

# Reptilian Research

"So, let me get this straight... Out of **all** the birds, giant reptiles, and massive beasts in your reports. You decided you liked a little skink." Revox hounds me about my latest endeavor while he combs through my datapad.

I reach into a small habitat box, and pick up the little creature by the tail, showing off the intricacies of its physique. I hold it gently in my paw, making sure not to scare it too much. "She is not *just* a 'skink' ; her reptilian nature differs significantly from 'ordinary' biologics I have witnessed! For instance, her scales—look!" I point out the bilayered black and purple design. "Unlike others, they are hardened like a rock! And oh-" He snatches her from my grasp.

"I mean, it is pretty weird—but like, *really*. I saw a snake the size of a tree out there when I was landing! And this is what you want to study?" He runs his paw over the scared reptile before handing her back. I calmly place her on a heated rock to settle down.

"What is beneath the surface is what counts! I bet you would not have guessed that these creatures absorb nutrients from the surrounding dew along the planet's surface! Nor that they lack a full digestive system as a result!" I try to explain.

"What's with you and always taking interest in little things anyway." He finally asks.

"Well, simply put. 'Prey' species evolve overtime to take favorable traits that help them survive. Therefore, they usually have the most interesting defense mechanisms. For instance: hard scales prevent them from being all chewed up! Unless they can be swallowed whole, a predator would have to give up, and they live another day!" I happily give my point of view.

"It sounds like you enjoy being eaten, is all." He adjusts his new suit, preparing to go outside for the first time on this planet.

"The best way to learn about a predator, is to become its prey! You can glean a vast repertoire of information from a beast's belly. My methodology is the most efficient system, learning about two organisms at once!" I give him a joyous smile.

"Whatever you say, *weirdo*! Want to try out the new camera set up?" He clasps on his helmet, and rummages through our new bag of supplies.

"Since you opted to spend a portion of our funds on it, I suppose I have to. I find it humorous that you call me a 'weirdo', yet you spent all that money just so you can watch!"

He pulls out a few different hardly visible harnesses, eyeballing them with the captured specimen. "Alrighty! This one should work!" He settles on his second choice, slotting a very tiny recorder into place. "Do the thing!" He stares at me with his curious silver eyes.

I shift into the paw-sized reptile, laying on the uncomfortably cold metallic floor of our ship. I am laying in a mess of dust and grim. *Of course he neglected to clean in my absence.* He reaches down and grabs me roughly, rotating me around, and compares me to the other. "I don't think I'll ever fully understand you." His milk-stained breath washes over me while he puts on my new harness. "Ah" *click* "There! *Like a glove.*" He sets me inside the warm container with the other of my kind.

Once his paw leaves, my fellow skink huddles up with me, giving a cute little *meep* of confusion. I give the appropriate nuzzle back, calming her down while Revox pops open the ship's side door. He picks up the habitat box with us inside, and walks out of the ship. The afternoon sun feels like a dream within my cold-blooded body! Light cascades from the floating orb through the magenta sky, partially blocked by a passing moon. A strong gust of wind blows through the dark purple foliage, almost knocking Revox off his feet! The trees here are massive, but have very little leaves. A vast array of blues, blacks, and purples litter the planet's surface in a variety of hues. The air is filled with noisy chirping and chittering. *This planet is full of life!*

He walks for a bit before plucking me from the container, setting me down on a hot black rock by a trudging stream of translucent blue liquid. The open air is filled with the fragrance of a flower field in the distance, blocked by a large protruding mountain. I cannot wait to see what else this magnificent world has to offer!

My current companion plops on the rock next to me after wiggling out of Revox's grasp. She skitters away, rustling into a nearby bush, but pops her head back out to keep an eye on me. "Don't have *too* much fun you two!" He checks his tablet over, playing audio with the new camera. "While you're doing lizard stuff, I'm going to check out that lake I saw when I was landing. Don't worry, I'm going to be careful." He leaves me to my studies, walking westward with his protective suit on.

Once he is gone, my friend wanders back to my rock, huddling up with me again. I feel bad for taking her from the community, so I begin the trek back to where I found her. The black and purple skink follows, looking cute with a permanent smile across her scaled lips. Scampering over large foliage, and avoiding growling noises, we travel. I have gotten used to having little legs, but seeing the world at such a small scale is always breathtaking. The ground is moist, gray dirt flicks up while I lead the little one home.

