wend. The cuffs bearing him seemed to sting and vibrate in a way that had the pain lingering. He hadn't realized he'd shut his eyes, opening them to see Glist had leaped past the dragon.

The dragon swerved over, rising up on his tail to swing down at Glist, only for her to deflect with... the dragon's own scepter? The dragon glanced at his hand, his face surprised to realized he was holding a harmless, charred twig from the central fire. Glist slammed the scepter onto his head. The dragon let out a mess of sounds before plummeting into one of the pillow pits and falling unconscious.

Wend blinked. The skirmish went faster than he could keep up with. His eyes followed as her tail swiped around.

She turned to face him. "Never lose track of a chameleon's tail," she said, dropping the scepter from her tail to a hand. "They're deft and have a strong grip."

"How did that spell not hurt you?" Wend blurted out, rubbing his wrists.

Glist pointed the scepter at the cuffs. "This is for casting spells attuned to metal. Metal resonates with it, amplifying the effect." She twirled herself around. "Being relieved of my satchel of metal stuff had its upsides. I barely felt it. But you had those cuffs on."

"Another reason I'd like to rid myself of them."

She tapped the scepter to the cuffs a few times and waved it aimlessly in the air. "Something like this, I think. Try putting your cuffs together."

Wend did as he was told. Glist placed the gemstone-tipped scepter between the cuffs. He was struck by a zapping sensation as sparks flew out, turning his head. It must have just been a brief second, but a stinging sensation made the pains in his talons burn. He realized Glist had gripped his snout shut.

"Shh! Sorry. I'm not that smart with magical tools. But if it's any consolation, I think it worked." She waved the wand around as if it were some kind of club.

She let go, and Wend brought his head down to his aching talons. The cuffs lost their violet sheen, appearing to be mundane metal. The cuffs were still locked on, but the chain that kept his talons close together had melted and come apart.

"I feel like that could have gone far worse for me, if that was luck on your part." Wend brought his talons together. Glist's eyes followed as they seemed to emit a soft light resembling sunlight, before they receded.

"You're a druid, then?" Glist asked.

Wend looked at her and shrugged. "Is that what you call this magic? I had picked up a bit of it over the years. You get hurt in the wilderness. It's worth knowing how to fix it."

"Won't get us out of here, but if we get torn to pieces, at least we can stitch some of ourselves back together."

A bang interrupted Wend before he could respond. The door behind them started shaking. He felt Glist's grip start pulling at him. "Already locked. You're welcome. This way, now! And don't step on any more

dragon tails!"

2

The paths mushed together in Wend's mind as Glist yanked and directed him around. He could hear hollering from chambers beyond his sight as the caverns were alerted of their escape. At least once, Glist had taken a hard right behind some barrels moments before two dragons turned the corner and darted down the tunnel. He was feeling dizzy and nauseous, his heart racing from how quickly things seemed to be spiraling into madness. Going slow let him get a feel for his surroundings, but the sudden rush in these tight spaces was too much and too fast.

"Ah, here!" he heard Glist finally say. He heard a hissing voice, followed by a *thwack*. The door locked behind him. He finally had a moment to catch his breath.

"You're really out of shape, Wend," she commented.

"I'm not normally running for my life. Where is this?"

"Treasury. I'm picking something up. Need to anyways, this is where I saw them take my... This key is completely useless... Oh, these chests aren't even locked. And here's my bags!"

"Is my gear in there? Should be an orb for the filigree on my cloak, and a pipe with a bag of herbs."

Glist continued digging through the chest. Without turning to him, her tail lifted a small leather pouch with a pipe sticking out to the side. Wend pulled it off the tail as she moved to the next chest, various bags tied back to her sash. Wend snapped the chain around the amber orb to the front of his cloak and pulled his pipe out.

"Don't get comfortable now," said Glist, her tail unlocking one of the chests while she dug through another. "They're going to narrow us down sooner than later. The moment I find what I'm looking for, we're

out of here."

"I just need a moment to breathe."

"We have half a moment at best. I need-" Her voice climbed into a sharp squeal as she leaped back towards him. Wend jolted, turning up to see a chest she had just cracked open had flung its top off. A blade swung through the air, wrapped around by a thick, green vine. More vines wormed their way out, with the largest bearing big round eyes and a ragged grin. Its mouth snapped towards Glist, lifting up the chest.

"Ah. A gontrap," Wend said casually. He glanced at Glist to see her pulling out some metallic claws. In a swift motion, he pulled her arm back just as the straps were sealed on. "Hey, whoa, what are you trying now?"

"You're really out of it, aren't you? Check what that thing's carrying!" She pointed to one of the vines lying on the side of the chest. Something was glowing, though he couldn't make it out. "That's what I need from here! It's guarding it! You think it's just popping out to say hello?"

The eyes turned to Wend, and he got a good look. The room wasn't particularly large, but the gontrap's vines were feeling their way out the chest, with the head half the size of the chest itself. *It's as if he's looking for the easiest meal*, Wend thought. "Uh, hold on. Rations, rations. Do you have rations in your bag?"

"Rations? I think we're the rations!"

"No food. Of course not. Back up."

Wend was still feeling light headed, as if he kept forgetting to breathe. He inhaled, eyeing the vine carrying the blade, and moved his front talons back. Pushing what strength he had into his legs, he leaped towards the vine away from the blade. As the blade came towards his left, he shifted his weight towards the opposite vine. The gontrap's eyes darted at its own vines, shifting the blade away.

Good boy. Slashing yourself would be bad, thought Wend.

Before the gontrap could get a grip, Wend used the thick mass of a vine to leap off towards the neck of the beast. He gripped of the head and brought his talons to the underside of its mouth...

... and began furiously petting it.

The gontrap stopped. A hissing laughter escaped its mouth. The vines that had begun gripping at Wend had loosened up. The blade dropped to the floor, as well as other random trinkets that he hadn't noticed when making his leap. Wend turned to Glist, who looked

completely dumbfounded.

"I've had one of these in my den's basement. They like dark places. Ticklish neck, at least if you apply just the right pressure. Good guard plants, aren't you good fellow?" he nudged his snout against the beast and turned back to Glist. "You can grab what you need. I think he likes me."

Glist blinked and looked around the vines. Her tail wrapped around the round glowing thing and stashed it away in a bag.

"You really are strange," she commented.

Wend leaped down from the head, though it was a sloppy landing. He had landed with an awkward angle and had to readjust himself. He shook the gontrap's vine as if it were another dragon's talon. "Now let's see if we can get you out of here too."

"You have got to be kidding me. This gontrap is larger than both of us, and the chest it calls home is big and heavy. Did you forget we're trying to escape a cult's prison? And that we're in pursuit?"

Wend brought his pipe back out, stuffing some herbs in. Tapping the orb on his robe, a small flame lit on his claw, which he dipped into the pipe. After breathing in and exhaling a faint bit of smoke, he could feel his body loosen up. The smoke dissipated and his mind had become clearer. Whatever Glist was yelling over, it was drowned by a momentary silence.

Once he got his bearings, Wend leaped back onto the neck of the gontrap and faced Glist, who had already opened the door and was on the way out.

"Let's get going. Did you see where they keep arboras?"

Glist turned around and tilted her head. She seemed caught off-guard by the sight she was witnessing. "Did you just turn their treasury guard plant into a personal mount?"

"Yes, but again, the arboras. I'm not leaving without someone."

"I'd seen their chamber just down this hall on the way in..." her expression dropped from one of bewilderment to resignation. "... don't tell me your friend is an arbora. Did they take the world's most famous vine viper or something?"

He peeked around the corner to see an open gate. His ears caught the sound of various hissing or chittering. He could hear Glist with more inquiring whispers, but he had priorities to take care of.

The cage opened to another prison room, with even more gated doors lodged into some small stone cavern rooms. It was damp, and

while the hissing and breaths were quiet and muddled, his hearing was especially keen at picking up sounds. He just hoped he could find who he was looking for before the distant voices caught up to them.

Some of the cages were empty, which Wend suspected were arboras set on their trail. Others seemed timid. *Vine vipers, floral lizards, big cataurpillars*, he thought to himself, a sickening sensation forming in his chest.

"They've been stocking arboras." Wend muttered.

"As they would. Do you not realize who these people are? I figure you would've caught they're a part of the Cult of Atmoss."

Wend felt a chill roll down his spine. "The name's familiar."

He took notice of a large cell in the cavern walls with especially strong grating. Glancing in, he could see a hulking, quadruped form pacing the room, draped with a thick mossy hide.

"Tecton? Is that you?"

The form shifted in the dark, with two glowing red pupils facing him. They approached the door with a thick grunting and heavy breathing. "Tecton! Buddy! You knew I wouldn't leave you behind!"

Glist approached to his side. Her eyes grew wide. "That's your friend? That's a behemoss! What do you mean you're friends with a behemoss! Why didn't you say that?"

"When I do, they flail their arms around and become completely unhelpful." He began tinkering with the lock. "Help me with this. I don't know how locks work."

"No! I mean, how are you? You really think I'm going to let that out and wreak havoc? Who are you to be calling a behemoss your friend?"

Wend opened his snout, but a shout cut through the air and startled the group.

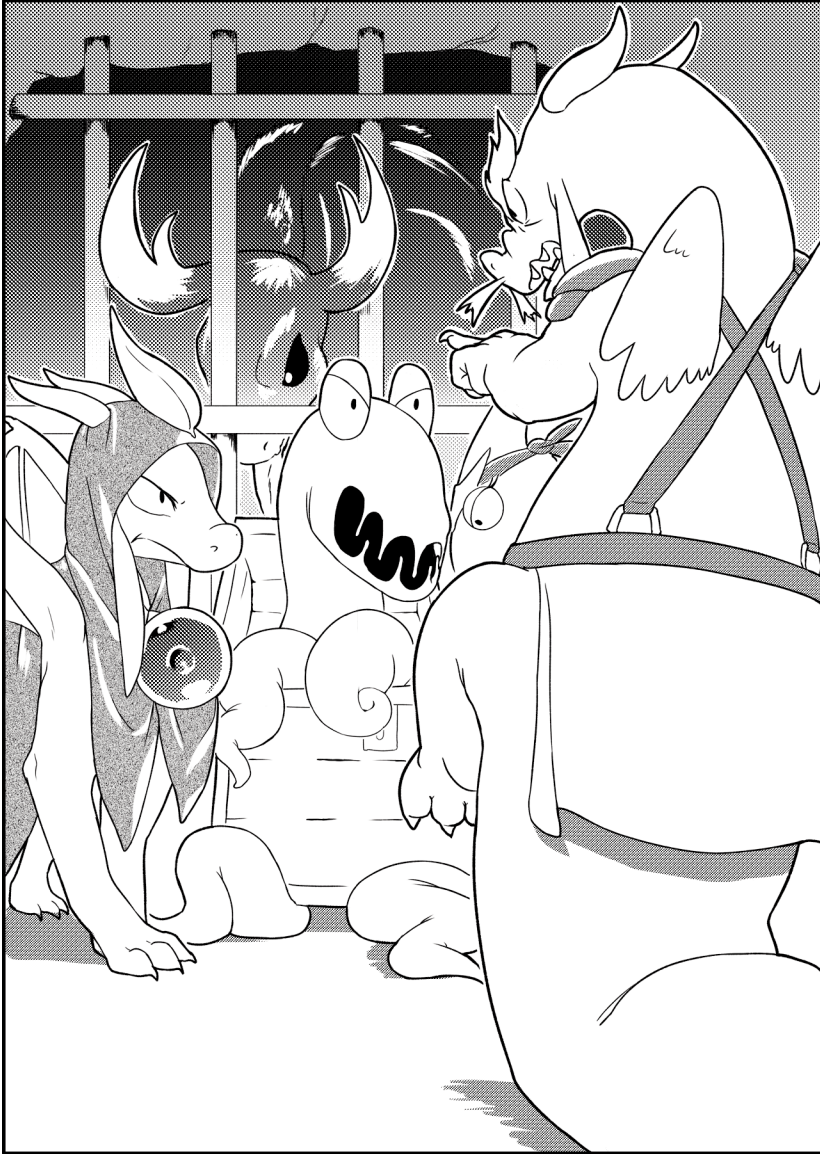
The duo turned to see the entrance gate blocked off by a furious dragon balancing on his tail. The same dragon which Wend woke up and Glist knocked out.

"Brats! Scoundrels! Heathens!" he shouted at them. It was a raspy voice, a tick sounding as if he had a brief cackling between each word. "And gontrap kidnappers, to add insult to injury!"

"Hey, I'm not the one starving your gontrap," Wend retorted, petting the back of the gontrap's neck. "What's with your arbora prison here?"

"Excuse me! I am Bezel, local engineer and your substitute warden. And wardens don't answer to prisoners!" He crossed his arms with smug satisfaction, keeping balance on his tail. "Furiously, your *previous*

warden is getting chewed out for reading comics instead of supervising you. You could've kept the peace in your first cage, but you just had to spit on my handiwork by breaking out, didn't you?"



"That was her, actually," Wend said, directing his head towards Glist.

She brought her hand up to wave before pulling it down and

putting her angry face on again. "For someone who builds doors all day, you sound unhinged," snarled Glist.

"I'll deal with this prowling snake-tail later! That warden's getting a double-chewout for not chaining your slippery limbs into a pretzel." His piercing eyes locked onto Wend. "We'd all had expected a warmer reunion, Sprout. Why have you been so rambunctious? You would not be locked up if you came quietly."

Wend felt a spark go off in the back of his mind. "Who are you calling a sprout? I've never done anything to you, you withering tulip." He turned to Glist. "Get these gates open. I'll hold this guy off."

"Sprout?" she echoed.

Wend angled himself up, nudging the gontrap's head to the side. He opened his maw and exhaled towards Bezel, splashing a dense, cold liquid.

Bezel braced himself, bouncing off his tail and onto his feet. He wiped off the thin rime from his scales and slammed the cavern gate shut. He spun a claw in the air. "You've not grown a day! Where are those useless guards?" He dragged a nearby box in front of the gate. "None of you are going anywhere, not while my handiwork keeps you locked in here."

Wend looked at Glist, her gaze bouncing between the exit, Wend, and Tecton. "Come on, please, I don't know these guys at all. I just want to get out of here."

She finally spoke again, "I've got so many questions later..." She turned back to the gate keeping Tecton in. She inspected the lock, inching away as the behemoss brought his hulking wooden snout and dark eyes up towards her hand.

"Oh, I get it now." She pulled out the key she had swindled. "Big monstrous face, fitting to be a master key to their monster prison." She jammed it into the lock. It clanked and turned with ease. "Wish you labeled your keys like a normal organization."

"Where'd you get that?" Bezel shook the gate. "That good for nothing warden!"

Wend dismounted from the gontrap. He braced himself as Tecton barreled out of the cage and slammed him up to the wall, licking his face. "Down boy, down!" He grabbed the horns and wrestled the beast until the swaying slowed. He turned to see Glist bewildered at the sight. "Have you never see a dragon and his pet before? Unlock the other gates and let's get out of here."

Wend climbed up on Tecton's back, gripping the horns as if they

were handle bars. She seemed to glance back and forth between the guarded exit and the behemoth, as if weighing her options. To Wend's delight, she hopped over and started opening the other cell doors.

"Hey, hey! You can't just release our arboras!" Bezel started banging at the gates. "Guards! Where are those useless, snail-brained guards? Get them!"

Two wingless dragons in hoods ran up to his side. "Sorry... Wait, we're supposed to fight that?" He pointed at the gontrap, whose eyes squinted in their direction.

The second one held a shield larger than he seemed capable of carrying, "But Bezel. I thought these prison gates were the strongest you could build," said the second dragon with a stutter.

"Yeah, actually, that's what we're hoping for," Glist called out. "So far, they've had as many screws loose as you do."

