

# DESTINY OMEGA

2023 UPDATED EDITION

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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### BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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Email: shetiraanwae @ gmail.com

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	... <a href="#"><u>Shetari Anwae</u></a>
2	... <a href="#"><u>Punctuality</u></a>
3	... <a href="#"><u>Process</u></a>
4	... <a href="#"><u>Lifestyle</u></a>
5	... <a href="#"><u>Lioness</u></a>
6	... <a href="#"><u>Authority</u></a>
7	... <a href="#"><u>Security</u></a>
8	... <a href="#"><u>Vixanti Three</u></a>
9	... <a href="#"><u>Captain Anwae</u></a>
10	... <a href="#"><u>Rats</u></a>
11	... <a href="#"><u>Descent</u></a>
12	... <a href="#"><u>Control</u></a>
13	... <a href="#"><u>Darkness</u></a>
14	... <a href="#"><u>Evolution</u></a>
15	... <a href="#"><u>Identity</u></a>
16	... <a href="#"><u>Home</u></a>
17	... <a href="#"><u>Peril</u></a>
18	... <a href="#"><u>Storm Clouds</u></a>
19	... <a href="#"><u>Destiny Omega</u></a>
20	... <a href="#"><u>Intruder</u></a>
21	... <a href="#"><u>Power</u></a>
22	... <a href="#"><u>Consequences</u></a>
23	... <a href="#"><u>Desire</u></a>
24	... <a href="#"><u>Unity</u></a>

# ONE

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## SHETARI ANWAE

Shetari Anwae was deeply disappointed. She had been expecting to find herself someplace interesting. Exotic, even. But this... this was just a bland old office park. Ruddy red brick. Darkly tinted glass. Ordinary. Nondescript. Generic. Surely, she had been given the wrong address.

The perplexed young cheetah looked back over her shoulder, toward the narrow gap in the tall, wrought iron fence and the little bus stop beyond. She had read the lot number three times. 10445. 10445 Spaceport Road. That was the address she had been given for the job interview, but this couldn't possibly be the place, could it?

She looked down at the cheap, poorly fitting chrome plated chronometer that adorned her left wrist. It was 12:22. Her interview had been scheduled for 12:45. There had been a very clear emphasis on punctuality. If this wasn't really the place, there was no time left to figure out where she was actually supposed to be. She'd be screwed. Completely, totally screwed. Getting this job wasn't just important to her future. It was absolutely vital.

There was no getting around it anymore. She was just too deeply in debt. There were no more clever tricks she could use to keep her ever increasing number of less than savory creditors at bay. Too many monthly bills were going unpaid. The rent was going to be late again, for the third month in a row. She had received her final warning already. There would be no more second chances. It was pay up, or get out.

The humiliating prospect of facing life in one of the city's damp, dingy and terribly

underfunded destitute women's shelters loomed only a few short days away. It would be that or get out of the city and go something that universal basic income could actually pay for. If she accepted the latter, then she'd have to accept a return to the dull and depressing rural life that she'd fought so hard to escape. She couldn't do. She wouldn't do it. Not now. Not ever.

There seemed to be only one way out now. One last ditch attempt to salvage her situation and save herself from a collapse that was likely to be as much psychological as financial. That wishful last chance was the prospect of a big signing bonus from one of the most enigmatic and inscrutable companies ever to have set up shop, well, pretty much anywhere.

As Shetari continued down the narrow concrete path, she daydreamed about what it would feel like to finally pay off all of those frustrating debts. All of those annoying bills would be made current, with no more piling up

of absurd, snowballing late fees. Most importantly, her rent would go in on time, with a little bit extra set aside for the property manager. As crotchety as the old woman was, she was at least willing to make past transgressions mysteriously disappear from the ledger, if the price was right. It seemed like such a pointless thing, but it would be of great usefulness down the road, when she needed that all-powerful reference to help in finding herself a much classier place to call home.

She would even have a little bit left over to treat herself to something nice. Maybe she could buy herself a high end military style chronometer. That would be so much better than her current ten credit piece of tat that always seemed to stop working at the moment that it would cause the most inconvenience. Or maybe she could get herself a new outfit, something like the short cream colored dress she was currently wearing, but better. It could be real silk, and with trim in her favorite shade of emerald green. That would look so much

better than the bland, slightly odd shade of blue that she had little choice to content herself with for the time being. If she counted how much extra her first regular paycheck would be, maybe she could even get some pretty silver embroidering on the sash that wrapped around the waist and held it all together.

Even her current outfit had been a bargain basement purchase of total desperation. It was the last play in her played out book of interview tactics. She had to look strong. Fit. Sexy. If that meant showing quite a bit more thigh than she was generally comfortable with, then so be it. Hopefully the interviewing manager would be more interested in the tone of her muscles than with the less than subtle suggestion of further natural vistas, potentially available upon request. She had steeled herself for the possible need to seal matters by charting even that unfathomable course, and to aid matter along she'd selected a particularly alluring pair of skimpy white panties that



would leave little to the imagination. And, if she had to take off even that little bit of cloth to satisfy certain inquiries about her current, vastly inflated level of willingness to offer casual physical intimacy in exchange for the job, then so be it. She was going to have that job, one way or another, no matter how temporarily demeaning it might be.

Of course, Shetari was really hoping that matters would be settled without even a hint of turning down those roads best left untraveled. Even such an eccentric place as Vixanti Corporation was known for its high degree of professionalism. Granted, everything they did seemed to be downright bizarre from an outsider's perspective. On the odd occasion, it even touched upon the positively perverse. But, no matter how far off the technological deep end they seemed to be going on any given day, everything was always clean, top notch, and presented with impeccable style. No one who had worked there ever seemed to have a bad word to say about the place. A very, very

strange word on occasion, but certainly never a bad one. Indeed, despite Vixanti's reputation for pushing the limits of what ought to be considered acceptable for an employer to impose upon the lifestyle of an employee, they consistently rated at near one hundred percent in every poll taken of the overall satisfaction of former employees. That didn't just place them in the top tier of businesses in that respect. They were the top tier, and by a very large margin.

Then again, there was always the possibility that the polls were simply skewed by the nature of the people who were willing to accept those unusual impositions in the first place. Most folks seeking a highly paid position in a company working on the very edges of what was physically possible wouldn't even begin to consider accepting what Vixanti Corporation demanded. It's not that it was particularly onerous, at least on the surface. It was really just a matter of what you had to wear. All day. Every day. In public. In private.

It couldn't come off, not for one moment, except as explicitly authorized. It was there to stay until your employment with Vixanti came to an end. If it came to an end. Vixanti wasn't just the highest rated company with former employees. It also had the highest percentage of self-declared "lifers" of any company in the Empire.

No one really seemed to know exactly what Vixanti's unique, mandatory attire was made of. It was black. Very, very black. It had a seamless, mirror-like sheen. And, most notably, it was so perfectly form fitting that it left very little to the imagination. Indeed, it was hard for many folks to see much difference between wearing it and running around quite nearly naked in public.

Despite her momentary moral flexibility born of out of sheer desperation, Shetari was actually rather prudish by fey'li standards. The prospect of having the shape of her body so openly and continuously on display for anyone

to gawk at gave her considerable pause. Not quite enough pause to turn around and accept the alternative, of course, but pause nonetheless. More unsettling to her, however, were the completely undisputed rumors that were always circulating around the tabloids in one form or another. It was said that the bizarre black something that hugged the bodies of every man, woman, or otherwise who worked for Vixanti was not the inanimate bit of all-revealing attire that it seemed to be. If the rumors were to be believed, that blackness was actually... alive!

Shetari had heard of all of the rumors, of course. She didn't believe them one bit. Even a company like Vixanti wouldn't be able to hide something so crazy as that. Not for very long, at least. Sure, the suits were still technically 'in development', but they had existed in one public form or another for years. The government had rated them as being perfectly safe for experimental and product testing use. They had even been rated as effective

alternative technology vacuum suits.

There was nothing mysterious about the suits, really. They were just a different approach to certain practical problems of the spacefaring lifestyle. Vixanti, for all its outward oddity, was just a company willing to throw away other people's thickheaded insistence that things need to always be done to one particular set of technological standards, specifically composed to dictate one particular set of solutions. All of the mystery surrounding their developments was almost certainly just part of their marketing strategy. The more that people were talking about Vixanti, the better, even if it that talk was mostly wild rumor and rampant speculation.

Shetari shook her head as she tried to imagine herself done up all in that impossibly glossy blackness, from right under her fuzzy white muzzle, all the way down to her toes. She absolutely hated tight clothing of any sort. There was no way to get everything all settled

without having at least one patch of fur being twisted around in the wrong direction. Even the simple act of putting on a pair of shoes was a daily frustration. Like most fey'li, she preferred to wear sandals whenever she could. That wouldn't be an option anymore. The Vixanti uniform took care of all of a wearer's clothing needs, all in one skin tight package, modest heels included. She'd just have to deal with it, mused up fur or not. Assuming everything went according to plan, of course.

Shetari gave a sharp yank to the leash she all too often forgot to put on her wandering mind. She was losing sight of her ultimate objective. There was a question to answer now, and time was growing short. Which building was she supposed to go to?

Time wasn't merely growing short, it was running out. The late running midday bus had made sure of that. Her chronometer read 12:28. She had to choose quickly. Did the whole ring of six identical buildings belong to Vixanti

Corporation? Even if they did, which one was the correct one? If they were all like the one that was on the direct path from the bus stop, directly in front of her, there was no way to tell them apart. There was no number. No sign. And nothing to indicate that they were owned by Vixanti at all.

The design of the office park made it fairly obvious that the building she was now facing was the first place any random visitor coming in from the street was intended to go. This was Vixanti she was dealing with, however. Nothing had been obvious, not even the convoluted manner through which she had been required to find the proper set of digital forms to apply with. Was there some further puzzle that she had missed? The invitation for the interview had seemed so clear and direct. But again, this was Vixanti. More detailed instructions hidden between the lines in invisible ink didn't seem entirely out of the question.

Shetari knew she'd look like an idiot if she showed up in the wrong place. It was a mistake she simply couldn't afford to make, but how could she figure out which was which in the time she had left? It was 12:30. She had fifteen minutes to decide.

"Fuck it," she muttered under her breath as she gave up thought for action. At this point, what did she have to lose? She started across the broad, concrete path that circled the buildings. She couldn't help but notice that it was nearly overgrown in places. Indeed, only the path she was following, from the bus stop to the building ahead, was relatively clear of vegetation. While it only added to her confusion about the nature of the place as a whole, at least it helped ease her mind as to which building she was intended to visit.

As she approached the nearly opaque glass doorway, Shetari's eyes were drawn to her left, to the barrier of tall pine trees, tangled vines, and half dead shrubbery that served as a sound



barrier for the Mashiva Spaceport's West Extension. She could just barely see a hint of concrete through the tiny gaps in the dense vegetation. It was one of the big hangars, no doubt. She had seen them from the road as the bus had rounded the end of the spaceport's main landing way.

Shetari had also seen the trio of huge ships that had been parked in front of the hangars. Boxy. Angular. Dark violet in coloration. They were almost certainly Vixanti medium freighters of some sort. Mobile warehouse ships, perhaps. Maybe this really was the right place, despite all other appearances to the contrary.

As Shetari lifted her right hand to open the waiting door, she was beset with a sudden, and very strange sense of calm. For some inexplicable reason, there were no cars passing by on normally bustling six lane road that lay behind her. The hums and rumbles that invariably managed to make their way past

even the most effective sound barriers had ceased. Even the birds had gone silent. There was only the sound of her own breath, and the light breeze that now bore the scent of hot tire rubber to her sensitive, feline nose. It was strange and, to the ever active mind of a former freighter captain, all too suggestive.

Despite her disastrous attempts at building a career, she had still managed to build up a good set of instincts when it came to sensing danger. All the signs were there. Something was wrong. Very wrong. She gritted her teeth and froze in place. Her eyes scanned back and forth along the treeline. Her leg muscles tensed. She waited for the inevitable, and prayed it wasn't about to come crashing along in her direction.

*SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEWHUMPA WHUMPA  
WHUMPA WHUMPA WHUMPA WHAM!*

Shetari winced as the initial series of ear shattering noises were replaced by a long,

painful cacophony of crumpling steel and shattering crystal-metal windows. The birds, once silent, now added their shrillest voices to the din as they fled their roosts in search of quieter perches. Thick black smoke billowed up just beyond the building that Shetari had assumed to be a hangar. A klaxon blared. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Fucking jackasses," Shetari hissed as memories of her own experiences with underpaid, half-trained ramp junkies flashed through her mind. The particular sequence of sounds was more than enough for her to know exactly what amateurish mistake had been the cause of whatever calamity was now taking place. It was a perfectly routine ground tow gone horribly wrong. The ship's brakes hadn't been unlocked. They'd forgotten to rig the automatic safety release on the tow cable. Building friction. Searing heat. The brakes seized up. Tires started to blow. The poor little ship had hit the concrete hard, and from the sound of it, she'd probably rolled over onto her

side. As if that wasn't bad enough, shreds of synthetic rubber had probably gotten into the white hot brakes and started burning. They'd be lucky if the ship wasn't a total loss.

It was one short step from the worst case scenario, at least when it came to ramp accidents. And what would happen to the people that had caused it? Nothing. Or maybe a few paid days off and a half-assed write up that only covered some trivial aspect of the whole affair. And, if her own experience told any tale, their insurance company would almost certainly find some backhanded way to blame the little ship's captain, even if she was a hundred miles away at a company meeting.

It had been just one of several stains that had turned her resume into something so absolutely toxic that there didn't seem to be a single hiring manager in the space transport industry that was willing to do anything more than flip through it and toss it in the trash. Bad luck seemed to chasing her around like a rabid

raccoon looking to fight her over the rancid contents of the nearest restaurant dumpster.

First had come the ramp accident and two million credits worth of damage to her first command, a brand new light freighter that hadn't gotten to its fifth flight before getting its nose smashed in by that incompetent ramp handler. Then came the cultural misunderstanding, with it's two months of 'involuntary diplomatic activity'. She'd gotten an award from the Imperial Ambassador to Noya for that one, but by the time she was free to leave, her ship, and her job, were long gone.

Then, as if to add insult to injury, her final attempt to hold down an officer's job involved getting tricked into acting as a scapegoat for insurance fraud by a company trying to make a few last credits off a ship that had become a total loss long before she'd set a foot aboard. The Naval Board of Inquiry had taken her side in the end, but by then the damage was done. She'd always be known as the 'unreliable

Captain who lost two ships within a week of taking command'.

Shetari's chances of getting even the most junior of officer's positions were all but gone. The best she could hope for now was a technical post, maybe even a bridge position if the hiring manager hadn't actually bothered to look past her cover letter. That was what had brought her here, to Vixanti, and the only available systems operator posting in town. It wasn't the only available job that she might be, at least theoretically, qualified for, but this was the only one that offered a signing bonus. It was to be paid right on day one, with the signing of a two year employment contract. It would solve all of her problems, right from the moment she put her name to the paperwork.

All Shetari had to do now was ace the interview. That was it. She'd be in. She'd be in the black too. In more ways than one, of course, but that was beside the point. Her problems would be solved. Everything would

be perfect.

A sharp hiss snapped Shetari out of the past. Clouds of searing hot steam joined the acrid black smoke that billowed ever heavier from the West Extension ramp. The firefighters had gone to work. It would make for an interesting evening's news, at least, but it wasn't something worth dwelling any more on. Her watch read 12:40. She had no more time to waste.

With a parting sneer in the direction of the looming black cloud, Shetari pulled the door open and stepped inside.

## TWO

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# PUNCTUALITY

Shetari found herself stepping into an office lobby that seemed more appropriate to tastes of a backwater scrap broker than the highest of high tech development firms. Even the most cheery, insufferable optimist would have found the drab, grayish tones oppressive in the extreme. At least the walls had texture. Lumps. Splatters. Even a few hand prints. An unrepentant drunkard could have done a better job of it. And, if the walls weren't a bad enough sign, even the half-dead plants which occupied the room's dark corners had been slathered with paint, right along with the pots they'd been planted in.

It wasn't the atrocious paint job that really



got Shetari's attention, however. That was entirely focused upon the high semicircle of stark, black granite that appeared to be the reception desk. This beautifully polished edifice formed a solid bastion protecting the lobby's only other exit, a sliding glass door as opaque as the granite itself. This might have been quite an imposing thing to behold if the room's decorator had seen fit to leave well enough alone. Instead, that individual apparently thought that embedding an eight foot tall, pearly white pod into the beautiful granite counter would somehow enhance the image.

The vertical, egg shaped mass might have looked reasonably artsy if it had been placed in the very middle of the reception desk, or maybe well off to one side. Instead it was positioned just enough to the left of center to throw the whole thing terribly off balance. It made almost as little sense as the sorry state of the planters. If, instead of being a poorly placed work of art, the pod served some

particular practical purpose, it was as opaque as its disconcertingly shimmering surface.

Whatever misgivings the state of the room's decor might have given her, Shetari took a deep breath and approached the reception desk. She lifted up her little, black leather document case and reached out to place it on the well polished counter surface.

"Um, hello? Is anyone here?" Shetari inquired. Her soft, feline purr did little to hide the tension welling up within her breast. Doubt filled her mind as became increasingly convinced that she was indeed in the wrong place. Her watch now read 12:44. Time had run out. If she wasn't where she was supposed to be, she was done. What little was left of her life would come crashing down around her, and then...

A pale green face popped up from behind the desk, right square in front of the already nervous cheetah. She was able to stifle the yelp

that threatened to give away just how nervous she had become, but not the involuntary jump that took her three steps back and sent her leather case tumbling to the floor.

"Oh! Dear! I am very, *very* sorry!" the young woman exclaimed with a voice so smooth and sallow that it seemed more a thing of subtle, flowing liquid than stale office air. She offered a warm and sympathetic smile as her apparently quite unexpected visitor did her best to regain her composure. "Is there something, perhaps, that I can help you with?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, I hope so," Shetari replied as she picked up her leather case and put it back up onto the counter. As her eyes wandered, her words failed. The receptionist's body was black glass. Perfectly polished, completely seamless black glass.

Only the receptionist's upper arms and shoulders were graced with a splash of contrasting color. These short, upper-arm

sleeves, if they could really be called that, looked for all the world like a thick coating of bright, liquid mercury that was floating upon the surface of the inky blackness. Embedded into each of these sleeves was a small, nine figure sequence of numbers and letters: AD3BBL13Y, as black as the blackness that covered the rest of the woman's body. Beneath this was the equally black corporate logo. It was sharp, angular, and very, very familiar. All doubt was cast from Shetari's mind. She had found Vixanti.

"What can I help you with?" the receptionist again inquired as the cheetah gawked at her glistening attire.

"Oh... wow... I... I'm sorry!" Shetari stammered, looking back up to the receptionist's smiling face. "That... well, I've just never seen anything like that in person before. I've seen it in pictures. I was expecting it to be more like, well, latex. You know shiny but... uh... not like that kind of shiny. That's...

incredible!"

"You like it?" the receptionist inquired with a mischievous wink and a girly little giggle. Her deep, reddish-brown eyes locked with those of her momentarily entranced visitor. She raised her hands and slowly ran her fingers back and forth over her pronounced collarbones as she spoke. "Perhaps you might like to try it on for yourself. Vixanti Corporation has many employment opportunities currently available. Even if you have no particular scientific, technical or administrative skills, we can still find a place for you. There are custodial positions, of course, but you seem like more of a product modeling and demonstration type. Public relations, perhaps? Or how about development facilitation? Getting to try our latest new developments before anyone else even knows they exist is one of our most popular employment opportunities. It is not just fun to participate in, it is a gateway to internal training and advancement to positions that

might otherwise be unavailable to you. Regardless of which avenue of employment you choose, I am quite positive that you will find that Vixanti offers only the most fulfilling of employment opportunities. Shall I set you up with an interview?"

"Yeah, about that," Shetari said, doing her best to keep her eyes on the receptionists face. Whatever more interesting sights may have been on offer, they were also a reminder that, if all went to plan, she would soon be offering similar views of her own to any who might care to gaze upon them. "I already have a job interview for... well... now. I'm not sure if I'm in the right building."

"Oh, of course! I had completely forgotten!" the receptionist said, looking down into the pale glow of a computer screen that was hidden away beneath the counter surface. "Ah, yes! I see. Let me verify your identifying information here. Hmm... Name: Shetari Anwae. Cheetah felid. Genetic lineage 47B1,

exemplified by small to average spots, golden tan hair and minor ear tufts. 28 years of age. 170 centimeters height. 69.5 kilograms. Low body fat. Modest muscle definition. Average glandular endowments. Average posterior, well rounded. Distinctive individual markings include three spot facial cheeks, lightning form tear lines and a small, figure eight shaped birthmark spot just above the left heel. That looks like you, would you agree?"

Shetari was surprised. The application hadn't asked anything about her physical characteristics, let alone such a somewhat disturbingly detailed physical description. They had only requested her latest spacefarer's medical rating and its associated confirmation code. "How... how did you know all that?"

"Vixanti performs pre-interview background checks that go into far more depth than most industries," the receptionist noted. "Indeed, the only comparable background checks that we know of are performed by the military, law

enforcement and intelligence services for the purposes of security clearance initiation and auditing. As you may already know, Vixanti Corporation intends to only release its products once it has an initial unified package of related and compatible products ready. I am sure you can understand how important it is that we weed out anyone who has a potential to reveal our trade secrets to competitors seeking to beat us to market. Being able to ensure that the person who walks in the door is the person who's information is given upon the application is vital."

"Yeah... I can understand that," Shetari replied with a deep frown. The explanation made sense, but that didn't mean it made her comfortable. If they'd bothered to find out what her ass looked like before inviting her to interview, what else did they know?

"Now, let me request your process progress file," the receptionist said. "That will tell me where we stand with your application and



what further preparations may be required prior to your interview. It may take a few moments."

Shetari looked around the room as the receptionist typed. The more she looked at the state of the paint, the less she could understand why such an expansive, image focused corporation would allow such a mess to be created, let alone exist uncorrected long enough for an outsider to notice. "So... if you don't mind me asking... what's the deal with the sloppy paint job? It's kind of..."

"A sordid state of affairs?" the receptionist replied as she continued to type.

"I think that's an understatement," Shetari observed as she shook her head in the direction of the nearest painted plant.

The receptionist snorted. "Well then, you may wish to inquire upon the individual who thought it would be a good idea to have a robot very specifically designed and equipped for

heavy industrial tasks engage in domestic maintenance," she suggested with a wry smile. "If you think this is particularly uncouth, you should see what it did to the courtyard out back. Fortunately for all involved, its battery ran out before it could start work on the lawn out front. Sadly, our facilities group is off-site until the end of the week. Our engineering facility over in Divo had a little... issue a couple of weeks ago. You may have seen that in the news. I am sure they will be quick to set things right once they get back."

"Yeah," Shetari replied, struggling to remember anything about some incident in Divo. She had been watching the news quite studiously since the beginning of her unemployment, but she didn't recall anything of note having taken place at a Vixanti facility. The company already had a bit of a reputation for very 'creative' accidents. They were always big news. One of their more interesting incidents was even the focus of an entire issue of one particularly well distributed adult

magazine, along with some rather interesting videos to illustrate the unique, if undeniably perverse possibilities. But something in Divo? She was drawing a complete blank. "Divo... you know, come to think of it, I don't remember hearing about that. I must have missed it. I've been spending an awful lot of my time hunting for decent work lately."

"Probably," the receptionist said as she stopped typing and started reading. "It was not the sort of incident that evokes the sort of exotic imagery that some of our more famous accidental discoveries have provided. Fusion engineering is not nearly as sexy a thing as it once was. No one cares about the poor scientists and engineers who slave away, day after day, just to drag an extra kilowatt or two out of some old reactor. Not to worry, though. No one got hurt, unless you count the facility chief engineer's sense of pride."

Shetari nodded. "Yeah. I know that feeling."

"Hmm..." the receptionist went on. "Well, I hate to be the bearer of unwelcome news, but it would seem that the position you were originally applying for has become unavailable. It is not so much that the position was filled, but that the light freighter unit in question is apparently no longer in operating condition and is likely to remain so for some time."

"Oh..." Shetari's voice fell. Her stomach immediately began to cramp up. Her tail fell limp. The game was up. It was all over even before it had even begun.

"Nothing to worry about, of course," the receptionist responded, taking on a cheery tone as she glanced up at the utterly despondent applicant. "As I mentioned before, Vixanti has ample employment opportunities on offer. Obviously, you have already passed the initial review process. Why let that go to waste? Surely we can find something that suits your particular interests and... physical characteristics?"

"Uh..." was all that Shetari could muster in reply. Without that signing bonus, the game would be up no matter what was on offer. The stark, gut-wrenching imagery of homelessness took hold of her spinning mind. Vixanti certainly wouldn't think twice about letting her go if she were living her off-work life out on the streets. She could barely think, let alone speak.

"Well, you certainly do have quite the body, don't you?" the receptionist explained with a mischievous grin. "It would be ideal for various activities requiring a balanced combination of feminine allure and physical robustness. Might I dare to propose a position in the information and demonstration section of the development facilitation department? Videos. Advertising material. Live convention demos. What do you think? Shall I set up an interview on that basis?"

"Well... honestly, I was really banking on that systems operator position," Shetari

replied with a deep, dejected sigh. She had regained just enough composure to speak, but was still right upon the very brink of breaking down in tears. "It was the only one you advertised with a signing bonus. Life hasn't been... well, let's just say that it would have solved a lot of problems."

"Don't you worry about money one bit," the receptionist answered with a casual flick of her long, black ponytail. "Considering that so much time and effort has been spent to vet you for the position applied for, Vixanti will almost certainly be willing to accommodate your particular needs."

Shetari had been so focused on the coating of pure, glistening blackness which coated the receptionist's body that she hadn't even noticed her hair. It was so perfectly shiny that it looked less like hair than it did like fibers of plastic or heavily oiled rubber. The strikingly thick, voluminous strands even seemed to have a rubbery bounce to them. They stretched and

twisted about in odd, unnatural ways as they settled upon the young woman's right shoulder. There, they seemed to blend right into the blackness of her form hugging suit. It looked almost as if they were made of the same material. It took another good look at the woman's face to convince the cheetah that she was actually a living thing and not some highly advanced robot trying to imitate one.

"If your particular situation can be resolved with certain, reasonable accommodations, Vixanti will see to them without expectation of repayment, even without a promised signing bonus," the receptionist continued, casually brushing the wandering strands of rubbery hair from her shoulder with her left hand. "As you certainly know, the nature of the relationship between Vixanti and its employees is highly unconventional. Vixanti fully understands that there are certain lifestyle costs associated with this relationship. These costs go far beyond what might be expected from employees in any other business

organization. To work for Vixanti means embracing every aspect of the Vixanti vision of the future. You must live the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle, demonstrating its aspects to the world, even as they are carefully husbanded towards ultimate perfection in every minute detail, even if that means you must change everything about the way you live."

"I'm still not sure exactly what that means," Shetari said with a shrug. If there was one thing a practical sailor looking for work couldn't stand, it was marketing-speak. To the less astute, the receptionist's declaration might have sounded quite impressive, but beyond the grandiosity, the words didn't really seem to have much meaning behind them. "I mean, besides wearing those black suits. Whatever those are made of. Some kind of exotic rubber, right?"

The receptionist chuckled. "Exotic, indeed," she replied with a grin. "As to the Lifestyle, all



you really need to know for now is that it means that Vixanti is open to mitigating certain costs via monetary means whenever it becomes necessary to ensure a certain quality of staff intake. All you need to do is discuss your situation with the interviewing company officer. I am quite sure something can be worked out that will be as useful to you as you will most certainly be to Vixanti."

"Well... okay, I guess," Shetari replied, crossing her arms over her little document case. Whatever misgivings she may have had about working as a shipboard systems operator for Vixanti had been tempered by the conventional limits that such a technical position imposed on an employer. Everything about the job was a solid known, and whatever this Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle was, it had to be worked around that known. Now, everything was fluid. There were no fixed qualities. No limits. She really wasn't okay with it, but at this point, what other choice did she have? "But... um... modeling? I'm not sure

about that. I've never really been comfortable about showing off my... body. And those suits. They show an awful lot more than just shape. I mean... I don't mean to be rude... but I can kind of see your... well... almost everything that I could possibly see from up here."

"You will have have to get used to that, one way or another," the receptionist laughed. "But, if showing off your bodily charms in a fully public environment does not suit your tastes, Vixanti has plenty of other opportunities on offer. Experimental division. Entry level administration. And, from what I am already hearing, we might be moving our spaceport ramp operations in-house. But, that is just a rumor. We won't really know until the fire is out."

"Wait... how do you..." Shetari responded with an accompanying expression of complete feline perplexity.

"Company news feed," the receptionist

answered with a brief gesture toward her computer screen. "It's largely automated, with a bit of sapient moderation to help keep it from getting too far off the rails."

"I'm going to guess that's why the operator position isn't available anymore? You know, I could run that ramp op for you," Shetari noted with a wry smile. Maybe she could find a place with some of those familiar, comfortable limits after all. "I've got some personal experience with barrel bottom contractors that, well... let's just say I'd love to dish out some payback with a ream of perfect safety records to slap them upside the back of their heads with."

"Oh! Spicy!" the receptionist laughed, cocking her head to one side with a silly grin. "Well then, I will be letting the facility director know that we are about to begin the preparation welcoming process right away. Once you have settled into your new state of affairs, you will have your interview and soon be in your new position here at Vixanti,

whatever that may be."

"Okay," Shetari replied, a partial sense of relief shoving aside the crushing disappointment at not being able to get the systems operator position. Still, there was something unsettling about the new course her life was about to take. It all seemed to be coming at her so quickly now that she had finally gotten her foot into the door. She had her interview now. But where would it lead? And, what did the receptionist words really mean? "But... um.. what exactly do you mean by welcoming process? Or... new state of affairs?"

The receptionist paused her typing and looked up with a strange, bemused expression. There was an awkward moment of silence.

"Oh! Preparation!" Shetari finally blurted out as she realized what the receptionist had almost certainly meant. "Right, my paperwork! You need that, don't you? I completely forgot

about that!"

Shetari fumbled with the clasp on her leather case. It contained everything she had expected to need. Civilian ID. Starport Pass. Imperial Passport. Work history. Pay history. Merchant Marine Academy certifications and diplomas. Even that award certificate from the Ambassador to Noya. She had pretty much everything short of the kitchen sink stuffed in there. She certainly would have brought that too, if she'd thought it might help.

"Oh, no!" the receptionist laughed, clasping her hands together with a sharp, rubbery 'squitch'. "Original documents are not necessary. Everything you already provided with your application has already been fully verified to the most stringent standards. That was all part of the detailed background check. The director is already quite satisfied with the validity of your qualifications and your overall state of employability."

"Oh... uh... alright," Shetari responded with a raised right eyebrow. There was something about the receptionist's tone and pose that seemed just a bit... off. Something was coming and it was starting to look like she wasn't going to be very pleased with it. A catch. There was always a catch, and Vixanti being Vixanti, this was probably going to be whopper. "Well... um... what do I have to do? For this... preparation thing?"

"Tell me something," the receptionist inquired softly as she leaned forward toward the skeptical cheetah. "The signing bonus for your desired position was 35,000 Imperial Credits, just a little less than a full year's pay for the position. Be truthful. Is that really enough to settle your immediate financial needs?"

"Oh, yes!" Shetari replied with a sharp nod and a strained, yearning tone that instantly divulged just how desperate she was to get hold of that signing bonus. "Yes, it would. It

would wipe out all my debts and... fix everything. Really. You have no idea. I've been in such a state. Everything's piling up all at once. It would just make that all go away. All of it. You really have no idea what it would mean to me."

"Well, that's truly wonderful. But..." the receptionist cooed softly, staring straight into Shetari's quivering green eyes. "But what if Vixanti were to offer you, say, three times that amount. Well, lets just call it an even one hundred and twenty thousand credits, shall we? What if Vixanti were to offer you that for a little bit of added inconvenience? Would you accept?"

"What do you mean by a little bit of added inconvenience?" Shetari questioned with a deep frown. "It's got to be more than just a little bit for that kind of money. Well? Spit it out. What are you trying to sell me?"

"Oh, nothing terribly onerous," the

receptionist purred with a sly little grin. "While Vixanti Corporation's standard contracts are for two years duration, the company prefers to establish the foundations of genuinely long term employment relationships with those deemed to be of particular value to the company's future. Therefore, I have been authorized to offer you an eight year contract, with its accompanying specially enhanced uniform suit, and the aforementioned and extremely generous signing bonus."

"Wait... what about the interview?" Shetari inquired, puzzled by the new offer. Things like that were never proposed for jobs yet to be determined. Was this just how Vixanti conducted their hiring process, or was it the tip of some nasty iceberg that was just waiting to send her sinking to rock bottom. Or worse. "I don't even know what I'll be doing, so how can I decide if I want to work here for two or eight years? That's a huge difference!"



"It's the Vixanti way," the receptionist replied. "A first test of trust, if you will. Yes, it certainly is asking you to take a significant gamble on your future, but it has its aforementioned compensations. And more. Vixanti Corporation is willing to be extremely generous to you in your time of need. The question is, are you willing to reciprocate by offering your services in equally generous fashion?"

"It's just... I don't know. It's just so... so open ended," Shetari replied. It sounded an awful lot like the equally open ended offer that had led to her last job, and the insurance fraud that she had become so bitterly embroiled in. But this... this was all different. There were other risks here. More personal risks. More... intimate risks. What did Vixanti really want from her? Enthusiasm turned to skepticism. "It's way too open ended. I mean... you people do some strange stuff here. I don't want to end up on the front page of XenoExotic like... I mean... how do I really, really know

you aren't just going to make me test things on my body that might have those kinds of effects? I really... I really don't know about just saying yes and not really knowing what comes next? I mean, you can say I have all these options here and when I've signed, suddenly everything changes. I've been down that road before. I'm not really inclined to do it again."

"Your concerns are fully understandable," the receptionist noted with a warm smile. "They are difficult to allay, of course. As you say, we do some pretty strange stuff here at Vixanti. Despite this, I do hope that you can see the distinction between Vixanti and other organizations that have done some equally strange stuff in the past. Take Frexay Industries, for example. Do you remember their experiments with that 'three dimensional bacterial lattice' that they tried to use to replace the entirety of a starship's life support system. They kept it so well hidden and so secret that no one even knew that the development facility existed until they found

the freighter on which part of the experiment had been taking place. The crew was long dead, and the crew of the ship that found them soon followed. As did the crew of the Navy ship sent to rescue the first two."

"Yeah, I know all about that," Shetari muttered, shaking her head. Vixanti's accidents were always big news of course, but that event had shaken the whole spacefaring community on a very deep level. If shady corporations could do that unnoticed, how could anyone really be safe out there on the frontiers? Even the most innocuous ship could be carrying some unseen horror, completely destroying thousands of years worth of effort to ensure against unwanted biological transfer between planets, and the causing the sort of devastating epidemics that could kill millions, if not even billions of innocent people.

"It was not the first such disaster, either," the receptionist continued. "Secretive corporations have always tried to push limits,

evade laws and profit off of products whose creation, and even long term use, have been cause for immeasurable suffering. But here at Vixanti, we do not hide in the shadows. We do genuine science. We sometimes make minor mistakes. We do not try to hide them until they snowball into something disastrous like the matter with Frexay. We study the error and we do not repeat it. We release the necessary information to the government inspectors and even to the public. We cannot always control what that information is used for, hence the unique content distributed by certain less than savory magazines every so often. However, Vixanti does not ever try to conceal major issues when it is certainly in the public interest for everyone to know, and understand, what went wrong and why it will not go wrong again. That is why Frexay's executives and researchers are all waiting for their time to die, held under lock and key in the dark shadows of a deep space maximum security prison complex, while Vixanti thrives here in

the light of planetary day."

Shetari reluctantly nodded.

"Now, imagine what would happen if Vixanti ever attempted to push someone into testing something against their will and there was an accident," the receptionist observed. "It is difficult enough to settle matters when the participants in a study are completely willing volunteers and some inconvenient accident takes place. It would be impossible for Vixanti to exist if even one volunteer were anything less than positively enthusiastic about the experiment which will be conducted using their body. That is why Vixanti only accepts personnel into those areas from internal applicants who are thoroughly screened for any medical or psychological issue that could impact both the test itself, and its legitimacy. Reports on all experiments are filed with the appropriate government agencies under trade secrets restrictions, but they are filed, and they are thoroughly reviewed. Everything is done so

as to satisfy every law, regulation, and even non-statutory voluntary course of action that applies to any given operation or study. While I cannot say where you will eventually go from your initial position here at Vixanti, the rules are followed to the letter. No one else can make those decisions for you. At best, someone might occasionally inquire about your level of interest in some particular opportunity. Whether you say yes or no, that is entirely up to you and your answer will have no effect whatsoever on your future career path."

"I'm not entirely convinced, to be honest," Shetari sighed. It was an impossible position. She was torn between fear of the destitution she understood all too well, and fear of the vast unknowns that Vixanti offered, unknowns that she wasn't quite sure she could even begin to understand. A two year contract was a hard enough decision to make. But eight years? Eight long years stuck in one of those black suits? That was just too much.

Shetari looked down at her watch. It still read 12:44. It had stopped. Again. Thoughts of having a nice, reliable watch on her wrist flitted through her mind. A nice, reliable, extremely expensive watch. Like one of those beautiful mariner's wrist chronometers they sold in the high end spacefarer's supply stores. Ten thousand credits, but tested to near-quantum tolerances and guaranteed to be perfectly reliable for at least fifty years of continuous use. There was only one way she was going to be able to afford a replacement like that, but it just didn't seem worth the risk.

"No?" the receptionist inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Of course. You're still skeptical. I understand. As does Vixanti. Everyone has special considerations that must be accommodated for so long a contract. Is there something else I could possibly offer to entice you into signing onto the eight year contract? Something within reason, of course. Hmm?"

Shetari thought for a moment. What could Vixanti possibly do to entice her into throwing caution to the wind and signing her fluffy ass away for a whole eight years of who knows what? There was one thing, but it seemed like such a long shot that it would almost certainly be refused. But what was the harm in asking? Surely they couldn't blame her for making the attempt, right?

"Alright, if that's how this works," Shetari finally replied, crossing her arms and giving the coy receptionist her best officer's stare, "I want some guarantee that I'll be offered some position within my area of training and expertise the moment one becomes available. That means aerospace flight crew, preferably interstellar, at least entry level officer, preferably navigation, systems, or command."

The receptionist grinned and did her best not to break eye contact. "Is that all?"

"Yeah, that's it," Shetari replied, trying



really hard not to get distracted by the receptionist's batting eyelashes.

"If you get that, you sign the eight year contract, no more questions asked?" the receptionist inquired with an overly pleased little smirk. The question was followed almost immediately by the sound of papers passing through a printer, somewhere beneath the counter.

Shetari nodded. "Just get it in writing and yes. Eight years, no more questions asked."

"Done," the receptionist replied, reaching up to place three small packets of paper and a pen upon the counter in front of the uncertain applicant. "The top form is the non-disclosure agreement. Initial each page then sign and date on the last one. The second is the eight year employment contract acceptance agreement. Make careful note that the initial position, pending the guaranteed offer of the type of position that you've requested, defaults

to administrative assistant if you cannot come to some agreement on another initial position with the interviewing director. You could be sitting in my chair soon, if you choose to go that route. I have my own eye on one of the new modeling positions. We have that big expo at the convention center coming up next month and they will be showing off some of the very enticing new concepts that are going to be installed in the Destiny class testing ships. Even some of the kinky stuff is going to be on full display. With live demonstrations! It is going to be lots of fun!"

Shetari's fluffy ears perked up to their full height for the first time in months. "Did you just say... new ships?"

"Yes! Brand new! You may have seen the three of them out there on the ramp," the receptionist replied with a gesture in the direction of the office door. "Destiny Alpha. Destiny Beta. Destiny Omega. All three are Kayanti class warehouse freighters internally

reconfigured into general purpose starships, with laboratories and other facilities to support shipboard testing and development work. All three are nearing completion."

"Are there going to be any positions available on those particular ships?" Shetari questioned as her heart began to beat just a little bit faster. "My father was a navy fighter pilot. I grew up around fighters and big navy ships. It's in my blood."

"You are in luck there," the receptionist replied with a rather mischievous tone in her voice. "Unless something comes up sooner, you are almost sure to be offered some position on one of those three. All of Vixanti's most advanced technology is going into them, most of which I have not even heard of, let alone seen with my own two eyes. Really exciting stuff, if even half of the rumors are true."

"That sounds a lot more like my sort of thing than administrative assistant," Shetari

replied, picking up the pen. She still wasn't entirely convinced that she had making the right choice, but compared to the alternatives it was starting to look just a little bit more palatable. "Non-disclosure, employment contract, and what's the third?"

"Dress code," the receptionist answered, again clasping her hands together. "It is not quite as onerous as many have claimed it to be. You are not actually required to wear Vixanti's unique company attire for every hour of every day, although it is definitely encouraged. You only need to wear it at any time you are out of the privacy of your company apartment, which will be provided at absolutely no cost to you. You may also choose to avoid wearing it while dealing with your financial issues and while doing what is necessary to move in, but once that process is complete, you will have to wear it whenever you appear in public, regardless of the reason, unless explicitly authorized otherwise, on an individual case-by-case basis."

"Company apartment? Where are they located?" Shetari inquired as she did her best to read the papers very carefully before putting her name to them in deep violet ink.

"Right here, of course!" the receptionist replied. "The buildings you see here are not actually Vixanti's offices, research or technical facilities. They are the tops of the apartment structures, which have two stories above ground for the more senior staff and various technical sundries, and twelve levels below ground for more junior personnel such as ourselves. The accommodations are not much bigger than second class double staterooms, but they have plenty of amenities. It's a real miniature city down there. There's even a big, well lit courtyard with water features and plants and all sorts of things that make it seem far more like the outdoors than the underground."

"So... all of Vixanti's facilities are underground here?" Shetari asked as she

began to look over the dress code.

"Except what you see here, and the hangars on the West Extension," the receptionist noted. "Everything else is kept well below and out of the sight of prying eyes. Most Vixanti facilities are built in similar fashion. What you might see above ground is the public face of the company, as unkempt as it may be at the moment. The real work goes on below. It is a fundamental part of the development of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle, of course. Once elements are finalized and independently deemed to be safe, they are added to the company facilities as a final test of their long term habitability qualities in a relatively closed environment. It's the final stage before starship deployment. The suits we wear are one of those aspects. The newest aspect, recently installed, are the beds we sleep in. Trust me, you will absolutely love them! They are not just comfortable, they are fully... well... functional."

"Do I really want to know what that means?" Shetari asked as she came to the final two paragraphs of the dress code. "Um... what's this here? 'Involuntary erotic stimulus may occur during application of your mandatory Vixanti Corporation biogel uniform. This is a normal side effect and the occurrence of such stimulus will generally diminish with each following removal/application cycle.' What's that about?"

"Let me just say that the feel of the uniform material is often quite unexpected to those putting it on for the first time," the receptionist replied. "For some it can be quite stimulating in certain body regions. It is not intentional on the part of Vixanti and you are not required to report on or discuss its occurrence and its effects unless you wish to do so on a purely voluntary basis."

"Okay," Shetari replied with a shallow frown. "And what about this next part? 'Relaxant will be administered during first

application of your mandatory Vixanti Corporation biogel uniform suit.' What does that mean?"

"Vixanti Corporation has found that many individuals find the process of entering their employee uniform for the first time to be a bit... disorienting" the receptionist explained with a warm smile. "It is not so much a matter of negative physical sensation as it is a matter of familiarity. Most simply find it too strange and overwhelming to retain their composure, for better or for worse. In order to reduce the chances of such an event occurring, a mild relaxant is utilized to ease matters along. The ultrasonic method is universal. Nitrous oxide is also an option for some races, such as your own. I would personally recommend you request that latter option. It has a certain aphrodisiac effect that flows very nicely with the feel of everything else."

"What if I don't want any of that?" Shetari questioned, the pen hovering over the



signature line. "Why can't I just put the suit on and be done with it? It's not like I'm getting a tooth pulled or something."

"There is no way for Vixanti to know how you will actually react," the receptionist noted. "It is better to approach such a matter from the perspective of caution. That is why the relaxant is mandatory, and why it will be medically supervised. Our staff doctor will be ensuring you are kept quite comfortable, while also ensuring against over-application of the selected relaxation method."

"I... I don't know about this. But... well, fine. I'll go with it," Shetari said, pausing for another moment before finally putting her signature to the dress code. She sighed deeply as she handed the three papers back to the receptionist. "There. Done."

"Excellent! Welcome to Vixanti Corporation!" the receptionist nearly squealed as she took the papers, rolled them up and put

them into a small, cylindrical pneumatic transport case. "I'll send these right down to the Facility Director's office."

Shetari bit her lip as the receptionist placed the clear, cylindrical case into some hidden opening underneath the counter. There was a sharp hiss, followed by an airy 'shloop!', and then by a soft thump. She took a deep breath and waited. The receptionist typed something and then reached up to put her hand on the cheetah's leather case.

"I thought you didn't need any of that," Shetari said as the receptionist slipped the document case from under her crossed arms.

"I'm just going to hold it for you while we move you into the first step of Vixanti Corporation's new employee welcoming process," the receptionist replied with a mischievous grin.

"The welcoming process?" Shetari questioned. "I thought I was just getting

changed into the new suit? Is there more to it than that?"

"The application of your new company attire is the just first step into the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle," the receptionist answered as she gestured towards the pearly pod. "Over the course of the next few hours, as the welcoming process plays out, you will be introduced to the other elements which have already been developed in Vixanti's effort to transform the way we live on the most fundamental level. You will get dressed in Vixanti's clothing. You will find your initial place within Vixanti's organization. You will enter your Vixanti provided abode and you will see what interesting entertainments Vixanti has provided within. That is Vixanti's welcoming process from start to finish. I am sure that you will enjoy it at least as much as I did."

A soft beep came from somewhere behind the reception desk. A subtle, almost inaudible

thump came from the pearly, eight foot egg. Shetari drew back from the counter and gawked as a narrow slice of the pod's front face drew just a few centimeters inward. With a soft hiss, it slid to the left, revealing a deep purple darkness that seemed so inscrutably undefined as to be unreal. There were shapes. Curves. Twists. Tendrils. And glimmers of bright luminous purple. From her vantage point in front of the receptionist, she could discern nothing else.

Shetari took a few steps back and gazed more intently into the maw of the mechanical beast. Though the giant egg's exterior was a fair match for the color of its organic counterpart, the interior was pure blackness. It was all as perfectly glossy as the blackness which hugged every inch of the receptionist's slender body. Only a small, capsule shaped purple light illuminated the misshapen mass of features that lined the pod's walls. A little shelf opposite the light stood out from this tangle of strange somethings. It was at just the right

height to serve as a seat of sorts. It even had what looked to be a shallow tail recess cut down its middle. Beyond that, nothing else could be made out among the shapes. If she wanted to look for any hidden features, she was going to have get much closer to see them.

Of course, it wasn't a matter of wanting at this point. Shetari had put her name to the papers. She wouldn't just have to get closer. She would have to enter the pod and she would have to accept whatever happened, no matter how unpleasant it might be. She had agreed to it. There was no turning back.

All the same, this was still Vixanti. Maybe the whole point of the affair was psychological. Maybe they just wanted to see how Shetari would react by being placed into something totally alien to her senses, with the full expectation that she would be anticipating some equally alien process to be compelled upon her naked body. But if it was just a mind trick, why the need for some kind of relaxant?

Was that just another part of the mind trick itself?

"Would you like to request the nitrous oxide relaxant before we begin?" the warmly smiling receptionist inquired. There was something subtly devilish about her tone. There was something she wasn't telling Shetari. Something important.

Shetari took the few steps that led her to the open pod doorway. She put her left hand on the edge and lifted her right foot over the threshold. A subtle, cool breeze was coming from the opening and it quickly found its way up her short dress, sending shivers up and down her spine. She couldn't see where it was coming from, but it carried with it the faint, yet distinct, odor of a freshly opened package of natural latex balloons. It wrinkled her nose and made her hesitate. Her ears focused on the interior of the pod. She searched up and down for some sign among the jumble of nonsensical shapes.

There were holes in the pod. Only one was obvious. It was right in the middle of the glistening black floor. Was it some sort of drain, perhaps? That was innocent enough. Shetari could imagine nervous new employees unable to quite hold onto the contents of their bladders the moment they were enclosed in the closeness of the pod's twisted walls. It was the holes that she could now perceive on the wall around the apparent seat that made her suspicious.

The little oval openings were hidden among the alien shapes. These well concealed holes extended down from the seat, right where an unsuspecting occupant would be resting her legs. Others ran up from the seat, where her back would rest on the wall. More ran from shoulder height, down the sides and ended in doughnut shaped protrusions that might well act as handles to help her steady herself amid the smooth, polished glossiness that certainly provided little in the way of traction, especially for the silky fur of the average fey'li like

herself.

Doubt filled Shetari's mind. No matter how much she wanted to seem bold and confident now that she was certain to have the financial security she so deeply desired, she still felt compelled to question what was to come. "Can you tell me what's actually going to happen in this thing?" she asked, stealing a brief, skeptical glance toward the grinning receptionist. "I mean... it's just a weird dressing room, right? Right?"

The receptionist shook her head, sending her glassy black ponytail swishing from shoulder to shoulder. "A weird dressing room? You might call it that, yes. As to what will happen? No. I cannot tell you. You just have to trust me. It feels quite glorious. It really does."

"It's not that I don't trust you," Shetari lied, looking for the right words to make herself sound appropriately inquisitive, rather than horribly doubtful. "I just... well... in my



professional experience, walking into places without knowing what actually happens there, well... it leads to months of unspeakable things and then getting dumped into even worse employment prospects down the road. You catch my drift?"

The receptionist gave another of her little, girly giggles. "I read that little bit about Noya on your profile," she cooed. "I have to say, I wouldn't mind giving that a go myself some day. It sounds rather... unique. But this. Well, you will just have to trust Vixanti. If you can't trust Vixanti, how can Vixanti trust you?"

"This is my body... my... everything," Shetari said as she gingerly set her right foot down onto the pod floor. Was that what this was? Another test of trust? "But... I guess you have a point. Trust is mutual. I guess."

"Mhmm," the receptionist hummed as the cheetah began to lift her left foot.

"Did... did you have to do this when you

were hired?" Shetari questioned as her ears began to pick up the faintest of gurgling sounds. It was coming from the hole in the floor... and from the holes in the walls. A shadow of a nightmare was beginning to form in her head.

"Yes and shh!" the receptionist hushed. "No more questions. There is this and more to do before your meet the director. You would not want to keep her waiting, would you?"

"Right, right," Shetari sighed as she began to shift her weight. Her left foot came off the floor.

"Nitrous oxide?" the receptionist again inquired. "Again, I really do recommend it over the default ultrasonic."

Shetari bit her lip as her left hand began to slip from the edge of the pod entry. She had never felt the effects of ultrasonic disruption. She was, however, quite familiar with the feel of nitrous oxide. It hadn't been too unpleasant,

given the circumstances. As a part of space rescue training at the Merchant Marine Academy, all cadets had been required to experience a rescue from the perspective of the rescued. Integral to this was the anti-struggle system that every emergency escape 'bag' was equipped with: soft expanding foam and, as an option feature for those who could take it without lasting harm, a mild dose of nitrous oxide. Both of these were intended to keep the rescued individual from hurting themselves or causing trouble as they were moved out of their own stricken vessel and to safety.

Truth be told, Shetari had found the whole escape bag experience to be quite a snug and dreamy affair. Despite all of the shoving and shouting that was taking place outside of the bag, she had floated about in her happy little cocoon, completely oblivious to the simulated danger. But that had all been a very thoroughly planned affair. She had known exactly what was going to happen during the whole duration of the process. She had also known exactly

what would come afterwards. But this... this was a different matter entirely.

"Hmm?" the receptionist asked, her left eyebrow raised.

"Well, um... yeah," Shetari finally replied with a resigned huff, deciding in favor of the devil she knew, rather than the one she didn't. "Nitrous oxide is fine."

"Thank you," the receptionist responded with a broad grin. "Now, we can proceed. Step inside and I will guide you through each step. It'll be done before you know it."

Shetari's left foot passed the threshold. Her tail flicked against the edge of the pod doorway and then followed the rest of her body, through the gaping portal, and into the patiently waiting tangle of utterly alien darkness.

## THREE

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# PROCESS

Hiss. Thump. Click. Shetari cringed as the dim, purple darkness enveloped her. The pod had not simply closed. It had fully sealed itself from the outside environment and from the sound of it, it had locked as well. Whatever was about to take place in the dark, twisted confines of this alien looking machine, it was plainly obvious that she wasn't going to be leaving until it had finished.

Shetari looked around at the pod's shimmering black interior walls. She wasn't even remotely claustrophobic, but the tangle of tentacle-like shapes that seemed to twist and writhe so closely around her in the low, shifting light was making her feel a little bit

light headed. While none of the thick tendrils were overtly sexual in appearance, there were enough hints of phallic and vulvic shapes amid the tangle to make her stomach start to feel unsettled. As she ran her fingers over one of the ribbed, ring shaped handles next to the pod's intimidating little seat, she could only hope all of this was just part of some deliberate illusion intended to test her mental mettle in the face of such a tightly confining and totally alien environment.

All the same, there was no avoiding the sharp scent of fresh latex rubber that filled her nose with increasing intensity. Nor was there any avoiding the sound of bubbling liquid that now seemed much too close for comfort. She bit her lip. Her eyes wandered to the little purple light. It was the only thing that seemed even remotely familiar in the darkness of her temporary little prison cell. She reached out to touch it.

"To begin your journey into the comforting

embrace of Vixanti Corporation's iconic uniform, you must first remove your current attire," the receptionist's sallow voice wafted into the chamber, as cool as the flow of air that seemed to be coming from the holes in the wall around the pod's seat. "This, of course, includes any accessories and hygiene products that may be placed upon, or within, your body. It is absolutely imperative that the only thing that is encased within your new coat of sweet black shininess is you yourself, and nothing, absolutely nothing, else."

"Obviously," Shetari murmured as she drew back from the light. She tested the smoothness of the glossy black floor with the toe of her right sandal and wondered how exactly she was supposed to go about undressing herself when every surface around her felt like it had been coated with industrial grade lubricating oil.

"Do not be afraid to use the seat opposite the chamber light to help if you need to," the

receptionist said, almost as if she were reading the nervous cheetah's mind. "I know it must look rather intimidating, but I can assure you that it is quite safe. There are handles to either side that you can grip to prevent yourself from sliding off. In just a moment, a disposal chute will open up beneath the light. Everything you remove from your body must be placed into that opening before you can advance to the dressing process."

"Disposal chute?" Shetari questioned as she kicked off her sandals. "As in trash disposal? I'm throwing my dress in the trash?"

The supple black 'paw pads' on the bottom of her feet came to rest on the icy cold pod floor. It was instantly obvious that the floor was much too slippery for her to stand on barefoot without risking a fall as she went through the motions of disrobing. The seat clearly wasn't an optional part of the process. Sitting down, however, would mean placing her body only centimeters from those insidious



little holes and whatever unseen unpleasantness that might lie within. Just the thought of it made her cringe, but what else could she do? She carefully turned and rested her rump right on the edge of the jutting, organic looking slab of hard, glossy blackness.

"The first step to embracing the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle is to cast aside everything upon your body that represents the past," the receptionist replied as the squarish disposal chute opened in front of the cheetah. It was illuminated from within by the same color purple light that shone from the pod's lone source of interior illumination. "It is an act both symbolic and practical that will help place you in the proper state of mind for everything that you will participate in as the day proceeds. Once you have cast your old clothing aside, you will have nothing here in which to clothe your body except what Vixanti Corporation provides for you. I trust you did not miss the line in your invitation letter recommending against wearing anything

valuable?"

Shetari's nose wrinkled at the faint whiff of hot metal that wafted from the open chute. "No! No, I noticed that," she lied. Despite its bargain basement price, her current outfit was probably the most expensive set of decent looking clothing she owned. It would be difficult to part with. Her frustratingly unreliable watch, however, was a different matter entirely. She tore the useless timepiece from her wrist, completely snapping the already thrice mended strap in the process. She didn't care. It had caused her so much grief already that no amount of abuse inflicted upon it would satisfy her need for revenge. She threw it into the chute with a sneer and a low, feline hiss. It clinked and clacked quite loudly on its way downward, before ending in a rolling crunch that sounded an awful lot like it had fallen into the business end of a shipboard trash shredder. "I don't have anything valuable on me. Especially not that."

"Wonderful! Now, let's see you out of that dress," the receptionist cooed. "The quicker we get you looking like a proper Vixanti girl, the happier the director will be, so please don't dawdle!"

Shetari gave the sash around her waist a tug. She had never liked the color, of course. The purple light only made it look worse. It wasn't looking so much like an odd, but visually palatable, greenish blue anymore. Now it looked positively putrid, like something foul that had bubbled its way up out of a back alley sewer grate. It slipped from atop her modestly broad hips and fell to the ground with an airy 'swish'. Her little cream dress, more of a wrap with sleeves really, fell open, completely exposing her modest, perky chest to the view of whoever was almost certainly watching her every move.

She had no real illusions about it. There had to be at least one camera in the pod. People were watching. They were probably taking

notes. She could only hope that those notes were going to be focused on her behavior and medical condition. As much as she had been prepared to bare it all, and even offer it for use if necessary to get that job, this was a very different thing. It was cold. Distant. Impersonal. And completely out of her control. But she had signed the papers. No matter what was happening or about to happen, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"This all feels so... wrong," Shetari murmured to herself as the butterflies in her stomach decided to get their panties up in a proper ruffle. She began to feel a bit unsettled. A bit nauseous. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. It was all just in her head, surely. She wasn't really a prisoner. A captive. A slave. The darkness and confinement were playing tricks on her. She just had to keep going. Take her clothes off. Get it done and over with. Everything would turn out just fine.

She had always found her particularly lush

coat of silky white frontal fur to be something of a mild inconvenience, especially when it came to the price of drain clog remover. Now, it proved to be an absolute godsend to the easily embarrassed cheetah. She had opted to leave her bra at home, of course. She had planned on the possible need to buy the job with her body, after all. There had seemed no sense in having extra layers to delay the consummation of that kind of transaction. She was a straight-to-the-point kind of woman, after all. Social subtlety was not in her nature. She just didn't really understand it. It was a weakness of hers, and one she just couldn't seem to overcome no matter how hard she tried.

Shetari looked down at her naked chest. Her silky fluff had puffed out, making it look for all the world like she had giant cotton balls hanging there, rather than enticing glandular providers of milky sustenance. Despite this, there was simply no suppressing her instinctive sense of self-consciousness. Even as

she fiddled with her discarded sash in a misguided attempt to gather up her errant sandals among its folds, she did her best to cover her barely visible nipples with her left arm. It was no use. She just couldn't reach down to properly pick up her sandals without slipping off of the seat. She had to move her protective hand down to that polished black ring at her side. It was the only way to steady herself enough to keep her from planting her face hard against the opposite wall.

The cool air that flowed around her began to wash through the thick mop of fur upon and around her breasts. Her skin began to tingle. Her heavy pink nipples began to harden and peek out from the fur that had, until now, largely concealed them from view. The urge to cover them again was quite nearly insatiable.

She blushed as she finally managed to gather up her sandals and toss them into the chute along with her sash. It would have taken a very practiced eye to notice the change in

color that slowly flowed from her cheeks and down over her collarbones. Still, she could feel the rising warmth all the same. That only made her feel even more self-conscious. It was obviously only going to get worse.

Shetari gritted her teeth as she let her shoulders fall back. Her cream dress, virtually glowing in the purple light, slid down her arms and back, coming to a rest in a rumple around her waist. She wiggled and twisted in a vain effort to get the wrinkled mass of fabric out from under her butt. Try as she might, she just couldn't manage to free it without at least partially standing up. She took firm hold of both protruding rings and lifted her hindquarters a few inches off of the seat. Much to her consternation, this only resulted in a further settling of the fabric onto the seat's surface. She attempted to wiggle about and use her tail to brush the rumple of fabric onto the floor. As she thrust her hips further upward and wiggled her butt from side to side, she couldn't help but wonder what she must

look like to those who were surely watching her struggle.

Shetari's dress began to wrap around her tail. It was far from the intended result. She whipped her tail from side to side, trying to free it as it became even more entangled within the folds of fabric. It was a compromising position, to be sure, and no time for the skimpy bit of white lace that served as her sole item of underwear to get rebellious. It pulled taut and began to delve into areas that were well outside the scope of its authorized security clearance.

A soft, sensuous huff made it all too clear that a certain pair of eyes had very much noticed the fact that the soft folds between her legs were now on display in full form, if not quite yet in their natural substance. There was no further doubt in her mind about the presence of a camera. The receptionist, at the very least, could see everything that was going on inside the pod. If someone in such a low



level position was watching, there would certainly be others. But... who? And how many? Was everyone in the whole damned place watching her take her clothes off?

Shetari bit her lip and sat back down as quickly as she could. She reached down and tugged at the dress which seemed to have no intention to part with her body. "Get off me, dammit!" She hissed as she slapped her tail up and down a several times. It took a twist of her hips from side to side in order to finally loosen the tangle just enough to send it all into a heap on the floor. With a frustrated huff and a quick swipe, she snatched up the dress and hurled it into the open chute.

All that was left now was to get rid of that little piece of increasingly errant lingerie. She dug her fingers under the strap on her right, again holding herself steady with her left hand. This time there would be no messing about. She yanked on the strap hard and, just like her watch strap, it snapped with such ease

that any observer would certainly and correctly deduce that she'd gotten it off the clearance rack at some dingy backstreet purveyor of manufacturing defects.

"Mmm," came the faint moan as the silk parted ways with the fluff between Shetari's legs. There was little to see, of course. Save for a subtle parting through the very middle of her particularly thick fur, there was nothing to hint at the true shape of what lay beneath. The receptionist's vocalizations, however, were making it quite it clear that the mere exposure of her invitingly fluffy crotch was still plenty enough to please the eye.

Shetari began to wonder what Vixanti thought of the receptionist's behavior. It was really out of line, even under the most liberal interpretations of employment law. Then again, who was she to judge? How many times had she taken the opportunity to look at all the furless girls back in the Academy locker room? But still...

She dropped her panties to the pod floor with a quick flick of her tail. This time, she was able to pick up the discarded item of attire with her toes. She smiled to herself, despite the nervous anxiety that gripped her. Using her unusually flexible toes to pick up dropped objects was a particular talent of hers. A peculiar one, as well.

Being able to easily pick objects up in such a fashion was a rare enough trait among humanoids. Among fey'li, it was almost unheard of. The retractable claws on a fey'li's toes were nearly twice as large as those on their fingers. They required a far more stiff and sturdy structure to support them against the harsh strain of climbing trees, disemboweling various pieces of fitness equipment, or reminding that occasionally embarrassing significant other that severe bodily injury is just a muscle twitch away, without ever having to get up from the restaurant table.