It feels as though I have been traveling for kilometers, but realistically half of one. I finally catch wind of our kind with a blowing breeze! Following along, the other notices it too. The little journey of ours feels like a frolicking adventure, ducking through little alcoves and black brush. Up ahead through a thick brush, I hear muted, *is that gurgling?* Cautiously, I try to peek through the otherside, but my traveling buddy bolts towards the noise! *What are you doing!?!* Forced into action, I valiantly follow, seeing a titanic snake coiled up on the ground.

To my shock, I see a number of my kind spotted over the creature. My buddy quickly climbs up the girthy serpent, and huddles up with another skink. Another loud gurgle, comes with a little rustle from the gargantuan coils. Some creature was recently consumed by the snake, and is still trying to fight back against the massive predator. A number of my kind are stacked by the bulging scales, so I wander over. I scamper up, using the sticky webbing of my feet to easily climb its thick black scales. They are hot, feeling strangely hypnotizing to touch. The heat of digestion provides a very comfortable platform to lay on, and the snake does not seem to mind the company!

The creature's stomach rumbles and clenches under its thick scales, grinding against a still wiggling lump inside. Sunlight beams over the lengthy coils of the slumbering serpent, providing an organic heater to bask on. I decide to stick around and observe this strange phenomenon. *These little skinks use a massive predator to deter others from snacking on them!* They are not even a snack to the snake, so in a fascinating way, they are safe around the creature. *Is it possible they potentially lead, or distract their predators for the serpent to devour? A symbiotic relationship?*

Whatever is inside eventually succumbs to its natural demise. The scales of the snake heat up while its stomach churns over its prey. A natural cycle, life transfers from one to another. I waddle along its lengthy, coiled up body, counting at least ten of my kind camouflaged on its scales. Eventually I make it to the serpents triangular head. I sit in front of its maw. *Should I explore this creature more thoroughly?* Its black tongue flicks out and tickles my scales before making its slimy way back into its mouth. The eyes of the snake are almost as big as me, opening up and staring into mine. *Perhaps I do not have a choice in the matter.* I accept that it may swallow me up, but it flicks me with its drooling tongue again. Its maw stretches open with a yawn, two large fangs jut out with a small drip of venom before the black fleshy abyss closes. The stench of acid-drenched fur wafts from its throat. To my surprise, it lowers its head back down, and falls back into a lazy slumber.

*Absolutely intriguing! The serpent understands, or at least considers my species to not be on the menu. What a bizarre phenomenon! I do not think I am forcing my way into those jaws anytime soon. Oh well, I am sure I will find one of the natural predators of my kind, if I wander around carelessly.* So I scamper down its coils once more, passing by my travel buddy on its bulging belly. The feeling of sun warmed dirt graces my feet, not as satisfying as the serpentine scales, but enjoyable nonetheless. Scurrying along, I hope to find a suitable specimen to learn more in depth about.

I walk on, leaving the safety snake behind, feeling a little cheery for returning the skink to a nice location. After passing by a number of creeks, I spot something I have not seen before. Drooping its head low, this odd creature drinks from the thick running river of blue, unidentified liquids. It has the head of an eagle, but with black and blue feathers spread around. Yet it transitions to what appears to be the body of a lion. Its front two legs go down to bird-like talons, while its back two are paws. Feathered wings spread from its back like that of a dragon. Such a

beautiful beast, but I would imagine it would not mind indulging upon my form. It could swallow me whole, the needed factor for this species consumption.

To test my hypothesis, I noisily step out into the open. It stops drinking, spreading its wings, flying at me with its open talons. In a second I am pinned to the moist dirt. It opens its beak up over top of me, sloppy blue liquid dribbles from its wet maw, a slimy purple interior. The pressure lifts off me as it snaps down over my midsection. I apply my usual passive traits that will allow for my survival. Aggressive lurches squelch as its head jerks back trying to orient my body into its dark blue beak. My head spins with each shaking motion it makes.

Its slimy tongue licks over my belly, spreading bird saliva across my hard scales. The pungent breath of the beast huffs over me as it finally lines me up with its throat. It closes its beak over all but half of my lengthy tail, which flops out of the side of its mouth. The thin, purple tongue of the creature slaps over my scales, lubricating my body to effortlessly slide me down its gullet. *With how my body is being handled, my species has to have been snacked on a lot!* It snaps its beak to adjust my position as it tastes me, poking at my scales with its salivating muscle. Its maw still dribbles with the translucent blue liquid that pools at the back of its throat. The muscles of its neck flex, splashing the fluids onto my face for further lubrication. Drool spills from rough ridges on its upper palate, enough to leak from its beak, dripping from my tail outside.

