

GELITECH

DARKNESS

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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SEASON 3 – EPISODE 6

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# SIGNS

All of the right signs were clearly present. Countless clues that might mean nothing to the average wilderness hiker, but everything to someone who'd dedicated their life to identifying such things. A few unusual rocks stacked here in the undergrowth. A bit of exposed gravel there against the side of the steep hill. An ancient mark lightly scored into the surface of a rocky outcrop. There was a path here. A path so thoroughly lost to nature that no one but the most practiced eye could have found it.

According to the old maps, the overgrown mountain trail simply didn't exist. Nor was there anything up the little valley that might justify its presence. There were only densely

packed trees, thorny undergrowth, and a little bubbling brook that ran alongside the mystery path. According to the surveys, that was all there had ever been.

“Look at that stacked rock,” Tachi said, gesturing toward a bit of exposed retaining wall. It had been built of roughly cut chunks of rock in order to shore up the low side of the trail. “Rough stacked rock and gravel fill. Someone definitely put an awful lot of effort into this. So... why isn’t it on any of the surveys? Kind of makes you curious, doesn’t it?”

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time that the tigress had found things that weren’t on the old maps. Or even the new maps. The mountains to the north and northeast of Mashiva were so full of ancient key’vin’ta sites and the detritus of long abandoned colonial mining activity that a dedicated explorer almost had to actively try to not find anything new or interesting.

Along with the more natural perils to be associated with mountain hiking, the old mines made wandering off the marked roads and trails a positively perilous affair. You never knew when you might suddenly come across a terrifyingly deep hole in the ground. A terrifyingly deep hole concealed by undergrowth and surrounded by loose ground just waiting to give way. And, if the urban legends were true, there was far worse in the form of key'vin'ta spirits bound to ancient sites. Trapped in the mortal world, they were fated to hunt mortal souls in a vain effort to snare victims whose own soul energy might potentially free them from their fate.

Of course, a professional explorer like Tachi didn't believe a single of those crazy urban legends, no matter how much she enjoyed playing them up on video for her hundred thousand fans. She'd come across numerous bits of ancient key'vin'ta civilization over the years. Village sites. Shrines. Even old 'shaman' caves full of raw purple slime formations.

Never once had she encountered anything unusual, let alone found herself face to face with a key'vin'ta ghost.

The old mines, on the other hand, were invariably hazardous, even in the best of local geological circumstances. There might be loose rock overhead, looking for the slightest of excuses to come crashing down. Or bad ground waiting for just the right vibration to completely collapse entire sections of the mine. Dust covered false floors hovering over hundred meter drops, and all too often completely undetectable until the wood they were made of started to crack underfoot... or worse. Rotten ladders. Deep water. Bad air. And so many other perils that it was hard to imagine anyone willingly risking life and limb just to see what secrets the long dead miners might have left behind.

“Well from the looks of it, there’s not much further this trail can go,” Tachi said as she briefly checked the battery level on the fancy

‘intelligent’ camera drone that was hovering right over her left shoulder. It was an older model, and prone to sudden fits of high power draw for no particular reason. Still, it did the job well enough for the hundred thousand fans that routinely watched her exploration videos.

“If there’s actually a mine here, we’ll know pretty soon,” the tigress continued, satisfied that her drone was behaving, at least for now. “Given all that we’ve seen so far, I can’t imagine it being just a prospect, but you never really know until you have a look, do you?”

Tachi slowed her pace as she spied a squarish looking chunk of old rotten wood resting against the hillside, covered in moss and vines. “That’s the first piece of lumber we’ve seen here. That’s a good sign.”

“I’m not seeing any sign of structures though,” the tigress added. “That’s a bit strange, but we’ve got at least a hundred meters to go until we run out of valley.

Looking at it, I don't think there's enough room on this side of the brook. Maybe they built on the other side. I don't see any sign of a footbridge, but I doubt anything would be left after so long. Then again, you never know. How many times have we found thousand year old wood out here that should have rotted away at least nine hundred years ago? They definitely don't preserve wood the way they used to these days, do they?"

