

DESTINY EXPLORER

A GELITECH STORY

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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PROLOGUE

A NEW BEGINNING

A shrill warning horn shattered the early morning silence, sending countless colorful waterfowl scattering to the four winds. Churning water began to issue forth from beneath the recently restored powerhouse. A long string of antique tungsten filament lamps which had been loosely hung along the massive structure's roof began to glow. The crowd of gathered spectators cheered. After years of toil and delay, the city of Mashiva's oldest and largest source of electric power was finally back in business.

"Shame," one rather unusual spectator dryly remarked as she watched events unfold from the gargantuan concrete hydroelectric dam's

lofty pedestrian walkway. "So much effort and expense wasted on an archaic anachronism that will be obsolete in how long? Four, maybe five years at most?"

Her stony faced companion frowned as he turned his gaze from the celebration below. "I think you grossly overestimate general acceptance of the new technology."

"I think you grossly underestimate the willingness of the average person to accept new and productive ideas on the fundamental nature of life," the tigress noted with a playful smirk at her longtime friend and sometimes rival for the title of 'maddest scientist'. "After all we've been through to get to this point, Wen... don't tell me you're getting cold feet?"

"No, Anshi, I'm not," Dr. Wen Kidan replied as he turned his skeptical gaze to his questioning companion and her perpetually naive outlook on matters of business. "I'm just being realistic. The average person simply doesn't see any benefit in allowing our products to become a part of their daily lives."

“Well, we’re just going to have to change that, aren’t we?” Dr. Anshi Alluwa responded as she turned just in time to catch her companion caressing her modest figure with his deep green eyes. “Just can’t help yourself, can you? And here I was thinking you weren’t a fan of the new mark nine gel.”

Dr. Kidan scowled and turned back to the celebration below. “I’m not.”

The tigress chuckled softly as she took a moment to visibly revel in the glistening, pearly white glory that sheathed her body from neck to toe. The vibrantly living substance hugged every millimeter of her smoothly curved figure, transforming her rather ordinary looks into something quite a bit more enticing to the eye. It had an energy to it. A deeply rooted power that spread out and warmed the very souls of those who lingered in its presence. A force that could make even the least curious of souls want to know what it might be like to share in the wonders of joining the ranks of those who surrendered their lives into the gel’s glorious embrace.

Biogel. A kink. A toy. A plaything for those who sought to experience physical transfiguration devoid of any apparent negative consequences. A synthetic symbiotic organism so fundamentally powerful that it rendered its wearers functionally immortal. A singular higher life form that brought together all who wore it into the skin tight fold of its Unity. And now...

Anshi wore the latest iteration of this wondrous substance with with the carefree pride of an inventor whose successful product had been developed to the point where it could no longer be improved. And what had it all cost her? Her freedom? Her soul? Small prices to pay for such exquisite perfection!

"Why?" the tiger asked, eyeing his companion with a mix of unsettled curiosity and well founded suspicion. "Why couldn't you just leave well enough alone?"

"You're one to ask," Dr. Alluwa replied with a sarcastic laugh as she turned away from the railing and a group of wandering tourists who were approaching along the otherwise

deserted walkway. “But that’s beside the point, isn’t it? We both have our sins, don’t we? No point in letting them get in the way of committing a few more, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” Dr. Kidan responded with a sour snarl as he followed his companion down a short flight of steps and into a dark access tunnel.

The damp, musty smelling passage was as far removed from the bright, celebratory atmosphere as could possibly be. Someone had clearly forgotten about the place when they’d drawn up the dam’s restoration plans. Or maybe they’d deliberately left it out, hoping that its unpleasant atmosphere would discourage random interlopers from wandering off the pedestrian pathway and onto the substantial wharf that had been built into the rear face of the dam. This was the city’s only available facility for the docking of large water landing aerospace vessels, and definitely not a safe place for wandering tourists.

“Maybe I just wanted to feel what it’s like to be hugged by an angel,” the tigress suggested

as she happily pranced into the gloom, just ahead of her grumpy counterpart in an obvious attempt to regain his non-professional interest. "Or maybe I just wanted to know what it's like to be corrupted in such a deeply visceral fashion. Or maybe I've just gone stark raving mad and I'm trying to drag all the rest of you along with me."

"Again?" Dr. Kidan sighed as six lanes of road traffic roared overhead. His expression became strained. He was clearly doing his best to avert his eyes from his companion's swaying hips, but the cacophony of soft rubbery squips, squeaks, and snaps that accompanied her every movement made her enticement virtually impossible to ignore.

