

GELITECH

EPISODE 13

XINTA

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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THE UNDERWORLD

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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I

“Are ye sure this’s a good idea?” Gorin whispered as he followed Chyka up the long, dark flight of spiral stairs. “Cuz I dunna think...”

Chyka sighed. “No, it’s not. But we have to take advantage of the situation while we can.”

Exactly what Chyka hoped to take advantage of so deep the bowels of the ancient key’vin’ta temple wasn’t quite clear to her, let alone to her skeptical companion. As much as she wanted to just escape the place, something deep inside of her wanted to explore the maze of passages that seemed to extend from every stairway landing, and had been kept well hidden from public view for so long. Who knew what other amazing secrets were just waiting to be discovered? Secrets that were apparently in the control of a dangerous cult. A dangerous cult that was now actively hunting for her, and was sure to take good advantage of any

pause she might take on her way to the surface, and to freedom.

“How much further, ye think?” Gorin huffed. “These’r an awful lot of stairs... dun’no how much more ah can take.”

“We’ve gotta be up in the rock by now,” Chyka replied as she sniffed the air. It was getting less dusty the further they went, and was even starting to smell a bit fresh, albeit also a bit damp. “It’s like twenty stories from street level to the top, right?”

“Aye,” Gorin panted. “Jus twenty little stories...”

“Can you get comm reception yet?” Chyka asked as they came upon yet another landing. It was a hard thing to insist her companion push himself so hard, but what other choice did they have?

“Eh... gettin a disruption message now,” Gorin replied. “Might mean we’re getting’ outta Macharri’s comm shielding, but I dunno. Seems like we ought’a be clear by now. Maybe just a bit further? The sooner we can call in the cavalry, the better.”

Chyka peered down the arched passage that led from the stairway toward places unknown. To her surprise, the passage went on for about fifty meters before abruptly ending in a set of upward leading stairs. A dull gray light illuminated the steps, and the cool dampness that filled the corridor seemed particularly fresh. “Hmm...”

It seemed almost too convenient. Was it really possible that there was some exit from the Xinta underworld that no one had discovered before? Or had the cult discovered it, and cleared it as they took possession of the tunnels and their secrets? Or was it trap laid to snare the unwary interloper, by the ancient key'vin'ta or their cultist theological descendants?

Chyka knew the answer. Or, rather, she had the ability to know the answer. All she had to do was pull the memories of that other part of her to come to the forefront. The memories of Ki'su. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. She couldn't bring herself to force that part of her to divulge its secrets.

The more the little snow leopardess thought about the absolute control she now had over the other souls who resided in her body, the more guilt she felt about it. It didn't matter that they were all 'married', or that they all 'understood', or that they all 'seemed to enjoy it'. They were still people. Conscious, fully aware people who were now little more than slaves to the will of their mistress. Slaves that their mistress had never really wanted. She hadn't been given the choice... but she could still choose not to abuse their minds by treating them as her own.

Still, Chyka needed to know what Ki'su knew about Xinta Temple. She didn't dare summon the key'vin'ta priestess, however. Not with Gorin present. It wasn't so much that he might know for sure that the priestess had become part of Chyka. It was what the key'vin'ta might reveal without knowing where that information might wind up. It was bad enough that he'd seen the portal. It might be worse if she revealed something about how to activate it.

It wasn't that Chyka wanted to keep secrets. It was that she knew that the revelation of those secrets might have very unintended consequences.

Consequences that might spiral out of control in the wrong hands.

Chyka took a hesitant step down the passage. If they continued upward they would almost certainly find themselves in the temple's public areas. There, they'd be in relative safety among the tourists who filled the places at all hours of day and night. On the other hand, unless her nose was deceiving her, there was another, very convenient exit right were they were. But... was it really an exit? And if it was, was it guarded?

“Stay here,” Chyka instructed as she decided to examine the exit for herself. “Just inside the passage. I'll go have a quick look to see if its safe.”

Gorin sighed. “Aight. If ye insist.”