Wafting from its throat is the foul stench of digestion in action. The beast huffs while it gives me a thorough tongue bath, bathing me in its steamy breath. The warmth feels lovely and the rugged muscle scrapes nicely against my scales. *I wonder if Revox is watching!* A shift makes the beast stir, causing a hasty change of actions from the creature. It raises its head, pressing me into its slimy throat. A sharp upward lunge coincides with a heavy *Glrp!* My head and upper torso squelch into its esophagus. *Glup—glurp—gorp!* A rapid series of gut turning swallows slurps my tail into its beak, and quickly shuttles me down its throat.

Rippling peristaltic waves of tight purple flesh squeeze hard against my scales. I instinctually squirm but the rolling muscles pin my legs against my body. Its neck shifts back, bending the tube—simultaneously squishing me along faster. Saliva showers down from above with more swift swallows. *It will not be long till I reach its belly!* A slimy gurgle rumbles below, evidence to my thoughts as the noises grow nearer. A sickly acidic stench wafts from its depths, I detect a miasma of wet hair, digesting meat, and soured berries. Yet before I can try any better to make my guess, a side valve opens up and slurps me into a folded chamber with a load of slimy saliva.

*Of course! The creature is part bird, it has a crop!* I imagine I am at the base of its neck, tucked in a little bit below its spine, and just above its churning stomach. The beast's heart pounds further in, the passage to its lungs passes over my chamber, loudly roaring with each breath. *The fact that I am being stored means that its belly is already packed with prey!* Rough grinding, and smushes of matter noisily sloshes within its belly, proving me right.

Its crop squishes against me tight, trapping my legs into different wrinkles, swallowing up my tail in a long winding crevasse of flesh. My face plows into a pink paste at the backend of its purple sac. *Looks like I am not the only food waiting in line.* The squashed remains of a few pulpy berries press over my head. The beast moves around, each heavy step works more pink mush over my scales. I rock back and forth in its crop, soaking in the sweltering heat of its slimy purple flesh.

A sudden lunge catches me off guard, my chamber pressed firmly into its gurgly stomach. Chaotic shifts and changes of direction dictate the creature has taken flight. A feathered bird-lion, like a tiny dragon soaring in the sky. A fantastic find, one that I will be able to shift into when this is all over. A loud groan comes from its belly, followed by a soupy suction sound. The hard beat of its wings causes a commotion inside its body, liquids flow into its intestines with muscular clenches.

After a couple minutes, the beast lands. Its slimy flesh holds me too tight to jostle around very much, but I Schluck back and forth with the pink paste a little bit. Another loud growl comes from its stomach, followed by a suckling gurgle. Swallows come from above, quick gulps that send a flood of thick fluids into its stomach. A load of blue liquid oozes in with me at the shifting of its esophageal valve. I am facing the wrong way, so I feel the warm fluid slush over my tail—under and over my belly—then finally pooling with the pink pulp encapsulating my head.

An organic shifting of muscles squash against its crop. It squeezes down hard, pushing me up with all the mush. The valve at the top swallows my tail with a guttural *squelch*. *A growling stomach, forceful clenches. The creature is going to send me to its belly!* The flesh rolls, as if collapsing in itself, squeezing me out like toothpaste. My tail slides over and down, a sharp kneading of flesh helps tug me from its crop. It does not take long before my belly and head pop back into its esophagus, though this time I am facing the other way! I stare up at the tunnel I came down.

Natural peristalsis takes over, I see the rippling muscles constricting down its throat towards me. A hard swallow tugs me past its crop, sending me towards its stomach. My tail tickles at the entrance, which opens up to a dizzying stench of digestion. Warped meat and berries fill my lungs as I squeeze through the tight sphincter. The fetorous chyme flutters against my tail before my back legs and body are forced into the beast's belly.

I am met with a strange concoction of colors when my head slushes inside. Blue fluids mix into a hodgepodge of digesting pink berries, chunks of softened meat, and bones, making a painter's mixed jar of watercolor. Black fur clumps against its purple flesh, churning rhythmically over all the slop. *Given the stench, black hair... yes! There is an antler! This has to be one of those tiny rabbit-esk species I have seen hopping around, or at least, what is left of one!* I cannot tell if it was torn apart, or swallowed whole like me. Its stomach does not care, gurgling loudly with my introduction.

Watery enzymes secrete from the purple walls, mixing into the mashed up medley. Sloppy burbles create a wet reeking mess. My tail gets kneaded in a long suckling wrinkle, legs pulled under the foamy surface while my head is submerged in the pool of digesting chyme. Chunky berry bits squirt around, squishing into my belly and over my back. *At least the heat is nice.* The growling flesh is eager to digest me, a plethora of acids seep from the walls, ramping up the heat even more. Muscular churns become more pronounced, grinding hard against my rocky scales. Sloppy sludge splats and mixes with each clenching tide of flesh.

