

GELITECH

SEASON 2 - EPISODE 2

CRISIS

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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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 Brightstone Mine ninety-four hundred level! All hands alert! Repeat, all hands alert!”

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 Nyena had somehow managed to liquefy her in the biogel filled tub. She began to ponder her existence.

Was Nyena right? Was she really just a machine? A combination of various settings and variables whose 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’myne 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 mitannti 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 till 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’mayne 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’mayne 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.”

“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,” Nenya 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 an 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!”

“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 has happened. 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!”

TO BE CONTINUED...