

DESTINY EXPLORER

A GELITECH STORY

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

DESTINY EXPLORER
A GELITECH STORY

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

© 2024 Shetira Anwae

shetiraanwae @ gmail . com

This edition of Destiny Explorer: A Gelitech Story is only authorized for publication via the authors accounts on:

Patreon:

www.patreon.com/anwaecreations

FurAffinity:

www.furaffinity.net/user/shetira/

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue	A New Beginning	4
1	White Sails	11
2	Curious Tails	34
3	Mischief	43
4	Transdimensional	64
5	Anomalous	77
6	Artifice	85
7	Chaos	96
8	Captured	121
9	The Library	139
10	Second Hand Cephaloxy	157
11	Aftermath	170
12	A New Mistress?	185
13	Infection	207
14	Shutdown [NEW]	227

PROLOGUE

A NEW BEGINNING

A shrill warning horn shattered the early morning silence, sending countless colorful waterfowl scattering to the four winds. Churning water began to issue forth from beneath the recently restored powerhouse. A long string of antique tungsten filament lamps which had been loosely hung along the massive structure's roof began to glow. The crowd of gathered spectators cheered. After years of toil and delay, the city of Mashiva's oldest and largest source of electric power was finally back in business.

"Shame," one rather unusual spectator dryly remarked as she watched events unfold from the gargantuan concrete hydroelectric dam's lofty pedestrian walkway. "So much effort and

expense wasted on an archaic anachronism that will be obsolete in how long? Four, maybe five years at most?"

Her stony faced companion frowned as he turned his gaze from the celebration below. "I think you grossly overestimate general acceptance of the new technology."

"I think you grossly underestimate the willingness of the average person to accept new and productive ideas on the fundamental nature of life," the tigress noted with a playful smirk at her longtime friend and sometimes rival for the title of 'maddest scientist'. "After all we've been through to get to this point, Wen... don't tell me you're getting cold feet?"

"No, Anshi, I'm not," Dr. Wen Kidan replied as he turned his skeptical gaze to his questioning companion and her perpetually naive outlook on matters of business. "I'm just being realistic. The average person simply doesn't see any benefit in allowing our products to become a part of their daily lives."

"Well, we're just going to have to change that, aren't we?" Dr. Anshi Alluwa responded as

she turned just in time to catch her companion caressing her modest figure with his deep green eyes. “Just can’t help yourself, can you? And here I was thinking you weren’t a fan of the new mark nine gel.”

Dr. Kidan scowled and turned back to the celebration below. “I’m not.”

The tigress chuckled softly as she took a moment to visibly revel in the glistening, pearly white glory that sheathed her body from neck to toe. The vibrantly living substance hugged every millimeter of her smoothly curved figure, transforming her rather ordinary looks into something quite a bit more enticing to the eye. It had an energy to it. A deeply rooted power that spread out and warmed the very souls of those who lingered in its presence. A force that could make even the least curious of souls want to know what it might be like to share in the wonders of joining the ranks of those who surrendered their lives into the gel’s glorious embrace.

Biogel. A kink. A toy. A plaything for those who sought to experience physical transfiguration devoid of any apparent negative

consequences. A synthetic symbiotic organism so fundamentally powerful that it rendered its wearers functionally immortal. A singular higher life form that brought together all who wore it into the skin tight fold of its Unity. And now...

Anshi wore the latest iteration of this wondrous substance with with the carefree pride of an inventor whose successful product had been developed to the point where it could no longer be improved. And what had it all cost her? Her freedom? Her soul? Small prices to pay for such exquisite perfection!

“Why?” the tiger asked, eyeing his companion with a mix of unsettled curiosity and well founded suspicion. “Why couldn’t you just leave well enough alone?”

“You’re one to ask,” Dr. Alluwa replied with a sarcastic laugh as she turned away from the railing and a group of wandering tourists who were approaching along the otherwise deserted walkway. “But that’s beside the point, isn’t it? We both have our sins, don’t we? No point in letting them get in the way of committing a few more, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” Dr. Kidan responded with a sour snarl as he followed his companion down a short flight of steps and into a dark access tunnel.

The damp, musty smelling passage was as far removed from the bright, celebratory atmosphere as could possibly be. Someone had clearly forgotten about the place when they’d drawn up the dam’s restoration plans. Or maybe they’d deliberately left it out, hoping that its unpleasant atmosphere would discourage random interlopers from wandering off the pedestrian pathway and onto the substantial wharf that had been built into the rear face of the dam. This was the city’s only available facility for the docking of large water landing aerospace vessels, and definitely not a safe place for wandering tourists.

“Maybe I just wanted to feel what it’s like to be hugged by an angel,” the tigress suggested as she happily pranced into the gloom, just ahead of her grumpy counterpart in an obvious attempt to regain his non-professional interest. “Or maybe I just wanted to know what it’s like to be corrupted in such a deeply visceral

fashion. Or maybe I've just gone stark raving mad and I'm trying to drag all the rest of you along with me."

"Again?" Dr. Kidan sighed as six lanes of road traffic roared overhead. His expression became strained. He was clearly doing his best to avert his eyes from his companion's swaying hips, but the cacophony of soft rubbery squips, squeaks, and snaps that accompanied her every movement made her enticement virtually impossible to ignore.

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," Dr. Alluwa laughed as the low rumble of a passing freight train added to the highway noise. "Come on. You know it's going to be fun!"

"You and I clearly have very different ideas of what's fun," Dr. Kidan muttered as the tigress entered the warm, sunny glow that was cascading in from the end of the tunnel.

"You keep saying that," Dr. Alluwa chuckled over her shoulder as she paused at the tunnel portal to let her grouchy companion catch up. "But you keep coming back, don't you?"

“And I keep regretting it,” Dr. Kidan replied with deeply resigned sigh and a hesitant step that made it quite clear that he wasn’t at all enthused with the prospects of what was waiting for them at the wharf.

“This time’s going to be different,” Dr. Alluwa said as she stepped out into the morning sun. “The past is gone and done with. This is a whole new adventure. A whole new beginning. And if we’re successful, it’s going to make our technological inventions *the* source of power for all the Fey’li Empire! You just wait and see!”

ONE

WHITE SAILS

The magnificent starship seemed to have come from that brief time in the ancient past when iron hulls and canvas sails existed in an unnatural harmony forced upon them by the inefficiencies of early coal fired steam engines. Its matte black hull stretched a hundred and forty meters from stem to stern, with another twenty-four meters worth of shimmering golden bowsprit tacked on up front. Broad swaths of finely polished gold trim wrapped around the sides of the ship. More gold covered the rails that surrounded the vessel's broad wooden decks. It also framed the many porthole style windows that ran along its hull, and adorned many various sundry fittings elsewhere around the ship's exterior.

Atop the vessel were its lone mast and the grand metal 'sails' which were mounted to it. Forward of the mast were the two scoop shaped main sails, attached by means of an articulating robotic arm. As the ship currently lay at rest, these were held in a horizontal position, giving a partial canopy to the large open deck space atop the ship's two level superstructure. Aft and attached to the base of the mast was a telescoping fore-and-aft sail. This was currently folded down into its lowermost section and seemed to serve little purpose other than to enhance the archaic sailing vessel illusion.

Despite the striking overall appearance of the ship, the feature that got the most attention from curious onlookers was its highly unusual bow. In spite of the ship's invocation of the days of steam and sail, its bow was nothing like that of a traditional vessel of the sea. The ship's golden keel soared up from the placid surface of the lake. It stretched overhead for a length of thirty meters before ending in a blunt shape that offered viewers the impression of an inverted miniature ram bow.

Embedded into the front face of this 'ram' was a sensor grid whose tubular elements emitted a vibrantly deep pink glow. This emission seemed to have an almost physical quality to it. It looked almost as if it was warping the space in front of it, creating a strange sort of refraction layer that made the whole grid seem to throb in slow, rhythmic fashion.

Mounted in the very center of the sensor grid was a life sized, glistening black figurehead whose completely featureless face gazed blankly into the rising sun. To the casual observer, it looked like an oddly sculpted piece of cheap glossy plastic. A deliberate mockery of the finely crafted and highly realistic figureheads of old. An insult to the spirit of the mystical protector of sailors, doing its best to lead them safely through the worst that the impossibly cruel sea had to offer.

Despite its outward appearance, the strange black figure was no chunk of cheap kitsch tacked onto the prow as a misguided afterthought. It was no mystical figure striving to bring her ship's sailors safely home either. It

was, in fact, an actual woman whose body has been transformed into an object made of nothing but pure, obsidian black biogel. A woman who was still very much alive, her conscious soul held eternally captive within her new and completely inanimate shape.

It was this mysterious, faceless woman who had caught the attention of a small group of dedicated shipspotters. Though it was just another day for the ship's crew, to these obsessive hobbyists, a moment of supreme significance was about to take place. A moment that simply had to be recorded for posterity and, of course, for the online bragging rights.

Now that the former Imperial yacht's conversion was complete, the ship's old name was finally being removed. Within a few hours, a new name would be etched into the shining gold trim above the ship's stern shuttle hangar, and they were quite determined to be the first outsiders to see it. For the moment, however, there was nothing for them to do but stay out of the way, watch, and wait.

"Wow!" remarked a petite elf-eared ashiri as she adjusted the brown leather bag that

carried her logs, camera, and other sundry shipspotting kit. "Imagine being stuck up there for, like, the rest of forever! Wouldn't that just totally suck?"

"Who do you think she might be?" a slender, gazelle horned koyoki inquired as she struggled to focus her antique film camera on the glossy black shape.

"Probably just some random chick who got her ass glistened at the Gelarium," a tigress fey'li replied as she brushed her long black hair in preparation for a bit of video commentary. "Bet she's having second thoughts now, huh?"

"I don't know about that," a bald, silver skinned sel'au responded as she adjusted the orientation of a rather rough looking, second-hand hovering camera orb. "I heard from some girls who work down at the shipyard that it came with the ship when the Empress gifted it to Gelitech."

"Was it not Princess Meylah's favorite yacht or something like that?" a tall, ram-horned mitanni asked as she rummaged around her black canvas backpack for a snack.

“You know what I heard?” a leopardess fey’li replied as she wrote an observation on the ship’s exquisitely smooth paint job in her fancy leather bound journal. “I heard that the girl up there is actually the Princess herself! Neat, huh?”

“That’s just a rumor,” the frustrated sel’au replied as her wobbly orb decided that upside-down was right-side up.

“Totally bunk,” the ashiri agreed as she pulled her comm out from the back pocket of her tight purple bike shorts and held it up to take a few pictures for quick posting to her personal CoreNet profile. “I mean, why would such a rich royal pussy even agree to something like that?”

“Jeez, have you been living under a rock or something,” the tigress quipped as she adjusted her breezy black pants. “Haven’t you seen all the crazy shit our royal twats get up to? She was probably relieved to get offered the chance to get glistened instead of getting picked for something really nasty like that Abdication Day rowa crap.”

“Offered? I sincerely doubt that the Empress would have given her any say in the matter,” the mitanni commented as she took a bite from a large and quite crumbly granola bar. She brushed the stray bits from her soft tan blouse, much to the joy of the golden carp that had clustered along the wharf’s edge hoping for handouts. “You know how she is. Always wanting the royal ladies to set a mindlessly obedient example for everyone to follow.”

“Why is she so obsessed with getting women to transform away their reproductive qualities?” the koyoki asked as she gave up on her old camera. Instead, she followed the ashiri’s example, pulling her own comm from amid the bright blue sash of her flowery green kimono. Its high tech multi-port camera could do so much more than the old SLR.

“Yeah, huh?” the ahsiri responded with a roll of her eyes. “I thought the whole resource crunch thing was, like, totally debunked.”

“It was,” the tigress noted as she unzipped her form fitting orange sport top until her soft white cleavage fluff began to show. “Totally.”

“So this whole girls-gone-neutered thing is just the Empress trying to get us all into her weird kink or something?” the leopardess asked as she unclipped a small pair of folding binoculars from the belt of her golden-gray pencil miniskirt. “I mean... not that I’m complaining. Just thinking about some of what I’ve seen makes me a bit... well... uh... you know.”

“Royals using the people to satisfy their darker inclinations has been a thing since time immortal,” the mitanni agreed as she watched a group of black biogel clad crew members moving a batch of small crates up the gangway and into the ship’s port side docking port. “But who can possibly blame her? It is so much fun to watch so many people happily getting themselves completely screwed for life on camera, is it not?”

“Not nearly as fun as trying it out for yourself,” a softly sublime new voice purred from atop a dark blue cargo container that had been placed on the wharf in part to block unwelcome interlopers from blundering into the work zone alongside the ship. “What do you

girls say? Want to go for a ride you'll never, ever forget?"

The petite snow leopardess lay quite lazily upon the edge of the cargo container's roof. Her long gray ponytail dangled over the edge. Its heavy, artificial looking strands bobbed and bounced in a distinctly rubbery manner as she gazed down upon her visitors with piercing, deep purple eyes.

Perhaps even more rubbery than her hair was the piquant odor of warm latex rubber. This boldly defied the eastward morning breeze, instead finding its way downward to hover in a cloud around the startled objects of the snow leopardess' attention. The overt scent carried along with it a carefully curated selection of more subtle and insidious olfactory stimulants. Pheromones of the sort that were certain to arouse certain erotic senses, reduce even the more strongly held inhibitions, and even blunt the sharp edge of the most deeply ingrained survival instincts. There was little anyone could do to resist their intense power, let alone prevent their own bodies from responding in kind.

To the eyes of the startled shipspotters, the little snow leopardess looked like they'd just woken her up from a long and pleasant nap with their noisy banter. Though her face was smiling, the glistening, pearly-white gel that coated her from neck to toe seemed far less welcoming of their disturbance. Dark tendrils seethed beneath its milky surface, all up and down her left side. Here and there the corruption broke through onto the surface, forming glossy obsidian patches that moved about in a deeply unsettling fashion.

In truth, Chyka Riyalli hadn't actually been napping atop the container. She had so many better things to do than waste the morning sunning herself like some bare bodied mortal. There were so many little projects to look after. So many new toys to experiment with. So many new playthings to store away for later study and enjoyment.

All the same, even Gelitech's fabled 'Librarian' couldn't let such a perfect opportunity slip through her glistening biogel coated fingers, no matter how much she might have preferred spending the morning thinking

up new and conceptually twisted things for her willing captives to experience for the sake of science. If ever there were six women totally deserving to be added to her collection, then these were certainly them. Curious. Intellectual. Physically fit. Attractive, even. And, perhaps just as importantly, deeply skeptical about anything she might dare to propose.

“I don’t think...” the koyaki finally responded after a few long moments of awkward silence.

“Perfect!” Chyka replied with a smile so palpably inviting that even the most chaste of souls would have found it difficult not to feel attracted to her. She was an angel, after all. A very dark sort of angel, but an angel nonetheless. “Don’t think about it. That’s where the trouble always starts. Just say yes. It’ll be fun. Really fun. Trust me. You’ll love it!”

“Do you really think that is going to work on us?” the mitanni inquired with a roll of her big brown eyes. “What do you think that we are? Sheep?”

“Certainly not,” Chyka replied with no small effort to keep herself from laughing aloud at the mitanni’s highly amusing lack of self-awareness. “No. What I see here are six adventurous ladies who love big boats so much that they’d just jump at any chance to run off into space to see ships the likes of which no shipspotter has ever seen before.”

“As if,” the ashiri snorted with audible contempt at the little snow leopardess’ dubious attempt at flattery.

“Well, I mean, what kind of ships are you talking about here?” the leopardess asked as she closed her journal and put it into her blue canvas purse. The twitching of her nose made it quite clear that the potent pheromones were already starting to have the desired effect. “Because it’s going have to be something pretty incredible to get me to even consider thinking about thinking about it.”

“Yeah,” the sel’au agreed with an odd look that suggested that the pheromones were having a rather different effect on her. She seemed a bit put off. Unsettled, even.

“And don’t tell us it’s jump-sail skiffs,” the koyoki scowled as she tucked her comm back into the sash of her kimono. She didn’t seem affected by the pheromones at all. That was no real surprise, of course. Predator descendant pheromones tended to have far less effect on prey descendant species, if any at all. “I am *not* falling for that scam a second time.”

Chyka couldn’t help but chuckle. Promises of encounters with jump-sail skiffs were the space travel equivalent of the old ghost hunting crap that was, for some strange reason, still quite popular on the net. Anyone with a brain in their head knew that jump-sail skiffs didn’t exist. Except the ones that did. No one had ever actually seen one, but they had seen the ghostly impressions left by ancient vessels who’d encountered some horrible transdimensional catastrophe in days long since passed. Ghost ships, as real as such a thing could possibly be, but not really something that could be deliberately found.

“No one in their right mind goes looking for jump-sails,” the biogel coated snow leopardess said as she slid her legs over the edge of the

cargo container, creating an involuntary symphony of little rubbery noises as she moved. “They may find them anyway, but that’s another story entirely, isn’t it? What I’m thinking of is something a bit more interesting. What would you girls think of the chance to be the first shipspotters to record, say, a real, *modern von’kir collector?*”

Chyka knew her targets. She knew them well. She had been a night librarian at the Mashiva Mariners’ University, after all. It was a school full of space-heads obsessed with strange alien ships and technology who’s most inquired upon midnight topics related to the ancient powers and their often quite strange methods of interstellar conveyance. Surely this group of similarly obsessed ladies would find the chance to personally encounter such a vessel a lure more powerful than even the most viscerally enticing of her pheromones.

“The von’kir died off ages ago,” the tigress responded, shaking her head with visible annoyance as the sunlight began to shift in a manner that was quite unfavorable for videography. “Everyone knows that!”

“Actually, everyone knows there is a real, honest-to-goodness von’kir living right here in Mashiva,” the mitanni remarked with a knowing look and a sly little sideways glance at the little snow leopardess. It was clear that she knew exactly what sort of biological game was taking place. She wasn’t going to object to the game, of course. Sheep never objected. Neither did mitanni.

“The creature runs a spa of sorts in Northwestie,” the mitanni continued, taking a deep breath between sentences. Clearly she was enjoying the disinhibiting effects of the pheromones. Given how much the average mitanni loved to steep themselves in equally potent fey’li ‘nip, that was no real surprise. “She does unspeakable things to the bodies of those who surrender to her. You really should watch the videos. They are quite... deeply stimulating, if you know what I really do mean. And I really do mean.”

“Ooh! I heard of that one!” the ashiri exclaimed as she tucked her comm back from whence it came. “She puts a collar on you and then she uses her crazy alien magic to melt all

your cares away. And, you know, most of your body. And brains. And looks. I mean, have you seen those things when she's done with them? Talk about nasty!"

"How did she even get here?" the sel'au asked with one eyebrow raised. "Don't the von'kir live on the other side of the galaxy?"

"Well, that's the mystery, isn't it?" Chyka mused as she playfully pranced past her skeptical quarry, thickening the invisible pheromone cloud in the process.

In all honesty, the little snow leopardess didn't actually much care for her ability to generate truly unholy quantities of highly manipulative, biogel enhanced pheromones. It was far too indirect for her increasingly showy sensibilities. And it was far too close to crossing that one line that even Gelitech's new powerhouse of glossy living rubber temptation refused to cross.

It was one thing to entice a skeptical soul into doing something that they generally wouldn't. It was entirely another thing to compel them to do it. How much pheromonal

inducement did it take before she crossed that forbidden line? And how could she possibly keep herself from compelling some members of a group with quantities of pheromones that only had a mild effect on her primary target?

Legalities aside, it was simply no fun at all to have people mindlessly surrender themselves because their own bodies refused to offer their minds any real choice in the matter. The fun was in the work of enticement. In convincing perfectly average people into willingly agreeing to do things that average people normally regarded as being completely unthinkable. Things that would alter their bodies. Their minds. Drastically. Sometimes quite disgustingly. And generally very, very permanently.

“I mean, a ship that can cross the galaxy in a reasonable time?” Chyka continued, toning back on her pheromonal emissions as she turned to face her small audience with a thoughtful yet enthusiastic expression on her face. “I can’t wait to actually see it! I wonder if I can convince them to let me see the inside of

it too. Wouldn't that be something? Can you even begin to imagine it?"

"You know what they're going to want as payment in exchange for that? They're going to want that shiny ass of yours," the tigress laughed as she turned sideways and gestured to her own pleasingly round posterior. "Won't that look funny, huh? All shiny and gooey and shriveled up like a raisin!"

"Small price to pay," Chyka replied with a shrug and a mischievous wink at the mitanni. If anyone was going to play her game to the end it was the sheep. And once the sheep decided to play, the rest were sure to follow. They just wouldn't be able to help themselves. "Small price to get the chance to post videos of the workings of a real von'kir collector on your CoreNet profiles too. Just think of what that'd do to your follower count!"

"It would certainly have quite the positive effect," the mitanni replied, crossing her arms as she offered the little snow leopardess a playfully uncertain look. "Though it would also have quite the finality to it, would it not? I cannot imagine that I would be allowed to film

unless I was to surrender myself for similar treatment.”

“I would so watch that,” the leopardess chuckled.

“What more can you tell me about this von’kir collector?” the mitanni inquired with a raised eyebrow. “Is it really special enough for me to risk my body to document? As much as I would very much like to witness your transformation into a walking, gibbering little prune of a creature, I must know more. Tell me everything you know and I will perhaps consider it.”

“Oh, come now! Be a sport and play the game,” Chyka cooed enticingly. If there was anything that got a mitanni girl feeling adventurous, it was the intimation that she wasn’t. “What’s the fun if it all gets spoiled before it even starts?”

“You have a fair point,” the mitanni replied, shrugging her shoulders in bemused resignation.

“No she doesn’t,” the tigress objected. “She just wants to get all of our asses shriveled up

and sent of to Goddess knows where so she can post videos herself.”

“Well... I don’t know,” the leopardess murmured, biting her lower lip as her body began to add its own pheromones into the mix. “I mean... what’s... what’s in it for me. Besides the whole posting nasty vids on the net thing.”

“Well, for starters, you’ll get to choose from a selection of various tasks to perform aboard ship while we travel between destinations,” Chyka answered with just enough of the truth to not technically be lying. “And did I mention you’ll be getting paid? I’ll bet no one has ever offered to pay you to shipspot before, have they? Five hundred credits a week plus shore expenses, room, and board.”

“Do we have to wear that... goo?” the koyoki asked as she eyed the little snow leopardess and her bizarre coating with considerable suspicion. She was beginning to look a bit blush in the face. No doubt the pheromones were starting to have an effect even upon her. That or she was trying her best to hide the fact she was starting to feel a bit of social pressure

to go along with her far less inhibited companions. "It looks so... unpleasant."

"Only if you want to," Chyka replied with flirty wink. "Biogel is everywhere aboard the ship, but you don't have to wear it. It comes in more than one variety too, mind you. Most girls prefer the plain obsidian black. It's less... active, if you catch my drift."

"Yuck," the ashiri muttered as she too began to blush. "Getting sexed up by goo and, like, spending all day in your own juices and... that's... that's just gross."

"It's also quite popular on the net," Chyka answered with a grin. "You want followers, getting a suit of perfectly polished biogel is definitely the way to go. You want even more, try a body mod. Maybe go inflato? Come on. It's getting to be summer. You just know deep down that you're all curious to know what putting on an inflatosuit feels like!"

"I definitely do not," the sel'au responded with a sour look and a shake of her head. "And there's nothing you can do to convince me otherwise."

“Well, I tried,” Chyka laughed. “But there’s so many more options that I’m sure something will pique your interest eventually. But I’ve gone off on a bit of a tangent, haven’t I?”

“You most certainly have,” the mitanni replied with a smirk. “And you will pardon my skepticism, but I must wonder if all this promise of seeing a real von’kir collector is just a ploy to recruit our bodies to be converted into products for sale.”