Chyka nodded and darted down the passage with little regard to the potential dangers. A new course forward was forming in her mind. A sly, mischievous course of action that could only be coming from that part of her that was Ki'su. If she could get Gorin to safety, she could summon Ki'su and they could explore the temple tunnels

together. Who knew what she might be able to lead her mistress to? Perhaps they could even...

The little snow leopardess frowned. Even if it was possible, it was hardly sensible, even to contemplate. But it seemed almost, barely logical. If they could take control of Xinta, then the cult would be stripped of any way to fulfill their undoubtedly dark intentions. And if they could reactivate all its esoteric mechanisms, they could satisfy all those tourists who came looking for a chance to experience purple slime for themselves. And they could get enough, they could even reactivate the portal between worlds... a portal whose possibilities seemed almost endless.

Chyka stopped at the beginning of the steps and looked up at the boulder that largely concealed Mashiva's cloudy skies. Another grand storm was in the offing, and it was already beginning to sprinkle. Getting caught out in the open was far from a welcome prospect, but if push came to shove, they'd be perfectly safe in their biogel suits. Unless, of course, the cult had been so stupid as to leave an obvious escape route unprotected.

The little snow leopardess slowly climbed up the shallow steps. They'd clearly been carved out of the living rock with the diminutive key'vin'ta in mind, and were well worn enough to suggest that they'd seen quite frequent use. But by whom?

Chyka proceeded with as much care as she could muster with the potential end of her peril seemingly so close at hand. The steps went up to a rocky landing, hidden beneath an overhang, and behind a large boulder. She contemplated her biogel enhanced senses, and found nothing amiss.

Come on! the little snow leopardess silently called out through the biogel.

Chyka could hear her companion shuffling up the stairs behind her. Clearly he hadn't been content to wait by the opening from the stairs into the passage. It was just as well. The quicker they found their way off the rock and into the city, the better.

The little snow leopardess peered around the edge of the boulder. Much to her relief, she could see the lights of South City beyond the brush and trees that kept the ledge well hidden from casual

observers. Much less to her relief was the fact that they were twenty meters up on the side of Xinta Temple's massive natural granite plinth, with no obvious way down.

"Comm?" Chyka inquired, looking over her shoulder at her extremely agitated looking companion. "What's wrong?"

"I heard em' commin, so I got the hell outta there," Gorin replied. "I dunno how they didn' see me... but they just ran past. But I'll bet they'll be back... we dunna have much time. How'd'we get down from here?"

Chyka shrugged as she moved closer to the edge. To her considerable surprise, there was indeed a steep, stone stairway of the sort that was obvious from the top, yet virtually invisible from the bottom. It led down into the wooded park that separated the south of Xinta Temple from the streets of South City. Her eyes scanned the trees. There was no movement. Given the approaching storm, that was hardly a surprise.

Then something caught Chyka's eye. A tiger-striped tabarri was walking through the

underbrush. Four legged, sapient felines who had split from the fey'li species a hundred million years before, they were rare beyond the fey'li homeworlds, and those who could be found in places like Mashiva were almost always individually recognizable to those who'd met them before.

“Katcha!” Chyka called as loudly as she dared. The tabarri was actually an employee at Mashiva Mariner’s University, providing the sort of subtly covert security against trouble with unwelcome interlopers that only a seemingly wild animal lurking about the campus could. “Katcha! Come here! Quickly!”

The tabarri looked up with an expression of confusion on her face.

“Can you get down there without killing yourself?” Chyka asked, looking at her companion while the puzzled tabarri approached the base of the cliff.

“Aye,” Gorin replied. “Let’s go.”

Chyka shook her head. “No. I’m going to stay behind and keep them occupied if they try to follow you,” she lied. “If you can’t get comms down there, Katcha is MMU covert security. She’ll help you get someplace safe.”

“Uh...” Gorin responded with visible consternation.

“Just go!” Chyka ordered. “Quickly! Before they come back! And before it gets too wet to be safe!”

