

GELITECH

EPISODE 12

MACHARRI

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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I

Chyka stepped off the train and into the mustiest, dampest, sorriest excuse for a semi-abandoned subway station that she'd ever seen. The few dim, flickering light fixtures spread across the six timeworn platforms revealed a mess of crumbling concrete, creeping rust stains, and not a few patches of shimmering liquid which adhered to various surfaces and looked much too thick to be water. Whatever painting or signage there might have been was long gone, save a few chips of yellow paint about half a meter back from the platform's rough edge, and a rusty metal sign hanging loosely near a steel grate doorway that read: 'Entrance Prohibited. Authorized Personnel Only.'

"Pfft!" Gorin huffed with a wrinkled nose as the Vixanti train's doors closed and it rumbled off into the darkness of the old military subway tunnels. "What a mess. An what a stench. Ye'd think they'd spruce the place up a bits, consid'rin how much they use it."

"They?" Chyka inquired as her companion looked around the old station in visible disgust. Given how run down the place looked, it was hard to imagine it getting any regular use. In fact, the more she looked around, the harder it was to imagine that anyone would even consider the place safe to use, let alone actually make use of it.

"Post office, mostly" Gorin replied as, almost as if on cue, a six car postal shipping train slowly rolled through the station along the furthest of the six tracks, on its way north toward the river, and the commercial heart of Mashiva. "They use these tracks te increase capacity on the main loop 'tween south city, the industrial zone, and Mashiva proper."

"Ah," Chyka replied with a shallow nod. She knew the post office used the old, obsolete subway lines for shipping parcels and mail around the city, but she'd never before heard of them using the old and, she'd always assumed, closed off military tunnels. "So... how do we get back to Gelitech from here?"

Gorin gestured toward the rusty, metal grate door. "Thataways, n through the backsides o the old secondary shipyard."

"Shipyard? Down here?" Chyka questioned with considerable skepticism. There'd always been a shipyard in the spaceport on the surface, and she'd heard of the shipyard facilities in the hangar network that honeycombed the cliffs from which the east end of Mashiva arose, but a subterranean shipyard somewhere under the spaceport?

"Aye!" Gorin replied with a raised eyebrow as he led the little snow leopardess toward the door.

"Dun tell me ye've never rode the subway through the canyon, lass!"

"Well, duh!" Chyka replied with a puzzled smirk. "How can you not? Half the lines run over the bridges across the quarry canyon under Anwae Arena."

"Then surely ye've seen the ol gantries n' such," Gorin replied as he unlatched the door.

"Yeah," Chyka replied. "That's all quarry equipment, right?"

Gorin chuckled. "Nay, lass! The quarry closed long before the naval base came along," he explained as the ancient metal door squealed open. "Millennia before. T'was dug out by the key'vin'ta te build bridges, an buildings, an temples, an whatnots."

A shudder ran down Chyka's spine as memories of her time in another, very different key'vin'ta excavation twisted their way through her mind.

"Anyhows," Gorin continued, "when they built Macharri, they included the ol excavations an covered over the canyon when they built the civvie spaceport on top. Used the place as a yard te build small ships in secret, te confuse potential enemies bout the real number of ships deployed te defend the planet. The canyon was the last stop before they'd be lifted up into the big yard hangar before rollout. Ye know. The hangar that's now Anwae Arena."

"Ah," Chyka responded as she gazed into the darkness beyond the doorway.

"Fun fact," Gorin added with a smile. "There's about ten half-built destroyers down in the yard. If ye could walk the bridges over the canyon, ye could even see a couple down below. The rest are in the side halls down toward the south end, in the

blocked off area that's now the former Vixanti Three. Ye know the big round residential area down there? That used te be the big turntable, where they'd take ships from the building halls to the sides of the chamber and turn them to head straight down the canyon."

"Interesting," Chyka responded with a raised eyebrow. She'd never been into the old Vixanti Three facility before, but she'd heard all about it. It was something of a tourist attraction now, though tours were in such demand that being able to get into a tour group was purely a matter of chance.

