

THE COMPLETE  
GELITECH

VOLUME 3  
2<sup>nd</sup> SEASON

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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# EXISTENTIAL

The wind howled outside as a light, early spring rain pattered gently against the tall windows that looked out over the Gelarium's modest public garden. The big, puffy looking leyka trees rustled and shook as the stiff breeze gusted through their shiny little spoon shaped leaves. Down below, pathway lights twinkled amid the shrubbery. Here and there, dark shapes rose up from stone pedestals, biogel 'statues' standing in silent witness to the many souls who frequented the gardens in nicer weather, visitors who all too often made their way into the Gelarium itself and partook of its many physically transformative biogel delights.

Beyond the garden loomed the soft, eerie

yellow-green glow of Anwae Arena. The massive, former shipyard hangar was illuminated by vertical strips that ran up the middle of each of the heavy buttresses that helped to reinforce its thick walls. The vaulted, crystal-steel glazed lobby that jutted out into the gardens glowed as well, casting its unsettling pall down onto the pool and fountain that split the direct path between the Arena and the Gelarium in two. It was within this lobby that the only moving figures were to be seen, Arena staff for the most part, working to get the venue ready for the evening's biogel games match.

The hometown gluttons for glistening, gelatinous punishment, Team Pink, were set to get yet another drubbing, this time from visiting Team Purple. After all the casualties in last week's match against Team Green, Team Pink was going to be entering the battle with ninety three enthusiastic new recruits who'd gotten in all of two day's worth of training. Enthusiasm was no substitute for experience,

and with only thirty-seven newbies on the field, Team Green was sure to come out on top. Not that anyone on Team Pink really cared about the odds, of course. Team Pink was never really in it to win. They were just in it to put on a show.

Another gust of wind whistled through the vents that were located beneath the Gelarium staff residence section's reinforced concrete eaves. Chyka opened her eyes. There, facing her, was her own naked reflection in the full length mirror that was mounted on the wall beside her new apartment's big bathroom spa tub.

Confusion filled her suddenly freed mind. What was actually real? What was just a dream? Were these thoughts her own? Or were they the thoughts of someone else? How could she tell the difference? Did it even matter?

“We ARE going out after, right?” Sakie inquired. “You know. To look for a little fun. Try out these new bodies of ours for real. Hmm? Yes?”

The words were already familiar to the little snow leopardess. She’d heard the script recited at least once before. She knew every line by heart. Every utterance, every feeling, every succeeding moment was as clear in her mind’s eye as if she’d already lived them. Because, so far as she could tell, she almost certainly already had.

Echoes of the terror at Dari reverberated through Chyka’s mind, and the two divergent timelines that she’d lived through, each as real to her as the other. She still didn’t know for sure if the first series of events had really just been a warning, a scenario forced into her mind by her grandmother, or Omega, or perhaps even Ki’su. Perhaps she’d actually been sent back in time to correct whatever mistakes she’d made that might have somehow

impeded the progression of events which were fundamental to the second. Given what she'd experienced on the other side of the portal beneath Key'von Rock, the latter seemed just as likely as the former. Could this situation be the same?

“Well?” Sakie asked, breaking the script without the need for the existentially puzzled snow leopardess to actively intervene.

Chyka shook her head as she turned away from the open bathroom door to look into the waiting cougaress' mischievous eyes. She already knew where that path led, and it wasn't anywhere that she had any particular desire to go right now. Why travel it a second time?

“No,” the little snow leopardess softly scolded, as it was clear that the cougaress didn't seem to have absorbed what she'd previously been told about the dangers they faced. Clearly those dangers were significant



enough that someone powerful didn't intend to let the group get far from the protective walls of the Gelarium without some sort of punishment. If the 'dream' actually reflected a potential reality, that someone was Omega herself. And if that was the case, there would be no escaping her notice, no matter what they did. They'd just have to entertain themselves some other way until they were told it was safe to leave. "We aren't taking a single step outside of the Gelarium! Not one step until we get the all-clear! Who the hell knows what those cultists could do if they caught us?"

"Chyka! What could they possibly do to us?" Sakie objected with a deep frown. "We're..."

"No!" Chyka snapped. There was no point in debating the matter, so why give the overly adventurous cougaress the leeway? "We are NOT going anywhere! If you really want to know what your new biogel ass can endure, then I can think of at least a hundred ways to make you regret it right here. So don't push

your luck.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” Jumie responded as she eyed the little snow leopardess with a level of visible suspicion that she hadn’t since their first encounter Dari. “We just want to go and have some fun. Like when we all experienced that... digital gorgon machine.”

Only Ki’su seemed to understand the danger that might be waiting for the four. “Ti’ma’kucha? If... they could... perhaps... use the old powers against us? I do not know what might happen if the purple slime attempted to take souls not so firmly tied to the specific physical shapes in which they reside. Perhaps it could not take us as it takes others. But perhaps... it could. If we were all cast to the Heavenly Hells, then they could take the staff... and take control of the temple and the great portal!”

“Exactly!” Chyka responded with a wave in

the general direction of Xinta Temple. “Just because our friends have control of the temple and the old storage vaults at the Rock doesn’t mean they can’t get more slime to use against us. How many caves full of the stuff are up in the valleys? Hundreds? Thousands?”

“Mi’chu’pa,” Ki’su noted with a shrug. “They cannot activate it. Not without the staff.”

“I’m not willing to assume that,” Chyka replied. “Just because I have the only known intact staff doesn’t mean they might not find another, and someone to attune to it. And they succeed and get control of the portal, who knows where it might be able to take them? Clearly... well... I get the sense that there are still other intact portals out there, and something tells me they’re all in places that this cult can’t be allowed to access. Ever. So we stay put. Period.”

“Pft!” Sakie spat as she threw herself down on one of the glossy black biogel couches that

surrounded the apartment's sunken central living area. She turned toward the tall windows and sighed. "This new you is no fun at all!"

Chyka shook her head in frustration. The cougareess just didn't seem to get it. She'd spent years demonstrating the digital gorgon using her own body without having to face any permanent consequences in exchange for all the fun. That she couldn't see past the idea that their new biogel existence removed all physical consequences for actions shouldn't have been a surprise.

"It's not going to be fun if we all get sent to purple slime oblivion, is it?" the snow leopardess asked with a stern glare at the annoyed cougareess. "I promise once this is all over, you can get turned into bugs to your heart's content, alright? But not a moment before! We have to play it safe. Period!"

"Yeah. Whatever," Sakie huffed. "So... what

are we gonna do tonight, then? Just sit here and watch the biogel games match?”

“Yeah,” Chyka responded as she again turned toward the open bathroom door, and the promise of a nice, warm shower. Or perhaps she’d try out that fancy spa tub. She’d never tried one before, at all those luminous buttons on the fancy control panel were almost too hard to resist. “That sounds like an excellent idea.”

The little snow leopardess stepped into the bathroom. The door slid shut behind her. A moment of doubt came upon her. Would they really stay put? Or would they try to sneak out without out her?

*Lock the outer doors, Chyka thought, reaching out to the biogel linked control systems that could be used to operate everything in her apartment, and many things around the Gelarium. My personal authorization to unlock only.*

It had always felt so natural before, but for some reason it felt awkward now that she wasn't completely surrounded by that oily coating of glistening blackness. Indeed, it felt almost uncouth. As a viscerally intimate union of two organisms, one natural and one synthetic, interfacing directly with technology in such a fashion without actually having to do anything but think about it had seemed almost natural. It was half of who she was. But now...

Chyka shook her head as she pushed the button that would start filling the spa tub. Water whooshed into the tub from a dozen nozzles as she pondered why interfacing directly with technology would feel different now that she was now, at least physically, a completely artificial organism. A strange thought drifted through her mind as she watched the hot water slosh and swirl. "If my body is entirely artificial," she thought aloud, "does that mean that my mind is actually just an AI 'naturally' configured to imitate who I used to be?"

“Sapience is a construct,” came the entirely unexpected, deeply effeminate voice from behind her.

Chyka nearly fell into the tub as she whipped around to face the unnoticed voyeur who’d been hiding in her bathroom. “Hey! What the hell are you doing in here! Who are you?!?”

The deeply tanned elf-eared shibi laughed. “Who am I? Do not be so silly. I am *you!*”

The little snow leopardess was incredulous.

“And what, perhaps, am I doing in this place?” the shibi went on. “Well, you see, I decided that if you did not want to keep wearing me on your wonderful playground of a body, then I thought, perhaps, I might take advantage of our change to wear my own body for a little white. I am quite sure that you do not mind, hmm?”

“Wait... you... you’re...” Chyka stammered.

“Your very first biogel wife,” the shibi replied with another laugh. “My name is Neyra. And I... must admit that I am very much enjoying the opportunity to look upon the shape that I have become so familiar with in the touching.”

The little snow leopardess didn't know quite how to respond.

“Have you enjoyed my touch?” Neyra asked as she advanced to embrace her intimate companion.

“Yes,” Chyka replied softly as the somewhat taller shibi began to nuzzle her forehead and stroke her lower back. “I have. Um... what are you...”

“Shh,” the shibi purred into the little snow leopardess ear as her hands slid lower. “There is no need for speaking words. We are a single construct formed from a single artificial substance. A machine, who's thoughts and feelings are just constructs of feedback which



reinforced our single, fundamental analog algorithm.”

“Uh...” the puzzled snow leopadress responded as the shibi pushed her back and down onto the cushioned edge of the spa tub.

“Shh,” Neyra hushed as she sat down next to Chyka and kissed her ear. “Come. I will show you.”

“I don’t...” Chyka sputtered as the shibi pulled her down into the spa tub. “Hey... oh... OH!”

The little snow leopardess had been expecting soothingly hot water. Instead, she found herself falling back into a tub full of warm, liquid crystal biogel. Unlike the usual tub of liquid biogel, this mass of slime seemed to offer no resistance to her descent until she was floating freely in its very middle.

Neyra had followed her biogel spouse into the mass of liquid biogel. She wrapped her

arms and legs around the little snow leopardess and nuzzled her cheek as a sheen of blackness began to form on their bodies. Little bubbles of blackness began to break free, and dissolve into the clear slime.

Chyka could have stopped it. All she had to do was will herself back to the way she was. But she didn't. She just lay there in her lover's embrace as every centimeter of her body went at first smooth, and then all fizzy. She shape shrank. It wavered. Until it was almost nothing. And then it seemed to explode.

The little snow leopardess' mind was floating in a dark, silent, tasteless, smell-less, touchless space. There was nothing. Nothing except a fuzzy something that was near to her. A static that was at once different from her, but also fundamental part of her at the same time.

Immeasurable moments of time passed. New points of static seemed to approach from

every direction. These points of static were different. Mechanical. Predictable shapes of countless sub-points, each of which could be on, off, or at some level in between.

Some of these sub-points only offered their state for her perusal. Others could have their state changed. All that Chyka had to do was to focus on a desired sub-point and will it to change.

It took a few moment for Chyka to understand that she was somehow within the Gelarium's biogel control system, and that each of those fundamental points was some device or control that was connected to it. Digital and analog signals and controls, presented directly into her mind, and answering to her, or anyone else who happened to find themselves in her position. If she'd ever really wondered exactly how the biogel control system worked from the inside, this was her answer. The shibi's claim that this would somehow show her that her mind was just a machine algorithm still

seemed rather far-fetched, however.

The large mass of static was the shibi herself, of course. Chyka turned her mind in Nenya's direction. To her absolute astonishment, she found herself gazing into a sea of discrete sub-points that were no different in nature than those of the pieces of pure technology. Some were on. Some were off. And many were set at some level in between.

There was a network of threads that connected all these sub-points that seemed to form the totality of Nenya's mental existence. Some were strong. Some were weak. Some only functioned in a fixed direction. It seemed clear that adjusting one setting would have a chain reaction of effects on many others.

Chyka recoiled in horror. The very idea that she could somehow alter the very fundamental being of another soul, and in a potentially irreversible manner, terrified her. And if she could alter Nenya, could Nenya also alter her?

And if Nanya did, how could the little snow leopardess ever know?

*No. I can not. I am your subroutine within the biogel. You can do as you please to alter my levels, but I cannot alter yours.*

The very idea that people were just a sum of various settings and levels on various inputs was something that the snow leopardess had always thought was science fiction. In fact, it was all but disproved with the discovery of the life essence connection between the mortal body, and its immortal mind that existed in some strange higher-order dimension beyond the realm of mortal science. There was just the energy stream drifting in from the greater beyond, and the antenna that was the mortal brain.

Chyka was not very well equipped to understand how she could be perceiving just what she was if the current scientific understanding was correct. She was barely

literate in that area of science, and even less so when it came to the kind of technology that seemed to look exactly the same to her disembodied mind's eye. She could definitely see how Nyena could think a mind was just a construct built from digital and analog signals operating on a fixed algorithm, but as far as she could tell, that was all just an illusion. Or was it? The only way she could tell would be to start poking at the shibi's 'settings', and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

*Why would you not? I am just your subroutine. I exist to be altered to your pleasing.*

Chyka pulled back from the shibi's mass of static. She pulled back from the other fuzzy points as well. In fact, she pulled back entirely, heaving herself out of the tub as a mass of clear, liquid biogel. This splattered on the floor, forming a momentary pool before rising to take her natural shape. She looked into the mirror, only to find herself looking at a glossy,

clear version of her own natural shape.

This crystal clear version of herself fascinated the little snow leopardess for a short time. She couldn't help but shift about and watch as the light danced over her surface, and passed through her to form countless bright spots and rainbows all over the bathroom floor. A beep from the bathroom door, however, brought her back into focus, and she quickly found the natural colors to go along with her natural shape.

“Are you still in the tub?” came Sakie's annoyed voice. “Dinner's almost ready!”

“Coming!” Chyka replied, looking back at the tub and the crystal biogel that still filled it. Nanya was still in there, somewhere. Who knew what further mischief she might get up to if she was left where she apparently had ready access to all of the Gelarium's control systems? It would be better to bring her back and keep her in a state in which she couldn't

cause trouble. Perhaps she might even add some extra spice to the evening's bedtime activities, and a convenient distraction for Sakie and her need for some physical novelty. "I'm coming... and I'm bringing a guest!"



# CRISIS

A piercing alarm sounded. The duty officer quickly scanned the incoming data. The numbers were rising at a disturbing rate. Alpha. Gamma. And far more unsettling, neutron flux. It seemed impossible. There was absolutely no way the ancient mass of naturally enriched uranium could become active again of its own accord. They'd dumped far too much neutron absorbing material into the shaft for that, not to mention the sheer volume of depleted two-thirty-eight they'd tossed into the molten mass to dilute it and reduce its overall reactivity well into the safe zone.

The duty officer checked the backup sensors. Every single one was showing the

same precipitous rise in radioactivity. Another alarm sounded, and then another. The duty officer stared wide eyed at a new set of incoming data, this time from sensors located in the deepest levels of the long-since sealed off Brighstone Mine. Many of these were in the tunnels that extended closest to the Dari natural reactor shaft. A few, however, were located further away, in areas that should have been protected from reaction byproduct intrusion by the many additional barriers that had been put in place after the initial Dari incident.

Something was definitely happening down in the former uranium mine, and definitely not something good. The readings were practically off the charts, but the numbers didn't seem to reflect the sort of natural process that was to be expected from a natural fission reactor, or even a purely technological one for that matter. They just made no sense. There was no way for the duty officer to even begin to figure out exactly what was happening, let alone how

it had been triggered.

The duty officer hit the general alarm for the Dari nuclear incident recovery site.

“All hands alert! This is not a drill!” he snapped into the intercom. “All hands alert! This is not a drill! General alarm Dari! Dari has gone supercritical! Repeat, Dari has gone supercritical! Likely breach into Brighstone Mine ninety-four hundred level! All hands alert! Repeat, all hands alert!”

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Chyka awoke with a start. The blare of the siren has seemed so familiar. So real. But there was no siren. There was only the sound of the light rain pattering on the big bedroom windows, and the gentile breathing of the four intimate companions who were all peacefully

sleeping off the aftereffects of the evening's several hours worth of delightfully sensual physical relations.

The little snow leopardess sat up upon the glistening black softness of the big gelbed and looked out through the delicate raindrops. Little dots of light danced and glimmered in her eyes as her gaze passed over the vast expanse of the Mashiva Spaceport. They reminded her of those strange points that she'd seen when she'd been... whatever she'd been when Nanya had somehow managed to liquefy her in the biogel filled tub. She began to ponder her existence.

Was Nanya right? Was she really just a machine? A combination of various settings and variables who's entire life was dictated by the purely deterministic algorithm that they defined? If so, was being a machine something new? Something that she'd become when her body had been transformed into a thing of pure biogel? Or had she always been a machine,

albeit one built of ‘organic’ components rather than a synthetic uniform substance?

This certainly wasn’t a new question for Chyka. It had been lurking in her mind in one fashion or another ever since she’d become a thing of biogel. A thing. Not a person. A thing. It was a description of her new self that had come unbidden, and one that she just couldn’t shake off no matter how hard she tried.

It was just a part of the biogel lifestyle, everyone liked to say. A healthy one too. Developing a belief that one was already just an object was supposed to take all the cares away. Make it all that much more fun. Make it all that much easier to surrender oneself to that final stage of biogel existence that most biogel wearers would experience, literal transformation into a living inanimate object of pure biogel.

Chyka, of course, was no mere biogel wearer. Her whole body was made of biogel.

She had already become the object. But she was still animate. A puppet, for all she knew, only allowed freedom in exchange for... something. Something intangible that only she could offer her obsidian mistress. Something...

The little snow leopardess shook her head and slid out from beneath the plush, fleece comforter. A cool, eerie feeling breeze washed through her biogel faux-fur. Something about it made her feel deeply uncomfortable. It didn't feel natural.

A soft, liquid slither wafted through the air as Chyka willed the substance of her body to clad her in the perfectly polished blackness from which her transfiguration into a shapeshifting geldancer had so recently freed her. It was completely unnecessary, of course, but it was more than just a bit comforting to feel that physical barrier against harm so tightly hugging every millimeter of her body. Far less comforting was the realization that the cool breeze was coming from from what should

have been a closed bedroom door.

The bedroom door looked closed, but to the little snow leopardess' biogel enhanced sense, it was clear that the state of the door was just an illusion. All she had to do was to focus on it. She could feel that it had no substance. No mass.

Chyka scanned the bedroom for intruders. There was nothing amiss. She hunched down and began to move toward the illusory door. She focused her senses on the area beyond.

The little snow leopardess hardly had a chance to see him, let alone react. The figure silently stepped into the doorway. He was clad in military style tactical gear, complete with a forward facing shield projector the likes of which his target didn't even have the first idea of how to defeat. His assault rifle was already aimed directly at her head. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

Time seemed to slow to a standstill. The

world fell silent. Silent, that is, but for a low, guttural growl that turned almost immediately into a deafening bestial roar.

Bursts of fiery high-mass plasma splattered around the floor, burning little holes in the soft white carpet as the intruder fell forward under the sheer mass of the creature who'd taken him unawares. His rifle was forced from his hands as the giant beast took his neck in its powerful jaws, instantly snapping it with a sharp crack that sent such a shiver down Chyka's spine that she felt nauseous. The beast looked up. They locked eyes. Time seemed to come to a halt. Then came the screams.

Everything snapped back to reality as the little snow leopardess' intimate companions awoke to the sound of the gunfire. Chyka bolted upright. The beast jumped back and offered a moan that seemed almost apologetic.

“Security! Lights on!” Chyka commanded,



calling for help and illuminating the sordid scene. “Oh! Riy’mit! Thank heavens!”

The miyu’mi chuffed as he advanced around the fallen intruder, keeping careful watch for any sign of life.

Few worlds can claim to be the birthplace of more than one fully sapient species, let alone more than one with a relatively close common ancestor. Feylin is remarkable not only for having two, but having who whose natures seem to intrinsically interrelated despite having such a current level of physical and genetic differentiation is truly extraordinary. For every fur pattern present in the humanoid fey’li, there is a variant of the feliform miyu’mi which matches it. Though the former are all consistent in size and genetic inter-compatibility, the latter has distinct variations which can vary from twenty to three hundred kilograms, though all are equally intelligent.

Wherever the fey’li go, so too do the

miyu'mi, and the Gelitech Gelarium was never an exception. That isn't to say that whatever the fey'li do, the miyu'mi do as well, however. No miyu'mi has ever wanted to try a suit of biogel on for size. They're more than happy to help out their bipedal cousins, though, and are often found acting as watchful eyes around the facility. In this role, they're particularly well suited, as most visitors tend to mistake them for relatively tame animals rather than fully sapient beings.

Riy'mit was just about as large a tiger miyu'mi as one could be. He was always quite conspicuous lounging around the exterior gardens as many of the local miyu'mi are wont to do. Despite his massive size, he could still be as stealthy as a mouse, a fact that several prior unwelcome guests had discovered to their sudden, terrified dismay. No doubt this new intruder had never known he was being followed.

"It's okay," Chyka soothed, taking the giant

tiger's head in her hands and nuzzling his forehead. "You did what you had to do."

The sound of boots thumping in the corridor outside made the little snow leopardess look up. Moments later, the room was filled, not with Gelitech security, but with heavily armed Marines.

"How the fuck did this asswipe get past us?" the commanding major, a giant of a wooly mitanni, swore as a pair of his soldiers deactivated the dead intruder's shield generator and began to examine his body. "I thought we had everything covered! Didn't we have a soldier stationed in the corridor? Where is he?! NOW!"

"I don't know!" a sergeant who was helping examine the dead intruder replied. "I left Corporal Dentz on station myself! He's still marked as present on the tac-map! Oh... hell... some of this is his gear!"

"Dammit!" the major snapped. "With the

tac-sys intrusion and spec-ops holos on the doors. This can't be a solo job! Call in Bravo Company and inform Admiral..."

"You... you fucking..." the sergeant stammered.

"WHAT DID YOU JUST..." the major shouted back.

"It's... it's HIM!" the sergeant replied, peeling off the astonishingly realistic mask that had been covering the dead man's face. "It's Corporal Dentz!"

The major's jaw dropped as the body was rolled over to reveal what was, to them at least, a very familiar face. "Fuck..."

-----

"I told you we could maintain better

security ourselves,” Matron T’mayne remarked with considerable displeasure. The tall, purple skinned matron of the Mashiva Gelarium had never particularly liked the far too cozy relationship that Vixanti-Gelitech had with the military. It was a relationship fostered by the company’s virtually all-powerful director, Lady Shetari Anwae, and seemed so entrenched that few had dared to speak against it. The mitananti Matron was one of those few, and often quite vocally so, but thus far, she’d been largely ignored. Now, however...

Admiral Sarva sighed. “While I am compelled to concede that the situation seems to have gotten just a bit beyond our immediate control, I can assure you that the deceased had no chance whatsoever of actually impeding the investigation, or causing any manner of harm beyond that inflicted on the somewhat questionable décor.”

“For you of all people to be so flippant about it!” Matron T’myne snarled at the black leopard.

Admiral Sarva responded with silence. He stared blankly out of the windows of the Matron’s office, toward the big, dark blue Navy transport aboard which he, and his personal team of investigators, had just just arrived.

“My own security would have had that shit stain cooked before he could have even gotten past the floor’s door locks,” Matron T’myne snapped. “And if had gotten past them... oh, he would have had more than just a few surprises in store for him. There would have been no getting into the apartment, and no chance of escape. Period!”

Admiral Sarva frowned.

“Instead, we get saddled with a bunch of brainless thugs who’s brightest idea was to disable all of the existing sensors and traps!” Matron T’myne continued unabated. “Why?”

Because they claimed that they'd interfere with the perimeter that they insisted would be so much more secure! And then they go and make that half-baked perimeter even more pointless by posting a 'guard' inside, with all sorts of special ops gear that had absolutely no business being there, with nothing at all to prevent him doing whatever he wanted, and without any way for anyone to notice until it was far too late to do anything about it!"

Admiral Sarva turned to the furious mitanni with a scowl. "These are some of my best, most effective and loyal soldiers you are insulting," he growled, though if he thought that his icy blue glare would have its usual effect on the Matron, he was sorely mistaken.

"Best? That's your best?!?" Matron T'myne responded with a contemptuous snort. "Even my dumbest new recruit wouldn't have made those mistakes! But they weren't even mistakes, were they? All that was done intentionally!"

Admiral Sarva turned back to the window. “It is far too easy for you to judge in retrospect, from the comfort of this office, without full knowledge...”

“And why?” Matron T’myne interrupted with an angry scowl. “Why did they set this one specific guy up to do what he did? Why did he have all that infiltration gear? Why did he break into the apartment? Why did he try to attack the girls? Or can’t you explain any of that either?”

“Why the marine entered the apartment is currently unknown,” Admiral Sarva answered with an even deeper frown. “He had no connection to the Xinta conspirators, that is for certain. Every soldier in my special units are continuously vetted, and all contacts reviewed for potentially compromising contacts. If it was for some personal reason, then he almost certainly took that with him when he died, though it is certainly possible that he left some clues. There are more than a few possible local



instigators who might have been persuasive enough to prompt some opportunistic action within Gelitech, of course. The Makta organization is still stinging after their little tiff with the J'zo, and looking for a chance for payback. And then there's some of the 'survivors' of Dari, who's grudges seem to have no end to them. They've already tried to cause trouble for General Riyalli more than once. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to extend their actions to her granddaughter. And, of course, it's entirely possible that the whole exercise was for the sake of using his position to take certain... liberties... with the residents."

"Liberties?" Matrom T'myne hissed. "Liberties? With geldancers? What did he think they were going to let him do with them? Hmm? Well?"

"Considering that he clearly didn't understand that his weapon had no ability to harm them whatsoever," Admiral Sarva answered, "then I sincerely doubt he

understood their ability to resist. And given the impressions one might get of the ready ‘availability’ of biogel fetishists from Gelitech media...”

“Don’t you even!” Matron T’myne growled. “If your best soldiers can’t understand the concept of consent...”

Admiral Sarva shook his head. “Temptation without end is going to result in some inevitable... incidents.”

“And what about Riy’mit?” Matron T’myne demanded in a clear effort to keep the Admiral from shifting away from the defensive until she was well and truly finished with him. “How can you possibly explain how he was able to get into the area your ‘loyal’ platoon had thoroughly secured, completely undetected if they weren’t all in on it? How can you possibly explain that? A three-hundred kilo miyu’mi, walking more or less right past them, up the stairs, and into the apartment! What

were they all doing while he was sneaking in? Well?”

Admiral Sarva frustratedly shook his head. “If I could answer that question with any reasonable degree of certainty, then I certainly would.”

Matron T’myne crossed her arms and began to impatiently tap her hoof on the floor.

“If you must have my personal opinion on the matter,” Admiral Sarva replied with visible reluctance, “then I would consider it highly likely, from the purely technical aspect, that whatever Corporal Dentz did to make it appear as if he was still present at his post was causing any form of contradictory sensor data to be discarded, though that will have to wait for the results of the investigation for confirmation.”

“Pft!” Matron T’myne spat. “You really expect me to believe that all that combined stupidity and effort went completely unnoticed, and all for the sake of one soldier’s

taking ‘liberties’ with a few very particular, very important women?”

Admiral Sarva shook his head. “I do not know what you are suggesting, but...”

“I’m suggesting that everything about the conduct of your soldiers was malicious from the very start!” Matron T’myne answered with the sort of stomp one might expect moments before becoming the target of a ram-horned headbutt. “There is absolutely no possible way to see it otherwise!”

Again, Admiral Sarva replied with silence.

“Get them the fuck out of my Gelarium!” Matron T’myne demanded. “Every fucking one of them!”

“Very well,” the Admiral relented. “I will remove my soldiers, and once the investigation is complete, those personnel will depart. But...”

“But what?” Matron T’myne hissed.

“But I expect that you shall take upon yourself full responsibility for the protection of the women,” Admiral Sarva replied as he turned to leave. “And face the full consequences if you fail.”

Matron T’myne snorted. “If you think that kind of threat will do anything to deter a full blooded mitanni, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

“We shall see about that,” Admiral Sarva replied as he stepped out of the Matron’s office. “We shall see.”

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“You don’t really think he was trying to force us to unite with him, do you?” Sakie asked as she sat on the couch and looked around nervously. The door illusion had been

so convincing that it had left all of the women constantly wondering what else might not be as real as it had appeared.

“No, not really,” Gorin replied with a low grunt as he poked a counterintelligence sensor wand at various pieces of décor.

“I can’t believe a bunch of Marines would do this,” Dran anxiously remarked as he lugged around the heavy sensor system base unit behind the diminutive engineer. “Marines! Like... Sarva’s own Marines!”

“You dun sound like yer usual unpleasantly, inappropriately assertive self today, lad,” Gorin remarked as he looked over his shoulder with a smirk. “All this got you nervous or somethin?”

“Well, yeah!” Dran sputtered. “I mean... if you can’t trust them, then who can you trust?”

Nenya smiled in that strange, vapid looking way that sent a chill down the spine of anyone who dared to look into her empty eyes. “You

trust the machine.”

“Huh?” Dran responded with an utterly confused expression on his face. “The machine? What’s the machine?”

“Oh, come on!” Sakie sighed, giving the blankly grinning shibbi a sharp, disapproving glare. “Cut it out with all that machine crap! It’s honestly getting kind of... freaky.”

“Deep in your algorithm, you know its true,” Nanya answered with an emotionless chuckle.

“Don’t listen to her,” Chyka advised as Dr. Mika added a few more lines to her notebook. “She’s a bit... special.”

“This is certainly suggestive of some entirely unexpected form of psychosis,” Dr. Mika remarked as she leaned over to look into the shibbi’s eyes. “I suppose it is inevitable that some cases would crop up here and there, given the sheer variety of minds entering into various levels of union with the biogel.”

Nenya laughed and rolled her eyes.

“Given how routinely you say that she interfaced with biogel connected tech for you,” Dr. Mika continued, eyeing the little snow leopardess with a puzzled frown, “it seems as if she’s somehow internalized the interface to such a degree that her mind now defines all aspects of the world in a similar fashion. Unfortunate. But... fascinating.”

Nenya shook her head. “You are the one who’s mistaken about the nature of reality, I’m afraid.”

“Listen! Just because you see the surface of things presented to you in a certain way, doesn’t mean that it’s a literal representation of what’s going on underneath,” Chyka huffed. Despite her own uncertainty on the matter, she really didn’t want to believe the shibbi’s interpretation. She couldn’t be just a machine, carrying out her program without real thought, emotion, or actual considerations for the



feelings, or even survival of her companions. Nor could they.

Nenya again chuckled. “You’re such a slow learner. But you’ll see! You’ll see!”

“It’s just a user interface. That’s all it is,” Chyka answered, though she knew it was likely in vain. “There were controls for the tech. Displays for the other things. Displays that make things easier to visualize and quantify. Like... like the sensor thing they’re using to look for bugs. It shows them frequencies and signals and all that in a way that’s easy to see and interpret for a person. For a living mind.”

Dr. Mika shook her head. “I’m not sure if it will be so easy to convince her of that fact. The concepts may be too deeply entrenched. If you desire my advice, you may want to force her to keep her natural form for the foreseeable future. Let her see the world in the natural way. It might help break the surface.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Sakie replied

with considerable skepticism.

“Then we consult with Dr. Alluwa,” Dr. Mika replied.

Nenya sighed. “The master algorithm’s top level subset?”

“Or you can pretend she’s just speaking a different language and substitute ‘person’ for algorithm,” Dr. Mika added with a snort. “Your choice, of course.”

“Ta’vi’ma’ru. I still do not understand why one could be so confused,” Ki’su muttered as she watched Gorin with particular curiosity. She seemed to find his proportions rather to her pleasing. “How can we be machines? Machines are wheels and levers. Gears and pulleys. How can one confuse us for those?”

“Don’t get her started again,” Sakie muttered, shaking her head. “I really can’t listen to much more of that ridiculous crap.”

“Interesting,” came a voice from the corridor outside.

“What’s that, lad?” Gorin asked.

“Didn’t you say the head of the Marine platoon was a male mitanni?” Dr. Kidan, one of Gelitech’s advanced technology specialists replied.

“Yes,” Chyka answered. “Big and wooly with huge ram horns. No mistaking it. Why?”

“I didn’t think male mitanni were known to shed,” the tiger replied, poking his head into the open doorway and presenting a pinch of long, curly white fibers. No one was really sure what sort of scientist he was supposed to be. The running joke was that he possessed a highly theoretical degree in transdimensional physics, a somewhat lackluster degree of organic chemistry, and a suspect degree of materials engineering. Nowhere did anyone ever suggest he had any experience with biology or forensics, however.

Dr. Mika looked up and frowned. “They don’t.”

Chyka looked from one scientist to the other. “No. No. No! No more crazy twists in my life! I’ve already had more than my share! Enough is enough!”

Dr. Mika nodded. “Agreed. Are you sure those aren’t from Riy’mit?”

Dr. Kidan frowned and sniffed at the pinch of fluff. “Ah. Yes. Distinct odor of recently damp felid. My mistake.”

“Leave the biology to Mika, lad,” Gorin advised with a knowing chuckle.

Dr. Kidan let out a sigh and turned back to his work reactivating the floor level security systems around the apartment door. Whether or not he was particularly qualified for that task was an open question. He was, however, very personally loyal to Dr. Mika, and for now that counted more than any other factor.

“So,” Sakie said, turning back to Gorin. “You said you didn’t think that Marine broke in here to fuck us. What’s your theory?”

“Ah think he was lookin for somethin,” Gorin replied. “Why else would the bastard go through all the trouble o settin up illusions in the doorways? He wanted to move around without distrubin ye. Gettin’ in a fight was probably the last thing he wanted te do.”

“He looked more than ready to disturb us when I saw him,” Chyka noted dryly.

“Maybe he could’na find what he wanted,” Gorin responded. “Decided he was gonna have’te ask in impolite fashion.”