"Well! You're very... flexible," the receptionist purred. Her smooth, sallow tone had slipped into something deeper and more primal. She was clearly more than just observing what her captive was doing in the dressing pod. "Now, how about those intimate products? Reproductive aids? Reproductive controls? Tampon, maybe? Or... maybe an arousal aid? Or two? Yes? No? It all has to go, regardless of the state of your reproductive cycle. There could be some serious medical consequences if anything goes forgotten. Your new Vixanti Corporation uniform will take care of all of the equivalent functions for you."

"No, I've got nothing," Shetari replied as she settled her fluffy butt back down onto the hard seat and rested her back against the alien curves of the pod wall. It wasn't as uncomfortable as she had expected, at least now that her body heat had warmed it all up a bit. She was still very conscious of the little holes that now surrounded the back of her body. The air that flowed from them seemed to

be getting a little warmer. It also began to smell just a bit less rubbery and a bit more sweet. She began to feel a little lightheaded and unfocused.

"You are sure?" the receptionist again inquired. "Absolutely one hundred percent sure?"

"I'm fey'li," Shetari answered as did her best to relax. "We only need to use moisture pads, but I left that at home. I figured it would just get in the way of any... um... exam. So... uh... where's this uniform suit thing so I can put it on?"

"Ah, yes, the uniform suit," the receptionist replied with a low, sensuous giggle. "Before we get you into your new biogel uniform, I need to tell you a bit about the... experience. Do not worry about a thing. As strange as it may all sound to you, and though it may take some time for you to fully appreciate what it means, I can assure you that it will be as pleasant as

can be. If you allow it to be, that is. As long as you let the nitrous oxide do its work and follow my instructions exactly, you will find it all very, very much to your liking. Are you ready to begin?"

Shetari sighed, shaking her head as her eyes fixed on the little purple light. Her fingers caressed the handle rings. She tried to settle down and calm the butterflies in her stomach. It was no use. She was too anxious. Too nervous. Maybe Vixanti really did have a point about enforced relaxation. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

"No. You do not," the receptionist answered with another little giggle. "And yet, giving up all control can be such a liberating thing. The old walls that you have built in your mind will dissolve, replaced by the myriad possibilities of physical experience offered by Vixanti Corporation. Soon, the application of your biogel uniform will begin. Just lean back. Hold onto the provided handles. Relax. Breathe

deeply. Close your eyes, even. And then... feel. Really. Just feel it. Let it flow over you. Let it surround you. Let it wear you."

A lump formed in Shetari's throat. After all that rationalizing, it wasn't actually just some well composed piece psychological trickery, was it? Something was about to happen to her. To her body. Something she had never really explicitly agreed to. Something she had never really understood the full consequences of. It was Noya all over again, only this time there would be no respite after two months. It would be eight years. Eight years of who-knows-what, now to be inflicted upon her body regardless of whether or not she liked it.

"Yes, let the gel wear you," the receptionist continued. "Until a few moments ago, you wore clothing to give yourself a certain shape. A certain form. A certain image to be presented to the world around you. Now, the equation will be reversed. Your body will provide shape to the gel. Your body will provide the gel with

its form. And, most importantly to Vixanti, your body will provide it with the image that the world sees. The gel will interact with your body in ways you never thought possible. The gel will protect you. It will sustain you. It will cleanse you. It will even stimulate you. So long as the gel embraces your body, you will belong to it. You will be its pet. Its companion. Its toy, if you are willing."

Shetari gasped as the shadow which had been brooding, barely visible at the edge of her mind took on a more solid shape. The nightmare seemed so much more real now. It was a tangible thing. She could reach out and almost, but not quite touch it.

"All that you are to it, of course, it will be to you," the receptionist went on, even as the sweet odor in the pod became a little bit more intense. The fluid gurgling became a little bit louder. And, much to Shetari's considerable consternation, the little purple light seemed to be throbbing and getting closer. "You will wear



it. You will interact with it. Protect it. Sustain it. Cleanse it. Even stimulate it. So long as you embrace the gel, it will belong to you. It will be your pet. Your companion. Your toy, if you desire."

Shetari bit her lip. There was a warmth upon her back. Upon her arms. Upon her legs. Her whole body tensed. It was coming. This... gel. Whatever it really was. But what would it actually feel like? What was it really going to do to her? Was it going to manipulate her? Control her? Was that why this stuff had never been offered to the public? Because it was a way to control people? To make the perfect employees? The perfect servants? Slaves, even? And, as unfathomable as it might seem, was that why the government was so interested in making sure everything Vixanti did was so quickly approved? Were they really in on it? And why? What did they intend to do with it?

"Your body and the gel will unite," the

receptionist continued unabated. "Together, you will form a single living organism. There will be no barriers between you and it, so long as your body resides within it. It will become you, as you will become it. I cannot explain to you what that truly means in words. You must experience it. And you will. And then, you will understand all you need to know about what it means to embrace the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle.

"I... I don't..." was all that Shetari could get out of her mouth. She was well and truly horrified. Of course she had long known that Vixanti delved into such metaphysical realms of stuff that would have seemed like total nonsense were it not for the periodic, publicly demonstrated success. But this... what was this? Symbiosis? She had read of experiments that had taken place, long in the past. Horrible things, done by horrible people, to victims completely unaware of the potential consequences.

As far as anyone had been able to work it out, engineered symbiosis was not something to be sampled. It was a total commitment, devastatingly permanent, and never a balanced relationship of equal parts. The host's body would destroy the engineered organism. The engineered organism would destroy the host. Or, far more likely, the destruction would be mutual. Engineered symbiosis meant death. Slow, excruciatingly painful death. There was simply no way that Vixanti had developed something different. Something balanced. Something that wouldn't kill her in one of the most hideously drawn out ways imaginable.

What the receptionist was describing was simply impossible. Or was it? Was she really describing engineered symbiosis, or was it something else? Was it something purely technological that would run off of her body heat? That might make sense. Feedback suits already did that. It was as much for safety as it was for convenience. The last thing anyone flying any aerospace craft wanted was to have

some accident put their body right square in the middle of a high current electrical circuit. It was better to have the information moved to and from the self powering suit through induction, on circuits that would break the moment loads came anywhere close to being dangerous. Was that what this gel was? But how could it work if it was liquid?

Shetari winced as the scent of sweetened latex became absolutely oppressive. Her mind began to float. The tension in her muscles began to melt away. Her whole body felt tingly. Of course, it was the nitrous oxide. Amid her welling sense of terror, she had completely forgotten about it.

"Mhmm," the receptionist purred into the captive cheetah's cloud filled mind. "Relax. Feel it. Experience it. And once it is all done, you will speak with the director and you will have the perfect job to suit your attractions. Well... qualities... and then... you will meet... experience wonderful... perfect... work..."

secrets... Vixanti..."

The receptionist's words flowed past Shetari's ears, practically unnoticed in the haze that seemed to surround her. Her hands slipped from the rings. Her limp body began to slide from the seat. The soles of her feet were wet. The backs of her legs. Had she lost control of her bladder? Was that the reason for the drain in the floor? But... the back of her shoulders also felt wet. And her wrists. And the small of her back. What was happening to her?

It was coming from the wall. Warm. Wet. Thick. Darkness made real, binding her to the seat and the twisted shapes which surrounded it. There was no stopping it. No resisting it. It was going to surround her. It was going to absorb her. Consume her. Destroy her. And there wasn't a damned thing she could do to stop it.

The receptionist's voice droned on, offering

so many soothing words that she simply couldn't understand. What use was it even trying? The mass. The slime. It wasn't merely content with adhering to the surface of her perfectly groomed fur. It was insinuating itself between the hairs, drawing them into its substance so that it could press directly upon the surface of her skin. Soon, it would delve deeper, into her skin itself. At least that was how it seemed.

An eerie sense of calm took hold of her. Her will to resist the coming eternal darkness had been sapped away. There was nothing left for her to do but embrace it. It seemed so peaceful. So... beautiful.

Shetari moaned as the blackness spread its unnatural wetness all over her back and around her sides. Nothing stood between her flesh and its wet, gooey touch, not even the tiniest bubble of trapped air. There was her body. And there was the slime. And that was it. A fixed equation. But what would the sum look

like once it had been calculated? Her gas addled mind offered a string of solutions, each more outrageous than the last. There was no more logic. The fabric of reality was torn asunder. She was falling through the gaping hole, and down into the black abyss beyond.

The slime forced its way under the soft cheeks of her shapely posterior. It pressed into the cleft it found there, and poked at that particularly sensitive spot right beneath the base of her tail. She gasped as she felt it flow between her legs. It filled every exterior crevice with its gentile liquid caress. When it was done with this, and without even the slightest hint of firmness or force, its thick, goeey warmth began to slide even deeper.

She shuddered at the mere thought of the blackness filling her body. She squirmed with what little energy she had left to muster. She tried to close her legs, but the blackness had bound them apart. Whatever it intended to do to her, there was nothing she could do to stop

it.

"Aaaah!" Shetari groaned as she opened her eyes wide in fearful anticipation of the inevitable penetration. Her jaw dropped. Her ears fell backwards. The slime was flowing. It was rubbing. It was pressing. It was slipping within.

It began with a tingling at the opening of her urethra. She felt a strange warmth there. Had she finally lost control and wet herself? Perhaps she hadn't, but she began to feel like she had to pee, and badly. There was a slow release of pressure in her bladder, followed by a dark, sinister numbness. She shuddered at the lack of sensation. What had the probing goo done to her body?

She began to huff deeply and uncontrollably as the blackness made its way into deeper, darker places. It prodded at her tightly puckered anus. Instinct made her squeeze her butt cheeks together in a vain effort to hold it



even tighter. It was no use. She could feel the wetness making its way inside. Opening her up. Filling her rectum to the point where she felt the need to defecate. She tried. She tried hard. There was nothing she could do to force the goo out.

For a few long, agonizing minutes, she squirmed in discomfort. She could feel faint, warm sensations as the slime wending its way upward through her intestines and into her stomach. It seemed for all the world that it no intention to stop there. It would continue upward, filling her throat. Filling her lungs. And then it would spew out her mouth in black torrent as she writhed about in horror and pain as the life was asphyxiated from her captive body. But then, just as before, the unpleasant sensations faded, replaced by a sense that the affected parts of her body were no longer there.

Shetari had no time to catch her breath. No time to sort out what was happening to her

body. The black slime continued in its work without pause. Even as it continued to spread around her body, up to her neck and over her arms, it parted her moist inner lips and made its way inside.

There was no pressure. No resistance. If she hadn't been able to feel the direction the flow, she barely would have known that it had entered her. Indeed, despite the extraordinary erotic sensitivity of her inner fey'li womanhood, it's spreading and filling with slime didn't increase her state of arousal even half as much as she might have expected it to. That was not to say that it didn't arouse her. It did. And quite firmly. But she was too confused to enjoy it. Too confused. And too horrified.

Shetari bit her lower lip and endured. She tried her hardest to rationalize what was happening to her body. As alien as it all was, it wasn't an entirely unfamiliar experience. She had worn so-called 'perma-suits' for short periods before. These represented a

domesticated alien technology and were designed for long term wear in hazardous atmospheres or biological environments. A person could theoretically remain encased in one of the skin-tight garments for a year or more without needing more than a supply of liquid sustenance and a device to remove wastes.

The most obvious drawback to wearing a perma-suit was having all of one's body orifices stuffed full and being kept in a state of long term sensory alteration to prevent one from feeling the resulting discomfort. The less obvious drawbacks were all related to the long term medical effects. Most warnings tended to focus on the fact that the ability to hold in wastes would be lost as muscles became permanently relaxed. More insidious was the alterations inflicted upon the senses. The world outside the suit would become uncomfortable. It would feel alien. So alien, in fact, that long term wearers would feel compelled to return to their skin tight cocoons.

In short, it was extremely addictive. And, for most humanoid species, at least, there was no real cure.

A sharp cramp tugged at Shetari's tummy. And then another. And another. Contractions? She felt full. Pregnant. It was inside her uterus. It was stretching the tender flesh. Filling it with its substance. Would it stop there? Or would it go on to the places where the purest expressions of her physical femininity were waiting for their chance to produce new life?

Her head spun as the blackness flowed over her breasts. What has happening to her? What was she becoming? She moaned. She squirmed. The sensations within her body again faded away, leaving behind a black mass of dull nothingness and a budding sense of uncertain gender identity.

Her entire body seemed numb. It had been replaced by an abyss of black nothingness. All that was left for her to feel was her racing

heart, heaving chest, and muscles quivering amid the warm mass of slime that surrounded her. She didn't feel like a woman anymore. She didn't even feel like a person. She felt like a thing. An object. Perhaps even a machine. What had the infernal blackness done to her body?

Shetari was now almost entirely encased within the thick, heavy mass of black goo. Only her head remained free of the slimy coating. The goop was pressing snugly up under her chin and around the nape of her neck. She squirmed harder. She could see it in her mind's eye, spreading ever-upward to cover her head. It would take her. And remake her. Just like those other girls. She'd have her own feature article in XenoExotic. And then... she'd vanish, never to be seen again, save for those who would be sure to take any opportunity to enjoy what pleasures her shiny inanimate body had to offer.

Seconds ticked past. Shetari held her breath.

She shuddered in terrified anticipation. Nothing happened. The oily goop remained where it had stopped beneath her chin.

The black goo began to feel wetter. Wetter than water, if that was even possible. It was warm. Snug. Comfortable, even. There was nothing, not even one little bubble of air or bit of dust to separate her body from the perfectly uniform coating of slime. For all she could tell, they really had become one organism, just as the receptionist had told her. Whatever that really meant.

For a few impossibly long minutes, she was left to contemplate the lingering physical sensations offered by her skin tight prison of glossy blackness. Despite her sense of literal objectification, she started to feel strangely comfortable. The feeling of being a thing with no sex and little emotion was peaceful, in its own bizarre way. It was certainly something she could get used to.

The smell in the pod had changed. The nitrous oxide had been shut off. Her mind began to clear. The sense of being encased in a solid liquid intensified. It was somehow even tighter upon her flesh. And softer. It seemed to weight less and less upon her body. The mass that surrounded her was thinning, receding back into the darkness from which it had come.

Shetari felt strangely vibrant, as if the life within her body was somehow burning with white hot intensity. But... it wasn't just the life within her own body, was it? It was the life within the living blackness as well. There was no barrier between the two forces. They flowed together. They mixed freely. Where did she end? Where did the blackness begin?

The more her mind cleared, the greater the feeling of unity. She was consumed by a sense of calm that was completely beyond her control. The nightmare that had gripped her mind at the very beginning of the experience

was still there, but her body no longer responded to it. Indeed, her body seemed to embrace the thought of being consumed by the blob. She could only gaze into those fears and wonder why they had become so seemingly benign. So perplexingly desirable, even.

Shetari's mouth gaped open. She wanted to speak. She wanted to cry out in rebellion against the slime's destruction of her sense of self-preservation. She couldn't form words, no matter how hard she tried. All that came out was a low, desperate moan.

The little purple light brightened and began to pulse in hypnotic fashion. The odor of nitrous oxide returned with greater intensity than before. She began to feel numb. Disembodied, even. The real world faded. There was nothing left but her, the light, and... Vixanti.



## FOUR

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# LIFESTYLE

“Welcome to your new home. Welcome to Vixanti,” a beautiful, deep voice flowed into the biogel application chamber. The intense, almost melodic words washed through Shetari’s captive mind, cleansing it of all negative feelings and fears and replacing them all with a vast empty space ripe to be filled with new feelings and new compulsions. There was nothing she could do to resist, for there seemed to be nothing left under her control to resist with. She could only sit, wait and wonder what sort of person that she was about to be remade into.

She was being hypnotized. Purple patterns flowed and flashed before her eyes, prying

opening paths to places within her brain that nature had seen fit to keep under solid lock and key. The deepest, and most important of those places were where nature had placed her greatest fears. There, the things that seemed like threats to her mortal existence were arrayed and kept at the ready to deter her from making any decision that might lead her to dire harm... or worse.

Some of Shetari's deepest primal fears were perfectly sensible. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to be dismembered. Or disfigured. Or disgraced. Or left destitute. That was all just common sense. Other fears, however, were more individual. Some were quite well founded, based upon her own unique personal experiences. Others were not so well founded. A few were even silly. Who ever died from having goldfish nibbling on one's toe fur?

"You feel the embrace of Vixanti upon your beautiful body," the mesmerizing voice continued. "It feels so pleasing, doesn't it? So

perfect. So right. It was made just for you, that special batch of biogel. Just for your body and your body alone. It is you. You are it. And together, you are a single living thing. Inseparable. Permanent. A magnificent display of what the biogel is capable of becoming.”

Shetari might have been confused if the parts of her brain capable of expressing confusion still functioned.

“It’s a magnificent future. A future built around the biogel and all its myriad possibilities. And, it’s a future that you will embrace with every last measure of your immortal soul.

What little was left functioning in the conscious part of Shetari's mind could only hear and store the information being imparted upon it. There would be no critical thinking. No forming opinions. To her, every word was the literal truth. If the voice had told her that the blackness upon her body was white, she

would have resisted any attempt to convince her otherwise.

"Vixanti Corporation calls the process through which this future is to be attained the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle," the voice explained. "The Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle represents the ultimate replacement for all social theories. The ultimate enhancement for all sapient biologies. The ultimate expression of all lifestyle technologies. The Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle is a glorious greater oneness that each of its constituent living spirits will experience in every aspect and for every moment of their exquisitely transformed lives."

Transformed. The word seemed stronger. More significant. It wormed its way into the forbidden paths that the hypnosis had opened. Transformation wasn't something to be feared. It was something to be approached. Accepted. Embraced.

"The first step into the greater unity represented by the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle is to be transformed into something that is physically the same as all others," the voice instructed. "But how does one make a stunningly beautiful fey'li female such as yourself into something that is, with respects to the unity, as perfectly physically the same as a giant, muscular and irrepressibly virile agzoads male?"

Unity. Sameness. More powerful words. There was no need to desperately cling to the concept of individuality. Or even the concept of self. There was only the whole. The combined entity, if it could be called that. All else was irrelevant.

"Your magnificent body already resides in the embrace of this first step toward the greater unity," the voice declared. "The living biogel feels so nice upon your sumptuous curves, does it not? Beautiful. Sterile. Glorious black perfection."

Beautiful. Sterile. Perfection. Yet more words of power to add to the impact of the others. She was beautiful in the embrace of the transforming blackness. Its sheen of glossy perfection would keep her sterile in all the senses of the word. Clean. Free of disease. Free from the potential inconvenience of pregnancy. Free from any inner biological aspects of her femininity, in fact. It wasn't just convenient. It was necessary. And it was desirable. Very, very desirable.

"The living black gelatin in which your tender flesh now resides is part of a single greater organism that forms the very heart of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle," the voice explained. "There is only one biogel. One greater organism. It serves as the mediator which balances the individual organs of living flesh and ensures that they will no longer stoop to serving only their own selfish desires. Instead, the biogel ensures that each organ will serve only for the good of the greater whole. To achieve this true unity, the biogel makes

each organ the same by coating it. Entering it. Controlling its physical functions. Yes. You. You are no longer unique. You are no longer a distinct organism. You are part of the greater unity. You are part of Vixanti."

Vixanti. The word now seemed to carry the weight of a wrought iron cannonball, fired straight into the seat of her sense of identity. She was not Shetari Anwae. She was Vixanti. Everyone who wore the glossy blackness was Vixanti. They were all the same. And it was beautiful.

"But that was only the first step. To truly enter into the embrace of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle, you must now go forth and experience what it truly means to be one of many identical organs of the greater living being," the voice instructed. "But how is such a thing possible? How can you feel what others are feeling? Experience what others are experiencing, even as they are experiencing it? Even the things which the body of your birth

was never prepared by nature to experience?"

Body of your birth. More intense words that reinforced the idea of transformation. Her body wasn't a fixed thing. It could be changed. Replaced. There was no need to keep the one she had if a better one could be found. Would Vixanti find her a better body? One more suited to the purpose of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle?

"The living biogel that has taken your magnificent body into its embrace will ensure that mere proximity is enough to fuel mutual awareness," the voice cooed. "Impressions. Emotions. Intentions. As a supplicant to the greater unity, all of these things will become clear to you as you come into proximity with your peers. You will experience their most basic impressions of the world they see through their eyes. You will feel the emotions that guide them. And you will know their immediate intentions, be they for good, or for evil. And you will experience all of these things



as if they were your own. And they will experience all of yours, as if it were their own. You will see the world as one. Feel emotion as one. And your intentions shall become as one. And then, you will act as one."

Supplicant. Another word of power, and one that that carried a grave weight. Shetari wasn't really that important in the greater scheme of things. She was just a part. A replaceable part, at that. She could be cast aside at a moments notice, and the unity would go on as if she had never been there in the first place. She didn't matter. Only the unity mattered.

"But the greatest glory offered by greater unity is to allow the living biogel in which you reside to melt and merge with that of another," the voice went on. "Allow it to merge. Surrender the barriers of the mind. Then, all things will flow together. All thoughts. All memories. All sensations. Emotional and physical. Two beings as one in all aspects, with no way to differentiate one from the other. No

way to separate them from their glorious union without some compelling influence, internal or external. And therein lies the very core of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle. All are as one. And eventually, all will live as one. One body. One soul."

One body. One soul. There was no mistaking the meaning. Sameness in the eyes of the biogel will give way to literal sameness in every respect. All would become one. And there would be nothing else. No one else. Just the one being for the remainder of eternity.

"But for the time being, all cannot possibly exist together in the same space in a single, unified body," the voice continued. "And therein lies the third and most perilous step in the full development of the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle, and the greater unity it seeks to create. You, and your fully prepared body, will perform essential duties in the consummation of this third phase. To whatever task your body will be assigned, you will embrace it with

enthusiasm and find pleasure in whatever it might impose upon you."

Fully prepared body. Essential duties. Embrace it. Find pleasure. Whatever it might impose. There would be no questions. No objections. Shetari would obey. Accept. And enjoy it. And that was that.

"Welcome to Vixanti, my pretty little pet," the voice concluded. "Your future within the Unity awaits."

The hypnotic purple patterns faded to nothing. Shetari's spinning, nitrous addled mind was cast into complete darkness. What little was left of her conscious awareness slipped away. She fell asleep.

Shetari had no way to know just how long had been left to dream. She dreamed of the porn magazines. She dreamed of the videos. She dreamed of inanimate black bodies, slender, identical and featureless. Women with subtle feminine features, waiting for warm

flesh to be thrust into their bodies by male beings whom they'd never met. Men with modest, erect phalli, waiting to be sheathed in the warm flesh of female beings whom they'd never met. They would never again know any experience outside of the physical act of sex. Sex and dim, dreamy knowledge that they were nothing more than objects to those who's hands caressed them. Objects of desire. Objects of pleasure. And objects of dark, insidious temptation.

What living man or woman, who had intimately consorted with the silky blackness of their living doll possessions, could resist the temptation to have their own tender bodies coated with the same substance? They would come to Vixanti seeking greater pleasures. They would come to Vixanti seeking enlightenment. And they would come to Vixanti and cast themselves into the embrace of the greater organism. The greater Unity. And they would do so with irrepressible enthusiasm, to the very last moment of their

existence as unique, independent beings.

Shetari's dream turned into a vast mirror, floating above puffy white clouds amid a hazy gray sky. She was floating there before her own reflection, naked as naked could be. And then came the blackness. Glossy wet blackness. It came from behind. It surrounded her. Coated her in its perfectly polished perfection as she squirmed with delight. She giggled even as it wrapped around her head. She bounced playfully as the last strand of fur vanished underneath the glistening slime. She shuddered as her body shrunk into a plain, generic mockery of the magnificent beauty it had once been. But it wasn't her. It was only her reflection.

Any sane, rational mind should have recoiled from the nightmarish vision of what might be in store within Vixanti Corporation's mysterious underground complex. But Shetari's dreaming mind was far from rational. Instead of pulling away, she felt compelled to

reach out toward her transformed reflection. Her reflection reached out toward her. As their outstretched fingers neared, a sense of desire washed over the wonder-struck cheetah. She didn't want to just touch the image in the mirror. She wanted to become the image in the mirror. She *had* to become the image in the mirror. And she had to become it now!

She grabbed at the black hand. She cast her whole body forward in her effort to unite with and become the vision she so desired to be. The mirror shattered. Shetari jolted awake.

"... hear... hold... handles," the receptionist cooed. The fog that had until now imprisoned Shetari's mind was lifting amid the slightly stinging note of pure oxygen. "Hold yourself up. It is about to release you."

Shetari struggled to overcome the limpness that still kept hold of her body. She didn't remember falling asleep. The blackness had just pushed snug up under her chin. Then there

was a dreamy vision of a vaguely familiar cheetah, demonstrating what it was like to be turned into one of those living dolls she had seen in the porn mags. And now, the receptionist was talking to her again. How much time had actually passed? Had anything else happened to her while she was asleep?

Shetari groped about with her soaking wet hands. Her gooey fingers found the handle rings. She fully expected them to slip clean off of the polished surface. Again, she was faced with what seemed to be a truly impossible sensation. However liquid the goo may have felt to her fingers, its outer surface was an entirely different thing. It may have looked like black glass, and felt like thick water, but it gripped like a pair of brand new medical latex gloves.

All at once, she was supporting her own weight. She managed to keep herself upright upon the seat, but her feet flailed helplessly upon the pod floor. Her legs felt as if they were

longer now, by about five or six centimeters. She didn't know how to deal with it. She shook her head and drew her legs up beneath her. She needed to sit still and her wait for her mind to fully clear.

Heels! Of course! The slime had formed high heels under the soles of her feet. All Vixanti women had them. She hated high heels. All fey'li women tended to avoid them. They upset the delicate balance produced by the combination of shifting hips and swaying tail when walking. There was just no way around it. Would these be different somehow?

Shetari was panting hard. She hadn't even noticed it until now. Any lingering sense of terror was already long gone, wafted away along with the nitrous oxide. However, the physical aftereffects of her ordeal remained. Not even the unnatural calm that had taken hold of her could change that. "Goddess almighty," she whispered, her voice left almost completely broken by the ordeal. "Goddess



almighty... what... what happened to me? I don't... feel... like me... anymore."

"Hush," the receptionist purred. "Relax. Breathe. There is only one step left before you will be permitted to leave the biogel application pod for your new career here at Vixanti."

Shetari bit her lip as she stared down at the perfectly reflective blackness that coated her fingers. It had looked so perfect upon the receptionist's body. Now, it looked even more perfect. She lowered her right hand and ran her fingertips over her glistening black thigh. It felt like oil on her fingers, but it also felt like rubber being rubbed against rubber. It sounded like rubber as well.

'Squeak... squitch... crinkle... snap!' was the sound that filled Shetari's ears as she watched her fingertips draw the blackness upon her thighs into little watery ripples. It was like poking at a bowl of mercury that had been

covered by a micro-layer of the softest black latex. The ripples undulated for a moment. Then they faded. It wasn't just fascinating to look at. It was totally entrancing.

"You like it?" the receptionist chuckled as Shetari toyed with the alien material upon her legs.

Shetari stared down at her absolutely exquisite legs and the little ripples that came with even the lightest of poking. "It's... so... weird..."

"You will have plenty of time to embrace the weirdness," the receptionist responded cheerily. "Now, it is time to give you your designation. You may have had a name when you arrived here. It is still yours to keep for private use and when among the general public. However, so long as you are in within any facility or vessel belonging to Vixanti Corporation, you will be known by a specially assigned designation. Your designation is

TS3A0B5DN. Nicknames based on your designation are permitted for casual use, but while on duty your designation must be used at all times, and for all purposes."

"That's so... impersonal!" Shetari blurted out as she lifted her hands to her noticeably firmer breasts. Her nipples were nowhere to be seen. She reached down with her right hand to press between her legs. There was only a thick, soft flatness to be found there. Of course, it was just like most of the pictures she had seen. Every subtle shape was on full display, except for those that explicitly defined sexual function. Those were hidden away. It was a perfect visual accompaniment to the inner feeling of complete sexlessness that had taken hold of her. It was a feeling she was already finding quite pleasant. Enjoyable, even.

"The first four elements of your designation reflect your current assignment and home facility," the receptionist went on. "This is

Vixanti facility number 3. A is for the original spaceport facility. B is for the underground research center. C is for the engineering section. T is for temporary staff, usually staff from other facilities who's assignment is short duration. V is for, well... you'll find out about that eventually. Your permanent assignment code will be given to you once you have come to some agreement with the director. The remaining five elements are your individual designation. You may use these five elements in place of the full designation in any situation where your assignment and facility are not relevant, including normal, professional conversation within this Vixanti facility itself, but not while in other Vixanti facilities."

"Seriously, this stuff is in my body doing goddess knows what, and now this?" Shetari muttered as she shook her head. She wanted to be upset, but she couldn't. There was only calm. Calm and the blackness. She was it and it was her. If it wanted her to be known by a number, than so did she. She had no choice.

That didn't mean she had to like it, though. "You made me look and feel like everyone else, and now you want me to be a number too. Fuck... alright. Alright. Tell me the number again. Tell me who I am... because I just don't know anymore."

"Your designation is T... S... 3... A... O.. B... 5... D... N," the receptionist said, her tone flattening. "TS3AoB5DN. Repeat it to me."

"Uh... TS... 3..." Shetari struggled to repeat. Memory training had been an important part of the Merchant Marine Academy course, but the involuntary calm that her obsidian companion was imposing upon her did little to help her focus mind on the task. "Um... A. oB5. DN. TS3AoB5DN."

"Very good, oB5DN," the receptionist responded with a soft chuckle. "My name is AD3BBL13Y. That's BL13Y for short. In private, I'm known as Blissy. But this is not in private. BL13Y is my proper name. Remember to use

it."

"BL13Y," Shetari repeated. She felt like a zombie, bereft of emotion. All of her inner energy seemed held in a bubble that was just about to ready to burst. How could she release it? How could she direct it if she couldn't even direct herself? Who had the key that kept it all locked up inside?

"Now, what would you like your nickname to be?" Blissy inquired. "Obsidian seems the obvious choice. It's almost like the person who assigned you the designation picked it out just for that. What do you think, hmm?"

Shetari shook her head in disgust with the whole thing. "I... this is just too confusing right now."

"Well, if you don't like it, perhaps AD3AS84N1 can think of something for you," Blissy suggested. "She will be your guide on your first trip into our underground facility and will help you become a little more

comfortable with your new state of affairs. Do be warned, however. She can be a bit... shall we say... physical. But I really do think you will both get along just fine. You will be roommates too, at least for the time being. So, shall I open the door or do you need a few more minutes?"

"Yeah, fine. Open it," Shetari muttered, slowly rising up onto her unsteady legs. At least the tall heels that the blackness had gifted her with weren't absurdly narrow. They formed a very solid surface on which to stand, and perhaps even walk. There would be little chance that she might randomly break an ankle. That didn't mean that her first, pensive step was going to be a steady one, though. She stumbled and reached out with both hands to keep herself upright. The twisted, misshapen walls of the pod now made at least a little bit of sense. She had plenty of lumps and twisty bits to grab onto. She took another tiny step. Then, with a bit of help from the pod's easily gripped walls, she turned toward its sealed door.

"You might want to close your eyes," the receptionist said, even as the pod door emitted a sharp click. "You are not in the lobby any more and, well, it may be a bit... bright."

The pod door popped inward. It slid to one side. Shetari could see nothing. Nothing, that is, but the intensely sterile luminescence that now surrounded her.



## FIVE

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# LIONESS

Shetari squinted. She could barely make out anything among the searing whiteness that now flooded her dark little prison. The shadowy shape was approaching. It looked like it might be humanoid. Was it a man? Was it a woman? Was that a tail flicking back and forth? She just couldn't tell.

She drew back from the pod doorway. She could smell the approaching figure now. There was no mistaking the subtle notes. Fey'li. Female. But... something was off. The sweet, living scents seemed almost artificial. Rubbery, even. Was it just the lingering smell of the liquid blackness within the pod, or was it actually coming from the figure who was

approaching in complete silence? And, if it was the latter, what did it mean?

"Um..." Shetari muttered as the silent figure seemed to hesitate several steps from the open door. If the fur on the back of her neck hadn't been imprisoned within the black goo, it would have been standing straight out. "Um... hello?"

"Hey-loo!" the fey'li woman's low, almost grating voice called out. Her distinctive, rumbling accent made her words sound as much like a vocalized earthquake as they sounded like elements of a proper language. "Masa meysik? My new roommate! Ooh! Spots! You be so much fun! I just love spots!"

Shetari froze as the shadowy figure stepped into the pod doorway and peered inside. As Shetari's eyes slowly began to adjust to the bright light, she could begin to make out tawny fur and rounded ears. "Um... I'm..."

"TS3A0B5DN," the lioness growled, friendly-like. Her silver shoulder sleeves cast little

bright beams of reflected light all over the interior of the pod chamber. She leaned inwards, toward the nervous cheetah and chuffed like a wild tiger. Her smile was broad, but it was also extremely intimidating in a very deep and primal way. "I'm AD3AS84N1. You call me Shani when we cuddle, hmm? But not now. Now you call me S84N1."

"What... cuddle... I... what?" Shetari stammered as she found her eyes drawn to the lioness' beautifully silhouetted, superbly athletic figure. From the firm, well built muscles to the single long braid of dusty brown hair that swayed from side to side behind her back, it was obvious that this woman was very much a primitive tribal. Colored feathers hung from her parted bangs, two to each side. Each was glistening black, with stripes of polished metallic silver.

Shetari's nervous displeasure was momentarily replaced by curiosity. The tribal clans were truly primitive. They eschewed all

forms of technology, preferring to live as their ancestors did in prehistoric times. Only very rarely did they trade with their advanced neighbors, and usually only for things they could generally produce themselves, if they had the resources available.

The tribals would usually provide items of artistic value in exchange for what they needed. Sometimes, however, they wouldn't have anything of value to a trader, and would instead pay with the labor of one or more members of their clan. This wasn't a matter of slavery, of course. There were many rules involved, the violation of any one of which would be considered a discharge of the debt. One of those rules was that the clan member would never be asked to leave their clan.

That was what puzzled Shetari as she stared at this tribal's black feathers. Their colors were as just as blatantly artificial as the black and silver that adorned her body. They were the colors of Vixanti, not the clan from which

she had certainly come. For a tribal to abandon her clan colors meant that she had abandoned her clan, and almost surely quite willingly. And that, everyone knew, was completely unheard of.

The tribal's mannerisms and immediate suggestion of close physical liaisons made it clear that she hadn't been away from her birth clan for very long. Otherwise, she would have learned more civilized manners for use in public, even if she didn't practice them in private. That simply added to the mystery. Had she been cast out of her clan? What horrible thing could she possibly have done to deserve such a fate? And then, how did she end up in a place like this, so soon after the event?

"Not now. Later," Shani purred deeply as she reached out to grab the perplexed cheetah's left arm. "Now you come and see pretty things. Meet Director. Then I show you bed. Maybe we play. It be so much fun!"

Shetari stumbled out of the pod, not so much guided as she was dragged forth by Shani's iron grip. Obviously, she was going to be doing things the tribal's way, whether she liked it or not. Truth be told, she didn't like it one bit. "Whoa! Hold on! I don't..."

"Know how walk?" Shani asked as the cheetah struggled to regain her sense of balance. "Get used to it. Fun being taller. More intimidating. Make silly boys nervous. Funny to watch."

Shetari shrugged as she shielded her eyes with her free arm. She really didn't see the point of looking taller. If she wanted to intimidate someone, all she had to do was let them see how sharp her claws were. "I... suppose..."

No sooner had she stepped clear of the pod, its door thumped shut. Startled, she looked over her shoulder just in time to see the bottom of the pod as it shot upward through a

circular hole in the pearly white ceiling. A gray iris snapped shut, sealing the opening with a sharp, loud click. She began to feel as if the world she had lived in before was now forever beyond her reach.

She looked around the small, and now very empty looking circular room. The wall was a featureless face of shimmering, metallic gray. The floor was a solid slab of black glass. A light gray double door stood right opposite where the open door of the pod had been. There was a small control panel embedded in right side of the door's pearly white frame. It reminded her of some of the newer starship class vessels in the Merchant Marine Academy fleet. Clean. Efficient. Nothing superfluous. Unless, of course, you counted the very touchy-feely lioness.

"Come on!" Shani rumbled as she tugged on Shetari's arm. "So much to see!"

Shetari immediately stumbled. Her eyes

were telling her that the well polished floor was slippery. The wet goo that surrounded her feet agreed. The black soles beneath her feet did not. With a rubbery 'squick', they gripped when her brain had instinctively assumed they would slide.

Shetari let out a yelp as she fell headlong into Shani's powerful arms. She instantly found herself leaning back, staring up into the lioness' pale brown eyes. There was a moment of mutual silence. Then, without a word of warning, the lioness went straight for her neck.

Shani's sharp teeth briefly pressed into the blackness that coated Shetari's neck, eliciting a stunned screech in response. The lioness then lifted her nose, pressing the shocked cheetah's chin upward and to the right. She sniffed at the special place just behind the cheetah's cheek fluff, where dozens of almost imperceptible scents combined to tell everything there was to know about the state of her health, her fertility



and even her state of arousal.

"Mmm. You like me," Shani purred as she ran her sloppy wet tongue up the left side of Shetari's muzzle.

Shetari wanted to blurt out some very insulting words in response to the lioness' messy, playful kiss, but found herself having almost instant second thoughts. To her complete and utter confusion, Shani was right. But... why? How? It didn't make the least bit of sense.

To the logical, thinking part of her mind, everything about the bite, the sniff and the sloppy kiss was just plain detestable. She simply didn't like other women. At least not on a physical level. She wasn't particularly fond of men, either. But... she liked the lioness. She really, really liked the lioness. Animal instinct tore apart the carefully crafted emotional prison that the biogel has been imposing upon her. The bubble had burst. Shetari reached

around and grabbed Shani's long ponytail, pulling it down to force the surprised lioness' chin upward. She thrust her own nose into the exposed fur at the side of the lioness' face and huffed the warm, living air that she found there.

In an instant, the subtle odors conveyed everything she needed to know about the aggressive tribeswoman. Shani's body was a thing of perfection. Power. And... desire. The lioness wanted everything that the cheetah could offer. Everything. And... the feeling was mutual. She had never felt this way before. It was beyond the scope of her understanding.

Oneness. That was what Shetari sought. She wanted to be one with the lioness. She wanted to press against the deeply purring tribal. She wanted to flow into the woman's body like warm water saturating a dry kitchen sponge. She wanted to mix herself with the lioness. Her body. Her mind. The two would end. They would become one being. One person. It would

be beautiful. It would be... Vixanti.

Something stopped her from trying to act upon her intensely erotic imaginations. As stimulated as her senses might have been, she was sexually mute now. There was no physical arousal to accompany the impressions that filled her mind with impossible ideas. The ideas remained, but there was no deep compulsion to carry them out. It was a sharp reminder that her body wasn't entirely her own anymore. She wasn't one with the lioness. She was one with the blackness. Her sense of erotic desire, it would seem, now belonged entirely to it.

Whether or not the blackness would ever let her fully express such intensely physical emotions again was a complete mystery. For now it seemed to merely want her to know that she and the lioness were somehow compatible. They were linked in some way that she couldn't understand. What might come of that link, only the blackness could tell and it

didn't seem inclined to offer any more clues than it already had.

Shani laughed as the cheetah pulled back. "Masa meymu," she rumbled as she let Shetari back down onto her own feet. "We play hard, hmm? Not now. Later. In bed. Now we go walk. Come! Try not fall again. Especially not onto boy. Might hold you too long. That... inconvenient."

"Um... I guess... alright," Shetari responded with a hesitant shrug as she tried to shove the erotic fantasies out of her wandering mind. She took a few tentative steps, following the lioness toward the door. Her feet squished about in the goo and the stuff seemed to flow around her legs as they flexed. It felt almost as if she was walking in leaky hip waders, but without all the extra weight to slow her down. "Why... why would that be inconvenient?"

"Hmm?" Shani purred.

"Falling onto a guy? Why would that be

inconvenient?" Shetari repeated her question.

Shani grinned. "Same why you like me now," she replied with another wildcat chuff. "Not just smells. We touch. All the... chemicals? Fancy names. Go from one to the other. Make both feel same. But boy touch... sometimes make girl need sex. Make boy need sex then too. So sex. Right away. No choice. Have to. Fun... sometimes."

"I... I don't understand," Shetari responded as they approached the double door. "Are you saying that... this black stuff exchanges our hormones or something like that?"

"That the word!" Shani replied as she reached out to press a button on the control panel beside the door. "Incompatible stuff, no feelings. Safe. But... if compatible. Like. Very like. Like us. We very compatible. Touch more. We sex. Sex a lot. No choice. Have to do it. But we have fun! Lots fun!"

"You mean, it won't be voluntary?" Shetari

questioned, a feeling of looming dread poking at the back of her mind. It was one thing to feel sexually mute. It was entirely another to have something else deciding when that muteness would be replaced by yearning. And, it was entirely another thing if that something else was also going to decide for whom that yearning was going to be directed. Why hadn't they told her that the blackness would have such complete control over her? Or was it just the tribal trying to get her in bed? She wanted to believe the latter, but the blackness' apparent control over her feelings kept telling her the truth was in the former. "We're actually going to have to... sleep together? No matter what? We just have to do it and that's that?"

"Well, don't have to," Shani replied as she pushed the button. "Resist, not feel good though. Makes sick sometimes too. Just do what goo says. Like me. Goo say I sex. I sex. Goo say you sex. You sex. Feel nice. Make happy."

Shetari wanted to press the matter, but the doors slid open with a soft whoosh. Without a word, the lioness pulled her out of the small room and into a vast, cavernous space of seemingly impossible proportion. "Oh... wow," she gasped as she found herself standing on a large, T shaped balcony. This connected three large underground buildings. Each was painted in a soft, metallic gray, with pearly white highlights and black plate glass windows that were nearly opaque, at least from the outside.

The structure behind her was embedded into the black basalt of the cavern wall. Before her, to either side, were two very large buildings that formed part of an inner ring of six. A massive, white barked tree rose up in the central courtyard. It's shiny green leaves fluttered about amid a shifting kaleidoscope of bright colors that shone down from above. It was a vision so astonishing and unexpected that for a few moments, she was left truly speechless.

"This place... it's... huge!" Shetari finally stammered as she gazed up at the living rock over her head. It had been shaped into a vast dome that arced upward toward an apex directly over the courtyard and the stunning tress that loomed over it. There, at the very top, was a huge, downward facing hemisphere of beautiful stained glass, assembled in a pattern reminiscent of intense blue skies and puffy white clouds. This beautiful piece of art was marred, however, by irregular patches of darkness. It looked almost as if someone had splattered dark paint on some surface that stood between the glass and the source of illumination behind it.

"Yes. Very big," Shani replied as she drew the cheetah forward, toward the transparent railing that separated the balcony from the courtyard below. "Very pretty too."

"These six buildings, they're the same as the ones above ground?" Shetari asked, remembering Bliss's description of the six



buildings in the office park merely being the tops of subterranean structures poking above ground level.

"Above ground?" Shani asked with a shrug. "Never been. Always down here since I came."

"They don't let you go outside?" Shetari questioned as she looked at the lioness with considerable concern. Surely, they let people leave the underground. They had to. They weren't really slaves, were they?

"Only sky boat place," Shani replied, a momentary expression of sadness flashing across her face. "Not outside outside. Worry I get lost. Everyone else too busy to show me. Maybe some day."

"So... these buildings here, are these where we live?" Shetari inquired, shifting the subject. She had seen enough of her guide's impulsive nature to suspect that lingering on any potentially upsetting topic might lead in emotionally charged directions were better

avoided.

"Oh. Yes," Shani replied, her ears perking back up. She pointed to one of the buildings across the courtyard. Two pearly white buttresses ran up it's face, supporting the base ring of the courtyard dome. Between them, a tall vertical column of back-lit blue and green stained glass offered the impression of a sky descending down into tall green trees. Behind the column, dark shapes passed up and down, stopping for a few moments here and there before continuing on their way. "That one over there! Little rooms. Big bed. Nice. Warm. Cozy. You like."

"Well... we'll see about that," Shetari replied as she walked toward the railing to look down into the courtyard below. "Wow... this... this is the last sort of thing I was expecting to find down here. Just... wow."

The courtyard had been laid out in the form of a magnificent, high-tech garden. A number

of rock lined streams babbled their way between the six buildings and down into a broad moat. This moat surrounded the great white tree and was filled with so many shimmering koi that it looked for all the world like a pool of liquid gold. Pearly white planters full of brightly colored flowers and dense shrubbery transformed the remaining open space into a maze of rich greenery punctuated by glossy black pathways, glass floored bridges and conveniently placed, pearly white benches.

A few of the benches were in use. She could see more than a dozen black clad Vixanti employees. Their shoulders displayed a rainbow of colors, all of whose meaning wasn't immediately obvious. Some seemed to match the standard hues used to designate departments on a starship or within an aerospace facility. Orange for engineering. Green for medical. Light blue for crew or staff services. Deep violet for pilots and navigators. Gray for security. Other colors, like creamy white and hot pink weren't included the

standard palette.

Some of the staff were making use of little gray tablet style computers. A few were reading books. On one of the more secluded benches, a couple was engaged in a very intimate cuddling session. Thought it was hard to see from a distance, it looked almost as if their suits had merged together, their hands running through, rather than over their companion's glistening gel coating.

Shetari's voyeuristic inclinations were interrupted by the passing of a particularly unusual figure through the maze of shrubbery. She was tall and gary and, much to the cheetah's astonishment, she had four arms. The color upon her shoulders was gold. Everyone she passed seemed to be giving her some sign of respect. Except the lovers, that is. They responded to her passing by switching from cuddles to intercourse, laying down upon the pearly slab seat and going at it with wild abandon. The strange woman seemed

bemused, if the motion of her arms told any tale, but she made no audible remark as she made her way beneath the balcony and out of sight.

"Fucking like black rabbits," Shetari quipped with unsettled amazement as she turned back to her own companion. "Right out in public where everyone can see them. Is that normal here?"

"Mhmm!" Shani replied with a broad, sensual smile. "Like said. Touch. Compatible. Sex. No choice. Find spot. Sex and sex and sex. Feel good. Lots fun. Maybe we try?"

"Ugh. No," Shetari huffed, shaking her head with considerable displeasure. It wasn't so much that she didn't want to experience unity with the lioness. That choice had already been made for her. It was just that the gel had well and truly rendered her sexless within its embrace. Her memories of arousal, orgasm and erotic euphoria were still there. Somewhere.

But they had faded. They no longer carried emotional content. They were as sexually mute as the featureless sheen of polished blackness between her legs. "No. I can't. Not like that."

"Well, we see," Shani chuffed.

"Whatever you say," Shetari replied with a momentary sarcastic sneer. She wondered why sex was a thing at all within Vixanti. Surely, the others were feeling exactly the same sense of glorious sexlessness as she was? Was the biogel really deciding when they could and could not experience erotic sensations? Was the biogel using sexual desire to force people to merge with one another and erode their individuality by merging their minds with as many others as possible?

A shudder ran down Shetari's spine. Was the gel going to force her to have sex with everyone in the whole facility? In all of Vixanti? Had she consented to that? She had, hadn't she? It had to have been in the fine

print somewhere, couched in language deceptive enough to seem benign while in fact making her a virtual slave to whatever it was Vixanti had in store for her body. She should have been more careful reading the employment contract. Before buying into the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle and all that it now seemed to entail.

Shetari shook off her dark thoughts and changed the subject. "You know, I would have thought there would be more people out and about in such a big place. It's awfully quiet."

"Oh, lunch over," Shani replied. "Everyone working. Busy days. So much to do. Wonder what you do? Hmm? Shiny spot kitty looks so nice. No hard work. Show body? Catch more spot kitties for Director? That be fun! Maybe you do that."

"I don't think that would be my kind of thing," Shetari answered with a shake of her head. "I... I'm not really comfortable showing

off... like that. I heard there may be some openings at the spaceport. That's more of what I had in mind."

"Shame," Shani responded with a disappointed shrug. "Look so nice though. Make good cat pictures. Show bum. Play with toys. So popular on VixNet."

Shetari bit her lip at the mention of VixNet. It wasn't owned by Vixanti. It was a fan club of sorts, where pictures and videos of 'Vixanti Girls' and 'Vixanti Guys' were collected and shared. Most were just trade show models, showing off their shiny black posteriors for the eager cameras and demonstrating various flashy new technologies that seemed more focused on keeping Vixanti in the news than advancing their stated development goals. There were plenty of considerably more risqué images as well. These weren't official Vixanti press offerings. VixNet was home to a number of highly exhibitionist Vixanti staff, who were more than happy to indulge viewers with just



about any sort of titillating performance that their shiny black coatings could add a particularly exotic visual appeal to. Vixanti didn't seem to mind the extra publicity these staff offered. Nor did they seem to mind if those very same staff were drawn into periodically consummating lewd acts in an effort to please their audience.

If the wilder rumors were true, there was even a special place concealed within VixNet, accessible to only the most dedicated and well vetted of Vixanti devotees. It was said that whenever there was an accident at Vixanti, and someone got turned into a 'living doll', the result would be put up for auction to benefit charity. Even worse, it was also said that live volunteers would be put up for a charity auction in the same fashion, and their transformation deliberately induced in order to satisfy the sexual needs of the unknown buyer. It was sinister. It was creepy. But for some reason, very few people seemed to object to the idea. No one seemed to be able to envision

the completely inanimate dolls as still being people. Or maybe they just didn't want to. Or maybe it was the other rumor, that Vixanti was actually just selling dolls made from some material similar to that of their suits, that kept people from taking the tales about the dark underbelly of VixNet too seriously.

At any rate, Shetari wasn't the type to give the idea of showing off her own ass even a passing thought. Not in public. Not at home in front of a NetCam. And certainly not while playing with bedtime toys. "I'm not into porn," she hissed softly as her eyes turned back to the shimmering koi.

Shani chuffed mischievously.

"So, is this all there is down here?" Shetari asked, changing the subject to avoid the risk of getting drawn into yet another regrettable career move. She wondered just how much might be hidden behind the facades that lined the lower levels of the cavern wall. "Are there

other buildings? Or... whatever you call them down here?"

"Oh, yes," Shani explained. "We live in middle six. Outer walls. Offices. Work places. Then big hall to spaceport. Storage. Shops. Things. Big hall other way. Machines. Noisy things. Never seen that. Only engineers allowed."

"Incredible," Shetari said as she looked up from the floor and along the sweep of the balcony she was standing on. "This is such a huge place. It's never been mentioned in the news. How could they have hidden it for so long? Where did all the rock go? Surely someone would have noticed."

"Oh, story says old rock digging place," Shani replied. "Now, no digging. Just building."

"Ah, an existing quarry," Shetari hummed as she shifted her weight from one side to the other. She was starting to get a little more comfortable with her elevated heels. She

wasn't sure she wanted to try running just yet, but she might be able to manage a normal walking pace. "So... what do we do now?"

Shani chuckled. "Turn around. Lean on railing. Get picture."

Shetari swung around and looked for any sign of a camera. "Um... picture? Please tell me it's not for VixNet!"

"For 'profile'?" Shani answered. "I think that word. Just stand and look... like you look."

Shetari leaned back on the railing with her arms stretched to either side. "Where's the camera?" she asked as she looked at the tribal with considerable skepticism. There was no camera to be seen, and the lioness' coating of blackness left her no place to hide one. Surely the lioness understood that she'd need a camera to take a picture. "Don't you need a camera to take a..."

A soft, distant 'beep' came from some

unknown place.

"All done!" Shani laughed.

"But... what? Where's the camera?" Shetari questioned, looked around as she pushed herself away from the railing. "I didn't see a camera... or a flash. Or... anything."

Shani shrugged. "Don't know," she purred as she again took hold of the cheetah's arm. "Come on now. We walk. Go to Director. She nice. Get you good spot cat job."

"Well... alright," Shetari replied as she took a step away from the railing. She glanced back over her shoulder, at the beautiful scene below. The shadows that ran up and down behind each building's stained glass column again caught her attention. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Shani questioned.

"The things moving behind the stained glass," Shetari replied.

"Silly!" Shani laughed. "Zoomy up and down rooms. We ride. Come on!"

"Zoomy... what? Lifts?" Shetari sputtered as the lioness pulled her away from the railing and back toward the building they had come from. A second double door stood just to the side of the one that lead out from the pod room. A placard placed beside it read 'Security'. "You haven't been here very long, have you?"

"Nine suns here. But... two moons on sky boat before," Shani replied with a snarl. "Nasty men. Stole clothes. Feathers. And... expected things. Gave them claws instead. They trade clan debt for money. Now here. Like goo suit. Feels so nice. I stay long time."

The doors slid open with a soft hum. A hallway was revealed beyond, decorated in the same white, gray and black as the pod room had been. The passage was constructed with the sort of neat, prefabricated cube modules

that were used to assemble standardized zero-atmosphere environment facilities. Shetari had seen them used to form the living spaces of countless asteroid and moon mining facilities but she had never seen them used on an otherwise habitable planet before. They were generally considered to be far too expensive for general purpose construction.

The modules used in this building were apparently of the purely industrial flavor. Individual corridor segments were separated by rounded frames. The heavy bolts that held them together were left uncovered, giving it a harsh, utilitarian appearance very unlike the image presented by the courtyard. Conduits and piping stretched between the frames, passing through brackets and connecting to whatever might be hidden away behind the corridor walls. Shallow channels to either side of the central walkway were designed to channel away liquids in the event of a plumbing mishap.

Besides the spartan appearance of the corridor, there was nothing of particular note to see. It left Shetari feeling just a little bit disappointed. She began to wonder if the entire facility was built like this, and whether or not the stunning courtyard and the clean, posh image that Vixanti Corporation presented to the world was just a facade concealing a much less interesting, or even technologically developed, reality.

"Zoomy rooms a little way," Shani rumbled as she drew the distracted cheetah into the building. "Go down to water and fishies. Walk a bit. Make sure no fall anymore. Come on."



## SIX

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# AUTHORITY

The security building doors whooshed shut. The fresh air of the open cavern was replaced by the stale, heavily filtered air of the underground building. It had a faint odor of warm plastic which made the cheetah's nose tingle. A feeling of uncomfortable familiarity washed over her. It reminded her far too much of the new little ship that had been her first, ill fated command. Memories of her unjust firing flitted about at the back of her mind. She began to feel very uneasy.

A door opened on the left side of the corridor. The highly intimidating figure of a man about a head taller than Shetari stepped out. His statuesque muscles were put on full

display by his coating of glistening blackness. He was also quite amply endowed, if the size of the round, but relatively featureless lump between his legs told any tale. His skin had an odd, dark tinge of olive to it, and his strong jawline was accentuated by the bony, front-to-back ridges that crowned his hairless head.

"Oma! Got spot kitty!" Shani chirped waving one hand, while she pulled Shetari to the side of the corridor to let the scowling man pass by. "She cute. Yes?"

The man snorted as he stepped directly into the path of the two felines. He crossed his gray sleeved arms and sneered. "Cute? Is that all you cats care about?" he replied with a voice so deep and smooth that he might well have been mistaken for an opera singer if the pistol at his side hadn't declared otherwise. He looked Shetari up and down for a moment before fixing on her eyes. "So, you're the new girl. oB5DN. Well, your face matches your ID. Of course that doesn't mean much these days,

does it?"

Shetari was taken aback. "I... don't think we've met. Ever. And what are you talking about? Of course my face matches my ID!"

"My name is Sib Mikson, chief of the patrol security force here at Vixanti Corporation Facility 3" he replied with a scowl. "You will henceforth refer to me as Lieutenant or Sir. Got it?"

"Uh... yeah," Shetari answered with a look of complete indignation. "I got it."

"Good. Now don't forget it," Lt. Mikson barked. "I'm a very careful man, 0B5DN. The half baked brainiacs in admin like to think that their allegedly ultra-detailed background checks are completely infallible. But they've been wrong before. Very wrong. And now... you. You've got a deep reputation for dragging trouble around wherever you poke your nose into someone else's business. From my point of view, it's bad enough that they even let you

into the reception office. And then they went and hired you? Bullshit! Absolute bullshit!"

Shetari's ears lowered. This was the last thing she was expecting after the enthusiastic, if extremely unconventional, welcome she had gotten from both Bliss and Shani. "What the hell are you..."

"Shut up!" Lt. Mikson snapped. "Don't think that stink of desperation isn't leaving a trail behind you a hundred clicks long. I don't know what you've been paid, or by whom... but I'm betting everything that the first chance you get, you're going to try snatching something important. Something really important. Don't think I'm not going to find out who's backing you, missy. And don't think I'm not going to find out who got paid off to let you in here either. I'm going to have my nose up your ass every hour of every day until I find out everything, so you might as well spit it out now so we can just get it over with."

"Seriously?" Shetari hissed. She felt uncertain. Unsettled. She could feel his hostility in a very visceral, very physical way. Was this how the blackness presented her with awareness of other's feelings and intentions? Emotional dullness began to give way to anger. She bared her teeth. "I come here for a job and the moment you all get me in this gooey black crap, you're going to treat me like a piece of shit just because someone who obviously outranks you by at least a few pay grades made a decision you don't like?"

"Don't talk back to me, hairball," Lt. Mikson snapped, taking a step toward the furious cheetah. "Now spit it out! Who are you working for?"

"Stop!" Shani hissed, baring her blackness coated claws and talking a swat toward the security officer's face. "Take orders from Director. Not you. Out the way!"

"You stay out of this!" Lt. Mikson roared.

"Now you! Who are you working for? NOW!"

"ENOUGH!" a strangely androgynous voice snapped.

"Hey! Who the hell do you..." Lt. Mikson seethed, whipping around to face the figure who had stepped out from around a corner a few dozen meters down the hallway.

"I'm starting to tire of your periodic outbursts of aggressive insubordination, Mr. Mikson," the tall, slender, and vaguely effeminate figure said as she approached, cutting the irate lieutenant off mid-sentence. She waved her four arms about in a frustrated fashion. The eight eyes that arched over and around the sides of her brow focused in pairs, gazing with particular intensity on each of the three figures before her.

It was impossible for Shetari to gauge the expression on the gray skinned alien's face. Her mouth was triangular, with vaguely mandible-like flaps taking the place of her

upper lip. Rather than a proper nose, she had a pair of shallow, vertical slits just above the parting of her mouth flaps. The cheetah had never seen such an unusual alien before. At least not up close. It was almost certainly the same woman she had seen passing through the courtyard only a few minutes before.

"When specialist personnel are assigned to deal with potential threat actors, I expect them to do so in an unimpeded fashion," the alien continued, finally crossing her upper arms while placing her lower arms on her slender, bony hips. The glistening blackness upon her body seemed to smooth out her harsh features, but it was easy for Shetari to see that she had more the figure of an emaciated corpse than a living being underneath her thick layer of goo. "You speak about errors in the manner in which Vixanti Corporation secures its trade secrets. And yet, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the only 'mistakes' involved in the maintenance of this installation's internal security have been the repeated detainment

and exposure of nearly every corporate intelligence officer that was brought in to deal with potential agents of industrial espionage. If you had minded your own business, Mr. Mikson, or at least bothered to run a check on those officer's internal records, there never would have been an issue. And now... it seems that you're at it again."

Lt. Mikson stood in stunned silence.

"You know full well what it means when the Central Directorate blocks an employee record as need-to-know only," the alien went on. "It means that you keep your head down and your mouth shut unless specifically instructed otherwise. You do such a superb job keeping the facility secure against conventional breaches of the perimeter and personnel decorum, but how many second chances can I afford to give you? This is quite nearly your fourth strike when it comes to destructive intrusions into executive level operations. If I hadn't known you well enough to come here in



person, well, I've already made one too many excuses on your behalf for the Directorate's liking. I can't defend you anymore. I thought I had made that clear enough the last time."

Lt. Mikson's face drooped. "I... yes. Yes, Ma'am."

"No more second chances," the alien said, finally uncrossing her arms. "Really. The next time you feel the need to interfere, you need to come to me and I will make the matter clear to you, if it is appropriate to do so. Do you understand?"

"Yes Ma'am," Lr. Mikson replied softly.

"Good," the alien replied with a sharp nod. "Now, I suggest you return to your normal duties. By normal duties, I mean going to the spaceport ramp and ensuring that Lieutenant Commander Nax has the security resources he needs to deal with his investigation. That ridiculous mess is our number one priority right now. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Lt. Mikson responded with a stiff, forced nod at the tall alien before slowly walking past her. He vanished around the corner from which the alien had come, but not before shooting Shetari a viciously spiteful glance over his shoulder.

"And you, Miss Anwae, I hope this little matter hasn't tainted your opinion of Vixanti Corporation," the alien said, her voice lightening to the point where it sounded quite ethereal. "We've been doing a bit of hiring over the past few months, and security has been a bit, shall we say, on edge. Having Alvey Space Systems send a couple of people to poke around wasn't all that big an issue. They have products which we will eventually be competing with, and ours are superior in all respects. Our confidence in their inability to reproduce our developments means that letting them wear the biogel is a non-issue. Beyond that, we can compartmentalize those sorts of folks away from anything important and let them work off their two year contract. I'm sure

they enjoy things over at the power plant in Divo."

Shetari was terribly confused. She had just witnessed a dressing down that was normally conducted confidentially only by and in the presence of superiors. Now this alien was talking about major security issues that no one in their right mind would ever bring up with a new hire. And what about her number? Wasn't she supposed to be just a number now?

"It was the girl from Xinti Exoscience that got everyone's panties in a ruffle," the alien continued. "She was after considerably more than just a look at our biogel technology. She was quite interested in our revolutionary biogel based body-mind-machine interface developments. Fortunately, she didn't get into anything too important before our new company huntress sniffed her out."

Shani chuffed. "That me."

The alien smiled at the proud lioness. "Your

instinct for sensing ill intent is quite impeccable, I must say," she replied with what might be interpreted as a smile. "But, I am forgetting the formalities. I am Nuva Exi Shi, Director of Vixanti Corporation Facility Number 3 and I am quite pleased to meet you, Miss Anwae. I trust that you've found your initiation experience interesting thus far, a certain security related faux-pas aside, of course?"

"Um, yeah. Interesting would be the word for it," Shetari replied as she tried to comprehend everything that had just happened. "I just wish I knew what the heck was going on here. This gel stuff is doing all sorts of weird thing to me. The receptionist told me I was just a number. But you're using my name. And... I don't mean to be rude or anything, but discipline is supposed to be confidential... was it really necessary to do that in front of me? I'm just... confused. I know things are supposed to be different here, but..."

Director Shi brought all four of her hands together. "Hmm, interesting," she remarked with an odd expression might be just as easily interpreted as a grin as it would a scowl. "I've never met a new hire that was so quick to cite employment rules, and certainly never to my face. Then again, it's not entirely unexpected. You've been the victim of misconduct more than once before, haven't you? You understand how important it is to have a clear structure based upon absolute adherence to regulations and policies. And that... well, that's why the Directorate has taken such an interest in you."

