

GELITECH

- SIDES -

EPISODE 8

ALL WRAPPED UP

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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ALL WRAPPED UP

Vai hesitated. It was only natural, of course. She had no idea what perils might be concealed within the maze-like ancient tomb and its collection of eye-catching treasures. Touch the wrong thing, or select the wrong tool to solve one of the puzzles, and who knew what very personal, very physical, and, indeed, very intimate sort of fate might befall her? But if she could make it through unscathed, well...

Come on, girl, the pale azure ashiri silently soothed her fluttery nerves. You can do this. Just a little bit further. You're so close you can almost taste it!

Vai's long, sensitive elf-ears twitched as a distant, scraping sound echoed its way through the dark, sandstone tunnels and galleries. It was just one of many such spine tingling sounds that she'd heard on her way toward the end of the tomb's current

level. Most of the noises had just been distorted echoes of her own movements and actions. Other sounds, however, gave her pause. Brief, distant grindings. Scratches. Clicks. And even a dull, deeply unpleasant sounding thump.

There was no way to know if the sounds represented some peril that she'd yet to discover, or if they'd been deliberately introduced as part of the game, to up the ante and excite the audience by making her more nervous and more likely to make some fateful mistake. Whichever might be the case, they were certainly having the effect of making her feel far less certain about each choice she made as she moved deeper and deeper into the tunnels. Who knew how many treasures she'd passed up, just for fear that they might trigger some unseen trap?

Vai bit her lip and began to wonder just how much potential treasure she'd left behind as a result of her excessive cautiousness. Her leather backpack was barely a quarter full, even though she was presumably nearing the end of the tomb's third level. Almost half of what she'd accumulated weren't so much treasures as they were tools, many of which she dared not leave behind for fear

that they might be needed later on, in the tomb's deeper levels. If, that is, she chose to delve into them.

Whether or not she was going to choose to advance to the next level, or get out with what little treasure she'd accumulated so far, was a decision that was ever-present at the back of Vai's mind. There were five increasingly perilous levels in all, and the current level was already testing the limits of her ability to observe and deduce the nature of the traps, as well as her ability to get away from the increasingly agile monsters who liked to lurk in the least easily escaped side tunnels and dead ends. And she hadn't even found the tomb's final chamber yet. Who knew what was waiting there, ready to snatch her up the very moment she made even the slightest of mistakes?

Vai took a few more steps into the darkness. She could see that the tunnel opened up into a large chamber at the edge of her torch's illuminations. What might lie within was a mystery, of course, but there were enough sparkly, golden hints amid the darkness to make her heart flutter. Was this the final chamber? The last stop before she had to decide whether or not to continue? The place full

of golden treasures that she was, yet again, going to be too timid to take?

Vai slowly advanced, carefully examining the floor, walls, and ceiling for even the slightest sign of some trap. The slightest glint of biogel hiding in the creases between the stones. The slightest smell of natural rubber that would give it's close presence away.

There wasn't a hint of biogel's distinct odor coming from the stones in the tunnel, but upon the cool breeze that wafted out of the chamber beyond, the scent was strong. Very strong. That wasn't all that much of a surprise, of course. There was certainly going to be some amount of biogel present in any of the tomb's peril filled chambers. If this was the final chamber, there was going to be biogel by the barrel full. Biogel that was just waiting for someone to find it. Someone like the nervous ashiri who was just now reached out to poke her torch into the chamber in an effort to see exactly what it contained.

Vai gasped. This was, by far, the largest of any chamber she'd encountered during her journey through the tomb. It was round, about twenty

meters in diameter, with a corbelled vault roof that seemed to stretch upward toward infinity. The walls were inset with vertically oriented quartz sarcophagi of the fashion once common among highly revered fey'li religious and other particularly honored souls in times long past. Most of these were open, with their lids set about on the floor or leaning on their sarcophagi in haphazard fashion. A few were sealed, however, and she could see dark shapes help captive within.

Goddess, she thought as she couldn't help but image the sarcophagi bursting open and being attacked by whatever sort of biogel 'undead' might be lurking within. I really need to be careful here. Really, really careful.

Vai's attention turned to the altar at the very center of the chamber. The ornately carved, black granite edifice loomed over the rest of the chamber on a large rectangular plinth accessible by several steps carved into each side. Upon the altar were a pair of golden torch holders, each holding an unlit variation of the faux-torch she was herself holding. A few small, painted ceramic jars stood to one side, while a collection of larger jugs and urns surrounded the altar's base. These latter jars were

well-adorned with gold leaf to accent their painted decorations, giving the impression of a pile of treasure that didn't really exist.