Chyka paused as her companion entered the narrow passage. A lone, flickering light fixture could barely be seen, so far down the perfectly straight, claustrophobically narrow passage that it made her start to lose her sense of scale. A strong, musty odor came forth, along with a very cool, very subtle breeze. "Ugh. That... stinks."

"Aye," Gorin replied as he beckoned the little snow leopardess to follow him down the corridor. "Nothin te worry bout though. Just old damp concrete. Perfectly safe. Well... unless ye take a wrong turn an get lost. Then... well. Ye probly dun wanna be meetin the sorts o things that lurk down below."

"Do I even want to know?" Chyka asked as she followed her companion into the narrow concrete passage. The metal door clanged shut behind her, and the sound seemed to echo for far longer than it had any particular right to.

"Not really," Gorin replied. "I mean, there's the alien types who've set up shop down in the cliff-side hangars wit their 'forbidden' wares. Tourist trap, really, and in more ways than one. But everywhere else down here? Yeah. Dun be wand'rin about without a lad who knows what's safe and what's not, eh?"

"Okay," Chyka responded with a shrug. The little, flickering point of light in the distance didn't seem to be getting closer, despite the fact that they'd already proceeded about a city block's worth of distance down the corridor. It was hard to imagine such a long, straight, and completely featureless passage anywhere under Mashiva, let alone in the midst of the old South City. "So... where are we exactly? Like... this tunnel, under the city?"

"This tunnel?" Gorin replied. "This use te be an old emergency passage tween the yards and the station here. The light ways up ahead is were an old escape way leads up into a closet in the spaceport subway station subbasement. So that puts us... oh... about six blocks east of that."

"Ah," Chyka replied as she began to feel exhausted just at the thought of having to walk so far. "So... this is going to be one hell of a walk then, isn't it?"

"Nah," Gorin responded with a smirk. "Unless ye plan on carryin me the last half o the way, we're gonna skip up at the station and hop a train back across the spaceport."

"Good," Chyka answered with a nod of wholehearted approval.

For a few minutes, the two advanced down the corridor in silence. Suddenly, the cool breeze turned into a virtual hurricane, accompanied by a distant, roaring rumble. The light in the distance shone brightly for a brief moment and then went out.

"Bloody hell!" Gorin snapped, turning back toward the subway station and the dim light that shone through the grated door.

"What? What was that?" Chyka asked as her companion grabbed her hand and pulled her back down the corridor.

"Dunno," Gorin replied as he pulled the little snow leopardess along as fast as his little legs could take him. "An I'm sure as hell not gonna stick around te find out!"

II

Almost an hour had passed since the very untimely incident had begun, and there was no sign of the water stopping. It rushed out through the openings in the metal grate door, across the platform and down onto the tracks. Beyond the door, the water was only about two feet deep. It's unpleasant, seaweed scent made it clear, however, that it wasn't something one wanted to come into contact with unless one genuinely couldn't help it.

"This sucks ass," Chyka muttered as she watched the water cascading off the platform edge from the relatively pleasant viewpoint of the nearest of the two mid-tracks platforms. The volume of water itself wasn't particularly concerning, at least so far as their immediate safety was concerned. The rail

tunnels had more than sufficient drainage capacity beneath the tracks. "So, what do we do?"

"Dunno," Gorin replied. "Coms won't connect down here, an we haven't seen a single postal train since this started. They've probably closed the tunnels until they can deal with whatever it is the water's comin from."

"Is there another way out?" Chyka asked.

"Well... yeah," Gorin responded with a lowered voice. "But that's a whole lot different than askin if there's another *safe* way out."