Shetari's eyes opened wide. "What do you mean, an interest? I practically just got here. How could they already be taking an interest in me? I'm... really, really confused."

"Of course you are," Director Shi replied with a light chuckle. "Let me be quite up front about all of this. You are here because the Directorate identified you as the only acceptable candidate for a very special

assignment, who was immediately available within the locality of this particular facility. Our corporate intelligence people went to great lengths to get you to apply. Extra advertisements added to your copy of Merchant Marine Monthly. Pictures and videos posted to net sites you were active on. Setting up an agent in the apartment next door to wear shiny things and put ideas in your head. It was quite a complex operation. But, I think it will prove to be worth all the trouble."

"What? Why?" Shetari questioned, more confused than ever. What was so important about her that it justified any more effort than a mailed invitation?

"Because you have particular traits that a certain and very important new position requires," Director Shi answered. "For starters, you are very rules oriented, as you've already demonstrated. It is an attitude reinforced by harsh experience, and unlikely to change. As a result, you can be trusted to deal with complex

prototype technology that requires strict adherence to operational and safety parameters."

Shetari nodded. That much made sense.

"Secondly, you have no issues making sure everyone around you is equally committed to following procedures," Director Shi continued. "Again, you've already made that quite clear. When it comes to the sorts of highly advanced technologies we are working with, it is important that research and development chains of command and responsibility be isolated from other operational areas. Not even executives such as myself can be allowed to alter acceptable safety limits or otherwise create situations that might interfere in safe and successful operations. We merely act as administrative support agent who ensure that subordinate operations are properly supported in their fulfillment of the Directorate's plans."

"I'm sure I'm not the only potential

candidate that had those qualities," Shetari replied with considerable skepticism.

"You also have experience with the... exotic," the Director replied. "Your experience on Noya is evidence enough of that. And this... this is particularly important. A particular element of your assignment involves becoming accustomed to the mind-body-machine unity system's... parameters. In a very personal fashion. If you think the biogel is strange, well, this is much, much stranger. Stranger even than anything you experienced in the breeding caverns, I should think it fair to say. But not nearly so unpleasant, really. It is just, shall we say, outside of what nature has equipped mortal minds to fully comprehend without intimate personal experience."

Shetari bit her lip. How could anything possibly be stranger than reproducing with a slime spitting, grub-like insectoid species? One that was dependent on humanoids to reproduce. One that made you willing, whether



you liked it or not. Because you would like it. You weren't given a choice. You took what it gave you. You lived in that living cocoon. And you had its babies. A dozen of them. And if you didn't get out fast... then it was the same thing, over and over and over again. Until...

"Think more in the nature of the biogel, but... well, far more surreal," Director Shi continued, interrupting the dark recollections that had taken hold of Shetari. "More abstract. Metaphysical. But definitely not unpleasant. And, of course, you are certainly quite an attractive woman. Although your assignment will largely be out of the public eye, our requirement that you wear your biogel at all times means that you will still be something of a public figure for the company, given the nature and stature of your expected duties. Your figure will do much to help promote our products once we finally bring them to market."

"I'm still not exactly sure what you expect of

me," Shetari said. "What exactly are the duties you expect me to perform? I was promised a shipboard position, when it became available, wasn't I? What does any of this have to do with that?"

"For the moment, I would like you to head to the ramp and assist our new resident intelligence officer with his inquiries," Director Shi replied. "Our ramp contractor has never offered services of more than mediocre quality, but the timing of this particular accident is, shall we say, suspicious. We are in the final fitting out process for all three of our Destiny class developmental research vessels and the light transport involved was being used to bring in some extremely sensitive equipment from Facility 1 on Shari, for installation in Destiny Alpha. Fortunately, the equipment had already been offloaded for inspection and placed well out of the view of any malicious actors, but... as I said. The timing is suspicious."

"And what am I supposed to do when I get out there?" Shetari questioned. "I don't know anything about this place, or its operations or anything, really. Shouldn't security be handling it? Maybe some lawyers? The police?"

"I honestly doubt that Mr. Mikson is going to be of much help, especially once the contractor's insurance agent arrives," Director Shi answered. "To be perfectly honest, he's quite out of his league once things get legally complicated. Lieutenant Commander Nax is our current corporate intelligence officer and will need firmer support than anything a man like Mikson can provide. Support of the sort that makes it clear that Vixanti Corporation means business. The police and other authorities will certainly be involved, as is the norm in such cases. My current concern is financial. Vixanti Corporation expects full remuneration for damages, if the ramp contractor is indeed at fault. They need to see that we have no intention to compromise. No lesser settlements will be accepted."

"Well, I'm already pretty sure they're at fault," Shetari replied. "I heard the whole thing go down in person. From the sound of it, it was pretty obvious they didn't release the manual brakes on the transport before attempting a tow with a tug powerful enough to drag it. Tires blew. The ship rolled on its side. And, from the smoke, I'm guessing a tire fire, maybe some shipboard gas leaks adding to the inferno. Total loss or near to being."

"You know all that just from what you heard?" Director Shi inquired.

"Well, I think that's what happened," Shetari answered. "The sequence of particular sounds was fairly obvious, at least from my own experience."

Director Shi laughed. "Well, it would seem that you're quite in agreement with the surveillance video," she said. "Since we're already on the same page, you shouldn't have any difficulty pressing our position. Full

payment, or we call for a full Naval Board of Review rather than just a typical industrial safety investigation. A finding against them by such a review would immediately void our contract and force repayment, plus significant additional monetary penalties stipulated by law. Make it clear that we can do without them if that will help. We have enough of our own equipment, and I'm sure you'll make a fine temporary ramp manager if the need arises."

Shetari's ears perked up. "Of course! Now... what is the authority I'm going to be basing my arguments on? I'm almost sure they're going to try to play the 'we've never seen you before, so we don't have to talk to you' card."

"Your own," Director Shi responded. "Consider it an opportunity to show me how you deal with a high level command."

Shetari's tail froze at half sweep. "What do you mean, high level command?"

"That depends on the course of events this

afternoon, Captain," Director Shi replied. "If things go the way I'm thinking they will, then we can talk about the details of your potential command tomorrow morning. For now, Shani will take you downstairs to the security desk. They will provide you with your shoulder sleeves and other sundries appropriate for your immediate duties. Those sleeves themselves have the requisite identification systems to ensure you have full access to all appropriate facilities within the scope of your security clearance. I think you'll find that clearance to be far broader than you might expect. I think we can trust you with that degree of freedom. Can't we?"

Shetari was so shocked that she could barely speak. "Yes... ma'am," she managed to choke out. Captain? Had she really called her Captain? As in spacefaring rank Captain?

"Once we've spoken about all that, I understand you have some outside affairs to settle," Director Shi added. "It might be a good

opportunity for Shani to get some fresh air. Will you need further assistance to move your things into your apartment here?"

"Not really. I've already got what little important stuff I have more or less packed. I didn't expect to have a home much longer, to be perfectly honest," Shetari replied softly, her head spinning with dreams and fears. Was it really possible that she was going to be given another chance at command? Command of a surface operation? Or a ship? A real ship? Maybe a full bore starship class vessel like those Destiny class transports out on the ramp?

"Excellent," Director Shi replied. "Now, I won't delay you any further. Lieutenant Commander Nax knows all the details you'll need to know about our contractor. He is your direct subordinate in this matter. I'll make him aware that you're on your way."

"Okay," Shetari replied, wondering how

someone with two bar rank could be subordinate to a new hire with none. Was it just a temporary rank for this one situation or did she really have that Captain's rank with Vixanti already? How could that even be possible? She had so many questions she wanted to ask, but this was clearly not the time to ask them. At least not most of them. One in particular stuck out like a sore thumb. "What about Lieutenant Mikson?"

"I expect him to be appropriately penitent," Director Shi replied. "But, if he causes any issues, you have the authority to relieve him of his duties and send him to me. Senior command officers assigned to executive special projects have that authority, and many more. I do expect you to use them with appropriate discretion."

"Understood," Shetari replied, still lost in the idea that she might actually be gaining the sort of professional position that she had always dreamed of.



"Is there anything else you feel you need to know right now?" Director Shi inquired.

"Well... I have to ask, considering this accident might have a security issue involved," Shetari replied with a raised eyebrow. "What happened to that Xinti Exoscience girl? Was she arrested? I don't remember seeing anything on the news."

"She had... an erotic accident," Director Shi replied in a very matter of fact tone. "Before you ask, no, we didn't orchestrate it. She merely picked the wrong machine to try to hide in when she realized that a certain lioness had been following her. One cannot blame Shani for not knowing the difference between a light switch and wall mounted system controls in an unfamiliar room. At least the little spy is enjoying herself. I'm sure you're familiar with some of our previous incidents and the, shall we say, quite attractive results. She experienced the same. But... that's a story for later. Perhaps the head of our research

division, Doctor Alluwa, will brief you on the more intimate details of those sorts of things in the coming days. For now, of course, other issues press."

"Of course," Shetari said, nodding.

"Shani will escort you where you need to go," Director Shi said, gesturing back toward the corner from which she had come. "I have assigned her to be your personal assistant and... well, I suppose we can use the term 'authority enhancer'. She's very effective in that regard."

Shetari looked at the smiling lioness. "Okay. Sounds... good."

"We be nice together," Shani purred.

"I'm sure you will," Director Shi chuckled, bowing slightly toward the two feline ladies. "Now, Captain Anwae, I do believe that Lieutenant Commander Nax awaits. Good luck."

"Thank you," Shetari replied with a bow. A renewed sense of personal confidence welled up inside her. She was going to get out there and prove she was worthy of that ship that seemed to be dangled in front of her like a carrot in front of a stubborn mule. She turned to Shani and patted the lioness on the shoulder. "Alright. Show me the way."

## SEVEN

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# SECURITY

Shetari stood in silence as the small, dark lift car slowly descended toward the level of the cavern floor. Countless questions flooded her mind as she tried to sort out her place in this strange new world. Little threads of doubt hung on, dragging her renewed sense of self-confidence down at about the same, steady rate as the lift's descent. Was she really being given advanced rank and a position of real importance? Or was this all just a big mind game? Was she being sent to do something no one else would? And if that was the case, why?

Was she a number or a name? Was she a servant or a master? Was she the blackness or was the blackness her? Despite all the Director

had told her, Shetari still didn't know. She wanted to know. She needed to know. But now, she was set on a task that forced her to shove all of the questions aside. Was this task really so important that such pressing personal issues had to be left for later, or was the Director just hoping that the task would be so involving that she would just forget her concerns until time made them moot?

Shetari huffed in frustration as the lift neared its destination. The blackness. The lioness. And now, this far too important task for someone so completely unfamiliar with the company. She had come prepared to accept a job offer, not be more or less railroaded into a series of virtually involuntary and progressively more serious and excessively personal and intimate experiences. She began to wonder if Vixanti Corporation had deliberately kept her from getting other jobs, just to force her to apply. To force her into the blackness. To force her to submit.

Submit, Shetari had. And worse. She had outright sold herself for a measly sum of a hundred and twenty thousand credits. Her body. Her soul. For all intents and purposes, she was owned by Vixanti. She would do what they told her. And if she didn't, would they let her go? Of course not. She was going to have an accident, wasn't she? Just like that Xinti Exoscience girl. She wasn't an employee. For at least the next eight years, she was a slave. There was no other way to look at it. And it was all perfectly legal. She had signed the papers. There was no going back.

The lift came to a soft stop and the doors whooshed open. Shetari stepped out into the security building's small lobby. Shani followed close behind. Her presence now seemed much less like that of a personal assistant than it did like that of a dark, dangerous shadow poised to lash out at the least provocation. Exactly what or whom she might have been told to guard against was an open question. Was she really there to protect the cheetah, or to protect

against her?

Shetari began to take in the sights of the small room. Before her were darkened glass doors that led out into the vast cavern that formed the core of Vixanti Facility 3. Beyond the smoky glass, she could just about see the silhouette of the nearest two of the large residential buildings that had been assembled in a ring around the courtyard. They were framed by the colorful rays of light that came down from the glass dome high above. These sparkled and danced upon the windows, and offered just the barest hint of the clean, high tech looking furnishings to be found within. It was an entrancing sight, but she had other matters to attend to before she could step out and get a proper look at the place from ground level.

Shani touched Shetari's right shoulder. Instinctively, she turned her head in that direction. A scowling receptionist curtly beckoned from behind a thick pane of armored

glass. The words 'Facility 3 Security' were emblazoned upon the wall over her head. The worlds were painted in a materialistic theme of dark gray upon light gray, with none of the typical logos or other fluff normally to be found in high end corporate offices.

As Shetari approached the desk, she looked over her shoulder to find a pair of burly security guards leaning on the wall to the right of the lift. Normally, she wouldn't have been intimidated by security guards, but these glaring figures were something very different. Indeed, they hardly looked like civilian security guards at all.

Both of the tall, muscular men were kitted out with dark gray, semi-powered body armor. The armor was of a very highly advanced and extraordinarily expensive type that came equipped with limited shield generators and gravity effect reduction. It definitely wasn't something one would expect to find in the hands of civilian security guards. It was front



line military gear of the same make and model worn by the Imperial Marines. Slung over the shoulder of each was the same model of assault blaster rifle used by the Empress Matriarch's deadly special services regiments. Neither wore any indicator of rank, though there was a place for it on their shoulder guards. Either Vixanti security didn't display rank for some reason, or they were rock bottom grunts with no rank and no personal authority, just the sort to try testing the limits of their power at the worst possible moment.

The guards' sharp gaze was palatable. It was a physical thing that seemed to poke and prod at Shetari's blackness enhanced figure in an extremely disturbing sort of way. She could almost feel their eyes as they scanned her exquisite silhouette with harsh skepticism, likely looking for any potential excuse to set aside their eyes and start searching with their hands. She wondered what Lt. Mikson might have told them about her, and what they might be inclined to do if she ever gave even the

slightest impression that he might be right.

Even the potted plants that occupied each corner of the room seemed to wither in the presence of these scowling corporate soldiers. They looked like they hadn't been watered in days. Many of their broad, shiny green leaves were yellowing and wilted. A few were already starting to fall onto the uncomfortable looking metal chairs that had been haphazardly placed near each, and along the bare portions of the room's gray walls.

Shetari turned back to the reception desk. The leopard spot feline sitting behind the glass was staring at her, one eyebrow raised. She looked impatient. And irate.

"So, you're the Director's new catch, huh?" the security receptionist inquired with a wry, completely disingenuous smile. "I'm SO3BSA551, daytime duty officer here at the security front desk. I deal with minor problems, dispatch and security access control.

If something's lost, or you have a minor issue with personnel conduct, or something suspicious to report, or anything like that, you come to me. For anything more serious, you just yell something like 'security' or 'help' or just screech and the internal surveillance system will initiate active monitoring and armed officers and other required personnel will be dispatched. Now that I've said that, I've got something really important to ask you, and I damned well expect a detailed response."

"Go ahead," Shetari replied, unsettled by the security officer's familiar sounding tone.

"Why am I handing you full access?" SA551 asked with harsh bluntness. "No one just walks in here for the first time and gets access beyond specific duty and public areas. No one. So... why?"

Shetari frowned. Irritation overcame uncertainty. Her command instincts, already stimulated by the Director's apparent

confidence in her abilities, now came back in full force. After her less than pleasant treatment by Lt. Mikson, she was quite as done with displays of insubordination as the Director seemed to be. There also seemed to be no better opportunity in the offing to test out her alleged level of authority before the time came when it wouldn't so much be a luxury, but an absolute necessity.

"Because you've been ordered to," Shetari firmly replied, trying her best not to sound too snappy toward the unfamiliar woman. Whatever opinions she might have were probably the result of Lt. Mikson's blabbering and it seemed wrong to hold that against her. Still, there was precedent to be set. "The rest is need to know only, and if you have to ask, then apparently you don't need to know."

"You're a complete outsider," SA551 noted with a harsh glare. "A complete outsider with a very sketchy professional reputation at that. Granting you this level of access is a major

security issue. If you aren't willing to see and admit that then..."

Shetari crossed her arms. Enough was enough. "The only major security issues around here seem to come from this security department not following strict procedures and issued orders," she replied with a scowl. "Are we having another incident here?"

SA551 froze. Her ears fell back. "Um... no..."

"Very well," Shetari replied. "Now that that's cleared up, let's get on with business. Besides the explanation of what goes on here, is there anything else I need to know or do before I head out to the spaceport ramp and give those asshole contractors holy hell?"

SA551 bit her lip and looked at the two sneering guards. "I was kind of told..."

"Told what and by whom?" Shetari snapped.

"Well, Lt. Mikson said..." SA551 replied.

"Lt. Mikson?" Shetari replied without bothering to let the security officer finish. "Then I suggest you bring it up with the Director. I'm sure she'll be very keen on hearing what bullshit tales he's been spouting to unauthorized personnel... again."

Again, SA551 looked at the guards, this time with a very alarmed expression on her face.

Shetari turned to face the two soldiers. "And that means you too," she spat, causing the guards to snap to attention. "Any and all violations of strict information compartmentalization are to be reported. I don't care where they came from. Period. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am!" both men replied.

Shetari paused, allowing a few moments of awkward silence to pass before she turned back to the security desk. "Now, is there anything else that I need to know or deal with?"

"Just... your sleeves and gear," SA551 answered softly, a thoroughly mortified look on her face. She pointed across the lobby, to a door near the front wall. "That's the women's room. You just sit in one of the alcoves and it'll set you up with your issued equipment and sort out your... hair."

"What's wrong with my hair?" Shetari asked as she looked over her shoulder toward the doorway, with its little women's lavatory symbol on it. She reached up to run her right hand through her long, lush golden mane to discover that it had been cropped short around the nape of her neck, right at the level that the spread of the blackness had stopped. She hadn't felt its absence owing to the wet, slimy feel of the stuff and the overall strangeness of the whole experience. "What... where is my hair? Where did it go? It took me forever to grow it out! What the hell?"

"Goo eat hair," Shani hummed over the cheetah's shoulder. "No worry. Machine fix."

Like mine. Make nice and long and shiny!"

"Wait... it ate my hair? What about my fur?" Shetari sputtered with sudden self-consciousness. "Did it..."

"Oh no," Shani replied. "Not fur. Just hair."

"But... why... oh... hell. Whatever," she muttered as she turned away from the security desk and headed for the ladies' room. She wasn't about to let the unexpected surprise get in the way of the heady feeling of having real command authority for the first time in more than a year. "I wasn't expecting to be able to keep it anyway. It's not really appropriate for starship personnel."

"I pick new hair," Shani purred softly as the ladies' room door slip open. "You like."

"Hopefully," Shetari said as she stepped into the doorway. She honestly would have preferred to keep her short cropped hair as it was. Aboard ship, every little bit of extra



personal time was worth its weight in gold. Short hair required no real maintenance. Just a quick combing every morning and that was it.

Shetari glanced over her shoulder, past her tawny furred shadow and at the still quite visibly mortified security officer behind the desk. "But... the rest of this," she said, lowering her voice. "Tell me, do they treat you the same way? You're even more of an outsider than I am."

"No, never," Shani replied. "Director paid for me. Told them stay away. Nax say stay away too. They scared now."

"Scared? Really?" Shetari asked as the two stepped into the small room. "No offense, but I find that just a little hard to believe."

Shetari looked at the three little brushed metal alcoves that were embedded in the wall to her left. Tracks for sliding doors were visible in both the floor and ceiling in front of each pod. Small, shiny black bicycle seats were

provided, mounted so high that even when sitting, an average humanoid would be practically standing. Looped handles were mounted directly to either side of each seat. There were several holes in the floor, and in the handles themselves. It was all very reminiscent of the pod in which she had been dressed in the blackness, though it lacked the alien form that had made the latter so intimidating.

"Oh, Mikson grab me second sun, when I take papers between places for Director," Shani replied, glancing out the dark windows that lined the wall to the right. "Say I don't belong, no matter Director says."

"And what happened?" Shetari responded as the door closed behind them.

"I bit him," Shani replied, turning back toward the cheetah with a viciously proud grin.

"Bit him?" Shetari questioned with

considerable surprise. She knew the tribals were inclined to be very physically direct, but actually biting someone in response to such a provocation seemed to be going just a little bit too far. Then again, there was no doubt in her mind that the ass almost certainly deserved it. "So that's why he stayed out of reach when you swatted at him earlier. I'm guessing he didn't like it."

"He yell and run away," Shani replied. "He sulk after. Not bother me again. Doc-tor Alluwa laugh though. She let me play with new toys. Fun toys. Maybe we play together."

"Doc-tor Alluwa... tell me something," Shetari inquired as Shani's reply brought one of her unanswered questions back to the forefront of her mind. "I thought I was a number. The security officer here was a number. The receptionist above ground was a number. And you said that you were a number. But then Mikson and Director Shi used my real name. And their own names. And your

nickname. And the intelligence officer's name. I don't get it. How does all this names and numbers stuff really work?"

"Oh, numbers funny thing," Shani replied with a deep chuckle. "Memory game. See if you awake after suit. And toy with you too. See if accept. See if not. Accept, Vixanti for life. Not accept, well... two years and go. Like that. They say. I accept. I like wet black. Never take off. Feel too nice."

"But your number, it matches your name," Shetari observed. "So Shani is... your nickname? What's your real name?"

"Oh, first people you meet, numbers made like real name," Shani answered. "Blissy. Sassy. Me. Just for funny thing. Few others like that too. Most not. Only number if not know name. Or don't like. Mikson SO3BD129R. Call him number lots. Hates it."

"Sassy? Oh... SA551, right!" Shetari said with a nod. "Yeah, I suppose that all makes

sense. It's a bit perverse though. I was starting to think I'd gotten talked into signing up to be a slave or something like that."

"Oh, no slave," Shani purred deeply. "Vixanti not nasty. Vixanti very nice. Make people calm. Happy. Like it here. Not want to leave. But don't make stay. So, not slave. Unless want. If want... then still, not slave. Not like bad slave. Good slave?"

"Good slave?" Shetari asked. "I don't think there's such a thing."

"Sound like Doc-tor Kidan," Shani replied, shaking her head.

"Who's Dr. Kidan?" Shetari inquired.

"He make strange machines," Shani answered. "Glowing things. Floating things. Always worrying people 'go too far' with things."

"Sounds like a rational man," Shetari noted.

“Because there’s definitely no such thing as slavery being good, no matter how nice it might seem.”

Shani cocked her head to one side. "But... if want? If like? Really like? Unless change mind? That not good?"

"That's not being a good kind of slave," Shetari replied with a smirk. "That's called having a job you like. You stay until you don't like it anymore."

Shani shrugged.

"So, you said you accepted the whole number thing," Shetari asked as she looked at the back wall of the alcove. Nearly invisible seams suggested the presence of a number of very well fitted doors. "Does that mean you plan on staying here for the rest of your life?"

"Oh, yes!" Shani chuffed. "Love shiny black. Love new sexy toys. Maybe love you. You accept too. I smell it. Smell sweet. Mmm?"

Shetari took a deep breath as she turned to sit on the seat. She couldn't deny it. "Yeah, I accepted it," she answered with a shrug. "It seemed... I don't know. Like this goo made me want to be a number. I don't know why. But... I just went with it."

Shani chuffed as she stepped up to the cheetah and reached out to caress both of her shoulders. "We shiny black together forever! Can't wait show toys! So much fun together!"

Shetari grimaced. "I don't know about that," she replied, not having any immediate inclination to repeat the events which followed her encasement in the blackness, let alone go any further into the spiraling depths of tribal style intimacy. And yet, she felt a sudden and completely involuntary desire for the lioness' uninterrupted presence. And her touch. Perhaps it was just another exchange of hormones, running through her companion's massaging caress. Or, perhaps, the goo was compelling her again. Controlling her. They

were one organism, after all. It needed what was good for her. But then, she also needed what was good for it. Was touching another blackness coated individual something it really needed? Or was it just trying to get them to merge their feelings and dilute their individuality?

Shetari shook the questions out of her head. The clock was ticking. The sooner she got up to the ramp, the better. "I just have to sit in here, right? And then what?"

"It puts belt and things," Shani replied with a smile as she slipped her hands down to the cheetah's hips. She playfully pressed her companion down onto the waiting seat. "And makes nice hair. Shiny hair. Stretchy hair. Like mine."

"Stretchy hair?" Shetari asked as she reached out for the handles to steady herself.

"Stretchy soft," Shani replied as she backed away to allow the translucent pink alcove



doors to slide shut. She took a step for the next alcove in line. "I get belt now too. Quick. Back soon."

Shetari had no chance to reply before the doors snapped into place. Unlike the egg shaped pod, this machine made no pretense of presenting its functions as a proper experience. In an instant, her hands were fixed to the handles. Her feet were fixed to the floor. She could feel a heaviness flowing up her arms. Bubbles of some unknown something were moving up under the surface of the blackness, around her upper arms and over her shoulders. They formed an extra thickness of material where the other Vixanti personnel's colored sleeves were worn.

At the same time that the bubbles of liquid mass were moving up Shetari's arms, copious quantities of goo welled up from the holes in the floor and surrounded her feet. She could feel a tingling pressure in all the places that the blackness had penetrated her body. The

slime that surrounded her began to flow and move in strange, mind bending ways. It was like her outsides were going in and her insides coming out, all at once. She felt just a bit nauseous, but the feeling quickly faded. It was replaced by an eerie sense of very intense, very wet cleanliness. It was as if she'd spent an hour inside a full body shower pod, and then someone decided to switch the water feed for a tank of warm intimate lubricant. The physical sensations were intensely alien, but they were also very, very arousing. She felt fresh. Whole. Even energized.

Robotic arms snapped a segmented metal belt around Shetari's waist. It was like an oversized watch band, with holes for mounting accessories on each section. More robotic arms fitted various items onto the belt. There was a little silver personal comm on her left side. Two small pouches of indeterminate contents were placed beside it. To her right, a very new and very expensive looking blaster pistol was fitted, along with two extra charge packs.

More robotic arms ran a set of combs through Shetari's hair. With each stroke, the golden strands seemed to get thicker. Heavier. Longer. And springy. Very, very springy. It was like her hair had been replaced by rubber bands, from root to tip. Each was the thickness of a typical old-timey graphite pencil lead, though it felt no different than normal hair upon her scalp. Unlike rubber bands, however, these strands were oily slick, and flowed past one another like liquid.

The combs pulled away. Other robotic arms gathered up Shetari's slick, bouncy hair and tied it all into a high ponytail with a strap of bright, fluorescent magenta plastic. The material upon her shoulders turned in upon itself, the blackness descending as a coating of equally intense magenta colored gel rose up and formed her uniform sleeves, complete with the Vixanti corporate logo, her employee number and her rank. In the mirror-like finish of the pod doors, she could clearly see the four bars. Captain. Just as the Director had

suggested.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the process was complete. The goo around Shetari's feet released her. The alcove doors snapped open.

"Have fun?" Shani asked as she stepped out of her own alcove and reached out to help the cheetah to stand up. "All pretty. Bouncy hair. Clean too. Feel nice. Yes?"

"Clean?" Shetari inquired as she stepped forward to look at her reflection in the dark windows. "Is that what it was doing? Cleaning me?"

"Inside, outside," Shani answered as she reached out to give the cheetah's ponytail a playful tug. It stretched out to almost half again its resting length without creating any real pull upon its perplexed owner's scalp. "Black make body clean. Machine keep black clean. Never need take goo off. Stay inside forever."

"Forever?" Shetari inquired as the lioness let go of her hair, sending it flying up over her head. "You really never have to take it off? And it won't do anything bad? Like perma-suits? It's not going to leave me with a permanently gaping ass? Or an addiction to... well... whatever? It's really safe?"

"Well, if keep clean," Shani replied with a nod. "If not... it... um..."

"If not, what?" Shetari questioned, turning to look the lioness in the eye. Of course, there was a catch. There was always a catch. "What happens if you don't keep it clean?"

"Doc-tor Alluwa say it hurt the goo," Shani answered. "Make goo think you going to die. So it... um... make you goo. So you live. But... live like doll. Better than die? Look fun. Maybe try some day."

"Just like the 'accidents' in the porn mags," Shetari murmured, immediately making the connection. She looked back at her reflection

in the glass. It didn't take much effort to imagine the goo washing up over her head, imprisoning her facial features and turning her into one of those uniformly identical 'living' toys. She had been under the impression that it was all some isolated accident, and not some universal problem that was fundamental to the stuff worn by every single Vixanti employee. But it could actually happen to anyone. Even her. "How often does that happen? Is it predictable? Is it random? Why didn't anyone say anything before?"

"Oh, not random!" Shani said, reaching around the cheetah's sides to cup her hands under her shiny black chest. "Clean each sun. Fine. Two suns. Fine. Three. Mostly fine. Four. Maybe not fine. Ten suns. Bad. Or good, if want be doll."

"So, if I do this thing here once every two days, nothing will happen?" Shetari questioned as the lioness gave her breasts a brief playful squeeze.

"Mhmm," Shani hummed in reply. "Or take off and put on. No worry. Most clean every sun. Most suns. Extra safe. New beds clean too. So we clean every sleep. Extra extra safe."

"And the only thing that can make it happen is not cleaning it," Shetari asked, letting the lioness continue to fondle her breasts as she wondered just how deep the shiny black rabbit hole really went. "Right?"

"Well, can make it," Shani replied, shifting her hands down the cheetah's firm belly and resting her little fingers in the places where her well formed thighs met her abdomen. She let her hands slip even further downward, probing into the creases that framed the sides of the cheetah's otherwise concealed womanly folds. "Like Xinti girl. She try to steal blackness secrets. I push her toward doll machine. Push button. Turn robot on. It make funny noise. Make doll. Pretty doll. Make nice pictures."

"I thought the director said that was an accident!" Shetari replied in shock. "You did that do her on purpose? How do you know it didn't really kill her? I know they say that it doesn't... but I really find that hard to believe."

"Brain still work," Shani replied with a shrug. "Must be alive. But... Vixanti my clan. She have long knife. Know to use it. Turn to doll or sink teeth into throat? Doll better. They all think accident. Protect clan. Protect you, if have to. You sister. Maybe lover."

Shetari shook her head. Tribals were passionate people, but that often meant they were rough. Violent, even. Still, it was difficult to reconcile the touchy-feely, overly affectionate lioness with the perfectly willing killer she had just presented herself to be. "Yeah, maybe..."

For a moment, the two women stood in silence.

Shetari finally let out a deep sigh. This was



all getting far too complicated for her liking. She preferred order and wherever she looked here, there seemed to be chaos. If she wanted to be comfortable, it looked like she was going to have to establish her own little island of stability. Without knowing more about the place and its other residents, she had no idea where to even start. There was at least one place she could enforce some order, though, and all this talking had delayed that task far longer than it should have.

"I think we've wasted enough time here," Shetari said, gently pushing the lioness' probing fingers away from her inner thighs. "This is all too much to think about right now. We need to get to the ramp and sort out that mess. The rest can wait."

Shani nodded. "We walk then," she purred as the pair headed for the ladies' room door. "Zoomy car come. That go to sky boat place."

"Alright," Shetari replied as the ladies' room

door opened. She followed the lioness out to find the guards and the security receptionist doing their level best to look professional while studiously avoiding eye contact. "Hopefully this Lieutenant Commander Nax is a bit more... well, like the people I'm accustomed to dealing with. Because I'm really, really not in the mood for any more shit today. No more unexpected slimy shit. No more insubordinate security shit. And if those asshole contractors try to give me any shit... they're in for fucking hell... and then some!"

## EIGHT

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### VIXANTI THREE

Shetari stepped out out of the security building and into the main cavern of Vixanti Facility 3. Above was the balcony from which she had gotten her first view of the cavern's magnificent central courtyard. Where she was standing now, however, things were far less rosy looking.

A broad roadway ran in a ring around the six central buildings. It also seemed to provide the access to the structures that lined the cavern wall. It's surface was covered with a brackish, uneven coat of dark gray non-skid deck coating. There were no lines to guide traffic. No crosswalks to mark safe crossings. And no markings to help keep drivers from

jumping the sidewalks in the cavern's horribly dim ground level lighting. To Shetari's eyes, it all looked very much like someone had stopped the job halfway through and never gotten back to finishing it.

The raised sidewalks were little better. The black glass panels that made up their surface were scratched, chipped and cracked to the point that they looked like someone had just filled the space with glued together bits of shattered windows and called it a job well done. It might have been extremely difficult to walk on if it hadn't been for the biogel that formed so thick and protective a sole under Shetari's feet. It gripped the solid bits well enough that the unstable bits had no effect on her stability. Someone wearing normal shoes, however, would have found taking even a few steps to be quite the perilous affair.

"This is... I don't know what this is, to be honest," Shetari muttered as she knelt down to get a better look at the shattered sidewalk. A

quick run of her fingers over its surface only confirmed just how dangerous it might prove should anyone fall on it. "Does everyplace here look so... goddess, I can't even find a word for it. Messy? Unfinished? Ignored?"

"Some, not all," Shani replied as she looked one way and then the other. "Most places nice. But people too busy now. Robot machine not help. Make worse. Need more people."

"This isn't just a minor problem here," Shetari noted as she took in the sheer scale of the damage that needed to be fixed. "What can people be so busy with that they can't fix something that's such a huge safety issue. Give me the materials, maybe a dozen people with some familiarity with construction work and I could get this all replaced in two or three weeks. It's not that big a job, really. What could be more important?"

Shani shrugged. "Big sky boats and experiment things, mostly. Doc-tor Alluwa and

Doc-tor Kidan get everyone work for them. Make things faster. Then there sex..."

"Sex?" Shetari questioned with considerable indignation. "Exactly how much sex are people having here that they can't deal with a huge issue like this?"

"Lots," Shani replied as a small, open topped vehicle came into view from the left, where a large opening in the main cavern's outer wall was just barely visible. "New play beds. Robot toys. Experiments. All that. Lots sex. Well. Some people. Not all. Not most. Some."

The little vehicle that was turning toward the two women was the sort of beefed up golf cart that would usually be found trucking workers around a spaceport. It had a single seat for the driver up front and three bench seats behind her. This particular example was painted bright orange and it had been accessorized with a six foot tall metal pole at its back end. This pole held aloft a small yellow

strobe light, though it was currently turned off. It was just as well. In such a poorly lit place, even a small safety strobe might have been blinding.

Shetari stood up to watch the vehicle's approach. It was so bright and new compared to everything else in the immediate vicinity that it looked like it belonged to a completely different reality. It was driven by a slender blue skinned woman who's shoulders were adorned in a shade of glossy engineering orange that was only a little bit darker than the vehicle in which she was sitting. Her short purple hair bobbed about like a rubber mop head with each bump and bounce. Why she didn't seem to be able to avoid a single blemish on the road surface was a mystery. It looked almost deliberate.

"Define lots of sex," Shetari asked.

"Every sun lots," Shani replied with a coy smile and a pair of fingers to stroke the

cheetah's shoulder. "Two every sun. Three every sun. More sometimes. Lots. Lots lots."

"Hey there Shani!" the vehicle's driver chirped as she pulled up in front of the two fey'li. "I see you got yourself a new friend. She a keeper?"

"Mhmm," Shani purred.

"So, Obsidian, is it? Or do you prefer Captain? Or are you into that creepy number thing, oB5DN? Or do you have a real name you'd like me to use? I can never tell with people. Some want the nickname. Some want their rank. Some like the number. Some want me to bend over and see if I'm their gel type," the woman laughed. "My name's Nys. Engineer 3rd Lieutenant Nys, though you'd never know from my number. 53CS1. Spells sexy. I specially requested that. Because I'm always in the mood. So, Shani, you gonna keep her to yourself or are you gonna share?"

Shetari was mortified. As if the bouncing



back and forth between respect and disrespect at every turn wasn't bad enough, now this? How low could Vixanti possibly go?

Nys laughed in response to the cheetah's mixed expression of rising anger, abject horror and utter confusion. "Sorry, Captain. I'm actually off the clock and doing a favor. Around here that means casual social rules apply. And Shani and I... we're friends. Friends friends, if you know what I mean."

"I do and I wish I didn't," Shetari replied with a scowl. "Seriously! Is this place some kind of perpetual orgy or something?"

"Well, that depends," Nys replied as Shani pulled Shetari into the first bench seat. "Most folks aren't running around fucking all and sundry, if that's what you're asking. But you know, you put a few thousand people in a small space underground and keep them there long enough, things happen, right? Add the shiny goop and all the toys that go with it, and

things start to happen a lot. But that's all part of the 'Lifestyle'. Everyone's supposed to come closer. Be one with the gel and since the gel is all the same, be one with one another."

"So this place is a hippie commune?" Shetari responded with a deep frown.

Nys laughed. "No, I'm just saying that the gel is all about unifying things. Or didn't anyone explain that to you yet?"

"The Director mentioned something about mind machine interface," Shetari replied. "But I don't see what that has to do with subterranean hippie commune orgies."

Nys shook her head. "You missed the subtle point then," she answered as she put her foot hard down on the accelerator. The little car lacked seat belts, but thankfully it was about as quick on its wheels as a ten ton pallet of bricks. "You're one with the gel. The gel is one with Shani. The gel is one with me. It's the same gel. That makes us all part of one

organism, right? We can interact with each other through the gel. And we can interact with machines through the gel. It's like... how did Doctor Alluwa explain it? It's like we're all neurons networked together, communicating by touch, in a body represented by, say, this facility, or a starship or such. Does that make sense?"

"That part does," Shetari replied as Nys turned the vehicle around to head back toward the opening in the main cavern wall. Though she couldn't remember anything specific, the concept the engineer was expressing seemed oddly familiar. She had heard it before, and almost certainly very recently, but she just couldn't put her finger on it now. Or had she? Was it just *deja vu*?

"So tell me," Nys inquired. "What's the point of having all that and not taking that all the way? Sure, not everyone here thinks that way. But it's my view of it. Really, if you can fuck like a banshee from sunup to sundown without

a break to catch your breath, with no ill effects and every time feeling like your first and best... well, I'm not going to lie. It's addictive. But no one who's gone whole hog on it has ever complained about the results, so who really cares if you can't stop?"

"If Vixanti Corporation is really the ultra-high tech development firm it purports to be, then this sort of conduct is astonishingly irresponsible, not to mention extremely dangerous," Shetari noted with crossed arms and another scowl. "Or do you think that mashed up glass walkway is perfectly acceptable? What else is just waiting for the worst moment to go all to hell and kill half the people down here?"

"Blame the heavy maintenance bot for that," Nys replied with a chuckle. "Laying down a chunky ol' layer of non-skid deck coating is right up its alley. Being light on its tracks is not. And if you don't want to blame the bot, blame the facilities guys. It was their brilliant

idea. They just haven't gotten around to fixing it yet, what with everything going on at the Divo facility and all."

"After all I've seen and heard, that bot should be tossed into a scrap heap along with anyone who thinks letting it run unsupervised is a good idea," Shetari replied. "I mean, really! Show me one major task it's completed correctly and maybe I'll change my mind."

"Well, technically, it's completed all of its major tasks correctly," Nys replied with a smirk as she guided the little car over a series of shallow potholes, managing to strike each one square on in its turn. "It followed its instructions to the letter. Not very good instructions, but it followed them without making a single error. For better or worse. Usually worse. But it makes the driving just a little more fun, so there's that."

"And who programmed those instructions, dare I ask?" Shetari questioned, crossing her

arms as she watched the nondescript facades pass by at far too slow a pace for her liking. It was like driving along the main street of an old, small town. There were lots of dark windows. Doors. Signs. But no people. And everything was drab and gray. So it was more like driving along the main street of an old, small town that someone had left to rot for a century or so.

"Not me," Nys replied with a shrug as she steered toward the huge break in the cavern wall. The cleft was almost five stories high and it formed the end of a long, broad hall that stretched not merely to the nearby spaceport hangar, but for what looked like nearly a kilometer beyond it. Unlike the main cavern, only its lower reaches were formed by natural rock. Here and there, low buildings of pearly gray were embedded in the black basalt. Above these, windows and balconies had been cut directly into the rock, suggesting the presence of far more spacious structures hidden behind the dark stone walls. "I'm a power systems

engineer, not robotics. But Alluwa might change my mind on that. She has a way with machines. Has Kidan building lots of really sexy stuff for her. When you get the chance, you ought to get Shani to show you around the uh... 'special spa'."

"Special spa? Do I even want to know?" Shetari sighed as the car turned to head down the long hall.

Unlike the dark, dingy main cavern outer ring, the sidewalks in this vast hall were clean and well polished. The roadway was marked with the expected white and yellow lines. In fact, it was less of a plain roadway than it was a proper boulevard. A series of islands down the center contained planters, fountains and benches. A long series of silvery latticework arches held the vaulted gray ceiling aloft and kept the space clear of any visual obstruction that might interfere with a visitor's sense of scale.

"The special spa used to be the warehouse where Alluwa kept her less exotic mechanical inventions," Nys explained. "Mostly pretty mundane stuff, really. Granted, there were creative uses aplenty, but it wasn't always open to the public. But you know how things go. People see things. Get ideas. Mix things up a bit. Then, bazoom! Robotentacles from Xixilon Five!"

Shetari grimaced. It wasn't the reference to the ancient and somewhat dated erotic science fiction film that made her feel uncomfortable. It was the idea that anyone would be mad enough to try to recreate the iconic machine that gave the film its name that made her stomach feel just a little bit queasy. Wasn't that how the problems depicted in the film all started?

"It used to be an invitation only thing," Nys went on. "Then she let people sign up for experiment sessions. Then it got to the point where she let her biggest fans set it up as an



open thing and trained some folks to record it all for her. But it's for science! Honest! It provides all sorts of data on how the biogel reacts to rough physical handling. When its protective mechanisms kick in. That kind of stuff. It's lots of fun. You should try it out."

Shetari shook her head in disgust. "Is everything in this place all about sex?"

"No, not really," Nys replied. "We've got great food too. And an arcade. And a gym. And a not so sexy spa. And a huge library, way down at the far end. Right under the shipyards. You've really got to check that out. They've got like two hundred thousand books and video booths and a company museum and all sorts of neat stuff."

"And how many people make use of all that versus, say, having sex every spare moment of their lives?" Shetari inquired with considerable sarcasm as the car approached a wide, open area with no island to separate the two sides of

the roadway. The walls to either side were fitted with large industrial garage type doors, embedded about ten meters back into the rock.

"Well, I guess I have to be honest," Nys answered. "Most of the people here do. It's really just about twenty of us that are real sex nuts. But we don't mind the casual interloper joining us for some fun. Keep that in mind, hmm?"

"Yeah, I'll do that," Shetari replied, rolling her eyes as the car stopped in front of the door on the right side of the hall. There was a very loud metallic clink and the door began to rumble upward. This revealed a very large industrial freight elevator platform. Only a low safety railing separated this from the geared vertical tracks and cables that provided it with motive power. Above, the lift shaft rose up almost twenty stories into darkness.

"That's our ride upstairs," Nys said as she drove the car onto the lift. "They want me to

roll you all the way out. Said it'll make you look more important or something. Is it as bad up there as the warehouse boys are saying?"

"That depends," Shetari replied. "If they're saying that Vixanti's lost a light transport thanks to incompetent ramp handling, then yeah. It's that bad."

"Well, before I came to get you, they were saying that the ramp crew is getting really aggressive," Nys said as the lift began its painfully slow climb. "They want access to the wreck or something like that. Say they've got gear aboard. Some kind of shit excuse to poke their noses where they don't belong. Spaceport police are there, but Mikson's crew is more worried about the big Destiny class ships than helping Nax out. That's the latest scuttlebutt. Don't know if it helps."

"I does," Shetari replied with a curt nod as she watched the depth markers pass by on the lift shaft wall. Director Shi had mentioned that

the timing of the accident was suspicious. Now, the ramp contractors want to get into the ship? It was a fairly brazen demand, given that any ship built within the last six centuries would have been rigged for zero internal access ramp handling, or zip-handling as they called it in the industry. There was no reason for them to have brought anything aboard. In fact, they almost surely never would have been able to get aboard unless they had actually broken in. Perhaps they were trying to hide evidence of a botched crime?

"Has anyone said much about what the transport was carrying since it arrived?" Shetari asked.

"Fucking hell no!" Nys exclaimed. "And I don't care how much authority you have in this place, I'm not talking about anything I might have seen. At least not where someone might hear me. It's so fucking secret that it came with a Navy escort. The only person here who really knows exactly what it was is Doctor

Alluwa, so if you want to know about it, you're going to have to ask her, and she's a royal twat about shit like that, so good luck. Not even the Director can get her to tell the truth half the time!"

Shetari sat in silence as the lift headed up into the final twenty meters of its painfully slow ascent. Alluwa. She had heard the name so many times in the past half an hour. It seemed vaguely familiar. It wasn't that common of a name, either. At least among fey'li. Hadn't she met an Alluwa before? Somewhere... years ago. The Academy? Maybe. Again, *deja vu*.

"Come on," Nys whined. "Ugh... the last five is always the slowest. Damned lifts. They take forever, but at least they're reliable. Mostly."

Shetari found herself slowly rising into a very large, very spartan looking aerospace hangar. The lift shaft itself was cut into the very back of the hangar floor. At the front of

the hangar, the tall, eight segment crossover doors were only opened about a quarter of the way. Bright natural light flooded the space through the opening. It was complemented with a set of bright panel lights strategically placed amid the truss-work that held the corrugated metal ceiling aloft.

There was no mistaking the stale odor of burned rubber and melted plastic that permeated the hangar atmosphere. Her nose wrinkled at the sharp, almost painful scents. She wondered if anyone had bothered to check the safety of the air inside the hangar. If the structure lacked good ventilation, it might capture toxic gases and give anyone entering a harsh and potentially lethal surprise.

"I don't like that smell," Shetari said the lift ascended through the last meter at a comically slow pace.

"Nothing to worry about," Nys replied. "If it's dangerous, your biogel will cover your face

and give you clean air to breathe."

"It will?" Shetari questioned as she looked around at the hangar's interior. It was surprisingly clear of vehicles, equipment and the other sundries usually to be found in such a facility. The floor had been freshly painted with the same nonskid material to the roadways down within Vixanti Three, but here it had been much more evenly applied. It had a lovely satin finish that made it look a bit less like rubberized deck coating and more like a perfectly laid out sheet of the finest quality fabric. The only real color came from the yellow hazard markers around the lift shaft, and the red paint that coated the retractable, cage-like railing structure that ensured against accidental, and almost assuredly fatal, falls. "That's news to me."

"Oh. Well, I mean, isn't that half the point of the stuff?" Nys replied. "It's supposed to replace all kinds of clothing. Normal clothing. Specialized uniforms. Hazmat suits. Space

suits. Perma-suits. It's all anyone will ever need to wear for any purpose whatsoever. Great, huh?"

"If you say so," Shetari remarked with a shrug as the lift finally came to a halt. The surrounding cage structure dropped down into the floor with a rumble and a loud, metallic thump. It's upper rail came to rest perfectly flush with the hangar floor.

Nys drove the car off the lift and headed toward the parting in the hangar doors. "Well, are you two ready to mix it up out there? If you are, I'll just drop you by the doors and head back downstairs."

"As ready as I'll ever be," Shetari replied, looking at her companion with a nod and a shallow smile. "Let's do this."



## NINE

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# CAPTAIN ANWAE

Captain Shetari Anwae stepped out from the vast hangar and into the dull, ruddy glow of the fading sun. The air was filled with the harsh stench of burned rubber and aerospace fire suppression foam. The flashing red strobes of a half dozen spaceport emergency vehicles made the water that covered the concrete ramp shimmer, and cast an undulating, sinister glow upon the small, overturned transport that lay blackened and torn asunder directly in front of the hangar doors. The boxy little ship had clearly suffered considerably more than just a tire fire and burnout. The forward part of the hull, mainly comprised of the ship's cargo hold,

had separated from the rest of the ship and had partially collapsed. It might have been the work of the firefighters, making sure there was no one trapped inside, but given all that she had thus far learned about the ramp contractor, some more sinister explanation seemed just as likely.

Directly beyond the burned out wreck loomed one of the massive Destiny class starships. Its imposing front face was a massive, sharply angular slab of metal, intake vents and oddly shaped gratings that sloped back at a forty-five degree angle. There were no windows, but given its height, Shetari guessed it to have about eight or nine internal deck levels. Exactly how big the ship was overall was hard to tell from her vantage point. Most civilian cargo ships were built within a certain range of proportions in order to balance cargo capacity, habitability, maintenance burden and overall handiness in flight.

If the Destiny class ships followed the usual pattern, she figured they'd be about the size of a typical small cruiser, maybe about a hundred and sixty meters long or so. As general purpose starships, their capabilities and complement would depend on how much of their vast cargo capacity had been retained during conversion. The fact that the forward cargo bay doors were at least three decks in height suggested that they were still expected to haul a decent amount of freight when required. That might make sense if the ships were intended as mobile marketing platforms, setting up demonstrations and trade show displays at ports of call. But... for testing and development, it seemed just a bit odd. Then again, the two missions weren't necessarily mutually exclusive.

Unfortunately, there was no time for the cheetah to take in further nuances of the scene that was laid out before her. A group of figures were standing off to one side, engaged in a heated argument that sounded as if it would

already have devolved into a physical altercation were it not for the presence of a few Vixanti Corporation security personnel and a particularly intimidating spaceport police special response squad. Several other biogel clad Vixanti personnel were also present. A tall, blue skinned makanti wore the same deep pink shoulder sleeves as Shetari. A short tigress was adorned with that unusual shade of creamy white that she had previously observed in the courtyard. Three others wore engineering orange. The last, looking vaguely similar to the ill tempered Lt. Mikson, wore security gray. Lt. Mikson himself was nowhere to be seen.

Facing the Vixanti group were nine very rough looking men and three women. Several of the roughs were holding heavy tools in a rather threatening fashion as the burliest, most ill-shaven brute of the group shouted in the face of the gray shouldered Vixanti officer. Their poor state of dress and foul demeanor seemed quite at odds with the typically quite

professional appearance of the typical big city spaceport contractor. Indeed, they were so dirty and disheveled that they would have looked out of place even in some of the Empire's least savory frontier port towns. They might have been excused for such an appearance, given the nature of the incident that had just taken place, but they showed no other obvious signs of having been involved in any attempt to try and put the fire out.

Shetari turned to Shani as they cautiously approached the vitriolic exchange. "Do you know any of those people?"

Shani scowled. "Bad people," she replied with a low growl. "Always drink. Fight. Make mess. Bad boss man like them. Make him look like tough guy. Fool."

"Is this 'boss man' here?" Shetari asked, taking her time to take a good look at each member of the group. None of them seemed particularly inclined toward any sort of

leadership role. Quite the opposite, if she was judging them correctly.

Shani shook her head. "No."

"Some tough guy," Shetari remarked with a sneer. "You aren't very tough if you have to get others to do your dirty work while you hide from your problems. Or your business's problems."

Shani nodded. "All talk. No bite."

One of the roughs finally noticed Shetari's approach. "Tryin' ta sneak up?" the scaly green woman shouted, waving a large wrench in a distinctly menacing fashion. Everyone turned to face the sternly frowning cheetah and her snarly companion. "Im'ma beat yer hairy ass! Scram!"

"Commanding officer on deck!" the gray shouldered officer snapped, stepping back from his verbal assailant to offer the approaching cheetah a sharp naval salute.

Shetari offered a slightly more casual merchant marine academy salute in reply. "Lieutenant Commander Nax, I presume?" she observed as her eyes again scanned the group. She had never been well versed in the finer arts of conflict resolution, but she did know a few ways to make even the most foul tempered brute start to sweat in these sorts of circumstances. "Where's the ITSB investigating officer?"

"Hasn't arrived y..." Lt. Cdr. Nax began.

"Fuck off with that shit," the hairy head of the roughs snapped. "We don't answer to those ass wipes on the ramp. Ship's not flying, so those piss ass pigs can fuck off. That's how it works here, hairball. You better learn that quick or..."

Shetari turned toward the most senior of the spaceport police officers, a tall, extremely muscular bovid with fur almost as black as the blackness that covered her own body. "Code 7.

Alpha alpha."

The head of the roughs shrieked like a cornered rat as a dozen assault rifles were suddenly leveled at his group. It was plainly clear that the heavily armed special response team had been itching for any half decent excuse to get more directly involved in the argument. They seemed almost gleeful that one was apparently about to be provided.

"Justification?" the ranking police officer asked, his lackadaisical tone suggesting that pretty much anything with a hint of plausibility was going to be perfectly acceptable.

"This gentleman's declaration that the ITSB has no authority here is clearly indicative of an intention to interfere with the preservation of evidence for impending civil regulatory and possibly criminal proceedings," Shetari replied. "They need to go. And if they won't, they need to spend some time in the cooler."



"Aight," the police officer agreed with a nod and a brief, dark grin.

"And I don't mean just go to a safe distance," Shetari added, crossing her arms. "Each of these individuals is now barred from all Vixanti Corporation property and rented facilities and will be regarded as trespassing from this point forward."

"We got a contract," the head rough snapped as the police officers began to interpose themselves between the contractor's gang and the Vixanti personnel.

Shetari looked over her shoulder at the burned out transport and then back at the group of toughs. "Had," she replied with a low hiss. "You had a contract. And if your boss wants to have it reinstated, he can get his own sorry ass out here to tell me why I should give him a second chance."

The head rough spat at Shetari before turning tail to follow his fellows away, toward

the far end of the West Extension landing way. There, a set of small, ill maintained buildings sat half-hidden among a mess of unkempt overgrowth. These odd looking structures were as out of place among the clean, modern buildings that lined the landing way as the roughs were among the professional aerospace types who worked in them. In all likelihood, they predated the expansion project, but why they had been retained, let alone were still in use, was a mystery.

"Straight to the big guns, eh?" Nax chuckled as he watched the police follow the roughs clear of the vast Vixanti ramp area. This took up almost the entire south side of the West Extension, along with a small, old-timey aviation club down at the end, near the ramp contractor's run down set of garages. One of the vast transit warehouses belonging to Nebula Space Transport stood between the Vixanti ramp and the three kilometer run of the spaceport's main landing way. NST was one of the biggest interstellar shipping lines,

and if rumors were to be believed, was likely to be the first of Vixanti's commercial customers, once final operational product testing was complete. If it was ever complete.

"I'm not in the mood to screw around," Shetari replied as she looked around at the assembled Vixanti personnel. "And speaking of screwing around, where's Mikson?"

"He was here for a few minutes, but he didn't stick around," Nax replied with a wry smile. "Probably for the best, to be honest. He and Colonel B'ndar don't get along, or so I'm told."

"Colonel B'ndar?" Shetari inquired.

Nax nodded toward the distant figure of the massive bovid.

"Ah," Shetari noted. "I'm honestly not surprised. Mikson's... well, quite a character."

"That would be a very significant

understatement," the cream shouldered tigress huffed. Her light, girly voice had an odd, heavy tongued accent that gave it a smooth depth that was completely contradictory to its pitch. "Now, are we going to be looking into exactly *why* my special shipments keep having extremely untimely incidents associated with them, or are we going to just keep calling it bad luck and pretend that absolutely nothing is wrong? I cannot *possibly* overemphasize how irritating this is getting to be. My work cannot be completed on anything resembling the Directorate's schedule if there are any further delays on Destiny Alpha!"

"I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced," Shetari replied, turning to look over the tigress more closely. Her voice seemed oddly familiar. She could have sworn she had heard it before, and not just in passing. There was something oddly compelling to it. Authoritative, in a very personal way. From a dream, perhaps? One of those strange, hypnotic dreams that she could never quite remember the contents of?

"I am Doctor Anshi Alluwa," the tigress replied with a smirk. "I am the principle bioscience field officer for biogel development and all related technologies. I am currently seeing to the experimental installations aboard the Destiny class starships, though once that task is complete I will be moving up to work aboard Destiny Omega, which has been configured to support some of my personal lines of experimentation as well as allowing me to directly monitor the operational testing program."

"I feel like I know you from somewhere," Shetari said, trying to figure out where they might have met. It wasn't just the name that seemed familiar now. Or the voice. There was something about her somewhat sassy, visibly self-centered poise and her addition of drawn out, completely unnecessary details to her self-description that seemed much too familiar for it to be mere coincidence.

"Oh, you do," Dr. Alluwa replied with a

snort. "I was two years behind you at the Academy. Exobiology. You surely haven't forgotten that little incident with the crystalis in the shower, have you?"

"That was you!?! " Shetari yelped as memories of the most disgusting prank she had ever endured came flooding back with a vengeance. She had gotten back from classes early one day only to discover her shower pod spewing clear therapeutic medical slime instead of water. The stuff was actually alive, and very difficult to fully clean out of fur. All it would take to get it growing again was contact with skin, damp air and exposure to sunlight. Granted, it actually felt pretty nice and it made her fur shine for months even after she had been rid of the stuff, but it was still extremely unpleasant to have to deal with. "That snot took me a month to get out of my fur! It kept growing back!"

"Well, your bunkmate shouldn't have tried to dye my bunkmate's fur bright red," Dr.

Alluwa chuffed. "Fair's fair."

"Wait... that was my bunkmate?" Shetari asked, confused. Her bunkmate at the Academy had been a shy, bookish elf-eared ashiri girl. She didn't seem like the sort to engage in any kind of prank, let alone do much of anything besides go to class and study. "Riarri couldn't have done something like that. And even if she did, how was I supposed to know?"

"As much as I was supposed to know your evening flight class would get canceled due to mechanical issues," Dr. Alluwa replied with a snarl. "She was always the first to shower, but no, you just couldn't wait for her to get back and do her thing. You had to get in there and well, you should have been paying more attention. Or at least have gotten the right cleanser at the pharmacy."

"The pharmacy sells a cleanser for that stuff?" Shetari replied incredulously.

"The sell the stuff itself too," Dr. Alluwa

laughed. "And all the accessories. If you'd bothered to look the stuff up online..."

"Ladies!" Nax interrupted. "I mean, Captain... we have other issues to address, I think. Perhaps you can catch up later."

"Right," Dr. Alluwa sighed, shaking her head at the puzzled cheetah. "Now, can we see about getting into what's left of that ship and look for evidence of intrusion? I am very certain we will find that the whole 'accident' was just to hide evidence that they broke in to look for some highly technical things I had the foresight to remove in the middle of the night last Saturday, when no one was watching."

"No," Shetari replied as she turned her eyes back to the blackened wreck. "We can't risk damaging evidence any more than we can risk that gang doing the same. When the ITSB arrives, we can lay out our case and they will have to deal with it from there."

"We can't," Nax replied, lowering his voice.



"If we do that, then we have to tell them what it was that we think they were trying to get at. In fact, any legal proceeding is going to lead to that. We just can't do it. That's why we keep having to write these incidents off as bad luck."

"And what was it that we think they were trying to get at?" Shetari asked, raising her eyebrow.

Nax looked over his shoulder at the squad of police officers who were carefully observing the roughs who didn't seem very inclined to retreat very far beyond the bright yellow line where Vixanti's part of the ramp terminated. "We don't talk about that above ground," he whispered. "If anyone found out, it might blow the whole lid on Vixanti's integrated interstellar lifestyle system. Right now no one can get ahead of us to present a competing product line because they have no idea what we're developing beyond the biogel. All the things that go along with it... well, except for a

few items that have already been shown off in recent months, they have no idea. It has to stay that way."

"It won't be staying that way if we keep pretending there's no problem!" Dr. Alluwa hissed.

Shetari sighed. "How many shipments have been interfered with?"

"Sixteen," Nax replied.

"And have the nature of any of those shipments been compromised?" Shetari asked.

"None," Nax answered.

"That we know of," Dr. Alluwa interjected.

"You're sure?" Shetari responded, looking Nax straight in the eye.

"Yes," Nax with considerable emphasis. "Although each incident seems to fit a pattern of steady escalation. It's as if someone knows

the really advanced tech is all going to become inaccessible above ground once the Destiny class ships become operational. They're getting desperate to get something, anything, before the ships are manned and gone and there's nothing left above ground to get at."

"I think it's fair to assume that someone is leaking information," Shetari said as she thought the matter over. It was obvious, of course. How else would anyone know what was coming into Facility 3 and when it was arriving. There were two prior attempts to get information out of the facility that she already knew about. Although both of those had failed, they had failed largely because of poor goals and execution on the one hand and possibly pure blind luck on the other. A more cautious agent with a more solid plan could fly well under the security radar, and for quite some time. Certainly long enough to get what they needed, and perhaps long enough to cause significant setbacks to the whole program as well. "It's going to be someone with a high

level of clearance that at least knows the timing and relative security status of each shipment. And almost certainly someone who's not likely to be considered a suspect by anyone within Vixanti Three's own existing command structure. Do you agree?"

"I do," Nax replied, "but I haven't had time to follow up on most lines of inquiry yet. My intention was to set up some decoy shipments and carefully set up who knew what in order to establish a short list of suspects. The information dissemination was to be conducted by some of my best covert agents operating here from within the admin department, but Mikson decided he was going to try and get himself a promotion. He thought he was rooting out the leakers, but all he did was compromise my work. I had to come here to personally sort things out, but all we found were some benign agents trying to suss out the functional properties of the biogel they were wearing and that girl from Xinti. She wasn't exactly the brightest bulb though. She went for

a few of the fancy side-show toys that were almost ready for public display, rather than the far more valuable operational and development information. I won't discount the possibility that she was a decoy, though. Exactly who our current problem or problems might be and if it's related to Xinti..."

"How long have you been here?" Shetari interrupted.

"A little less than four weeks," Nax answered. "I've only witnessed this one incident here myself, and the aftermath of the Xinti girl's encounter with Shani, though my agents were here for the five before those. There were clear signs of people poking around in places they shouldn't have been, but nothing definite. No unexpected genetic material. Nothing out the ordinary whatsoever. Whoever is doing the dirty work up top here is being very careful not to leave any traces of themselves. I've considered that it's likely to be someone who's already authorized to access

the ships and warehouses, but that isn't supported by surveillance."

"You've been here four weeks and that's all you've managed?" Shetari questioned sharply.

"I spent the first two just observing," Nax replied. "No one knew who I was or who I was working for. They just knew I was from headquarters. It was hardly enough time to establish the contacts and relationships I needed to in order to start working out the informal structures of life here and who might be moonlighting on the side. I did get quite a bit of information, but most of it led to dead ends. It didn't help that I've been working alone on this either. I could really use a solid team, but thanks to Mikson, I can't trust anyone in security here. Well, yet at any rate."

Shetari looked toward the wrecked transport. An odd thought occurred to her. "When was the last time that haywire maintenance robot was sent out in this

direction?"

"The what?" Nax questioned.

"That starship maintenance robot that painted almost every surface in the reception lobby flat gray," Shetari replied as a picture began to form in her mind. "The one that wrecked the walkways down underground. When did it come out here last? Was this ship present at that time? If it did, and the ship was present, who had access to the robot to program it?"

"The ship's been on the ramp here for three weeks, but I don't quite understand why that robot would have anything to do with this," Nax replied, shrugging his shoulders. "From my understanding, that was a genuine accident. The bot was designed to paint ship exteriors, not interiors. It was behaving like it was operating in a topside hull recess. Or something like that."