The further Tachi advanced along the overgrown trail, the denser the undergrowth became. The trail followed the curve of the valley to her left, toward the west, as it came toward an abrupt end in the form of a fifty meter tall cliff face. "Still no sign of any structures, but the trail is leading right up to the cliff. I'll bet we're going to find an adit there, but I'm not really confident it's going to go in very far. There's been no sign of a waste rock pile so far, though I have to wonder if they used a portion of it to build the road I'm walking on."



The tigress looked up at the gray cliff, and the little cascade of water that splashed down its middle. “That’s a pretty little waterfall, isn’t it?” she mused as she pushed her way through the last of the vegetation. “Now... what will we find at the end of the trail here?”

Much to Tachi’s considerable satisfaction, she found herself looking at a colonial era mine portal. The wooden shed that protected it from falling rocks had long since succumbed to nature. Its rotten, rough-hewn timbers were crushed and half buried by the very rocks it had been intended to shield against. This meant that only a small opening, roughly a meter square, was left exposed atop the mess.

“Well! It looks like we do indeed have a mine here!” the tigress exclaimed with deliberately exaggerated excitement. “That’s awesome! It looks like we can get through the collapse here too. Whether or not we can actually get inside the mine will depend on how much water there is. I don’t see any

running out of the mine, but whether or not that's a good sign... well, we'll just have to look and see."

Tachi took another look up the cliff, this time being careful to look for any sign of rocks that might be loose and ready to fall. There was likely only one entrance to this lost, abandoned mine. The last thing she wanted was to get trapped by an untimely rock fall. Thankfully, and much to her relief, the country rock looked solid as solid could be.

The tigress frowned. The rock was solid, yes. But it was also perfectly uniform in composition. That wasn't exactly the sort of exciting geology that got a minerals miner in the mood for some good old fashioned blasting. There were no veins. No faults. No sign of mineral bearing ore. So why did they decide this was a good place to drive an adit?

One possibility was that the actual mining was being done higher up on the mountain.

The might have driven the adit in beneath the existing workings to act as haulage for ore dropped down through ore chutes from stopes well above. Or, perhaps, it had been built as a drainage adit to help clear water from workings above. Perhaps it had been intended to serve as both.

“I’m not seeing any real evidence of what the miners were might have been chasing after here,” Tachi noted. “It’s definitely not the sort of geology that you’d typically find high value minerals associated with. If I had to hazard a guess at this point, I’d say that we’re looking at a haulage level for workings higher up on the mountain. That kind of just deepens the mystery, though, doesn’t it?”

“I can understand the surveys overlooking a small prospect,” the tigress continued as she gingerly climbed over the rocks that were blocking most of the mine portal. “But a multi-level, ore bearing mine? That’s kind of hard to believe, honestly. Especially since this is just

off the mine road leading up mine sites six thirty seven and six thirty eight.”

Much to Tachi’s surprise, a light, creosote steeped breeze greeted her sensitive feline nose as she peered into the opening with her trusty high intensity flashlight. “Oh! Well... this is interesting. We’ve got some nice cool air coming out of the portal. That means there’s another opening into the mine somewhere.”

Even more to Tachi’s surprise was the state of the adit beyond the collapsed portal. It was dry. Very dry, to the point of being positively dusty. She could see small animal prints all over the ground. A few meters in, the rusty rails began, though the wooden cross-ties that had held them in place were now so rotten that some of the rails had fallen over onto their side.

“Kind of weird, isn’t it?” Tachi noted. “Looks a lot more like a dry desert mine than a mountain forest mine, doesn’t it? But we’ve

come across stranger things in the past, haven't we?"

"Alright," the tigress continued, backing away from the portal to get her gear in order. "Let me just get things sorted and make sure the right people know where I am in case something goes wrong. I'll be right back."