The stomach systematically balls up all the fur and bones into a knitted pellet while it churns. After the fur collects a broken bit of antler, a strange noise squelches through the creature. Its body bends down, a gagging slurry of muscles separates me, and the rest of its meal from the indigestible materials. The esophageal entrance grips onto the pellet, and begins to shuttle it up with grotesque slimy sounds. I hear the suction as it regurgitates the mass, spilling out of its beak with a guttural cough. A number of swallows sends in gushes of saliva with a few rogue bits of leftover hair.

A sudden lurch sends me to the bottom of its gut, pushing through the pulpy chyme until I am pinned into a kneading fold. *The beast took flight again!* Rhythmic, muscular beating of wings makes its stomach a chaotic storm. Before I was held firm, but now? I slush all over, its stomach churns still, clenching up even more. The sac constricts into a condensed ball as its wings flap down, then squishes into a column when it goes into a slight freefall. Its belly takes advantage of the muscular storm, grinding profusely. The rough, velvet like walls remind me of a lion's tongue, grazing against the grain of my scales. *I wonder if the beast has the cognitive capacity to understand that flying speeds up digestion? Is its stomach more lion or eagle?*

As quick as it started, the flying ends with a rough landing. A high pitch squawk comes from the bird creature, rumbling its guts. *Sglorp!* Its lower sphincter sucks in some of the more processed chyme while its stomach continues to churn. Each heavy step from its hybrid feet makes the stomach sway, abruptly stopping, sloshing everything around during a violent squeeze. A number of swallows echo above, followed by a flood of blue liquid. Its wrinkled gut expands with the sudden influx, bloating out slightly. *Flying certainly builds a thirst!*

Its stomach gurgles loudly, churning over the abundance of chyme and fluids. It swallows again, but this time I hear the slick suction as matter slurps into the sac above. *The creature is storing food for later! I wonder if it knows I am still alive and well?* I decide to test its cognitive capacities, thrashing about with more room inside its gut. The muscular walls clench tight, wrapping around my slapping tail, and pinning me into a fold of purple flesh. *Well it definitely felt that! Though it is more than possible the creature is aware that this species of skink can be quite resistant.*

Squishy noises come from above, the sounds of its crop pushing out paste. A swallow smushes more pulpy berries into my scales, this time an assortment of blue. I press my feet into its fleshy walls, kneading angrily while I squirm, trying to see what it will do. Another couple of swallows come from above. Rather than food, three black rocks plop heavily into its gut.

*Fascinating, it has realized I am being stubborn, rocks are harmless to its gut, but should aid in pulverizing my rocky scales! For a feral beast, it has a smart solution!*

Its stomach angrily churns the stones, grinding them roughly against my scales. They clack and clatter, making even more noise inside this gastric chamber. Chunks of stubborn meat break up with the aid of the rocks, berries are pulverized faster. I want to push the creature further; figure out if it has any other tricks! I wait for the onslaught to calm down, but it never ends. With the addition of stones, its digestive system remains active, squeezing me hard against them in folded flesh. I push out again, with the pressure and grinding, I would have been dead if it was not for my passive traits. The beast squawks angrily almost, as if it came to the same conclusion as me! *Perhaps this species is more intelligent than I gave it credit! What will it do next?*

*Glrp—Gulp!* Its solution is to swallow something else. Pouring into its belly are a number of hard black berries, swallowed whole. The stomach bloats, it sends it all inside rather than storage. *So its new idea is to bloat its gut, drown me in a sea of food. Certainly it should know by now that there has not been air in here for a while already.* It keeps eating, the wrinkles of its gut expand with each addition. Angry groans and protests grumble out from the flesh. It churns on, breaking up the pungent sweet scent of new berries into the mix. Acids secrete in large loads to digest the mass.

A sudden strong force slams into the beast from outside. It lets out a guttural screech that pierces my ears. Its stomach shakes wildly with its movements. Whatever is happening outside, the creature is struggling against something. I feel its wings trying to flap, but it all begins to slow down. The fleshy walls of its gut start to relax, the beating of its heart calms, and the influxes of its breaths lull. *What could possibly be going on out there?*

The noises are faint, but outside I hear something slimy. *A swallow?* The beast's body shunts a bit, lurching its currently-inactive stomach. Another suction sound, coinciding with a sudden jerk forward. The sounds grow nearer, like the crinkling of flesh over feathers. A hard squeeze crushes down around its midsection where I am, now I hear a much more pronounced *Sglrp. The creature is being consumed! Did I inadvertently put its guard down with my research? Oh dear.* The swallows become louder, flesh kneads against my predator, in turn squishing down its stomach. I can feel the peristalsis of another's flesh crushing the poor beast's body with each wave of pressure.