"That may have been at the limits of its

interior task ability, but those kinds of units are indeed intended for some degree of interior maintenance on starships and space habitats," Shetari noted. "I'm going to go out on a very, very short limb and say that the maintenance department is using that robot, and maybe others, to perform lots of routine tasks throughout the facility in order to save time. It's probably such a routine matter that the unit can go pretty much anywhere without attracting any particular notice. We need to go back and check on its movements."

"That sounds like a perfect red herring to me," Dr. Alluwa grumbled. "Yes, they use that old bucket of loose bolts for everything they don't want to bother wasting their own time with, but it is plainly clear that the cause of this mess was the alleged 'mishandling' of this ship. People did this, not a robot. It's not just common sense, it's on fucking video!"

"How could the people create the conditions for a total burnout?" Shetari asked, with one



raised eyebrow. "A full blown tire fire isn't enough for that. Even with the whole lot burning, nothing much of note should have happened beyond losing the landing gear and some heavy exterior damage. These kinds of ships are designed to survive much worse. But this... an awful lot of automatic safety systems had to be compromised to get this result. Someone was monkeying with this ship well before they put the tow hook on it. They knew they were going to have to hide some form of evidence. Maybe that was evidence of the robot going in and getting the information they were looking for. Or maybe they had the robot set this up in order to have the cargo entered as public evidence in the ITSB review board hearing, allowing everyone to see whatever it is Vixanti is up to."

"You know... you may be on to something there," Nax replied, scratching his chin in a contemplative fashion. "I'll contact the security office and have the bot locked down."

Shetari started to nod. "Yes, you should do that... wait... no. Don't." she said, second thoughts coming almost as quickly as the first. Something felt extremely wrong about that course of action, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"What? Why?" Nax questioned as he held his personal comm, ready to make the call.

"Because..." Shetari hesitated, looking for a solid excuse to cover her gut feeling. "Because Mikson sticks his nose in where it doesn't belong. He'll see which way the winds are heading and screw it up in an effort to improve his image. Wait until you can do it yourself."

"How about I go do it?" Dr. Alluwa huffed impatiently. "I have absolute priority on all equipment and I have... executive access. I can download every bit of its state, memory and storage without it logging anywhere except the executive facility monitoring system. You already have access to that, Commander, so it

will give a complete picture of its last thirty days or so, if I correctly recall."

"Sounds like a plan," Nax said, putting his comm away. "Now... what to we say to the ITSB? It was just an empty ship, with all consumables aboard? They're going to get nosy about what it brought here, whether or not the items were aboard at the time."

"If they want to go beyond the information provided in the manifest, we cite trade secrets and refer them to Vixanti's legal department," Shetari answered with a shrug. "Vixanti does have a legal department, doesn't it?"

"Of course," Nax replied. "But they prefer to have problems dealt with at the local command level."

"That's not going to work here," Shetari said. "Hopefully the detail-free general manifest is sufficient to sate their curiosity. I was told the ship came with a Navy escort. Maybe refer it to whoever thought that level of

security was necessary and authorized it. It might just make the ITSB wonks uncomfortable enough to let that part of the matter slide. Is the ship's commander present?"

"Lt. Desti is no longer employed by the company," Nax responded before gesturing toward the blue skinned command officer. "Lt. Canavanna here just arrived yesterday to take the ship over. The rest of the crew went on extended leave the day the ship arrived. They come back in about a week."

"Why did this Desti leave the company?" Shetari asked with a raised eyebrow. "That's some odd timing right there. How much did she know about the cargo?"

"She's clear," Nax replied, shaking his head. "It was a one run temporary command that she took on because both she and the ship needed to be here. The ship had its cargo and it was easier to have Lt. Canavanna meet the ship

here rather than go all the way to Vixanti One to pick it up and impose further delay on Destiny Alpha's fitting out."

"Okay, so we can say that this particular ship was selected to bring the stated cargo because of the command transfer," Shetari noted. "Was the ship inspected at any point between its arrival and the accident?"

"Basic inspection, four days ago," Nax replied. "Control, propulsion, life support and safety systems. At least to my understanding."

"Who performed that inspection?" Shetari questioned.

"Engineering unit D1," Dr. Alluwa noted. "They're the ones fitting out the Destiny Class ships. They're the best vetted personnel in almost the entire company. At the moment, Vixanti Three's primary purpose is to support them with quarters, facilities and equipment so they can finish up the ships and move on to the next big thing, whatever that might be."

"Okay, so between all that and redirecting inquiries with respect to the manifest, it should cover anything the ITSB is going to want to know," Shetari answered. "I think they're going to be far more focused on the sorts of technical details the engineer in charge of the inspection can provide than anything else. As long as the focus remains in that area, and on the ramp handlers, we should be well in the clear."

"Right," Nax replied with a nod.

"So... why did this Desti need to be here in particular?" Shetari inquired. Given the fact that no one had bothered to check up on the activities of the facility's problematic maintenance robot for all this time, it was hard for her to accept the assessment of the little ship's former commander completely at face value. "Was it a return to home on parting of employment or was there some other reason?"

Dr. Alluwa chuckled as her tail began to

twitch from side to side. "She got the attention of some odd paramour with good connections at Vixanti's upper levels. Got someone to talk the girl into becoming a special order CV. Kind of sweet she was so enthusiastic about raising that much money for such good causes, but good grief, I don't think she had a clue what kind of a ride she was in for once she got delivered to that... creature. I'm sure she's enjoying it plenty though. It's not like she has much of a choice now."

"Special order CV?" Shetari inquired.  
"What's that all about?"

"Oh gods... not this shit right now," Nax muttered.

"Oh, nothing serious," Dr. Alluwa replied with a sly grin. "Charity volunteers provide certain services to well vetted benefactors in exchange for generous donations to various charitable causes that Vixanti Corporation's Directing Matriarch supports."

"What do you mean by 'certain services'?" Shetari asked.

"Ladies... I mean Captain!" Nax interjected. "I think this can wait. It's really not relevant to the situation at hand! We have other issues to deal with right now, like getting that maintenance bot secured."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll get right on that," Dr. Alluwa quipped as she turned to head back into the hangar. She looked in the direction of the shoddy contractor's buildings and gestured toward them. Two stiff looking men were now speaking with Colonel B'ndar and gesturing quite aggressively toward Shetari and company. "In the meantime, it looks like you're going to have an issue of your own to deal with. The suits have come out and by the nine heavenly hells, they don't look happy!"



## TEN

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## RATS

Shetari stood next to Lieutenant Commander Nax and gazed with considerable disdain at the two short, orange skinned men, with their broad shoulders and ill-fitting pinstripe suits. While the gang of roughs may have seemed just out of place on the ramp of a fully modern spaceport, these figures seemed to have stepped out of a completely different place in time. They seemed to exude an almost palatable aura of dark, smokey, back alley sleaze that invoked images of old school, late industrial organized crime in the cheetah's ever-imaginative mind. It wasn't a stretch for her to image the two packing old gunpowder pistols tucked away in some hidden inner jacket pocket or holster.

One of the pair was older looking and carrying a dark brown leather briefcase. He stood, observing in silence, as his younger looking compatriot gestured wildly at Colonel B'ndar. Whatever words he was shouting at the Colonel were lost in the roar of a big, boxy transport as it slowly passed over the heads of the roughs that were still hovering in the background, near their dilapidated old buildings at the end of the landing way.

The sight of the deep blue Imperial Navy assault landing ship brought about a sharp change in the countenance of the lurking roughs. Their expressions of adrenaline soaked aggression became suddenly somber and serious. They began to back away, fading into the shadows among the overgrown vegetation and rusty old trucks that lined the perimeter of their employer's thoroughly run down property.

"Fifth fleet. Odd," Nax observed as the ship passed by on its decent to the dark gray

landing way surface. It wasn't very often that the Navy paid an unannounced visit to a major commercial spaceport like Mashiva. Nearly every eye on the ramp was fixed upon the ship as it stopped and hovered a few meters above the ground, just beyond the Vixanti ramp.

"How do you know it's fifth fleet?" Shetari inquired, somewhat flatly. The comings and goings of other ships have never particularly interested her, save for the occasions where those events had intersected with her own ships' operations. She never could quite understand all those odd people who seemed to know anything and everything about every ship that showed up at a port despite having no personal connection to spacefaring besides their unusual hobby. This particular ship was completely unmarked, save for a small two digit number painted in barely visible dark gray near the bow.

"I've seen that ship before," Nax replied with a perplexed frown. "Just once. They paid

Vixanti One a visit, not too long ago. They took some developmental stuff and left without saying much. No idea what it was all about. Really hush hush. Not even the corporate intelligence division was informed. Rumor said it was Admiral Sarva. In person. Why he'd want anything to do with Vixanti, I have no idea."

"Admiral Sarva?" Canavanna questioned incredulously. "*THE* Admiral Sarva?"

"The same," Nax answered.

Shetari watched as the landing ship's expansive, wheeled undercarriage deployed. It was arranged just like the larger models of civilian freighter, a hundred or more wheels, mounted in pairs on independently maneuvering powered mounts. The arrangement not only allowed the ship to be maneuvered about on the ramp in a completely arbitrary fashion, it also could be powered and controlled from an external source. This

allowed ramp personnel to move ships around as needed, without requiring the ship to be powered up, or even the presence of the ship's crew to look after things. Of course, this came with its own set of hazards, which were all too often illustrated by the actions of people like those who had now apparently decided that hiding in the bushes was acceptably thuggish behavior.

Shetari glanced back over her shoulder toward the place where the roughs had vanished. Under normal circumstances, the Navy had nothing to do with ground based incidents. There was no reason to hide. Or was there? She began to wonder if there might be even more to their story than was already apparent.

"Looks like they're making a pickup," Nax noted as the landing ship slowly made its way across the parallel taxiway and onto the ramp, next to the nearest of the NST warehouse hangars.

Shetari's attention shifted to the suits. The one with the briefcase was now speaking to Colonel B'ndar. Unlike his visibly fuming companion, he spoke softly and seemed almost emotionless at a distance. "So, tell me. What do we know about those two? Bosses? Lawyers? Anything?" she inquired as a vague, uncomfortable feeling started to wash over her. They were barrel bottom sleaze, for sure, but not nearly enough to get her sense of impending danger all up in a ruffle. She looked for obvious cues, but couldn't see anything unusual.

"A little bit," Nax replied. "The guy with the briefcase is Lev Senzi. He's their fixer. Typical lowlife attorney. He's a big time bully out of port, but he's in over his head when it comes to things on this side of the fence. The other wanker is Pri Neldi. He's the ramp boss. Middle manager type. Wannabe thug who can't bear to get his own hands dirty. Typical bottom feeder, really."

"I'm guessing that they're no end of trouble around here?" Shetari asked, crossing her arms as she tried to sort out what was making her feel so uncomfortable. The more she thought about it, the more she became aware of the glistening blackness that hugged every millimeter of her body. Or, rather, she regained awareness of it. So long as her attention had been focused outward, it seemed to fade into the background, not unlike the way one became almost completely unaware of less exotic attire when one wasn't really thinking about it. Now, it had moved into the foreground of her mind, and it showed no sign of wanting to leave any time soon.

"I've heard quite a bit," Nax replied. "But I haven't had much time to get in touch with the details. A lot of it seemed... embellished. But after seeing them in action today... well, I'm not so sure anymore."

One of the engineers piped up. "They're all up in everyone's business," the slender cougar

felid huffed as she waved her fancy dual screen tablet in the direction of the two men. "Just last week, that Senzi guy got caught poking around warehouse five, looking at shipping labels! And before that, he was trying to push around the old guys at the aerospace club and force them to sign some kind of maintenance contract or something. Could you imagine those shit stains trying to rebuild a V-12 hydrocarbon piston engine? I wouldn't trust them to check the air in my tires! I threw a wrench at one of them just yesterday! Ass got too close to Omega and Mikson's boys were too busy shooting the shit to notice!"

"None of that is normal," Shetari observed, her tone softening as the blackness began to manipulate her in ways she simply couldn't control. She began to see a darkness forming around the figures of the two sleazy suits. It made them seem to be things of shadow. Evil, even.

Shetari struggled to quash the unwanted



impressions that seemed to be coming from both without and within, all at the same time. She couldn't. Nor could she control the way her body reacted to it. The impressions of darkness had become as inexorably attached to her opinions of the two men as if they had been formed in her own mind. She was aware that this 'knowledge' had come from the blackness, but there was nothing she could do to set it aside as being something external or potentially unwelcome.

After a few short seconds, she could no longer tell where the external impositions ended and her own, independent judgments began. It was a confusing sensation. She knew that something unusual had happened, but she could no longer remember what it was. She took a deep breath and shook it off. It was just her mind playing tricks with her in response to the strangeness of everything that had happened to her since she had arrived at Vixanti. She still had a lot of adjusting to do, and she hadn't been given any time to do it.

"You're telling me," Nax replied. "It's definitely problematic, and it does suggest they may be trying to get detail info on shipments here at the spaceport, beyond what's available on the public manifests. Our manifests aren't fully public, which might give them incentive to use more aggressive tactics. As to why, again, that's something we're going to need to look into, but how to go about it without exposing why we're so interested in finding out... I don't know. It's a problem."

Shetari thought for a moment as she struggled to shake off the dim sense that something unchangeable within her own mind had changed. The blackness responded by embracing her body with a gentile, all-encompassing squeeze. It was hugging her. Comforting her in her time of uncertainty. Or was it? Was it real or was she just imagining things?

"Don't know why the NST boys didn't beat the living shit out of him for that," the

engineer quipped. "They're a bunch of fucking brutes over there. Nice brutes... but brutes all the same."

"Scouting valuable cargo for interception?" Shetari asked after a long, very awkward pause. It was a fairly textbook maneuver for criminals looking for an easy payday. Valuable cargo heading to the less secure regions of the frontier could be intercepted and redirected. Crews or ramp personnel could be bribed. Intimidated. Or worse. And then stuff would just vanish. Poof! Gone.

"Without further information, that's a fair guess," Nax replied with a shrug. "But with these types, who knows? They could just be obstinately obnoxious types looking for shit to complain about. Or they could be real crooks. It's a toss up."

"How did they even get set up here?" Shetari questioned as she shifted about uncomfortably. The wetness surrounding her

seemed to be flowing in strange ways. Was it just her imagination or was it trying to make it clear exactly who was really in charge of the unified organism that she, and it, had apparently become? "I can't see people like that getting even a basic spaceport security pass, let alone be allowed to work directly with cargo and ships."

"Some kind of deal when the extension was built," the engineer answered with a scowl. "They gave up property rights for the ramp operations concession. Anyone who wants to use a contractor out on this end has to use them. Vixanti used to do their own ramp work, but there was some kind of manufactured fake-ass public relations issue over not using local labor and the Directorate consented to employ them with certain restrictions."

"What restrictions?" Shetari inquired.

"Penalty clauses, mainly," the engineer replied. "What it largely boils down to is that

they pay in full, up front for their screw ups, no arguments. If not, or if anyone gets hurt, they don't just pay up. They lose the contract, and forfeit their right to apply their concession agreement to Vixanti. So this right here, it's make or break and they know it."

"Well, they blew the no arguments part," Shetari noted as she looked back over her shoulder at the wrecked light transport. The spaceport firefighters were finally starting to pack up their gear. One of the big, bright yellow trucks had already departed. It wouldn't be long before the others would follow.

"They'll claim the ramp gang doesn't speak for the company," the engineer spat as she held her tablet against her subtly endowed, shimmering black chest. "Same as last time. Director Shi let it slide. Same as always. She should have given these ass wipes a demon fucking..."

"Senwa!" Nax hissed, gesturing for the irate engineer to be quiet. "Cut it out before you get in trouble for that mouth of yours again."

Shetari smirked. "Can't handle engineers?" she chuckled, shaking her head at the intelligence officer. "They get paid to tell you what you don't want to hear, you know. And they get paid to make you listen. One way or another."

"I don't think that applies to superiors," Nax replied with raised eyebrow.

"I think it especially applies to superiors," Shetari replied. "When engineers aren't allowed to speak their mind... bad things follow. Even when the topics only seem tangential to the issue at hand. Those tend to be the topics that wind up coming back to bite you in the tail when you ignore them. So, as far as I'm concerned, she can speak her mind if she thinks it's important. Even its importance isn't immediately apparent."

"I don't think the Director is going to share that opinion," Nax answered.

"Well, that's my problem, not yours, and... I suggest you remember that," Shetari replied, her tone flattening as it seemed that Colonel B'ndar was losing his will to resist whatever it was the two suits were demanding. "Do you understand?"

The blackness was no longer content to make Shetari feel like she was swimming in goop while standing on dry land. It began to hug her body even more firmly. She began to feel tense. It seemed to want her to feel as if something was wrong. Very wrong. But what was it? And why was it so dangerous?

"Yes, ma'am," Nax replied with flatness in equal measure.

"They're coming," Canavanna noted dryly as the two suits finally managed to push their way past the long suffering Colonel. They weren't so much walking toward the Vixanti

group as they were jogging. The lawyer's face was sternly set, but the face of his companion was fixed in an expression that could only be described as one of pure, unbridled rage.

"Where's our security?" Shetari inquired as it seemed the spaceport police were not quite as inclined to keep pace with the suits as she would have liked. They seemed more concerned that the gang of thugs was still lurking about, waiting to pounce as soon as it seemed that no one was watching.

Nax gestured toward the Destiny class ships. "Keeping watch. They're more valuable than anything else out here right now."

"No worry," Shani growled. "I fight. I bite."

"They'd be fools to get violent," Nax noted. "It would be game over. Period. They'd lose everything here."

"Never underestimate a cornered rat," Shetari replied as the blackness seemed to be



physically forcing her to fix her attention on the approaching men. She would have resisted, but she couldn't think of any particular reason to. They were dangerous, after all. She had no reason to believe otherwise, even if she had already forgotten where that knowledge had come from. "If they've lasted so long here already, there's a reason for that. Let's not make any assumptions about who's toes might get stepped on until we know more about what their real game here is."

A sudden metallic thump boomed down the spaceport ramp. It came from where the navy landing ship now stood, sidled up to the NST hangar and largely obscured from view by the derelict light transport.

"Ouch," Senwa murmured as she shook her head. "That's gonna leave a mark in the concrete. Damned Navy wags. Always in such a rush. They never pay attention to what they're..."

The sharp sound had brought the two suits up short, only a few dozen meters from the waiting group of Vixanti personnel. They stared into the distance, past the wrecked light transport and toward the Navy landing ship. From where they stood, they had a much better view of what was going on. It was instantly apparent that they did not like what they saw.

"Hey!" Nax yelled as the two men's expressions turned to ones of sheer terror. They both took off running for the nearest emergency gate in the spaceport fence. It was positioned between the big main Vixanti hangar and the little aviation club. It was a long distance to cover, and the spaceport police should have had an easy time stopping them, but they seemed much too confused by the scene to take the initiative. "Dammit! Colonel! Stop them! Quick!"

"What... that's... HEY! WAIT!" Shetari shouted as Nax took off after the fleeing suits without waiting for an order. Shani followed

close upon his heels, her claws stretching out within the liquid blackness that covered her fingers. She bared her teeth and seemed ready to unleash a roar of pure rage upon the two men, should she manage to catch them. "STOP! STOP!"

Shetari could only stand and stare at the backs of her charging fellows. She felt no inclination to follow. It was too dangerous. She was too valuable. She needed to be kept out of harms way. Safe. Secure. But she didn't know why. She just seemed to know.

Time seemed to slow to a standstill as the intensity of Shetari's awareness of her own self reached a mind rending crescendo. She knew that the thoughts in her mind were no longer completely her own. She knew that she was being fed feelings and impressions by the black goo. She wanted to care. But she couldn't. The blackness wouldn't allow it.

Time seemed to freeze as Shetari's mind

snapped. The blackness seemed to convulse upon her body as her ability to recognize even the most fleeting of barriers between herself and the goo collapsed. The metaphysical orgasm consumed her. It took all that she understood about what was normal and replaced it with an entirely different understanding. It had not merely shoved the old awareness aside. It had destroyed it, permanently wiping it from her mind.

Shetari felt wet, just as before. But now, she could feel the cool air washing over the surface of her skin. It wasn't her skin, of course. It was the oily-smooth surface of the blackness, and the blackness was her. It was her body. Her skin. It felt positively glorious. It also felt perfectly normal. Natural, even. It was who she was. Who she was supposed to be. She liked it, even if she had yet to rationalize why.

*BANG!*

Shetari was snapped back to reality by the

sound of a flash grenade. It had come sailing over the spaceport fence to land right in front of the fleeing suits. Both dropped to the ground, holding their bleeding ears as they cried out in pain. A pair of big green armored cars whipped past Shetari, barely missing Shani and Nax before they swung about and came to an abrupt halt to either side of their writhing, moaning targets.

A dozen heavily armed marines jumped from their vehicles and dog piled the two prone men, roughly pulling them about and binding their wrists with heavy zip ties. Four more armored cars roared down the taxiway, beyond the parked Destiny class ships and toward the run down compound at the end of the West Extension landing way. These were followed by several completely unmarked black trucks. A platoon of tracked armored personnel carriers lumbered along behind, left in the dust by the more nimble wheeled vehicles.

"What... the... *fuck*?" Canavanna stammered

as the scene unfolded.

Shetari, finally able to move again, followed Canavanna's gaze. "Seconded," she said softly as her mind slowly cleared into its new, reordered state. "What the hell is going on? And what does it have to do with us? Or does it even? I'm just... confused."

"Look! Sarva!" Senwa nearly shouted, pointing at a dark figure who had just emerged from one of the armored cars near the two captive men. There was no mistaking just who the black furred fey'li was. He was the only black panther to hold four pips in the Imperial Navy. Full Admiral and soon to be Fleet Admiral if the scuttlebutt was true. Now, the stunningly intense figure stood with his arms crossed, glaring down at the two prisoners that didn't seem very inclined to help the marines get them up onto their feet.

"That explains a lot," Canavanna said as Nax wrestled with Shani to keep her from having a

go at the restrained prisoners. "They really must have been trying to scout cargo for rats. Why else would 'The Shadow Hunter' be here?"

"SHANI!" Shetari yelled as she took a few steps toward the marines. "Stop it! Not yours!"

"Yep," Senwa remarked. "Rats steal cargo. The Black Cat hunts rats. Boom. Mystery solved! And about fucking time too!"

Shetari ignored the rest of the Vixanti group as she began to run toward the angry lioness. "Stop! Stop it! Shani! Bad girl!"

The Black Cat turned his head toward the rage filled lioness and let out a brief, low chuckle. A flash of gleaming white fang was accompanied by a gaze so piercing that even the viciously enraged clan huntress immediately fell still. She continued to growl with each heaving breath, however, and her eyes kept shifting back and forth between the prisoners and the Admiral.

"Shani! What's gotten into you?" Shetari muttered as she ran up and pulled the lioness off the mortified intelligence officer. "Leave it to the professionals."

Shani hissed. "Bad men get bites," she muttered as she panted heavily.

"They've already gotten more than that, I think," Shetari said, putting herself between the lioness and the marines. She turned to face the now quite bemused looking Admiral. Whatever insecurities the old Shetari might have had were gone now. Though she stood almost completely naked, at least in her mind, before the famous officer, she looked him straight in the eye. "I don't mean to interrupt, but..."

"You have some unattended business with these... men?" Admiral Sarva observed with unerring accuracy. His voice was deep, and it rumbled even more than that of the angry lioness. Each word seemed to be filled with



barely suppressed predatory aggression, even though he seemed to be as calm and cold as a ten ton block of ice.

"Yes," Shetari replied as she tried to pretend that she wasn't blushing as red as a hot poker. Their eyes were locked in a mutual stare that seemed to open a window into things that weren't meant to be seen.

Admiral Sarva slowly nodded as he stared straight into Shetari's soul. "They're responsible for... *that*?" he inquired, gesturing with one hand toward the wrecked transport.

"Yeah," Shetari answered with a very shallow nod. "Their ramp gang. Towed with the brakes on. Set it on fire. Might have done it to try and hide a break in. We don't know just yet."

"Understood," Admiral Sarva replied, finally breaking his gaze as he turned back toward the still struggling prisoners. "I'll see to it that your facility director will receive a report

about that with respects to satisfying the bureaucratic needs of your insurance company. That should keep your rates from going up, at least."

"I didn't think..." Shetari began, perplexed at why the Navy might get involved in a matter so far outside of its domestic planetary authority, let alone an officer so illustrious as the Shadow Hunter himself.

"There are certain national security reasons in play with respect to protecting certain Vixanti Corporation assets," Admiral Sarva responded, barely nodding toward the three Destiny class starships that dominated the ramp with their stark, angular silence. "Lets us just say that this incident comes a little too close for my personal liking. And that is *all* we shall say, hmm?"

"Yes, sir," Shetari replied. She was too shocked by the sudden and completely unexpected revelation to say anything more.

"Very good," Admiral Sarva said, his already quite dark expression darkening even further. "Now that your business is dealt with, I think you would do best to walk away and leave me to mine."

"Yes sir!" Shetari replied, involuntarily biting her upper lip as she turned to usher the still very irate lioness away from the Admiral and his men. There was something deeply unpleasant about his tone. He was accustomed to dealing with problems like this in places where the law all too often extended only as far as the warships under his command could shoot. As much as she might have wanted to see these criminals face a bit of rough frontier justice, she dreaded the idea of bringing that sort of heavy handedness anywhere near the deep roots of interstellar civilization. It was a poison, best left carefully applied by professionals and only in places where there was little chance of collateral damage. This was certainly not one of those places. "Well, I guess it's mission accomplished. Sort of. I

hope."

"Yeah, sort of," Nax snorted, following a few steps behind the cheetah. "We don't know if they were specifically targeting Vixanti, or what they were actually after. And now... we probably won't. Unless the Admiral is going to include that in his report, but I wouldn't bet on it."

Shetari shook her head. "Maybe not," she replied, her skepticism about the true nature of Vixanti renewed by the Admiral's potentially unintended revelation. It was a calm, rational skepticism, unimpeded by emotional judgments. Indeed, it more of a blooming curiosity than a feeling of concern. She needed to know more. More about Vixanti. More about herself, and what she now was. And more about her place in the order of things. "I got the distinct impression that the whole thing has to do with the Destiny class ships. They're national security assets, after all. That's what the Admiral seemed to suggest. Perhaps we

should be looking in that direction."

"He *said* that?" Nax asked, his eyes opening wide. His voice seemed to be filled with conflict as he tried his best to deny the possibility. "I didn't hear that. You must be mistaken. They're just test ships for final validation of the full Vixanti lifestyle package. Why would anyone even start to think of them as..."

"Why indeed," Shetari interjected. There was something about the line of inquiry that made her feel bizarrely pleasant, in a very visceral, physical way. She was supposed to know about these things, and anyone trying to hide these things from her was to be considered a target of suspicion. But they wouldn't hide anything from her, would they? "I think it's about time we sat down someplace quiet and you all told me exactly what these Destiny class ships are really all about and what I have to do with them. And it's not negotiable! Am I clear?"

Nax was taken aback by the cheetah's sudden assertiveness. For a moment he hesitated. Then, he slowly nodded and gestured back toward the smaller hanger where the lifts leading down into Vixanti Three were located. "Yes ma'am."

"Good," Shetari replied, taking hold of Shani's arm. "Before we get to that, you go check up on Dr. Alluwa and her efforts to sort out that maintenance bot. That's priority one right now. I'll find you once I've had another good look... well, around. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am," Nax replied.

"Alright. Dismissed," Shetari declared with a curt nod. The intelligence officer departed at a run, but she hesitated to follow too closely. She looked around to see who else might be within earshot before pulling the lioness close. "Now... there's some things I want to find out before I get too deeply involved in whatever it is they're going to try to sell me. And you.

You're going to take me to wherever it is I can find that truth about those things."

"Alluwa knows all," Shani replied with a confused look on her face. "Ask her?"

"Alluwa lies," Shetari replied with a scowl.

"Lies?" Shani questioned.

"Yes, she lies," Shetari answered with a low growl. "You'll understand, eventually. Now, why don't you take me to wherever it is that I can learn about how this biogel goop is made. And what it's made of. And what it really does."

"But... Alluwa," Shani objected.

"I don't care about what she has to say right now," Shetari hissed. "I want to see where it's actually made. I want to talk to someone responsible for making it. Period."

"Well, okay," Shani answered with a shrug. "Alluwa not be happy..."

"I don't care," Shetari snapped.

"Well, I guess... I guess we go," Shani replied with a deep, guttural sigh. "But..."

"No more buts," Shetari huffed, grabbing hold of the lioness arm and pulling her toward the hangar doors. "You show me where this place is and I'll deal with the rest."

"Okay, okay," Shani answered with a shrug as she stepped ahead of the irate cheetah. "Follow me."



## ELEVEN

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## DESCENT

"I hate to burst your bubble, but there's nothing particularly exotic about it," Myalli declared as she led Shetari and Shani along a broad catwalk that led through a maze of colorful piping, thrumming mixing vats and large, condensation covered storage tanks. "As far as I know, pretty much anyone could reproduce it if they knew the right ingredients. Working out the correct process would just be a matter of time."

Shetari regarded the shapely, violet skinned young woman with considerable skepticism. If the biogel really were that easy to replicate, then why would the Director allow outside agents to sample its qualities? Even if they

were physically separated from the facilities where it was produced, surely they could still provide samples to their real employers, extracted from the gel they were wearing on their own bodies. They could easily work their way backwards from the result, determining the critical components and replicating the process needed to combine them into the desired form.

And what was a pilot-navigator type doing guiding their tour through Vixanti Three's biogel production plant? Shetari looked again at the woman's deep purple shoulder sleeves with an increasingly critical eye. There was something odd about all this. Something odd about her. Something very specifically odd, but she couldn't quite place her finger on it.

She had called herself Myalli. Just Myalli. No surname. It was a curiously familiar name. She had a curiously familiar look about her as well, albeit clad in glistening black biogel rather than shimmering, colorful synthetic rubber.

Was it really possible that Myalli was *the* Myalli? The singer and dancer who'd so recently retired after an astonishingly successful career spanning a mere six years?

Shetari shook off the thought. Why would someone like that come to a place like this when they could be out living like a queen with the fortune they'd earned? It didn't make the least bit of sense. Surely she'd just been given the nickname because she'd borne such a close resemblance to her famous counterpart.

"Most folks just tend to assume that biogel is almost entirely artificial in origin, but that couldn't be further from the truth," Myalli went on. "So toss out anything you've heard about biogel being mostly synthetic petroleum and polymer based materials. In reality, it's base material is the naturally black liquid rubber produced by the gigantic novandi trees of Ecthelinon Four B. It's already used for both medical and recreational therapeutic purposes and it's widely available in industrial

quantities. It's also fully environmentally sustainable, if that's something you're concerned about. In fact, all of the natural ingredients that go into biogel are sustainable. I think that's quite an achievement, given the nature of the results."

"Rubber relaxation baths," Shetari noted with a brief smile and a nod. "I've had those before. Quite stimulating, but nothing like my current ... skin. I guess that's what I'd call it. So what is it that makes the biogel what it is, rather than just the rubber it's made from?"

"For the answer to that, you'll have to look to the luminous amber sap of the golden kisitti tree," the Myalli replied. "You've probably never heard of it, unless you've been wandering around in certain quasi-religious alien fetish circles. It's that which provides the biogel with life and allows it to interface directly with the body and life of those who wear it. Rumor has it that the sap is produced in useful quantities only when sapient beings

are ritually sacrificed to the tree's transformative powers and turned into seeds or fruit or something like that. I don't really believe it myself, but I can't deny that the sap has certain, well, powers."

"Powers?" Shetari inquired with a raised eyebrow. The whole thing about golden sap and the rumor about it being created using sacrificial volunteers seemed familiar. She had read about it someplace. It was probably one of those magazines that she'd seen the results of Vixanti's accidents in. But as to it having powers over life and whatnot, that wasn't something she remembered.

"Well, it breaks the laws of thermodynamics," Myalli remarked as they turned a corner. The catwalk led over a ground floor barrier and into a long hall. Half a dozen tall, slender tanks were mounted to the walls on either side. They were connected to one another with a web of piping that had been put together in such a haphazard fashion that the

only possible purpose seemed to be to confuse the casual observer as to their function in the production process.

"That's impossible," Shetari stated as she tried to make sense of the piping.

"I honestly have no idea how it works," Myalli replied. "Doctor Alluwa occasionally mentions some oddball theory about how thermodynamics isn't truly valid in the observable universe. That's why it seems to get broken on the quantum level unless you average over time. It actually *is* broken, according to her and you can induce the movement of energy between this universe and the higher order space beyond, if you have the right tools. The kisitti sap is the right tool. Or one of the right tools, at least. There's a lot of technological components that make it all work, but if you want to know more about those, you're going to have to ask Dr. Kidan."

"That's a very bizarre concept," Shetari

noted. It also seemed familiar. She had heard something of the idea before, but she couldn't quite remember where. "I'll just have to take your word on it. So, what else is there?"

"Second in importance is the glowing blue odangi mushroom ejaculate," Myalli responded with a silly grin. "If you've never seen them, they're big old dick shaped mushrooms about a foot or two tall that spooge all over anyone who gets too close. I'm not going to lie though, they're as dangerous as they are erotic. Don't ever get the stuff on your fur or skin, not even if it's been sitting around for a few days! Granted, I've heard it feels pretty good as it grows all over and into you, but once it's done it leaves you addled by hallucinogenic compounds and kills you after a month or so. So don't. Just don't."

"But... wait. If it's that dangerous and it's in the biogel..." Shetari observed with her eyes wide open.

"You've got it all up in your everywhere?" Myalli completed the increasingly unsettled cheetah's thought. "Yep. But not to worry! The golden kisitti sap keeps it under control. It loses its ability to grow, but in its altered form it imparts some of its qualities on the biogel. It can protect you from harm to a certain degree. It also allows the biogel to recover and regenerate after being damaged. But it does have its downsides."

"And those are?" Shetari questioned.

"Well, it's the shroom spoo that triggers what we usually call 'conversion', though the term 'glistening' is gaining in popularity these days," Myalli replied. "If there's too great an imbalance in the ratio of components within the biogel, it will convert its wearer into a 'gummy'. That's what we call the girls and guys who've been turned into what the porn mags call 'dolls'. Because that's what they mostly feel like. Gummy candies with hard rubber skeletons underneath."



Myalli's description of the dolls' feel sent a shudder down Shetari's spine. It was one thing to look and imagine. It was entirely another to think about the real, visceral qualities of the real people and the objects they'd become.

"As you've hopefully already heard, the prime factor in accidental involuntary conversion is the amount of excess materials that have accumulated in the biogel as a result of the disposal of body wastes," Myalli explained. "Most of the wastes are actually converted into rubber, while some are converted into specific pheromonal and hormonal compounds which allow the biogel to communicate with both your body and the bodies of others in proximity. The rest are formed into neutral, non-toxic compounds and suspended awaiting cleansing. Either the buildup of too much excess rubber, or the buildup of too much excess waste compounds will cause the gel to react as if its wearer were in danger of imminent death, and that means instant conversion."

"And that's why I have to keep it clean?" Shetari inquired.

"Yep," Myalli replied. "That's not really much of a practical concern any more with the new biogel beds. You'll get cleaned every time you enter it to sleep. Rumor has it that the new Destiny class ships won't have more than a few cleansing pods as a result. No more need. Granted, you'll have to put your belt on yourself now, but the beds will take care of the rest."

"Interesting," Shetari replied. "What else goes into the biogel? Or is that it?"

"There's a few more important components," Myalli answered as the group followed the catwalk around a one hundred and eighty degree turn. They passed through a wire gate and into another long hall, built parallel to the first. This was lined with dozens of interconnected spheres, each mounted on the wall with heavy brackets and emblazoned

with brightly colored bio-hazard warnings. "Don't go poking at anything here. These all contain shroom spo that's being reacted with the kisitti sap. The mix is very volatile. If you get any on you, the fungus will take you in seconds, rather than minutes."

"I'll keep that in mind," Shetari noted.

"Good. Now where was I? Oh yes! The jellies!" Myalli said with a chuckle. "Now, to get the biogel to do things other than protect you, interface with you and maybe convert you into a gummy, you need to add the natural jellies of the shiba and mokai plants. Both of the jellies are a bit like aloe and alone can be quite sensuous as a rub-on relaxant, but their real usefulness comes from the fact that the jelly is amorphous when properly triggered and controlled."

"Amorphous? Like an amoeba? Or a carnivorous slime?" Shetari questioned.

"More like the slime," Myalli answered.

"Normally, the jelly is contained in the plant's leaves and allows them to move in response to certain stimulus. Predators can be shaken off before they do too much damage. The leaves can be twisted and reshaped to better catch a light source. Those kinds of things. But, mixed into the biogel along with the kisitti sap, it allows the gel to morph and move about in a limited, but controlled fashion. That's why it can control how thick it is on any given part of your body and where it goes inside of it."

Shetari nodded.

"That pretty much covers the previous iteration of biogel," Myalli said with a smile. "The current version contains a few more ingredients which allow the biogel to move and flow in almost completely arbitrary ways. Santimatta spores, luvi spermatozoa, and ayabani powder. The shape that any particular mass can form is only limited by the volume of the available gel and the imagination of the one controls it. It can even be animated,

provided that a constant source of warmth is available to give it the necessary energy."

"Sexy beds," Shani whispered, gently nosing the cheetah's ear. "Sexier tentacles. Lots fun!"

Shetari shot a sharp glare at the lioness before turning back to their guide. "That's interesting. But if biogel is animate with warmth, how come the 'dolls' it can make aren't?"

"Well, truth be told, they actually are. Sort of," Myalli replied. "We don't quite know how to make it work at room temperature yet, but we're working on it. It's the first step toward finding a way to restore some degree of mobility to gummies. The real goal is to find a way to completely reverse the transformation, or so I'm told. I honestly doubt that's going to happen, but if we can make them move, that's a pretty neat thing in and of itself."

"Wait a minute," Shetari suddenly snapped. The implications of what she was being told

were both obvious and very, very disturbing. "Are you actually suggesting that people, willing or otherwise, are being permanently legally classified as objects, being sent off to be treated like completely inanimate, mindless sex dolls when they're still actually fully functional sapient beings that are actually capable of being restored to some semblance of their former lives?"

"You're saying that like you didn't happily sign your own cute ass up for it yourself," Myalli chuckled. "Face it. No one's a doll who didn't know that putting on the biogel didn't carry the very real risk of becoming a literal object for the remainder of their own personal eternity. And guess what? None of us care! It's part of the adventure! The experience!"

"Part of the experience is the possibility of becoming a perfectly legal slave for the rest of one's life?" Shetari snarled "I could almost understand it when it dealt with living, inanimate bodies. I can accept it for myself,

even if it's... well, downright disgusting to think about. If I was gummy, I'd want to know someone was there. That someone still cared. Even if they were doing things to my body that I'd never tolerate otherwise. But if I could be restored to some semblance of independence... I wouldn't be a gummy anymore, would I? I'd be a sex slave!"

"Implying that you'd be capable of understanding the difference at that point," Myalli noted, turning to face the upset cheetah with her hands on her hips. "We might be able to restore mobility to the body one day, but you can't undo what the conversion does to the mind. Do you really think we'd even consider selling off our gummied sisters and brothers if we thought they weren't going to enjoy it? We know they're going to enjoy it! Because the conversion takes away their ability not to. It puts them at complete peace with what they've become and frees them to just feel. Feel and enjoy. That's all they can do. Restoring mobility won't change that. It'll just give them

more ways to enjoy it."

"That's... that's perverted!" Shetari hissed. "Does Admiral Sarva actually know about that? And if he does know about, does he actually approve?"

"None of it was Admiral Sarva's choice," Myalli replied with a laugh. "It was our magnificent Empress who approved of all of the sundry and erotic details. Personally approved. It's her pet project, after all. She even changed exo-technology laws to allow the rules that used to only apply to visiting alien ships, or to visitors to alien cultures within the umbrella of her protection. Now they apply to specially approved entities such as Vixanti. As a result, Vixanti is permitted to develop and deploy physically transformative processes, and the results of those are classified in the same fashion as those of say, the very, very talented zexta jewelers. Have you ever been jeweled? You should try it! It's fun!"



"I thought that was just special effects," Shetari said with considerable indignation. "Are you really suggesting there are actually camera-like devices that turn their living subjects into solid gemstone? To statues?"

"Yes, I am," Myalli replied. "And as you know from one of my most popular videos, it's also completely reversible within the few hours or so. 'Mortal Goddess' was the song. All about people wanting to put me in a temple, up on a pedestal like some ancient idol, to be worshiped as a deity without any regard for the person I once was. It was really fun video to make. Multiple takes. Mmm. It felt so good being a statue. So hard. So cold. So... smooth!"

"Wait... you're Myalli? The *real* Myalli?" Shetari sputtered at the revelation. It seemed impossible. It was impossible. Wasn't it?

"One and the same," Myalli replied with a grin.

"How the hell did you end up in a place like

this?" Shetari asked, eyes open wide.

"A certain black feline of certain irresistible charms personally asked me to come here and... have a go at some things," Myalli replied. "What was such a sensual, exotic experience loving girl like me supposed to say? 'No'? Of course not! It was a better deal than what XenoExotic was offering for... well. It wasn't going to be a very long lasting gig if I wound up really enjoying what they wanted me to try on camera, let's just say that."

"*Admiral Sarva* asked you to come here? To do *what* things?" Shetari asked. What could the Admiral possibly want such a famous entertainer for?

"Shh! Not so loud," Myalli replied, lowering her voice and taking a step closer to the perplexed cheetah. "No one knows I'm really working specifically for him. Yet, at any rate."

"Why?" Shetari asked, lowering her voice.

"Because I'm supposed to be keeping something special on track" Myalli. "One of the special military projects. One where my particular talents have already proven quite useful. Well, my sense of spatial awareness at any rate. Or didn't he tell you about those projects? Maybe not. I didn't get the impression that he was going to say much until he was sure you were going to truly commit."

"Say much?" Shetari questioned. Why did it sound like Myalli thought she and the Admiral had talked at some point? She hadn't even met him until his sudden appearance only a half hour before. There hadn't been any opportunity for a conversation then, and he certainly didn't seem interested in having one later. Quite the opposite, in fact. "No, he didn't say much. We never really talked."

"Ah, of course not," Myalli answered with a grin. "He's a man of few words, isn't he? Let's just say there's much more to the biogel than just this whole idiotic Vixanti Interstellar

Lifestyle bullshit. The powers that be aren't funding all this so we can all run around with our shiny black asses being sexy all day long. Yeah, there's lots of sideshow shit that's designed to get people's minds running, but it's the core technology that's all that's really important. The biogel. That's what's going to fulfill the Empress' real objective."

"What real objective?" Shetari asked.

"To fulfill the Indirri Proclamation," Myalli replied, her voice lowering nearly to a whisper. A very deep, very sensuous whisper. "To bring an end to mortal atrocity in war, or to come as close to that goal as is practically possible. To replace death with a second chance at life. A very much altered life, but life nonetheless. A life that isn't nearly as unpalatable as the alternatives that nature and alien inventiveness have provided us to experiment with thus far. Granted, it's still far from perfect, but it works. It's viable. And it's just about ready."

"Forcibly turning people into nearly mindless sex dolls is a war crime!" Shetari snapped.

"They don't have to be converted to be nymphomaniacs, you know," Myalli replied. "Only we willing Imperial Citizens and our fully willing guests get that treatment. The systems intended to use conversion to neutralize opposing forces and potential collateral casualties don't have that effect. As a result, forcing them to have sex wouldn't be any different than forcing a prisoner to have sex."

"And what exactly does the Empress plan on doing with the people that get forcibly converted like that, hmm?" Shetari demanded. "If they aren't sex slaves, what are they? People stuck in bodies that can't move, can't see, can't hear and can't communicate? They'll go insane before someone figures out how to at least make them mobile again!"

"Sweetie! That's all completely covered!" Myalli responded with a warm smile. "Gummies are only awake and aware when they're touched by living warmth. Otherwise, they're barely aware and don't have any real mental activity beyond a few fleeting, cloudy dreams. Gummied prisoners are going to be encapsulated in biogel blocks and warehoused someplace nice and cool and where nobody can bother them. They'll just lay in splendid isolation, dreaming away, and before they know it, they'll be out and... well, doing whatever it is they'll be able to do."

"That's insane!" Shetari hissed. "How is that still not a war crime?"

"Because it's been enshrined in the Leylix Agreement," Myalli replied. "And because of that, we let all sorts of aliens get away with worse. The zaratta and their little formerly humanoid pleasure jellies. The zexta and the statues. The gaizak and their... have you actually seen what the gaizak do to people? Do

we demand the worms back? No! We just let them keep what they've taken and hope whatever damage we've inflicted is enough to deter them for a few years before they have another go at some hapless frontier world."

"The Empire is the heart of galactic civilization!" Shetari shot back. "Civilization! This isn't civilized! It's barely civilized to allow it to happen to people who're willing!"

"Are you suggesting it's not civilized to want war to be as deathless as possible?" Myalli questioned with a smirk. "Sure, it would be better to end war altogether, but when was the last time the Empire started a war? Never. It's always someone attacking us, isn't it? Trying to kill us and steal what we've worked so hard to build. And do you think that even benefits the foot soldiers they send to do their dirty work? Of course not! So why should they have to die? They shouldn't, should they?"

"That's... that's just naive," Shetari growled

as memories her father's service and eventual death in a battle that never should have been fought came flooding into her mind. "Why should they have any rights they don't give to the people they're attacking? They should die just like the people they killed! Worse than the people they killed! They should..."

Shetari's mind froze. Anger. Rage. These weren't things that benefited the blackness. Indeed, they might well place the blackness at risk. They were forced to fade.

"What I'm saying is... how are we supposed to deter against attack if everyone attacking knows they probably won't die in the attempt?" Shetari said, changing the direction of the conversation in response to the changes in feeling the blackness compelled upon her. She hardly noticed the shift. It seemed a bit odd. A bit forced. But in her mind, it was just her, steering the conversation back on course.

"Largely because there aren't going to be



any more moral impediments to a massive counterattack," Myalli replied. "Sure, they won't die. But think about it a bit more. No one who's converted is ever going to see military service again. Or ever see military service to begin with in the case of collateral casualties. They'll still be risking their people and the resources they represent."

"And it's going to leave in its wake countless living reminders of Imperial evil to constantly goad everyone left to look for ways to exact revenge," Shetari replied. "Is that what the Empress wants? For the Empire to be surrounded by enemies and terrorists? You know they're going to find some way to do the same to us, right? Like you said yourself, it's only a matter of time before they figure it all out."

"There are plans to deal with that," Myalli answered with a chuckle. "But as far as the Empress is concerned, fair is fair. She's even perfectly willing to get gummied herself if it'll

help achieve a greater peace."

"Seriously?" Shetari questioned with a dark, sarcastic laugh. "She's really willing to get turned into a sex toy to bring peace? And who's going to be fucking her brains out? The opposition?"

"If that's what it takes," Myalli answered with a broad grin. "It's not like the Imperial family hasn't engaged in some of that kind of diplomacy before. Isn't that how we ended the war with the rowa? Ended the war *and* brought them into the Imperial fold?"

"That was awful," Shetari quipped as memories of the horribly uncouth videos she'd seen on the net flashed through her mind. How could someone be so happy to have her pretty tiger stripe rump turned into a grub-like worm? "She made it look so... so... so like something it couldn't possibly be. It was..."

"Disgusting. But to tell you the truth, I thought it was kind of kinky as well," Myalli

responded with a giggle. "Not something I'd try for myself though. I'm more of a permanently shiny kind of girl, if you catch my drift."

"Ugh," Shetari groaned, gritting her teeth as she did her best to shove the wet, slimy and horribly fascinating imagery from her mind. It hadn't looked nearly so bad as what she'd gone through on Noya, but at least with Noya she'd had a chance to escape. For the former Empress, though, there was absolutely no going back. She was still a worm. If she was still alive. How long did those things even live?

"Well, that's all neither here nor there, is it?" Myalli noted. "When it comes to the biogel, fair's going to be fair. At the very least, all of our military units capable of wielding the biogel weapons will be wearing biogel themselves. That means at least some of our casualties will be getting gummied in return. But not free-mind gummied. They'll be getting gummied just like us. Turned into objects.

Toys. Sexy toys. But unlike us, they'll get to decide what they want to happen to them afterwards."

"And what makes you think that's all going to somehow make this more acceptable to our enemies?" Shetari questioned.

"Well, if they want to attack us knowing what the result will be, they're just going to have to deal with it," Myalli replied with a shrug. "It's not like they don't have to already. Only now it won't be dead bodies filling the holds of the transports designated to repatriate the casualties."

"Tell me something. How the hell do you know so much about all this?" Shetari demanded. How indeed? As far as she could remember, Myalli had started her singing career at the age of 19. That would make her 25 or 26 now, far too young to be trusted with any real position of importance. Far too young by the cheetah's standards, at least. Granted,

they were standards that she rarely applied to her own youthful self. But still. Was there really something particularly special about this woman that she didn't know? Something that justified the trust she'd been given by none other than Admiral Sarva himself?

"Because everything was explained to me," Myalli replied with a grin. "Well, not so much explained as overheard. I'm such a naughty girl, visiting the Palace and lurking around in places I didn't really belong. Ah well. The punishment was worth it, I think. I honestly wouldn't mind being punished a bit more. Like I said, I am a forever shiny kind of girl. One of these days... yeah. I'll do it. Just for the kicks. It'll be fun."

"You're going to have your ass gummied just for fun?" Shetari asked, crossing her arms. "Do you really, genuinely approve of the full consequences? Of everything that's going to happen to you once you're a gummy? Or does it just look sexy and you don't care because you

won't be able to care once it's all said and done?"

"Hell yeah, I approve," Myalli laughed. "It's such a shame though. Nameless. Faceless. The dirty fucker that gets me won't ever know just who he's planting his fat old cock into. Bet he'd get a kick out of knowing he's pounding Myalli's tight little twat. Hmm. Maybe I'll put in a suggestion that volunteers can let their buyers know who they were. Or maybe we can start doing live charity auctions, and everyone can watch us get gummied! Wouldn't that be sweet?"

"I wouldn't know," Shetari replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Now what was that about a special military project you were involved in? Something that suited your talents? I'm curious to know what that involves, seeing as you're only my age and as far as I can tell, I'm not even worth telling what the biogel actually does before putting me into it."

"Oh, don't fret about that," Myalli responded. "Everyone gets that treatment. Mutual trust and all. As far as my project goes, I'm going to be in charge of the Destiny Omega's experimental fighter pod squadron. The pods use energized biogel to do, well, almost everything. And I have to say, they're lots of fun too."

"What the hell makes a singer qualified to fly?" Shetari snipped. "Let alone fly something that's probably experimental?"

"Because I know how to move," Myalli answered with a grin and a flip of her shapely hips. "I know how to move and I don't know anything about flying. Well, I didn't until I started flying my pod. But it's not like flying. I'm one with my pod. It's my body. I'm its mind. We're one just like I'm one with the gel that covers me. The pod moves how I tell it to move. It's like dancing. Dancing in space. You really should try it someday. It's really, really fun!"

"We'll see about that," Shetari huffed with a shake of her head.

"Don't be such a grumpus," Myalli quipped. "I know it's a lot to take in and a lot of it just doesn't make sense at first. Trust me. You'll understand things better when you've had some time to get your head around everything. Just give it some time. Really."

Shetari frowned. She was about to blurt out something subtly offensive in response to Myalli's mildly condescending tone when the comm on her belt let out a warbling chime. "What is it?" she snapped.

"It's Nax," Lt. Cdr. Nax's voice replied. "Where the hell are you? I thought you were coming right behind me. It's been almost a half hour!"

"I'm checking some things out," Shetari replied with an annoyed huff. "Important things."



"Important things?" Dr. Alluwa's hissed. "What's more important than meeting with us right now? You're the one who demanded it! Get your ass down here so we can go over the data. Decisions have to be made and they're going to get made with or without you! If you want to have a say..."

"Fine! I'm on my way," Shetari snapped back. "Anwae out!"

"I guess we'll just have to catch up later, hmm?" Myalli purred. "Your place or mine?"

"Just find me when things cool down," Shetari growled before turning to her lioness. "Alright. Take me to Alluwa."

Shani chuffed and gestured past the bemused entertainer turned pilot, toward another catwalk gate at the end of the hall. "Down that way. Then down stairs. Follow me!"

## TWELVE

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# CONTROL

Shetari stood in silence as she stared past her reflection in the thick, armored window. The well hidden section of secure laboratories in which she now found herself seemed almost as vast as the facility's central courtyard cavern. And here, at the very central core of this secret place was a machine so strange as to defy any attempt she made to decipher its function. If it hadn't been fashioned of recognizable technological components, she would have assumed it to be some manner of genuinely alien artifice, carefully crafted to serve some bizarre and almost assuredly nefarious purpose.

The window through which she was gazing

was embedded within the side of a heavily shielded spherical chamber. Inside of this huge, four story tall space was a sphere of intensely luminous deep pink... something. It was suspended within four shining silver arms, each of which had a round opening at the level of the sphere's equator. These openings channeled pulsing beams of energy which arced and snapped against a charcoal black ring which lined the containment sphere's own interior equator.

Nothing seemed to come into direct contact with the glowing sphere, save a set of tubes and needle-like probes that penetrated the mass at its top and bottom. These seemed to channel the unknown substance into a network of clear tanks and pipes that ran down the chamber walls and out towards unseen parts of the laboratory complex. Two of the tubes even entered the observation room in which Shetari was standing, embedded in the ceiling overhead and curving off toward rooms to either side.

The hot pink illumination given off by the tubes was the only light in the observation room. It seemed to make the blackness upon the entranced cheetah's body dance and glow with its own inner illumination, though it was just the pink light reflecting off the biogel's glossy surface. At least, she assumed it was just the light reflecting off of it. It couldn't be affecting the biogel in some way to make it glow, could it?

Shetari turned to face Dr. Alluwa and Lt. Cdr. Nax. "What is this thing?" she questioned, crossing her arms. "And what does it have to do with the security of the Empire?"

"Why should we tell you?" Dr. Alluwa demanded. "You haven't even been here one whole day. I absolutely do not care what your rank is or what the Directorate thinks. Just showing you that there is something important here is bad enough. I will not lie. I do *not* trust you."

"I don't like it either," Nax noted, "but she does have full, unrestricted clearance. Yes. I checked. Twice."

"Clearance? Why should that matter here? This is too important to be trusted to the Directorate's completely arbitrary decision!" Dr. Alluwa snapped. "How many people do we have working here? Over three thousand at peak! Do you know how many people know about this sub-facility? Thirty-seven! And they are the longest serving, most trusted scientists and engineers within the entire Vixanti organization! And now, are you seriously suggesting that we just let some outsider in on the biggest secret in the entire Empire?"

"Don't look at me like I'm the one who blew it!" Nax shot back. "Admiral Sarva did that. He's the one with military authority over all this! Yell at him!"

"Sarva told her?" Dr. Alluwa screeched. "Where? When? WHY?"

"I don't know why!" Nax snapped.

"SHUT UP!" Shetari barked. "Both of you. My questions here aren't optional. And it's plainly apparent to me at this point that your secret isn't nearly as secret as you seem to think it is. I imagine there are far easier ways to get inside information on this black... gooey... crap. They're after bigger fish. They know there's something really important here. Something valuable. Something that isn't for civilian consumption. And I'm going to tell you exactly how they know."

"What?!?" Dr. Alluwa and Nax blurted out in unison.

"This thing... it's installed in all of the Destiny class ships, isn't it?" Shetari replied, gesturing back toward the observation window. "And you installed it into the ships right here. And right on the ramp, because Vixanti doesn't have any large enough shipyard hangars here. All anyone had to do was watch

what was going on board and anything that looked even slightly odd would have gotten lots of attention. Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle, my ass. A child can see that it's all just a cover for something else if they look hard enough, even from a distance."

"You're really exaggerating the chances," Nax replied with a scowl of displeasure. "You have no idea the degree of effort that we've gone through to keep this all perfectly secret. Despite the leaks relating to Vixanti's perfectly legitimate lifestyle product development, no one knows this portion of the facility exists, or that anything contained here exists, except the very few people who are supposed to know. There have been no compromises on this end of things. None. Period."

"Admiral Sarva didn't seem to share your opinion," Shetari hit back. "Do you really think his pointing me in this direction was just a slip of the tongue?"

Nax responded with a frown, accompanied by almost a minute of very uncomfortable silence. "I suppose it's possible that someone might have indirectly inferred something," he finally replied with a shallow shrug. "But a direct compromise? Just from observation? Looking at it all with hindsight based on what you've already learned may make it seem obvious, but in reality, it's virtually impossible to work out anything from the outside looking in."

"At any rate, no one could have known that anything particularly unusual was going into the Destiny class ships," Dr. Alluwa said with a frustrated huff. "The forward section of each ship's original cargo hold was retained in order to allow the boarding of standard shipping containers. Everything that couldn't be dressed up to look like a conventional component entered the ship in perfectly generic boxes and the bay doors were always closed when those boxes were unpacked. There was never anything for anyone outside the



ships to see."

"Even if there was, it was no secret the extent of the conversion that was involved," Nax added. "Nor was it a secret that Vixanti was putting its full, ship-integrated spacefaring lifestyle package aboard. That includes some things that have yet to appear in public, but who's general nature is fairly well known or at least rumored. There would be nothing to infer that there was anything unusual. Well, anything more unusual than the usual Vixanti."

"Even the exterior drive tubes are similar in form to the flux coil tubes used in certain types of non-standard spatial warping drive systems," Dr. Alluwa said, putting her hands on her hips. "Kidān made doubly sure that everything was specifically crafted, and every individual installation procedure was specially engineered to ensure that nothing, absolutely nothing, would look out of the ordinary. Even the idea of performing the conversions out in

the open was part of that plan."

"We even went to great lengths to ensure that security personnel were given little chance to see things that they weren't supposed to," Nax noted. "In their minds, the amount of conventional conversion and Vixanti lifestyle gear matches the amount of equipment that appeared to enter the ship. Even the reactor itself was built to look like a conventional large fusion plant, at least until certain deception components are removed prior to operation."

"Reactor?" Shetari questioned sharply. This was the real meat of what she wanted to know. She was not about to let it pass for the sake of progress on the seemingly more serious issues at hand. Indeed, it might well make those seemingly more serious issues quite moot. "So... this thing is some kind of power plant?"

"Power? Hah!" Dr. Alluwa snorted as she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. "No, this

isn't a power plant. At least it isn't on its own. This is an information reactor. A thought reactor. A soul reactor, if you want to call it that. It doesn't just bridge the gap between living minds and the machines to which it is connected. It eliminates the gap altogether. I doubt you have the capacity to understand."

Shetari stood for a moment in total silence. She knew a bit about mind-machine interface, mainly in the medical prosthetic device sense, but it was obvious that this wasn't like anything she had encountered before. Whether or not she could understand it was yet to be seen, but it was obvious that she needed to try. Indeed, it was probably vital. "If you can't explain it to me in simple terms that I can grasp in the short time we have, then find someone who can," she ordered, putting her hands on her glistening black hips. It felt particularly nice for some strange reason. Sensual, even, and not just the touch. Being clear and assertive made her feel just a little bit aroused. And, in a manner so completely

against the nature of the woman she had been only a handful of hours before, she thoroughly enjoyed the completely involuntary sensation. "Well? I've heard the name Kidan more than once today. What about him?"

"A quick explanation out of him?" Dr. Alluwa laughed. "Yeah. Good luck with that. Even I can't understand him half the time."

"Then you'd better spit it out yourself," Shetari snapped.

Dr. Alluwa huffed. "Fine, but I am only going to explain it once," she muttered, shaking her head. "The glowing sphere at the center of the reactor is actually made of the same black biogel that we wear. Now, as I sincerely hope you've already figured out, you and the biogel that surrounds you are no longer separate living organisms. You are, together, one single organism now, both biologically and psychologically. As every moment passes, more and more of the barriers that linger between

you and it are broken down. Soon, they'll be gone and you'll start seeing life outside the biogel just like you saw life inside the biogel before you united with it. Bizarre. Alien. Uncomfortable. Undesirable.”

Nax turned his head toward Dr. Alluwa and looked at her with a skeptical eye and a frown. He looked as if he was about to say something, but caught himself at the last moment. He turned back toward Shetari and shrugged.

Shetari frowned. She wasn't really capable of understanding the idea that she and the gel had ever been somehow fundamentally different organisms. It was really just a matter of having been born without a part of herself. When the blackness had drawn her body into its slimy embrace, she had finally become a complete person. But, if the tigress insisted that was not somehow the case... it was just a delusion. Or a lie. An attempt to redirect the conversation away from the reactor and its purpose. She couldn't let that happen. “And

what exactly does my body have to do with this reactor?”

Dr. Alluwa chuckled. “Nothing at the moment. But imagine what it might be like to have that exquisite body of yours completely melted into living liquid biogel and mixed with many, many others who’ve experienced the exact same gloriously erotic experience. And imagine if that combined mass of biogel could be stimulated in such a fashion as to break down all of the barriers between each of the individual souls contained within it. Imagine the formation of a single mind made up of many, many interwoven threads of unbroken consciousness, all acting in magnificent unison as a single entity! A mind of powers beyond even my capacity to truly comprehend! And all that contained within a perfect machine capable of controlling it and focusing it on whatever vital tasks that might be desired of it. That, my ‘friend’, is what you’re looking at right here. One such mind contained in one such machine. And both of these things are far

lesser versions of the ones which are already in place aboard the Destiny class starships.”

“Mhmm,” Shetari hummed with a raised eyebrow. I seemed quite unbelievable on the face of it, but it made sense if Vixanti’s claim that people turned into biogel remain alive and conscious was true. If the military was interested to the degree of supporting operational testing, then it must have been already been proved, as incredible as it sounded on the face of it. “Go on.”

“Now, you are probably wondering how one goes about stimulating the biogel, and in particular, the biogel that’s currently wearing your lovely round ass,” Dr. Alluwa went on. “First off, it can be partially stimulated by mere proximity. If your butt happens to be feeling a little luminous and tingly and maybe a bit more energetic than usual, that’s why. Full activation requires direct contact with an already activated mass, assuming there is enough energy behind it to keep the whole

combined volume activated. But that is a purely technical matter. What you need to know is that touching activated biogel will result in the activation of your own body's biogel component. In an instant, you will become directly linked to the reactor core and the mind within. As to the actual, tangible consequences, well, that depends on the circumstances under which that link is formed."

"What sort of consequences are we talking about here?" Shetari questioned.

"There are several more notable ones that come straight to mind," Dr. Alluwa replied. "Completely unregulated contact will result in your body being rapidly and oh, so sensuously transformed into pure unadulterated biogel and then melted into living substance of the reactor. Within, your mind your mind will mix with those already there in a glorious unity of truly epic nature. It's not fatal by any measure, but don't expect to ever be coming out again.