Tachi tapped her wrist com to stop the drone from recording. From here on in, she'd rely on a hand-held camera in combination with an all-around view camera mounted atop her safety helmet. She also had plenty of lights with her, and enough extra batteries to last her a week if need be. She also had enough food and water for several days, and an advanced first aid kit just in case something went horribly wrong and she had to wait for help to arrive. Assuming help was able to. Or even willing.

Exploring abandoned mines was perilous at the best of times. Trying to rescue someone in

an abandoned mine after something had gone horribly wrong was doubly so. No rescue services were obligated to provide aid in such circumstances. Not even the dedicated mine rescue services. A trapped or injured explorer might well find themselves on their own, obligated to rescue themselves, or at least get themselves to a place that was safe enough for others to help them.

Explorers who worked in groups could at least help each other. Solo explorers like Tachi were at much greater risk. It was something she always kept in mind whenever she entered an old mine. No matter how much she wanted to explore every nook and cranny, she had her limits. And, thankfully, she had the willpower to keep herself from second guessing them.

“Batteries, water, food, first aid” the tigress said to herself as she looked through her backpack. She then stood up and looked over the gear she had attached to her ‘tactical’ vest. “Lights, air monitors, camera... all good.”

Tachi zipped up her backpack. She looked at the mine portal and took a deep breath. “Well... here goes nothing!”

# TIME

Dr. Kidan frowned. “I can’t just turn my back on them. On her. To hell with Sarva. I’ve worked so hard on all this. If I don’t do something...”

The deeply unsettled scientist rested his forehead on the blinking control panel. “All I’ve ever wanted was a girlfriend that I didn’t have to worry about disappearing forever in one of my experiments. We were so close. So close! How in all the heavens and hells did I screw this up so badly?”

Dr. Kidan looked up at a set of four status indicators. One after another they changed from red, to yellow, and then finally to green. He looked over his shoulder at the machine.



The ultimate machine that collected together everything he knew about life essences and their mechanics. Everything he knew about biogel and its attunements. Everything he knew about space and time.

“She’s right though,” Dr. Kidan remarked with a deep sigh. “The clock is just too risky at this point. But... I think it’s given me enough data. Maybe... maybe I can just sidestep it all. Maybe.”

The biogel clad tiger adjusted his hologlasses and gave the machine one last good look over. The six exquisite quartz sarcophagi that sat to either side of the elevated walkway were full. The obsidian black biogel they contained had been extracted directly from the Omega Core overflow tanks. It was as timeline-transcendent a mass of biogel he had access to without getting caught. If any mass of biogel still had a strong imprint of Chyka and her intimate companions, that was it.

At the end of the walkway, looming over the whole mass of interconnected machinery, was a large five meter circular portal, partially embedded in the walkway floor. Glowing pink coils of activated biogel wound around its perimeter. These were connected to similar coils that wrapped around and then entered each of the sarcophagi. For the moment, they were all empty. That was, however, about to change.

“New log entry,” Dr. Kidan said to his comm. “I have finished filling the sarcophagi with Omega Core biogel. I will now commence energizing the system. If all goes to plan, I will be able to resynthesize the four targets using the transgel portal. If not...”

The tiger sighed and shook his head. That wasn't something he wanted to think about. He'd done enough damage with the clock so far. Each divergence was further and further from the correct timeline. One too many and it was entirely possible that there would be such

a complete break that there wouldn't be any chance of fixing things. Ever.

“It *will* work,” Dr. Kidan said to himself as he reached for the lever that controlled the system's main activated biogel valve. “It *has to* work.”

The scientist took a deep breath. He pulled the lever.

# STRANGE

“I honestly don’t think I’ve ever seen a mine quite like this one before,” Tachi remarked as she gingerly tiptoed over a seemingly unending stream of disintegrating wooden track ties. “It’s just so... strange!”

The tigress was already five hundred meters into the side of the mountain and there was still no sign of where the arrow-straight adit might be leading. At least there was no doubt in her mind that was is going to lead *somewhere*. The cool breeze and slowly intensifying odor of ancient creosote was more than enough evidence to make that quite clear.