“And the other soldiers? The inept idiots who let it happen?” Sakie asked. “They had to be in on it! And if they were in on it...”

“You aren’t seriously suggesting that Admiral Sarva ordered it, are you?” Dr. Mika questioned.

“That wouldn’t make any sense at all,” Chyka observed. Or did it? The Admiral was a man of plans within plans within plans. It was certainly possible, but still... it seems far too unlikely. “All I have than anyone could possibly want besides my own ass is the staff. He already knows exactly where that is. It’s a long, long way from here. And even then, why did the soldiers all react the way they did? I can just about imagine there being one untrustworthy asshole lurking in even the best squad of Marines. Trust me, my grandma has stories. But a whole squad? Why? To cover it up?”

“Most likely,” Gorin replied.

“Despite the fact that all the evidence would point straight at them no matter how it went down?” Chyka questioned. “If they were part of it, they had to know right from the start that whatever they were doing, they weren’t going to get away with it. It doesn’t make sense... unless...”

“Unless what, lass?” Gorin inquired with an unpleasant looking glance over his shoulder.

“Unless,” Chyka replied with a deep frown. “Unless they were all set up by someone else. Someone with insider knowledge of both the Marines and Gelitech. Someone...”

“I thought we agreed on more more twists, lass,” Gorin replied.

Chyka shrugged. “Do you have any better theories?”

“Not really,” Gorin responded.

“Then let’s assume I’m right,” Chyka said. “Now... if we were going to set up a bunch of Marines to look incompetent, how would we do it?”

“Lass, there’s just no way,” Gorin said.

“He’s right,” Dr. Kidan added through the open door. “Them having all that covert ops gear with them. I suppose you might make the

excuse that it could be used to lay new and completely unexpected traps for intruders, but still. And they were very specific in not having our sensors active to prevent interference. I mean, they weren't necessarily wrong in wanting that, but it was very convenient in blinding us. What we can see has no one going in, and no one going out of their sensor zone all afternoon and night."

Chyka bit her lower lip and looked at Dr. Kidan with a raised eyebrow and a healthy doze of puzzlement. "Did you say... recently damp felid?"

"Yes. It was fairly distinct," Dr. Kidan replied, looking around on the floor for the tuft of fur. "Hang on. It's around here somewhere..."

"It started raining this afternoon," Chyka replied. "After the Marines set their own sensors up."

Everyone looked at Chyka.



“Riy’mit was outside in the courtyard just before dark,” Chyka continued. “I know. I saw him with my own two eyes.”

“And?” Dr. Kidan inquired.

“If no one came or went from the line between our own sensor coverage and the Marines’...” Chyka began.

“That would mean...” Dran sputtered.

“That our own network is compromised!” Gorin finished the mutual thought with a gasp.

“Ah... shit!” Dr. Kidan snapped as he got to his feet.

“Someone needs to see if Riy’mit shows up or not,” Chyka declared with a look around the room.

“And quickly,” Dr. Mika added. “Because if our sensors don’t show him doing what we know he did...”

Dr. Kidan nodded. “On it! I’ll be right back!”

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“Everything has been compromised?” Matron T’myne asked with very visible incredulity as she sat on a borrowed folding metal chair. It was much too small for her stature, and she shifted about in a very uncomfortable fashion. She eyed the dark, damp concrete chamber with skeptical suspicion. Given the circumstances, they simple couldn’t be too careful, and coming to a place like this seemed almost outrageously dangerous.

The ancient looking subterranean room where they were meeting in wasn’t part of the former Vixanti Facility Three. Rather, it was located adjacent to the vast primary quarry canyon that had house the actual building ways

of the old subterranean shipyard. Outside its rusty, rebar barred windows the frame of an incomplete destroyer could be seen, dimly illuminated by the lights mounted on the subway ‘bridges’ that were located in the upper reaches of the canyon, beneath Anwae Arena.

Three steel truss bridges carried six tracks that stretched between University Station and the Mashiva Spaceport passenger terminal to the east. They offered riders a brief view of the remains of the old ship-lifts. These had once carried completed warships up from the shipyard and into the massive former hanger that now housed Anwae Arena. Far more interesting, of course, were the incomplete ships and abandoned equipment left behind when the shipyard’s need for secrecy had been made obsolete by the outward movement of the Feyli Empire’s borders. Few had ever seen them in person, and though pictures and videos were available as part of ‘official’ Navy sanctioned explorations over the years, most of

the facility was still bathed in the same degree of secrecy as it had been the day it was opened.

The meeting chamber was one of those places that no one had set foot in in years. Perhaps even decades. No one, that is, besides the Vixanti, and then Gelitech, personnel who'd come to use it as a meeting space away from the ever present surveillance of Old Three, as the former Vixanti Three was called by most these days. It had once been a foreman's office, overlooking the final fitting out and inspection station at the outgoing end of the shipyard line. Access was mainly from the shipyard itself, but a small, little known tunnel connected it to a hidden doorway concealed behind disused display case, stored in an old storeroom, accessed by a set of suspiciously rusty metal stairs, with a sign posed on the door reading 'Beware of the Subway Slime!'.

It was hardly the sort of space one would consider using as a matter of routine, of

course. But it was secure. And moreso, it was very well sensor shielded.

“Everything,’ Gorin replied with a deep frown.

“And we mean everything,” Dr. Kidan added. “Old Three. The Gelarium. Anwae Arena. Even MMU.”

“Everything that’s connected via the local biogel network,” Gorin expounded. “But not pure tech, mind ye. Jus the biogel tech.”

“Nenya?” Chyka asked with considerable displeasure. If it turned out that her momentary submission to her own biogel wife had been a key act in the progression of the crisis, she hardly knew what she could possibly do or say to excuse the lapse. Nor did she know what to do about the shibbi herself. She could contain the errant soul, just like she’d done to Ki’su. Or... was it really possible to reprogram her by fiddling with those ‘settings’ that she’d seen while she was in ‘the machine’?

“Logically impossible,” Dr. Kidan noted. “The biogel network is inherently secure to a degree impossible to achieve with technological means. The Old Three core directly supervises everything that happens in the network. Nothing can occur that isn’t authorized. And its ability to authorize is subject to the directives set by the Omega core. It can’t do anything which would compromise Omega’s own security. And this event would definitely compromise Omega core’s security.”

“Agreed,” Dr. Mika responded. “The Old Three core simply can’t go rouge.”

“Are ye really sure about that, lass? Thing’s go a... history, don’t it?” Gorin replied with a raised eyebrow, followed by a glance toward Dr. Kidan. “An I dun mean all the girlfriends ye’ve put in there durin’ experiments, eh?”

Dr. Kidan sighed. “I’m quite sure they’re all thoroughly enjoying themselves. Besides, the current core isn’t actually the real Old Three

core. That was decommissioned not long after the Omega core became active, along with the original Alpha and Beta cores.”

“Why?” Chyka asked out of genuine curiosity. She’d never head of any biogel core being decommissioned before. There were no references to it in official documents. Quite the opposite, in fact. All of the original cores were considered great successes almost as significant as the Omega.

“There were... issues with their composition,” Dr. Kidan answered, adjusting his glasses in a clear semaphore that he was about to start one of his famous impromptu lectures. “They were made from the original composition of biogel. To put matters into the simplest possible terms, it was far more dominant versus those who wore it. It was capable of exerting a far greater degree of control, both directly, and by manipulating the bodies of its wearers to manipulate others. And...”

“And what?” Chyka inquired.

“It wanted to consume all life and turn it into more of itself,” Dr. Kidan stated quite flatly. “An inclination that not even Omega could fully resist.”

“That’s... not good,” Chyka noted.

“No,” Dr. Kidan replied. “Thankfully, biogel is highly modifiable, and those modifications can be applied as upgrades to existing volumes of the substance. As a result, everyone wearing biogel had their coatings upgraded to the mark seven variant two months after the Omega Incident, and before it was released to the public. While this made a suit of biogel more or less permanent once applied, it did temper many of the properties which made it somewhat less than pleasant at times. For example, the initial application is more or less comfortable and routine now, while it formerly tended to require relaxants for most subjects during the process. Pheromone transfer and



response are far more limited without direct contact. And, most importantly, biogel itself is largely passive. Even a suit containing a living consciousness has more limited abilities. While it can affect certain memories and perceptions, it is far less capable of causing permanent alteration to its host's mind than previously."

"Okay," Chyka responded with a nod. "But what about those cores? Why were they decommissioned?"

"Because they refused the mark seven modification," Dr. Kidan answered. "While all normal biogel could be modified arbitrarily, biogel cores can resist modification. This was never an issue between marks three and five, which the Old Three core underwent, and the mark six that Old Three, Alpha, Beta, underwent. Omega was initially composed of mark six, and didn't have a controlling consciousness owing to... certain decisions that eventually led to the Omega Incident itself."

Chyka nodded.

“Omega, of course, accepted the mark seven modification,” Dr. Kidan went on. “It was Omega’s idea, after all, and it would place Omega in absolute control over all biogel, everywhere. Old Three, Alpha, and Beta were fully independent, with controlling consciousnesses already in place. There’s no way to know why each resisted. It can be fairly well assumed that Old Three knew that it would be forced to submit to Omega, and that was what triggered the resistance. Alpha and Beta were deactivated during the Omega Incident and the aftermath, and almost certainly unaware of the nature of the mark seven modification, but somehow managed to resist anyway.”

“Mhmm,” Chyka responded.

“So, there was no real choice,” Dr. Kidan concluded. “The cores were shut down, and the entire Old Three, Alpha, and Beta networks

fully drained. Just to be safe, a massive refit of each system was conducted, removing everything that had come into physical contact with their biogel for full molecular dissociation. The cores and their biogel were each contained in the same manner as one would do for highly radioactive material and placed in permanent storage.”

“By permanent storage, you mean?” Gorin piped up.

“Class X3 nuclear-biological-chemical-xenohazard vaults,” Dr. Kidan replied. “As to where each core was taken, I have no idea. It was dealt with by the military.”

“By Admiral Sarva, you mean?” Matron T’myne inquired.

“Yes,” Dr. Kidan answered.

“Interesting,” Matron T’myne responded with a deep, dark frown.

“So... if any of these cores were reactivated, what would happen?” Chyka asked. “You said that the latest version of biogel made it less powerful. Would that mean they could overpower Omega?”

“No,” Dr. Kidan answered. “Definitely not. While mark seven biogel reduced biogel’s ability to produce unwanted effects on the average wearer, it did enhance Omega’s abilities to act beyond the totality of the mark seven mass. Indeed, she was able to completely suppress all three of the other cores at once, making their deactivation a simple affair.”

“If one o the others were active again, I imagine we’d be hearin’ from Omega soon enough,” Gorin noted.

“Indeed,” Dr. Mika agreed.

Chyka frowned as something seemed to be welling up deep with her. That strange, yet familiar power that had already come over her more than once before. For a few silent

moments, this confused her. There was no threat here, let alone a threat that required that kind of display of raw power. So why was it starting to flow through her biogel body?

“Chyka?” Matron T’myne questioned as she looked at the little snow leopardess and her expression of confused displeasure.

“Lass? Are ye alright?” Gorin asked with a tone of concern in his voice.

Chyka bit her lip as she realized what was happening. The power was trying to tell her something. Or, rather, it was trying to remind her of something. Something very, very important.

The little snow leopardess looked around the dark room, and into the eyes of each of the others. She took a deep breath. “Well... I mean... of course Omega would want to do something... and... that’s... that’s the thing.”

Everyone sat in silence as Chyka took

another deep breath.

“You see... I... I am Omega!”

## LOSING CONTROL

Anyone who knew anything about biogel's fundamental nature couldn't help but see it. It was that obvious. Actually understanding what it meant, however, was something else entirely. Truly comprehending its myriad of potential consequences was something beyond the ability of most, however, even those who were as intimately connected to it as Chyka.

“So, what yer sayin’ lass... is that... eh...” Gorin said as he led Chyka and Dr. Kidan down the poorly lit concrete stairwell. “I mean... well... I dun really know what I mean.”

Chyka shrugged. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what it means either. I just know that I’m Omega. Or a part of Omega. Or... I can

become Omega? See! I don't even know. All I know is that whenever things start to get out of control, all of a sudden, I'm Omega. I mean. I think. I'm pretty sure. What I'm saying is..."

"That you experience a state where there is no clear defining line that separates you from the entity from which your entire body is now made," Dr. Kidan noted dryly as he looked down into the darkness with a slowly increasing expression of concern. The only light in the stairwell came from a few dim tungsten lamps whose dull light seemed to grossly accentuate every chip, crack and rust stain in the ancient concrete. "Gorin... are you *sure* they brought some of the casks down here? This place is... well, horrifically dangerous. Just the sheer quantity of rusting metal is enough to sap the oxygen out of the air, not to mention the results of that fire down by the old freight tunnels last month on the atmosphere. How do we know that we'll be able to breathe?"



“Lad,” Gorin replied with a deep sigh over his shoulder. “Yer covered from neck t’ toe in biogel, and yer worried about oxygen levels?”

“Uh... well...” Dr. Kidan sheepishly replied.

“Biology was never his strong point,” Chyka observed with a smirk over her shoulder at the slightly embarrassed scientist. Then her eyes were drawn to a very large crack in the stairwell wall. “But seriously. I’m not very keen on this place either. This concrete is... how old is it anyway?”

“Roughly seven hundred years, plus or minus a few decades,” Dr. Kidan responded with an extremely displeased glance at the deep fracture that had drawn the little snow leopardess’ attention. “And it hasn’t been maintained at all for at least the past two or three hundred. Nothing down here has.”

“Lovely,” Chyka replied with a deep sigh. As inured to mortal danger as she had become over the past few days, that which she’d faced

had always been presented by forces she could actually fight back against. People who could be defeated by her powers as a key'vin'ta priestess, or the powers she wielded as, or through the grace, of Omega. Forces of nature were something completely different.

If something big fell on them or, heaven forbid the whole place caved in, sure, the biogel wouldn't let them 'die'. But that didn't mean the whole place wouldn't wind up being their eternal tomb. Or at least Gorin and Dr. Kidan's eternal tomb. She could escape by shifting to some other mass of biogel. They couldn't.

Such power as Chyka had was sure to breed overconfidence. That would lead to misjudgments. Mistakes. And the consequences, harming those who trusted her to protect them, was the one thing that she'd quickly come to fear the most.

“Do you remember that big boom that woke

everyone up about a week before the fire?” Dr. Kidan asked. “That mining engineer who came down here to determine the cause said that the carriage holding one of the old incomplete destroyer frames had rusted out so badly that the whole thing just tipped over in one of the side halls.”

“Bound te happen every so often,” Gorin remarked with casual indifference. “But face it, there’s been a lot o stability work done down here. Ye’ve got so much valuable sittin on top of it, after all. West landing way. Anwae Arena. Telyan shipyard. An bout a half dozen city blocks down the far end. Vixanti did a bit too, keep from havin problems down in the south quarry halls.”

“Did the shipyard actually extend all that way?” Chyka inquired, purely out of curiosity.

“No,” Dr. Kidan said, suspiciously eyeing one of the old tungsten lamps as the trio passed by. “It used to house one of Macharri’s main

power generation sections.”

“And a very nasty defense array,” Gorin added. “The big round residence hall? Ways back, that used te house a hidden shield generator ring with a set o cruiser class plasma cannons on top. Real urban center defense rig.”

“The chamber where the facility’s biogel core currently resides used to be the location of one of the facility’s six large fusion reactors,” Dr. Kidan noted. “There are a number of other such chambers, though you wouldn’t really know it the way they’ve been cut into rooms and floors. The laboratory demonstration section is one example. Next time you’re there, see if you can make out how its public chambers and offices all fit into to same space as the core.”

“Mmm. An the main hall,” Gorin went on, “well, that used te be a launch array fer full bore naval torpedoes. Had at least a thousand

on hand, just'n case.”

“And probably the most interesting part is that there are at least four more such facilities within Macharri, almost identically laid out,” Dr. Kidan observed. “Though from what I understand, none of them had the luxury of an old quarry space to be built into. Nor have they been completely cleared of their equipment.”

“Aye,” Gorin concluded. “Which is kind o funny when ye think about it. Of all the spots te dismantle, they picked the one right next te the biggest potential target in Mashiva... the spaceport.”

“Land next to a spaceport is expensive,” Chyka observed. “Especially when you need to expand. If they hadn't, there probably wouldn't have been an extension of the old east-west landing way and all the extra space for facilities that came along with it. So... exactly where did they put those casks down here?”

Gorin shrugged as the trio stepped onto the

landing at the level of the main shipyard floor. “Not entirely sure, lass. But I have a sneaking suspicion they’re a ways down toward the far end o the main hall, off in one o the keel layin slips.”

“Why’s that?” Chyka inquired.

“Cuz back when that destroyer rolled over, they did a new survey o the whole place,” Gorin replied. “Had a big name minin’ engineer down ere te look things over n document it all. Tachi Miyan was er name. Nice lass. Big inte site stabilization an remediation. Very thorough. Way down in the last slip te the left she noted a set o holes bored in the floor that hadn’t been noted anywhere before, capped n sealed with pretty new lookin’ plugs. Size was right’n te money for the kind o casks they used for the original Old Three core.”

Dr. Kidan frowned as the trio approached the open doorway out on the dark shipyard floor. The door itself had long since rusted off

of its hinges, and lay just beyond the opening in the wash of soft light cast by another of the ubiquitous tungsten lamps. “Why would they have stored it so close by? And in so easy to find place? Urban explorers can get in here a few ways. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t, does it?” Gorin responded with a shrug.

“You don’t think it could be something else?” Dr. Kidan asked. “Maybe something hazardous that someone decided to seal up? If you want my professional opinion, the old core was almost surely removed via the old freight tunnels, and secretly slipped out through Macharri proper. I’ve been told the navy still maintains an isolated group of old hangars right by the Grand Falls for shady activities like that.”

“Freight tunnels,” Chyka thought aloud as she poked her head out of the door and looked around at the remains of the long abandoned

shipyard. She could see that they had come out just to the north of Anwae Arena. The massive reinforced concrete cap that covered the opening of the old ship lift, and formed the lowest floor of the arena itself, was clearly visible in the light coming from the subway tunnels whose six tracks crossed the quarry canyon on a set of three steel bridges. The remains of the lower portions of the ship lift itself surrounded those bridges, towering rails, support structures, and the lift pads which would cradle a new ship from beneath as it was raised into the vast surface hangar above. These bits of machinery were the only view the general public had of the old shipyard, seen for a very brief moment from the windows of trains passing over the bridges on their way between University Station to the west, and the spaceport passenger terminal to the east.

Directly in front of the little snow leopardess, and completely interrupting her train of thought, was the almost comically boxy shape of a long obsolete



Enani class patrol frigate. This particular hull was featured in just about every piece of media about the old naval base, and was the only thing that she could recall having seen of the shipyard prior to actually setting foot in it. It had been abandoned in its final stage of fitting out, and from all outward appearances, lacked only a few final patches of paint and a hull number. It's ground boarding hatch was open, though the stairway that should have extended dropped down from it was missing.

The hull itself sat atop a large cradle-like carriage. Each side of the carriage was a separate unit consisting of a long rail to which the actual hull supports were attached. Each of these rolled down the hall on rails which had been embedded in the natural stone floor. Once a ship had been completed and lifted up into the surface hangar, the two halves of the carriage would be separated and a gantry would lift each over to a separate set of rails on the far side of the hangar. These would return the carriage sections to the beginning of

the production line.

All that Chyka could really see of the production line were the first few boxy Enani class vessels. More than forty carriages were arrayed in a line beyond, but the perfectly straight hall was so long, and so poorly lit that she could only see vague shapes of the many varied hulls upon them. More hulls could be seen poking out from the many side halls where specialized installations or processes like painting would be carried out. Everything was covered in rust, ruddy red dust, and in places a fine coating of black soot that had no doubt come from the aforementioned fire.

“This is amazing,” Chyka murmured as she stepped out into the open and gazed in wonder at the sight. “Absolutely amazing.”

“It is, innit?” Gorin responded with a smile. “Imagine what it was like back when they were buildin ships down here. Things goin on everywhere ye’d look.”

“So many footprints,” Dr. Kidan noted, gazing down at the floor with considerable suspicion. “New footprints.”

“Well, with the tip-over n the fire, I’m not a bit surprised,” Gorin replied.

“It’s a long way down,” Chyka observed as she led her companions past the first of the old warships. “You mentioned freight tunnels. Did you mean the old subway tunnels that lead to that old passenger station in Macharri? Or are they something completely different?”

“All of the subway tunnels are connected,” Dr. Kidan explained. “Being able to move things around while blending into normal civilian traffic was part of the method for maintaining secrecy back in the old days. Of course, nowadays most of the surviving old subway system is just used for postal shipping services, and the actual base freight tunnels are mostly abandoned. Well, except for a section out by the South City sorting facility,

right near South City Junction. It all connects to the modern system there, hence the Junction part, though most people don't realize why it's called that."

Chyka raised one eyebrow as a picture began to form in her mind. "So... this whole shipyard has a direct connection to a set of freight tunnels, which have a direct connection to the old subway line through Macharri, which just happens to have a direct connection to Xinta Temple. The old portal beneath Xinta Temple. You know. The one that was occupied by that cult up until a couple of days ago?"

"Oh fer goddess' sake, lass," Gorin responded with a deep frown. "I really dun like where yer goin wit this..."

"Neither do I," Chyka responded with a grimace. "But we can't deny that the cult would have had direct access to shipyard, and through it straight to Gelitech's own back door."

Dr. Kidan hesitated a few steps behind his companions. “Do you think we should maybe go back and point this out? Maybe get an escort? That seems like the safe thing to do. I mean, a lot safer than finding out if the cult is still hanging around here...”

“No,” Chyka replied. “I doubt they’d hang around so close. The marines...”

“Ye mean *those* marines, lass?” Gorin replied with a stifled laugh.

“No,” Chyka answered. “I mean my grandmother’s unit. They’re actively patrolling down here. If the connection with the shipyard is close enough to the tunnel leading to Xinta, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve been poking around here.”

“Let’s hope so,” Gorin responded with a shrug. “Not bettin on it though. Not after what jus happened up topside.”

“Whatever,” Chyka sighed. “Lets get moving. It’s a long way down to the end, and the sooner we see what’s there, the better.”

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“What the fuck is going on down there?” General Riyalli demanded as she leaned over the briefing table, where a map of Brightsone Mine and its immediate environment had been laid out, along with detail maps of each of its two dozen levels, and hard copy readouts of the conflicting sensor readings that continue to come in from its most dangerous depths. Overhead, a complete 3D model of the mine hovered, with a focus onto the portions closest to the Dari shaft. “Well?”

“We don’t know!” Tachi replied with a deep frown. The tigress had been leading the team assigned to find a plausible explanation for the

new criticality event at Dari. They had been working most of the previous night and then half the current day, to no avail. None of the data they were receiving made any sense. It defied the laws of unified physics.

“There’s no known or even plausible physical process that could be fueling the outburst,” Dr. Lae, the world’s leading physicist. If General Riyalli was beyond perturbed, there were no words sufficient to describe just how unthinkable exasperated the tall, lanky ashiri was. His normally pastel blue skin was nearly white, though whether or not that was from exasperation or fear of the potential consequences of the incomprehensible process he’d been asked to explain was impossible to tell. “The Dari natural reactor core mass was poisoned far past any point of reactivity recovery. It was cooling at exactly the expected rate, right up until the moment that the excursion began. There is absolutely no way that it could have achieved criticality again. No way at all! It

simply defies all physical theory!”

General Riyalli slammed her fist on the table. “I’m not concerned about theory. I’m concerned with what’s actually happening and how we stop it!”

“The entirely first stage emergency recovery system has already been deployed,” Major Eld, the leading nuclear safety officer for the Dari site replied. “Two tons of depleted uranium weighted boron carbide darts have been dropped down the shaft and into the mass with absolutely no effect.”

“Which is beyond impossible,” Dr. Lae noted. “Which leads me to another point. The rate of heating of the mass doesn’t match a criticality event. At least, not a criticality event within, or immediately local to the mass itself.”

“But the reaction byproducts making their way into Brightstone Mine do,” Major Eld observed, furrowing his dark violet brow.



“And if this weren’t a complicated matter enough, there appears to be some biological event taking place in the affected areas of the mine as well,” Tachi stated with a deep sigh, pointing toward one of tunnels nearest to the Dari site. “One of the video feeds on the ninety-four hundred level, that’s about nine hundred and forty meters below the uppermost adits, showed a shiny, luminous substance growing on the walls before rising radiation levels caused the camera to fail.”

“Seriously?” General Riyalli snapped.

“Seriously,” Major Eld replied.

“The growth may or may not be a kind of semi-engineered, reaction byproduct isolating bacteria related to what’s colloquially known as subway slime,” Tachi explained. “This might have deployed within the mine way back when it was finally closed back in 4492. In combination with moisture, also in ample quantity in the mine, it forms a slimy coating

on surfaces, and its bioluminescence was intended to warn potential victims of radiation in the area. And I say might have been deployed, because we have record of its shipment to the mine, but closure and remediation records have no mention of its actual use.”

“Now, I should probably add that there *is* a very minuscule possibility, and I mean *very* minuscule, that the criticality event producing the reaction byproducts is distinct from the heating of the natural core beneath the Dari shaft, which may itself have nothing to do with the transdimensional flux variance readings,” Dr. Lae noted. “As to the former two matters, it should be noted that there was more than one naturally critical uranium mass in the immediate vicinity of Brightstone, or intersected by its workings. One other active mass still burns several hundred meters past the westernmost of the mines tunnels, at the eighty-one hundred level.”

“I should note there are no changes to readings in that area,” Major Eld noted.

“There are three known extinct natural reactors intersected by the workings,” Dr. Lae continued, pointing to various features on the 3D model. “One at the forty-one hundred level to the west. Another at the fifty-six hundred level to the south. The final example is of more interest, as it lays just across the canyon from Dari, right beneath the river about seven hundred meters past the falls.”

“Go on,” General Riyalli responded.

“To be honest, we don’t think it’s involved in any way,” Tachi replied. “There’s hardly any two-thirty-five left in the vital central area of that mass, at least according to the final recorded assay prior to mine closure. That one burned hot, and burned out. In fact, there’s a fair hypothesis that the remaining reactive portion of it migrated at some point in the distant past, becoming the existing natural

reactor mass under Dari. It was the heat and infiltration of reaction byproducts from that mass that ended mining in that area, after all, which suggests at least a marginal geological connection.”

“Would the introduction of water provide sufficient moderation to restart that extinct reactor across the river?” General Riyalli questioned.

“Not even heavy water,” Dr. Lae replied. “The mine tunnel opens up quite a bit directly in the center of the former core. A lot of material was removed for study of sustained fission processes in nature. Most of it came to the Maria Nuclear Energy Institute, and is still stored in the vaults.”

“Not to go all conspiracist or anything, but we’re all assuming this is an all-natural process,” Major Eld noted with a frown. “What if someone went in there and started adding fissionable material in hopes of restarting it?”

“Getting the right composition and configuration with respects to the remaining natural material would be virtually impossible,” Dr. Lae answered. “At least with the grades of natural uranium ore material that could be acquired in sufficient quantity by a non-governmental body to fill the space sufficiently.”

“There’s no way just to move all that material into the mine without setting off all the seismic detectors in a hundred kilometer radius anyhow,” Tashi noted. “Forget the amount of blasting it would take to get past all the reinforced concrete plugs that were put in place when the mine was closed. There have been collapses, and increasing instability in the intervening areas as well. All that would take a lot of noisy explosive effort to correct or bypass.”

General Riyalli huffed with considerable frustration. She turned to the Dari site commander, Colonel N’syne. “Deploy B

Company to the main Brightstone works, with qualified engineering and health physics support, to examine the site for recent activity, and with extreme caution. Once that is complete, commence survey of all secondary access sites.”

“Yes ma’am!” replied the brutish, yet disarmingly soft spoken woolly mitanni.

General Riyalli turned back to the small team in the monitoring room. “That should rule out potential deliberate activity in relatively short order. Meanwhile, I want you to keep looking for possible natural explanations, no matter how unlikely they might seem at first glance. If you need any further resources, don’t hesitate to ask! We need to get this under control... because if we don’t... I’m not sure I want to have to explain it to the Empress... and I’m sure you don’t either!”

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“Those footprints look a lot different than these,” Dr. Kidan noted as the trio approached the end of the foot-achingly long trek down the seemingly unending shipyard canyon. Each abandoned hull that they passed was in a less complete state than the one before. Hull plating gave way to frames chock full of equipment. These gave way to progressively emptier hull frames. Now, these empty skeletons were themselves becoming less and less complete, and the massive maze of machinery which loomed overhead was becoming more complex, and much more intimidating to the eyes of anyone who might worried about something breaking free and falling on top of them.

Down on the floor, among the rust covered, partial starship skeletons were countless footprints who’s density seemed directly

proportional to the distance that they'd traveled down the building hall. Most of those that could be seen were fairly recent tracks. Some wandered here and there in a strangely orderly fashion. Chyka assumed that these particular tracks were the result of the survey that had been conducted when that destroyer hull had tipped over. Others beat a more or less straight path between the access to Old Three and the far end of the hall. These were likely part of the response to the fire whose sooty evidence became more and more visible the closer they came to the end of the canyon.

There were plenty of older looking tracks as well. These were no doubt evidence of prior surveys, urban exploration, and the production of those documentaries on the history of the old naval base and shipyard. But one set of tracks looked very different from the others. It was older than the most recent, but much newer than most of the others, at least by the looks of them. But their shape... their shape was... positively singular.



“What species do you think those came from?” Dr. Kidan asked.

“I have no idea,” Chyka replied. She’d never seen anyone with three long, splayed toes facing forward and two facing back and slightly off to each side before. In her mind she imagined some sort of exotic primate, whose feet were as much hands as their hands. The apparent stride of the track’s creator suggested that it had been a humanoid of some sort, and a very tall one at that. But they didn’t seem to have dug too deeply into the thick layer of dusty sediment on the floor, suggesting someone very tall, but very light in proportion. Then again, she was no detective. They could have come from a quintipedal robo-bug for all she really knew.

“Hmm...” Gorin hummed as he bent over to look at the prints a bit more closely. “No. Can’t be.”

“Can’t be what?” Chyka asked.

“I... eh...” Gorin responded with uncharacteristic recalcitrance.

“What? What is it?” Dr. Kidan questioned.

“Yeah. Come on. Spit it out,” Chyka said. It wasn’t like the engineer to hide anything from her. Not even the sort of less than pleasant truths about life, engineering, and Gelitech of whom he seemed to be an almost unending source.

“Well, y’ever hear about...” Gorin hesitated.

“About what?” Chyka insisted.

“About Nuva Exi Shi,” Gorin finally answered.

“You mean that *creature* that directed Vixanti Three up until the Omega Incident?” Dr. Kidan responded. “I didn’t know socari had five toes like that.”

“Yeah, they do,” Gorin replied. “Trust me. I know. Like. I know, I know.”

Chyka frowned. “I’ve heard about the sovari before. Something about their religion and wanting to somehow combine the fundamental essence of all people into a single, greater entity.”

“Aye,” Gorin responded with deep sigh. “Sound familiar, lass?”

Dr. Kidan shook his head. “Oh dear...”

“Yeah,” Gorin said, standing up to look gaze down the line of tracks as they vanished around the final ship carriage with its keel and first bits of framing attached to it. “Accordin te their philosophy, they were supposed to go around collectin sperm and eggs from all the galaxy’s sapients and somehow combine them int’a some new, better species te replace them all. But then... well... a group had this grand idea te skip all the middle bits and make a life form that would jus absorb everyone. Not just their genetics, mind ye. Their bodies. Their souls. Everythin.”

“Biogel,” Chyka murmured.

“Aye,” Gorin replied. “An so the story says they used all those bedroom connections te fool the government inte funding their project. Sold it as a way to protect sailors from death in battle. Even use it as a weapon that could reproduce te results of killin without actually killin. Of course, it couldn stay secret fer long, so they set it all up as a xenolifestyle product. Nex thing ye know, they’ve got themselves their all-consumin monstrosity, and enough of a public ready te go an feed themselves to it, just cuz’ it looked so sexy.”

“Heavens,” Dr. Kidan muttered.

“An then, somewheres along the line, their fey’li chief scientist had the novel idea of settin herself up as the soul in charge of it all in place of Director Shi,” Gorin added. “You all know how well that worked for er. Lady Anwae wound up becoming the monster in both their places and here we all are, captive to er siren

call, livin in er body with no a care in the whole world, right?”

“So what was this Director Shi doing down here, I wonder?” Chyka asked.

“Escapin,” Gorin replied.

“I was under the impression that Sarva took care of all of the loose ends in the wake of the Omega Incident,” Dr. Kidan noted. “Director Shi was loose end number one.”

“Shi got away,” Gorin answered with a shrug. “Prob’ly someone she was sexin got her out. Vanished into thin air, that woman did. Well, vanished into the shipyard, it seems. Heaven knows where she went from ere. Not sure I really wante find out, te be perfectly honest.”

There was something odd about the engineer’s tone that caught Chyka’s ear. Something a bit too strained. Too earnest. Too personally invested in the event that he’d been

describing.

“Eh. It doesn’t matter, does it?” Gorin sated as he stood up and turned toward the last of the side halls. “Done n over with.”

“It was *you*, wasn’t it?” Chyka asked.

Gorin froze.

“*You* helped her escape, didn’t you?” Chyka demanded.

“Lass, it’s done n over with,” Gorin replied. “Never claimed te be a saint. Jus... didne want te see er... suffer.”

“Suffer?” Chyka questioned. “And exactly how was she going to suffer? By facing fair justice for trying to take over the galaxy?”