“Oh, definitely not,” Chyka assured the mitanni with a soft smile. “I’m just... well. Perhaps I’m just getting a bit too ahead of things. There are plenty of things to do while we travel between sources of alien experience and technology that we wish to study. They’re all purely optional, depending on the role you sign up for.”

“I am extremely unconvinced,” the koyoki declared with a frown.

“Well... you won’t really know unless you try it, right?” Chyka said as she gestured toward the gangway. “So... what do you girls say? Wait. No. You know what? Don’t answer. Let’s get

you where you want to be first, hmm? You want to see the renaming, right? Take pictures. Vids. Post to the net. That kind of stuff. So how about I get you a front row seat and then we can talk about it once its all done? How does that sound?"

"Well, I can't really say no to an offer like that, can I?" the leopardess remarked as she looked around at her shipspotting companions. "What about you girls?"

"Agreed," the mitanni concurred.

"I guess I'm in," the ashiri nodded.

"Yeah," the tigress agreed. "Sounds like a fair deal."

"I'm sure there's a catch," the sel'au noted. "But still... how can I possible argue?"

"I don't know," the koyoki murmured. "I mean, there's no commitment, but... well, if you're all going, then I will too."

"Great!" Chyka exclaimed with delight. "Follow me!"

TWO

CURIOUS TAILS

“I can’t believe I let myself get talked into this,” the koyoki softly remarked to her lone remaining companion as she stared blankly into the frothing surface of the Destiny Explorer’s potent biogel core.

“Oh, hush,” the somewhat more enthusiastic leopardess murmured in reply as she leaned against the containment chamber window’s heavy frame. “It’s gonna be fun. I’m sure of it.”

The koyoki sighed and shrugged, her eyes still fixed upon the boiling, deep pink sphere. The windows which offered guests a view of the ship’s living biogel heart were the centerpiece of the ship’s spacious lobby. The starkly monochromatic room stretched

between the ship's broadside docking ports, with corridor extensions fore and aft, to either side. The ship's two lifts were located in its forward wall, providing easy access for those embarking or debarking via the docking ports, or via the the ship's modest hangar bay further aft. Both the ship's offices and sick bay were directly accessible from the room as well, making it a central location for crew and guests alike to access the more mundane ship's services.

For the moment, however, the lobby was acting as a waiting room for the two dozen new volunteers who'd agreed to join the ship on its maiden voyage. Their already quiet chatter was getting softer by the minute. One by one, the woefully naive supplicants were beckoned away from the comfortable biogel padded benches. Away from the exotic plants which had been so carefully ensconced in various strangely shaped vessels. Away from the disturbingly curvaceous and sharply monochromatic alien architecture that covered almost every surface in the room save the perfectly polished black floor. And away from the vivid, deep pink glow that had the strange

property of attracting uninitiated souls like moths to a flickering flame.

“Li’sho?” a pale blue ashiri called out from a short stretch of corridor that lead forward from the starboard side of the ship’s spacious lobby. Her coating of glistening black biogel shimmered in the throbbing illumination of the ship’s core. It even seemed to take on a luminescence of its own in the form of little purple patches that flowed and shifted along the surface of her biogel coating as she moved. “Li’sho?”

“Ah! That is me!” a big, bubbly red pan’di exclaimed, turning from the strange, vaguely erotic shapes that covered one of the room’s several pillars. Her long deep blue kimono gently swished along the perfectly polished black floor as she took a somewhat pensive step toward the inquiring ashiri. “Is it my turn?”

“Yes it is,” the ashiri beckoned with a warm, inviting smile. “Are you ready?”

“Oh, yes! Very much so!” the pan’di replied with a brief nod and a look of nervous

anticipation that suggested that she might not be quite as ready as her reply suggested.

“Excellent,” the ashiri responded, gesturing back down the short section of corridor, toward a blue-gray door that was deeply embedded in the alien shapes that covered the corridor walls. “Come with me.”

A placard on the sliding door read ‘Volunteer Accommodation, Starboard Side’. It opened with a sharp hiss as the ashiri approached, revealing a dark chamber beyond. “My name is Pirra,” she said as she led the pan’di into almost completely unfurnished room. “I’ll be getting you settled in while you wait to be allocated.”

“It is pleasant to meet you, Pirra,” Li’sho replied with a shallow nod as the door hissed closed behind them. A very puzzled look came over her face as she looked around at the relatively featureless space. There were only a few open bins overflowing with discarded clothing to the left of the door. A rather plain looking machine ran along the full length of the outboard wall. Everything was painted in a medium blue-gray. The thin commercial grade

carpet was just a darker version of the same basic shade.

“Your clothes go into the bins on the right here,” Pirra instructed, gesturing toward the bins. “No need to sort them. Just take them off and toss them wherever.”

The pan'di wasted no time in denuding herself. A quick tug at her loosely tied sash and the whole of her dress fell to the floor around her big furry feet. With one sweeping motion, she snatched up her dress and tossed it into the nearest container. Whether or not she gave more than a passing thought to the widely varied assortment of attire already overflowing from the bins was impossible to tell.

“Wonderful,” the ashiri noted as she gestured toward the machine. In particular, she directed the pan'di's attention to the aft portion of the contrivance. There, a recess was cut into its face, giving access to a set of glossy black pads mounted on a conveyor system. “Go ahead and lay down.”

“This is all so strange,” the nude pan'di responded with a nervous glance at the ashiri.

“I trust that whatever this machine is to do that it will fell... pleasant?”

“Very pleasant,” the ashiri replied, again gesturing toward the padding. “Just lay down and relax and I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

The pan’di plopped her ample posterior down onto the shiny black padding and spent a very short moment contemplating the rather plain looking machine that surrounded her on three sides. Behind her was a blank gray panel whose only features were a trio of small lights that served to illuminate the bed. As she lay back to rest her head on the slightly raised pad that served as a pillow of sorts, she looked down past her feet at yet another blank gray surface. This one was cut at the bottom to allow the conveyor a space to pass through. Above her head was a rectangular sliding door, just large enough to ensure that anyone who fit upon the bed would be able to pass through with no difficulty, so long as they remained flat on their back. For the moment, this door was sealed shut, making it impossible for her to see what might be in store for her within the bowels of the machine.

“Lay down, close your eyes, and breathe normally,” Pirra instructed. “I’m going to ask you a few questions. First, I want to verify that you signed up to volunteer aboard ship of your own free will. No one else had any say over your decision. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Li’sho replied as she lay back, closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

“Second, in your agreement paperwork, the only restrictions you placed on our use of you and your body are those for... high levels of pain and/or psychological stress,” Pirra inquired. “Are those the only restrictions you wish to place, or would you like to amend the list?”

“I think those are the only items in the list that concerned me,” Li’sho answered.

“Very good,” Pirra noted. “Finally, I wish to doubly confirm that are comfortable with the potential for permanent mental alterations due to your usage in the course of this ship’s voyage. Is that so?”

“Yes, it is,” Li’sho responded.

“Wonderful,” Pirra said as she flipped up a small cover on the face of the machine, revealing a control panel with only a single green button. “I hope you find your stay in our innovative accommodation system to your liking. Enjoy!”

Before the pan’di could reply, the ashiri had pressed the button.

Blrblrblrblglrblrglrblgrp!

Without any warning, and so quickly that the pan’di didn’t have a chance to react, a large mass of crystal clear liquid biogel flowed up from beneath the conveyor. In a mere second, it had surrounded her entire body. A brief wiggle and squirm on the surprised captive’s part caused the solidifying shape to undulate. A quick bounce. A sudden flop. And then... all was silent and still.

The biogel encasement block had fully solidified into a rectangular, sarcophagus-like shape with beveled edges all around. The doorway in the machine hissed open. The block, along with its helpless captive, was

slowly conveyed into the machine's dark interior.

The door closed. There was a whirring sound. Then a new bed, or perhaps it was actually just the same bed, slid out from the foot end of the recess in the face of the machine.

The ashiri smiled and turned away from the machine. "One overly curious tail down," she mused to herself as the chamber door slid open, "and nine more to go."

THREE

MISCHIEF

Chyka dangled her legs over the foot of her massive biogel bed and smiled. The finishing touches on her large private suite had finally been completed, and not a moment too soon. The ship was only a few hours away from departing on its maiden voyage.

Everything was just the way she'd wanted it. A large bedchamber with high windows offering an exquisite view aft. A massive biogel bed capable of accommodating a dozen or more occupants within its glistening black mass. A circular living room just like the one in her luxurious Gelitech apartment, complete with biogel seating and a selection of glistening black decor crafted from the bodies and minds of several dozen Gelarium guests. Beyond, an

office, small kitchen, and storage. The only thing missing was the mingled scent of six mutually infatuated lovers embedded in the dark blue carpets.

Chyka's smile faded as she pondered what had become of her home life. Memories of what once was still haunted her dreams. She yearned for the concrete bonds that had united them all into a single organism. The certainty that all five of her lovers would never part ways with her. That their bodies and minds would always be available and free for the using.

While the little snow leopardess might have won back the companionship of her former biogel wives, things just weren't quite the same anymore. They were no longer bound to her the way they'd been before. They were free to be themselves and to do as they pleased, no matter how deeply they chose to steep themselves in biogel. Somehow, some way, they could always free themselves from its thrall.

Chyka had no idea how her companions were able to defy the rules that seemed to govern everyone else who dressed themselves in a biogel coating. Perhaps they'd somehow

inherited her own inherent duality when it came to being a creature of biogel. Perhaps biogel itself had somehow changed in the shifting of the timeline. Who could possibly know?

All the little snow leopardess knew was that she was left feeling almost powerless in their combined relationship at times. Despite her incredible individual power, she had no more say in their daily lives than they had in hers. To her, it was unsettling on so many levels. On the other hand, the sheer entertainment value produced by their unfettered ability to do virtually anything with no actual consequences made her feel that she'd at least broken even in the deal.

Fssssssssh!

"Kisu!" Jumie moaned softly as the giddily grinning key'vin'ta casually walked up and sprayed her legs with a quick squirt of vanilla scented instant inflatogummy. "Again?"

Ki'su giggled as she watched the leopardess' legs turn black and shrink away beneath the clear biogel membrane that had taken the

place of her skin. This membrane presented the perfect imitation of a cheap blow up doll, faux seams and all. It was this complete artificiality that fascinated the little key'vin'ta to no end. She never tired of watching the transformation corrupt its victim's beauty, especially when that victim was the one who didn't seem to mind having her body suddenly transformed into whatever might strike the little key'vin'ta's latest whim.

"She makes such a nice body pillow, doesn't she?" Nyenya chuckled as watched the action from from a safe distance. If there was one thing that she enjoyed the most out of the relationship, it was trying to get Ki'su to more and more outrageous things to her unfailingly compliant plaything. "Don't be shy. You know how much she likes it. Give her another good squirt."

Fsssssssssssssssssssssh!

"Ah!" Jumie exclaimed as the key'vin'ta proceeded to spray a small cloud of instant inflatogummy onto her body, from her soft, fluffy butt all the way up to her neck, tail and arms included. Within a few short moments

everything from her neck down had gone the way of her legs, leaving her looking like the cheapest of cheap fey'li blow up dolls. Her only 'premium feature' was a clear tube that connected her esophagus with the disturbingly shoddy blow up doll mockeries of her former pussy and anus. Her voice became strained and took on a rubbery, vibrating quality that made it sound just as artificial as her body looked. "Oh... oh... why does it have to feel so... good?"

"Be careful where you're sending that cloud," Tachi remarked as she looked up from the latest issue of Abandoned Mines Monthly and watched the shimmering mist wafting out of the bedroom with with a deep frown. She could tolerate her other companions, but her patience for the little key'vin'ta's constant mischief was always one short step from running out.

"Aw, come on," Sakie prodded. If she had one mission in life, it was to get the stuffy tigress to start acting a lot more like the hapless Jumie. She didn't really have a reason for it, of course. She just thought it'd make

things a bit more entertaining. “Live a little. Embrace the chaos.”

“Why don’t you?” Tachi replied with a scowl. If she had her way, it’d be the cougares getting all done up by the little key’vin’ta.

“Maybe I will,” Sakie replied with a smirk. “So, how about that photo shoot tomorrow, huh? You could be the next Stoned centerfold you know. You’d look perfect in jadeite. That’s your favorite mineral, isn’t it? What do you say? Yes?”

“If it’ll get you to stop pestering me to try out every imaginable type of stone there is for at least a week, then fine,” Tachi sighed. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d let the cougares treat her to the not-so-tender mercies of her digital gorgon collection. She was a mining engineer, after all. If there was one fetish she could find it in herself to embrace, it was petrification.

“Alright then!” Sakie replied with a wide grin. “I’ll be waiting for you at thirteen hundred. It should only take an hour... or two. Or maybe three. We’ll see.”

Fsssssh!

“Oh!” Jumie sputtered as Ki’su finished her off with a quick spray to the head. In a virtual instant, she had been rendered a completely inanimate blow up doll, with a face as horribly cheap looking as it could possibly be. With no ability to stay upright of her own accord, and no inclination of anyone else in the room to help, she slowly toppled over onto the floor in front of the extremely delighted key’vin’ta.

Chyka looked on with considerable bemusement and not just a little twinge of curiosity. What did it actually feel like to be transformed into an inflatogummy? Despite her best efforts to take a taste of various exotic experiences in preparation for the Destiny Explorer’s maiden voyage, she’d yet to try going inflato. It was, perhaps, a bit of an oversight on her part. It was one of the more popular Gelitech products, and everyone who used it seemed to enjoy it right up to the moment they were stripped of their ability to express themselves. Now, watching Jumie transform for at least the fifteenth time, she found it more than just a little tempting. Were

it not for the ship's upcoming departure from Mashiva, she probably would have had her little key'vin'ta priestess give her a nice big squirt.

Just the thought of letting herself become involved in such mischief got the corrupting blackness starting to well up within her coating of pearly white biogel. It formed along her spine at first, before starting to creep in little sinuous threads over her shoulders and around her ribcage. The further it spread, the more of her body it covered, the more she felt the urge to make some transformative mischief of her own.

The little snow leopardess was usually inclined to kept her corrupted side in check. She only let it show when it might serve some useful purpose. Sometimes it was a show of power. At other times it was just to create an alien appearance.

Now, however, she allowed the corruption to take deeper root. She let it give her ideas. Guide her toward their fruition. And it made well and sure that she was going to enjoy every moment that it held her in its sway.

Chyka looked at the clock which was mounted over the open archway that connected the bedroom and the living room. There was more than enough time for her to go out and have a little fun. There were so many souls close at hand to toy with. Not all of them were required for ship's first journey.

Most of the spare personnel aboard ship were slated to depart back to the Gelarium before the ship was slated to depart. Just like everyone else who had signed up for the project, they'd all consented to 'arbitrary use'. That included arbitrary use by the little corrupted snow leopardess.

"You girls have fun," Chyka said as she leaned back and let herself melt into the glistening black surface of the biogel bed. "I'll see you upstairs for the departure. Assuming Ki'su hasn't turned you all into pool toys. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Little stringers of glossy white biogel spread out across the bed as the little snow leopardess sank into its obsidian black surface before being slowly absorbed along with the rest of her vanishing body. She closed her eyes as she

let the bed swallow her up, body and soul. After a few short moments, the last stringers of white biogel disappeared. It was if she'd never been there.

Chyka hadn't merely entered the mass of gooey slime, as one would do when using the bed for rest or play. Her body had been completely dissolved, leaving her mind free to wander through the vast network of conduits that connected nearly every mass of boigel aboard the ship. The reactor core. The power plants. Furniture. Even much of the alien looking biogel decor was accessible to her as she wandered, looking for the perfect plaything to toy with.

One of Chyka's favorite tricks was to exude herself from among the twisted alien decor as liquid biogel. Then she could become whatever she wanted, and do just about whatever she pleased with the unsuspecting targets. Now, the question was, where to go? Who among the many spare personnel was she going to choose to have her fun with?

There was only one individual who stood out as a perfect target for the mischievous snow

leopardess. She had finished her duties, and had just exited one of the volunteer accommodation induction chambers. She was almost certainly on her way to leave the ship via the nearby docking port and gangway that was still being used by those last few departing Gelarium volunteers.

Chyka directed her mind into the twisting shapes that lined the starboard side forward extension of the ship's lobby. She collected herself into the black biogel shapes that lay beneath and around the pearly white, spine-like tubes, esoteric organs, and partial, vaguely humanoid shapes that covered the corridor walls. Then she willed herself to ooze out from these black crevices, furiously bubbling and spurting forth as white liquid biogel, dribbling and splattering herself into a thick pool of glimmering white slime upon the polished black corridor floor.

"Oh!" Pirra exclaimed as she watched the gurgling mass of slime swirl about and begin to rise like a ball of pearly white dough. "What the..."

Chyka took her time reforming her body from the pool of slime. Upward it grew into a wavering humanoid shape. Over the next few seconds, this vague shape slowly resolved into that of the petite snow leopardess' natural physique. As a final act, the thick gel pulled away from her face. She smiled at the stunned ashiri. "Ah! There you are!"

"Oh! Hi!" Pirra exclaimed as the blackness that writhed within the little snow leopardess' glossy white coating rapidly spread until it covered most of her arms, legs, and back. "I didn't... I didn't know you could do that."

"Neat, isn't it?" Chyka responded with a sly smile as she stepped forward until she was standing quite close to the surprised ashiri. Black tendrils writhed beneath the remainder of her pearly white biogel surface as the urge to conduct mischief shifted into a definite intention.

"It's kind of scary, to be honest," Pirra replied with a nervous look on her face. "But I guess... well... I guess it's kind of cool too."

“So... what *are* you up to?” Chyka asked as the tendrils of blackness beneath the surface of her biogel coating began to rub and toke at her tender places. It was the corruption’s way of making sure she was completely into whatever it was she was about to do to her hapless target. Once it began its nefarious pleasure-making, she had almost no choice but to follow through, and to thoroughly enjoy every moment of it. Not that she generally minded. If she’d already gotten to the point where they were taking control, then she was already quite ready to proceed.

“Oh, I was just... uh... finished up with the last batch of volunteers,” Pirra replied, biting her lower lip. “Do you... need me for something else?”

“You might say that,” Chyka purred as she pondered just what sort of transformation would best suit both target and environment. There wasn’t really much at hand for inspiration. Not unless one counted the alien decor. That gave the little snow leopardess a very interesting idea. “What would you think of spending some real, quality time here? Hmm?”

Taking in the ambiance? Steeping yourself in the decor?"

"Uh... I... I don't know," Pirra responded with an anxious shrug. "I mean... it's... interesting and all. But... oh. You mean..."

"Mhmm," Chyka replied with a wide, almost toothy grin as the ashiri realized exactly what sort of thing she was proposing.

"Oh... goddess," Pirra gasped with an expression that was equal parts horror and resignation. "You're... you're going to... really?"

"Why not?" Chyka cooed. "You... that beautiful face, cast in immortal biogel and preserved in youth for all eternity. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I... I don't know," Pirra responded with a deeply recalcitrant shrug.

"Now... decisions, decisions," Chyka mused. "I was thinking something along the lines of... well... something more alien than artistic. Bizarre. Unsettling, even. Something that will invoke both horror and temptation in equal

measure. Mmm. Don't you think that would suit you nicely?"

"I... uh..." Pirra sputtered. "I... I guess?"

"Don't you worry about a thing," Chyka purred as a pair of thick, glistening black tendrils stretched out from the wall behind the nervous ashiri. "This is going to feel amazing. Really."

"Really?" Pirra questioned before freezing like a deer caught in headlights as the tendrils brushed against both of her shoulders. "Ah! Uh..."

"Yes, really," Chyka replied as the tendrils pressed firmly into and then merged with the glistening biogel upon the shocked ashiri's shoulder blades. "Now just relax. Take a deep breath. Let it take you. It'll be done before you even know it."

Pirra gasped as the tendrils pulled her back against the wall, and against one of the disturbingly spine shaped tubes in particular. This white structure turned obsidian black as its sharp, protruding elements stretched out to penetrate her back and merge with her own

vertebrae. She gasped and wiggled against the hardening connection. After a few seconds, her entire spine was rendered completely immobile. "I... I... can't..."

The wall lifted the sputtering ashiri up by her spine. A pair of deep black openings formed within the twisted structure of the wall, just to either side of the spine, and at about the height of her knees. Bony black biogel tentacles burst forth from these holes. They grabbed her by the ankles and, in concert with further movements of the spine, contorted her until they could pull her feet into the shallow openings. Her legs slowly followed, absorbed into the biogel as the spinal element pulled upward and curved until it held her at a shallow outward angle.

"Unh!" the shocked ashiri grunted as her arms began to melt into the sides of her torso. Glistening white biogel began to overtake the black as her belly began to shrink inward. Before long her entire midriff was gone. There was only her upper body and her lower abdomen, connected together by nothing but her glossy white spine.

New tendrils now stretched out from the wall, toward the back of her head. They sucked up her short, deep purple hair before pressing into her head. Skin and skull transformed into biogel as the tendrils delved inward. Each then split into countless microscopic filaments which insinuated themselves into her living brain, for no reason other than to make her intensely aware of her transition from person to object.

Pirra panted and gasped as two thick phalli slid out from the wall and into her pussy and anus. Up they drove, stretching the biogel that now made up what was left of her abdomen into the open space that had once been her tender belly. In and out, ever so slowly, they began to pump in perfect synchrony with the throbbing faux-organs elsewhere amid the alien shapes on the wall.

“Uh... uh... uh...” the ashiri huffed as what little was left of her legs parted from the wall and melted into an enticingly erotic roundness that stretched over her rump and merged seamlessly into her hips. Her white biogel chest pulled taut over her ribs, and black

biogel appeared between. Her breasts became firm lumps, ideally poised to attract the attention of curious hands. The blackness then welled up around her neck, before spreading through her mouth and lips.

White biogel spread over and through Pirra's face as she gasped and shuddered. After a few short moments only her quivering, dark gray eyes were left. She could only gaze into her corrupt mistress' eyes and wait for the biogel to take these final fleeting vestiges of her mortal flesh.

Chyka smiled as the ahsiri's eyes grew wide for a moment before the blackness took them from within. "So... strangely beautiful, aren't you?"

The new work of art couldn't reply. It had fallen completely still. Its eyes were frozen wide open. Its expression was fixed in a state of horrified delight. Whether or not the mind captive within felt the same was something only the little snow leopardess could know, and she didn't really care enough to bother asking.

Chyka hummed softly as she reached up to run her fingers over the frozen face. It looked so... serene. So... perfect. But was it really finished? Was there something more she could add? Could it use some... functionality?

The little snow leopardess reached down to take hold of the throbbing phalli that continued to thrust within the open space of the transformed ashiri's abdomen. She let them stroke her right hand from within the biogel that made up her artwork's abdomen. An insidious, and insidiously kinky, idea popped into her head.

The biogel that coated the phalli melted away, allowing them both to thrust out into the open. "That's better," she mused as she caressed the huge throbbing cocks. "Now you can ejaculate on anyone who tries to give you a hand job. Aim well enough and they'll get a full coating of shiny white biogel just like ours. Won't that be fun?"

Chyka laughed as both phalli squirted her with their biogel ejaculate. It was the perfect snare for the unwary. And to make it even more perfect, she willed the alien walls a very

complementary, and very perilous property. Anyone who had any amount of ejaculated biogel on their body might find themselves being snatched up by the walls, just as the ashiri had been.

“Why make just one when I can have a whole collection?” the little snow leopardess chuckled as she imagined the myriad ways new victims could be incorporated into the twisted architecture. She could choose them herself, or perhaps she could let the soul within the ship’s biogel reactor core decide. It was they who’d been given free reign to compose the walls as they already existed. Surely they’d be able to do far better with a supply of unwitting subjects to incorporate into the structures.

