

GELITECH

SEASON 2 - EPISODE 7

THE LONG DESCENT

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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DESTINY

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THE LONG DESCENT

“Be careful,” Tachi whispered as she led Chyka along an excruciatingly narrow mountainside trail amid the pre-dawn darkness. “It’s a long way down, and the last thing you want to have to do with that biogel ass of yours right now is climb all the way back up here.”

Chyka looked down toward the place where the foaming Dari River passed down its deeply foreboding valley. Its roaring mass of flood swollen water shimmered and sparkled in the subtle light of the waning crescent moon. She could just about see the rocky outcrop where the ancient Dari Temple once stood. If she looked hard enough, she could swear that there was a very dim, very purple glow coming from a place atop it.

Chyka looked up to the sky, hoping for some reassuring glimpse of the Destiny Omega. They were supposed to be mounting a more obvious expedition elsewhere. A distraction to keep the cultists' attention away from the two women who were precariously clinging to the side of the mountain. They were seeking the entrance to mine, but not one of Brightstone's. This was the entrance to an old, marginally successful gold mine, which Tachi had some evidence had been intersected by the former at some point. If that was the case, and with some luck, and perhaps Chyka's virtually arbitrary ability to change shape, they might be able to get into Brightstone completely unnoticed. Assuming the cultists hadn't already found it, that is.

The little snow leopardess looked up to the sky. It was quite a testament to the successful management of light pollution on Maria that she could see the whole, magnificently colorful breadth of the Maiae, despite major urban centers

being located on either side of the mountain range. She could even see the faint trail of stars which led from the Maiae to the Kinae, pulled away from the latter as the two galaxies passed by one another. It was a bridge of sorts. Tales of spacefarers old even suggested that some had traveled it, bringing back stories of alien vistas and monstrosities even more incredibly bizarre than those they'd encountered back home.

Again, Chyka looked for some sign of the Destiny Omega. Besides the stars, the sky was uncharacteristically empty. Ships typically passed over Dari all the time. Now there were none. The military was keeping the sky clear. Just in case. But just in case... what?

Perhaps the purple glow at the site of the old temple was the team from the Destiny Omega. It seemed like a good place to stage the distraction. It was the obvious entry point, after all. Then again, it was so close to where they were looking

for that one particular gold mine that it seemed almost sure to bring attention to their presence.

“There,” Tachi whispered. “Just up ahead. Do you see it?”

Chyka looked down the path. She couldn’t see much in the darkness. Trees. Vines. And a couple of odd branches that crossed the path at a downward angle, into a depression in the mountain face. “What is it?”

“The old headframe,” Tachi replied. “Never could figure out where they put the hoist for this one. Then again, I’ve never been inside. I’ve got a sneaking suspicion they put it in the mine itself, which would have been difficult, but to be perfectly honest, would have been pretty smart as well.”

“Where would they have put it inside? Wouldn’t it have gotten in the way?” Chyka asked, thinking back to the basic diagrams that Tachi had

skimmed through before they'd been dropped on the mountain path. This was supposed to be what the miners called an incline shaft. A steeply sloping shaft with just enough room for a pair of tracks for the ore carrying skip car, and a ladder beside it. The cable which hoisted the skip car ran down from the wheel on the headframe, between the skip car tracks.

“Above the skip, I'd guess,” Tachi replied. “There's no real waste rock pile at the top of the shaft, but there are a few that haven't been washed away down at the bottom of the valley. Adits are all collapsed though, but I think at least one of them would have been the main haulage for this mine. That's going to be the level where the hoist would have been located.”

“Why have it sticking out the side of the mountain?” Chyka inquired as the pair ducked under the first of the branches, which turned out to be a very unstable looking timber, roughly square hewn to dimensions more than a half of a meter

meter each side. At least it looked roughly hewn. Given its apparent age, and the soggy, rotten shape it was in, it could well have been precision milled when it was new.