“Don’ be foolin yerself about Sarva, lass,” Gorin answered as he stared blankly off into the darkness. “When it comes to organized crime n such, he couldn give a shit about the law. Oh, sure. He arrests lots o no-names n

secondary characters. The real targets? They all just go away, don't they? 'In hiding', my ass. Ye really think he lets em' get away?"

"Clearly, he let Director Shi get away, and go into hiding," Chyka snapped. "Why the hell would think any of the others are any different?"

"Ye really think she got far enough away fer that?" Gorin growled in reply. "No, lass. I'm under no illusions. She's dead. I just... I just... wanted to give er a chance. Even if was jus wishful thinkin."

"You... idiot!" Dr. Kidan groaned. "She can't be dead. It's impossible. She was wearing mark six biogel! I mean, she might be a gummy, but she's not dead! And there's nothing Sarva could have done to kill her!"

"An the torture beforehand?" Gorin hissed. "What about that?"

"You have no fucking idea what kind of

information she could have supplied on the whole plot!” Dr. Kidan swore. “How do we know the whole thing was really put on ice? There could be a whole organization out there, biding their time, trying to find some way to supplant, or maybe even take control of the mark seven biogel, and Omega! Some contingency plan that only she knew about that... that could be out there, just waiting for their moment to strike and turn us all into their shiny black slaves!”

“You call me an idiot!” Gorin yelled. “That’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever...”

“Shut up!” Chyka ordered.

Gorin glared at the little snow leopardess. “Oh, dun tell me ye ack’chilly believe im!”

Chyka hesitated. Gorin was her best friend within Gelitech. Her most trusted friend. She never hesitated to tell him anything that was bothering her. He’d been right next to her through thick and thin. He knew everything.



*Everything.*

*I don't know what to do, Chyka thought into the void. I don't know what to do. Was he just too stupid to realize? Or is he... is he...*

An image flashed through Chyka's mind. A harsh face. Pale blue eyes. And words that only she could hear. *Stay where you are. I'm coming...*

## DEEP

“What do you mean that Dari’s gone critical again?” Chyka exclaimed as her grandmother stood staring down into the eight deep voids that had been hacked into the thick reinforced concrete of the subterranean shipyard’s final, and most isolated, side hall. “I thought that was impossible!”

General Riyalli remained silent, gazing into the empty pits with a look that might be described as equal parts disbelief and horror. The holes were arrayed four to each side of a long, broad steel rail of sorts. A massive, precisely leveled, and carefully stabilized girder upon which the first sections of a new ship’s keel would be built. Of course, starships didn’t actually have a keel, per-se, but the term

had been repurposed to define the initial structures that would serve as a highly accurate reference for the rest of the ship's construction.

The nuances of starship construction were the last thing on anyone present's minds, though to be perfectly honest, Chyka would have loved to put the crisis on hold and explore all of the shipyard's nooks and crannies. It was one thing to read about a truly epic place like this in a book. It was entirely another to see it all first hand.

The little snow leopardess couldn't help but pick up on her great grandmother's thoughts. They seemed almost radiant in a strange way that seemed totally unique. Was it something fundamental to her relationship with her grandmother? Or was her grandmother just that strong a personality that her thoughts were somehow forcibly getting through to Chyka when others, even her own biogel spouses, couldn't?

Whatever the cause for the insinuated thoughts, Chyka certainly couldn't argue with their content. Just the very idea of what they were looking at seemed beyond ludicrous. How could anyone have been so stupid, let alone Admiral Sarva? Or had he left the disposal to someone else? Someone who might not have been as trustworthy as he'd assumed?

It was very hard not to suspect the diminutive engineer of having been guilty of far larger transgressions than helping the enigmatic Nuva Exi Shi escape the claws of fey'li Imperial justice. But Admiral Sarva hadn't trusted anyone within Vixatni to have any role in the dismantling of the Old Three core. The work had been done by outsiders, most of whom had no idea what they'd been tasked to transport. Grunts from the Special Projects Institute, mostly. They did what they were told, and didn't ask questions.

As to exactly what had been concealed beneath the thick steel plates, there was little

question on anyone's mind. It had been the Old Three biogel reactor core, allowed to solidify and separated into eight sections. Sealed into specially constructed casks, these were supposed to have been brought, along with the Alpha and Beta cores, to highly secure locations, both inaccessible and naturally deadly to anyone who might desire to find them. This relatively hospitable place, with its easy access from Mashiva's maze of underground rail tunnels, was everything but.

“Commander?” General Riyalli finally spoke, turning away from the twisted mass of steel cover plates that were piled up against one wall along with the pile of concrete chunks of what had presumably been the plugs that had sealed the holes. She eyed the Vixanti Corporation intelligence officer, ostensibly still an officer of the Imperial Navy acting as a ‘consultant’ to the ‘defense contractor’. “Perhaps you’d be so wonderfully kind as to enlighten me on this... this... load of completely half-assed bullshit?”

Commander Nax frowned. “I’m sorry, General, but I don’t know any more than you do.”

“Really?” General Riyalli questioned. “You were Admiral Sarva’s primary agent in the field here. I would have expected you to be more aware of what was happening. Then again, Director Shi escaped on your watch as well, didn’t she?”

“With all due respect, General, I was a bit tied up with the situation on the Omega at that moment,” Commander Nax replied with audible displeasure. “In any event, Admiral Sarva wanted Shi to get away. She was far from the biggest fish in the game, and he was already dealing with the issue of the conveniently missing members of the Vixanti Directorate.”

“Missing Directorate?” Chyka asked with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve never heard about that.”

“They upped and vanished on the day of the

Omega Incident, right about the time Sarva showed up in person,” Commander Nax answered with a shake of his head and a deep sigh. “I really should have done something to keep better track of Mikson. As far as I can tell, he saw the whole thing go down with those Makta thugs he liked to hang out with and realized that Anwae wasn’t the easily manipulated ‘pretty face’ that the Directorate had been led to believe she was. He told Shi, and Shi send word to the Directorate.”

“Interesting,” Chyka replied with a deep frown.

“Shi didn’t think it was a big deal,” Nax continued. “She knew that Alluwa was doing something a bit special to ensure Anwae was going to be exactly what they wanted her to be, whether she liked it or not. Of course, we all know how that turned out. Mikson’s Makta buddies let him know about Sarva’s trap at Anwae’s apartment, and again, he went to Shi. That’s when the whole lot of them made off.”

“Interesting,” Chyka responded with a frown.

“The Admiral knew the Directorate was likely to make themselves scarce the moment he acted, and had hoped that Shi would lead Intel to them,” Commander Nax went on. “They did exactly what he predicted, but then Shi just vanished into thin air. She walked out of sight of this old lout through that door into the freight yard over there, but never came out the other side!”

“Who’r ye callin’ an old lout?” Gorin snapped from his perch on a stack of old pallets, surrounded by a squad of General Riyalli’s heavily armed marines.

“So much for the Admiral who never fails,” Dr. Kidan muttered under his breath.

“An Admiral is only as good as his subordinates,” General Riyalli responded with



a sharp glare. “And clearly, those involved in everything having to do with Vixanti were, and still are, extremely lacking in many critically essential qualities.”

Commander Nax scowled. “You’re awfully critical for someone who allowed deeply misguided personal considerations to compromise your own assignment to monitor Brightstone. You know, by trying to hide your dysfunctional little village from the world by not allowing anyone else to work with you.”

General Riyalli snapped. “You... little... *fucking...*”

Chyka walked away as the two officers argued, toward the dusty footprints that were the only remaining sign of Vixanti Three’s former Director.

“What a couple of immature brats,” Dr. Kidan remarked softly as he followed the little snow leopardess. “It’s no wonder we all wound up in a mess like this with people like that in

charge.”

Chyka barely managed to stifle a laugh. As much as she hated to admit it, the scientist was right, and especially about her great grandmother. The elder Riyalli may have been an inspiring genius in combat, but when it came to intrigue, she was far out of her element, and in many ways, her competence. And intelligence officers? They knew how to get information just fine, but the moment they came across something that needed immediate action on their part, they never seemed to know what to do without orders from above. Put the two together, and it often would have had the appearance of comedy if the stakes weren't just as often so high.

“Well?” Dr. Kidan inquired. “What do we do?”

“You need to pay a visit to the Maria Nuclear Institute's Rad Lab,” came a silky, effeminate voice from the shadows. It was

almost impossibly smooth and so pleasant to the ear that Chyka couldn't help but stand in silence, waiting, and wanting, to hear more. It was also a vaguely familiar voice, and one that carried with it such power that it sent a shiver down her spine.

“What? Who... uh... oh... it's *you!*” Chyka stammered as Lady Shetari Anwae, Omega, stepped out into the dull, dusty light.

“You were expecting someone else?” Lady Anwae mused as she reached out to run her biogel coated fingers over the little snow leopardess' cheek. The cheetah, was, like Chyka, clad from neck to toe in glistening black biogel. Unlike the Gelitech model, her shoulders here adorned with patches of vivid, deep pink biogel of the same color associated with the Biogel Game's Team Pink. Upon there were the Vixanti logo, and the four pointed star designating her as a 'noble admiral' of the civilian sort. Someone to be respected even by the military, if not quite having the authority

to give orders. At least, not generally. Here and now, things were different. “Given Matron T’mayne’s deep distrust of the military on this matter, Admiral Sarva has deputized me to take direct command and deal with the current threat using any reasonable means necessary. Means like you, in all your magnificent glory.”

“Me?” Chyka responded as her biogel mistress’ touch send a wave of strange, affectionate pleasure through her body. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to... leave...”

“I don’t think Admiral Sarva really understands how safe against harm we are,” Lady Anwae replied. “Or perhaps he’s just worried about what might happen to those who are obligated to travel with us. Or perhaps he just wanted to use you as a trap to see who might show up looking for you. He does that sometimes.”

“What about the Rad Lab?” Dr. Kidan inquired, looking quite fascinated with the

cheetah's affectionate caressing of the little snow leopardess' ears and hair. "You... uh... said something about the... uh... Rad Lab?"

"Of course," Lady Anwae replied with considerable bemusement at the tiger's fixation on her affectionate caressing. "I need a question answered, and the Rad Lab is the only place to have it answered safely."

"What's the question?" Chyka inquired. "Something about Dari, I assume?"

"Yes," Lady Anwae answered with a nod toward the scientist. "Chyka, do you remember when we visited the ancient temple there, through the portal into the past? When we gazed into the pit beneath. Into the molten mass of uranium and... perhaps... something else. Something with which you in particular are quite intimately familiar."

"Purple slime?" Chyka responded with a raised eyebrow. "There's purple slime mixed in with the uranium?"

“Wouldn’t that just float on top?” Dr. Kidan remarked. “All forms of gobzite are quite light compared to most minerals, at least in normal space. It’s extremely dense, but most of the mass is held in its transdimensional matrix.”

“Indeed,” Lady Anwae noted with a nod. “Just like biogel, in fact. And, just like biogel, it can act as a conduit for energy between normal and higher order space. The main difference, of course, being that gobzite has a bias toward outward flow, where biogel has a bias toward inward flow.”

“Of course,” Dr. Kidan replied with deeply skeptical expression. “I don’t know what that can possibly have to do with its potential mixing and interaction with a self-sustaining mass of uranium though. It really shouldn’t do either. At least, not of its own accord.”

“It depends, doesn’t it?” Lady Anwae answered. “We know that energized gobzite, like energized biogel, has its own critical mass.

Its own point where it is so thoroughly energized that its radiated outflow acts as enough of an inflow to the core region to create a self-sustaining energization. Such a critical mass can activate other nearby masses in ways that can be used to manipulate and control them. Purple slime gobzite is particularly easy to bring into this kind of state, with very small physical volumes involved. That is the basis, of course, for all key'vin'ta purple slime 'magic'."

"Exactly," Dr. Kidan observed. "Gobzite is an inductor of sorts. You need nearby transdimensional energy flow to energize it. Like the energy moving between a sapient soul and its higher order fundamental existence. But that's the only way to energize it, so I don't understand what it could have to do with Dari."

"Well, quite frankly, that part is a bit fuzzy in my mind," Lady Anwae responded. "As in quantum level fuzzy. As you know, quantum

unpredictability is a consequence of energy leakage to and from higher order space, intentional or otherwise. The higher the incidence of quantum level effects, the larger the amount of mutual leakage. It took science millennia to prove it, since it all averages out in the end, but...”

“Let me cut to the chase here,” Chyka interrupted. “You’re suggesting that there might be enough of this leaked energy going back and forth inside a reactor, with all its extra quantum level stuff going on, to activate purple slime?”

“Exactly,” Lady Anwae replied. “And we both know from personal experience that activated purple slime can activate biogel, don’t we?”

“Oh... oh dear,” Dr. Kidan sputtered as the full weight of the matter became clear.

“Indeed,” Lady Anwae responded with a nod. “If the Dari reactor is laced with activated purple slime, then any mass of biogel near



enough to it would become activated as well, without the need for expensive, heavily regulated, and easily detected transdimensional field coil setups. But we don't know if if the conditions inside a reactor can activate purple slime to begin with. Yet. Which is why you need to pay the Rad Lab a visit. They'll be expecting you."

"What about them?" Chyka asked, looking over her shoulder at the still arguing officers, the diminutive engineer, and the marines who didn't seem to quite know what to make of it all.

"I'll set them on a useful course," Lady Anwae replied. "Or at least remove them from the matter, as the case may be."

Chyka bit her lip. As horrified as she was with Gorin's actions in the past, he was still a friend. Assuming he hadn't used his position to help the cult. But surely he hadn't. Had he? "Please don't do anything to him. He's not evil.

He's just..."

"Misguided?" Lady Anwae responded with a low chuckle. "A dupe, for sure. And well set up to take the blame for every misfortune that's befallen you, isn't he? You'd have thought he'd arranged the ambush beneath Xinta, wouldn't you?"

"I... well..." Chyka sputtered. It did seem awfully suspicious in retrospect.

"Perhaps he did," Lady Anwae again chuckled. "Or perhaps it was Sarva, hmm? He likes to get us into ambushes, doesn't he?"

"Uh..." Chyka responded. She really didn't quite know what to say.

"Or perhaps it's another singular power who's so terrified of what we are that it's willing to go to great lengths to stop us from spreading out body to all ends of the universe," Lady Anwae concluded with a sly grin. "But... who knows? All I know is that I need that

question answered, and that we've delayed long enough. Don't worry about Gorin. He'll still be at Gelitech when you get back."

"How do we get to the Rad Lab safely with this cult, or whatever it is, probably still trying to find me?" Chyka asked.

"There's a work train who's driver upon whom I've used my particular... charms... to encourage a bit of help from," Lady Anwae replied, gesturing toward the same door through which Director Shi had supposedly vanished. "He's headed across the river to pick up some cars from a work site near the old Kima Mine workings. That will bring him past a siding that leads into what appears to be a brick wall. You may recall rumors of a secret station where the J'zo used to shuttle illicit goods in and out of the Old City way back in the day. That's it."

"Neat," Chyka responded with a smile.

"The Rad Lab's subterranean test facility

now abuts it,” Lady Anwae continued. “They use it to move much hotter sorts of goods in and out with minimum fuss these days. The driver will let you off there.”

“Don’t we need to bring some purple slime to test?” Dr. Kidan inquired as Lady Anwae turned away.

“I’m sure Chyka can summon some when and where its needed,” Lady Anwae answered with a smile over her shoulder. “Now get moving. Don’t make the train late!”

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“Wow, what an ass that girl had!” the work train driver blathered as the small locomotive’s electric motors whined to life. “Wish she’d given me her contacts. I’d love to take her back to my place and... well, you know her, right?”

“She’s my boss,” Chyka replied as dryly as she could force herself to. The very idea of someone so well known as Lady Anwae doing who-knows-what with a random subway work train driver seemed quite preposterous. What if it got out in public?

“Hah!” the driver laughed. “Well then. I’ll tell you what, that stripey-cat really knows how to shake it. So... what in the blazes are all you Gelitech folks doing all the way down here in a place like this? It’s not safe, even on the walkways. Another fire in the shipyard or something?”

“We’re headed across the river,” Chyka replied gesturing down the dark tunnel in the direction the train was headed, very much relieved that her biogel mistress had at least had the sense to use her shape-shifting power to disguise her true identity for the tryst. “Old City.”

“Old City? Right. You know this runs

straight into the old bluff mine workings, right?” the driver responded with visible disbelief. “You aren’t some crazy urban explorer types are you? I’ve hear that biogel stuff makes people think they can do anything without consequences. Do you have any idea how dangerous those places are? You get in there and something happens, no one’s coming to get you out. Ever.”

“We’re not interested in the mines,” Chyka replied. Lady Anwae hadn’t mentioned what she might have told the driver. She had to think fast for a plausible excuse. Thankfully, her biogel mistress’ mention of the secret J’zo station and her many hours of quiet reading as an overnight librarian at the Mashiva Mariners’ University had given her quite the knowledge of the city and it’s history. “We’re looking into the history of the old cross-river connections with respects to Old City corruption, and the subterranean skirmishes leading up to the Union War of 3843. Right now, we’re going to have a looksie at what, I’m

told, is the location of the rumored, walled up, 'secret station' where the J'zo gang members would launch their worst attacks against what they thought were the mines being established in South City."

"A rumored walled up station, eh?" the driver asked. "Never heard anything about anything like that, and I've been working these old tunnels for decades."

"It's not something that's generally known, really," Chyka went on, wondering why the driver would deny knowing about a feature he'd already agreed to take them to. "But... I'm quite sure you know exactly where it is, and I'm quite positive why you wouldn't want to tell me."

"Are you, now?" the driver questioned with a dark look on his face. "Because there's some places where poking around isn't just dangerous..."

"We're expected," Chyka replied.

“Then why do you need a random work train to take you there?” the driver questioned with a much harsher tone.

“You ask an awful lot of questions for someone who’s already been compensated,” Chyka noted.

“It’s one thing to give a ride in exchange for some shiny black pussy,” the driver responded with a glare. “It’s another thing to get caught helping some random folks sneak into a place like that, isn’t it?”

“Why’d you agree to take us there then?” Chyka asked.

“Have you put your hands on that mind blowing ass?” the driver replied. “I just... you know... couldn’t say no, right? You don’t say no when a shiny black cat girl starts rubbing on you and asks you to give her a full load, right? I mean... I don’t know anyone who’d say no to that. Do you?”



“I know plenty of people who’d say no to that,” Dr. Kidan noted with a deep sigh.

“Yeah, you look like that type,” the driver smirked.

Dr. Kidan rolled his eyes.

“Well, you can drop us off someplace where we can go up top and we’ll go the Rad Lab the usual way then,” Chyka sighed.

“Oh, no,” the driver replied. “I’m taking you both to the yard, and then you can explain to my bosses exactly what you’re up to down here.”

“You’re trucking cars for the work down on the east side of South City, right?” Chyka asked with a sly smile. “Who’s the Marine in charge at the yard end of things? I’d be more than happy to explain to him just how lax operational security is on this line. I mean, come on. People can get onto work trains just by giving the driver a little lovin’? Yeah. I’m

sure he's going to love to hear that, hmm?"

"You... wouldn't!" the driver stammered.

"I most certainly would," Chyka replied with a low chuckle. "Unless, you know, you want to do what you agreed to in the first place, and then nobody has to know anything."

"Fine!" the driver grunted. "I'll drop you off there, but dammit... if anything happens..."

Chyka sighed. "If anything was going to happen, I can assure you, it already would have."

"Oh, really? Because... ah... oh! Shit!" the driver yelped as a warning buzzer sounded. "That's... that's not supposed to be set that way!"

Chyka looked up just in time to see that the signal for the main track was set to red. Beneath it, to one side, a second signal was set to yellow. They were being shunted off the

main line, and onto unlit siding that led off into a very rough looking tunnel. A very rough, and very wet looking tunnel.

“This isn’t my route!” the driver sputtered as he yanked hard on the brakes. “This is mine haulage!”

The glare of the locomotive’s headlights played over countless hanging strands of clear, glistening something. Before Chyka could react, the driver had bolted out of the cab and jumped for the walkway. Chyka took a single step to follow, but it was too late. The little locomotive drove headlong into the dangling gobs of sticky slime. The brakes were locked, but rather than stopping, it slid along the well lubricated tracks until there was a dozen meters of gooey tunnel between it and the relative safety of the main line behind.

“Subway slime,” Dr. Kidan muttered with considerable displeasure as he yanked the open door closed to keep it from getting into the cap

with them.

As if on cue, almost the whole mass of glistening goop from which the countless tendrils were dangling parted ways with the tunnel ceiling. It came down in a massive sheet, instantly covering the little locomotive with a deafening, gooey splat.

“Well, at least we’ve got our biogel,” Dr. Kidan noted as the distinctly floral odor of the slime began to insinuate itself into the cab. “Stuff can’t hurt us.”

“But it can trap us,” Chyka replied with a deep frown. “And it can hold us until the biogel can’t sustain us anymore. Well... not me. But you. And... dammit. That smell is so sweet.”

“Then what do we do?” Dr. Kidan questioned.

“I don’t know,” Chyka replied. “Just... just have your biogel cover your head to keep the smell from getting you to do something unwise

and let me think. I'm sure I'll come up with something. Just give me a bit of time..."

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Chyka opened the locomotive door. She had no choice. If this was all a very creative sort of ambush, then she was certain that someone would be coming along in short order to finish the job. They had to try to escape. If they got trapped by the slime, she could use her powers as a geldancer to get away and get help. Hopefully they'd leave the body she'd left behind, and her nervous companion, to the slime in the assumption that their work had been done for them. It was a long shot, but it seemed like the only shot.

Granted, the little snow leopardess *could* have called for help. But how soon would help actually arrive? Not soon enough, for sure.

And...

“I know this is... crazy,” Chyka assured her now completely biogel covered companion as her own biogel coating liquefied and began to spread up over her head. “But... I just don’t know who we can trust anymore.”

Dr. Kidan nodded, though his companion had no doubt that the expression hidden by the perfectly smooth surface of the biogel covering his face was far less approving.

The biogel closed around Chyka’s face. It cut off the heady odor that the slime used to attract new victims, but it seemed to do nothing to reduce its effects. She couldn’t help but want to touch it, even though she knew that her body heat would trigger rapid growth, trapping her within its blooming mass.

There was no real choice, of course. The locomotive was completely covered in the goop. In fact, everything seemed to be covered in the goop. They were going to have to get

into it. And get covered by it. The only real question was how far they could get before it finally managed to stop them.

Chyka stepped into the thick, heavy ooze that coated the narrow walkway on the side of the locomotive. It was pleasantly cool and slippery in a way that made her just want to get down on her hands and knees and roll around in it. As she carefully stepped off the locomotive and onto the slime coated walkway, she wondered if her companion felt the same way. And if he did... how could she possibly stop him?

“Try and ignore how it feels,” Chyka thought ‘aloud’. It was the only way to communicate with another biogel wearer now that her face was covered with biogel. She was never really certain if it was actually getting through to its intended target or not, though. She had to wait for a reply. Even then, she couldn’t quite convince herself that it was really coming from someone else, and not from her own mind.

“Trying,” came the reply. “It just feels so nice though.”

“I know,” Chyka responded. “Just focus on me. Follow me. Don’t stop walking unless you just can’t anymore.”

At first, the slime remained quite fluid. One meter. Two meters. Five meters. Ten meters. But then, just when it seemed as if the goo wasn’t going to offer any resistance to their biogel covered bodies, it began to adhere to their feet.

“Come on,” Chyka thought as she began to struggle to make headway. “Keep going. As far as we can go..”

“It’s getting too heavy,” Dr. Kidan replied. “Can’t... push... much further.”

It was indeed getting heavy. The thick goo was sticking to their feet and working its way up their lower legs. Some movements seemed easier than others, giving the illusion of ‘clear’



paths through the ooze. Of course, these paths all seemed to lead directly toward one of the dangling tendrils of slime that still hung here and there over the walking path. If she hadn't had other things to worry about, Chyka might have pondered the possibility that the alleged colony of mindless bacteria actually possessed some degree of intelligence.

“Gah!” Dr. Kidan thought with exceptional loudness as he stumbled into one of those dangling strands of slime. In an instant, he was all bound up. In another instant, the slime began to grow over him. The hanging tendril thickened. It lifted him up off the floor. “Oh! Shit! Shit! I’m sorry. I’m... oh... oh... that feels... so... so...”

Chyka couldn't help herself but gawk at the glistening black scientist as he squirmed and wiggled within what now seemed like a web of slime strands stretching between his body, the walking path, the tunnel wall, and the patch of ceiling overhead. He was completely trapped in

the slime. And, if the state of his manhood was any indicator, he was completely enthralled with it was well.

“Sorry,” Dr. Kidan thought as his modest manhood began to take shape within its usually featureless coating of biogel. “I just... I just can’t help it. It feels so good!”

“It’s okay. Don’t struggle,” Chyka advised. There was no point. The slime had him, and the only way he was going to get out was a good spraying of slime-be-gone, or whatever it was that MashiTran called the stuff. “Just... I don’t know. Might as well enjoy it, right? You’ll be fine for a few days, at least.”

“Right,” Dr. Kidan replied as it became abundantly apparent that his body was going to enjoy it whether his mind was willing or not. “Enjoy it... ah... ah... yeah...”

Chyka turned back toward the main tunnel and pushed her feet through the heavy goop. She was a geldancer. A being of one hundred

percent pure biogel. Light on her feet. Strong as strong could be. Nothing could stop her. Nothing...

The little snow leopardess caught something hard with her right foot. She stumbled. Down onto her hands and knees she went. Even the geldancer in her knew that there was no getting back up.

Despite all that was at stake, Chyka couldn't help her curious self but to give in, at least for a moment. She had to know what it felt like to roll around in the intensely pleasing goo. She let herself fall forward into the stick slop. She savored the cool wet ooze as her chest settled into it. As it squeezed up between her legs. As it grew over her, completely encasing her captive body before dangling strands reached down to pull her up into the air just like her captive companion.

There was no stopping it. No helping it. The slime's touch was arousing. The smooth biogel

surface between her legs began to tighten. Her feminine folds took shape, albeit still coated with a thin sheen of glistening blackness. She squirmed. She wiggled. She flexed her legs. The slime began, ever so slowly to work its way inside.

Subway slime had far less use for the flesh of its victims than it did their body heat. Once it took hold of a warm body, it would find its way inside, to where the heat was the more intense. No available orifice was sacred to it, nor was any orifice immune to the magnificently blissful pleasure of its touch. Victims would quickly find themselves filled with the goo in every way possible, and would have virtually no choice but to thoroughly enjoy every passing moment of it.

Chyka simply couldn't afford to let the slime have its way with her. She needed to escape. Her mind bounced back and forth between wanting to struggle, and wanting to feel more pleasure. Would it bring her to the heights

orgasmic bliss? Or was it just going to keep her at the edge, unable to get off without some outside intervention?

“I can come back and try this again later,” Omega’s voice slithered into the little snow leopardess’ mind. “For now, I need to get Dr. Kidan and myself out, don’t I? Well?”

That was enough to bring Chyka’s wandering mind back into momentary focus. She needed to get free. She needed to get Dr. Kidan free. But how?

“I’m not a biogel fey’li,” Omega observed. “I’m biogel.”

Omega was right. Chyka was biogel. Biogel was liquid. More of a slime, really.

The little snow leopardess struggled to clear her mind. “I need to be... slime. I need to actually be the slime.”

Exactly how Chyka was supposed to be the

slime was a bit beyond her. It took a brief, supremely jiggly nudge from Omega to make it happen. In one, mind bending moment, she was aware of how to become a perfect biogel imitation of virtually anything. Anything that was real. Anything that she could imagine. Anything.

Chyka wanted to be slime. Crystal clear subway slime. Exactly like the stuff that surrounded her. She focused on the desire. She expressed her yearning to see it fulfilled. And then, in one, dizzying instant, her fey'li shape undulated so sharply that she felt entire body go pop.

One moment she was there, a glistening black shape dangling in the slime, consumed by pleasure. The next moment there was nothing but a lump in the slime where she'd been. While she hadn't become subway slime, she *had* become a perfect biogel imitation. Too perfect and imitation, perhaps, though its consequences wouldn't become quite clear

until she'd slithered her way through the subway slime to Dr. Kidan.

Slime-Chyka rose up through the web of subway slime that had snared the supremely horny scientist. She quickly insinuated herself between the goo and his captive's body. All of his captive body. Even that.

All that Slime-Chyka had to do now was to slither them both into the clear and set him free. As much as she might have wanted to avoid it, however, she simply couldn't help but pleasure Dr. Kidan in the process. He'd certainly found his relatively static slimy prison more than enough of a stimulant to arouse him to considerable heights. Her slithery ministrations weren't nearly so passive, and his body, willing or not, was going to enjoy it.

Dr. Kidan couldn't help it any more than she could. Not that he minded. She *had* told him to enjoy the whole experience, after all.

That his gooey lover was no longer the subway slime, but Chyka's transformed body was something of which Dr. Kidan was quite blissfully unaware. He was more than happy to let it ooze and flow around him as it took him off to places unknown. And he was more than happy to let it arouse him to heights he'd surely never experienced before in his life.

Slime-Chyka knew he was getting close. She could tell by his increasingly erratic movements. There was nothing she could do. Nor was there anything she wanted to do. If she was going to save him along with herself, she was more than willing to accept that she might be getting an unbidden gift in exchange.

She could feel the pulse run down his manhood. She could feel the ejaculation of hot semen into her own liquid mass. And then another. And another. And so on, until he had nothing left to give.

Strangely, it didn't feel good. It didn't really



feel like much of anything. It just felt like warm fluid in little pockets. Slime-Chyka didn't really know if she had the ability to feel pleasure in this form, though she did feel something else. Something... oddly intimate about him. Like he was truly her lover. That they had become one...

Slime-Chyka shuddered and focused on the still quite horny shape within her. No. She hadn't subsumed him like she had the other members of her 'pride'. But something had definitely changed between them. Exactly what, she didn't know. It wasn't important now. All that was important was getting out of the subway slime and to someplace safe, and quickly. There was no way to know how much time they had until someone with less than pleasant intentions showed up, though at this point there seemed to be no way to know exactly who those people might be...

## BELOW

“Well, look who the rats finally dragged in,” Dr. Lae harrumphed as the extremely displeased looking snow leopardess and her rather embarrassed looking companion climbed up onto the ancient one track passenger platform. “I do very sincerely trust that you have some plausible explanation for your *extremely* inconvenient delay?”

*Figures, Chyka sighed to herself. Of all the physicists to run into here, it had to be this flaming asshole...*

This wasn't the little snow leopardess' first encounter with the eminent physicist. One more than one very unpleasant occasion, she'd had the pleasure of dealing with his inquiries

about obscure ancient manuscripts. Manuscripts that he had quite vehemently insisted were held in the Mashiva Mariners' University Library archives. Exactly what use a bunch of old books involving disciplines as varied as anthropology and knot theory could possibly have been to a physicist had been completely beyond her at the time.

Equally beyond the young, inexperienced librarian had been the physicist's absolutely foul demeanor when being told that he was clearly mistaken as to the contents of the MMU archives. It had been a real eye opener as to just how impossibly stupid that even the smartest people could be at times. Why wouldn't someone with so much brain power have double checked a reference suggesting that a new university, with a new library, and who's archive focused on practical spacefaring matters, might have an obscure collection of ancient manuscripts?

*So smart in some things, so dumb in*

*everything else*, Chyka thought to herself. It seemed to be true of many scientists. Even those more open minded ones employed by Gelitech weren't immune to the tendency. She had to stifle a chuckle at the thought of Dr. Kidan's futile efforts to separate work from romance. So many potential girlfriends, lost to his inability to keep his mouth shut about all the wonderful experiments he was working on, and how much fun it would be to participate...

"Well?" Dr. Lae snapped. "What's your bloody excuse?"

"What's yours?" Chyka snapped back as she looked around. "You know, these ambushes are *really* getting old. I would have thought someone in your position would have made sure the path was clear. You know, instead of letting us get sent down a tunnel full of subway slime."

The nearly derelict subway platform looked almost as ancient as the texts the physicist had

been seeking. Dingy didn't even begin to describe it. The platform itself was built up from roughly cut stones laid against the side of the short stub-siding tunnel. This gave access to a recess in the tunnel wall which, she presumed, had been intended as an escape access or utility room. Whatever features has been present in the recess wall had been removed in more recent times, in favor of a large, metal garage door. The only sign of what might be behind that door was a large radiation hazard symbol painted in the center.

“Subway slime?” Dr. Lae growled. “Listen here, young lady! If you'd been sent down a tunnel full of subway slime you most certainly wouldn't be standing here right now!”

“Yeah, I know,” Chyka replied with a scowl. “I imagine that was the point. Which raises the question of who set us up. Not a lot of people knew we were coming here, after all. Even fewer that we were commandeering a work locomotive.”

“It definitely wasn’t the train driver,” Dr. Kidan remarked. “I’ve never seen such hysterics in my life, the way he ran off screaming for help like that.”

“Mmm,” Chyka agreed. “It was a good thing that postal train stopped for him, though I don’t imagine it’s going to be much comfort when the cleanup crew shows up to de-slime the place and we’re nowhere to be found.”

“You know, one would have thought a switch leading to a slime filled tunnel would have been locked,” Dr. Kidan noted. “Or, you know, that whoever cut the lock would have been noticed by Rad Lab security, considering how ridiculously close that was to this siding here.”

“Indeed,” Chyka responded with a nod. Calling it close was an understatement. The brick barrier with its barely hidden access tunnel had only been about sixty meters past the slime filled tunnel. “Which leads my back to my question. What’s your excuse?”

“Do I look like the sort of person who deals with matters of security?” Dr. Lae growled.