Far less clear was why the adit had been blasted into the mountain. Her assumption

that it had been intended for ore haulage wasn't being borne out by what she was seeing as she advanced. Despite its remarkable length, the adit had no alcoves cut into its sides for miners to safely get out of the way of passing ore cars. There were no drifts. No ore chutes. No anything. Had it really been blasted out just for drainage?

“It's been a long dusty slog, but at least I've still got that cool breeze blowing into my face,” Tachi commented as she continued into the darkness. “How much further do you think this adit is going to go before we find the source of this oily creosote smell?”

Creosote meant wood, of course. And that meant timbers. Framing. Lagging. A shaft, perhaps? A winze? Some very rare intact square set? Wouldn't that make for an awesome video?

Tachi continued down the passage, looking for anything that might hint at the purpose for

all of the colonial era miners' hard work. There wasn't a single clue in the rock that she'd seen so far. It was all the same mottled, grayish country rock with little sign of faults or fissuring, let alone any veins of mineral right intrusion. It was disappointing, to say the least. It did, however, mean that the tunnel had survived long enough for her to explore it.

“No drill holes. No pick marks. Nothing, really,” Tachi commented as she advanced. “They were really careful to make this as neat and tidy as they could and honestly that really doesn't make much sense to me right now. Why go through all that effort? Were they expecting to be working here for a really long time?”

Slowly, the smell of old creosote became stronger. Shadows appeared at the limit of her flashlight. Objects intruding into the otherwise clear adit. A few glimmers of shiny metal. A squarish something to one side that looked like it might be a sign of some sort. “Hey! Finally!

It looks like we've got something up interesting up ahead!" Tachi said with considerable excitement in her voice. "Hopefully it isn't a blockage. I'd hate to have brought you all this way for nothing. But... if I had to hazard a guess from what I can see right now, it might actually be a shaft station of some sort. Let's go have a look."

The tigress took another step forward. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Her helmet with its bright light was knocked clean off, clattering to the floor several meters down the tunnel. She was thrust forward by something big. Heavy. And hard.

All that Tachi could think as she fell forward was that the seemingly benign tunnel had collapsed on top of her. In a moment the full weight of the rock would be upon her. She would be crushed. Dead before she even had a chance to scream.

The tigress wasn't crushed. She didn't even have a chance to hit the floor. Hard chitinous claws grabbed her around the shoulder and waist. Before she even had a chance to curse in objection, she was flying forward over the rusty rails, deeper into the mine and its nearly pitch black darkness.



# ENERGY

Luminous pink liquid biogel filled the coils that had been bored through the walls of the four quartz sarcophagi. It spread through the pipes that lead up onto the raised platform that had been constructed between them. It ran through the pencil-thin tubes that surrounded the perimeter of the four meter portal. Within, a thin sheet of obsidian black biogel began to spread inward from the edges.

“Portal formation proceeding as expected,” Dr. Kidan noted for his log. “Full alignment will take several minutes. If all goes well, I will proceed to signature locking.”

The scientist looked over the small portal control panel. One screen in particular took

most of his attention. It was there that he would have to answer the most difficult question before subject extraction and resynthesis could take place. “There are so many readings from the quantum clock. So many possible states to choose from. But... which? Do I take them as they are in this divergent timeline? Or do I choose them when they’re most suitable for..”

Dr. Kidan shook his head. “This. This is how you got into trouble in the first place, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Dr. Alluwa replied.

Dr. Kidan whirled around. “I thought you’d...”

“Gone off to find out what our most recent use of the clock had done to break the timeline even further?” Dr. Alluwa replied with a deep frown. “What’s the point if you’re just going to keep meddling with the natural order of things in my absence?”

Dr. Kidan sighed.

“We need to *fix* things,” Dr. Alluwa scolded. “And here you are trying to break things even more. And all for what? To engineer yourself the perfect girlfriend?”

“This isn’t going to break anything,” Dr. Kidan replied. “It’s just... sidestepping. Until we can figure out how to correct the whole timeline without using the clock. No one will ever know because the original bodies, or organic masses, or whatever you want to call them get left behind.”