“As an escape route,” Tachi replied. “And for ease of maintenance. And they probably had the idea of dumping waste rock into the valley off this level too. Doesn’t look like they did, though.”

Chyka nodded as the pair were presented with what to her proved to be a very unexpected sight. On the ground, between the rotting legs of the head frame, was a low concrete lip, upon which had been built pair of heavy wooden doors, like a basement bulkhead, only larger. Each door had a rusty air vent built into it, shaped to keep rain from getting in.

“This is one of the reasons I’m sure this mine connects to Brightstone,” Tachi noted as she tested the door to the left. “At some point when Brightstone was expanding in this direction, they

came up here and built this to keep the weather out. If we're lucky, they also rebuilt the ladders for use as an emergency exit.”

The rusty hinged crackled as the tigress lifted the door a few centimeters. There was nothing keeping it secure in place besides its own weight, and its weight was apparently far less substantial than its appearance might have suggested. Chyka walked around to the other side of the door to help the tigress lift it. It moved in fits and starts as the rusty hinges broke free, but they were able to get it open with relative ease.

Much to Chyka's surprise, a cold wind blasted out of the darkness beneath the door. Even more to her surprise, and considerable consternation, the Advanced ChemRad unit that her companion was carrying began to show an elevated level of radiation. It was only half again above normal background levels, but that was more than enough to raise the tigress' eyebrow.

“Interesting,” Tachi noted. “None of these old gold mines encountered radioactive ore bodies. More evidence that this one does in fact intersect with Brightstone. That and the air coming out. Though that might just mean that there’s another open entry to this one somewhere. Maybe one of those adits down in the valley isn’t as completely closed off as I thought.”

“You said before that air flow was good, right?” Chyka asked as the tigress gestured toward the old, awfully insubstantial looking steel ladder that led down into the black depths.

“Yes,” Tachi replied. “But this elevated radiation level is... a bit concerning. I’m not getting reaction byproduct readings though. So... perhaps it’s just granite dust getting stirred up by the air flow. Best be putting on a respirator regardless. Silicosis is no laughing matter.”

“We don’t need respirators,” Chyka noted. “We’ll just let the biogel cover us completely, and

it'll exclude anything that isn't normal breathable gasses."

Tachi grimaced. "It was hard enough to convince myself to let you people dress me up in this... permanent coating of good. Now you want me to let it cover my head too?"

"That part isn't permanent," Chyka replied. "It's biogel's way of protecting its wearer from things like radioactive dust. Heck, it can even catalyze the oxygen out of the carbon dioxide you exhale and properly dose it if it can't get breathable air from the outside."

Tachi shook her head and sighed. "I really don't..."

"Trust me," Chyka replied. "It's far safer than the respirator. And did I mention that it'll give you senses so highly enhanced that we won't need lights. Lights that could give us away to those cultist freaks?"

Tachi huffed. “Fine. Fine. I’ll do it. I just...”

“Don’t know how?” Chyka asked.

“Yeah,” Tachi replied. “That.”

“Let me show you,” Chyka said, reaching out to touch the glistening blackness which coated the tigress’ shoulder. “Relax. Imagine it spreading up over your chin. Yeah. Just like that.”

Tachi didn’t relax. Instead, the little snow leopardess could feel her tense up. She was holding her breath. Clenching her teeth. Waiting for the terror of being asphyxiated by the biogel to come upon her.

It was only natural, of course. Chyka knew exactly what it felt like to be fully surrounded by biogel for the very first time. It felt unnatural. Terrifying, even. But once you got past what your

own mind was saying it should feel like, and started feeling what it actually felt like...

The blackness liquefied and spread up the tigress' face in response to Chyka's prompting. In a virtual instant, her head was completely encapsulated in a featureless, effeminately head-like shape. She shuddered a few times. Then she seemed to relax.

That... that... the tigress' words found their way directly in to Chyka's mind.