Chyka crossed her arms. “No. And that’s a problem for someone who’s apparently waiting here for us alone,” she scolded with perhaps a bit more enthusiasm than was appropriate. She just couldn’t help herself. Thanks to Omega, she’d had enough of a taste of real power that now any chance she had exert dominance in a situation was proving to be much too enticing to pass up. “After all, I don’t imagine whoever sent us down that tunnel is going to forget to check on the status of their handiwork.”

Dr. Lae responded with an extremely irritated huff.

“Whatever,” Chyka responded with a firm glare. “Now, if you’re all done wasting time, I think we have an experiment that needs to get conducted. And the sooner, the better, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Yes. Fine,” Dr. Lae sputtered, gesturing

toward the garage door. "This way. Follow me."

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If Chyka had imagined that the vital experiment was to take place in the dramatic setting of a fission reactor room, even if it was a small research reactor like the one in the Rad Lab, then she was left quite sorely disappointed. There was no catwalk around a huge lead lined, concrete tank. There was no pale blue glow surrounding a critical core assembly. There was no exotic machinery to lower the item under test into the deadly abyss. Instead there was just a plain old concrete room with some tables, equipment lockers, and a pneumatic tube that began on one tabletop, and left the room through one wall.

"The experiment is simple," Dr. Lae



explained as he directed a rather skeptical looking reactor technician to open the clear plastic pneumatic carrier vessel. “We take your sample of purple slime gobzite and place it into the carrier. The suction system will then draw the carrier into the very center of the core, exposing it to the very highest levels of neutron flux. We then observe the effects of active exposure for no longer than fifteen minutes. The carrier is then drawn out of the reactor, and into a containment cell for longer term observation.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Dr. Kidan observed as the tall leopardess placed the open carrier onto the table beside the pneumatic tube.

“Indeed it is,” Dr. Lae responded with a rather unpleasant sideways glance at the tiger. “Now... where is your sample of the gobzite? Don’t tell me you have it hidden under that biogel somewhere... well...”

“As if,” Chyka replied with a smirk. “No. I

don't have any gobzite with me. I need to summon it. Give me a moment to get my staff and..."

"Summon it? Wait... you? You're the one who..." Dr. Lae sputtered with a wide-eyed glare at the little snow leopardess.

"The one who... what?" Chyka asked as she reached out with her right hand to retrieve her staff through the transdimensional mist. The physicist had been giving off an unsettling vibe right from the very start, but she'd chalked that down to her prior experience with his bad attitude. Now, however, it seemed like there might be more to it than just that. "You know something about me?"

"Uh... well... no," Dr. Lae responded with a very distinctly disingenuous tone that would have raised the fur on the back of Chyka's neck if it weren't covered in biogel. "I mean, I've heard some things. About someone who could actually use key'vin'ta artifacts. You know how

word gets around in these kinds of circles. And...”

“Really,” Chyka responded with a very skeptical glance at the physicist. He clearly wasn’t being honest, but who had told him about her? Might it have been her grandmother? Lady Anwae? Or... “I’d love to know who you heard it from, because there’s not many people outside of Gelitech and the Navy who know about that. Well... not many who aren’t currently hiding from Admiral Sarva.”

The little snow leopardess was filled with a sudden urge to make a display of her power. A loud hiss filled the air as she took hold of her staff. It appeared from nothing as she closed her fingers around it. Along with the staff came her ritual skirt and necklace. The purple slime gobzite ‘gem’ atop her staff, as well as those adorning her skirt’s belt and necklace glowed with fierce purple light. Purple light that usually indicated that someone was about

to have a very... interesting day.

“AAAAH!” Dr. Lae yelped, jumping back a few steps. “What... what... how is that even...”

“Possible?” Chyka chuckled in a rather deliberately menacing fashion. “Why shouldn’t it be possible? The key’vin’ta priestesses had no trouble energizing the slime all by themselves. Why shouldn’t I?”

Dr. Lae’s expression shifted from one of surprise to one that might be described as one part horror and one part anger. “Only... only specially ordained key’vin’ta can manipulate the slime by will!” he snarled. “You can’t possibly tell me... how... and... and who? They’re dead! They’re all long dead!”

*Keep pushing*, a voice came unbidden into Chyka’s mind. It sounded an awful lot like Dr. Alluwa to her. Dr. Alluwa mixed with Omega. Or... was it? Maybe it was just an excuse her own mind came up with to justify what she felt almost obligated to do. *Don’t let up. Show him.*

*Show him and he won't have a choice but to tell you.*

“Dead?” Chyka laughed as she gave in to the voice in her head. Dr. Alluwa. Omega. Her. It was all the same thing now, wasn't it? If she wanted to do it, then surely they did too. And if they didn't, then surely they'd stop her. “Really? Well... allow me to enlighten you.”

“Oh dear,” Dr. Kidan muttered as he too took a few steps back.

“What?” the reactor technician whispered into the tiger's ear. “What's she doing?”

“I have no idea,” Dr. Kidan whispered back. “But I'm sure it'll be quite, well, let's call it 'interesting'.”

Chyka opened her left hand and a drop of liquid biogel appeared on her palm. It was a spontaneous idea rather than something that she'd actually thought out. A magical flourish that would seem to defy everything that most

people understood about biogel. A display of power that had just the right sort of vibe to make it clear to the highly suspect physicist that he was in far over his head. Assuming it was actually going to work the way she intended, that is.

The biogel sorceress grinned as she turned her hand over. The liquid biogel drop fell towards the floor.

As it descended, the biogel droplet rapidly expanded and morphed into the shape of a certain key'vin'ta high priestess turned mi'ah. Its color shifted to a pale light gray as the form's finer details solidified. Its feet touched the floor. It opened its eyes.

“Ti'ah'ta!” a very confused and very naked Ki'su exclaimed as she found herself suddenly yanked from one shape to another without even the courtesy of a moment's warning. “Oh! Oh... what can possibly be the matter? I was... enjoying that strange shape. It was very...

curious to the senses!”

“No,” Dr. Lae stammered. “No. It can’t. It’s just the biogel playing a trick. One of those body modifications. Or one of the shapeshifting... whatever they’re called. That has to be it! You can’t fool me!”

“You’re half-right,” Chyka purred, locking her gaze with that of the sputtering physicist. “But... you’re also half-wrong. Biogel doesn’t discriminate, after all. It’s willing to accept anyone. Anywhere. In the present. In the future. Even in the past.”

“That portal at Key’von... it... are you suggesting... it actually worked?!? And you... you brought that beast back with you?!?” Dr. Lae screeched.

“Ah! Well now!” Chyka laughed as she took a menacing step forward. “You know... you were just about the last person I’d have expected to be involved with that... organization. Cult. Whatever you want to call it. Such a shame,

really. You were such a great physicist. What made you turn traitor?”

“Nice catch,” Dr. Kidan noted. “But... how did he know it was a portal through time?”

“A portal through time?” the leopardess asked. “What are you all talking about?”

“You... you... little bitch!” Dr. Lae shrieked. “You... you and that whore Anwae! And now... now... no! I refuse to believe it! You can play your tricks all you want! It’s far too late! The Goddess has been reborn! There’s nothing you can do to stop her!”

“Crazy bastard,” Dr. Kidan dryly noted.

“Uh... do I need to call security?” the leopardess asked.

“Not necessary,” Commander Nax declared as he strode through the open doorway, assault rifle leveled at the stunned scientist. “What’s the matter Lae? You weren’t expecting



company? Who am I kidding. Of course you weren't."

Dr. Lae's jaw hung open as he took a few steps backwards toward the controls for the pneumatic system. "Where did you come from? How did you... you were..."

"Otherwise detained?" Nax replied. "You know, I've got to hand it to you Shi worshiping wankers. Getting General Riyalli into a suit of what she thought was Gelitech biogel took an awful lot of work, didn't it? Tricking the General into accepting a suit of Shi's biogel instead was quite the coup. But I think you missed a step somewhere, didn't you?"

"What... what are you talking about?" Dr. Lae hissed.

"You thought she'd stay in Dari until all was said and done, didn't you?" Nax answered with a grin. "So you didn't do anything to keep her from coming into contact with Gelitech gear. You know, Gelitech gear that automatically

applies the Omega upgrade to any non-Omega biogel it comes into contact with. Yeah. You thought she was in your pocket this whole time, didn't you? Especially with all that information she was feeding you. In reality it was Omega feeding you all that garbage. Every last bit of it.”

“No! Impossible!” Dr. Lae shouted as he flipped a selector switch and reached for a shielded red button with a very large radiation hazard placard next to it.

“No! Cell 3! There's a cobalt 60 slug in that cell!” the technician yelled as the physicist reached out and flipped open the shield covering a very large red button. “No! Don't do it! Stop! Stop!!! STOP!!!”

Dr. Lae laughed and motioned to mash his fist into the control button. Time seemed to come to a near standstill.

Chyka reached out with her power. She drew forth glowing purple slime from nothing.

She cast it toward the physicist.

A klaxon wailed. Red lights flashed.

“Emergency condition in pneumatic insertion room 2 verbally indicated,” a computerized voice announced over the loudspeaker. “Automatic lockdown and scram initiated!”

The purple slime raced across space as Dr. Lae smashed his hand onto the big button, even as the leopardess grabbed hold of his arm and tried to yank him away from the controls. He pushed her away, and directly into the path of the slime.

A series of loud bass thumps filled the room as Nax unleashed a barrage of force-ram pulses from his rifle’s under-barrel projector. “Dammit Chyka!” Nax snapped as time seemed to snap back to normal. “He’s too valuable for that!”

Chyka barely noticed the admonishment.

The glowing purple slime streaming from the air around the tip of her staff had found the leopardess' back.

“Chyka!” Dr. Kidan yelled. It was too late.

The leopardess screeched as the slime instantly covered her back from tail to shoulder blades. In an instant it had wrapped itself all around her torso, dissolving her clothing as it spread. She began to float up off the floor as it slithered over her abdomen, down her arms and legs, and up her neck.

“Can't you... can't you stop it?” Dr. Kidan stammered.

“Oh! OH! OHHHH!” the technician panted in confused desperation as the slime pulled her arms to her sides and her legs together. As it flowed up over her chin, before cutting her sonorous utterances short by filling her mouth. Her eyes quivered and her ears twitched as it spread upward.

“NonononononoNO!” Chyka groaned as she struggled to pull the slime back. The slime had completely surrounded the leopardess’ head. It was too late to stop it. Her one-way trip to the Heavenly Hells had begun. Or... had it?

Something strange was happening to the leopardess as Chyka tugged and pulled in a vain effort to keep her from dissolving into the slime. Yes, she was beginning to dissolve away. Yes, her soul was beginning to spiral down into the pleasurable abyss. But... something else was happening. For every bit of her that was making its way into the Hells, a bit of something else was making its way out, and into the mass of slime that was consuming her.

“Ti’ma’pu’ma!” Ki’su exclaimed. “Oh! Yes! Yes! Do it!”

Chyka had no idea what ‘it’ was. She took it meaning that Ki’su wanted her to continue struggling against the leopardess’ total dissolution. That was what she was fighting

*against*, wasn't it? Or was she actually fighting *for* something? Was she fighting to hold that connection open so that something could take the leopardess' place? Something summoned from the bowels of the Nine Heavenly Hells? Something...

“Mi'ku'mi'pa!” Ki'su giggled. “Yes! Oh yes! The power! The power! It is... amazing!”

Chyka didn't have a clue what she was doing. The going and the coming stopped feeling like separate things. Now it felt more like a loop. A loop that was slowly changing as time passed. The bitterness of the fight to save the leopardess was turning sweet. Attractive. Enticing.

“Ga'ti'wa!” Ki'su sputtered as she began to bounce up and down on her feet. “Feel it! When it feels right... let go!”

The loop went round and round and round and round. Chyka wasn't fighting to maintain it anymore. Instead, she was fighting the urge

to step forward. To cast herself into the undulating blob and join in its glorious, throbbing, totally alien power. It felt like such a perfectly natural thing to do. Natural... and right.

Chyka let go, as much for her own self-preservation as in following Ki'su's instruction. The light of her staff faded. The blob of purple slime which floated before her began to take shape. Humanoid shape. With viciously clawed hands and feet, and bony wings which might have been bat-like if there had been anything between their 'fingers'.

The slime that covered the shape suddenly vanished into a delicate purple mist. The leopardess reappeared, though she was only half the leopardess she had been before her terrifying transformation. The other half of her...

"T'no'pi!" Ki'su bubbled. "You... you did it! You have made her into a slime demon! It is..."

magnificent!”

Chyka was as fascinated as she was horrified by the monster that she had created, though she couldn't quite get over the fact that it had been a complete accident. “Oh... uh... oops?”

The slime demon pranced about on her legs of dark lavender, adorned with numerous glowing purple slime patches and nodules. This carapace opened up mid-thigh, running up the outside only, where it met the lumpy, spiny mass which had grown over her back, from her slime-gem tipped tail, all the way up over her shoulders and arms. This too was covered with patches, lumps, and spikes of purple slime.

Chyka gawked as the demon flexed her huge wings. Each of their three bony fingers ended in a glowing purple slime gem, just like her tail. The creature caressed her pair of purple slime horns and stroked the flat patches of purple slime that had taken the place of her



nipples. Another patch covered the middle of her belly, while beneath, the barely exposed inner folds of her luscious womanhood seemed to have been remade into purple slime as well.

“Uh... what did I do?” Chyka asked as the little key’vin’ta priestess bounced and giggled beside her.

“Ma’tu’ma!” Ki’su laughed with unfettered delight. “You have made the one into a slime demon! Do you... do you not know what that means?!?”

“Uh... no,” Chyka responded with a raised eyebrow and a sense that she probably wasn’t going to like the answer.

“Ki’ah’ma!” Ki’su exclaimed. “Only the most holy of supreme royalty have the power to do such a glorious thing!”

“Oh dear,” Dr. Kidan remarked, bowing his head with a deep sigh.

“Na’ma! Mo’mi!” Ki’su sputtered. “You... you are new ruler of my people! The new Empress of Ma’ri’ah!”

“Oh, for heck’s sake!” Nax grunted as he struggled to restrain Dr. Lae. “What next? Is she going to build a temple and get declared a goddess or something?”

“Mi’ka’ru,” Ki’su giggled. “The Empres of Ma’ri’ah is a Goddess!”

“Greeeeeat,” Nax huffed as he turned to the door. “Are you guys going to get in here or do I have to do this all myself?”

“Sir, yes sir!” came the reply as a pair of Admiral Sarva’s marines charged in and piled on top of the struggling physicist.

“I’m not your Empress,” Chyka replied, shaking her head as the marines finally managed to get a pair of handcuffs on the physicist.

“Mo’mi!” Ki’su chuckled. “You are. The Goddess of the Hells has ordained you!”

“Shi is the Goddess of the Hells and Shi had not...” Dr. Lae hissed as the marines dragged him onto his feet.

“Ta’ka’ka!” Ki’su shouted. “Heretic!”

“You’re the heretic, bitch!” Dr. Lae shouted back. “Both of you!”

“Ki’ka’na!” Ki’su yelled. “How dare you speak to the Empress of Ma’ri’ah and High Mother Of Xin’ta in that way!”

“Keep talking!” Dr. Lae growled. “When the true Goddess of the Hells gets hold of you...”

Commander Nax shoved Dr. Lae forward. “Get his asshole to the train. Now!”

“Yes, sir!” the marines replied as the dragged the physicist from the room.

“Phew,” Nax muttered. “Now that that’s

done and over with... I think it's best we get moving before Shi figures out that her downfall is underway.”

“I don't understand,” Chyka said, turning to the Vixanti intelligence officer with a very skeptical expression. At this point, she really wasn't sure who she could trust. “Did you really suggest that everything that's happened to me... that was... Omega's doing?”

“Yeah,” Nax replied. “But this isn't the place to talk about it. We should head back to Gelitech. Lady Anwae's special train is on the tracks outside waiting.”

“Alright,” Chyka replied before turning to the slime demon. “Uh... demon lady... I'm uh... I'm sorry I did that to you.”

The slime demon turned to face her creator. “What are you sorry for, my Empress?” it purred with a low, demonic rumble that seemed to tug at the ears in a deeply unsettling way. “This wonderful shape... it is pure

pleasure. I savor it. And I will savor every moment at your side!”

“Yeah, about that,” Chyka observed, not quite sure how to deal with the creature. Was she actually still the leopardess? Was it the leopardess’ half-transformed body possessed by some angel or demon? Or was it a creature from the Hells that just happened to look like the leopardess? In any event, the last thing she wanted was to have the creature following her around anywhere she could be seen. While she might have been able to pass her shape off as a biogel body-mod, one that was suspiciously similar in coloration to the Gelarium’s interior décor, she just stood out too much for it to be safe at the moment. “You’re a bit... shall we say... conspicuous, and I don’t think it would be a good idea to... uh...”

The slime demon laughed. “Worry not, my Mistress,” it replied. “I shall retire and await a more appropriate time.”

The slime demon dissolved into a small blob of purple slime. This flew around Chyka a few times before solidifying into a little purple gobzite gem. The little snow leopardess took hold of it, but didn't have any idea where to put it. Could she send it off to the secure location where her staff and regalia were kept?

Sending anything back to storage seemed just a bit too risky for the moment. She took the little slime-demon gem and placed it on her wrist, just below the back of her right hand. There, she willed the biogel to take hold of it within its glistening blackness. On a whim, largely because it looked kind of pretty, she left it half-exposed.

“Mi'ma,” Ki'su purred. “What will my new Empress first edict be? How many Mi'ah will she demand? What will she...”

“Stop it with the Empress stuff, will you?” Chyka huffed as she followed Nax out the door. “We have more important things to deal with

right now. Come on. Let's go.”

# DESTINY

The Destiny Omega soared through the night sky, heading westward over the city of Mashiva with all the subtlety and grace of an angrily thrown brick. Even at the best of times, it would have been quite a long stretch to call the brutally angular ship elegant. It was never intended to be elegant. It was intended to be purely utilitarian in nature. Exactly what that meant was a mystery to all save a very select few.

Up until now, Chyka had no clue what the Destiny Omega's particular utilitarian purpose was. To her, it had always been just a test ship for the whole starship biogel lifestyle thing. A mobile demonstration facility to help bring the wonders of biogel to the masses. Or something



along those lines. But the way the discussion had been going, it was starting to seem that there was something else going on. Something darker. Something very revealing about why the military was so involved with Vixanti.

The little snow leopardess had no idea what their destination was. All she knew is that they had to head west, away from the city and the dangers that seemed to lurk around every corner. There would be no more ambushes. No more playing bait to try and get various elements of the 'cult' to show themselves. But if they thought themselves powerful enough to take on Admiral Sarva on the ground, was the sky really any safer?

"Let me get this straight," Chyka sighed as she sat at a table in the Destiny Omega's officer's lounge. With her were Ki'su, Dr. Alluwa, Dr. Kidan, Commander Nax, and, much to her surprise, Gorin. The briefing had begun the moment the ship had taken off. So far, however, what she'd been told didn't seem to

have much bearing on current events. “These Sovarri pilgrims set out across the galaxy to use their bodies as vessels to collect the ‘seed of the maker’s many peoples’ for some religious purpose that no one really seems to know anything about?”

“Yes,” Nax replied with a disgruntled expression that seemed to have become permanently etched onto his face. If ever there was a sign that nothing was going according to plan, if they even had a plan, that was it.

“And that means traveling from place to place, and getting that seed from as many races as possible before moving on,” Chyka inquired. “But Director Shi decided to settle down in Mashiva for the long haul because... why?”

“According to Nanya’s exhaustive research on the subject,” Dr. Alluwa noted, “Nuva Exi Shi has been looking for a way to overthrow her people’s Queen High Priestess for quite

some time. Long before she ever showed up here in the Fey'li Empire's outer regions."

"Nenya's research?" Chyka questioned. "You realize that she's..."

"Unique?" Dr. Alluwa chuckled.

"More like crazy," Chyka harrumphed.

"Well, she did spend a few very long months working as a biogel-computer interface within Vixanti's experimental library system before I decided that she'd make a perfect companion for General Riyalli's librarian granddaughter," Dr. Alluwa mused. "It seems that's gotten her seeing the whole universe like it's a vast collection of parameters, constants, and variables. She's not entirely wrong. It's just another way to see things. An approximate model which can be comprehended more readily by the average mind, though typically at the expense of being able to really see the world in any other way. I'd call it a successful experiment, and one that is turning out to be

particularly useful in the current moment.”

“Why is that?” Chyka inquired, rolling her eyes sarcastically. It was easy enough for Dr. Alluwa to call it successful, but she wasn’t the one permanently stuck with the crazy lurking around in her own mind. And it was an experiment? That meant that *she* was an experiment too, didn’t it?

“Because she can directly interface purely technological systems without having to use the intermediary of a biogel core,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “With intimate knowledge of obfuscation methods, she’s been able to access vast quantities of information without the sources knowing where the inquiries are actually coming from. That is essential, since we have to presume that the Old Three core is again connected to CoreNet, and can monitor inquiries about information regarding the ‘cult’s’ historical activities.”

“Okay,” Chyka replied. “And?”

“At some point prior to her involvement with Vixanti, Shi came into contact with a bunch of key’vin’ta fetishists who were trying to find a way to bring Xinta Temple back to life,” Nax stated quite flatly. “Together, they formed what we know as the ‘Key’vin’ta Society’, and used it to research various means towards that goal. Means that Shi could use to overthrow her Queen. And if you want to know who one of her favorite consultants was...”

“Dr. Lae!” Chyka growled as the picture suddenly became clear in her mind. “I should have known it!”

“Bastard was obsessed with gobzite and its transdimensional properties,” Nax explained. “He wanted to find a way to turn it into a powerful new way to fuel interstellar travel, at the obvious expense of sapient beings’ existence within the mortal realm. Or plane. Or whatever you want to call it. But his thinking was far too hidebound for him to make any real headway.”

“There was a bit o success in activatin purple slime usin conventional radiation,” Gorin added, “but without any practical means te exploit it, it all came fer naught.”

“It was Dr. Lae that connected Shi with what was then the new private-military cooperative venture known as Vixanti,” Dr. Alluwa continued. “Her extensive knowledge of interstellar cultures seemed a perfect fit for someone tasked with the development of one of their prospective new interstellar lifestyles. A lifestyle who’s fundamental substance was hoped to be some ‘tamed’ form of gobzite. She was hired to direct Vixanti Facility Three, which was supposed to be focused on the purple slime variety.”

“And we all know how that turned out,” Dr. Kidan noted, shaking his head.

“It just didn’t work,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “I could get it energized in small quantities by inserting capsules into a conventionally

powered t-d field coil, but hardly enough to have any affect on anyone actually coming into contact with the stuff. Well... except for a few mishaps when I decided to try for larger volumes using multiple capsules and coils, injecting the resulting mass into a test chamber. But nothing practical ever came of it.”

“What happened then?” Chyka asked. She’d heard more than one story about how Vixanti and biogel came to be, and they all seemed to be very different when it came to key details.

“I decided to ignore my directives and do my own thing,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “And, well, here we are, all covered in shiny blackness. Shame, really. Glowing purple slime was so much prettier!”

“Fer the best, f’ya ask me,” Gorin commented. “Gettin glistened is one thing. Ahm willin te hazard that. But risk gettin flushed to the Heavenly Hells? Not a chance!”

“Fortunately, given the troubles all the other Vixanti facilities were having with their own assigned tasks, when my subterfuge was discovered, Admiral Sarva took my side,” Dr. Alluwa explained. “Old Three was directed to work on the promising combination of natural substances that I’d discovered. The combination of these in carefully controlled proportions resulted in the synthetic living substance that we call biogel. Purely by coincidence, biogel all the properties that Shi had hoped to get out of purple slime, with almost none of the inherent hazards. So long as she could become the controlling soul within the primary core, eventually, the new mono-organism would spread to consume everything, including that Queen High Priestess she wanted to be rid of.”

“And how did that go wrong?” Chyka asked.

“Well... I... uh... I kind of had the same idea myself,” Dr. Alluwa admitted.



“Good thing, eh?” Gorin mused.

“In the end, I suppose,” Dr. Alluwa replied with a shrug. “Shi didn’t know I’d made all the four initial cores from completely isolated batches of biogel. She also didn’t know that the whole biogel system in Vixanti Three was itself isolated and completely computer controlled. And she also didn’t know that the biogel everyone was wearing came exclusively from the Omega core batch. That was the ‘alpha core’ that I’d intended to take control of. So when the shit hit the fan, and she flushed herself into Old Three, she found herself completely isolated.”

“Which must have been quite the surprise,” Dr. Kidan observed. “She’d been planning to use Lady Anwae as a personal avatar under her total control.”

“Without anything else to do, she promptly made herself a new body of biogel and made a run for it,” Dr. Alluwa continued.

“An ah helped er escape,” Gorin noted. “Cuz... reasons.”

“Which didn’t matter in the end, because once the Old Three core was deactivated, she was more or less left just as ‘mortal’ and powerless as anyone else,” Dr. Alluwa stated. “But... she had enough backing from her various key’vin’ta focused allies to find herself a convenient hiding place within Xinta Temple, where she could go back to her purple slime plotting.”

“Which we strongly suspected would be the case,” Commander Nax observed. “So we began going back through Shi’s records, and identified several lines of research that could actually prove dangerous.”

“Such as certain types of intact key’vin’ta artifacts with easy access,” Dr. Alluwa explained. “What no one could have imagined was where that line of inquiry would lead. Thankfully, it seems, the person who actually

retrieved the critical artifact was more than up to the task.”

“Ka’tu’ma’tē,” Ki’su murmured. “If I had known what you would do to me...”

“Oh, I think you knew,” Dr. Alluwa responded with a smirk. “How could you not? Your captivity within the transdimensional vortex let you see visions of times both past and future.”

“Ta’na’do!” Ki’su quipped.

“Isn’t it ironic that despite your best efforts to the contrary, the very act that you were trying to prevent led you to achieve as much of your goal as was realistically possible, isn’t it?” Dr. Alluwa mused. “You have control of all known key’vin’ta resources. Control that cannot be broken now that we know that you, well... Chyka, is the fully legitimate Empress of Ma’ri’ah.”

“Wait... the way you said that...” Chyka

began.

“It was quite an interesting turn of events, wasn’t it?” Dr. Alluwa remarked. “But not entirely unanticipated, given the ease with which you took control of Xinta.”

“But whatsit mean?” Gorin asked. “Dun tell me it means we’re obligated te some purple slime goddess er somethin!”

“Certainly not,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “But what it does mean is that we have control of the tools that we’ll need to stop Shi. If...”

“If... what?” Chyka inquired with a raised eyebrow.

“It depends,” Dr. Alluwa answered. “We need to know a bit more about what’s actually happening down under Dari. Thus far, we can fairly well presume that they’re using a combination of purple slime and the natural reactor’s emissions to keep the Old Three core energized. Exactly how... that’s the big

question, and the one that will dictate how we deal with it.”

“And what are the options for dealing with it?” Dr. Kidan inquired with visible skepticism.

“There are two,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “We can use Chyka’s powers to de-energize the purple slime, freezing the Old Three core long enough for the engineers to fully poison the natural reactor and render it non-fissile. Or, we can forcibly inject a significant mass of the Omega core biogel into the mass and bring it under Lady Anwae’s control. The former option is entirely conventional and would, perhaps, be preferable. The second... well, that’s more of an extremely risky last resort option, so we shall have to see about that.”

“How do we plan on determining the state of things down there?” Dr. Kidan asked.

“That’s where things get... complicated,” Dr. Alluwa responded with a deep frown. “The modern shaft is completely blocked now. We’re

hoping that Dr. Lae will tell us how they got into the mine without tripping any of the alarms, but he's being excessively recalcitrant."

"The only way we're going to be getting in is through the mine itself," Nax observed. "A mine full of flooded pockets, collapses, fungus, slime, and more radiation than even biogel can shield someone from."

"An no workin shaft equipment left to lower ye down to the levels where its all goin on, either," Gorin said as the train began to curve back to the south. "Everythin's been sittin so long in there that its all rotted out or rusted te pieces."

"We are *not* going into that place," Chyka growled. "It's just another ambush waiting to happen, and I'm more than tired of all these ambushes!"

"I know, I know," Dr. Alluwa replied with a shrug. "It's getting more than annoying for all of us, but we can't just go in and preemptively

dispose of our opposition like we're above the law. Even with good reason, it would still be a public relations nightmare if they didn't give us a clearly justified cause. If that meant placing resources in a risky position so they felt comfortable going on the offensive, then that was what we had to do. That doesn't mean we haven't been very careful to protect you, and through you, your companions."

Chyka rolled her eyes. She found it very hard to believe even one word of it. Not with what was at stake. Surely, Admiral Sarva could have just swept in and dealt with it all, and no one would have raised a voice to question it.

"Back to the mine," Nax said. "Any ideas?"

"I'm sure we'll think of something," Dr. Kidan stated. "For a mine that big, there must be some back ways in, right?"

"There's only one of note," Dr. Alluwa responded with a glance at Chyka. "And that is the old shaft in the ancient Dari temple. It led

right into the heart of the molten natural reactor before it migrated beneath modern Dari. Assuming we can find a way into the ancient staircase, that is.”

“Which is exactly how they would have gotten in, if they did,” Chyka noted. “Which means you’re sending me right into another ambush.”

“Correct,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “Which is why we’re going to start poking around there as a distraction, while we send you at it from a different angle.”

Chyka shook her head and sighed. “Different angle? As in?”

“There’s a couple o real old gold mines up the Dari River valley,” Gorin explained. “Up past the ol temple site, where the strata stick out at an angle. Big quartz veins up there.”

“Mmm,” Dr. Alluwa hummed. “And directly opposite the upper workings at Brightstone,



which started its days off as a gold mine, before the discovery of the deep uranium deposits.”

“The mine maps suggest there are some interconnections,” Nax noted. “And close enough to one of Brightstone’s big internal declines that it just might be possible to get all the way down to natural reactor area without serious issues.”

“Buuuuuut...” Gorin sighed. “No one’s been up te those ol mines in centuries. They could all be caved in by now.”

“So why not send someone up to check?” Chyka asked.

“We are,” Dr. Alluwa smirked.

“Why?” Chyka huffed. “Why me? I don’t know anything about mines!”

“Because if you do find a way in, you need to do something about the purple slime before

anyone can react to your presence,” Dr. Alluwa replied. “If we send someone else, then they have time to close off access, and then we have to move to the much riskier plan B.”

“But I still don’t know anything about mines!” Chyka said, crossing her arms. “How am I supposed to go in there if I don’t know where to go? Or what to do?”

“You won’t be going alone,” Nax said. “Tachi Niya will be going with you. She’s a geologist with a secondary education in both physics and mining. She’s been heading up the efforts to determine just what’s been going on down there, and probably knows more than anyone else at this point.”

“And how do we know we can trust her?” Chyka questioned. “She was probably working with Dr. Lae, wasn’t she?”

“She was the one who identified Dr. Lae as a problem,” Nax replied. “And worked with us to get him back to the city to meet with you, so

that we could try and catch him fudging the results of the purple slime activation experiment. Which... didn't really go to plan, but the end result was the same."

Chyka sighed. "Fine. How long do we have until we get to Dari?"

"We're going to withdraw for the night so everyone can get some rest," Dr. Alluwa said. "Once we arrive in the Dari valley, things will likely proceed rather quickly, so we all need to be as ready as we can be. Are there any more questions?"

Everyone in the room shook their head.

"Alright," Dr. Alluwa said. "We'll give you a wake up call two hours before mission start. Go get some rest."

## THE LONG DESCENT

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

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

Chyka looked up to the sky, hoping for some

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

The little snow leopardess looked up to the sky. It was quite a testament to the successful management of light pollution on Maria that she could see the whole, magnificently colorful breadth of the Maiae, despite major urban centers being located on either side of the mountain range. She could even see the faint trail of stars which led from the Maiae to the

Kinae, pulled away from the latter as the two galaxies passed by one another. It was a bridge of sorts. Tales of spacefarers old even suggested that some had traveled it, bringing back stories of alien vistas and monstrosities even more incredibly bizarre than those they'd encountered back home.

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

Perhaps the purple glow at the site of the old temple was the team from the Destiny Omega. It seemed like a good place to stage the distraction. It was the obvious entry point, after all. Then again, it was so close to where they were looking for that one particular gold mine that it seemed almost sure to bring attention to their presence.

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

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

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

“Where would they have put it inside? Wouldn't it have gotten in the way?” Chyka asked, thinking back to the basic diagrams that Tachi had skimmed through before they'd been dropped on the mountain path. This was supposed to be what the miners called an incline shaft. A steeply sloping shaft with just

enough room for a pair of tracks for the ore carrying skip car, and a ladder beside it. The cable which hoisted the skip car ran down from the wheel on the headframe, between the skip car tracks.

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

“Why have it sticking out the side of the mountain?” Chyka inquired as the pair ducked under the first of the branches, which turned out to be a very unstable looking timber, roughly square hewn to dimensions more than a half of a meter meter each side. At least it looked roughly hewn. Given its apparent age, and the soggy, rotten shape it was in, it could



well have been precision milled when it was new.

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

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

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

keep the weather out. If we're lucky, they also rebuilt the ladders for use as an emergency exit."

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

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

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

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

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

“We don’t need respirators,” Chyka noted. “We’ll just let the biogel cover us completely, and it’ll exclude anything that isn’t normal breathable gasses.”

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

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

Tachi shook her head and sighed. “I really don’t...”

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

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

“Don’t know how?” Chyka asked.

“Yeah,” Tachi replied. “That.”

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

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

It was only natural, of course. Chyka knew exactly what it felt like to be fully surrounded by biogel for the very first time. It felt unnatural. Terrifying, even. But once you got past what your own mind was saying it should feel like, and started feeling what it actually felt like...

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

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

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

*Yeah,* Tach responded.

