

GELITECH

TWEEN-EPIISODE 6.5

HOME

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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Email: shetiraanwae @ gmail.com

HOME

There has been nothing Chyka could have done to prepare her new companion for her first view of the big city, as fleeting as it had been. A quick look out the train windows at Runai, beyond the broad Mashiva Reservoir, and then into the subway tunnels they'd went. It was enough to bring out a gasp of utter astonishment, quickly followed by lip biting anxiety. Nothing about this new place was familiar to the nervous leopardess. Even the brief glimpse had been overwhelming.

It certainly didn't help that Jumie's first introduction to many of the basic components of civilization had taken place in the two hours before, gazing out the train windows as they'd passed through all the mountain valley towns and villages. All were so unlike little Dari that they

might as well have been built by aliens. The pretty houses. The gardens and fields. The roads, and the cars and trucks that drove on them. She'd never seen anything like it before. She hadn't been allowed to. It was the Brimstone Devil's country, after all. Or so she'd been told.

Feyli religion was a curious thing. So many divine aspects. A bureaucracy of goddesses and gods, angels and demons, all in one way or another answering to the One. The Power. The Prime Maker. Or whatever one preferred to call her. Or him. Or it.

These lesser divine powers occupied the immortal domains, separated for the convenience of mortal comprehension into the Three Nirvanas, the Four Primalities, the Five Originations, the Six Seas of Light, the Seven Heavens, the Eight Purgatories, and the Nine Heavenly Hells. These comprised all the divine lands of the old feyli beliefs, and all those which had been adopted over

the millennia, such as the Heavenly Hells, from the ancient, extinct key'vin'ta.

Completely apart from these divine domains was the Abyss. The real, honest to goodness Hell, where the Brimstone Devil's hordes tortured the souls of the genuinely vile for no particular reason than their own personal amusement. At least, that's what the crazies thought it was. According to the old ways, it was where the souls of the truly, irredeemably evil were cast into eternal nothing. But the crazies had other ideas. They mostly kept those ideas to themselves, forming little communities of like-minded believers. Communities like Dari, that inevitably came to the conclusion that the whole world outside their borders was the Abyss itself.

Exactly what was going through Jumie's mind as she watched the lights in the subway tunnel flash past was a mystery. But Chyka had no doubt she was thinking about all the sermons she'd been plied with over the years, exhorting her to reject

every aspect of this 'devil's country'. To treat it as a foreign land, occupied solely by the servants of unspeakable evil.

"Next stop, 16th Avenue Main," the smooth, feminine voice of the train's automatic announcement system called out. "Transfers to green line and the Old Mashiva Center shuttle."

"Well, be home soon," Chyka said, nothing the extremely nervous expression on her companion's face.

Jumie kept staring at the passing lights. She was so entranced by them that bright lights of the first of the train's subterranean stations made her jump.

Chyka did her best not to laugh at the startled leopardess. "Everything's underground here. Even the stations. Well, except for the bit along the river."

The train paused for less than a minute before heading on its way. It was a special rapid service, only stopping at the bigger all-trains stations while in Mashiva. It therefore passed by the next two stations, before exiting the tunnels, directly onto a bridge over the Mashiva River at the western end of the city.

Jumie gasped at the sight of the icy river, and the huge rail yard to the west. There, long lines of local subway cars were joined by the bigger, long range passenger trains of the pink and sky lines. Beyond these were such a myriad of miscellaneous rolling freight stock that it was impossible to tell what purpose most of the cars might have served in the short time that they could be seen.

Beyond, further to the west, was Mashiva's much more recently built sibling city, Runai. Densely packed, and largely residential, Runai was more of a dense vertical suburb than a city in the proper sense, as most who lived there had jobs

in Mashiva, or in the Intercity Industrial Zone just to the south, across the massive, ten lane Planetary Highway 47.

As the train turned eastward, this busy roadway became the focus of Jumie's attention. She'd only just been introduced to the idea of roads and motorized vehicles as modes of routine transportation. So see so many cars and trucks, all moving too and from the city on a single massive roadway was surely mind blowing.

The elevated highway blocked much of the view of the Industrial Zone beyond, but Jumie could see just enough of the vast factories and warehouses to leave her jaw slack. Most of the individual buildings were larger than the whole of Dari, several times over. And their largely snow covered roofs just seemed to go on and on with no end in sight.

The train slowed as it entered Mashiva Station, the gargantuan, multi-level, 30 platform rail hub

that served as the primary transfer point for passengers coming to and from Mashiva via the sky line, who's trains generally only stopped at Mashiva Station, the spaceport, and in the city's Resort District. Again, Jumie gasped as she found herself looking at more than a dozen other passenger trains, either stopped at their respective platforms, or moving to and fro as they ran their routes around the city.

