

Crop & Claw

Serial of Wend – Act 2

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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Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Chapter 4..... | 1 |
| Chapter 5..... | 11 |
| Chapter 6..... | 24 |
| Chapter 7..... | 32 |

Illustrations

| | |
|--|----|
| He had his talons gripped around his tail, brandished towards Tecton like a spear..... | 3 |
| Maybe that wasn't the right word..... | 18 |
| "I only wish you'd come back quietly." | 27 |
| "Just down that way, maybe a day or three." | 38 |

Chapter 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?”

Chapter 4

“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 to 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.”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend



Chapter 4

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?”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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.

Chapter 4

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

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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 behemoss 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.

Chapter 4

Wend admired the white petals with blue circles, but shook his head. “Pollen from those is 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, before we become honey farmers.”

“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.

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“Spooking myself, maybe.” he said. “Some critter was rustling through bushes. Thought it was a cultist. Turned out to be a snail, 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.”

Chapter 4

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."

Chapter 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

Chapter 5

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. 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?”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“Behemoss,” Wend corrected, and he’s my pet. We’re seeking refuge for a few nights. Does the name Itzuso from Drench remind you of anyone?”

Tzau snapped her head forward. “Itsuzo... yes. Our tribes are in occasional communication.” Wend could see her upright and aggressive posture relax. “The hermit and the behemoss. 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 ditzy 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

Chapter 5

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.”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“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.

Chapter 5

“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 Atmoss.

“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.

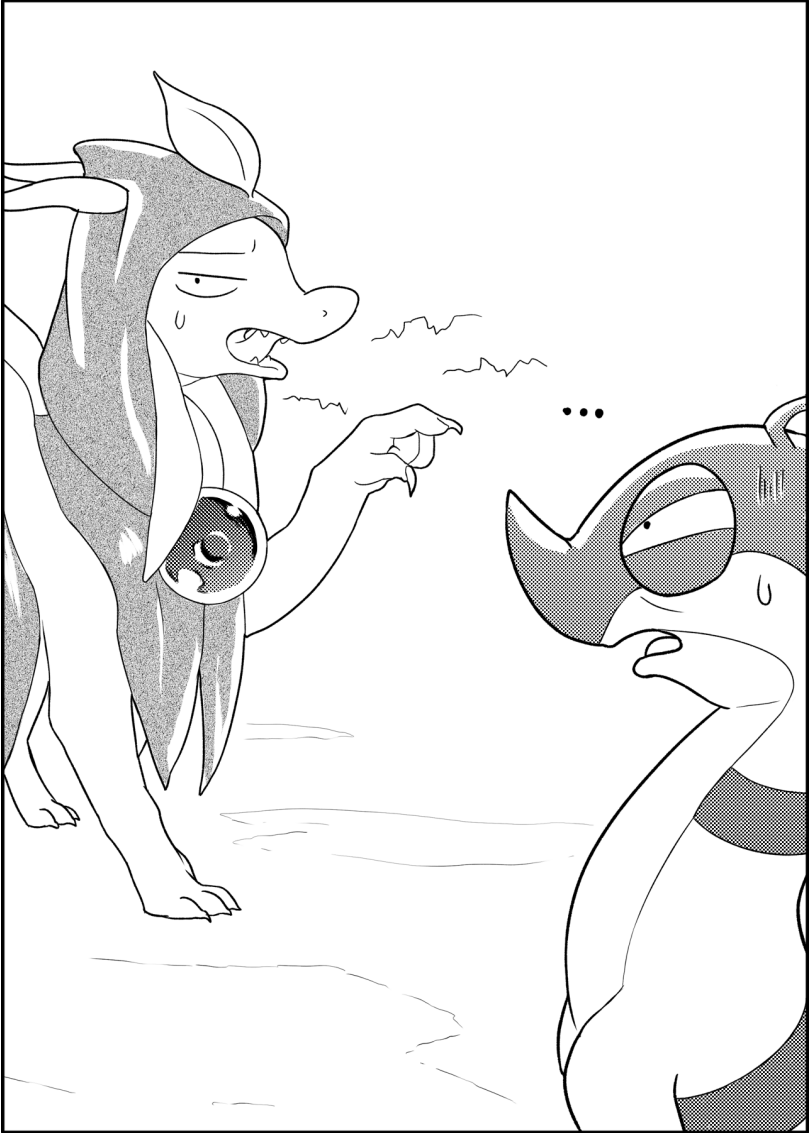
“*Ztudda ter?*” he asked, pointing at the imprisoned dragon.

