

NINNA



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The alien sat with her back to the cave wall, huge stomach stretched over her thighs. She dug her hands into the viscous flesh, trilling to herself. She could feel the girl stirring inside of her, arms pinned by her innards. Warm, safe, encased in moving, dripping flesh. That's where she should sleep tonight.

Suddenly, something stirred. The girl was screaming. The alien watched her stomach bubble and roil, panic welling in her chest as the girl continued to scream and kick.

What what what?

The alien attempted to touch the girl's emotions and was violently repelled. The only thing she could feel was pain. The girl was in pain.

Then, she went still.

The alien pressed against the underside of her stomach, lifting the girl to her esophagus and opening her throat. She thrust, guiding the girl up through her throat and back between her lips. Tess was tossed onto the ground in a pool of bile and acid, hair plastered to her scalp. Her thin body was shaking.

"Nina?"

The alien cocked her head. She licked the girl, washing her with her tongue. Her chest was rising in short bursts. Humans weren't meant to breathe the carbon-rich air of the alien's planet. Nina longed to gulp her down again, down to what she had previously thought to be the only safe place for the fragile human. Why had her stomach harmed the girl?

"Nina?" Tess called again. "Something is different."

Nina curled up around Tess, holding her close. Tess rested her head on one of Nina's heavy breasts, taking shallow, almost tentative breaths. Her eyes flickered.

"The air. I can breathe it."

Her oxygen tank lay beside a shallow pool of water. Tess stumbled to it, lifting the mask to her mouth. She immediately devolved into a fit of coughing.

Hurt?

The question came as a feeling, not as a word. Tess shook her head, touched by the alien's concern.

"No," she said, fingering the mask. "Not hurt."

Stomach hurt?

"Yeah. But why?"

Tess inspected her skin, half-expecting it to be blue. She looked back at Nina, whose slitted eyes were wide with concern.

"Strange. First, your transformation. Now this? What changed in the past day?"

Lust rolled over her in waves. Nina was transmitting it so strongly that Tess nearly staggered. Her chest felt hot. The area between her legs stirred. The alien's tongue unrolled from her lips, multicolored eyes narrowing as she approached.

"Oh," Tess muttered, right before Nina pounced, pinning her to the ground. "That might be it."

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Satan

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It started when the oxygen tank broke.

The pale-blue mists rose through the crags, fogging Tess's mask as she crouched atop a shallow hill. She was watching the creature below.

"I'm not sure it can see," Tess whispered, raising her voice recorder to her helmet. "The alien appears non-hostile. While it took note of my presence as I approached, it didn't show any sign of aggression. Its eyes are one solid pupil cut into the side of its conical head. Several tendrils hanging off of it. Their purpose is unknown to me at this point. The alien is a quadruped, perhaps two and a half meters long. It does not make any noise, thus my name for the creature. No iris, non-articulate. Nina for short."

The nina raised its head. It didn't have any nostrils that Tess could see. Instead, it unfolded its split-jaw, revealing the moist blue-green flesh of its throat. No sound came out.

"Perhaps there is some sort of sensory input in its mouth. Instead of two pieces, its jaw is comprised of three, unfurling at random intervals. It eats the small hopping creatures that Dallas spotted along the rock pools, moving at a blinding speed. Its skin looks soft, covered in some kind of liquid sheen like a protective layer. It's pointing its snout at me right now and - oops!"

A pebble dislodged from under Tess's foot. It rolled down the hill, coming to rest at one of the nina's flat paws. It lowered its head toward it, then turned and batted the stone away with its tail. Tess adjusted her mask, fascinated by the behavior. The alien was exhibiting signs of play. She stepped forward, foot sliding along another loose rock. Tess waved her arms, trying to adjust, but the ground gave way and she fell, tumbling to the bottom of the hill.

She landed with a *whump* at the foot of the nina. It stared at her with interest, bright eyes glinting in the hazy sunlight. Tess scrambled to her feet, backing away with her arms outstretched. A high pitched whine rang in her ears. She shook her head, but the sound wouldn't stop. A concussion, perhaps?

No, the air in the mask was getting thin.

Tess's heart rose into her throat. She felt like she was choking. She unhooked her pack as fast as she could, all the while watched by the silent alien. The metal canister rolled over in her hands. There was a jagged puncture mark in the side, leaking precious oxygen into the poisonous atmosphere. No, no, no!

Tess tore open her backpack, searching for the backup canister. She flung off her mask, holding her breath as she dumped the contents onto the ground. Journals, pens and batteries scattered against the rocks. Tess sifted through them, flinging the notepads to the side. The nina was closer now, right at her shoulder, its wide shadow falling on the hapless woman.

The base was too far away. In thirty seconds, Tess would be rendered unconscious. She briefly considered placing her mouth against the hole in the canister, if only to take one last gulp of oxygen before her lungs collapsed. Her body was seizing up, ears ringing. Her limbs felt heavy, like gravity had been turned up. Then, she spotted it.

The spare oxygen canister was between the massive paws of the nina. It stepped toward her, nudging her with its enormous head. Maybe it was responding to her stress, or maybe it sensed something that she couldn't, but its demeanor had changed. Its jaws unfolded in front of Tess until her entire vision



was dominated by the fleshy tube of its throat. Tess screamed as it descended upon her, burying her head in its esophagus.

Darkness and motion. Muscles squeezed around Tess's neck and shoulders as the nina's jaws lifted her off the ground. Its mouth was soft against her exposed arms. The scream had expended the last of Tess's oxygen. She could barely think as she was shuttled down the alien's throat, its slimy interior lubricating her until her entire body was encapsulated in the nina, stretching from its lips to the narrow opening of its stomach. Her head broke through first, squeezed into messy alien innards.

Tess was burning up. Why she kept fighting, she didn't know. The alien continued to gulp her down, firm undulations of its throat kneading her, squashing her. She had been consumed entirely. She was out of oxygen. She was nowhere near the base and, as far as she knew, it would be an entire day before someone came looking for her.

Tess took her final breath, expecting the influx of CO₂ to choke her.

Then she took her second final breath. Then her third.

Oxygen.

Tess gasped. Her head felt like it would float off of her shoulders. She flipped onto her back, pressing her spine into the fleshy underbelly of the alien. It bulged under her like a hammock. She began to laugh, quietly at first, then uproariously. Her hands dug into the moist walls, confirming that she was trapped.

"I am either the luckiest bitch on this planet, or the most unfortunate," she muttered. "Imagine dying in the oxygen-rich stomach of an alien."

The nina's belly sagged with its occupant. It ducked its head beneath its legs, staring at the shallow hump of its stomach, heavy with prey. Indents showed where the woman had planted her feet, kicking out. All it did was make its belly jiggle. There was an odd prickling at the back of its scalp that it just couldn't shake. It looked around, but no other aliens were near. It felt first elation and then sorrow.

She dragged her belly across the ground. Her prey struggled. It felt rather nice, so she did it again. This time, a small bulge appeared where her prey's arm pressed into the spongy flesh.

Nina chirruped. The noise startled her so much that she fell onto her back. Her stomach wobbling between her paws, she glanced around. There were no living beings around the crater. She blinked. Rolling back over, she crouched at the edge of the dusty hole, inspecting the hill. Nothing.

The girl was still moving inside of her. Nina watched her stomach swing back and forth. Her head moved along with it, nose between her front paws, back and forth. The girl made her feel bubbly. Nina sneezed. She collapsed onto her haunches, holding her stomach with her front paws. She played a game where the girl would push a hand into her gut, and she would move to press it down. Then the hand would move. Nina spent a few glorious minutes chirruping and trying to topple the girl back into her mushy belly. It was great fun.

Tired.

Nina jumped. Again, she swept the landscape for living creatures. There were none. The distant sun was rising above the hill, burning away the mist. Nina was alone in her crater.

Tired. Sleep.

Nina bounded to her feet, stumbling over her front paws. They seemed shorter than she remembered. The fizzy feeling in her stomach was spreading its way across her back. Nina murmured with discontent. Her balance was all wrong.

While Nina stumbled across the landscape, Tess rummaged around her pocket. She was exhausted, but there was one last task she had to complete before she could pass out. Her initial panic had faded into a faint dread. Every bump startled her. When she had tried to push her way out of the creature, it had pushed back, proving that it was sentient and willing to keep her trapped.

"C'mon," Tess muttered. The slimy walls thumped against her. She had sunk up to her elbows in the squishy sac and it was hard to move. Her hand finally parted the soaked fabric of her suit. She took out the voice recorder and clicked it on.

“This is Tess,” she whispered. “As you can hear by the loud gurgling, I am currently trapped in the stomach of a nina. It is an oxygen-rich environment, but I am covered in its digestive juices. I don’t know how much longer I have to live, so I hope that this recorder is expelled with the rest of me.”

A loud thump interrupted her message. Tess was swung about for a minute before another thump made her faceplant into the mush.

Ow.

The feeling came suddenly. Tess patted her body, sure that she had bruised her shin, but not sure how. The nina’s stomach, while cramped, was comfortable. She was entombed in soft, pulsing flesh. How did she bruise her shin?

“Something weird just happened,” she said, putting the recorder to her mouth again. “I may be experiencing hallucinations, perhaps due to the increase in oxygen. I will make my report fast. The nina’s esophagus is approximately a meter long, consisting of several groups of muscles that push the prey into the stomach. It doesn’t seem to swallow, or have any tongue to speak of. Instead, its mouth unfolds like a flower, enveloping the prey. It’s soft and smells, well, kind of like warm herbs. It’s hard to explain.”

Oops.

This time the feeling came before the crash. Tess braced herself as she was squished against a flat surface. Some of the air in the stomach was expelled and she could hear the rumble in the nina’s throat before she belched.

“I’m going crazy,” Tess muttered. “Eaten by an alien. Locked in this gurgling tomb. She’s going to digest me now, and yet, I can’t keep my eyes open. I hope this recording makes it and finds you in good health. This has been Tess.”

She dropped the recorder into the murk. The blinking light briefly illuminated the chamber, showing her the ridged blue walls that were her prison. She lay flat, her arms behind her head, staring at the ceiling. Her thoughts floated like dandelion fluff, there one moment, gone the next. She relaxed, sinking further into the nina, listening to its soft cooing.

Funny, she thought, right before she drifted off. I didn’t think they could make noise.

When she woke up, the stomach was significantly more cramped. She had been rolled into a ball, knees to her chest, supported from below by some unknown means.

Awake!

“Oh fuck.”

Tess cracked her neck, doing a brief pat-down to make sure she had all of her limbs. Everything was intact and functional. It felt like she had been asleep for hours.

Out now?

The question reverberated in her brain. It came as the feeling of her sliding through a tight space, expelled onto the floor. Tess squeezed her eyes shut, trying to transmit a thought back. It was hard to eschew words in favor of feelings.

Yes.

Okay.

Something bunched underneath Tess’s butt. The esophagus spread over her face and mouth, opening as she was pushed upward. This time, the muscles helped her ascent, carrying her forward through the blue innards and out into the light. Tess was spat onto the ground in a quivering heap, coughing up slime. The nina leaned over her, multicolored eyes shining bright in the mouth of the cave.

Different.

Tess transmitted it before she knew what she was doing. Nina tilted her head, smiling with uncertain lips. She was sitting up, legs crossed, arms beneath her chest. Instead of a lumbering quadruped, she looked vaguely humanoid. Long tendrils hung in front of her shifting neon eyes. Her paws had

separated into long, flat fingers that gripped at her elbows. Two enormous tits bounced over her flat stomach, knocking against her slimy blue skin.

