

It had taken a few days to get to the observation site. Cheese Melt was squashed in the back seat of the truck next to Mule, who was Uligo's research assistant. He was a nice enough Crook. A pleasant black and blue color, with streamlined stripes along the blocks of color. He had wide inquisitive eyes lined along his neck, and each one was staring in a different direction, though mostly focused on what was flying by on the side of the road.

Though "road" was a bit of an exaggeration. The vehicle they were riding in was designed for being able to traverse the wilds, and it used a state of the art suspension that allowed it to hover slightly above the dirt path that counted as a road with few casualties to the underbrush. A few large insects did fly directly into the vehicle as it approached, but there was little unnecessary carnage.

Uligo was driving and chatting with Wrench, who needed the front passenger seat so his leg wouldn't act up. She sounded genuinely interested in the idea of humans living in the wild by choice, though she was wise enough to not ask questions that would make Wrench or his people feel like they were being studied like animals.

Cheese Melt didn't like being in vehicles that hovered, even if they were low to the ground. He always had the feeling that he was going to fall out of the sky. To him, being able to feel the bumps of the road meant that the ground was solid. It was safe.

He was managing to keep his cool by allowing his long tail to snake into Wrench's lap, who stroked it without looking. Cheese Melt was in human form to allow for as much space for Mule - who could not take a human form yet - as possible, and he found himself curious as well. Mule was definitely an old Crook, but didn't give off the same churlishness that Cheese Melt had seen in other old Crooks.

Uligo had been confident that Mule would be able to handle any of the physical labor required, including combat if it came down to it and Cheese Melt had a hard time seeing how a Crook as small as Mule could deal with the ichor beasts, which had been reported to be monstrous in size.

He kept his questions to himself, twirling his long curls around his fingers. More than anything, he wanted to meet Wrench's family so the both of them could make sure all was well. So he could maybe endear himself to them, as nervous as he was.

"We're almost there," Uligo said, adjusting a small hanging screen. It had a crude looking GPS active. "Looks like it'll be another few miles. I hope everyone's excited. I've already seen signs of the types of specimen we're here to study."

"Me too," Mule replied, though his voice did not relay any kind of excitement. In fact, he sounded focused, and his fur was slightly puffed, making him look threatened.

Cheese Melt stared out the window. He hadn't seen anything, but he also didn't know what he was supposed to be looking for. He'd never seen a good image of an ichor beast, and the dense foliage outside was all starting to blend together. He was feeling a sense of dismay that he couldn't really parse.

He'd chalked it up to his overwhelming anxiety and took to biting at his fingernails to calm down. The muscles in the rest of his body were working overtime to keep his teeth from chattering. It wasn't all that effective, however.

The resting site became obvious when a caravan of old vehicles broke the monotony of the wilds. The individual vehicles were not large and were painted dark colors to break up their

silhouettes. Some of them were so well painted that Cheese Melt hadn't even seen them in the line. It was odd to him.

Uligo parked the truck in an open space, and hopped out, dusting herself off of Mule's shed fur, and wiping a film of sweat from her brow. The humidity of the jungle took hold, and while she didn't mind it, it would not look good for her to be sweating into her mouth like that.

Wrench climbed down and Cheese Melt and Mule were not that far behind him. Cheese Melt was grateful to be on solid ground again, and he hooked his arm into Wrench's and gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"I hate flying," he muttered under his breath. Wrench did not correct him, for he was beaming as members of his tribe noticed him and made their way over.

Mule and Uligo got to setting up their temporary housing - a tent big enough for the two of them to share, and another for housing their specimens - and Wrench was pulled into half a dozen hugs and chest thumps.

The Hwwaskr Tribe comprised about thirty humans, all of whom looked sharp and capable. They were also some of the densest humans Cheese Melt had ever seen. They were well muscled and athletic and looked at Wrench with an adoration that was unusual for Cheese Melt to witness outside of himself. Nobody in their neighborhood thought Wrench was amusing, and did not try to joke or play with him, not even the other humans.

It was nice to see him smile so freely, and when he introduced each member, Cheese Melt took extra care to remember their names and faces. They spoke in a language that Cheese Melt did not speak, and eyed him up and down with subdued suspicions.

"It's a pleasure to meet ya face to face," one of them said. "Heard a lot about you over the past few years."

This one was called Archer, and he was much older looking than Wrench. He stuck out a hand and Cheese Melt took it, smiling his best smile and trying to steady himself. Archer worked Cheese Melt over with his eyes and gave a nod of approval, having seen something in Cheese Melt's merit that he liked and Cheese Melt was surprised that this made him feel relieved.