Wend slapped his back leg against Tecton's side. Tecton howled and charged straight forward. The two dragon guards dived out of the way as the gate was torn from its hinges, with Bezel being overrun. Wend would have wondered if he'd be okay, but he was more concerned with leading the arbora jailbreak.

The various arboras followed Tecton lashed at the guard dragons. Glist seemed to find the show amusing. "Ha! That snail's gone hug-slaughtering someone!" Wend could hear her cheer.

He swerved Tecton's horns, and his body followed the halls. The guards at the front seemed ready to strike until the beast came into sight. Glist had a tight grip under his chest, with her legs and tail wrapped at the base of Tecton's own tail. Wend was feeling off-balance with the extra weight, as his frail body wasn't used to carrying a second passenger. He could tell Tecton wasn't quite used to it either, having to take turns slower to not throw the two dragons off.

"Wend!" he heard her cry out. "Duck your head right now!"

He brought his head down between Tecton's horns just in time to see Bezel get flung in front of him. The unfortunate dragon slammed into some barrels of pink, glowing goop and they swerved around the corner and dashed out the cave's maw.

That gontrap must be having fun, he thought.

The cries and hollering from behind began muffling with the grunts and heavy footsteps of Tecton. Wend glanced back to see the arboras spill out and scatter into the woods and bushes. He brought his focus forward and swerved before Tecton plunged into a tree.

Soon, they had also disappeared into the damp, dense wetlands. The

cave and its inhabitants falling out of sight and further away.

3

Wend wasn't sure how much time had passed when Tecton slowed down. The swamplands were dense with thick trees piled high on top of each other. The sun was beginning to set into the trees, casting a shadow over the paths that lay before them.

He leaped off Tecton to a trunk that appeared dry and stable. His back ached from Glist's extra weight. Turning back, he saw she was checking what looked dry and safe to land on, before giving up and instead leaping to the thickest branch of a tree near him. Hanging upside down, her head turned to him.

"Quite an escape, I'll give you that," she complimented. "But now where are we?"

Wend brought his head up. "Sundown's light says we've been moving east."

"Away from Drench, then."

"Drench? The city?"

"Drench doesn't have exact boundaries. Once you've entered these bogs, you've entered Drench in one way or another. Witch huts cloaked in vines and leaves. Cultists who've weaponized foliage and seek to grow their numbers. The city of Drench is a little safer, with its own guard and residents keeping out the filth. But the surrounding areas around here are not so lawful."

Wend stretched, his muscles aching from the ride. "You know better than me." he looked over to Tecton for any wounds, but the beast seemed fine. He'd already started chewing on nearby mushrooms growing at the base of a tree.

"I can't tell if you're local or not," she commented, bringing herself upright onto the branch with her tail gripping onto another branch

above "You talk as if you've been here all your life, but sound completely oblivious to where you are."

"I don't get out much. Usually Tecton would be seen and strangers would go running. I guess if there's dragons running cults and arbora armies, that'd explain it. Works out for me because usually they're often lowly bandits trying to break into my den and regretting it."

"Oh yes, it's no wonder the Cult of Atmoss wants you. Right now, you need to explain why you have a behemoss! And how you can control it!"

"What do you mean control?" He glanced to Tecton, who'd finished off the mushrooms and started chewing at some of the tree trunk's roots as if they were thick noodles. "He's my pet. Had him as long as I can remember."

"That's not normal! You don't know what a behemoss is. You can turn a vicious arbora into your best friend by petting its neck. You don't know why the Cult of Atmoss wants you. Are you such a hermit that all of this is normal to you?"

Wend's head pulsed as her insistent berating sliced through his ears. He brought himself to his hind legs and pulled out his pipe and herbs, using the tree as support for his side. He only just realized how much his talon had been shaking. At first he didn't respond, saving his breath for his pipe. As he watched the smoke leave his snout, he relaxed.

"I don't know what you want from me. We're out and safe. Is that enough for now?" he finally responded.

She looked as if she'd continue berating him, but seemed to stop and think it over. "Okay, fine. One step at a time. Here's a question, where are you going now?"

The earthy taste of his smoke was holding his attention as he tried to put his thoughts together. "My home den, of course. Back to where we belong."

"They made it clear they want you," Glist was hanging upside down again, pointing to his neck. "You helped me get out, so it's fair I help you. If you give me just a moment, I might be able to orient myself and get us away from here."

Wend didn't like the image of his home being constantly bothered by anything more than lowly thugs he could chase off. "But why would they try bringing me in twice?" he said after a moment of silence. "I'll just trap the place or something. In the worst case, we can spend the night there, should you wish."

And you can carry on tomorrow while I remain, he thought.

She looked as if she was going to protest, then seemed to think it over. "Fine. Do you happen to know where home actually is, though?"

"Edge of the swamp. Moving east means closer. Which means Tecton over here has been following his instincts."

"Perfect! Stay here, stay low, and don't let yourself or your... pet... run off."

She scurried her way up the tree, disappearing into the thick branches and leaves above. Glist possibly just saved his life from a bad fate, but he felt she would likely get him in more trouble somehow. He'd rather not get wrapped up in anything after the long day he had. But at the same time, he'd probably be better off returning home with an extra pair of eyes on the trail, rather than risk himself and Tecton getting caught out in the cold. Even Tecton had limits before needing rest. He held pictures of lighting his den with a warm fire and returning to sleep.

He exhaled another puff of smoke, wanting the anxiety to dissipate with the smoke. Looking up and watching it waft through the air, he saw Glist scurrying her way back down the tree.

"Not much to see up there, but we're pretty close to the eastern edge. Just a little further and we're passing some rivers which surround Drench. Is that a useful landmark for you?"

"Yes. We're close." Wend turned his pipe over, dipping the burnt herbs to a puddle on the side before climbing up onto Tecton. The behemoth let out a grunting sound as he pulled his head up and backed away from the partially eaten tree trunk. He brought his talon up, offering Glist to ride.

"Nay, not this time," she said with her hands up, inching away from Tecton as he turned to eye her. "I need to keep myself oriented, and I'm feeling rather roughed up from before. Those stubby wings of yours are not comfortable to have jabbing at my underside."

"The same could be said of your whole body to my wings."

They disembarked without further delay. The sun was slowly dipping them into darkness, but Glist seemed to have keen eyes for the dark. She mostly kept clean with some agile leaps between trees, gripping onto the vines and foliage rather than treading the muddy, damp trails. Wend already knew Tecton was fine in the dark, as any awry thorns and branches would just be crushed, posing no threat to the beast.

After some time, Wend finally recognized the immediate area. "Just

down this path. You can tell because Tecton has crushed a lot of the foliage in prior passing.”

As they approached, Wend felt a pang in his chest and he caught a scent of smoke, as if his fireplace was in use. As his humble den came into view, he could see the signs of lights and occupants. He tapped Tecton to signal stopping and keep low in the bushes. Glist had leaped to the trunk next to him.

“I can’t see them too clearly from here, but that’s almost certainly the cult’s ilk,” she whispered.

“I’ve been here as long as I can remember.”

He was pulled out of his thoughts when he felt Glist’s tail wrapped around his wrist. He hadn’t realized his pipe was already in his talon.

“We can’t stay. We need to get moving before we’re caught.”

“Couldn’t we fend them off?”

“This isn’t normal. You’re not normal. They want you specifically. Believe me, I know a thing or two about the Cult of Atmoss. They don’t typically snag dragons off the path, or hijack their dens in the middle of nowhere. Even if we take out the... four... five... gons there, I’m going to assess they’ll check here first and you’re going to end up right back at square one.”

“I’m not feeling better hearing that. You’re telling me I’m special in the unluckiest way possible.”

Glist sighed. “Come on. If you want somewhere safe from them, I know where to go. But it’s going to be a lot of distance to cover.”

In his mind, he could imagine walking in with Tecton, crashing into his pile of pillows, and forgetting the whole day. Glist’s tail tugged at his wrist, less aggressive and hasty than when rushing through the caves. If anything, Wend felt a little comfort in that she didn’t seem apathetic. After some time, the sickened feeling in his lower body overcame him, and he finally relented.

He tapped Tecton and the trio delved back into the darkening swampland.

* * *

Some time passed before they found a small, unassuming cavern. Glist assembled a makeshift cover to hide any lights. She piled some thinner sticks, logs, and foliage together inside for a bonfire to warm up, allowing enough ventilation for smoke to escape. Wend did not know a lot of magic beyond his restoration abilities and manipulating plants,

but the warm, amber orb he wore on his cloak helped with drying damp wood and starting simple fires.

Wend laid on Tecton's back as if the beast was a shaggy bed. He watched as the faint smoke from his snout dissipated, taking in the earthy aroma. In an effort to get his own mind off his situation, he scavenged his mind and remembered something.

"So you were caught trying to take something from them. That glowing thing. What was it?" he finally asked Glist as she just finished securing the door of leaves and sticks for the fourth time.

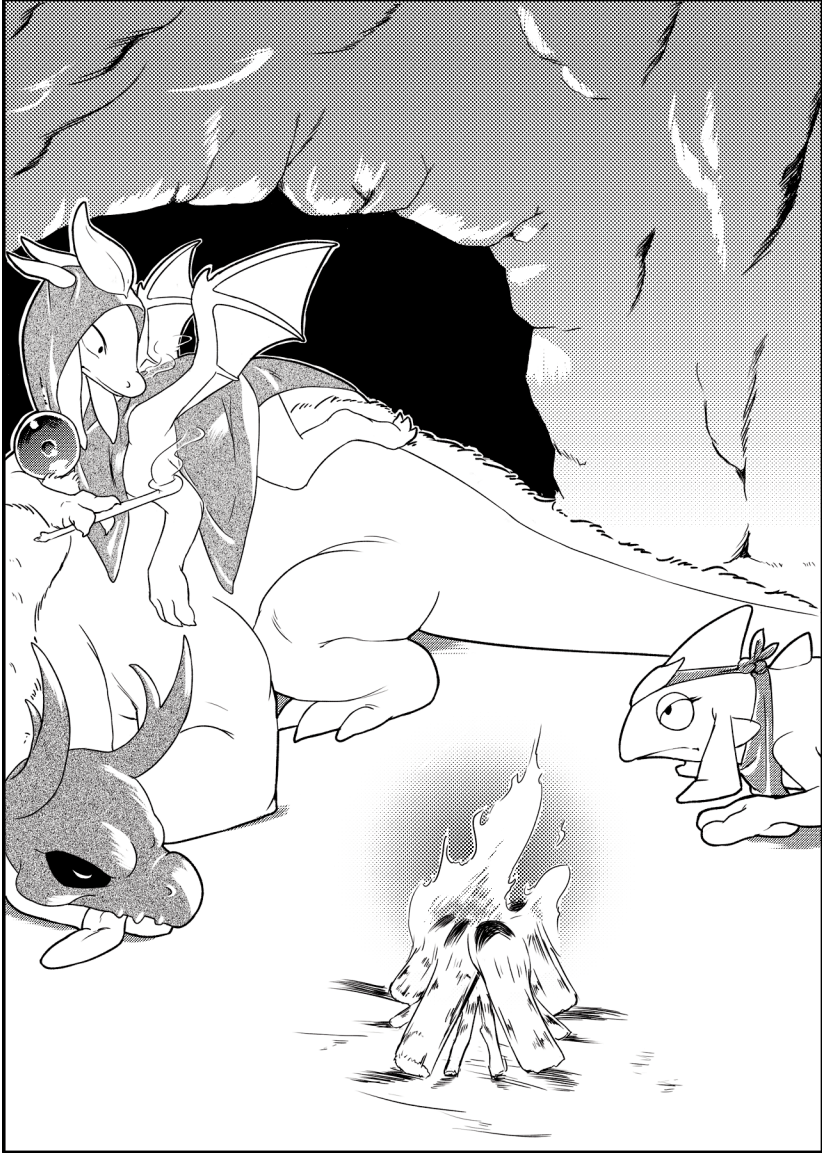
"Oh, right. That reminds me." She tightened the knot on a vine securing some sticks and dug into one of her bags. Glist could see the glowing, round cylinder.

"It's a compass. A fancy compass. It shouldn't be glowing like that. They must've been trying to tinker with it." She laid it down on the ground away from Wend and Tecton. She gripped the scepter she'd swiped from Bezel during their jailbreak, hesitating for a brief moment, then swung in the compass's direction. A high pitch squealing came from it and sparked like some kind of firework before melting. Tecton snarled at the sudden burst.

"Sometimes bad gons manage to snag one of these. So a clan I'm with will direct us to take it back. And destroy it for good measure. Not used to messing with metallic magic, but it seems I'm a natural with destroying things."

"A clan?"

She brought a rounded finger to her mouth. "I shan't say much, but I urge you to come along with me. You seemed to be having a moment earlier, so I didn't press it too much."



Wend frowned, waving his pipe around. "Don't I deserve a little more than being dragged around for other gons' secret reasons? Haven't I been through enough of that in a single day? What's the difference between you and the Atmoss cult, and what has all this got to do with me?"

Glist's eyes glanced between him and his pipe, as if she were in

thought. "That guy called you Sprout. Does this not mean something to you?"

"I thought he was calling me *a sprout*," he said, exhaling another puff of smoke. "Though he was rattling on as if I had anything to do with them before. Mistaken identity? Only makes this mess feel worse for me. What's so important about a gon named Sprout?"

Her eyes drifted off of him and into the fire. She was silent for a moment. "It's a name and title for someone in their ranks that went missing a long time ago."

"And? That's all?"

"It's all I'm aware of. Not exactly a historian. But I know some gons in my clan who might have answers if you come with me."

Wend felt his breathing go shallow. He already had enough issues being around other dragons. "I've been taken by one gang of complete strangers today. I really don't know if I want to walk a long distance and be taken by another."

Glist's tail curled around a few sticks, stacking them into the bonfire. She seemed in thought again. *For someone who acts so fast, she sure stops to think a lot*, Wend observed to himself.

"I couldn't drag you anywhere against your will if I wanted. I didn't break you out of a prison to throw you into another one, if that's what you're worried about," she said with slower and softer cadence than usual. "We're not going anywhere tonight, anyways. I think it would be better if you sleep on it and come to a decision tomorrow."

It was Wend's turn to size up the situation in his mind again. But everywhere he looked, there were many unknowns. For as long as he could remember, he could suffice alone. Most petty thieves and aggressive flora that bothered him were easy to scare off or subdue, and food grew on the dense foliage for him to live off of. In just one day, his outlook of self-sufficiency had been flipped upside down.

If she's honest, maybe something could come out of this. Or I can at least set up home somewhere I'm not going to be bothered, he thought. *If she's not, she surely can't keep up with me and Tecton should we slip away one night, somewhere safer than here.*

He brought his head down to his talons. "Tomorrow," he heard himself say out loud, not to anything in particular other than his own thoughts. He tipped the pipe over, letting loose the remaining ashes of its contents into the small, smoky bonfire. *No matter where I'm going next, things are changing*, he conceded to himself before his tired eyes fell heavy and he knew no more.

4

"Tecton! Tecton!" Wend called out.

"Haven't you considered a leash for that beast sometime?" Glist asked.

Wend shook his head. "No point. If a vine viper slithers along enough to catch his attention, steel cuffs tied to a mountain wouldn't hold him." He held up a small flask. "This trail has honey and pollen trickled around. Something he can't get enough of. He's probably going to waltz into a wasp drake nest."

Glist stopped. Wend turned to face her.

"Wasp drakes... Are you telling me we're about to walk into a wasp drake nest?"

"No, not... Possibly. Not a guarantee... But likely. But they're typically not unreasonable. Not all of them, at least. Some are. They're tribal, sure, but I've been friendly with some before. Just be polite."

"Wend... A behemoss, a giant hulking beast known for devouring everything in its path, is possibly about to enter a tribal wasp drake nest. Do you think they'll consider anyone looking for it to be polite?"