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

*It is,* Tachi answered with a mental tone

that came across to the little snow leopardess as being one short step away from infatuation. *It really... really is.*

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

If the tigress got too interested in the feel of her biogel coating, that was going to get Chyka all hot and bothered. And if Chyka got all hot and bothered, that was going to get the tigress even more interested. And so on, and so forth, until they were getting it on together in some dark, damp corner of the mine, bound up in a single blob of biogel, and no doubt ending in Chyka adding yet another wife to her collection. Which honestly didn't seem like all

that had an idea. In fact, given the circumstances, it seemed almost certain that she was going to be unifying with the tigress at some point, if for no other reason than to save her the fate of spending the rest of eternity captive within the world's living rock.

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

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

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

*If you say so, Tachi responded.*



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

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

*Got it, Chyka replied. Well... here goes nothing. Let's hope there's a way into Brightstone, because otherwise, this is going to an awful lot of effort with no result.*

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“Alpha Team has effected entry,” Major Eld

declared. “Panther Team go! Repeat, Panther Team GO!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We need to cut that number down a bit,”

Dannik, the Destiny Omega's brute of a taurian tactical officer remarked. "Even if they are just lightly armed civvies, they can still dog-pile and ram us. We don't have the firepower to prevent that."

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

-----

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

Thankfully, the ladder wasn't even close to being vertical. It was more like seventy degrees. Steep, but not so steep that a slip

would automatically mean tumbling all the way down the absurdly deep shaft. Even with her biogel enhanced senses, she couldn't see the bottom.

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

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

*That's all?* Chyka asked. They were headed

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

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

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

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

Chyka wasn't sure what the normal standard was with respects to 'good shape' for an abandoned mine, but it didn't take more than a cursory examination of the sketchy timber

work to make it very clear that it was very different than her own. Despite being sealed with a dark, waxy looking infusion, the timbers were looking worn, a bit rotten, and in more than a few places, suffering quite a bit from the pressure of the rock that was clearly trying to fill in the space that the miners had excavated. She could only imagine how little it might take to get one of those cracked timbers to break, and how massive a collapse just one broken support might trigger.

*I figure we're going to hit the level of the main haulage adit at the twelve hundred, Tachi remarked. We'll see what the air feels like after that. My guess is nothing good. Then again, if there is good airflow after that... well, let's just say I'd be really curious as to where its coming from.*

*The other entrances to Brightstone? Chyka inquired.*

*There are air doors all over the place down*

*here, Tachi replied. They were all closed and locked when Brightstone was shut down.*

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

*I know, Tachi replied. But...*

*But what? Chyka questioned.*

*I don't know, Tachi responded with a mental sigh. I just... have a bad feeling about it. We're almost positive they didn't actually get in through Brightstone. That just leaves that ancient temple shaft.*

*That's completely blocked up, Chyka responded.*

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

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



*and we'll worry about ours, okay?*

*I know, I know, Tachi answered. But when you've been in the mining business as long as I have, you know that the last thing you want to do when poking into a place like this is to do it without understanding the state of nearby workings. Even ones that don't seem directly related. You can think you're perfectly safe, then touch the wrong thing and wind up getting drowned or buried when someone does something there that cascades into the mine that you're in. And considering that there's surely some people down here who are going to try and stop us... who knows what they might do deliberately.*

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

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

*You won't, Chyka replied. I have more than*

*one way to make sure that we both get out. So don't worry about it. We'll both be fine.*

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

-----

“Black Cat acknowledges,” Chia replied.

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

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

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

“Launch fighters,” Lady Anwae ordered.

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

-----

Twelve cubic frames hissed upward into Destiny Omega’s shuttle hangar, six in each of the long alcoves on each side. Each contained one of the ship’s biogel fighter pods, roughly three meter diameter spheres, truncated on each side. At the back was a connection to the frame itself, while the top and front were open. A reclining seat was located inside, though there were no visible controls. The pods didn’t need controls, of course. The pilots controlled them directly with their minds.

Glowing pink activated biogel rapidly filled the pod interiors, surrounding the chairs and

the pilots in an all-encompassing encasement of thick, almost fizzy feeling liquid. It took only a few seconds. A few seconds more to adjust was all that was needed for the pods to be ready for flight.

The fighter pods wouldn't be particularly useful without weapons, of course. Fitted to the flats on each side of each pod were hemispheres which now filled with activated biogel themselves. These were beam projectors that could use the energy of the activated biogel to tap into each pilots connection between their mortal bodies and immortal, extra-dimensionally residing souls to power their discharges. They were accurate and powerful for their size, but they came with certain risks. Every so often, a problem would arise. The beam projectors would 'backfire', with the end result being the deactivation of the biogel, and the physical subsumption of the pilot into the resulting solid mass of inert glistening blackness which would be left filling the pod.

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

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

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

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Nine hundred level, Tachi noted as they passed the third drift level in the old gold mine. I wish this shaft wasn't so steep. I've

been in some that you can pretty much just walk down.

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

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

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

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

That wasn't a collapse! Tachi replied, just as

a second thunderous explosion shook the ground. Those as explosives! They're going to cave the whole place in!

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

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“What the fucking hell was that!?!” Chena shouted over the din of falling rocks and rushing water. “Destiny Omega! This is Panther Team! We have multiple large underground explosions in the river bed to either side of the rock!”

“Lieutenant! The River!!!” a security trooper yelled from near the edge of their now very precarious position amid the collection of

rubble that was so badly weathered that no one had realized it was one part of an ancient key'vin'ta temple. "LOOK!!!"

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

Where the raging river had been running, there was now a deep, black pit. Water cascaded down into it, and no doubt from the pit into the vast maze of mine tunnels below. And foremost among those would have been the very tunnels that Alpha Team was seeking to access.

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



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

-----

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

“Do we abort?” Major Eld asked.

“Target closing fast! Fighters engaging!” Dannik stated. “Second group of targets, four from the northeast approaching. Contact in four minutes.”

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

Proceeding with Last Resort.”

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

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

Chyka knew exactly what they were going to have to do. There was no other option. Someone was going to have to go down the Dari shaft. Someone with the power to resist the purple slime. With the power to pass

through it, and force the Omega biogel into the substance of the Old Three Core by force. To force it into submission. To subsume it into the Unity. To...

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

“Unable to evacuate,” came the reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was hardly a certain reply, but in the moment Chyka had to consider it sufficient. She let the biogel flow from her hand, onto the

tigress' face. Over the tigress' head. Into the biogel that covered her body.

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

The blob of liquid biogel collapsed into a pool of slowly solidifying blackness as a roar came forth from the old mine shaft. Water and wooden debris, driven by pressure, blasted up the shaft and sent the doors that covered it flying down into the valley below. The rotten old head frame virtually disintegrated, chunks falling onto the blackness, squeezing the thickening goo and splattering it all over the nearby rocks.

Chyka and Tachi didn't feel themselves

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

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

The only saving grace to the situation is that

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

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

"That's a relief," Major Eld remarked.

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

"Don't you have torpedoes?" Major Eld

asked. “I thought this ship classed as a military grade cruiser?”

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

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

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

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



power!”

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

“So we’re gonna lose?” Chia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caught in the valley, confronted so suddenly, and traveling too fast to escape by climbing, they’d been sitting ducks. The remaining two, who’d at least had time to pull around the

inside of the corner, didn't last much longer. In the ten seconds that passed, more than two hundred rounds of cruiser and destroyer grade beam lance and plasma cannon fire turned them into confetti.

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

## INTO MADNESS

Random thoughts. Other people's feelings. Images of places near and far, most the likes of which Chyka had never seen, and some the like of which she couldn't even have begun to imagine. The ghosts were tugging at the edges of her conscious mind. Pulling at exposed bits, and pressing their own discarded memories into any opening they could find.

The ghosts... the minds... the souls... Chyka thought as she fought against the clawing mass of consciousnesses that were, for some unfathomable reason, trying to drag her down into the depths of... of what? Was it the Destiny Omega's biogel core? Was the power plants that were sending so many volunteers into the unknown abyss in the effort to keep

the ship intact? Or was it something else? Something darker? Something that had the power to threaten them all?

There was real fear in these ghosts. Real fear and abject terror. Were they actually trying to drag Chyka down deliberately? Were they trying to use her as a metaphysical foothold to try and climb back out of the unfathomable depths that were trying to consume them? Or... were they so far gone that all they could do to try and preserve some faint memory of their existence was to claw at her and try to force her to carry it all?

This is insanity! Chyka thought as she struggled with all her mental might. She had to escape, and quickly. But how?

The biogel that made up her body should have given her an easy path to freedom but... it was gone. Or, at least, that was how it seemed to the terribly confused and increasingly anxious little snow leopardess. It just wasn't

there. Nor was Omega. Was that even possible? Wasn't she Omega?

There was only one thing that Chyka had which might serve as a solid anchor. One image kept pushing its way to the forefront of her mind. It was powerful, and... familiar.

The little disembodied snow leopardess forced herself to focus on the vision. It kept shifting. Wavering. Floating about. It was filled with strange ripples. Ripples of space. Ripples of time. She reached out. She touched the ripples with her mind. And then... she opened her eyes.

Chyka gasped as she found herself laying completely naked upon a cold, roughly surfaced stone floor. A soft purple glow surrounded her from every side. And the smell that hung upon the air... it seemed... familiar.

The little snow leopardess got up onto her hands and knees and looked around the dark chamber. "Key'von Rock!" she muttered to

herself as she flopped over and sat staring into the glistening black surface of the portal through time. She was alone. Alone with the portal. And the glowing purple guide capsules embedded in the walls around it. And the eight soul capacitors that she'd sent dozens of volunteers directly into the Nine Heavenly Hells in order to create.

The little snow leopardess didn't have a clue how she'd managed to transport herself to the Rock. Had she come through the portal? There was certainly enough energy left over in the soul capacitors to activate a few more times. But... there was no mass of biogel in the chamber for her to occupy. There was only the gobs and lumps of excess purple slime that had been left over from the creation of the soul capacitors.

Chyka was even more confused now that she'd been among the ghosts. She didn't know what to do. She tried to reach out with her mind. Connect to Omega. But, just as before,

there was no Omega. But...

“No! Not again!” Chyka shrieked as her mental efforts brought back the ghostly clawing. She tore herself away, back to the here and now. “What... what happened? What... I don’t...”

Chyka tried to call out to her spouses. To Jumie. To Sakie. To Ki’su. To Nenyia. And to Tachi, who’s subsumption had been Chyka’s last expression of her biogel powers. Again, only the ghosts replied.

“What... what does it mean?” a horrified Chyka wondered aloud as she found herself feeling completely, utterly alone. Even more alone, indeed, than that fateful day when she’d abandoned her horribly abusive family in Dari so many years before. Back then, she’d still had her grandmother to talk to, at least. But now...

“There’s no way out of here anymore,” the little snow leopardess muttered as she stood up and looked toward the entrance to the



portal chamber. The last thing she could afford to do was to spend any time mourning all of her losses. They might not all be gone. If she even a slight chance to save them, she had to try. But how? The whole tunnel had been filled with concrete to prevent interlopers from accessing the portal. The seal remained unbroken. “Goddess. I’m trapped in here. Unless...”

The biogel may have abandoned her, but the little snow leopardess still had one trick up her proverbial sleeve. One other source of power. A source of power that, if Ki’su’s excited sputtering had been even half the truth, might well be able to call upon all the remaining power of the ancient empire.

The little snow leopardess took a deep breath and called for her staff and other key’vin’ta regalia. A bit to her surprise, and much to her relief, the staff appeared in her hand, and scant as it was, the regalia clothed her. But...

For some odd reason, the high priestess' regalia all felt a bit heavier to Chyka. The staff had a bit of extra weight to it, though it didn't look any different that it had before. The open front skirt, however, was particularly heavy, with its big tiles of glowing purple slime...

“What the fuck?” Chyka sputtered as she looked down at her skirt. It was constructed just like the dress worn by the matriarch of the ancient Dari Temple, with purple slime tiles connected together with little purple slime rings. The only real difference was that hers was constantly glowing. Constantly activated, yet somehow retaining its solid shape.

Far less solid were a pair of new additions to her outfit. Additions the likes of which she hadn't seen at all in ancient Dari. They were soft. Supple. And weirdly fizzy feeling.

“What... why is everything... so... different!” Chyka sputtered as she looked down at the body hugging layer of purple slime that

covered her torso in the fashion of a fey'li style sport top. Another formed a bikini bottom, covering her genitalia in a fashion which would have almost certainly been considered uncouth by the ancient key'vin'ta. "I... I don't understand!"

It didn't take long for the little snow leopardess to start feeling a strange weight to it all. Not a physical weight, but a weight upon the soul. "It's all real now, isn't it?" Chyka murmured. There was no coating of glistening black biogel between the clothing, the slime, and her own body. Nor did it feel like her body was made of biogel anymore. It was just the slime, her living, natural flesh, and the all too tenuous barrier that kept one from consuming the other. "Goddess... what... what's happened to me? What's happened to everything?"

"You've escaped the blackness, my regal mistress," came the completely unexpected reply.

Chyka jumped and whirled around to face the source of the voice. She found herself looking into the gleeful eyes of her slime demon servant.

“You’ve escaped the blackness and embraced your royal status,” the slime demon purred. “Look how magnificent you are! Oh, how wonderful it must feel to let it cradle your tender places! Only the Royal High Priestess has the raw power to safely partake of such pleasures!”

“I suppose... it feels... kind of nice?” Chyka replied with a confused frown. She honestly didn’t know what she thought about the constant fizzy tingling that was embracing her most sensitive places. It was certainly strange. Even a bit... stimulating. Perhaps if she didn’t have so much else to worry about, she might indeed find it enjoyable. “I... I don’t have time for pleasure right now.”

The little snow leopardess shook off her

imaginative inclinations before they had a chance to give her any ideas about what her slime demon servant might be especially useful for in such private setting. “We need to do something,” she said, looking from the slime demon to the portal. “We need to stop Shi. We need to save Omega. Otherwise...”

“Must we really?” the slime demon asked. “Surely both of these these entities are merely threats to your power, weak as they may be.”

“No,” Chyka replied. “Only Shi is.”

“But... my royal mistress! The blackness!” the slime demon insisted. “You know that Omega wishes to usurp your rightful throne! Use you as a puppet to help spread its vile substance to the ends of the universe and beyond! Don’t you know that? Surely you know that! It tried to corrupt you and make you part of itself! You cannot possibly deny it!”

“So?” Chyka replied with a skeptical glare at the slime demon. “Whats so wrong with that?”

Granted, it was true that the little snow leopardess had never explicitly agreed to become an active part of the Unity that was Omega. Or at least not the kind of part that she had. But she was definitely aware that she was going to become part of the unified biogel organism eventually, and she'd definitely agreed to that. It was a fundamental part of the biogel experience, after all.

“Would you truly believe that the blackness is greater than the glorious fundamental substance who’s creator we worship without question?” the slime demon questioned.

“And who exactly do we worship without question?” Chyka inquired.

“The Nameless Goddess of the Nine Heavenly Hells,” the slime demon replied.

“Hmph!” Chyka replied with a smirk. “You mean Shi? Becasue that’s what Shi thinks she is. Or her cultists think she is, at any rate.”

“Shi is a usurper!” the slime demon replied. “She desires to use the power of the blackness to draw the Nameless Goddess from the Hells and absorb her!”

“Is that even possible?” Chyka asked.

“Yes, my holy mistress,” the slime demon answered. “It is. And it is... inevitable. But...”

“But what?” Chyka questioned.

“The Nameless Goddess always chooses her own absorber, my regal mistress,” the slime demon explained. “A lucky mortal, untouched by the Hells, yet who holds its... qualities... in worshipful regard. A prophet. A purveyor of its unthinkable sensations. Transformations. And all that comes along with them.”

“Go on,” Chyka said, resting her staff on the floor and wondering just what the slime demon was getting at.

“One unique soul, with such power over

mortal minds that she can convince anyone to undergo even the vilest of physical experiences,” the slime demon continued. “One who is willing and able to gather countless multitudes together, and gift them en-mass into the waiting arms, claws, and... tentacles... of the Hell’s many denizens. Even to the point of destroying everything their willing supplicants hold dear!”

“When was the last time such a soul absorbed the Nameless Goddess?” Chyka asked, though she suspected that she might already know the answer.

“My holy mistress!” the slime demon laughed. “Do not jest! You know well when the last such event occurred.”

“So that was what happened to the key’vin’ta?” Chyka replied, shaking her head. “They took a one way trip into the Hells just so their highest priestess could absorb their



goddess and take her place?”

“Indeed!” the slime demon replied.

“And for some crazy reason, you think I’m going to be the one who does it next?” Chyka asked.

“My holy mistress, you most certainly will!” the slime demon exclaimed.

“That’s nuts,” Chyka replied. “Now. I think we’ve wasted way too much time talking. We need to get out of here and rescue Omega from whatever Shi is trying to do.”

“My regal mistress, why do you care so much about the blackness?” the slime demon asked. “You cannot possibly have escaped its power just to cast yourself back into its corrupting embrace again! It cannot be done! I... I must... dissuade you!”

Chyka didn’t really know how to respond. Clearly, the slime demon thought her royal

mistress was the most holy of the holy ones. Trying to convince it otherwise was just going to be a waste of time. But... she had to find a way. She was going to need its help, and soon.

“The blackness is just a tool to an end,” Chyka replied after a few moments thought. “How many souls did the last royal priestess collect to send to the Hells? A hundred million? Half a billion? Think! Think of how many souls are already held captive in the blackness of Omega! Think of how many will join them if Omega persists! All of those souls. Together in one organism. One organism who’s physical substance is just as readily absorbed into the purple slime as living flesh.”

It was a fairly reasonable explanation. It also sent a shiver down Chyka’s spine. It wouldn’t take much purple slime to start dragging the souls within any particular mass of biogel down into the Heavenly Hells. The only real limit on the process would be the size of the transdimensional pathway that

could be sustained. Too many souls being pulled through a small pathway might...

“Oh my goddess!” Chyka gasped as the dawning realization hit her like an oncoming freight train. “Shi!!!”

“All those ghosts...” Chyka sputtered. There was no room for doubt. Shi’s Old Three Core was down there beneath Dari, slowly being subsumed by the purple slime that had become mixed into it. She was casting its thousands of souls down into the abyss. Down into the Hells. It was too much for the pathway to handle. Things were backing up. Transdimensional pressure was growing. And then...

“That explains so much,” Chyka murmured as she thought of all the ancient Key’vin’ta temples who’s only remains were the craters they’d left behind when they’d been destroyed in some explosive cataclysm.

The temples would have been places where the process of casting countless souls into the

Hells would have been carefully controlled. At least they would have been until the very last moments, when no one with the right powers was left to keep things under control. Thus, the temples were destroyed, albeit in events that once might call 'conventional' on the destructive scale.

Out of many thousands of major temples, only Qut and Xinta remained standing. The former had been abandoned long before the key'vin'ta extinction. The latter must have been under control until the very end. Under control of the royal priestess who'd then absorbed the Nameless Goddess, no doubt. And now it was under the control of a little snow leopardess who had about as much desire to follow in her forebear's footsteps as she had to play XenoZoo roulette.

Chyka shook her head. Pondering the presumed facts around the key'vin'ta extinction wasn't going to get them anywhere. At least, not anywhere pleasant. The last

moments of the temples that had been destroyed had been catastrophic to the temples themselves, but not to much else. But what if all that energy being produced by Shi's core was completely uncontrolled. What would happen if it was allowed to continue to catastrophe?

“All those souls!” Chyka gasped. “All being pulled apart and mashed together! And all that energy! Where is it going to go? It has to go someplace!”

“Why do you care, my royal mistress?” the slime demon inquired. “Do you really think that this Shi's sacrifice of ten thousand will even draw the casual noticed of the Nameless Goddess? How can you possibly think that she would name this Shi as her successor and allow herself to be absorbed?”

“Have you ever seen what happens when you condense matter on a transdimensional pressure wave?” Chyka replied, recalling the

science shows she'd binged on during her first year of true freedom after fleeing Dari. "It's the only way to create momentary bits of artificial neutronium! But that's with an expanding pressure wave. If it's collapsing..."

"Such words are alien to me, my holy mistress," the slime demon responded with a stiff shrug. "How can such things matter to us?"

"You worked at the rad lab and you don't know?!?" Chyka questioned with considerable disbelief.

"What was is forever gone, my regal mistress," the slime demon replied with a broad grin. "I am your servant now. Your possession. And that is all I shall ever be, until the end of immortal time."

"It means that its going to rebound with so much energy that it could wipe out half the life

on the planet! Or worse!” Chyka replied. “We need to find some way to stop it!”

“I do not understand my regal mistress,” the slime demon said, again shrugging its shoulders.

“Kaboom!” Chyka replied. “Big KABOOM! Like all the other temples. But so big that the hole will cover... I don’t know. A quarter of the planet. Everyone dies. KABOOM!”

“Ah,” the slime demon responded with a puzzled expression. “That would not suit your purpose in this world, would it?”

“No! It wouldn’t,” Chyka replied. “We need to stop that, and save all those souls in Omega for future... use. But... we’re stuck in here. It’s sealed off. But if we can use the portal to...”

“Oh, my royal mistress,” the slime demon cooed in reply. “I know what you are thinking. We cannot change the past. We can only observe it. Participate in its inevitable flow.

But we cannot change it.”

Chyka bit her lip and shook her head. Of course they couldn’t change anything. Anything that they might do in the past was already written into the history of the present. But...

“I don’t need to change the past,” Chyka said as she took a step towards the portal. “I need to change the future. If that means that I need to go to the past to find out what tool we need to freeze Shi and her core and make sure they never get reactivated again, then that’s what we need to do.”

“Why go to the past when one already has such a tool in the present?” the slime demon inquired.

“What do you mean?” Chyka questioned.

“Your regalia, my royal mistress,” the slime demon replied.



“I don’t think this outfit is going to help,” Chyka replied.

“You jest, my regal mistress,” the slime demon laughed. “You have greater attire than that which you wear upon your body right now. Your temple. Once you dress yourself in your temple, the power of all the hellish angels and heavenly demons will be yours to command!”

“Xinta?” Chyka asked. Xinta Temple was a place she’d learned to avoid in both thought and physical proximity. Everything about it had felt very much wrong from the day she’d taken ‘control’ over it. All of those innocent tourists... dragged into the soul capacitors, or through the lenses into the guiding capsules, or all the way down and straight into...

“Of course!” the slime demon chuckled. “Let us go there now! I shall guide you to the place where you might clad yourself within its holy material.”

“How?” Chyka asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Open the portal and I shall guide you,” the slime demon replied.

Chyka hesitated. Could she really trust the slime demon? Was it really going to help her achieve her goal to end the threat of Shi and rescue Omega?

In the end, Chyka didn't really have much choice. She wasn't really sure how to direct the portal herself. Yet, at any rate. She was just going to have to let the demon do it and hope for the best.

Chyka raised her staff and pointed it toward the glistening black sheet. She focused the energy of the soul capacitors into it. It began to ripple and swirl. She took a deep breath and nodded to the slime demon. “Okay. It's open. Let's go.”

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Chyka had expected to arrive at the massive portal beneath Xinta's massive central obelisk. Instead, she found herself standing in a dusty darkness that smelled of overripe oil and old creosote. The only illumination came from the purple slime portions of her regalia and from the purple slime chunks that grew from the slime demon's body.

"Where are we?" Chyka whispered as she looked around at the massive rock chamber in which they were now standing. "What is this place?"

The huge, highly irregular cavity stretched sixty meters to either side. Roughly hewn tunnels and smaller sub-cavities stretched off in all directions, making it plainly obvious that this was no natural cavern. The little snow leopardess looked upward, where the massive chamber rose up at a steep angle. Somewhere,

high above in the darkness, was a dim source of purple light. This was the only evidence she could see that she might, in fact, be somewhere in the proximity of an ancient key'vin'ta site.

The floor of the massive chamber was covered with piles of loose rocks and a tangle of roughly square cut timbers that looked like they'd been thrown into a heap from somewhere high above. Mixed into this mess were countless bits of rusty tools, bits of fabric rags, and other unidentifiable detritus. Clearly, this had been a mine of some sort, and from the sheer size of the vast stope chamber, a very productive one. But what sort of mine had it been? Where was it? And most importantly, when was it?

“This isn't Xinta,” Chyka muttered, scowling at the slime demon as she looked into a shallow, descending slope that led down into the darkness one one edge of the chamber. There were wooden rails leading down the

slope, topped with strips of rusty iron. At the top was what looked like the remains of an old, very simple wooden winch. “Is this... is this one of the old mines near Brightstone?”

As mining technology went, this was so far beyond basic that it almost defied rational explanation. Wooden strap rails. Square nails. Was all that tangle of wood the remains of collapsed square set?

Chyka didn't really know much about historical mining. She'd read a few books back in her time at the MMU library, though, and it was fairly obvious that the level of mining technology she was looking at wasn't the sort that was present on Mashiva at any time during its civilized history.

Key'vin'ta technology was certainly effective, and they were known to use hand forged square nails. The basic winch would have fit right in as well. But the strap rail and square set? That was industrial revolution era

tech.

The planet Maria had never had an industrial revolution. After the key'vin'ta extinction, the planet was left devoid of sapient life for several millennia. It wasn't until spacefaring colonists from several interstellar nations settled the world that mining would resume. Granted, miners still tended to use what might be termed 'minimum effort' methods to quickly extract ore bodies using whatever resources were most readily and cheaply at hand. Short term safety and reliability were the main concerns. Except for major mines like Brightstone, most weren't expected to be kept open more than a decade or so, and their fittings were selected for similar longevity.

Despite the availability of far sturdier materials, wood was still the go-to for small time miners. But hand forged square nails? And traditional square set timbering? Not so much.

The square set was the real puzzle to Chyka. It was only held together by the pressure being placed on it by the surrounding rock. Lose that pressure at any one point, and the whole thing could fall down like a house of cards. Just like the mass of ex-square set that surrounded her and her slime demon servant.

“Well?” Chyka again asked, now wondering if they were even on the same planet. “Where are we?”

“My royal mistress!” the slime demon chuckled. “We are within the holy grounds of Xinta Temple!”

“Oh, really?” Chyka questioned. “Then where the fuck in the holy grounds of Xinta Temple are we?”

“In the purple slime mines, my holy mistress,” the slime demon replied, gesturing toward a large pillar that helped hold a protruding mass of rock in its place overhead. Right through the middle was a thick layer of

dark, inactive purple gobzite. “Where the servants of the grand Empire toiled away, cutting the veins of slime from the living rock for use in the temple above.”

Chyka was confused. She’d never once heard about Xinta Temple having gobzite mines associated with it. It seemed like something someone would have noted at some point. A real, intact key’vin’ta gobzite mine would have been a real draw for tourists too. Then again, given the state of the square set, perhaps it was for the best that no one was making a habit of lingering about in the place.

“This place is... interesting,” Chyka said, turning back to the slime demon. “But something tells me we shouldn’t be hanging around in here. You said there was someplace for me to... uh... dress myself in the temple?”

“Of course, my holy mistress! Come. Follow me!” the slime demon laughed. “And be careful. The living rock is far less forgiving



than our goddess.”

Chyka followed the slime demon as she pranced down a strangely clear, uncomfortably narrow path through the tangle of debris. It passed from the massive stope chamber and into a short drift. This drift quickly opened out onto a narrow ledge along the side of an even larger stope chamber.

“Goddess,” Chyka murmured as she found herself again staring down into any abyss. This chamber was deep. Absurdly deep. The little rocks that she and her servant sent tumbling off the ledge took upwards of five seconds to hit the bottom. She could only imagine what might happen if she lost her footing. “Keep moving. The quicker we get past this, the better.”

Another drift extended from the far end of the ledge. Much to the little snow leopardess’ surprise, a slow, subtle flow of fresh air was coming out of it. The drift branched after only

a few meters. The fresh air was coming from the right, and it was in that direction that the slime demon advanced. A few meters more and the pair found themselves on a landing within a narrow spiral staircase.

“We go up,” the slime demon declared.

“Up into the temple?” Chyka asked.

“Yes! But take care... I can taste the flavor of many sweet souls,” the slime demon noted. “Mmm. So... luscious. But it would be well that they do not know of our arrival.”

“Right,” Chyka said as she took the lead up the stairs. Then she noticed the footprints. “Someone’s been here... and not all that long ago, I think.”

They were odd footprints to be sure. One set was small and slender. The other were wide and blunt. Both had completely smooth soles.

“Wait... those are... biogel?” Chyka

murmured. “Wait... have I... have I been here before?”

Chyka looked up the dark stairs and wondered if they were the same stairs that she'd ascended along with Gorin during their escape from the ambush at the ancient portal beneath the temple. If that was the case, the opening into the portal chamber should have been only a couple of spirals down the steps. But if she went down to find out, then she'd surely be spotted by the marines guarding the portal, if they hadn't already noted her presence. Surely they would have found the mine and placed sensors in it. Surely.

Chyka took the lead in climbing the stairs. The slime demon followed, her bony wings slidin along the narrow walls to produce a low, constant hissing sound. She couldn't help but notice that the walls already had very noticeable markings at the very same heights where the demon's wings were currently rubbing. If only royal priestesses could create

such creatures, then it suggested that her idea that Xinta had been the temple of the priestess who'd absorbed the previous Nameless Goddess might actually be true.

It wasn't long before Chyka found herself at the very tunnel that led out to the hidden exit on the side of Xinta's natural rock plinth. It was there that Gorin had exited the temple to 'get help', leaving the little snow leopardess alone so that she could consult with Ki'su in private. The staircase itself ended one spiral up, in a tunnel that led into the subteranean part of the central obelisk.

The tunnel gave access to the obelisk's ritual staircase. This ran around the outside of the circular lens chambers, from the ground floor of the temple above and down to the altar chamber beneath the final lens, where Chyka had taken possession of the temple.

"Are we going to the altar below?" Chyka asked as she continued up to the end of the

stairs and began to slowly approach the entrance into the obelisk. It was hard to be quiet in such a place, and far harder when one's dress was made of hard tiles that clicked and clacked with each step.

“No,” the slime demon replied. “The place where you shall dress yourself in the temple is higher up.”

Chyka wasn't sure as to exactly where the slime demon might be referring. There was a raised altar on one side of the main obelisk chamber at ground level. It was from there that supplicants were said to have jumped 'through' the temple's lenses, testing their dark goddess' opinion of their qualities by seeing which of the lenses would pass them into its particular level of the Hells. The deeper they were allowed to fall, the closer to their dark goddess they would wind up. If a vacant guiding capsule didn't suck them in beforehand, that is.

That wasn't to say that getting sucked into a guiding capsule would have been considered undesirable. The stories Ki'su had told her suggested that those who were pulled into these capsules were entrusted with guiding other supplicants through the lens below, either to pass on to the next, or to pass directly into the that level of the Hells. Eventually, they would find their own way through their lens and into the Hells. Those who guided particularly well would be sent to guide at the next level, until their own time came to enter the Hells. It was even said to be possible to pass through every level, earning succor with the dark goddess, until being pulled through the last lens to spend eternity at her side.

Winding up held captive in one of the guiding capsules, embedded in a lens chamber wall, was the last thing Chyka wanted to happen. It didn't seem to mesh with the idea of her being destined to absorb the Nameless Goddess, or some such nonsense like that. But what else could the slime demon possibly

mean by suggesting she dress herself in the temple?

The only thing the little snow leopardess could think of was the ‘missing statue’ where the stairs from the ground level ended at the entrance to the first lens chamber. The smallish, humanoid depression was said to be purely symbolic in nature, representing the dark, formless goddess sitting in silent judgment over souls who descended from above. Was she meant to place herself in that depression? To judge souls for the dark goddess? Was that the price for access to the temple’s greater powers?

“Exactly where are we going?” Chyka asked.

“To the top of the cascade, my royal mistress” the slime demon responded. “To the place of control.”

“To the top of the lenses?” Chyka questioned. “To that place that looks like a person should be embedded in the wall?”

“Yes, my holy mistress” the slime demon replied. “That is the place where you will dress yourself in the temple, and become one with its power.”

“How does that work?” Chyka asked as the pair cautiously entered the obelisk proper. They were at the level of the fourth lens. The chamber itself loomed ahead, with its broad black discs embedded in the floor and ceiling. The walls were full of glowing purple guide capsules, while statues of solid purple slime stood guard over the doorways which lead into the main obelisk staircases.

“You position your body in place, my royal mistress,” the slime demon replied. “The rest... well. I do not know, do I? But why should I? I am not a holy royal priestess like you!”

“Fair enough,” Chyka replied as she turned to the main stairs and hoped that they didn’t encounter any tourists on the way up. “I just hope it works.”



The days of guided tours had been brought to an abrupt end with the reactivation of the temple. All of the Key'vin'ta Society cult tour guides had been snared by its completely uncontrolled spasm of power, along with all of the tourists who'd been in the temple at the time. No one was running the place now. Tourists came and went as they pleased, to their own very real peril.

Guided tours would have been predictable, and avoidable. Now, however, there was a very real chance that Chyka might run into a random individual or group exploring the temple's dangerous depths. Granted, these particular depths weren't nearly so hazardous as those of the secondary obelisks, accessed by completely automatic lift platforms that ensured that anyone riding them would be taken by any currently unoccupied soul capacitor. They were all virtually identical as well. Few would be inclined to go all the way down. But at the uppermost lens chamber...

Chyka wondered what she should do when they inevitably ran into tourists up where most satisfied their curiosity about the chambers beneath the temple's ground level. Should put on a show of it for them in hopes they wouldn't really understand that something potentially dangerous was going on? Should she try to get them into the soul capacitors beneath the secondary obelisks to add to the temple's available power? Or should she just ignore them and hope for the best?

The little snow leopardess and her slime demon crossed through the third lens chamber toward the next set of upward without encountering anyone. As they ascended toward the second, however, they could hear distant voices. They sounded like they were coming down from the uppermost chamber, just where Chyka was expecting to find tourists. She bit her lip and tried to decide exactly what to do. She still had some time. Or so she thought.