As more introductions were made and Cheese Melt listened to Wrench tell everyone how they had come together, his nerves settled down and he found himself better able to speak for himself. He swore he had shaken every single person's hand at least twice, and had been hugged and kissed just as much by the older carers of the group.

According to them, he made for a handsome human, and they loved the colors of his tail and cluster eyes. Cheese Melt felt unusually bashful then.

Outside of the line of vehicles, a series of temporary shelters had also been constructed. The technology was on the older side, but still worked perfectly, and used a series of sails and collapsable struts to make simple roofs to keep them out of sight during the resting hours. Many of the members slept in their truck beds or in small cabins on top of them.

Some of the younger Hwwaskrs were watching Mule and Uligo set up, making comments about the tanks in the storage tent. About how they were going to keep a beast in such a flimsy container. Mule had to chase them away more than once before Wrench told them off for being rude to guests.

The containers were lab issue, and would be secure containment. Uligo was adamant about that, more for liability related reasons than pride. She wouldn't skimp on any aspect of her experiments or observations.

"Especially so close to another population," she'd said.

"We're probably going to poke around for a little bit," Cheese Melt explained.

Archer, who was one of Wrench's fathers, and Salva, who was one of his mothers, were a couple, and seemed to be the wisest of the group, outside of their lorekeeper, and they nodded in understanding.

"We heard about the beasts," Archer said, voice gruff. He wasn't keen on bringing one so close now that he could see the size of the tank needed to contain one, but he tempered whatever was there to keep from turning them away. "They've been making migrating this year more difficult. Chasing away the good game."

"Have you seen one up close?" Cheese Melt asked.

Archer shook his head again. "No, but they leave behind a residue. We're seeing more of it on the ferns. Smells awful. It's made some of our members sick."

Cheese Melt swallowed.

"They are being taken care of," Salva added, her voice firm. "A lot of coughing and sneezing, but it is not contagious. The best theory I have for now is that it is a sickness of the magics. I'm not looking to gamble on that, though, not one bit."

Cheese Melt noted this down in a ledger that he kept tucked into his pocket. Every observation he made about Wrench's family went into this book as well, and he found himself idly watching for Teller specifically, so he could ask questions. Relevant questions only, he assured Wrench.

After several hours of set up, Cheese Melt and Uligo sat in the storage tent, where he unloaded all he learned about the ichor beasts to her. She mostly nodded and asked clarifying questions, but accepted the Hwwaskr Tribe's wealth of information. A lot of it was just detailing things she had already heard and confirming some of her own observations as well. It was clear that Uligo was itching to hunt down one of these things and get her hands all over some samples, but not when night was falling.

Archer was agreeable enough to help them track it, but he was not going to engage in a fight, even with a Crook on their side. He'd point them in the right direction, but the wrangling was up to them.

"This is excellent," Uligo said, clapping her hands. She and Cheese Melt were meeting in the storage tent. "It seems they believe that there are not that many ichor beasts around, which should do good for our safety. That was the main thing I was worried about, to be honest."

"Agreed," Cheese Melt replied. "They have a few members who are sick as well. A sickness of the magics was what their medicine woman said."

"That tells us a lot about what we're dealing with."

"If you say so," Cheese Melt said. "We will probably have a long day ahead of us. I'm going to get back to talking, and do let me know if you find something you think might be relevant."

"Of course."

And they parted ways for the evening. Cheese Melt and Wrench were invited to shelter closer to the rest of the tribe. They sat together in a tent as a couple of night guards patrolled the encampment, Cheese Melt sat with his legs folded and Wrench resting his head in his lap. He was playing with Wrench's hair and hummed with thought.

"Your family is very skittish," Cheese Melt said. "I like them."

"Pot," Wrench teased, poking his tongue out just slightly. Cheese Melt pressed his fingers to Wrench's lips.

"I was worried they would hate me."

"Why's that?"

Cheese Melt pursed his lips and stared at the tent wall. Recreated images of a time before Banishment when Crooks hunted humans flashed in his mind. The talk of the students who joked about a second Banishment coming. The students who were reminded that humans were once prey, and now the world seemed to be ending?

Was he not a walking reminder of a harder time?

"Uhm," Cheese Melt twirled a lock of Wrench's hair in his fingers, searching for the right words. "I suppose I am just seeing a lot of things that I have seen before. I am unused to this peace of mind. Maybe I thought they would treat me like how a lot of my colleagues treat you."

Wrench huffed. "I do not care about any of that, you know."

"I know."

"They don't care about any of that either."

That brought Cheese Melt comfort, and he repositioned himself to cuddle with Wrench, dropping his human form so that Wrench could bury himself in the thick white ruff of fur at Cheese Melt's shoulders.

"I hope you're ready for the most amazing expedition of your whole life."

"Can't wait for the lecture."