Was pretty scary, wasn't it? the little snow leopardess replied as she let her own biogel surround her head in the same fashion. She, being a being of pure biogel, didn't actually need to do it. If it would help make her companion comfortable, though, then there was certainly no harm in it.

Yeah, Tach responded.

It always is the very first time, Chyka noted. But once you feel how nice it feels, then it's pretty different, isn't it?

It is, Tachi answered with a mental tone that came across to the little snow leopardess as being one short step away from infatuation. It really... really is.

Chyka bit her mental lip and hope that the tigress' newfound appreciation for biogel's physical qualities wouldn't cause any undue distractions. Or perhaps the tigress was just a bit overwhelmed by her vastly enhanced senses. Vastly enhanced senses which included vastly enhanced responses to Chyka's own, biogel steeped pheromones. Which came back around to the physical qualities of biogel.

If the tigress got too interested in the feel of her biogel coating, that was going to get Chyka all hot and bothered. And if Chyka got all hot and bothered, that was going to get the tigress even

more interested. And so on, and so forth, until they were getting it on together in some dark, damp corner of the mine, bound up in a single blob of biogel, and no doubt ending in Chyka adding yet another wife to her collection. Which honestly didn't seem like all that bad an idea. In fact, given the circumstances, it seemed almost certain that she was going to be unifying with the tigress at some point, if for no other reason than to save her the fate of spending the rest of eternity captive within the world's living rock.

I'll go first, Chyka thought to the tigress as she shook off the imagined union and forced herself back to the here and now. If I fall, I can just shape shift into something that can get back up and help you get past whatever it was that caused me to slip.

Okay, Tachi replied. Just be really careful. The rungs aren't thick, and they're going to get damp as we go down. I just hope none of that slime made its way up this far. That could get...

Don't worry about that, Chyka answered. I already have some experience with dealing with that kind of slime. It won't be a problem for either of us. Trust me.

If you say so, Tachi responded.

Chyka nodded and knelt down on the concrete rim around the shaft opening. She hung her legs over and tested the top rung of the old steel ladder. Feels pretty solid. Should hold us nicely. Going to have to shift some of this gear around, though. Do we really need the hover descenders? They're awfully heavy.

There's no guarantee that we're going to have ladders all the way down, Tachi observed. And we can use them to carry us, or our gear, over gaps if we have to.

Got it, Chyka replied. Well... here goes nothing. Let's hope there's a way into Brightstone,

because otherwise, this is going to an awful lot of effort with no result.

“Alpha Team has effected entry,” Major Eld declared. “Panther Team go! Repeat, Panther Team GO!”

“Panther Team is on the rock!” the voice of Chena, the Destiny Omega’s boisterous chief security lynx, came through the speakers of Destiny Omega’s command center. “Repeat, Panther Team is on the rock!”

“Standby Combat Team,” Lady Anawe as she watched the ad-hoc combat engineering team debark the pair of assault shuttles, onto the surface of the ancient Dari Temple site. “Prepare to launch fighters.”

“Combat team standing by,” came the voice of Commander Nax through the speaker.

“Fighters ready to launch,” the voice of the Destiny Omega’s fighter pod squadron leader, the incomparably beautiful violet elf-eared singer Myalli declared.

“Well, the bait’s all set,” Major Eld noted. “Are you sure they’re going to bite?”

“They will,” Lady Anwae replied with a confident nod. “They have no choice. We know their secret. Now, they are aware that we know at least part of their secret. We just need to keep it looking like we don’t know all of it. They’ll think they have time to take measures to deactivate the Omega Core... and there’s really only one way they can achieve that.”

“Black Cat is on the line,” the Destiny Omega’s leopardess communications officer, Chia Kanatti declared. “Twelve targets. Four from the northeast, five from the northwest, two from the west and one coming in from the southeast. All with

suspected Makta associations. All coming in spicy.”

“Twelve on one?” the Destiny Omega’s new first officer, the tan elf-eared Shai’el asked from her post guiding the ship itself from the flight control room forward of the command center.

