

Cheese Melt was a notoriously bad flier, which was funny considering he had married a mechanic who specialized in fixing personal vehicles meant for flight. Melt often tried to “help” his human husband, and as far as he was concerned, he did a darn good job at it, even if he had to look up what the tools were called every single time.

The reason for their excursion out to Meteor Lake was not considered acceptable use of Keystone University funds even though Cheese Melt had written up a whole proposal about bringing back sand hearts for study by the biology department. As charming as it was, the board wasn’t interested in the history of a serpent that was more legend than anything else. It was barely relevant, so it was for personal time only.

Though they did wish Wrench well, which was something they rarely did. Perhaps they were finally warming up to him.

“Melt,” Wrench said. “Tail.”

“Sorry.”

Cheese Melt grabbed his tail, which twitched uncontrollably as he pressed himself against the window of Wrench’s pride and joy. It was a hovercraft that he’d been spending a lot of his free time fixing up. It had come to him as a “hunk of junk” and he’d poured months into getting it in working order. If he didn’t love it so much, he would have been able to sell it for quite a bit.

Wrench wasn’t the type to care about money, though. Which was nice because Cheese Melt wasn’t the type to get into weeds where it didn’t need to happen. His life was in danger, and he couldn’t stand it for much longer.

“I can’t help it,” Cheese Melt said. “What if we fall?” He stuffed the end of his tail under his seat, and it continued to make a soft thumping noise against the floor. Orange and purple hairs flew in every direction.

Wrench remained straight faced. He understood plenty of Cheese Melt’s idiosyncrasies, so he did not chastise him for blocking his right side mirror. Wrench didn’t really need them anyway. Most Skireans used teleportation magic to go long distances, so the skies were going to be clear for at least another hour.

He’d land if he could, but the entire length of the trip was over Skirean wilds, which were not suitable for landing unless it was an emergency. And even then, the average population wouldn’t chance it.

“We’re not going to fall,” Wrench replied.

Cheese Melt looked at him with wet eyes, not believing him for a moment, but not complaining. He chittered, wringing his massive hands together. When his knuckle spurs ground against each other, Wrench visibly winced.

“Why don’t you tell me about that thing in the water.”

Cheese Melt almost immediately perked up, his rounded ears twitching in much the same way his tail did. He seemed to relax for just a moment, and that’s what Wrench needed from him.

“Well I already told you about it at least a dozen times,” Cheese Melt replied, somewhat sheepish. “I don’t want to distract you from your very important job.”

“I saw you looking stuff up before we left.” Wrench grimaced, which was close to a real smile as Cheese Melt was going to get while he was piloting. “And it will help you calm down. Your fur is getting in the vents.”

"Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize."

"Sorry," Cheese Melt said. "I'm just a nervous flier."

"I know." Wrench reached over and patted Cheese Melt on the leg. "You'll be alright. We're almost there."

Cheese Melt returned the gesture. "So it is definitely a serpent. Turns out they did some testing on some of the scales from a few years ago, and it turned out to have a similar profile to a type of sea snake found near Maasek. At least at the time."

"Cool."

"We'll need to bring some back."

Cheese Melt pulled out a few brochures from his bag and leafed through them. They rode in silence for a few minutes while he scanned the pamphlets for some more information. They were brightly colored and adorned with gorgeous vistas from the shores of Meteor Lake. One thing Cheese Melt noticed was how sappy all the language was.

"Since the Nautipods came up from the lake, there's been some speculation that the scales and the Nautipods are related somehow. Something about mineral deposits? That seems a bit sketchy."

He was mostly rambling to himself at this point. Wrench was only halfway paying attention as their hour of free flying was coming to a close. They could see Meteor Lake long before they had clearance to land. It was huge, easily the biggest crater in all of Eeridi, and it was surrounded by jagged mountains.

Right above it was the iconic Stonewing, floating a mile off the surface of the lake, with its equally impressive Stone rings attached to the main island via massive metal chains. The sun glinted off them and cast rays of fragmented light down on the lake surface.

The whole city was swarmed with hovercraft of all make and model and thousands of Gravents descending down to the shoreline. Cheese Melt was speechless.

"We'll be landing soon," Wrench said. "Hold on to something."

"I thought you said we weren't going to fall!"

"You're going to tear your pamphlets, Melt."

Cheese Melt gripped the armrest, which had been fortified with extra tough leather for this very reason. Cheese Melt dug his claws into it as they descended, making a series of odd noises that ranged in volume. When he got too loud, Wrench poked him in the stomach, making a squeaky wheeze come out instead. Cheese Melt breathed out another apology and clamped his mouth shut.

When they landed, Cheese Melt scrambled out of the craft, planting his feet and hands on the ground, and arching his back. It was the easiest way to release the tension in his throat without bursting any ear drums. Wrench climbed out as well and took Cheese Melt's head into his hands, patting him on the head until all the jitters were gone.