Vai carefully studied the floor as she stepped forward toward the altar. If there was one thing in the game that was guaranteed *not* to trigger a trap, it was lighting a torch. At least, not directly. There was no rule against using a torch as bait, and the ashiri had to be extra-careful to avoid whatever traps might have been put in place to take advantage of her desire to illuminate the chamber more clearly.

One particular stone directly between the tunnel and the altar looked just a bit too suspicious. The space between it and its neighbors was just a hair larger than the rest of the seams. She carefully stepped around it, and up the steps to the altar. She carefully reached out over the jars at its base, and touched her torch to those upon the altar, first the left, and then the right.

The altar's torches flared up with an unnaturally bright flame, illuminating the chamber far more clearly than Vai had been expecting. For a few moments she blinked as her eyes adjusted to the

light. She looked around nervously, for any sign of activity from the sarcophagi who's captive dark shapes now seemed even more threatening. Then she looked back at the surface of the altar. It's surface was perfectly smooth and polished, devoid of all decoration that might have suggested some specific ritual purpose.

It wasn't the surface of the alter itself that really caught Vai's attention. It was what was reflected in it. She looked up, past the altar to the far wall beyond. There were two exit portals, one to either side of a central plinth that rose a dozen steps above the level of the altar. Above each were ancient fey'li runes for escape and catacomb, marking them both as the final exits from the level. One would take her out of the game with the treasures that she'd accumulated, or more precisely, their designated value in credits. The other would take her to the next level. But it wasn't the exits that the ashiri was fixated upon. It was what was looming between them.

Upon the central plinth was a quartz throne. It was empty, but laid out upon it was a beautiful set of golden regalia. Its centerpiece was a dress of gold, glossy black beads, and nearly transparent fabric

that had clearly been designed to expose far more than it covered. This was accompanied, by a golden circlet filled with obsidian jewels, a gold adorned, and an obsidian capped staff that all looked as regal as it did intimidating.

Vai carefully studied the regalia from a distance, pondering her next move. It was the only obvious treasure to be seen in the chamber, but that just made her feel as if it might be bait to trigger some trap. Or perhaps it was a trap in and of itself, something which might snare her if she dared to put it all on. Then again, perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was actually a tool that might serve her in some capacity deeper within the tomb.

Or, perhaps, it was actually the final reward for completing the level. The reward for the third level was always some ancient looking outfit with a shiny black biogel inspired twist, invariably matching the jewelry offered as rewards for levels one and two, and the home décor items offered for levels four and five. These outfits were intended to be kept and worn as a mark of the master tomb-delver, a title created back when the game had only three levels.

The fourth level had been added as a bonus for those who were willing to test fate by delving into even more intense perils than those posed by the first three. The final was added after too many tomb-delvers managed to get through the fourth. So far, of the sixteen who'd tried, none had made it all the way through.

Vai was almost, sort of, half-willing to give the fourth level a try. She had at least a sixty percent chance of making it through by the numbers, and if she was actually going to walk away from the game with any real money, she was almost surely going to have to give it a go. But if she was going to do that, she was almost surely going to have to claim this chamber's ultimate prize. The necklace she'd gotten in the second had been a key to one of the main puzzles in the third, and who knew if the outfit she got in the third would be the key to something in the fourth? But...

Vai just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off about the regalia on the throne. It was too obvious. Too easy. Too...

Dammit, she thought as she looked around the chamber for some clue. *For all I know, the real*

prize is on one of those bodies in the sarcophagi... or in one of these urns. But how can I know? There's got to be some clue here. Some sign

Vai looked down to the ornate carvings on the black granite altar. They seemed to tell a story of sorts. Of a priestess casting some magic spell, and directing wrappings to mummify a body held aloft in mid-air. Of the resulting mummy floating into a sarcophagus and being sealed within. There might have been more to the story on other sides of the altar, but from where she was cautiously standing, they couldn't be seen.

The ashiri's attention turned to the ceramic jars. The three atop the altar had nothing to indicate what might be within. Those around the base were all painted with female figures of different, ancient-empire races carrying jars upon their shoulders, walking toward the entrance to a tomb, presumably bearing offerings for the dead laid within.