Hard jerking sashes push along its spasming body. Muscles grind over feathers and fur, jostling me inside the relaxed sac. *Whatever took down my beast used some form of tranquilizer. Venom—The snakes—Of course! A grizzly way to go, but not unlike the fate it tried to condemn me to.*

*Groorp—slursh.* More of my beast is pulled into the serpent, being devoured whole. Slimy swallows ripple with peristaltic waves, shunting the creature inside. I am along for the ride, being sashed inside an inactive stomach, slushing against relaxed quivering flesh. It certainly feels

active, being churned by the muscular throat of a third party. The black berries are resistant, hard like a rock, but slowly start to soften during our descent to the snake's stomach. Roaring lungs line the serpents esophagus, helping squish its throat and shuttle its meal inside with each crushing breath. The pounding of a serpentine heart booms as we pass, sloshing meat and berries with each pulse.

The snake begins to slither along, my carrier has been fully ingested, still making its way to the stomach. Movements grind in a wave like pattern as its body slides noisily along the ground, heard even through multiple layers of flesh. Circular constrictions wrap around as I imagine the snake is coiling up upon itself after filling its digestive quota. A loud, rumbling yawn punctuates its meal.

Nature takes its course, gastric gurgles are muted from outside, but the serpent is so large that the bassy noises rumble through. The forward movements halt for a moment, but a squeeze slowly pulses over the creature. There is a sudden lurch that seems to suck the majority of the creature along. A rhythmic kneading of flesh with a long grumbling *guuurple*. *We must have reached its stomach.*

I feel the beast twitch and stir. *The venom must be wearing off.* I think back to the snake before, its coils were squirming. Like déjà vu, but now on the inside. The creature's bodily systems reboot, its stomach begins to churn me thoroughly once more. Panicked struggles kick out from the beast, creating a series of moist squelches outside. The more awake it becomes the more violent the movements grow. Hard clenching squeezes of outward muscles pin the creature tight, working it over like I have been these last few hours. *There is always a bigger fish!* I cannot help but feel a little at fault for the inevitable digestion of the majestic creature. Doomed to suffer the same fate it gave many others.

The rocks still clatter, the noises are doubled being in two separate stomachs. A flurry of slushing moments makes the whole place a gastric frenzy of gurgles and groans. The bubbling crinkles of flesh pressing—squeezing down on the creature condenses its own stomach over me. The black berries digest loudly, spewing out a magenta pulp that coats my scales. A little tingle bleeds through my scales. *That should not be happening, why am I feeling numb!?! The berries are toxic! It ate them to subdue me! How is this happening?!?* I begin to panic myself. Thrashing about, becoming numb all over. *How could I have forgotten. This species absorbs nutrients through its scales!* I shift my traits, trying to filter out the poison, but the toxins have already taken hold.

Loud groans echo all around, but they start to sound muted. My vision becomes grainy and black as poison fills my veins. I exert my energy to try and deduce what toxin it could be, I have spent years discovering traits that counteract fatal poisons. *A numbing agent—not fatal. It has to be, I cannot filter it—I cannot.* **Darkness.**

A hard squeeze, a tight clench—I shoot awake. Immediately overwhelmed by a messy sputtering of putrid gas. A most foul smell sizzles my senses, opening my eyes to a sea of



chyme. Black flesh scrunches over the mess, the remains of my former predator is nothing but a sloshing soup inside the serpent. *How long was I out? It looks like I am in its intestinal tract. Snakes have a long winded digestion—it is been days—weeks! I hope Revox is ok out there.* I slush around, wiggling villi poke at me, each the length of my toes. The snake is massive, pushing along the once graceful bird creature. Tufts and clumps of fur shuttle along undigested. Snapped and abused feathers litter the gooey slop, creating a hairy, feathered nutrient soup to be slowly absorbed by the large predator. *This creature does not regurgitate the keratin mess of furs and feathers! Indigestible materials just sop right through—Is that a claw?* A solid bit of its talon rubs into me with another peristaltic pulse. *How intriguing!*

The snake's interior is not as hot as I expected. *It must be night time, cold-blooded creatures digestion slows without additional warmth from the sun!* A rough peristaltic churn slushes me into the vile remains of the creature. I try to get over the fact I potentially got the beast into this situation, but I feel horrible for doing so. I do not like tampering with the natural cycle of life. The only thing to take my mind off of it is to focus on the predator at hand. This massive digestive tube, a serpent.

