

# THE SCENT OF THINGS TO COME

*Breathing is believing.*

BY J. R. JOHNSON

The big male roared as the door behind me opened. Wade walked onto the observation deck just as a thick, wet splat hit the far side of our one-way mirror. I tried to hide a snigger and failed.

"I don't care what BlackSky's techs say, Elsa, those bastards can sense us through the divider," Wade said, eyeing the dripping pile of excrement and wrinkling his nose. "This place reeks. He does that every time I come in."

I frowned, but not in disgust. "Really?" I brought up old readouts on my lab tab by flicking a finger. "This is the first time I've seen Phil do that."

Wade snorted. "Phil? You're naming them now?"

Despite the three PhDs that made him my boss, Wade was an idiot. I was an evolutionary biologist tasked with understanding why this dying colony had regressed into something less — or other — than human. Of course I'd named them.

"You'd be pissed too, if you were one of the last of your kind."

A man of limited imagination, Wade just shrugged. Still, he wasn't wrong about the smell.

A mix of proteins, pheromones, gaseous chemicals and some unknown component gave the air a pungent aroma that often defeated even the lab's filtration system. I hadn't noticed it for months.

"Got anything for me?"

Ah. Time for our weekly 'why aren't you making more' progress' meeting, followed by what Wade called research and I called a travesty.

"I'm studying the natives' use of chemo-signalling."

Wade sighed but let me continue.

"Their olfactory cortex is huge. It's active in social identification and behaviour, but the data also indicate that odour performs physiological functions. Functions that are in the process of transforming."

His eyes glazed over but I was desperate to discuss the puzzle. I pulled up my research results. "See these curves? Phil is pumping out high levels of hormone elevators. Could this be a reaction to their declining birthrate?"

Wade frowned. "I don't care, and neither should you. We're here to analyse the cave's chemical make-up and exploit it. That's it."



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wounds at the sides of his neck. Our research showed that they were still genetically quite similar to humans. Close enough, Wade had said, eyeing a well-endowed female.

This was my chance, and after that containment incident with Omega Corp's asteroid lab, well ... Trying to save the crew was all that kept me credentialled.

"We're done here," Wade said. "Want to get a drink?"

I didn't bother looking at him, knowing that he would be ogling me with what we in the trade call 'space goggles'.

"I should keep working. Or else, right?" The painful frisson of fear

tightening my throat was better motivation than Wade's clumsy threats.

As the door whispered shut, Phil turned and looked straight at me. The nodes on either side of his neck flared a deep red, and a scent more pungent than any yet recorded flooded the sensors. Strong, yes, but it no longer disgusted me. It made me feel ... hungry.

I checked the readout and frowned back down at my tablet. The numbers looked off.

The odour wasn't all external.

Hunched over in fear and anticipation, I inhaled the new smell coming from my body, then winced as a rough patch on my neck rubbed against my jumpsuit's collar. Fresh skin, transforming.

That wasn't the only change. I could sense Phil like a beacon through the lab wall, his scent a melody I almost recognized. He stood in silence, then extended his hand.

The self-doubt that had haunted me since Omega melted away; I knew what I needed to do. What I wanted to do.

My tablet chimed with a new message from Wade: "Remember, Elsa, something new, something hot!"

No one saw me cross the hall to the cave's access hatch, or heard the squeal as I jerked it open and slipped inside — to Phil, and to the way I could fix the birthrate problem and stop BlackSky at the same time.

With quarantine alarms ringing, I sent my final message as a BlackSky employee: "Wade. I've found my 'sexy idea'. We'll be in touch." ■

Pompous ass, so what if his last post was lecturer on MIT's flagship vessel? Everyone knew he didn't get tenure.

"You do want to keep your job, right, Elsa?"

I knew what he was about to say and didn't want to hear it.

"If you're going to dig yourself out of this rock and back to civilization, you need a project with legs. Something sexy."

Unlike Wade, I no longer thought about returning to Earth. What I wanted was my reputation back, and work worthy enough to make up for past misdeeds.

I'd find a way to get the birthrate back on track with or without Wade.

When company surveyors reported that the locale's chemistry promised an extensive range of new materials and that the inhabitants were on their last legs, BlackSky couldn't set up fast enough.

Hollowed from the mountain, BlackSky's lab was supposed to let us collect data on Phil and his depleted clan undetected. The plan was a bust. An hour after completion, one of Phil's relatives began knocking on the mirror, which to him should have looked like any other rock face.

The one-way pane overlaid the dim cave view with readouts, but I watched the occupants. Ostensibly my job was to keep the poor creatures from gasping their last — at least until they signed resource-extraction contracts in Galactaspeak. Not entirely ethical, but I needed the job. My gut twisted at the thought of screwing up again.

Phil was cute, in an off-kilter way. I could ignore the extra phalanges and the sensory glands like open

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