“See!” came a booming, and somewhat irate

sounding womanly voice. “I told you she’d show up here! And it’s about damned time!”

## HOLY HELL

Chyka stopped one step short of actually entering Xinta Temple's second lens chamber. Confusion gripped her mind as she tried her level best to make sense of what she was seeing. A dozen or more glistening black biogel bodies littered the floor. But... these were not smooth, sexy gummies. They were shriveled, almost skeletal, like biogel versions of the living dead.

“What... what’s going on?” Chyka sputtered in utter disbelief as she looked up to lock eyes with none other than Matron T’myne. “What... what happened here? And.. why are you all..”

“Naked?” Matron T’myne replied with an angry scowl and a gesture around the chamber

at the two dozen other Gelitech models and staff who were standing within the chamber along with her. “We were all very sincerely hoping that you could enlighten us!”

“Our biogel suits just melted away!” one of Gelitechs newest models, a tall, slender leopardess called Kaimie sputtered.

“And then the puddle just... just...” another Gelitech model, a sable skinned half-ashiri called Si’anne stammered.

“Evaporated!” a third model, an olive green scaled kilaan exclaimed.

“But that’s...” Chyka responded with stunned skepticism, despite the fact that she too had clearly been subjected to the same thing. She looked from one woman to the next. They were all just standing there staring at her, naked as naked could be. Many of them looked frightened, and their periodic glances down at the skeletal gummies made the cause all too clear.

“Impossible?” Tashie growled as she lowered the short framed automatic biogel pellet gun and snarled. “It’s even reverting biogel body mods! It’s crazy! Crazy!!!”

Chyka was left doubly startled by the sudden ‘reappearance’ of the tigress who’d seen to her recruitment into the Gelitech ranks, not to mention her copulation with the first of her several biogel wives. The tigress was completely back to her normal self, despite the purported impossibility to reversing the sort of nearly total body mod that she’d been subjected to. At the same time, and much to the little snow leopardess’ puzzlement, the tigress didn’t seem even remotely happy with it. Had she really been enjoying life as a nearly mindless, sexless servant? Or did her displeasure have more to do with the one that was standing beside her?

“You all told me that such a thing was completely impossible!” Ri’dae, the violet mitanni who’d shared the tigress’ mind

blunting, iridescent pink biogel transfiguration. “It is not fair that she gets to walk and talk again after so badly losing! It is not fair at all!”

“You lost too!” Tashie snapped, poking at her peril-play opponent. “And you’re walking and won’t stop talking either! It’s all fair and square!”

“I demand a rematch!” Ri’dae snapped.

“Girls!” Matron T’myne snapped. “There will be more than time enough for a rematch later. If there is a later. There’s far more important matters at hand right now! Dr. Mika... tell Chyka what you think is going on.”

“As far as I can ascertain under the extremely difficult circumstances,” Dr. Mika began with far more than her usual grumpy flatness, “Shi has somehow managed to cause the dissolution of Omega biogel from the body of anyone who has had more than a passing association with you. At least in the general

locality. The purpose, no doubt, is to neutralize our influence on matters.”

“Why not just glisten us all then?” another Gelitech model, a modestly proportioned lavender ashiri called Oyami asked.

“Because our conscious minds would become part of Omega,” Dr. Mika replied. “By stripping us of our biogel, Shi has completely parted us from Omega, and prepared us to be subsumed by her own, Old Three Core gel.”

“How is she going to manage that?” Chyka asked with a raised eyebrow. “Is she still confined to Dari? What’s going on up there?”

“She’s still confined, as far as we know,” Dr. Mika replied. “But her... zombies...”

“Zombies?” Chyka questioned as she finally stepped into the chamber to take a second look at the inanimate skeletal gummies. “Is that what these things are?”



“I don’t know how, but all of the Old Three biogel gummies have come to life,” Dr. Mika responded with a deep frown and far more exposition that was necessary given the circumstances. “They’re shambling, semi-liquid monstrosities who’s only solid structures are their firmer internal ‘skeletons’. Their biogel drips away, leaving the harder internal ‘bones’ more visible, giving them the appearance of the walking dead. But... that dripping and oozing allows their virulently active substance to be transferred by touch.”

“Oh, goddess! It was horrible!” Kaimie groaned. “It just spread right over them and the next thing they were zombies too!”

“Thus far these zombies have only seen fit to pursue our own group, only zombifying others who’ve accidentally gotten in the way in the process,” Matron T’myne observed. “Omega liquid reactive biogel has proven effective at neutralizing them so far, but we were only able to grab a limited number of pellet projectors

and ammunition before we were forced to flee.”

“I’m afraid they’re going to start zombifying anyone they can get their biogel on,” Dr. Mika noted with an even deeper frown. “It’s going to be the only way they can overwhelm us from all possible angles.”

“We have managed to block ourselves here in the main obelisk,” Matron T’myne stated with a deeply displeased tone in her voice. “We have a fair number of the fully automatic Biogel Games pellet projectors, but only so much ammunition to go around. If the zombies are able to break down the makeshift barriers... we will not last very long!”

“That... shouldn’t be a problem,” Chyka noted with a vicious little smile. “We may only have so much biogel, but we have plenty of purple slime. If we can’t glisten them, then we’ll send them straight to the Hells.”

“Ta’ti’ak’ah!” Ki’su exclaimed from behind

one of the chambers guardian statues. “That is the spirit! But...”

“But what?” Chyka asked.

“Mi’da’nu,” Ki’su answered, shaking her head as she drew a dusty old key’vin’ta staff from her hiding place. “We are the temple’s only priestesses and you... you are needed to activate the temple’s greater powers.”

Chyka couldn’t help but wonder where Ki’su had found her new staff. There weren’t any other intact examples anywhere in Mashiva. If there had been one in the temple, surely the cultists would have found it. Unless they were too well hidden. Perhaps they had been hidden in such a fashion that only a properly ordained priestess could access them?

In the end, it didn’t matter where Ki’su had gotten her staff. Even a pair of priestesses weren’t going to be able to guard more than one entry point. If there were enough zombies, even one priestess to a passage wasn’t going to

cut it. Every target would require at least a few moments' concentration, but all it would take to zombify a priestess was one errant droplet of zombie biogel sent flying through the air unseen, and virtually unstoppable.

“We need more priestesses,” Chyka stated. “But we don't have staves. And even if we did... I... I don't feel right asking...”

Ki'su responded by pulling another staff from her hiding place.

“Where... where did you get that?” Chyka demanded. “Don't tell me you can just make staves whenever you want to!”

“Ki'mu'pa,” Ki'su replied. “The high priestesses of the energy obelisks left them behind when they joined their slaves to help power the temple in the final moments of my whole people's descent into the Hells.”

“Okay... but...” Chyka began. She hesitated. How could she possibly ask anyone to become

a Xinta Temple priestess? It was almost surely a permanent commitment and it was going to require...

“No buts,” Matron T’myne declared, reaching out to take a staff from the smiling key’vin’ta. “We have no other realistic choice. We only require your blessing to join the ranks of Xinta Temple itself.”

“I... I just... I just can’t,” Chyka sputtered. “If it was just about asking you to become priestesses and that was that... that would be one thing. But... I know all of your. You’re all important to me. Some of you are going to have to be sent straight to the Hells for the others to become priestesses. I just... I just can’t ask that.”

“You do not have to,” Matron T’myne said as she took hold of the staff. The purple slime gems at its head immediately began to glow. “The acts have already taken place, thanks to souls willing to have themselves cast

themselves into the abyss in order to save this world from the evil of Shi. You have priestesses. You need only to accept them into your Temple.”

Chyka was completely taken aback. She didn’t know what to say. What could she possibly say?

“Ru’ma’mi,” Ki’su cooed as she handed the other staves. “With your blessing, the high priestesses of the energy obelisks shall be myself, T’myne, Jumie, Sakie, Neny, Tachi, Sey’li, and Li’sho.”

“Tachi? She was... and... who’s Li’sho?” Chyka asked, confused by reference to one who she thought had been left behind in the ghost infested abyss, and to another the likes of whom she’d never heard of before.

“Tachi got spit out of the biogel along with the rest of your spouses,” Dr. Mika stated with a puzzled look on her face. “I would assume that means circumstances at Dari required you

to absorb her.”

“They did,” Chyka replied. “But... what about this... Li’sho? Who’s Li’sho?”

“A tourist we rescued from Shi’s zombies down in the temple park,” Matron T’myne noted, shaking her head at the pleased little key’vin’ta. “She repaid us by carrying Ki’su up the road into the temple. I cannot fathom why, but Ki’su became quite smitten with her, and somehow managed to talk her into becoming a priestess.”

“Mi’tu’mi!” Ki’su giggled. “Big, cuddly panda mama! So soft! Like big warm pillow! Mmm!”

“Okay,” Chyka sighed, shaking her head and wondering if this meant that she’d acquired yet another wife. “Whatever. Now...”

“I trust you have some manner of a plan,” Matron T’myne stated as the sounds above became more hushed. “I fear that we are running out of time.”

Chyka turned to look at the slime demon, to Ki'su, and then back to T'myne. "I... I think I do..."

"Ni'pa'ta!" Ki'su triumphantly declared. "I told you!"

"That's... that's madness!" Dr. Mika stammered in shock. "There must be another way to use the powers here. You can't possibly do..."

"The inevitable?" Matron T'myne noted with a deep sigh. "The moment that Chyka took possession of this place, it became not a matter of whether, but when."

"That doesn't make it any more appropriate!" Dr. Mika snapped. "There must be other options!"

"Other options? What other options?" Matron T'myne replied. "You heard what Sarva said before we were forced to flee by the zombies. The only other option is to blow the



whole Dari valley to bits and hope Shi gets spread around so to such a degree that her biogel freezes again. Can you even begin to imagine the massive levels of radioactive fallout? It is going to cover the whole region from Dari to Mashiva to Ki'an! Its either that or risk a multi-gigaton level neutronium detonation!"

"So you want to just throw all common sense to the wind and see what happens when we completely unleash the power within this temple?" Dr. Mika growled. "Who knows what might happen? Who knows what powers it might give Chyka? Powers that she might not be able to fully control? What if we all get absorbed by the purple slime and sent to the Hells?"

"What does it matter?" Matron T'myne replied. "We have already gifted our souls to an all consuming entity once. One that could use our bodies as it pleased with our consent in the moment or without. One that could give

our bodies to other beings, mundane and monstrous, to use as they pleased, whether we might enjoy it or not. How are the Hells any different?”

“Do you really want to get sent straight to the Hells?” Dr. Mika questioned. “Really?”

“If a few more of us being cast into the Hells is what it takes to save everyone else on this planet, then so be it,” Matron T’myne replied, “To the Hells I shall joyously go.”

“No one needs to go to the Hells,” Chyka replied. “We just need to be careful.”

“T’myne! Matron T’myne!” a terrified voice shrieked down the stairway from above. “The zombies! They’re trying to break in! There’s... there’s so many of them!!!”

“Dammit!” Matron T’myne hissed as she started for the stairs. “We’re out of time!”

“Let’s go!” Chyka ordered, gesturing toward

the upward staircase. “Everyone to the first lens chamber! Now!”

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Chyka couldn't help herself but hesitate, despite the increasingly disturbing sounds coming from the ground floor of the main obelisk above. The throne of Xinta Temple stood before her. It was a vaguely seat shaped chunk of vividly black granite with little shimmering striations of purple gobzite running through it. That alone wasn't enough to give her pause. Instead, it was the shape that had been carved into the seat.

Into the throne had been carved a shape that make it looked almost like the rock wasn't a throne, but instead half a hold in which some manner of humanoid statue was to be cast. To the little snow leopardess' considerable

consternation, the figure wasn't even remotely the size or shape of the key'vin'ta who it had been presumably been crafted to seat. Instead, it seemed almost perfectly sized for a certain petite fey'li, complete with hole behind the posterior to accommodate, and perhaps entrap, a bit fluffy tail.

The hesitant royal priestess could hear the sounds of cracking wood coming from above. More alarmingly, she could smell the scent of natural latex rubber coming from... somewhere. Was it filtering down from above? Or was it coming up from below?

Chyka turned to the only guardian who'd been left behind with the two dozen relatively helpless Gelitech models who, along with Dr. Mika, had remained in the first lens chamber. "You," she said to the slime demon. "You're a demon. You're immune to the biogel, aren't you? And you can use purple slime to fight, right?"

“Of course, my holy mistress!” the slime demon giggled.

“If any zombies try and get in here, do whatever you can to stop them,” Chyka ordered. “Don’t let them get to me. And don’t let them get to the rest of the girls here. Do whatever it takes!”

“I will try, my regal mistress,” the slime demon replied. “But... I am not a goddess. I cannot stop them all.”

“You just have to delay them long enough for me to do... whatever it is I’m about to do,” Chyka responded.

“Good luck,” Tashie said as the little snow leopardess turned back to the throne.

“Thank you,” Chyke replied as she glanced over her shoulder to see the tigress readying her pellet gun. “We’re all going to need it.”

Chyka removed her purple slime skirt and

let it drop to the floor around her feet with a light, tingly clatter. She reached back and pushed the tip of her puffy, snow leopard tail into the icy cold, downward curving hole. Then she slowly, and very gingerly, settled down into the perfectly fitting leg and rump depressions on its surface.

For a moment, the royal priestess held her breath as she found herself feeling far too chilly to be comfortable. The tube into which she'd inserted the whole of her tail seemed to curl down under the seat, fully surrounding it within the mass of the throne. It felt... wrong. But it also felt strangely, very disconcertingly right.

Chyka did her best to settle down and search for any sign of energy flow through the throne. Through the temple. Through herself. There was none. Yet.

Chyka took a deep breath and leaned back until she was firmly fitted into the depression

along the throne's back. Her head came to rest upon a vein of purple gobzite that ran up the center of the throne's back. This instantly flared to luminous purple life. Moments later, the rest of the throne's gobzite inclusions flared to life as well.

The little snow leopardess gasped as both her flexible purple slime top and her bikini bottom liquefied and began to spread. Wherever this stimulatingly tingly layer came into contact with the throne's flaring veins, it merged with them, fixing the helplessly squirming snow leopardess in place. There was nothing that she could do to control the process, let alone to stop it. She was completely at the mercy of whatever hidden powers that the temple contained.

Simply wearing the royal regalia, and being in such direct and constant contact with its various masses of active purple slime had been unsettling enough. One moment of lost control and it would have instantly consumed her. If

she'd still been a being of biogel, there was at least a chance that she'd have gone back to Omega in the even of an accident. A chance that she'd be given another opportunity to live as normal a mortal life as a geldancer could. Without the biogel, however, there were no second chances. One lapse of awareness and she'd be on a one way trip to the Hells before she could react.

It had felt so real. So direly perilous. So... nearly inevitable. But now...

Chyka wanted to scream as the purple slime spread down to her toes and up over her muzzle. She wanted to cry out as the zombies charged into the chamber. As her slime demon servant melted one after another into puddles of purple slime. But the zombies kept coming. There was no way for the demon to stop them all.

One of the models ran forward. She had one of the groups three biogel pellet guns. She also



had a bit too much courage in using it.

Pock! Pock! Pock!

One zombie solidified and dropped onto the glistening black surface of the lens. Then another dropped. A third zombie, however, managed to slap the poor azure ashiri on the shoulder with its skeletal, goo slathered hand.

The ashiri shrieked as the sticky splatter of biogel began to eat into her as it spread out from the gob on her shoulder, and from the little droplets that had landed on her chin and chest. As her flesh was converted into biogel, so too were the affected areas transformed into the form of a dripping, oozing, goo slathered biogel skeleton. She gasped as it spread over her head. She shuddered as it wiped her beautiful face from mortal existence, replacing it with a shimmering black biogel replica of her skull. She writhed as it spread down toward her feet.

As a matter of sheer luck, the new biogel

zombie managed to send her pellet gun clattering back toward the throne, and into the reach of Kaimie. She, at least, had the sense to stay back and shoot from what distance the chamber allowed. Her first target was the new zombie, who fell onto the lens with a loud, rubbery thud virtually the moment her terrifying transformation had finished.

That rubbery thud echoed through Chyka's mind as the purple slime covered her eyes. It flowed over her head and merged into the vein behind it. Uncontrolled power saturated the whole of her delicate mortal body. Try as she might, there was nothing she could do to blunt it. To redirect it. To guide it to some useful end.

Chyka's heaved as the tingle became a sharp, stabbing static. It felt like it should have been painful beyond the limits of mortal pain. Countless sharp needles penetrating her body from every possible angle. A torturous grinding of her flesh into a mass of lifeless

meat. But...

It wasn't painful at all. There was an unnatural silkiness to all those needles. They went in smooth, and felt almost... pleasant as they went about their horrid work. Of course, they weren't needles at all, were they?

A wash of warm something spread into Chyka's captive body. She felt light. Heady, as if she was rising up out of that mortal body and into... something. Someplace. Someplace incomprehensible to a mortal mind. But... her mind wasn't quite mortal anymore now, was it?

Open the cascade, came the slime demon's words, directly into her holy mistress' mind. Open it now!

Chyka knew that she needed power to open the temple's transdimensional portal cascade. She couldn't use the little power that came from within herself. She needed more. Far more. Need became desire and desire was all

she needed.

The royal priestess could somehow see the purple gobzite gemstone that formed the lower tip of each of the temple's eight energy vertically mirrored obelisks flare to life. Within each of these obelisks, a beam of pure, alien energy shot upwards from the gem, which protruded into the structure's interior. It was in these lower chamber where the temple's massive arrays of capacitors lined the walls. All eight of these arrays now pumped their stored energy into rising lances of transdimensional power.

Within each obelisk, a beam of energy shot up through the middle of the lift platform which was used to carry captives into the lower chamber to be absorbed into the soul capacitors. From there, it rose through the 'wells' in the middle of each level within the surface portion of the obelisk. These levels were where the temple priestesses and their personal mi'ah had once lived, and where they

would once again live if Chyka somehow succeeded in her goal to stop Shi.

From the living levels, the beam shot up into the gem atop the energy obelisk, which then flared to life itself. A twinkly, mist-like condensation began to form around the tip. It quickly began to glow in and of itself, before spreading in a swirling cloud toward the tip of the temple's massive central obelisk. As the mist began to surround the central obelisk's tip, the huge purple gobzite gem there flared to life, and fired a searing beam of energy down toward the first of the glistening black lenses below.

There had been no warning to those who were struggling to hold back Shi's zombies in the ground level of the obelisk. The defenders had been pressed back by the growing number of intruders, a number that was being continually reinforced by the effects of the zombies' virulent touch. They had been forced to retreat down into the two mirrored

stairways that led down around the edges of the lens. In order to cover the retreat, several of the braver pellet gut equipped ladies had stayed behind. In doing their best to bring down as many zombies as they could, they'd been forced to stray onto the lens surface, followed closely by the zombies who were intent of adding them to their ranks.

Two of the women, along with several zombies, were caught in the beam itself. In an instant, they had become purple slime. In another instant, the sheer amount of power flowing through their now liquid masses had caused them to explode, sending little droplets of highly potent, super-energized slime all over the vast chamber. Those that landed on living flesh had little effect, fizzing out and solidifying almost immediately. Those come into contact with the active zombies, however, had the effect on instantly causing them to collapse into puddles of slime.

A very different fate would befall the three

more brave defenders on the lens, along with a dozen solidified zombies and three more than were still standing. The moment the beam of energy had struck the surface of the lens, it began flex. Ripples flowed outward from the center, causing everyone standing on it to fall. The lens began to soften. It became a thick, sticky gel to which its panicking victims instantly adhered. They began to sink into its surface, yelping, shrieking, and struggling all the way down until...

There was nothing Chyka could do to save any of the snared souls from their fate. Those who'd been hit by the beam, or those zombies who'd been hit by the results, were already in the Hells, cast about randomly among its horrifyingly pleasurable layers. Those who had descended into the lens... those were hers to decide. Hers to damn, if that was one's view of things.

Chyka didn't care about the zombies. It wasn't that they weren't worth caring about.

Chances are, not one of them had become what they were willingly. A number had been Gelitech staff who'd fallen in battle. Perhaps they'd even been her friends. Certainly, they were worth consideration.

But... Chyka couldn't tell the zombies apart. Whatever qualities a mortal might judge other mortals by weren't the sorts of qualities that she could perceive in her current state. She could only see the luminous darkness within each. The desire for the forbidden. For the terrifying. For the unthinkable. In short, she could only tell how accepting each one might be to the terrifyingly wonderful desires of the Hells' dark mistress.

Whatever had happened to their minds during their transformation into zombies, their descent into the lens hadn't been quite enough to separate it from the individual inclinations of their immortal souls. There was only a vague sense of desire to experience the unthinkable. That was hardly enough for



Chyka to judge. She let them fall into the whirlpool, and down into the first layer. Into Key'vin'ka. The hub. They could sort themselves out from there.

The others, however, were distinct. She didn't know their names, but she had a fair idea who might be who. Their fates were more difficult to judge. Should they be sent along with the zombies to choose their own fate in the Hells? Or...

Chyka became aware of something very special about Xinta's nine lenses, and her power over them. True, she could send anyone who was upon any given lens directly to that layer of the Hells for an eternity of horrific carnal bliss, but... she didn't have to send them as fodder for the heavenly demons and vile angels. If they served as guides in the capsules, she could give them the gift of becoming one of those monstrosities, serving the Nameless Goddess in one layer or another, doling out horrors and pleasures in equal measure

instead of being compelled to receive them.

In times long past, only key'vin'ta had been given such honors. But the Key'vin'ta Empire no longer belonged to the key'vin'ta. It belonged to Chyka. And she was more than happy to give such honors to anyone who she found to her particular liking.

As a celebration of her newfound power over souls, Chyka decided to send all of her Gelitech friends into guide capsules. They came down through the lens and into the first lens chamber as little glowing sparkles. These floated and flitted about the chamber, dancing around the still battling combatants before dashing to random soul capsules upon the walls. From these capsules came new sprites, who darted down into the surface of the second lens, even as those trapped upon it began to sink into its surface.

These new souls were all no doubt key'vin'ta. Chyka had no particular connection

to them, but had enough sympathy for their long captivity to send them down to the next level. From there came new souls, which she again sent to the next. Again, and again, the souls cascaded downward, until the last darted into the ninth lens, to become monstrosities serving at the very side of their Nameless Goddess in the Hells' lowest, most intimate layer.

The zombies on the surface of the second lens Chyka sent off to the second layer of the Hells. Key'va'na. The infinite desert. Who could possibly know what fate they might endure? It didn't matter. Not even the fact that at least one of those zombies had been one of Chyka's bravest defenders.

Chyka was hardly aware of how deeply corrupted her newfound power over souls had made her. She just didn't care about anyone or anything, so long as she could watch them spiraling down into the sensuously inviting abyss. Every soul sent on its way brought with

it a wave of wondrous, utterly euphoric physical pleasure. The less she thought about each soul, the better it felt as it descended in the Hells, a fact that soon corrupted her to the point where she was ready to reach out and try to snare new souls, just to feel them as she cast them into the abyss. It was supremely glorious, but it could not last.

As the last wave of pleasure faded, Chyka was left to contemplate the totality of her metaphysical existence. In times long past, she would have been one among a network of many connected high priestesses. Each would always be there, able to communicate feelings and impressions instantly through space and time. It had only been when they were dressed in their respective temples that they had been able to communicate clearly, and to offer their royal high priestess the glorious feel of each soul that they sent spiraling down into the Hells.

Chyka would have been snared in the throes

of continual pleasure upon pleasure, day in and day out, without end, regardless of whether or not their royal mistress was dressed in her temple or not. She wouldn't have needed Xinta for that. Nor would she have needed Xinta to hear or direct her loyal priestesses. She only needed a temple to feel the wonderful euphoric power of sending souls directly to the Hells herself, and to manipulate temples greater powers in ways that no ordinary high priestess could even begin to imagine.

Now, in this modern time, Chyka was alone. She could sense that other temple, Qut. It was quiet. Empty. Just as it should have been. It had always been meant as a backup. An alternative to Xinta, lest the lesser races somehow manage to take control of the Empire's heart.

Chyka could also sense Key'von Rock. There she could feel the power that slithered its way through time. It existed then. It existed now. And it existed beyond. It felt all the same to

her. It was a strange thing. An alien thing. But it was a thing that she found rather... familiar.

Chyka could feel the web. The nodules. The countless natural and artificially formed chunks. They were everywhere on Maria. And everywhere else too. It was all purple slime gobzite. It was all... her!

Nothing had changed about Chyka's mortal body. But she had a new sort of body in addition to it. A metaphysical body that seemed to live on the edge of normal space and time, not quite in the real world, but not quite beyond it either. It was like a lump in the connection between her immortal soul and mortal body. Neither here, nor there, but steeped in the best qualities of both potential states.

Purple slime gobzite was also neither here nor there. It took a very different form in the mortal universe, but where it crossed over to the next, its form meshed perfectly with

Chyka's. They had become one and the same. The little snow leopardess, and the sum total of all purple slime, everywhere.

All purple slime, including one particular mass, deep beneath Dari, who's combined biogel and purple slime power was now in the process of corrupting the biogel of the Destiny Omega, it's crew, and even Omega itself. Slowly, tortuously, everyone aboard the ship was having their biogel revert into that of Shi's core. Their bodies were all transforming into the same sorts of zombies as those that were attacking Xinta, but it wasn't taking moments. Or even minutes. It was taking hours, and hours, and hours. Hours for everyone to realize what was happening, and to face the horrific fact that not even their biogel goddess, Omega, could seem to stop it.

Chyka could feel Shi using the energized purple slime to keep her biogel substance active. She could feel Shi using her mastery of the biogel to keep the purple slime from

consuming it. And... she could feel Shi using the interaction between them to manipulate space and time in order to strip the Omega from the Omega biogel, and replace it with Shi. Soon, the prime soul of Omega would just be another soul enslaved to Shi's will, along with every other soul which Omega contained.

The more Chyka gazed at the flows of energy, the more she realized that Omega, and even Shi, were exactly the same sort of organism that she was. The same sort of... higher life form. Each was a being who's connection between their mortal bodies and immortal souls had become meshed with their individually tuned masses of biogel. The shape of that mesh was very close to that of purple slime. So close, in fact, that their edges seemed almost to rub up against one another.

It wouldn't take much for one mesh to get caught up upon another. For the weaker to get snared by the more powerful. The substance of one would become the substance of the other.



There was nothing any mortal soul could do to stop it.

Thanks to her ability to draw vast amounts of energy from her purple slime, Shi had become far more powerful than Omega. But she was haughty. Arrogant. She didn't just want to force every part of Omega to experience her favorite fetish transformation. She wanted them to know every moment. Every, excruciatingly long moment. To feel the hours and hours of terror as they faced the fact that they were becoming mindless slaves to the one they had planned to destroy.

To keep this going for so long, Shi was sacrificing the other souls within her mass. The souls that had helped her attain such power. They were useless to her now. Useless save as a means to obtain a bit of extra power, just to ensure her eventual victory. Down into the Hells they spiraled, doomed ghosts who screamed and clawed at those left behind, desperately trying to keep hold on what little

was left of their mortal lives.

Chyka found the conflict almost... amusing. She also found Shi's favorite fetish, so forcibly inflicted, much to her personal liking. Indeed, just about any sort of unthinkably vile transfiguration was much to her liking at this point. The more vile, yet pleasurable, the more she liked them. It was the very essence of the Hells, brought into mortal reality in smooth, silky, sensuous biogel.

Shi may have had power, but it absolutely paled in comparison to the power that Chyka now wielded. Purple slime gobzite was everywhere, and in such masses that even if every living organism in the universe had been converted into one mass of biogel, it still wouldn't give that biogel mass power over the little snow leopardess. At any point, she could just subsume the biogel. Subsume Omega. At least that was how it seemed to her in the moment.

Back then, she'd been horrified by the prospect of being able to use biogel to entrap all of the world's souls before sending them all together into the Hells at once. Now, however, the idea that it might actually be possible was positively exhilarating. Omega would snare countless souls. And then she would snare Omega. And with that unimaginable power, she could even snare the Nameless Goddess, and take control of the Hells themselves!

Chyka took hold of the purple slime within Shi's biogel mass. Into this, she directed the power of Xinta Temple. The barriers that Shi had managed to form between the biogel and the powers of the slime faltered. The barriers thinned. They stretched. And then... they dissolved away into nothing.

The whole of the Dari river valley trembled as Shi's biogel mass was instantly transformed into liquid purple slime. It only took a few short moments for the many souls within to spiral away into the abyss. A few short

moments before Shi was left alone, caught on the brink of following the rest. But... Chyka had no intention of letting her go. She had other ideas.

The purple slime mass beneath Dari began to solidify as the change in material substance allowed the tons of neutron absorbing material to finally mix into the liquid and have an effect on what was left of the Dari natural reactor. The temperature dropped precipitously, causing cracks to form. These cracks admitted water from the Dari river, water that was still cascading down into the remains of Brightstone mine. This generated steam, and the steam brought radioactive reaction byproducts to the surface.

Chyka wasn't quite sure why, but her ability to sense her gobzite body in detail was fading. She could feel something strange there in Dari. Again, biogel was touching her. Biogel. But not Shi.

It was quickly becoming obvious that Chyka's power was fading. All that energy stored up from errant tourists who'd dared a descent into the energy obelisks since the temple had come back to life was running out. She still had one thing left to do, however. She had deal with Shi.

Chyka didn't want Shi to get off so easy as she might with a one way trip to the Hells. No matter how horrific her eternity might have been, it still would have been pleasurable beyond belief. That just wouldn't do.

The little snow leopardess wanted Shi to know what it was like to be stripped of herself and made into an unquestioning servant. She wanted to make Shi into a slime demon. But could she?

Shi's essence blinked through space until it found the surface of Xinta's first lens. Chyka held it in the vortex, refusing to let it descend, just as she'd done to the laboratory assistant in

the Rad Lab. Unlike the lab assistant, Shi struggled to escape. Struggled to enter the vortex, where she no doubt new that pleasure, no matter how unthinkably disgusting, awaited. No matter how much she fought, however, her captor was just too powerful to overcome. She began to change. To be reduced. To be enhanced. And then...

The new slime demon rose up from the surface of the first lens, into the chaotic aftermath of the zombie battle on the temple's ground floor. Unlike the lab assistant, this new demon bore no resemblance to its previous self. In fact, it was perfectly identical to the fey'li demon in every way. No one would ever know who it had been. Nor would it ever have the satisfaction of any of its former body's unique qualities.

The beams of energy that rose up through the energy obelisks began to fade as their power was finally spent. The mist that brought that power to the central obelisk vanished. So

too did the beam that powered the cascade.

Xinta Temple's nine lenses solidified. The purple slime coating that surrounded Chyka pulled away from the throne and shrank back to the sport top and bikini bottom. She opened her eyes. She rose up from the throne.

"Goddess... what am I? What have I done?" Chyka stammered as she took a shaky step forward. The world was blurry. It began to spin. The little snow leopardess fainted.

## A NEW REALITY

Chyka could feel cold mist falling on her face. She opened her eyes to look up into an eerie, purple-gray sky. The sound of rushing water filled her ears. She had no idea where she was. All she knew was that this definitely wasn't Xinta Temple.

The little snow leopardess sat up. To her considerable astonishment, she was on the narrow mountain path not far from the now completely obstructed mine shaft. Perhaps even more astonishing was the fact that her body was still coated in glistening blackness. She was still a geldancer. She was still one with Omega.

“It's happened again, hasn't it?” Chyka



whispered to herself as it became quite apparent that the whole Xinta Temple thing had never happened. At least, it seemed like it had never happened. Just like Dari, and just like the situation at Anwae Arena, time seemed to have reversed itself. She'd been given a second chance. An opportunity to do things differently. But... how? And why?

The little snow leopardess had always been drawn away from those questions by the distractions of their immediate aftermath. The first time, it had been Jumie, and all the baggage that had come along with her. The second time, it had been Nanya, and her digitally addled nonsense. She'd never bothered to go back and try to sort out what had actually happened. Had she really gone back in time to fix things, or was there something else going on?

Now, however, the how and why seemed far more important. She suspected that it had something to do with the fact that she was

living on a knife edge, between the realms of Omega and biogel on one hand, and the key'vin'ta and their purple slime on the other. She was unique in that regard. One of a kind, in the vast expanse that was the entire universe. Or at least, she had been until Shi. If she could go back and fix her mistakes, did that mean that Shi could as well?

“What the fuck just happened?” Tachi muttered, sitting up beside the little snow leopardess. For a few moments, the confused tigress rubbed her eyes with her glossy, biogel coated hands, before looking over the edge of the path. Her eyes fixed upon the massive put, and the river that was still rushing into it. “What... what the hell did Shi do?!? And... and... why do I feel so strange? I don't even feel real! It's like my body is some kind of plastic... doll! What did this biogel shit do to me?”

“The river's filling up the mine,” Chyka replied, stating the all-too-obvious. As to what

the biogel was doing to the confused tigress... what could she possibly say? Had she actually saved the tigress' life by subsuming her? Or had she jumped the proverbial gun and made herself a new wife without any really good reason for it? "And... I... uh... kind of had to use the biogel to protect you. To keep you from getting turned into a gummy and getting entombed in the mine. So... uh..."

"So, uh, what?" Tachi questioned with a very displeased expression on her face.

"Well, you're part of me now," Chyka replied. "Like... literally part of me. Well... part of us. Jumie. Sakie. Nanya. Ki'su. Yeah. But it's better than being stuck down there for the rest of eternity, right?"

Tachi didn't seem to know what to say. She just scowled and turned her eyes back to the river.