"How?" Tess wanted to ask, but on the first breath, she realized her mistake. The atmosphere was still poisonous. Her head swam as she plugged her nose and toppled to her knees. Nina leaned over her.

Hurt?

Blood pounded in Tess's head. She pawed frantically at the ground, searching for her oxygen canister, but of course, it was nowhere to be found. Nina crawled up to her. Tess touched her face, trying to transmit the image of the canister. Nina didn't understand. Whatever image she received was foreign to something that had previously thought of only food and shelter. There was one option left.

Stomach, Tess transmitted, collapsing on Nina's lap. The alien stroked her shoulder, chirruping with concern. She pulled Tess up to her navel, pressing her nose into her slick belly. The slime stuck to eyes and mouth. Tess could feel Nina's heaving breaths beneath her elastic skin.

With the last of her strength, she raised her head, bringing her mouth to Nina's. Their lips entwined, Tess sucked in air. A wave of hot, fresh oxygen filled her lungs. Tess breathed in again, her body flat against Nina's, the alien's arms wrapped around her back.

Nice.

Tess more than heard it. She felt it through Nina's skin. The emotion enveloped her. It crept up her spine and latched onto her brain in a riotous release of chemicals and the only thing that she wanted to do was keep kissing Nina, sucking in breath after breath of her air, wrapped in her embrace, safe for once on this alien planet. She was so happy that she wanted to cry. She did cry, and Nina cried with her, confused by the sudden influx of emotions that were just as alien to her as they were to Tess.

Now that Tess's head was clear, she could transmit freely. She quested toward Nina and found that among her own thoughts and emotions, there was an untapped reserve. Upon examination, she found that she could search the open channel of Nina's mind, seeing the world as she did. In an instant, she knew that Nina was intrigued by her, enamored by her new form and curious to learn more. Embarrassingly, there was also a cache of lust that Tess had unconsciously transferred. It appeared that Nina was now in possession of a fully functional, throbbing member that she longed to use. Tess could feel it beneath her, under her ass, pressing against her legs. For a brief moment, she imagined what it would feel like inside of her, and Nina shared with her a vision of animalistic, slimy passion that was sure to leave Tess gasping for air.

Gasping for air...

Tess looked into Nina's eyes. The alien blinked back at her. Her long, greenish tongue slipped between Tess's lips, twirling around her pink one. Nina's spit tasted like her stomach, and Tess realized with a twinge that it was a good taste. The appendage filled her, and she let it. Nina hugged her tighter, withdrawing her tongue, letting her heavy lips cup Tess's small ones. Tess ran her hand along Nina's breast. Her fingers dug into the elastic skin and Nina purred. Pleasure filled her brain. Tess's fingers ran lower, circling the nipples, then lower still until they were spread across her stomach.



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In, she transmitted.

In? In stomach?

Me, Tess tried, projecting an image of herself. *Me, in stomach.*

Nina nodded. Her tongue dragged over her lips as her jaws unclenched, widening over Tess's head. Where before she was wrapped in three soft folds of Nina's maw, now she was simply thrust deep into Nina's gullet, her tongue coating Tess in a thick layer of saliva. Tess could smell the life-giving air of her stomach, hot and intoxicating, ready to receive her at a moment's notice. She lay across the length of Nina's tongue and right before it lifted to send her down into the packed muscle of her throat, Nina thrust the tip between Tess's legs. It flitted against her salty skin until she found what she was looking for.

"Oh!"

One firm press against her clit had Tess gasping. She tried to turn, but the tongue lifted and she slid into Nina's throat. The tight muscles clenched against her head and shoulder, spreading over her face. She could feel Nina following her with a finger. The alien had one hand on her leg and was guiding her, curious to explore this new *swallowing* ability she now possessed. With a jerk, Tess was yanked up through the undulating throat and back into the mouth where she lay sputtering on Nina's tongue. A low rumble sounded that Tess identified as laughter.

"You think that's funny, you jerk?" Tess said.

Nina continued to laugh.

Feels good!

"Eating me feels good," Tess muttered. "Well, isn't that nice to know."

That was all she could get out before she was plunged back into Nina's throat. This time, the alien swallowed hard, washing Tess down into her stomach with a wave of saliva. Her head broke through into the gooey chamber, spreading out the walls with the bulk of her body. She was enveloped by Nina, cradled by her body, safe within her makeshift womb.

On the outside, Nina continued to laugh. Her stomach was now a rotund ball that she could play with. She spent minutes shaking it softly, watching the noisy undulations of her skin as Tess got comfortable inside of her. The girl was trying to send her some kind of image, but Nina was having trouble processing what it was.

Why should she go and get a shiny tube when this was much more fun?

So, for the next hour, Nina continued to rub her stomach on every object in the cave. It felt nice pressed against the flat floors. The pool was good, too! When she tried jabbing it against a stalactite, Tess cried out.

Ouch!

Nina rubbed her stomach, apologetic. It was starting to rumble. This confused Nina, seeing as her stomach was currently filled with wonderful, thrashing meat. For the first time in her life, she sat down and pondered.

Normally the things she ate melted. It felt very nice and it made her very sleepy. Her stomach would grow large and squishy for a few days and then would shrink back to normal. Then Nina would have to eat again.

This time, though, her stomach was not growing squishy. The girl inside of her stayed hard and whole and moving. Not food. Therefore, Nina concluded, she needed to find food. Happy to have thought of something on her own, she hefted herself to her feet, wobbling gently around the middle. She took a tentative step toward the entrance of the cave, then another. Tess was poking at her emotions.

Where? The question came with another image of the shiny thing.

Food.

This didn't seem to please her occupant. Tess punched the inside of her stomach, her fist pushing out an inch of skin before being pulled back into the mush. Nina scratched at the spot, unsure of what the problem was. A grin plastered itself on her face. It felt kind of nice when Tess moved around a lot.

Food!

Tess kicked inside of her and Nina moaned. She hugged her stomach and rocked from side to side, jostling the girl and stirring up her juices. Something was happening to the appendage between her legs, but Nina was distracted by the rumbling in her stomach. She still needed to eat. Nina scanned the landscape, searching the rocky crags for movement. Along the peaks a bird landed, its suckers attaching to the stone. It pecked at a fungal outcrop before flying away. Nina stood still, belly in hand, her light blue body blending into the mist that circled this part of the planet. Something was coming toward her, winding around the pools, stopping to flick its tongue at the breeze. Nina crouched. Her eyes flickered. She took a step forward, then another, hoping that the growls of her stomach wouldn't give her away.

Tess, for her part, was enjoying the peace and quiet. Her own stomach was aching miserably, but after her encounter with Nina's lips, it was the least of her worries. She touched her mouth, mulling over the situation.

"I must be affected by her instincts," she muttered. "No way do I want to bang the alien."

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The lust was still there, throbbing between her legs. When their lips met, Tess hadn't just been desperate for air. That kiss was the first physical attention that she had received in months. The other researchers were not unkind, but there was a strict policy against relationships on base, and while a few people skirted along the edge, Tess wasn't one of them.

Nina was preparing for something. Tess could feel the calm aura she exerted as she crept forward. The stomach was warm, though, and Tess had was still exhausted from her bout with suffocation. She leaned against the sagging walls, crossed her arms in front of her chest, and closed her eyes. Then she was flipped upside-down.

Something slammed against her arm from the outside. Nina seemed to be caught in some kind of wrestling match. Jostled and confused, Tess looked for her emotions, finding only a blind dominance. Nina was in a fight and she was winning.

A concerning thought took hold of Tess's mind. If Nina died while she was inside of her, how would she get out?

The fighting seemed to be dying down. Something slapped against Nina's belly twice, winding against her chest. Whatever it was, Nina had a firm grip on it. There was a noise not unlike a drain unclogging, and a heavy glug of saliva splashed against Tess. The faint light coming through Nina's skin was enough that she could see the knot that separated the throat from the stomach. A loud gulp filled the chamber, and then the wet smack of something sliding down Nina's throat.

What is that?

Food.

Dead?

Nina didn't respond and she didn't have to, because right at that second a head broke into the stomach, mouth open wide. Its flat, forked tongue flicked against Tess's face. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps. All she could see was its open mouth, the hard upper palate descending on her face as more of it was forced down Nina's throat.

Tess screamed. She punched at the snake, but it caught her hand in its gullet. Muscles squeezed along her fingers and arm, dragging it down into the snake's body. It wrapped its mouth around Tess's head as she felt the familiar sensation of a widening throat, ready to gulp her down.

Compared to the soft light of Nina's stomach, the inside of the snake was dark and cramped. Hard muscle pulled Tess into it, beating against her skin and soaking her in digestive juices. Her nipples dragged across the meaty interior as it constricted around her breasts and legs. The snake swallowed again and again, forcing Tess further and further into its winding stomach.

On the outside, Nina patted her distended stomach. She was used to it hanging beneath her, large enough that the struggles of her prey were inconsequential. In her humanoid form, however, the snake made it bulge outward, every movement evident through her thin skin. Digestive juices were already flooding into her stomach, rounding it out. It sloshed as Nina dragged it across her legs.

Meanwhile, Tess was dangerously hot. The temperature inside of the snake was rising at an alarming rate, toasting Tess's skin and making her pant. She couldn't see or feel anything in the tight embrace of its coils, but she could what was happening. The snake was digesting with her inside of it.

"Nina?" she called. Something thick and viscous dripped onto her lips. Her hair was plastered along her neck.

The connection to the alien was there, but blurry. It was like a gelatinous shell had been placed over the reserve of Nina's emotions. Tess had to push through it to even scratch at the surface. When she got there, she understood.

Nina was asleep, back against the cave wall, stomach lying across her legs.

Really?

Tess tried to wake Nina through their connection. She dug into the shell, all the while being pushed and pulled by the whims of the snake's digestive tract. It let out a gurgling hiss that vibrated across Tess's body. The muscles moved her deeper, tightening, making it harder to breathe. In the back of her head Tess thought that it might be lucky that she could breathe at all. Another thing to add to her log, if she wasn't boiled alive.

Ten minutes later, the hard muscle of the snake's interior relaxed. Tess found that her shoulders could move in slow semi-circles. Her toes were no longer being crushed. Her breaths were even and the air was humid, but not burning. Something sharp pressed into her back and when she reached for it, the bony protrusion of the snake's spine met her fingers.

“Yeagh!”

Tess threw herself against the soft outer wall of Nina’s stomach. In the mild light that filtered through, she could see the eyeless remains of the snake’s skull. Nina had turned her meal to mush, burying Tess in the slurry.

“Thanks, Nina,” Tess grumbled. She stuck an experimental finger in the mush. Beneath the hard scales, muscle was being broken down by Nina’s enzymes. A nasty smell filled the tight chamber making Tess gag. Her stomach growled.

She hadn’t eaten in days, but more pressing was the dehydration that was sinking its dusty claws into her. Tess wondered if there was any water to be had in the remains of the snake. She began to drool. If this went on for much longer, she would have to try the water in the cave. The PH of the strange planet’s water was identical to water on Earth, but nobody dared drink it without proper filtration.

Full.

The stomach shook as Nina rose to her feet. A wave of putrid meat and digestive juices hit Tess. Her naked body was covered in foul-smelling liquids. Tess wiped a hand over her small breasts, annoyed at the amusement that she could feel emanating from Nina. In the dim light, she could see how small she was compared to the alien. And then she spotted a problem.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I’m naked.”

Her suit had been completely dissolved by Nina’s stomach last time. She was left bare, protected only by the thin skin of an alien on a hostile planet. Her research group hadn’t finished studying the environment. For all she knew, three minutes without protection would result in tumors.