"Tecton's not an it. Also, they don't devour everything in their paths."

"Whatever! I assume this is common knowledge to a pack of wasp drakes then?"

"No. Had to explain that anytime we were around some..."

Wend brought his head low to the dirt and closed his eyes. He could pick out the aroma of honey mixed with the damp, mossy soil. Among the honey and soil, he craned his head towards the right where he could make out the scent of a rainy day. *The telltale scent of a behemoss*, he thought. "I think he's gone this way."

He heard the steps of Glist to his side. "I know. Don't need a nose to tell."

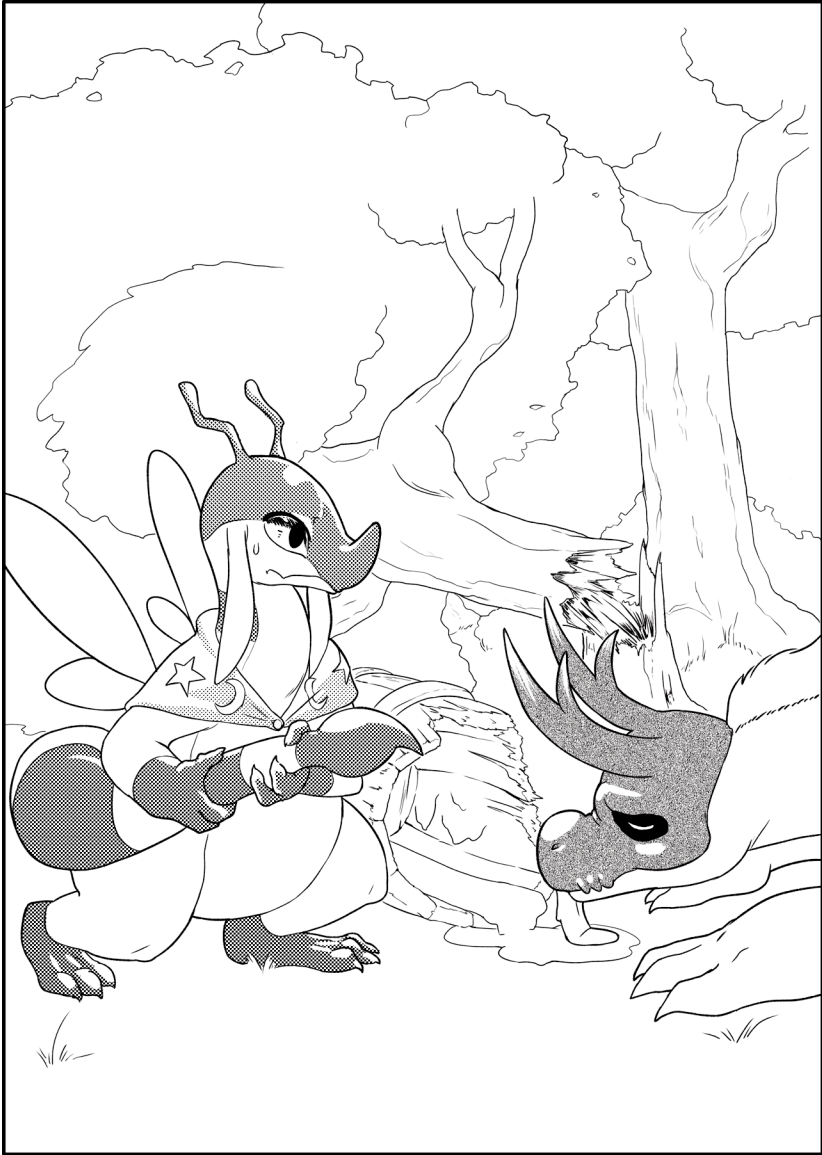
Wend opened his eyes. Before him laid bushes and trees that had been knocked over and trampled. A wood barrel had been torn open. Arising from the small barrel was the honey coated snout of Tecton.

"Bad behemoss!" Wend scolded. "You know not to run off and break into other gons' stuff!" Tecton brought his body down and hung his head in shame.

"Whose is this, actually?" he heard Glist say. Looking around, there appeared to be various blunt wood and stone tools on a tree trunk along with a few containers. What drew their attention most was the small, shaking wasp drake. He was yellow with black stripes, and a white underside, as typical for a wasp drake. He wore a violet mantle around his neck, each side wearing a crescent moon and a star. He had his talons gripped around his tail, brandished towards Tecton like a spear.

"C-Cultists! What are you doing here? Out!" he stuttered, a faint buzzing occasionally lacing his speech.

Glist held her hands up. "No! No no! No cultists here. If anything, we're the ones on the run from them."



Wend glanced between the distressed wasp drake, the scattered tools, and what was once a barrel of honey. "Sorry. He's my pet. The last time this happened, the wasp drakes weren't happy, either."

"What do you mean last time?!" he shouted.

He went to speak again, but Glist's tail lashed his snout shut. "Bad bedside manners. Please, we're not cultists. That... beast would be

chewing dragon meat if he weren't this hermit's pet."

The wasp drake glanced his dark eyes towards Tecton. Tecton turned to him and placed his head on the ground. The wasp drake's posture softened, but his arms were jittery.

"Oh, this is bad, very bad," the wasp drake said as he began pacing in circles. "I was supposed to come back with this after I finished some experiments. I can't show up empty clawed!"

"Relax, kid. Walk in circles long enough and you'll make yourself dizzy." Glist said.

"Dizzy? No, Dizz," the wasp drake said.

"Is that wasp drake dialect?"

"What? No. My name's Dizz," he corrected, a buzz emitting from his tongue. "Although my name will be *Ditz* if I don't at least bring back some honey!"

"And Tecton says he's sorry," Wend said. "Right, Tecton?"

Tecton yawned and shut his eyes. Wend sighed and tried changing the subject. "Unusual for wasp drakes to make honey away from the hive."

"Unusual for strangers to have a great big Drench beast barging in!" Dizz threw his arms up. "There's maybe a few hours before the communal feast in our clan. I like spicy honey with a magic touch, away from the hive in case... anything goes wrong." He rolled out a second, smaller barrel and began cupping honey that hadn't dumped all over the floor yet. "I'm not going to be get my usual rations in time."

"Perhaps we can help with that."

Glist looked dumbfounded. "We're on the run. Did you forget that part? We need to get far away from Drench. We can't go picking flowers!"

"We've been going for a while now. I'm exhausted. I suppose Tecton is tired too, but I'm never sure. Perhaps we could request refuge from the wasp drakes for a while. I know their customs to some extent."

"Oh? You do?" Dizz perked up. "If you know how our honey alchemy works, you could gather some flowers for the pollen and herbs while I salvage what's left here. The clan might be willing to spare a little space, if you're nice." He frowned. "Of course, you also are why I'm in this mess to begin with. What had you coming this way? We're a little out of the main path."

"We've been on the run for about a week now, fleeing the Cult of Atmoss." Glist said.

A week? That's not right, Wend thought. He turned to look at her. "Huh? What do you mean a week? I only met you maybe two days ago now."

She stared dumbfounded at him. "What? Is your memory that bad? I picked up you're pretty forgetful when you kept asking the same questions about the town of Flutter, but that's absurd."

"I guess the days run together," he muttered.

"Maybe we should be quick then," Dizz said, filling about half of the smaller barrel with the salvaged honey. "Just go out and get me flowers, pollen, good stuff. I'll maybe just have to call it early. Alchemy, even for something as simple as honey, takes a while to get right. I don't want to be caught out with a bunch of cultists running around. Just down that path and to the left, there's some grove of blooming plants I didn't look at much this morning. You might find a stash there."

"Good to know. Glist, have you ever foraged before?" Wend asked.

"Not for flowers. Just berries, fruits, anything that serves a good brew in a pinch. I'm not a wasp drake who eats pollen."

"Not pollen, just the honey we make from pollen and nectar." Dizz corrected. "And of course, the things we dunk into honey. We have lots of pastries to sweeten back at the hive."

Wend and Glist made their way to the grove armed with some extra bags, keeping a brisk pace and a watch for whatever may lurk in the brush. It took some convincing Dizz to watch Tecton while they were out, including leashing Tecton to a nearby tree. Wend even managed to keep the secret that a leash would do nothing to stop Tecton if the behemoth really wanted to break loose.

Wend craned his head up and around, snipping bundles of bright and colorful flowers ranging from radiant reds to vivid violets.

"Why is this flower so difficult?" he could hear Glist struggling behind him, he turned around to see what was going on.

"Uh, Glist? That's not a flower you can pluck." he observed, pointing below.

Glist followed his direction, realizing she was pulling a flower off of the head of a lizard half her size. The lizard hissed and a thick tongue lashed out of their mouth, slapping her in the face. She backed off as the lizard scurried into some bushes and disappeared.

"That guy must've been patient. Have you gotten any other flowers?"

"I've got this huge one." she said, holding out her flower bag. Wend winced at the small, red rafflesia that fell out and landed in the dirt with a thud.

"That's not a flower. There's no honey in that," he commented. "In fact, eating anything from that would be gross."

"Well thanks," Glist said, kicking the rafflesia aside. She pulled out some flowers.

Wend admired the white petals with blue circles, but shook his head. "That stuff's loaded with sleep pollen. Those would knock you out. Great for insomnia, though."

Glist threw up her arms. "I've been raised all my life for infiltration and mechanics. You've raised yourself to master the art of picking flowers."

"Plants in general," Wend corrected. He pulled out some freshly cut herbs. "Herbs too. These were what I put in my pipe. They're good for relaxation."

Glist squinted at the bag. "I know. You keep bringing the pipe out all the time. I hate the smell."

"You get used to it." Wend disagreed. The thick, earthy taste seemed to calm him when he couldn't think straight. "Do you have a pipe? You could try it. You often seem high-strung."

"No." she flatly rejected. "Do we have enough of these flowers yet? We have to move on eventually. If the cultists catch us, we're not going to their dungeon, we're going to be farming honey for them."

"Just a little more."

In due time, they returned with a bag of flowers. Dizz seemed to have grown less worried of Tecton and more worried over the rustling of wind. He had grabbed portions of his stuff as if he were waiting to bail as soon as they returned.

"In a rush?" Glist asked.

"Spooking myself, maybe." he said. "Some critter was rustling through bushes. Thought it was a cultist. Turned out to be a snail nearly my own size, which hurried off when Tecton went growling towards it."

The wasp drake took the bags of flowers. "I'll go throw this in with the rest of the communal supplies at home. Come on, untie the big guy and let's get going. The hive's not too far."

The walk wasn't too difficult. Occasionally Tecton would start fixating

on the barrel of honey Dizz was rolling, but Wend would pull his horn back up and focus on the path ahead. Dizz explained a few customs about the wasp drakes. Glist seemed bewildered, trying to keep the names together and trying to mimic a wasp drake's vibrating tongue for certain sounds. While Wend already struggled with the tongue vibrations, Glist's tongue seemed a bit too long and loose to come close.

"No, Dztaz isn't the monarch. That's Tzau. Dztaz was her brother," Dizz said. Neither Glist nor Wend could mimic the buzzing tick that Dizz could do naturally when referring to a lot of names or specific terms in the wasp drake's own dialect. "You know how *see* and *she* are similar sounding but are completely different? *Tsui* and *Tzui* do that too. *Tsui* is a word for leader. *Tzui* is something you should never call anyone or you'll get in trouble."

"I said *Tsui*," Glist pushed back.

"No, you didn't."

They continued with similar conversation until they reached a cliff side. Curtains and wood panels decorated holes along the stone walls. Most notable was the wood gate that blocked the main entrance to the hive's cavern.

A single wasp drake guard had been laying outside. Dizz let out a buzzing sound through his mouth, getting the guard's attention. The droopy guard turned to face him, then to Wend. His tired eyes sprung open when his head turned to Tecton, and he let out a chaotic ticking sound.

"Is that good?" Glist called out to Dizz.

Before Dizz could respond, a bunch of wasp drakes flew out from various cavern holes across the den. Wend counted somewhere around ten of them as they circled him and his crew. Each of them landed, a club in one hand and their own bladed tails in the other, both brandished towards Wend and his crew. In the briefest moment, the calm, quiet evening had been engulfed in angry chittering and buzzing.

"Um, sorry," Dizz said through the buzzing. "I think they're mad about something."

5

"No! No, Glist!" Wend shouted.

"What? We're surrounded."

"By wasp drakes. Lucid wasp drakes. If they smell their own blood, they have an instinct to go berserk and lash out at everything around them. Bashing and blades would do just that." He turned to one of them, slinking back and trying to keep composure, though he could feel his legs trembling.

Words, words, wasp drake words, he thought, digging into what memories he had. He turned to one which approached particularly close and asked "*A-tza?*"

The wasp drake looked confused. Dizz spoke to the same wasp drake, a buzzing that Wend's tongue couldn't replicate. The two spoke too quickly for Wend to understand, though he wasn't confident seeing Dizz waving his arms around and the guard squinting his eyes.

"They want you to come with them quietly to Tzau." he finally said. "Sorry, they weren't really willing to compromise on the blindfolds."

Glist groaned.

Wend stepped forward, his blindfold covering everything in darkness. He could only feel light-headed and anxious as they were being escorted through the wasp drake nest, surrounded by the poisonous tail blades of the guards. Perhaps the worst was that they had taken his smoke pipe.

As they stepped ahead, he could hear Dizz chastising the guards. At least, he thought it was chastising. The buzzing and clicking sounds made the tone difficult for him to parse, and he didn't understand enough of the vocabulary to pick words out. Tecton would get restless,

but usually a scolding remark kept him in line. The last thing he wanted was for Tecton to get aggressive.

"Are we at least going to have a chance to speak with your *tzui* before you throw us in a prison cell?" Glist asked.

"Watch your tongue or you'll find yourself in a hot wax prison," hissed one of the guards.

He heard Dizz let out a sigh and correct Glist's pronunciation again as they continued their way down the caves until they were instructed to wait. A moment later, he heard the sound of curtains opening. They were instructed to walk forward, and finally could remove their blindfolds.

The den seemed small for a public den. Curtains hanging from wax stalactites gave the impression the space was more closed in than it may have been. Wasp drakes were shorter on average, which Wend could guess would let a cramped space feel cozier for them. *Almost as small as my home's den*, he thought. *Or what was my home.*

Standing upright in a commanding posture was a wasp drake, larger than the rest, but only nearly the size of Wend himself. Her elevation and stature was enough to make Wend feel significantly smaller. She was decorated with woven cloth and amber jewelry, and held furrowed brows and dark, reflective eyes towards all of them.

"Now, what all is this?" Tzau asked, her voice stiff and with a thick, buzzing accent. Wend figured she didn't speak common tongue often. "While Dizz was away, we caught some outsider skulking around the food supply. What are strangers skulking around for?" She brandished her tail towards Tecton. "And who would bring a Drench beast into our home?"

"Behemoss," Wend corrected, "and he's my pet. He wouldn't harm a vezpa."

The wasp drakes all took notice, their heads craning to focus an eye on him. Wend clenched his jaw, hoping that was only surprise and not alarm.

"Vezpa? Outsiders call us wasp drakes," said Tzau, one claw under her jaw. "You speak with our words. Who are you?"

Wend dug through his memories like Tecton dug his grip into the soil below. It had been at least a year since he had dealt with wasp drakes.

"Wend. We're seeking refuge for a few nights..." he started, trying to stall.

There was a tribe, who were they again?

"I'd been around vezpa... A while back. Oh! Does the name Itzuso from Drench remind you of anyone?"

Tzau snapped her head forward. "Itsuzo... yes. Our tribes speak." Wend could see her upright and aggressive posture relax. "The hermit and the behemoth. I trust you've learned a thing or two about his bad tenancy to break into wasp drake honey caches?"

Wend opened his mouth before the earlier events of the day clawed to the surface of his mind. "Getting better every day. I think. Er, might I ask why Dizz does his cooking so far out?"