“Aight!” Gorin huffed as he stepped down onto the narrow, cliffside staircase.

“Keep him safe!” Chyka called out to the stiff quite confused looking tabarri. “Please!”

The tabarri nodded.

Chyka turned back toward the staircase and waited until Gorin was no longer able to see into the well hidden ledge. She closed her eyes and concentrated. A little drop of glistening black biogel parted from her fingertip and floated to a place on the ground near the staircase. The

moment it hit the ground, it began to grow into a vaguely humanoid shape.

For a few moments, that shape wavered and wobbled as if it were liquid compelled to stand upright by some unseen force. Then the faceless form began to solidify and become clearer. The features of the diminutive key'vin'ta priestess became more obvious, all coated as they were in a layer of glossy blackness. The faceless 'helmet' melted away, and revealed her shiny gray head.

Ki'su sighed in a deeply pleased fashion. "Ma'to'ri'ah!" she cooed with a sly grin. "I was beginning to think you considered me something less than a mi'ah. But... well... I see you desire the sort of mischief that I denied you back when... well. Let us not talk about that, shall we?"

Chyka smirked.

"Ki'tas'turi!" Ki'su chuckled. "Now... you want to know how to take the temple for your own, do you?"

Chyka's smirk turned to a frown. "I don't want to control it. I just need to know how... if I eventually have to."

"Pa'ka'ti!" Ki'su laughed. "You can't fool me! I'm a part of your mind now, after all! But I will play your game, because it amuses me. So, let us go. There is much to see... and little time in which to see it."

II

“Ti’ah’mu,” Ki’su whispered as she led Chyka into a vast cylindrical chamber. “In here. This is the place.”

The little snow leopardess gazed around the vast room in utter amazement. It was impressive on a scale that made the public areas of Xinta pale in comparison. “Goddess! This is... incredible!”

High above Chyka’s head was a glossy black disk, identical to those embedded in the main temple floor, and in the eight levels directly beneath. Legend had it that they were lenses that could focus energy to some unknown end. It was a useful tale to tell tourists, and carried with it a taste of peril-play for those who dared to settle themselves onto a lens surface. According to the story, anyone sitting on a lens when the whole this was activated would be sucked into one of the

purple slime capsules embedded in the walls of the spaces between the lenses, and eventually sucked into the level of the Nine Heavenly Hells associated with the lens through which they'd passed.

Chyka approached the altar and peered down into the large hole in its center. It reminded her a bit of the hole beneath Dari Temple, and she bit her lip as she looked down into the depths beneath. Rather than a mass of radioactive lava, she found herself gazing at a barely glowing band of purple slime, embedded in the outer surface of the giant portal ring below. She then looked back up to the shimmering black disc in the roof. Assuming she was looking at the bottom of the ninth lens, it was looking very much as if the legend was true, and the lenses were intended to focus power to some end. That end being the giant portal below.

Chyka looked around the chamber, at the faceless, glossy black statues that held in their hands the glowing purple orbs that served as the chamber's only sources of illumination. She couldn't help but notice the resemblance to the biogel statues who's glowing orbs illuminated various places around Anwae Arena and the Gelitech Gelarium. One

would have been hard pressed to tell one from the other from any distance, and even close up only the overall shape would give away their differing origins.

Ki'su gestured toward the altar. "E'ke'vi. It is there that the naked priestess must float, taking permanent possession of the temple and all its powers, until passage to the Hells parts her from them."

Chyka nodded. "I see. And... what sort of ritual does that involve?"

Ki'su laughed. "Dar'vi'sha! Ritual? There is no ritual. There is only the knowledge of how to control the slime, and the will to take what is free for the taking."

"Surely there's a catch," Chyka responded with a deep frown. "What's the catch? What's the price for taking the temple?"

"Fa'mu'ri'ta," Ki'su replied. "There is none. Well... there is one, if you consider it a price, that is."

“And what’s that?” Chyka questioned. “What’s the price?”