Tess groaned. Problem after problem. Some of her melancholy transferred to Nina and the alien found herself as miserable as her friend.

Sad?

Yes.

The stomach was still for a moment, and then bunched as Nina wrapped her arms around it. She rocked back and forth, exuding comfort. Tess couldn’t help but smile at the display.

Mask.

Shiny?

Yes.

Nina thought about it. She didn’t want to move while she was digesting, but she also didn’t want to the uncomfortable feeling of sadness to continue. She wasn’t used to complex emotion and it prickled at her skin. The shiny wasn’t far from her cave anyway.

Tess felt them begin to move. For an hour, she sat watching the rest of the snake slurp down into a hole that she had never noticed before. She wondered if it led to Nina’s intestines, and if so, what they were like. The insane part of her brain wanted to test it. The rational part was just glad that, once the snake was washed away, her recorder had avoided becoming a part of a pile of alien feces. She picked it up and clicked it. Her voice filled the chamber.

“Tess here,” her voice said over the whir of the recorder. “Excited for the day’s trip. It’s my first day out alone, so I’m going extra prepared.”

“Lotta good that did ya,” Tess snorted, clicking off the recorder. She held the comforting metal between her hands, wondering what she would do when she got out. Her body was exhausted from disuse and dehydration. She would have no suit to protect her. Nina might not even let her out in the right place.

Here!

The thought was accompanied by an image. Her belongings lay in a pile in the crater, just like she had left them. Something had come and torn up the pack, but the metal canister with its plastic mask lay untouched. So did the flare and the radio.

Okay, Tess transmitted. Let me out.

Out.

Hands circled Tess from below. Her head was rammed against the esophagus that squeezed over her face and cheeks. From there, the throat muscles carried her up and into Nina’s mouth. Tess hung

between her lips, her breasts resting on the smooth tongue. Cool air caressed her brow for the first time in nearly a day, yet that wasn't what caused Tess to blush.

Nina's uvula was caught between Tess's legs. It rubbed over her clit, stimulating it with the small vibrations of Nina's breath. Tess gasped, embarrassed, unable to formulate a plan.

Feels nice.

Tess let out a low groan. Of course the alien knew what she was feeling. She was so used to receiving Nina's emotions that she hadn't thought about sending them.

Nice.

Something was happening to Nina. She shuddered, her throat closing around Tess's legs. She had to pull them free before she was gulped back down, sagging farther out of Nina's mouth. Nina thumped to the ground and stared at something between her legs. Tess fell with a smack onto her breasts, hanging from the enormous globes as she scanned the ground for her mask. It was right between Nina's legs.

Tess slid down Nina's stomach and sat in her lap. She held her breath as she reached down between Nina's legs and fumbled for her mask. Something slippery poked her arm. She ignored it, the plastic tubing of the mask catching on her middle finger. As Tess pulled it back up, her arm was coated in some kind of viscous liquid. She slipped the apparatus over her head and took a deep breath. Cold, clean oxygen filled her lungs.

Weird.

Nina shuddered again, her boobs swinging over Tess's head. She seemed to be holding back a moan, but for the life of her, Tess couldn't tell why.

"What's wrong?" she said. "Sad that I'm leaving? I have to head back to the base, but I promise that I'll come back tomorrow."

Weird. Tingly. Leaking.

Tess frowned. She looked back down between Nina's legs and found that she had grown some sort of mutation in the area between her tail and her stomach. It was slimy, like the rest of her body, but an opening at the tip seemed to be leaking some kind of clear liquid. Tess placed her hand against it and Nina grabbed her around the waist and moaned. Her entire body quaked. The appendage had grown longer.

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Hurt?

No. Yes. Good hurt.

Good hurt? Tess had to get back to base, but something was obviously bothering Nina. Perhaps it was some kind of tumor that she had gained from keeping Tess inside of her for too long. Nina was transmitting long, pulsing desire that made her skin crawl. Weird indeed. Tess scrambled down between Nina's legs and took a look.

The appendage trembled under her grasp. She could feel the muscles beneath the skin elongating. The underside had a thin ridge that led up to the pointed tip, still leaking fluid over Tess's hands. She poked a finger inside and Nina nearly kicked her in the mouth.

No!

"Okay," Tess said. "Just making sure."

She took the appendage up again and rubbed her hand over the slimy surface, searching for bumps. Maybe Nina had gotten a splinter.

Pink flashed in the corner of her vision. Her stomach flared. Her eyes blurred. Vibrant, pulsing pleasure spread over her. Then she understood.

Nina's cock twitched in her hands. Pre-cum squirted and covered Tess's front.

Want.

Want what?

Dunno. Just want.

The funny thing was: Tess wanted it too.

It was perverse. It was terrible. If she had told anybody about it, she would lose her research license so fast it would make her head spin. But there, in the crater, sharing emotions with Nina, Tess wanted to take that thick alien cock inside of her and let it fill every nook and cranny of her body. She didn't know how much of it was Nina's influence and how much was hers. All she knew was that the warm drip going down her leg wasn't stomach juices or pre-cum.

Gotta go.

No!

Nina's multicolored eyes flashed. She grabbed Tess's shoulder, dragging her back into her lap. Her dick ground against Tess's bare ass, hot against her legs.

No. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow?

Tomorrow. One sunrise.

Nina hesitated to let go. Tess had to pry her arms off and slip out onto the ground. Her base was almost a mile away. She had to get moving or risk dying of thirst.

As she crested the ridge that she had tumbled down two days earlier, she looked back at Nina who was still sitting in the crater. The alien cocked her head and stared up at her with sad eyes. Their connection faded the farther Tess got. By the time she reached the base, it was like it wasn't there at all.

The next day, Tess packed two extra oxygen canisters and an extra suit. Her naked trek back the base hadn't resulted in any abnormalities, but it paid to be careful. The first thing she had done after her return was throw on some clothes and visit the clinic.

"You're in top shape!" the doctor exclaimed, retracting his stethoscope. "Great, actually. How long did you say you were without your mask?"

"Maybe a minute," Tess had lied. "I just wanted to make sure it didn't, like, give me superpowers or anything."

"Nope, none of those. All of your tests came back clean. Are you sure you want to go out alone again today? I could see if Bryc-

"Nah, Doc," Tess had said, jumping from the bed. "It was a minor scare. I'll be careful."

Her pack was heavy on her shoulders as the air-lock doors slid open. She looked out over the stark landscape, eyes peeled for movement. Most of the other researchers had taken a buggy on a two-day trip to what one of them thought might be a budding volcano. Kat and Mick were on flora. Tess was the only one assigned to fauna.

She stumbled along the rocky path that she had created, keeping her psychic channel open. The base faded into the background as she crossed over the first hill. Her boots stirred up the mist. Strange shapes loomed in the half-darkness, flitting in and out of her vision. One looked like the creature that had swallowed her in Nina's stomach. Tess pulled out her knife.

The exploration team didn't let their researchers carry firearms. There was no faster way to fuck up the local fauna than with shotgun diplomacy. No, unless she filled out the proper paperwork and submitted it for approval, a knife was all Tess got. It felt hopelessly inadequate after her previous ordeal.

!

The emotion came to Tess like crackling over a radio. It was distant and fuzzy, but it was there. Tess was cresting the final hill. She could see the crater beneath her where she and Nina had first met. The alien wasn't there.

"Nina?" Tess called. "Nina? I can feel you."

Close.

Tess smiled.

Today she had worn her full kit. Her helmet had two tubes connected to a pair of air canisters slung over her back. The suit was made of an air-tight fiber that regulated heat and exposure to certain amounts of radiation. In her backpack, she carried two extra air tanks, her flare gun, a voice recorder, a spare voice recorder, food for several days, water, and water purification tablets. They were a last resort—as Tess didn't relish the idea of drinking alien water—but they would do in a pinch.

Nina was nearby. Tess could feel her, groggy and slow, just rolling out of a comfortable sleeping position. It seemed like she had gotten used to her humanoid form. Tess sent her a burst of excitement and Nina reciprocated. She began to move faster.

Tess sat on a rock and waited. A dark cloud passed over the sun, pitching the crater into darkness. Tess fumbled with the lights on her visor. When they flicked on, she wasn't alone.

It rose from the water, its milky eyes unblinking as its bulbous head swung to-and-fro. Webbed hands slapped against the dry earth. It pulled itself from its pool and raised its flat nose toward Tess, sniffing the air. She held completely still.

It took a step toward her. Then another. Soon it was running at a full spring, its heavy feet slurping against the stones as its mouth opened wide.

"Oh fuck!"

Tess dove just in time. The alien's broad head smashed the rock that she was sitting on. It shook itself free of the rubble and turned toward her.

Nina!

Coming.

She could feel Nina speeding up, but by the time she got to her, it would be too late. Tess rolled behind another rock as a sinewy tongue passed right through where she had been standing. She took a step back and stumbled. Her foot was at the edge of a crevice in the ground. The toad alien approached with outstretched arms. It had her trapped.

Now that it was right in front of her, Tess could get an idea of its size. It stood two feet taller than her, its creamy throat bulging out with every breath. Its stomach sagged beneath, ready to be filled by her squirming form. Tess trembled. She took another step back and lost her footing.

"Aii!"

Nina flew over the hill. She lowered her shoulder and slammed into the toad so hard that its head cracked against one of the stunted trees. It sank to the floor, dazed, as Nina pulled Tess into her arms.

MINE!

Tess clung to the soothing bulk of Nina's stomach. The alien gazed down at her. Happiness rolled off of her in waves, filling Tess's brain and floating across her skin. She was giddy with salvation.

She couldn't explain how much it meant to her, having Nina back inside of her. It felt like her heart was whole again. She nestled her head into the crook of Nina's arm and blinked back tears. The alien cooed. Then she turned back to the toad.

It was getting up, shaking its head and gnashing its jaws. Nina took a step toward it and it flinched.

MINE!

The toad wailed and lashed out its tongue toward Tess. Nina blocked it with an upraised arm, winding the tongue around her hand. She yanked on it and the toad followed, flailing its flabby arms. Nina's arm rocketed into the side of its head and it crumpled into the dirt.

Tess was still trembling as Nina carried her back to her cave and laid her on a bed of moss. The alien rolled down beside her, cupping her face in her hands.

Here!

Of course, Tess thought. ***I'm not going anywhere.***

Nina murmured, not understanding the words, but appreciating the sentiment. She sent over her own bubbly emotions, prodding at Tess's space suit and tapping on her helmet. Nina frowned when she found out that she couldn't touch Tess's lips through the glass. Tess marveled at her first lucid, up-close look at the alien. Nina looked... well... like her.

The shape of their eyes was nearly identical. Both had noses that turned up at the end and when Tess touched Nina's jaw, she could see that even her cheekbones were similar. The only things that were different hung just above her stomach, heavy and dangling with pale blue nipples. Tess raised her hands to her own modest breasts and wrinkled her nose.

"You're copying me," she noted, turning Nina's head. The alien let her, shuddering at her touch. She looked at Tess with such endearment that she had to laugh. Nina laughed too, in her own, chirruping way.

Want.

The emotion made Tess blush. It suddenly became hard to peel her eyes away from Nina's swinging breasts. The alien was naked, although she didn't seem to mind the cold. Her entire body was covered in some kind of slick coating that protected her from the elements. Between her legs, something was growing.

"Oh," Tess said, blushing as Nina crawled on top of her. "No. No no. We don't do that."