"Don't sound so enthusiastic," Dr. Alluwa laughed as the low rumble of a passing freight train added to the highway noise. "Come on. You know it's going to be fun!"

"You and I clearly have very different ideas of what's fun," Dr. Kidan muttered as the tigress entered the warm, sunny glow that was cascading in from the end of the tunnel.

“You keep saying that,” Dr. Alluwa chuckled over her shoulder as she paused at the tunnel portal to let her grouchy companion catch up. “But you keep coming back, don’t you?”

“And I keep regretting it,” Dr. Kidan replied with deeply resigned sigh and a hesitant step that made it quite clear that he wasn’t at all enthused with the prospects of what was waiting for them at the wharf.

“This time’s going to be different,” Dr. Alluwa said as she stepped out into the morning sun. “The past is gone and done with. This is a whole new adventure. A whole new beginning. And if we’re successful, it’s going to make our technological inventions *the* source of power for all the Fey’li Empire! You just wait and see!”

ONE

WHITE SAILS

The magnificent starship seemed to have come from that brief time in the ancient past when iron hulls and canvas sails existed in an unnatural harmony forced upon them by the inefficiencies of early coal fired steam engines. Its matte black hull stretched a hundred and forty meters from stem to stern, with another twenty-four meters worth of shimmering golden bowsprit tacked on up front. Broad swaths of finely polished gold trim wrapped around the sides of the ship. More gold covered the rails that surrounded the vessel's broad wooden decks. It also framed the many porthole style windows that ran along its hull, and adorned many various sundry fittings elsewhere around the ship's exterior.

Atop the vessel were its lone mast and the grand metal 'sails' which were mounted to it. Forward of the mast were the two scoop shaped main sails, attached by means of an articulating robotic arm. As the ship currently lay at rest, these were held in a horizontal position, giving a partial canopy to the large open deck space atop the ship's two level superstructure. Aft and attached to the base of the mast was a telescoping fore-and-aft sail. This was currently folded down into its lowermost section and seemed to serve little purpose other than to enhance the archaic sailing vessel illusion.

Despite the striking overall appearance of the ship, the feature that got the most attention from curious onlookers was its highly unusual bow. In spite of the ship's invocation of the days of steam and sail, its bow was nothing like that of a traditional vessel of the sea. The ship's golden keel soared up from the placid surface of the lake. It stretched overhead for a length of thirty meters before ending in a blunt shape that offered viewers the impression of an inverted miniature ram bow.

Embedded into the front face of this 'ram' was a sensor grid whose tubular elements emitted a vibrantly deep pink glow. This emission seemed to have an almost physical quality to it. It looked almost as if it was warping the space in front of it, creating a strange sort of refraction layer that made the whole grid seem to throb in slow, rhythmic fashion.

Mounted in the very center of the sensor grid was a life sized, glistening black figurehead whose completely featureless face gazed blankly into the rising sun. To the casual observer, it looked like an oddly sculpted piece of cheap glossy plastic. A deliberate mockery of the finely crafted and highly realistic figureheads of old. An insult to the spirit of the mystical protector of sailors, doing its best to lead them safely through the worst that the impossibly cruel sea had to offer.

Despite its outward appearance, the strange black figure was no chunk of cheap kitsch tacked onto the prow as a misguided afterthought. It was no mystical figure striving to bring her ship's sailors safely home either. It

was, in fact, an actual woman whose body has been transformed into an object made of nothing but pure, obsidian black biogel. A woman who was still very much alive, her conscious soul held eternally captive within her new and completely inanimate shape.

It was this mysterious, faceless woman who had caught the attention of a small group of dedicated shipspotters. Though it was just another day for the ship's crew, to these obsessive hobbyists, a moment of supreme significance was about to take place. A moment that simply had to be recorded for posterity and, of course, for the online bragging rights.

Now that the former Imperial yacht's conversion was complete, the ship's old name was finally being removed. Within a few hours, a new name would be etched into the shining gold trim above the ship's stern shuttle hangar, and they were quite determined to be the first outsiders to see it. For the moment, however, there was nothing for them to do but stay out of the way, watch, and wait.

“Wow!” remarked a petite elf-eared ashiri as she adjusted the brown leather bag that carried her logs, camera, and other sundry shipspotting kit. “Imagine being stuck up there for, like, the rest of forever! Wouldn’t that just totally suck?”

“Who do you think she might be?” a slender, gazelle horned koyoki inquired as she struggled to focus her antique film camera on the glossy black shape.