Just like the empresses of old, Vai thought as she recalled the pictures from a book that she'd once read about the ancient, pre-technological Fey'li Empire, in the days after the key'vin'ta extinction,

when all that connected the peoples who'd once been ruled by that alien empire were a number of von'kir transit portals that were somehow maintained until interstellar spacefaring technology took over. In those days, many of the former key'vin'ta subjects had gravitated toward the powerful fey'li nation that had somehow manage to resist falling before the key'vin'ta and their purple slime magic. With the passing of each Empress, countless goods would be sent, carried by maidens to be given as offerings to the deceased, or as gifts to the newly ascended monarch. Among those providing such offerings were Vai's own people, the ashiri, one of the first to offer their world, and their people, to fey'li rule.

Vai took a careful step back and began to ponder the situation. The jars were clearly marked as jars containing offerings, and potential treasure. But, like the regalia on the throne, it seemed just a bit too obvious, not to mention just a bit too copious. While the game was designed to force players to pick and choose what they took with them, there was no way that she was going to have to sort through more than a dozen large jars to pick what she wanted. Even if one held some treasure, it was

almost certain that most were actually traps of one sort or another.

The plain jars on the altar, however, were small and unassuming. They were just the sort of things that might be passed over simply for looking too ordinary, and perhaps a bit too dangerous given their location. If there was going to be any real, portable treasure, surely those jars would be the most likely to contain them.

The least likely location for anything valuable was the sarcophagi. That seemed to make them the most likely location. One, at least, might hold the real final prize. Perhaps it would hold more than just that. But how to figure out which one was safe to open...

What if I'm just overthinking things, Vai thought as her eyes again turned to the throne. What if the real trap is making me think the safe things are the traps?

Vai turned and carefully stepped back down from the altar. She began to examine the floor for a safe path around it, so that she could look at the sarcophagi more closely. The discarded lids,

strewn about the floor, made that virtually impossible. There were only two clear paths, leading around the altar to either side, toward the throne and the exits.

Am I not seeing something here? Vai thought as she puzzled over the way she seemed to be shoehorned into choosing between two paths, and only two paths, if she wanted to avoid the perils of walking over the sarcophagus lids, and whatever hazards they might be concealing. *What am I missing? I have to be missing something. I have to!*

Vai gingerly made her way around the left side of the altar. The lack of any further obvious traps on the floor made her more and more nervous with each hesitant step that she took. Perhaps she'd just been lucky to take the correct path. Or perhaps, and very unlike previous chambers on this level of the tomb, there simply weren't any.

Again, Vai surmounted the altar plinth, this time up its left side. In the open space between the altar and the steps leading up to the throne was a large obsidian mosaic that covered much of the floor. If ever there was an obvious trap, that was certainly

it. Almost too obvious. Again, the ashiri began to wonder if the obvious peril was just being used to direct her to the hidden.

The rear side of the altar lacked the ornate carving of the front. Nothing about it, or the floor along its rear, suggesting some concealed trap. Vai approached and eyed it with considerable suspicion. She waved her torch over its surface. Then, accidentally, she bumped it into one of the small jars.

“AAAH!” Vai shrieked as she jar immediately tipped over and spilled a portion of its contents onto the altar surface. Shiny gemstones scattered about, mixed with a few golden rings, and other less valuable looking baubles. “Aaah... oh. Oh. Phew!”

Vai stood for a moment to let her racing heart subside. Then she reached out and picked up one of the gems. It was cold. Hard. Real. *How lucky did I just get?* the ashiri wondered as she shrugged off her backpack and placed it on the altar. She began to pick up the baubles, one by one, and place them in with what little she'd accumulated thus far. It was only a portion of the contents of

the jug, but she wasn't quite sure if she should risk trying to get the rest. *What do I do? Do I just dump it out? Or should I just play it safe and leave it?*

Despite her reservations, Vai chose the former option. She carefully lifted the jar up and dumped the remaining baubles out onto the altar before placing them into her pack along with the rest. She still wasn't quite sure if she was willing to give the fourth level a try, so at this point every little bauble was a few more credits she'd get for a prize if she opted for the exit. She could always get rid of the crap later if she decided to delve deeper.

Vai pondered the other two jars. At least one of them almost certainly had to be a trap. There was no way they were just going to let her get treasure so easily. She turned away from the altar and looked back up at the throne. The longer she looked, the more the resting regalia looked like an exact match for the jewelry she'd gotten at the ends of the prior two levels. Surely, this was the final prize for the third. Or was it? There was only one way to find out, and that was to examine it more closely.