Tzau gave off a buzz that Wend couldn't tell if it was laughter or vulgarity. "Dizz is a ditzzy spellcaster. He does honey alchemy away from the hive for *when* he sets something ablaze."

Dizz seemed to recoil at the stressed *when*.

"I suppose he can show you around if you're already acquainted. Doors and curtains are off limits, but there's a room that can be used as a den. *Zet-tur*, Dizz. For the chameleon, stash any of your concealed blades safely. You would not live to see another night if we smell blood.

"Oh, she's got good eyes." Glist observed.

As they were dismissed, Wend and Glist were left to roam the wasp drake nest. Much to Wend's annoyance, Tecton had to be put in an animal storage, to which he only warned for them to not put any harmless critters they cherish with him.

The entire hive appeared to be built into a hillside. Some chambers had open skies covered by various foliage with ways to fly out. Some areas would have given Wend a nasty flashback to his prison not too long ago, if not for the wax sculptures and geometric aesthetics giving a more friendly and decorative feeling.

Dizz show them around the caverns for a short while before the communal dining. "There aren't a lot of public services here like you full dragons got. No public dens and no soup kitchens. We've only got about thirty-five wasp drakes in our tribe... Or was it thirty-four?"

Only now he could get a clearer grasp on the area, now that he wasn't being dragged around with bladed tails swinging around him. He mostly grew familiar with the central cavern, which climbed up to a hole in the ceiling, letting internal heat out and sunlight in. Dizz remarked that let the wasp drakes travel in and out without being seen by anyone on the ground. It also let smoke from torches and lighting escape, keeping some of the wax furniture in place.

That was the thing that seemed to overtake Wend the most. The aroma of wax, honey, and various herbal aromas. The mouths of caverns would be molded with wax hexagonal panels. He lost count of how often they passed various wasp drake alchemists turning pollen into wax and wax into sculptures.

"I tried out making a wax figure once," Dizz remarked when passing by a particularly focused wasp drake's hexagonal cubby. "He and I were on the same team in a competition." The wasp drake turned to them, looked at Dizz, and his dim eyes livened up as he swung a curtain shut. Dizz's voice was toned down to a vibrating whisper, "I think he's still upset I turned our candelabra into a volcano."

"How recently was that?" Glist asked.

"Too young to remember. I've been looking at magic for a long time."

"Is that why everyone is so..." she paused. Wend figured she was trying to pick a gentle word.

Dizz's head seemed to drop a little. "Oh, that. I don't have very good control of spells yet. Most of us don't know how to read. I got a little help from a previous wizard wasp drake."

"I never even bothered with magic since I couldn't keep up, but I could read fine. You wouldn't think Wend here could read with how he apparently lived under a rock all his life, but he somehow knows a few spells."

This stuck out to Wend as strange. "What? I can't read," he clarified.

"How? Your not a very innately magical species. I figure you'd seen a few scrolls."

"No. I've always been able to cast natural magic."

She stared at him. *She does stare too much at times*, he thought. *It's getting unnerving when she starts giving me that look. As if she's sizing me up.*

She blinked and sighed. "Just my luck. Here I am in a group of three. All of us lacking magical talent, and I'm the only one that has no real ability to use any of it."

Dizz tilted his head, his floppy ears dangling. "You can read and didn't try to learn spells? You're strange. I was so excited for what I could do with magic. The first thing I did when reading was learn how to light a candle. Even if the box it was on also ignited with it."

Glist squinted. "It's a longer story than I'd like to mull on," she said with a rasp. Wend felt a bite in the words that made him nervous about asking about it.

"Ah, right, Dizz," he cut in. "When was the communal feast?"

Dizz perked up. "How long has it been? I suppose I should get pollen made from those flowers before they wither. I'm not supposed to make honey here, but pollen we can preserve until it's ready. I'll meet up later. See you!" And with a twirl, his wings buzzed, he flew off and was gone.

"See? Wasp drakes. Not so bad if you know how to deal with them." Wend said.

"Sure, though I think everyone keeps giving us weird looks. Especially me." she twisted her tail, glancing around and locking eyes with a random wasp drake, who brought his head down quickly and acted as if he was busy.

Wend looked back and forth between Glist and the surrounding wasp drakes. He couldn't stifle his chuckle. "Oh, I get it. Your orange scales aren't that far off from some kinds of flowers. They might find it uncanny."

"If they try to pollinate me, they're getting slapped."

"Try not to. Blood alarm might unleash the whole hive on us."

"Ugh. Fine, let's just get somewhere a little less open aired. Didn't the monarch say something about capturing someone prowling around? I want to see if it was one of the cultists."

"Maybe. Perhaps we could get some insight on their obsession with me. As long as I'm on this side of the locks and doors."

It took some wandering, and a few poorly formed questions from Wend, to make their way to the dens used for prisons. They weren't large or numerous, as if it was less for capturing prisoners and more for isolating some rowdy wasp drakes until they cool down. Wend couldn't help but be a little nosy, seeing a sleeping wasp drake with a bandaged wound. *That much exposed blood could trigger their attack instincts fast. No wonder they mostly work with wax. The tools are mostly their own hands and blunt objects.*

"Well, that's ironic," Glist said towards the prison cell.

Wend glanced over and met the wild eyes of Bezel, the engineer from their previous escapade with the Cult of Atmos.

"You. Snaketail," his voice was coarse like gravel on Wend's ears.

Wend turned to the nearby wasp drake keeping watch. "So how'd this one end up here?" he asked.

The wasp drake looked confused, shrugged, and lifted his floppy ear.

Oh, not a common tongue speaker, he thought. Not a lot of these dragons are familiar. He flicked his forked tongue a few times to warm it up.

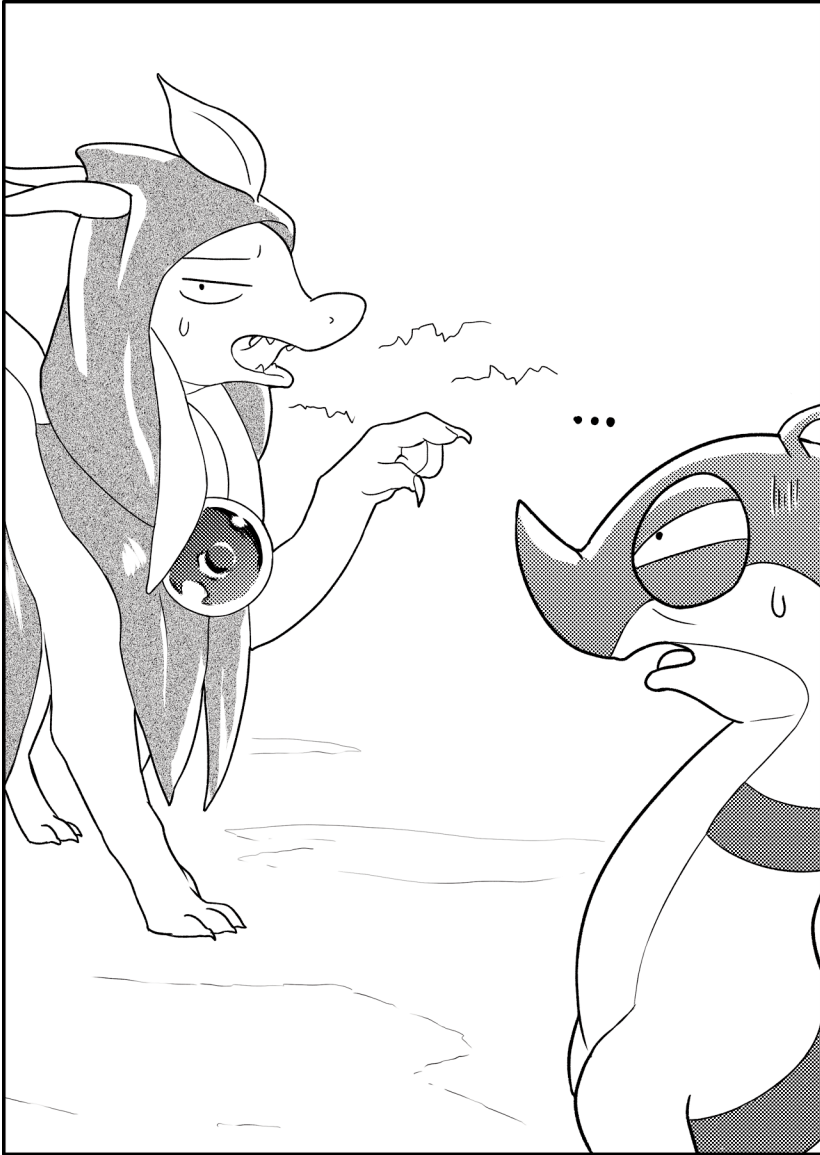
"Ztudda ter?" he asked, pointing at the imprisoned dragon.

From what little he'd been able to learn of wasp drake speech, he felt no hope in understanding what was said to him in response.

He tried remembering the right words to ask to repeat. "*Ts-ts-dau?*" he asked, trying to mimic the rapid buzzing.

The wasp drake squinted and twisted to disgust. He turned away. *Maybe that wasn't the right word, he thought.*

"The glove's on the other claw," said Glist, her voice seeping with amusement. "Got thrown out from the cult? Stealing from wasp drake hives to survive? For shame."



Bezel's arms gripped the gate, holding him up as he balanced on his tail. Wend had gotten the impression the prisoner was trying to look large and menacing. "Don't talk to me about thievery, Snaketail. You're still carrying my scepter."

"I'd rather ask about why of all the cultists in your ranks, it's you that happened to be tailing us."

"Wouldn't you like to know? Well, just as I am an engineer and a warden, I am also a master of silence and stealth. A champion of it, even!"

"Do you brag about that while chasing your prey?" Wend asked.

"Now even Wend is cracking jokes about you, loud-snout!" Glist laughed.

Am I? I thought it was a fair question, Wend thought.

"Then I'll enact the protocol of silence and not speak until you go away. You will not be getting any information out of me!" he shouted. He crossed his arms and legs, and with a single leap of his tail, he spun himself to face away from Wend and Glist.

"Aw, come on Wend. At least the old kook's got a place to rest now, until the wasp drakes figure out something for him." Glist twirled her tail as she made her way out of the jail. "At least we won't be worrying about him stalking us anymore."

Wend glanced back at Bezel's stubby, feathered wings. The dragon peeked over but turned back just as quickly. *No point in trying,* he thought. As he made his way out, something didn't seem right to him, but he couldn't put his claw on it.

The thought quickly left his mind as he eventually got a chance to rest. He and Glist would find their way to the den Tecton was stored in. Glist showed no interest in dining with a bunch of wasp drakes in their mess hall, and Wend favored a quiet moment to pull out his pipe with his freshly plucked herbs. Dizz did leave them with some various pastries and a spicy glaze.

"I brought Tecton a bit of honey from the main supply while you were gone," said Dizz. "I hope that's okay. He had enough of my spicy honey earlier."

"That explains why he's been well-behaved in here, I suppose." said Wend. "He's been sleeping like a hatchling ever since we made our way here."

The duo eventually dropped all the pillows in the room into the sleeping pits and laid themselves down. Wend was relieved that, for the first time in what felt like forever, he could rest easily.

* * *

"Hey! Hey!"

The next thing Wend knew, he was being nudged and yelled at. What he was surprised by is that it wasn't Glist doing the nudging and yelling.

"Dizz?" he asked. He shook his head and pushed himself up from the pile of straw and pillows. "Is it morning already?"

"No. Something's wrong," he buzzed, his accent and rushing words melded together to Wend and he could barely understand what was being said.

Wend turned to see Glist had also woken up. "Slow down, kid. What's going on?"

Dizz glanced behind him. "It's the other wasp drakes. They're not acting right. Most everyone's fallen and conked out."

Wend began nudging at Tecton, but he continued slumbering as if he was back at home by the warm fire. He grabbed the behemoss's horn and lifted his head up, but it fell back into his arms.

"Hmm. Tecton's not responding..." he said. "Dizz, have you any idea what's gone wrong? What happened after you last saw us?"

Dizz brought a claw under his snout. "I ran off with my honey to drop it off with the rest. The food supply's all in one place, since Tsui keeps everything in a communal storage. I took some of my own rations since I like the extra spicy honey I've been making."

"Then?" Glist echoed.

"Then I left my private study, and then everyone else was getting sluggish and sleepy. I thought maybe if you were all awake still, you'd know something."

"Wait, hold on," Glist's tail flicked Tecton's horn. "You fed Tecton and he's not responding. Everyone else is falling asleep just after a communal feast. Can you show us where all the foodstuff goes?"

"It's not far from here," said Dizz. "Out here, to the right, down this way. Can't miss the aromas in the kitchen areas."

The three of them made their way down the path. The chittering and buzzing from before had all gone out, leaving an eerie quiet. A few wasp drakes laid unconscious in their dens, curtains wide open. Wend saw a few who appeared to fall over while at workstations, as if they were so busy they didn't even realize they were tired. As they approached the kitchens, one wasp drake appeared to have fallen asleep into a half-eaten pie.

Dizz pulled aside a curtain, and a strong aroma of bread and honey seemed to be unleashed upon them. Were the situation less unsettling,

Wend would have probably requested an entire pie for himself. The kitchen itself appeared empty, with a single, wooden table stretching across the length of the den. They moved their way to the back where a supply of barrels were stacked, with one appearing to be empty. A shorter barrel laid next to it, still fairly full.

"Did no one have your spicy honey? This looks like yours." asked Glist, pulling her up to get a look in.

Dizz shrugged. "Not a lot of them take the spicy stuff. A few do. Your pastries earlier. You could compare them if you want."

Glist brought her long tongue out and licked a little of the communal honey off her fingers. "Sugary, sweet, that's honey all right. But a little milder than I usually would have. And... licorice?"

Licorice doesn't sound right, thought Wend. He took a small claw of honey in for himself. It was as Glist described. Mild honey with a faint licorice taste. *Not just licorice*, he realized.

"This is wrong. We have a problem," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Dizz as he licked a little spicy honey off his claw.

"This honey's been mixed and laced with sleep pollen."

"Sleep pollen? But we all know not to use flowers with sleep pollen. How could that be?"

Wend felt pieces of a puzzle falling into place. "Bezel is here. Tzau said they caught him trying to steal food. But he wasn't. He was contaminating it for some reason. We need to get to him and find out--"

A familiar cackle erupted behind them. Dizz dove under one of the tables by Wend. Wend and Glist turned to the doorway to see Bezel.

"Come quick, I've got them here!" he shouted.

6

A large, rounded figure emerged from behind Bezel. Protruding from her body was a craned neck, wrapped with a crimson, horned viper. Contrast to Bezel, who looked ragged and rough, she was rounded and smooth. She brought her staff down to her side with a stoic expression on her face. Her eyes scanned the room. A chill ran down Wend's spine as they fixated on him.

"Sage Cepa," she introduced. Her voice was smooth and calm, as if she just introduced herself during a casual tea party. "You would be correct. Wasp drakes have predictable rituals, and you are most vulnerable when sleeping soundly. Bezel just had to spike their food and wait until nightfall." She glared back at Bezel. "And not get captured on the job, but clearly he couldn't manage that part."

"He's persistent," snarled Glist. "I'll give him that. But that must suggest you knew we were coming here."

"We have our eyes and ears," the bulbgon smirked. She turned towards Wend. "It's been a long time, Sprout. I'm hoping to undo whatever blundering mess Bezel's done when you were in his care."

She took a step forward, and Wend automatically took a step back, "Not who you think I am, miss. Just leave me be," he begged.

"Cepa, Sprout. Do you not remember?" She asked. Wend could feel something in her voice. As stressed as he was, he felt there was a genuineness to her words, as if she was truly confused.