Nina's eyes were hypnotic. Tess watched as chips of bright blue and green swirled in the orange pool of her iris. The alien was transmitting a warmth in her chest that was spreading across her neck and stomach. Tess could feel it too, growing in strength as it approached her crotch. She shot up with a gasp, but Nina pushed her down. Her cock was already between Tess's legs.

The long, alien appendage rubbed against her inner thigh. It was hard and pulsing. Tess's breath caught in her throat as some of her own interest was picked up by Nina.

Want!

"No," Tess said firmly, shoving Nina off of her. "I'm sure you're confused."

Feels good.

Tess went bright pink as Nina took her cock in her hands and began to stroke it, running her fingers from the base to the tip. Precum dripped onto her legs. Tess was struck by the sudden urge to take it into her own hands. Place it between her lips. Let it squirm inside of her. She could only imagine what it would feel like, pressed against the walls of her vagina, the tip rubbing right up against her cervix as it filled her with Nina's cum...

The moss shifted as Nina pushed her to the ground again.

"No, Nina!"

Want.

Tess did want. She could lie to herself, but she couldn't lie to Nina. The alien was in touch with all of her emotions and held no silly, human qualms about fucking in an empty cave. Tess helped her undo the straps on her pants, suddenly desperate, her fingers fumbling with the clasps until they slid around her ankles. The air was cold in the cave. Tess shivered as she felt Nina's warm body descend on top of her, cock outstretched. "Nina..."

It slid over her vagina and she gasped as it made contact with the sensitive skin. The tip dug right underneath the clitoral hood, fumbling against the slick surface until it was positioned at the opening. Tess wrapped her legs around Nina's back. She closed her eyes. She could feel Nina's heavy breasts dragging across her own small ones. There was the smack of her lips and the ragged breath of a beast in heat.

The first inch of Nina's cock slid into Tess, worming its way past the outer layer and into the warmth within. Nina explored her, slowly at first, letting the new feeling of carnal comfort wash over her. Tess could feel it too. It was odd, experiencing both the vibrant thrill of being fucked, but also the guttural

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sensation of a hot cunt spreading across her cock. Nina pushed further, pinning Tess's hands. She was aroused. Insatiable.

More of Nina's cock stuffed itself into Tess. It was prehensile and slimy. The cold moisture of Nina's skin mixed with the hot pulsing of Tess's vagina. A shudder ran through their spines. Together they gasped and clutched at one another, desperate. There was a slap as Nina's balls rocked against Tess's ass. Her breath fogged her helmet.

"Ungh."

Tess bit her lip. There was too much of Nina and not enough of her. The alien's cock filled every inch of her vagina and still it wanted more. It bulged against Tess's abdomen.

Thrust, Tess thought. You have to thrust.

Yes!

Nina slid out of her and it felt like her body was melting. The raw void Nina's cock left in her was unbearable. Tess whimpered as she once again brought the tip to her lower lips, precum dripping down the flaps of her cunt. Then, in one glorious thrust, Nina put her entire cock into Tess.

"Oooh," Tess moaned, her mouth half open. She was only vaguely aware of Nina's expression as her writhing appendage pounded her, warming with friction, covering every nook and cranny of her innards. Her first orgasm came and went, leaving both Tess and Nina gasping for air.

Feels weird!

Nina was slowing her thrusts. Her cock pricked inside of Tess, pulsing against the walls that engulfed it, squeezed it. Tess could feel something stirring against her conscious that she had never felt before. Her own orgasms were jolting. Nina's was going to be explosive. Pressure was building inside of her. She was full and needed release.

Tess would provide it.

She hooked her legs around Nina's hips. The alien descended onto her, driving away her breath. She unhooked the helmet. Their mouths found each other, tongue curling, dancing in time with the motion of their hips. Every thrust pushed Tess against the moss. Every thrust sent Nina closer to the edge. Tess wasn't sure where their emotions began and ended anymore. All she knew was that she wanted Nina's mouth on hers and that she wanted to be filled. Nina gulped and the motion reminded Tess of her own flight down Nina's throat. She came.

Her orgasm pushed Nina over the edge. She drew back the tip of her cock before pushing it slowly, methodically, into the deepest part of Tess that it could reach before releasing its load. Salty alien cum made purchase in her hot cunt. It filled her to the brim and then some, oozing out over Tess's legs, pressing against her abdomen, dripping onto the moss. Still more pulsed out of Nina until her balls were empty and she collapsed.

Sakr

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Good, she purred. ***Again.***

Tess lay semi-comatose. Nina had soaked her legs down to her knees. Her thoughts flickered by like lampposts through the car window, blurring past and disappearing into the distance.

She should probably put on her pants. She should probably get Nina off of her. She *probably* shouldn't have fucked an alien. All of these thoughts faded into the wilderness of her subconscious as she let the cooling balm of Nina's bliss spread over her. The alien was in heaven. She had her arms wrapped around Tess, her mouth pressed against her neck.

Again?

No. Tired.

Oh. Inside?

Tess turned to see Nina's mouth wide open against her helmet. She watched the undulations of her throat, saliva building around the edge of her tongue before being gulped down with a swish. It looked cozy. The alien's greenish insides might be just what Tess needed to recover. As long as Nina didn't go snacking again.

Okay.

Her pack lay against the cave wall. Tess had to waddle over to it, cum oozing out of her as she bent to gather what she needed. She would guzzle some water and have a few mouthfuls of jerky before she went in. That way, she wouldn't come out delirious if Nina kept her for too long. Tess turned back to find Nina on her hands and knees, mouth open and waiting.

In!

Okay, okay. Wait.

Nina clicked impatiently as Tess unhooked her helmet. She held her breath, placing her suit down next to her pack. She bit off a chunk of jerky and followed it with a few glugs of water. Still holding her breath, she made her way to Nina. The alien's eyes followed her naked body.

Tess placed her foot into Nina's mouth. Nina tilted her head back, opening her throat. Tess steadied herself on her shoulders as she tucked her other foot in. Nina's tongue ran over her legs and thighs. She was eager to swallow. Tess took one last look at the cave and her equipment, then nodded.

Go ahead.

Nina obliged. Tess's vision was dampened by a swirling mix of saliva as she was gulped down, letting Nina guide her with a hand until her gullet took hold. The rest of the journey was smooth sailing except for the rough squeeze of muscles that dropped her into the rubbery stomach.

Tess sank into the acids and sighed. She could feel Nina settling against the wall, tucking her between her strong thighs. Tess relaxed inside of her, content to doze off listening to the soft gurgles and pops and the resounding beat of Nina's heart. She drew in a deep breath. Then another. Then she began to panic.

Oxygen. There was no oxygen in Nina's stomach. Tess didn't know what was happening, but every breath was fire and her lungs were burning. Amidst the pain of suffocation came the sudden realization that her legs and her ass had gone numb. The acids were eating away at her skin. Somehow, in the past day, Nina had adapted to digest her.

"Nina!" she choked. "Nina!"

Tess thrashed against the wet flaps of the stomach. She kicked. Every movement drew more air into the dank environment. Nina was responding to her struggles.

What what what?

Tess wasn't conscious enough to send her emotions. She could feel Nina reaching for her, only to be repelled.

"Help!"

The alien's hands were under her stomach. The throat was opening. Tess was being thrust upward, back through the pulsing tube and out onto the floor. She gasped in the fresh air as Nina stood over her, covering her chest with her hands.

Hurt?

Tess wasn't sure. She inspected her legs, frowning at the red blotches that covered them up to her genitals. Exposure to Nina's juices had resulted in minor burns that faded upon contact with the cool air. Nina licked away the rest of the slime.

"Thank you," Tess said, patting her head.

Something was different. She wracked her brain to figure out what. Had Nina adapted to be able to digest her? She had gone from a four-legged being almost humanoid. Maybe contact with Tess's anatomy had converted her to breathing oxygen and excreting CO2. But no, that couldn't be it, because if it was, Nina wouldn't be able to breathe.

Able to breathe...

"Nina!" Tess yelled, jumping up and startling the alien. "I can breathe!"

Nina cocked her head and burbled. She wasn't sure what the big deal was. Of course she was able to breathe.

Tess ran over to her pack and grabbed one of the extra oxygen masks. She held it to her mouth and turned the knob. Immediately, her lungs crumpled. She keeled over, gasping for breath, choking on her own spittle. Nina rushed to her side and patted her back.

Hurt?

"No," Tess said, fingering the mask. "Not hurt."

Stomach hurt?

Yes.

The stomach had definitely been able to digest her. Something had changed in the past day, or maybe even the past hour. Had Tess eaten anything strange? Done anything different? Had she come in contact with anything on the planet that would cause a drastic shift in her biology?

She stood naked in the cave, hands on her narrow hips. Nina's tongue ran over her back, washing her. It felt good. Nina turned her around and thrust her against the wall, tongue running from the base of Tess's neck to her cunt where it stayed, pressing against the glistening flaps. Their emotions connected again. Nina wanted her.

Oh, Tess thought as the alien carried her back to the bed of moss. *That might be it.*

Sex with Nina was much more pleasant without the suit. Nina cupped her smaller body in her hands, rubbing over her sides and ass. She was slimy, but Tess was glad for the lubricant. It helped when her legs were forced apart and Nina's cock had once again burrowed inside of her. They had only been going at it for a minute before Tess reached up and guided Nina to the ground.

"My turn," she said, taking Nina's cock in her hand and holding it beneath her. She shimmied down onto it as Nina purred, her eyes flickering closed, both experiencing the beat of the other's lust. It took them a moment to find the rhythm, but soon Tess was riding her like a pro. Nina squirmed and kicked against the moss.

Good! Full.

Tess felt the prick. There was a split second where she could have rolled off of Nina, but she bit her lip and forced the alien to release inside of her. The hot cum made her eyes roll. *This is for science*, she thought vaguely. *If ingesting her cum lets me walk around without my suit, then it might be worth making daily trips...*

Spent, Nina's tongue lolled out of her mouth. She lifted Tess off of her and set her on the moss, hauling herself up into a sitting position with her fat tail.

Food.

Her stomach growled to reinforce the demand. She rose on unsteady legs and jogged to the entrance of the cave, then looked back.

Stay.

With that, she was gone. Tess didn't mind. Her thighs were aching from keeping up with Nina. There was still cum sloshing around inside of her. She looked at the pool and considered taking a bath before deciding that it might not be wise to test her luck. Instead, she washed herself with some of the water in her water bottle and settled down to eat. The others would be returning to the base soon and she couldn't wait to tell them about her discovery.

Or should she? Tess gulped down the salty meat and got to thinking. Nina was such a scientifically interesting case that she could earn critical acclaim if she presented her findings to the right people. The alien had evolved from a quadruped to a biped over the course of several hours, taking on features of the human that she had consumed. It didn't seem to work with other animals, either. And, whatever the effects were, they seemed to also have an effect on humans. Nina's fluids were almost definitely what was letting Tess breathe the otherwise toxic air. Nina could be instrumental in continued exploration of the planet.

But, then Tess would have to explain how she had ingested Nina's fluids. Her face turned cherry red. No, the researchers at her base could never know what kind of relationship she had with the alien, even if a few of them might understand. She would have to experiment more on Nina's other excretions.

!!!

Tess could almost feel the prey sliding down her throat as Nina transmitted her catch. Their connection was getting stronger. Or perhaps it was the sex. Tess picked up her notebook and resolved to document everything, even if she didn't share it. By the time Nina got back, she had filled ten pages.

Tess tossed her notebook back into her bag and stood up to greet her. "Whatcha catch?" she asked.