“Ah,” Dr. Alluwa responded, shaking her head with visible displeasure. “And what makes you think that any of them are really necessary for the timeline to settle back into a normal progression? Hmm? How do you know that their actual individual progression wasn’t supposed to come to an end?”

Dr. Kidan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t see how they couldn’t be. Omega exists across

all timelines as a single coherent entity. They're just as much a part of Omega as you are. So that means..."

"*Were,*" Dr. Alluwa sternly. "*Were* a part of Omega. Or have you forgotten that your attempt to save them from the dragille took them back before they became part of the Unity?"

"Why should that matter?" Dr. Kidan questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm telling you, they aren't a part of Omega," Dr. Alluwa responded with a scowl. "And I certainly should know. I *am* Omega after all, aren't I?"

"I think you're confusing yourself with Lady Anwae again," Dr. Kidan sighed.

"You really don't get it, do you?" Dr. Alluwa snipped.

"Oh, I get it," Dr. Kidan replied, rolling his

eyes. “I just find it funny that for all that’s happened, Lady Anwae hasn’t said one word to me about it despite ample opportunity. It’s always you.”

“We’re the same person,” Dr. Alluwa answered, crossing her arms. “Our minds are one. Our souls are one. Everything about us...”

“Is what she *allows* you to perceive about what you are,” Dr. Kidan answered with a wry smirk.

“Fuck you,” Dr. Alluwa snapped. “And that doesn’t change the fact that none of those girls are part of Omega anymore.”

“Exactly how sure of that are you?” Dr. Kidan inquired as he reached out to turn a dial and press the glowing red button right next to it. One of the lines on the screen became highlighted.

“Absolutely one hundred percent positive!” Dr. Alluwa responded with a hiss. “They *are*

*not* part of Omega!”

“Well then,” Dr. Kidan said as he flipped a switch. “Let’s find out which one of us is right!”

# NIGHTMARE

Tachi struggled in vain as the rowa workers stripped off her exploring gear. “What the fuck!?! You’re... you’re not allowed to be all this way north of the city!” she sputtered as they turned their attention to shredding her tan hiking shirt and blue denim pants. “Let go of me! I’m not...”

A sticky bubbly sound drew the captive tigress’ eyes to a rowa worm of some sort that had been trapped in a vile, greenish tan pod hanging from the mine chamber’s ceiling. It was spitting out a mass of sticky mucous that contained a number of small, softly luminous spheres. They were eggs. Rowa eggs. There were hundreds of them already laying about the cavern floor in piles of jelly-like, half dried

mucous.

The eggs served as the only illumination in the chamber. They also served as the favored food source of the ‘true rowa’ who ruled over the hives. On a very rare occasion, one might actually be fertile enough to develop a new true rowa within.

There was a second pod hanging from the chamber ceiling. This one was empty. It wasn’t hard for Tachi to see exactly who was intended to occupy it.

*How have they spread so far without being caught?* Tachi thought as the last bits of her clothing were shredded to bits and scattered all over the floor by the handsy little workers. *How? It’s...*

Tachi’s thoughts were interrupted by a wet, squishy sound behind her. A sudden sharp jab delved deep into her tight little tailhole. “AH!” she cried out as the prehensile tentacle wiggled about inside her. She cried out again



as a second thrust into her equally tight little pussy.

*Ah! No! Both... oh... ah! It's not use! I'm done!* the tigress thought as she could feel the tentacles filling her with their foul transformative seed. There was nothing she could do now. Nothing to stave off the disgusting transformation that was already taking roots in her semen stuffed body. *Relax, Tachi. Relax. Just take it. It'll be done before you know it. Then you won't care anymore. All you're care about is laying bug eggs. Goddess... I...*

A strange, gooey snapping sound filled Tachi's ears. The world suddenly went dark and silent. She could feel herself changing. Changing into one of those reproductive worms. But she was also floating. Spinning. And then... she felt as if she were coated from head to toe in a skin-tight sheathe of tingling oily wetness.