Chyka looked at the dual track tunnel that led northward out of the station. There were solid concrete walkways built into the tunnel walls on both sides, giving safe access to things like wiring and the inactive signal lights who's darkness made the little snow leopardess feel a bit extra uncomfortable. "What about that way?" she asked, pointing up the tracks. Surely they'd find some

escape stairway or ladder not too far up the tunnel. They were placed at regular intervals to allow train passengers to exit the system in an emergency. Barring that, they'd almost certainly run into at least one postal train stopped on the line. It seemed like the safest course of action. "We could just head up that way, right? Find a stairway out, or meet a train?"

Gorin shrugged his shoulders. "Ah suppose we could. But..."

"But what?" Chyka questioned. "Do you have a better idea?"

"Well... not really," Gorin replied.

"Then let's go," Chyka said, hopping down off the platform's north end, with her eye on the stairs that led up onto the walkway along the east side of the tunnel. Crossing the tracks was risky, even if they were almost sure the trains had been stopped, but climbing the concrete stairs up to the pitch black,

overhead 'promenade' level of the station seemed riskier.

"If ye insist, lass," Gorin responded with clear hesitation. "I jus... dunno what's up the rails there, ye know. So many nasties down here..."

"Considering that they run postal trains through here, it can't that dangerous, can it?" Chyka responded as she looked both ways down the tracks before darting across to the steps.

Gorin shrugged as he followed.

"You said this place is about six blocks east of the spaceport, right?" Chyka asked, trying to get her bearings, and maybe convince her companion that heading north along the tracks was a far better option than he seemed to think it was.

"Yeah, bout that," Gorin replied. "Give or take a block or two."

"So... that puts us about right south of the main line tracks coming out of Spaceport Station," Chyka noted as she started down the narrow walkway. Dim yellow lights illuminated the path every twenty-five meters or so, making it hard to see cracks and loose bits of concrete, but it was better than nothing. "If we're lucky, there's going to be a stairway up to those. Or maybe Southwest 45th Station, if we're extra-lucky. If we aren't, well, there's got to be an escape somewhere, or we'll just have to keep going. I wonder if these tracks lead to the Spaceport Postal Exchange? They probably do, right?"

"Well... if ye really think so," Gorin responded with a skeptical shrug. "Ah jus... I dunno. Seems awfully convenient with all that's happened te ye that all of a sudden we're trapped down here with only unguarded ways out."

Chyka looked over her shoulder at her concerned companion. "Do you really think any outsiders know what happened to me? And had enough time to cause... whatever?"

"Yeah, akchilly, I do," Gorin replied.

"Who?" Chyka questioned with considerable skepticism.

"That damned Society," Gorin replied. "Ye know. The one that wanted ye to show them all them key'vin'ta secrets? The one we chased off before they could figure out what happened to ye?"

Chyka hesitated and turned to face her companion. "Do you really think the people running one of Mashiva's biggest tourist draws would try something so stupid like that?"

Gorin nodded. "Yeah, ah do. Well, some o them at least. The crazies that wan'te reactivate Xinta temple. For some unknown reason. Ye know. The ones who go ye to open that little portal."

Chyka shook her head and turned back down the walkway. "If I were them, I wouldn't even think of trying. Unless they want to find out what a real

key'vin'ta priestesses opinion on the matter is. And I don't mean me."

"Whatever did happen te that little beastie?" Gorin inquired.

Chyka smiled as she mentally caressed the captive key'vin'ta mind that had so recently become part of her own. "We're... well. Let's just say that we're married now and leave it at that."

Gorin shook his head. "Ye dun need to say a word more, lass. Ah... ah jus... well..."

The pair fell into silence as they trudged north along the tracks. It was not long, however, before their path was interrupted by a much older looking, branching tunnel. Fashioned from a mix of gray stone and dark red brick, the arching tunnel was pitch black and so decrepit looking that it clearly predated the construction of the naval base subway by a considerable margin.

Chyka was puzzled by the ancient looking tunnel and its single, rusty track that poked out of the dust and dirt here and there. Setting the formerly secret military tunnels, the modern subway system was the first to have been built in South City, replacing the districts old elevated rail system about a century prior. This tunnel, with its single track, lack of concrete and electrical fittings, and the almost impossibly narrow walking path along its south side suggested that it was much, much older.