Nina pushed aside a tendril from her face and held out her stomach. Through the nearly translucent skin, Tess could see the squirming form of a toad-like creature. She put both hands on either side of Nina's gut. Nina hummed as she smoothed the skin over the wriggling lump, bringing the details into clarity. One side of the creature's face showed signs of swelling.

Is this the same one as before?

Yes!

The stomach bounced as Nina let out a gurgling peal of laughter. Tess hugged herself against it, glad that there was one less danger for her to face on the way home. Her fingers glided over Nina's back until they reached her waist and her heart was overwhelmed with gratitude. Nina seemed to feel her emotions, because she stopped and looked down at her, smiling.

Happy?

Yes. Very. Stand still.

Nina did as she asked. Tess rubbed her face against her stomach and then went lower. She let the bottom of Nina's gut, already filling with acids, rest on her forehead as she brought her mouth to Nina's crotch. There was a smooth area that rippled between her lips.

"Retractable," Tess muttered. "That's useful."

Her hot breath washed over the sensitive area. Nina's stomach shifted. She wanted to see what Tess was doing.

Relax, Tess transmitted. It's okay.

Feels nice.

I know.

Suddenly self-conscious, Tess poked her tongue out and licked along Nina's inner thigh. It tasted like silicone. Nina's cock unfurled onto her shoulder, twitching. For the first time, Tess saw how large it was.

It hung from her shoulder to the middle of her back. When Tess wrapped her hands around it and stroked, it hardened. The tip flicked against her cheek. Nina's lust caused her breath to hitch. It fogged her brain. She found her lips opening over the tip of Nina's cock, letting it rest on her tongue. She gave it an experimental lick.

!!!

Nina's legs buckled. Her stomach slammed against Tess's back as she regained her balance. Tess wrapped her hands around the length and squeezed, pushing to the base of her cock and then back, milking her. Nina's balls had come unstuck, dangling between her legs. Tess took the opportunity to fondle them.

Nina's cock twitched in Tess' mouth. The alien had thrust forward, shoving herself deeper into her lover. Tess didn't mind. The cool slime was welcome in her throat. She put her fingers back on the base and let the wriggling appendage explore the depths of her gullet.

Oh! Oh!

Tess pulled back, saliva dripping from the tip of the cock as it slapped into her hands. She massaged it into the skin.

IN!

Not yet.

This was crazy. Tess was sweating, squished between Nina's stomach and her thighs. The toad's digestion rumbled against her ears. Nina's breath hitched. She was impatient. Tess stroked her balls again, earning a groan. Tess groaned too. She didn't have time to think. Whatever this was, it felt too good. Nina's pleasure was her own, after all.

Her lips went back around Nina's cock and this time, she thrust it right into her throat. It wriggled inside of her, trapped by her clenching muscles, unable to push forward or pull back. Tess was in control. Her mouth opened wider and wider until she was at the base, her tongue against the pulsing ridge. Nina was going to cum. She transmitted it loud and clear. Tess made sure that the tip of her cock had broken into her stomach, and then she grabbed Nina's balls.

Oh! Ooooooooooh.

Nina came. Tess could feel the flow of cum as it inflated the base of her cock, rushed across her tongue, shot through her throat and sprayed into her stomach. Nina filled her stomach, making it bulge under the weight of her seed. When she finished, she pulled herself out with a pop. Tess collapsed.

"Okay," she said. "That...that was interesting."

Her jaw was sore. She rubbed it as she pushed herself up on sore knees. What she wanted was water, but she wasn't sure if her stomach could handle more fluids. Instead, she dropped herself onto Nina's lap. The alien was leaning against one of the walls, cross-eyed.

Feel good?

Yes.

Tess curled up against her chest. Nina wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close. Together they dozed, digesting the remains of their respective meals.

I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Tess thought, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Nina burbled happily, hugging her closer as they both fell into a deep slumber.

"Tess!"

"Yes, sir?"

Bryce looked her up and down. His muscular arms were folded in front of a formidable chest. He was wearing blue camouflage to go along with his buzz cut. He looked more like a soldier than a scientist. Tess shrank before his stern gaze.

"Where are your reports?" he asked.

"I've been making them every night."

"Not every night," Bryce interrupted, tapping on his wrist. A small display appeared against his skin. Tess was jealous. The augmentation must have cost a fortune. He placed his wrist in front of his face and read off a list. "You reported in last Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. That's not every day."

"I was in the field," Tess stuttered. "I took paper notes."

"And where are those?"

Tess flinched. The notebooks were hidden behind a pair of panels in her bedroom. She had been documenting every encounter that she had with Nina in those notebooks, as well as various superficial notes to put in her electronic report that she was supposed to submit every night.

"Well," Tess said. "I lost them. I was dropping into a crater when a rock shifted under my foot and I stumbled. My bag opened up right beside a pool. When I gauged the temperature, it was nearly 200 degrees Celsius. I wrote about it in Thursday's report. There was also a toad-like creature in that crater that I reported on."

"I read that," Bryce said, dropping his arm. "That was incredibly detailed. You did good work there."

Tess breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, sir."

"However..."

Oh.

"I want an electronic report every night. No more sleeping in the field. Control is already on my ass about 'resources this and resources that'. They knew how damn expensive this trip would be and still they bitch about every penny spent. The more time you spend in the field, the more oxygen canisters you are going to need. We can't afford it."

"Well, actually, there might be a solution for that."

As soon as she said it, Tess wanted to slap herself. Bryce, who had been turning toward the exit, whirled around. He grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Did you discover something?" he asked, his eyes wide. "Flora team said that the fungus here eats oxygen and expels CO₂. That means there must be a source of oxygen. Did you find one?"

"Yes," Tess squeaked. "Some of the animals produce oxygen as their waste product."

"Why wasn't that in your report!"

Tess flinched. She knew it was coming. "It was just a theory until last night. Most of the animals are too dangerous to get close to. I haven't tested it properly."

"Well," Bryce said, tapping his foot. He gripped his chin and looked at the ceiling. Tess knew that look. She hated that look. "Maybe you should let Cass tag along. Bag a beast. Run some tests."

"We can't do that sir. Control said-"

Bryce waved his arm at her. "I know what Control said. This would take precedence. If we can figure out by which process they create oxygen, we could establish a colony here. The air is clean, if unbreathable. The temperature is stable. Flora says most of the plants are edible. This place would be perfect!"

"Wait!"

Bryce didn't wait. He stomped into the hall, letting the door slam shut behind him. A vague anxiety had planted itself in Tess's chest. She sat back down at her desk. Several unread messages blinked at her from the screen. She couldn't bring herself to check them.

Trouble?

Yes.

The more time Tess spent with Nina, the stronger their connection. Over the last month, Tess had experimented with different ranges, staying out of the base for days on end thanks to her ability to breathe without the oxygen canisters. Nina's cum usually gave her up to 10 hours of CO₂ conversion, depending on where she ingested it. However, it also made her vulnerable to every creature's stomach acids. More than once, Nina had to come save her from a dire situation.

Need me?

I'll come tonight.

Their conversations had also become more complex. Nina could express herself with more than just images and simple emotions. Sometimes, when Tess couldn't sleep, she would reach out to Nina just to feel her calming presence. She kept a vial of Nina's cum with the notebooks in case she needed to leave the base without checking out a canister.

The door to the office opened. Cass ducked his head into the room, messy black hair falling around his eyes.

"Captain says you needed my expertise," he called. "What needs shooting?"

Cass was 29, but he looked no older than 18. Despite his skinny arms and goofy demeanor, he could land a shot with a tranquilizer dart from almost a mile away. Through the trees. At night.

"Ugh," Tess groaned. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Because if it were Wallace, you'd end up with a dart in your ass instead of in whatever he was trying to hit."

Tess smirked. Cass wasn't wrong there. Wallace had the coordination of a circus bear and was just as large. The office was small, so she pulled up a chair and Cass flipped it around, resting his arms on the back.

"So? You. Me. Creature hunting. I can already feel the romance."

"Shove it. Didn't you have a thing with Darby?"

Cass wiggled a finger at her. "No relationships on base, remember! I don't know this Darby that you speak of."

"Do you remember that time when I walked into your room with the report and he--"

"La la la! Not listening!"

The keyboard clacked as Tess brought up her notes from the last week. There was a sketch of one of the toad creatures, as well as one of the snakes. She turned the screen toward Cass and pointed to the snake.

"I know for sure that this one produces oxygen," she said. "They live in the shallow pools that form near the roots in the trees."

"I know," Cass said, spinning in the chair. "One nearly bit Wallace's leg off when he tried to take a sample. We gonna bag one?"

"Mnhmm."

The snakes were the safest creature for them to go after. Tess knew for a fact that they lived to the North. The opposite direction from Nina.

"Cool," Cass said. "We'll take the buggy and set up on a hill. You'll act as bait and when it tries to chomp you, I'll tag it."

"Not a bad plan."

"Whew! I like a lady with guts. Maybe you and I could--"

"Remember that time with Darby where--"

"Ah! Not listening! Gotta go!"

He blew her a kiss as he kicked open the door. Tess waited for it to slam shut before she sagged into her chair. It was going to be a long day.

Night fell across the planet, spreading its velvet curtain over the mysterious landscape. Tess lay awake in bed, fiddling with her kit. There were still people moving in the halls, making their way to the dining room or returning to their bunks from the rec center. Their boots tapped against the hard linoleum, interrupting the irregular cadence of Tess's thoughts.

Coming?

Not yet.

Tess covered her face with her pillow. Nina's sadness was hard to deal with when it seeped into her own melancholy. A weirdness has taken residence in her chest, filling her brain with its static. She wanted to go see Nina, but her body wouldn't move. Her habits had been severed. She felt like a puppet with strings missing, limping across the stage.

She rolled off the bed and locked her door. The notebooks were still behind the wall panels. She took them out, along with the vial, and returned to her bed. There was a sketch of Nina on the first page, her enormous, flower-like head questing after smells that Tess couldn't comprehend. She remembered

sitting on the hill, watching the beast, marveling at its hulking glory. There were notes scribbled in the margins about how she moved, what she ate, when she was active. There was also a small scribble asking how she reproduced.

Tess sighed. She rubbed the inside of her legs, thinking of Nina's body on top of hers. She loved gazing up at those amber eyes, feeling her sensual thoughts, consuming those fertile desires for herself. When she was with Nina, she could let all previous experiences slip away. With a mind like water, she became a creature of pure stimuli. No different from a beast.

There came a knock on the door.

Startled from her daydream, Tess looked at her watch. It was just after 10. She eased herself off the bed and opened the door. Bryce stepped into the room.

"Tess," he said, sliding the door closed behind him. "I'm glad you're in, although I would prefer that you keep your comm on during business hours."

"It's 10 PM," Tess said dryly. "I wouldn't call those business hours."

"Right."

Bryce's gaze wandered to her bed, falling on the notebooks. He took a step forward. Tess stepped in front of him.

"Are those the paper notes you took?" he asked, pointing over her shoulder.

"What do you want, Bryce?"

Tess couldn't keep the hostility from her voice. She was off-duty. She missed Nina. Why was her boss in her room?

Trouble?

Nina's transmission made her wince. She had enough to deal with right now. She ignored it, focusing her attention squarely on Bryce.

"I want to know if those are the paper notes," he asked. "You said that you were recording your logs on paper as well as electronically. I think that we should make copies of the paper notes to keep with the electronic notes. Don't you agree?"

"No," Tess said, shaking her head. Unease bloomed in her chest like a dark flower. "No, those are my sketchbooks. Besides, any paper notes I took have already been transcribed."