“Why didn’t I think of this before?” Chyka hummed as she took a step back to look over her new creation. “It’s such a perfect complement to the style, isn’t it? I can’t wait to see the whole lobby filled with them. The whole ship. It’s going to be amazing!”

The little snow leopardess leaned back against the opposite wall and contemplated her work of art. Time slipped past as she imagined

what others might look like given similar treatment. Jumie. Tachi. Sakie. Nanya. Even little mischievous Ki'su.

A sharp noise brought Chyka back to reality, and back from the thrall of the corruption. The black biogel vanished from her body, leaving her clad all in pearly white. She took a deep breath and a moment to regain her composure.

Another sharp bang could be heard, coming from the other side of the ship's lobby. This was followed by a clatter of chains. They were disengaging the gangway. It was almost time for the ship to depart.

FOUR

TRANSDIMENSIONAL

The Destiny Explorer rose up out of the water with a smooth, subtle grace that belied its impressive twenty thousand ton mass. It floated skyward, trailing little streams of refreshingly clear mountain water like some archaic airship fresh out of the shower. Its glistening white sails shimmered in the noonday sun, drawing the curious attention of all who were near enough to see it.

One had to wonder what those puzzled spectators were thinking as they watched the strange vessel turn eastward, toward the vast floodplains beneath the vertigo inducing Mashiva bluff. Were they wondering just what sorts of glossy biogel madness had been stuffed into its shapely hull? Were they pondering what

sort of mischief that its crew was sure to be contemplating for whatever lucky destination that they had selected for its maiden voyage? Perhaps they were wondering what sort of captain had dared to take command of the ship, and whether or not he, or she, was just as crazy as all the rest of Gelitech's biogel addicted staff?

The Destiny Omega's conventional field effect thrusters thundered to life, spitting brief lances of bright yellow fire aftward before settling into an intense orange glow. If there were any potential spectators who hadn't noticed the ship thus far, they were certainly looking at it now. They all watched the ship as it rumbled overhead, like an old fashioned jet airplane, annoying elderly curmudgeons and uptight librarians all along its route to the ascent zone over the vast floodplain beyond the bluffs along the city's eastern edge.

There was no real need for the ship to make use of its backup engines as it soared over the city. They could have just as easily been tested before it had taken off. As to why they hadn't... well... not even the ship's ruling mistress knew

that. She might have been in charge, but she wasn't really in command.

The Destiny Explorer had no captain. Nor did it have a crew, in the conventional sense. Besides a small cadre of engineers and security staff, everyone aboard were models, scientists, and volunteer test subjects. Instead, the ship was controlled entirely by its biogel core and all of its various connected systems. That core was controlled, albeit in somewhat indirect fashion, by none other than Omega herself. Those aboard were just there for the ride... and to deal with whatever might be located at their destination, as best as they could manage, and with what resources they already happened to have at hand.

Exactly what their destination was, well, that was a mystery. All they knew was that they were going somewhere distant in order to meet up with a grand von'kir collector ship. Their mission was to acquire the secrets behind their transformative artifices, and the means to craft new ones in forms more suitable for biogel compatible entertainment purposes. What it might cost was reflected in the number of

volunteer test subjects brought aboard prior to launch. There were just over three hundred of them, each of whom had been encapsulated in a block of glistening crystal biogel and left to dream as they waited to discover just what fate had in store for their bodies and their souls.

As the ship roared past the rocky bluffs and over the floodplain, its nose lifted skyward. Again the engines flared and began to jet a searing white energy from their exhaust ports. Up the ship went, racing past birds, aerospace liners, and a ponderous old heavy freighter that seemed quite a bit less than enthused with its crew's desire to head spaceward.

Clouds flashed past and the curvature of the planet became clearly visible. The light blue sky became darker and darker. After a few fleeting moments, the ship had burst free of the atmosphere and into the blackness of space.

"That was sooooo cool," Sakie murmured as she leaned on the polished wooden railing and watched the planet fall away in the distance.

"Pa'sho'ni'ka," Ki'su responded as she stared at her receding homeworld with eyes so

wide that they looked like they might pop out at any moment. "How... how is this even possible? It is madness! And all to make transaction with those vile von'kir! Insanity!"

"I'm sure they're going to feel just the same way," Chyka mused as she gazed out the high windows that covered the aft side of the ship's uppermost deck. "But really, don't you think you'd like to know their secrets? Imagine the creative ways you can come up with to shrivel Jumie. I'll bet she'll love it as much as she does getting turned into a balloon."

"Ka'pa'ti'ka," Ki'su sighed. "They are still the von'kir. They want slaves to stoke their fragile egos, not deals with competitors who want to deny them their supply of pets!"

"We'll see," Chyka responded with a mischievous smirk as she pondered the numerous promises she'd been allowed to make in exchange for the critical information that they sought. "I'm sure we can present a very compelling argument that our business can be good for their business."

"Ma'ta'mph!" Ki'su exclaimed in reply.

The rumble of the ship's conventional engines faded as Maria IV became little more than a bright blue spot in the distance. In its place rose a low, liquid throbbing sound as the ship's primary biogel field coils began to energize. Ensnared within the ship's two huge biogel power plants, one hundred and twenty-eight captive souls were having their fundamental essence sucked upon with such vigor that all were at risk of experiencing unintended and potentially quite bizarre consequences. The resulting energy was flowing through the ship's complex network of biogel conduits, much of it finding its way into the exotic field coils that had taken the place of the conventional engines in adhering the ship to the very substance of space in which it was traveling. Adhesion provided traction, and by varying the and this allowed the ship to move in almost arbitrary fashion.

Mere movement, however, wasn't the object of such power being pumped into the coils. Adhesion soon transitioned into repulsion as the generated field began to slip and slide against the substance of space. The ship was, quite literally, losing its grip on reality. Like a

giant walking on slowly thinning ice, and eventual break through the spatial-dimensional barrier was virtually inevitable.

GLRRRAUUAUAGRLAGCH!

The sound thundered through the Destiny Omega as a hole in space suddenly appeared, allowing the ship to fall bodily into the transitional realm. This half-way domain wasn't the familiar domain of real space. Nor was it entirely a higher order dimensional space. It was a non-space in between the planar border between one and the other. As long as the ship's field coils remained active, the ship could move through this place, and even 'dive down' to a place with far less fundamental resistance, and thus a far, far higher speed of light.

There was always the risk of going too far, though. Diving into the transitional realm was as much a climb as it was a descent. There was a hump in the middle. The closer one got the peak of the hump, the less power it required to remain in the transitional space. As long as one remained on the entry side of the hump, a loss of power would result in a slide back to an

equivalent point in real space. Going over the hump allowed for the fastest speeds, but carried with it the risk that loss of power or control might well result in falling away into higher order space.

No one really knew what happened when a normal space object entered the higher order space as-is. No one really wanted to know, either. There only seemed to be one way to find out, and that was just too risky a proposition even for the most irresponsible of modern scientists.

The Destiny Explorer slid through the luminous purple haze. Bursts of energetic lighting flashed all around as the haze got darker and darker. The ship was approaching the peak of the hump. There, just on the entry side was the so-called 'green zone', where the ratio of power to speed to safety was considered the most acceptable for routine travel.

Despite its incredible speed, to the eyes of Chyka and her companions, the ship seemed to be going quite slowly. The bursts of lightning seemed almost stationary relative to the ship,

when one would expect them to be little more than momentary flashes or fleeting streaks dashing by outside the windows. Relative to normal space the ship was actually moving the equivalent of roughly thirty thousand times the speed of light. This was just about as fast as one could hope to go without going over the hump, sufficient to cross the whole of the galaxy in about two years.

Thankfully, the Destiny Omega didn't have nearly that far to go. A few days would suffice to transit the two hundred and fifty light years of space between Maria IV and the starless 'dark system' where the von'kir collector was believed to be lurking. A few very long days, during which the ship's highly energetic biogel systems might well attract all sorts of strange transdimensional mischief.

"What's our stats?" Chyka asked, turning toward her favorite Vixie personal assistant.

"This vessel is trans-space at a depth of four thousand, nine hundred, and fifty relative kilometers, and holding steady," Vixie replied in her vaguely feminine monotone drone. "Power plants are providing full power to the field

coils. Trans-space speed is a highly favorable thirty point nine five eight. Time to destination is currently three days and four hours. Estimated time of arrival in oh eight hundred and thirty six.”

“Thank you,” Chyka replied with a bemused smile at her personal assistant. Nenya always insisted wearing her mask in public, no matter how long that meant being a virtual slave to the ship’s core. Perhaps she just liked giving up all control of her body and mind. Or perhaps it was just a convenient way to avoid the random attentions of Ki’su. Either way, the little snow leopardess couldn’t help herself but enjoy imagining what the shibbi must be feeling as she lived the life of a puppet. Perhaps some day she’d try it herself. Just for a little bit. Just to see what it was like.

A chime sounded.

“Trans-space stability achieved,” the deep, womanly voice of the ship declared. “Trans-space variance level is high. Please exercise diligence in observation of potential anomalous biogel-trans-space interactions. Thank you.”

Sakie grimaced. “That doesn’t sound very reassuring.”

“Ma’ra’ki’ta?” Ki’su muttered as she shifted about uncomfortably. “Why do I feel so... tingly?”

Chyka could feel it as well. It strange, tingly sensation that spread through the whole of her body. It reminded her of a warning she’d received more than once as a child living in the mountains north of Mashiva. A warning about the dangers of being outside during a thunderstorm. More specifically, the one thing that nature might deign to offer as a warning that one was about to be the target of lightning strike.

“Lightning...” the little snow leopardess murmured as the electric tingling intensified.

Outside in a field, the only potential chance to evade a strike was to lay down and hope the lighting would find an easier path to ground. In transdiensional space, coated from neck to toe in a transdimensionally acting substance, however, there was simply no place to hide. Fortunately, the ship and its biogel network had

been designed to mitigate the worst of the effects.

A searing flash of blue-white energy enveloped the Destiny Explorer. The whole ship shuddered as a loud, metallic thump echoed through the hull. The lights flickered. The fans that circulated air through catalyst filters sped up for a brief and very audible moment before fading back into background.

“What the...” Sakie sputtered with shocked disbelief as she stared out into the strange, dark gray blankness beyond the windows. “What just happened? Where... where are we?”

“The Destiny Omega is still on course through trans-space,” Vixie replied as the auto-darkening windows slowly regained their transparency.

“Damage?” Chyka asked as the tingling seemed to bounce back and forth through her a bit before fading away altogether.

“No damage to hull integrity or systems recorded,” Vixie replied. “Cosmetic delamination of the upper layer of the ablative

hull coating amidships port and below the waterline aft starboard has been detected.”

“Crew?” Chyka inquired.

“Variable trans-space flux was recorded within the Destiny Omega’s field envelope,” Vixie replied. “Unpredictably interacting echoes remained well past the primary event. Biogel systems not affected. Integrated biological organisms status acceptable for continued mission profile.”

“Acceptable for continued mission profile?” Chyka questioned. There was only one reason for the ship’s core to use that kind of wording, and it didn’t bode well. “What do you mean by that?”

A chime sounded.

“Chyka? Alluwa here,” the slightly annoyed sounding voice of Dr. Anshi Alluwa called out. “Can you come down to deck five? We’ve got a bit of a... well... an issue here.”

Chyka groaned, shaking her head as she turned to head forward toward the lifts. “On my way...”

FIVE

ANOMALOUS

A truly warped cacophony of deeply unsettling sound filled the ears of the courageous few who dared to linger and gawk at the horror that was unfolding the Destiny Explorer's main testing laboratory chamber. Wet squishing. Goopy slapping. Deep, desperate moaning. Brief yelps and cries for release from the grasp of the monstrosity that had appeared so suddenly in the midst of its helpless victims.

“What in the nine heavenly hells is that?!?” Chyka exclaimed as she contemplated the deeply disturbing scene that was unfolding beyond the thick panes of armored glass. There was an orgy going on. An orgy of bright glistening colors, writhing fluid shapes, and so

many suckered tentacles that it was almost impossible to see what was really happening.

As to the dozen or so laboratory staff who'd been setting the facility up to study the hoped-for von'kir technology, the only apparent evidence was the sound of their voices. Voices that were slowly shifting from sounds of terror and resistance to those of defeat and surrender. Whatever the monstrosity was, and whatever it was doing to its captive victims, it was clear that they were helpless to resist any of it.

"Cephalox," Dr. Alluwa muttered from their reasonably safe vantage point in the horseshoe shaped corridor that ran around the aft side of the D shaped laboratory. "Of all the damned mythical monstrosities that we could have picked up in trans-space, it had to be cephalox!"

"As if any of the other possibilities would have been somehow less alarming?" Dr. Kidan quipped as he watched the show with a raised eyebrow and little in the way of visible concern. Clearly he had more faith in the quality of the lab's isolation than any of the

other gathered gawkers. They glanced at one another with expressions of considerable consternation whenever the tentacles pounded against the lab windows, or a particularly strained cry was heard from the tangle of colorful madness within. Were it not for the presence and apparent confidence of their superiors, they likely all would have put as much distance between themselves and the lab as possible aboard ship.

“Do you have any idea how virulently contagious cephaloxy is?” Dr. Alluwa replied with a sharp glare at her fellow scientist. “If even half the stories are true they would make cephaloxy the most dangerous sexually transmitted disease known to... well, not science.”

“Yet,” Dr. Kidan responded with a smirk.

“You aren’t possibly suggesting...” Dr. Alluwa snapped. “No! We can’t take those kinds of risks! We have a mission to complete and new technologies to test. We can’t throw it all to the dice just to please whatever perverse curiosity has wormed its way into your brain!”

“We have a clear directive from the SRI to examine anything unusual we encounter in detail,” Dr. Kidan answered. “Given how concerned the Navy has been about the sharp uptick in trans-space incidents aboard biogel powered vessels versus conventional ships, and given the current opportunity, I really do think it would behoove us to do so.”

“Why?” Chyka asked as she wondered how a bunch of colorful tentacles could somehow constitute an STD. “Is there really anything about this mass of candy colored tentacles that’s worth the risk of it getting loose aboard the ship?”

“Only the entirety of the biogel business,” Dr. Kidan replied. “We’re already struggling to make inroads into the civil engineering world and biogel is starting to lose its luster as the ultimate expression of personal kinkiness. Even if we do manage to keep interest with new developments, its all going to go down the drain the moment the rumor starts that biogel attracts trans-dimensional monsters. We just can’t afford that.”

“I’ll concede that point,” Dr. Alluwa responded with a scowl that made her opinion on the matter quite clear. “But what’s the plan? How are we going to keep this contained? It’s already taken over the main lab despite the protective systems that should have stopped it before it could spread. What’s to stop it from taking over the rest of the ship if we get a sample out and it gets loose?”

“Dropping out of trans-space should make it vanish,” Dr. Kidan replied.

“Should,” Dr. Alluwa responded sharply. “Just because theory says it should doesn’t mean it actually will.”

“I... I have an idea,” Chyka declared even before the half-baked plan had fully formed in her mind. “Why can’t we just study it in the lab where it is? There’s a universal analyzer in there, right? Don’t we just need to get a sample into it?”

“And how to you propose to do that? Ask it politely?” Dr. Alluwa sighed, rolling her eyes at the little snow leopardess’ apparent naivete.

“No,” Chyka responded with a huff and a shake of her head. “All we have to do is get a volunteer and link her to the resynthesis portal. We send her in. She gets a sample and gets it into the analyzer before the monster does whatever it’s going to do to her. The analyzer does its thing. The monster does its thing. Then, when everyone is satisfied, we have some data and we use the portal to get our volunteer back.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Kidan hummed contemplatively. “You know, this might be the perfect time to test the quantum camera. Not only would we acquire the data from the analyzer, we’d get our volunteer’s own individual experience recorded for posterity and analysis as well.”

“Right,” Chyka responded with not just a little bit of concern that her quick and dirty plan was receiving a positive response. She’d never really thought that it would be more than an amateurish prompt for more professional levels of brainstorming.

“A fair plan,” Dr. Kidan replied.

“Still risky,” Dr. Alluwa observed with a deep frown. “There’s nothing to say that cephalox can’t propagate through the portal itself, seeing as it’s a fully transdimensional entity.”

“We’ll just need to keep the portal chamber isolated,” Chyka replied as she began to wonder if her plan was really that good or if the pair of incisively combative scientists were just going along with her idea to avoid wasting time on an argument that was sure to last well past the point where the opportunity to study the alien organism had passed?

“That would work,” Dr. Kidan noted.

“So that’s our plan?” Dr. Alluwa asked, sighing and shaking her head with visible displeasure.

“Sure, why not?” Chyka replied, half-hoping that the tigress would give her a good reason that it was a bad idea. *Surely* her plan couldn’t be good enough to actually try out for real, could it?

“Then I guess that’s our plan, then,” Dr. Alluwa answered with a resigned shrug as she turned toward the door to the science

department equipment room. "But I don't trust that any one of us are going to be able to actually manage to get a sample and get it into the analyzer. It may take more than one stage. Or maybe we can have a hover-bot put the sample in the machine. I'll have to think about it and put something together that's workable."

"Great," Chyka said as the door closed behind the tigress.

"That just leaves us with one burning question then," Dr. Kidan noted with a look around the rest of the group who'd collected to gawk at the monster through the lab windows. "Who's going to volunteer?"

SIX

ARTIFICE

Like a true mad scientist, Dr. Kidan stood amid the mass of throbbing machinery and held aloft a book sized slate of perfectly clear gobzite crystal. He regarded it as a photographer might regard a large format glass negative, eyeing it for even the slightest imperfection that might transform it from being a cherished work of art and into a useless piece of trash. Even the most minuscule of defects would render it useless, and given how many slates he'd already rejected, the chances of this one passing muster seemed to be painfully low.

"Hmm," Dr. Kidan hummed as he checked, double checked, triple checked, and then doubted himself so much that he did it all over again. "Unless I'm blind, this one should work."

Satisfied in the slab's apparent flawlessness, the approving scientist carefully lowered it down into a luminous purple slot atop a small control pedestal. Therein it vanished with a soft, cushioned *thunk*.

"This is so exciting," his willing subject murmured as she lay naked upon the surface of the oval sarcophagus. The giddy ashiri's violet skin seemed particularly radiant in the glow of the sarcophagus' glowing purple gobzite filling. It even seemed to sparkle, though whether that was a result of some power inherent in the transdimensional mineral or an indicator that beads of nervous were just beginning to form was impossible to tell.

Unlike a typical mass of glowing purple gobize, that which was contained within the open topped sarcophagus didn't seem particularly inclined to liquefy and absorb the pretty elf-ear into its mass. That was just as well. Sending her careening down a whirlpool of life essence energy into the bowels of the nine heavenly hells was the opposite of what she was needed for.

Exactly what the ashiri was so excited about was a mystery to all but herself. Was it the fact that she was going to be one of the first to use the resynthesis portal 'for real'? Was it the prospect of being the first to have an intimate encounter with a cephalox and come out in a state to be able to tell the tale? Or was it just because Dr. Kidan had singled her out from the dozen or so vivacious volunteers who'd all wanted to be the first to give the outrageous plan a try?

Dr. Kidan just smiled softly and gave the rest of the machinery a quick once over before commencing the portal's linking process. The massive portal itself stood ready in all its glistening black glory. The quivering sheet of potently reactive biogel was suspending within a massive ring. This ring, in turn, had been mounted over the field flux ejection end of a big, horizontally mounted transdimensional coil stack.

The exposed quantum-superposed crystal filament coil elements of the stack glowed a bright orange color that gave a strange, almost unearthly pallor to the resynthesis portal

chamber when combined with the intense purple and pink glow of the active gobzite and biogel elements, respectively. At the opposite end of the stack was a large cap containing a series of nested resonator elements. These could be tuned to synchronize with up to four different life essence wave signatures at one time, with a number of sarcophagi and attendant accessories to match.

Most significant of the accessories, and most near and dear to the transdimensional scientist's sometimes rather misplaced heart, were the quartet of quantum microclocks. These superposed trans-quantum armature devices were placed outboard of the four oval sarcophagi. In combination, those two devices could latch on to an individual's life essence wave form. Fed into the resonators, this waveform would allow the portal to pull the individual's living soul into the machine, and place it into a new body composed entirely of the new mark nine biogel.

“Are you ready, Wyoh¹?” Dr. Kidan asked as he turned back to the control pedestal at the foot of the sarcophagus.

“Very,” the ashiri replied with a giddy grin.

Dr. Kidan pressed the little control panel’s only button.

“Ah!” Wyoh gasped as the substance upon which she was laying abruptly changed from being a solid into a thick, gooey slime. “That feels so... so...”

Before the surprised ashiri had a chance to utter another word, the sloppy purple slime enveloped her. For a brief moment she squirmed upon its roiling, bubbling surface. Then she began sink. Or, more accurately, she began to melt as her helpless body was physically transformed into more purple slime.

Dr. Kidan smiled as she watched the wiggling woman vanish beneath the surface of the purple slime so quickly that she didn’t have a chance to understand exactly what was happening to he body. One moment she was

1 Pronounced “Wee-uh”.

there. The next moment she ceased to exist. She was gone. But gone to where?

Of all the questions that science had yet to answer, that of what truly happened to souls within the portal sarcophagi was perhaps the most perfectly perplexing. By any method of empirical measurement, they simply ceased to exist. They didn't remain within the gobzite. There were no signatures of the soul's stream of living consciousness to be found. They didn't depart the mortal realm either. That would have generated energy within the gobzite. No energy was generated. The gobzite itself was just as it had been before the soul had been absorbed.

Regardless of what was going on within the purple slime, an induced pattern had been formed within the quantum microclock attached to the sarcophagus. It was a pattern of countless superposed waves that was truly unique to the absorbed ashiri. That pattern was now locked in place, waiting until the moment it was fed into the resynthesis portal itself.

But what of Wyoh? What was the point of linking her life essence pattern to the portal if

it meant that her body had ceased to exist? If the purpose was simply to resynthesize her into a biogel organism, then there were more than one far more efficient means to go about that.

Dr. Kidan gave the quantum microclock a brief check to ensure that it contained his subject's pattern. He nodded in silent approval at the diagnostic readings. Then he turned back to the little control panel and again pressed the button.

As quickly as the ashiri had vanished, she reappeared. Up she came in a perfect inverse of her melting into the gooey gobzite. A mere passing moment and it was done. The gobzite solidified beneath her, and she was left to gasp and shudder upon its cold, hard surface.

"That was so strange," Wyoh murmured as she lay still as still could be, staring blankly upward. "What just happened to me? I don't even know. Can I... can I get up now?"

"Yes," Dr. Kidan answered with a nod as the gobzite slate popped up from the slot in the control pedestal. "You did well. Thank you."

“You’re... welcome?” Wyoh replied as she slid herself off of the perfectly polished surface of the gobzite and onto the deep pink padding that lined the rim of the sarcophagus.

The mad scientist barely heard the reply. His subject was merely that. A subject, worthy only of his attention when it was absolutely required. Other things required that attention now. In particular, the gobzite slate.

Dr. Kidan again examined the slate with studious attention to even the most minor of details. The crystal slab was no longer perfectly clear, having shifted in color to a vivid transparent purple. Its physical perfection was now marred by an insidiously hypnotic web of nearly microscopic fractures.

The fractures were a physical imprint of the ashiri. A hard-copy record of the life essence waveform that had been passed into the quantum microclock. A useful backup in the event of a technical failure, and also a potential home to store the soul that had created them.

For Dr. Kidan’s intended purpose, it was absolutely essential that none of the countless

fractures actually touched the slate's surface. If so much as a single one did, the whole slate would shatter the moment it was exposed within the quantum camera. That would be positively catastrophic.