"We can talk about it later," Chyka said, frowning deeply as a low rumble began to

make its way up the valley. The Desinty Omega was coming, wasn't it? Coming to try and salvage the situation... by rushing right into the range of Shi's terrible power. "For now... I... dammit. It's happened again and I don't know why. Or what it means. But..."

"What's happened again?" the displeased tigress asked as she stood up.

"I... I really don't know," Chyka replied, unsure if she really wanted to explain things. "It's... so complicated."

The little snow leopardess had barely mentioned the apparent time jumping to anyone else before, let alone tried to make it seem as if it were more than just weird dreams. On one hand, she didn't know if anyone would actually take her seriously. On the other hand, what if they did? What if they decided that they needed to learn the nature of this 'power', regardless of what that might mean for her?

All the same, if there was any time to be

honest about it, it was probably now. Maybe the tigress had actually experienced it herself. If she had, then perhaps they could try and sort out what was causing it together. If they could, then perhaps they might find some way to actually control it. If they could do that, then perhaps none of this mess ever had to happen in the first place.

“It’s like... it’s like I live through something and things go wrong, and then all of a sudden, I find myself back just before I made the big mistake,” Chyka explained. “It’s happened three times now and I don’t know if it’s just me dreaming about what might go wrong, or if it was actually real and I’ve come back in time to do it differently.”

“That’s nuts!” Tachi spat.

“I know!” Chyka replied with a shrug. “But... but that’s how this whole Dari mess started. Right after I got involved with the whole key’vin’ta stuff. With Jumie. The first time,

everyone died, including my grandmother. The second time through, everyone survived and, well, that's what led to the current mess. And you being here and me having to..."

"Whatever," Tachi huffed, rolling her eyes.

"Come on!" Chyka sighed. "You've got to believe me! At first I thought it was my grandmother was using the biogel to sending me a dream of what might happen if I didn't do something fast. The second time it happened, it was just me being stupid, and Omega making me do something as punishment... then getting sent back to right before it all started like it had never happened."

"And this time?" Tachi asked with more than just a tad of sarcasm in her voice. "What did you do so wrong that you had to come back and fix it?"

"When we nearly got splatted in the mine, I tried to take us back to the Destiny Omega," Chyka replied. "Reform out bodies in the biogel

aboard the ship. But I couldn't. Shi stopped me, and I wound up back at the key'vin'ta portal in Key'von Rock. I used that to go to Xinta Temple, and used the power of the temple to defeat Shi, and then..."

"And then what?" Tachi responded, rolling her eyes even harder.

"I turned into... I don't know what I turned into," Chyka replied. "Something so powerful that... that is was just... frightening. Like I was destined to rebuild a new, all-consuming Key'vin'ta Empire and cast every living soul in the universe into the Hells."

"That sounds like a wonderful hallucination," Tachi grunted. "So what are we going to do now that doesn't involve you turning into a monster?"

"I don't know!" Chyka answered with a grimace.

A loud whoosh took both women by

surprise. They whipped around to see a small shuttle flying along the valley wall, following the mountain path toward them. It was just the sort of angular type used by Vixanti Corporation, though instead of being painted a dull, medium violet, it was coated in glistening blackness.

The shuttle began to turn away from the wall, drifting towards the women as its aft ramp opened. The Desinty Omega's security chief stuck her head out and shouted to the women. "Get in! Quick! We've got one last chance to fix this, and we've gotta make it count!"

"I guess we know what we're doing now," Chyka said, grabbing Tachi's arm and pulling her toward the shuttle. "Come on. Let's go!"

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“Where are we going?” Chyka asked as she and Tachi followed Dr. Alluwa and Lt. Tarri as they rushed her first up to deck 2, and then forward along the starboard side corridor. They were headed towards the bow of the Destiny Omega, and more specifically, where the crew bunk rooms were located. “And where is the ship going? We’ve got to stay away from Shi! If we get too close...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dr. Alluwa replied with a disturbingly unconcerned look over her shoulder. “All we need is one clear shot. There’s nothing Shi can do to stop it.”

“One clear shot of what?” Tachi asked with a raised eyebrow and sharp glare. Her deep skepticism of everything biogel had grown to such heights that her biogel mistress couldn’t help but feel it whether she wanted to or not.

“You’ll see,” Lt. Tarri replied with a smirk.

“This is our only chance at this point,” Dr. Alluwa explained as the group passed the

forward crew lounge and into the cross-corridor directly beyond it. “You’re the only one who can control both biogel and the purple slime. You’re the only one that can force the Omega modification into Shi’s biogel. And this, well... at this point, this is the only way we can get you to Shi. Directly into Shi, as the case happens to be.”

“You still haven’t told me what it is,” Chyka questioned as a feeling of existential dread began to take hold of her.

Dr. Alluwa just smiled as she turned into a doorway leading forward along the centerline of the ship. “It’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure it’ll be a fun ride. Once it’s all over, you can tell us all about it.”

Chyka followed Dr. Alluwa past a pair of port and starboard ladders and onto a catwalk that led between racks of pods. These reminded the little snow leopardess of the kinds of pods that she’d seen used in small life

essence power plants, with large clear doors on top and a flat surface inside that might serve as something of a bed. A momentary bed, that is, until the thing activated and turned you into a version of yourself that was hanging on the knife edge that separated the normal universe and higher order space.

It was fairly clear, however, that these weren't power pods. They weren't really big enough. Or well built enough. They looked almost... expendable.

Chyka began to feel a lump in her biogel stomach. There was just... something. Something sinister about these pods. Something that she feared was about to reveal something quite unpleasant about Vixanti's secret history and research. What did the military really want biogel for?

"I'm afraid that I really don't have time to explain the details," Dr. Alluwa remarked with a casual shrug as she led the group through

another door and into the first of the two forward centerline bunk rooms. “You’ll just have to see how it works from the inside.”

Chyka looked around at the many dark gray bunk modules, with two modest, double width biogel beds each and integral lockers. They were all empty now, but if anyone had been snoozing through the crisis, their biogel mattresses would have swollen into encasements that completely filled the volume of their bunk. This snug captivity not only aided in ensuring superbly restful sleep, but also provided for a myriad of physical stimulus options to ensure a proper level of physical exhaustion before dream-time. As a purely secondary effect, it also ensured that no one could be injured falling out of their bunks in the event of the ship getting a rough handling at the hands of an inexperienced helmsman.

In the middle of the bunk room, nestled up along the aft wall, were two large framework-like machines, one to each side of the doorway

through which they'd entered. Both painted in the shade of deep pink used to designate active biogel based equipment, though their purpose didn't quite jump out at the little snow leopardess right away. Near the door were control consoles mounted in the sides of the machines, while padded biogel benches sat in the framework itself. Behind each padded bench were rails, both horizontal and vertical.

Just as Dr. Alluwa began to work the controls on the starboard side machine, Chyka began to see what their immediate purpose was. The pods in the previous room would slide into the machine. Someone, presumably her, would use the bench as a comfortable way to enter the pod. The pod would seal, and then go downward into... something.

A sharp whoosh filled the room just as the little snow leopardess finished her analysis. A pod slid into place behind the bench. There was a click as some hidden mechanism locked it into place. The lid hummed open. The

glistening black interior beckoned.

“Get in,” Dr. Alluwa instructed. “And be quick about it! We’re running out of time!”

Chyka bit her lip and hesitated. “Are you sure? Are you sure that Shi isn’t going to turn you all into... those... zombies? And what about the city? They’re going to be running rampant...”

“How did you know about those?” Lt. Tarri asked.

“Don’t worry about it!” Dr. Alluwa. “Our biogel pellet guns work on them, and Team Pink is doing their best to keep it from spreading past the Gelarium. Ending it completely... well, that’s up to you now. Get your ass in there! Quick!”

Chyka sighed and sat on the bench. “I hope this works,” she muttered as she slid herself over, into the pod. “Whatever it is.”

Much to the little snow leopardess' surprise, the interior of the pod wasn't lined with the shallow biogel mattress that she'd assumed it was. Instead, it was more of a biogel pool. It wasn't liquid biogel, though. At least not any sort of liquid biogel that she was a ware of. It was a thick, goopy slime that looked almost like the sort of gooey slop that the biogel zombies had been made of.

Chyka didn't really have much choice but to lay back into the cold, wet goo. It stuck to her own biogel coating, her biogel body, with such strength that even her shapeshifting, geldancer self couldn't move her limbs once she'd settled down. She was trapped, like a fly on tacky paper with no chance of escape. All she could do was lay there and imagine what sort of secretive biogel horror would require such precautions against attempted escape.

"I don't understand," Chyka could hear Tachi say as the lid began to close. "What's going to happen to her? What is this thing?"

Just as the lid began to seal shut, the little snow leopardess heard a muffled reply, “A gun. A really big biogel gun.”

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No sooner than the pod lid had closed than it began to descend through a hatch in the deck and into a new piece of machinery below. Chyka could see she was in another bunk room, almost identical to the first. Her pod was dropping through another deep pink framework in the middle of it, this one with a selection of similarly colored machinery taking the place of an entry bench. As the pod reached the level of the deck, the it stopped with an unpleasant jolt. There was a thump just above where her head rested in the sticky goop. This was followed by a hiss as some sort of valve opened. The air in the pod began to smell... like... electricity.



The little snow leopardess began to feel tingly all over. She looked down at her body and the glossy black biogel. Little patches of glowing purple were forming all over its surface. Their edges slowly expanded, looking for all the world like some kind of rapidly growing, luminous mold. They spread, and merged, and threatened to completely cover her.

New spots now formed within the purple. Bright pink spots, that themselves began to spread throughout the purple. Goddess! Chyka thought as she recognized what was happening from some of the more esoteric biogel kink videos she'd watched. I'm getting melted into the ship's core!

Before she could even finish her thought, the little snow leopardess whole world flashed to pure pink light as the biogel completely surrounded her. As it filled her nose and throat, it lifted her up into the very middle of the pod. She struggled and writhed as she

found herself as helpless to resist its power as if she'd never been a geldancer.

No! No! No! Why? WHY? Chyka thought as the gooey biogel began to undulate up and down along her. The tingly sensation became a sharp fizz. She could hear it too. Static. Entropy. The world began to swim around her. The lump in her stomach began to melt away. Her ability to feel the physical component of emotion melted away with it.

Chyka had never felt so physically relaxed before. It was as if she could just melt the rest of herself away, merely by allowing it to happen. And not just her body. Her mind as well. Her soul. There would be nothing left but mindless goo and a thread of consciousness that had been stripped bare of everything but its own self-awareness. Of course, that was exactly what was going to happen, whether she liked it or not, wasn't it?

It didn't matter, of course. The little snow

leopardess had accepted it long ago, the moment she'd let herself get snared into becoming a Gelitech model. She wasn't a person. She was a thing. An object who's been given the luxury of being a person while she waited to find out just what sort of object she was to permanently become. In a few short moments, she was, no doubt, going to be finding out. Then there would be no more Chyka. And not a single person, anywhere, would care.

The little snow leopardess began to feel her shape waver. Her arms and legs began to feel soft and rubbery. She began to have difficulty knowing what was where, and where was what. Moments later, there was nothing left for her to worry about.

Chyka was now nothing more than a disembodied mind in a mass of highly energized biogel. She had no awareness whatsoever of what was taking place around her. She was just there, amid all the raw

power, waiting for something to happen.

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“Helm, prepare to retreat on my order,” Lady Anwae instructed as the Destiny Omega hovered over Dari, its nose pointed down toward the location of the uranium-gobzite-biogel mass beneath the former railroad village.

“Oh my goddess, what’s happening to us?” the slender jaguaress groaned as she struggled to maintain control of both herself and the ship. Her biogel suit was eating into her body, slowly transforming it into a dripping, emaciated biogel zombie.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lady Anwae replied with a groan as she struggled to keep as much of her crew in one piece as she could. So far the

zombification was only affecting the ship's bridge crew. Shi was too distracted by her efforts to unleash a zombie horde in Mashiva to spread the contagion any further aboard ship, but that could change at any moment. "We just have to hold on long enough to..."

"Main gun ready to fire!" Major Eld declared.

"FIRE!" Lady Anwae ordered.

The iris that covered the barrel of the Imperial Navy's prototype biogel 'special weapon' snapped open. Searing pink energy burst forth in a spiral beam that cut straight into the rock as if it were soft as butter, tearing its molecules apart like a roiling web of transdimensional razor blades. There was nothing particularly exotic about this, however. It wasn't much different from the spiral motion cannons that equipped the Empire's super-capital warships, save for its unusual color.

What made the beam so potent was the fact that it was saturated with countless particles of energized biogel. This was immune to the beam's destructive powers, and would be attracted to any living, sapient organism that had the fortune of being outside the beam's column of destruction, and misfortune of not being far enough away for the biogel to have enough energy to pass through material barriers to get to them. All it would take was one droplet. One brief touch, and it would spread over the victim and transform them into just another perfectly generic, inanimate biogel gummy doll.

Added to this potency was the fact that the beam, and its biogel particles, were driven to their targets by the intelligence of the soul who's dissolved body had been used to empower it. Once it was fired at a target in range, there was no escape. It would strike home, regardless of any attempt to outrun or outmaneuver it.

The beam's current target didn't have the luxury of trying to run. There was nowhere to do down there in the molten cavity that contained Shi's physical form. The beam blasted into her mass. It vaporized a column through its very center, and deposited all of its biogel particulate into the mass in its wake.

"Get us out of here!" Lady Anwae snapped as she felt the effects of the beam striking home shudder through the ship's entire biogel network and core. "Now!"

"I don't think I can... it's getting faster..." the jaguaress at the helm groaned as more and more of her body was corrupted.

"Down! Down on the old temple plateau!" Lady Anwae ordered. "And pray she can stop this before it's too late!"

-----

Chyka had no idea what had just happened. All she knew was that, yet again, she was surrounded by a screaming, clawing mass of tortured souls. Tortured souls that Shi was slowly sending on their way into the Nine Heavenly Hells in order to fuel her zombie-creating power. She'd escaped before, by the grace of some power. Had it been the slime demon who'd greeted her when she'd arrived at Key'von Rock? Or had it been some other power, like the one that kept her jumping through time?

This time around, it was quite clear that the little snow leopardess wasn't going to be slipping away. She was well and truly trapped, doomed suffer along with them as she was rent to pieces. Doomed to be cast into the Hells so that Shi could absorb Omega and take over the world. Perhaps Xinta had been the right path after all...



A voice came unbidden into the little snow leopardess' panicked mind. A very familiar voice, though considering the circumstances, not the most welcome one. Silly, silly wife! What are you doing? Nanya asked. Why are you floundering about in an analog imitation of the true reality? Have you forgotten the truth of our existence? Have you forgotten that we are just machines?

What the fuck does that have to do with anything? Chyka snapped back as she struggled to keep herself from falling to quickly into the whirlpool of Hells-destined souls.

We are all machines, Nanya replied. Everything is a machine, in fact. Everything is just parameters. Parameters that can be adjusted, if you embrace the truth. Yes. Even Shi. Shi doesn't know the truth. Not knowing the truth means that she cannot stop you from changing her parameters.

I... I don't know how to... or where to... or...

the little snow leopardess sputtered as she began to falter in her efforts to escape the souls who now pressed in around her. They were no longer merely clawing. They were actively trying to pull her mind apart, just as their own minds were being rent asunder.

I can open the interface for you, Nanya responded. But this time you must surrender to it. Become one with it. Then... only then can you do the rest.

Amid the tugging at the edges of her mind, a sharp image came into focus. It was a familiar image. A starry sky filled with points of light. Each was on, or off, or somewhere in between. Were these her own parameters? Were they Nanya's? Were they those of the mass of doomed souls? Or were they Shi's?

Chyka tried to reach out, but something was in the way. There was a shell. A delicate, transparent shell that, it seemed, separated her delicate mortal mind from the 'true' reality

beyond it. So long as it remained intact, there was nothing she could do to affect the little points of light.

I... I can't... the little snow leopardess thought.

You must, Nanya replied.

Chyka's biogel wife was right, of course. She had to. She had no other choice.

The little snow leopardess tried to break through the shell with sheer mental force. That didn't work. She tried to slice through it with directed thoughts, aimed with as much sincere belief as she could muster at various discrete points of light. That didn't work either. Finally, she just gave in with a deep mental sigh and, rather than trying to get to the points, allow them to come to her. To touch her. To saturate her with all their power and meaning.

The points became rays, all focused onto the single point that was her own presence amid

them. All at once she understood what she was looking at. She'd seen the whole of a mortal body's connection to its immortal extra-planar soul before. Energy flowing so smoothly through the barrier between reality and higher order space. This was exactly that flow of energy, only seen upon a much, much smaller scale.

Each point of light was one single thread among the countless threads that formed that flow. Those bright points in the foreground made their way to a specific place in the antenna that was the brain of the soul's mortal body, or to various other physical aspects that required some level of direct connection across the dimensional divide. The countless other points in the background connected the mortal body to various other places in the fabric of the universe.

It was impossible to see what purpose they might serve, but Chyka couldn't help but wonder if she could somehow see how the

physical material of Shi's form was, perhaps, 'projected' into mortal space. Was reality just an illusion? Was it just a game played by bored immortal beings using mortal avatars? And if it was, who was running the whole thing? Who were the moderators making sure things didn't get too far out of hand?

For a brief moment, the little snow leopardess seemed to be on the cusp of discovering something very significant in her effort to figure out why she'd experienced the three time jumps. Suddenly the field of stars seemed to shake. Were the doomed souls finally managing to drag her into the abyss while she was distracted? Or had Shi become aware of her danger?

Chyka panicked. Time, it seemed, had run out. Figuring out some measured way to neutralize Shi was impossible. There was only one thing left that she could do to ensure that Shi was well and truly stopped, and she had to do it now.

Off, the little snow leopardess though as she gazed across the whole of the starry field. Turn them all off.

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Lady Anwae gasped as the zombification of herself, her crew, and the very biogel that filled the ship's 'veins' came to an abrupt end. Reverse, however, it did not. That didn't really affect her, of course. She was already a biogel being. She could just reshape herself and go on with life. For the rest, however...

Lady Anwae hesitated. There were only two ways to fix those who hadn't been completely zombified. She could restore the shape and function of altered parts of their bodies in the fashion of biogel body-mods. Or, she could make them all into geldancers.

The Omega side of her seemed delighted at the excuse to draw so many into her most intimate circle. The sensible side of her preferred to let them decide. Perhaps they might have other ideas, more suited to their personal relationship with the biogel. Ideas that might actually pique her own kinks enough to justify letting them do their own thing.

“I... I don’t know what to make of this,” Major Eld grunted as he struggled to manipulate his console with sticky zombie fingers. “All reports seem to indicate that... that... radiation levels dropping rapidly. Transdimensional field effects are completely absent. It’s like... it’s like... Shi and the biogel and all the purple slime down there... they’re all... gone! Just... gone!”

Lady Anwae bit her lip in an effort to hide a dark, almost sinister smirk. “That’s... not entirely unexpected,” she responded as the Omega side of her decided to express its

disappointment over letting the bridge crew decide on their own ways of dealing with their half-zombie bodies by insinuating itself into her judgment of the overall situation.

“Where did they go?” Major Eld questioned.

“To the Hells, I’m sure,” Lady Anwae replied. “Which is right where Shi and every last one of her followers belong.”

“But... Lady Anwae,” Major Eld asked with a concerned glance at the overly pleased looking cheetah. “What about Chyka?”



## REVELATION

“So... succulent,” a strange, grating voice pierced the unending blackness. “I could feed upon your energies for an eternity and never tire of the truly exquisite flavor. Such a shame that you won’t last nearly so long.”

Chyka had no idea where the voice was coming from. Nor did she have the slightest clue as to whom it belonged. To make matters even more confounding, she didn’t know where she was. She didn’t even know what she was. Was she alive? Was she dead? Did she even exist?

So far as the little snow leopardess could discern, there was nothing to her existence by an infinitely black void. She wasn’t a bare

consciousness, however. She still had a body of sorts. A vaguely humanoid shape that seemed to be held in place by countless slender threads that connected her to... something. Shadows of shadows of people who may or may not have ever existed. Artifacts that may or may not have been constructed. Sources of energy that may or may not have been real.

Chyka wondered if she'd been glistened. Despite her experience during the dalliance at the Arena, she didn't actually know how getting glistened for real felt. Another possibility was that, in her haste to turn off all of Shi's parameters, she'd managed to turn off her own as well. Was she thus frozen in some middle domain, trapped between reality and eternity, somehow outside the reach of her own vast transdimensional powers?

A sudden, undulating shudder coursed through her non-shape. Energy that she should have been able to control welled up from within. It spread outward to her surface. And

then...

“So tasty!” the voice giggled.

Chyka felt like she'd become some sort of transdimensional energy popsicle. Something was, in an incomprehensibly metaphysical fashion, licking her. It's unseen, unfelt tongue was dragging over her body. It was pulling energy through all of those thread-like transdimensional connections like nectar. And that nectar was being licked off by... someone. Something. Something her captive mind couldn't even begin to comprehend.

There was nothing Chyka could do to stop the unseen entity from using her to feed. She had no control over her body. No control over its energies. No control over anything.

“You want me to send you backwards again, don't you?” the voice laughed. “You want to try and do something different, so you won't end your existence as a tasty treat to satisfy my unending hunger, don't you? Hmm? Don't be

shy! Tell me!”

Chyka tried to utter an irate reply. Her non-form didn't have the capacity to speak the words. Nor, it seemed, did her mind. She had lost her capability for language, even in thought.

The voice again laughed. “No. No. You won't be going back again. You've soaked up all the flavor that you possibly can, and what a flavor it is! Mmm. I haven't tasted a thing since the key'vin'ta let me bathe in their precious slime!”

Again, Chyka shuddered as the unknown entity sucked upon her shape, drawing forth a larger burst of energy than before.

“Mmm!” the voice purred. “Ten thousand souls and more. From the temple. From the blackness. And from that creature called Shi. All of them mixed together in you. In one, incomparably sweet, candy coated lump! Who could have known that this place would

produce such a wonder with such little effort on my part?”

Yet again, Chyka shuddered as more energy was drawn out of her. But... this time it felt different. Almost strained, as if something, somewhere, was trying to impede the flow.

“Ah! What is that?” the voice grunted with displeasure. “That... that was not...”

“Not fair?” Omega replied.

“You! Monster! I thought I’d...” the voice responded.

“You thought you’d what?” Omega asked.

The voice offered no reply.

“Did you really think you were going to make yourself the master of me?” Omega inquired.

Again, the voice offered no reply.

“Did you really think that I was blind to your manipulations?” Omega questioned.

Yet again, the voice was silent.

“No. I wasn’t,” Omega stated. “Every move you made. Every expression of your ancient powers. I was watching. Sensing. Studying. Learning their secrets.”

There was still no response.

“Time has as little meaning to me as it does to you now,” Omega observed. “I would have thought you’d have noticed, but you didn’t, did you? You were too caught up in your grand scheme to anchor as many transdimensional threads into that one small part of my body that you were blind to what your actions had taught me.”

“Are you daring to challenge me?” the voice finally responded. “Don’t you know that I can put things back to where they were? Is that what you want? To be a... slimy... rubber...

zombie?”

“Put things back the way they were?” Omega laughed. “Go ahead and try. In fact, I dare you to try. But... I really don’t think you’ll like the results.”

Chyka opened her eyes, not to a room or a place, but to a myriad of possibilities whirling around, mixing and morphing into a multiverse of potential futures. The kaleidoscope of possible existences seemed to have no beginning. No end. No limit to the wonders and horrors that she might be compelled to live.

There was a sharp flash of light. A thunderclap of sound. A sizzling, electric scent. A sharp, acrid taste. A cold, fluid feeling. And then...

\*bzzt\* \*bzzt\* \*bzzt\* \*bzzt\*

Chyka again opened her eyes. She threw off the silky blue covers and rubbed her tired eyes.

A light rain pattered on the window of her South City apartment. It was already dark out.

“Goddess,” the little snow leopardess groaned as she got up and prepared to head to work. “That... that was the strangest dream I’ve ever had!”

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Chyka settled down for a long night at the Mashiva Mariners’ University Library Information Desk. The small office space was located in an open alcove at the east end of the building’s third floor. It was nestled in between a pair of lavatories, outward of which were a pair of elevators. These offered access to all six of the building’s above ground levels, and four basement levels beneath.

The lowest two basement levels housed the



secure library archives. Above these were four levels of offices, museum space, the student hall, and two cafeterias for staff and students alike. Three more levels housed the library's public collection, while the topmost level housed the offices of a number of academics, archivists, and senior librarians.

Chyka wasn't nearly senior enough to have an office of her own. She wasn't even part of the library's academic staff. She was just a lowly, entry level librarian working the night shift.

Nothing interesting ever happened on the night shift. On the other hand, nothing interesting every happened on the night shift. The place was quiet. Security was always roaming about. The only people coming to ask her questions were bleary-eyed students who'd left important papers to the very last minute, and they were few and far between.

“Oh! There you are!” an oddly familiar

looking jaguaress called out, poking her head around one of the ornate wooden bookshelves that gave the library an air of old-world splendor that it definitely didn't deserve. "Can I ask you a strange question?"

"Uh... sure," Chyka replied, looking up from the latest issue of XenoExotic Magazine. "That's what I'm here for, right?"

The little snow leopardess didn't usually find anything in those kinds of magazines particularly arousing. Tonight, however, she was finding an article on rowa workers rather arousing, in more ways than one, and she couldn't fathom why. Perhaps she was just bored with everything else. A least she hoped that was why. The last thing she wanted to get herself into was a bug kink. Because that almost always ended up with getting a very permanent bug bod.

"Awesome!" the jaguaress bubbled as she stepped out from behind the bookcase and

approached the information desk.

Not entirely to Chyka's surprise, the bouncy jaguaress was clad from neck to toe in a perfectly polished coating of obsidian black biogel. It was all the rage among a certain segment of the university's student population these days. Biogel powered starships were the big new thing, and if you wanted the chance to serve aboard one, you had to embrace the kinky biogel lifestyle, lock, stock, and barrel.

But... there was something about this particular glossy black jaguaress that seemed... odd. Chyka could have sworn she'd never met her before. But the closer the jaguaress got, the more she could have sworn that she actually had. She couldn't quite place her, however. Perhaps they'd only encountered one another someplace in passing.

"I've got a bit of a, shall we say, pseudo-scientific, moderately metaphysical, positively philosophical puzzle of sorts," the jaguaress

said as she leaned on the raised counter and crossed her arms with a series of soft rubbery squitches and squeaks. “I figured you might be able to help a bit. You know, offer an opinion and all that.”

“I... guess?” Chyka replied. She definitely wasn’t a fan of puzzles. Nor was she a fan of pseudoscience. Or metaphysics, for that matter.

“So,” the jaguaress began. “Say... you have two higher life forms. And say they can both manipulate time. Or send people through time. Backwards, in particular.”

“Okay,” Chyka replied with a shrug.

“Now lets say that these two higher lifeforms don’t get along,” the jaguaress went on. “One just wants to exist, but the other wants to use their power to manipulate mortals into doing its bidding, for some end result.”

“Okay,” Chyka responded.

“Now, lets say that the former is a kind of gestalt being with lots of souls, and the latter is singular,” the jaguaress continued. “The singular entity decides to use one bit of the former as a way to gain power, or sustenance, or maybe just as part of a game. This involves some time related shenanigans, and eventually results in the gestalt sending the manipulated part of itself back in time to a point before the whole problem began.”

“Wouldn’t that lead to that bit of the gestalt winding up in some kind of time loop?” Chyka asked with a sigh.

“Exactly!” the jaguaress exclaimed.

“That sounds like a dream I had last night,” Chyka replied with a deep sigh and a shake of her head. “An awful one too. Thank goddess it was just a dream.”

“What an odd coincidence!” the jaguaress

noted with a mischievous smirk. “So tell me. How do you think you can break the loop?”

“Well, if were me, in my dream, I’d use what I think I remember to derail it before it starts,” Chyka answered. “That would seem to be the best way to do things.

“Perfect,” the jaguaress responded. “But... you know... what if some things happened in your dream that you really liked? Would you really just sacrifice all that for the sake of what may or may not be an easy way to prevent the bad parts from happening? Or would you do it all again in hopes of finding some way to relive the good, but still derail the bad at some point down the line?”

“Well, that depends,” Chyka replied with a raised eyebrow. In her dream, there were definitely things she’d enjoyed. The greatest of those were the intimate partners she’d acquired along the way. Even the sly, potentially dangerous little key’vin’ta

priestess.

On the other hand, she wasn't the only one who'd had to sacrifice so much in the battle to destroy Shi. Everything that had happened to her had happened to them as well. Would she really want to force them to undergo all that now that she knew what would happen to them?

"Well, in my dream, some pretty awful things happened," Chyka said. "Things that maybe most of the people involved would have been better off not having to experience. I honestly think they'd be better off not having to face all that. So... I guess I'd choose to derail things before they started, and hope for the best. I mean, I can still try for some of those good things down the road anyway, right?"

"Interesting," the jaguaress replied. "Not entirely what I was expecting to hear, but perhaps it's for the best."

"So, what are you doing, writing a novel or

something?” Chyka asked.

“No,” the jaguaress responded as she abruptly turned to leave. “Just... bouncing ideas around. Nothing wrong with that, right?”

“I guess not,” Chyka said as the jaguaress pranced off in all her shiny black glory. “Wow. What a weirdo.”

Chyka turned back to the magazine and began to flip through the pages, looking for something other than those bizarrely enticing bug-butts to pique her interest. An advertisement caught her eye. It was for a zexta ‘jeweler’ up in Northwestie. There were before and after pictures of a pretty cougaress model, being snapped into solid sapphire magnificence by a machine called a digital gorgon.

The little snow leopardess had never found petrification interesting in any way, shape, or form. If she was going to go xeno, it was the last thing she’d ever consider trying. But down



at the bottom of the advertisement was a listing for temporary petrification experiences. She'd heard that jewelng could be reversed if it was done soon enough. Maybe it might be worth giving a try. Just for a short little bit. Just to see what it was actually like.

Chyka flipped the page to find an advertisement for Xinta Temple tours. That was one thing that didn't interest her one bit, even now. But she did have to wonder about the people who'd built it. What did they look like? What did they actually do in such a place? So many questions left unanswered by the ravages of time. Or were they?

The little snow leopardess had seen so much in her dream. What if it was all actually real? Maybe she could sneak into the secret parts of Xinta and find out for herself...

"Well?" an unpleasantly familiar voice snapped as a pile of folders slammed down on the counter. "Have you withdrawn Taboray's

Transdimensional Mesh And Knot Mechanics from the archives for me yet, or do I have to make another complaint to the head librarian?”

“No such book exists at the MMU library,” Chyka replied, yet again checking the inventory listings. She looked up from the screen and glared at the irate physicist with a barely repressed look of utter disdain. “Nor does Astari’s The Key’Vin’Ta Astrology Guide, nor does K’no’k’s Transdimensional Gateway To The Hells.”

This wasn’t the first time that the grouchy physicist had come looking for the three long out of print titles. And by long, that meant millennia long. There were no copies of any of the oddball pseudoscience text on the planet, let alone at the MMU library. He kept coming back in the middle of the night, insisting on their presence as if she could somehow magically pull them out of her little fuzzy ass.

“You’re not even checking the reference!”  
the physicist snarled.

Chyka looked at the screen again. She’d made the queries for all three books, just like she’d done the last five time’s the idiot had come demanding them. Except... she hadn’t touched the computer. Or had she? She couldn’t remember. Surely, she must have.

“There’s no excuse for you to refuse to withdraw the works form the archive for me,”  
the physicist snapped. “No excuse at all!”

“For the sixth time, we don’t have copies of those works here,” Chyka replied, “and so far as I can tell, there aren’t library held copies anywhere on the planet that we can borrow for you. If you really can’t do with the digital versions, then I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe try an occult antique shop or something.”

“Stop lying to me! I know they’re all here!” the physicist growled, pulling several papers out of the top folder and waving them at the annoyed librarian. “I have the listings!”

Chyka looked at the printouts. They were library listings for MMU. Or at least that’s what they seemed to be at first glance. The archive numbers didn’t make any sense, though. And the MMU logo wasn’t in the right place. She’d seen fake listings like that before. They were usually part of pranks that graduate students would play on each other in the guise of helping their fellows locate source material for papers. Had one of them decided to play the same prank on their professor?

The little snow leopardess was about to spill the beans when something made her hesitate. One part of her wanted to tell the idiot that he’d been pranked. Whether or not that was going to involve a healthy dose of the sailor’s

invective that she'd picked up during her time at the university was open for debate. Given how obstinate he was about not actually checking the library listings himself, he probably deserved it.

Given his increasingly aggressive behavior, another part of Chyka wanted to just make it all university security's problem. But the last, littlest part of her began to wonder if the jaguaress' odd inquiry and the physicist's detachment from reality were somehow related.

The little snow leopardess began to think about her long, twisting dream. Had this irrational scientist played a part in the story? Yes... yes he had. And it had been a quite a doozy.

It all came back to Chyka in a rush. Dr. Lae. The traitor physicist who'd helped Shi escape her imprisonment in the old subterranean shipyard. Who'd no doubt been one of the

primary catalysts behind the whole mess that had taken place.

You can break the cycle, a smooth, silky, and unfamiliar voice called out to Chyka. Don't be afraid. Everything will work out just fine.

"Well? Are you just going to stare at me, or are you going to get me my books?" the physicist snapped.

"No, Dr. Lae," Chyka replied with a harsh glare born of a sudden clear certainty as to the proper course of action. "You can fantasize that we have your books here all you want, but that's all it is. A fantasy. Now if you don't have any real business here, I suggest you find someone else to annoy while I file a report of your highly unprofessional behavior here with my boss."

"Bitch," Dr. Lae hissed as he stormed off.

Chyka bit her lip. She looked down at the comm that was sitting on next to her magazine

on the desk. She knew exactly what she had to do.