“We need to cut that number down a bit,” Dannik, the Destiny Omega’s brute of a taurian tactical officer remarked. “Even if they are just lightly armed civvies, they can still dog-pile and ram us. We don’t have the firepower to prevent that.”

“Agreed,” Lady Anwae replied. “Black Lady to Black Cat, request you redirect the northwest group to less problematic activities. The longer you can hold them, the better.”

Be careful, Chyka thought as she did her best to keep a quick pace on the slimy old steel rung ladder. *These rungs are so slippery, even the biogel can't get a grip.*

Thankfully, the ladder wasn't even close to being vertical. It was more like seventy degrees. Steep, but not so steep that a slip would automatically mean tumbling all the way down the absurdly deep shaft. Even with her biogel enhanced senses, she couldn't see the bottom.

How deep is this shaft, anyway? Chyka asked as she spied the first of many tangles of dark, damp wood that seemed to surround the shaft on several levels. These began with a pair of heavily timbered tunnels, drifts, leading from either side of the shaft. Beyond these were large wooden walls, covering the upper part of a void that had been blasted above the shaft. A chute, hung down from this, over the skip tracks, no doubt to allow rock to be dumped into the skip car in a relatively controlled fashion.

If it wasn't extended by Brightstone, then a bit over two hundred meters in vertical elevation, Tachi replied. *That would bring us to Brightstone's three hundred, or thereabouts.*

That's all? Chyka asked. They were headed down to at least Brightstone's ninety-four hundred level. If it was going to be this hard just going down two hundred, then she couldn't even imagine how long it was going to take getting to their intended destination.

In meters, Tachi replied. *Fey'li Imperial mine levels are generally surveyed to an average vertical accuracy of one tenth of one meter. One decimeter. So for every meter in vertical depth, that's ten survey 'levels'.*

What level is this one? Chyka asked as she passed under the timber wall, with its chute.

Four hundred is the first drift level, if I recall correctly, Tachi replied. So we're forty meters from the top of the shaft. Looks in pretty good shape too. Hopefully it's the same all the way down.

Chyka wasn't sure what the normal standard was with respects to 'good shape' for an abandoned mine, but it didn't take more than a cursory examination of the sketchy timber work to make it very clear that it was very different than her own. Despite being sealed with a dark, waxy looking infusion, the timbers were looking worn, a bit rotten, and in more than a few places, suffering quite a bit from the pressure of the rock that was clearly trying to fill in the space that the miners had excavated. She could only imagine how little it might take to get one of those cracked timbers to break, and how massive a collapse just one broken support might trigger.

I figure we're going to hit the level of the main haulage adit at the twelve hundred, Tachi

remarked. *We'll see what the air feels like after that. My guess is nothing good. Then again, if there is good airflow after that... well, let's just say I'd be really curious as to where its coming from.*

The other entrances to Brightstone? Chyka inquired.

There are air doors all over the place down here, Tachi replied. They were all closed and locked when Brightstone was shut down.

Shi's people had to get in here somehow, Chyka noted. And they didn't do it down the Dari shaft.

I know, Tachi replied. But...

But what? Chyka questioned.

I don't know, Tachi responded with a mental sigh. I just... have a bad feeling about it. We're almost positive they didn't actually get in through

Brightstone. That just leaves that ancient temple shaft.

That's completely blocked up, Chyka responded.

Was, Tachi replied. We don't actually know if it still is, do we?

Well, that's what Panther Team is there to find out, right? Chyka responded with a mental shrug. Let's let them worry about their thing, and we'll worry about ours, okay?

I know, I know, Tachi answered. But when you've been in the mining business as long as I have, you know that the last thing you want to do when poking into a place like this is to do it without understanding the state of nearby workings. Even ones that don't seem directly related. You can think you're perfectly safe, then touch the wrong thing and wind up getting drowned or buried when someone does something

there that cascades into the mine that you're in. And considering that there's surely some people down here who are going to try and stop us... who knows what they might do deliberately.