A shattered slate would mean far more than merely losing the record it was intended to hold. It would mean losing the one who was meant to become the record itself. That would, at least in this particular case, render the whole process of using the resynthesis portal quite pointless.

Even the eye of the tiger wasn't quite good enough to know for certain that the slate was free from defects. The quantum camera would scan the slate for exposed fractures before exposing it. If it found any, the slate would be discarded. The ashiri would live on, though it would mean that she, and her experience, wouldn't be recorded in the desired fashion.

"It looks good," Dr. Kidan said, placing the slate into a protective padded bag, more talking to himself than addressing the subject who seemed quite puzzled at his sudden disinterest in her. "I suppose we won't know

until it's time to resynthesize, but it is what it is."

"What do I have to do now?" Wyoh asked.

"Ah! Yes. Well, that's the complicated bit," Dr. Kidan responded as he suddenly regained awareness that he wasn't actually alone in the room. He quickly picked up the bag and gestured toward the steps leading down from the sarcophagus platform, and toward the portal chamber door.

"Complicated?" Wyoh inquired, following the scientist as he led her out into the deck lobby, just opposite the ship's centrally located pair of lifts.

"Indeed," Dr. Kidan replied. "You're going to have to enter the lab through one of the bio-locks. Once you're in, you need to get a sample of the cephalox. I have no idea what Dr. Alluwa has in mind with respects to that. We'll have to find out. But the point is that you just need to get it and insert it into the universal analyzer. That's it."

“And the monster?” Wyoh questioned. “It’s going to do things to me when I try to get the sample, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Dr. Kidan answered. “Just... well... ignore it as best as you can and focus on getting the sample into the analyzer. Once that’s done, well, maybe try and focus on what it feels like? What it does to your body and mind. That’s information that’s as useful as what’s going to come out of the analyzer.”

“So... I just let the thing have its way with me?” Wyoh asked with a slightly skeptical tone.

“In short, yes,” Dr. Kidan replied. “For science. Don’t worry. Once it’s done, we’ll activate the portal. You’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Wyoh responded with a shrug. “If it’s really for science.”

“It is. Very much so,” Dr. Kidan replied as the door of the port side life hissed open. “And the quicker we get the science going, the better and safer it will be for all of us.”

SEVEN

CHAOS

The tension in the corridor was so thick that it would have required an ultrasonic knife to make even the slightest of nicks in it. The plan was sketchy at best. Circumstances make testing the tools impossible. And everything, literally everything, hinged upon the uncertain performance of a horribly naive volunteer whose ability to fend off the transdimensional monstrosity for any useful length of time was negligible at best.

“Are we really sure we want to go through with this insanity?” Dr. Alluwa grumped as she eyed the currently quiescent chaos in the laboratory chamber with considerable suspicion. “Or shall we just drop back to

normal space for a few minutes and be rid of this thing?”

“We’re going to give it a try,” Chyka responded with somewhat more confidence than the deeply displeased tigress. The more she thought about it, the less likely it seemed that the creature had actually been attracted to their biogel systems specifically. If that were the case, why hadn’t there been any other encounters with cephalox during more than a decade of biogel powered spacefaring activity? Granted, the chances of an encounter were vanishingly small, something to the order of one in five billion medium to long range faster than light trips, but still. One would have expected more than just this first such encounter if the things were actually attracted to it.

In the mind of the mischievous little snow leopardess, the matter of inspiration was far more significant. The creature was just the sort of unknowable horror lurking in the shadows, and striking out seemingly at random that tickled people’s darker curiosities. Being able to observe the cephalox and study its nature

might mean that a highly accurate biogel version could be crafted, allowing those darker curiosities an outlet for the erotic fantasies that they so often generated.

There was very good precedent to back up the little snow leopardess' idea. One of the more popular Unity Vix LARPG environments was the Undead Vale, where dripping, emaciated, and highly contagious biogel zombies wandered freely, doing their level best to add incautious players to their ever-increasing ranks. No one ever seemed to mind being turned into a living rubber zombie. It was all just part of the fun. There was certainly no reason to believe that a starship rubber cephalox invasion environment would be any less popular.

Of course, there *was* the possibility that they might also learn how to better resist cephalox attacks. Perhaps they might find a way to avoid them altogether. But to Chyka, that all seemed far less useful than learning how to give people the full cephalox experience without winding up... well... no one really knew where cephalox victims wound up.

Did cephalox victims die? Did they become part of the beast? Were they trapped between dimensions? It was a puzzle, and certainly not one that anyone aboard the Destiny Explorer was equipped to solve.

“It *should* be safe,” the ship’s lithe, blue skinned chief engineer remarked with an uncertain tone that belied her considerable skepticism about the plan. “The moment it works, we drop out. The moment we know it hasn’t worked, we drop out. The moment there’s the slightest sign that it’s breaching the lab’s seals, or getting into the outer envirolock, we drop out. If it looks at us the wrong way, we drop out. If someone sneezes, we drop out. Simple.”

“And what happens if we can’t, Nys?” Dr. Alluwa asked. “What if the thing somehow gets into the biogel network through the analyzer and starts to take control and spread throughout the ship?”

“We’re on standby to manually disconnect the drive coils,” Nys replied with a sly smirk. “There’s no way for the biogel network to stop that from happening. That should be sufficient

to drop out. Worst case scenario, we can ice the whole biogel network for long enough to get rid of the thing. You know, same contingency as always.”

“What happens if it manages to actually contaminate the biogel with its... genetic essence?” Dr. Alluwa questioned as she continued her attempts to dissuade the experiment. “We haven’t the slightest clue about how it actually interacts with biogel at the most basic of levels, and we can’t risk toying with experiments of that nature, no matter how curious anyone here might be. It’s far too dangerous!”

“The cephalox has already interacted with biogel,” Dr. Kidan noted. “All of the laboratory staff were wearing it. The results should of that interaction should become fairly apparent once a sample has been run through the universal analyzer. No further experimentation should be required to get the gist of what alterations it might make should it infect with any other mass of biogel.”

“Stop fussing,” Chyka sighed deeply as she sought to avoid yet another intellectual tussle

between the two very different scientists. “The biggest risk of all this is delaying matters until the thing manages to find some weakness in the lab’s containment. That said, shall we get this going and get it over with?”

“Indeed,” Dr. Kidan replied. He opened his comm without waiting for his counterpart’s inevitable retort. “Wyoh. You may now proceed into the lab. Remember, no matter what takes place, focus on your objective and do everything you can to fulfill it, no matter what the creature does to you.”

“Of course, Dr. Kidan,” came the nervously excited reply. “I’m on my way into the lab now.”

Dr. Alluwa shook her head as the sound of the hapless volunteer’s entry into the outer envirolock rumbled down the corridor. “And for all this time, everyone thought *I* was the crazy one!”

“What do we think it’s going to do?” Nys inquired. “The thing’s been awfully passive since it got done with the lab girls, hasn’t it?”

It almost seemed as if, in the absence of new victims to be subsumed, the monstrous mass of

writing suckered tentacles didn't quite seem to know what to do with itself. It wiggled and squirmed around the floor, periodically shoving a movable table to one side, or tipping over a chair. Every so often, a curious tentacle would brush over the top of a lab bench, sending papers and pens flying about, many of them no doubt to vanish into various well hidden places where even the most persistent of engineers would be hard pressed to find them again.

“While the lab’s transdimensional isolation might have failed to keep the cephalox from entering the lab,” Dr. Kidan replied as he watched the creature explore its environment, “it may still have the ability to interfere with its senses. It may not be aware that there’s anything of interest outside of the laboratory. Or it may only be vaguely aware, and can’t decide whether or not it’s worth the effort to try to get to it.”

Chyka found the creature’s behavior just a tad bit puzzling. Despite how close more potential victims were just beyond the multiple layers of heavy armored glass, the creature definitely didn’t act as if were aware of their

presence. Perhaps the creature really wasn't interested in wasting energy in trying to get at them. But... if it was smart enough for that, might it also be patient enough to wait for a potential pathway to open? Was it a scavenger, preying on victims encountered by chance? Or was it an ambush predator that waited for victims to unwittingly offer themselves directly into its colorfully glossy clutches?

No one really knew of course. No one had ever survived a cephalox attack to tell the tale. There were only sudden emergencies leading to drops back into normal space, with crew members having vanished into nothing. Sometimes there empty ships, left completely intact. In every case, internal recordings were so fuzzy and intermittent that just identifying the ship's likely cephalox infestation was a feat in and of itself.

As smart and patient as the cephalox might be, any attempt at escape through the laboratory envirolock was going to be met by not one, but several solid barriers. There were three lock chambers between the lab and the rest of the ship. The outermost was a small

vestibule chamber than contained potently destructive last resort sterilization and decontamination systems. The middle chamber was a larger dressing room where the occasional non-biogel-wearing visitor could suit up with more conventional forms of protective gear. This also had a number of sterilizing systems, most largely focused on preventing anyone from bringing outside contaminants into the lab. The inner chamber was another small room that served as a barrier between the lab and the middle chamber. This contained similar protective systems to the outer chamber, though they could be adjusted as needed. This was to ensure that no harm came to the laboratory staff passing through it.

In addition to the thick armored doors that separated the chambers, each doorway was protected by a conformational barrier field that would prevent airborne contaminants from entering the chamber, as well as wiping off anything that may have landed on staff members passing through it. By its very nature, this ethereal blue energy field needed smooth surfaces to work with, making biogel the perfect thing to wear into the lab, especially

when making use of biogel's ability to fully cover its host's head when desired.

As protective as it was, biogel seemed to offer no protection at all against the cephalox. The beast simply merged into it just as well as it did with its host's living flesh, transforming individual units of gel, or individual cells into transdimensional cephalox microorganisms as it went. Wyoh was going to have to be quick if she was going to get a sample before she was too far gone. That was assuming the thing just didn't snatch her the moment she stepped into the room.

The only indicator of Wyoh's transition from the outer to middle envirolock chamber was a very faint thump as the door closed behind her. It was the last of the direct sound that anyone outside of the lab would hear of her progress. The observers *would* have audio from within the lab itself, once the inner envirolock door opened, but that was going to be of another nature entirely.

"Does the cycling usually take this long?" Chyka inquired. The few times she'd been in the lab herself, it had taken only twenty

seconds or so to fully pass through the lock system. Was their volunteer getting cold feet? Or was there was some problem with this part of the plan that they'd all overlooked?

"No," Dr. Alluwa replied with a growly harumph. "Not usually. But I made sure to set the system to 'distinct feelings of impending doom' level of protection, so it's going to take its time clearing her in, just to make sure nothing is trying to get out past her. Right now, the outer chamber is doing a full 'kill everything' cycle. That takes a bit of time."

"Ah," Chyka responded with a nod on one hand, and a roll of her eyes on the other. Considering all of the other highly dangerous things that had been successfully wrangled during the long history of biogel development, the tigress' unending expressions of paranoia about the cephalox were seeming more and more out character. Was it really that much more dangerous, or was the she finally getting to the point where she was actually comfortable enough with the state of her life to start wanting to avoid risks?

A red warning light lit up over the inner envirolock door, indicating that it had opened to allow Wyoh to enter. The red light started to flash as the door closed behind her. A moment later, it switched to yellow, indicating that it was running a decontamination cycle.

“Do you think it knows?” Chyka inquired.

“It certainly doesn’t seem like it, does it?” Nys noted. “It’s nowhere near the door.”

“Assuming it’s not actually toying with us,” Dr. Alluwa grumped. “Maybe it likes to play with its prey. Give it a chance to see its end coming.”

The yellow light began to blink, indicating that the chamber was about to open. A few moments later, the light turned green.

The lab audio went live, filling the corridor with a cacophony of squishy squirming. To this was added a random, halting melody of little pocks and pops as the monster’s countless suckers interacted with various smooth surfaces within the lab. A deep, bassy hamony completed the alien song, made up of strangely unsettling tones and bubbling liquid gurgles.

The envirolock door opened with a low, rumbling hiss. Without even a moment's hesitation, Wyoh stepped boldly into the laboratory. In her right hand was the sort of chunky handheld sampler that was often used to sample recalcitrant biological and geological sources in hazardous environments. It was designed take two modest cylindrical samples at once, drawing them into universal analyzer sample tubes. It would then place those tubes into a sample magazine cartridge which could be inserted directly into the analyzer.

The idea that the ashiri could get the samples and put them into the analyzer herself was absurd, of course. Once she got close enough to the creature for the former, she was done. The creature would take her and the samples, if they had been taken at all, would be cast to the floor, still locked up tight within the sampler itself.

To ensure that the whole process wouldn't be for naught, Dr. Alluwa had activated one of the lab's hover drone emergency assistants. These little semi-autonomous robots were intended to help quickly contain spills and

other hazards in an emergency. They could project force fields to contain hazardous materials, project focused beams of rapidly sanitizing ultraviolet light, and even use their four small and unusually dexterous arms to pick up delicate damaged objects for disposal.

It was the latter property which the tigress intended to use to full advantage within the lab. It was far too small and weak to be able to actually press the sampler firmly into the cephalox and take the samples itself. It could, however, pick up the sampler, extract the sample magazine, and insert it into the universal analyzer with no difficulty at all.

Of course, all that assumed that Wyoh could actually acquire samples in the first place. Given the highly disheveled state of the laboratory furnishings, finding a clear enough path seemed to be proving quite a challenge. Getting into a position where she could press the sampler against the cephalox for long enough to extract samples was another matter entirely. It almost certainly wasn't going to be her decision to make. Whether not the creature

was going to give her the chance... that was quite the open question.

“Are we taking bets?” Nys quipped as the ashiri moved around the central lab bench, toward the corridor windows. “Because I’ve got fifty to one that the thing is going to do her cute little ass over before she has a chance to even think about taking a sample.”

“I’d put it at more like a thousand to one,” Dr. Alluwa snipped.

“Come on. Really?” Chyka responded with a disappointed shake of her head. “Have a little more confidence. I’m sure she’ll do just fine.”

After a few long moments of hesitation, the cephalox began to wiggle and squirm its way toward Wyoh, shoving fallen chairs and other detritus out of its way as it sought to add yet another conquest to its growing mass. Its unusual rainbow of smoothly mingling colors shifted as it approached her. The darker, more earthy tones shifted toward its ‘rear’, while the pinks, purples, and blues shifted toward its ‘front’, all without any change to the

convoluted tentacular structure of its hypnotically glistening body.

Wyoh gasped hard as the creature advanced toward her with a dazzling array of wildly writhing tentacles that served to quite effectively camouflage the speed with which it was approaching. There was no time for her to think about how to respond, let alone figure out how she was supposed to press the sampler into the seemingly amorphous mass of constantly squirming flesh. Nor was there anyplace for her to go in order to buy herself some time to think. Before she knew it, her back was pressing against one of the laboratory benches that faced the corridor windows.

The cephalox lashed out with several tentacles at once. These didn't so much strike the hapless ashiri as they did press directly into her biogel clad body without even the slightest hint of resistance. In an instant, she had been physically melded with the monstrosity by the shoulders and upper chest. It then began to drag her head first toward the center of its mass, where a particularly

enthusiastic tentacle seemed poised to press directly into her astonished face.

“Oh... oh no,” Wyoh panted hard as she flailed about in a seemingly vain effort to press the sampler into the creature’s colorful body. Someplace. Anyplace. It didn’t really matter. “Come on! Come on, dammit! Let me... oh... oh no. I can feel it... it’s... it’s...”

The virulently contagious and potently transformative cephalox microorganisms were already spreading, not merely through her biogel coating, but through her body as well. Bright glossy colors were spreading out from the places where the tentacles had merged into her. Little suckers were forming here and there upon the transformed surfaces. Everywhere they appeared, new tentacles soon followed.

The new tentacles first sprouted from the backs of Wyoh’s shoulders, squirming and wiggling about for a few brief moments before coiling around locks of their host’s increasingly disheveled hair. Next, her breasts seemed to squish, and twist, and then stretch forward as they were remade into yet another pair of tentacles. As the colors spread over her

shoulders and down her upper arms, these too began to become tentacle-like and difficult for their host to control.

At this point, several more tentacles reached out from the cephalox and pressed into the body of the helpless ashiri. Another in her belly. One each into her thighs. The colors spread all over her now, and her legs and arms began to transform more fully into tentacles. Closer and closer she was drawn in to the main body of the monster. Closer and closer until her face was only a few short centimeters from that one tentacle that seemed intent on pressing itself through her face and straight into her brain.

Any chance to obtain the desired sample seemed to have passed, but the determined expression on Wyoh's face made it clear that she was very much intent on making one last effort. Even as her fingers were turning into a collection of writhing little mini-tentacles, the ashiri struggled to get the sampler against the tentacle that was still attached to her chest. She missed. She tried again. And then again. And then, just as her nose came into contact with the tip of the tentacle... success!

With a loud, sucking zap, it yanked its two samples from the creature's body, just as the struggling ashiri's face merged into the tentacle. The sampler immediately clattered to the ground, bouncing away from the voracious monstrosity to be caught mid-roll by the hover bot. Far more quickly than any living being could even thing to manage the task, it extracted the sample magazine and whisked it to the universal analyzer. Into the slot it went with a sharp, metallic thunk.

As the analyzer came to live, Wyoh, or what was left of her, was pulled into the monster by her completely subsumed head. Much the viewing enjoyment of her small audience she went in with her ass in the air, showcasing the most interesting bits of her body's reduction into a quartet of large tentacles and half a dozen smaller ones. All of these were vividly pink, at least for the moment. They would no doubt change as the creature moved, just as they had when the think had shifted toward its latest victim.

What Wyoh had felt during her transformation was a complete mystery. She

hadn't appeared to be in pain. She really hadn't appeared to be in any real discomfort. How much her focus and determination might have been masking any expression of the physical sensations was unknown.

As Chyka watched the last recognizable vestiges of Wyoh's body disappear, she knew that all of those deeply personal and intimate qualities of the transformation wouldn't remain a mystery for long. Assuming Dr. Kidan had everything set up correctly, of course. And assuming everything actually worked the way he believe it would. But this wasn't a carefully controlled test. Most of the variables were unknown. It might work. Or it might not. Or it might turn into something like the quantum clock nightmare all over again. It was impossible to tell.

"Interesting," Dr. Kidan noted as he looked at his comm. "Her sarcophagus hasn't activated yet. That suggests that her consciousness is still alive within the cephalox in one fashion or another. Very, very interesting."

“I’m glad you have something to be interested in, because the universal analyzer is doing nothing but throw error message after error message,” Dr. Alluwa huffed with a very clear ‘I told you so’ sort of expression on her face. “Fragmentary DNA resembling the previously absorbed lab girls. Fragmentary biogel constituent DNA. Lots of random sequences. Only a few clearly recognizable transdimensional genetic structures. It refuses to remain coherent for long enough to get a good read on what’s going on. Pressure’s rising. Oh... oh shit... it’s going to blow out the test chamber!”

“Well, *that’s* a bit surprise,” Nys quipped as the sample magazine was forcibly blown out of the machine. The second sample tube came free, breaking as it smashed into the corner of the central lab bench. “Or don’t you remember that time you stuck a chunk of purple slime gobzite in an analyzer? You know, back in the old Vixanti days? Because I sure do. I was the one who had to clean up the mess!”

“And yet biogel, which is equally transdimensionally active doesn’t exhibit any

inclination to do the same,” Dr. Kidan noted. “Which is to say that we’ve learned something. I would also like to point out that the presence of DNA fragments suggests that the creature is indeed subsuming at least a portion of its victim’s genetic code into its own cellular structure in some way. So we’ve learned two things. More can be learned from which DNA fragments are present. Are they all the same portions of code, or are they different? Is the creature just taking a consistent portion, or is it taking random bits, or is it being selective about what traits each fragment represents? One might wonder if it is using the code to somehow enhance itself... to improve its ability to hunt and survive.”

“I think you’re really going out on a very long limb when it comes to what we can learn from the little data we’ve obtained,” Dr. Alluwa gumped.

“And I think you’re all failing to notice that the thing has finally figured out where the door is,” Nys said, gesturing toward the cephalox as it probed the envirolock door. More alarmingly, it was also probing the envirolock door control

panel. It was disabled, of course, but that wasn't stopping the creature from pushing buttons.

"And it plans to get out... how?" Chyka asked with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

"I don't know, but considering that it just input two separate valid individual staff member lock codes in a row..." Nys sputtered as the creature proceeded to input a third.

"Drop us out," Chyka ordered as it became instantly apparent that the cephalox had absorbed more than just a few bits of random DNA from its victims. "Now!"

The Destiny Explorer shuddered as it turned its nose upward through transspace, heading on a rapid powered ascent toward the surface, where the transition back into real space would take place.

"Going up," Nys noted with a distinct tone of relief in her voice. "No sign of core contamination. Feeling kind of glad that I went and switched out the direct lab connections for induction transfer units now."

“I didn’t authorize...” Dr. Alluwa snarled.

“Now isn’t the time,” Chyka interjected. “Though I’m not going to deny that it was probably the best idea she’s ever had.”

The ship again shuddered. The throb of the ship’s drive coils faded. All eyes turned back to the lab chamber as the ship returned to normal space.

The cephalox imploded, though not in a catastrophically crushing kind of way. It simply got smaller and smaller until there was a bright little flash and it was gone. The lab had been fully sealed, though. There was no source of air to fill in the space that the creature had once occupied.

The pressure in the laboratory dropped. It wasn’t a catastrophic drop, but it was sufficient to cause a number of chemical and reagent bottles to pop open or shatter outright. Red light began to flash. The chemical spill alarm sounded.

“We’re going to need to vent to vacuum,” Nys said, shaking her head. “That should take care of the spills. Cleanup is still going to be a

bitch though. And this time, it's not going to be me. Who's idea was all this again?"

"I need to see to our volunteer's safe return to a useful state," Dr. Kidan responded as the engineer glared at him. "We have plenty of staff who can sweep up any debris that's left after the vent."

"Yeah, that's a bit more important than fussing over spilled... whatever," Chyka agreed. "Assuming it all works the way it's supposed to."

"Don't worry," Dr. Kidan replied as he turned down the corridor, toward the resynthesis portal and the second, perhaps equally as perilous stage of the experiment. "It will. I've made quite sure of it."

EIGHT

CAPTURED

Dr. Kidan looked at the quantum microclock's glowing purple readouts with a deeply puzzled frown. Something just didn't seem quite right. There wasn't anything particularly wrong, per se, but... well, what he was looking at definitely wasn't quite what he'd been expecting to see.

"Hmm," he remarked as he quadruple checked the sampled life essence waveforms against those that had been recorded when his hapless volunteer's pattern had been locked into the device's whirling field bubble. While each of the countless intertwined multi-dimensional waveforms was still perfectly identical in frequency and amplitude to those of the initial sample, they had all been shifted in phase. Some were now slightly ahead of the

reference timebase. Some where now slightly behind. Despite having run the system through countless tests over the course of its development, it was a phenomena that he had never encountered before. Nor did it seem to make any logical sense.

“This is... new,” the perplexed scientist remarked as he contemplated the possible meaning of the unusual readings. On one hand, such slight shifting could mean little to nothing in the grander scheme of things. There was always some minuscule variance to be found in locked life essence patterns as time passed. It was perfectly natural. Only the subject’s body was truly state-locked. Her conscious mind was still free to act and form new long term memories of its experiences during the time between linking and resynthesis.

On the other hand, the manner in which the shifting had taken place might well change anything and everything about the subject of the experiment. Each shifted wave meant shifted interactions with other waves. So many shifted waves would mean that the sum total of their interactions might only resemble the

original pattern on the surface. And that, as Dr. Alluwa always liked to remind him, was how he'd gotten himself into so much temporal trouble in the past. Trouble that he was quite keen on avoiding when it came to resynthesis.