Black wiggling villi line all along its small intestine, battering against my scales while it suckles up its meal. The little velvety nubs pick at my tail, tugging me through the viscous goop. Even in such a massive creature, I have little room to move. The chyme is spread throughout its system, slurped around enough that the surface area of its flesh blankets every bit of the soup. Its small intestine zigzags to provide more folded creases to suckle at the liquified nutrients. A strong roll of muscles squishes me tight against a lion-like claw that is tangled up in some fur.

It absolutely reeks, sulphuric with the stench of long digested meat. I can even detect the distinct scent of the creature's stomach contents fluttering around: a pungent miasma of sour berries among the abundance of meat. Food that has sat in its stomach for days, maybe even a week—possibly two! Rotten is not the proper word, it did not let the flesh and bones go bad. Digested, broken down into a gooey mush, laced with acids and enzymes. Liquified bones and meat soak the wet hair and feathers, making its fumes smell like Revox after a rainstorm on a planet with a sulphurous atmosphere. The heavy smells are absolutely oppressive, and they can only get worse with time. *I did not think I would ever find a material that reeked more than fish!*

Fur clumps to my legs, but gets yanked off by passing villi during hard clenches. The black flesh makes it harder to dictate exact details of its innards. Trickling chyme seeps into the walls, but being a soupy brown with black fur everywhere blends too well with the muscles. A camouflaged black rock scrapes against my belly scales by surprise. Mucoid secretions mix into the slop, smothering me in thick webs of salty bile. The viscous mucus and enzymes cake hair and bits of feather onto my scales. Wet burbles echo the long pipes, the sounds of slow moving liquids continuing to digest in the lengthy coils of the serpent. I notice the overall bend to its body, it feels like I am traveling in a circuit with the snake all bundled up on itself. The pressure grows the further along I am shuttled, increased weight from its heavy body compounds upon itself.

Its body begins to slowly heat up the more time that passes. *It must be morning, it is getting much hotter in here!* I feel the snake shift as its meal processes further, slithering ever so slightly to soak in more of the sun. I can certainly notice the difference. Over time its intestines become an oven, baking the putrid mix into a more pungent goo. Portions congealed overnight, creating a sticky surface that squelches messily. *Such a strange texture, reminiscent of a ralonwood's resin.* It melts into sap, dispersing with the sweltering heat. The muscles pump harder, shuttling the pesky furs and feathers with all the sloppy stew. Black flesh grips and shoves me forward in a flowing river of sludge. Each suckling ripple laps up a different portion of my body, nipping at my toes, entangling my tail, or sandwiching my head. One of the rocks is stuck following me through the sludge, occasionally clacking against the hardened scales of my back.

The digestive process gets louder as the place gets hotter. Operating at a higher efficiency, squishy squelches get more pronounced with tighter grinding flesh. The winding tube contorts and constricts its coils with messy squirts of salty smelling bile being absorbed back into the serpent's body. Up ahead I hear shlucking sounds, I crawl forward through the goopy sludge, over a rock that grinds over a claw. The villi combat my movements, getting my legs caught up in a few wriggling pockets. Eventually I make it to the front of its meal, battling through bile-webbed fur and slimy chyme. The flesh ahead opens up with strands of mucus spanning the walls, beyond that is the puckered sphincter to its large intestine.

What remains now of the beast is simply waste to be passed along, giving a hard *schlup* as a stone slurps though. One last crushing shove of hot flesh batters me into the valve with a tide of liquids and fur. For a moment, the hole only quivers, but another peristaltic squeeze flexes it open with a slimy *squelch*. I flood through with the soppy sludge, spilling out into what I can only imagine is its cecum. Its odorous of weeks past scat, stained with all the assorted animals that ended up here. Portions of its meal messily works through, soaking for a little while in the sac like flesh. The ribs knead and work over the mush, pushing me through gobs of fur and tickling me with goo covered feathers. I am acquainted with the stones, two join from behind when I slap into the one that was ahead.

A strong muscular clench voids its cecum, sending me along to further experience the fermentative process of the snake. The flesh of its colon is slick, feeling thin in comparison to its small intestine. Fur already helps the future-dung clump together, even while still mostly liquid. The fluidity quickly saps from the sludge as time goes by, ensnaring me into a thickening mush. Glorps and gurgles burble wetly in its large intestine, only a tiny amount of gas accumulates from the digested remains of berries. Mucus secretes while the scat becomes semi-solid, covering my head in the slimy substance.