Don't worry, Chyka replied. There's not much they can do to permanently harm us.

Speak for yourself, Tachi replied. I don't want to wind up stuck down here in a pile of rock for eternity.

You won't, Chyka replied. I have more than one way to make sure that we both get out. So don't worry about it. We'll both be fine.

Tachi shook her head as they both continued down the seemingly endless ladder. *I wish... I wish I could believe you.*

“Black Cat acknowledges,” Chia replied.

“Shields and weapons on line,” Lady Anwae ordered. “Helm, keep us low in the valleys. I don’t want any stray fire getting out of the immediate area.”

“Keep it down and dirty, aye!” Shai’el replied.

“We have the nearest target on sensors,” Dannik declared. “Twenty-four kilometers to the southeast, closing, five minutes to contact.”

“Launch fighters,” Lady Anwae ordered.

“Fighter launch sequence commencing,” Miyalli replied. “Let’s rock this!”

Twelve cubic frames hissed upward into Destiny Omega’s shuttle hangar, six in each of the long alcoves on each side. Each contained one of the ship’s biogel fighter pods, roughly three meter

diameter spheres, truncated on each side. At the back was a connection to the frame itself, while the top and front were open. A reclining seat was located inside, though there were no visible controls. The pods didn't need controls, of course. The pilots controlled them directly with their minds.

Glowing pink activated biogel rapidly filled the pod interiors, surrounding the chairs and the pilots in an all-encompassing encasement of thick, almost fizzy feeling liquid. It took only a few seconds. A few seconds more to adjust was all that was needed for the pods to be ready for flight.

The fighter pods wouldn't be particularly useful without weapons, of course. Fitted to the flats on each side of each pod were hemispheres which now filled with activated biogel themselves. These were beam projectors that could use the energy of the activated biogel to tap into each pilots connection between their mortal bodies and immortal, extra-dimensionally residing souls to

power their discharges. They were accurate and powerful for their size, but they came with certain risks. Every so often, a problem would arise. The beam projectors would ‘backfire’, with the end result being the deactivation of the biogel, and the physical subsumption of the pilot into the resulting solid mass of inert glistening blackness which would be left filling the pod.

Fighter pod pilots knew the risk. They didn’t seem to care. To them, it was just part of the game. If they lost, who cared? They could just be liquefied and made into something else, like a biogel suit to hug and caress the body of the next pilot to take their place in the roster.

One by one, the fighter pods detached from their mountings and advanced into the hanger proper. One by one, they turned toward the open hanger door. One by one, they silently shot out into the open sky.

The stage was set. The only question now was how the final game would play out.

Nine hundred level, Tachi noted as they passed the third drift level in the old gold mine. *I wish this shaft wasn't so steep. I've been in some that you can pretty much just walk down.*

That would have been to easy, wouldn't it? Chyka remarked with a smirk.

Suddenly, without any warning, there was a massive, thunderous boom. It was so impossibly loud that Chyka was sure it would have blown out both of their eardrums if the biogel hadn't been protecting them. In fact, it was so loud that she suspected it might have done far worse. The ground shook. Dust and debris rained down on them.

OUT!!! Tachi screeched as she started to scramble back up the slippery ladder. *GET OUT!!! NOW!!!*

What just happened? Chyka asked as she hesitated to follow. The mission was just too critical to abandon unless it was truly hopeless. *Was there a collapse?*

That wasn't a collapse! Tachi replied, just as a second thunderous explosion shook the ground. *Those are explosives! They're going to cave the whole place in!*

Chyka didn't need any further prompting. She followed the mining engineer back up the ladder and prayed they could get out of the mine before it fully caved in.

“What the fucking hell was that!?!” Chena shouted over the din of falling rocks and rushing

water. “Destiny Omega! This is Panther Team! We have multiple large underground explosions in the river bed to either side of the rock!”

