

DESTINY EXPLORER

A GELITECH STORY

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue	A New Beginning	4
1	White Sails	11
2	Curious Tails	35
3	Mischief	44
4	Transdimensional	66
5	Anomalous	80
6	Artifice	88
7	Chaos	100
8	Captured	125
9	The Library [NEW]	143

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 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 think 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 possibly 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?" Nanya 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 cougaress 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 cougaress 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 keep 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 the 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 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. Nenyra 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 lightning 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 do 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 an 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

1 Pronounced “Wee-uh”.

a chance to understand exactly what was happening to her body. One moment she was 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 that contained potentially destructive last resort sterilization and decontamination systems. The middle chamber was a larger dressing room where the occasional non-bio-gel-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 conformal 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 wiggling 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 think 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 life, Wyoh, or what was left of her, was pulled into the monster by her completely subsumed head. Much to 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 were 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 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 of 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. She wore it through her time at the Mashiva Mariners' University. She explored all of its less perilous forms and potentials. Once reversible body mods had become available, they had become a virtual addiction. She 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 she 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 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.