"Does every blue dragon look like the Sprout of Atmoss to you?" Glist stepped forward. "Your engineer with loose screws in his head is blue. Just do whatever you do with him and get lost."

"You back off, Snaketail!" Bezel thrashed about, trying to keep balance on his tail. "And give me back my scepter while you're at it!"

Wend brought his eyes down to the red viper. Its eyes gazed back at him. *Thorny viper. Subspecies of vine vipers, can breath fire. Not dead, maybe I can bribe him*, he thought. He pitched his voice up, looking towards the viper. "Hey fellow. There's some spicy honey in it if you lash at that bulbgon using you like a scarf."

The thorny viper's eyes twisted to malice and lashed towards him instead, but Cepa kept held of it. The viper hissed, eyes darting across the room.

"Patience, Torch. Not now." she said, petting the viper. "Warmth around the neck. Sweet fellow. Also very loyal to me, so we'd rather you not try anything. Come, Sprout."

"Ready!"

Wend pulled his head around to see Dizz leap onto a table. He waved a talon up, which Wend could feel a heat emitting from. A flash of orange light engulfed the room. He felt Dizz swing by him, but he couldn't follow as his eyes were thrown off. He heard shouts and calls, but couldn't make any of them out as he found himself disoriented and confused.

Wend felt his way around the room and found a cavern exit that he'd seen before. His legs were automatically moving, swaying his body to avoid crashing into things to the best he could. His head was thrown in disarray as he tried to right himself and focus on his ears to get away from shouting. As his blank sight returned to the chambers of the hive, only two things flew through his mind. *Away, Tecton.*

It was a few wrong turns, but his heart beat couldn't cover the sound of Cepa's voice shouting towards him. Wend didn't see Glist or Dizz anywhere. Only sleeping wasp drakes. Wend's stomach tied into a knot as a thought crossed him, *was I abandoned?*

He reached the den he and Glist were resting in. Tecton laid undisturbed, but sleeping soundly as if it were any calm night at home.

Wend pushed and pulled at Tecton's horns. "Come on, get up. Honey, boy, if you just get up!" But no matter the shaking and poking, he was completely out of it. *Dizz must have given a lot of honey to knock such a large creature out.*

His heart sunk as he heard steps behind him. He turned back to the only exit. Cepa and Bezel stood before him. The only way out of this cavern would've been to charge through with Tecton, but the beast was sleeping soundly.

Wend exhaled. "You have me. Now what?"

A twisted grin stretched over Cepa's face. "I only wish you'd come back quietly."

"I'm not this Sprout you keep calling me. I have nothing to do with any of you."

Her gaze pierced him, as if she was sizing him up. "You are. There's no mistaking it."

"I'm just a hermit who wants to be left alone. I've always been that way."

"And what's always mean to you? Where do you come from? When did it start for you?"

"I came from the den your circus raided." Wend said, backing himself into Tecton's unconscious body. The walls were closing in and he was feeling dizzy. "What's it to any of you?"



Cepa took a step closer. "How did you get there? Everyone comes from somewhere. Have the years worn your mind? How could you forget, Sprout?"

"I always was, I-" he stopped. He couldn't help but mull over the words. Vague impressions brushed the surface of his mind, but he couldn't make sense of any of them. For the briefest of moments, he

felt as if something came to him that he had not thought of in a long time. As soon as the feeling came, it was gone again. *Was that even real?*

"You really don't remember, do you?" her stance softened, but Wend felt no less threatened by her confrontation. She brought her staff to a sleeping wasp drake. "Your acquaintances abandoned you. You and your behemoss come with us. Don't force my hand to bring pain to those around you. We'll be on the same page soon, just trust me."

The beating drum of his heart drowned every other sensation, he found himself holding his breath. Part of him tried to will a step forward, but his body denied it as the two figures stared down at him. Over his heart and breath, the only sound he could make out was the distressed buzzing in his mind.

Or was it in his mind? He focused on it only to realize it was coming down from the cavern hall.

"This way buddies! Incoming!"

Dizz's voice sliced through the noise in Wend's mind as a few wasp drakes were following behind. He couldn't be sure how Dizz awoke them, but his fear was pushed back by a spark of relief.

Dizz gave off a clicking, buzzing sound and the other wasp drakes leaped towards Cepa and Bezel. The two leaped aside. Cepa brought her staff down on one, slashing at the wasp drake with magical thorns. Wend saw a few drips of blood drop to one of the guards nearby, who also began stirring awake.

The wasp drakes gave off vicious buzzing sounds as they closed in on the cultist duo. Bezel brandished a stick, but one of the wasp drakes tore it out of his hand with their mouth and snapped it in a single bite.

"Retreat and regroup," Cepa barked at Bezel as the two turned tail and fled down the cave, out of sight.

Dizz moseyed his way over to Wend. It was only then that Wend realized how he'd nearly fallen to the floor during the confrontation.

"Whew. I was worried you'd get blood on you," he said.

"Blood alarm?" Wend took a deep breath and exhaled. "That was clever. I knew blood alarm was a strong impulse, but not to the degree it could awaken one from heavy doses of sleep pollen."

"It came to me earlier. Blood alarm's a survival instinct for the hive as a collective. Should last long enough to chase those guys away. Though I'd been keeping it away from my own nose. Don't want to go crazy and attack the first thing I see that moves. Glist is also camouflaged somewhere, in case she would've been a target."

"Glad I kept still then. I can heal your tail, if you want."

"Please do, before I flip out. Glist had to slash it just enough without causing much pain."

Wend held Dizz's tail and focused, bringing a warm sunlight sensation along the wound. "I don't get it though. Why didn't you tell me of that plan? For a moment, I thought you'd both run off and left me."

"What?" Dizz tilted his head, his long ears hanging down. "That's silly. I whispered it to you and Glist from under the table. I thought you got the hint. But in hindsight, you always space out, so I guess not. You and Glist just needed to buy me a few seconds to surprise them with my blinding light spell. Then we were all supposed to run past them when they were dazed."

"And I was supposed to understand all of this in the span of a few seconds?"

"I thought you were playing along when the big ugly one was talking to you." his face dropped slightly. "Sorry, I guess I screwed that up."

"No, no. I mean you did some clever stuff. Maybe just too quick thinking for me." Wend found himself turning back to thoughts from his brief chatter.

"That bulbgon sounded like she knew you." Dizz said.

"I don't. The worst case of mistaken identity." He brought back his talons from Dizz's tail. The cut mark had returned to solid flesh and scales. "This wound wasn't anything. Quick cleanup."

Wend heard a voice which nearly had him leap out of his cloak. Turning back towards the cave entrance, he saw a faint dark shape approaching.

"My bad. Camouflage." Glist said, entering the light of the chamber, her scales a dim amber color that reminded Wend of the wax figures in darker parts of the hive's den. "Sorry about the tail, Dizz."

"No, it's fine. Wend's already cleaned it up. A scratch for a little blood in exchange for chasing out some cultists is a fair trade."

"I thought you all ran off." Wend said.

Glist looked at him. Wend never liked how she looked in a way he could never quite read. "Why? This entire debacle lasted ten minutes. Maybe ten minutes? You almost sound like you're accusing us of leaving you out."

"Also, I'm not going to abandon my hive." Dizz chimed in.

Wend curled up by Tecton, burying his head in the pile of pillows

that made up his bed. *Do I sound like that? I don't mean to*, he thought. At first, he was going to say as much, but decided to leave it be. "Five, ten minutes. That's enough to make me assume the worst, I guess. Can I just rest? I'm really not in the mood for any of this."

There was some shuffling he couldn't see, before Glist sighed and spoke again. "I'll keep an eye out. Dizz, can you go out and check if those lunatics are gone? You're the only one of us those wasp drakes won't go sting-happy on while they're seeing red. Or smelling, I suppose."

"It doesn't last that long, I don't think." Dizz pointed out. "Though I do need to make sure they don't tire out and end up in a bad way. I'll never hear the end of it."

Wend heard the wasp drake's wings buzzing off. In due time, anxiety turned to exhaustion, and exhaustion turned to a shallow sleep.

7

The sun barely shone its light over the tree tops when the wasp drakes were coming to. Wend exhaled a puff of smoke from his snout to try and calm himself down from the eventful night. Many thoughts rattled through his mind, all of which he saw dissipate when the smoke would spread and vanish.

Glist and Dizz didn't sleep much either. Glist was distressed that in spite of this being the safest night since their escape, they had been ambushed in a most unexpected way.

As he was starting to doze, he started seeing a few of the wasp drakes starting to stir. "I'm worried a bit. They won't be too happy to hear about all this."

Glist's tail waved around Bezel's scepter. "What should they be mad about? We just chased off the gons that contaminated their honey, knocked them all out, and nearly looted their homes. They'll probably be thankful."

"It wouldn't have happened if we weren't here," said Wend.

"I'm sure Tzau will understand. She's open to hearing visitors out when the clan's not on high alert, after all."

"It seems where ever you go, trouble follows," Tzau said. "If the Cult of Atmos is pursuing you, we cannot risk your presence after last night's incident."

"I can't seem to shake off this trouble." Wend sighed.

"Even were we charitable, the clan is in disarray and shaken from the attack. We're going to be on guard and locked down for some time."

Dizz grabbed his ears as if he were about to tear them off. "Not

again! The last time we locked down, none of the kids could go out for a month and everyone was restless."

"Dizz, you were, and barely still are, one of those kids."

"I still like my nature walks and magic studies." Dizz turned her head from Tzau and towards Wend. "In fact, if you're all going to hide away, I'll just go with them!"

Wend was taken aback. Glist stepped towards him. "You what? When did we say we'd--"

"Go on, then." Tzau said.

"Nope! I've made my mind." Dizz brought himself to his hind legs and crossed his front arms. "Wait, I can go?"

Tzau sighed. "If we keep you in here at this point, you'll probably turn the hive into a volcano. No one here's going to stop you." She glanced over to some other wasp drakes and spoke something Wend couldn't understand. The wasp drakes nodded in response.

Dizz remained in his position for just a moment. Though Wend couldn't read the wasp drake's dark eyes, he wondered if he was already regretting his decision. Dizz brought himself off his hind legs and walked his way to Wend and Glist.

"Ready when you are!" he cheered.

"Isn't there someone else you forgot to ask before tagging along?" Glist asked with a twinge of annoyance.

"I don't think your behemoss can speak. Once you get him, we can make way. I should have a little spare stash of spicy honey for the road."

Dizz sauntered off on his hind legs, projecting some level of confidence. "He's a bit assertive when he wants to be." Wend admitted. "And did get us out of a bind."

"You see why we're fine with him going." Tzau said. "He's uncontrollable. But in fairness, perhaps he will hold his own if traveling out with you, if you will have him."

"I'll be happy with an army keeping me safe at this point. Besides, we usually had to split the night watch between Glist and I, but three of us might make that more bearable." He turned to Glist, but found her to be in thought with a grumpy expression plastered on her face. "Is something the matter, Glist?"

"No, it's fine. I can't argue with this." she said rather quickly. "We're going to be on the road for a while, and I think these guys want Wend too much to leave us alone. Which means another pair of eyes and talons won't hurt."

* * *

* * *

Wend glanced up towards the sky. It was the tail end of dawn when they'd left the hive. Their exit had been quick, so as to slip quietly through the less trodden paths, using the darkness of the forests to stay hidden long enough to get a lead on any stalking cultists. He found himself in thought, but without much rhyme or reason aside from his encounter with Cepa last night.

"Tecton's sure taken a liking to me." said Dizz, scratching at the moss on Tecton's neck.

"He would. You'd been filling his sweet tooth." Glist pointed out. "Wend, is he balanced with all those bags piled on him?"

Wend's thoughts evaporated as he was brought back to the forest. "He's carried more before."

Tecton had been strapped up with an assortment of bags for the road. Some wood containers contained pastries and rations for the road, and a few were just empty bags. In spite of the sour mood at their departure, Tzau didn't seem to be as hostile towards him as he'd thought. If Dizz's reassurance afterward was anything to go by, at least. "Everyone's had to deal with those maniacs if you lived near Drench. Apparently it was really bad a few years back before they'd mellowed out" he'd said.

"Not mellowed out," Glist corrected. "They just thinned in numbers after their chain of command broke down. The ones that stayed are the most deranged and dedicated, I guess you could say."

"Or the ones with no place else to go?" Wend found himself asking.

"Maybe, but you'd find some who turned a new leaf." Glist stopped walking and looked at him. "What makes you ask that?"

"I just want to be home. Travel is tiring and I just want my warm fire. I'd think most gons are going to prefer a familiar and homely place once they've found it."

Glist did stare for a moment before tilting her head. "I suppose." she said before turning and resuming forward.

The path continued for a short time. By the time the sun had risen to the height of the sky, the foliage gave way to a coast. Wend felt damp dirt turn to coarse sand as they continued on. The dense foliage to their left, and a wide sea of waves to their right. A blast of frigid, salty air blew through them. Wend had gotten so used to the dense jungles and forests that he'd not felt strong gusts in an open field for a while. Let

alone an entire sea. The warm, humid air had dropped to a cool chill. The direct sunlight now seemed to be the strongest source of heat.

"That puts us a little further south than I thought," Glist said. "Must have been our unusual route. We're avoiding common paths, so we're losing our way when we can't orient ourselves easily."

Dizz perked up at the sight of the sea. "I think this is the furthest I've been. Sometimes one of the other wasp drakes would travel out and tell us about the roaring waves and sparkling horizon."

"We had something like this a little out from my den," Wend said. "But where are we then? You had a destination in mind, Glist."

Glist brought her gaze far down the coast. Wend didn't see much beyond the horizon. From here to there, it was palm trees, forest, and sand.

"Just down that way, maybe a day or three. We might be able to make it to Flutter. Biggest town in the local area. Not where we're going, but a place to rest and recuperate."

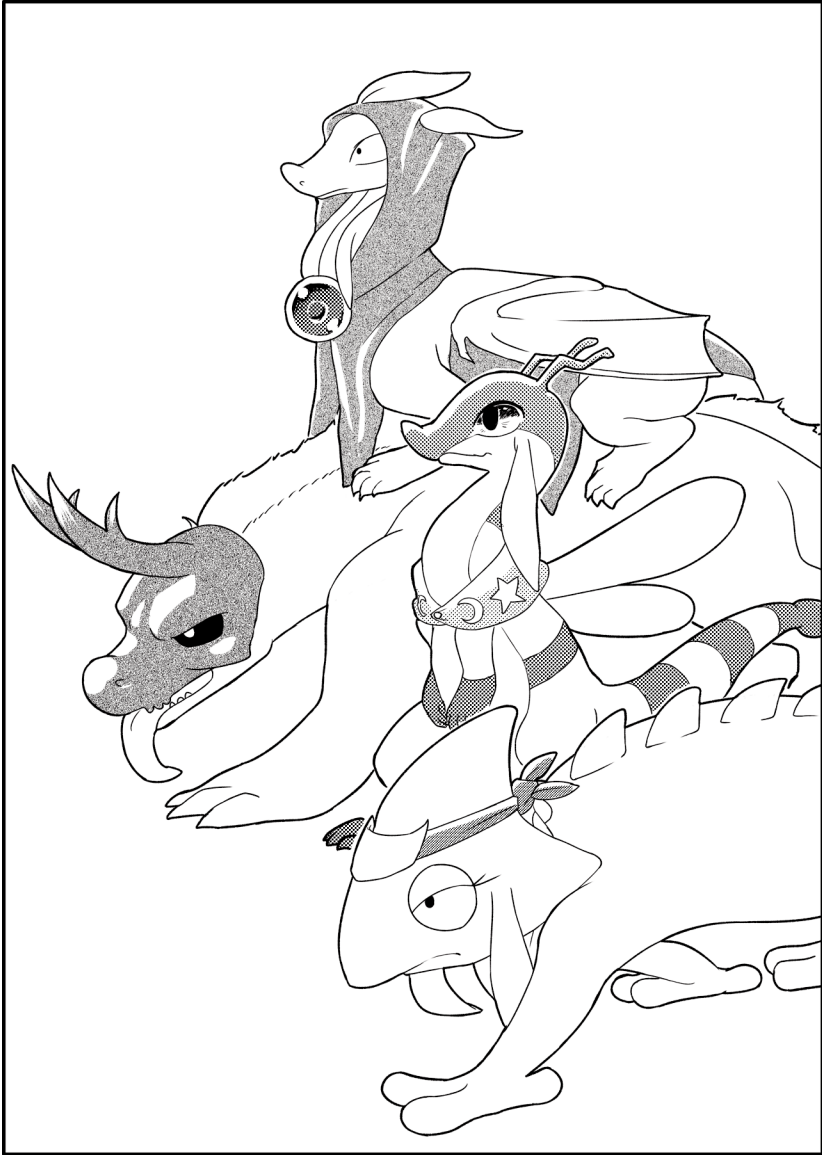
"I don't like the idea of resting out in the open though," said Wend. "We're snails in a salt mine. We should probably stick closer to the woods."