“Lieutenant! The River!!!” a security trooper yelled from near the edge of their now very precarious position amid the collection of rubble that was so badly weathered that no one had realized it was one part of an ancient key’vin’ta temple. “LOOK!!!”

Chena darted toward the edge of the rock as the last of the large debris gave way to a cloud of dense dust. “Check for casualties!” she shouted over her shoulder as she came up beside the trooper and looked down into the river. Or, rather, she looked down into where the river should have been. “Oh... oh my GOD!”

Where the raging river had been running, there was now a deep, black pit. Water cascaded down into it, and no doubt from the pit into the vast maze of mine tunnels below. And foremost among

those would have been the very tunnels that Alpha Team was seeking to access.

“We have casualties!” a yell came from across the rock. “Two of our combat engineers are wounded! We need to get them evacuated! Now!”

“Destiny Omega!” Chena barked. “Abort mission! They’ve opened the mines up to the river! The river is flooding the mines! We have casualties! Send the shuttle back for medevac! Repeat, abort mission! Send medevac!”

Lady Anwae stood in silence, staring at the holographic images being projected above the command center operations table.

“Do we abort?” Major Eld asked.

“Target closing fast! Fighters engaging!” Dannik stated. “Second group of targets, four from

the northeast approaching. Contact in four minutes.”

“Yes,” Lady Anwae replied. “We have no other choice now. Inform Black Cat. All conventional options are now closed. Proceeding with Last Resort.”

Chyka followed Tachi back out into the open air. The dim morning light revealed the horror of the situation. The river, cascading down into pits to each side of the temple rock. The shuttles, flying down to evacuate those still atop it.

“Oh... oh goddess!” Tachi gasped as the biogel pulled away from her face. “What... what have they done?!? What are we going to do?”

Chyka knew exactly what they were going to have to do. There was no other option. Someone was going to have to go down the Dari shaft.

Someone with the power to resist the purple slime. With the power to pass through it, and force the Omega biogel into the substance of the Old Three Core by force. To force it into submission. To subsume it into the Unity. To...

“We have to get back to the Destiny Omega,” Chyka said, turning to her comm. “Destiny Omega, this is Alpha Team requesting evacuation.”

“Unable to evacuate,” came the reply.

Return by your own power, Lady Anwae’s voice came directly into Chyka’s mind. And quickly. We may not have much time.

“What do we do? How do we get back?” Tachi questioned as the first sounds of battle echoed through the valley. Sharp buzzes. Hisses. Whines. “Oh... oh shit! There’s no way back, is there? We’re trapped! They’re going to find us... and...”

Chyka reached out to touch the tigress' cheek.
“There is a way... but...”

“But what?” Tachi answered in a tone that suggested that she could at least imagine what sort of reply was coming.

“Will you... will you... marry me?” Chyka asked.

“Will I... what? What are you... since when is this the time...” Tachi stammered.

“Marry me,” Chyka replied. “And I can bring you with me. It’s the only way. I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“I...” Tachi responded with a shocked look on her face.

“Will you?” Chyka asked. “Because it really is the only way.”

“I... I... I guess,” Tachi replied with audible hesitation.

It was hardly a certain reply, but in the moment Chyka had to consider it sufficient. She let the biogel flow from her hand, onto the tigress’ face. Over the tigress’ head. Into the biogel that covered her body.

Chyka embraced the shuddering tigress. Her whole body melted into the blob that surrounded the tigress’ magnificently warm and soft body. The urge to play was almost insatiable, but she just didn’t have the time. She pressed inward, melting the tigress into more liquid biogel. In a flash, the tigress was gone. Gone, that is, save her now captive mind.

The blob of liquid biogel collapsed into a pool of slowly solidifying blackness as a roar came forth from the old mine shaft. Water and wooden debris, driven by pressure, blasted up the shaft and sent the doors that covered it flying down into the

valley below. The rotten old head frame virtually disintegrated, chunks falling onto the blackness, squeezing the thickening goo and splattering it all over the nearby rocks.