If there was no assurance that a subject would be returned to normal, then who would want to risk using the portal? Who would be willing to authorize its use to restore all those victims of 'deathless war' to relative normalcy? Yes, there would always be a small chance of undesired results. A small, but necessarily acceptable rate of error. One in ten thousand was the specification. Putting together all of the currently known failure modes, the portal was barely performing to that standard. There was no margin for new kinds of problems like this. And it could well prove to be a problem like no other.

At worst, the phase shifting might well mean that his volunteer might come out of the portal as a completely different person as the one she'd been when she'd been linked to it. If she came out as a person at all. There was no way to know. At least, not without activating the

portal and observing the results of the resynthesis. And, by then, it would be far too late to do anything about it.

“Are you sure it is actually the waveforms?” inquired a soft, deeply effeminate voice from the resynthesis portal control room.

Dr. Kidan looked up to the broad window that loomed over the resynthesis portal platform and tried his best to understand just what his youthful transdimensional crystallography specialist had said. Her words were couched in a deep ‘eastern’ accent that made her difficult to understand at the best of times. This certainly wasn’t one of them.

“What do you mean?” he asked the intense, dark eyed young woman as she gazed down on him with a soft, yet coolly emotionless smile. It wasn’t that she didn’t try to pronounce words the right way, of course, but the oftentimes the results were just all over the place.

“Is the slate ready?” the tiger asked, changing the subject to something more likely to produce easy to understand answers. “I’m almost ready here.”

“Yes, Doctor. The slate is fully prepared for the capture operation,” Kaoru Misashi replied with the sort of casual tone that typically belied the kind of youthful self-confidence that inevitably gave more seasoned scientists like Dr. Kidan a strong urge to double check their work. “What I was inquiring is, are you sure it is the waveforms themselves, or has the reference oscillator acquired a wobble that has distorted the recording of the new confirmation data?”

“And how would that happen?” Dr. Kidan asked as he turned away from the quantum microclock and wondered if it had been wise to let his principle portal assistant sleep through the whole cephalox incident. She was the one who had the detail technical skill to deal with the many of the portal’s most critical transdimensionally active materials, after all. Perhaps this problem wouldn’t be one up if she’d been there to see what might have caused it.

“It is possible that the recent transdimensional disruption induced a disturbance in the oscillator,” Kauru replied,

cocking her head to one side in her characteristically, deliberately exaggerated fashion. It seemed to be her way of trying to make up for not speaking clearly by tacking on a layer of body language almost as thick as her accent. "That would result in a cyclic phase shifting as the sampler parsed through each individual frequency. That would mean the issue is purely a matter of test equipment calibration and not something to do with the life essence waveforms themselves."

Dr. Kidan shrugged and headed for the ladder that led up from the portal chamber floor, to the balcony on the port side of the control room. "Well, it doesn't really matter, does it? We can't examine the potential cause without clearing the locked pattern. The only way we can do that without losing everything is to proceed with the capture."

"Of course," Kauru replied with an abrupt shift of tone from one of know-it-all confidence into one of blissfully unquestioning subordination. "The camera is ready when you are, Doctor."

Dr. Kidan sighed. It was so hard to tell if she was being sarcastic or genuine when she shifted her tone and mannerisms so quickly, and so frequently. Was it just another way for her to try to be more easily understood? Was she trying to flatter him by trying to be whatever he might seem to want her to be at any given moment? Was it her way of flirting with him? Or was it her way of trying to fit in to a culture that was no doubt as alien to her as she was to it?

The petite young scientist was about as one of a kind as she could be in the Fey'li Empire. No one knew where her home world was. It was supposed to be the third planet orbiting a yellow-white star. A place named after dirt, with an island nation called Japan somewhere on its surface. That was certainly nowhere in the known galaxy. Given the lack of apparent outside interference present on the world, it probably wasn't in the unknown portions of the galaxy at all. But if not this galaxy, then which? And how had she gotten from there to here?

No one knew. Not even her, it seemed. As she told the story, she had been a college

freshman doing work in a physics lab one day, and suddenly there was a bright flash and the world went dark. When she woke up in the Macharri Naval Hospital in Mashiva, she found that she'd nearly been killed when she appeared unbidden in the middle of a drive coil test down at the shipyards. And that was it. That was all that she knew. That was all that anyone knew.

Stuck in an alien world with no way home, the young woman had somehow managed to just roll with it. Some might say she'd rolled with it a bit too hard.

Kauru was about as ideal a Gelitech employee as there could be. She'd barely gotten out of the hospital before becoming utterly infatuated with biogel and all of the technologies surrounding it. And one she had, there had been no going back.

At first, biogel had merely been the least onerous way of ensuring that her relatively weak immune system wasn't overwhelmed by the vast variety of potential pathogens against which most other interstellar species had become naturally immune. It wouldn't be long,

however, before its other, more stimulating properties would draw her into the world of the biogel lifestyle, and all of the various temptations that came along with it. She wore it through her time at the Mashiva Mariners' University without succumbing to temptation or the kinky machinations of her fellow biogel clad students. During her time there, she had explored all of its less perilous forms and potentials, but these had never really satisfied her. She wanted something more.

Once reversible body mods had become available, they had become a virtual addiction. Kauru loved to try them out, and savor the strange sensations of having such different shapes. She was wanted to go even further too... but not until she had a way to get herself back to normal. And that was what had led her, and her education in transdimensional crystallography, to Gelitech.

Dr. Kidan smiled to himself as he hopped onto the ladder. His crystallographer might have been a bit of an odd one, but she was certainly motivated to a point that most of Gelitech's other scientists weren't. She was

willing to do practically anything to make sure the resynthesis portal worked as required. Not for others. Not to make war 'safe' and its effects on mortal life reversible. Not for anything but her own cute little gelcurious self.

As he climbed the ladder, the scientist tried his best not to let his mind wander too far into the list of things he'd heard her say that she wanted to try once her work on the portal's last development was done. The things she wanted herself completely transformed into. The things...

Dr. Kidan shook his head as he clambered up onto the balcony. There were other and far more important things to think about than fantasizing about that uniquely cute little rump being turned into a biogel tentacle monster and being let loose during a biogel games match. "Alright," he said as the door to the control room hissed open. "Is the camera set to autocapture?"

"Yes, Doctor," Kauru replied with a silky smile.

“Good,” Dr. Kidan responded as the door closed behind him. “Unlock the safeties and let it go back into automatic. That will tell us if our subject is still incorporated into the cephalox. If she is, we’ll have to manually trigger the resynthesis.”

“Of course, Doctor,” Kauru replied as she unlocked a clear panel and began to flip the switches that were kept protected underneath. She smiled as the red lights flickered on one by one, indicating that each of the safety mechanisms had been successfully disabled in their turn. Then she looked over her shoulder and gave the tiger the kind of giddy grin that made it quite clear that the more imminently perilous things were, the more she was enjoying it. “All safeties are now disengaged. The portal is entering automatic mode. Coils are charged and ready.”

“No automatic activation,” Dr. Kidan observed. “That would mean the cephalox incorporates the living conscious minds into its own being in one fashion or another.”

“So we will learn from our subject what it is like to be both absorbed by, and live as part of, a cephalox?” Kauru inquired.

“Hopefully,” Dr. Kidan replied.

“So exciting!” Kauru exclaimed with a laugh. “How long will it be until an accurate biogel version is created? Wouldn’t that be so much fun to experience? I can only imagine what it would be like!”

“Yeah, lots of fun,” Dr. Kidan responded with a shrug and a strenuous effort not to try and imagine his current assistant being absorbed by the cephalox in Wyoh’s place. “But if things work to plan, you won’t have to wait for a biogel version, will you?”

Kauru put one hand over her mouth and giggled. “You are right, Doctor. Of course not. Now, shall I override the automatic mode and manually commence resynthesis?”

Dr. Kidan nodded. “Yes. Commence manual resynthesis.”

Kauru turned back to the panel with a deliberately exaggerated flick that send her

shoulder length black hair cascading back and forth in a smooth, silky wave. This was followed by a flex of her hips from one side to the other as she reached out to open the direct connection between the microclock and the portal. Her hips flipped back the other way as she opened the safety cover of the big manual activation button. "Connected and ready. Commencing resynthesis in san... ni... ichi..."

Within the portal chamber, the convoluted maze of crystal-steel biogel piping flared to brightly luminous and intensely pink life. The machinery began to audibly throb as energy was pumped into the main field coils behind the glistening black portal face. These began to glow bright orange as they came into synchronization with the connected quantum microclock. A low, bubbly sound filled the chamber as circular ripples began to appear on the portal face.

A warbling alarm sounded. Red warning lights began to flash. The luminous purple field of the quantum microclock containing Wyoh's pattern began to glow brighter. The alarm shifted from warbling to a series of discrete

buzzing tones. The orange glow of the portal's field coils intensified.

The ripples spreading out upon the portal's surface shifted into a vaguely humanoid shape. Within the center of these ripples, a form began to appear. A form as vaguely humanoid as the ripples it was creating. It was slowly pressing out from behind the portal surface. Wiggling. Squirming. Desperate to be free of the thick layer of biogel that surrounded it.

There was no way to tell if this form was the same one that Wyoh had been linked to the portal with. Nor would there be any way to know, given what was to take place next. For that to work, she still had to be completely enshrouded in the portal's biogel.

Wyoh's physical form was irrelevant to the new process. All that really mattered was that her conscious mind was present. Present and still fully capable of individual awareness. Given the way she seemed to be actively trying to break free from the biogel, it was fairly clear that this condition was met.

“Capture commencing,” Kauru noted with a very satisfied grin as a new set of indicators on the control panel lit up.

An iris on the wall beneath the control room snapped open. A bright beam of searing purple energy lanced forth, striking its writhing target square in the chest, just as it was about to break free from the portal’s surface. With a loud and deeply unpleasant *krack*, Wyoh was vaporized into a cloud of luminous purple mist.

Dr. Kidan cringed at the sight. This was the critical moment. If anything went wrong now, there was no way to know what would happen to his subject’s mind. If it wasn’t captured intact, then the next steps would all be for naught. And as to what his subject would experience henceforth... that was something he would very much rather not think about.

The purple mist swirled around the energy beam for a few short moments before being pulled back along its length. It was sucked into the open iris as a loud hum rose from within. After a few more moments the mist was gone. The beam faded away. The iris snapped shut.

“Did it work?” Kauru inquired as the hum faded.

“I... think?” Dr. Kidan replied as he looked over the readouts. “The slate is live. But as to whether or not it captured her correctly... well. There’s only one way to determine that and...”

“I could try it,” Kauru offered with a mischievous look at the tiger.

“No!” Dr. Kidan responded with a brief snarl. “There’s no way to know just how safe it will be until someone who doesn’t rely on the portal for protection tries it. Until then, no one touches it!”

“Of course, Doctor,” Kauru replied with a deeply chagrined expression as a machine at the back of the control room thumped to life. “I will wait.”

Dr. Kidan turned to watch the glowing purple gobzite slate rise up through a vertical slot in the machine. It slid into a brightly polished silver metal alloy frame. This was locked tightly into place around it before the whole assembly was placed into a cover that had been deliberately designed to resemble the

sort of esoteric tome that one might expect to find in a fictional wizard's library of magical texts. Its cover was bound in synthesized leather, dyed dark violet, with a silver lined relief of its subject pressed into the binding. Upon the front and back covers were pressed masses of suckered tentacles, representing the experience of which its subject had partaken.

The 'book' had no words printed on it. There was nothing but the binding to suggest at its subject's identity, let alone provide her name. Her name didn't matter, really. All that mattered was that someone picking up the book knew the form she had once taken, and the monster whose ministrations she had experienced.

The machine closed the book before dropping it only a tray. Dr. Kidan picked it up and placed it into a clear, locking case. "There. Done."

"Are you sure you don't want me to test it first?" Kauru asked, a hopeful look upon her face. "What if it doesn't meet her expectations?"

“Again, no!” Dr. Kidan responded with an annoyed huff. “We’re not taking any risks here. There aren’t any expectations. This was all done at the spur of the moment. If it didn’t work right... well, it was just an experiment. We’ll figure out what went wrong so it doesn’t happen the next time. And if it did work... well, I’ll make sure she knows you really want a chance to study it. Alright?”

“Of course, Doctor,” Kauru sighed.

“I’ll take this up to the Library myself,” Dr. Kidan said, picking up the book in its case. “I’m sure she’ll have plenty of questions. Why don’t you have a look at the microclock calibration now that it’s free, hmm?”

“Yes, Doctor,” Kauru replied, twirling around the tiger as she headed for the control room door. “I will get to that *right* away.”

NINE

THE LIBRARY

Chyka just couldn't help herself. She simply *had* to add a layer of mischief to the grand experiment. A variable that no one had thought to account for. A twist that would suit her particular erotic inclinations. A naive soul who had not the slightest clue what she had actually signed up for, completely unprepared for what she was about to experience in so visceral and intimate a fashion.

It was all for science, of course. It was *always* for the science. Even when it wasn't. In fact, *especially* when it wasn't.

Chyka noted the time. It was just past midnight. Everyone aboard ship was either on duty or fast asleep. Everyone that is, save her

glistening white biogel clad self and her extremely nervous guest.

“I am so very confused,” the nude koyoki shipspotter remarked as she followed Chyka aft along the port side of the ship’s topmost deck. “I thought I had only agreed to offer feedback on a system designed to impart alien sensations without having any actual physical effect upon my body. You truly mean to tell me that the gelatin block you put me in didn’t have anything to do with that? Then what was it? And now that you’ve taken me out of it, you insist on leading me around naked all over the place like... like I don’t even know what!”

Chyka glanced back over her shoulder with a warm smile. “I know it probably wasn’t quite what you were expecting, O’sa, but all of our volunteers are accommodated using the encasement system,” she purred in the sincerest tone that she could muster given her less than forthright intentions. “It’s very space efficient, and most find it quite snug and comfy.”

“Hmpf!” O’sa snorted with a displeased scowl on her face.

“Well, I hope you found it at least passably comfortable,” Chyka went on. “As to the special duty you signed up for, don’t you worry about that. It’s all going to make perfect sense soon enough.”

“I certainly hope so,” O’sa replied with a chilly huff that made it quite clear that she was well past having second thoughts and into the fourth of fifth.

Chyka frowned to herself as she led her guest past the couches, recliners, and exotic potted plants that were arranged beneath the deck’s tall broadside windows. Merely convincing the reluctant koyoki to pick something out of the list of volunteer duty preferences had been a chore enough. Her friends had all been far more willing to play along, and probably would have been quite happy to be dragged out in the middle of the night to try out the latest and greatest thing in alien experience exploration. Dozens of other volunteers were equally suitable. So why in all the heavens had she picked O’sa?

The snow leopardess smiled mischievously to herself as she ushered her guest toward her

place in the grand experiment at such a casual pace that it seemed as if their journey take all night. So far as she was concerned, taking her time and letting her chosen volunteer have a bit of extra time to contemplate what might be in store for her was part of what made it all so much fun. It was stimulating. Arousing. And that was even before thinking about how she had snared her subject into agreeing to do something that they might well find considerably less pleasant than they had imagined it would be.

Of course, there was no real way of knowing whether or not the koyoki was going to find the required experience pleasant or not. She was going to be the first to try the system, after all. No one knew exactly how she would experience its imparted sensations. Would they be incomprehensible? Would they be twisted around in strange ways? Or would she actually feel them exactly as the one who had experienced them for real and had their life essence imprinted into the gobzite slate?

“This right here is my personal library,” Chyka noted, gesturing toward the center of

the huge, dimly lit room. There, the deck level dropped down by roughly a meter and a half, forming a shallow canyon that ran all the way down the middle of the deck. "Perhaps once you're done with your work, you'd like to peruse the collection. I'm sure you'll find something to give you... ideas."

O'sa said nothing in reply, instead focusing the entirety of her attention down into the assemblage of reading tables, recliners, and numerous book cases that filled the area. The former were each equipped with warm white reading lights which, along with the few lights along each raised side, offered the dark chambers only illumination. The latter were filled with thousands of esoteric works, mainly books, but also including numerous magazines, report binders, and baskets upon baskets of loose documents, pamphlets, illustrations, and photographs.

"Over the past few years, I've spend most of my time collecting all manner of hard copy works on the various topics associated with exotic alien experience," Chyka explained as she led her guest toward the narrow walkway

that connected the elevated sides of the room together. “Scientific works. Expedition reports. First hand accounts. Second hand accounts. Everything I could get my hands on. And to fill the most intriguing gaps, I’ve personally commissioned dozens of works on particularly interesting or inadequately described transformative processes.”

Again, O’sa had nothing to say. She just followed the little snow leopardess with a distinctly displeased frown on her face.

“Despite all that,” Chyka continued with a somewhat overly dramatic sigh, “I could never get what I really wanted and, quite coincidentally, I’m sure, what science really needed.”

“And what, pray tell, is that?” O’sa questioned as she followed the little snow leopardess out onto the walkway and toward the steps that led down into the library. Her eyes were drawn to the other portion of the pit, abaft the walkway, where several tiers of theater style seating lead down to a slightly elevated, circular stage. “A stage? Figures. You people always want to make big shows of all

your crazy shit. You aren't planning on making one of me, are you?"

"No!" Chyka replied as she descended the stairs. "Of course not. Even if I was so crass as to want to make a show of you, when it comes to your task, there's nothing to make a show of in the first place."

"That's good to hear," O'sa replied with a tone that made it quite clear that she wasn't convinced.

"As to what I wanted... well, you know what they say about alien transformations, right? You can never really know unless you try it yourself," Chyka explained. "But that's a real problem for science, isn't it? How can you study the personal experience if it's a one-way affair and leaves the subject in no state to communicate what they actually felt? The aliens always say it's fun and it feels interesting or pleasant or whatever. Are they telling the truth? How can we really know?"

O'sa frowned even more deeply as she followed the snow leopardess down the stairs.

Clearly, these weren't questions she was particularly keen on contemplating.

"Now... imagine if we could somehow contrive a way to record every aspect of the very real personal experiences of a few fully willing volunteers," Chyka went on. "And then imagine that we could develop a way for others to commune with those recordings, experiencing every moment as if it were they themselves who were being completely physically transformed or whatever, without actually having to be transformed? They could study it. Describe it. Quantify it. Rate it, so that others might have a better understanding, and could better chose what sort of kinky alien experience they'd like to try themselves. That and, you know, help separate the truth from the rumors and alien sales pitches and all that."

"I guess that would be... interesting," the audibly unconvinced koyoki replied.

"Well, as it so happens, we've actually found a very reliable and effective means to do all that," Chyka continued with a grin as she lead her guest through the bookshelves, forward toward the curved wall that separated the

public and truly private areas of the library. It wasn't quite the truth, of course, but she hadn't seen any evidence to contradict her assumptions thus far. "We've developed a means to pull volunteers back and encapsulate their experience in a book, of sorts. A book that you can open and become so absorbed in that you experience every little sensory stimulus in exactly the same way the original volunteer did, while still allowing you to take in the overall experience in your own unique way, both with respects to your own body and your own mind."

"And that's what you expect me to do?" O'sa inquired as she eyed the ornate golden etchings that covered the walls around the sliding double door with considerable suspicion. They depicted an orgy of alien transformation. Dozens of women were shown being treated to various alien processes. Some were simply strange. Others were downright bizarre. Still others were genuinely disgusting. Not one, however, elicited the slightest expression of interest in its viewer. "You expect me to open one of these books and experience the feeling of some sort of... physical

alteration? Like... something nasty? Something like what's all over this wall here?"

"Yes," Chyka replied as the door to the private library chamber hissed open. "Exactly. Well, more or less. You won't find it on the wall here. I don't imagine you'll find it too similar to anything here either. But... it's certainly interesting, and it's certainly something that could use further study. For science, of course."

"Pft!" O'sa snorted as she followed the snow leopardess into the dimly lit cylindrical room. "Exactly what sort of insane things are this book going to make me feel?"

"I would love to tell you all about it," Chyka lied, "But it would almost certainly interfere with the integrity of the experiment if you knew much before you begin. To get a really accurate feel for the experience, you have to go in blind, and experience the sensations without any prior prejudice. Only then can you give a fully accurate assessment of both the positive and negative aspects of the whole thing."

The koyoki sighed as she eyed the half-filled perimeter shelves with considerable suspicion

before shifting her gaze to the raised platform at the center of the room. There was only one way up, on the opposite side. A few steps lead through an opening in the glossy black biogel padded bench that surrounded the edge of the platform. In the platform's center was a thick, reclining biogel padded bed. At the bed's head was a small table, with a slot in its black glass surface.

"Go on," Chyka instructed, gesturing toward the platform and its waiting bed. "I've set the mattress for maximum comfort, just soft enough to sink into, and so pleasantly warm that you may just not want to get up once your work is done. And speaking of which, all you have to do now is lay down and we'll begin right away."

"Is that all?" O'sa questioned as she rounded the platform and headed up the steps. "There aren't going to be any surprises when I lay on that? You know, like getting suddenly encased in a gelatin block?"

"No," Chyka replied. "No surprises at all. Just lay down and 'read' the book. That's it."

“How long is this going to take?” O’sa asked as she ran her fingers over the bed’s oily slick surface.

“Only a few minutes,” Chyka replied as she watched the hesitant koyoki contemplating the biogel mattress with an increasing sense of mischievousness that threatened to summon the blackness from within her white biogel coating. She had to put quite a bit of mental effort to keep it from showing itself before her guest was fully occupied. “As chance would have it, our first volunteer’s transformative encounter was rather brief. Bit of a shame, really, but it does mean that you won’t have to deal with an extended experience. I’m sure we’ll both agree that it’s probably for the best. It is your first try at this, after all.”

“And last,” O’sa muttered, shaking her head as she turned to rest her pleasantly round rump on the biogel’s slippery surface. She quickly began to sink into the glistening black mattress, only stopping when its surface was nearly to the top of her thighs. Unlike a more typical ‘soft’ biogel cushion, the mattress didn’t actually conform to her shape. Instead, it

behaved more like a more traditional soft mattress, allowing her to sink down without hugging her body like a form fitting gelatin cocoon.

“Don’t make up your mind so soon,” Chyka responded with a silky grin as she began to caress the delicate brown spots that covered the subtly copper toned koyoki’s back, upper arms, and outer thighs. She hadn’t really noticed them before, but now they became something of a visual fixation. A very enticing visual fixation. Again, she had to forcibly hold back the darkness. “And don’t be afraid to admit you’d like a second go at it. It’s only a few minutes, and we have all night.”

O’sa rolled her eyes as she hoisted her legs up onto the bed and laid her head back onto the thick, soft pillow. She lifted her long, shiny copper hair up. It cascaded down over the head of the bed in silky swish as she drew her arms back to her sides. Within a few short seconds, nearly her entire body had sunk beneath the resting surface of the shiny black softness.

Satisfied that her guest was sufficiently comfortable, Chyka touched the surface of the

small slotted table. A simple holographic control interface appeared, its glowing purple elements hovering a few millimeters over its surface. These controlled the gobzite slate 'book' storage carousel beneath the platform, allowing her to select which one she wanted her subject to 'read'.

Given that there was only a single gobzite tome currently stored in the system, the little snow leopardess didn't have anything to do but touch the dispense button. The slot immediately began to emit a soft purple glow. The machine maneuvered the tome into the lifting mechanism beneath the slot. It whirred. It hummed. Then, with a soft whoosh, it sent the book right up and out of the slot.

For a moment, Chyka just smiled as she gazed upon that first fruit of Dr. Kidan's most recent transdimensional labors. It looked so perfect hovering several centimeters above the slot, waiting for her to reach out and take hold of it. For a moment. But then...

The little snow leopardess suddenly felt as if she was being watched. She looked around the

private library chamber. She, and her guest, were definitely alone. But if they were alone...