"Nah, you're right. But I also need a change of scenery."

Glist rose to her hind legs and stretch herself out. Wend noticed Dizz seemed transfixed by the ocean. He leaped off Tecton and felt his talons sink into the sand. Tecton seemed to stick by the mud, taking his own moment to rest.

"The big guy's telling us it's time for lunch," Wend said.

"Yeah. Dizz, go pick out something from our supplies. Maybe Wend can go forage in the forest for a little extra. Don't want us to go through everything too fast when we can split it up. As soon as we're ready. Flutter is just west of us."



8

The days blended together for Wend as they marched along the coast. They seemed warm and humid, but a cold wind whooshed through the sand and trees. Sometimes the sky was rainy, other times it was sunny, but it was always breezy.

Anytime Wend would go anywhere in Drench, it would be at a brisk speed on Tecton's back. But the safety of traveling in numbers and the unfamiliar terrain meant a slower pace was necessary. He would have rather leaped off and reached somewhere remote where he may never be bothered again, but with the growing paranoia that they were being constantly followed and monitored, he was not feeling so self-sufficient.

The ocean waves crashing along the side and the ambience of the wind and rain often washed over Wend's worries, though his attention span was pulled aside as well. Were he not often on Tecton's back, he may have found himself accidentally wandering too close to the shore. On occasion, he'd hear waves crash in from the side, then count the seconds to the next splash.

Glist wasn't too bothered with navigation, but it could have just been that the coast line offers only two directions: towards sunrise or sunset. They often took their travels to the nearby woods mid-day, however, as some larger shorelines felt open and exposed. The biggest concern for her was that Tecton embedded plenty of great big prints in the damp sand and mud, leading to travel across rockier shores and cliff sides, or passing through cluttered terrain that would obfuscate and cover their road taken.

It was Dizz who seemed the most unfamiliar with traveling out into the wilderness for longer than a mere day. He often found it easier to

hover a lot to keep the sand and mud off his talons, with his wings buzzing and blending into the sounds of waves. Wend often found it impressive wasp drakes could lift themselves with such thin wings, especially when his own wings were so small and could not carry his own weight. Dizz was also the most curious, picking up various shells as souvenirs. Everyone had also needed to pull him out of a mess when he tried moving an enormous shell, only for the snail residing inside to pop out and hug him with their whole body. Dizz spent an hour trying to get the goop off of himself, between washing in the ocean water and roasting by a bonfire before their group could continue on their way.

By noon of the fourth day, some of the sandy coast rose up into a small cliff. As the ground elevated, Wend noticed a distant hillside that stuck out from the surroundings. Tree leaves stuck out in such a way that from this angle, he had first mistaken it for a bush.

"Finally," Glist spoke up. "We can stay there. I know the guy. Somewhat."

"He's not going to mind strangers lying around for a while?" asked Wend.

"He's Charok. We come from the same clan. A number of us have safe houses for those of us on the road. Don't worry. You'll like him. He's an arbora nut like you."

A ticking buzz came from Dizz. "What I wouldn't give for a pillow pit right about now."

There was still some distance between them and the den, but they still managed to reach it just as the sun climbed to the top of the sky. The den was quaint, with vivid red hibiscus plants sharply contrasting the small shrub-like trees growing around it. Wend noticed it was larger than his own den was, with an extra mound on top for a second story, and a section jutting out up to the cliff, giving what must be an excellent view from the inside. The tree sticking out from the second floor rustled in the wind. Wend felt there was a dreamlike mystique to the scenery as they all walked their way through the patio and up to the humble doors.

Glist gripped at a knocker to the door.

Knock knock knock!

Wend gazed off to the distance as they waited for a response. Down the coast, he could see a hillside sticking out with ships. A chill ran down his spine from the cold wind against the warm humid air. But

Wend also had an eerie feeling creeping in, though he couldn't put his claw on it.

"We're pretty close to Flutter, I think." Dizz piped up.

"Yeah, that's it all the way down there. An hour of walking brisk though. I said we're going there. You ask any gons here where they live, they'd say Flutter even if the city's more than a mile away. Just as Drench isn't limited to the city of Drench." said Glist, knocking at the door a second time.

"It's a wonder no one stopped and asked about removing the ambiguity..." said Wend.

The sound of four different locks unlatching came from the other side, and the door opened. Wend recoiled as an upright croc nearly the size of the door itself came into sight. He was big and round, draped with an apron with a little pocket on the front. An earring was pierced through his ear, much like Wend was pierced by the croc's sideways eyes.

Being close enough that Wend could see his size compared to himself. Wend felt this guy could split him in two were he provoked to. His heart nearly leaped out of his throat as the croc fixated his eyes on him, before jumping to Tecton, Dizz, and finally Glist.

"Glist? What's with the colorful cast?" he said. The voice was gravelly, but a little higher pitch than Wend expected.

"Special guest. Has a behemoss. This guy," she tilted her head towards Wend. "You can figure out the rest."

Wend felt the croc's eyes analyzing him. He stifled his thoughts in fear they were being read, until his pace quickened and he started asking himself if he and Tecton were going to have a fight.

"A behemoss? Glist, did you..." the big guy stopped himself as he relaxed. "Come in. It's been warm out. You look like you could do with some cooling down."



The den was respectably large outside, but Wend couldn't have known if he only saw the interior. The front room was still spacious, but much of that space was taken up by boxes, chests, and metallic fences partitioning off segments. It was a miracle Tecton could fit through the door and find a space to rest.

Floral lizards, vine vipers, snails and other arbora crawled around

the room. A blue lizard with a white lotus flower came up to Wend with big, curious eyes and dropped a red ball from their mouth. Wend picked it up with one of his forelegs and tossed it to the other side of the room. The lizard scampered off and crashed into a viper.

"Oh dear, reminds me of when I'd leave my window open to see who would sneak in." Wend said.

Charok opened up a chest towards the back. It seemed to give off a chilling aura, which Wend could only suppose was magical in nature. The croc pulled out something from the chest. He held up sticks topped with the shape and color of blue vine vipers. "Here. Treat yourselves."

Wend crept a talon out to take the stick. "What is it?" He asked.

"What? Never had an ice pop before?" Glist wrapped her tongue around her own and tore off the viper's head. Her expression dropped as she grabbed her head. "Aah, brain freeze. Don't eat it too fast."

Wend looked closer at his ice pop. The rime viper pop stared back at him. The eyes were made from some kind of hard candy, which stared at him. It was made worse by the eyes being displaced, as one was half submerged in the head and the other was sticking out from the side. With a lick, he could taste a sweet hint of blueberries and sugar. *Sickeningly sweet*, he thought. "So that's *what* it is. But *why* is it?"

"HA!"

A big *thunk* from the croc came down onto Wend's back from out of his sight. The ice pop flung out of his and onto Tecton's face. It bopped onto the hard skull before falling to the ground, to which Tecton began licking at it.

"I didn't think a rime viper ice pop was too much for ye." He gave a heavy chuckle.

Wend clenched his teeth. He glared towards Glist and Dizz. Dizz seemed preoccupied picking apart the candy eyes on his ice pop and observing it closely.

Glist glanced back towards him before returning her attention to the croc. "Right. Introductions. This is Wend. Wend, this is Charok. Don't let him get to you. He's no stranger."

"Is- is that so?" Wend asked.

Charok hunched over and faced down, his large snout nearly could reach Wend's own snout, even when Wend found himself so low to the floor. The croc's gaze snapped to Tecton's head. He outreached his thick hand to the behemoth.

Wend felt dizzy. The last thing he wanted was for this guy to get

startled and angry. "He bites when strangers do that. You really shouldn't--"

Wend was interrupted as Tecton's body thrust forward and his jaw chomped down on Charok's arm. Wend felt his stomach fall to the floor and his mind go blank.

A brief silence followed, which felt longer to Wend than it truly was. Charok burst out with a deep, guttural laugh.

"Ha! That's a tough one, now!" He waved his arm, dragging Tecton's head left and right, whose grip would not waver. Charok brought his other arm around and pet Tecton's neck. *He likes pressure applied there. How did this guy know?* Wend thought.

Wend blinked and looked around. Dizz looked dumbfounded with his mouth open. A buzzing came out, as if he tried speaking but words failed him. Glist seemed to try holding her usual stoic demeanor, but even she couldn't hold back wide eyes.

Tecton eventually unfastened his jaw, and Charok laughed again. "See, even if a behemoss isn't hostile, they still test strangers. You just can't flinch or show weakness."

"And he likes being pet there," Wend echoed his own thoughts out loud. "You *do* know arbora well. I had thought I was the only one that actually knew anything about behemoss in particular."

Charok stopped and brought himself up to face everyone. "Well, I know arbora, and I know behemoss. But I would like to know about you, fellow. Quadruped, can you balance upright?"

Wend postured himself up on his hind legs to appear upright, laying his tail back to balance.

Charok pulled out tape and started measuring various limbs. He felt awkward and exposed. He turned to Glist and Dizz, wishing he could beam his thoughts for someone to say or do anything to make this less awkward.

"So what's with the measuring?" Dizz finally asked. Wend sighed in relief, though he wasn't sure if Dizz got the hint or if that was just his constant curiosity.

"He's strangely proportioned, for sure. Look at him. This is the body of an adult, but the wings of a cheap carnival costume. I could probably hover in the air longer than him, and I've got no wings!"

Wend winced. "I never really needed to. I ride Tecton around since he's far faster than I am."

"Quiet, you. Now stay still." Charok commanded as he gripped

under Wend's forelegs. Wend had no time to protest as he was lifted into the air and dropped back down.

"No weight either. Light as a feather. Never mind. Maybe you could glide if you strengthened these wings a bit." he observed.

"Glist and Dizz have remarked these things too. You could have just asked them."

Charok dug into his bags and pulled out a bottle of ink, a brush, and a scroll. He unrolled it and wrote a few glyphs down. Seeing such thick claws that could lift him with ease also have the dexterity for writing swiftly was impressive.

"What are we doing? I don't understand. Why do you want to know about me? I'm not sure why I've become so popular the past few weeks."

Glist spoke up. "Think of it as a doctor's visit. Figured he'd be better at figuring out what's up with you than I am."

"What *is* up with him? Remind me. Why you were being chased around by the cult again?" asked Dizz before biting off the head of his rime viper ice pop.

"Mistaken identity." said Wend with a twinge of annoyance. "They decided a blue dragon and his pet living alone was their grand leader."

Wend turned his head, nearly leaping out of his robe when his snout hit Charok's own snout. He hadn't even noticed being orbited. *For such a big guy, this guy's quiet*, he thought. Charok tilted his head to better his intense gaze into Wend.

"Glist... You didn't... About that. So where are you from?" Charok asked.

Wend shook his head and refocused himself. "Far outskirts of Drench. Could you perhaps give a little space?"

Charok's stubby legs backed up. The croc tilted his head so his snout wouldn't stick out so close to Wend. Wend felt a twitch in his gut as Charok's eye locked onto him while turning. Wend found his gaze slip from Charok's eye and down to the large fang pointing out from the snout.

"You do magic? You're no fighter, clearly."

"A little." Wend held out a talon, the warmth of sunlight emitted from the glowing light along his claws before it hung in the air. "To some extent, I could channel other natural powers, but I'm not very skilled."

"Sounds like druidic magic then." Charok flicked at the light, dissipating it.

Wend glanced over at Tecton slurping up the rime viper pop he dropped. One of the viper's eyes stared back at him.

"He didn't sound certain of it himself when it came up," said Glist. "I don't think he's done much else."

"It's easy to wound yourself out in the wilderness. Tecton would fend off most trouble that would cross our paths. I mended the harm done."

Charok leaned in. "And how did you learn this practice?"

Wend shrugged. "Everyone seems to ask me this. Must I be reminded of my memory problems? I've been able to do it for as long as I've known."

Wend watched as the croc's side eye locked onto his own. For the briefest of moments, it felt as if his thoughts were being read. Charok followed up with another question. "And your behemoss, befriended when?"

"For as long as I've known." Wend repeated.

After some brief moment, the croc's eye pulled away, loosening the invisible grip around Wend's body. He glanced at everyone else. Dizz and Tecton looked on dumbly, whereas Glist was as stone-faced as ever.

"Is-is there a problem with that?" Wend managed to stutter out.

Charok turned around. His eyes squinted, staring past Wend. A grin finally broke the facade. "Ha! Nah. You're no liar. You'd be a bad liar if you were trying!"

Wend sighed. "I think that's a good thing?"

"Well, I'd say so." Dizz said. "Even I could tell you were lying about Tecton not stealing Glist's rations this morning."

Glist's head snapped to Dizz. Her arrow-shaped head pointing at him as if singling him out. "Wait, huh? What do you-"

Charok slammed down a bottle to the table. Where that bottle came from Wend had completely missed. "Come, now! Friends of Glist are friends of mine. It's been a long trek for you. A little wine to unwind, eh? There's a lot of vineyards around Flutter. This is one of the best places to get wine on a budget!"

9

Wend looked to the others. The emotional whiplash he got from this guy left him without words

"It's fine," said Glist. "We'll be spending the night. Been on the road for a long time now."

Dizz let out some kind of rhythmic buzzing. "On the road? We've hardly been on a road for days now! It's either been a never-ending strand of sand or a tightly packed forest where you couldn't see the horizon."

"Would you rather be back with the wasp drakes?" asked Glist with weary eyes.

"Nope!" Dizz quickly responded. "I wish we could slow down, but this is much better than sitting around in the 'limited spell zone' for a month."

Wend felt a nudge against his side. Tecton appeared to be wanting for some attention. Wend brought a talon to the Tecton's neck as Charok's gaze fell on the duo. Given how large he was, and how prone he seemed to a change in attitude, Wend was mildly nervous over what could come next.

"So tell me, kid, what got you wrapped up in this?" The croc asked, popping the cork out of his wine bottle and wrapping his jaw around the end, drinking all of it as fast as it'd pour out. Wend imagined Charok's bluish-violet scales was a result of him drinking so much wine.

"You trust him with all this?" Wend asked Glist.

Glist nodded. "It's fine. As I said, Charok and I are of the same clan. We go back a bit."

* * *

Glist recapped from her perspective, starting with a botched job of sneaking into a base of operations the Cult of Atmoss was operating in. Charok was quick to ask how it went wrong, to which Glist simply said "some guards are too dumb to fool." Wend didn't quite understand, but she didn't elaborate, and Wend wasn't about to stick his head out and interrupt. Glist continued and explained their chance encounter, the escape, the long trek through Drench, and the wasp drakes. Dizz wouldn't let her get away with her clunky pronunciation anytime a wasp drake term came up, much to her annoyance.

