

# Futures

## On the ice of Nix

A slippery slope. By Mari Ness



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**A**nother slip. A tiny one. Another lurch, a huge one. Another – Her teeth sunk into her lips, drawing blood. She was *not* going to scream. She was *not*.

She was *not* going to give anyone that satisfaction.

Assuming anyone was even listening. Probably not. But she could not – would not – ignore the possibility – the probability – that her suit also held some sort of recording device, allowing them to check on her regularly. A device she would have to locate and destroy. Until then –

No screaming.

No matter how much her brain was shrieking.

Not from the cold, or from the ice, or the isolation. But from the vertigo, the horrific unceasing vertigo, the way the stars kept shifting and spinning and the way the ice and rock beneath her –

No.

She had never succumbed to vertigo before. Not on Earth. Not in her first orbit. Not on the ship that had brought her here. She was not going to succumb to it now, no matter how unstable she felt. She and her supplies were firmly tethered to the ice, damn it. Too firmly tethered, at that, which was part of the problem. Her head was free, as was her left hand, but everything else –

*oh god I'm falling*

She could taste the blood in her mouth.

No.

Focus.

Swallow.

falling

SWALLOW.

Her suit automatically recycled her urine and sweat, forcing water back into her veins through the IVs set into her wrists. But not her saliva, or blood in her mouth. *Swallow*. She couldn't afford to lose any fluids. Which also meant that she *had* to stop biting her lip, even when –

*falling falling falling*

– when it wasn't her imagination, not completely. The ice beneath her was shifting constantly and erratically. If anything – anything – happened to the tethers, she would – she could –

Rip out the alarm now ringing in her ear, warning her that her pulse was elevated. *That's all this is. Pounding heart. That's it.* She would get this under control. She would. All she had to do was *breathe* and –

*dropping*

– get her heart rate down, then pretend that this was just one of the amusement park rides she had loved so much as a kid. Perfectly safe.

*oh god stop spinning stop spinning –*

And think of something else. *Anything* else. Like how to get the hell away from here.

*falling*

Supply ships would be coming every three months. *Drone* ships, which meant no hope of overcoming a human crew, but every hope – *if* she could regain some independent movement, if she could free her other arm – of capturing some technology, some battery

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power, *something* to help her get off this rock. It wouldn't take that much; part of the tethering was meant –

Another slip.

*no no no*

No.

She was not going to cry. Tears could be as dangerous as blood, if not more – she had no hope of swallowing them and no certainty that her suit would absorb and recycle them. Which meant losing not just blood, but *salt*. Salt she had no hope of replacing. She'd been left with only lab-created, salt-free nutrients. To prevent kidney stones, she'd been told.

Her heart *pounded*.

*Don't waste the oxygen*. That, she had plenty of – no one wanted her to *die*, after all. But she would need it if –

*falling*

– she did slide off. The drone resupply ship, with its fresh oxygen and nutrients, could find her only if she stayed on this rock. Specifically, stayed on this patch of ice. If she headed elsewhere, the drone ship would not follow her.

Would not be able to follow her.

Not that she had much of *elsewhere* to head to – 42 kilometres at most of rock, and otherwise –

*falling*

Her fingers bent into the ice.

No.

And that assumed that she could even go anywhere on the rock without –

Another lurch, this one bad enough that for a full a five seconds, she thought she *had* slipped off, until the pain in her fingers told her otherwise.

Careful. She did not know how strong her suit was. She did know that she didn't want to test that. They had not left her anything to repair the suit, if she tore it.

They had not left her with much at all.

Just the ability to live – to breathe – and, yes, *float*.

*Float*.

She forced herself to look up – or down – whatever, it didn't matter – at the spinning stars, and the two tiny nearby discs.

One of which had a base. A base with at most four people at a time. And sometimes, even a – *oh god I can't take anymore of this I can't I can't*

But she could.

She *would* conquer this. She *would*. She would get used to the constant tumbling, the way the stars above were never still, and somehow – somehow – use her limited supplies, or the robot drones to escape. A *controlled* escape, not just a slide into space. After all, she'd killed far too many people to stop now. And at that thought – the thought of killing still more – the ice beneath her finally seemed to pause, allowing her fingers to grip it again a little more tightly, and allowing her to swallow every tiny drop of her own blood.

**Mari Ness** is a speculative fiction writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *Tor.com*, *ClarksWorld*, *Lightspeed*, *Fireside*, *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare* and more.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Mari Ness reveals the inspiration behind *On the ice of Nix*.



I have occasional to frequent episodes of severe vertigo. When in one, it's hard to think of anything else, and hard to think of how to escape.