Fuck it. I've come this far. I can't leave without the outfit, the ashiri thought as she carefully walked around the obsidian mosaic and stopped at the foot of the dozen steps leading up to the altar. *No one's ever left without the outfit. I can't be the first. That would just be embarrassing.*

Just as with the path around the altar, the path around the mosaic was unsettlingly free of any indication of traps. So too were the steps up to the throne. She carefully climbed up to the eight step, where she could be close enough to examine the regalia, but not so high up that she might not be able to escape if she triggered the monsters who presumably lurked inside some of the sarcophagi.

They're an exact match, Vai thought as she compared the items to the necklace that she'd gotten at the end of the second level, and which, along with the bracelets from the first, she was currently wearing. *An exact match. This must be the final prize. It has to be!*

Vai ascended two more steps, to the point where she could actually reach out and touch all of the different pieces of regalia. She gingerly reached out to take the circlet, which sat upon the dress. As

she picked it up... nothing happened. Not wanting to take off her backpack to stow it away, she placed it upon her head. She picked up the bejeweled sandals that were under the circlet. Nothing happened. Then she picked up the jingly dress. Again, nothing happened.

For a moment, Vai thought to just toss the dress over her arm, grab the staff and exit the tomb intact. But that just wouldn't have been sporting, would it? It wasn't a rule, but there was a general expectation that master tomb-delvers would put on their new dress right there in the tomb. The completely unnecessary lingering and potential for accidental disaster was certainly a good way to increase one's popularity with the kind of live-peril fans who watched Tomb Delver. That and the extremely titillating nature of the dresses. They never seemed to leave much to the imagination.

Gotta make the fans happy, right? Vai thought as she examined the throne very, very carefully. Again, there was no sign of any sort of trap. At least not one that might be triggered by putting her backpack on it while she changed.

Alright. I guess here's a good enough place, Vai thought as she stepped up onto the level of the altar and placed her backpack onto it. She very carefully took off her tomb-delving outfit. Short sleeve shirt. Shoes. Short pants. Skimpy undies. One by one, each piece found its way onto the throne beside her backpack. Gotta be careful not to fall though. The last thing I want to do is hurt myself and look like a total idiot.

Vai very carefully slithered her way into the middle of the strings and strands of gold, obsidian beads, and see-through fabric that made up the dress. It was designed to mimic ancient fey'li fashion, and it did so with totally shameless homage to the style that left almost nothing to the imagination. Its top was more of an under-bra, holding her little round breasts aloft for all the world to see. Its bottom wasn't so much a bottom as it was a belt that held up the transparent fabric, which only covered the sides and back, leaving her front completely exposed.

Goddess, I'm practically naked, Vai thought as she pondered her new outfit. Cat-style. Tits out and showing puss. I wonder if I actually look good in

this? Shame I don't have a mirror. Ah well. I guess I'll have to wait until I'm out of here to see.

Vai picked up her backpack and did her best to get it on without getting it all tangled up in the bits, bobs, and boobs that seemed to be doing their level best to make it all but impossible. The best she could manage was to get it over her left shoulder, with her torch in that hand, and the staff in the other. She turned to descend the stairs, and immediately began to wonder if she'd made a mistake getting changed at the top.

Getting up in normal shoes and with one hand free had been easy. Getting down with sandals and both hands full was another matter entirely. It was only twelve steps, and she had the staff with which to steady herself, but it proved quite a perilous task, especially with the obsidian mosaic at the bottom, just waiting for her to fall upon its presumably trap-laden surface. *Oh... this was a mistake. Gotta be... gotta be careful. Really, really careful.*

Somehow, Vai actually managed to get down the stairs with only a couple of close calls. If her backpack had been more heavily laden with

treasures, however, things almost certainly would have ended quite differently. She sighed with relief and pondered her next move.

Get out now, or go deeper? Vai asked herself as she looked over one shoulder toward the exit, and the other toward the tunnel down to the next level.

A chill filled the chamber, sending a shudder down Vai's nearly naked spine. She looked from one sarcophagus to another, fully expecting one of them to open and unleash the biogel beast within.

“What are you waiting for?” a cute, very girly voice inquired from the altar. “Summon the wrappings. Mummify me, so that I can serve the tomb in my biogel afterlife.”