A dark brown with a tinge of purple and black litter the sloppy crap. Tufts of fur make slick sounds brushing along the slimy walls. Hard squishing flesh compacts the scat together, some leftovers of weeks old dung periodically dislodges from folds farther ahead. I am at the front of its feces, but I have to fight for the position. It constantly shoves me into the creamy

interior of its still-hardening scat. I manage to scamper out, but battle the massive pile that my former predator became. *To think a creature close to the majestic elegance of a dragon can be reduced to a mere bowel movement. It could even be me if I let my guard down!*

I am coated in the stinking stuff, it cakes uncomfortably over my tail, getting caught between my toes, and globbed over my jaws. Each fleshy contraction grinds it against my scales, gluing fur under my chin, and a claw to my back. Its colon feels like a never ending tunnel. An otherwise straight shot to its vent, but curves around while the serpent is coiled up. The dizzying stench makes me lucid, catching me off guard with sudden squashing muscles.

The sweltering heat helps bake the humid cement, however it never fully stiffens up, remaining overall mushy in transit. Fibers of hair create a net that ensnares my tail, my movements are rendered useless. I am a passenger, shuttled along inside the remains of my former predator-turned shit. It keeps getting hotter as the day goes on. *I have to be close by now? What is that smell? Urine?*

Up ahead, I faintly detect it growing closer. The unmistakable pungent stench of piss. *Snakes have a cloaca...* I realize my mistake too late, sitting at the very front of the bowel movement. The shit slithers forward, pushing my face into a puckered valve. It slowly yawns open, spewing the putrid concentrate of overwhelming urine. My pile slides through, dunking me into the vile bluish-yellow liquid. Its urine is woefully thick, like the fluids it drinks from the rivers, creating a disgusting slime that slathers my face. I bump into a solidified pellet of urate, which begins to integrate into my lump of scat.

I have never experienced a concentration of feter so foul, combined with the fecal prison that entombs me. The phenomenon is fascinating, but abhorrently primal and unhygienic. I am pushed further in, I see the exit, a puckered vent that is sealed shut. By the time I am pushed against the tarnished flesh, my body is freed from the rehydrated dung. A solid chunk forces me beneath the sea of thick urine, but I fight back, managing to get stuck in the mush. Cloacal walls expand and collapse at the introduction of fecal material, cramming as much of the waste inside for storage.

I am shoved up against wet hair and feathers, soaking in a pool of fermented waste and snake pee. The fur soaks up some of the urine, lowering the pool for a moment, but more squirts in from another valve. The snake slumbers on, unaware that it is condemning me to continue living in its cloaca. It feels like hours soaking in the sweltering sea, squished constantly by contracting muscles. Fur keeps wrapping around my legs while I try to paddle, pushing up against its massive vent. Enough scat pushes in to create a quivering pressure that pins me to its upper flesh with a black stone.

Finally the snake stirs, slowly uncoiling its massive body. Each slithering movement slushes me through the appalling mush. Sticky squelches squash with the sounds of its scales scraping across rocks outside. The vent slowly opens; urine fecal medley gushes out with a strong cloacal clench. My body gets caught in the current, getting bundled up in fur like a net as

the scat shortly follows. The fleshy cloaca exit quivers upon my release, slopping me down onto the soiled rocks below. Tides of shit pile out, plopping down and trapping me underneath. At first the release carries the mushy bits that has soaked for a while. Then the long semi-solid muck slops out, pinning me in place. I did not realize how much there was, but with the size of the other creature, it feels like a whole animal is piled on top of me.

Eventually it ends, I hear the snake slither away from under all the pungent mud. The weight disperses as the scat settles. I start to claw my way out, scraping through the brown clay, digging around black clumps of fur. I avoid the pungent urates that litter the sopping dung. Finally, I break through to the outside world, skittering away from the massive pile. It is already swarming with indigenous insects while it bakes in the evening sun. What looks like a mound of slimy scat covered in fur and protruding black feathers. Thankfully there is a slow flowing river in the distance, I hurry over to clean off. I dive into the blue translucent fluid, thick compared to normal water. Thrashing around to the best of my abilities, I feel the strands of hair finally leave my scales.