## RESYNTHESIS

Tachi had been caught. Snared by some kind of alien spider even as she was being transformed by the rowa. Her body had been wrapped in an opaque, oily wet substance and left to hang in a rubbery, bouncy web until the time came for it to consume her. But she wasn't just hanging, was she? She was being pushed through the web. Pushed out into the open, even as her wrapping began to shrink and pull taut around her helpless body.

For a moment, the terrified tigress was dangling helpless upon an unseen precipice. A single thread held her to the web. A single thread held her weak, quivering body upright. It was only a matter of time. The thread broke. She collapsed onto a surprisingly soft floor.

“It... it worked!” Dr. Kidan exclaimed with almost child-like excitement. “It actually worked! I told you!”

“I guess everyone gets lucky once in a while,” Dr. Alluwa huffed. “That still doesn’t mean she’s part of Omega.”

Tachi got up onto her knees as the bigoel withdrew from her head, leaving her coated from neck to toe just as she’d been before that final time shift. “Ah... oh... oh shit... oh shit,” she gasped as clarity returned and she locked eyes with a very familiar scientist. “Kidana! Thank... thank goddess! I... I don’t know what happened. I was... I don’t know what the hell I was doing. But all of a sudden there were rowa and they... they... is this... is this what she meant?”

“Is this what *who* meant?” Dr. Kidana asked as he helped the shaky tigress to her feet.

“Chyka,” Tachi replied as she looked around the chamber, at the transgel portal and all of

its accessories. “When we escaped from the mine shaft over Dari, she said that she kept experiencing time jumps that let her fix mistakes. I didn’t believe her but now...”

“Wait,” Dr. Alluwa said, stepping up onto the platform to eye the tigress more closely. “If you remember that then...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dr. Kidan responded with a sharp look at his fellow biogel scientist. “I know. But I had to. It’s the correct version of her, and if I’d gone any earlier, she never would have understood enough to actually help us.”

“Wait... what?” Tachi said, looking from one scientist to the other. “Correct version? What’s that supposed to mean? What’s happening? Did Shi win?”

“No, but... it’s a long story,” Dr. Kidan replied. “But let’s just say that me trying to keep the world from ending may have had some...”

“Unintended consequences?” Dr. Alluwa snarled.

“Yeah, that,” Dr. Kidan responded. “We need to fix things, but the problem is that the versions of all of you in this divergent timeline aren’t... well... I’m not quite sure I can say that they aren’t *real*... but they aren’t who any of you are supposed to be. Some of you aren’t so bad. But others... well. They’re different.”

“I don’t understand,” Tachi replied. “There’s another me?”

“There was another you,” Dr. Kidan answered. “I mean... you’re both the same person. You remember what was happening to you just before I reeled you in. That was this timeline’s you. The rest of you is the real, correct timeline’s you. Which probably still doesn’t make much sense, but it’s really all I can do for the moment.”

“So, now what?” Dr. Alluwa huffed. “What’s your genius plan from here on in?”

“I’m going to grab Jumie and Sakie,” Dr. Kidan replied. “We need to leave Chyka for now, I think. The fact that the rowa seem to be going out of their way to snare everyone involved is... puzzling. Maybe we can find out who’s really pulling the strings.”

“And then?” Dr. Alluwa inquired.

“There’s Nenya, but I think she’ll be good as-is for the moment,” Dr. Kidan replied. “Once we have them all back together, maybe it will help suggest a path forward.”

“Aren’t you forgetting one of them?” Dr. Alluwa inquired. “Or do you not need that vile little creature for all this?”

“Dammit!” Dr. Kidan grunted. “I’d completely forgotten about her!”

“Do you really think the portal will work on someone stuck between dimensions?” Dr. Alluwa asked.

“Well... we’ll just have to wait and see,” Dr. Kidan replied. “I’m hoping to avoid that, really. If it wasn’t for her influence on Chyka, everything wouldn’t have all gone spiraling out of control the way it did. We *really* can’t afford to have that happen again.”

**TO BE CONTINUED...**