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.”



Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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

Chapter 5

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?”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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.

Chapter 5

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-”

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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.

Chapter 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 Atmos 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."

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“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 the sound of Cepa’s voice shouting towards him. Wend didn’t see Glist or

Chapter 6

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."

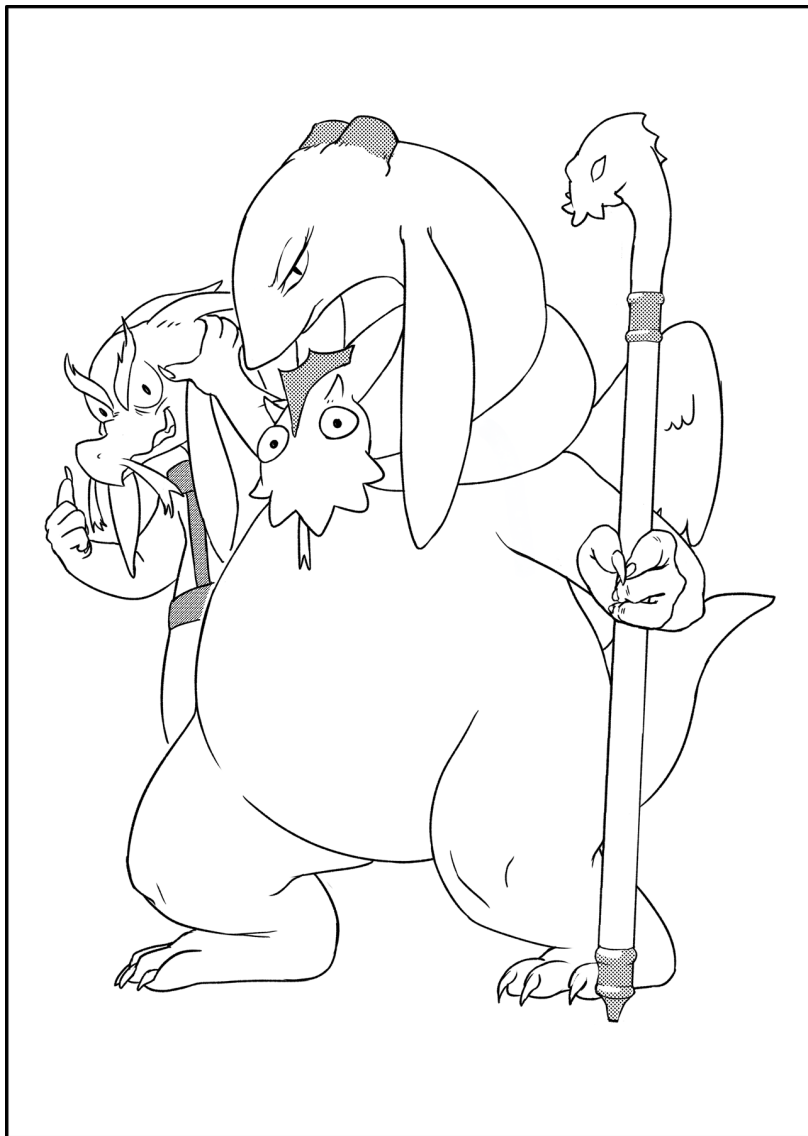
Her gaze pierced him, as if she was sizing him up. "You are. There's no mistaking it."

"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?"

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend



Chapter 6

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.

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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

Chapter 6

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.

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

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.

Chapter 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 Atmass is pursuing you, we cannot risk your presence after last night's incident."

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

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“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.

Chapter 7

“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.

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“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

Chapter 7

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.

Crop and Claw – Serial of Wend

“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.”

Chapter 7