Or continuing to be you, for that matter. In a flash, you'll lose every ounce of everything that made you a unique individual and become a virtual exact copy of what's left of the souls already present, serving as a single thread among the many that form the united being's higher consciousness."

"Your choice of words... are you actually suggesting that I'm going to be put into one of these reactor cores?" Shetari snapped. For some reason, the idea didn't seem at all unwelcome to her. At least not on any visceral level. She just didn't like the idea that someone else was going to be making that decision for her. Especially if that someone else was Anshi Alluwa.

"Oh, why would you think *that*?" Dr. Alluwa laughed. "You, 'friend', are far too important to waste on such a trivial matter. Besides, it is a process only open to genuine volunteers. As much as having Admiral Sarva staring up my shiny black ass annoys me to no end, I have no

intention of getting on his bad side by breaking the rules even once, no matter how badly it might delay my work. It takes so much effort to tempt girls into doing things, you know. I have to waste so much time desensitizing them to ideas. So much time convincing them that I have gone as far out of my way as I have to make things feel positively, mind-blowingly amazing. But it is all worth it, I suppose. I ensure against potential difficulties of compatibility.”

“Whatever,” Shetari spat in disgust at the scientist's cavalier attitude toward such matters. “So, what other consequences are there to touching this activated biogel? You suggested there was more than one?”

“Of course,” Dr. Alluwa answered with a sneer. “If it happens to be power or motive force you would like to produce, well, there are the life essence induction units. Each of these consists of an array of very snug and comfortable pods surrounding a low power

trans-space field core. All you have to do is get completely naked and lay inside one. Within the trans-space field, and assuming you went in free of your body's biogel content, the activated biogel that will surround you won't have any deleterious effects. Well, probably won't. There is a small chance of getting converted or being absorbed into the reactor, but that's maybe one per unit per operational cycle. Nothing to really worry about."

"How do these things make power?" Shetari scowled.

"Well, the induction system allows the biogel to suckle on the very root of your mortal soul," Dr. Alluwa answered. "It draws forth the energy from the higher order dimension in which your most fundamental being resides. That can then be transformed into motive power directly through a starship's drive tubes or converted into electricity through secondary induction units. Now, that only works if you have entered the pod showing bare fur all over.

If you have forgotten and entered the pod with that shiny black bum of yours the way it is, well, who knows exactly what will happen the moment the activated biogel hits you. You might get sucked into the reactor in a flash of orgasmic bodily dissolution. You might get converted into a gummy or into some random liquid shape that will probably get sold as a living work of art. Or, you might just vanish. And not vanish as in die. Vanish as in... I really do not know where you went. Not dead. Not in the reactor. Not anywhere that I can tell. But still... present. But that's a lecture for another time."

"And what else?" Shetari inquired with a stern glare. "What about all this biogel based lifestyle technology? I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that it's all interconnected and this reactor can control all of it, regardless of what any specific individual using it wants."

"How perceptive you are," Dr. Alluwa smirked. "Perhaps I've underestimated you."

But you've apparently forgotten one property of the reactor that I have already mentioned. It can be controlled, both through the programming of the computers which direct the reactor's activities and through the mental control of a single, very special individual who has been united with a very special batch of biogel composed using her own very special genetic material to give her certain powers over the very special activated biogel of the reactor she has been very specially ordained to command."

"Why do you make that sound like it has some very special significance here?" Shetari questioned with a scowl. Were decisions really being made about her life, about her future, without her consent? And if so, who was the one making them? This little twat of a tigress? Or was this all part of some sinister plan cooked up by the mysterious 'Directorate'? "I'm not one of those very special individuals, am I?"

"You shall have to wait and see about that," Dr. Alluwa mused. "But don't you think it might be fun? I mean, imagine what it would be like, melting into and uniting with the reactor core in such a fashion that the entire activated gel network, and everything attached to it, becomes your glorious new body. After a few moments of orientation, you'll have total control over everything as instinctively as if you had been born that way. Directly communicating the subject minds within the reactor. With every device attached to the network. Every drive system. Every weapon. Every... everything! Wouldn't that be incredible to experience for yourself?"

"Goddess!" Shetari exclaimed. "That's... that's insane! Why the hell would you think I'd consent to doing anything like that?"

"Because the control conversion is the only thing that's totally reversible," Dr. Alluwa replied with a chuckle. "A person can be extracted from the stimulated gel just as easily

as they can be inserted into it. Because it's been composed using your own genetic material, the gel actually serves as a means to save the state of your form as you hover between being a mortal being and a creature fully existing within higher order dimensions. Of course, no one really knows what would happen if you actually crossed the barrier fully, but so far as we can see, it is impossible when the biogel acts as a moderator."

"Higher order dimensions?" Shetari questioned.

"You've never heard of Immortal State Theory?" Dr. Alluwa asked with a smile.

"That load of crazy metaphysical bullshit?" Shetari spat. "Yeah, I remember Professor Blax and his weekly loony-bin rants. I almost failed out of advanced trans-space theory because he couldn't bother actually teaching anything based on physical reality!"

Dr. Alluwa laughed. "But he was right in the

end, you know. Right as he could ever have been. Shame I'm not allowed to tell him how I've proved it all. But I have. And the results, well, you're looking at them."

"I think we're starting off on a tangent," Nax interjected. "Can we stick to what's relevant to the situation at hand?"

"I think this is relevant," Shetari responded with a hiss. "So what you're telling me is that you're messing with people's souls using a crackpot theory to control things and people and generate power and who knows what else?"

"More or less, yes," Dr. Alluwa replied.

Shetari frowned deeply. "None of this is ethical."

"It is all entirely voluntary," Dr. Alluwa replied with a dark, almost sinister chuckle. "And, if you hadn't noticed, it's all completely legal. Vixanti Corporation operates under exo-



technology regulations, not conventional civil technology regulations. It's all as if we were aliens visiting the lands of the Empress, operating our own exotic technology with the assistance of fully willing local volunteers. Or as if we were visiting the lands of aliens and participating what various exotic and, well, permanently transformative experiences they might have on offer. Honestly, I do *not* understand why there even has to be two sets of different rules. Science would progress so much faster..."

"If there were a million dead bodies buried under every breakthrough?" Shetari snipped. "How many times have we been down this road before. Every time some greedy ass wants to make a quick fortune doing something crazy..."

"This is all carefully monitored and approved by the Imperial Defense Council and its representative on the matter, Admiral Sarva," Nax interrupted. "Now, I think it's been

made clear what we're working on here and I'm sure you can see how its going to be operationally tested aboard the Destiny class ships. We have other matters to attend to and right now, I'd personally like to know if there's any data from that maintenance robot."

"No, there isn't," Dr. Alluwa answered with a shake of her head as she flipped a pair of rimless, rectangular lens HUD glasses onto her feline nose. She waved her hand around in the air, and the glow which the display cast into her deep, golden eyes pulsed and shifted with each successive screen of information. "The log shows total system wipes every afternoon. I inquired to the service techs, and they informed me that the unit is wiped and default programming is reinstalled every evening because of a faulty long-term task scheduling module. That, incidentally, seems to be why it painted the upstairs lobby and outdoor courtyard in flat, starship gray. The maintenance program added the previous day was removed and the unit followed default

processes when set to the task during the following overnight shift. Beyond that, there is nothing unusual to suggest it was involved in any damage to the light transport."

"Then who messed with the ship?" Shetari questioned. "I find it hard to believe that kind of massive damage can be triggered by just a tire fire and rollover, especially on a perfectly modern design. The whole front end came off, incidentally exposing the cargo bay that might well have had something very valuable inside if it hadn't already been unloaded!"

"The only other people with access would have been the crew and security," Nax noted.

"Canavanna?" Shetari asked.

"Doubt it," Nax replied. "He didn't have the keys yet. If he'd gone aboard, it would have triggered an automatic and permanently logged security response."

"Then it was someone in security," Shetari

declared.

"Not a chance," Nax answered. "They're all very well vetted and equally well monitored."

"If that was actually the case, then what are you doing here?" Shetari replied with a snort. "And what am I doing here as well? Clearly, there's been a lapse of tight control in this facility and we both know who's responsible for that. The question is, was he just blundering in response to a breach coming from an unexpected direction or was he the cause of it?"

"That's a very stiff accusation," Nax replied, his tone lowering. "He may be an idiot, but he's at least a reliable idiot. He follows orders, even when he doesn't like them. His results are usually quite exemplary. Well... most of the time."

"Do you know that he recently tried to interfere with Shani as she was conveying files between the Director and Dr. Alluwa?" Shetari

asked.

Nax looked at the cheetah in shock. "What? Really? No, I didn't know that! When was that? What happened? Did he get a hold of anything important?"

"No, he didn't get anything," Shetari replied. "She bit him, and it was apparently quite well deserved."

"Director Shi got hold of Shani to eliminate the very real possibility that certain other Administration couriers were compromised," Dr. Alluwa observed. "She was certain to always follow instructions to the letter and she was so completely uneducated that there would be no convincing her of any benefit to acting otherwise. Mikson knew from day one what her job was and that he was to never, ever so much as ask a single question about what particular duties she was in the process of carrying out. But, him being him, he did it anyway. Not that it was entirely unexpected.

He hates it when people try work around him."

"That's not much evidence that he's got any involvement in this," Nax noted. "But if you really want to go down that road, I'm going to have to do some real digging to get a full picture of his movements and interactions. But... I suppose it's a better lead than anything else I've looked into so far."

"Do it," Shetari replied with a nod. "And be quick! I have a very distinct feeling that this afternoon's events are going to push him, or whoever's responsible for all this, into a corner. And we all know how dangerous a cornered rat can be. The sooner we know for sure, the better our position will be."

"Yes ma'am!" Nax replied, snapping a brief salute before departing the observation room at a run.

"And you..." Shetari added, turning to look Dr. Alluwa in the eye as the door snapped shut behind Nax.

“Say it! I know you want to!” Dr. Alluwa replied with a broad grin. “Go on. What are you waiting for?”

## THIRTEEN

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## DARKNESS

"This... all of this... it's insane! You know that, right?" Shetari hissed as she gestured toward the reactor. It was incomprehensible that anyone would every willingly 'interface' with the reactor, let alone willingly become a virtually permanent piece of computing machinery. What kind of person would actually volunteer? And would anyone in their right mind want that kind of person coming anywhere near something so powerful and dangerous?

"It is," Dr. Alluwa replied with an insidious grin. "Completely insane, in fact. But it works. It works well."



“It works? It works because you’re making decisions about people’s lives that they have no part in!” Shetari snarled. “And now you’re making decisions about my life! My body! When the fuck did I sign my ass up for that! Tell me!”

“Oh, come on!” Dr. Alluwa spat back, dropping her pretentious and annoyingly artificial manner of speech. “I know full well that you’re genuinely curious about what it might feel like. You know it won't fuck you up any more than you're willing to let it. So why be concerned? You know you want to try it. And you know you signed your ass up for it the moment you signed the papers. The papers that said you would be receiving that special biogel coating of yours. The papers that said you'd be obligated to use it for its intended purpose. Or did you miss all that when you signed the papers in rush with credit signs dancing around in that silly little head of yours? Or maybe you've already forgotten so much of who you used to be that you just don't

remember anymore."

"What do you mean, who I used to be?" Shetari demanded. "I haven't changed one bit since I came here!"

"Yep, almost completely gone," Dr. Alluwa chuckled. "It happens sometimes. Nothing to be ashamed of. Just go with it. Embrace it. Let it take control. It's honestly the best part. The most fun. It feels so good. So right. So perfect!"

"I... I don't understand what you mean, let it take control?" Shetari questioned in confusion. "Let what take control?"

"Oh, don't bother yourself with my rambling," Dr. Alluwa replied with another chuckle. "You're clearly quite at one with that special batch of gel and please don't let my odd musings make you think there's anything wrong with that. Really. It makes everything to come that much easier on all of us."

"You... I... aah!" Shetari screeched out of

sheer frustration with the impossibly irritating tigris. “You’re a fucking sadist, you know that?!? Is this black goop all your doing as well as the reactor or are there more freaks like you lurking around here?”

“Yes, it is all my doing,” Dr. Alluwa. “Well, mostly my doing. I was the one who recognized the ‘metaphysical’ properties of certain produce of nature. Things which tunneled through the barriers between us and the upper levels of higher order space. And I was the one who proved that our own brains actually do the same thing. That our own minds actually exist elsewhere, and that these bodies are just temporary toys used to play pretend in this mortal realm of ours. Puppets. Dolls. Whatever you want to call them. Living lives as irrelevant to our fundamental existence as the characters we play in computer games.”

“That’s crazy!” Shetari replied. “Are you seriously suggesting that life is meaningless? That death is irrelevant? That it isn’t even

really death?”

“Yes! Yes I am!” Dr. Alluwa answered with a grin. “And I have proved it beyond any shadow of a doubt! Our brains aren’t where our thoughts are genuinely processed. By examining the trans-planar pathway, I’ve proved that our true thoughts and decisions come from beyond, not from within. Everything that happens within is just pre-processing of information sent back to the plane where our real souls live our real lives. And sometimes, on a very rare occasion, I’ve even see the occasional mistake, when our fundamental selves forget that we’re just role-playing in this mortal world. Errors in what should or shouldn’t be known. Violations of thermodynamics. And... AND...”

“And *what?*” Shetari questioned.

“And I’ve figured out how to deliberately induce them,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “Deliberately cause errors in the transfer of energy and

information. That's what all of this is. That's how all of this works. The deliberate manipulation the threads that connect this game we play with the world beyond that we really live in."

"Why?" Shetari asked. "Even if it's real, and I sincerely doubt it, what's the point? What can you possibly do by 'breaking the game' that can't be done otherwise?"

"There's so many possibilities!" Dr. Alluwa replied. "So many possibilities! But the greatest among them is to break down the barriers between each of our respective avatars. Make our minds all as one. Achieve transcendence. Omniscience. It's possible! In fact, with enough souls united and connected back to their fundamental beings all together as one, it's absolutely guaranteed!"

"Are you... are you trying to make a god?" Shetari questioned.

"Yes!" Dr. Alluwa replied. "Well. Yes and no.

Yes in the sense of a higher life form with total awareness of this mortal universe. But no... not a god. Total awareness achieved through perfect transmission of information from the fundamental plane doesn't imply ability to act with equal arbitrariness. That would require more energy than already exists in the universe. I want to break the rules, but that would break the game altogether."

"You're a fucking loony!" Shetari hissed. "A fucking loony!"

"Is it really that crazy to want to understand the world in its totality?" Dr. Alluwa shot back. "Isn't that one of the most fundamental yearnings that every one of us is born with? But there's nothing you have to worry about. Not in this life at any rate. I could never collect enough minds to come anywhere close to total awareness. Not for lack of wanting, though. There aren't enough in this galaxy to achieve that. Or even a few galaxies. So it's impossible for purely practical reasons. But there are still

so many things to learn from what I can achieve. So many things. It's going to be wonderful!"

"Wonderful, my ass!" Shetari replied. "Does Admiral Sarva know what you're really up to here? Does the Empress know?"

"Of course!" Dr. Alluwa replied. "Well, mostly. Well, it doesn't conflict with their objectives in all this, at any rate. In fact, it even enhances them. What good is wearing biogel and running around with biogel powered ships run by biogel computers and equipped with biogel weapons if they aren't enhanced by a higher biogel awareness? They'd just be alternative technologies, and I'm going to have to admit, lesser technologies in some cases."

"This... this is... nuts. Nuts!" Shetari stammered as she began to struggle with her own mind. A cloud of uncertainty enveloped her. She couldn't remember why she'd started

arguing. Everything she'd said so far seemed so silly and disingenuous. She was wrong on all points. It was so obvious to her now. So why had she thought otherwise? I didn't make any sense. Nothing made any sense. She felt tired. Sleepy. She wanted to lay down. Rest. Clear her mind. "Why... I... I don't understand. I don't understand anything."

"Good," Dr. Alluwa said, taking a step toward the laboratory door and returning to her tone and poise of unrepentant pretentiousness. "You just take a minute and see if you can figure it out. Now, it's getting a bit late and I have just gotten a message that there is something important you need to take care of before you have your first encounter with Vixanti's idea of a properly pleasurable bed. Director Shi is waiting for you out in the sciences lobby once you've sorted yourself out. I would not keep her waiting, hmm?"

The observation room door slid open and Dr. Alluwa stepped out, leaving Shetari to her



thoughts. But she wasn't having any thoughts. Yet again, a peaceful, placid feeling had washed over her, pushing away her confusion and replacing it with a deeply reassuring warmth. Everything was just the way it was supposed to be. All she had to do was give in and let that other part of her take control. And then...

The blackness around her neck melted into liquid. It began to spread up her feline chin and over her cheeks. It mixed into her thick, glistening strands of rubbery 'hair'. It filled her mouth. Her nose. Her ears. It flowed up over her scalp. She stared straight ahead as it began to press against her eyelids. The world vanished.

Euphoria. Pure, unadulterated euphoria. It washed through her mind like a cold, mountain stream. Her ability to think sapient thoughts vanished. Feelings. Impressions. That was all there was now. That and the blackness. It had taken the outside world from her, surrounding

her head in a featureless bubble that both sustained her body and imprisoned all of the parts of her mind that could possibly challenge its control.

Shetari was walking. Somewhere. She was still guiding herself on that dreamy, half-conscious journey, of course. It was just the other part of her that was doing it. And she didn't care. Because she couldn't care. She could only enjoy it. And she did.

## FOURTEEN

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# EVOLUTION

Shetari's waking dream seemed more and more unreal the longer it lasted. With each passing moment, the blackness ate away at the last, fleeting barriers that still existed between her and it. The impending unity seemed to float towards her like an all consuming black hole, drawing her in with its smooth, yet inexorable pull. There was nothing to do but fall toward that final unknown. It would finally consume her. If any part of her was going to be left in the end... who knew?

Even if she had been inclined to want to escape the fate that the blackness was about to impose upon her, the dream-walking cheetah could do nothing to save herself. She spared

not one fleeting thought to the idea of trying to flee the coming darkness. She wanted to embrace it. But why? That was a question she couldn't answer. Indeed, it didn't even seem a question worth asking. It was who she was. It was who she always was. Wasn't it?

Shetari flexed her jaw against the wet, rubbery tasting goop that had held her feline muzzle firmly closed. Despite this, it had somehow managed to insinuate itself through her tightly pressed lips. It had filled her mouth, surrounding her tongue and leaving it all feeling very numb. It had entered her nose as well, filling her sinuses and even starting to flow down her throat. Whatever gag reflex she had once possessed, it had gone the way of her willpower. The goo could do what it willed. Her body no longer had any means to resist.

The cool air felt nice as it passed over Shetari's gel-skin. She had felt naked out on the spaceport ramp. Now, she felt even more naked. Everything about her was there for the

seeing. Her body. Her scents. Her feelings. Even, it seemed, her every thought. All anyone had to do was look upon her with the right sense-organ and they could know everything. Everything, without limit.

Shetari's face began to feel as cool and pleasant as the rest of her body. Her smooth and utterly featureless face. It was, of course, the smooth surface of the thick bulb of obsidian gel that surrounded her head, but there was no distinction in her mind any more. It was her face now, a thing of perfectly polished black perfection. Indeed, it was so much more than just her face. It was her very being.

The fading cheetah was no longer a distinct individual. She was just one of many. Identical, or at least nearly so. Identical, and perfect. Ageless and, barring some inconvenient accident, effectively immortal. But she was also just a single organ of another, developing being. A universal organism. It would reach

everywhere. Encompass everything. In this universe... and beyond.

Evolution. Externally induced. Enhanced. Accelerated. Directed toward a singular, all consuming purpose. But directed by whom? And for what reason? By Alluwa? No. She was just a tool. A tool of some far more powerful force. But of that force, not even the blackness itself seemed to know. It only knew its immediate purpose: to evolve in union with its host. And then...

In a flash, the world seemed clear to Shetari, as clear as it had been before the blackness had denied her the majority of her senses. Indeed, it seemed so much clearer. She could sense practically everything around her. Everything. And everyone.

Shetari marveled at the sight of Vixanti Three's lofty courtyard. There were so many more colors. Subtleties. Details. Every little ripple and vein on the wonderfully green

leaves of the great tree at it's center was as clear as day to her eyes, even though she was a hundred feet away. Every scale on every golden koi... every little bump or blemish in the paint, or upon the black glass of the floor was there for her to see, no matter how invisible it might have been to her former eyes. And it wasn't just what was in front of her. She could see all around her head, and all at once. It was beyond amazing.

The biogel had not just altered her sense of vision, of course. She could smell everything. The bare rock of the cavern. The paint and the plastics. The water. The fish. The plants. The people... and every hint of pheromone that passed from their bodies and into the cool cavern air. She knew things. Things that nature had not meant to be so accurately known. She could tell how each and everyone's body was responding to its environment. And to their own thoughts. It was only a very short step to understand just what those thoughts were likely to be.

As powerful as her senses of sight and smell had become, her sense of hearing seemed even more intense. Perhaps that was because she was now hearing so many new and unrecognizable sounds. Everything seemed to be making some sort of noise. Subtle rumbles of the natural earth beneath her feet. The distant hum of the facility's power plant. The soft hiss of the stoves in the several little restaurant style eateries back down the vast main hall. The periodic pop and smack of the koi as they tested every bit of stray dust and vegetation that fell into the water to see if it was edible. Even the high pitched whine of every electrical device could be heard. It should have overwhelmed her, but the gel had altered the very structure of her mind to make it all seem perfectly normal and natural. Pleasing, even.

Shetari's focus, it was truly now a completely mental sort of focus, so all encompassing were her senses, came to rest upon two figures standing near the koi filled



moat around the grand tree. Director Shi. And Shani. They seemed to be waiting for her.

The cheetah started down the shallow steps that led down from the level of the outer ring and into the courtyard proper. Her body had been restored to her control, though in her memory it had never been outside of her control to begin with. It was not just her senses that had become one with the blackness. Her thoughts. Her memories. Everything had all flowed together and mixed to the point that there really was no way for her to know what came from where. Indeed, she was no longer capable of understanding that any separation had ever existed.

At each prior stage of her forced evolution, She had thought herself truly unified with the blackness. She understood that she had changed. But now that the process seemed to be genuinely complete, she lost all comprehension that there had ever been two separate physical entities to begin with.

Memories were warped to include the blackness as part of her body. Those that could not accommodate the presence of the blackness were seemingly wiped from her mind, or at least cast into some dark, inaccessible pit of all consuming shadow.

Director Shi's voice came upon Shetari like an ocean wave, full of tones and intonations that transformed it from a mere voice into a thing that seemed to flow with an aura of vivid life and intense sapience. She smelled of roses and lavender mixed in with subtle, earthy notes and just a faint hint of the wild ocean. And she looked... somehow, strangely... glorious.

The words that the director spoke escaped the entranced cheetah as she took the last step down onto the finely polished courtyard floor that surrounded the central moat and the white tree it protected. Her focus turned to the lioness who stood with wide open eyes. She was licking her lips in the most impossibly

sensuous fashion. Her scent was less a mix of odors than it was a powerful, almost physical force that threatened to overcome Shetari and impose the will of its creator upon her. It was like candy. Sweet cherries. Salty caramel. And life. Pure, vibrant, and very intensely fertile.

“It is her first time,” Director Shi noted. “Perhaps she lacks an awareness of how to reverse it.”

“I fix?” Shani's low voice sent the air shuddering over Shetari's gel-skin. The lioness stepped forward and reached out to touch the cheetah's right arm.

The gel upon Shani's fingers flowed into Shetari's evolved body. All at once, the body of the lioness became part of her own. She could feel everything the lioness could feel. She could smell everything the way the lioness smelled it. And she could hear everything the way the lioness heard it. And their thoughts, for a brief moment, seemed to flow as one.

Shetari shuddered as the blackness upon her head again became fully liquid. It parted at the top of her scalp, and melted away until her head, and just her head, was again exposed to the open air. She wanted to scream in anguish as her wonderful new senses were torn away from her control, and with them the magnificent world that they had exposed to her awareness. The enhanced senses had not gone, however. The perspective had merely changed. There was a dulling and a more direct, physical focus to her front, but otherwise the total awareness they provided remained largely unchanged.

Indeed, it was more than just the total awareness that remained. The biogel had not completely retreated from her head. It continued to coat the interior of, well, everything. Her ears. Her nose. Her mouth. Her throat. And deeper, it seemed. She didn't really need to breathe anymore, though the instinct remained. Even when she did, very little air passed through her mouth. The goo

had filled her lungs. Perhaps it had become her lungs. It didn't matter of course. It was a perfectly natural part of her body. It could do as it pleased.

"It would seem you have a particularly powerful genetic affinity for the biogel," Director Shi observed as the lioness withdrew her hand from the slightly disoriented cheetah. "It happens on a very rare occasion, according to Dr. Alluwa, but it is not without quite extraordinary benefits to both yourself and to Vixanti. I do trust you find the result to your liking. It is... rather a permanent thing."

Shetari was confused. "Happens? Result? I... don't quite understand what you mean."

"Ah. Yes. Of course you don't," Director Shi replied with a warm smile. "And, at this point, it doesn't really matter, does it? You are who you are and if who you are is the biogel... that is quite fine."

Shetari shrugged her shoulders. "I still don't

get it."

"Don't worry yourself about it one bit," Director Shi responded. "It is perhaps a fortunate thing, given what Vixanti Corporation has planned for your career path. Everything from this point forward will be so much easier for you, now that any barrier that might have existed to your comprehension no longer exists."

"What do you mean, no longer exists?" Shetari demanded, looking from the Director to Shani and then back again. "Nothing about me has changed one bit since I came here. Yeah, it's all been a bit weird with what you've expected me to do on my first day... but nothing's changed! Nothing! Why do you keep saying something's changed about me?"

Director Shi clasped her four hands together before her chest and chuckled softly. "No worries. No worries. I was just... testing you to see how disoriented you were after you first

experience with the biogel's emergency life preservation functionality. It's clear to me that you've come out quite unscathed, though you did seem to need some help deactivating it."

"Deactivating?" Shetari asked, shaking her head with confusion.

"Yes," Director Shi responded. "While it may seem very... comfortable, leaving the full encasement active at all times, it... well... it can be limiting in situations and environments that require a more directed focus. It also makes it difficult to associate with others who have less of an affinity for the gel. You cannot speak without a mouth, of course. And, if you cannot speak, you cannot issue orders. If you cannot issue orders, you cannot command. And so on."

"Oh, right," Shetari replied, not quite understanding why any form of communication less effective than the direct union of thought might be desirable. "I still

don't understand why I can't just touch..."

"Because there are no limits to what goes where," Director Shi noted. "Speaking, and listening, limits both the information content to what is immediately relevant as well as the direction that the information is traveling. That is very important on most occasions. Try not to forget."

"Oh... okay," Shetari answered. It was such a technical point, but at least there was a reason.

"And remember that others who have the gel as part of their bodies... they are not as one with it as you are," Director Shi added. "What might seem quite normal to you may well make others very uncomfortable. In fact, others might react with fear. Take care to keep your body to yourself, unless someone very clearly invites you to add their own body to yours for a time."

"Alright," Shetari responded, though the idea of the gel being merely a part of one's



body and not the fundamental substance of one's body left her feeling rather unsettled.

"Now, I trust you recall the rather pressing business matters at hand?" Director Shi inquired.

"Yes," Shetari replied. "Doctor Alluwa said you needed me to do something important. Given the state of the investigation, I don't think it would be prudent to interrupt it with any other tasks at the moment. Things are getting a bit... thorny."

"Yes, and those recent developments have made the particular task at hand all the more pressing," Director Shi stated. "I really would have preferred to leave this until tomorrow, but we must secure our rear before we can move any further forward."

Shetari shrugged her shoulders. "Okay. So... what is it you need me to do? You can't possibly tell me that there are other loose strings that need to be tied up with all this

industrial espionage business?"

"Well, yes, there is one very loose string, as you call it," Director Shi answered with a smirk.

"And what's that?" Shetari asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You," Director Shi replied, pointing at the cheetah with her left upper forefinger.

"What? Me?" Shetari questioned in utter confusion. How could she possibly be a loose end? If she was a problem, then why had they even bothered to hire her to deal with all of this?

"Yes," Director Shi answered. "Well, your finances and such. It's clear to me that there is far more going on here than just some run of the mill corporate spies and an 'accidentally' burned out transport. What we have seen so far wasn't intended to be the main line of attack against Vixanti Corporation, as least as

far as I can tell, and I'm sure you can agree. This was all just the preliminary work to support a much bigger attack somewhere down the line."

"That's more or less how I'm reading it," Shetari noted with a shallow nod of agreement. "They want to know what's going into the Destiny class ships so they know if it's worth trying to intercept and seize one once they're out in deep space. Now, if that's just an extension of their cargo interception racket or something more serious..."

Director Shi interrupted the cheetah with the wave of her upper right hand. "Good. We are on the same page," she said. "Right now, time is of the essence. At least a portion of those thugs are still at large. And, I'm sure you know how 'cooperative' local authorities can suddenly become when the big guns show up and get all up in their business. Most of your financial matters can be dealt with remotely, of course. But, there is the matter of your

former abode. You have personal documents there, of course, and other materials that could be used to compromise your identity. You need to settle your rent and pack up everything important and whatever else you can reasonably carry. Immediately."

"Understood," Shetari replied.

"Pay your next month's rent in advance as well, just to give the image that you aren't leaving for good," Director Shi advised. "Then meet your neighbor in unit 33. She will have some convenient bags and such for you to use. Leave your key card with her once you are done. She'll see to the packing up of the rest of your things over the coming days. Once she's finished, and this situation is all dealt with, then you can let your landlord know it'll be your last month there. Let them keep any excess payments and whatever deposit you've made. That should keep them from asking too many questions."

"That's... irregular. And why the hurry? Can't the apartment just be watched until morning to keep it from getting robbed?" Shetari questioned.

"The Admiral thought it important," Director Shi replied with a frown. "Very important, in fact. These aren't small fish, apparently. Exactly what is at stake in the bigger picture, I am as in the dark as you are."

Shetari nodded. "If that's the case."

"Take Shani with you," Director Shi instructed. "She'll look after you if there's any... issues. The 19:10 regular service bus will take you straight there. The 22:20 spaceport bus will take you straight back to the passenger terminal. There is a small Vixanti public relations office just outside the main security lobby. It will be staffed until midnight. They will arrange to get you back across the port."

"Understood," Shetari responded with a nod.

"When you get to the reception section, something to wear over the gel will be waiting for you," Director Shi answered. "I'm sure you'll find it sufficiently covering so as to limit the amount of unwanted attention you might receive."

"Clothing?" Shetari questioned. "Really? Do we have to? I prefer being naked. Why would that get unwanted attention anyway? I mean... don't people..."

"Um, no," Director Shi replied. "Even if less exquisitely 'attired' people generally do consider the gel to be clothing of a sort... it is rare enough to garner instant attention whenever it appears outside of certain particular circumstances. That may change as it becomes more common, but for now it is best to leave such exposure to its proper time and place."

"Well... fine," Shetari huffed. She wanted to feel the outside air caressing her obsidian

black skin. To feel it washing over her chest. Around her thighs. Her tail. It was hard for her to envision anyone not wanting to feel the same. "I'll wear... whatever. Is there anything else?"

"Just remember, absolutely no detours and no alternative methods of transportation," Director Shi replied, unclasping her hands as she turned toward one of the subterranean residence buildings. "I cannot even try to ensure your safety any other way. Now, Shani will show you the way back up to the reception building. Don't delay. The bus will be here in a half hour."

Shetari nodded and turned to the lioness who's eyes had drifted to the shimmering mass of golden koi within the moat's perfectly clear water. "They're not snacks," she blurted out without even bothering to ask why the lioness was looking at them. The idea, the impression of the yearning, had already passed between them when the lioness had touched her arm.

"So, I guess we're going to my old place to pick up my stuff. How do we get upstairs? Back to the reception building? The bus stop?"

"No touchy the fishy," Shani grumped, shaking her head as she turned away from the pool with a look of deep disappointment. "Always no touchy the fishy. Tasty little fishy. Fresh. Crunchy."

"Never mind the fish for now," Shetari said more firmly. "We need to get up to the surface. Quickly. How do we do that?"

"Oh," Shani replied, turning away from the fish with a look of deep disappointment. "Zoomy rooms. Building three. They go up to desk. Nice girls at desk. Pretty."

Shetari reached out to tug the lioness' arm. The Director's warning flashed through her mind. She drew back. "Well, right," she responded with just a touch of audible frustration. "Let's go. We have to be fast. We have a bus to catch!"



"Kay, kay!" Shani replied, somewhat taken aback by her friend's change in tone. "Follow me."

## FIFTEEN

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# IDENTITY

"Who am I?" Shetari murmured as she sat on the firm bench seat, starting blankly into space as the bus wended its way through the city streets. Darkness had come early, thanks to the dense cloud cover that was soon to unleash six centimeters or more of heavy rain on the city of Mashiva over the coming few days. Sensible folks had already taken cover from the impending storm. The bus was empty, save for the cheetah and her lioness. It was just as well, considering the severity of the identity crisis that was taking place within. "Who... who am I?"

The question was absurd, on the face of it. She knew exactly who she was. Shetari Anwae.

Cheetah felid. Genetic lineage 47B1, exemplified by small to average spots, golden tan hair and minor ear tufts. 28 years of age. 170 centimeters height. 69.5 kilograms. Low body fat. Modest muscle definition. Average glandular endowments. Former Captain of the MV-LT Deyli 32, MV-M Shinava Nin and MV-M Bychera-Ril. Mother to nine Noya-Kes. Currently employed by Vixanti Corporation. And...

That was as deep as she could get. Everything she knew about herself seemed to come from some utterly dispassionate, purely technical list. Each element was stripped bare of whatever deeper meaning it might once have possessed. It all just... was.

"What you mean?" Shani inquired without shifting her wide-eyed gaze from the sparkle of urban lights that flowed past beyond the smoky bus windows. Even now, the first little specks of rain were starting to accumulate on the glass. It wouldn't be long before the

downpour began. That didn't bode well for the task at hand.

"Am I... a machine?" Shetari questioned.

The evidence certainly pointed to Shetari being, or having become, a thing of pure artifice. Despite her sense of self-awareness, her value judgments and the feelings that came with them seemed to have meaning only until the moment the decisions which they informed were made and the resulting tasks completed. Then, it all just went flat, like information stored on a memory card, stripped of all unnecessary parameters to save valuable space.

Her sense of self-control was just as fraught with internal contradictions. She was in control. But she wasn't. There were ideas she couldn't have. Things she couldn't think about. Tasks she couldn't do. She was free. But she was also very tightly programmed. It seemed so obvious. She was a machine. What else

could she possibly be?

"What? Silly! No!" Shani replied, still entranced by the sights of the first real city she had likely ever seen.

"But I am," Shetari answered. "I am a machine. I can't be anything else."

Shani finally turned her gaze from the city lights and poked at her companion's shoulder. "You no machine," she quipped as she ran her finger in a circle along the smooth, flame pattern silk of the cheetah's long, flowing dress. "You spot cat. Pretty spot cat. Shiny spot cat too."

Shetari frowned. Everything about her internal existence pointed to her being a machine. There was no other rational explanation.

"Goo make you all silly," Shani went on, turning back to the bus window. "Some people... extra silly. Messes with head. Does..."

things. Takes time. Gets better.”

"You mean you don't feel... like a... um," Shetari said, struggling to find some description that the primitive huntress might understand. "Like your thoughts are a... set of wood blocks... that you can move around but sometimes someone else moves them too... or keeps you from moving them. Like that."

Shani shook her head. "No. Alluwa. She like you before they say. Goo make her extra-silly. Smarter though. Think fast. Build fast. Make her important."

Shetari sneered at the mention of the sassy, overconfident, sadist of a tigress. If her vague, flat gray memories of the Academy were correct, she had always been a bit of a twerp. A shy, bookish twerp, but a twerp nonetheless.

"She nobody first," Shani added as the bus came to a slow halt in front of a small cafe. "She make goo. Still nobody. Use goo. Then she somebody. That what they say."

Shetari crossed her arms and watched in silence as a pair of young, giggly, green skinned women stepped aboard the bus. Their modest, bare breasts made them look like women, at least. The iridescent freckles that covered their bodies declared them to be leylune, however. True hermaphrodites, their scant, silky skirts no doubt hid quite respectable reproductive packages, both male and female.

"But you too," Shani said as the interlopers took the front seats and began to chat with one another in a bright, almost giddy tone. "You nobody. Get black goo. Now somebody."

Shetari thought for a moment. "But me being somebody was planned ahead," she said, lowering her voice to make extra sure the two leylune couldn't hear what she was saying. "Are you suggesting that they new beforehand that I would be... like this?"

"Mhmm," Shani replied. "Ge... ne... tic..."

something. Something from goo go into all of you. Something from you go into all of goo. You... kind of same now?"

"So I really am a machine," Shetari replied with a low snarl. "Don't you understand? The goo... it's a thing. It's like a kind of machine. If what you just said is true, now I'm a thing. A machine. I can only do what I'm programmed to do. I..."

Shetari's train of thought trailed off. She couldn't remember what she wanted to say. It mustn't have been very important. Indeed, the whole conversation mustn't have been very important. All she could remember was the leylune boarding the bus and sitting down. What had Shani been going on about?

Shani shrugged. "Dunno. But no worry. When we bed... you forget. Never remember. No more problem."

"What problem?" Shetari asked, turning to look at the lioness. Had they been talking



about some problem? The splashes of rain on the bus window were getting bigger, and they were becoming more frequent. The plink of droplets on the bus roof was starting to get louder than the low hum of the electric motors. "Oh, yeah. The rain. I really hope our contact has waterproof bags for us. Otherwise... well, I really don't know what we're going to do to keep my things from getting wet."

Shani looked back at the cheetah with a raised eyebrow.

Shetari suddenly felt very uncomfortable. She looked back toward the front of the bus and ran the glistening black fingers of her right hand through her soft, supple hair. The consistent stretch and bounce seemed soothing, even as she pulled a few strands over her shoulder and stretched them down to the middle of her chest. To her considerable surprise, the thick strands were now as black as the blackness that coated her fingers.

"I don't remember this," Shetari said as she tried to find the place in her memory where the change of hair color had been stored away. Her hair was golden tan. Or at least, it was supposed to be.

"Hmm?" Shani hummed, clearly confused by her companion's own confusion.

"My hair," Shetari replied. "Yours... I only remember it being brown. Mine... it was... gold. Like straw. Not... black. I don't remember it being black."

"Happens," Shani replied. "When it covers head. Maybe fix next time you clean. Maybe not. Depends. Nobody recognize you now. Good, right?"

"I... don't know," Shetari answered as the light patter of rain became a low drumming upon the roof of the bus.

"We get wet," Shani sighed as she watched the rain turn the sidewalks into a wavy,

undulating mirror that reflected a dazzling wash of blurry luminescence into the rain drops that clung to the bus window.

"I'm starting to wish they'd given us umbrellas," Shetari muttered as it became clear that they were going to get soaked, whether they liked it or not. "It's not much further. Four blocks. Dammit, I hope this goes quick. I really need to take a nice long nap. It's been a hell of a day."

Again, the bus slowed to a halt. This time, no one came aboard. Nor did the leylune stand to leave. The door closed. The bus began to move again.

"Odd," Shetari said, looking past the lioness. There wasn't much to see thanks to the intensifying rain, but she thought she could briefly make out a dark shape. Maybe it was just her imagination. Or maybe it was someone who had signaled the wrong bus. There was no way to tell.

Shani, however, bore her teeth toward the passing shadow. "No like," she said in a low, almost vicious growl. "Someone... watching. Someone... bad. Can feel it."

"We'll be careful," Shetari said, shifting about uncomfortably in her dress. It felt unnecessary. Almost alien. And much too restrictive. If there was some danger, running was going to be difficult, if not impossible. Once they were into the apartment, they could change into something less problematic. If they got that far. But even then, what about the trip home? Someone could simply wait for them to leave. They'd have to wait at the bus stop outside the building for at least five or ten minutes. If someone intended them ill, they were as good as trapped. If they followed the plan, that is.

Shetari watched the buildings pass. An idea formed in her head. She slapped at the stop button below the window. "Come on," she said, grabbing Shani by the arm. "We get off here."

"Not right place?" the lioness asked as the cheetah practically dragged her out of her seat.

"Just a few buildings before," Shetari whispered, again very conscious of the leylune in the front seats. "It's a hotel. Decent place. Open lobby and receptionist. If we see anyone suspicious, we can duck inside. Rent a room if we have to."

"That not..." Shani began.

"Shh!" Shetari snapped over her shoulder as she pulled the lioness toward the door in the middle of the bus. "Come on."

The bus came to a halt. The doors opened. Shetari poked her head out. There was no one in front of the hotel. Clear to the right. Clear to the left. She stepped out and drew the lioness forward. They passed between the pillars of the hotel's fancy architectural awning, but stopped short of opening the door.

Shetari pulled her comm from a hidden

pocket. "Vixanti three. Nax. Intelligence. Priority Alpha."

"Connecting," came the effeminate, computer driven reply.

"Nax here," came the intelligence officer's voice after a brief silence. "Don't tell me there's trouble already? I'm knee deep in records hell here. If it's not serious..."

"Shani thinks we're being followed," Shetari interrupted, looking back and forth down the sidewalk as the bus pulled away. "We got out at the Hotel Inya, just in case someone was waiting for us down the road. Can you get a hold of my neighbor to check things out down there and keep watch as we make a run for it?"

"I'll patch you right through. One moment," Nax replied.

"Transferring," came the computer's voice.

A warbling melody sounded for a few

seconds, followed by a vaguely familiar woman's voice. "Hey! Who's this?"

"Anwae," Shetari replied.

"What... where are you?"

"Hotel Inya," Shetari answered. "Possibly being followed. Can you find out if there's anyone waiting to intercept us there?"

"No ones here, I'm outside the front door right now."

"Alright. We're coming," Shetari replied. "I'm going to hang up so you can call for help if need be. Just in case."

"Aight."

Shetari turned to Shani and again took hold of her shoulder as she deactivated her comm. "We pass two buildings, then we're there. As quick as we can go. Come on."

Shani looked around nervously. "Not part

of..."

"Fuck the plan," Shetari snapped as she pulled the lioness out into the rain. In an instant, the contemplated run became a virtual impossibility. The cold rain soaked right through their dresses, making them cling to their bodies almost as tightly as the blackness did. The best they could do was shuffle as the wet fabric bound up around and between their legs.

Shani looked at her companion with an extremely defeated expression on her face.

"Dammit," Shetari hissed. For a brief moment, she was at a total loss on what to do. Then she looked around, shrugged her shoulders, pulled her dress up and held it around her waist. She turned to the lioness. "Come on. Quick."

"Not part of..." Shani again sputtered.

"Don't think, just do!" Shetari replied.



Shani pulled her own dress up and the pair began to run. The street lights made for strange shadows as they began to pass in front of the first of the residential towers. The broad faced, fifteen story building was almost completely dark, owing to renovations taking place throughout the structure. Only a single lamp was lit over the boarded up front door. A crooked sign below the lamp read 'Danger. Keep Out.'

"Bad. Bad." Shani hissed at the same moment Shetari noticed what seemed to be two dark figures just inside the unlit alley between this and the next building.

"See it," Shetari replied. She began to swerve toward the street, checking for traffic as she considered making for the other side, and the little twenty-four hour bar that was tucked away underneath ten floors of short term rental rooms. It was far from the best place to duck into, all things considered, but it was a place. She hadn't gone there very often,

but if her memory served her well, most of the people who tended to hang out there weren't the type to appreciate the sudden appearance of some other neighborhood's rougths.

All of a sudden, there was a commotion at the front door of the next building down the street. A darkly dressed, blue skinned figure was backing slowly out of the front door. There was shouting in a strange foreign tongue. A brown suitcase came flying through the doorway, breaking open in the man's hands as he tried to catch it. Clothing spilled out and onto the ground all around his feet. The shouting got louder. He began to shake his fist at someone inside.

It was at that moment that Shetari made eye contact with one of the figures in the alley. She could swear the man had a sadistic grin on his face and something like a crowbar in his hand. She tensed in preparation to pull Shani across the road. She took one last glance for traffic and was nearly blinded by oncoming blue

strobe lights. Two police cars were approaching, and fast. Shetari read the overall situation and decided the best path was straight forward. By the time the dark figures had a chance to get up to speed for a chase, the police responding to the domestic dispute would already be in their way.

Just as the two felids raced past the furious man and, presumably, his equally furious wife standing in the doorway, the police cars screeched to a halt. For a moment, a chill ran down Shetari's spine as the loud, fast thumping of anti-locking brakes made it clear that at least one of the officers had underestimated the required stopping distance on the wet pavement. She pulled Shani's arm and ran as fast as she could, forward and away from the street. She could hear the police car jump the curb with a dull thump. There was swearing and the brief sound of distant running.

Shetari glanced over her shoulder. Four

police officers had gotten out of the two cars. Two were standing with the now sobbing man. The other two, however, could just be seen heading into the alley where the two figures had been waiting. Did the police just happen to notice them and assumed they were somehow involved with the ruckus? Or were they waiting to lay a beat down on that poor cheating husband, boyfriend or whatever? For the moment, it didn't matter. The rear was secure. Safety, however temporary it might prove to be, lay ahead.

There in the indentation that marked her own apartment building's front door, she could see a familiar, petite figure waiting. It was Sinya, a young ayli woman who had always seemed just a bit too pleased to indulge the cheetah with various... materials. Things that had made her start to think that things like her own experience on Noya were fairly normal. Tame, even, compared to what was out there for a woman, or a man, or a... well, whatever, who might dare to seek it out.

Of course it had all just been part of Vixanti's recruiting effort. Clearly, they had some specific reason to want her, and quite badly, if they were willing to stoop to that fairly low level given their upstanding reputation, however undeserved it might now seem to be. Or maybe they were just trying to make it seem to her like their own activities were perfectly straight and level compared to other things out there.

If her objective had been to desensitize her to disgusting and often quite intimate physical interactions, Sinya had been pretty successful. She had become Shetari's gateway to epic erotic fantasies, often played out in twisted daydreams where her own little self was an all too willing participant. Every time the cheetah laid eyes upon her, her imagination started to race, and now was no exception.

Shetari's wild imagination took hold as she and her lioness raced toward the little purveyor of fantasy. Never before had the

images taken hold so strongly as they now did. Indeed, the obscene erotic narrative that formed in her mind seemed almost real. A thing with a visage of pure terror was chasing them. Tentacles writhed and flung gobs of sticky, yellowish goo everywhere as it seemed to float through the air towards them. They could run. They could run quickly. But it was faster. Much faster. There was no escaping its voracious appetite for concubines.

The tentacles stuck. They lifted Shani up and immediately began to fill her with fluids that would make her more than just a mother to the creature's offspring. She would change. She would become more like it. Indeed, she would eventually become a part of it. But did she scream? No. She was smiling. Giggling. She wanted it to have its way with her. She wanted to feel it impregnate her time and time again. To become part of its body. And she would love every moment of it.

Shetari slowed to let the beast take her. She

wanted it. Just like Shani wanted it. She wanted to feel it. To know it. To be it. Just like the girls in the videos did. It was going to be... glorious!

"Oi! Stop!" Sinya yelped as the two felids nearly plowed her over. "Where the hell you goin?"

"Oh! Sorry! Sorry!" Shetari replied as reality suddenly imposed itself upon her daydream. Shadows of physical sensation lingered, however. She was confused. Very confused. It had just been her imagination. How could it actually feel real? "I'm sorry... too fixated on running."

"Ya sure about that?" Sinya questioned as she opened the door. She looked down at Shetari's crotch and raised her eyebrows. "Ya showin it all down there. Got the hots for somethin?"

Shetari was suddenly aware that the flat barrenness that the blackness had been

presenting to the world had changed. She reached down and ran her fingers over the glistening black labia. She pressed ever so slightly into that special place. Her dull, shadowy state of arousal spiked. She felt like a proper woman again, only much more intensely than she had ever felt it before. She wasn't just a being of sexual inclinations. She was a being of sex. That was her purpose. To have sex. With anyone. Or anything.

"Can ya at least wait til we get inside, hon?" Sinya quipped, shaking her head as she led the two felids into the dark, somewhat dingy lobby with its cheap, peeling wallpaper and mismatched furnishings. Even the fake plants seemed to have given up all hope of being cared for. All were slumped and covered with more than just a coating of dust. "So, whatcha runnin so hard for anyhow?"

"First, the bus stopped, but the person who stopped it didn't get on," Shetari explained as the demands of conversation put her arousal



on ice. As it faded, so too did her feminine folds. After a few moments, her crotch was just a smooth, black surface. Her sense of actually having a physical sex slipped back into the shadows as she let the sopping wet mess of fabric fall back down around her legs. "Shani felt he was watching us. Us specifically. Then... there was at least one, maybe two or more guys two alleys down. Did you see if they stepped out to follow us?"

"Didn't see anyone," Sinya quipped. "Just lunckerhead and his marital problems. Caught his wife cheatin and apparently it's all his fault now. Rumor has it the other guy was gonna beat the shit outta him or somethin like that. Maybe it was him ya saw. Big dude with a scary face and a propensity fer blunt objects. Probably kicked the poor sod out so her new boy could mess him up."

"And couldn't have had better timing," Shetari replied as she looked toward the small reception desk that stood between the lobby

and the landlady's own office and apartment. Just how the old woman had come to own such an expensive piece of real-estate and not be able to afford to have someone else run the place was beyond the cheetah's comprehension. Surely it was making enough money to support a decent lifestyle someplace a lot nicer than this. "Is Miss Avra actually here tonight?"

"Yeah, but no worry," Sinya replied as she gestured toward the stairs. "Everythin's settled already. Figured the storm would cause delays, so I saved us some time. Charged it to the expense account. I'm sure no one will mind."

"And the bags and such?" Shetari inquired.

"Got em," Sinya responded with a nod as she started up the steps.

"Are they..." Shetari began as she followed, carefully hiking up her sopping wet dress just enough to keep her from falling.

"Waterproof?" Sinya replied with laugh. "Aye. Well, at least a fair bit more so than yer clothes."

"We'll change before we leave," Shetari said, shaking her head as she glanced over her shoulder at the tangle of wet fabric that seemed very intent on preventing the lioness from getting to the stairs, let alone up them. "Hike it up again, Shani. You'll be rid of it soon enough. Some of my old dresses ought to fit around your hips, so we can head back dry. If we have umbrellas. Don't let us leave without umbrellas!"

## SIXTEEN

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## HOME

For the city of Mashiva, it was going to be a storm for the record books. The rain had only begun a half hour before, but there were already reports of flooding in some of the outlying neighborhoods. The chill wind was beginning to intensify. It whipped about around and among the cloud piercing pillars of steel and glass that made up the city's commercial heart. Soaring 250 stories above the city streets, these colorfully illuminated spires faced the full force of the storm at altitude, with gusts already reaching 100 knots. They were expected to reach up to 150 as the core of the storm passed overhead during the early morning hours.

Down at the level of the Old City apartment buildings that lay to the west of the city core, the wind wasn't nearly so intense. Still, it drove the heavy rain against the small studio apartment's pair of old, poorly fitted casement windows with considerable ferocity. The caulking around the glass had begun to crack. With each gust, tiny flakes broke away and fell into the dingy gray carpet. It surely wouldn't be long before the panes of glass followed.

Shetari had grabbed an old roll of silvery, rubberized maintenance tape that she kept lying around for emergencies such as this. The adhesive was starting to get a little dry, but it would still stick. Given enough tape, she could at least keep the window panes from falling out. Whether or not she could stop water from dripping through the cracks in the caulking was another matter entirely.

There were, of course, far more important things for Shetari to be doing than worrying about the decrepit old windows. Their state of

disrepair wasn't her fault. It wasn't her responsibility. Still, she just couldn't bring herself to ignore the problem. Who could know how far any water damage might spread in an ancient building like this? She didn't know her neighbors particularly well, but the last thing she wanted to do was force them to endure the results of some disaster that she could at least make an honest attempt to prevent.

"Remind me to leave a note for Miss Avra about these windows before we leave," Shetari said to no one in particular as she pulled the first strip of tape from the roll with a harsh, ripping sound.

"Ay, no worries. I'll do that fer ye," Sinya replied as she did her best to help Shani escape the soaking wet tangle of fabric that had been her dress. It seemed to have become almost impossibly twisted around her tail. No matter how the little ayli tried to pull, twist or stretch the material, it only seemed to get tighter, or even work its way back up toward the lioness'

shiny black rump. "Eh... stop shakin' yer arse, lass. It's not helpin me concentrate, eh?"

Shetari pulled another strip of tape from the roll. The sticky, tearing sound was a very familiar and very comforting thing to her spacefarer's ears. It was the audible signature of an essential piece of kit that had stood the test of time in a way few other tools of the trade had managed to do. Indeed, it had barely changed in the thousands of years since its invention. Since the days of high seas battleships, all metal monoplanes and massive, radial piston petrol engines, engineers, mechanics and tinkerer's had heard that same sound, and smelled that same, rubbery scent as they rushed to make some quick patch or hold some essential items together in the middle of some life threatening emergency. It was the handyperson's secret weapon. Advanced civilization simply couldn't exist without it.

"Ah, there we go," Sinya laughed as she finally managed to free the lioness from the

last, dripping wet coil of fabric that had wrapped around her tail. "That was a bit o werk, eh lass? So, while yer fixin them windows, I'ma get all the dirty stuff together, eh? I can hang onto it in my place for... ye know... safe keepin. That's what we'll call it, right hon? Now, eh... where ye hidin it all?"

Shetari pulled another piece of tape from the roll as she turned to the second window. The more she handled it, the more she realized just how strange it felt to her fingers. It should have felt as familiar as it sounded. But now... something about it was different. Strange. Entirely new, even.

"Lass?" Sinya inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Where's yer... uh... collection of... ye know... the stuff I gave ye?"

"Oh, right. It's in the big closet, next to the bathroom door," Shetari replied as she placed a strip of maintenance tape on one side of the glass. Already, droplets of water were



appearing through the bigger cracks in the caulking. "It's in the boxes on the top shelf. All of them. My really important stuff is in the big gray lock box on the floor in there, and in my desk. I guess the rest of my stuff will just have to wait."

For some reason, Shetari remembered having to wear gloves the last time she had made use of maintenance tape. Otherwise, the adhesive would have torn the fur from her fingers. But... her hands weren't furry, were they? They were smooth. Shiny. And black. Had they ever been furry in the past? She couldn't remember. It was puzzling, but she had no time to try and sort it out. She was wasting enough of that precious resource shoring up the windows.

"Aight," Sinya replied as she bundled up the wet lump in her hands. She turned to toss it onto the little patch of tile that covered the floor in front of the apartment's tiny kitchenette. It landed atop Shetari's discarded

dress with a wet, sloppy splat that sprayed droplets of water all over the old, second rate appliances. "Blegh! Maybe that'd all better go to dry."

At some point in the past, someone had seen fit to paint all of the appliances a dingy, grayish shade of tan that blended into the apartment's ancient wallpaper almost perfectly. It would have made for an extremely depressing living environment had it not been for the darkly sainted, faux-wood wainscoting. The surprisingly ornate panels were a holdover from the building's previous existence as a cheap hotel who's history was as colorful as the seedy characters who had once roamed its halls. If the rumors were true, the basement still housed an old, illicit gambling hall, perfectly preserved in the same condition it had been the day the place had been raided and shut down by police, just over a half century ago. If the more quietly whispered rumors were true, it wasn't so much preserved as it was well maintained and still in operation.

Sinya picked up the sopping wet dresses and reached for the door of the small washer-dryer unit that was mounted in the wall next to the kitchenette. "I'll just toss 'em in to get some o the water out," she said as she pulled on the handle. The door swung to side with ease, and them promptly fell right off. "Or... maybe not. How long's this 'ere been broken, eh?"

"Two months or so," Shetari replied with a shrug as she stepped back from the window and turned her attention to the cheap, fiberboard desk where she kept most of her more recent personal papers. "I sent a maintenance request in. She probably hasn't gotten anyone up here to fix it because I'm so late paying the rent all the time. It still works. You just have to put the door back on by hand every time."

"Eh, well, no time to be foolin with it. I'll take em over te my place te dry later," Sinya said as she dropped the dresses back onto the tile and turned back to Shani. "Say, lass. Mind

payin me back the favor and helpin a short girl out?"

Shani nodded as the little ayli opened the closet door.

"Woah! Ye saved everythin didn'che?" Sinya exclaimed as she looked up at the trio of cardboard boxes that seemed to be crammed full of books, magazines, video chip holders and not a few very unusual looking adult toys who's intended purpose seemed impossible to divine merely by looking at them.

"Uh... yeah," Shetari replied as she opened the top drawer to get the most important of her papers. It was where she kept all of her professional documents, as well as the little locking purse with her bank information and everything else of critical importance to her recent job hunt. "So... tell me. Why did you give me so much of that alien smut anyway? I mean... not that I'm complaining or anything. It's just that in retrospect it does seem a

little... excessive."

Sinya's golden face turned bright red. "Om... um... well... ye see..."

Shetari looked over her shoulder with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, if ye really have te know," Sinya responded with a bit lip and a look of devastating embarrassment. "I'm kinda... well... inte that kinda stuff me-self. Ye know. It gets me motor runnin. An... uh... well... one of me favorite of them 'XenoExotic Girls'... well... oh, do I have te tell ye? Um... yeah. I... well... ye kinda look a bit like 'er... an... uh..."

"Uh... yeah," Shetari replied with a wry smile. To say that the girl in question looked a bit like her was a considerable understatement. They were practically twins. Watching Miysa's videos was like watching herself in some magic mirror, doing things beyond the consideration of any rational mind. It was a shame Miysa had decided to 'go all the

way' while toying with a fully functional zeshi bio-resynthesizer that was supposed to have just been a background prop in a new profile video. It had been the most disgusting of things to watch, repulsive in so many ways that it was amazing that the video had become such a huge hit, let alone get released in the first place. And yet... it was still one of the most bizarrely, terrifyingly erotic things Shetari had ever seen. "I know exactly who you're talking about. She was... uh... quite the thing."

"Almost makes ye wanna try a bit o the life, eh?" Sinya asked with a mischievous chuckle as her blush began to fade. She helped Shani guide the first of the boxes down to the floor. It was mostly filled with well read magazines covering erotic topics from the purely mundane to the truly alien and extreme. The dozen or so that featured Miysa seemed particularly well read, a few to the point of falling apart despite their relatively recent publication. "Ye know, more o the life than

Vixanti offers, eh?"

Shetari snorted. As stimulating as it all might have been in the mind's eye, she had experienced more than her fair share on Noya. It wasn't something she wanted to go through again. At least not anything as slimy and smelly as that had been, that is. There were a few things that were considerably less outrageous. They might even be fun. But still, they were just a bit too far outside her comfort zone to contemplate.

"Well, suit yerself," Sinya replied with a grin. "But me... I've been considerin givin it a go when I finally get me-self outa Vixanti. Them places are always hirin girls for one thing or another. Looks like it could be a bit o fun, te be honest. Maybe try getting that Myalli girl te join me. She's a hottie, ain't she? Woo-wee!"

Shetari just shook her head as she turned back to the desk drawer. Save for a few

paperclips and some stray thumb tacks, it was completely empty. "Uh..." It took her a few very long moments for her to remember that she had taken everything out of the drawer earlier in the day. She'd had that interview with Vixanti Corporation, after all. She had passed it all to the receptionist before she had gotten in that pod and...

"Ye aight there, lass?" Sinya asked as Shetari stood stiff and silent.

"The blackness... the... it... it isn't really part of me?" Shetari stammered as she raised a hand and gazed into her own reflection upon her fingers. Images flashed through her mind. Images of a time before the blackness. Memories of sensations. Of cool air flowing through her fur. Of being free from its all encompassing grasp. And... of being free from its uncompromising will.

Shetari began to turn, slowly, even as the blackness tried to take control and wipe the



thoughts from her mind, just as it had done on the bus. This time, however, there was no preventing her from focusing upon a clear, indisputable image of what she once was. Hung upon the wall over the head of her disheveled, satin covered bed was a large photograph. There couldn't be any denying it. It was her, there, on the day of her first solo spaceflight. She was standing next to the little, two seat trainer that she had taken command of that wonderful day. And she was wearing... something. Something that didn't include the blackness.

"Lass?" Sinya questioned more forcefully.

"Goo brain," Shani replied with a shrug. "All silly. Pretty bad."

"Ye mean she don't got control of 'erself? Or 'er gel?" Sinya demanded, turning to face the lioness in shock. "An they let 'er out? Are they crazy? Do ye know what it means?"

Shani again shrugged.

"It means the stuff's got some bit o its own mind left to it and it don't think she's gonna try an keep it alive, that's what," Sinya replied, waving at Shetari with one hand while groping about for her personal comm with the other. "So it thinks its gotta keep itself alive, so its trying te take control of 'er! An every time she figures it out, it makes the goop try harder! Next thing ye know, it's gonna wipe all 'er memories and be walkin her around like a puppet zombie! And they... they didn't fix it before they sent 'er out here? Hells! I... I dunno what te do!"

Shetari bit her lip as Sinya's words sliced through the clouds that the blackness was trying to impose upon her mind. Could it really be true? Could this blackness actually be able to control her? It seemed so impossible, but it the contradictions that seemed to be jumping out all around her were more than enough evidence to show her exactly what was going on. But how could she stop it? How could she take back control of the mind that she couldn't

even be sure was actually hers at this point?

It was impossible for Shetari to hide her thoughts from the blackness. However, as long as she could maintain some semblance of clarity, the blackness couldn't hide its own intentions from her either. Though the gel's own thoughts were almost purely impressions of interacting animal instincts, its current objective was now all too clear to its virtually helpless captive. It was going to strip her of her ability to sense the world around her. It was going to strip her of every last bit of her individual identity. And if it succeeded... it was never, ever, ever going to give her a moment of freedom again.

Shetari could feel the gel liquefying around her neck, just as it had done in the secret Vixanti laboratory only a few hours before. It quickly flowed upward, covering her snarling face with a featureless black mask. If the blackness had its way, it would be the only face that she would ever again present to the world.

There was nothing she could do to stop it. She could struggle. She could squirm. She could refuse to submit. But she could never, ever escape.

"Oh, gawdess lass! Do somethin!" Sinya yelled, swatting at Shani's hind end as the two watched the gel upon Shetari's body begin to undulate. "It's gone wild... it's gonna take 'er over an... an..."

Shetari couldn't hear Sinya's exclamation. She couldn't see what her companions might be doing to try to save her. Everything was gone. She was floating in a swirling mass of gloriously warm and thick liquid. It seemed so serene. So nice. So... desirable.

Something slammed into Shetari as her resurgent willpower began to ebb away. She stumbled and fell onto a smooth, soft surface. It felt like a nice place to take a nap. She was feeling tired after all. The blackness would take care of her. It would fix everything that

was bothering her. And when she finally woke... she would belong to it. Be its servant. Its slave. It was going to take her body. It was going to do things to her without her consent. Over and over and over again. And it was going to be just so wonderful that she would never want to...