"Weird," Chyka muttered as she descended the short set of concrete steps that led down to track level so that they could cross and continue up the main tunnel to the north.

"Quite," Gorin agreed. "Hasn't been used in ages on those tracks. Gives me the willies jus looking at em."

"They're just tracks," Chyka replied with a soft chuckle.

"Nay, lass. They're not jus tracks," Gorin replied with a darkening tone in his voice. "I know the profile an fittins pretty well. Those there are colonial era rails, locally made. Back when Old Mashiva was jus a little town with an ore processin plant, a foundry, an a rail yard servicin the mines. Was'n anythin out these parts back then, cept the old temple an the tall grass. Not even a single road."

"So?" Chyka inquired as she climbed up onto the walkway beyond the old tunnel. "Industries use old stuff all the time to safe costs."

"Sure, but mine-grade rails?" Gorin inquired. "In a tunnel that looks like it was built a thousand years ago, an not jus a few hundred?"

Chyka shrugged. She knew a bit of history, and a bit more about the history of Mashiva, but not the

sort that got into such esoteric technical details as tunnel building and railroad track types.

"An that when they built Macharri, they left access open?" Gorin continued as the two continued along the walkway. "I dunno lass. It doesn't sit me right."

"Considering how secret Macharri was back in the day, maybe they built the first bits from materials that wouldn't arouse suspicion," Chyka replied. It was pure speculation, of course, but it seemed like a sensible idea. "No one would think someone was building a military base if they were using stone and brick, right? Then they could bring in the real materials like concrete in secret."

"Well... maybe," Gorin replied with considerable skepticism as the tunnel began to curve to the west. "Still... it's jus... strange."

A sharp, metallic clank somewhere down the tunnel brought both of the companions to an abrupt halt. This was followed by a dull, rough, scraping sound that lasted for a few seconds before fading back into silence.

"Yer ears are better than mine," Gorin whispered. "What was that?"

"I don't know," Chyka softly replied. The sounds were too sharp and distinct to have occurred anywhere but right in the tunnel itself, but the curve made it impossible to see what had caused them. "Sounded almost like a metal gate opening, maybe?"

"Aye," Gorin responded with a deep frown.

"Could be railroad workers, maybe?" Chyka thought aloud. "They'd send people down to see about the water, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe, but they'd be on a work train for a quick retreat if there was real trouble, wouldn't they?" Gorin asked. "An if they're walkin, they wouldn' be nearly so quiet either. Not with a belt o tools an such, for sure."

"Yeah," Chyka replied with a strange sense of existential dread looming up within her. "I guess."

"Whad'we do?" Gorin inquired.

Chyka pondered the feeling inside her. It wasn't coming from her own heart. Instead, it seemed as if that power who'd absorbed her into its all-consuming unity was trying to tell her to turn around. To go another way.

"We go back," Chyka said, grabbing her companion's hand and pulling him back toward the darkness of the strange tunnel. "The old tunnel. No one will think to look for us down there. And it should lead out of Macharri's comm interference zone. We can call for help."

"Yer barmy!" Gorin hissed as the little snow leopardess dragged him down onto the rail bed and then back up onto the horribly narrow walkway alongside the old tunnel.

"I am," Chyka agreed. "But something doesn't feel right about that noise, and we're both not the quickest on our feet. If we have to, we can use our biogel in full coat to mask us. You know it makes us invisible to most tech, right?"

"No it..." Goring started.

"It does, actually," Chyka replied. "At least, when its vital to survival. And right now, it might just be."

"Yer..." Gorin again started.

"Just trust me," Chyka replied as she willed her biogel substance to fully encase her head. "Now be quick about it!"

Gorin grunted with audible disapproval, but did as she asked all the same.

As the biogel closed over Chyka's head, she could see the world around herself bright as day, and in all directions, all at once. Her other senses were heightened to incredible levels, and she could just about hear the sounds of more than one person trying to move as quietly as they could back in the main tunnel.