"Good job," Wrench said.

"I hate flying so much," Cheese Melt muttered. Wrench began handing him a beach bag. "I love you so much, and I hate flying and these things can happen at the same time. And I am trying to stay calm but I want to scream."

Cheese Melt's panic was almost adorable if it didn't stress him out so much. His fur puffed up and he made these pining noises that Wrench thought was cute. It reminded him of

when they first met. He couldn't really do much other than let it ride out, as Cheese Melt was huge compared to him, though he did appreciate that Cheese Melt would let him fly them all the way out here.

The lapping waves on Meteor Lake seemed to calm him enough, though, as when he'd finally shaken out the panic, he was back to his usual self, making a thousand comments about the chill in the air and how nice the Gravent flocks looked, and how the ice formed on the surface so easily because of the shadow of Stonewing.

And how two hundred years ago there was a massive library built in the mountains that had been destroyed by magic gone awry. And how he would have loved to try to get the funding to track down the previous tenant to ask them questions about Skirean history that might still be buried in the mountains.

Wrench put a coat on.

"And if we find the perfect sand heart, we could put it on the mantle. Right next to that picture of your folks we took last year. Oh! We could send one to them too."

"They aren't big on these kinds of souvenirs."

"Okay just for us then. Oh and maybe one for Uligo, I bet she would love to have one of these specimens."

Wrench grunted affirmations to Cheese Melt's speculations all the way to the shoreline, where he stopped just short of the water. The best scales would likely be found in an unexpected place, away from the crowds that dotted the beach. The cold made his leg hurt and he reflectively reached to rub his knee.

Cheese Melt was already on the hunt, using his hands to sweep sand away in big piles. He kept an eye on Wrench, who seemed to be soaking in the natural beauty, and dug little holes searching for scales. What he found were mostly broken. Some were lumpy and misshapen. Some were nicked and dull.

They were supposed to be old scales lifting off the serpent in order to make room for new ones, but if he was lucky, maybe a new one that had been shaken off in the molting would be available. That would have been a rare find indeed.

It was hard to dig too deeply while it was so cold. The sand was compacted still in a lot of places and Cheese Melt had to really struggle to find something of worth. He wanted the perfect scale. Something smooth and shiny and blue, because it seemed like the right color for Wrench.

He happened upon a yellow scale that would have been perfect for Uligo, and he placed it in his beach bag, which was filled with snacks and bottled water. There was also a scarf, just in case Wrench got too cold, though Cheese Melt didn't think that would happen. Wrench was rugged and never took more than exactly what he needed, but Cheese Melt liked to be prepared anyway.

Wrench didn't seem to move too much either, Cheese Melt noted. Still enraptured by the lake, he supposed. He went back to searching. Occasionally, they called out to each other, just to remember not to stray too far away. Well, Cheese Melt needed the reminder more than anything.

It took some time, but Cheese Melt did eventually find what he was looking for. It was a bright blue scale, perfectly heart shaped and crusted with frozen sand on the bottom of it. The scale was somewhat concave in the back and Cheese Melt tried in vain to dig the sand out with

his claw. He gave up when it didn't budge, so as to not scratch it. It had very thin concentric lines along the whole thing that beautifully faded from the bright blue to a pale pink, and then a white center.

He couldn't wait to give it to Wrench, who was waiting for him closer to their starting point.

"I didn't abandon you, did I?"

Wrench shook his head. "You wanted it to be a surprise."

"I did!"

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Cheese Melt's tail wagged behind him in excitement and he smoothed it down. "You have to close your eyes, though. And no peeking. Or else!"

Wrench closed his eyes and made it a point to cover them with his hands. When Cheese Melt told him to open them, he hesitated for a moment before feasting his eyes upon the beautiful scale. It was covered in sand and fur, but he could tell it was a priceless specimen. One that took a lot of effort for Cheese Melt to track down.

"You're supposed to give the first good one to someone you love."

Wrench cracked a smile and presented his own, which Cheese Melt adored. He hadn't even seen Wrench move from his one spot, let alone find a scale so peachy that it looked just like the fruit. Cheese Melt clutched it to his chest. It was clean. Not a speck of sand in any of the crevices.

"It's gorgeous." Cheese Melt gave Wrench a big hug. "The most perfect one I have ever seen. It's so clean."

Yeah, Wrench thought Cheese Melt would appreciate that.

"We're good to go?" Wrench asked.

"Flying again so soon?" The sad wet eyes again. "Do we have to?"

"Well we can't really stay here for much longer. Won't be any good to fly in the dark."

Cheese Melt's life was once again in danger for the few hours it would take to get home, but at least this time, he had a nice little heart to hold onto for comfort.