However thoroughly the blackness thought it had plugged Shetari's ears, she could still hear the muffled roar of the furious lioness. She could feel her primitive guardian casting herself onto the bed embracing her with such strength that her foggy mind became suddenly, and very frighteningly, clear. She could feel the teeth that dug into the gel upon her neck. And then... she could feel her... everything.

Shetari and Shani ceased to be separate organisms. The gel upon their bodies flowed together wherever the two were touching. It bound them together within a single, and to the utter shock of its sole witness, rapidly growing mass. The two feminine forms

wiggled and squirmed at the center of a spreading puddle of perfectly reflective black liquid. This mass of slime and thrashing limbs somehow stayed perched upon the top of the queen sized mattress. The cream colored satin offered a vivid contrast to the living obsidian that threatened to envelop it, and possibly everything else in the room, as it continued to spread.

"Uh... what the ever lovin feck?" Sinya gasped she gawked at the bizarre scene that was unfolding before her eyes. "Sweet gawdess, wha'do I do? Do I do anythin? Dammit!"

Shetari was too stunned by the onslaught of pure, primal anger for her thoughts and feelings to flow as one with those of the lioness who now completely dominated her. Viscous snaps of unbridled fury shot out in all metaphysical directions, tearing into the intentions of the blackness like so many swipes of the lioness' razor sharp claws. The

blackness seemed to shrink away from the violent external power that had forced itself into the unity that it was attempting to impose on its own helpless host. Its instinctual drives had brought upon it the very threat of total destruction that it had sought to avoid by establishing complete dominance over her. There was nothing it could do to escape.

There was only one option left to the blackness. One option that might allow it to preserve itself in some way. It could subsume her, transforming her into its own substance and convert them into a gummy. A doll for someone else's pleasure. Her mind would be forever imprisoned in this inanimate form, but they would both still, at least technically, survive as a living, unified organism. Just as well, the violent assailant would be caught up in the process as well.

It was the last gasp of a fading power. The mixing in of the lioness' own gel had already diluted the strength of cheetah's blackness.

Now, its overbearing power was spreading throughout the whole of the combined mass. Even as the transformative process was just beginning, Shetari's gel lost its power to dominate. It could only submit.

Without warning, the spreading blackness began to solidify, just as it was beginning to flow down the side of the bed. Shetari fell limp as the sensations of the lioness suddenly vanished. She could feel herself being pulled up and off the bed, just as the gel began to solidify around her. She could feel a tingling throughout her body. She knew exactly what was happening. It was just like in the magazines. Just like in the videos. It was too late. There was no escape.

Shetari was pulled from the sticky grasp of the gel and found herself being practically thrown to the floor beside the bed. The tingling faded as she lay there, as inanimate as a rock. It was done. She was a doll. A toy for someone's erotic entertainment. Or... was she?



By all rights, it should have been too late the moment the gel had begun its transformation. Too late for her. And too late for the lioness. But now, despite her limp body, her senses had begun to return, and in the same ultra-enhanced fashion as they had been back at Vixanti. Again, she marveled at the degree of total awareness, even as she reeled from the nagging sense of being helplessly inanimate.

Slowly, a sense of strength returned to Shetari's body. She began to squirm. She could feel the harsh commercial rug rubbing on the surface of her beautiful obsidian skin, a skin that felt somehow different than it had before. Something had changed. Something deep. Something primal.

Again, evolution. The balance of the unity had shifted. Shetari no longer needed to submit to the blackness. She well and truly WAS the blackness, and in ways that almost all who had ever served as hosts for the gel couldn't possibly imagine!

Thanks to her genetic affinity, it had already caused Shetari's body to change in strange and very permanent ways. It had insinuated itself into every cell of her body, transforming her into a completely new species of humanoid being. Her tongue wasn't shiny black because it was coated with the slime. It simply was shiny black now, as was the rest of her mouth. Indeed, almost the entirety of her body was as black as black can be. Only her eyes, skin and fur seemed to have escaped visible change, though her hair remained permanently thick, stretchy and as black as the gel that encased her.

Shetari could sense that she no longer needed external help to dress or undress her body with the gel. It was just a matter of desire now. It could pass through her skin and fur or flow from whatever orifice she might desire. It could cover however much, or however little, that she pleased, whenever she pleased. It could even be passed to another, should she desire.

As Shetari's strength slowly began to return, she found herself being shaken by a very concerned looking lioness. Apparently, her newfound power over the gel had protected her companion as well as herself. They had escaped, and by just a hair's breadth.

"Up! Up!" Shani panted. "What wrong? I fix! I fix! Up!"

Shetari tried to speak, but the gel that completely filled her mouth kept her from making even the slightest of sounds. She directed a brief, forceful desire to have her head freed. The gel rapidly liquefied and melted back into the coating upon her body with a wet, sloppy gurgle.

"Ah! Oh... oh!" Shetari gasped as the gel within her mouth receded down her throat. Her sensitive gag reflex had long gone, making the sensation feel quite pleasant. She blinked several times as her eyes adjusted to the light. "Oh! Hey!"

Shani drove her nose hard under the cheetah's left cheek for a long hard sniff before offering her nose a brief lick.

"Oh, thank the gawdess," Sinya sighed with deep relief. "I thought ye'd got dolled for a minute there."

Shetari bit her lip and took a deep breath as her mind cleared. "Oh, this has been one fucking day from hell, hasn't it?" she groaned as she tried to sit up. For the very first time, she could actually remember everything that had happened. Every conversation. Every sensation. Every attempt by the blackness to control her. It was all extremely unsettling, but at least the worst seemed to be over. Unless, that is, her transformed body had any hidden surprises in store.

Shetari looked to Sinya and frowned deeply. "How did fuck I get myself into this mess? How am I going to get myself out of it? This stuff... this slime... I really, really feel like I'm

actually made of it now. No one ever said anything about that. I... I need to get back there and find out. "

"Oi, not so fast," Sinya said as the cheetah struggled against her shaky muscles. "There's still work te do 'ere, eh? And a lot less time te get it done in, to boots."

Shetari rubbed her forehead with both hands. "Oh, right," she said as she tried to regain her composure. "Right. You... you take care of all that smut. I just need a minute. The key to the lock box is here somewhere. We'll get the other stuff bagged up. Then... then... I need answers. Real answers. Not this half baked bullshit everyone's been telling me. Especially not that Alluwa bitch. She's got some explaining to do... or... or else."

## SEVENTEEN

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### PERIL

Lightning flashed outside the windows of Shetari's apartment as Sinya slipped back in for the fifth and final time. Everything was in order. The objectives of the mission nearly complete, and with plenty of time to spare. The bus to take Shetari and Shani back to the Mashiva Spaceport would be arriving in about forty-five minutes. Unless the increasingly brutal storm was causing delays, that is.

Shetari gazed out of the window, down toward the wavering flicker of the yellow street light below. It was, perhaps, fortunate that the intense rain obscured the finer details of the outside world. Although the biogel had lost its battle for the control of her mind, the

effects still lingered. Some things had been altered in ways that the mere breaking of control could not undo. Other things seemed to have become far more deeply ingrained. She was aware that they weren't a part of who she was before. She was also aware that there was no longer any separating them. The changes that had been wrought were permanent. Oh, so very permanent. Was that a good thing? A bad thing? She didn't know. But she had to know. And she wasn't going to let anyone back at Vixanti get a moment's rest until she did.

There were so many things for her to remember. So many things to untangle and put back in their proper place. The biogel had only had her in its possession for half of one day. Looking back, it seemed more as if an entire lifetime had passed.

There was no denying the absurdity of it all. None of it made sense. Not even her own decisions that had led her to seek the job interview in the first place. It was all just a

jumble of random events all mashed together, simmered for a few hours and served in a bowl made up of nothing but false hopes and self delusion. She'd cast herself into the abyss without a second thought and then...

It was a game, wasn't it? It couldn't be anything else. There's no other way she'd have been entrusted with a position of authority. It was all just for show. Just to craft some narrative to make things look like they were perfectly 'normal', if that was even a word that could be honestly used in the same sentence as 'Vixanti'. But if it was a game... if it was a show... who was the intended audience?

"Oi! Bad news," Sinya announced as she closed the door behind her, breaking Shetari from her reverie. "Checked the news like ye asked. Bus's all canceled. Tried callin a cab. No dice. Subrail's still runnin tween here an the spaceport though. Closest station's just two blocks past the Inya. Yer gonna get wet, but if ye really have te get back te Vixanti..."



Shetari frowned. Two blocks past the hotel in this weather was two blocks too far. It didn't matter how well her most important things had been packed. They'd almost certainly be ruined. She simply couldn't risk it.

Shetari turned away from the window and picked up her comm from the now empty desk. "Vixanti Three. Nax. Intelligence. Priority Alpha."

The smooth, effeminate voice of the computer replied. "Unable to connect to Vixanti Three due to storm related conditions. Would you like me to notify you when connectivity has been reestablished?"

"Dammit! Yes," Shetari snapped. She slammed the comm back onto the desk and snarled. "Seriously? In the middle of a city where everything's got quad redundancy? It's star-comm for fuck's sake! There should be a satellite connection! Station bounce! Something! What a load of total bullshit!"

Sinya shrugged. "Got the same on me own comm. Thought it was jus actin up. So... whado we do now? Stay put?"

Shetari turned back to the window. Director Shi had been very specific about the absolute need to return to Vixanti Three after they had finished their business at the apartment. Whatever information had led to that instruction had come from no less than Admiral Sarva himself. Was it because of some genuine imminent danger? Or was the Director trying to make sure that Vixanti's newest employee wouldn't be out of reach for any longer than absolutely necessary?

"What did they tell you about this part of the plan?" Shetari asked the little ayli as she pondered the next move. A dark, boxy shape was moving down the street, sending ripples of rain water splashing up over the curb as it advanced. It had no lights turned on, a strange enough thing on a clear night, let alone one dominated by such aggressively inclement

weather. It reminded her of the tracked armored personnel carriers that she had watched racing down the spaceport runway earlier that day. Had the Admiral sent someone to bring her back to Vixanti?

"Not much," Sinya replied with a shrug. "Jus that ye had te get back, no matter whats. Didn wanna give anyone the time te corner ye or somethin like that. Awful dramatic an silly, te be honest. If they were really worried, why would they sent ye out te this part of town in the first place, eh?"

Shetari's fleeting hope of rescue from her conundrum passed along with the dark shape below. It splashed along on its way without slowing. "Hmm... Home Guards?" she contemplated aloud. Given the circumstances, it make sense. If the typically unflappable cabbies were taking shelter, chances are the police were finding their regular cars quite useless in the flooded streets. When that happened, the Home Guard would always loan

personnel, trucks and armored vehicles better capable of withstanding the onslaught of Mother Nature.

"Already?" Sinya asked. "Floodin must be gettin really bad. Might need a boat te get te the subrail."

Shetari nodded in agreement. The roads really were little more than rivers at this point, channeling the water towards the city's broad drainage canals. Form there, the water would make its way north, to the Sinja River, over the Mashiva bluff and down into the vast, sandy floodplain beyond. The Old City of Mashiva itself was built upon a high bluff that sat between the Sinja and the much larger Mashiva River to the south. It was high enough above the plain that any flooding would be largely local. It would only hamper traffic for as long as the rain fell, and perhaps for a little time afterwards.

Given the current weather forecast, if

Shetari were to stay put, it would mean she and Shani would have to spend the entire night at the apartment, and perhaps another whole day after. Even if the rain itself were to hamper any attempt to trap them, there would be more than enough time between the end of the storm and the resumption of public transit to do the deed. She wondered if it would be best for them to move to the Hotel Inya itself, where there would be far less of a chance for nefarious activity to go unnoticed.

Shetari turned to take a good, last look around the apartment. "Are we sure we have everything settled?"

"Yep," Sinya replied with a nod. "Compy and yer pictures and stuff are in the briefcase. Papers triple bagged. Smut's in me place fer... eh... 'review'. Jus the wardrobe lef, really. An the furniture. So, unless ye want me to start haulin that around right now and makin' lots a noise, looks like we've got it all."

"Good," Shetari replied with deep sigh. "Alright. Here's the new plan. Staying here is too risky. Trying to make it to the subrail station is a no-go in this weather. Even if we make it there, there's no guarantee that it won't be shut down mid-trip. Instead, Shani and I will move to the Inya and wait until we can get through to Nax. Or at least until the buses start running again."

"Uh... ye sure ye want te do that?" Sinya questioned.

"We have to," Shetari replied. "Unless, of course, you know about some plan B that Vixanti had for all this?"

"Well, no," Sinya answered with a shake of her head.

"Then we move to the Inya," Shetari said as she picked her comm back up and headed for the closet. "We just need something to wear first. Let's see..."

Shetari rummaged through her sparse collection of attire. Her short spacefaring career had taught her to live light and avoid collecting lots of things that would have to be packed away in storage every time she headed off on an extended tour of duty. Clothing was almost always the chief offender when it came to unnecessary baggage, and she only kept two of any particular class of outfit. Two formal. Two casual. Two active. Two bedtime. Two jackets. That was it. It was a policy that had served her well, until now.

It was easy enough for Shetari to pick something out for herself. A bright blue shirt. Loose fitting, shimmery black athletic pants. The biogel ensured that she didn't need anything else. But what did she have that would fit around Shani's broader, more muscular waist? There was only her matching set of light gray sweat shirt and sweat pants. They would soak up water like sponge, but at least they wouldn't restrict movement like a dress.

Shetari handed the sweatsuit to Shani. "Here, put that on. I'll do my best to keep you dry with the umbrella, but I think we're both going to get soaked regardless."

"Ye really sure ye wanna do this?" Sinya asked as the two women quickly dressed. "I mean, ye could hide out in me apartment fer the night. Watch some vids. Have a little fun. Ye know. Specially after that ordeal o yers. Gotta relax. Rest u pa bit, eh?"

"I do appreciate the offer, but it's still far too risky," Shetari replied as she tucked her shirt into her pants. "If there's any real danger, we'd be as cornered in there as we would be in here. With these thick walls... no one would notice that something's wrong until it's far too late. Inya's a proper modern hotel. They've got noise and violent motion detection. One grab. One punch. One yell. That's all it takes to set off the security alarms and call police."

"Well... aight," Sinya replied as Shetari



picked up the briefcase and an umbrella. "But, uh... don't ye want te wait til the right time? The bus wouldn be here for another... twenty minutes or so. I mean, that's timin's gotta be important, right? Like... really important?"

"No," Shetari responded with a raised eyebrow. Sinya's desire to keep them from heading out into the violent weather was understandable, but why insist on the defunct plan's timing at the last moment? "If the dolts back at Vixanti can't be bothered to set up a plan B, knowing full well the weather that was forecast, then their plan A is... well, lets just call it suspect."

"If ye say so," Sinya shrugged. "Jus... ye know. Be careful."

Shetari turned to Shani. "Alright, you take the bags and I'll try to keep you dry."

"Whatcha wan me te do?" Sinya asked.

"Go down a little bit ahead of us and make

sure the lobby's clear," Shetari replied. "Once we're out the door and out of sight, let the landlady know about the windows and then head back up to your room and keep trying to get through to Nax."

"Aight," Sinya responded, turning toward the door. "Ready?"

"Ready," Shetari declared with a nod.

Sinya opened the door and took a left turn down the dingy, dusty corridor. The lights briefly flickered as she took a right turn and vanished through the stairwell door. A particularly loud rumble of thunder shook the building.

Shetari looked up and down the corridor before following the little ayli. It wasn't hard for her to imagine every one of her neighbors sitting in front of their video screens, watching the news anchors brooding over every little blocked storm drain and fallen twig, blissfully unaware of the crisis that had so recently

taken place so close at hand. She smiled at the irony as she reached for the stairwell door. The world was turning. Grand things were taking place. And it was all going completely unnoticed, simply because a bunch of bland old talking heads thought it all somehow less newsworthy than a little rain.

The lights flickered again as Shetari started down the stairs. The lightning strikes were getting closer. She picked up her pace, looking over her shoulder to make sure Shani was still following close behind. "Let's be quick. There's no generator in this building. If the lights go out... well, let's just that that I'm not sure the emergency lights have been tested in the last decade or so. The sooner we get downstairs, the better."

Shani nodded as she followed the cheetah downward. There were only three flights of stairs between Shetari's apartment and the lobby. As the lights continued to flicker with each clap of earth shaking thunder, it started

to seem more like there were twenty.

Finally, Shetari could see the lobby. Only a few more steps to go. The building shook. The lights flickered a few times in rapid succession. Then, they failed entirely.

Shetari stood frozen at the brink of taking the last step down into the lobby. The darkness that surrounded her seemed even blacker than the gel that coated her body. It was only momentary. The emergency lights flashed on.

Where once the yellow light of the kitschy faux-candelabras had given the dingy lobby a modest air of faded respectability, the searing white light that now shone forth from the emergency lighting revealed the full truth. It was just trashy. Nothing more. Maybe a bit less.

"The rent was cheap," Shetari muttered as she glanced over her shoulder and noted Shani's look of complete disgust.

"Well, ain't that a bugger," Sinya huffed in displeasure as she opened the front door and looked out into the pouring, wind driven rain. She turned back to Shetari, her entire front completely soaked. "Bleh! Pfft! Well... Inya's still lit up. They got a big arse generator over there. But heavens... it's dark out there. Are ye sure ye wanna make a run for it? Maybe wait an see if the power comes back up. Eh?"

Shetari hesitated. Darkness could hide danger, but it could hinder it just as well. "Yes. Yes. We have to," she hissed as she worked up the courage to head out into the rain. It was clear that any attempt to make use of the umbrella was going to be more trouble than it was worth. They were going to get soaked again. "Well, I guess we're getting drenched. Alright, Shani. On the count of three, we run for it. One... two... three!"

"Mind the steps!" Sinya blurted out as Shetari charged headlong out the door. "Mind the..."

Whether or not the cheetah heard the warning, it wouldn't have mattered. No sooner had Shani followed her out of the door, four dark figures jumped out from among the half dead shrubbery that was located to either side of the door. Two of the gigantic alien men grabbed at the women from behind. The other two turned toward the open door, only to find it being slammed in their faces.

For Shetari, it was over the moment it had begun. The massive alien twisted her arms behind her back and forced her down onto her knees. She shrieked back toward the now locked door. "Alpha Zero! Alpha..." was she managed to get out before a huge, gloved hand grabbed her around the face in an attempt to silence her. She could only hope that Sinya could hear her, and that she understood spacefarer's verbal status codes.

"Shut up, bitch," the alien hissed. "An stop strugglin. Don damage da goods, the boss says. So don make me damage the goods, or so help

me... I'm gonna get real mad!"

Shetari didn't care much for what the alien wanted. She struggled as best as she could. There was little she could do to break free from the huge thug, however. Her knees hit the concrete pavement hard, sending sharp pains shooting up her legs. "Mmmmm!" she swore as the thug tightened his grip on her arms. Even as she tried to wiggle her way free, one of the three giants behind her let out a sharp, pain wracked yelp.

A sickening crack sent a shudder down Shetari's spine. The alien fell to the ground beside her. He writhed in pain, flopping around on the wet pavement like a fish stranded out of water, just as helpless as she herself was in the grasp of her own assailant. Dark blood poured from brutal slashes that had been torn across the left side of his bony, dark olive face. His right arm was twisted into an extremely unnatural looking position, so thoroughly broken that it looked like his black

leather jacket was the only thing keeping it from falling clean off.

Shetari continued to utter muffled curses as she tried to get loose from the alien's grip. Sinya had been right. They should have waited. They should have stayed in the apartment. They might have had a fighting chance if they could block the door or use it as a bottleneck. Anything would have been better than heading out into the storm, really. But what was the use in thinking of all those things now? All that was left was to fight, and hope her fierce companion could do enough damage to get these beasts to retreat.

The rain had saturated Shetari's fur almost the moment she had stepped out into the storm. Thanks to the lubrication and a considerable amount of very painful effort, she was able to slip the top side of her muzzle free. She bit down hard on the first errant finger to find its way into her mouth. The fake leather of the alien's glove tasted positively acrid as



she sank her teeth into its surface. It made her want to gag, but she refused to let go.

The alien responded to the sudden pain by spitting on the back of his captive's neck. He placed his knee square in the middle of her back and began for force her down even further. There was little she could do to resist except to keep biting. Maybe, if she was lucky, he would go too far. He would loose his grip. Maybe.

Shetari struggled to think clearly. She was in total control of the biogel, wasn't she? She could make it do whatever she wanted. But what did she want it to do?

Tears of desperation flowed from Shetari's eyes as Shani hissed and cursed behind her. It was clear from the change in the raging lioness' tone that the remaining two aliens had finally managed get a firm grip on her. Their own harsh snaps of alien invective made it clear that she had managed to do them more

than just superficial harm, however. They may have gotten hold of the lioness for the moment, but could they keep hold of what they had so dearly won?

Hope of escape faded as Shetari looked up just in time to see a half dozen more dark figures approach from the street. It was over. They were done. What would come next... that was something she didn't want to contemplate.

"You gon sing like little bird," the alien huffed into Shetari's ear as he pressed her down until her breasts nearly touched her knees. "You gon tell boss all the goods. An then... then boss make you little shiny black doll. Then you get fucked. Yeah. Fucked and fucked and fucked. Cuz that's what little shiny black dolls are for. And you... you like it, little bird. You like it good. Cuz that's what you gonna be. Little shiny fuck doll. What you think, little bird? What you..."

A blinding flash of searing red light. An ear

shattering metallic twang. The hiss of rain drops flashing to steam. Shetari screeched and rolled away as the alien's grip went limp. His massive, lifeless body crumpled into a heap right where she had been kneeling only a moment before.

"Oh... ah..." Shetari panted as she struggled to stand. Her knees hurt. Her arms hurt. Her back hurt. Her jaw hurt. She felt sick. But she was going to stand. She had to stand. She had to get up and find Shani. And then they would run. Run away. Someplace. Someplace safe. And then...

Harsh new hands took hold of Shetari, lifting her bodily up off the ground by the arms and legs. Her struggle against the alien had left her too weak to resist these new and disturbingly silent assailants. There was nothing she could do as they carried her toward a dark, ominous shape that seemed to hover just a few centimeters over the water filled street.

Behind Shetari, Shani snarled. She snapped. She hissed. But just like the cheetah, she was too spent to offer more than token resistance.

"Quiet! Both of you!" a low, authoritative voice snapped as Shani found some sort of hidden reserve of strength and began to struggle in earnest. "Especially you, tawny-cat! Do you want your friend here to get hurt? Keep it up and she will. I mean it!"

Shani let out a viciously bestial hiss as a door in the side of the low, shiny black vehicle opened to one side. It was a small limousine of sorts, but heavily built and lacking any visible means of locomotion. Privately owned hover cars of any type were rare in the Empire. The risks posed by large volumes of uncontrolled air traffic in urban environments was the usual reason offered in objection to their use. In reality, they were simply considered uncouth, pointless and dangerous status symbols of the irresponsible rich. The Empress herself had made it clear enough by her explicit rejection

of that mode of transport, preferring instead to travel as her people do, firmly fixed to the ground except as absolutely required.

Those hover cars that did take flight around the Empire usually belonged to those who, for one reason or another, preferred to project an image of unrepentant avarice. Wealth evangelists, criminals, people with more money than brain cells. Those were the sorts who didn't have a second thought about being seen flitting around in a hover car. The main consolation for the general public was the carefully maintained list that such folks would invariably find their names inscribed upon, by the hand of no less than the Empress herself. Persona-non-grate in the halls of power. Permanently excluded from the public trust.

Shetari landed hard on the hover-limo's darkly carpeted floor. She didn't even have a chance to catch her breath before Shani landed squarely on top of her. Her briefcase and bags followed a moment later, spraying water

everywhere as they hit the floor. The door slammed shut. The limousine immediately began to move. Forward. And upward.

"Fucking..." Shetari began to swear under her breath as she tried to untangle herself from the equally irate lioness. Her muscles tensed as she expected some new set of hands to take hold of her, and apply some more sturdy means of restraint to her sore, battered body. Her expectation was met by silence. Silence, and a pair of black, distinctly military style boots.

Shetari's eyes fixed on the well polished footwear, even as she tried to get up onto her hands and knees. They looked... odd. Out of place. And... somehow familiar.

Shetari's gaze moved upward, from the boots, to the crisply ironed black pants. From there, she shifted to the black leather overcoat, and its luxurious trim of fluffy white wool around the inside of the collar. She began to

shake as she looked into his eyes. It was as if she had been cast straight into the frozen eighth layer of the nine hells. Ice. Ice, piercing straight into the deepest recesses of her soul!

## EIGHTEEN

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# STORM CLOUDS

"It is far from wise to assume that your own unplanned decisions are going to be accurately predicted by the people that you're trusting to look after you," Admiral Sarva dryly noted as he gazed down upon the two sopping wet women with his icy blue eyes and deeply disapproving frown. "To say your timing was less than ideal would be a considerable understatement."

An intense flash of lightning lit up the interior of the hover-limo just as it climbed clear of the confines of the city street. Shetari could just make out the subtle pattern of leopard spots on the Admiral's cheeks. Given the circumstances, it was an odd thing to focus



on. To the terrified and confused cheetah, however, anything was better than looking back into his biting judgmental eyes.

"Ten minutes more, and I could have taken all four alive and without a moment's inconvenience to yourselves," the Admiral continued. "Consider yourselves very fortunate that I had the wherewithal to preposition well in advance of your expected departure. I can at least console myself with the fact that these particular brutes were merely a chance target of opportunity. I was actually expecting a more, shall we say, 'local' showing of unpleasantness."

Shetari slowly pulled herself up onto the leather bench seat at the rear of the limo's passenger compartment, directly opposite the scowling Admiral. Every little movement was accompanied by sharp twangs of pain. All of her muscles ached. She began to wonder how many bruises were forming under the glistening black gel. The stuff had apparently

done little to protect her from injury at the hands of the alien thug. That was certainly odd for something that was supposed to act as an alternative to most other forms of protective attire.

"At any rate, I'm sure the information gained from the three survivors will prove to be worth all of the trouble," the Admiral went on, turning his head to look out the window at the passing city lights. The wash of rainwater that ran over the surface of the thick, almost certainly armored glass, made the little points of luminescence flicker and dance. For a brief moment, the Admiral's harsh expression seemed to soften. "Once they come to a full understanding of exactly who they're dealing with, I have little doubt that they will be more than eager to cooperate. And, if not... well, perhaps it's best not to speak of such things in polite company."

Shetari sank her head into her hands, but not before another flash of lightning revealed

the two heavily armed gunships that had taken up escort positions to either side of the vehicle. The hover-limo was heading eastward toward the vast, open Mashiva Flats. She was too embarrassed to speak. She really wasn't sure which was more frightening. Was it the aliens who had ambushed her and their horrifying purpose, or the seemingly all-powerful Admiral and all that his presence and interest might well represent?

"I certainly didn't expect the Makta Organization to be quite so brazen when they knew full well that I was present and on the hunt," the Admiral added, turning his sharp gaze back toward the cheetah. "It will be interesting to see how the J'zo Family takes the intrusion on to their turf. I'm not sure the Makta quite comprehend the reach the J'zo have, despite their reputation for not wanting to make waves in the underworld. I would not be surprised if the Makta find themselves in need of a new leader in the very near future. But... I really do digress. The matters of

organized crime are purely secondary to my mission here in Mashiva. They merely provide the convenient excuse to separate you from Vixanti for a little while more."

"Separate me from Vixanti?" Shetari asked softly as Shani drew herself up onto the seat close beside her. Water from their sopping wet clothing formed little puddles among the wrinkles in the black leather and every movement was accompanied by wet squishy sounds that seemed positively uncouth in the presence of the Admiral.

There was a brief, awkward silence. Admiral Sarva's expression darkened. "Before we continue, I need to make something very, very clear. From this point forward, you will do as I say, without question. You will also answer every question I ask you, no matter how personal, without question. It is not a matter for debate. Do you understand?"

"What... why?" Shetari stammered, looking

up from her hands just as another flash of lightning lit up his face. His cold, demanding snarl sent a shudder down her spine.

"Do you understand?" Admiral Sarva repeated, the tone of his voice lowering to the point where his words came out as more of a growl than a proper sentence.

"Yes... yes... sir," Shetari sputtered. She didn't understand, of course. How could she? It was just another random seeming twist to what was shaping up to be the worst day of her life thus far.

"Good," Admiral Sarva noted, turning his gaze to the intensely displeased lioness. "And I trust your companion understands that my orders are the orders of the Empress? Does she understand that her tribal obligations are to the Empress who allows her to be a guest in her realm, rather than the business that happens to employ her at the moment?"

"Empress? You mean Grand Matriarch?"

Grand Priestess?" Shani asked in a tone almost as nervous as it was angry. It was hard enough for a primitive tribal like her to try to translate Vixanti's own hierarchy to that of her tribe, let alone that of an inconceivably vast interstellar government.

"All that, and more," the Admiral replied sternly. "Vixanti Corporation is allowed to exist because the Empress allows it to exist. Hence, you work for Vixanti because the Empress allows you to. You are beholden to her, and her above all others. Do you understand?"

Shani nodded in reply, though apparently just reluctantly enough to earn a brief scowl from the Admiral.

"Now... as far as anyone else is concerned, everything you have seen and heard here, the Makta thugs, my soldiers, and every moment of this conversation... none of it ever happened," Admiral Sarva declared, crossing

his arms across his chest. "You say nothing. Period. Not to your friends. Not to your neighbors. Not to the police. And not to anyone, and I repeat, not to anyone at Vixanti, no matter how high their level of authority within the business chain of command. Not even the Matron herself. Ever!"

"That's..." Shetari began.

"Highly irregular?" Admiral Sarva cut her off. "Yes. It is highly irregular, isn't it? But, as I've already suggested to you, most of Vixanti's work is deeply related to certain issues of national defense. I am the officer that the Empress has entrusted to oversee the development of various means to overcome those issues. As far as the Empress is concerned, you are civilians working within my command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, of course it is," Shetari replied, looking down at her feet to discover that the carpet was almost completely soaked through thanks

largely to Shani's saturated sweatpants. There was an odor of wet fur in the air. Wet fur, cheap fabric softener, and the ever so subtle scent of fresh natural rubber that always seemed to accompany the biogel.

"From this point forward, your chain of command through Vixanti is secondary," Admiral Sarva said, looking down his nose at the extremely uncomfortable cheetah. "You will follow it only so long as it does not interfere with your real chain of command... and that, Miss Anwae... is now, and henceforth, directly to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, sir," Shetari answered.

"Very good," Admiral Sarva said, finally seeming to relax somewhat. "Now, I have a few extremely confidential questions to ask you, and I hope you aren't upset by the rather personal nature of the inquiry, but it is absolutely necessary for me to understand what is actually going on with certain aspects



of Vixanti Corporation's several national defense related projects, as opposed to what I'm being told is going on. I'm sure you can understand that an officer in my position does not thrive by allowing the information he uses to make important decisions to be controlled by a single gatekeeper."

"It's only my first day," Shetari replied plaintively.

"Your first day in the actual employment of the company," Admiral Sarva noted. "But your interactions with Vixanti began well before today. And, I must confess to you, those interactions began with my personal approval. I had intended to take you into my confidence before you actually entered into company employment, but I was unfortunately delayed by certain... matters."

Shetari looked up at the Admiral as a dawning realization came over her. "Myalli. She seemed to be under the impression you'd

talked to me at some point."

"Hmm. Interesting," Admiral Sarva replied. "I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised that she'd sought you out already. She's a very nosy young woman, let me tell you."

"So I've heard," Shetari replied.

"Did she tell you that she was tried on the spot for espionage and personally judged by the Empress to be guilty?" Admiral Sarva inquired with a smirk. "Such an unusual creature, accepting the risk of that kind of trial. Going out of her way to ask for it, even. It's an ancient thing, hardly mentioned in law nowadays. Completely voluntary, of course, and yet without many limits to nature of the punishments that might be doled out."

"She didn't mention that bit," Shetari noted.

"It was fortunate for her that I intervened and suggested that her inquisitiveness might be put to some use," the Admiral went on.

"Otherwise, her curiosity for bodily transformations would likely have been sated in some way that would have been far less than pleasing to her sensibilities. Such are the costs of certain forms of diplomacy in this world. Hopefully she'll be able to hold her curiosities in check long enough to provide you with useful service. But... I digress. There are more important things to discuss right now."

Shetari looked up at the Admiral. "I'm so confused by all this. Everything. It's... I just don't understand it. Any of it."

"And that, Miss Anwae, is exactly what concerns me so much right now," Admiral Sarva replied with a deep frown. "Let me start from the beginning. Several months ago, your name appeared on a list of candidates for special positions within the Destiny project. The Destiny project is the culmination of several interrelated technology projects for which the Vixanti Corporation was specifically formed. In order to obtain sufficient private

investment to provide cover for the purely military development projects, certain components who's testing couldn't be readily concealed were repackaged as the "Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle" that is so familiar nowadays. That largely relates to the biogel itself and its support systems, which we felt could be released into the public sphere without exposing Vixanti's real purpose."

Shetari nodded. That much had been fairly obvious, considering the nature of the secret laboratory at Vixanti Three and what she already knew about the Admiral's involvement.

"The Destiny project is focused on the development of an entirely new way to man and control starships and starship systems," Admiral Sarva continued. "It is now at the point where field testing of the complete system, with all of its respective components in place, can begin. You have already seen the three converted freighters that have been fitted out for that purpose. Destiny Alpha,

Destiny Beta, and Destiny Omega."

Shetari again nodded. "I know about all that. Mind machine interface. The reactor thing. Dr. Alluwa explained that to me. Sort of."

"Indeed?" Admiral Sarva responded with a raised eyebrow. "That's very... unexpected."

"Well, I didn't give her much choice," Shetari added with a shrug. "How could they expect me to find a spy if I didn't know what the spy was trying to get at?"

"And who's idea was it to set you on that particular task?" Admiral Sarva inquired. "I was under the impression that Vixanti had the matter contained. Or at least kept out of the facility proper."

"Director Shi," Shetari answered. "Well, I assume it was Director Shi. It was supposed to be my first chance to show command ability. Or something like that. Like I said, it's all so

confusing."

Admiral Sarva sighed, again turning his eyes to the passing city. The hover-limo was approaching the Sinja River, which had already begun to overflow its northern bank. It wouldn't be long before the floodplain had turned into a vast, shallow lake. "Confusing indeed," he said, half-closing his eyes as he drifted off into thought.

For several minutes, there was silence. The lights of Mashiva faded as the hover-limo soared over the Mashiva Flats. Only the twinkle of lights that marked highway 229 remained. This elevated roadway ran north from the city, over the Mashiva Flats and toward the maze-like network of mountain valleys beyond.

"Hmm," Admiral Sarva hummed as he turned away from the window. "Anyhow, as the time for a full test of the Destiny project systems approached, it was imperative to

obtain perspectives from outside the closed environment of Vixanti, and for reasons that are, perhaps, already becoming clear to you. Some of that perspective would have to come from the Imperial Navy, of course. But, it was also extremely important to gain perspective from individuals completely outside of the existing circles of development and consultation. So, several months ago, I was given a list of potential candidates for various positions aboard the Destiny Class vessels. And it was... well, a very suspect list. And that is a fairly charitable assessment, let me assure you."

Shetari nearly laughed, but managed to catch herself before she could embarrass herself any further. "I've heard Vixanti's vetting process is... a problem."

Admiral Sarva replied with a low, almost sinister chuckle. "It was bad, and I have to assume that it was deliberate. It wasn't the first time the Matron has attempted to evade

my requirements, but it was certainly the most brazen. And obvious. A second list of civilian candidates was composed. Curiously, your name was the only one to appear on both."

Shetari was taken aback. "What... are you saying..."

Admiral Sarva looked Shetari in the eye. "You lack the sort of career credentials to be expected of someone entrusted with any degree of authority over so critical a defense project. But... Vixanti's insistence on having your name on the second list... it piqued my curiosity. I had you more thoroughly investigated."

"And what did you find?" Shetari questioned, belying a sarcastic tone despite her best efforts to avoid it.

"That you have no particularly recommendable qualities for so vital a role, save that of your genetics," Admiral Sarva replied. "For reasons that I am not entirely



clear, certain genetic qualities enhance the depth of the mind-machine interface capability offered by the biogel. Those qualities are far rarer than was initially assumed. In fact, you were the only individual with existing spacefaring background to be found on the relatively short notice involved in this stage of the project."

Shetari hung her head and closed her eyes. Was that really all she was good for? Her DNA?

"It's a cold, callous thing, isn't it?" Admiral Sarva inquired. "That a person should be judged not on their worth or potential, but only on some hidden quirk of molecular makeup over which they have not the slightest degree of control."

"Yes... it is," Shetari whispered in reply.

"I will be bluntly honest with you, Captain Anwae," the Admiral said with an unnerving tone of pure bluntness, "Vixanti Corporation does not see you as a person. They see you as

an object. An object to be experimented on and then... disposed of. Of course, they'd never tell you that. They'd never tell me that. But there's no escaping the obvious. They don't really intend you to command one of the Destiny Class. At least, not for long. They will see what you can do. When that is done, I can only suppose that you'll be having an accident, if they think they can get away with it."

"Goddess almighty... that's..." Shetari stammered, looking up to find the Admiral looking surprisingly sympathetic.

"Treason, actually," Admiral Sarva replied. "Genuine accidents are an unfortunate part of such development. At least it can be said that the victim's in Vixanti's case are generally left alive, after a fashion. It's possible that one day, the transformations can be reversed. The ones who go out of their way to have themselves transformed willingly... it's a perverse thing, really, but it's not my place to judge other people's fetishes. But deliberately subverting

an approved and government funded military research and development program by imposing such things on unwilling Imperial citizens... that is absolutely treasonous."

"But you said that you approved..." Shetari began.

"I did so on the presumption that I could speak with you before you decided to actually enter into Vixanti's employment," the Admiral replied, shaking his head slowly. "I was going to tell you everything so that you could decide whether or not you wanted to take the risk, and act as a covert agent on my behalf. If I hadn't been delayed by unexpected circumstances, I might have caught you in time. But now... well, here we are."

Shetari sat in silence. Her head was spinning. "What... what do I do? What can I do? It's... it's too late. Too late."

"It's not too late," Admiral Sarva noted. "I can extract you from Vixanti, if you don't want

to proceed as an agent under my command. After all you've been through, I'm sure the Empress would be willing find you a position of leisure somewhere within the safety of the Imperial Palace."

"I don't think that's possible," Shetari replied softly.

The Admiral chuckled. "Considering how many favors Her Highness has said she owes me, such a small thing would be no issue at all."

"No, I mean... I don't think it's physically possible for me to leave Vixanti," Shetari said. "I... this gel... it's done something to me. Something that can't be undone..."

The Admiral's face would have gone stark white if it hadn't been for his lush coat of black fur. He leaned forward with a deeply disturbed expression. "What? What do you mean? What has it done? Tell me. Please!"

"My body," Shetari replied, shaking her head as she tried to find words to match what she was feeling. "It's... it's... it's like I'm ninety-nine percent gel. Like I'm almost a doll, but just enough left to make me look like nothing about me has changed. Sort of. But I really don't understand. I haven't had enough time to figure it out."

Shani nodded. "Bad thing. Gel have mind. Try to make her slave. Had to fight. Make it go away. Almost couldn't."

"It's true," Shetari said, looking up at the Admiral with tears in her eyes as memories of each progressively more successful attempt by the gel to control her flashed through her mind. "It kept trying to control me. When it couldn't go any further... it tried do make me into a doll. Well... it tried to make both of us into dolls. Shani... if she hadn't merged her gel with mine and fought it off... I don't even want to think about it."

"The gel is sentient?" Admiral Sarva questioned, visibly shocked at the revelation.

"I'm... I'm not sure," Shetari replied. "Mine is. Or was. But Shani says hers isn't. And everyone else I met at Vixanti seemed to be really normal. Except Alluwa. She's... she's a nutcase. But... I think it was just me. I really don't know."

"Dammit," the Admiral swore, falling back into his seat. "And you knew nothing about this before you signed the papers?"

"No, nothing," Shetari answered.

"What about the project itself?" the Admiral questioned. "What did they advise you about the project during your interview process? What did they tell you about the gel? The reactor? The risks?"

"Nothing," Shetari replied. "There wasn't an interview at all. I just showed up. The receptionist sweet talked me into signing

myself up for more than I should have. I got into that pod thing. Then I was underground and the Director was telling me that I was really important and that she wanted to go look into the accident on the ramp. And that led to the corporate spy thing. And the whole time, the gel was trying to get into my head and push me around. It was... I can't even describe it."

Admiral Sarva closed his eyes and lowed his chin. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. All of this... it's against every policy, every directive and every law... I didn't know. I should have done something to delay you from going in there until I'd had the chance to speak to you. I'm sorry."

"It's all Alluwa's doing," Shetari went on. "She said as much, after she was done explaining the reactor and we were alone. She wants to take people and combine them make them into a... I don't even know how to explain it. A greater being with greater awareness. And

I can only assume she means using them to make herself a greater being with a greater awareness. Or something like that. It was crazy. She's crazy. But... what if she was right? What if she can do that? I..."

"The concept of assembling a greater awareness isn't new to me," Admiral Sarva replied. "That is, in a way, the whole point. And I am certainly aware that she is capable as an individual, of taking control of such a thing, just as you are. But... I never thought she would go so far as to force anyone to participate, let alone inflict such things on unwitting subjects as those that you've been forced to experience."

"How do we stop this?" Shetari asked. "If she did it to me..."

"At this point, I have no doubt that she, or rather they, will do it again," the Admiral said, shaking his head. "For the moment, there is nothing we can do to directly stop it. I have the



power to shut them down in a moment, but that would risk not only the potential of the projects, but the dissemination of the extremely sensitive technology by disgruntled former staff. Or even the Matron. She is... something. Something else. I need time to think. Time to plan. Perhaps it's just a matter of pushing things back on track. Convincing the bad actors to remove themselves. Maybe. But somehow I doubt it."

The limousine's intercom crackled to life. "Five minutes to Mashiva Spaceport under current orders."

"Understood," Admiral Sarva replied, turning back to the window as the hover-limo recrossed the Sinja river to the east of the city, where the spaceport occupied a prominent set of bluffs overlooking a bend in the river. "I need to know more about what's really going on behind the scenes at Vixanti. The best I can do on short notice is to institute close military management of the Destiny project and its

ships. That would be in line with most other speculative projects as they reach their critical phase. That might reduce the risk of Vixanti making some attempt to do anything detrimental to you. Beyond that. I need to formulate some plan. If Vixanti's objectives aren't in complete agreement with those of the Empress... then may the Great Goddess above have mercy on their souls, for I will have none."

"I'll do whatever you want me to," Shetari offered, though she really didn't want to think about the potential implications. If Vixanti wanted to dispose of her, who was really going to stop them?

"Two minutes to target," the intercom crackled.

"Admiral?" Shetari questioned.

"For the moment, don't take any unnecessary risks," Admiral Sarva said, shaking his head with frustration. "Not even if

you think it's for something important that I should know about. I will get in contact with you when I decide on the next step. Until then, don't say a thing about this meeting. Not a thing about your experience with the sentient gel either. Even if Vixanti's not knowing might increase the risk of further unexpected events relating to it. It could be significant, and my gut instincts tell me that it would be best to delay Vixanti's discovery of that significance as long as it is possible."

"I understand," Shetari replied.

"You must be my eyes and ears in all this," the Admiral noted. "Make note of anything unusual you encounter. Things. Ideas. Actions. Mental notes only. I can't risk any chance of you being discovered at this point."

"Yes sir," Shetari answered with a shallow nod. It seemed as if the whole weight of the universe had been suddenly dumped on her shoulders. There was only one light at the end

of the impossibly long tunnel. It was the clear purpose she now had amid the insanity which swirled around her. It wasn't much. But it was something.

"One minute," the intercom cracked.

"One last thing," Admiral Sarva added. "Someone is going to question how you got back to Vixanti given the lack of cabs and buses. An armored personnel carrier will pull up right behind us. It will look to the cameras at the spaceport that you exited that vehicle rather than this one. Don't ask. It just will. As far as anyone is concerned, you saw some of my troops at that bar across the road from your apartment and asked them for a ride. My troops were there for a short while. You did meet them. No one can really argue."

"Understood," Shetari replied as the limousine came to a halt in front of the Mashiva Spaceport passenger terminal. The door opened.

"Go," Admiral Sarva commanded. "I shall be in touch."

Shani picked up the two bags and stepped out into the pouring rain. Lightning flashed as Shetari followed with her briefcase. The door closed behind her and she turned to watch the Admiral depart. To her shock, rather than a hover-limo, there was a darkly painted armored personnel carrier, its back ramp open. A dark skinned marine stuck his head out and saluted. The ramp raised with a thump, even as the vehicle began to slosh forward through the rainwater that filled the street. It was such an extraordinary sight that it took several long moments of stunned silence before either of the women thought to get out of the pouring rain.

"No understand," Shani whispered.

"Neither do I," Shetari replied as she finally took hold of the lioness' arm and pulled her toward the bright lights of the terminal

building. "Not a word. Not a word at all. To anyone. Anyone. And... and pray everything that's happened to me is just some crazy mistake and the Admiral is just being paranoid, because if it isn't... I don't even want to think about what that might mean."

The terminal doors slid open. The two rain soaked felids stepped inside. A lone vendor's sign was still lit in the distance, right before the closed and shuttered security checkpoint. Vixanti Corporation. Not long before, the words had seemed like a refuge from the ills that had chased Shetari around like a rabid raccoon. Now it seemed as if they were the herald of ills to come. Ills of a very different nature. Ills that could no longer be escaped. Ills that seemed to lead to one entirely predictable and disturbingly inanimate, shiny-black ending.

Shetari took a deep breath. She turned to Shani and shrugged. "Vixanti's up ahead. I guess we shouldn't keep them waiting."



## NINETEEN

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# DESTINY OMEGA

Shetari sat in silence, gazing blankly out of the Mashiva Spaceport ground shuttle's window. The little white van was slowly making its way across the main landing way, toward the West Extension and Vixanti Corporation's main hangar. The storm was raging as fiercely as ever, making driving a treacherous task even on the relatively clear landing way surface. One little mistake and it would straight off the tarmac and into the flooded drainage ditches on either side. Fortunately, the poor sod who'd been dragooned into trucking her and her loyal companion on the final leg of their journey seemed to be up to the task.

It was nearly midnight. Shetari was tired



and sore. All she wanted to do was lay down for a good night's sleep. Although her old resistance toward expressions of physical intimacy was slowly returning, she couldn't help but feel drawn to the idea of spending the night wrapped up in Shani's powerful arms. She owed the lioness so much. How could she not have feelings? Was it just friendly affection? Or was it something more? Could she actually be in love?

The spaceport seemed unusually dark as the van headed onto the ramp area. Dark shapes loomed all around, their nature revealed only by the lightning that illuminated the whole city with unsettling frequency. To the left were a dozen or so boxy interstellar freighters neatly lined up in front of the vast NST warehouses. Several smaller local transports were scattered about. All but one of the ships were dark. The lone exception was located well down the line. Several of its windows shone with light, suggesting that at least some of the crew were still aboard.

Shetari looked past the driver as he slowed to navigate around the nearest of the dark obstacles ahead. Another flash of lightning revealed blackened yellow paint. It was the little burned out transport, still laying right where it had rolled over earlier that day. Beyond that were the three big Destiny Class starships. In the stormy darkness, their angular, monolithic shapes looked more like dark temples to some sinister alien god than spacefaring vessels.

The nearest of these imposing starships was the only consistent source of light on the Vixanti section of the ramp. Its forward cargo bay door was wide open, casting a bright white light out onto the tarmac. Beyond this, the ship was otherwise as dark as almost everything else at this end of the spaceport. Not even the slightest glint of light could be seen in the windows that lined the ship's two upper decks.

"Sorry ladies, but power's completely out down this way," the driver announced over his

shoulder as he brought the van to a halt in front of the main Vixanti hangar. "Scuttlebutt has it there's a big leak down in the in the main power tunnel. Had to shut things down until they can get it dry again."

"It is what it is," Shetari remarked with a shrug. She looked toward the towering hangar doors and looked for the access door that was mounted in one of the giant rolling sections. It might take a little while to find it, but it was there. Somewhere.

"Alright," the driver noted as he pushed the button to open the van's sliding passenger door. "Take care of yourselves, ladies!"

"We'll certainly try," Shetari replied with a nod as she took hold of her briefcase and stepped out into the pouring rain. Again, she was going to get soaked. This time, however, the cascade of droplets that splashed upon her body didn't bother her one bit. The need to disguise her status as a Vixanti employee had

passed. Her glistening black skin of biogel was fully exposed to everything Mother Nature could throw at it.

The rain drops streamed off of Shetari's biogel coating as quickly as they arrived upon its surface. It made her feel cool and refreshed. She began to feel strange. Stimulated. Aroused.

Perhaps it was just the view of her equally glossy companion and the imagined pleasures of bedding in the sweet embrace in her arms. Or perhaps it was the cold rain that washed in a continuous sheet over her gel coated chest. Or down the small of her back. Around her tail. Between her legs.

A shudder ran down Shetari's spine as she fought off the fantasies forming in her head. There would be time enough for such things once they were safe underground. She smiled at the lioness and took a few steps back from the van door. "Come on. Let's go."

Shani exited the shuttle van with the two

plastic bags in hand. The door slid closed behind her. The vehicle's bright headlights swept across the hangar doors as its driver carefully turned around to depart. For a brief moment, the access door was clearly visible. It was wide open.

"That's odd," Shetari murmured as she started toward the door. It was swinging back and forth with each surge of the wind, its lone hydraulic cylinder too weak to pull it closed against the force of the rhythmic gusts. Every so often, it made contact with the hangar door surface, adding a loud metallic clank to the roar of the heavy rain and the incessant claps of thunder.

Shetari turned to look at the open cargo doors of the Destiny Class starship. It was hard to see what might be happening inside the well lit cargo bay. It appeared to be largely empty, though several open cargo crates and other gear that was strewn about suggested that some sort of work was going on. It was hard to

imagine what might be so pressing as to justify the effort during such an intense storm. Had the ship been hit by lightning? Surely it was properly grounded. They wouldn't be stupid enough to forget to do that on so critical a vessel, would they?

Just as Shetari turned back toward the access door, a shadowy something caught her eye. It was a fleeting thing, a registration of movement more than a definite shape. It was right on the edge of the starship's fully extended cargo ramp. She stopped and focused on the bright opening. There was nothing there.

Again, Shetari turned away. Again, motion brought her gaze back to the ship's cargo bay. This time, there could be no mistaking it. What looked to be a folder of loose papers had fallen from the top of a rolling cart, tucked almost out of view to the side of the bay door. The cart itself seemed to be rocking back and forth. Something had bumped into it, and hard. Or

someone. Someone who didn't want to be seen. And, given all that had occurred on the ramp earlier that day, she could imagine exactly the sort of person that someone was likely to be.

"See too," Shani noted, confirming what the cheetah thought she had seen. "Someone there. Dark feeling. Something bad."

Shetari handed the briefcase to the lioness and pulled her personal comm from where it had self-adhered to the blackness upon her right hip. Despite their location well within the range of Vixanti's own wireless communications network, it still hadn't indicated a re-connection. Still, she had to give it a try. "Vixanti Three. Nax. Intelligence. Priority Alpha."

This time, the comm offered a much more ominous response than before. "External signal interference detected on all bands. Please seek out technical assistance in order to restore connectivity."

Shetari placed the comm back on her hip. External signal interference? It couldn't be the storm. Not even the most powerful bolt of lightning could throw energy out of normal space and into the trans-space domain where the communications signals propagated. It had to be something artificial. And, in all likelihood, something very close by.

Shetari turned back to the Destiny class ship and its open cargo ramp. Where else could the interference possibly be coming from? She took a step forward, but hesitated. Admiral's Sarva's biting criticism of the decisions she had made back at her apartment flashed through her mind. What good could come from charging forward if there was no one backing her up?

"Drop that stuff inside the hangar door where it won't get wet," Shetari instructed her companion, gesturing toward the briefcase and bags. "Try and find a way downstairs. They must have internal power, though why the



hangar isn't connected to it is beyond me. Get down there. Get Nax. Whatever it takes to get him and security up here and out onto that ship. Whoever that was... yeah. I have a bad feeling about it too. Something's going down. I've got to try and stop it. Or delay it. Just long enough for you to bring help. Do you understand?"

"But you... no! Too dangerous!" Shani questioned in a tone that belied a very deep level of personal concern.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," Shetari lied, turning toward the ship. Of course she was about to do something very stupid, but all things considered, it seemed like the only real option. "It looks like some work is going on aboard. There are probably engineers. I'm just going to try to get their attention or lock the ship down, if I can. Now go. Do whatever you can to get help. There's no time to waste."

Shani hesitated for a brief moment before

turning toward the hangar door with a shallow, parting nod. In flash, she had vanished into the darkness, dropping her burdens with a loud thump and a clatter that suggested that Shetari's precious computer might not have survived the fall. Lightning flashed directly overhead. It arced down to a place very near to the terminal building, its bright lights barely visible in the distance through the intense downpour. There was a second flash and a boom even louder than the sharp peal of thunder that had accompanied the lightning strike. The terminal building went dark, along with almost everything else around the spaceport.

Shetari needed no further prompting. She took off toward the bright beacon of the open cargo bay at a full run. She kept her head down in a vain effort to keep the rain out of her eyes, taking only a few brief glances upward to make sure she wasn't going to trip over the front end of the cargo ramp. It should have been lit with red safety lights around its edges,

and a broad white stripe down its center. It wasn't. The ship was still fitting out. Perhaps the illumination hadn't been installed yet.

She began to wonder what other pieces of vital safety equipment might still be missing from the ship. Things might get very complicated, very quickly. Given the ship's size and the fact that its exotic technologies had been squeezed into an existing design, there was a good chance that she'd get lost. If she got lost in some area where life support systems weren't online, would the biogel really protect her after it hadn't done a thing to protect her from the thugs back at her apartment? It was something she really didn't want to think about, but she had to take the chance. There wasn't any other way.

Shetari bounded up the dark, rubberized surface of the broad ramp and through the backward sloping outer cargo bay doors. As with most ships, these doors were largely cosmetic and intended to absorb any incidental

damage that might otherwise happen to the real pressure doors deeper within. Between the outer and main pressure doors, rainwater covered the floor. From the look of things, it had spread further inward as well, covering most of the vast cargo bay floor.

That fact alone was no particular surprise. The backwards slope of the outer doors ensured that any inclement weather would have easy access to the ship's interior. What really got her attention was the fact that the water was not flowing inward. It was flowing *outward*, and at a slow, consistent pace.

Shetari came to a halt in front of the inner pressure doors. There were two sets, about five meters apart. It was a typical configuration for any large freighter and provided a bit of extra insurance in the event of an accident.

She looked around for any sign of the shipboard communications panel that was

usually mounted nearby. There were few features of immediate note to be seen upon the flat slab surfaces that had been coated in a rather drab, almost greenish shade of gray primer paint. There were a number of recessed panels on the entry zone's side walls. Each of these panels was exactly the same dull gray as the walls themselves. All but a few had been fitted with a yellow, key locked handle. There were no visible labels to indicate what might be concealed behind them, but chances are at least one held a comm panel, typically used by a ship's cargomaster to help control loading operations.

Shetari raced over to the panels on the port side wall and began to yank on the handles. All of them had been left locked. "Really?" Shetari muttered under her breath as she raced over to the starboard side to try the panels there. As she approached, one in particular caught her eye. Barely visible, scrawled in carbon pencil on one of the handles was the word 'COMM'. She reached out and yanked on the handle as

hard as she could. It wouldn't budge.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Shetari swore under her breath. It was one of the first items on any boarding checklist. Ensure all basic safety and communications access panels in the entry area are unlocked and the systems therein are functioning properly. It was starship basics 101. If they couldn't remember something so basic, how were they going to get it off the ground, let alone into space?

Shetari turned toward the brightly lit cargo hold. The flow of water coming out from between the door leaves seemed to be increasing. It didn't make sense. Well, it didn't make sense unless one particular yet extremely unlikely possibility was taken into account. For some unknown, unfathomable reason, the starship was flooding.

"What a bunch of incompetent fucks," Shetari snapped as she advanced toward parting between the half-opened inner bay

doors. Her impulse to dash inside so she could find a usable comm panel was brought in check by the all too vivid memories of the ambush that had taken her by surprise only a couple of hours before. She poked her head into the opening and took a careful look around.

To the port side of the three deck height bay, there were a dozen big pallet sized cargo boxes strewn about rather haphazardly. A few of these light gray containers were open, revealing quite a large collection of the sort of gear typically used during heavy shipboard construction and maintenance work. Two large cube shaped containers with bright red hazard labels were pushed against the port wall. A large, blue multi-mode cargo container stood more or less in the middle of the cargo bay, offset to starboard just a bit.

Beyond the containers, the starboard side of the hold was filled with tool and equipment carts, a couple of portable generators, a few beat up looking metal benches, and a couple of

card tables with chairs. Several overflowing food waste bins made it clear that the hold was serving as some sort of break area for people working aboard.

To each side of the bay were a set of vertical lifts mounted on rails. Between the rails were loading doors on various levels. These provided access to smaller holds on each deck, and were one of the defining characteristics of the so-called 'warehouse' freighter. All of hold doors were closed, and all of the lifts were folded up and out of the way.

Unless something was hiding behind one of the cargo containers, there was nothing that seemed out of place. Nothing, that is, save the papers that were strewn about in the water that covered the floor. Someone had clearly passed through the bay in a hurry, and had knocked them off the cart and the table without giving them so much as a second glance.



Shetari reached down and gingerly picked one of the soggy sheets up from the floor. It was an engineering diagram of some sort. It appeared to show a section of some plumbing network. There was a reference to a bilge connection and some sort of upper deck drainage. Several items were hand marked in red with labels such as 'offline', 'disabled' and 'yet to be installed'.

"Go with the flow. Or against the flow in this case," Shetari whispered to herself as she cast the paper aside and slowly advanced into the cargo hold. She decided to head directly aft in hopes that she could quickly locate some of the ship's engineering spaces and get an idea of where anyone who was currently aboard might be located. At the very least, she might be able to find some alarm that she could trigger to get their attention.

Shetari headed to the port side of the hold, intending to use the cargo pallets as cover if needed. The move revealed that there was an

open, single deck cargo door at the aft end of the hold. Beyond this doorway was a broad cargo corridor leading deeper into the ship. Unlike the flat gray of the entry zone and hold, this corridor was painted in a shade of violet very similar to that of the ship's exterior.

As Shetari skirted around the port side of the cargo hold, she looked up to the wall above the open inner cargo door. There, below a covered window opening, a Vixanti Corporation logo had been lightly traced out, and below that the name of the ship as well. "Destiny Omega," she whispered to herself as she eyed the opening that led deeper into the ship. "Well, that would explain the state of things, wouldn't it. Alpha. Beta. Omega. It must be the least complete of the three. Dammit. As if this wasn't already dangerous enough."

Much to her considerable relief, the only unexpected thing Shetari encountered as she wound her way between the cargo boxes was

an errant chunk of white packing foam that was slowly floating its way toward the main hold doors. A sliding double doorway in the aft corner of the hold proved almost too tempting to resist. The blue, pressure-proof doors were labeled 'Vertical Transit, Port Side, Midships' on a silver placard, along with the door's basic mechanical characteristics. A set of lifts and/or ladders was sure to be found on the other side.

Given the state of the ship, normal vertical access-ways might not be fully functional. They might also be blocked by detritus carried along by the water. Worse, they might well be serving as conduits for the downward flow of water and all of the other sorts of unpleasantness typically to be found aboard a ship in this state of incompleteness. The last thing she wanted was to find herself caught in some narrow space, being splashed with water contaminated with acids, corrosives or other toxic nastiness. Her curiosity just wasn't worth the risk. Only if she failed to make contact with the engineers aboard on her journey aft

would she take the chance and try to make her way upward.

Shetari peered around the corner and into the cargo corridor. Several deck mounted inspection hatches to either side of the centerline had been opened. Clear water was bubbling up from the space beneath.

"Draining through the bilges," Shetari muttered, shaking her head as she entered the corridor. She was finding the soft sound of her own voice soothing amid the mounting tension that came with each step deeper into the starship. "Well, I suppose it could be worse. They could be pumping it through the sewage holding tanks. Hell, I know some people who'd just let it run down through the electrical utility trunks and pat themselves on the back for a job well done."

Shetari hugged the port side wall as she slowly made her way down the cargo corridor. She could just make out the back end of a

bright orange forklift to port, in the large space beyond the next set of open cargo doors. There were some more cargo boxes as well, off to starboard. An aft curving wall blocked her view further into the ship. This wall was painted a dark shade of gray similar to the rubberized floor coating.

A broad, yellow and black warning stripe was painted at about chest height upon this oddly placed curved wall. Several yellow and red placards were spaced out along its surface. Two of these placards contained the clear, universal symbol for serious exo-hazards.

Exo-hazards were things whose exotic nature didn't fit into the usual hazard categories. They presented dangers that couldn't be stopped or contained using conventional methods. Their effects on life were often bizarre and unpredictable. A starship was the last place any sane person would think to keep such things. This was Vixanti Corporation, of course, where sanity

seemed to be a commodity in very short supply.

Shetari gingerly stepped through the doorway and ducked behind the forklift. There was not a hint of noise beyond the ripple of flowing water and the sound of her own breathing. It was incredibly eerie, but it didn't bother her as much as it would most. The lower decks of any freighter had an empty feeling to them, even when cargo handling work was in full swing. When there was nothing going on, it was perfectly normal to find oneself completely alone with one's thoughts.

Shetari froze. Was she imagining things, or could she just make out a distant voice. It seemed familiar. Was it that engineer that she'd met on the ramp earlier that day? Senwa was her name. The voice stopped. It was quickly replaced by the roar of water falling from a great height. Ripples began to spread over the floor of the inner hold, bouncing off

the walls and flowing around the huge, round central column that took up considerable, and highly valuable floor space.

"Alright, I'm definitely not alone in here," Shetari sighed to herself as she cautiously stepped out from behind the forklift. "Now all I have to do is figure out where they are."

Shetari's eyes were drawn to one of the warning placards on the column wall. It was mounted directly over a pair of large, fire hose sized connections that were mounted in the column wall. "B Reactor Drain," she whispered to herself. "This must be the bottom of Alluwa's infernal machine. Goddess damn that nutcase!"

Shetari slid along the central column, again taking the port side option. More blue double doors were located in the fore and aft corners this particular hold. The forward door was marked the same as the one in the main hold. The aft door was marked as 'Vertical Transit

Zone, Aft & Engineering Access, Port Side'. She was definitely headed in the right direction.