“Probably just some random chick who got her ass glistened at the Gelarium,” a tigress fey’li replied as she brushed her long black hair in preparation for a bit of video commentary. “Bet she’s having second thoughts now, huh?”

“I don’t know about that,” a bald, silver skinned sel’au responded as she adjusted the orientation of a rather rough looking, second-hand hovering camera orb. “I heard from some girls who work down at the shipyard that it came with the ship when the Empress gifted it to Gelitech.”

“Was it not Princess Meylah’s favorite yacht or something like that?” a tall, ram-horned

mitanni asked as she rummaged around her black canvas backpack for a snack.

“You know what I heard?” a leopardess fey’li replied as she wrote an observation on the ship’s exquisitely smooth paint job in her fancy leather bound journal. “I heard that the girl up there is actually the Princess herself! Neat, huh?”

“That’s just a rumor,” the frustrated sel’au replied as her wobbly orb decided that upside-down was right-side up.

“Totally bunk,” the ashiri agreed as she pulled her comm out from the back pocket of her tight purple bike shorts and held it up to take a few pictures for quick posting to her personal CoreNet profile. “I mean, why would such a rich royal pussy even agree to something like that?”

“Jeez, have you been living under a rock or something,” the tigress quipped as she adjusted her breezy black pants. “Haven’t you seen all the crazy shit our royal twats get up to? She was probably relieved to get offered the chance to get glistened instead of getting

picked for something really nasty like that Abdication Day rowa crap.”

“Offered? I sincerely doubt that the Empress would have given her any say in the matter,” the mitanni commented as she took a bite from a large and quite crumbly granola bar. She brushed the stray bits from her soft tan blouse, much to the joy of the golden carp that had clustered along the wharf’s edge hoping for handouts. “You know how she is. Always wanting the royal ladies to set a mindlessly obedient example for everyone to follow.”

“Why is she so obsessed with getting women to transform away their reproductive qualities?” the koyoki asked as she gave up on her old camera. Instead, she followed the ashiri’s example, pulling her own comm from amid the bright blue sash of her flowery green kimono. Its high tech multi-port camera could do so much more than the old SLR.

“Yeah, huh?” the ahsiri responded with a roll of her eyes. “I thought the whole resource crunch thing was, like, totally debunked.”

“It was,” the tigress noted as she unzipped her form fitting orange sport top until her soft white cleavage fluff began to show. “Totally.”

“So this whole girls-gone-neutered thing is just the Empress trying to get us all into her weird kink or something?” the leopardess as she unclipped a small pair of folding binoculars from the belt of her golden-gray pencil miniskirt. “I mean... not that I’m complaining. Just thinking about some of what I’ve seen makes me a bit... well... uh... you know.”

“Royals using the people to satisfy their darker inclinations has been a think since time immortal,” the mitanni agreed as she watched a group of black biogel clad crew members moving a batch of small crates up the gangway and into the ship’s port side docking port. “But who can possibly blame her? It is so much fun to watch so many people happily getting themselves completely screwed for life on camera, is it not?”

“Not nearly as fun as trying it out for yourself,” a softly sublime new voice purred from atop a dark blue cargo container that had

been placed on the wharf in part to block unwelcome interlopers from blundering into the work zone alongside the ship. “What do you girls say? Want to go for a ride you’ll never, ever forget?”

The petite snow leopardess lay quite lazily upon the edge of the cargo container’s roof. Her long gray ponytail dangled over the edge. Its heavy, artificial looking strands bobbed and bounced in a distinctly rubbery manner as she gazed down upon her visitors with piercing, deep purple eyes.

Perhaps even more rubbery than her hair was the piquant odor of warm latex rubber. This boldly defied the eastward morning breeze, instead finding its way downward to hover in a cloud around the startled objects of the snow leopardess’ attention. The overt scent carried along with it a carefully curated selection of more subtle and insidious olfactory stimulants. Pheromones of the sort that were certain to arouse certain erotic senses, reduce even the more strongly held inhibitions, and even blunt the sharp edge of the most deeply ingrained survival instincts. There was little

anyone could do to resist their intense power, let alone prevent their own bodies from responding in kind.

To the eyes of the startled shipspotters, the little snow leopardess looked like they'd just woken her up from a long and pleasant nap with their noisy banter. Though her face was smiling, the glistening, pearly-white gel that coated her from neck to toe seemed far less welcoming of their disturbance. Dark tendrils seethed beneath its milky surface, all up and down her left side. Here and there the corruption broke through onto the surface, forming glossy obsidian patches that moved about in a deeply unsettling fashion.