"Really?" Bryce asked. His eyes flicked to the open panels. Tess could feel her heart in her throat. Her captain wasn't an idiot. "How could they have been transcribed if they fell into a pool?"

Tess choked. She had forgotten about that lie. Her face went pale as she raised an explanatory hand, but Bryce put a finger to his lips. His gaze was white fire.

"You've been acting odd," he said. "So I did some digging. The GPS on your suit tracks south every single day, sometimes staying in a location for ten to twenty hours at a time. Including at night. However, according to the log, even on the days when you were gone for over twenty hours, you only checked out enough oxygen for five. Care to explain?"

Her mouth went dry. She tried to swallow, but couldn't summon the spit. The vial tinkled against her bedsheets, a crystallization of her guilty conscious.

"I, uh, have something to admit, sir."

Bryce's shoulder lowered. He let out a slow breath from his nose and closed his eyes. When they opened again, disappointment had etched itself into his wrinkles. He pulled the rolling chair away from her desk and sat down hard, motioning for her to continue. Tess rubbed her sweaty palms on her pants.

"I've been doing experiments," she said. "With the creatures. A particular creature. I knew that Command wouldn't approve, but it was so important that I had to continue."

"With the oxygen," Bryce said. His expression softened. Curiosity replaced disappointment. "You found a way to stay out with only one canister."

"Yes. But it was dangerous, and I learned it by accident. The connection to my helmet was severed and my bag landed between the feet of one of the aliens that I had been watching. I was desperate. Choking..."

"Then, it swallowed me."

Tess told him the story of how she survived in Nina's stomach, breathing the air contained within while she planned her next steps. She omitted the part about Nina's transformation, their psychic connection, or the relationship that ensued. Instead, she focused on the scientific discoveries she had made about how the animals on this planet consumed CO2 and released oxygen, testing her theory with several of the local fauna. Bryce listened with his fingertips pressed together, eyes widening at the accounts of her trips down various gullets.

"How do you escape?" he asked. "These creatures just let you go?"

"Yes. When they realize I can't be digested, they disgorge me. I wanted to collect samples, but I didn't think that this experiment would be approved."

"No," Bryce mumbled. "Definitely not. I can already imagine what Command would think if I asked for them to approve this. But still..." His eyes grew hard again. "You should have told me."

"I know," Tess said. "I know I should have. It's just that it started as a secret and it was embarrassing and then it just kind of spiraled out of control."

"I understand."

Bryce hefted himself to his feet. He rubbed a hand over his short hair and stared at the ceiling. Tess could see the cogs turning in his brain.

"Okay," he said. "Alright. The plan doesn't change. You still go out with Cass tomorrow and bag a critter for testing. But!" Tess cringed. She had been waiting for this. Bryce pointed a finger at her chest. "But, you aren't to go on any more unsupervised trips. No nighttime strolls. You will record everything that you do and you will deliver those reports to me and me only. I understand that you don't want Command to nix this project, but I am your captain and I need to know what my researchers are doing."

"Alright," Tess said, looking at her shoes. "I'll do that."

"Good," Bryce said, slapping her on the shoulder. "You've done the right thing. I think that we can wrangle a paper or two out of this, eh? This is groundbreaking. Your name will forever be etched into the annals of scientific discovery."

He left the room. Tess waited until she couldn't hear his boots in the hall before collapsing back onto her bed.

Trouble?

Hearing from Nina just made her headache worse. Tess turned onto her side and buried herself in her sheets. Hot tears dripped onto the fabric.

I can't see you tonight.

Trouble. I'll come.

No. Stay.

Nina was silent for a few seconds. And then:

Fine.

Tess breathed a sigh of relief. Her time with Nina would have to be used sparingly. If Bryce decided to take a trip out to the crater, who knew what he would do? And while she could sneak out of the base without her suit using the vial, if anyone saw her, the entire house of cards would come collapsing down on her. She didn't know what to do.

Good night.

The dam broke. Tess fell asleep several hours later, curled in a ball, dreaming of a cave not so far away and the mossy bed where her worries disappeared.

In the airlock the next morning, Tess scratched at her suit. The vial was hidden in a pouch at her side. Cass was deep in conversation with Bryce, his rifle slung over a scrawny shoulder. Tess knew that it was only loaded with tranquilizers, but the sight of it made her shudder. She could imagine Cass lining up the shot, Nina between his crosshairs, finger on the trigger. Nina would be taken back to the lab for dissection and when she breathed her last, their connection would sever.

“Tess?”

She started. Bryce was loading his sidearm. While less accurate than the rifle, the tranq pistol came in handy if the critter closed the distance. He checked the safety as he gave instructions.

“You’re on your way to the north side of the pass, through the petrified woods. There is a path cleared for the buggy. You’re both kitted out with 10 hours of oxygen. No excursions. Is that clear?”

Cass saluted, but Bryce wasn’t looking at him. His eyes were locked on Tess’s.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he said, putting the gun on his belt. “Keep in communication. I’m heading out to check on Wallace. He’s been babbling about some mineral that they found in the water. Might be rare. We’ll be at the boiling waterfall. Do you remember where that is?”

Boiling waterfall. Tess rubbed her elbow. *Good. That was out of the way of Nina.*

She couldn’t feel the alien. Nina hadn’t responded to her summons all morning. She was hiding herself in a fog of ambiguity, making it impossible to gauge her distance. Tess longed to bolt out the door and run the entire way to her cave. Cass slapped arm.

“Ready?” he said, grinning. “I was serious about using you as bait. A running target doesn’t make a difference to me, but these darts don’t hold up in water.”

“The snakes sometimes hang from trees,” Tess said. “We don’t necessarily need to bait it out of the water.”

“Oh! Even easier. I’ll need your help lugging it onto the buggy, though. And what if it has friends?”

“They’re solitary,” Tess explained.

The airlock door was opening from the middle, letting in the swirling blue mist. Everything was silent. Bryce lugged his kit onto his broad back and stepped onto the rocky soil, scanning the hills that surrounded the base. The buggy had been parked in front of the door, alongside an ATV. Bryce threw his pack onto the ATV and revved the engine.

“Report in every hour, on the hour,” he said. “No funny business. Be punctual.”

“Right,” Tess said, loading her own gear onto the buggy. Cass was already bouncing up and down in the passenger’s seat. A thin smile crossed her lips and then faded. Something pulsed from behind the hill. It was subtle, but it was there.

An emotion. Longing.

Nina?

...yes?

The sheepish response was right behind the north hill. Nina popped her head over the rocks. Tess watched, transfixed, as Bryce’s head slowly swiveled toward her. Then stopped.

“What the?”

Everybody exploded into action.

RUN!

For once, Nina listened. She took off over the foothills, dodging between trees and leaping pools. Tess made a grab at Bryce, missing his bag by an inch as the ATV peeled out of the dock, cresting the hill and crunching out of sight. The last thing Tess had seen before Bryce disappeared was his gun unholstered.

She flung herself into the buggy, turning the key and slamming on the steering wheel. Cass screamed as the buggy flew across the rocky terrain.

“Tess! Where the fuck are we going?”

She didn’t respond. Her body was hunched over the steering wheel. Half of their gear had been lost on the first bump, but she didn’t care. She could feel Nina, scared and helpless. Running. The buggy’s wheels dipped into a small stream, almost throwing Cass out the side. His face was a pale green and his eyes were wide as saucers.

“This is crazy! This is crazy!”

They were catching up. She could see the dirt trail in the distance, heading toward the crater. Tess swerved to avoid another ditch, not letting up on the gas pedal. They peeled across the tundra, crested the final hill, and came face to face with a standoff in the crater.

Bryce had his gun in hand, pointed at Nina's chest. The alien looked confused. Now that the loud, scary vehicle was turned off, she couldn't understand why the man was pointing a piece of metal at her. She took a step forward and Bryce's finger tightened on the trigger.

Dive!

Nina dove, the dart grazing her side. She tumbled into a sitting position and cried out.

Danger! Tess!

Cass tried to grab Tess's arm as she dropped out of the buggy. She kicked him in the side, running into the crater as he wretched. Bryce stood with his back to her, lining up another shot.

"C'mon," he muttered. "Stay right there."

Tess tackled him from behind. She hit him low, right above the knees, sending them both toppling into the dirt. The gun skidded to the edge of the bubbling pool.

"Run!" Tess shouted, wrestling with Bryce. Tess was in a good position, but Bryce was stronger. He got one arm out from behind his back and flipped Tess over his shoulder, knocking the breath out of her. He placed his knee on her ribs.

"What in the fuck do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

A thick, blue leg rocketed into his stomach, throwing him back against the ATV. Nina hugged Tess close to her chest, her emotions a torrent of confusion and concern. Tess tried to calm the alien, all the while watching her Captain struggle to his feet. He had his hands to his throat.

"Tess!" Cass yelled down at her. "His helmet."

Bryce fell to his knees. His face was turning an ugly bluish-purple. There was a thin hiss as air escaped from the severed tube on his back.

"The extra canisters!"

Tess ran to Bryce's side, elevating his head as Cass rummaged through the buggy. He tore open one of the sacks, spilling ammo, notebooks and batteries. Bryce was muttering something that Tess couldn't hear. His eyes kept flicking shut. A vein on his head bulged with every shuddering breath.

"No good!"

The last bag had been torn open. Cass was throwing everything to the ground, panic welling in his voice.

"It must have fallen off the back!"

Tess looked at Nina. The alien nodded. They unhooked Bryce's helmet and pulled it from his suit. Tess took the vial from her pouch and popped the cork. Nina had to force Bryce's mouth open, but she managed to pour the contents down his throat.

"Bryce?"

He lay still. Too still. Tess put her head against his chest. His heartbeat was a faint flutter. He wasn't breathing.

"C'mon," she hissed. "C'mon."

There was foam at the corner of his lips. His eyes were closed. His head hung down over his chest, air still hissing from the severed oxygen tank. It ruffled his thin hair. Cass knelt down beside him, awestruck.

"Tess. Why?"

Tess couldn't muster the saliva. Her mouth was a desert. She opened and closed her lips, rubbing the Captain's cheeks. Nina reached toward her, but she pushed her away.

Then, the captain took a convulsive breath.

"It worked!" Tess cried. "It worked! It worked!"

Bryce slowly opened his eyes. He wiggled a finger. Flexed his hand. Took another breath, assuring himself that he was still alive, one function at a time. He moved his head with a groan. There was a nasty bruise spreading across his scalp.

"The helmet," he whispered. "It's not on."

“No,” Tess said, taking his hands. “I’m so sorry. This was all my fault. I should have told you everything.”

Cass stared at her, baffled. Bryce just shook his head.

“My bad,” he muttered. “I pushed too hard, too fast. How am I breathing?”

“Um. Well. It’s thanks to Nina.”

Bryce raised an eyebrow. The alien was crouched behind Tess, hiding behind the smaller human. She pushed a tendril out of her eyes to get a better view.

“She looks like you,” Bryce said. “Tess, why does the alien look like you?”

“This is too fucking weird,” Cass muttered. “I should have been a farmer. Or a computer technician.”

“She’s really sorry,” Tess said, ignoring the question. She pulled Nina forward, but Nina tore away. She still hadn’t forgiven Bryce for hurting Tess. “She’s really good, I swear. You just scared her.”

Bryce rose, using the ATV to pull himself to his feet. He wobbled. Cass reached out to steady him. The Captain pressed his fingers to his lips and looked around the crater, taking short breaths as though he didn’t trust his lungs.