"Do you hear them now?" Chyka asked, her words communicated to her companion without sound, directly from one mass of body-coating biogel to the other. "Someone really is trying to sneak up on us."

"Aye," Gorin replied. "But..."

"No buts!" Chyka replied. "Let's go!"

III

"How long *is* this damned thing?" Gorin grumped as he followed his much braver companion down the ancient rail tunnel. There were no features by which to mark distance and, so far, there had been no apparent escape routes despite the tunnel's apparent length. Nor was it possible for either of them to see where the end might be, despite their vastly biogel-enhanced vision. "We keep walkin, we're gonna fall straight outa the cliff at some point. Back and forth and back and forth. What direction are we even going, anyways?"

"Hells if I can tell," Chyka replied as the tunnel curved back to the left just a bit. So far as she could tell, its northeasterly path swayed back and forth from right to left seemingly at random,

though never so much to alter its overall course. At least, that's what she thought. Whether or not that was the case, only time would tell. "Gotta end someplace though, doesn't it? Do we have a comm signal yet?"

"Nay," Gorin replied, pulling his comm from the biogel around his waist for the fifth time. "Makes me wonder if yer right about this bein an early access for Macharri. Jus as shielded as the rest o the place."

Just as the little biogel snow leopardess was about to reply, she could just see what appeared to be an exit from the current tunnel into a much larger space beyond. It was just as dark as the rest of the passage, and even with her biogel enhanced vision, she couldn't really tell what lay ahead. Perhaps it was another abandoned station. Or perhaps it contained the gear used to access the tunnel, and Macharri, back when it was being built.

A strange, almost familiar feeling made Chyka wonder if something very different lay in the cavernous space ahead. Something old. Ancient, even. Something she'd encountered before. And something she wasn't too keen on encountering again, let alone so soon.

"I dun like the feel o' this place," Gorin remarked as they approached the opening.

"Neither do I," Chyka replied as dark shapes began to emerge from the blackness. A rusty bumper at the end of the track, not far beyond the tunnel opening. An ornately tiled floor, cast in some polished black material, with threads and swirls of dark purple snaking about and leading toward, then up a very broad flight of low stairs. "Black and purple. Like biogel and..."

The little snow leopardess came to an abrupt halt beside the old rail bumper. Beyond the stairs, perhaps twenty meters past, loomed a giant, open ring. A ring that sprouted many slender threads

which all curved upward and vanished into the ceiling high above.

The longer Chyka looked at the giant ring, the more strangely connected to it she felt. An image of what it was began to form in her mind. It wasn't a picture of what it looked like, however. It was a vision of its geometry in more spatial dimensions than she had any particular right to be able to perceive. It was a dark geometry, passive in its nature, and yet something about it suggested that the right kind of exotic spark could bring it to life.

"What'n the bloody blazes is *that*?" Gorin gasped as his companion pondered its nature.

For a few very long moments, the inquiry was met with silence. The impossible geometry grew before Chyka's astonished mind's eye. Upward and outward into structures that seemed far more tangibly familiar to her than all the vague feelings and impressions that she'd experienced so far. A giant, squat obelisk, surrounded by eight shorter,

more slender ones, and all atop a massive rocky outcrop, upon an equally massive stone plinth.

"Oh... goddess above!" Chyka sputtered in disbelief as she realized exactly where they were, and what the geometries she was seeing in her mind really meant.

Gorin turned to look at the biogel snow leopardess. "What? What is it?"

"That... that's the portal. The missing portal of Xinta Temple," Chyka replied as she took a few steps forward. "No one knew that it even had a portal like this, even though there were hints that there should've been one. And here it is. No wonder the Society was so keen on seeing how to activate the smaller one! With this they could..."

The sound of a light, liquid 'pock' came from the rusty bumper.

"Look out!" Gorin snapped, running off to the right side, away from the tunnel opening.