"Next station is ours," Chyka said softly as she pulled her small travel bag from under the seat, and gestured for her companion to do the same. "Don't forget your things."

Things might have been the wrong word for it. All Jumie had was the old, extremely timeworn winter clothing she'd been wearing when she'd fled Dari. She didn't need any of it now, of course. The black biogel that coated her body was all she'd need to wear from now on. But that bag of ratty fabric was all she had. Changing that was Chyka's number one priority.

The little snow leopardess smiled at the thought of her new lover's first trip to a proper store. Or to the big mall adjacent to the government center in the heart of the city. Or anywhere, really. There was so much that Jumie had never seen, or done. It would take all year just to show her half of it.

The wait at Mashiva Station seemed almost excessive. Chyka had long since become so used to the local subway trains that ran continuously, not so much scheduled as kept separated at a safe distance. She'd forgotten that the big, long range trains ran on strict timetables. Theirs was to depart the station at 14:45, and not a second sooner.

A long, colorful freight train rumbled past on the other side of the platform. No doubt it was coming from the spaceport, laden with all sorts of fascinating off-world goods destined for customers all over the region. It was yet another thing that Jumie had never seen in Dari, as freight trains larger than a few cars long almost never headed

very far into the relatively steep Yu'min valley. It was more of a backup route, after all. A bypass that allowed certain trains the freedom to avoid passing through Mashiva, or being forced to take a much longer route on their way to the vast, northwestern mountain plains.

Finally, at exactly 14:45, a chime sounded and the train doors closed. It rolled out of the station and straight into the arrow straight subway tunnel that led to University Station, and the spaceport beyond.

"Next stop, University Station," the automatic announcement system called out. "Mashiva Mariners University. Anwae Arena. Gelitech Gelarium. Transfers to blue, green, yellow, red, and purple lines, as well as the University Station Bus Hub."

"I... I'm so nervous," Jumie murmured.

"It's okay," Chyka soothed. "It's going to be different. But not as different as you might think. A home is a home, after all. It just has to be home-like, even if it is all done up with biogel lifestyle stuff."

Jumie tried to smile, but it wasn't particularly convincing.

Again, the train slowed. Chyka stood up. "Come on. Let's go."

Jumie got up and followed Chyka the few steps to the door. The train slowed to a halt. A chime sounded. The doors opened. They stepped out onto the busy platform.

Jumie hardly got a dozen steps toward the escalator at the end of the platform before she froze, overwhelmed by the sheer number and extraordinary variety of people that were moving around her. As with so much else, she had never seen so many people before, let alone crammed

into so small a space. And so few, at least reasonably familiar feyli faces. Most were different species. Aliens, at least in her eyes. Colorful elf ears. Tall, ram-horned mitanni. Tentacled chavadi. Bee-like drochaki. Little buggy rowa drones. And so many others. It was almost too much for her to handle all at once.

"They're just people," Chyka said, tugging at her shoulder. "Different sorts of people. But people all the same. Come on. It's not so crowded upstairs. We'll go through the arena, and be at my apartment in no time flat."

It took a few more tugs to get Jumie to move, and before long, she was gingerly stepping onto her first escalator.

"Just put your hand on the hand rail, and walk with it," Chyka coached, wondering if, perhaps, taking the elevator would have been a better choice. "Make sure you don't step on the yellow mark where the steps separate. Then just ride it up."

And don't forget to step off the moving part at the top."

"It's so strange," Jumie murmured as she nervously stepped onto the moving staircase. "Just... why?"

"To force people to move up and down at a constant pace, I think," Chyka replied. "That way there's less crowding on the steps, and at the exit, and it discourages people from trying to rush the ones in front of them, preventing falls."

"Oh," Jumie responded as they reached the top of the escalator and stepped out into the lower level of Anwae Arena's west side lobby. There, yet another incredible sight greeted her. Black biogel, shimmering in the bright, yellow-green light, oozed from the ceiling, forming large dribbles and threads. These formed barriers that separated the escalators on the sides from the open center of the room.

Archways prevented the dripping boigel from completely blocking the way near the ends of each barrier, and through one of these the couple walked. Jumie gazed at a pair of bejeweled, lavender skinned elf-ears, looking at one of the many computer screens mounted along the sides of the biogel barrier.

"Those are the ticket terminals for the Arena," Chyka noted. "That's where you can buy tickets for Biogel Games matches."

"What are biogel games?" Jumie asked as the pair passed out of the lobby and into the long, open corridor that ran the length of the Arena's west side. Instead of turning down it, Chyka led Jumie toward a broad double door in the wall opposite the lobby, between two of the many glowing green lift tubes that provided access to the arena seating. A sign above the door glowed yellow, and read "Cross Arena Access: Gelitech Staff Only".