Vai whipped about to discover a lovely brunette leopardess fey'li laying atop the altar. Standing beneath its head was one of the gold leaf decorated jars, the one painted with fey'li maidens bringing offerings to the tomb. At its foot was a second such jar, the one with the painted ashiri maidens.

“You only have a short time to decide,” the leopardess said, smiling mischievously as she gazed up into the darkness above. “Summon the wrappings. Or leave. Or...”

Vai wasn't sure what to do. It was one thing to face peril. It was entirely another to act as the peril faced by someone else. “How do I summon the wrappings?” she asked in an effort to buy a bit of time to process exactly what was happening.

“Just point your staff and desire it,” the leopardess instructed. “Just do it. Do it now. Or...”

“Or what?” Vai asked, still unsure of how to respond. On one hand, she didn't want to do anything to the pretty leopardess. On the other hand, she kind of wanted to see what it would look like mummifying her. She'd only seen it on video. But... being able to watch it in person, and so closely, would be something else entirely. Something fun. Something exciting. But...

“Do it,” the leopardess again instructed.

“I don’t understand,” Vai responded as she found herself hesitating, forgetting for a moment exactly the sort of place she was in.

“Then you’ve made your choice,” the leopardess giggled, suddenly floating up off the altar to smiling down at the stunned ashiri. “But don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll find the consequences to be very physically... enlightening!”

Vai turned to bolt for the exit, but to her horrified astonishment, there was no exit. The walls simply continued around to the sides of the throne, with more sarcophagi standing where the exits had been. It was like the tunnels had never existed. “Wait... I...”

The leopardess laughed as the lid of the ashiri adorned jar popped off and clattered onto the stone floor.

At the same time, a strange force took hold of Vai. She yelped as she was tugged up into the air over the obsidian mosaic. Her backpack, torch, and staff fell to the ground as ribbons of glistening white biogel flowed out of the open jar. This

began to swirl around her as the leopardess began to chant some spell in a long forgotten tongue.

“Hey! I... I...” Vai stammered as the oily-slick biogel ribbons slither toward her body and began to wrap around her. They slipped smoothly under her skimpy dress completely covering her from neck to toe. “Let me... let me go!”

The leopardess continued to laugh as a second layer of biogel ribbon bound her captive’s legs together and her arms across her chest.

“Please... I... oh... OH!” Vai sputtered in shock as the remaining ribbon began to wrap around her head, covering it until all that was left exposed was her deep purple eyes. For a few deeply unsettling moments, the squirming mummy felt as if she was asphyxiating. A strange, dull feeling spread through her chest. Her need to breathe faded away. She felt unable to move. Unable to resist. All she could do was stare out at her gleeful captor and feel the strange sensations that were being imposed upon her helpless body.

As terrifying as her abrupt mummification had been, and as deeply frustrated as she was with her

own fatal moment of untimely indecision, she couldn't help but feel strangely comfortable within her shimmering white biogel wrappings. It was nice and snug and felt so pleasant that she found herself quite at ease with it all, despite the fact that she knew quite well that her real biogel fate was yet to come.

“You've made your decision and now you shall decorate this tomb for the viewing pleasure of the next delver who braves its foreboding depths,” the leopardess declared with a flourish as her captive floated toward one of the open sarcophagi. “Are you ready for the final step? The final moment when all goes dark? When all becomes a dream? When all that you are becomes... the gel?”

Vai couldn't respond as she settled into her quartz sarcophagus. She didn't want to respond. She just wanted to keep feeling nice and snug and warm and comfortable. What she actually felt was a cool, dull uniformity spreading over her skin. An oily slickness that brought with it a relaxation so complete that she felt almost as if she was melting. Her biogel wrappings tightened around her as the plainness spread up her neck. Over her face, replacing her features with a featureless blackness.

Over her eyes, casting the world into absolute darkness. And then...

Vai shuddered as her transformation into a thing of pure, uniform biogel was completed. Reality faded into dreams as a thump-like motion made her quartz prison move just a tiny bit. Dreams of dull, distant sensations. Of lust for carnal fulfillment that would be forever denied by her permanent biogel wrappings. Of being put on display for her audience, so they could see, and even touch what she had become. And then of being put back in the tomb, to fade away into an eternal liquid dream, lost to the world as much as she was to it.

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*ANOTHER EPISODE
COMING NEXT MONTH...*