Chyka turned just in time to see the tiny globule of obsidian biogel flying straight at her chest. In an instant, it had splattered onto, and merged with her biogel coating. A sudden, smooth and silky sensation of solidification spread out from the impact. She hardly had time to think, let alone react, before her stiffened, virtually inanimate body began to subtly change shape and fall to the floor.

The new gummy bounced and rolled a few times before falling still beside the rusty rail bumper. A pair of darkly clad figures stepped forward, looking from side to side in search for its companion.

"Oh, is *that* how you want to play this game?" the gummiform geldancer asked aloud, shaking off her stiffness as she stood to face her assailants. Power welled up within her as she let her distant

mistress guide her actions. She began to float off the ground as the dark figures splattered her with dozens of completely powerless biogel pellets. "Fine. *You* want to try and use *my* weapons against *me*? Let's see how you feel about *me* using *your* weapons against *you*!"

With not so much a mental effort as a slight, fleeting whim, Chyka summoned her staff. The dark figures immediately began to retreat as its bright, purple glow revealed enough of their faces for her to see that they were members of the Society who'd helped her set up the little experimental portal inside Key'von Rock. *You fuckers!* She thought as she projected her power toward the tunnel opening. A wash of shimmering purple light filled the space, and sealed the tunnel with a wall of pulsating purple force.

One of the assailants now pulled out a proper weapon. He aimed the plasma pistol at the floating geldancer-priestess.

Chyka summoned a liquid blob of purple slime and cast it at the pistol wielding thug. He tried to duck, and in the process managed little more than to shoot the crossbar off the rail bumper before the slime struck him in the shoulder. In an instant, it had spread through his body. In another, his body collapsed into a puddle of glowing slime on the floor.

"Bitch!" the other thug shouted as he ran toward one side of the cavernous chamber, ducking and dodging on his way to someplace very specific in the darkness.

Damned fool, Chyka thought as she realized that he had inadvertently pointed the way to some access to the world above, most likely through the temple itself. She summoned another blob of slime, and sent it flying into his back. A moment later, he too was just a puddle of glowing slime on the glossy-tiled floor.

The geldancer descended to the floor, and sent her staff back to wherever its resting place happened to be at the moment. One brief mental effort later, and her form rapidly shifted back to her natural, petite snow leopardess shape, head still encased in a biogel 'helmet'. She reached down and picked up the thug's discarded pistol, as well as a bright flashlight that he'd been carrying on his belt. She switched it on and let her helmet liquefy, flowing back into her biogel suit.

"I thought you said..." Gorin snapped as his helmet melted away.

"I didn't think they'd have natural dark-vision," Chyka replied with a shrug. "It doesn't matter. There wasn't anything they could do to hurt me. Or you, for that matter. But I don't think they quite understood that."

"Bloody hell," Gorin huffed, looking at the puddles of purple slime. Their luminescence was fading quickly. "Well. What now?"

Chyka looked toward the place where one of the thugs had been running. "There's an exit somewhere over there," she said, pointing toward the darkness beside the stairs. "Up to the temple, I think."

"Are ye barmy, lass?" Gorin questioned. "Oh, who the hell am I kiddin? Yer barmy as a drunken teatoat'ler!"

Chyka rolled her eyes. "Listen! We need to get to the bottom of this before the Society has too much time to try and fuck around with us, or Gelitech, or who knows what else!" she declared. "There's only one way to do that, and that's up into the temple to see just how deep the Society is into trying to reactivate this portal."

"That's crazy! They'll..." Gorin sputtered.

"They'll have made sure we won't be going back the way we came too," Chyka said with a firm

look at her recalcitrant companion as she took his shoulder and pulled him toward that place in the darkness. "And we have one advantage in the temple that we won't have in the tunnel."

"What's that?" Gorin questioned.

"We have two key'vin'ta priestesses," Chyka responded as she spied the arched opening hidden beyond the stairs. "And that means that the temple's powers, whatever they might be, are ours to command."

TO BE CONTINUED...