“Chi’vor’ah,” Ki’su answered. “Once you take it, you can never, ever be rid of it. It will be yours, until you go to the Hells. No matter what happens to you. You will always be the High Priestess of the temple. Until you go to the Hells. But...”

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

“Du’ri’na,” Ki’su chuckled. “This blackness. This biogel. Unless you send yourself to the Hells of your own accord, you will never go, will you? To secure the temple, all our mistress Omega has to do is turn us into a solid block and store us away, doesn’t she? Perhaps that is her plan, hmm?”

“Point taken,” Chyka replied, her desire to take control of the temple waning as the realization that now matter how powerful she might feel at any moment, she was still just a pawn in the Unity’s all-consuming game. But... what if Omega was just trying to protect the world by taking away anyone else’s ability to control Xinta? A containment of power that would last for the

remainder of mortal eternity. Would refusing to take control of the temple be a refusal to sacrifice herself for the noble cause of permanently containing its perils?

“Mo’kai,” Ki’su purred. “So... what are you waiting for? Let us fulfill her plan and end the threat of this temple’s powers forever. It is the right thing to do, isn’t it? Hmm? Yes? Of course it is! So what are you waiting for?”

Chyka looked over her shoulder at the grinning key’vin’ta. “Do you really think Omega is going to turn us into a solid block of biogel and bury us?”

“Ka’ro’vah,” Ki’su laughed. “Well... I don’t know, do I? But it *is* the only way, isn’t it? So why delay? Why take the risk that the heathens who occupy this place might take control themselves?”

Chyka shook her head. “You... gah! I know you’re just trying to get into my head and make me take the temple. But...”

A sharp sound caught Chyka's ear. Someone was coming. Someone wearing boots, and carrying metallic objects. Was it help? Or had the cultists finally tracked down the intruders in their midst?

“Di’ra’ka,” Ki’su said, not bothering to be quiet about it. “Well? It’s now or never. Do it, and save the world from Xinta... or let the heathens force you to give up our secrets, and take control for themselves.”

Chyka looked back at the doorway. Whoever the cultists might be, they would be just as helpless as those she’d taken down in the portal chamber earlier that day. Unless, of course, Omega decided to sacrifice her to prevent them from using some unknown method to capture her...

“Cho’vai?” Ki’su questioned. “Well?”

Chyka felt as if she had no choice, no matter what her all-knowing, all-controlling biogel mistress might have planned for her. She summoned her staff, and climbed up onto the altar.

“Bitch!” a cultist thug yelled as half a dozen charged into the chamber. “Stop right there!”

“I’m gonna fuck your jelly-ass!” another barked.

Chyka jumped up into the air over the hole in the altar as little black biogel globules flew all around her. Clearly they hadn’t discovered the secret of her nature yet, and that meant that she could pretty much react however she pleased. Her first inclination was to send them the way of the two she’d already dealt with, but that seemed risky. What if those pellets weren’t the same? What if they’d found a way to permanently glisten even a geldancer? Was that even possible? She didn’t know, and she had no intention of finding out.

The little snow leopardess could feel the power begin to cascade over her body. It came down from above, through the trans-dimensional lenses, wrapping around her and flowing through her on their way down into the portal below. In an instant, she was aware of all the purple slime in the temple. Every mass. Every channel. Every thread. And everyone who happened to be in its proximity.

Chyka gasped as a sudden, terrible awareness came upon her. More than a dozen souls were

touching the lenses in some way. There was nothing she could do to prevent their rapid passage through, and their dissolution into sapient threads of luminous energy, swirling about before being trapped in the capsules within the chambers between the lenses.

Nor was there anything that the little snow leopardess could do about the tourists in the subterranean portions of the soul capacitor obelisks. The soul capacitors flared to life, and their tendrils reached out to snare anyone within reach. Dozens of astonished tourists were absorbed, and their energies focused into the purple slime capstones of each obelisk.