In truth, Chyka Riyalli hadn't actually been napping atop the container. She had so many better things to do than waste the morning sunning herself like some bare bodied mortal. There were so many little projects to look after. So many new toys to experiment with. So many new playthings to store away for later study and enjoyment.

All the same, even Gelitech's fabled 'Librarian' couldn't let such a perfect opportunity slip through her glistening biogel coated fingers, no matter how much she might have preferred spending the morning thinking up new and conceptually twisted things for her willing captives to experience for the sake of science. If ever there were six women totally deserving to be added to her collection, then these were certainly them. Curious. Intellectual. Physically fit. Attractive, even. And, perhaps just as importantly, deeply skeptical about anything she might dare to propose.

"I don't think..." the koyaki finally responded after a few long moments of awkward silence.

"Perfect!" Chyka replied with a smile so palatably inviting that even the most chaste of souls would have found it difficult not to feel attracted to her. She was an angel, after all. A very dark sort of angel, but an angel nonetheless. "Don't think about it. That's where the trouble always starts. Just say yes. It'll be fun. Really fun. Trust me. You'll love it!"

“Do you really think that is going to work on us?” the mitanni inquired with a roll of her big brown eyes. “What do you think that we are? Sheep?”

“Certainly not,” Chyka replied with no small effort to keep herself from laughing aloud at the mitanni’s highly amusing lack of self-awareness. “No. What I see here are six adventurous ladies who love big boats so much that they’d just jump at any chance to run off into space to see ships the likes of which no shipspotter has ever seen before.”

“As if,” the ashiri snorted with audible contempt at the little snow leopardess’ dubious attempt at flattery.

“Well, I mean, what kind of ships are you talking about here?” the leopardess asked as she closed her journal and put it into her blue canvas purse. The twitching of her nose made it quite clear that the potent pheromones were already starting to have the desired effect. “Because it’s going have to be something pretty incredible to get me to even consider thinking about thinking about it.”

“Yeah,” the sel’au agreed with an odd look that suggested that the pheromones were having a rather different effect on her. She seemed a bit put off. Unsettled, even.

“And don’t tell us it’s jump-sail skiffs,” the koyoki scowled as she tucked her comm back into the sash of her kimono. She didn’t seem affected by the pheromones at all. That was no real surprise, of course. Predator descendant pheromones tended to have far less effect on prey descendant species, if any at all. “I am *not* falling for that scam a second time.”

Chyka couldn’t help but chuckle. Promises of encounters with jump-sail skiffs were the space travel equivalent of the old ghost hunting crap that was, for some strange reason, still quite popular on the net. Anyone with a brain in their head knew that jump-sail skiffs didn’t exist. Except the ones that did. No one had ever actually seen one, but they had seen the ghostly impressions left by ancient vessels who’d encountered some horrible transdimensional catastrophe in days long since passed. Ghost ships, as real as such a

thing could possibly be, but not really something that could be deliberately found.

“No one in their right mind goes looking for jump-sails,” the biogel coated snow leopardess said as she slid her legs over the edge of the cargo container, creating an involuntary symphony of little rubbery noises as she moved. “They may find them anyway, but that’s another story entirely, isn’t it? What I’m thinking of is something a bit more interesting. What would you girls think of the chance to be the first shipspotters to record, say, a real, *modern* von’kir collector?”

Chyka knew her targets. She knew them well. She had been a night librarian at the Mashiva Mariners’ University, after all. It was a school full of space-heads obsessed with strange alien ships and technology who’s most inquired upon midnight topics related to the ancient powers and their often quite strange methods of interstellar conveyance. Surely this group of similarly obsessed ladies would find the chance to personally encounter such a vessel a lure more powerful than even the most viscerally enticing of her pheromones.

“The von’kir died off ages ago,” the tigress responded, shaking her head with visible annoyance as the sunlight began to shift in a manner that was quite unfavorable for videography. “Everyone knows that!”

“Actually, everyone knows there is a real, honest-to-goodness von’kir living right here in Mashiva,” the mitanni remarked with a knowing look and a sly little sideways glance at the little snow leopardess. It was clear that she knew exactly what sort of biological game was taking place. She wasn’t going to object to the game, of course. Sheep never objected. Neither did mitanni.