“You did it,” he said. “You had already figured out a way to walk around without oxygen. It’s not the creature’s stomach at all.”

“Well,” Tess said, blushing. “It is, but that’s not all.”

“Then what?”

Tess looked at Cass for help. He shrugged his shoulders. Nina was kicking around the tranq gun, chirruping to herself.

“It’s, ah, fluids.”

“Fluids?”

“Fluids.”

“What kind of fluids?”

Cass threw back his head and laughed. Tess stood with her hands folded in front of her, blushing even harder.

“What?” Cass asked, slapping her arm. “Did you just pour alien pee down Bryce’s throat?”

“No,” Tess mumbled.

“Then what?”

Bryce was turning red as well. He smacked his lips together. He had been so preoccupied with his near-death experience that he hadn’t checked all of his senses. His eyes widened.

“Oh Tess, you didn’t.”

She buried her head under her arm. Nina had finished traipsing about and now hovered over her shoulder. Cass looked back and forth between them and the captain. It finally clicked in his head. His eyes bulged. His mouth opened. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“I can’t,” he wheezed, doubling over. “Oh my God. Oh. My. God. Tess. The good girl. The animal expert. With an alien? Oh my God, that is too funny. Too funny! And the Captain! You fed it to the Captain!”

He rolled on the ground, laughing as Bryce cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said. “We will talk about this back at the base. You have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bryce threw his arm over Cass and stumbled to the buggy, leaving Nina and Tess alone in the crater.

“I should probably have warned him that he can’t even go in the airlock right now,” Tess said. “Not for the next ten minutes, at least. Ah well. I guess he’ll figure it out.”

She sat down with her head in her hands. Nina curled up behind her. The alien held out her arms and Tess relaxed against her soft body, allowing some of the stress to fall from her shoulders. But not all of it. The house of cards was falling and all she could do was watch as they slipped between her fingers.

Now that she had come clean to Bryce, he was going to take her off Fauna. Even if he thought there was merit to her studies, he wouldn’t want her to be the one doing them. She would be relegated to

deskwork, or worse, sent off-planet. For a crazy moment, Tess considered staying with Nina, running to the far side of the mountains, holing up in some cave somewhere, content to live in ecstatic pleasure for the rest of her days.

Stay, Nina thought. ***Don't go.***

I want to.

Tess rested her head on Nina's breast. The helmet was cool against her skin. Out of habit, she slid her hand down between Nina's legs to see if she was erect. She was. It would be so easy to do it now. To strip off her pants, fuck Nina, and throw away her old life. She would never have to wear a helmet again.

But then, there were the dangers. The toads. The snakes. The hundreds of other animals that could consume her when her body was digestible. Nina would have to protect her for the rest of her life. What if the alien abandoned her?

Never abandon.

"I know," Tess said. "I know."

She was tired. Her fight with Bryce had left bruises on her ribs. All she wanted was a hot shower, but she doubted she would make it to the bathroom before she was pulled in for questioning. If she went back to the base, that was it. She would be held accountable.

"Oh Nina, Nina, what are we going to do?"

Nina lifted Tess into her lap and kissed her helmet. Her saliva left smudges on the mask.

Stay in stomach. Leave together.

That was it, then. That was the decision. Tess undid the clasps on her helmet, taking a deep breath as it suctioned away from the rest of the suit. Nina opened her jaws wide, gullet ready. It would be easy. Step inside and *gulp*. On to a new life.

Tess stood on her toes, took Nina's head in her hands, and bent her forward. They kissed. Their breath became one. Tess inhaled the honeyed scent of her lover, warm and familiar, as much a home to her as any she had frequented as a child. She pulled away. There were tears in her eyes.

"I have to go back," she whispered.

No. No!

The helmet was ripped from her hands. Nina held it away from her, her eyes wild. Tess stood calmly.

Give it, she thought. *Nina.*

Can't. You'll leave.

I'll be back.

I don't believe you.

The noise that Nina made broke Tess's heart. It was a low rumble in the back of her throat that spoke of pain. Betrayal. It was communicated to Tess in a rush, bringing her to her knees. Nina leaned forward to kiss her, to give her air, but Tess pulled away.

The helmet.

NO!

Nina threw the helmet, smashing it against the rocks. She once again brought her face close to Tess's, but Tess turned away. Nina grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her over her head.

In!

Tess kicked and struggled, but Nina's grip was firm. She fed her legs into her mouth, burying them in the green ripples of her throat.

Nina.

No!

The alien shuddered. Their sorrow was coming together in a violent clash. The closer they got, the worse it felt. Nina continued to swallow.

Nina!

NO!

Tess took a deep breath. The air burned her lungs. Black dots crowded the edge of her vision. In her last effort to hamper Nina, she held her arms out, stopping herself against Nina's jaw. The alien was crying. Her tears looked like liquid amber.

It hurts, she whimpered. You're hurting me.

I'm sorry.

Tess breathed in and it all went dark.

She came to in the sickbay. Bryce was standing over her. There was a bandage wrapped around his head and one around his chest. His right arm was in a sling.

"Welcome to the land of the living," he said. "The alien spat you out on the doorstep before taking off. You were lucky that Walter was just coming back or you might have asphyxiated. That was a week ago."

Tess reached for Nina's emotions. She was met by a void.

"You're going to do a write-up," Bryce continued. "Everything you know. No omissions. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

Tess's voice came out a hoarse whisper. It hurt to talk. It hurt to think. She reached for Nina again, and again was met by nothing. It was as though the connection had never been there at all.

"Then, Tess, you will be relieved of your duties. You attacked your Captain. There were witnesses. I pulled for you, but Command was firm. There will be no charges filed if you resign your position and leave."

"When?"

"Tonight. Turn over your notebooks and voice recorder. Make your final report. The ship will be waiting for you."

So soon. Maybe it was best that it was so soon. Like ripping off a band-aid. Tess didn't feel sad. She didn't feel anything at all. There was a void where her heart should be.

"Nina?" she asked.

Bryce's jaw twisted. He held his broken arm closer to his chest.

"She'll be unharmed," he said. "I promise. We went to check the cave and she wasn't there. We found some of your garments."

Tess couldn't even muster the energy to be embarrassed. She just nodded. It was over. Nina was gone.

Bryce turned at the door.

"Hey," he said. "I'm sorry. I know this is hard to digest. Just get some sleep. The stenographer isn't coming for a few hours. We'll pack your things."

"Fine."

That was it, then. She was being shipped back to Earth. This was what she traded a life with Nina for. Tess tried to summon even an ounce of optimism for the future. She was going back to Earth, filled with green vegetation and breathable air. There was ice cream and movies and friends that missed her.

But no Nina.

The stenographer came and went. Tess told her everything. There was nothing left to hide. The stenographer's eyes bulged out of her head as Tess described the various positions that she and Nina had lain together. It was scientifically relevant. When she finished transcribing Tess's notes, she packed up her machine and shook Tess's hand.

"Chin up," she said. "Some good might come out of this."

Cass and Walter visited her, both trying to cheer her up in their own ways. Cass made jokes. Walter told her about a plant that made people's faces swell up like a balloon. They both apologized to her and wished her luck. Then they were gone, and it was time to board the ship.

Bryce followed her to the loading dock, boots tapping on the linoleum floors. He carried her clothing. Everything she owned fit into a small purple suitcase. He loaded it onto the ship and stood by the door.

"You are a great researcher," he said. "One of our best. It's a pity."

"Yeah," Tess said. "A pity."

They shook hands. Tess entered the one-person rocket and the door closed behind her. Through the window, she could see two guards standing by the entrance of the loading dock, making sure she didn't leave. She settled into her seat and closed her eyes as the thrusters engaged. The ship pulled away from the swirling blue mist and into the darkness beyond.

Tess watched the planet that had been her home for the past year grow smaller in the distance. The trip would last for approximately three days. Space travel had come a long way.

Something stirred inside of her. Tess ignored the feeling, content to let her feelings ice over until the planet was out of view. The feeling became more insistent, unearthing itself from the frozen soil of her heart.

The connection. It was still there.

Nina hadn't severed it, just hidden it. Tess could feel it like a long rope, straining at both ends. It went taut for a moment and Tess pounded against the window.

"No!" she screamed. "No!"

Through the line came on last panicked thought:

Don't go.

But it was too late. The connection severed and Tess was forced to endure the fact that Nina's last memory of her was a growing distance followed by an endless nothing. That Nina had thought until the very end that she would come back.

Like hell.

The ship wasn't meant to be piloted. It was a one-way shuttle meant to take passengers to and from Earth. Tess broke open the glass box at the side of the control panel, ignoring the warning bells as she slammed on the red button. Immediately, the ship began to jolt. She had engaged the manual controls used in the event of a crash landing. Taking the lever between her knees, she guided the ship back toward the misty planet.

Sirens were blaring. Turning a ship 180 degrees in full thrust took a lot of fuel. There was barely enough left to get her to the planet, much less land. Tess didn't care. She would rather be dead than know that she had done nothing to stop true love from slipping through her fingers.

The ship was approaching the planet. It was burning as it entered the atmosphere. Tess was thrown against her seat, lever still clutched tight, fingers on the controls. The mountain range was in view. There was the base, like a small, glimmering mirage in the distance. It all came flashing past in a blur as Tess hit the eject and braced for impact. She grabbed the emergency oxygen tank and hugged it close.

The ship crashed into the top of the mountain, blowing a chunk out of the peak. The ejection seat floated above the wreckage, parachutes fluttering in the wind. Tess was alive, if dazed, drifting down into a narrow gorge. She hit the ground with a bump.

"Nina?" she called.

Of course, there was no answer.

Tess unbuckled herself from the seat, stumbling onto the stony shelf. It was a miracle that her legs weren't broken. She slipped the oxygen mask over her mouth and breathed in. Five hours of air. Five hours to find Nina.

"Nina?" she called again.

Without the connection, it was impossible to tell which direction Nina had gone. Bryce said that she wasn't in her cave. She could be anywhere.

Tess tried not to think about it as she wandered into the mist. The world was silent. She passed over a stone outcrop and a babbling brook. She scoured the banks of a boiling lake, looking for signs of life among the caves that lined its shores. Once, she caught a glimpse of a hulking shape in the distance, but it turned out to be another toad creature. She ran before it noticed her.

Deeper into the petrified landscape she delved. Two hours of oxygen left. She shortened her breath. Maybe it would give her more time. Wet moss sucked at her legs. Ominous plants rattled as she passed. One, the size of a horse, lashed a tendril toward her. She ducked beneath it and started to run again.

One hour of oxygen. Tess was hopelessly lost. All of the trees looked the same. The valleys blurred together. Each hill led to another hill, to another stream. To follow one would mean to abandon six more. Tess stood by the water and looked around. There was nothing. Nobody. She had gambled and lost.

Oh well, Tess thought, sinking to her knees. *I tried.*

Don't go. Those had been Nina's last words.

"Well here I am!" Tess shouted into the mist. "Here I am, Nina! I left! I'm sorry that I left! I'm back now, so please. Please..."

Her voice echoed along the hills, relaying her message over and over. A stick cracked and Tess turned.

A creature stood at the top of one of the hills. Tess's heart soared for a moment, then dove back into her stomach. It wasn't Nina.

It was one of the bear-like creatures that Nina had resembled when she had first swallowed Tess. It swung its bulbous head toward her, sniffing the air. When Tess stepped toward it, it stepped back.

"Hey," she called. "Hey!"