As the rains began in earnest, what few tourists still dared to wander the temple grounds were astonished to see beams of purple energy sizzle from each obelisk, and into the open portals in the sides of the main temple obelisk. Those inside, who'd just witnessed some of their fellows passing through the upper black glass lens now found themselves looking up as the massive sphere of purple slime suspended above began to glow brightly as the capacitor energy brought it to life.

A searing beam of energy shot down from the sphere, through the lenses, and then through the little snow leopardess below. Visions of the Nine Heavenly Hells flooded her mind. Visions of beautiful people living an afterlife of physical pleasure among the heavenly demons and demonic angels with whom they lived in harmony. Visions of equally beautiful people serving as willing objects of pleasure for those who made the Hells their home. And visions of yet more beautiful people being physically corrupted into disgustingly enticing forms so pleasingly vile that they warped her sense of what beauty actually was.

Below, the portal came to life. Its black glass surface began to ripple and swirl. A passage to another world opened. Though what might come through... that no one could possibly know.

The visions came hard and fast upon the now quite helpless Chyka. Bodies and body parts made one with the very substance of the Hells. A myriad of species the likes of whom she'd never before seen, all mixed in with those so very familiar to her eyes. And then...

Ky'tin! Chyka gasped in thought as she somehow managed to recognize one of several dozen otherwise disembodied posteriors that was held aloft on a rumply tentacle and offered to a deeply unpleasant looking creature who happened to be passing nearby. The creature took hold of the magnificent mitanni rump and began to have its way with it. *No... this can't... it can't be real! It's just my imagination! It's just the things in the Biogel Hells theme park that my brain is trying to make seem real. Gotta snap out of it! Gotta snap out of it! Gotta... gotta...*

Chyka woke up from her terrifying reverie. She was kneeling on the altar, facing a massive, four story high, glowing purple slime artwork that depicted many of the hellish fates that had been turned into biogel art in the Biogel Hells tourist attraction. For a moment she stared in confused wonder at the sight, and found herself wondering if she hadn't been the first biogel coated interloper to discover the altar-chamber.

“Di'a'pa,” Ki'su chuckled. “See? That was easy, wasn't it?”

“Easy?!?” Chyka spat, suddenly remembering that she’d cause so many tourists to be taken by the temple and its purple slime. “Do you have any idea... what I just... what happened to those...”

“No’sha’ri,” Ki’su cooed. “They are just the first of many, aren’t they? But we have other matters to attend to.”

“Other matters?” Chyka hissed as she scooted off the altar and took a few deep breaths in an effort to still her pounding heart, and try in vain to soothe away the horror of what she had done to all those completely unsuspecting tourists. “What other matter can be so important...”

“Ta’va!” Ki’su replied with a stern expression on her face. “Why do you worry about the temple’s catch? They were all told that the temple could come to life at any moment. That they could be taken unaware. They knew, and they accepted. Willingly. Just like those who enter the Gelarium for a close encounter with our beautiful blackness, hmm?”

“It’s not the same,” Chyka snapped. “It’s not the same. I... I saw...”

“Di’ro’shu’na’mi,” Ki’su responded with a sharp glare. “You saw what the darkest places in your mind wanted to see, because you weren’t ready. But that isn’t important now. The heathens have all run down to the portal, and they’ve made quite a bit of noise. Who knows what damage they might be doing, just to spite us!”

“Fine, fine,” Chyka responded as she headed for the chamber door, completely unconvinced that she hadn’t actually seen into the Nine Hells, or that all those tourists had really accepted the chance that they might be sent there on a one-way ticket. But still, if the danger of such things happening in the future was to be prevented, there was only one way to do that, and that was to finish off the cult who’d tried to take control of the temple for themselves. And that meant going down and dealing with their threat to the portal. “Fine. Let’s go.”

III

Chyka had gone through a myriad of possibilities on her way down the spiral staircase. Of all the things she expected to find in the portal chamber, this was just about the last on the list.