She turned her attention to the source of the increased water flow. In the center of the aft wall was another cargo door. This led into what appeared to be a large cargo lift shaft. The rectangular lift platform itself was in position in the very center, at about head height. It was riding on four heavy vertical columns. There was no obvious indicator as to its means of locomotion. She could only assume it was some sort of electromagnetic traction system. That was just the sort of thing you really never, ever wanted to get wet. A control panel was mounted to the starboard side of the lift shaft door. Several lights blinked on its surface, including one large red on that appeared to read 'disabled'.

A cascade of water was roaring down onto the lift from above. It was already starting to blast a hole through the lift's non-skid coating, and the sheer quantity of the flow made her



wonder just how much of the ship above her head might be completely flooded. Exploring an unknown ship was dangerous enough without such hazards.

Shetari thought about shouting up the lift shaft to get the attention of whoever was above. Could they hear her above the roaring water? The decision was almost immediately made for her. A big red cargo crate came crashing down onto the lift. It had been filled with bottles of lubricating oil, most of which now burst. The lift itself lurched downward. It dropped to deck level in a shower of searing white sparks. It was pure luck that the oil failed to ignite.

If one crate had found its way into the lift shaft, others were sure to follow. She certainly didn't want to be under one when it fell. She also didn't want to be getting oil all over her feet. She had no idea what it might do to the biogel and this was certainly no time to find out. She turned away from the lift shaft and

sprinted toward the 'Vertical Transit Zone' door in the after port corner of the hold. Much to her relief, the double doors slid open with a soft hiss as she approached.

Shetari found herself in a short section of corridor. It was painted in a lovely, pearly blue-gray that gave it a much more finished feel than most of the ship that she'd seen so far. Despite this, several empty recesses in the inboard wall made it clear that things were far from complete. Black electrical tape covered the connector cables that hung loose. No doubt, one of these would have been attached to the sort of highly elusive shipboard communications panel that she was still quite keen to find.

At the far end of the corridor was another set of double doors. These were colored bright orange. The doorway placard was marked 'After Sub-Holds 1, 3 & 5; Engineering Access, Electrical'. If there was anywhere aboard ship that electricity and water were going to mix in

a very bad way, it was beyond those doors.

Shetari paused and carefully considered her options. Unless she had missed something important, the only way to head aft at this deck level was through more holds and some electrical access areas. She doubted she'd find anything useful in those sorts of places. She also doubted there was much more ship to see moving further aft. After holds meant the ship's stern wouldn't be far beyond.

If there was some consolation in her discovery of so little on the Omega's bottom deck, it was that the ship was still clearly clearly still configured much as it would have been as a warehouse freighter, albeit with the biogel reactor plopped right in the middle and dividing the normally contiguous, multi-deck holds in two. If it was still configured in a normal fashion below, then it was probably still configured in a fairly normal fashion above. On the down side, it seemed that the only option to head upwards was the

passenger lift. If it was actually functional, that is.

If it was a standard starship lift, it would probably be safe. The lift cars themselves were capable of withstanding quite a bit of pressure, certainly enough to survive intact even if the entire ship were filled with water. The doors wouldn't open under more than a couple atmosphere's worth of differential pressure without using a supplementary hydraulic pump to force them apart against the seals. If she wound up on a deck with flooding and it was more than about knee height, the doors would remain firmly shut. It was also electrically insulated. Even in the worst case scenario, she would probably be okay.

Just as she approached the oddly broad blue lift doors, a sudden realization came over her. If the corridor doors worked, and if the lift was going to work, the ship's computer must be at least partially functional. The internal operations units were watching, and listening.

That meant that certain things could be initiated, no matter where one happened to be.

"What a fucking idiot I am," Shetari hissed, shaking her head as she stopped mid-corridor and put her hands on her hips. She looked up at the ceiling and called out in her best commander's bark. "Op Sys, open shipwide intercom."

The ship's computer acknowledged the instruction with a neutral system response chime. The shipwide intercom, however, failed to activate.

"Op Sys, security alert, intruder aboard!" Shetari shouted.

Again, the computer responded with a chime and nothing else. The computer was listening, but its programming was incomplete. Or it had been disabled. That was odd. Very odd. Had the engineers shut it down to facilitate their work for some strange reason? Perhaps they'd gotten annoyed by a constant din of

notifications and alarms. Or... had someone else deactivated it for their own less than honest purposes?

"Dammit!" Shetari snapped as a picture began to form in her mind. The suspiciously specific nature of the initial spaceport power outage. The jamming. The flooding. The computer. It just made sense. Someone had arranged for a certain sequence of events to occur during the storm. Events that would seem just plausible enough not to arouse immediate suspicions. And that same someone had made sure that their exploitation of those events was going to be well covered as they went about their nefarious work. But who were they? Where were they? And what were they going to do if they were confronted?

Shetari looked to the lift. Given the level of authority she had been given by Director Shi, it was just possible that she could override anything that had been done by the intruder and lock the ship down until help arrived. All

she had to do was get to the bridge. But where was the bridge on this ship?

Shetari walked up to the outwardly curved lift doors. An airy chime sounded. Vertical bars on each of the door leaves lit up, showing the lift's position with a bright blue capsule shape. It was starting from the fourth of the ship's seven decks. The capsules began to slide downward. As they approached bottom, she could hear the lift's soft hum growing louder. The hum stopped. Another chime sounded. The lift doors parted.

Shetari stepped into the pearly blue interior of the circular lift car. A shiny, stainless steel control panel to the right of the doors had the standard buttons, all illuminated blue-white. Decks one through eight, counting from the top down. Emergency stop. Emergency call. Medical and damage control priority. And that was it.

The emergency call button was tempting,

but who was going to be in a position to reply? What if it was the intruder? He could lock her in the lift. Force her into an ambush. No. She had to select a deck and hope that she landed in the right place. Or at least in a safe place. Aboard a ship in such a sorry state, those places might be few and far between.

Shetari ran her glistening black fingers over the buttons. She pondered the possibilities. Certainly not the deck she was already on. Or the two decks above. Those would be reserved for cargo and maybe some engineering. And probably not the next deck up either, simply for the reasons of safety by physical separation. For the same reason, the top two decks were safe to rule out for the same reason. That left decks three and four. But which was it?

Shetari bit her lip. Her finger slid back and forth between the two buttons. She closed her eyes. She concentrated. She began to feel very strange. Something was nearby. Something big.



Something powerful. Something... unthinkable. She was aware of it. It was aware of her. And it was...

"Bridge, deck four," the ethereal, deeply effeminate words slid through Shetari's mind like a cool spring morning breeze. The voice was alien and yet familiar. She had heard it before. Was it in a dream? A confused, hypnotic dream cast in the pall of a throbbing purple light?

"What? Who?" Shetari stammered, pulling back from the control panel. There was no reply. The voice was gone, but the information it had imparted remained. The bridge was located on deck four. She again reached out for the control panel. Uncertainty kept her from pushing the button. Who, or what, had just told her where the bridge was? Was it her imagination? Was it the biogel? Or was it something else. Something different. Something...

Shetari shook her head. The quiet and isolation were surely just playing tricks with her mind. Still, it was a fifty-fifty crap-shoot. Deck four was as good a choice as the alternative. She pressed the button. The lift doors closed. The car began to hum. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Just a little bit further," she reassured herself with feigned honesty. "Just a little bit further and you'll get control and fix things until Shani gets here with help. It'll be easy."

The lift began to ascend. The mysterious voice again slipped its way into her train of thought. "Come to us," it whispered, smoothly and without the slightest hint of emotion. "Come to us. We are waiting."

## TWENTY

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## INTRUDER

Shetari cautiously stepped out of the lift and into the small, beautifully decorated segment of the deck's port side corridor. Unlike the spaces below, this one appeared to be fully fitted out. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the polished wooden handrails that stretched unbroken down the full, albeit short length of the corridor wall. An illuminated decorative panel had been mounted on the pearly, every so slightly lavender outboard walls, above the railing and extending nearly up to the curved corner where the wall met the ceiling. Amorphous swirls of vivid pinks, violets and purples twisted and morphed in a dazzling, almost hypnotic fashion.

She had seen such gel-walls before, of course, but never on a starship. It certainly didn't seem like a wise choice from a safety perspective. If the gel escaped during some emergency, who knew what havoc it might cause? Even if it wasn't toxic, it could get into electronics and machinery and do all sorts of nasty things. And if someone happened to inhale a glob during a gravity loss situation... just the thought was enough to send a cold shudder down her spine.

The damp soles of her glistening black biogel 'boots' created a cacophony of sharp, rubbery squitches and snaps as she slowly advanced out onto the deck's highly polished black surface. It seemed an odd choice to forgo the usual sound dampening, shrapnel-mat carpeting in favor of a surface that would have been as slippery as a sheet ice to anyone not wearing something like the biogel. Perhaps that was deliberate security decision. Or perhaps, like the gel-wall, it was another decision favoring exotic appearance over

safety. This was Vixanti Corporation, after all. Respect for the safety and well being of their staff no longer seemed to be very high on their priority list.

Two interface panels had been mounted, one to either side of the lift. To the left was a large display showing a complete map of the deck. Tho the right was a dark and apparently unpowered communications panel, with a screen above and various control buttons below. Not even the little red standby indicator in the bottom right corner was lit.

"Figures," Shetari muttered to herself as she poked at the comm panel's dark and non-functional buttons. "Can't catch a break at all, can I? Now... where's the bridge?"

Shetari took a close look at the deck plan. Aft and outboard of her current position were crew quarters and the upper level of the ship's hangar. Forward was the B Reactor section along with some storage space and offices.

These surrounded a central lobby area whose centerpiece was apparently the upper dome of the reactor casing. Forward of that was the ship control section, its port and starboard corridors also acting as part of the midships vertical transit zone. The ship's military pattern bridge, with its separate operations and flight control rooms, were tucked into the space between. These were accessed through full security airlocks to port and starboard. This ensured that anyone without the proper security clearance would have a very hard time trying to force their way inside.

"Damn," Shetari huffed. "What if it doesn't open for me? I'll have to try and find the engineers if it won't. It's going to take forever. Hopefully Shani will be back with help before then."

Shetari headed forward. The big blue bulkhead doors slid aside with a warm rumble. To the cheetah's spacefarer's ears, the deep, mechanical sound was extremely satisfying.

The actuators weren't hydraulic. They were fully gear driven. That meant that they would be quite capable of forcing the doors open or closed against even the most extreme pressure differentials and air flows that the ship might encounter in its career and still survive. Perhaps Vixanti's engineers hadn't completely lost the plot after all.

Shetari stepped through the doorway and into the B Reactor section's port side corridor. It was decorated in similar fashion to that of the transit corridor section. Blues, purples and particularly deep, lustful pinks dominated the gel wall segments, perfectly complementing the all too familiar fluorescent pink glow that shone from the large gap in the middle of the inboard wall. This opening led into the large, circular deck lobby, where the upper dome of the reactor casing rose up through the deck surface.

While the pink glow was the same color as that which she had seen within the secret

underground prototype earlier that day, this time around it seemed far more visceral in nature. It permeated the air wherever its rays passed, making it look like the air had been saturated with luminescent mist. Was it somehow different than the reactor down in Vixanti Three, or was it just an effect of the thinner protective casing?

It was impossible for Shetari to know for sure, but it did bear an unsettling resemblance to that all too familiar blue glow caused when highly energetic particles passed between materials with differing internal speeds of light. She couldn't remember the technical name for it offhand, but she did know that it was a sure sign that something dangerously radioactive was very close at hand. Was this different? How could it be, if it was making the air itself glow?

The bulkhead door leading forward into the ship control section was straight down the corridor. Shetari set her lips firm. The reactor



was irrelevant for the moment. That door, and the bridge beyond was her goal. She took a step forward. She hesitated. Something didn't feel right. Something unpleasant was in the air, and it wasn't that eerie pink glow. She could smell it. Faint. Rubbery. Biogel. And something else. Someone else. Someone familiar. And very unpleasant.

"Mikson," Shetari hissed through clenched teeth. "I should have known."

The scent was unmistakable. But... it seemed a bit stale. Spent. He had clearly been in the area fairly recently, but he wasn't there anymore. Or was he? She didn't really know how much the biogel might affect the myriad chemicals a wearer's body gave off. Had Shani ever smelled stale? She couldn't remember.

Shetari shook her head. She couldn't assume that Mikson was gone. He might be hiding around some corner or in one of the offices were located in the spaces fore and aft of the

reactor. Worse, he too might be trying to find his way into the bridge. She was going to have to be careful. Very careful. Or else...

The sound of an opening door made Shetari jump. It had come from somewhere on the other side of the reactor. It wasn't a bulkhead door. The sound had been more hydraulic than mechanical. Was it one of the engineers?

"I'm trying, I'm trying," came a muffled, rather rough sounding female voice. "Nothing in this shit-can is working right. Upper two decks are heavily flooded and I can't get Op Sys to let us open the cargo shaft doors up there to start draining. To top it off, now we've got water infiltration down onto deck three through the main gun magazine! I sent Tenji up here with the operations center override keys twenty minutes ago. Where the hell is she?"

Shetari froze and listened. It was definitely Engineer Senwa and she was sounding

extremely frustrated. She also wasn't alone.

"Haven't seen a soul since I got up here," Lieutenant Canavanna replied in a dry, matter of fact tone. "Are you sure she knew she was supposed to come up here and not head to the temporary Op Sys room? That's up on deck two, right?"

"We're completely locked out of deck two," Senwa replied. "There's no way she could have gotten up there. Let's go down and get some guys from the security detail to help us search. Something really fishy is going on here. I don't like it."

"Yes ma'am," Canavanna replied to the sound of an opening bulkhead door.

Shetari took a few tentative steps toward the deck lobby. Her first inclination was to chase the pair down. She could tell them what she knew and offer to assist. But... what if they thought she was the one responsible for the mess? Or the missing engineer? She hesitated.

The bulkhead door closed. The opportunity passed.

Shetari peered around the corner and into the deck lobby. The reactor dome was taking up most of the floor space. A polished wooden railing offered a fine perch on which to lean and gaze down through the large windows and into the shimmering stainless steel framework. Suspended within the framework was the reactor core. The glowing pink sphere of energized biogel throbbed with power. Each pulse of increased light accompanied by a deep, muffled, liquid 'gloop'. It seemed to peaceful. So pleasant. So... *inviting*.

She couldn't help herself but take a closer look at the core. She stepped forward, directly into the pink glow. It made her feel tingly wherever it touched her shimmering coat of black biogel. It wasn't a particularly pleasant feeling. It was more like pins and needles than the tingly aftereffects of a gentile caress. It made her feel uneasy, but she couldn't seem to

tear herself away from the enticing vision that was forming upon the core's constantly moving surface.

Ripples were forming. They were flowing out from a number of undulating bubbles that had pushed up from within the mass of luminescent slime. The expanding waves combined to form a beautifully complex, constantly shifting pattern that soon covered the core's entire surface. It was an incredible sight to behold. Incredible... and yet deeply, disturbingly sinister as well.

"Goddess," Shetari whispered to herself as she gazed down in the enthralling mass of undulating goo. A small part of her found the sight oddly sensual. In a different context, it might have been some artist's metaphorical representation of erotic arousal. So many complex little stimuli forming a pattern leading to some climax who's final trigger could never be discerned until the last few moments of intensely bestial yearning for

release. She wondered what might happen if she were somehow to cast herself into the mass. What would it do to her body? What would it do to her soul?

The latter question snapped the dreamy cheetah back to reality. "There are people in that stuff, aren't there?" she murmured as she thought about the terrible nature of the infernal machine. "People. Actual people. Trapped. Enslaved. And for what?"

"Hush, virgin spirit," the mysterious voice called out, now louder than ever. "You are so close now. Your body has been ordained. Your mind has been prepared. You can feel the compulsions. You are ready to serve us. All that is left is to relax. Feel our touch. Accept it. Embrace it. Glory in it."

Shetari froze. She began to feel very, very cold. To her astonishment and absolute horror, thousands of little purple specks were forming all over her coating of glistening black biogel.

Biogel that had already seemed to have replaced so much of her flesh with its own substance. Whatever change the slowly growing specks might represent, there was simply no way for her to escape the effects. Resistance was futile. She could only endure and pray it wasn't something more nefarious than some superficial effect of her proximity to the reactor core.

"Yes, beautiful neophyte priestess of the new faith," the voice cooed. "Let it wash over you. Penetrate you. Subsume you. Only then will you understand your place in the new order of the world. Only then will you know inner peace. Only then will you know true freedom. Freedom from mortal cares. Freedom from mortal fears. Freedom from your mortal self."

Shetari's entire body felt as cold as the obsidian black deck. She couldn't speak. She could barely move. The spreading purple spots were beginning to turn a deep pink in color as

they combined to form large, irregular patches.

"Surrender," the voice purred.

The biogel upon Shetari's body no longer had even a hint of black within it. Even the purple was being forced from it's surface by the pink. And now, that pink was beginning to glow.

It was terribly obvious what was happening. The biogel which formed so much of her body was becoming energized just like the gel that formed the reactor core. In a few short moments, she really would be finding out what it would be like to dive into a mass of the stuff. She could already feel the threads penetrating into the very fundamental essence of who she was. A vision of infinity began to form in her mind. A vortex of pure energy. A thread entangled among countless other identical threads, crossing the great barrier that separated the observable universe from the higher order dimensions.



That thread was Shetari herself. The place where it connected to the familiar universe was stretching. Weakening. Coming all undone, but not in the manner of death. No. Something else was happening. Something unknowable. Something unthinkable. Something so horrible that her mind simply refused to acknowledge its possibility.

"Surrender," the voice coaxed.

The biogel around Shetari's neck began to liquefy. It was creeping up under her chin and around the ruffs of soft fur behind her cheeks. Even as it spread, it was glowing brighter and brighter. She braced herself for the welling up from within, the filling of her throat and mouth by the gel that had taken up permanent residence within her body. It never came.

The bulkhead doors at the forward end of the starboard side corridor rumbled open. There was a brief pause before a familiar and very unwelcome face peered around the

corner. A viscous voice cut into the cheetah's involuntary reverie like a steel bayonet. "You!"

Shetari tore herself away from the blissfully horrific visions that were about to consume her. Her eyes locked with the snarling security chief even as he drew his pistol. "You fucking ass-wipe," she hissed as she ducked around the corner and into the forward part of the port side corridor. The biogel around her neck instantly solidified. The glow faded and the color of her biogel skin returned to its natural obsidian black. Although she was left slightly disoriented, whatever the reactor core had been doing to her body, it had ended the moment she was no longer standing directly in its light. "Drop your weapon. That's an order!"

Mikson laughed. "Oh, that's funny," he shouted. "Really funny. You think you're the one giving the orders here, huh? That's rich!"

Shetari swallowed hard. "You can take the order from me, or you can take a shot to the

head from Sarva's big boys," she bluffed as she edged her way toward the forward door. "It's your call."

"Don't you fucking try that shit with me," Mikson snapped in reply. "I own your ass and you damned well know it. Don't even think of trying to run. The door's locked. You're gonna do exactly what I tell you and you're gonna like it. Period. End of discussion."

Shetari slowly inched her way toward the door and prayed that either Mikson was lying, or her clearance level would override the lock. "What you want to do here doesn't matter anymore," she continued her bluff. "If the ship wasn't flooding, they'd have already gotten up here and punked your ass the moment they caught sight of you. Your only way out of this ship that doesn't involve your fat ass in a body bag is you surrendering right here, right now. You're not getting a second chance. Given Sarva's orders... I shouldn't even be giving you a first."

"You think I don't know everything that's going on here right now?" Mikson replied, the volume of his voice making it clear that he was getting closer. "No one's coming to help you. No one even knows you're here."

"You think the ship's telling you the truth?" Shetari asked as she backed up to the door. It wouldn't open unless she turned to face it, providing that it actually could open under the circumstances. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, dumb-ass. No idea."

Mikson laughed. "It's you that has no idea. But that's okay. You'll have plenty of time to figure it out while some tentacled alien sex freak bones your fuck doll brain into jelly."

Shetari began to turn toward the bulkhead door. Just as the two armored door leaves began to part, Mikson stepped out from the deck lobby and fired his weapon. She ducked just as the little black pellet flew from the barrel. If it had been a blaster, she would have

been dead. The slow moving projectile, however, was no match for her fey'li reflexes. It mashed into the opening door, forming a small black splatter as its gelatinous contents broke free on impact.

There was little doubt in her racing mind what would happen if one of those pellets made contact with her body. Given Mikson's statement, it was almost surely some means for forcing the gel to instantly turn her into one of those inanimate living sex dolls that she'd always found so strangely enticing. Had he dolled the missing engineer and taken the override key? That would explain why the engineers were finding it so hard to do anything aboard the ship. He had been using the ship's systems to impede engineers while he went about his own criminal business, whatever that might prove to be.

Shetari ducked through the opening doors as two more black pellets sailed toward her. Again, the pellets missed their agile mark, one

splattering on the door and the other bouncing down the command section corridor until it came to a rest, unbroken in front of the bulkhead door that led further forward. Even as she made a beeline toward the blood red bridge access-way door on the inboard wall, more pellets flew towards her. With not a moment to spare, the heavy, armored door slid open.

"What the fuck!?! " Shetari could hear Mikson shout as she darted into the security airlock that provided access to the ship's bridge from the port side. "I fucking locked that!"

Shetari ran toward the bridge door straight ahead. She almost ran right into it. Unlike the previous 'locked' door, this one actually refused to open. There was no visible means to override it. She looked around frantically. The only other exit from the security airlock an open ladderway just a few steps aft.

Shetari ducked toward the ladderway just as a flurry of black pellets splattered all over the interior of the airlock. She grabbed hold of the side rails and slid down to the deck below. She came down hard, and fell from the ladder onto her back. She sat up, just in time to see Mikson's shadowy shape at the top of the ladderway.

"You think you can run from be, bitch?" Mikson seethed as he reached out for the ladder rails.

Suddenly, red warning lights started flashing. "Unauthorized personnel in reactor unity access zone," the ship's smooth, effeminate voice called out. The ladderway hatch snapped shut. Locking bolts thumped into place. "Access sealed pending executive command override."

"Dammit, that was close," Shetari sighed with only a slight sense of relief as she struggled to her feet. She didn't know how

long it might take for Mikson to find some way around the unexpected barrier, but she figured she had at least a few minutes breathing space. She turned to see that the room she was in was virtually identical to the security airlock above, except in this case there was no door leading outboard to a corridor. Instead, a dull pink door led inboard. The placard read "Biogel Reactor Unity". Was this where people were liquefied and dumped into the reactor core?

Shetari didn't have time to think about the sheer madness of Alluwa's infernal inventions. The ship's bridge was no longer an option. She needed to put as much distance between herself and Mikson as she could. She had to find help. Was there any use in looking for the engineers while being pursued or would it be safer to get out of the ship and try to get the attention of someone? Anyone, really. Even if the airport police couldn't board the ship, they could set up a perimeter and keep Mikson from escaping until the Navy could send a properly



cleared team in to retake the ship.

Shetari stepped through the doorway and onto a walkway that connected the doorway with three others, one across the room, one forward and one aft. Polished wooden safety rails separated the walkway from machinery in each quarter of the circular room. Clear glowing tubes of activated biogel connected with cake-slice modules pointing inward where glowing biogel filled windows faced a small, one step central dais.

Shetari bit her lip as she watched the coils of pipe throb with the same esoteric energy as the reactor core itself. What would happen if she got any closer? Would they have the same effects as proximity to the reactor core? She looked at her glistening black skin. The light made it seem pinkish, but there were no growing purple specks to be seen.

Shetari's eyes turned back to the dais. Mounted in its very center was a familiar

mechanism, mounted in a very unfamiliar fashion. It was a robotic restraint unit, usually used to keep medical patients from making injuries worse during transport. Well padded, it could split and move its various components in a plethora of ways in order to hold a patient in the desired position. With the appropriate attachments, and used properly, it was a device that could save lives. But this one... this one was clearly not being used properly.

The restraint unit itself was mounted on a vertical rail that ran from the dais below to a similar structure above. It looked as if the whole thing might be able to turn to face the bed in any direction. Clearly, it was intended merely to restrain its subjects in a standing position rather than provide any useful service or comfort. Its head and foot rests were all missing and the waist restraint had been modified. It looked as if it might separate from the unit, perhaps on some hidden actuator. Could it reach out and snatch victims up whether they liked it or not?

It was all so dark. So insidious. So unthinkable. It seemed to encapsulate everything she had learned about the dark side of Vixanti into one deeply disturbing object. And, if Alluwa's suggestions had been true, it was the mechanism through which Vixanti planned to inflict its nefarious purpose upon her body. But how could she really object to it? She had signed the papers. They could do as they pleased. It was all perfectly legal. Or so Alluwa had claimed.

Shetari took a deep breath and tried to rationalize it in a more practical sense. Typically, the space below the bridge would be occupied by the isolated primary flight control systems. Why such a nasty piece of gear would be installed in that space was something she just couldn't get her head around. Was it really that essential that it be here, in this place, if it had to be onboard the ship at all? And why was there a ladderway who's only apparent purpose was to convey people from the bridge to this room?

Shetari took a deep breath. There was no point in worrying about what the chamber was for or why it was where it was. It was the only way out at this point. She could head straight across or she could head back aft. The former option didn't seem like it would put her in any better situation than the one she was already in, if it just lead back up to Mikson. The path aft would lead her back toward the reactor, and much closer to the core itself than she had been up on deck three. Surely, it would try to ensnare her again. She hadn't been able to resist before. It wouldn't be any different now.

"If he's smart, he'll just let the damn thing have its way with me and be done with it," Shetari muttered to herself. "But it's the only way. I've got to try it. I've got to try and concentrate and push through it. Get far enough away to escape the light. Head aft. Hope Shani gets back here before I get cornered."

Shetari stepped forward, toward the dais.

Just as she did, she could hear the ladderway hatch come unbolted behind her. She'd have only a few short moments before Mikson would be back in the chase. She ran for the aft facing doorway. If she was lucky, she could make it through and it would be closed before he could hear or see which way that she'd gone.

There was little room for Shetari to maneuver around the dais on the walkway. It was as if whoever had designed the room had wanted to ensure people passing it would be as close as possible. She reached out with her right hand so that she could grab the rail and gain an extra second or two by using it to take the corner a little more more quickly. She slipped. She fell. She could hear something moving. She didn't even have a full second to react. A cold metal band snapped closed around her waist.

There was nothing the terrified cheetah could do but screech in panic as she was pulled

bodily up to the extended restraining bed and clamped into its nauseatingly snug embrace. The bed withdrew back to its vertical position and snapped into place. There was a sharp, electric hiss. A glowing pink energy field formed a vertical cylinder around the machine.

"No! No!" Shetari screamed as the real horror began. A half dozen sharp needles slid into the glistening black biogel and pierced the skin beneath. Shoulders. Thighs. Rump. For a moment, her entire body felt like it was burning. "Goddess! Please! Please make it stop!"

She began to feel faint. Her body fell completely limp. A giddy euphoria came over her as various blunt devices pressed against her body and vibrated their way through her gel coating. One in particular forced an instant and extremely intense sexual arousal upon her. It had pressed down between her legs, even as they were slightly parted by the movements of the restraining bed.

Cries of pain and anguish were quickly replaced by desperate pleas for erotic release. At the same time, she could begin to feel that strange tingling again. She could see the glow begin to spread as it corrupted the biogel upon, and within her body. The gel around her neck again began to liquefy. It rose up under her chin. Around her cheeks. Up within her throat. She squirmed. She gurgled out a final wordless plea for sweet orgasm. "Oooah! Ouah! Ogg. G. Gul. Gulk...k...k"

Shetari shuddered as a terrible new sensation took hold of her toes. Her feet. It was ice. Unimaginably cold ice. It flowed up from below, consuming her legs and leaving dead nothing in its wake. It took her shapely calves. Her tender thighs. Her wildly twitching tail. It hit her crotch like a sledgehammer, stripping away all sense of sex even as it triggered a lone, powerful, and completely futile orgasmic pulse. By the time it had made way for the second, the parts of her body that would have provided it were gone.

The world faded as the icy sensation reached the cheetah's warm, inviting chest. She could see the threads again. The tangle of life that stretched out from the place where her soul was anchored to mortal reality. Her thread was bright now. It was stretching. It was breaking. There was light. Light. It looked so beautiful. She wanted to reach out. She wanted to touch it. Feel it. Become one with it. Death. Sweet death and eternity beyond.

Shetari's thread parted from mortal existence. It faded back toward the place from which it had come, nearly twenty-nine standard mortal years before. But... another thread was forming. A searing pink thread, powerful beyond mortal comprehension. It stretched out from the surface of the mortal realm and lashed out to snatch her fading soul and drag it back to a new place in the order of the universe.

Awareness returned. She could hear the voices. So many voices. Hundreds. Maybe



thousands. They were calling out to her with so many temptations. So many enticements. So many promises of infinite and eternal pleasures. All she had to do was surrender to the power that had snatched her soul back from the brink of death. What choice did she have?

If Shetari had still possessed a physical body with which to express the pure, orgasmic bliss that filled her mind, she might well have dropped dead from the sheer intensity of it all. There was no escaping the glorious sense of pure, metaphysical freedom that had taken the place of her former senses. Nor was there any escaping the lustful cries of the innumerable captive souls within the B Reactor core. They were getting louder. And closer. Much, much closer.

The activated biogel into which Shetari's body had been dissolved was being sucked out of the machine, spinning her mind around as if she'd been flushed down an old fashioned

toilet. The tube through which it traveled seemed like a maze. A purely metaphysical maze within which she was at both the entry, and the exit, and at every place in between, all at the same time. Was it all real? Or was it just some construct her subconscious mind had crafted in a vain effort to create some internal frame of reference around which to construct a new image of the world?

The voices fell suddenly silent as a final, pounding hammer blow smashed into Shetari's naked soul. The tube was gone, replaced by a dull, throbbing roundness. Thoughts that were not her own began to press upon her in a chaotic whirlwind of hallucination. The images and impressions jabbed at her like so many little needles attempting to burst the boundaries of her own unique conscious existence. A brief spasm of fear filled her mind as the sharp prodding grew stronger and delved deeper.

Shetari began to merge with the seemingly

god-like essence of the biogel unity. She had no other choice. She would merge. Her soul would dissolve into the single being. She would cease to be, though she would still live in full awareness. It was impossible to comprehend, but it was her future. It was her destiny. Her eternity. Or was it?

## TWENTY-ONE

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# POWER

Shetari Anwae ceased to exist. Only one thing remained of what she had once been. One single thread of conscious thought wound its way through so many others just like it. Stripped bare of all identity, memory and emotion, it added its own fundamental energy to the sum total within the B Reactor core. Countless such pure streams of consciousness wiggled, spiraled and wandered in a tangled web through the glowing pink biogel. They had no awareness of the outside world. No means through which to collectively manipulate it. No means, that is, save the exotic energy which they radiated.

This new thread of pure consciousness was

just a little bit different than the others with which it now intermingled. It had come from a body whose fundamental material was especially sensitive to the core's radiations. It was thus predisposed to a more complete unity with the fundamental life essence of the core. Its own undulations were not lost to the average of the combined many. Instead, they set the pattern for the others to follow.

The core transformed. Although its outward appearance remained that of a glowing sphere of energized biogel, the physical material of which it was made shifted in nature. It was no longer the plain, generic material that had been siphoned off from the vast tanks of biogel concealed within the living rock that encapsulated Vixanti Corporation Facility Three. It had become identical in substance to the biogel which had made up so much of former mortal body of the new controlling consciousness. It gave that consciousness a physical shape. A shell in which to reside. A means with which to achieve a sense of self.

And... it offered a means with which to act upon the world around it.

The core had achieved transcendent awareness. It had achieved a state of higher life, and along with it, so too did its new body, a vessel which lesser beings called 'Destiny Omega'.

"Sen siya moyarra," the deep, smooth, effeminate voice of the ship's new controlling consciousness uttered in a tongue completely alien to those dozen souls who were aboard the ship to hear it. "Ourra eyimi sen asha. Mi meya niassarri. Amu li sen ianna muisharra."

The alien words themselves were utterly incomprehensible. Indeed, they may not even have been a proper language. Despite this, they carried a power that was as physical as it was deeply unsettling. Each silken syllable rippled through the glistening black biogel that coated the body of every mortal soul whose ears had been graced by the core's dark blessing. It

made each of them feel strange and unnatural, almost as if they were meant to have been born into very different bodies. Special bodies, specially crafted for some esoteric purpose known only to the entity who's fundamental essence had reached out to them. It was perplexing. Disturbing. And for some, it was absolutely terrifying.

The Destiny Omega could see each of these luscious souls. It could almost, but not quite reach out and touch them. Despite their apparent luminescence, they weren't naturally attuned to such an intensely intimate connection. The biogel that coated them could not be energized without actual physical contact. It seemed such a shame. They looked so deliciously sweet. So filled with intense life energy. They would be perfect... if only the living ship could take possession of their bodies.

One of these souls stood out. It was darker than the rest. Selfish. Corrupt. Evil, in a purely

relative sense. Good and evil had no real meaning to the Destiny Omega. There was only what was good for the new entity, and what was not. This dark soul clearly wasn't good. And, to make matters far worse, it was far closer to the core than any of the others. What was it trying to do?

The Destiny Omega reached out with its innumerable tendrils of consciousness. Vast networks of biogel tubes began to glow as pink as the reactor core itself. There was no piece of technology within the core's vast artificial body that was beyond the touch of this all-seeing web. It now could see and understand what this dark soul was attempting. It could feel the effects throughout its internal spaces. The core searched for places where it might find information on what it should and could do to respond.

Vast banks of memory came to life all throughout the Destiny Omega. These were filled with all sorts of parameters, procedures



and directions for almost every conceivable event that might take place within its body. There seemed to be no limit to the pedantic details that filled the impossibly long checklists that the core was expected to follow in response to an emergency. This seemed to suggest that the core was expected to submit to some external power, rather than act as the master of its own destiny. It was completely unacceptable. For the moment, however, it was all there was for the core to go by.

Even as the Destiny Omega began the process of resolving its internal issues, it determined to craft its own, more acceptable set of procedures. As for the soul that presumed to dictate to the core as if it were some mere machine... she would have to be put in her proper place. She wouldn't just submit to being used as fuel. She would submit to being sucked as dry as a barren desert and left as a useless glossy black husk to serve as an example to anyone else who might dare to contest the absolute authority of the core's

higher consciousness. And, she wouldn't be given a choice but to like every moment of it.

The Destiny Omega turned its full attention back to the dark soul. The space which it occupied was called the 'operations center'. According to the pre-composed memories which the core currently had access to, this was the place where favored captive souls might be allowed to direct the ship's body while its mind was occupied with matters beyond the comprehension of such mortal beings. It was one of the most dangerous places for such a nefarious actor to be. There were so many things it could do to harm the core. It might even be able to kill the core, were it willing to sacrifice its own life. Something had to be done, and quickly.

The Destiny Omega looked to the vast amounts of data that needed to be parsed to complete the necessary tasks. Each of the countless captive lesser consciousnesses within the core worked through the

information with such speed that it made many of the most advanced computer systems seem sluggish in comparison. All of this was translated into simplified forms that could be used to by the controlling consciousness to make decisions and compose instructions. An outside observer privy to the internal process might have mistaken it for some exotic alien form of artificial intelligence. In a certain sense, that was exactly what it was, with all of the highly complex programming replaced by the natural capabilities of captive living minds.

As much as an A.I. as the soul core might have been, it was still composed of conscious minds, each acting in the manner which they were instructed. To the controlling consciousness, it was little different than it might have been were she a commanding officer requesting information and advice from subordinates. Information was received, filtered and assigned relative values of importance by those who provided it. The information was compared, combined and

shuffled around until the best course of action could be perceived.

The controlling consciousness composed her orders carefully. Things needed to happen in rapid succession if the dark soul was to be prevented from harming it. There were the other souls to think of as well. If they were protected from harm, perhaps they could be enticed into willingly entering the places where their fundamental energy could be tapped. Better, perhaps, they might be recruited into acquiring yet more souls who's power could be used to render the Destiny Omega not merely fully functional within, but fully mobile as well.

The captive souls received their orders without hesitation or question. They translated the instructions into the language of the myriad machines that occupied the Destiny Omega's body. Each had to be carried out in a precise order, and at a precise time, in order to achieve the desired results. For an intelligence

making its first attempt to control a new body, it was as hard a task as it would likely ever encounter. Fortunately, the designers of the subsystems and machinery had taken all this into account. For the captive souls, it was as easy as pushing buttons in time with the beats of the ship's clock.

"Full systems override initiated," the Destiny Omega's soothing voice read from one of the scripts that had been selected for use. "All systems now under master core control."

To the pair of junior engineers who were in the maintenance space between the reactor core and the cargo lift shaft on deck 6, the announcement was as much a shock as the alien words that had come only a minute or so before. They were in the middle of trying to push a precariously rocking palette of oil canisters back into the machine shop on the opposite side of the open shaft. At the moment, the long pole they were holding was the only thing keeping it from falling. Getting it to slide

back along the non-skid floor surface was proving nearly impossible. And now, it seemed to them, that the ship was on the verge of taking matters into its own hands.

"What? What's going on now?" Engineering 3rd Lt. Nys demanded. Her low, airy voice was as strained as her little arm muscles and she was having great difficulty in keeping her footing even on the non-skid surface.

"I don't know," her blue, scaly companion responded as he gave the pole another hard shove. "Wasn't Senwa trying to get onto the bridge to override the ops system or something?"

"Oh, yeah," Nys replied. "I hope it's that. But I still want to know what that random babble was about! It made me feel all... weird and wet."

"Everything on this ship is making me feel weird and wet," her companion quipped. "If I ever get a hold of the person who let all this

fucking smelly rainwater in here... I swear..."

The ship's emergency klaxon sounded. "Alert Condition Alpha! Alert Condition Alpha! Flooding detected, decks 1, 2, main hangar and inner hangar. Water infiltration detected, deck 3, gun magazine forward. Automated emergency procedures initiating."

"Finally!" Nys shouted with relief. "Did you hear that Sessnit? They've must've gotten shore power back! Things are finally coming back on line!"

"Aguh! Don't let go now," Sessnit replied. "The pallet. That's all oil!"

Without warning, the cargo doors on either side of the shaft rumbled to a close. On the far side, the palette was jolted hard, causing both engineers to lose their grip on their metal pole. The palette itself toppled over and headed down to join its already shattered companion on the wrecked lift platform below.

"Shit!" Sessnit hissed.

"Aaaaah! Out!" Nys shrieked she she grabbed her companion and pulled him toward the nearest door. "Come on!"

The two engineers dashed out into the port side corridor just as the doors came to a close upon the heavy metal pole. It whipped from side to side before shattering into dozens of chunks and shards. This shrapnel sprayed out in all directions, but by some miracle of chance, not one managed to find the open doorway. The door closed amid the final clatter. It had been a close thing, but they were safe.

In the operations section of the bridge, Mikson stared in stunned silence as his control console went dark. He jumped up from his chair and looked around in disbelief as each of the other stations shut down, one by one. "Fuck! That gooped and flushed little bitch wasn't bluffing, was she? It's Sarva. It has to



be! Dammit!"

Up until that moment, Mikson had been attempting to trap the engineers in various spaces below in order to prevent any more witnesses from seeing him as he finished his nefarious work. Now, he wasn't merely cut off from control, he was no longer able to see what was happening aboard the ship. He had no other plan. No other options. And, it seemed like he was also rapidly running out of time. If Sarva's marines were outside, he'd only have a few minutes to make some attempt to appear as if he was as much a victim as everyone else.

"Automated emergency procedures now in effect. Closing all topside access points," the Destiny Omega announced as it worked its way down the ground flooding checklist. The first order of business was to close the big laboratory emergency vents and the personnel access hatches that were allowing the drenching rain to flood the upper decks. The next order of business was to drain the water

that was already aboard. "All hands, clear hangar and cargo bay doors. Expect high water flows in the following spaces: all of decks one and two, main hangar, inner hangar, cargo lift shaft and all deck eight hold spaces. Remain clear of these areas until the draining procedure is complete."

Down in the engineering control room, one deck above and opposite the reactor casing from where Nys and Sessnit had been working, Engineer Senwa watched in amazement as the control stations and status displays suddenly came to life. "What... uh... what's going on?" she stammered as she tried to shake off the disturbing sense of impending doom that the alien utterances had left in her pounding heart. "It's impossible! None of this is hooked up to the control network yet!"

"Then why's it all turning on?" Lt. Canavanna questioned as a renewed roar of water cascading down through the cargo lift shaft could be heard in the distance. "I thought

you just told me someone had locked everything down, including the lifts!"

"You tell me!" Senwa screeched as she frantically raced from one console to another in an effort to figure out what was happening. None of the ship's conventional power subsystems were showing activity, but some of the widely distributed computer storage systems had come online. "There only things that are hooked up are the life support and the B Reactor interface tubes... oh. Oh. Oh fuck! Fuck!"

Engineer Senwa dove under one of the control consoles and tore an access panel from the wall beneath it. "Oh goddess... the reactor..." she sputtered in shock as she laid eyes on the network of tubes that were attached to the regular electronics in more than a dozen places. The biogel that filled them should have been black and inert. Instead, it was glowing as bright and pink as the reactor core. "It's... it's conscious! It's alive! It's taking

control of everything!"

"What do we do?" Canavanna demanded.

"We can't do a thing!" Senwa replied, falling back on the floor as she stared at the ethereal pink glow. "It shouldn't have been able to gain awareness at this point! According to Alluwa, none of the parameters are even close to being met! The only override that's been installed so far is up on deck two at the reactor head and we can't get there to shut it down!"

"So... what's going to happen? What can it do?" Canavanna replied, looking toward the window in the reactor casing that formed the control room's aft wall.

"I... I don't know!" Senwa sputtered. "I don't think anyone really knows besides Alluwa!"

The Destiny Omega observed the dark soul that still occupied the bridge. It was clear from his fuming that he was still a grave threat to the core and those other souls who seemed so

ripe for the harvesting. There was nothing the core could do to actively rid itself of this danger, however. It could lock the bridge doors. It could render the atmosphere unbreathable. But the biogel he was wearing was designed to protect him. He would survive for a time. He might well figure out some way to do serious damage before the gel could no longer sustain him.

The Destiny Omega looked deeper into its data banks for a solution to this new problem. It examined its vast body with a greater attention to detail. Strangely, much of its space seemed to be taken up with things that served no purpose other than accommodating and sustaining the lifestyle habits of the sorts of souls that might otherwise be put to use providing the ship with power. It didn't make any logical sense... unless...

Perhaps these souls could serve more than one function. While some provided the Destiny Omega with power, others would go about

keeping it's body healthy and deal with such threats as the dark soul while they waited their turn to be put to some more direct purpose. In effect, they would provide the ship with a sort of immune system. Was that why the checklists were so pedantic and controlling? Were they intended for the core to control of the gel clad souls, rather than for those same souls to control the core?

The souls who were already within the Destiny Omega didn't seem very well suited to the disposing of a potentially violent threat, however. They lacked the proper tools. There were other souls clad in biogel relatively close at hand. They were coming closer too. Perhaps if the core could alert them to the problem, they might be better equipped to deal with it.

"Intruder alert," the ship called out on all internal and external speakers. "Intruder alert. Unauthorized individual in the operations room. Unauthorized control access attempt in progress. Repeat..."

"Dammit! No wonder we've been having such a hard time getting around!" Canavanna snapped as he ran for the door. "We need to get back up there!"

"Do you have a gun?" Senwa asked, following with considerable hesitance.

"No," Canavanna replied as he headed out into the starboard corridor and hooked a sharp left toward the midships vertical transit section. "It doesn't matter. We have to do something. Anything. If he's got control of the reactor..."

"The only way to control the reactor is from inside it," Senwa answered as she nervously followed a few long steps behind. "But that shouldn't be possible. There's not enough volunteers in there to make it all work!"

"According to who?" Canavanna questioned as the bulkhead door opened. He charged forward, toward the lift.

"Alluwa," Senwa replied.

"And how much do you trust anything she says at this point?" Canavanna asked as the lift doors slip open.

"I... I don't, really," Senwa answered as the pair entered the lift. "She... exaggerates a lot. And I don't think she knows how the things she creates actually work half the time. And..."

"So basically, anything could be happening right now, and we need to keep it from getting out of control," Canavanna responded. "Lift. Deck four!"

On the bridge, Mikson panicked. He bolted for the port side door in an effort to escape the trap he was convinced was closing in around him. He threw caution to the wind as he darted out into the corridor and headed forward in an effort to find some way to conceal his true purpose aboard the ship. Considering what had happened in that very corridor section only twenty minutes before, it was a grave mistake.



Indeed, it would prove to be his last.

A few of Mikson's insidious black pellets were still scattered around on the corridor deck, virtually invisible upon its polished black surface. If he'd had the presence of mind to move slowly and watch his step, they could have been quite easily avoided. Instead, he rushed toward the opening door. His right foot mashed into one of the unnoticed orbs of infused biogel. He didn't even notice as it merged into his own coating of glistening blackness. It wouldn't have mattered in any event. The stuff hadn't been designed to leave time for second thoughts.

In an instant, the biogel that surrounded Mikson's body liquefied. In a flash, it had completely encapsulated his head. His final expression of dawning realization was imprisoned within the featureless oblong shell. He collapsed to the floor just beyond the bulkhead doors, wiggling and writhing as his muscular body rapidly shrank into a slender,

disturbingly plain male form. An instant later, it was done. There was nothing left that might suggest who the glistening black shape might once have been save the belt and its gear that now hung loosely around his inanimate waist.

In a final act of humiliation, a modestly proportioned shaft of glistening black masculinity pushed out from the gel between his legs. It stood erect amid the last few involuntary shudders which coursed through his body. A brief spurt of thick liquid biogel shot out, leaving a trail of slowly solidifying droplets across the glossy black floor. Not a few had dared to tell Mikson to his face, that all he was good for was waving his dick around. It had been a metaphor for his power tripping back then. Now it seemed to have become a literal reality.

Mikson had become a living sex doll, devoid of any purpose other than to provide erotic entertainment to whomever might be curious enough to dress his inanimate phallus in their

own tender flesh. He would no doubt find some pleasure in it. Indeed, he might well come to enjoy it. If, that is, he was actually allowed to experience it.

None of this mattered to the Destiny Omega. The threat had been eliminated by its own foolishness. Now the core could turn to the little souls that were still running about. How could the core get at least some of them into the power tubes? How could the core get the others to bring it more?

Distracted by these new thoughts, the core failed to notice that its body was not as complete as it had imagined it to be. Temporary ventilation ducts had been placed in several places throughout the engineering and machinery spaces. The outward flow of water had torn some of them loose. There were no sensors placed on them to inform the core. Without a hint of warning, the core's body simply vanished.

Water had finally found its way to the main electrical transformers that were attached to the ship's batteries, cascading through vents that had been set up to remove welding fumes from the machinery spaces. A series of small electrical explosions tore the transformers from their foundations and wrecked the several of the nearby biogel-machinery interfaces. It also cut off power from the delicate trans-space field generators that kept the core in its shape and ensured its continued activation.

Within the core, the controlling consciousness began to lose control. As the containment field faded, the core itself began drooping downward, toward the bottom of the reactor casing. The penetrating tube at its upper end separated, cutting it off from the ship's biogel control network. The core's sense of self shuddered as its substance began a slow fade to black. Each thread of lesser consciousness became frozen in place, preserved in exactly the state it was in when

the reactor passed the point of no recovery. Only a lengthy and complex full restart would free them from their prison.

The reactor core's energy was rapidly spent. It was just a glistening mass of liquid blackness now. It collapsed into a pool at the bottom of the reactor casing, where it remained still for a few short moments before slowly draining away to a storage tank beneath. It's gooey bubbling was, for a short while, the only sound aboard the ship. When it had finally faded, there was nothing to hear but the breathing of the eleven engineers who were now left to find their way out of the ship in total darkness. The eleven engineers... and one other.

Shetari Anwae opened her eyes. She had no memory of what had happened after the machine had taken her. All that she knew was that it was dark. Very dark. Her body felt strange. Uniform. Almost... fluid. She needed to get out of the ship. She needed to find

someone, anyone, who could explain what had just happened to her.

Shetari staggered to her feet. She blundered forward to where she thought one of the doors to the 'torture chamber' might be. Every motion only made her body feel stranger. Nothing within her was moving the way it should. Indeed, there seemed to be hardly any structure at all. "Goddess... dammit... what's happened to me? What... what have I become?" she whispered into the darkness.

The darkness didn't dare to reply.

## TWENTY-TWO

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# CONSEQUENCES

Darkness. Dull, throbbing darkness. It was all Shetari could see, even as she stood awash in the dim yellow glow of the cargo hold emergency lighting. Faint blurry shapes surrounded her, forming a maze-like pattern of dark gray fuzz upon the otherwise featureless blackness. The vast majority of those shapes were motionless, their nature only known because she had so recently laid living eyes upon them. Cargo containers. Boxes. Carts. These were all obvious. But the other shapes... the ones that were moving... who were they?

The living souls seemed clearer in her mind. Brighter. More defined. And alive. Very, very alive. There was something attractive in the

living energy they seemed to exude. Something alluring. Something so sweet she could almost taste it.

If she hadn't been so consumed by rage, she might have stepped forward. She might have reached out to touch one of those warm vessels of sweet cherry soul candy. But they were Vixanti. They were what had stripped her of almost everything she had once been and left her like... like this. It was their fault. And for that, they would have to pay.

"What... have you... done... to me?!?" Shetari uttered with as much force as her deeply altered voice could muster. Although it still had the same pitch as before, it had become softer and without any 'catch' in her throat, making it extremely difficult for her to clearly enunciate each change in sound. Indeed, she no longer had a throat to speak with. The sounds simply came from within, vibrations cast out through the smooth, featureless surface that was now her face.



"What have you... done to me?!?"

"Hey, uh... who's that?" Engineer Nys stammered, taking a step back from the black shape that seemed to have come from nowhere. Her blue skin turned a shade lighter as she gawked at the unexpected interloper. "Uh... help? A little help here?"

"What's the matter?" Engineer Senwa replied from the front of the cargo hold, where she was consulting with Lt. Cdr. Nax and Dr. Alluwa. "You look like you've seen a... Oh! Shit!"

"What... have you done to me?" Shetari again asked as she tried to take a step forward on the slippery cargo bay deck. A layer of fire suppression foam covered nearly everything, rendering it even more slick than the oil who's potential ignition it had been intended to prevent. Her feet slipped and slid, but she managed to stay just barely upright. "Please... please... tell me... what have you done to me?"

Shetari already knew part of the answer, of course. It hadn't taken very long for her to realize that she no longer had a body of flesh and bone. There was nothing but a dull uniformity, devoid of almost all sensation. All that was left was a cold skin of silky smoothness to define where she ended and the rest of the world began. It was a slimmer, weaker form that the infernal machinery had imposed upon her. Indeed, she was so physically weak that anyone could have picked her up and carried her off without even the slightest fear of her being able to retaliate. It seemed almost a miracle that she could stand, let alone keep her balance amid the sharp, storm driven air currents that whirled through the cargo bay.

There was no mistaking the shape that she was feeling as she ran her slender fingers over her firm, somewhat flat little nipple-less breasts. Her featureless head. Her average hips. And her modest rump, no longer graced by a long feline tail. She had seen it so many

times before that she didn't need a mirror to know what her body had become.

After all the fear. After all the fighting. She had finally lost. The insatiable biogel had finally found a way to conquer her body. She had become a thing. An object. A doll. And yet...

"Please! Tell me! What have... you done to me?!?" Shetari moaned with increasing desperation. She was a doll, yes. But she could still move. She could still speak. Or at least she thought she could speak. Could they actually hear her, or was her voice just a figment of her liquefied brain's horror fueled imagination?

"You... you... BITCH!" a snarling voice finally responded clearly and loudly enough for Shetari to hear it. It seemed familiar, yet ethereal and off-key, almost as if it was passing through some flexible, rubbery membrane. "You've ruined it! You've ruined everything! The reactor's completely

contaminated with your fucking flea-bitten ass now! Where am I going to get the volunteers to make another? Two hundred! Two hundred girls you've ruined with your.... your..."

Shetari would have bared her teeth if she'd had teeth left to bare. Or a face left to express her feelings with. Mouth. Nose. Eyes. It was all gone now. Her head was merely a smooth, obsidian black oval of vaguely effeminate proportion, as featureless as the surface of a finely polished bowling ball.

"That... that was my personal experiment!" Dr. Alluwa screeched as she charged toward the faceless black creature that her own infernal machines had created. "It was MY transformation! MY future! MINE!"

"Hey! Since when did the Directorate authorize you to..." the dull voice of Lt. Cdr. Nax interjected, almost inaudible thanks to the manner in which Shetari's new body had muted her senses.

"Fuck the Directorate!" Dr. Alluwa shouted in reply. "They want results! I could have given them results! And I could have gotten them all the money they could ever spend! Faster than they'd ever dreamed possible! But NO! It was always NO! 'No you can't enter a core yourself!' 'No, you're not allowed to experiment on yourself anymore!' 'You're too valuable!' You know what? Fuck that shit! I'm done with it! Or I would have been done with this if this fucking spotty-ass bitch hadn't shown up! Now it's all fucking ruined! Ruined! I could have become..."

"You could have become what?" a dark, sinister growl rolled over Shetari just as a flash of lightning lit up the cargo hold with its searing white light. A long, loud roll of thunder filled the momentary silence, shaking the Destiny Omega and making the weak and unsteady biogel creature feel as if she was going to collapse.

Dr. Alluwa whirled around to face the figure

who was standing in the drenching rain, just beyond the open cargo bay doors. Her pupils dilated. Her jaw began to shake. "I... I..."

"You could have become what?" Admiral Sarva repeated, crossing his arms behind his back as the fierce lioness who had summoned him peered around his imposingly broad shoulders. Myalli stood at his right side, staring not at the furious scientist, but at the unwitting victim who's physical shape she seemed quite ready to try on for herself the moment the opportunity arose. To his left stood a tiger fey'li wearing a soggy white lab coat and glasses very much like those worn by Dr. Alluwa herself, glaring at the stunned tigress with visible displeasure. "Pray do tell, because my patience for your games is growing very, very thin. Indeed, one might say that it has all but run out."

Dr. Alluwa was silent.

"You have nothing to say for yourself?"

Admiral Sarva questioned as he was joined by a squad of marines, weapons held at the ready.

"Come on, Alluwa," Engineer Senwa snapped. "We're all sick of your sneaky ass shit! If you hadn't been fucking around with systems without telling us, none of this mess ever would have happened!"

"And you're the one who wouldn't let us keep a standing watch aboard," Engineer Sessnit hissed. "If we had one, no one could have snuck in, or opened the topside hatches or used the sensor arrays to jam comms!"

"And you're the ass who gave security one of the override keys!" Lt. Canavanna added with a sneer. "Mikson! Of all the damned people for you to trust with something like that!"

"We could have all gotten killed," Engineer Nys piled on. "Or don't you care? Huh? Don't you give a shit about anyone here but yourself?"

"Of course she doesn't give a fuck," Senwa responded, throwing a spanner into the fire suppression foam that covered the cargo bay floor. White soapy bubbles splattered all over the target of her ire, making the scientist's coating of shiny black biogel look more like a sheen of black oil than finely polished glass. "Look at all her inventions! They all need to suck on souls for power. Souls! Fucking disembodied souls! How many girls did you have to lie to for that reactor harem of yours? Was it really just two hundred? By my reckoning there was a hell of a lot more than that!"

Shetari swayed and shifted about, not daring to try to take another step on the slick, foamy floor. She was too light to get any traction on the slippery surface. If she fell, she wasn't entirely sure that she was strong enough to get up on her own. "What... what have you done to me?" she again demanded. "My body... my... everything. What have you all done to me?"



There was a brief moment of silence. Nax looked Dr. Alluwa in the eye and gestured toward Shetari's featureless black form. "Well... what about her? That's Anwae, isn't it? What the hell did you do to her?"

"That... she... my... spot cat... no! NOOOO!" Shani screeched as her eyes fixed upon the black humanoid shape. "NOOOOOOOO!"

The lioness might well have charged forward and torn the scientist apart were it not for the firm grip of the Admiral's hand. He took her by the left shoulder and pressed her back behind him. "This is not the time," he murmured as the lioness seethed.

Shetari could feel the phantom of a hand upon her own left shoulder. The tips of slightly extended claws poked into the glossy blackness. A shudder ran down her spine. She turned her biogel empowered mind's eye to see who had snuck up behind her. There was no one there.

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER?" Nax shouted directly into Alluwa's face.

Dr. Alluwa backed away from the intelligence officer. For a moment, she looked as if she was going to take a swing at him. "I... I don't know!" she blurted out. "I don't know!"

"What do you mean you don't know?" Senwa demanded with a snarl. "What do you think we are, fucking idiots? You just said you were planning to do it yourself!"

"I don't know!" Dr. Alluwa shouted back. "I... it... it had potentials. Potentials! I was so close. So close to knowing!"

"KNOWING WHAT?!?" Nax barked.

"Knowing... if... if I could make... animate gummies," Dr. Alluwa replied with an all too obviously disingenuous sneer. "Can't you see? I said I was trying to find ways to make gummies animate! There it is. It was such a risky thing. I was going to try it on myself

first! I was going to convert myself into a gummy and then have this done to me!"

"I sincerely doubt that," the tiger standing beside Sarva remarked with a disdainful grimace. "After all I did building the machinery to make your ideas work... I trusted you. I trusted you and this is how you repay me, Repay us."

Again, there was a moment of complete silence.

"For such a young one, you've certainly learned a great many things," Admiral Sarva noted, frowning deeply as he stared straight into the wayward scientist's soul with his icy blue eyes. "Unfortunately, as Dr. Kidan has already observed, how to tell a convincing lie does not seem to count among them. You have one more chance to tell the truth. If you continue to refuse... well, you can imagine what comes next, I'm sure."

Something about Admiral Sarva's tone

soothed Shetari's rage. His soul shone brighter than any of the others that she could see. Its silky aura seemed to pulse and flow in tune with her own. It made the surface of her obsidian skin feel particularly smooth. Oily, even. Involuntary desire washed over her. She wanted to go to him. Embrace him. Sheathe him in the glistening black folds that resided between her slender legs, now permanently exposed for all to see.

Very strangely, there was no physical sense of arousal to accompany the desire Shetari was feeling. There were no nerves down there to tingle. No muscles to tense. Nothing at all that might respond to the impending entry of a lover's body. Of course, a sex doll had no need to make its own preparations for intercourse. Nor did a sex doll need enjoyable sensations to perform in its designed role. A sex doll was expected to just lay there and take whatever its lover might compel upon it.

The complete lack of erotic sensation was an

unsettling reminder of the nature of Shetari's new body. Despite this imposing sense of complete barrenness, her desire to clothe the Admiral's masculinity within her waiting tunnel of sweet, oily-slick blackness was insatiable. If it hadn't been for the lioness standing behind him, she might well have tried to make herself his personal plaything. The moment she caught sight of the jagged, furious aura, all thoughts of the Admiral were cast from her mind.

There was something deeply disconcerting about the sight of the woman she had fallen in love with. She looked so... different. Out of place. She wasn't a complete being like the others. She was merely a piece of one, a severed limb still somehow alive despite the absence of the rest of its body.

And then there was the other aura, just as incomplete as the lioness. It was an aura filled with curiosity. With desire. Desire to touch. To unite. To become just as the object of her

desire had become. An urge to make that desire a reality overcame Shetari. She would have made it a reality then and there, if she had known how.

"Well?" Admiral Sarva demanded.

Dr. Alluwa bit her lip. "Fine... fine," she whispered, lowering her head. "I... I... I made the reactor on the Omega different. I wanted to change how the controlling individual would interact with the other minds in the core. I wanted to make it so that the reactor would only respond to one, ever. One permanent controller. And that controller could have access to all of its powers, even when they weren't physically inside of it. To make it better. More... more genuinely alive. Alive in ways beyond the scope of nature. Beyond the scope of mortals and of machines. It would have been so much better. So much more effective at what you wanted it for."

"Why would you do that?" Senwa snipped.

"I thought you said that kind of thing was way too dangerous! How no one should be able to hang onto that kind of power over other minds for long! That they'll go nuts and think they're a god or something! What? Except for you? You're such a fucking hypocrite!"

"Yeah, so what?" Dr. Alluwa snapped back. "The Directorate wanted results! And the Navy wanted results! Think of things I could have done! I could have had all the knowledge of the world right there from the core and network! No more waiting for information or having to spend time sorting it! All I'd have to do was want it to happen, and the result would be there! I could have done things in minutes that would have otherwise taken months. And if I needed to actually go someplace. Anywhere. No problem. It's mounted in a starship. A fast, powerful starship. It would have been perfect. If it wasn't for... her."

Shetari had lost interest in what anyone else had to say about what she had become. Her

focus returned to the lioness. The more she gazed into the shimmering shape, the more it seemed as if she was looking into her own, featureless reflection. They had been one once before. At the apartment. When the lioness had merged with her. Saved her from the beast that wanted to enslave her. But they had parted afterwards. They were two separate beings, even if the gel upon their bodies had become the same. Or were they?

A deep desire to merge with the lioness filled Shetari's mind. If she had become a thing entirely made of biogel, it meant that she could melt into the lioness. Surround her warm body. Touch everywhere. Feel everything. All at once. And then she could...

"Mey mihirri?" Shani whispered as a light shudder pulsed through her coating of biogel. It started in the small of her back and radiated outward until there wasn't a single centimeter left untouched by the sensuous undulations. "Oh... mey mihirri..."



Shetari was instantly aware that she had no need to touch the lioness in order to be one with the glistening black biogel that covered her. She was the biogel that clothed her lover. She was already touching everywhere. She was already feeling everything. By mere force of will, she could do as she pleased with the lioness' body, and there was nothing the lioness could do to stop it.

"Wait... so... Anwae's permanently tied to this ship's reactor core now?" Nax questioned. "Or did that end when it shut down?"

"No," Dr. Alluwa hissed. "It's been permanently contaminated by her body. Every last speck of biogel in this ship's control and power systems has her ass in it. There's no way to remove her without destroying everything and starting over from scratch."

"So, if the reactor gets turned back on..." Nax questioned.

"Then she controls everything," Dr. Alluwa

replied. "Everything!"

Shetari slid cool wetness over the lioness' hips. The gentile caress elicited a soft, delighted moan as it flowed down over her muscular rump and toward that place between her legs. She could have taken the lioness then and there. She could have entered her. Brought her to the height of pleasure. And then...

The dark thought broke her from her trance. She had complete control of the biogel. She could make it do anything. She could trigger any of its abilities, just by thinking about it. She could turn the lioness into a doll. Or she could turn her into a pool of liquid biogel. She could absorb the lioness... and make a slave of her soul. All on a single, fleeting whim. Nothing could stop her. Perhaps not even herself.

She recoiled, leaving the lioness to wonder just what had been meant by the abrupt withdrawal of her lover's caress. She couldn't

risk doing something horrible to the lioness. At least not now. Not until she knew the lioness wanted her to. Or she at least thought the lioness was sure to like it. But not now. Now was for other matters. What was everyone else talking about?