Chyka and Tachi didn't feel themselves being crushed. They weren't there anymore. They were back aboard the Destiny Omega, as the former tried desperately to make a new body for herself in the first unoccupied mass of biogel that she found there to latch onto.

Lady Anwae grimaced as the ships quartet of biogel beam projectors blasted away at the four small freighters. They had been rigged as makeshift attack ships, with civilian grade beam lances and defensive missiles. They weren't much of a threat to the Destiny Omega, so long as they kept their distance and didn't try to ram the ship. Given everything that had already taken place,

however, they were almost surely going to try the latter at some point.

The only saving grace to the situation is that the two bigger ships that had been approaching from the west had chickened out and headed back the way that they'd come. That was cold comfort, all things considered. The four little freighters had much more powerful shields than anyone would have expected. The biogel beams were slowly whittling them down, but if they couldn't find a way to dish out catastrophic damage in a hurry, there wasn't going to be any way to set up the required maneuver for the Last Resort, let alone conduct it.

“Target disabled!” came Miyalli's voice through the command center speakers. “On our way back to assist!”

“That's a relief,” Major Eld remarked.

“Not good enough,” Dannik grunted. “I don’t know who got these Makta crooks their military class shield generators, but they should be strung up for it.”

“Don’t you have torpedoes?” Major Eld asked. “I thought this ship classed as a military grade cruiser?”

“Sarva didn’t think it was wise,” Dannik replied. “Maybe he’ll think again once this is over.”

“Would someone please bring this to some kind of conclusion,” came the voice of the ship’s Chief Engineer over the speaker. “Keeping the shields at full power is starting to push the curves into the red. I’m running out of volunteers to replace the ones that are getting burned out and flushed in the power pods! If we lose more than a few more, we’re going to start losing overall power. A few more than that and we could have a burnout cascade!”

“Dammit,” Lady Anwae huffed. “If we lose power, the core will deactivate and... and... dammit! They planned for this, didn’t they?”

“Don’t you have backup power?” Major Eld questioned. “Please tell me you have backup power!”

“We do,” Lady Anwae replied. “Enough to fly the ship in non-combat condition. But not enough to keep the shields up and maneuver in a gravity well.”

“So we’re gonna lose?” Chia asked.

“Nothing’s a certainty,” Lady Anwae said as the Desinty Omega descended even lower toward the Dari river, heading west, away from the temple rock, the four small freighters in close pursuit.

“Coming up on the Deka Bend,” Shai’el’s voice came through the speaker. “Gonna go wide, maybe get one of them to hit the wall.”

Lady Anwae nodded in silence. At this point, getting creative was just about all they could do to keep the playing field level. It wasn’t like Sarva was going to do anything like set up an ambush on their behalf and risk blowing the cover of the whole operation...

“Turning in... oh... OH GODDESS! UP! UP! PULL UP!” Shai’el shrieked.

The Destiny Omega pulled hard up and in the resulting confusion arced far closer along the side of the valley wall than Shai’el had intended. The bottom of the ship clipped rocks and broke off the peaks of a dozen pine trees as it tried to avoid the massive, glistening black edifice that had appeared out of nowhere, nestled down above the river, just around the bend.

The dim light of the early morning became daylight for a brief moment, there in the secluded valley. In an instant, one, and then two of the pursuing ships were completely obliterated, along with a massive chunk of the valley wall beyond them.

Caught in the valley, confronted so suddenly, and traveling too fast to escape by climbing, they'd been sitting ducks. The remaining two, who'd at least had time to pull around the inside of the corner, didn't last much longer. In the ten seconds that passed, more than two hundred rounds of cruiser and destroyer grade beam lance and plasma cannon fire turned them into confetti.

The command center and flight control crew of the Destiny Omega stared slack jawed at their screens. The amorphous looking, glossy black shape itself was simply too big to have no shown up on their sensors. And then there was the massive power source putting out such a massive

amount of heat that should have been impossible to miss. Unless...

TO BE CONTINUED...