Hearing everything from the past few weeks all at once left Wend uneasy. The most obvious points, he could recall. The general direction they had left from, and where they're going, and the rough paths they've taken to avoid chance run-ins with the cult of Atmoss. Yet despite the relatively short amount of time, a vast majority of what had happened were ashes of a flame he never recalled. But bringing it up would be pointless. Asking for clarification would be pointless. Perhaps he could take solace in having forgotten the specifics of the nasty hurricane from two days ago.

A thud on the back of Wend's neck knocked him out of his trance. A fresh bottle of wine was raised in front of his snout. Charok's thick grip held it, the cork stuck to his claw. "How well do your forelegs hold? Need a grip?"

"Grip? I'm fine, uh... Here. I can hold things," said Wend, posturing himself upwards and taking hold of the bottle. "I can't drink this whole thing."

Charok closed in, squishing Wend into Tecton's side. "And you shouldn't! Dizz can barely even handle it. One sip and he's already buzzed."

"I'm not buzzing," Dizz buzzed.

Wend noticed himself feeling dizzy, as if he'd been forgetting to breathe. He inhaled and glancing around for an open space in the room. The clutter and arbora running around had him feel closed in, but finding himself between a large gon and a behemoss only seemed to be putting pressure on his mind as much as his body.

"Might I have... a little room..." Wend exhaled out, feeling as if his bones were about to crack between the croc and the behemoss.

Charok pulled off. "Whoops. Forgot you're so thin. Didn't mean to flatten you, you blueberry pancake. Tell you all what, let's head out to the beach. I'll bring some wood and we can all chat there. I love the arbora's company, but I've not cleaned the place. Didn't expect

guests!"

With how claustrophobic Charok's front room was, stepping back outside to the warm sun and wide open space was relieving. The aroma of salt water and seaweed in the air elevated Wend's mood so much he nearly thought he would start floating away after a single deep breath. Tecton trailed behind, squeezing through the door before the others had any chance to slip by first. *Protective as ever*, thought Wend.

Dizz turned to look back at the den. He tilted his head and fluttered up to the roof. "Hey. There's so much grass and flowers up here. Might I take a little nectar for some honey tonight?"

Charok shrugged. "Oh, sure. Plenty of farm space in rural Flutter, but the garden on top of a den is the most convenient to go for a den owner. A nice balcony lets you harvest without leaving it. That tree is growing from the first floor on the inside. The vipers sometimes gnaw at the roots, until I give them the glare. Ha!"

"I'd mostly been in Drench. They often had huts built from bark and straw, but the standard den could be found. Mine was, anyways," said Wend.

"Cramped from what I saw," Glist remarked.

"It was just me and Tecton. Small suited us."

"How'd you get yours? Don't seem like the kind that would buy a den," Charok remarked, pulling closed the door with piles of dry wood. "Did you chance upon an abandoned one?"

Wend sighed. Was this interrogation going to persist all day? "This is the part where I'm told I have a bad memory, as usual. Not much to say. I just always lived there. Tecton was there from the start as well."

Charok looked at him dumbfounded. "My memory's not the best either, but that's a very large gap to have. Was it your childhood home? No parents living around?"

"Can't say I remember them. But not everyone remembers their childhood."

"Nonsense. Even I've got a few stories from my youth. And Glist, I remember Glist just eight short years ago, even! Glist, do you remember how you'd run around and-"

Wend glanced over. Glist was staring daggers at Charok. "Ahaha, it's no matter. What was it like out there?"

Wend felt the hard slab of stone below him turn to the sand of the beaches as they walked on. He thought back for a moment before

answering. "It was a quiet, pleasant life. Tecton just scared off anyone who tried to bother us. We had to go into town for supplies I couldn't just grow in the surrounding swamplands. I could deal with arbora. If anything, I've always been better with arbora than other dragons."

The logs were dropped down. Charok started stacking them up into a cone shape. "Perhaps I can't judge too much," he said. "After all, I'm just an old croc surrounding himself with arbora as well. Ever teach a lotus lizard how to repeat proverbs? I've heard tell of her twice now ever since she went out to explore Flutter."

Glist groaned. "Yes. Words of tranquility while lashing her tongue at you."

"Ah, that one, yes! Glist got to see her before she scurried off.

"You're one to talk with a long lashing tongue," Dizz remarked, having just tied a floral necklace out of some of the flowers he nabbed from the den's garden. "Wait, Arbora can speak? I didn't even know they had... zuhh... thoughts?"

"Oh they're certainly not all too smart, but they do have potential. Woefully misunderstood creatures here, after the Cult of Atmoss's sway over plant life in the past. Of course, a vine viper and a cataurpillar are going to be different averages. Why, I've heard the average kobold of the far east is smarter than the typical vine viper! But some arbora exceed various dragons. I should've brought out the books I've got."

Wend brought himself down on the sand, close to the newly formed cluster of twigs and logs. "No need. I can't read anyways."

Charok continued, nodding as if he expected as much. "Your behemoss is likely pretty smart too. Behemoss are... complicated. Misunderstood to an extent. Often wrangled along by the Cult of Atmoss. That rich aroma of a rainy day spelled dread if whiffed in the sun. Behemoss have souls, regardless what is claimed. They're slowly becoming more normalized as arbora around these parts, but the average gon doesn't know how to deal with them."

Wend glanced over at Tecton, who had buried his skull in the sand right as the waves crashed down on him. "Smart... If you say so..."

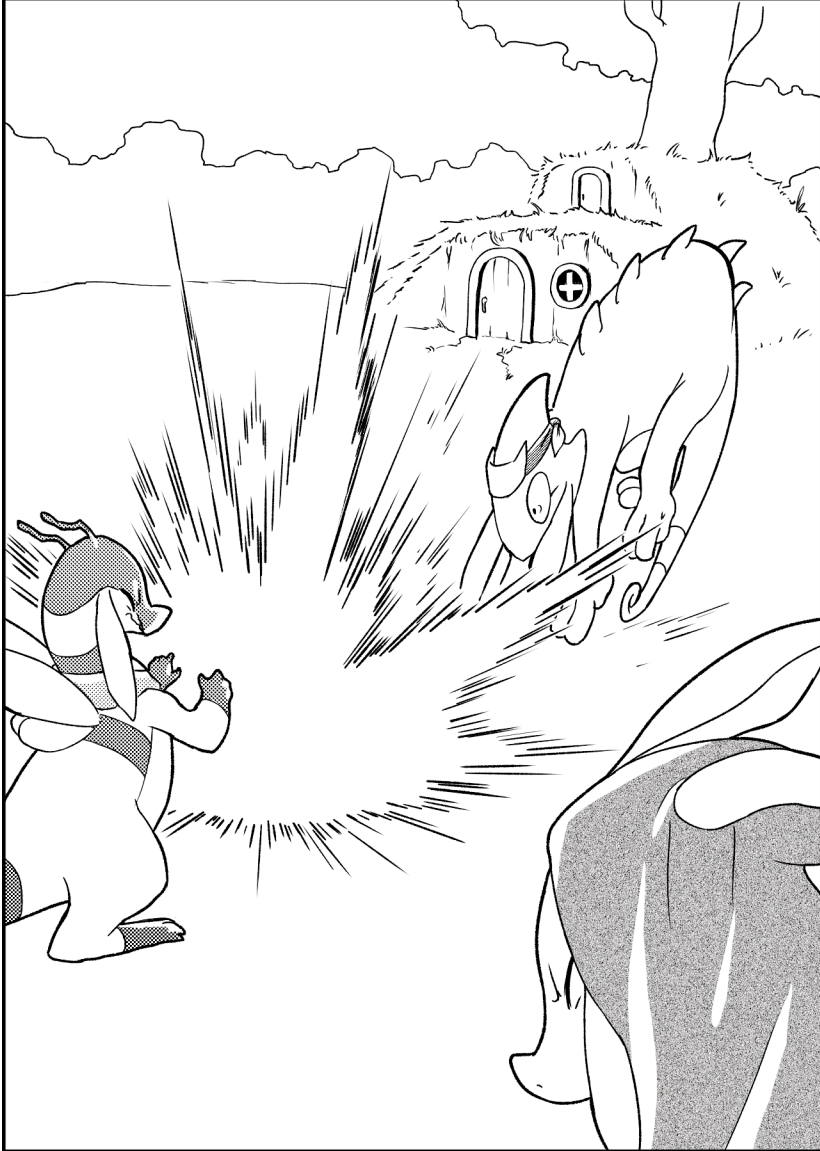
With the last of the wood set up, Charok glanced around before slapping his claws against his snout. "Ah, I've forgotten the light in the den."

"Oh! I can light this for you, if you need," offered Dizz.

Before Charok could turn him down, Dizz conjured a bright light between his talons. Wend shot up as the entire bonfire was engulfed in

flames, the blast of heat hitting him like a tidal wave. His lungs strained as he found himself in a coughing fit.

Once realizing his eyes were tightly shut, he opened to find where the bonfire once stood was now a blowing pile of ashes. Dizz hung his head downward. "Sorry. I guess I still haven't gotten that particular magic in check."



"Well. Speaking of intelligence. Hadn't seen a real spell casting vezpa. Glist, you've found yourself with a wild lot."

Wend had noticed Glist must have leaped thirty feet away, because she was much farther back from the blast than she was before the logs were vaporized, with few steps in between the two positions. Her eyes were wider, but she held her typical stoic gaze.

"It's not the first time with him..." she sighed.

"You okay, Wend? I probably should've waited," Dizz said, buzzing out an apology in his tongue after.

"I'm fine, really," Wend said, his cough letting up. "Perhaps I need my own smoke after this." He pulled out his pipe and lit some of the herbs he had before cramming them into the pipe. He'd noticed Charok watching, but didn't pay too much mind. A breath or two later, and he felt more at ease again as the strain in his body faded out.

"Hm? That scent... What is this herb?" asked Charok.

Wend held his pipe up. "Dimroot. Easier to find in Drench, I'm afraid. Seems to thin out the further we go. I've had to stock up with wild plants."

Charok gazed at Wend. Even while being carried by the rich, earthy aroma, he found this a tad uncomfortable. He pulled a small bag from under his cloak. "Want a taste? It helps in trying times. Or you could use my pipe for a puff."

Charok held his arm out and took the bag. He loosened it open and brought it to his large snout. "How long have you breathed this stuff in?" he asked in a monotone growl. One that put Wend on edge a little.

"I- As long as I can remember. Years, I could only say."

"Let me see that pipe."

The sudden request surprised Wend. He was used to Glist and Dizz rejecting the offer and didn't expect it to be accepted. He took another breath before passing the pipe over.

Charok observed the pipe. Wend was slow and relaxed from the aroma, that it took him a moment to realize Charok had tilted the pipe into the bag.

"Huh? What are you doing?" asked Wend.

Charok tightened the bag with the pipe's thin top sticking out. He gripped the pipe like a ladle...

... And threw it into the ocean waves.

10

Wend stared in disbelief. Charok flipped like a single copper coin. "What have you done?" he heard himself ask, his voice trembling.

Charok turned to him. "Dimroot. A form of plant said to have grown from the body of Atmoss himself. That crushes any doubt about your memory problems." His voice was deep and intense, which only worried Wend more.

"Huh? Those herbs are related to Atmoss?" asked Dizz. "But how?"

"Atmoss is a real being. The cults don't worship the abstract," Charok turned his head to focus one piercing eye through Wend. "Glist... You found him. You actually found him."

Wend squirmed as all eyes fell on him. His throat tightened as he tried to form words. "But... it's just a herb. What could--"

"Wend, dimroot is dangerous. To have breathed in as much as you did over the course of years and still be able to walk or speak is nothing short of supernatural."

"It just relaxes me!" Wend shouted.

"You're not relaxing, Wend! You're forgetting!" Charok bellowed back, twice as loud.

Wend slunk back, feeling nauseous. Once he let his guard down, he found claws being pointed at him. He tried forming some coherent thought to put this accusation to rest, but he could hardly string words together in his mind. His eyes skimmed towards the waves, unable to see any sign of the pipe. A heavy breeze carried droplets of water against his face.

"Of course I'm forgetful, I--"

"Burning dimroot is burning your memories. Cultists used this stuff to feel connected to Atmoss. Naive gons falling into their grasp may be

gifted it to forget their troubles, so it may be filled with the whispers of Atmoss himself. But *this much*, for *this long*? No gon can survive that without something more to them."

"But I..." Wend started, but how could he explain this was wrong? Where would he begin to reject this?

Wend snapped his head to Dizz. "No. No, I haven't anything to do with this." He turned to step away, but was intercepted by Glist.

"Let me go. I've nothing more to listen to," he turned to Tecton, who had perked up and was watching the confrontation. "We're going, Tecton. Let's go."

Glist grabbed at Wend's foreleg. "Wend, you can't waltz off now. This is more important than you realize."

Wend's heart raced as Glist closed in. He yanked his foreleg away. "The most important thing is I can't trust anyone. Least of all you for leading me here to a trap. Calling me someone I'm not. I have nothing to do with this."

Wend glanced at Charok. The croc was shifting his snout back and forth to lock an eye on Wend and Tecton in turn. Tecton was stomping his way towards Wend. *Tecton can take him if he tries anything, but I can't take Glist*, he tried to focus, but his head and heart pounded and he was finding himself fading. He scanned to find Dizz on his forelegs, looking worried. At least Dizz probably would stay out of the way.

Charok's side eye looked right at Wend, his snout aimed at Tecton as the behemoss was passing by. What took Wend off guard was the shift in his expression from aggression to... pity? "I'm sorry, Wend," he said, his voice sounding softer than before. "But I can prove you are the Sprout of Atmoss."

"No, you can't," Wend snapped back.

Charok focused onto Tecton. "Babanus, lie down."

Babanus?

Tecton's legs froze. His head swung to Charok.

"Lie down, Babanus."

Tecton swung his head back to Wend, and back to Charok. A confused growling emanated from him. Then he brought himself down, as if he were curling up to rest, but he was clearly in distress.

Wend stared, dumbfounded. "What?"

Charok stroked the back of Tecton's neck, once again where Tecton always liked to be pet. "As I said, behemoss are smart. Very good memory."

Wend held still as the oncoming tide washed up against the shore,

splashing against his talon. He felt as if the sand was pulling him under briefly. The sound of the waves stacked up in the background, but for a brief moment it felt as if it'd taken over him.

Charok looked at the tide, and up at Wend again. "And now you're focused on the ocean."

"How--"

"You've told me before."