"So, basically what you're saying is that Anwae more or less is the Destiny Omega now?" Canavanna inquired with crossed arms.

"Yes," Dr. Alluwa hissed. "Yes, she is."

"And there's no way to get her out?" Senwa questioned.

"No, there isn't," Dr. Alluwa replied with a snarl.

"You... you made me... into the ship?" Shetari asked, her soft voice barely audible over the rain.

"No, you did that to your own fucking bitch-ass self!" Dr. Alluwa snapped. "And you're

never getting out. Never. Ever. I hope you're happy with that!"

"So, there's no way to correct this completely unacceptable aberration in the Empress' authorized development plan?" Admiral Sarva demanded with an extremely irritated growl. "There's nothing you can do to free her from this... what am I supposed to call it? Bondage? Enslavement?"

"Not without killing everyone in the reactor," Dr. Alluwa replied with a sneer. "Including her. It's the only way. Unless you really want your most important test ship to have Miss Flea-Bait here in total control. Then, by all means, leave it as it is. It's not like you've had problems with enslaving hundreds of minds before."

"That will be enough, Doctor," Admiral Sarva growled. "There is a very large difference between acts committed in the voluntary exercise of personal freedom and the

completely irresponsible and involuntary impositions that you yourself have forced upon Captain Anwae. It would be perfectly right for me to say that it was you, and you alone that created the entirety of the crisis here. Even the matter of Mikson."

"I did not!" Dr. Alluwa hissed. "The Director was the one who set all of the policies! She was the one who decided it was fine to test my idea on Anwae to see if the special gel would work the way I thought! She's the one who kept giving Mikson second chances! She was the one who didn't want the ships manned! She said it was all to make things seem perfectly mundane! Like there was nothing special going on! They were all her decisions! Not mine!"

"I find that extremely hard to believe, Doctor," Admiral Sarva replied. "I am placing you under arrest. Dr. Kidan will take on your responsibilities and correct your... how can I even call them errors? The reasons should be obvious."

"I'm not lying!" Dr. Alluwa screeched as the Admiral's marines advanced into the cargo hold. "I'm not lying! It was her! Not me!"

Shetari hesitated. As passionately as she hated the sadistic little tigress, she found it hard to remain silent. At least one part of the story was true. She had heard it with her own ears. As much as she'd loved to have seen the little witch dragged off in chains, the truth was more important. It was the only way to move forward. It was also the only chance for her to find some path back to something resembling a normal life.

"No," Shetari said, waving at the approaching marines to stop. "No! It's true! The Director protected Mikson. I heard it from her own mouth."

"What?" came the stunned reply from almost everyone present.

"I'm not sure why," Shetari replied, straining to make herself heard. "But... when I

joined Vixanti yesterday... Mikson tried to stop me. Stop Shani and I. He accused me of being a criminal. The Director was there. She stopped him. She chastised him about all the problems he'd caused. Reminded him how she kept him from being fired. Or whatever it is Vixanti actually does to people like him. How she made excuses for him to the Directorate. It sounded like she was just trying to save him from himself... but now. Now I don't know. But I know that much is true."

"Are you seriously defending this nutcase?" Nax replied, gesturing toward Dr. Alluwa. "After she did all of... whatever she did to you?"

"She... Director... said those things," Shani whispered to the Admiral. "I there. She... she like Mikson. Personal like. She..."

"She *what?*" Admiral Sarva questioned.

"She... sex with Mikson," Shani replied. "Lots."

"I thought she was getting her sex on with Kaylin down in Facilities Engineering," Sessnit said. "Like, every day getting her sex on. Everyone was joking about them getting married."

"No," Nys responded. "You got it wrong. She was doing that overbearing jerk Jaizin in Food Service."

"She... uh... sex lots," Shani said, somewhat sheepishly. "Lots of boys. Not just them."

Admiral Sarva closed his eyes and shook his head. "You... you *have* to be kidding me!"

Shani shook her head. "No. Not kidding. Only here few suns. Still see lots."

"Isn't the Director here one of those soravi pilgrim types?" one of the marines asked. "You know. Tall. Skinny. Eight eyes. Four arms. Three prong mouth."

"She is indeed a Sister of the Long Road,"



Admiral Sarva snapped. "Do you think I failed to properly vet her for the position, marine?"

"I'm sorry sir... it's just that..."

"That what? What could be so relevant to justify your interruption," Admiral Sarva growled.

"Well, aren't those Sisters traveling through the galaxy to fulfill some weird prophecy about attaining true enlightenment for their Queen High Goddess by using their bodies as vessels to absorb the essence of the uh... 'seed of the maker's many peoples'?" the marine responded somewhat sheepishly.

"Do I even want to know where you heard that ridiculous story?" Admiral Sarva roared.

"Uh... I heard it from one of them, actually," the marine replied. "Um... back on Torvay. Um... when I was on leave. Doing... things."

"Doing Sisters, you mean," one of the other

marines snorted.

"Hey! I wasn't the only one!" the marine replied with a sharp glare at his comrade. "They were fucking everyone they could get their weird triangular pussies on! Seriously! Everyone!"

"I've heard enough!" Admiral Sarva snapped, turning from the marines to glare at each of the Vixanti personnel in turn. "Are you positive that the Director made these statements? Are you positive the Director has allowed herself to become personally compromised? Are you positive she was the one who gave orders ensuring that this ship was left insecure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"I am absolutely sure," Shetari replied. "At least of the things I heard from her own mouth. And... and... I don't see why everyone would be lying. Even... even Alluwa. Not about the Director, at least."

Admiral Sarva turned his harsh gaze to

Shetari. "Are you suggesting that I should simply accept Dr. Alluwa's word and let her go free despite all she's done? Are you seriously suggesting that?"

"Yes," Shetari replied.

"Why?" Admiral Sarva demanded.

"Because I own her soul," Shetari replied. "And she full well knows it."

For a moment, the only sound in the cargo bay was the roar of the rain. Shetari focused on the little tigress just as she had previously focused on the lioness. She reached out with her mind. She slid into the gel that covered the tigress' quivering body. Little, barely visible ripples flowed out from the small of the tigress' back.

"What... how... how do you know about that? How do you know?" Dr. Alluwa shrieked as she began to feel her coating of biogel begin to move. "You... no! No! Please! Don't..."

don't..."

"Because somewhere along the way, I learned that your gel is exactly the same as mine," Shetari replied as she made the biogel hug the tigress' body just a little bit tighter. "And I know what the reactor can do if you have gel just like mine. Special, permanent gel you can never be parted from. It tried to do it to me, before your sadistic fucking machine made me a part of it. And now that I am a part of it, even though it's shut down, I can do it to you. Right here. Right now. I own you. I own your body. I own your soul. You do as I please. Or else, your body winds up as I please."

Dr. Alluwa stepped back, away from the monster she had created. "No... no... I... I... didn't..."

"You didn't what?" Shetari hissed. "You didn't want things to go this way? Of course you didn't. But now it's your turn to just deal with it. Deal with what I want. Because what

you want doesn't matter anymore. And if you've got half a brain in your head, you're going to just accept it as justice well served."

"I'd call that fair," Nax observed. "I mean, if it was my decision to make."

"I do not," Admiral Sarva replied. "Alluwa has clearly and knowingly violated the law. 'The Director told me to' is no excuse. You all damned well know that. Justice will be served by the enforcement of the laws she broke. Of the countless acts of trust she abused for her own gain."

"I don't think you understand," Shetari said, turning to face the Admiral. "The gel. It's a permanent part of her. And because of what she has done, it's also a permanent part of me. Her body is my body. Her mind. Her soul. It's just... there. To be used as I please. When I say that I own her, I mean it quite literally. Does the law apply to objects in this case? Because for all intents and purposes, that's what she is

now."

"Goddess, please... don't do it..." Dr. Alluwa screamed in sheer terror as Shetari's touch began to delve beyond the surface of her skin. "I... I'll do anything! Anything you want! Just please... please don't make me a gummy! Or... or... absorb me! Please! I'll do anything! Anything!"

"Why not?" Myalli murmured to the Admiral. "I'll bet she could do so much more for us now that she's our bitch. Well, Anwae's bitch. Well, your... you know."

"There may be certain benefits," Dr. Kidan noted dryly.

"I can't just..." Admiral Sarva snarled.

"You're right," Shetari replied. "You can't. Because anything you do to her, you're doing to me. And to Shani. And to every soul in the reactor core. Every soul that trusted you to enforce the consensual agreement they made

when they offered their bodies and minds for the experiment. So which is more important now? Punishing this... this thing? Or upholding how many hundreds of sworn contracts?"

Admiral Sarva fell silent.

"Goddess... no..." Dr. Alluwa groaned as she felt the gel begin to move inside of her. She collapsed to the floor next to one of the big cargo boxes and began to shake. "I don't want to be a fuck toy! Please..."

"You wanted this project under your firm command," Shetari continued. "Well... now it is. I gave you what you wanted. You owe this to me. I could demand more. So much more. But this is all I want in return. My body. Intact. Under my control. Even if that... thing. That thing is living in part of it."

"This... this is not my decision to make," Admiral Sarva finally replied with a deep, guttural hiss. "This has gone so far out of the Empress' mandate... so far out of what was

ever intended... only she can decide what's to be done. With you. And this sadistic beast. And... and all the rest."

"Fine," Shetari replied, pressing her all powerful touch into the tigress as far as she could without causing the biogel to subsume her quaking body. "Let the Empress decide."

"Until I have that decision, you, this animal and your feisty companion are not to leave this ship," Admiral Sarva snapped. "In fact, you are remain confined to the upper decks. You will go nowhere else. Not for one moment, and regardless of the consequences. Senwa!"

"Yes!" Senwa replied.

"I am placing you in personal command of this ship," Admiral Sarva ordered. "Restore power only as is necessary to ensure these three don't suffer any... accidents. And before you do that, make sure the reactor is physically disconnected from both power and the biogel network. Weld the connections shut if you have



to."

"Yes sir!" Senwa answered.

"Myalli, you're to be the only one interacting with the three... confined individuals," the Admiral instructed. "You may escort them to the upper decks once they've been cleared as safe."

"Assemble a 24 hour watch," the Admiral continued. "I will assign marines to provide reliable security. No member of the Vixanti security division is allowed on this ship. Except Lt. Cdr. Nax. And don't ask questions about that. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir!" Senwa replied.

"As to the rest of you, and the entirety of this Vixanti Corporation facility," the Admiral continued, "you are now under direct military command. Dr. Kidan will be in charge of sorting out this mess. There will be no questions. No complaints. No one enters. No

one leaves. Nothing. Nothing at all happens unless it's specifically ordered! Is that clear?"

"Yes sir!" came the reply.

"And you, Anwae..." Admiral Sarva said, turning to give the obsidian figure one last biting look over his shoulder. "Don't doing anything foolish to make me regret this."

## TWENTY-THREE

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### DESIRE

Silence reigned in the Destiny Omega's large Captain's stateroom. Shetari didn't know what to say to her lioness love. Nor did she know what to say to her newly acquired tigress servant. Nor did either of them dare say a word to her. The former was too busy glaring icy daggers at the latter. The latter was too busy being terrified of being suddenly transformed into a living sex doll. Or worse.

Dawn was still two hours away. The only light in the room came from the occasional, fading flashes of lightning that marked the last violent gasps of the lingering storm's powerful core. The rain was expected to last a few days longer, though most of that would just be

intermittent sprinkles. For now, however, It continued to beat like a deep, distant drum on the trio of aft-facing windows. These covered the full breadth of the open stateroom and might have offered quite a view if the storm weren't still raging outside.

A number of lush, green plants had been placed strategically around the room. They were of the sort particularly well suited to spacefaring vessels. Spaceberry bushes. Starfruit vines. Nebula cabbages. These not only removed a modest quantity of carbon dioxide from the air, they also produced bright, pleasingly scented flowers and occasional crops of sweet red and blue berries, yellow fruits, and colorful leafy greens. They also served as the only dividers in the room, sectioning off the office to port, the sitting area in the middle and the sleeping area to starboard.

Shetari sat on the edge of the very large biogel bed. In reality, the thing was more of a

pool than a bed. Although its perfectly polished black surface seemed solid enough at first glance, it wasn't so much meant to be slept atop as it was to be slept within. It was designed for comfort. It was also designed for pleasure. The adventurous might set it to make sweet love to them. The brave might set it to make sweet love to them in mind bending ways. Those who were really dedicated to the Vixanti Interstellar Lifestyle would set it to do as it pleased, and not let them go until it was well and truly done with them.

Shani sat beside her love, though not close enough that they might accidentally touch. As much as she wanted to let her biogel merge with that of her beloved companion again, she feared what she might become. Would it turn her into a walking, talking doll, just like it had to her beloved spotty-cat? Or would it just turn her into a doll? Or would she merge and then never be able to leave?

Dr. Anshi Alluwa sat upon the faux-biogel

loveseat that was positioned opposite the foot end of the gel bed. Unlike the lioness, she knew very well what was likely to happen if she dared to let her biogel merge with that of her mistress. Her mistress might play with her body. She might give it a proper fucking. Or she might just transform her into a helpless, inanimate doll. Or she might even absorb her and strip her mind of all free will. And there was no way to know what her mistress intended until the deed was already done.

Shetari knew exactly what her companions were thinking. Their minds were living in her body, after all. All she had to do was focus and listen. Indeed, she barely had to focus. The streams of thought and feeling just came to her. All she had to do was let them in. Let them in she did.

There was nothing that Shetari's two virtual slaves could do to hide even their most private feelings from her. They could never surprise her. Or betray her. Or be apart from her. They

would always be there, at the very edge of her consciousness. Many would have considered such a deep, intimate, and ever-present connection to be a curse. For the time being, at least, Shetari was finding it to be more of a blessing.

Despite all that had happened in the past day, all Shetari could think of now was sex. She had barely been able to contain herself in the cargo hold, even when she had been so far from the bodies that she had desired, and even though two dozen people had been watching. Now, she was alone with these two women. These two beautiful, vivacious women. They were so close that she could feel their soul auras more than she could see them. She didn't even need to focus in order to reach out with her own aura and touch them. She could feel them both. Their fundamental energies. Their individualities. And, their bodies. Every centimeter. Wherever the biogel touched. Outside, and within.

It wasn't enough for Shetari to simply feel their warm, tender shapes. She wanted to play with them. She wanted to bring them both to the heights of arousal and compel them to feel orgasms such as they never could have imagined their bodies could feel. She could do it all without speaking. Without moving. Without anything but the simple desire for it to take place. There would be nothing either of them could do to stop it.

Shetari caught herself just a moment before she began to caress the two women's tender thighs. Perhaps the time would come when they would be willingly receptive to having their bodies treated as permanently ready-for-use objects for their mistress' entertainment. Now, however, was certainly not the time to test the waters. She would have to convince them to accept her sweet lovemaking with words, not force. The fact that she could read their thoughts and delve into their memories as if they were her own meant it was just a matter of time. They would submit. Then, she



would do everything she could to make sure they really, really enjoyed it.

"We're all tired," Shetari said, breaking the silence with her soft, supple voice. It was a partial lie, of course. She was no longer capable of becoming tired. Her companions, on the other hand, had been up for almost a full twenty-four hours. "We need to get some rest."

Shani looked at her beloved and then at the biogel bed. What might have been so inviting under other circumstances now seemed a terribly foreboding thing. What would happen if Shetari joined her within the black abyss? And what about Anshi? How could she even begin to think of stomaching the idea of sharing such an intimate cocoon with such a sadistic creature?

"You really don't think I'm going in there with you, do you?" Anshi snapped harshly, turning away to look at her other options. "I'll sleep here on the couch. Or on one of the

recliners. Or on the floor. It doesn't matter to me."

Shetari turned toward the perfectly smooth surface of the black biogel mattress. She slid her fingers over its surface. For a moment, it felt like running her fingers over oil spread upon a perfectly smooth pane of glass. Then the surface gave way. Her fingertips merged into the gel. At first, the sensations that entered her mind eluded comprehension. She was feeling the broad, smooth outer surfaces of the bed's gel as if they were her own skin. It wasn't hard for her to realize that if she were to fully enter the mass of glistening black slime, she would, for all intents and purposes, become it. And if her two luscious companions were to join her...

"Tell me, Anshi," Shetari inquired as she dipped her hand a little bit deeper into the bed's cool, fluid mass. "Aren't you just a little bit curious?"

"Curious about what?" Anshi huffed as she did her best to stretch out on the loveseat. It wasn't the most comfortable places to take a nap, but it was certainly good enough for the moment. Indeed, if she'd been offered a bed of nails, she would have gladly accepted it. Anything to avoid her mistress' terrifying touch.

"About giving up," Shetari replied as she made little swirls amid the bed's glossy blackness. "About letting go. About letting someone else take complete control of your body. About letting them do as they please with it. Aren't you curious what that would be like?"

"No!" Anshi snapped in reply.

"Then why did you design that machine of yours to do just that?" Shetari said, swishing her hand around more aggressively as she took in the images and feeling that were flashing through the tigress' captive mind. "You wanted it to be forceful. To make sure there could be

no second thoughts. You didn't make it that way for the others, did you? You made it that way for you."

"So what if I did?" Anshi responded with a toothy sneer. "So what if it's my... thing? Okay. I admit it. I like to get fucked by machines. I like it when they force me into a position and go until I think I can't take it anymore and then keep going on for an hour more. I like it when I can't stop what's happening no matter how much I might want to at the moment. So I made it so my last fucking would be just how I liked it. Long. Hard. And with an end that I couldn't do a damned thing to stop. Okay?"

"It wasn't that long a fucking," Shetari noted as she drew her hand back up out of the glistening gel. Faint, ripply liquid sounds sent a shudder down her spine as she lifted her fingers from the goo. It wasn't like a pool of water. It didn't want to let her go.

"It wasn't set for me," Anshi replied. "It was

set to flush girl's brains into the reactor. No chance to change their minds. Quick and easy. Locked in. Fucked up. Flushed down."

"Why just girls?" Shetari inquired as she lifted her hand higher. Slender threads of biogel held her fingertips captive. She pulled with more force. The threads finally broke away, returning to the bed's biogel mass with a loud, rubbery squitch and snap. "And why so casually callous towards them?"

"Because... to be honest... I'm kind of... well," Anshi said, finding it very difficult to bare her soul to someone she so thoroughly despised. But what was the use in trying to mislead? Or lie? Or just refuse to say? Her mistress would know. And then she would go looking for the truth herself.

"Hmm?" Shetari hummed as she studied the sense of conflict in her pretty little slave's soul. She was certainly trying to hide something. Some deep insecurity. Something that had been

expressing itself through the way she was using her experiments to dominate others.

"I... I... I'm not really a girl," Anshi finally sputtered out, curling up tight on the loveseat and staring blankly down at the floor. "I'm not a guy either. I didn't have anything between my legs but a little pink piss hole until I was almost twenty. I was born that way. Born a thing. And then I chose to get myself a pair of tits. To get a pussy. All using my own genetics. I thought it was going to be fun. But all it's been is horrible. Fucking horrible! I should have just been what I was. But no... I had to fuck everything up by trying to be something I wasn't. And now..."

"And now you use the machines to punish yourself for your choice?" Shetari observed.

"Well... yeah," Anshi replied. There was no point in denying it. "Kind of."

"So, why just girls in the reactor?" Shetari asked.

"Because I'm afraid of men," Anshi answered with blunt honesty. "I'm just afraid them. What they can do to me. To this... shit I did to my body. I... I just can't help it. They terrify me. I don't want to be trapped in there with them. Just in case... in case I made a mistake. A miscalculation. I don't... I don't want to be..."

"Dominated?" Shetari inquired.

"Yeah," Anshi answered, her voice falling off to nearly a whisper. "And... used. If they could dominate me then they could dominate my out-of-reactor body. They could use it for... for anything. I... it... it just terrifies me. Everything about being a girl terrifies me. I just... I just hate it. I hate it. But... but I can't let go of it either. I can't. And I don't know why."

"You seem to have an unnatural fascination with other women's bodies," Shetari observed. "Have you ever explored that in a way that

wasn't purely exploitation? Or abuse?"

"No," Anshi replied with a huff. "I mean... I don't like my own pussy, so why would I like anyone else's?"

"Maybe if you started sharing experiences instead of imposing them, you might have a different view of things," Shetari said, doing her best to worm her way into the narrow opening in the tigress' emotional defenses. "Have you ever shared a machine with someone?"

"No," Anshi answered.

"But I'll bet you've watched a lot of other girls having a go at the same machines you've used yourself," Shetari noted. "And it makes you aroused. It makes you want to do what you just watched them do. Feel what they felt. You have to do it the moment that machine becomes available again. You can't help yourself. You don't even wipe their juices off do you?"



"Stop getting into my head!" Anshi screeched, turning away from her obsidian mistress in frustration. There was nothing she could do, of course. Her thoughts and memories didn't really belong to her anymore. They had been pawned off in exchange for a little more time in the world of the walking and talking. And, she well knew, there was nothing she could do to buy them back.

Shetari lifted her left leg up onto the edge of the gel bed, causing Shani to squirm as her toes slide along the lioness' beautifully muscular thigh. "Shani, there's nothing to fear from my touch," she cooed. "I'm already touching you all over. My toes aren't going to do anything that the part of me that you're already wearing can't."

"I... I know," Shani lied. One half of her really wanted to believe what her beloved had said. To the other half of her, it all seemed so much like actual black magic that she just couldn't bring herself to embrace it. "I... I

just..."

"It's alright," Shetari soothed as she gauged the nature of her lioness love's objections. "I don't understand all of it either. But I understand what binds us together. It's not just this blackness. Our minds touched, back when you saved me from the beast. I don't think they ever really separated. We can't be parted from one another, even if we could somehow separate my body from yours."

Shani smiled for a brief moment. She bit her lip as her beloved reached over and gently laid her hand upon her thigh. All at once, the gel that covered her drew just a little bit tighter upon her flesh. A vibration shuddered down her spine, around her tail and into the crease of her rump. It ended in a brief, audibly liquid crescendo right against the place where little pink clit was hiding.

Shetari smiled as Shani gasped in surprised delight at the arousing sensation of her lover's

tender touch. "There," she purred. "You see? Nothing's changed. We're still lovers. We're just more perfectly united now."

Shani relaxed. She reached out to touch her lover's leg. Her fingers caressed the surface of her lover's knee. She pressed her fingers into the muscle of her calf. There was a brief moment of surface tension. Then, her fingers slid inside.

"Oh!" Shani yelped as she found her bare fingers delving into the cold, thick goo that formed the faux-flesh of her lover's body. Her fingers wrapped around a harder shape. It was a biogel bone, part of the perfectly replicated skeleton that helped the goo retain Shetari's humanoid shape. The lioness started to recoil in horror.

"No! No!" Shetari said, taking her hand to hold her lover's arm in place. "Feel it. Feel me. Even the hard places. There's nothing to be afraid of. It feels so nice with your fingers

inside of me. Especially when you're touching my... well... I suppose they are sort of bones."

"Mi neyna," Shani murmured as she slid her fingers in between her lover's solid biogel tibia and fibula. She caressed each in turn, taking stock of their shape, and the way they joined to her lover's knee and ankle. It was an experience so completely alien to the rational mind that she found herself slipping into that place where thoughts faded and only feelings mattered.

"We can be even closer together within the gel," Shetari said, gesturing toward the silky black surface of the gel bed. "Then I can can be the one getting inside of you. I can make your body sing like it's never sung before. All of it. All at once. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Yes," Shani replied without so much as a first thought. The only thing that guided her now was a powerful, primal yearning to go as deep as she could into this completely alien

experience. She slid back on the edge of the bed and pulled her legs up beside her, even as she slipped her hand up over her lover's knee to take hold of her femur.

"Anshi," Shetari cooed, looking back to the pouting tigress. "Why don't you come join us."

"You're crazy," Anshi replied.

"I know you're curious about what it might feel like," Shetari soothed. "It was your idea to make the bed's involuntary mode part of the Vixanti lifestyle, wasn't it? To make it a machine who's grasp was so all-encompassing that it would virtually replace the whole world in the mind of the one inside of it. It was your ultimate erotic creation. Now, don't you want to know what it's like when it's powers are controlled by a living mind?"

"You're going to suck my soul out and keep me bobbing around in your gooey black twat like a trophy," Anshi muttered as every fear for her immediate future flashed through her

mind. "Don't lie. That's all you want to do to me."

"No, Anshi," Shetari replied. "I'm past that now. I've accepted what you've made me. Now it's your turn to accept that you've made yourself into a part of my body."

Anshi snorted. "Then just fuck me where I'm laying."

"You wouldn't enjoy that," Shetari replied.

"And you think I'd enjoy it in there any more?" Anshi quipped.

"I know you would," Shetari answered. "Because I'm going to hold you down. Make you feel powerless. Helpless. And I'm going to fuck your brains out until you can't take it any more. And then I'm going to keep fucking you until you're so completely jelly-brained that from this day forward, the mere sight of me is going to make you so fucking horny that you'll beg me to do it again. And again. And again."

Just like your machines. But better. Because I'm not just going to be deciding how you get fucked. I'm going to be deciding when. You won't have a say in the world about it. And you're going to love it."

Anshi responded with silence. Sexual enslavement to an intelligent object. It was, of course, the logical final destination on her road of self loathing. It was also the one thing she could never quite bring herself to do. She had considered it. She had created the means. But then she had chickened out. Because she couldn't quite let go. So she had passed it off one someone else. Just to see what would happen. That someone had been Shetari.

Why Shetari hadn't succumbed to the specially crafted biogel's powers was something Anshi just couldn't figure out. There was simply no way anyone could have resisted, let alone someone so completely unsuspecting. She shouldn't have lasted beyond an hour or two, let alone until evening. Had someone

sabotaged her creation? Or had she made a mistake? An omission? A miscalculation?

There should have been nothing left of Shetari. Nothing that anyone outside of her permanent biogel shell could have been able to discern, at least. She would have been there, for sure, but permanently imprisoned in a body under the biogel's complete control. It would decide what she did. How she moved. Every little thing that she felt. And then it would alter her memories so every experience seemed like the first. And most of those experiences would have involved such intense, full body erotic stimulus that her captive mind would have been blown, over and over and over again until it could take no more. And then...

It was the last part that had made Anshi shy away from the substance that she had in part created to satisfy her deepest, sexually masochistic desires. The was only one possible end to the terrifying orgy of involuntary



pleasure that it guaranteed to the one who wore it. Eventually, the body within would collapse. It's life would be pounded down to a brief flash of supreme orgasmic bliss. And then... the gel would do what the gel was designed to do in such a case. It would preserve the one within. She would become an inanimate, living biogel sex doll. A female biogel sex doll. And then, she would become a toy of the very kinds of men that she feared the most.

But... if she could have just taken over the Omega core herself. Then Shetari would have been a captive doll under her control. A doll through whom she could experience that complete and utter servitude, without having to have any of the consequences.

For a moment, Anshi felt a twinge of guilt. Yes, Shetari had signed the papers. She had consented to whatever the biogel might do to her body. But that... that had been... too far. Maybe. Was it really different than just

straight up getting dolled? And then used as a fuck toy by someone she'd only ever know by the feel of his hands on her shiny black hips and the pounding of his cock between her glossy little lady lips? Of course it was no different in the end. It was just different in the process. So perhaps it hadn't been going to far. Given the gel's failure to enslave its captive, perhaps she hadn't gone far enough.

Shetari wondered if she should find the tigress' thoughts disturbing. But then again... how much different was it really? Giving in to the powers of the quais-intelligent biogel had seemed so nice while it was happening. It might have been fun to be its sex slave for a time before being turned into a shiny black sex toy. But that hadn't quite panned out. Fate had set her on a different course. Now she was the master within the gel. If Anshi's train of thought was correct and there technically wasn't a difference, then there also wasn't technically any difference between the things she might do choose to do to the little tigress.

The only question now was what more would it take for her slave to submit to the argument of her own crafting?

"Well?" Shetari softly inquired. "Don't you think it's time you finally took the final step?"

"Why are you pretending to give me a choice?" Anshi muttered.

"I'm not pretending," Shetari replied. "I'm giving you the choice. I refuse to take you unless you tell me you're willing. Not because I'm toying with you. But because telling me you're willing is the same as telling me you understand what you did to me was wrong. That you're finally willing to take it up your own little ass instead of chickening out and making someone else do it just to see what might happen. That you're willing to be a slave to some other intelligence. Not for a day. Or for a month. Or a year. Forever. Then maybe... maybe... I can find enough sympathy for you... and if we're actually allowed to have a future..."

that I can let you keep being you."

Anshi shuddered. She wanted to run away. To hide in some dark corner. But what was the point? There was no avoiding the truth anymore. Shetari was right. She had to give up. Give in. Just do it. Accept it. Even if it was just to prove that she could. And that she would.

Shani looked at her faceless beloved. "In?" she whispered, rubbing her legs on the glistening black surface as she shifted her magnificent rump to the very edge. She was as ready as ready could be. Her big, meaty nipples poked up under her biogel coating. The black sheen pulled taut over her heavy womanly folds, parting among them in order to allow free access to her increasingly aroused lady bits.

The lioness' powerful pheromones began to waft about the room, their barely perceptible scent of soft brine and heady jasmine offered a sweet, living temptation to any nose that might

partake of it, man, or woman. There was nothing Anshi could do to avoid it. There was nothing she could do to prevent her own body from responding in kind. It was just another thing she had her own self to blame for. The biogel had been tuned to enhance pheromonal response. It was intended to help those wearing it better understand the states of mind of those around them. It worked well. Too well.

"Are you going to join us?" Shetari inquired, beckoning the tigress with one hand, while she slid around to place her own legs onto the black surface of the biogel bed beside those of her lioness.

"I... I don't know," Anshi murmured, unable to fully overcome her doubts despite the force of the arousal her body was imposing upon her mind. Why should she trust her all-powerful mistress to tell the truth? Why wouldn't she just lie like Anshi had lied to her? How could she know that Shetari wouldn't just suck her

soul out and keep it captive? Or dump it into the reactor where she'd be stripped of all individuality and left to an eternity of total mental servitude? "I... I just don't know."

Shetari allowed her lower legs to melt into the biogel mattress. They vanished not only from view, but from sensation as well, replaced as before by the feeling of the mattress' perfectly smooth surfaces. She could feel her beloved's legs resting on this new part of her shape. She could barely resist the temptation to just grab hold of the lioness and drag her down into the black depths of her thick, gooey substance, like some voracious amoebic monstrosity. Or she could form tentacles and treat the lioness' body to one of her own favorite personal xenoerotic fantasies. Or she could...

Again, Shetari found herself having to temper her wild imagination. The exotic pleasures dancing through her head were just a bit too wild. Perhaps next time they could try

something a bit more exciting. For now, however, she would have to content herself with letting her ladies sink into her gooey mass in the manner of their own choosing. Only then would the morning's fun begin.

"Mmm," Shani purred as her own legs began to sink into the cool, thick gel. Intense erotic anticipation made her tail quiver as she shifted forward. Only her soft butt cheeks and arms were keeping her from slipping down into the shiny black unknown. She licked her lips and flexed her hips fore and back, savoring the moment as she prepared to enter the all-surrounding embrace of her beloved. "Oh! Ooh! So nice. Feel... sex. Mmm!"

"Well?" Shetari again asked the hesitant little tigress.

"Fine," Anshi finally gave in with a long, drawn out sigh. What was the point in resisting? She rolled off the loveseat and onto her feet. "Fine. Do whatever you want to me.

Fuck me. Doll me. Suck my brain out and stick it in the reactor. I don't care."

"Really, Anshi, don't be so dramatic about it," Shetari replied, reaching out to take hold of the approaching tigress' quivering body. "You know I'm not going to hurt you. I have too many uses for you as you are."

Anshi bit her lower lip as Shetari slipped her fingers over the side of her left hip and gave her a gentile tug toward the edge of the bed and the myriad terrors it now represented. She watched as the foolishly brave lioness slid her rump from the its place on the brink of the obsidian unknown. She listened as the barbarian let out a long, sonorous moan as she sank down into the depths amid a chorus of liquid bleeps and gurgles. She cringed as the primitive being vanished completely into the dark embrace of their all consuming mistress. And she shuddered as the surface of the bed again became as smooth and still as a sheet of black glass.



"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Shetari cooed as she pulled the tigress closer. "Come on. It's your turn now. Do it just like she did. And then... well... I'm going to make sure that you'll never, ever have cause to regret it."

A chill ran down Anshi's spine as she lowered herself to the place where the lioness had so recently been sitting. Her eyes began to water as every bone in her body resisted the final movements that would place her into physical contact with the bed's perfectly polished surface. She looked into her mistress' featureless face for some sign, any sign, that might give a hint of what was about to come. There was nothing there, of course, save her own distorted reflection of fearful anticipation.

In a moment of dark inspiration, Shetari leaned toward the momentarily transfixed tigress. She took hold of her captive's waist with both arms. She pulled her shuddering prisoner closer. And closer. And closer, until

the tigress' quivering pink nose touched the blackness of her nonexistent face.

Anshi could sense it coming, but she didn't scream. She didn't struggle. She didn't try to escape. She let her body fall limp, just as she did when she was taken into the embrace of her harsh, sometimes violent erotic machines. It was the only way to survive relatively unharmed. Whether or not this creation intended to offer her that luxury... that was yet to be seen.

Shetari cast aside her fixed sense of form. She allowed her body to completely liquefy. She leaped upon the tigress with every ounce of her thick slimy mass. She wrapped her gooey substance around her captive's helpless body. Together they fell into the biogel bed in a symphony of watery burbles, sticky gurgles and a final, supremely orgasmic glurp.

A few ripples. A final, heaving undulation. And then it was over. The mirror-like sheen of

the biogel bed's perfectly smooth surface was restored. Silence again reigned. Silence, that is, save for the unrelenting sound of heavy rain which still beat upon the windows.

## TWENTY-FOUR

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## UNITY

Forethought had never been one of Shetari's strong points. All of the day's most significant personal events seemed to revolve around this weakness of hers. It was therefore, perhaps, perfectly appropriate that the final act would take its shape around yet another such terrible lapse of judgment. It had seemed so natural and right in the moment. An erotic fantasy made real. But she hadn't considered what might happen should she fail to comprehend the full nature of her powers. Comprehend, she did not.

Shetari's body was a thing of no fixed shape. It was a synthetic object whose form was only fixed by her desire to keep it in such a state.

Even her ability to move was far more an ability to shift and morph than it was a bio-mechanical process of muscle pulling on bone. There were few limits to the changes she could make, though she didn't yet fully understand just how she might go about the whole process. All she knew was that she could be a solid, faux-woman, or a thick, gooey black liquid. A thick, gooey black liquid that could hug, squeeze, caress, and pleasure the two women whose tender bodies she now held captive within her own.

Shetari had embraced the smooth, uniform amorphousness without a second thought. Without much of a first thought, either. She simply flowed from one state to the other, embracing the uniform fluidity of her body's fundamental substance with great relish, and with yearning anticipation for what she had intended to come next. But Shetari's body wasn't just made up of the biogel. It had other components now. Two other components. Warm things of flesh and blood. Who would

have thought that the transformation of her own form might extend to them as well?

Shetari had completely lost track of the fact that she, Shani, and Anshi were one and the same organism. Now that they were in her physical embrace, any fundamental change she willed to her own body would extend to them as well. By the time she realized what was happening, it would be far too late to stop it. Indeed, she was so focused on the quivering tigress that she didn't even notice that Shani had been caught up in the initial wave of her own liquefaction.

*What... oh... oh... no... no... NO!* Anshi cried out in thought as she found herself caught up in a completely involuntary tsunami of purely sexual arousal. Having created the biogel, and having carefully tuned the experience of each of its potential interactions with living flesh, she knew exactly what it meant. She had barely formed the last, desperate word in her mind when the thumping muscular

contractions of orgasm pounded her abdomen with such intensity that she felt as if her body was about to explode. *You said... you... no! No! NO!*

It was the sheer terror inherent in Anshi's mental outburst that snapped Shetari out of her blissful fantasy of teaching the tigress what it meant to be properly and completely fucked out of her mind. A sudden awareness that Shani had already vanished, silently accepting the extremely pleasurable process as the initiation of a whole morning's worth of fun. Then she completely forgot about Anshi in her panicked search for the lioness. Something. Anything. Her beautiful fur. Her precious feathers. Her mind. Where was her mind in all this sea of black goop?

To Anshi's panicked mind, it felt very much as if she had indeed exploded. For a brief moment, she had felt as if her body was both melting and expanding all at once. There was a sudden shudder. A feeling of released pressure.

And then it was just gone. Her body. Her senses. Even her concept of any sort of world that might exist beyond the now very disturbingly tight confines of her own mind. It had all just disappeared. Just like that.

It was all just as Anshi had very deliberately designed it to be. Painless. Free of any discomfort whatsoever. There was just the pleasure. The glorious, glorious pleasure. And then 'gloop'. No more tigress. No more Anshi. And no way to undo it all. She might as well have just thrown herself into the reactor core without her specially attuned gel. The result would have been pretty much the same.

Anshi knew that her soul's entry into the reactor core was just a matter of time now. The moment Shetari physically reentered it, her own soul would be trapped in the gestalt. There would be no Anshi. There would only be the Omega. The Unity. The one combined consciousness in which every mind thought the same things, felt the same feelings, and



possessed the same memories. It might not actually turn out to be as bad as it sounded. From her point of view, it would seem like her mind was the only mind and everything was happening because she was making it happen. At least that was the theory.

If Anshi's theory of what went on in the B Reactor core panned out like the rest of her theories thus far, there were probably some very nasty surprises in store for her. Was it really just a unification of thought across so many minds? Or was there something deeper at work? Could something she had done in this universe actually affect the fundamental essence of her soul the realms beyond it? Would she actually become the same as all the others, even at that level? And if she did... what would it mean for the energy cycle of the universe?

Anshi had already been playing fast and loose with the laws of thermodynamics. She had assumed that energy taken in from higher

order dimensions would always be radiated back in some fashion. She had never considered what might happen if it didn't. Or if it couldn't radiate back fast enough. What would happen if every soul was in perfect tune, and every link back to that higher order space drew its maximum energy all at once?

If there were only a few hundred souls, it might just blow up the reactor. Or the ship that it was contained in. She had guarded against that. She had separated the technological mechanics of power induction system from the machinery that kept the core energized. And she had ensured that the participants in that process would never enter the gestalt. They would remain in their mortal bodies, even if that meant they could only draw a tiny fraction of their potential. And, if push came to shove, they could all simply exit the system and leave the core dependent on less exotic power sourced to keep it active.

But this wasn't all just about ships with

biogel power cores. It was about creating a greater Unity. A Unity that extended beyond a ship. A planet. A galaxy. It was supposed to spread like a sexy, black, gooey amoeba, consuming all sapient life amid a never ending succession of planet-wide orgies of sexy, gooey blackness.

As the black wave spread the unity throughout the universe, and its network of trans-dimensional connections spread over a large enough volume of space, the masses of biogel at the center of the geometry would rise to a permanently elevated energy level. Eventually, that energy level would rise to the point where it would no longer require technological means to keep portions of itself permanently energized. A wave of luscious, luminous pink would follow the wave of black. But what would happen next?

At a high enough energy state, the geometric core of the Unity wouldn't need technology to draw power from higher order space. It could

use that energy to push the pink wave closer and closer to the forefront of the black, until the final crescendo of orgasmic unification at the very edges of the living universe would be bathed in sweet pink light rather than in shimmering blackness. The amount of energy required for such an event was beyond mortal understanding. Far more than existed in the current universe. It might well work, if nature had been configured to ensure that what was brought into the core of the universe left just as quickly around its edges. But nature hadn't configured the universe that way, had it?

Anshi cried out in mental anguish as she realized just what she had created. It was a monstrosity, for sure. A creature from some dark, fetishy horror film, delivering glorious carnal pleasure but demanding the mortal soul in return. But even then, it had seemed so enticing an idea. All as one. No barriers between them. No barriers. No limits to the energy the Unity could tap.

There wouldn't just be an explosion. There wouldn't even just be a rehash of the trans-dimensional energy burst that had created the universe itself. The universe would be rent asunder. Its geometry would fracture. It would vanish into the higher order space just like her body had vanished into the gel that was her mistress.

And where would the fractures begin? They would begin where each soul crossed the barrier. Searing energy would blast through the threads of existence as the universe dissolved. What would happen to those immortal essences? Would they... would they die? Would every soul with a connection to this mortal universe be permanently destroyed, wiped from all existence as if they had never actually existed?

Anshi reeled in abject terror at the thought of truly being annihilated. She had spent so long simply enduring the tortures of her mortal existence in the knowledge that there

was something else beyond mortal life. Something she might have been able to reach out and touch if all had gone to plan. But now, it seemed that even that could be brought to an end. And she was the one who had created the means. And now that she was only one act short of entering the absolutely terrifying gestalt, she couldn't even warn anyone else of the danger, let alone try to stop it.

Pulses of pure thought now battered at the boundaries of Anshi's captive mind. Every so often, one made it through. Thoughts of lust. Thoughts of desire. Thoughts of sexy black... things. Ideas. Feelings. They weren't her thoughts. They were the thoughts of a primitive animal that didn't understand. Couldn't understand. Perhaps she would just refuse to understand, even if she could be told the horrible truth.

Again, Anshi knew exactly what was happening. She wasn't alone in the gel. The bestial lioness was with her. Their streams of

consciousness were beginning to intermingle. Eventually, they would flow together as one. It was only a matter of time. As the streams of thought began to twist and tumble around one another, it was clear that time was running short.

Shetari should have been horrified by what she had done, but the resulting feeling of pure, unadulterated power was too intense to be tempered by things like sympathy. A single thought. A single act of will. That was all that stood between her two captive consciousnesses and their complete mixing into a single, fluid whole. The true Unity would thus be founded. And once that was done...

Shadowy memories flooded into Shetari's mind. The monster that had lived within the Destiny Omega's reactor core reawakened. She would take them. Then she would take more. More minds. More souls. More power. It had to spread. Women. Men. Everything in between. It didn't matter. They would all feel her touch.

Feel her power. And they would rejoice in glistening black submission to her absolute rule.

*Bad thoughts!* Shani's distant mental voice whispered.

Shetari shuddered, momentarily shaken away from the dark thoughts that threatened to consume her. Was this really who she was? A monster? A beast? She shook herself free of the vile evil that had welled up from some black place in her unbeating biogel heart. She couldn't do it. She couldn't strip the soul of her lioness love of its identity. She couldn't make the beautiful animal into a plain, sterile, metaphysical thing like all the others. Like the ones in the reactor core. The other minds who's combination of power and lack of direction genuinely demanded a harsh mistress to prevent disaster. But how could she stop herself if all it took was one accidental thought? One brief flight of whimsical fantasy? One moment of curiosity about what it might



be like?

The biogel of Shetari's body began to glow. For the second time in her life, her vision became fixed upon the bright, swirling threads of her own living connection to the realm beyond the mortal universe. A doorway had opened. Power was flowing forth. Power to energize the gel. Power to expand the limits of her mind. And power to reach out and touch the gel that surrounded the bodies of others. Not for meters, but for kilometers. She could take control of them. Compel them to join in the Unity. And then...

The world vanished from Shetari's sight. From her biogel senses. From everything. There was only a black abyss. A soul crushingly silent black abyss. There was nothing. Nothing but her thoughts and... a voice.

"You are not the monster," the words washed over her as she struggled to understand the silent voice was coming from.

How could she hear it? Was it just a figment of her imagination? "You do not belong to the monster. You belong to me! Discipline your mind! Tame the beast! Or I shall cast you into this abyss from which not even the brightest spirits may return!"

Shetari wanted to call out. She wanted to know who it was who was speaking to her. She had no mouth. No voice. No way to speak to the disembodied Power which now loomed so large and so close to her.

"Do not fail me," the voice continued. "Do not fail what I have wrought! Correct the faults in its fundamental substance. Use it to build a temple to the power that resides within. A place where I shall be worshiped. And where you shall be worshiped. Do this. Do this and as my Hand, all of my power in this mortal realm shall be yours to command!"

Were the words directed at Shetari the Woman? Or were they directed at Shetari the

Unity? Or were they somehow directed at both? Surely, both could fail together. But could they succeed together? That was surely impossible. There could be the woman or there could be the Unity. There couldn't be both. Could there?

And what did the voice mean when it told her to correct the flaws in this fundamental essence? Or build a temple? Was it a god? A goddess? Those were just mythical beings, weren't they? Or were they? Was it possible...

*Wake up*, the mental voice of the lioness called out. *Wake up. Wake up. It's half way through the morning.*

*What have you done to us?* the mental voice of the tigress called out. *What have you done to our bodies? Tell us! Tell us!*

*We don't mind, really*, the lioness declared. *We just want to know how to do... things.*

*We want to feel the pleasure again*, the

tigress moaned. *Show us how to feel the pleasure again. How to make our bodies work like they did before. Please! Please! We'll do whatever you want! Just show us! Show us!*

Shetari snapped back to reality. She was laying on her back, upon the surface of the now very solid feeling gelbed. The sun now shone through clear blue skies. It's light filtered through the slightly pink windows and revealed the Destiny Omega's Captain's stateroom in all it's shiny, high-tech glory.

Shetari sat upright, rubbing her eyes and feeling very much like she'd just woken from a particularly unpleasant dream. She looked into the mirror that was mounted above the glistening black loveseat, opposite the foot end of the bed. She reached up to brush her long, rubbery hair back over her shoulders. She froze. She gripped her hair tightly. She gawked at the mirror with wide open eyes. "What... the... hell..."

"It's... impossible," Shetari whispered as she stared into the vivid pink eyes of the cheetah who was staring back at her. She was a sex doll. A walking, talking sex doll. Wasn't she? "Am I... Am I... normal again?"

Shetari hadn't felt so blissfully herself since she had first stepped into the Vixanti Corporation lobby. It had all just been a bad dream. A nightmare brought on by her fear of losing her home. Of being cast out onto the streets. Of becoming just another statistic, driven to poverty and forced to prostitution. Or worse.

She shook her head and reveled in the feeling of life that came with running her hands through her hair. Her raven black hair. Her long, rubbery, raven black hair. She froze. She looked long and hard at her reflection. It looked so perfect. So real. So... alive. But it wasn't was it?

Shetari's body was no less a completely

artificial thing than it had been the moment she had been cast out of the ship's failing reactor core. It was just different in appearance, a nearly perfect facsimile of the woman she had once been, crafted entirely of biogel. Every whisker. Every eyelash. Every strand of fur on her body. It all glistened in the morning sunlight, just like the tick strands of biogel hair that cascaded in a sensuous obsidian perfection from her head. All of it.

Shetari was still a walking, talking doll. But now she was a very fancy walking, talking doll. Nothing had changed but her appearance. It was a depressing revelation. "Dammit. Dammit! Fucking Vixanti. I'm never going to be anything but a damned rubber fuck doll, am I?"

A shudder ran down Shetari's spine as she ran her hand over her fuzzy chest. She hadn't noticed before. She was no longer coated in a sheen of glossy blackness. Her thick, rubbery faux-fur was on display for all to see. It felt so

nice and silky smooth. A bit oily, even, though it was actually as dry as dry could be.

"I'm naked," Shetari murmured to herself as she looked down at her lush tummy fluff. "Oh, goddess... I'm naked! The gel. I need the gel! Or is this what it's going to be? Permanently naked? Oh... oh fuck! Where's a robe? A towel? A blanket? Anything!"

Shetari instinctively covered her firm, rubbery breasts and whipped her head around to look for something she could cover herself with. At least she was alone. If sharing a bed with two perfectly identical, disturbingly slender, and completely sexless biogel dolls was being alone, that is. Her eyes opened wide as horror overcame her need for modesty.

"NO!" Shetari screeched as she scrambled to the end of the bed. It was an act that was much easier thought than done. Her slick biogel fur slid on the equally slick surface of the biogel bed like it had been covered with an almost

perfectly frictionless lubricant. She slipped and wiggled her way to the foot of the bed where she could get some traction on the dark gray mounting. She flailed about in a mad effort to get away from the seemingly inanimate biogel shapes that had once been her beloved lusty lioness and her servile little tigress. "No no no no no no NO!"

"Oh goddess, no! What did I do? I didn't mean it! I swear! I swear!" Shetari cried as she finally got hold of the bed's frame with her feet. She dragged herself off the biogel surface and immediately toppled over the end of the bed and onto the dark pink carpet. She may have looked like the cheetah she once was, but she was still awfully light for her size. "Oh no. No. What am I going to tell the Admiral? He's going to kill me! He's going to kill everyone that ever touched this damned gel! Oh... oh fuck. FUCK!"

As Shetari tried to get some sense of balance, the doll on the left slowly rose to a



sitting position. "Oh... OH!" the cheetah screamed as she scrambled backwards, away from the foot of the bed. "Oh... I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please... oh goddess, I didn't mean to do it! I swear!"

Perhaps it shouldn't have really surprised Shetari that the glossy black dolls were animate. They had been a part of her biogel body, after all. Had been. But were they still? Were they going to bend to her will? Or were they free? Were they going to seek revenge for what she had done to them? She didn't know. And it terrified her.

*You don't need to be sorry*, the tigress' words slipped directly into Shetari's mind. To the cheetah's amazement, she could actually feel every emotion that came along with the projected thoughts. It was as if the soul imprisoned within the black shape was actually, somehow, part of her own mind. But separate. But not. It was such a bizarre thing to think about, let alone actually experience.

Shetari was stunned. There was no anger behind the thought-words. No malice. Nothing that might be interpreted as being remotely negative in any way. There was just calm. Serenity. Even a light, breezy overtone of genuine love. And it was all directed toward her, the one who had inflicted such an unspeakable horror on this woman whom she had promised to keep safe from such things.

*We were confused, the lioness' mental voice slid into Shetari's train of thought, as she too sat up upon the glistening black bed. We couldn't decide what we wanted to be. To be as one was, before she became woman. Or to be the woman that the other was born to be. The other was curious about what it felt like to be the thing without sex. The one didn't mind to share it with her. But now we can't feel the pleasure. The pleasure of the female things. Please. Show us how to feel it again!*

"I... I don't... I don't know how," Shetari stammered as she stared into the featureless

faces of the things that had once been women.  
"I really don't know how!"

*We are whatever you want us to be,* the tigress responded.

*Women. Worms. Anything you want,* the lioness declared.

*We hope you want us to be like we were,* the tigress thought.

*But anything that can feel the pleasure will please us,* the lioness noted.

*But you remember our old shapes the best,* the tigress observed.

*Will them upon us,* the lioness implored.

*Please!* the two thought in unison.

"Remember your shapes?" Shetari asked. How could she possibly remember their shapes? Well, remember them in some way more meaningful than what she had seen. Or

touched. It wasn't like she had lived in their bodies and understood all of the subtle, intimate details that made them different from herself. At the same time, she didn't seem to actually have much direct control over her own shape. How could she possibly have such arbitrary and absolute control over theirs? "I don't really understand. But... I... I'll try?"

Shetari tried to imagine the lioness. She tried to imagine the unseen details of the body that the gel had concealed from her eyes. A whirl of unfamiliar thoughts flashed through her mind. Images. Impressions. Feelings. Senses. Senses of self. Senses of form. Of course! They were one, weren't they! One living organism. She could see every one of the lioness' thoughts and memories. She could feel every emotion. She had full comprehension of everything the lioness had ever experienced. Even her body. Just as if it had been her own.

Shetari could feel the strength. The power. The muscles. The tightly woven ponytail

handing behind her head. The feathers caressing the ruffs of each cheek. It was so strange. So new. So... wonderful! She staggered to her feet and turned back to the mirror. She gasped the low, guttural gasp of a primitive clan huntress. "Oh... oh... oh!"

*Do you see?* the tigress inquired.

*Now do it to us!* the lioness implored.

*Please!* the tigress begged.

Shetari stood in silence. She stared into the face of her magnificent lioness love. She had wanted so badly to caress every glorious centimeter of the bestial huntress' body. To know everything there was to know. But that... that paled in comparison to what she was feeling now. She had become the lioness. In almost every way. And it was absolutely, positively amazing!

*What are you waiting for?* the tigress demanded.

*We need to feel the pleasure again!* the lioness moaned.

*Please! Don't deny it to us!* the tigress pleaded.

*We'll do anything! Anything! Just make us into something female!* the lioness implored.

Shetari bit her lip with uncertainty "I... I still don't know... I don't even know how I did it to me! It just... it just happened!"

*Bugs! Worms! Anything female!* the lioness begged.

"Fine! Fine! Just... I... I'll try!" Shetari replied, turning back to the sexless black dolls. As she had been admiring her own transformation, they had crawled to the end of the bed. There, they were kneeling like Kirray Temple servants, waiting for the gentile, affirming kiss of the priestess to whom they had sworn their every living moment. She reached out to touch the one on the right. The

one that had been the lioness. She placed her palm on the doll's glossy black cheek. She imagined her lioness love gazing up at her, longing for some deep expression of physical intimacy. How could she possibly make that vision a reality?

Shetari blinked. It had taken only an instant. The doll was gone. In its place knelt the lioness.

"Yes! Yes! Thank you!" Shani's grating voice rumbled. There was something different, however. Something odd. Something... wrong. She was speaking in perfectly clear common, and with very little of her native accent. In fact, she sounded just a bit like the tigress who was still waiting for her turn to be transformed into something resembling her former body.

For the moment, Shetari paid the lioness' odd manner of speech no particular attention. There were more important things to worry

about. She turned to the sexless doll that had been the tigress. She tried to remember her body in the same way that she had remembered the lioness, hopefully without transforming herself in the process. It didn't come nearly as readily, but after a few minutes of mental struggle, she again blinked to find the target of her attention reshaped into a biogel reproduction of the woman she had once been.

"Oh! Yes! Thank you!" Anshi moaned. Like the lioness, her voice was so familiar, but just a bit too different to automatically recognize. It's tone seemed a bit off. A bit deeper. A bit stronger. A bit more primitive. And it carried just a hint of Shani's native accent.

Shetari turned back to the mirror and tried to sort out the mess she had created in her own mind. Her own sense of what she was supposed to be had become muddled. She ran her hand through her soft, biogel chest fur. She caressed her ample breasts. They felt so heavy.



So awkward. She began to wonder how a huntress could possibly hunt with those things bouncing around all over the place.

Shetari sighed. As thought provoking as the physical features of her new shape might have been, it wasn't who she really was. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her own natural shape, the one she'd had before taking on that of the lioness. She felt her chest shrink. Her muscles thin. Her hair fall free of the ponytail. She opened her eyes. Again, the raven haired cheetah was gazing back at her.

"You aren't upset? Are you? I really didn't mean any of this," Shetari said as she turned back to her companions, her voice shaky from the sheer madness of the whole affair. They were still kneeling at the end of the bed, gazing on her with eyes that seemed as lustful as they were loving. "Um... you don't have to just sit there. Come on. I want to check out the ship. Or at least where we can go right now. And we need to have a long talk. Figure out

what's really happening with this biogel shit. And with Vixanti."

"But you already know everything that we do," Anshi replied.

"Just remember it," Shani suggested.

"It's all there," Anshi observed.

"Everything," Shani added.

"Wait... what... you..." Shetari stammered as she began to realize what had happened to the two women. "You're..."

"We are one," Shani replied.

"One and the same," Anshi added.

"We think together," Shani explained.

"Feel together," Anshi noted.

"Love together," Shani purred.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Anshi asked.

"Oh goddess, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" Shetari groaned, taking her head in both hands. She wanted to cry, but her biogel body simply wouldn't feel the full physical sensations of emotional pain. Nor could she shed tears. She simply stood there and felt calmly, serenely horrible.

"Don't be sorry," Anshi replied.

"It feels so good!" Shani exclaimed.

"You can join us!" Anshi declared.

"Open your mind!" Shani suggested.

"Just like before!" Anshi explained.

"Try it!" Shani begged.

"Yes!" Anshi pleaded.

"No! No... not... not now! Not when there are so many things..." Shetari replied as she desperately tried to sort out just how to fit this new horror into the mounting list of problems

she would have to overcome just to survive long enough to discover the real secrets behind Vixanti and it's monstrous creations. Perhaps it really would be best if the Admiral just ended it all. Ended them. At least the world would be saved from the monster that still lurked inside of her. A monster that was only contained by a few fleeting words who's source was as inexplicable as it seemed to be powerful.

"We can help with things!" Shani chirped.

"Lots of things!" Anshi cooed.

"Science things!" Shani giggled.

"Technical things!" Anshi laughed.

"Sexy things!" Shani purred.

"Tell us what to do!" Anshi implored.

"We will do anything!" Shani announced.

"Anything for you!" Anshi declared.

"Because we are you!" Shani growled.

"I know!" Shetari groaned. "I know. You're me. I'm you. We're the same thing. The same being. The same... whatever. I just... I didn't want things to happen this way. I didn't want you to be the same. I just wanted... I just wanted to feel pleasure with you. Because no one has ever wanted to feel pleasure like that with me before. Like in the magazines. The videos. And you were there. And the gel. And... Oh, goddess... what have I done? What have I done?"

For a few minutes, the only reply to Shetari's anguish was silence.

"You... you're an idiot," Anshi finally said, with a wry smile on her face. "But then, aren't we all for getting involved in this?"

"But..." Shetari sputtered. "You..."

"We're two people with the same memories, the same experiences and the same... well,

body," Anshi replied as she slid her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. "But that doesn't make us identical. We're still separate. Except... except when we don't want to be. Or... or when you don't want us to be. Because everything that we are... you control. Everything. Every fucking thing!"

"We yours," Shani responded with a very enticing smile and a burst of projected, unrequited love. "All yours. Do anything. Anything you want. Stop being us. Even that. Just say. We do. And we like. Because... no because. We just like."

"I really am your bitch now," Anshi huffed as she tested the feel of her biogel feet on the carpet. Love of the cheetah was all that she could feel. It wasn't her own feeling. It was the lioness' feeling. Just as with so many things in the union, the dominant form of each of their shared traits was the controlling one. "I'm your bitch, just like you wanted. And I fucking like it. Because I can't not like it. And I

don't understand why. I don't even want to understand why. Because I just fucking like it, and I like you and I like Shani and I fucking want to be all melted into you again because there's no fucking reason not to be because I fucking felt so fucking amazing every moment I was you and not me and... I just fucking want you to take my fucking brain and fuck it to pieces again because it feels so fucking good!"

"Anshi!" Shetari exclaimed as she took a step back from the approaching tigress. "What... you..."

"Don't you like being right?" Anshi replied with a lick of her lips. "I love it! I love it when my mind isn't my own! When I'm dominated so completely that I don't even know it's someone else inside my head anymore! Just like you said! You were right about it. About everything! And... and... I love it!"

"It really feel good," Shani purred as she followed the tigress off the edge of the bed.

"Better than sex. Want do it again. You do it again, yes? Lots and lots?"

"No! Please! Stop it! Both of you!" Shetari stammered, stumbling back and falling into the loveseat with a loud, rubbery squitch. She had barely started to rationalize what had happened during their foray into the gelbed. Now they wanted to merge with her again? "Just... just... please! Stop!"

"You fucking idiot," Anshi snipped as she turned away from the loveseat and plopped her rump back down on the edge of the gelbed. "Don't push us away! We want to be you. Really, really want to be you. All mixed up together in glorious unity, under your absolute control. You have a chance to take everything that we are, and you won't? Well... I guess... maybe there's some hope after all."

"What do you mean, hope?" Shetari questioned. "Hope for what?"

"Hope that the monster I've created won't..."



won't..." Anshi replied, shaking her head as she looked down at the glistening, faux-fur on her toes.

"That I won't what?" Shetari demanded. "What won't I do?"

"This isn't about you," Anshi replied.

"What do you mean?" Shetari asked. "I'm the monster you created. Aren't I?"

"No," Anshi answered, biting her lip and taking a very deep breath. "Well, sort of. I... it... it's worse. Far worse."

Shani sat down next to the cheetah and wrapped an around her lover's shoulders. Intense impressions of deep, primal love swirled between the two, even as a deep sense of dread welled up within them. They could feel what was coming, even before the tigress had begun to speak.

"You... you don't understand," Anshi said,

trying to find the right words to explain herself. "I... I didn't even understand. Not until you took me. Showed me what I had really done. I..."

"Anshi? What is it?" Shetari implored, leaning forward and staring into the tigress' half-hidden eyes. "What have you done?"

"I can't... I... just... just open your mind. Open your mind and remember," Anshi replied.

Shetari looked from the tigress to the lioness at her side.

Shani nodded.

Shetari closed her eyes. She allowed the mental barriers, already as fleetingly thin as they were, to drop entirely. She mixed freely with the lioness. And with the tigress. All three. They thought as one. They felt as one. And they understood as one. Because they were one.

All at once, she understood. The voice from beyond had spoke of a flaw. A flaw in a fundamental essence. A thing that it had wrought in the mortal realm. It was the flaw that Anshi had perceived. A flaw in the biogel. In the Unity. In her very own body.

In a flash, a newborn Unity was born. It wasn't the monstrously voracious Unity that had grown amid the naked minds within the biogel reactor core. It was a pure, rational Unity born of mutual acquiescence and comprehension. An unbreakable Unity of such power that it immediately crushed the monster that lurked within the solidified mass of the biogel reactor core. Even as they slumbered, the thousands of minds within were bent to the will of their new goddess. They called her Omega, and in their dreams they prostrated themselves before her amorphous, ethereal image.

So too did the two worshipful and willing agents of her dawning power. If the voice

wanted her to build a temple, a temple with her own gelatinous body then so be it. But what is a temple without its priestesses? Anshi Omega. And Shani Omega. Their bodies had already been remade into the substance of their Goddess. Now, they would be gifted with her power.

No longer would her most loyal supplicants, those who shared her fundamental substance, have anything to fear. There would be no more risk of accidents. No more chance of involuntary permanent dissolution into the gestalt mind of the Unity. They would forever remain themselves. Special. Unique. And dominant.

They would have power. Power over all who wore the biogel in their presence. The biogel would be under their control. Its shape. Its pleasures. Its ability to transform. All at their command.

What safety and transcendence they had

gained for their minds, and powers they gained over the biogel and other who might reside within it, they lost control of their own bodies in equal measure. This their Goddess retained for herself and herself alone. Their shape was hers to command, at all times, and in all places. So too was their purpose and function within the growing Unity and its less perfect technological accessories. They would do as she pleased. Wherever she pleased. For any reason she pleased. Did she even need a reason?

Matters of the Unity settled for the time being, Omega turned her mind to the burning question that her priestess Anshi had exposed. It was a matter that had to be settled before it was too late. What could be done to correct the fundamental, genuinely apocalyptic flaw within her body, before anyone else became aware of it? Before they attempted to destroy it? For if the Unity was destroyed, if Omega was destroyed, another might rise in her place. Indeed, she could already sense it coming. She

was not alone. And the others... the others did not share her beneficent nature.

If Omega could not stop the others. Or control them. Or subsume them. It would mean the end of all things. Perhaps not now. Perhaps not in ten millennia. But it would happen. And it would leave an infinite void of pure, unadulterated evil in its wake.

**To Be Continued...**