"Simulated combat using biogel instead of real weapons," Chyka replied. "Kind of like paintball, but the casualties get turned into various biogel things instead of, you know, getting actually hurt."

"What's paintball?" Jumie questioned as they approached the door.

"It's a game where you shoot little balls of paint that go splat on whatever you hit," Chyka replied as the door opened. "Come on. Short cut."

A short, ascending corridor led to a second door. This too opened, as well as a third door just beyond.

"They let anyone cross the arena floor when there's no games on," Chyka explained. "Just Gelitech and guests when there's match prep or cleanup though."

Jumie gawked at the vast open space, with it's alien looking arches, suspended platforms,

mushroom shaped structures, and the multitude of seating units, each protected by a glowing, yellow-green force field. There were a few biogel clad people about, carrying various devices which they seemed to be using to clean splatters of biogel off the concrete blocks, barrels, and cargo containers that were stacked up all over the floor. A small forklift was being used off in one corner to move some of these items about, and it's incessant beeping echoed through the otherwise quiet building.

"We don't go right through the middle," Chyka said, pulling her companion away from the two tightly spaced arch structures, and the glowing force field tube that rose up between them. It ended in a huge, opaque sphere suspended from the ceiling, it's only visible means of entry up through the force field tube itself. "Wouldn't want to float up there and let the goo loose all over the place after they just finished cleaning it all up."

"There's... I don't..." Jumie responded as she followed close beside her companion.

"Oh, I've got so much to tell you about all this!" Chyka giggled. "It's so much fun to watch. But not now. For now we just need to get home and maybe get something to eat. Then we can talk all night."

Jumie nodded as she followed her companion out of the arena, down a short, descending corridor, and into a lobby area that was a virtual mirror image of the one on the other side of the arena.

"Straight across to the lifts," Chyka said as she lead the leopardaess straight through the lobby and into a broad corridor. This corridor led into a round tunnel equipped with clear walls that ran directly through the center of the Gelarium-side courtyard pool. "Check out the biogel mermaids."

Jumie yet again gasped as several beautiful felyi biogel bodied mermaids swam past. One of

them smiled and waved at the astonished leopardess. "Are they wearing... fish bodies?"

"Sort of. They've had themselves biogel body-modded," Chyka explained. "Like, that's all their body is from the neck down. One hundred percent pure biogel. It's pretty awesome, but it's quite a commitment. Can't be undone."

Jumie shuddered and frowned as she followed her companion out of the tunnel, and into a bunker-like concrete room where the corridor branched out, and there were stairs down to a lower level. Her companion led her to the left, and they passed through another, much darker, clear walled tunnel section. This led into a corridor with windows that shone into an interior mermaid pool, where more of the biogel mermaids twirled about in the water.

Another corridor followed, this time over a section of warehouse floor, where automated forklifts were moving boxes too and fro. Here,

Chyka came to a stop, before a glowing purple doorway. After a few moments, a chime sounded and the doors opened to reveal a circular lift car.

"Up we go," Chyka said, leading her companion into the lift. The ride within was short, and the doors opened out onto the Gelarium ground floor.

Jumie's eyes grew wide as she gazed up at the six level mall filled with all things biogel. There was so much to see, and so many people who seemed very interested in seeing it all up close. Some were fully clothed, but there were quite a few who were nearly, or even completely naked. "This is where you live? Why are so many people here naked?"

"Where I work," Chyka replied as she led the leopardess to the left, toward the open garage-type door to the staff residence courtyard. "I... well, we, live *this* way. It's a clothing optional zone. If you're going to sample the goods here, you're

going to be taking it off anyway, so might as well take it off right off the bat, right? Oh! Mind the biogel pool! Don't fall in!"

Jumie was so entranced by all the shiny black things, the people, and the intense purple glow that illuminated them all, that she nearly slipped right over the smoothly rounded edge of the biogel pool that ran from north to south across the center of the Gelarium. Fortunately, her companion pulled her to safety before took a headlong dive into the mass of undulating blackness.

"I don't think you're quite ready for that," Chyka said as she lead the leopardess out into the courtyard. "Go in there, and it's totally anonymous sexy time with anyone else who might happen to find you."

Jumie grimaced.

"Come on," Chyka said, tugging on her companion as she led her toward a spiral staircase

at the far corner of the courtyard. "We're almost there. We'll get settled. Eat. I can't wait to find out what everyone else has been up to while I've been gone! I'll bet they've been having lots of fun!"

TO BE CONTINUED...