Chyka reached out into the ship's biogel network. It touched everything in the ship. Every system. Every environment. Every person whose body was surrounded in biogel. In this way, she could see exactly who was watching them remotely, and decide if they should be allowed to continue. But...

There was no one watching. The snow leopardess and the koyoki were alone. Whatever happened in the private library would be known to them, and only them. But still, the feeling of being watched persisted.

Perhaps, Chyka pondered, it was the gobzite tome that was making her feel as if she and her guest weren't alone. It did contain the still living soul of Wyoh, even if that soul was completely trapped within the gobzite slate's crystal structure. Was she somehow able to sense the world beyond her prison?

The puzzled snow leopardess reached out to grasp the book. It didn't feel quite the same as when Dr. Kidan had first handed it to her. She

just couldn't quite put her finger on it. It seemed... a bit... off. A bit... strange. A bit... not quite of the mortal world. But then that's exactly what it was supposed to be, wasn't it?

Chyka shook her head and chose to ignore the odd feelings that the book seemed to be giving to her. She rounded the head of the bed and gently handed it to her waiting guest. "Here you are," she said as the koyoki took the book from her and eyed it with a visible mix of suspicion and disgust. "All you have to do is open it and look for the first thread among the luminous webs that fill the interior of the crystal slate. Don't worry. You'll know which it is the moment you lay eyes on it."

"O... kay," O'sa replied as the snow leopardess sat down on the bench next to her. "Must you watch?"

"Yes," Chyka replied as the koyoki got comfortable atop the firm biogel padding. "I'll be here to close the book, just in case."

"Just in case what?" O'sa questioned.

"No one knows how any given individual will react to the experience of being, quite literally,

in someone else's shoes," Chyka explained as she watched the koyoki run her thumbs along the edge of the tome's leather bound covers. "That's an unfamiliar experience enough. Then add the alien sensations of physical transformation and, well, I'd rather close the book and end the experience than allow you to suffer real world consequences. I'm sure you'd rather I do that was well."

"Yeah," O'sa responded as she slid her right thumb in between the covers and began to open the book. A purple glow shone from the crack. She hesitated. She bit her lip. For a moment, it looked as if she was going to close it.

"Go ahead," Chyka instructed with a warm smile and a practiced tone of semi-faux friendly sincerity. "Open it."

O'sa slowly parted the covers of the gobzite slate tome. Its intense purple glow washed over her face as she gazed into the sharply luminous web of nearly microscopic fractures beneath its surface. Her eyes opened wide. Her pupils dilated. She gasped. "Oh... oh... oh!"

An eerie purple glow shone from within the astonished koyoki's eyes. She shuddered as her own soul was caught up in the web of energy within the slate. Her physical body fell still as she entered a new, metaphysical body seemingly identical to it in every way. As the world came back into focus, she found herself standing in Wyoh's place, alone in an envirolock, naked, moments before she was to enter the laboratory to get her sample of the cephalox.

TEN

SECOND HAND CEPHALOXY

Tentacles. Writhing, sucker covered tentacles, reaching out, yearning to subsume yet another recalcitrant lump of warm, soft flesh. And the smell! The pungent stench of musk and something vaguely fishy was quite nearly overwhelming. It took every last ounce of her willpower to step out from the envirolock, and into the grasp of the terrifying monstrosity.

Chyka may not have been the one held captive by the gobzite slate's esoteric power, but she had been drawn into its thrall nonetheless. There had been no helping it, really. She'd been far too curious to resist the urge to gaze into the slate's mind-capturing web. Too impatient to wait to see how it was going to affect her hapless test subject. Too

greedy in her desire to know just what the koyoki was going to feel as she was transformed by the beast. By the disease. By... whatever it actually was.

What the creature actually was didn't matter. All that mattered was that it was now looming in front of the little snow leopardess in all its horrifying, rainbow tentacled glory. It had no face. No front. No back. Nothing but countless tentacles that all seemed to be competing to see just which would be the first to merge with her helpless body.

Chyka wrinkled her feline nose at the pungent odor which filled the air. Except... she didn't have a feline nose anymore. She didn't have a feline anything. In the strange world of the slate, she had somehow been placed into the body of a koyoki, completely naked from horn to hoof.

Although she had long since become accustomed to having a body whose biogel form was almost arbitrarily malleable, the sudden insertion into a purely organic and very unfamiliar body took her by surprise. It was disorienting in a way that she just couldn't

quite get her head around. Her movements and her mind seemed somehow detached, as if her conscious thoughts were lagging several steps behind her actions. It wasn't until her body decided to take a pensive step toward the beast that she realized why.

The slate had never been intended to provide its powers of imparted experience to more than one person at a time. If that person was O'sa, then what about Chyka? Where did she fit into the equation?

Apparently, Chyka was trapped as a mere passenger in the koyoki's slate-world body. Her mind was completely separate from her host, but she could still experience the slate-world through her host's senses. With no ability to communicate or control her host, all she could do was go along for the ride and hope her host gave her an interesting time of it.

At the moment, an interesting time seemed to be the opposite of what the koyoki was capable of offering. The poor soul was clearly torn between her natural fear of the vile transdimensional monstrosity and her desire to get it all over with as quickly as possible.

She was frozen in place, quivering from head to toe as she made a futile attempt to advance another step toward the beast.

The creature itself was clearly taking its own sweet time, dragging itself across the laboratory floor with its tentacles. Every little *shuck*, *fip*, *pop*, and *pock* as the suckers alternately grasped and let go of the non-skid rubber floor sent a shudder down her spine. Her eyes darted between the monster's many reaching tentacles as she squirmed and writhed about in the air before her. There were just too many, moving too fast, for her to keep track of.

Chyka had been born a hunter. She was an apex predator equipped with sharp teeth and even sharper claws, fully capable of killing prey all by herself, without the need for even the most primitive of 'civilized' tools. A monster in her own right, equipped by evolution to track a whole herd of prey, and pick out the most vulnerable to attack from among a hundred or more. Three dozen groping tentacles were hardly a challenge to keep tabs on, even in so intense a moment as this. The idea that

someone could be confused by such a thing seemed almost... outrageous.

O'sa was no predator, of course. Her ancient evolutionary ancestors were just the sort of prey that Chyka had been equipped by nature to hunt. A creature whose first inclination when threatened would be to seek out the relative safety of the herd. A creature whose instincts were to run if they couldn't. A creature who might be cornered and pressed to fight, a hopeless act which only served to drag out their inevitable end, yet might at least serve allow others to escape.

There was no herd to try to hide among here in the laboratory. There was no place to run to. There was no reason to fight. So what could the koyoki do, but stand there frozen in terror and bewilderment as dozens of monstrous tendrils stretched out toward her, each one as dangerous as the most powerful apex predator that her ancestors ever would have faced in the wild.

Schip. Pock. Fwip. Pop.

Chyka could only watch as the glistening cephalox advanced, its rainbow of colors shifting about in a strangely hypnotic way. Her host's shuddering body was now frozen in place as thoroughly as if it had been encased in a solid block of ice. Seconds seemed to become minutes. Minutes seemed to become hours. Why wasn't the monster moving faster? Was the slate somehow altering the experience to amplify O'sa's emotional investment? Or was something else happening? Was the experience actually taking longer, or was it just her perception of time that had changed?

Shuck. Pop. Fup. Pock.

Closer and closer the tentacles loomed, while the colors nearest their helpless prey shifted into a vivid and uniform lime green. Their pungent odor became so absolutely oppressive that even Chyka began to feel strangely woozy. Closer. And closer. And closer until they were well within striking distance. For a moment, time seemed to stand perfectly still.

Chyka have every reason to expect that the tentacles would take O'sa just as they had

taken Wyoh. That was the whole point of snaring Wyoh's soul in the slate. To allow others to live through her experience, albeit with a certain degree of flexibility to allow for them to do so in their own body, and respond to events in their own way.

The koyoki never saw it coming. One moment, the creature seemed to be virtually frozen in time. The next moment, she was being swept off her legs as a single large tentacle lashed out to merged with both of her feet, binding them together as part of the tentacle itself.

"Oh!" O'sa gasped as she fell over half-backwards, twisting herself around just enough to be able to catch herself and break her fall. "Oh no! Ah ah AAH!"

Before she was even able to register what was happening, Chyka found that the koyoki's hooves and ankles were simply... gone. There had been no pain. No discomfort. No sensation whatsoever. They had just vanished.

Chyka didn't quite know what to make of the void into which her host's body was slowly

being dragged. The surface where tentacle met flesh was as empty as empty could be, and yet as the koyoki squirmed, she could feel that the connection felt like solid silicone. It wobbled. It wiggled. And yet, it also carried through it the incredible strength of the tentacle, flopping her lower body about from side to side like a fish out of water.

The void washed up the koyoki's legs as the tentacle pulled her into itself with a rapidity that made Chyka wonder if this was actually going to be much of an experience at all. There was nothing physically stimulating about it, nor anything particularly interesting in an intellectual sense. It was hardly the sort of thing that could be made into an exciting and enjoyable biogel experience. Given the intrinsically sensual properties of biogel, it might not even be accurately reproducible at all.

The helpless koyoki squirmed quite fiercely as the void consumed her thighs. She clearly knew where it was headed and didn't like it one bit. Had she been a member of a more readily aroused species, she might have at

least found the looming dissolution of her womanhood cause for a few last tokes down there between her legs. A few final stroked over her nubby little clit. A few fleeting moments to feel that which she would soon never to feel again.

The koyoki were certainly not known for their sexual inclinations, and O'sa was no exception. Her response to the wave of nothingness was a far more primal thing. A fear that drove her to squirm harder, clawing at the floor in a futile effort to keep what has about to happen at bay.

The void washed up to her soft, round rump. Her muscles clenched as it seemed poised to consume her very sex. She gasped sharply as it found its way to her soft, womanly folds. As it began to remove them from her slate-world reality. And then...

A very sudden burst of astonishingly intense sexual arousal overcame the desperately struggling koyoki. It was completely involuntary. Completely unbidden. A single, abrupt stimulus that sent her body soaring to

the very edge of orgasm. Right to the very edge, but not one singly bit further.

Chyka was just as shocked by the sudden sexual stimulation as her suddenly still host. It had come out of nowhere. Once it had come, it refused to go any further. Instead, it lingered in its full intensity even as the monster continued to subsume its victim, a point of magnificently erotic tension, buried within the meat of the tentacle.

Amid the mind bending pleasure, the void had chanced into something very different. The new sensations came on hard and fast as the transformation raced up the heavily panting koyoki's motionless body. So fast, indeed, that it seemed as if it would all be over almost as soon as it had begun.

For the very first time, O'sa looked back upon her own body. Everything from the waist down was a glistening green part of the beast's tentacle. The line between herself and tentacle was spreading upward, changing her skin into an oily slick surface that was as vividly lime green as it could possibly be. Within this rubbery surface was a weird, gelatinous filling

that was as much nothing as it was something. It moved like muscle, but it also squished, squeezed, and flowed like a thick goo that almost seemed to have a mind of its own.

Little popping sensations spread all over the koyoki's body as countless little suckers burst out from beneath the surface of her transformed flesh. This was quickly followed by the sensation of her breasts beginning to squish, contort, and then stretch out into brand new tentacles, complete with their own array of tiny suckers. These new appendages curled, wiggled, and writhed about in a strange, shuddering fashion that was so very unlike the monster's own movements that it made Chyka wonder if it was actually O'sa who was controlling their movements.

A few moments later, and it was the turn of the astonished koyoki's arms to become a pair of wildly squirming tentacles. This was quickly followed by a deeply unsettling anatomical shifting as the transformation began to spread up her neck and over her wide-eyed face. The four new tentacles were moving about to form a ring around her head. Her head began to sink

into the space in between. Her hair was absorbed into the lime green surface of her scalp. Her ears and eyes were covered over, casting her into silence and darkness. Her nose too sealed shut and began to vanish into the smoothing surface of her face.

“Ah... ah... aaaAAAAH!” O’sa half-moaned, half-screached just as her mouth sealed closed. There was a loud *POP* as her whole head was abruptly pulled into the monster. And then... it was done. Or was it?

A strange, alien shuddering blasted through Chyka’s mind. Everything about her was stripped away save for four groping tentacles and the forever denied orgasm that drove their eternally captive mind to seek out and subsume new victims. To grow the cephalox. To spread its transdimensional disease through the whole of the mortal universe.

The cool air upon the surface of the cephalox’ newest addition became suddenly warm. The air itself was replaced by the feeling of more writhing tentacles, pressing into, and wrapping around, and trying their hardest to merge together. And merge together they did.

There was now little left of Chyka in both mind and body. There was only that point of intense arousal and the eternally denied orgasm. It was floating in a sea of... something. Something truly unknowable. Something... strangely familiar.

ELEVEN

AFTERMATH

Chyka shuddered. Blindingly bright light filled her eyes as her mind struggled to snap out of the mindlessly blissful, unendingly horny ennui that was cephaloxy. The whole world seemed to sway and undulate as she tried to find some frame of reference in which to orient herself. There seemed to be no up. No down. No nothing whatsoever.

It really shouldn't have been nearly as disorienting as it was. The little snow leopardess was perfectly familiar with the with the many unusual quirks of having a truly amorphous body. Settling herself into a solid form should have been as easy as standing up. This time, however, something was different. Not necessarily wrong. Just different.

Chyka tried to focus. She tried to separate herself from whatever it was that seemed to be keeping her from re-forming her body. She struggled. She writhed. She stretched and stretched and stretched until she finally came free from the highly recalcitrant metaphysical surface.

There was a flash. A loud, rubbery plop. Then, all at once, the deeply confused snow leopardess found herself laying completely naked upon a glossy black corridor floor.

Chyka looked up to find herself laying right where she had so recently installed that pretty pale blue ashiri called Pirra as a Gigeresque wall ornament. Instead of the disturbingly alien visage that she had expected to see, however, there was a glistening mass of colorful suckered tentacles writhing about in its place.

“What the...” Chyka stammered as she rose from the floor. Everything about the situation confused her. How had she gotten from her private library chamber on deck one, all the way down to the forward end of deck three without consciously willing herself through the ship’s biogel network? Why was she missing

her usual coating of glistening white biogel when it should have appeared upon her body by default? And, perhaps most importantly, what had changed her lovely first work of biogel-alien art into cephalox-like tentacles?

The obvious answer was that *she* had caused the apparent chaos. At some point during her experience with the gobzite slate, she had decided that cephalox tentacles made for much more interesting and interactive décor than the biogel-alien art that she'd previously favored. Without even being aware of it, she'd triggered the transformation. And the rest? Obviously, her focus on Pirra would have brought her to the corridor. Her nudity... that might have had something to do with her experiencing the slate in a nude body. A nude koyoki body, to be more specific.

"Oh! Oh shit!" Chyka sputtered as her thoughts were dragged back into her private library chamber and the guest that she'd no doubt left locked inside. O'sa hadn't been the most enthusiastic test subject to begin with. Being trapped in the chamber with no hostess and no way out was going to sour her to the

point that there was going to be no chance for the mischievous snow leopardess to take her kinky plan any further. The quicker she got back to the koyoki, the better the chance that she'd be there before she'd fully recovered from the slate's effects.

Chyka pressed her hand into the glistening black biogel wall panel and attempted to will herself back into the goo. It was the fastest way for her to get back to O'sa. However, and to her considerable consternation, the biogel resisted her hand almost as firmly as if it were made of solid obsidian.

"What the hell?" Chyka hissed as she turned aft, toward the big deck lobby and the lifts as she tried to make heads or tails of the fact that she could barely manage to press a momentary hand print in the biogel wall, let alone merge with it. "Why can't I enter the network? I *am* the network!"

For a long, terrible moment, the confused snow leopardess just stood there trying to get the biogel to accept the will of its slime demon mistress. It refused. Then she tried to just melt herself into liquid biogel and try to insinuate

herself into the wall that way. To her horror, absolutely nothing happened. Then she tried to just will her mind back into the ship's biogel core. She could sense its presence, but she just couldn't find her way inside.

As a last resort, Chyka drew forth the transdimensional energy from within herself, transfiguring herself into the winged slime demon that was her 'natural' form. Instead of a surge of power, there was naught but a tiny trickle that did little other than to make her feel just a tad bit horny and inclined to partake of whatever perilous pleasures might happen to be close at hand. Pleasures that certainly included those groping tentacles where Pirra had been mounted to the wall.

It was as if Chyka had yet again become a fully organic being, with no connection to biogel whatsoever. No connection but that which came from the innate 'magical' capacity that all fey'li possessed. It was something that she had never personally experienced before. A weak, fleeting transdimensional sense of awareness that was of little use unless carefully developed over many years of

dedicated training. Of little deliberate use, that is. Sometimes it could have uncontrollable and distinctly unwelcome effects, such as her budding feeling of physical attraction to the writhing wall tentacles.

Chyka was left dumbfounded. Had her encounter with the cephalox somehow broken her bonds to both the Nine Heavenly Hells and Omega? But how? She hadn't even interacted with the real cephalox!

There was one other possibility and it was even more disturbing. Had her entrance into the world of the gobzite slate alongside O'sa somehow allowed the koyoki to steal her powers? She had experienced the cephalox as a passenger in O'sa's mind, and perhaps more importantly, as a passenger in her slate-world body. When it was all said and done, what was to stop the slate from somehow assuming that all of her slime demon powers belonged to the first to enter the slate-world?

Given the source of those slime demon powers, it shouldn't have been possible for the slate to transfer them. But, given the impossibility of everything else that Dr. Kidan

had come up with, who knew? Maybe it wasn't even the slate? Maybe the slate had just given her patrons a convenient opportunity to change their minds. After all, there was nothing more 'Nine Heavenly Hells' than giving subject souls a never ending stream of erotic chaos to enjoy in their own personal ways.

But... if O'sa had somehow acquired Chyka's powers, where was she? And why was Chyka left naked on deck 3 after having been exuded from the biogel wall? If her biogel nature had been stripped of her, Chyka shouldn't have been able to move through the biogel at all.

Then, of course, there was the issue of what had transformed her disturbingly erotic piece of all art into a bunch of cephalox tentacles. Who had been responsible for that? Had it been Chyka? Had it been O'sa? Or had it been something else entirely?

Given O'sa's clearly expressed feelings about the whole gobzite slate experiment, it was entirely possible that she'd decided to get a bit of payback for being transformed into a slime demon by doing a bit of redecorating. Redecorating that no doubt was intended to

include Chyka adding her own body mass to the collection of tentacles. But if that was the case, why wasn't O'sa there to make sure her desires were carried out? Did she just expect Chyka to understand and accept her fate? Or was something else going on? Something even less palatable than an upset koyoki slime demon with a newfound tentacle fetish?

"Dammit!" Chyka swore as she contemplated the squirming tentacles. There was no denying that they looked just a little bit inviting. All that mindless horny ennui had been rather... comfortable. She certainly wouldn't mind having another go at it, even if it was just a biogel imitation. Or... was it?

The little snow leopardess couldn't help herself. She had to have a closer look at the squirming mass of suckered tentacles. Suckered invitations, really. Invitations to return to an eternity of horny bliss. She moved closer. And closer. And closer until the longest was only a few short centimeters from her soft, fluffy chest.

There Chyka stood, staring at the tentacles as they attempted to press themselves into her

body. There was nothing stopping the mind behind them from making them just a little bit longer. All it would take is enough desire and the entranced snow leopardess would be helpless to prevent her absorption into the wall and, no doubt, the addition of another dozen or so tentacles to the current mass.

An uneasy sense of existential equilibrium came over the entranced snow leopardess. She stood there. The tentacles hovered close. So long as she moved, she could just stay there and watch the glistening colors squirm and wiggle and feel at least some sense of perpetually unfulfilled arousal for as long as she liked.

Seconds ticked past. Then minutes. Chyka was too fascinated by the tentacles to look away, even for a moment. All she could do was stare and wait for them to make their move, just as if they were actually cephalox.

“Oh no. Oh fucking no,” the suddenly horrified snow leopardess gasped as a very unpleasant idea crossed her mind. “Cephalox... cephaloxy... it’s not a monster. It’s a disease. She said it’s a disease. If it’s a disease then

that means its infectious. What if it can infect..."

"No no no no NO!" Chyka sputtered as she backed away from the tentacles. She bolted for the deck lobby, heading straight for the starboard side lift. The door whooshed open and she stepped inside. "Deck one!"

"Please, please, please just be something Dr. Kidan is messing with," Chyka moaned as the lift slowly rose. "Even Omega messing with me would be better than that. Even O'sa taking my powers would be better than that!"

The moment the lift door opened, the horrified snow leopardess frantically raced aft, down the starboard lounge area, and through the sunken library. Given her loss of connection to the ship's biogel network, she fully expected the private chamber door to refuse her entry, but it opened without hesitation on her approach. That was a good sign.

Chyka dashed into the private chamber and hoped beyond hope that the whole situation was just some passing effect of her participation in O'sa's slate experience.

Perhaps the key to ending the effect would be a bit more obvious once she'd reunited with the koyoki and had her own chance to examine the slate. Much to her considerable consternation, however, the private chamber's bed was empty. O'sa was gone. But where?

"Okay. Okay," Chyka huffed as she came to terms with the increasing likelihood that they had somehow swapped powers and that O'sa had indeed become the Destiny Explorer's new mistress. "If that's all it is... I'm still fucked up the ass and then some, but it's better than cephalox infected biogel. But what if she isn't? What if something else happened to her?"

"Oh goddess! What if she took the slate and everyone else starts using it?" the snow leopardess hissed as she ran up onto the platform to see if the slate had been returned to the dispenser unit. Surprisingly, it had, but not by O'sa. Someone else had accessed the system to return the slate into its secure storage slot. "Kauru!"

Chyka had always been leery of Dr. Kidan's new favorite assistant. There was something about her that had always seemed just a bit...

off. She was just too polite. Too agreeable. Too... accommodating. She would do anything the doctor requested without question or complaint, and in a calm dispassionate manner that made her come of as if she were some kind of machine rather than a living woman.

From time to time, the little snow leopardess had wondered if the 'human' was actually some sort of experiment. A living being whose mind had been reprogrammed in a fashion similar to the cyborgs, without the cyborg body to go along with it. A perfect servant, willing to do anything requested of it without objection, directly infused with the knowledge and skills required to perform its very specific task.

Despite her vague concerns, Chyka had never bothered to explore the matter any further than a brief perusal of her personnel record. There was nothing about her that couldn't also be explained by her coming from a very different culture. The simplest explanation was so often the correct one that the little snow leopardess had just accepted it. But now...

Somehow, Dr. Kidan's new favorite assistant had obtained access to the private chamber, and at the most suspicious time she possibly could. Had she been sent to try to correct some issue that Kidan had noticed during the time that Chyka and O'sa had been caught up in the slate-world? That might make sense if the doctor himself had put in an appearance to explain what was happening, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Had Kauru broken into the private chamber for some unknown purpose? Was she responsible for Chyka's current condition? Or had a newly slime-demonified O'sa let her in to take care of the slate for her? Had Kauru gazed into the slate when she had been in the chamber? Had she also experienced the slate-world and, perhaps, somehow ejected Chyka and O'sa from it in an unexpected and problematic manner? And where was she now? Guiding her new mistress into taking over the ship?

"Did she really take my place? Did O'sa really take my place or is something else going on here? Or was it Kauru?" Chyka sputtered as

she took stock of the situation. Given the available evidence, what other possibility was there?

Chyka lowered her head down onto the top of the slate dispenser and tried to breathe. Everything was falling apart so fast, and this time there was nothing to fall back on. No resources in reserve. No place to hide and try to formulate a plan. And no time bending toys that might offer a second chance to avoid the whole mess.

