

Wander and Heat
By Angelus

A curious red Lizard crept their way through the dim underbelly of the Garbage Wastes. The interconnected catacombs were almost entirely devoid of light, and pools of stagnant water half-flooded many of the rooms. Still, wherever there were undiscovered things to be found, Wander was sure to end up there. They crept around on the walls and ceiling above the water, keeping their eyes wide to drink in as much light as possible. Their modified body had longer limbs and more spines than a typical Lizard; a result of their being combined with a bit of Scavenger DNA to improve their natural abilities.

A sound caught their ear. In the darkness ahead, something was moving. Slowly but surely, it was creeping along the walls just like they were. They stopped in place, trying to see what it was. Another Lizard? A skittish Scavenger? Something else?

Something clinging brushed against their head for a moment, and Wander froze. Unfortunately, it was too late. The thing came back and slapped itself to Wander's body, sticking to them like an adhesive.

Wander's red spines fanned out in panic as they were gripped by some kind of fleshy tentacle. They pulled back, trying to peel it off, but another tentacle lashed out and stuck to the side of their face, and yet another whipped out and snared their tail.

Wander snarled and snapped at the tentacles in the dim light, trying to get free. The rubbery appendages bent and squished between their teeth, and they had to thrash to tear through them, but for each one they ripped apart, another one seemed to take its place. An awful sound of squishing, pulsating flesh grew closer as they clawed at the ground to try and pull away as the tentacles dragged them in. A dozen dim x-shaped eyes appeared in the darkness as a mutated blob of flesh crept into view. Wander strained against the bindings and cursed their curiosity for driving them to poke their snout where they shouldn't.

A shout of rage cut through Wander's thoughts. "Rot! DIE!!"

Wander heard the distinct sound of a spear whizzing past their body and plunging deep into flesh, and every tentacle attached to them seized. They scrambled free just before a deafening blast of fire incinerated the thing that had grabbed them. The explosion blew them away, making them tumble head over tail until they caught themselves.

Morbid curiosity got the better of them, and they turned back to look at the pile of burning flesh that was now illuminating the room. It was a many-eyed, many-tentacled... thing. It didn't resemble anything they had cataloged before. It had no discernable mouth or body orientation, though that may have been because it was blasted open and on fire.

Something heavy and squishy dropped to the floor, catching Wander's attention. They turned, and were face to face with an aggressive-looking red Slugcat. Curiously, Wander noted, it had the Mark of Communication above its head just like they did, and it seemed to be accompanied by a neuron fly.

"Scavenger safe now?" it ventured, before seeming to realize what Wander was. It quickly pulled a spear off its back and pointed it at the Lizard. "Wait, not Scavenger friend. *Lizard.*" It practically hissed the last word.

"Wait! Thank you." Wander bowed their head.

"Eh? Speak? Grr..." The Slugcat lowered the spear for a moment, but raised it again, spitting a glob of red onto the head, just below the point. It sizzled as it cooled, and Wander recognized it as explosive material. "No Lizard tricks. Or die."

Wander shook his head. "No tricks. Grateful! That thing... What was it?" They shivered at recalling those tentacles clinging to their body.

"Bleh. That thing, Rot. I hate." The Slugcat hoisted its spear and hurled it over Wander's head, spooking the Lizard. The spear lodged itself in the burning corpse and exploded, searing away the remaining chunk of the horror. "Wants to turn everything into more Rot. So I burn it." The flames were reflected in its large, dark eyes. "What of you? Strange for Lizard speak."

"Wander. It is what I do, and what I am," they explained. "Designed by Iterator to experience and learn."

The Slugcat scoffed. "Should learn be more careful," it muttered to itself.

Wander's expression and spines flattened as they overheard the comment, but they decided to ignore it. "Seen many creatures! But that one? Awful. Slugcat grudge seems... justified."

"Slugcat instructed to destroy it. Burn it up. So you Wander, so I Cleanse."

Interesting, for the creature before Wander to refer to itself as being "instructed." Wander wanted to get closer, but the Slugcat was still wary, obvious from the way it stood ready to pounce at a moment's notice. Wander looked them over, and their eyes fell upon the neuron fly that was flitting around the slugcat's head.

"What of you? And the neuron?" they ventured to ask.

"Neuron is gift from Iterator. Gives instructions, knowledge. Mark is also from Iterator. Allows speak." It explained. "Called 'Cleansing Heat Within Five Stones'. 'Heat' is fine for short."

Wander blinked. Such a self-important name. They wondered what Iterator could have given this Slugcat such a haughty and volatile personality. "A good name," is all they voiced of their thoughts.

"Thank you. And you. Lizard Scavenger?" it tilted its head, looking at Wander's elongated limbs and prominent back spines.

Wander nodded in affirmation. "Combined with one to be more... capable. Intelligent. Better to explore, survive, document, tell of findings." They left out that it made them an outcast, not fitting in with Lizards or Scavengers, so they wandered alone.

Heat nodded. "Mistook it for Scavenger when Rot got it. Would have saved Lizard anyway. Rot die."

Wander almost admired Heat's single-mindedness. He had such a clear purpose and goal, even if it was imposed on him by an Iterator.

The fire was dying down, and the trash pile under the Garbage Wastes was growing dim again. "Alright, chatty Lizard. You going this way? Heat will escort you," it offered.

"Escort?" Wander had never been offered such a thing before.

"This dump full of Rots. Also Scavengers. Not friendly to Lizards, but trust Heat. You with me, they will not kill," Heat explained.

"Appreciated. I will accept." Wander didn't feel like Heat would suddenly turn on him at this point, and having a guide who knew the area would be a boon to his travels.

"Good. Move slow, look sharp. Rot here hunts by touch only." Heat skittered up a pole and leaped across to a ledge near a pipe. "Come!"

Wander simply crawled straight up the wall to join him, reaching the ledge effortlessly.

Heat frowned at the feat. "Sticky lizard..." he muttered all too loud again as they wiggled into the pipe and were whisked away.

Wander rolled their eyes but followed all the same, feeling like their time spent digging around the Garbage Wastes was finally paying off.