

Crop & Claw

Serial of Wend – Episode 1

Preface

Serial of Wend is a working title for a Crop and Claw novel. The intent is to release around six stand-alone yet related serial novelettes, approximately 7,500-10,000 words. This allows us to put a full novel together 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 send feedback to feedback@dinoleaf.email.

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Chapter 1

The echoing caverns of the tunnels carried an irritated, shrill voice. Wend brought his head up as the voice approached his prison cell, slinking his lean body away 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.

He was also especially anxious. Wend was the first to break the gaze, having enough to be uncomfortable over today.

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"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 arboras. Nasty plants, those things are."

Wend frowned. "Oh, it was just these dragons in my case. I'd rather have the arboras. 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."

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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.

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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 prison 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.

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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

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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

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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. The dim room was illuminated by the faint glow of a fire in the center of 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.

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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. "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

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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!"

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The paths mashed 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. Sprout snapped the chain around the amber orb to the front of his cloak and pulled his pipe out.

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"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."

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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

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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.

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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 Atmass."

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?"

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"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 behemoth your friend?"

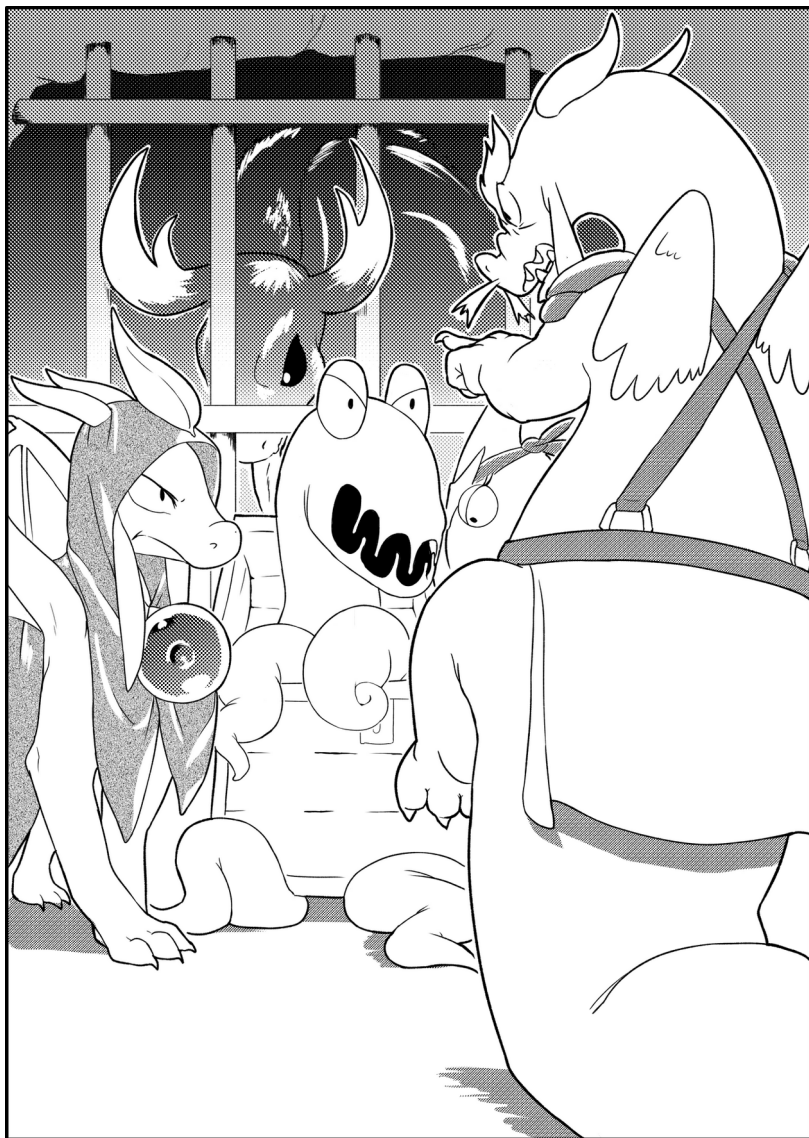
Wend opened his snout, but a shout cut through the air and startled the group.

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 kidnapppers, 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?"



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“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.”

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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 behemoss, 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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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“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.”

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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 behemoss 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.”

Chapter 3

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 Atmos. 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

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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.

Chapter 3

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.

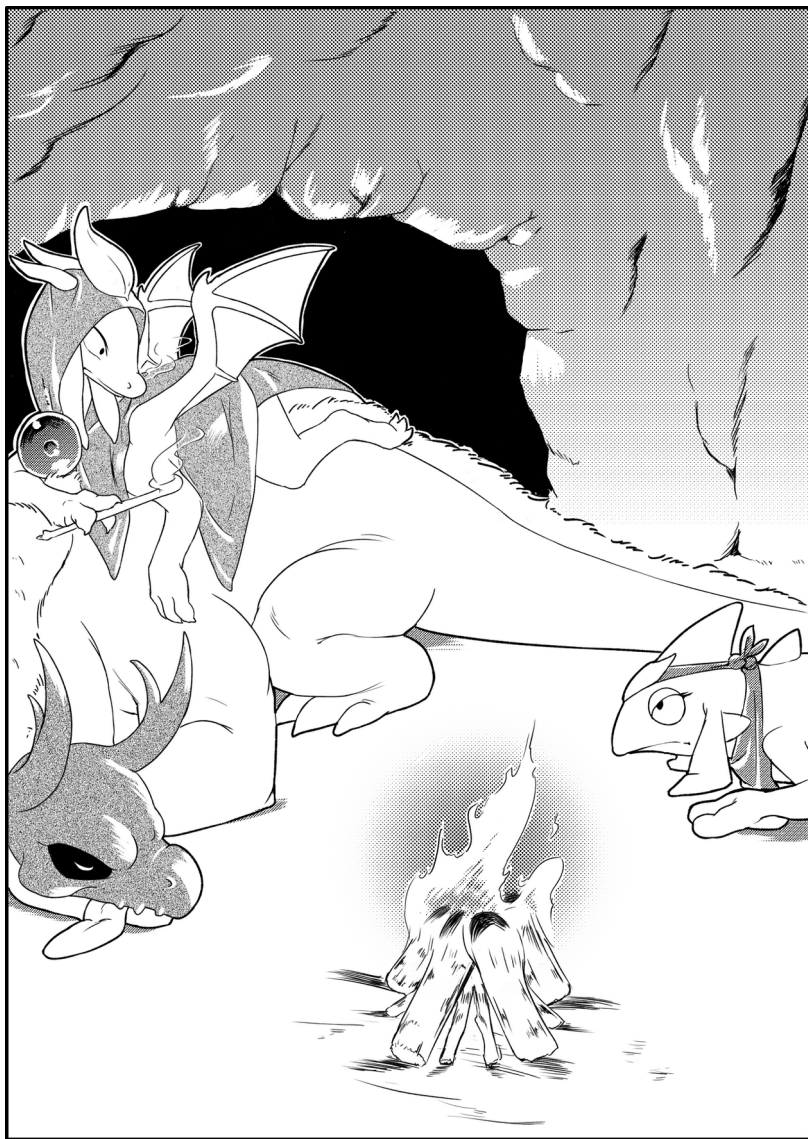
“Oh, right. That reminds me.” She tightened the knot on a vine securing some sticks and dug into one of her bags. Glist could see the glowing, round cylinder.

“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.”



Chapter 3

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 Atmass 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.

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“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.