The creature turned. It tumbled down the other side of the hill and Tess took off after it. Her feet pounded over the rocks. She crested the hill and slid down the other side. The creature was a hundred paces in front of her, looking over its shoulder. It lumbered away at a steady pace. Tess followed.

The creature led her through a series of caves. Every time Tess thought she had lost it, she would hear one of its lumbering footsteps and she would take off again. The caves were filled with glowing stones and strange echoes. Fungus lined the walls. The creature navigated the twists and turns, alarmed at the two-legs' persistence, scurrying for home. Tess could see the daylight. Dawn was breaking outside of the cave mouth. The creature ran into the morning sun and Tess stumbled out of the cave.

She was in a valley, ringed on all sides by jagged cliffs. In the center was a pool of clear water, its surface marred only by the roots of a giant tree that towered above the landscape. A herd of creatures stood at the banks.

"Nina?" Tess called.

The creatures pawed at the ground. Tess couldn't be digested, but she could be trampled. Only twenty minutes remained in her oxygen canister. If Nina wasn't here...

"Nina?"

The creatures stirred. They ringed around the pool, waving their heads. One took a threatening step toward her. The others watched as it stomped the earth, working itself into a frenzy. Tess took a step back. The creature charged.

It bore down on her with astonishing speed, head lowered to fling her against the rocks. There was no time to dodge. Tess clutched her chest and closed her eyes. This was the end.

From the back of the herd came a trumpeting noise. One of the creatures broke from the huddle and sprinted across the valley, intercepting the charging beast right before it dashed Tess across the cliffs. The beast was thrown onto the grass, dazed.

"Nina."

The creature that saved her stared down at her. Just like the rest of the herd, it stood on four legs, fat tail dragging along behind it. Its head was split into three maws that unfurled as it breathed. The only difference was its eyes. Where the rest had solid green slits, two multicolored eyes blinked back at her.

“You’ve changed,” Tess said, reaching for her. “I’m sorry. I took too long. Let’s get you back to normal.”

Nina shied away from her hand and shook her head. The message was clear. She wasn’t forgiven.

“Nina,” Tess said, choking on her words. “I’m sorry. I should have stayed. I wanted to stay. You were right. You were always right. Please, Nina.”

A quiet wind swept through the valley. Tess’s hair fluttered around her shoulders. Nina wouldn’t look at her. Tess stepped forward to pat her neck, but Nina pulled away. There was no hint of their previous connection and barely any humanity left in the alien. Tess wasn’t sure that she could even understand her.

Ten minutes left in the oxygen tank.

“Nina. You have to eat me. You’ll remember then. Look.”

Tess pulled her shirt over her head. Nina watched, nonplussed, as her pants and bra fell to the dirt. Tess stood naked before the alien, arms outstretched, offering herself to Nina.

“Come on,” she said. “You love this. I know you do.”

The wind was cold on her shoulders. Gooseflesh was breaking on her arms. Tess shuffled in the alien soil, knees knocking together. Still, Nina wouldn’t listen. She just stood. Stared. Tess tried to pry open her maw, but it was clamped tight. Five minutes left in the oxygen tank.

“Nina,” Tess begged. “I get it now. I get it. Please, open up. In! In! You used to say that to me all the time.”

Something seemed to get through to her. Nina reached forward with a lumbering paw and shoved Tess to the ground. She trembled in the dirt which drank in her tears. Nina hovered over her, larger than life, an animal in all but the name. Then, Tess saw what she wanted.

Nina’s cock unfolded onto Tess’s stomach with a wet slurp. It was almost twice as big as it had been when she stood on two legs. The thick meat responded to her warm body, hardening, seeking. Tess spread her legs.

Nina hesitated. She blinked, pulling back slightly. Then the hostility returned and she forced herself into Tess.

Tess felt like she was going to split in two. Nina’s cock didn’t just fill her; it stretched her to her limits. The pain made her jaw clench, but Tess bit her lip and took it. It felt...nice to have Nina back inside of her. It felt right. The pain was a small price to pay. But whatever this was, it wasn’t forgiveness. Far from it. This was a punishment.

Nina started to thrust. Tess braced her elbows against the ground and arched her back. The force of the thrust raised her entire lower half. Tess cried out. She wound her legs around the base of Nina’s cock and used the friction to massage her like she used to. The oxygen mask was spent.

“Nina...”

It was getting hard to focus. Between the pain and asphyxiation, Tess was at her limits. She thought she saw Bryce between the rocks. Then Cass. Then Nina in her full form. The animal that pounded away at her grunted. She was getting close.

I wonder if I’ll make it, Tess thought, bringing her hands to Nina’s face. *It doesn’t matter. I’m here. She knows that I’m here.*

The big head was descending upon her, the three flaps of its maw opening to form a tube. It pressed itself to her lips and exhaled. Her lungs filled with fresh air. Another ferocious thrust made Tess cry out into Nina’s mouth. She remembered her tongue, her lips. The way they kissed. This was different. This wasn’t Nina as she remembered her.

The tip of her slimy cock bulged. What felt like an ocean of cum was pumped into her, unrelenting, unmanageable. When Tess’s cunt was full, Nina pulled out and spread her ass with her cock. Tess let out a ragged gasp. It hurt. She could smell blood. And yet, she took it, widening herself for Nina, letting her cum flow over every corridor of her body. Nina pulled out again and spread the rest over her stomach. Tess couldn’t see it. Her face was still in her mouth.

“Nina?”

The effect of her seed was instantaneous. Nina's mouth was now a vacuum. The flaps were closing in around her head and neck, twisting over her slender shoulders and arms. Nina had her body halfway in her mouth when she raised her head. The flaps opened just enough for her to get a last taste of clean air.

Gulp!

The soft folds of her throat turned hard as mechanical muscle guided her toward the hanging stomach. It wasn't fast, merely deliberate. She was enveloped by Nina for what was perhaps the last time, feeling her heart, her warmth. Ebbing. Flowing. The thin swish of approaching liquid. The squish around her head and neck as she slid into the final chamber.

Pulsating flesh greeted her in Nina's stomach. Heat lashed at her skin. Acid threatened to consume. Still, Tess didn't mind. She was back where she belonged. She should never have left.

Nina?

Tess reached out with her mind and instead of the void, found the shell of Nina's thoughts. The alien had barred herself from Tess, but she was there. Tess pried at her shell, shoving her mental fingers into the cracks. It was okay if Nina digested her. That was fine. But not until Nina knew that she was sorry. Otherwise, her death would have to be enough.

Nina lay on her side, watching her gut bulge. Her eyes were half-closed. Tess was there, inside of her. It was what she had been aching for since the day she dropped Tess at the human's nest. For the next week she had waited, sobbing in her cave. Change had come over her, hunching her back, melting her fingers together. Her mouth elongated. The keen senses that she had gained dulled once more. She had begged for Tess to return and was left unanswered and alone.

Now she was here and Nina was furious. She had wanted to pummel her. Didn't she understand the hurt that Nina had gone through? It felt as though her chest was going to crumple. The tearing sensation of their connection breaking crippled her. It was a final goodbye. And Nina had accepted it, the fact that the future would be duller. That her eyes would eventually moss over and she would once again be content with roaming the hills with the rest of her species. But when she had seen Tess, the scars of her heart that had only just stopped bleeding were reopened in a new, fresh agony.

The struggle that Nina expected never arrived. She waited a minute. Then two. Tess wasn't moving. It was strange. The last time, she had kicked and yelled. There had been a struggle. Nina opened her mental barrier and quested toward the girl.

Angry.

No response. Nina wrinkled her nose.

Angry!

Still nothing. Tess's mind was a static field. Nina probed deeper, clutching her stomach, feeling for those arms that had held her so tightly. Her fingers brushed against Tess's face.

Tess?

Nina peaked into Tess's thoughts. Under the calm outer fuzz, there was one thing running through her head. A single track; a final message.

I'm sorry, Nina. I was wrong.

Even that was getting quieter, faintly playing over and over again.

And then it was gone.

Hey. Hey!

Nina slapped her stomach. She was rewarded with a liquid rumble. Nina wasn't sure how long humans could go without air. Two minutes? Five minutes? She waited, sure that Tess was faking, vying for forgiveness.

Another minute passed. Tess didn't move.

Out now?

Nothing. No movement. No thoughts. No Tess.

There was bile in the back on Nina's throat. This wasn't happening. Tess was supposed to struggle. That's how she knew. Why didn't she struggle?

Seth

The struggle that Nina expected never arrived.
She waited a minute, then two. Tess wasn't moving.
It was strange. The last time, she had kicked and yelled.
There had been a struggle.
Nina opened her mental barrier and quested toward the girl.



Tess?

Another minute passed.
Tess didn't move.

Out now?

Nothing.
No movement.
No thoughts.
No Tess.

Nina placed her arms under her stomach and heaved. More bile pooled in her mouth, but no Tess. She spat it out and heaved again. Nothing. Nina's breathing became erratic. Something was wrong.

Her body was changing, but slowly. She didn't know how to disgorge Tess like this. Everything inside of her was shifting into new positions.

No. No no no.

Nina ran to a rock and used it for additional leverage. She squeezed from both sides of her stomach and felt her throat open. It hurt. It hurt so bad. Still, Nina squeezed. Tess was forced upward, inch by agonizing inch. Nina could feel her at the base of her tongue. One last push and Tess was free.

This time, Nina remembered to crouch down, laying Tess at the edge of the lake. Her face was a dull purple. Her eyes were closed. The other creatures watched as Nina cupped water in her hands, washing the girl's naked body.

They couldn't see why she bothered. The girl was clearly dead.

Nina spent an hour by the lake, washing Tess, massaging her limbs, reaching out to her mind. She shared memories of when she was young. The time she saw a sea serpent. Her first time catching food. She poured her memories into Tess, but like a bucket with a hole, they passed through her. Hopes. Fears. Wishes. Nothing stuck.

Nina's transformation was half-formed. She pulled Tess into her lap and kissed her head. Tess used to love that. Nina's lips were so big that she almost always went too far. Tess would laugh inside of her mouth and pound against her jaw. She tasted good.

Had tasted good.

Come back.

Tess hung limp. Nina shook her.

Come back!

Fat tears splashed onto Tess's body. The bruises were starting to fade. Her skin was now a mottled blue. Nina held her by the waist, hugging her to her chest.

Come back, come back, come back!

She squeezed too hard and liquid came out of Tess's mouth, dribbling down her chin and onto Nina's breast. Fainter than a feather falling onto the sand, Nina felt a tremble in Tess's back. She squeezed again. More liquid was ejected. Another tremble.

The creatures watched Nina lay the human on the ground and press her strange hands into its chest.

Then, they witnessed a miracle.

Tess coughed, hacking up foul-smelling liquid as she turned onto her side. The color was returning to her skin, but the world was in black and white. Her ears rang. Everything hurt. She remembered the crash landing and the search. Nina had been there, but that had been a dream. She was on her way to Earth on a ship, lightyears away from the planet where she let love slip through her fingers.

Tess.

Hmm.

You're back.

Now she was imagining things. Her connection with Nina had been broken. She had felt it. Just before... the crash. The search. Nina.

She flicked her head. If only her body would listen. Somebody was rubbing her arms, pricking the life back into them. It hurt like hell. Color was slowly returning in shades of blue and green.

You're back. You're back!

A face wavered in front of hers, multi-colored eyes shining in the morning sun. Tess reached for it, cupping its cheek in her hand. Her thumb brushed against smooth skin, if slightly slimy.

I'm in heaven, Tess thought.

The face smiled.

Not heaven, it said. ***Just Nina.***

Saku

Not heaven,

it said.

Just Nina.