The tank sat squarely in the middle of the ornately tiled floor leading up to the portal itself. Its mottled brown and green camouflage was pocked with little black splatters, and in some spots burned by more lethal discharges. A dozen bodies, most charred and a few completely rent asunder, lay all around the lower floor, and the old rail tunnel exit. A dozen more were laid out on the steps leading up toward the tank. The horrid stench was almost overwhelming.

Clearly the cultists had been completely unprepared to face much in the way of opposition, let alone the sort of opposition that came in the

form of a heavily armed armored vehicle. And that didn't even count the heavily armed soldiers that had come along with it. Of these there was little evidence, save the sounds of their shifting, and the sense of being watched that filled the little snow leopardess with deep apprehension.

“Identify yourself!” came the booming voice of an Imperial Marine who was just peering around the front corner of the tank. “NOW!”

“Chyka Riyalli!” the little snow leopardess replied. “I'm with Gelitech!”

“Who the fuck is the little one?” the voice again called out. “Spit it out!”

“Ki'su Riyalli,” Chyka responded with a frown at the attitude in the marine's voice. “Also Gelitech.

“I didn't ask you!” the marine shouted. “Little bitch! Spit it out! NOW!”

If there was anything her grandmother had taught her about life in the world beyond Dari, it was never to put up with the kind of disrespect. Chyka was about to respond with a very poorly timed

string of soldierly invective when the sound of a sharp slap came from behind the tank.

“That’s the General’s granddaughter, you idiot!” came a second, much more womanly voice. “Come out you two. Slowly!”

Chyka slowly stepped over one of the dead cultists and into the open. She gestured for Ki’su to follow. The carnage that was now spread out all around her was so intensely real that it made her visions of the Hells and the fate of all those innocent tourists pale in comparison. For some reason, she’d never thought of the cultists as posing the sort of mortal danger that required marines to deal with, let alone the sort of elite marines that one might expect to journey through an alien portal on a moment’s notice.

“Sorry about the jackass, but we’ve had quite the afternoon here, as you can see,” the tigress said, stepping out to greet the approaching women. “What in Goddess’ name are you two doing in a sty-hole like this? Do you have any idea what those ass-wipes were trying to do here?”

“No,” Chyka replied to the tall, athletic Major, just as the portal made a sticky, liquid sound that filled the vast cavern. More marines charged through, several in power armor, and a few looking less like marines than they did scientists. “Well... I *do* know that they wanted to use me to find a way to take control of Xinta and activate the portal. But that’s about it.”

The Major shook her head. “Oh, it’s far worse than that. But... that’s not for me to discuss with you. If you want to know more...

Again, the portal made its squishy noises and several more marines stepped through.

“Grandma!” Chyka called out in astonishment as she immediately recognized her biogel clad grandmother. “I mean... uh...”

General Takka Riyalli smiled and beckoned her granddaughter toward the portal. “It’s been too long a time, hasn’t it?”

“Wha... how... I thought...” Chyka stammered in disbelief.

“You thought I was still recovering from the beating I took from our wonderful former neighbors at Dari, did you?” General Riyalli replied with a smirk. “Well... not so much that I couldn’t return a favor. After all... it’s been my job to track all this Goddess forsaken mess for quite a while now. And now this... well. I was expecting it to land square on our doorstep, but this... this is something else entirely, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” Chyka replied softly as the whole weight of the day’s events again seemed to press down on her very soul.

“It’s not your fault. None of it,” the General replied, reaching out to caress her granddaughter’s shoulders. “Nor is it your... ‘friend’s’ here either. Not even the Society. No. This has been in the offing since Mashiva was just a little shithole of a town, and no one gave a rat’s ass about the key’vin’ta, or purple slime except how they could profit off it.”

“I don’t...” Chyka replied.

“Neither do I, really,” General Riyalli answered. “But all the evidence points to a very malicious,

manipulative force that's been acting over at least the last millennia in order to bring about a mass extinction event so devastating that it might well destroy all life, everywhere, were it allowed to take place. Many methods have been attempted, from tearing space itself apart, to weapons that can trigger targeted gamma ray bursts, to crafting life forms whose properties render it pleasurable all consuming to anyone who comes into physical contact with it. And yes... you know exactly what I mean."