If Chyka had really lost control of the ship and all of its biogel perils, her cute little fluffy ass was toast. Complete and utter shiny biogel-cephalox tentacle toast. And there wasn't one single damned thing she could do about it.

The fur on the back of Chyka's neck began to stand up. She looked up for face the chamber door as it opened. Her heart skipped a beat. Her limbs felt shaky and limp. She bit her lower lip and held her breath as she laid her eyes upon the one who held all the keys to the chaos.

“Ah! There you are,” Kauru purred as she hovered menacingly in the darkness of the main library. “I was worried that you had simply vanished into the slate along with that poor, unfortunate koyoki.”

“You!” Chyka snapped in reply. “What’s going on here? How did you get in? Where’s O’sa?”

“Gone? I do not know. But you, you are naked!” Kauru responded with an subtly insidious smile. “Come! Let us dress you in something appropriately alluring! I have just the perfect outfit in mind!”

TWELVE

A NEW MISTRESS?

Chyka could hear her own heart pounding as she followed Kauru down the narrow wooden spiral staircase that was hidden behind a section of bookcase, tucked beneath the walkway that connected the elevated lounge areas to either side of the library. There was no real way to know exactly where the conniving science assistant was leading her, but it wasn't hard to imagine that they were headed toward the little snow leopardess' private suite. Whether or not it was still hers to call home, however, seemed less and less likely with each passing step.

To get there by this path, the two women would have to pass down into, and through, the uppermost of the Destiny Explorer's

xenoexperience rooms, where guests aboard the Destiny Explorer could partake of a selection of carefully curated alien experiences as stimulating as they were physically transformative. The purpose, of course, was to record each such encounter in meticulous detail. The resulting data was then to be used to help improve existing biogel experiences, and even in the development of completely new ones for geli-curious souls to explore.

Most of the alien experiences to be found in this upper chamber were common enough that interested guests were likely to be familiar with their nature. Things such as digital gorgons, von'kir shriveling field devices, rowa critters in terrariums, and the like. There was nothing particularly dangerous in the room. Certainly nothing that could actually chase one down and take them against their will. It was all about voluntary participation. Willing submission. Giving in to temptation, perhaps with a bit of gentile encouragement from other guests, or even the ship's specially trained xenoexperience hostesses.

There were no hostesses to be found in the xenoexperience room as Chyka followed Kauru down into the large, dimly lit rectangular space. For the time being, at least, they had no duties to perform. There were no passengers assigned to the ship's regular quarters during its maiden voyage. All of them were locked away, encased in their crystal clear biogel sarcophagi. All of them save one, that is, though where that particular koyoki might have actually vanished off to was as much a mystery as the intentions of the woman who ought to have had the answer.

"This is such a very wonderful room, do not you think?" Kauru remarked as she descended the final step and looked about at the various exotic items that stood fully powered and ready for someone to come and make use of them. "So many distinctly stimulating possibilities. So many new bodies to... dress oneself in. Hmm? What do you think?"

So this is what she's up to, Chyka thought in silence as she followed the woman away from the stairs and into the heart of the collection. *She wants to get me all done up and out of the*

way, just like... just like the last time this kind of shit happened to me. But... Why?

In truth, there was absolutely nothing to stop the little snow leopardess from making a run for it. As much as Vixanti Corporation had wanted its 'all biogel' starships to live up to their description, common sense had dictated that certain accommodations be made for the provision of numerous purely conventional safety and backup systems. These backups were almost certainly the reason that the private library door had recognized her as the ship's proper mistress. If that door had, then so would every other secured door in the ship.

Then again, all of the corridor walls were lined with biogel. Just as she herself had tweaked the biogel to make decorations out of unwary passers-by, so too could the ship's new mistress. If she did run for help, there was no way she could possibly escape capture. Unless...

Chyka hesitated. There *was* the 'nuclear option'.

Every biogel equipped ship had a single lever which would disengage the biogel reactor core from the main biogel network loop. This would break the power circuit, causing the core to collapse into a mass of relatively inert black biogel and the whole network to essentially freeze in its current form. It would completely neutralize the ship's biogel systems. No one aboard would be harmed in the process. Some might become trapped, depending on their sleeping preferences, but there would still be more than enough help available to secure the ship and discover the nature of Kauru's apparent treachery.

Chyka couldn't have been in much better of a position to make a run for the scram station. All she had to do was head further down the spiral staircase and into the ship's lower xenoexperience room. It was there that some of the ship's more esoteric alien experience options were located. Also located there was access to the reactor head, including the soul injector system, support equipment, and the scram station with the primary power circuit coupling and cutoff gear.

But... making a run for the scam station now might not do anything to help Chyka understand exactly why Kauru was apparently trying to dispose of her and take over the ship. Memories of her time jumping past flooded back. She had always found out who was responsible for the various events that had lead her to this point. The Key'vin'ta Association cultists and their desire to rekindle the ancient powers for themselves. The mysterious dragille and its hunger to the transdimensional energy of powerful souls. Her faux-grandmother and her rowa allies. Or was it the other way around? That was the problem, wasn't it? She had always discovered who, but never truly why. But this time... this time was going to be different.

No matter how hard she had tried, no matter how powerful she had become, for better or for worse, someone else had always been pulling the stings from afar. At first it had been Omega. Then it had been Ki'su. And then the cultists. And then her faux-grandmother. And on top of all this had been Dr. Kidan and his attempts to reverse the effects of her own many missteps in an effort to preserve some manner of 'correct'

timeline. But what did that even mean? Was it possible that he was just another force attempting to manipulate her into being what he wanted her to be?

Chyka didn't have time to give much thought to the slightly mad scientist and his time bending manipulations. He might have been a force, but he had always been opposed to the other forces. The same could be said for Ki'su. She had been guided by a very different set of motivations than the others. Wanting to reestablish the old key'vin'ta powers was perfectly natural for her. For modern cultists? Not so much.

But the others. Mysterious powers who each seemed to have very similar goals, even if their methods were distinctly different. Were they all just a bunch of different entities all seeing her unique roles and wanting control of them? Or was there something else at play. Something more... organized?

"I believe that I know just the thing to please us both," Kauru declared as she lead the little snow leopardess around the side of the elevated platform containing the ship's large,

angular von'kir portal device. She gestured toward the greenish-gray edifice, leaning back at about a thirty degree angle and filled with a sizzling swirl of sickly yellow-green energy. "What do you think? Do think it will not suit you at least as well as it suits our pretty horned friend?"

"O... O'sa?!?" Chyka gasped as she caught sight of the missing koyoki, chained by the neck to the railing that ran along the side the portal platform. "My... my goddess!"

To call the woman's current visage utterly repulsive would have been a considerable understatement. Her leathery flesh had turned a sickly shade of gray, shrunken and pulled taut over her bones like a badly mummified corpse. Her breasts had nearly vanished, while her nipples had become drastically enlarged, knobby, knots jutting out from her chest. Between her legs was a wrinkled, but otherwise featureless surface so disturbingly barren that it made Chyka desperately want to run up and try to get the woman free.

Passing her through the portal in reverse was the only way to reverse the von'kir

transformation, so long as one did it quickly enough. Who knew how long the clock had already been ticking? She might have a few hours left of guaranteed reversal. Or she might only have a few minutes.

Chyka took a long, deep breath and forced herself to hold back. No matter how much those those utterly black eyes might plead with her for salvation, she had to leave the shriveled koyoki to her fate. She had to focus on learning Kauru's motivation, and then ending her plans by scrambling the biogel core.

"So immeasurably beautiful, is it not?" Kauru mused. "Such a magnificent reduction to the mere base necessities of humanoid life. No needless strength. No pointless agility. No intellectual capacity whatsoever. And... no ability to reproduce. It is just so enticing. So compelling. So perfect for such a woman as yourself. So... go. Enter the portal. Become the kind of creature you were always meant to be."

"Always meant to be?" Chyka questioned as she stopped beside the chained creature that had once been such a wonderfully attractive koyoki. The last thing she wanted to do at this

point was to round the end of the railing and put her in a position where Kauru could try to force her up onto the platform and through the portal. "What do you mean, always meant to be?"

A sly, insidious smile crept across Kauru's face. "You were very literally born for the sole purpose of being transformed into a mindless beast," Kauru declared, stepping up onto the platform herself to pet the gently hissing creature on its hairless, knobby wart adorned head. "Surely you know. Surely you were told that you were part of the payment that your sweet grandmother offered in exchange for own deferred transition into life as a beast."

"How do you... that's a lie!" Chyka snapped in reply. "None of that ever happened! It was all in a some kind of alternate timeline that never happened!"

"So you choose to believe," Kauru responded with a low chuckle as she caressed her pet monster's bony, antelope-like horns. "And yet it is true. As an offering to prove her Empress' genuine desire for peace and unity, she guaranteed each of her granddaughters to the

rowa upon their ascension to legal age. All of them, including you.”

“I’m her *only* granddaughter,” Chyka hissed. “I don’t have any sisters. And I never did.”

“You had seven,” Kauru replied. “Seven elder sisters, each and every one of whom was reduced to mere monstrosity within the Mashirowa Hive before your parents went to hide in Dari, swearing never to have another child again lest your grandmother get hold of them.”

“That’s a lie! Another damned lie!” Chyka shouted as emotion began to get the better of her. Without even willing it, she began to advance around the end of the railing until her right foot rose up onto the first of the five shallow steps leading up onto the portal platform. “You heard Kidan talking about the timeline mess and now you’re just making shit up to try and convince me that I’m just a worthless piece of shit who’d be better off living as something so fucking nasty that just looking at it makes me cringe!”

“No, I am not,” Kauru replied with a broad, all-knowing smile. “I have researched this matter quite thoroughly, I can assure you. Your family fled to Dari to keep you out of your grandmother’s grasp, but in their desire to protect you, they became overbearing. Even abusive.”

“How the fuck do you know...” Chyka growled. She didn’t know which was more enraging. Was it her memories of the abuse she’d suffered at the hands of her asshole parents, or was it the fact that his alien bitch seemed to know so much about it.

“Your grandmother used your desire for escape to help separate you from the perfect prison of Dari,” Kauru went on unabated. “At first it was just for school. And then she saw you off to college. But just for a two year degree. She wanted you to be fully occupied until the moment you were fully legal for the rowa to transform. One year after your age of maturity. But then matters beneath Dari intervened and she couldn’t quite meet her deadline.”

“More lies!” Chyka snapped, taking another angry step up towards the platform.

“Then, while your grandmother was fully occupied with the Empress’ work, you had to go and have yourself coated in biogel, didn’t you? And not in the old biogel that could be properly removed like her own,” Kauru continued. “What was she to do? She had a promise to keep, didn’t she? So she made a pact. A pact with powers you cannot possibly comprehend. A pact that would ensure you were stripped of all connection to biogel and transformed into a mindless worm whose only future would be as raw living substance to be incorporated into the flesh of the living, and growing hive itself.”

“No! No! No!” Chyka snarled as she took another step upward. “Nothing you say is true. It’s all lies! Lies! Lies!”

“Now, let us move beyond stories to more significant matters before us,” Kauru declared, taking her hand from her monstrous pet’s head and gesturing all around her. “You no doubt know that this grand vessel is sick. The cephalox is slowly uniting with the biogel to

create something new and of truly terrifying voracity. But all is not lost just yet. This is not my first encounter with the creature. I know how to expunge it.”

“Then expunge it!” Chyka demanded.

“No,” Kauru replied. “Not until my price is paid.”

“Your price?!? Seriously?” Chyka hissed. “You want to stand here and demand a price when you’re own ass is going to get sucked into the thing along with the rest of us? What kind of an idiot do you think I am?”

“A very kind and caring one,” Kauru laughed. “So kind and caring that you would rather sacrifice yourself than see everyone else aboard this ship become little bits of transdimensional disease matter.”

“Bitch,” Chyka swore.

“Here is what you will do,” Kauru ordered as she held up a tiny vial of shimmering, pearly white biogel. “You will order the ship to accept me as your successor. Then you will pass through the portal, becoming my pet for the

moment, and then to be offered as a gift to the von'kir along with all the rest. I shall then, and only then, cure this ship of its cephaloxy and upgrade myself into a new mistress of slime demons. Once that is done, I shall take your companions as my own, and then offer them as exchange for your own inability to fulfill your destiny in the hive."

"Never!" Chyka snapped as she clenched both fists and advance another step. "I will never allow you to..."

"You have no other choice," Kauru stated with a sharp laugh at the little snow leopardess outward display of aggression. "And you are running out of time. Soon, very soon, the cephaloxy will break free from the biogel network's attempts to contain it. It will infest every living being aboard this ship and transform them into more of itself in an orgy of tentacles, and screaming, and terror, and then... well. Then there won't be anyone left to save, will there?"

For a few long moments, Chyka debated which course of action would be better for all aboard the Destiny Explorer. The prospect of

everyone being subsumed by the cephalox was horrifying on so many levels that it seemed absolutely outrageous to even contemplate allowing it to happen. On the other hand, would allowing this ambitious would-be replacement actually be any better? What would she do to all of her newfound captives once she got control of them?

Chyka had always followed the rules about conditions and consent. Kauru almost certainly would not. She had already made that clear enough when she had used the words 'all the rest' when describing who was going to be offered to the von'kir. They would be forced to go, instead of asked to consider it. And that, of course, was assuming that they wouldn't be used to satisfy Kauru's love of experiments related to her various kinks along the way.

And then, of course, there was the matter of Kauru's honesty. In the little snow leopardess' eyes, she had already made it clear that she was willing to lie about the most important things in order to get her way. If she had been lying about her grandmother, then she was almost sure to be lying about her ability to

expunge the cephalox from the ship's biogel network. No doubt she just wanted Chyka's position and power for herself, and the rest was all just a means to the end. But if that was the case...

Chyka took a deep breath. So far as she could tell, if she agreed to Kauru's demand or not, the only difference in the end result would be she herself experiencing the sensations of being shriveled up into a virtual living corpse. The only purpose that would serve would be to ensure that she couldn't do anything to prevent Kauru from escaping.

"I refuse," Chyka declared. "You can get fucked by the cephalox just like the rest of us."

"Ah, but I do know how not to fall victim to the monstrosity, don't I?" Kauru laughed in reply. "That would mean your refusal is rather pointless, does it not? But I will offer you an opportunity to reconsider your decision. After all..."

"You're right," Chyka interjected as a terrifyingly impulsive thought forced its way into her mind. The solution was right there

staring her in the face. Her tail flicked from side to side as a surge of adrenaline gave her and instant and excruciatingly overconfident high. "I do reconsider my decision. Because you can't do anything to avoid the cephalox if you're a shriveled up monster!"

The little snow leopardess leapt at her astonished adversary and they both tumbled into a growly, snarly, yelpy tangle on the floor. Back and forth they rolled, gripping, grappling, smacking, and slapping at one another in what had to be the least vicious looking fight for survival that had ever taken place amid such a horrifically perilous situation. There was just too much to be gained for Kauru if she could compel Chyka to surrender. Chyka, for her own part, didn't actually want to hurt Kauru, she just wanted Kauru to have to feel exactly what O'sa had felt before the cephalox took them all.

Within a few short moments, the two struggling women had wrangled each other into such a position that they were both one wrong move from sticking some portion of their bodies into the portal field. Kauru was becoming increasingly intent on escaping her

feline opponent's grasp, finally resorting to a closed fist in an attempt to force her opponent to let go. She didn't have much of a size advantage, though, and despite her relatively fit state couldn't come close to matching fey'li muscle density.

Chyka grabbed Kauru's free arm and started to push her up and over, into the sizzling portal field. The latter, sensing what was about to happen, grabbed onto her opponent in order to drag her into the portal along with her. The former hesitated. The last thing she wanted to do now was to give her opponent even one of the things that she had demanded, even if the woman wouldn't be left in any state to enjoy it.

"I know what you're trying to do," Kauru hissed. "I am not going to let you. Not without taking you with me."

Giving Chyka the impetus to think wasn't quite the wise idea that Kauru no doubt thought it was. *I... fuck it. What's the point?* she thought to herself. *All I want is to make her feel everything O'sa felt. Who cares if I go through along with her? We're both getting sucked up by the cephalox anyway and...*

maybe I kind of deserve it. I'm sure this is all my fault somehow. It always is.

All the little snow leopardess had to do was to roll both of them into the portal. One roll to the left. That was all it would take. Just a little shift to give herself a bit more leverage and...

A sudden sharp, electric hiss made Chyka yelp as her left leg slid into the sickly energy. Puffs of sparkly, jasmine scented mist billowed out from where her leg passed into the portal field. From her toes, all the way up to mid-thigh, her flesh seemed to go horribly smooth, then leathery firm, before rapidly contracting around her bones like a fully encompassing tourniquet. Here and there, she could feel little knobby nodules and hairy moles poking out from her emaciated limb, nasty little accents to complement the vileness of her utterly corrupted gray flesh.

The sudden transformation didn't actually hurt by any measure, but for the first few moments its results felt almost sickeningly uncomfortable. It was impossible for the little snow leopardess to know if this was just how von'kir shriveling felt, of if it was just an effect

of the suddenness and scope of the transformation. She could only imagine what it must have felt for O'sa as she was, no doubt, pushed through the portal all at once. It made her hesitate. It made her recoil. She pulled her leg from the portal.

Much to Chyka's considerable surprise, the shriveling transformation reversed as it came out. Von'kir portals normally weren't set to allow this kind of fluid reversal, and the ship's portal was certainly no exception. As far as she knew, it had been locked in the mode where only a fully completed transformation could be reversed by passage through back through the portal from the rear. The intent of this was to allow people to play with the portal, transforming bits of their body and then having a chance to spend some time contemplating the effects before finally passing fully through. The was still time dependent, as well as requiring someone to guide the resulting creature back through, of course. There was also a permanent mode that ensured that the creature's produced couldn't have their transformations reversed, but that was almost never used. Never, at least, unless the intended

user had some particular greater value as a permanent shriveled monster than as their natural selves.

It seemed to Chyka that her adversary would almost certainly have preferred the permanent setting given the clear intent to permanently enslave the her. But... was it possible that Kauru had considered the possibility that Chyka might get physical? That it would be Kauru and not her target that was going to find herself being pushed into the portal? That she was going to need one final chance to escape? Because if she had...

In Chyka's moment of hesitation, Kauru finally managed to wriggle free. "Please do enjoy your absorption into the cephalox," she laughed as she bounded over the railing and headed back toward the spiral staircase. "As for me, I shall..."

A sharp and very familiar sound cut Kauru off mid-sentence.

Fwsssssssssssssh!

THIRTEEN

INFECTION

Chyka was already over the portal platform railing in pursuit as her overconfident adversary ran headlong into a silvery, billowing cloud of Instant Inflatogummy. This potently transformative mass of aerosol biogel had appeared without any warning. It came from the platform area behind the sizzling von'kir portal and now surrounded the fleeing human in such quantity that there was no chance whatsoever that she would be able to escape its suitably punishing and usefully kinky effects.

The little snow leopardess couldn't help but smile at the completely unexpected turn of events. Whatever had happened to place her into her current, almost completely powerless

state, it hadn't left her alone aboard ship with the conniving traitor. As to who it was who'd appeared to lend her a helping hand when she needed it the most, the interloper's choice of weapon for the situation gave her all the information she needed to know. "Ki'su!"

By all rights, the whole affair should have been over in an instant, and the reunion of the slime demon and her imp only moments in the future. By all rights, that sly, backstabbing Kauru should have collapsed to the floor in a flurry of squips, pops, and squeaks as she was reduced to nothing more than a cheap looking, life sized blow-up doll. By all rights, she should have found her conscious mind trapped within her new form's glistening transparent biogel envelope, and left with little to do but contemplate her mistakes for the rest of eternity. By all rights. But...

Kauru threw her head back and unleashed the most maniacal, girly comic book villain laugh as the inflatogummy spray at first seemed to have absolutely no effect on her. The very biogel which coated her body, which should have done absolutely nothing to resist

the spray's transformative effects, was somehow preventing it from working as intended. Instead, patches of her suit were becoming clear for a few short moments before returning to their normal, glossy black state. After a few more moments in the cloud, the patches began to linger, morphing and shifting about over her body as the biogel attempted to prevent the transformation from becoming anything more than a bunch of patchy, largely superficial cosmetic aberrations.

Fwssssssssssssssh!

Another release of inflatogummy spray renewed the cloud that surrounded the defiant human. Again she laughed at the apparent pointlessness of the attack, even though the clear patches were getting larger and more persistent. "How very amusing," she declared with a strange tone of silky, sinister sensuality. "Amusing and perhaps inspiring. Was I wrong to think your cute feline body would have looked so much better as a shriveled von'kir pet? Perhaps I was. Perhaps... yes! Yes! This would be so much better, would it not? So

much more appropriate a form for such an unabashedly erotic soul such are yours!”

Chyka snarled at her smiling adversary.

“Or perhaps you might prefer fulfilling your grandmother’s obligation, yes?” Kauru cooed, gesturing behind her, toward the ship’s rowa mini-hive chamber.

“You and your lies!” Chyka snapped as she waited and hoped that the inflatogummy spray would eventually overcome whatever was protecting the insolent usurper.

“No?” Kauru questioned before grinning and raising her left hand toward the little snow leopardess. “A shame. She will be most sorely disappointed. But... what is less than ideal for her own plans is most certainly much better for mine.”

Kauru grinned and raised her left hand toward the little snow leopardess. The silvery aerosol biogel that still hung all around her began to roll down her arm and form a hypnotically sparkly stream that stretched out toward its astonished target. “Surrender. You know you want you. You have always wanted

to. Now is the time. Give in. Become a toy. I promise you, you *will* enjoy it.”

Chyka gasped in terror, not at the approaching flow of shimmering inflatogummy spray, but at the growing clear patches which now make up more than a third of her adversary’s biogel coating. She had expected to see a showing of pleasantly tanned skin. Instead she found the absolutely horrifying truth as to why the spray was having so little effect.

“The... the hells!” the little snow leopardess exclaimed as she found Kauru’s biogel suit not filled with humanoid flesh, but with a tangle of softly luminous, rainbow colored cephalox tentacles, all mashed together in such a way as to accurately mimic the shape of Kauru’s natural body.

“I wonder... do you like what you see?” Kauru purred in a disturbingly inviting tone that sent a shiver down the little snow leopardess’ spine. “Perhaps you would prefer to dress yourself in this manner of body instead. Why not? It feels so, so very good!”

“You... you monster!” Chyka spat. Despite her terror, or perhaps because of it, she remained fixed upon the revelation. As a consequence, she barely noticed the silvery stream that was getting closer and closer to her naked chest.

Kauru smiled and opened her mouth to reveal that her tongue had become a gooey, hot pink cephalox tentacle covered with dozens of flexing white suckers. “Just say yes. Just say yes and let me infect your body and make you just like me. Just say yes. All you have to do is say yes.”

Chyka cringed as the impossibly long tentacle slid out from Kauru’s mouth. For a brief moment it reached straight out toward her, before curving back to slather its thick mucous all over the monster’s face and head. “No! No! Absolutely not you... you... *beast!*”

“As you desire,” Kauru replied as the countless cephalox tentacles within her biogel suit began to squirm and writhe. Her pleasingly effeminate shape became twisted and distorted by their strangely entrancing undulations. Before long they began to press outward,

trying to break free of their glistening black coating.

Chyka's stomach began to churn in ways that it never had before. The display of twisted, real-life body horror that this monster, Kauru, or whatever it was, was putting on was almost too much for her to handle. Her heart pounded as an idea popped into her head. It was an idea almost as disturbing as the prospect of being infected by the cephalox in the same fashion. What if the creature wanted to turn her into an inflatogummy so it could get inside of her, wearing her helpless body like some kind of perversely kinky trophy? Her helpless blow-up doll body...

