

Emergency Storage Tank

By: IndigoRho

On the bridge of the survey ship *Lycia*, three crew members huddled over a screen showing the results from their last scans. For over a week they'd been analyzing the atmosphere of a barely-charted gas giant, collecting samples in the hopes of finding something valuable. Even confirming a couple uncommon gasses would be enough to interest potential investors for a mining operation, not to mention pay for future surveys. Fortunately their venture was already looking to pay off. Despite a profit being guaranteed, Captain Imeron had given the go-ahead for one final scan while ship maintenance was completed.

"You're sure this isn't a system glitch?" Imeron asked. The goat still wasn't sure he was reading the screen correctly.

Christoph, the lion serving as ship's science officer, shook his head. "I ran the sample through three times, even had my personal A.I. examine it. Same answer every time."

The bright green-and-white naga besides them tried his best to appear knowledgeable about what was going on, but quickly gave up the charade. "Uh, I assume that's a good thing?"

"Yes, Radimov, it's a very good thing," Imeron said with a sigh. He sometimes wished the naga would put an effort into learning about the resources they collected, but Radimov's skills as an engineer more than made up for it. "Is the third storage tank all sealed now?"

"Uh, well, that's what I came up here to talk about," Radimov sighed. "The breaches were more extensive than I thought. Didn't have enough sealant to get them all closed up."

Imeron resisted slamming a fist on the console. "Crap! This *alone* is worth more than the other two samples combined, but if we vent either of them then we'll get lowballed by buyers for not having solid proof of the planet's broader value."

"Two weeks back to port, days of downtime, two weeks back here, two weeks back to port..." Christoph shook his head. "We'd lose over a month if we had to make a second trip to get the stuff back, and I can't guarantee our sensors will pick up this deposit again so easily."

"Radimov is there *any* alternative you can think of for storing this stuff?" Imeron asked out of desperation. "Something that can be converted with what we have on board."

"Nothing with the right capacity or durability," Radimov said. "Unless you want to pump one of us full of gas."

Christoph and Radimov both snorted at the joke suggestion, but Imeron was uncomfortably silent in response. "Would that work?"

Radimov gave his captain a skeptical look. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Would. That. Work."

"I...maybe?" Radimov hadn't expected to think the bizarre idea through, but put his A.I. to work on the calculations. "Huh, apparently yes? Computer's convinced everyone on board could safely hold enough for a viable sample, and we've got the space for it once they're, ya know, all blimped up."

Imeron smiled, grateful for the continued streak of good luck. "Good, good. Only problem is who gets to spend two weeks as a storage tank. I've gotta fly the ship, so obviously not me."

"I'm needed for collecting the gas itself, along with documenting the samples so they can be marketed as soon as we return to port," Christoph said.

"This whole ship will fall apart if I'm stuck as a balloon," Radimov quickly added.

Practically in unison the trio turned their heads towards the fourth member of their crew, who was still handling sample data on the far side of the bridge. An obese hyena with an eye-catching pink mohawk, Raf was Christoph's assistant. The hyena was also infamous for his persistent grumpy attitude and tendency to get wedged in chairs. Keeping him secluded seemed like a wonderful idea.

"Hey Raf, would you come over here for a sec?" Imeron said, grinning.

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“Why do *I* have to be the storage tank!” Raf grumbled once more. The crew had moved into the main cargo hold in order to prepare for gas collection.

“We’ve already been over this. You’re the least essential of the crew and the computer confirmed you can stretch to contain the most gas.” Imeron held back a laugh, trying to remain somewhat professional.

Raf frowned and pouted some more. “Ugh, this is stupid. I don’t want to be stuck in here the entire trip back. What if I explode!”

“I ran dozens of simulations, Raf,” Christoph piped in. “You only suffered a catastrophic rupture seven percent of the time. Mendable punctures only occurred twelve percent!”

“Any percent is too high!” Raf growled.

Captain Imeron gave Raf a pat on the shoulder. “You’ll be fine Raf. We’re on track to make way too good a payday for us to risk losing a storage container of your quality.”

The pep talk failed utterly, but Raf was too frustrated to argue any further. “Alright, alright. Let’s just get this over with so we can head home.”

A thick hose was extended from the wall and carefully placed in Raf’s mouth, the hyena begrudgingly gulping it down until it reached his stomach. Afterward a muzzle-like mask was strapped around Raf’s snout to create a seal. Raf crossed his arms in irritation as Imeron brought up a holographic display on the hyena’s space suit, directly over his round gut. Internal pressure and capacity readings appeared on the screen, though unfortunately so did Raf’s weight and circumference. A thorough look-over confirmed their impromptu storage tank was in working order, and Christoph turned on the collectors.

There was a low hum at first as the machinery spun up and went to work, all eyes on Raf’s middle. Raf’s cheeks abruptly puffed up and he stumbled as the gas started pouring through the tube. His belly began swelling steadily, the displayed data adjusting in real-time. The suit he wore easily stretched to handle his expansion as well. Imeron and Christoph did their best to hold back giggles as they watched their grumpy crewmate balloon up in front of them, though their amusement wasn’t lost on Raf. He glared at them as his middle rapidly approached three feet in width, his arms and legs puffing up as well.

Soon the hyena could no longer keep his arms crossed, widening his gait and letting them rest by his sides as his limbs grew stiffer. Raf’s inflation had begun spreading away from his gut, rounding out his chest and even his back to a certain extent. While the pressure building in him was unnerving, the readings projected on his bloated belly showed him as still well-within safe parameters. He was nearly spherical in shape, body gradually enveloping his limbs while his paws rounded out. His face was in a state of permanent scowling. As the hyena approached capacity the flow of gas trickled to a stop, light creaks emanating from Raf as he became completely immobilized by his blimp of a body.

Raf hated the ominous noises his body would sporadically make, the feeling of being so incredibly taut, the fear he could topple over and roll across the room at a moment’s notice. Being as wide as he was tall was rather annoying as well for a hyena obsessively concerned about his weight. The hose was removed and his muzzle readjusted to prevent leaking, Imeron and Christoph dutifully securing their living storage tank to the wall for safekeeping. They couldn’t resist poking at the inflated grump, though, curious as to what a hyena balloon felt like. Raf’s muffled growls in response finally made them burst out laughing.

Imeron regained his composure first, beaming at the apparent success of their odd storage solution. “Wonderful job Raf, you’re a natural at this!”

Raf didn’t seem very proud of that fact.

“Alright, I’m going to prep the ship for departure. Christoph, good luck running the sample tests on Raf here.” Imeron gave the inflated hyena a pat on the belly before swiftly leaving.

Christoph diligently began making adjustments to the display on Raf's middle, essentially turning him into a workstation as well as a storage tank. Raf sighed; the next two weeks were going to be the longest of his life...