I clammer out, then shapeshift into a tiny bug from Yerkin-2 to strip the harness and camera from my body. Then I shift into a dragon and wash off any of the rest that speckles my black scales. *I wonder how much Revox watched? Probably all of it.* I pick the puny harness up off the ground, and take flight back to the ship. I land just beside it on the back end, forgetting that my draconic form is effectively the same size as our space vessel. Changing shape into a blue furred anthro fox, I go around the ship and see Revox asleep in a janky foldable chair just outside. The tablet fell out of his grasp onto the ground next to his lazily slumped arm.

A devious ploy crosses my mind. One of those things that he calls a "prank." I shapeshift into the giant snake, and flick him with my tongue. Annoyingly it takes two flicking slaps to jolt the fox awake. His eyes shoot wide, spilling out of the chair onto the ground. I open my maw towards him—then change back into a fox!

"You are SUCH AN ASSHOLE. You almost gave me a fucking heart attack!" He catches his breath.

"If you did not fall asleep outside the ship, I would not have to prank you!"

"Not funny. Nothing has come even close to the ship since I landed."

"Yet."

He gets back to his feet, snatching the tablet from the ground. "Catching me with a form I understand is you is one thing, but this? I thought I was going to die." I detect that he is actually upset.

"I was just trying to be funny. Information I read on the terminals dictated that scaring is a form of comedy between individuals."

"You really haven't been around to many people, huh. Putting foam on your pillow is a prank. Flashing someone's life before their eyes isn't." He jabs.

"You are the only advanced form of intelligent life I have ever directly interacted with. I apologize if my actions were misguided, I am still getting used to how you operate." I feel bad about scaring him now. Different lives process different threats.

"I still can't believe you've never encountered anyone else. The way you speak, and the personality you have. It's unbelievable to think otherwise."

"Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"Absolutely not! You're weird, but in a good way. I can see why people would be. Like animals, they are afraid of what they don't understand. I don't know what I'd do without a friend like you! I was worried sick about you these past few days." The use of friend is strong terminology from what I understand.

"What did I do that caused you worry?" I hope I did not do anything else to cause him dismay.

"It's because you didn't move for like a week inside whatever ate that gryphon. Your vitals were low and everything. I thought I was going to lose you..." *He worries about my well-being, rather than something I caused. I worry about him too.*

"A rare mistake, I have nothing to combat sedative poisons at the moment. What was that name? Have you seen such a beast before? The winged creature?" *Why did I tell him my weakness?*

"A gryphon? I forgot you don't get out very much. It's like a fairytale thing in Central. Who knew they were real! We could make some serious money off of this one!" His mood chippers up.

"I am not used to the story telling of your kind. Works of fiction are rather mundane in my opinion." I stop myself from ranting. "Might I ask, why do you care about me?" I go to the entrance of the ship.

He shakes his head with a smiling sigh. "I can't believe I have to explain this. We've been together, what, six months and you're asking this? You're like family—not like, *actual relation*. How do I put this in a way that'll make sense to you?" He takes a moment to think, folding up the chair. "I view you as a nice person; someone I trust, even if you can be a pain in the ass sometimes. I would feel sad without you, because I like who you are."

"My feelings align with yours! I apologize for my tendencies, feral creatures are much easier to understand."

"Yeah—yeah. I know you care. Even if you don't know how to *properly* show it—and stop apologizing! I'm just surprised that the stench didn't wake me up." He keeps his distance, changing the subject. "I don't think that's coming out anytime soon my man."

"We should invest in better soap!" I step inside the small hull, taking note of the mess he has made in the (once organized) interior.

"Trust me, gryphons are like a fantasy dream. It's gonna pay out." He enters behind me after I've almost entered the bathroom. "We'll have all the bells and whistles. Maybe I can afford one of those survival pods? I can't believe our luck!" His enthusiasm brings me happiness.

"I am ready to leave if you are!"

"I think you'd really learn a lot if you actually came to the space stations with me. I'm only one of trillions in this universe you know." He shouts from his desk.

I slide half the door shut. "I do not feel comfortable with doing that yet."

"You'd be surprised that you're more 'normal' than half the people I've met."

"I will think about it..." The door jams when I try to close it, so I give up.

I walk over to the mirror after getting the shower to finally start. *I have to be more careful. Simple slips kill, it is not just myself anymore.* I get lost in random thoughts. *He is so reckless, I do not know what I would do without him. I can integrate with any random creature, but I do not understand him at all. Do I have any hope if I am caught? Am I ready?*

"You good?" Revox's voice makes me jump.

"Yeah, just waiting for the water to warm up!" The mirror is completely fogged over with steam.

"Just making sure! I'm about to take off, so try not to slip!" He unjams the door and closes it.

*I'm not alone anymore.* The hot water feels nice on my fur.