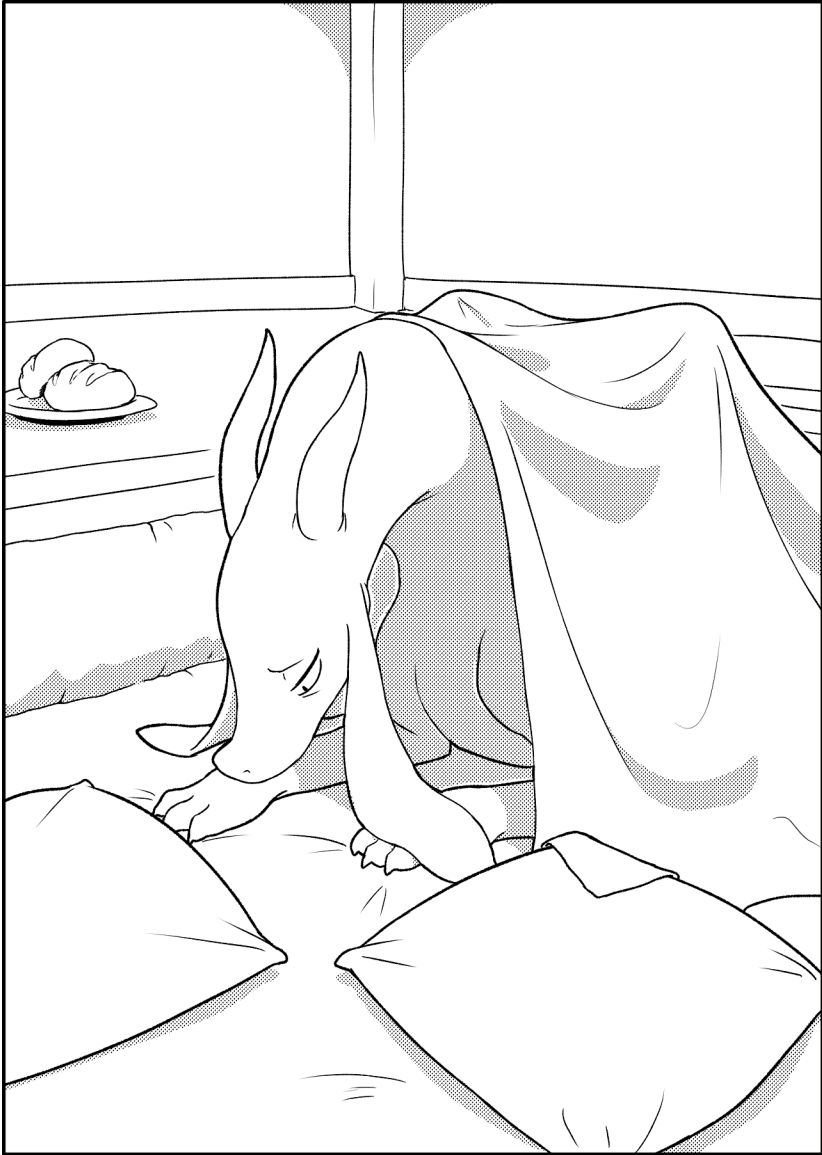
The sound of waves crashed against a nearby stone sticking out, and as if on cue, everything on his mind crashed down on him. Nothing made sense. Nothing should make sense. He wanted nothing about this to make sense. His stomach turned upside down as he lost his grip on the sand below. Feelings faded and everything fell away to nothingness.

* * *

There were no dreams or nightmares. Only an eventual sensation of cushions below and a strong gust of wind that spurred wooden wind chimes to sing. The wind brushed against Wend's snout as he stirred awake.

Then the aroma struck him. The rich rosemary was the first to strike him, before he picked out other scents he could only pin down as baking bread. His surroundings could have been on fire, and he would struggle to fight the groggy weight of waking up. But as his stomach reminded how he had not a single bite since this morning, whenever that was, he found his neck craning upwards like a vine searching for sunlight.

With his eyes half open, he could see the room around him. He felt a brief brush of alarm before he remembered where he was and what had transpired. He was sure he was back in Charok's den, especially seeing an occasional lotus lizard or vine viper poking their heads around boxes. But this room was less cluttered than the front room they all came in through on their arrival. There were arches into other parts of the room. In one corner, he could see a thick tree jutting out from the floor, which he figured was the tree that stretched to the roof and gave natural shade to the balcony outside.



A buzzing sound morphed into words. "Oh, he's up, I think," it said.

The yellow and violet form approached, and so did the intensity of rosemary and bread. "Here, the rolls are done," offered Dizz, crouching down to reveal a platter of bread rolls.

Wend blinked and focused. Bread rolls they were, but the rosemary

was a new touch. *No doubt it's Dizz's. I can already see the honey seeping out.*

The roll was in Wend's mouth before he even realized he'd grabbed one. He swallowed it down and jolted up. "Tecton? Tecton! Where...?" He turned to see right behind him was the sleeping head of the behemoth. Wend sighed in relief.

"You okay? There's a stew brewing, though Glist's still working on that."

Wend tried stretching his wings and limbs, though quickly realized he had a blanket weighing on him. "Fine. Just starving." He found his talon on another roll.

"Two is enough for you now. The others say it's bad to rush down eating after a collapse like that.."

"What happened?" He asked, reaching for his pipe, only to find his whole satchel had been removed. The image of his pipe and herb bag being flung into the ocean replayed in his mind, which stung him further.

"Well, your bag and your orb were pulled aside. They're over here. Everyone just wanted to take weight off you while checking you were stable."

Wend did notice his orb had been removed as well. It hadn't been since the escape from the cult that he'd removed it from his neck, and he had forgotten it could be so heavy. *But his pipe...*

"I need to go find it. It could have washed up on the--"

Dizz's hissing put Wend back in place. "You need rest. Sorry, that's just what everyone else told me. Charok thinks your weight is from not having enough to eat, at least for a dragon."

"Charok..." Wend looked back at Tecton, fast asleep and perhaps more at ease than Wend found himself now. *Who is he? I've never seen anyone flip Tecton so fast.*

He turned to look through the doorway to the kitchen, intending to call out to Glist. He saw her positioned upright, dicing some unseen vegetables with one hand, and pulling out a pan from a cupboard with her tail. *Maybe later I'll ask, when she's not busy...*

"Where is he?" Wend asked Dizz.

"Wanted time alone after getting you stable. He'll come back after supper."

The anticipation made the short wait last for ages. Wend was starting to feel the effects of not having a safe place to rest for weeks, nor a

meal more filling than a freshly picked melon with drying bread slathered with spicy honey. All fine things, but none warm and filling for long.

But now he found himself with a breath of fresh air. Riding on Tecton kept the stress on his frail legs low. But the pillow pit and piping hot stew, sided with warm bread rolls and sliced, salted squash healed the toll on his mind and heart. Glist had taken some out to Charok before joining Wend and Dizz, and they devoured all of it. Even if he awkwardly remained in the pillow pit, chomping off a small wooden tray, Wend was *mostly* content.

Of course, Tecton had to start waking up as food came to him. Everyone prepared for that case too. There was way too much for four dragons, but Tecton dove his head into the half-filled cauldron. Dizz had commented being less worried of Tecton being hungry and more that he might drown in the stew.

But only mostly. In the back of his mind, he couldn't help but feel anxious. *Who was this croc? How did he command Tecton? Is he really a friend? Could he be right about me?* He wanted to voice his concerns, but found himself stuffing his snout with bread or a sip of stew. For just one moment, he would have liked to not worry about anything. He must've felt for his pipe at least thrice when catching his breath, only to find once again it had not magically appeared.

Sooner than Wend would have liked, the polished wooden bowls were empty and the remaining bread rolls were mere crumbs. Only then did Wend finally bring himself to open his mouth to ask what is really going on around him.

Then he heard the door behind them open, and there stood Charok looking right at him.

"Wend. Are you better?" asked Charok.

Wend hesitated.

"You're in no danger here. I want you to hear me out."

"Am I in no danger here?"

"Safer here than out there," Charok nodded his snout out a window.

"What have you to--"

Charok plopped himself down near the pillow pit. Wend nearly felt as if the floor would quake.

"I'm going to tell you everything I can, so you know where you stand."

Glist's head snapped to Charok. "Everything? How much is

everything?"

"Everything Wend needs to know, if you'll have my counsel."

Wend sighed. "Not as if I'm going anywhere else. I'd at least like to know why..."

"Why everyone thinks you're Sprout. Why I know so much. Why Tecton responds to the name Babanus."

Tecton slunk over the cauldron, his wooden skull head drenched in stew. He let out a mild growl.

"I can't say you're wrong. Fine. Okay. What *is* all this about?" Wend shuffled himself around, trying to get comfortable as he felt the faint impression of that sickening worry trying to creep through the warm stew.

Charok pulled a bottle of mead from a cupboard right next to him. He pulled out the cork and the briefest of moments, Wend noticed Charok's grip tremble.

"It must have been about twenty years ago now..."

11

“Your average croc is strong, but I was also apparently smart. Or if you ask me, resourceful. A croc in the far south city of Sandstorm, where a big eater’s often a big liability. Was still a lad myself about fourteen years ago, and there’s only so much I nor my family could do about our metabolism in a time famine was regular even among other dragons there. The specifics aren’t important, but the fact is I got noticed for my knack to work under these constraints.”

“An old friend of mine brought me up to a group of gons. Bad group, they were, though they were friendly and welcoming. Had connections outside Sandstorm, and they wanted me. Said it’d solve the food problem at least, and I was open to work at the time. Anything to earn the daily meat and bread.”

“They relocated me to a town just across the sea from here. I think that’s where it started going wrong. They respected me in ways that I didn’t have in Sandstorm, and within two years I’d gone from a new recruit to an unchallenged leader. Now I could’ve stopped there, but then the next opportunity arose. I was offered a chance to serve close associates. The ones we know as the cult of Atmoss.”

A sharp click yanked Wend out of the story. “Wait, you were in the cult?” asked Dizz with alarm.

“Were. Was.” Charok quickly specified. “And even then, it just sort of happened. “Many of you were still young at the time, but I remember how this continent, Caustic, was swarming with cult activity. They operated in splinter groups and with various tangential factions. This is where you come in, Wend.”

Wend’s eye twitched. It only just occurred to him that his impulse to reject the claim was secondary to hearing the rest of this story.

"I, among others, were ferried to the canyons of the south, bordering on the rugged wastes of the southern continent of Juke. It was a well guarded secret at the time. No one in Caustica would ferry down there, and Juke is sparse and rugged. The important thing is the cult used the canyons as a base, and ferried agents and beasts to Caustica. And that's where I met much of the council of the cult. And the child they used as the vessel to Atmoss. The Sprout."

"What?" Wend blurted out, a sinking sensation pulled him down into the pillow pit below him.

"The Sprout of Atmoss, whose egg was infused with countless enchantments to let him hear the words of Atmoss himself. While the Sprout was shown to be the figurehead, it was apparent the decisions were made by those around him, mixed with the words of Atmoss ringing in his head. Most who learned this were never supposed to return to the mainland, as everything in Juke canyons were to be secretive. Evidentially I had a chance to."

"And you turned tail and ran?" Dizz asked.

Charok shook his head. "I was complicit. With everything. I never forgot that."

"I don't get it. Everygon calling me Sprout. This- This isn't me," Wend spoke again, but his words were choking.

Charok looked straight into him. "Breathe, Wend. The window's open."

"The..." Wend craned his head over to the window. He could still hear the waves outside, the reverberating roar. He felt a breeze he couldn't help but think carried a faint scent of seaweed.

"I'd seen the Sprout gazing off into the ocean with that same look," Wend heard Charok's voice rumble. "As if you were trying to drown the sounds of Atmoss out of your mind."

"None of this makes sense. Juke is far away from Drench, and across an entire sea. There's no way..."

"At that point, the Sprout could have still escaped through the cult's own ferries. As for land, the Sprout had a behemoss who carried him around everywhere, hatched the same day as him. Babanus."

Tecton stopped licking off the stew and faced Charok, lifting his head high and alert. Wend couldn't help but stiffen up whenever Tecton responded to the name.

"Behemoss are smarter than gons give them credit for." Charok laid his large hand onto Tecton's side. "When Atmoss was pushed back, the Sprout... he was never found. Somehow, maybe he'd fled to Caustica."

Much smaller back then, and still fresh off of Atmoss's influence. All the way to Drench, where his old cult still resided, with all the knowledge of arbora one could ever need to handle himself. Where he drowned himself in dimroot to bury it all."

Words failed Wend. He was sure there were leaps in logic. Holes in Charok's arguments that couldn't be definitively answered. But every time, he found himself going back to the one thing he couldn't fight back on. Tecton's name wasn't Tecton. If that's the case, then who's to say Wend's name isn't Wend?



Only the waves outside and the cracking of a fireplace made noise. Everyone was silent. Wend had not even realized his eyes were closed. Squeezed shut. There were faint impressions rushing through, but intangible. Behind the dark, he could feel everyone staring accusingly. Then Glist came into mind. All that time ago, the way she analyzed him. The stoic, distant expression. Dragging him around.

"Glist... You knew, didn't you?" he finally choked out.

"Suspicious, yes. Certain, no." he heard her say.

"Is that true, though?"

"I'm an agent myself, Wend. I-"

"I hate this. All of this. You took me from one prison to be flung into another, didn't you?"

"That's not-"

Wend felt the strong, yet careful, grip of Charok on his neck. "I'm not done with my story, if you'll hear me out."

What alternative do I have? He thought. He took a deep breath again and buried his head under a pillow, trying to imagine himself washed away from this room.

"When Atmoss was brought down ten long years ago, all order among the cult of Atmoss fell apart. Their activities died down, but that wasn't the end for many of its members. Some had retreated into the shadows. But as Caustica recovered from the damage, many of its former members were able put their claws to good use again. Those were the lucky ones. I knew a lot of gons in my time there. Some rotten to the core, some with a warm spark in their eyes. Many of those gons are- they're not around anymore."

Wend felt himself sink into the pillow pit as Charok's voice cracked. A strange, looming dread hung over the words. If this were all true, Wend may have seen some of these dragons. *And they're gone now*, he found his thoughts wandering into. *They're gone and I can't remember anyone.*

"But me... I fell before all that." Charok continued.

"Fell before?" Dizz asked. "You left before the collapse?"

"I couldn't face the shame of the higher ranks." Wend heard Charok inhale before resuming. "I fled across the continent until I couldn't anymore. Found myself among an unmarked mountain village. The Hidden Clan, Glist's clan where she was hatched into. Turned everything around. I live here, with their support, and I serve as a safe haven for their agents dealing with cultist activity in the area."

Charok paused. Wend could hear him taking a gulp of his drink. He instinctually gulped along from under the pillows.

"What I'm saying, is you certainly must have been the Sprout of Atmoss. But you don't have to be, if you don't want to be."

Wend felt the words run through his head. He wanted to call out that he wasn't the Sprout. He wanted to throw out everything.

"Tell me, Wend, what do you want to do now?"

"I want to sleep," Wend said bluntly.

The guttural chuckle was what took Wend off-guard the most.

"Sleep well kid. Come on. It's getting late. There's much to do, but you've all earned some time to knock yourselves out."

Much to do? Wend thought over. But he couldn't muster up the energy to speculate on it. The weight of his supper had made him weary, and there was too much rattling around after everything that happened today.

A gust of wind that pulled his attention back to the room. He lifted his head up, pulling on his long ear that had slipped under one of the pillows. The room was dark, he and Tecton were alone. For the briefest moment, he contemplated if he should say or if he should sneak out. If Tecton dashed away with him riding now, *maybe* he could slip out and get away from all this madness.

But I can't flee, he thought. If someone else knew a name that commanded Tecton, a name Wend himself was unaware of, then what could the cult pursuing him know about himself that he doesn't? How dangerous does that make them? How dangerous does that make *him*?

"Babanus," Wend muttered to the sleeping behemoth. The syllables leaving his mouth left an uncomfortable familiarity in his muscles.

He brought his head back into the pillow pit. His body was still heavy from the weeks of travel, his mind weighed twice as much. Unable to burn it away with his lost pipe, he angled his ear to the window so the sounds of the waves outside would wash him away.

* * *

The same waves outside greeted Wend. He opened his eyes and found the sun bright outside. From the angle, he supposed it must have been a little before noon. The first time he was able to sleep in as late as noon ever since his prior life was torn apart. Tecton lie next to him, still snoring. His head swayed to survey the room, only to swing into a snail shell.

"Whoops. Sorry, fellow," he said.

The snail's eyes crept out. They always seemed closed, but Wend knew from plenty of experiences they could see. The snail started moving along into another room as Wend straightened up and stretched. With a little searching, he found his cloak and satchel.

Outside, the air was crisp and fresh. Wend reached for his pipe, only to once again be reminded it's gone. He skimmed the shore, but only a few shells and seaweed laid about. After some momentary breathing in

sync to the waves, Charok called out to him.

"How you feeling?" He asked.

Wend exhaled. "Feels I slept more in the past night than I have in the past week." He inhaled another slow breath.

Charok smiled. He put a gentle hand over Wend's neck. "Good. Now, come on over this way. You're going to move a tree for me!"

Wend's breath was cut short. "I- what?"