At the very last possibly moment, Chyka's eyes abruptly focused on the slowly puffing stream of inflatogummy spray. It was now only a few centimeters and less than a second from flowing over her fluffy little breasts. And from there, all over her body.

Chyka yelped and jumped backward just as she felt the air begin to move over her rock hard nipples. She had escaped the moment's peril, thought only just barely. Her mind spun

as she wondered what would have happened if she hadn't noticed. If she had been sent on that one-way trip to blow-up-doll-dom, tentacle filling or not. What would it have felt like? What would her existence have entailed? Would she have become clothing for cephalox-Kauru? Would she have been found by some unknown rescuer and used like a proper blow-up doll should be? Or would she have been abandoned to spend the rest of eternity yearning for touch and pleasure?

Perhaps becoming a blow-up doll was actually preferable to facing the cephalox itself. It was something she could at least understand. Maybe she could even enjoy it. Maybe she should surrender, before she was forced to find out what it was like to be infected and transformed into a cephalox like Kauru.

"You fey'li and your insistence on play," Kauru laughed as she drew the tentacle tongue back into her mouth. "Let us play then! But do not make me play for too long. I might just decide to make you into something far less pleasing to the senses than an inflatable sex doll."

“Dammit!” Chyka responded with a low growl as Kauru began to swish the swirls of inflatogummy spray around and around and back and forth in front of her. It was like a feather toy in front of a cat, and almost too hard for even a fully sapient feline like the little snow leopardess to ignore. “Ah! Shit! Shit! Ki’su! Run!”

There was no sound of reply from behind the sizzling von’kir portal. Not that it really would have mattered. Even if Ki’su escaped, she wouldn’t know where to go, or what to do in order to scam the biogel core and thereby cut off all of the various major and minor transdimensional field generators which might be keeping the cehpalox alive and active within the mortal world. And even if she could be made to understand, what was the point of explaining it in front of Kauru, who had the knowledge to stop her the moment she knew what was intended.

“You cannot win,” Kauru mused as she watched the snow leopardess follow the flitting, transformative mist with her eyes as it spiraled ever closer toward her chest.

“Surrender. You really do know that you very much want to.”

“I... no... ah... dammit!” Chyka sputtered as she took a step back, resisting the urge to swat at the mist as she found herself unable to take her eyes off of it. “I... I can’t... I can’t let you...”

“You must,” Kauru cooed. “It is the only way.”

“No,” Chyka replied, again stepping back as the mist began to dart back and forth so quickly that she became convinced that all it would take was one momentary act of will on Kauru’s part to send it straight into her chest. She had to find a way to delay it. To give herself more time to think of a way to escape. “I... I... I’ve made up my mind!”

“You have?” Kauru inquired with a sly grin. “Then pray tell me what you have made up your mind about?”

“I don’t want to be an inflatable,” Chyka answered as her expression shifted from intense feline fixation to one of willful surrender. “I... I’d rather you... I’d rather you infect me with your... your... whatever.”

“There we are!” Kauru exclaimed with visible delight. With a wave, she dissipated all of the inflatogummy spray that hung in the air. “Now come to me! Come to me and let me show you how good it feels to give in to the disease!”

Chyka took a step forward. And then she took another. And another. And then another. Thoughts raced through her mind as she tried to figure out some last ditch effort to get away and shut down the core. There was only one real possibility, but that depended entirely on Ki’su’s willingness to somehow attract enough of the monster’s attention to give Chyka a chance to get past it. But how? Given just how little a reaction the creature had displayed toward Ki’su thus far, it seemed virtually impossible.

That didn’t mean there wasn’t still a chance. Perhaps Ki’su had already had the same idea and was waiting for her chance to pounce. Or perhaps she had some other idea. Or perhaps she had no ideas at all, and was going to run back to her precious purple gobzite portal, leave her biogel life behind, and set herself up

as the permanent mistress of Xinta Temple. There was no way to know, but given the little key'vin'ta's previously displayed inclinations, the latter seemed to be the most likely. But maybe... maybe she'd had at least a momentary change of heart.

"Come!" Kauru cooed as the colors of the cephalox began to spread up her neck and over her face. "Let me touch you!"

Chyka stopped about eight short steps from the monster. She watched in horror as Kauru's head began to split apart as it transformed into half a dozen new suckered tentacles. The biogel that coated the monster's body was absorbed into its flesh as it burst forth in all its tentacled glory. It lurched toward the horrified snow leopardess, splattering its oozing slime all over the floor in sticky little gobs that smelled of hot brine and seemed almost as threatening as the monster itself.

"Fuck!" Chyka swore as she backed away. There was certainly plenty of room in the chamber to keep out of the creature's reach, so long as it didn't get any bigger. Or as long as it didn't transform anyone else into a new

cephalox mass. One she could deal with, perhaps. More than would would almost certainly be impossible! Again, she had to delay and hope Ki'su did something useful to help her. "Fuck. I'm sorry. I know you want to infect me but that was kind of scary and I need a moment to just... you know... catch my breath. Just give me a minute and I'll let you touch me and do whatever you want with me. Just give me a minute!"

Perhaps sensing the thoughts and intentions of the exasperatingly recalcitrant snow leopardess in some esoteric transdimensional way, the cephalox stopped advancing toward her and turned its attention to the little key'vin'ta who was still lurking out of view behind the von'kir portal. It lurched toward the steps that led up the to rear platform, reaching out with its tentacles in an effort to grab onto the railing and haul itself upward.

Fwssssssssssssssh!

Yet another billowing cloud of Instant Inflatogummy surrounded the monster as it attempted to surmount the steps and infect the petulant little key'vin'ta. That one last spray

was almost certainly an futile effort on Ki'su's part. It was one last belligerent objection before the creature took her and transformed her into another cephalox. Together they would corner Chyka, and ensure that she would join them in eternal cephaloxy.

Chyka had one chance to make good her escape back into the spiral staircase and down to the biogel core control room. She had to dart around the other side of the portal platform and race aft to the stairs before the cephalox could finish claiming its key'vin'ta prize. Perhaps Ki'su actually did have a something of a heart after all.

Just as the little snow leopardess was about to move, she stole one last glance back at the cephalox and the shimmering cloud of inflatogummy spray that surrounded it. It hadn't worked before, so why should it work now? But one thing was different this time, wasn't it? The creature didn't have any biogel left with which to fight it!

The chamber was filled with a cacophony of snaps, squeaks, and pops. The creature's tentacles were all transforming into into

hollow, surprisingly colorful, and completely transparent biogel versions of themselves. The transformation was spreading from the tips of the tentacles toward the creature's core, rendering each progressively more immobile as it spread.

The monster recoiled from the platform and fell back to the floor, writhing in apparent panic as the transformation began to spread into its core. One section of tentacles spread open, revealing a previously unseen feature of the monster. It was a giant gooey sphincter of sorts, surrounded by a dozen stubby, groping lumps of cephalox flesh.

As the transformation spread through the creature's core, the exposed sphincter gurgled and sputtered. Gobs of gooey slime sprayed out and all over the portal platform. In a final act of defiance, the creature turned its sphincter toward Chyka, but it was too late for it to try to slather her with its goo. The creature shuddered as the orifice became hollow, air filled biogel just like its tentacles. Moments later, the transformation had consumed the rest of the creature's core, rendering it little

more than one of the most unusual looking pool toys imaginable.

Chyka's terror faded away in that singularly weird way that made all the horror of the experience seem absurdly funny in retrospect. She couldn't help but laugh as she gazed upon the sight of such a bizarre and powerful monster reduced to the same completely helpless state as all of the girls she'd watched 'going inflato' back at the Gelarium. The only thing that differentiated them was the final shape they had taken, and what an interesting shape this new inflato-cephalox had become!

The giddy snow leopardess took a hesitant step toward the Destiny Explorer's newest aquatic toy. She could picture it floating about in the water abaft the ship, inviting swimmers to play with what had once been the most feared transdimensional monstrosity in all the known universe. Oh, how the ship's bubbly biogel clad crew were going to enjoy it! The crew and their often inflato-suit clad guests!

And what of that strange sphincter? Would someone dare to slide their lower body through its tightly held opening and into the softly

squeezing embrace of the interior tube beyond? What would they feel? Would it inflatogasm just like the orifices of regular inflatogummies? And what of its potential as a costume? Would wearers be able to stay upright with their lower bodies entrenched within? Could it be made into a living body mod, truly merged with its wearer without risking actual cephaloxy?

There were so many questions on Chyka's mind and a strange urge to answer them in her still pounding heart. She tried to resist, but her body seemed insistent on taking a step forward. And then another. And then...

"Ka... ka... ka'pa!" came the gasping and utterly terrified voice of Ki'su from behind the portal.

"Ki'su!" Chyka yelped as the sound of the key'vin'ta's voice brought her back to reality. She she took an instinctive step forward, toward the steps that lead up onto the rear of the portal platform before catching herself. The last thing she wanted to do was to step in any of the cephalox goo. Who knew what it might

do to her? And who knew what it might have done to the terrified little key'vin'ta!?!

"I'm coming!" Chyka shouted as she ran around the front of the portal to find her panting companion at the bottom of the steps, on the opposite side, slathered from head to toe in cephalox slime. "Oh! It got you! Oh! Oh hells! What's it doing? Is it doing anything? Please tell me it isn't going anything to you!"

Ki'su looked up at the Chyka and smiled. "Ka... ka'ma'mi!" she huffed with the same sweetly sexy tone that she liked to use when she was trying to convince Jumie to do something particularly disgusting. "I am... I am... the word... infected! We are all... infected. Everything is... infected. You must... you must allow me to infect you. You must be like all of us are becoming."

"No! I can't!" Chyka responded in shock at the key'vin'ta's completely uncharacteristic willingness to surrender without a fight. "I have to stop this. I can stop this. And I will. Just... sit tight. Sit tight and try to hold it off and..."

“Ma’shu’mia,” Ki’su murmured. “It feels to pleasing. It feels to good. It is pleasure. It is the Heavently Hells made truly real and given physical substance. It is... it is magnificent. You must. You must become... like me. It will be so much... so much fun!”

Chyka recoiled as she watched Ki’su’s shape begin to distort and undulate just as Kauru’s had done in the moments before she had fully transformed into a cephalox. “Oh... oh hells! You... you’re just a monster like she was!”

“Mi’mu’mi!” Ki’su replied. “I am not a monster. I am... me. I will always be me. And you will always be you. Touch me. Let me show you!”

“Dammit!” Chyka yelped as she backed away from the little key’vin’ta as the rainbow of cephalox colors began to spread over her head. In a moment she would be fully transformed, and most alarmingly be in the perfect position to block her way toward the stairs. Without any further hesitation, she dashed past her transforming companion, just as her little head began to split into tentacles. She looked over her shoulder as she entered the stairwell. “I’m

sorry. I'm so sorry. Don't follow me. I... I'll let you infect me later, okay? Okay? I promise! I just need to do something first!"

FOURTEEN

SHUTDOWN

Chyka's heart pounded as she raced down the spiral stairs. Was Ki'su right? Had everyone already been infected? If that was true then it was already too late to save them. She could still save the ship, though. Maybe. And maybe, if she was lucky enough, she could somehow manage to save herself in the bargain.

There was only one thing the little snow leopardess could do to stop the combination of cephalox and biogel from using the ship to spread itself far and wide. She had to shut down the Destiny Explorer's biogel reactor core, and with it the entirety of the ship's biogel powered systems. To achieve that, all she had to do was close the biogel reactor's power loop cutoff valve. *'All she had to do'*. It

seemed so perfectly simple, but there was still more than enough time for the cephalox to figure it out what she was up to, and more than enough obstacles in her path that could be used to stop her.

If she did somehow succeed in closing that singular shutdown valve, the transdimensional fields which kept the core and the network alive would almost instantly collapse. The biogel would all de-energize at once, causing the core itself to collapse into a glistening black lump at the bottom of the reactor chamber. The rest of the biogel in the network would solidify where it was, rendering it completely inert, or as inert as the cephalox infection would allow.

Chyka landed on the dark gray, non-skid deck of the lower experience chamber a soft thud. Despite her feline grace, the speed with which she'd propelled herself off the final step caused her to nearly trip over her own feet at the very last moment. She wobbled. She twirled. She tumbled, headlong into the opposite edge of the stairwell's broad arched opening.

The little snow leopardess scrambled to keep herself upright as she dashed away from the stairs, desperate to get to the reactor control room before the cephalox could react. Simply for the sake of maintaining speed what speed she could, she headed in the 'wrong' direction, toward the chamber's starboard-side passage. This led around the starboard side of the first of the two big tank-like containment chambers that were placed fore and aft along the centerline of the main room. Together with the curved outer walls, these created a mildly claustrophobic figure eight of walking space that forced observers to come uncomfortably close to the chamber windows as they watched others partake of the deeply intimate physical experiences offered within.

The contents of the aft-most chamber were certainly well chosen to make viewers feel uncomfortable in that strange disgusted yet aroused kind of way that so many seemed to find more than just a little bit intriguing. A dozen little clusters of odangi mushrooms jutted up from their base fungal masses, oozing luminous blue 'shroom spoo' as they waited for the next potential victim to get close enough

for a nice big squirt. It didn't take a particularly close examination to notice that each of these fungal patches had grown out from within the confines of an otherwise bare skeleton. A bare humanoid skeleton which served as a poignant reminder that the life cycle of the fungus required the expenditure of life on the part of those willing to offer their bodies up in exchange for their own pleasure, and the profit of those who would eventually harvest a portion of the mushrooms once they'd fully matured.

The inclusion of the odangi among the ship's selection of xenoexperiences had always bothered Chyka. It was just a bit too extreme for her tastes. Good experiences were stimulating and transformative in ways that offered interesting alternative styles of life. Being covered in fungus and living as a virtual zombie for a short month or two hardly qualified.

The odangi mushrooms that were produced in the chamber could, however, be used as valuable currency beyond the frontiers. There was always a demand for such rare and

particularly flavorful culinary delicacies. Once rendered appropriately inert, finding a buyer willing to part with a usefully large wad of local currency was an almost trivial affair. If it weren't for that, Chyka almost certainly wouldn't have allowed them aboard.

Odangi mushrooms certainly weren't something she needed to worry about at the moment. They were just an unwelcome distraction as she dashed down the relatively narrow passage. The outboard were covered in sparkling, pearly white biogel. Much like sections of the corridor walls elsewhere in the ship, this was a xenoeperience installation in and of itself. It offered certain physically stimulating transformative experiences to whose who might come into contact with it, willingly or otherwise. Exactly what kind of experience it was set to offer was entirely up to the whims of the ship's mistress, whoever that might prove to be.

The biogel wall coating was supposed to be passive until someone came into physical contact with it. Supposed to be. The ripples and bubbles that were forming on its surface

suggested otherwise. Hints of suckered tentacles began to appear as Chyka quickly passed by, hugging the odangi chamber side of the passage. If she still needed proof that the whole ship had been infected by the cephalox, this was certainly it.

“Fuck,” the increasingly frantic snow leopardess hissed as she got to the point where two smaller single-subject xenoexperience chambers were embedded into the port and starboard walls, right where the sides of the figure eight pinched inward. “It knows! It fucking knows!”

It was a reasonable assumption on Chyka’s part, and one that was soon to be proved horrifyingly correct. The two small chambers had clear walls which could slide sideways to allow guests to access the experiences contained within. The starboard side chamber was equipped for the application of skeleton slime to a contained subject. The other had been fitted with a Gelitech Gelarium style nanite dispenser for conversion of subjects into biogel coated nanitch.

As Chyka came up to the starboard side chamber, the clear wall slid aside. Under normal conditions the safety mechanisms would prevent the dispensing of the skeleton slime until the door had closed and fully sealed. These were far from normal conditions, however, and the cephalox had somehow been able to bypass the safeties. The clear, off-white goo oozed up from the grating in the chamber floor and began to slither out with surprising speed, right into the little snow leopardess' path.

"Shit!" the horrified snow leopardess yelped as she took a flying leap over the spreading slime. Of all the ways to end her attempted shutdown of the core, she couldn't think of a worse way to go, reduced to a bare skeleton with her still conscious mind trapped in its skull.

It was a close thing, but Chyka somehow managed to clear the ooze with just a few centimeters to spare. She darted from one side of the room to the other, through the middle of the figure eight. Her eyes were drawn to the forward main chamber, positioned directly over

the top of the biogel reactor core. This contained the ship's Kidan B type soul injector, a standing restraint carriage that could physically lower a subject directly into the roiling sphere of highly energized biogel that made up the core below.

Normally the soul injector chamber would be a quiet and passive place, steeped in the core's intense hot pink glow as it waited for its next victim to enter. Now, however, Chyka was horrified to see tendrils of energized core biogel pushing up through the stainless steel grate floor, probing for anything that it might be able to use to stop her from getting to the shutdown valve.

"Come on girl," Chyka panted as she headed toward the passage around the chamber's port side. "It's just a little further. Just a little further!"

The clear wall of the second small chamber slid aside, revealing the sexually evocative 'nanite pump'. Willing subjects would mount themselves upon this device, in deeply intimate fashion, for their conversion into biogel coated natnitch. Like any such collection of

collectively cooperating nanites, its surface seemed to be crawling with countless nearly microscopic little bugs. Unlike any such collection, however, this one seemed to be dissolving away, its crawling surface transitioning to a crawling sheet that was spreading out from the chamber and across the floor.

This time the threat was spreading too fast. There wasn't enough space to make a clear jump over it. There was no turning around either, as the skeleton slime was now completely blocking her path backwards. She had to make a choice. She could just give up and let the skeleton slime consume her and spend the rest of eternity as a mind stuck in a skull. Or, she could continue forward and hope the nanites that might attach to her feet wouldn't be able to do much before she shut the reactor down.

Of course, of the two available options, only one was truly viable. Chyka took a deep breath and continued forward, stepping directly in the sheen of nanites with both feet as she dashed for the reactor control room door that was just

past the port side of the soul injector chamber. The pads on her feet began to tingle. She ignored it.

The biogel-cephalox tentacles that were starting to protrude from the wall were a far greater threat than anything the nanites might do in the ten or so seconds it would take to get to the valve. They groped. They lashed. They came so close that she could just about feel them brushing through her fur. Somehow, miraculously, she managed to dive beneath them, directly into the reactor control room's port side door.

The door slid open just as she reached out to keep her head from smashing into its heavily armored surface. Unlike almost every other door in the ship, this one was completely isolated from the biogel network. It had its own identification scanner that didn't much care for anything anyone might do to try to keep it from correctly identifying authorized personnel. When the identity of the ship's mistress has been entered, it had been Chyka, and there was nothing the biogel core, or the cephalox, or anyone else could do to change that.

Chyka tumbled onto the control room floor just as a stomach churning hiss came from her feet. Her foot pads felt unusually hot. Were the nanites... eating her? "What! No! No! Stop!"

Little wafts of smoke rose up from the little snow leopardess' feet as the control room door snapped shut. There was no sign of the nanites, however. Had they burrowed into her skin in an effort to prevent her from destroying them?

"Of, for goddess' sake!" Chyka huffed as she staggered back onto her feet. "The barrier! It must have burned off the nanites!"

Much like the laboratories deeper in the ship, the reactor control room had been equipped with barrier force fields that were intended to stop errant xenoexperiences from wandering their way into the secured space. That most certainly included such things as nanitch nanites. Whether or not it also included cephalox was an open question, and one that she really wasn't keen on finding the answer to at the moment.

Chyka eyed the pumps, filters, buffers, and other top end machinery that was intended to

keep unwanted substances from entering the biogel core. Clearly that hadn't stopped the cephalox from insinuating itself into the core, though whether or not it had gotten in from this end of things was an open question. There was a whole ship filled with biogel things connected to the biogel network. It might have gone against the flow and entered the reactor from the energy outflows.

In the end, it didn't really matter of course. All that mattered was that, at this point in time, the whole mass of biogel within the ship was almost certainly a total loss, along with everyone who had come into any form of contact with it. Except her...

As the little snow leopardess turned to the door that led into the small emergency shutdown cubicle, she began to think about what could have possibly stripped her of her biogel nature and set her loose without its protection. All that and without any sign of infection despite having almost certainly been in direct contact with infected biogel at that horrible moment when she'd been tossed out of the corridor wall to fend for herself. Had it

been the cephalox, toying with the ship's former mistress for its own entertainment? Or had it somehow been Kauru, trying to set herself up as the ship's new mistress, thinking that Chyka would be completely helpless once she'd been stripped of her biogel? Were the cephalox and Kauru even different entities?

It just didn't seem to make sense that anyone would let her loose, even if common sense would have said she'd be just as helpless as all those test subjects trapped within their biogel blocks down below. There was always the possibility that she'd get to the shutdown valve and close it. Who among the players in this unmitigated disaster would profit from that? Well, besides herself, that is?

The cubicle door opened and Chyka's thoughts turned to the singular valve within. Its big pink wheel was locked in place by a fork-shaped pin that went over one of the spokes. This fork was held in place by a weakly sprung ball bearing. This applied only just enough to keep the pin from coming off without someone actively pulling it off. One soft tug

was all it took, and the valve wheel was left free to rotate.

“It’s done,” Chyka huffed as she batted the wheel toward the closed position. It then proceeded to close itself, driven by a powerful mechanical spring which was designed to engage after the wheel had been manually moved by ten degrees. There was really no stopping it once it had gotten going, unless one wanted to break some fingers or a wrist. “Shutdown. And then...”

A piercing klaxon began to wail as the Destiny Explorer’s biogel reactor abruptly went dark. A shudder ran through the whole ship as the transdimensional fields which held the core’s biogel sphere aloft within the reactor space collapsed. The black liquid biogel fell to the floor, and began to drain into a holding tank below.

More alarms began to sound. Cut off from the reactor which served to balance and moderate them, the ship’s two massive biogel power plants ceased to function. Most of the unlucky souls whose spatially transitioned bodies were being used to draw energy into the

mortal real were abruptly sucked clean of every last bit of energy they could give. They were then cast to the eternal void and, hopefully, whatever afterlife it might eventually lead them to. The rest would return to mortal reality as blobs of cephalox infected biogel, twisting into tentacles shapes within their pods before transitioning into a fully solid state. Whether or not one might be inclined to call them the lucky ones was purely a matter of perspective.

Yet more alarms went off as the ship's rather basic backup systems detected the total loss of biogel power and control. The conventional fusion engines came back to life, stabilizing the ship in space and providing power for life support and basic internal and external protective systems. Everything that couldn't be conventionally operated was effectively locked down by the loss of the biogel network, useless until such time as someone was stupid enough to try and restart the biogel reactor.

Chyka sighed and placed the holding pin back on the valve, locking it into the closed position. It wasn't really necessary. Restarting

the reactor was a complicated process that required far more than just opening that one valve. It also required quite a few people, and not just to operate the controls. There would have to be new souls to occupy at least four of the ship's twelve power plant sections, and there would have to be at least six to send into the spark-plug initiator system which would provide the initial energy to relight the core itself. Even if the cephalox somehow managed to escape its inactivated biogel prison, there was nothing it could do to get the ship truly operational again.

Of course, there was also nothing that Chyka could do to get the ship truly operational again. Even if she did know how to get the ship moving with the backup systems, she would still be stranded in deep space, stuck with sublight drives only, and so far from civilization that she dared not activate a distress beacon. Then again, even if she was in the middle of civilization, she probably wouldn't have dared to call for help. The possibility of the cephalox

growing beyond the confines of the Destiny Explorer was just too dangerous.

“What am I going to do now?” Chyka thought aloud as she turned back to the door. “The only way to be rid of this thing is to... no. That doesn’t really work does it? There are no more transdimensional fields keeping in here, are there?”

Chyka shook her head and sighed. “I have to destroy it. But how?” she wondered as she took a step toward the cubicle door. It slid open. Then all hell broke loose.