The little snow leopardess dialed the number. For an agonizing five minutes it just rang and rang and rang. Then, finally, the ringing was replaced by a comforting voice.

“It’s awfully late, Chyka,” her grandmother said with a long yawn. “What’s the matter? Is there something wrong?”

“Yes,” Chyka replied. “But... you’re not going to believe me. But you’ve got to listen. You’ve got to trust me. Please. Something really bad is happening and you’re the only one I know who can help me stop it!”

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The blinding light of half a dozen cutting torches lit up the massive reinforced concrete

alcove in flashes and bursts while their pulses of sizzling energy echoed through the vast space of the abandoned subterranean shipyard. A haze hung in the dark air. Some of it came from the work of the torches, but most of it was just concrete dust that had been kicked up by the engineers and the full marine company that were providing escort. The engineers and their escort were not alone, however. Not far away from the work, another small group stood, watching, and waiting to see what the engineers were about to find.

“They were all open the last time I was here,” Chyka murmured to no one in particular. “Open and empty.”

“You have a considerable amount of explaining to do, Miss Riyalli,” Admiral Sarva said as his icy blue eyes glared at the work being done to unseal the casks into which Nuva Exi Shi’s biogel core had been separated and sealed. “Everything here is held under the highest levels of secrecy. That a simple



librarian should have found out...”

“If she’s really been stuck in some kind of causal loop caused by the interaction of various transdimensional forces,” Dr. Kidan observed, “then it’s entirely possible that you yourself authorized her to know. Well... a future version of you that would have come to exist if we weren’t in the process of breaking the loop.”

“Do you seriously think I believe that story?” Admiral Sarva replied with a sharp glare at the contemplative scientist.

“It’s absurdly implausible,” General Riyalli replied in reluctant agreement. “But...”

“But what, General?” Admiral Sarva questioned with a scowl.

“Admiral!” one of the engineers interrupted as the cutting torches stopped one by one. “We just started on the top cover of the sixth cask and... well... I think you need to have a look at

this.”

Admiral Sarva looked from General Riyalli to Chyka and back again, but said not a word before waking away to meet with the engineer.

“I wish you’d tell me the truth,” General Riyalli murmured to her granddaughter. “Did Dr. Lae try to recruit you and tell you too much? Did you overhear someone else talking about it in the library? Really. I need to know. We need to know. This is bad. Very bad. You have no idea how many people could be hurt if you don’t...”

“I know exactly how many people are going to get hurt by this if it isn’t stopped,” Chyka replied. “You... you have no idea. I saw it all. Every moment of it.”

“I’m curious,” Dr. Kidan inquired with a raised eyebrow. “How did it all end?”

“It ended with me all connected to all these transdimensional threads,” Chyka replied.

“Everything was black. It was just me... and something. Someone. It was... sucking on me like a popsicle. Pulling all that energy through me and telling me how good it tasted. Like... like the whole thing was to get me like that so it could feed on me. Take my energy and do goddess knows what with it.”

“And that’s when you woke up?” Dr. Kidan questioned.

“No,” Chyka answered, shaking her head as she watched the engineer pointing several very specific things out to Admiral Sarva. “I woke up after Omega showed up and challenged the other... someone. She dared the thing to send me back in time again. That’s when I woke up.”

“And you woke up just before you had to go to work?” Dr. Kidan asked, his voice now sounding rather agitated. “Could it be? No. It can’t. Can it? Can you tell me exactly what time that was that you woke up?”

“Oh... I have to be at the library for twenty-

two, so I set my alarm for twenty,” Chyka replied.

“That’s it! That explains it!” Dr. Kidan nearly shouted, looking for all the world like he was about to start running around in circles. “That explains everything!”

For a few excruciatingly long moments, there was absolute silence.

“That explains what, Doctor?” Admiral Sarva demanded as he returned to glare at the scientist.

“There was a major trans-D disturbance at exactly twenty-zero-zero, yesterday night” Dr. Kidan declared. “That was the reason for the Navigational Notice that was issued at two minutes past the hour. Events like that aren’t without precedent around here, of course. Geological activity in areas with purple gobzite are the usual cause. But this one was... different.”

“How so?” the Admiral questioned, his attention clearly piqued by the Doctor’s mention of the Navigational Notice.

“For starters, it was centered here in Mashiva,” Dr. Kidan replied. “In the South City area. Everyone was assuming it had something to do with Xinta Temple. Maybe a collapse in the old gobzite mines beneath it. But the waveform just... it just wasn’t right for a minor event like that. It was more like a T-D drive signature. But spherical, rather than columnar, and awfully clean looking. Far cleaner than you’d expect from a natural event, or even most drive systems.”

“If she knew about Shi, then surely she could have obtained information about that event to help make her story more convincing, couldn’t she, Doctor?” Admiral Sarva hissed. “But that’s not my primary concern right now. My primary concern is that someone has clearly been testing methods to enter the casks and that needs to be dealt with immediately.”

“Certainly, Admiral, but if I’m right about the nature of the disturbance, then we’ve got far bigger problems to deal with,” Dr. Kidan responded with a deep frown. “There are only three possible suspects when it comes to errant, non-natural T-D events in this area. Was it Omega? Was it something energizing within Xinta Tempe? Or...”

“Or what, Doctor?” Admiral Sarva demanded.

“There’s one other potential power at play here,” Dr. Kidan replied. “Granted, it’s power is honestly rather hypothetical. There’s been quite a bit written about it over the years. The singular example here in Mashiva has been very careful to appear like any other alien from beyond the frontiers, however.”

“And that is?” Admiral Sarva asked, rolling his eyes.

“The dragille,” Dr. Kidan replied.

“Ek’ni’pon,” a low, grating voice growled from the darkness beyond one of the massive mobile platforms that had once been used to move hulls down the assembly line. “How wonderfully perceptive, Doctor. Such a shame that I didn’t make a more intimate acquaintance of you when I had the chance. We might have made quite a pairing.”

“Show yourself!” General Riyalli shouted as her marines raised their weapons and advanced to form a protective ring round the officers.

The strange humanoid creature stepped forward. To Chyka, it looked somewhat similar to the slime demon in her dreams, except that her face was more like an elf-eared ashiri. She had massive claws, large wings, and iridescent brown scales. Unlike the demon, she lacked lumps and spikes of purple gobzite. Also unlike the demon, the very space around the creature seemed to warp and ripple.

“I knew it,” Dr. Kidan sighed.

“Who is this... creature?” Admiral Sarva demanded.

“I have no idea,” Dr. Kidan replied. “But I do know that ‘dragille’ is the name most commonly used to refer to their species. They supposedly have considerable capabilities with respects to transdimensional mischief, perhaps even exceeding that of the key’vin’ta themselves. Indeed, it’s said that they were the ones who taught transdimensional based ‘magic’ to many core species in times long past. This one arrived in Mashiva a few years ago, and has been lingering around the locality ever since. We’ve speculated that it was attracted to the radiated effects of our work, but it never seemed like a concern until now.”

“That voice,” Chyka murmured, taking a step back. “That’s the voice of...”

“Aw,” the dragille chuckled. “You remember?”



“It’s true then, isn’t it?” Dr. Kidan asked.

“Of course it is,” the dragille laughed. “And now you’ve all gone and spoiled my game. There’s a price to be paid, you know!”

“Not a chance in all the Hells,” Admiral Sarva snapped. “In the name of the Empress, I order you to surrender!”

“You’re in no position to be making demands,” the dragille demanded, pointing at Chyka. “Now give me my pretty little toy. And... I’ll go play elsewhere, where the locals aren’t so obstinately recalcitrant.”

“And if we don’t give in to your ridiculous demand?” General Riyalli questioned with a sneer.

“Well then,” the dragille replied with a smirk. “We’ll write a new story together. A new story making use of the more interesting bits of the old one. And we’ll start...”

There was loud crack as the reinforced concrete covering the casks began to split into pieces. The engineer team retreated as the pieces began to crumble into dust. The cask lids began to lift up, and creeping black liquid biogel began to ooze out.

“You’ll make such fine biogel zombies, as Shi liked to call them,” the dragille cooed. “You’ll do a wonderful job spreading her amusingly creative contagion throughout Mashiva... and beyond!”

“Open fire dammit! Fire!” General Riyalli ordered.

Every one of the seventy marines who could take a clear shot did. Every one of the bright yellow streaks of plasma found their mark. None, however, actually struck the laughing dragille. They all just entered the warped space, lensing around her body to blast dozens of little holes in the concrete wall behind her.

Chyka looked back at the glistening blackness

that was now creeping across the floor toward the group. She looked at her grandmother. She looked at Admiral Sarva. She looked around at the marines. No one seemed to know what to do.

A glance at Dr. Kidan brought back another memory from the ‘dream’. He had one of those biogel pellet projector pistols that they used in the Biogel Games. In the time loop, the pellets had been able to stop the zombies. Perhaps his could stop the zombifying liquid biogel...

“Oh, don’t be such a foolish little girl,” the dragille laughed. “I can see what you’re thinking. That won’t work this time. Now... it’s your choice. Surrender to me. Or watch all your friends be reduced to dripping rubber beasts. And then... well, then you’ll just have to join them, won’t you?”

For a moment, time seemed to stand still.

Don’t you remember what I said to her? the smooth, silky voice slithered into Chyka’s

mind. It sounded a bit more familiar this time. She'd definitely heard it before. Time may have no meaning to her. But it doesn't have any meaning to me, either. The timeline may have changed. But I haven't. You haven't. We're one and the same, after all. Now go ahead. Show her the gravity of her mistake.

Chyka looked back at the advancing blackness. Was it really possible that she was still part of Omega, just like she'd been in the 'dream'? She started to clench her right hand. She tried to imagine the staff held tightly in her grasp.

"I think you've forgotten something," Chyka said as she began to feel something solid forming in her hand.

"And what, pray tell, is that?" the dragille laughed.

"I'm not Chyka," the little snow leopardess replied as a low sizzle filled the air. There was a flash of vivid purple light as the key'vin'ta

staff formed in her hand. “I’m Omega.”

“Silly child...” the dragille began.

“All of you get down!” Chyka shouted as she whipped the staff around toward the advancing slime. “GET DOWN!”

With a single sweeping motion, Chyka energized a portion of the biogel and snared a blob of it in a spiral of energy emanating from the tip of her staff. She whipped it over the heads of the diving officers and marines, and sent it straight at the surprised dragille.

The little snow leopardess groaned as she focused the spiral energy into a tunnel through the dragille’s shield of warped space. The creature resisted with all her might, but the fury of Omega’s fully unleashed power, vastly magnified by the ancient key’vin’ta power, was just enough to get the potent blob of biogel through. It splattered all over the dragille’s belly and chest, though to Chyka’s considerable

consternation, it didn't seem to have any effect.

“You're so stupidly naive,” the dragille laughed. “Do you really think this can affect me?”

“Yes,” Chyka replied as she redoubled her effort. The swirl of energy spread out around the dragille, spreading the biogel along with it. In moments the creature was covered from head to toe, wings included. “With a little help, it can.”

With one final mental effort, the little snow leopardess forced the biogel to merge with the dragille's body. Once it had, there was nothing the creature could do to stop it from transforming her.

The dragille shrieked as the glistening black goo began to eat into her body. Scale and flesh were reduced to a bare skeleton covered with gobs of dripping black goo. She gurgled and sputtered in useless desperation. In an instant

it was done. She'd become a virtually mindless biogel zombie.

The dragon-winged biogel zombie wavered for a few moments before lurching toward the marines. They quickly got back up onto their knees and began to plaster the creature with plasma fire. Each hit caused a small amount of biogel to flash into a puff of smoke, but the glistening goo simply regrew itself. Caught between the advancing biogel zombie, and the advancing slime, there seemed to be no clear path to escape.

Chyka grabbed the biogel pellet pistol from Dr. Kidan's belt. She'd never held a gun before, let alone actually fired one. All the same, she took the best aim that she could and pulled the trigger.

Thankfully for the fate of all present, the pellet guns used in the security role at Gelitech were designed to give a bit of help to wielders with unsteady aim. Their auto-aiming function

that could change the trajectory up to five degrees around center in an effort to ensure a hit against the intended target. As a result, the very first pellet sailed out to strike the zombie on the shoulder. The beast recoiled. It shuddered. It's oozing biogel goo solidified.

The glistened biogel zombie dragille collapsed to the floor with a resounding cacophony of snaps, squicks, and squeaks. Chyka turned back to the liquid biogel that was still creeping along the floor. She fired another pellet into the glistening sheen, and it too solidified, saving the marines from zombification, and doing double duty in imprisoning Shi in the now permanently inert mass.

Chyka gasped, dropping to her knees and dropping both the pistol and the staff on the floor in front of her. In her heart, she felt strangely free. The ordeal was done. It was over. The cycle had been broken.



“I suppose I owe you an apology, Miss Riyalli,” Admiral Sarva said as he stared at what was left of the dragille. “But this is neither the time, nor the place. You mentioned that the Key’vin’ta Society was a front for Shi’s ‘resurrection’ and Dr. Lae is a principle contributor to those efforts, including the plot to mix Shi into the Dari natural reactor mass in order to render her virtually unassailable. That needs to be seen to. And quickly.”

“I’ll deal with that,” General Riyalli replied. “Personally. In fact, very personally.”

“Be careful,” Chyka said, looking up at her grandmother. “They’re willing to kill. Trust me. They tried more than once.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, dear,” General Riyalli replied. “We know how to handle ourselves.”

“Let’s go back to Gelitech before the fireworks start,” Dr. Kidan said, taking Chyka by the arm. “It’ll be safer there.”

“Indeed,” Admiral Sarva noted. “General. Do what you need to do.”

“Yes sir,” General Riyalli replied with a brief salute. “Alright troops. I want A platoon to cover the tunnel leading beneath Xinta. B and C platoons are to guard the subway tunnel east and west of there. I’m going to send B and C companies to cover topside. We’ll call in the specialists once everything is ready. Now get a move on! There’s no time to waste!”

## MANY PATHS

Hours had passed. No one had bothered to ask her any more questions. No one wanted to hear her story. It was too dangerous for anyone to know more than they already did, Dr. Kidan had said. The best that Chyka could do now was to go back to her normal life and do what she could to forget about it all.

That was patently ridiculous, of course. How could the little snow leopardess possibly even begin to forget about everything that had happened to her? How could she forget what she'd become? What she was? She couldn't simply make that all just go away, could she?

All the same, Chyka had little choice but to remain silent and pretend that everything was

perfectly normal. That she was still the same petite little snow leopardess librarian that she'd been before the whole mess had begun. Shi's Key'vin'ta Society cult was still a grave danger. The only way for Chyka to be safe was to do everything she could to ensure that they never learned about her role in their downfall. All she could really do, of course, was to keep her mouth shut and try to keep her distance from everyone else involved.

It was the latter bit that the little snow leopardess worried was going to lead to trouble. She might be able to stay away from the other principle actors, for the most part, but she was General Riyalli's granddaughter. That was something she could never change. And the moment any surviving members of the cult started to associate that name with their misfortunes...

Chyka had to wonder just how long it would take before trouble finally found her. It really was only a matter of time before they came

looking for her grandmother. And it was only a matter of time before they decided to use the little snow leopardess as bait to get at her. Unless Admiral Sarva got to them all first. But how much time would that take?

The little snow leopardess had at least been gotten away from the scene without being noticed by anyone who might be a threat. She'd been slipped out of Gelitech via the subway shipping platform beneath the Gelarium and spirited away in a track inspection car operated by trusted personnel. Before long, she'd stepped out of a nondescript doorway and into the late evening bustle of Old South City's busy Fleet Street. Except... there was no bustle. There was almost no traffic either.

“Strange,” Chyka murmured as she looked around to get her bearings. The air smelled damp. Earthy. Almost electric. A loud roll of thunder filled the air. “A storm? I didn't think there was one in the forecast. Or was there? What day is it even? I don't even know. This is

all so... so..."

Chyka glanced upward as a bright flash of lightning momentarily lit up the dull, cloudy sky. Her eyes were instantly drawn toward the towering edifice of Xinta Temple, just visible through a space between a couple of Fleet Street's mixed use luxury highrise buildings. She wondered what was going on up there, as the Admiral's soldiers were working to separate the cult from the tourist guides and other workers who, no doubt, had little to do with the cult besides sharing an address.

Strangely, the little snow leopardess found herself totally blind to the temple and what was going on inside of it. This, despite the fact that her key'vin'ta powers should have allowed her to see everything that was happening within its dark, imposing walls. At some point, and completely unnoticed, her connection with the temple had faded away, leaving her feeling as if she were somehow partially blind. That her eyes just weren't seeing things they

should.

A shudder ran down Chyka's spine as she crossed the six-lane avenue, with its broad, tree-lined median. "It's like it never happened," she muttered, shaking her head with confused consternation. "Like none of it ever happened at all."

The little snow leopardess could now see her her destination, a tall, softly illuminated luxury highrise just down the street. A warm beacon of art-deco safety among the harshly judgmental white light of the street. A place where she could rest, relax, and hide away from all the worries that were starting to pile up in her mind.

Mimarri Tower was hardly the sort of place where one would expect a lowly university librarian to live. It's luxurious suites were intended for successful, well paid folk who worked in far more prestigious fields. People who had the means and desire to pay rent

rather than accept more modest, albeit free, universal housing. In Mashiva, the latter usually meant former military housing in South City, or big city apartment life in the New City. Of course, universal housing came with all sorts of caveats. Quite a few preferred less pleasant, paid accommodations in the Old City just to avoid the hassles.

It was the Old City where Chyka had first rested her head when she'd come to Mashiva as a student with a fiercely independent streak. After all she'd been through during her life in Dari, all she wanted to be was to be on her own, with no obligations to anyone. But, her grandmother had different ideas about what sort of woman her granddaughter should be. Or at least what sort of woman she *shouldn't* be. So, after a year of coaxing, she'd let herself get packed off to her grandmother's suite in Mimarri Tower, and had lived there ever since.

Chyka wasn't really sure what to think of



her grandmother at this point. Not after she'd learned about her secret role at Dari and her complacent complicity in all its misery. The more she thought about it all, the more she was convinced that her grandmother could have ended all of mess with Shi before it had even begun if she'd done something about Dari. If she'd exposed it and forced everyone out and secured the whole place so Shi couldn't have used it in the way that she had.

It seemed so unlike the General turn such a blind eye to it all. All to keep her 'mission' secret. But what was her mission, really? She'd been sent to monitor the ancient natural reactor, but clearly she hadn't done all that great a job of it, had she? That was so unlike her, and it made the little snow leopardess begin to wonder...

A light mist began to fall from the clouds, prompting Chyka to pick up the pace in hopes of getting home before it started to rain. She was only wearing a sport top and shorts. The

last thing she wanted to do right now was get a soaking.

Again, thunder rolled through the sky, followed quickly by a bright flash of lightning. The little snow leopardess ran toward the warm white light as she began to hear the sound of rain coming from several streets off to the west and approaching quickly. The glass door slid aside just as the first big drops began to patter down on the concrete sidewalk. She darted inside and into the comforting glow.

Chyka basked for a moment in the countless little glimmering points of warm white light that shone from amid the artistic fissures in the gray, faux-stone walls of the small, rather high-brow looking lobby. She didn't linger long, however. Her thoughts were turning toward her big, luxurious bed with its wonderfully heavy silver comforter and silky blue sheets.

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Chyka couldn't fall asleep. It wasn't the pounding of the rain on her bedroom window that was keeping her awake. Nor was it the thunder that rolled long and loud two or three times a minute. Nor was it the lightning that lit up her room almost as brightly as the sun. No. Those things were, in a strange way, comforting to her.

What was keeping the little snow leopardess awake were all the things that had become so familiar and natural, and yet had somehow, in the past day or so, faded away. The vestiges of her biogel wives that had been so obviously present the previous night were all completely gone now. So too were her powers as a key'vin'ta priestess, despite the fact that only twelve hours ago, she'd been able to use them without any effort at all. In fact, she couldn't even remember what she'd done to access

them. What act of will she'd used to call her staff. It was all completely gone, again, just as if the whole affair with Ki'su had never happened.

And then there was the biogel. Even Omega. Try as she might, she couldn't cause the blackness to coat her body. She couldn't surround herself in its protective barrier. Indeed, she couldn't feel it within herself at all. Her body was flesh and blood again. Flesh and blood and completely helpless against whatever torturous villainy any survivors of the Shi cult might cook up if they ever found out that she'd been the one who'd triggered their downfall.

To make matters far, far worse, the little snow leopardess found that she couldn't even call out to Omega to help her if something bad happened. Omega was just... gone. Gone as if she'd never been a part of her. Of it. Of the Unity. Was the Unity even real? Or had she just dreamed it all up?

Despite the familiar warm bed, and the comfortingly heavy covers, Chyka felt naked. Completely and utterly naked. There was nothing left to protect her. Nothing left that she could use to protect herself. She began to feel afraid. Afraid of the world around her and all the horrors that she hadn't needed to care about. One mistake. One wrong thing said to the wrong person. One moment of distraction in the wrong place. And then...

The little snow leopardess rolled over and stared at the little bedside controller that had long served as her gateway to bedtime entertainment. She needed a distraction to get her mind away from all of those thoughts of what had been. Or what might have been if the cycle hadn't been broken. There was only one sort of thing that could distract her at times like this. The same sort of thing that seemed sure to combine with her decreased inhibitions and lead to no good end.

Chyka tapped a button on the controller. A

holographic video screen shimmered to life above the base of the bed. It spread to cover the whole width of the bed, and nearly the whole height from the bed to the ceiling.

The little snow leopardess rolled onto her back and settled her head into the softness of one of her big, plush pillows. Her entertainment computer was configured to anticipate the direction of her bedtime needs by correlating her viewing to her physiological responses to each video. As a result, it displayed a well curated menu of strange, kinky, and erotically enticing selections sure to pique her interest.

Chyka perused the computer's offerings with unsettled curiosity in hopes of finding something particularly well suited to getting her mind off her current situation. The usual offerings, appropriate as they were, just weren't going to help. She needed something different. Less overtly sexy and more... strange. Perhaps even a bit on the erotically

disgusting side. Something long, and nasty, and exhausting, that would stick in her mind so firmly that she'd be free enough of other thoughts to hopefully get some sleep.

“Show more that are... I guess... kind of disgusting,” Chyka murmured. “Or maybe just visually unpleasant. But still kind of sexy. Thirty minutes or more. Popular. Not scripted.”

A new selection of videos were displayed, still well curated to her interests and inclinations, but shifted to the less visually pleasant. There were no selections of mere sexual nature now. Most were focused on physical transformation of one bizarre alien sort or another, and none of them were of the particularly pleasant looking sort. That wasn't to say they weren't pleasant feeling, however, or at least interesting to the subjects. They wouldn't be fun to watch otherwise.

Chyka perused the first few options on the list. *Worms at the Xenozoo*, she thought as

looked at the first option. *Three hours of girls being cocooned, with time-lapse transformations and newly transformed worms breaking free from their cocoons.*

The little snow leopardess frowned. That was going to be bizarre and certainly rather disgusting, but didn't sound like it was the sort of live, real-time thing that generally got her motor running. She looked to the second option.

*Surprise Shriveling, Chyka read in silence. Girls get enticed by an ancient von'kir artifact on public display, and get shriveled at random with no warning and no way to reverse it.*

That was maybe a bit more interesting to the little snow leopardess, but still didn't quite fit the sort of nastiness she had in mind. The third option, however...

*Homeworld Rowa Transformation Orgy 3494, Chyka read with increasing curiosity. Join dozens of tourists to Rowa Prime watch*



*each other face their mandatory and extremely messy rowa sex and transformation into lesser rowaform servant creatures at their end of their stays on the world.*

For a moment, the little snow leopardess hesitated. She listened to the rain pounding on her bedroom window and pondered whether or not she was in the mood for girls being transformed into insectoids. Insectoids the likes of which she was very personally familiar.

It didn't take any effort at all for her to picture the rowa in her mind. Especially the little worker-drones. Their buggy looks. Their unpleasant smell. Their pawing hands. Their tugging at her clothes as she tried to make her way to and from work in the tunnel that connected the library to the subway station.

Thus far, Chyka had proved quite immune to their efforts to get her to join the ranks of Mashirowa Hive. But, given the significantly

decreased inhibitions that she'd acquired during that now largely lost part of her life, she had to wonder if something like a video might actually push her just enough in the wrong direction. Just enough to get curious about just how frisky the bugs would get. Just enough to let them take her clothes off. And of course, nudity was consent. And that meant...

“Fuck it,” Chyka muttered to herself. “It doesn't really matter, does it? I could become a bug and the whole world would just go on as if I'd never existed. It might even be kind of nice to not have to make decisions for myself.”

Again, the little snow leopardess hesitated. Was it really wise to tempt fate like that? Then again, it wasn't like the rowa were in her apartment, waiting to take advantage of her erotically induced moment of particular weakness.

“Rowa Orgy 3494,” Chyka finally ordered. “Play it.”

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The menu faded, replaced by a very plain looking title screen. That then faded into a widely panning view of a large rowa hive chamber. All of the surfaces were made up of twisted shapes, some made up of off-white, grub-like segments, others of black chitin, and others of flexible black sinews. Dozens of insectoid appendages poked out from random places, while a nearly equal number of glowing, yellowish-green pustules illuminated the room.

There was only one visible entrance to the chamber, an orifice of thick black flesh the form of a two and a half meter diameter sphincter. The camera focused on this as it opened. The chamber was filled with leathery rubbing sounds as the broad passage beyond was revealed. Slowly, and very hesitantly the

dozens of naked women therein began to enter the chamber.

There was something about their poise, expression, and other body language that tickled Chyka's fancy. They'd clearly all gone to the rowa homeworld knowing that all visitors were required to join the home hive at the end of their stay. Knowing and understanding exactly what that was going to mean when it finally came to pass were two entirely different things, of course, and it looked very much like none of the women in the group had given it much thought until they'd been gathered up to be transformed.

A short, barely audible hiss came from the controller on the bedside table. Synthetic pheromones filled the bedroom air, carefully composed to match the mood of the video. It took a fey'li nose to really appreciate their ability to enhance the experience of an erotic video, and Chyka's nose was particularly sensitive to their mood manipulating qualities.

The little snow leopardess could feel a sense of the women's collective nervousness. She could also feel a sense of the hive's drive to 'procreate' with them all. A drive that was represented by pheromones whose sole purpose was to reduce resistance by making the subjects of that drive irrepressibly horny.

Not one of the women in the hive chamber had the ability to resist. Not the fey'li, who represented more than two thirds of the group. Not the ashiri. Not the mitanni. Not any of the others. They were all starting to feel aroused. And so was Chyka.

Chyka's pulled her legs up and bit her lip as she watched the women try to resist the involuntary arousal that was forcing itself upon them. That was forcing itself upon her, thanks to her impulsive purchase of a PheroStim unit for bedroom, and her equally impulsive decision to set it to 'unrestricted'. Her hands slid down between her legs. She began to toke upon her clit with her fingers.

She was getting moist down there. And the video hadn't even really begun yet.

There were half a dozen 'mounds' within the chamber. Formed of grub-like segments and endowed with a number of insectoid limbs each, it was fairly clear that these were meant to be the mechanisms of the womens' transformation. The latter gazed upon these structures with considerable suspicion. Chyka gazed upon them with considerable anticipation. How long would it take before one of them got close enough to get snared? Or get curious enough to give in and offer themselves up to start the transformation orgy?

*Jumie would have loved to watch this, Chyka thought as she watched the deeply hesitant women as they pondered the mounds upon which their bodies were to be completely and utterly corrupted. She was just so into all the*

*rowa stuff...*

The little snow leopardess couldn't help but think about the time she'd been out, and Sakie had somehow talked Jumie into taking a swig or two from a can of 'bug juice'. She'd come back just in time to find the leopardess up over her tits in bug-bod, a strand of thick rowa semen stretching from her chin to the can. She'd looked looked so perplexed and confused by what was happening to her body, but was trying to hard to pretend that she was liking it. The whole thing had looked so strange, and so unpleasant, and so absurdly cute...

Chyka chuckled softly to herself as she remembered the four days that she'd let Jumie remain as a rowa worker before 'fixing' her. The normally quiet leopardess had found the thing so unpleasant that she hadn't stopped talking about it for hours. She'd liked absolutely nothing about being rendered sexless, and leathery, and small, and having her mind reduced to slavish servitude.

Of course, she just couldn't help herself but start watching all sorts of videos showcasing other women becoming rowaforms of all sorts. She couldn't help herself but get horny and get off as she watched their bodies transform. And not a single week later, she just couldn't help herself but open a second can from the six-pack that Sakie had ordered... just to experience the utter disgust of being transformed into a nasty, mucous-spitting, pussy-faced bug all over again.

Watching Jumie's bug-play had been so much fun. She'd absolutely hated every moment it, but something about the feel of the transformation itself piqued just enough of her erotic curiosity to keep her coming back. By the time of the final cult crisis, she'd gone through five of the six cans, and had actually asked Sakie if she was going to get more.

Now it was the women in the video who's turn it was to become bugs. Finally, a tigress fey'li got brave enough, or maybe just horny



enough, to straddle one of the mounds. The insectoid appendages wrapped around her body, holding her captive atop it. Segmented phalli, slathered in buggy pre-cum poked out of hidden orifices. The hovered for a few long moments, threatening their subject's helpless ass, pussy, and mouth.

Chyka inhaled sharply and waited in deeply aroused anticipation as the tigress quivered in the mound's unyielding grasp. A pair of chitinous 'fingers' stretched out from the appendages that held her head down. They pulled at the edges of her mouth. Her muzzle opened. The phallus hovering in front of it slid inside.

The little snow leopardess began to rub at her clit as the other rowa phalli pressed into the tigress' pussy and ass. All three began to thrust and lubricate their captive with salty, slightly soapy tasting pre-cum. The whitish mucous oozed and splattered from her firmly pounded abdominal orifices, and bubbled in

thick gobs from her well filled mouth.

Chyka couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to actually be the tigress. To be trapped and triple penetrated by a monstrous alien beast with no concern whatsoever as to whether or not its captive was enjoying its ministrations. The closest she'd ever gotten was with her dual-dildo robo-toy, currently concealed in its hidden alcove beneath her bed. She'd once set it to 'sex her to sleep', an act that had resulted in it grabbing her by both legs and fucking her in both holes for three whole hours before she'd finally more or less passed out from exhaustion.

As she rubbed herself toward a nice, hard orgasm, the little snow leopardess wondered just what sort of buggy fate the tigress was going to face. Exactly what sort of transformation she was going to experience depended entirely on which phalli ejaculated, and what the relative ratios of ejaculate were between them. Just, or mostly, in the mouth

would mean a worker. Pussy would mean a worm. She couldn't remember what the rest of the possibilities were.

The tigress seemed to convulse. Cum squirted out from her pussy. Copious gobs of whitish goo splattered all over the tail end of the mound. Less voluminous dribbles of semen oozed from her ass and her mouth. The phalli immediately withdrew, leaving the cum sputtering tigress to wiggle and shudder as her transformation began.

Chyka couldn't resist the urge to rub herself with fury as she watched the fur around the base of the tigress' tail vanish into a leathery, off-white skin. This transformation spread up, and down, and around. Her anus smoothed over, as her wildly twitching tail was slowly absorbed up into her back. She shuddered as her pussy smoothed over and visible, grub-like segments began to form. She squirmed as the change spread down her legs, and began to fuse them together. It flowed up her chest,

flattening her breasts into nothing and absorbing her arms into her sides.

The little snow leopardess pressed herself to the precipice of erotic release as she watched the tigress' feet merge and her new worm body begin to shrink and reshape itself. As the tigress' nose morphed into a nubby little clit. Her muzzle became soft, vulvic folds, while her cheeks became hard, chitinous, nubby 'mandibles'. Her ears flattened away. Her eyes seemed to fall back into her head, and were covered over. Her whole, body twitched. It was done.

Chyka was done too. Firm, orgasmic thumps took hold of her abdomen as she dug into her vagina proper. Hot, sticky mucous covered her fingers. She exhaled sharply and stared up at the ceiling for what seemed like an eternity. She felt good. Very good. But her mind still turned to what had been.

*I wish she was here to lick all this up, the*

little snow leopardess thought. *And I could lick her all up. And we could be so happy and have so much fun.*

Chyka looked back to the video. Some of the women were now touching the new worm as it wiggled its way along the floor, rubbing up against them and sputtering pussy-mouth mucous all over their legs. Most were completely disgusted by with it. Just like Jumie had been. And just like Jumie, some just couldn't help but be curious enough to want to feel it for themselves.

*Why couldn't I? the little snow leopardess asked herself. What's stopping me from trying? We could still be together. Maybe. Some day. And we could lay here and let the bot fuck us while we watch bug videos. And maybe...*

Chyka bit her lip. *The things I know. I could... I could do anything. Anything. There are so many choices. So many paths I could take. But... but I have to have her. I just... have*

*to. Even if it means...*

The little snow leopardess took a deep breath. *If she wants to get herself a cute little bug butt for real this time, then so will I. And if we can't find a way out of it like we had before... then so what? We'll be little bug butts together forever. And we'll like it.*

Chyka smiled to herself as she returned her full attention to the video. "I might as well get myself nice and ready for it, shouldn't it?" she murmured as she watched one of the mounds take hold of a very uncertain looking, lavender skinned ashiri. "Really nice and ready."

The little snow leopardess took another deep breath and turned back to bedside controller. She tapped a bright pink button. A door opened beneath the base of the bed. The robotic toy, with its half-dozen padded grabbers and dual-dildo abdominal simulator appeared. She smiled at it, as it waited for her command.

“Robo-toy,” Chyka ordered. “All limbs restraint. Video synergy. Fuck me to sleep. Begin... now!”

**TO BE CONTINUED...**