"That's..." Chyka sputtered.

"Insane, I know," General Riyalli replied. "Both of our bodies surrounded by a living substance intended to consume every living thing, everywhere in the universe. To make everything shiny blackness, and leave in its wake a silent world whose 'dead' are left captive in inanimate living vessels, until the very substance of reality itself falls apart. Well... until that plot was discovered during the Omega Incident, that is. Our biogel has been 'fixed', insofar as it doesn't compel us to spread it, and use it to transform the unwilling along with the willing."

General Riyalli watched as a new group of marines slowly approached through the old subway tunnel. “And that is what lead to this fucking mess. Without biogel to consume all life, the manipulator changed tactics yet again. Apparently, the objective was to find a way to reproduce the key’vin’ta extinction, but on a much larger scale.”

Chyka looked down at her companion and wondered if anyone else in the room knew what she was. The little key’vin’ta seemed quite threatened by the soldiers. No doubt she’d never encountered such a firm expression of governmental authority that she didn’t have some degree of control over before. Or perhaps their gawking was just getting to her. Or maybe it was a bit of both.

“To make as short a story as possible of it,” the General continued, “Dr. Mika was manipulated into taking all of the risks, and potential blame, in retrieving your friend’s staff. When it turned out to have ideas of its own with respects to you, our former neighbors were pushed to try and contain me with a deliberately engineered problem in Dari. No doubt they rightly suspected that the

moment I became aware of your control over the staff, that I'd take you here to secure the temple against future threats. When that tactic failed, they manipulated the Society into promoting the experiment with the small portal inside Key'von rock. This time, they had a backup plan for the initial failure to account for your friend and her own plans, which led to their attempt to catch you in Macharri station."

Chyka nodded.

"Of course, we were already in the process of intervening, and managed to throw off their timing," the General went on. "As a result, they weren't ready to catch you in the station, and your escape path was secured using covert means. But we didn't expect you to duck straight back inside and try to take matters into your own hands. I assume that was your friend's doing?"

Ki'su grimaced up at the General.

"Hey," Chyka scolded. "She's my grandmother!"

General Riyalli laughed. "She's a spicy one, isn't she? Well, you did what I was going to have you

do once the local troops had arrived to secure the place. Now Xinta's more or less permanently no more dangerous than a darkly kinky tourist attraction. Shame a big storm's brewing. I imagine there'd be quite the crowd to watch otherwise. Everyone trying to be among the first to try out the ancient perils and all."

Chyka frowned. "All those people..."

"They knew what the risks were, wandering around in a place like Xinta," General Riyalli replied. "It's in an assumed consent zone, after all. No different than poking into a rowa hive. Really."

"That's easy for you to say," Chyka replied, shaking her head.

"I suppose it is," the General replied soothingly. "But... well. I suppose we can talk about it more some other time. For now, I need to secure the temple, and brief the honest members of the Society about what's taken place. I think the best place for you to be is back at Gelitech. We've brought a train up to the tunnel, and it'll take you to the Gelitech postal siding. It's not as covert as

taking the long walk from Macharri, but its going to be one hell of a lot safer.”

“Okay,” Chyka replied with a shrug. “But... I... can I ask you something?”

General Riyalli nodded.

“Where did you come from?” Chyka asked. “How did you know where this portal led, so you could be on the other end, waiting for it to open?”

General Riyalli shook her head. “Some secrets are best kept that way,” she replied with a gesture toward the subway tunnel. “And now, I think it’s best we part ways for the time being. I’ll talk to you again soon.”

“Okay,” Chyka replied, turning away from the portal and her grandmother with very mixed feelings. She’d already been feeling like a pawn in other people’s games. Was she just a pawn in her grandmother’s game now too?

The little snow leopardess turned to her key’vin’ta companion. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Ti’ah’vu,” Ki’su replied with a final sneer at the marines who were still gawking at her. “Let’s.”

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TO BE CONTINUED...