“The creature runs a spa of sorts in Northwestie,” the mitanni continued, taking a deep breath between sentences. Clearly she was enjoying the disinhibiting effects of the pheromones. Given how much the average mitanni loved to steep themselves in equally potent fey’li ‘nip, that was no real surprise. “She does unspeakable things to the bodies of those who surrender to her. You really should watch the videos. They are quite... deeply

stimulating, if you know what I really do mean. And I really do mean.”

“Ooh! I heard of that one!” the ashiri exclaimed as she tucked her comm back from whence it came. “She puts a collar on you and then she uses her crazy alien magic to melt all your cares away. And, you know, most of your body. And brains. And looks. I mean, have you seen those things when she’s done with them? Talk about nasty!”

“How did she even get here?” the sel’au asked with one eyebrow raised. “Don’t the von’kir live on the other side of the galaxy?”

“Well, that’s the mystery, isn’t it?” Chyka mused as she playfully pranced past her skeptical quarry, thickening the invisible pheromone cloud in the process.

In all honestly, the little snow leopardess didn’t actually much care for her ability to generate truly unholy quantities of highly manipulative, biogel enhanced pheromones. It was far to indirect for her increasingly showy sensibilities. And it was far to close to crossing that one line that even Gelitech’s new

powerhouse of glossy living rubber temptation refused to cross.

It was one thing to entice a skeptical soul into doing something that they generally wouldn't. It was entirely another thing to compel them to do it. How much pheromonal inducement did it take before she crossed that forbidden line? And how could she possibly keep herself from compelling some members of a group with quantities of pheromones that only had a mild effect on her primary target?

Legalities aside, it was simply no fun at all to have people mindlessly surrender themselves because their own bodies refused to offer their minds any real choice in the matter. The fun was in the work of enticement. In convincing perfectly average people into willingly agreeing to do things that average people normally regarded as being completely unthinkable. Things that would alter their bodies. Their minds. Drastically. Sometimes quite disgustingly. And generally very, very permanently.

“I mean, a ship that can cross the galaxy in a reasonable time?” Chyka continued, toning back on her pheromonal emissions as she turned to face her small audience with a thoughtful yet enthusiastic expression on her face. “I can’t wait to actually see it! I wonder if I can convince them to let me see the inside of it too. Wouldn’t that be something? Can you even begin to imagine it?”

“You know what they’re going to want as payment in exchange for that? They’re going to want that shiny ass of yours,” the tigress laughed as she turned sideways and gestured to her own pleasingly round posterior. “Won’t that look funny, huh? All shiny and gooey and shriveled up like a raisin!”

“Small price to pay,” Chyka replied with a shrug and a mischievous wink at the mitanni. If anyone was going to play her game to the end it was the sheep. And once the sheep decided to play, the rest were sure to follow. They just wouldn’t be able to help themselves. “Small price to get the chance to post videos of the workings of a real von’kir collector on your

CoreNet profiles too. Just think of what that'd do to your follower count!"

"It would certainly have quite the positive effect," the mitanni replied, crossing her arms as she offered the little snow leopardess a playfully uncertain look. "Though it would also have quite the finality to it, would it not? I cannot imagine that I would be allowed to film unless I was to surrender myself for similar treatment."

"I would so watch that," the leopardess chuckled.

"What more can you tell me about this von'kir collector?" the mitanni inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Is it really special enough for me to risk my body to document? As much as I would very much like to witness your transformation into a walking, gibbering little prune of a creature, I must know more. Tell me everything you know and I will perhaps consider it."

"Oh, come now! Be a sport and play the game," Chyka cooed enticingly. If there was anything that got a mitanni girl feeling

adventurous, it was the intimation that she wasn't. "What's the fun if it all gets spoiled before it even starts?"

"You have a fair point," the mitanni replied, shrugging her shoulders in bemused resignation.

"No she doesn't," the tigress objected. "She just wants to get all of our asses shriveled up and sent of to Goddess knows where so she can post videos herself."

"Well... I don't know," the leopardess murmured, biting her lower lip as her body began to add its own pheromones into the mix. "I mean... what's... what's in it for me. Besides the whole posting nasty vids on the net thing."

"Well, for starters, you'll get to choose from a selection of various tasks to perform aboard ship while we travel between destinations," Chyka answered with just enough of the truth to not technically be lying. "And did I mention you'll be getting paid? I'll bet no one has ever offered to pay you to shipspot before, have they? Five hundred credits a week plus shore expenses, room, and board."

“Do we have to wear that... goo?” the koyoki asked as she eyed the little snow leopardess and her bizarre coating with considerable suspicion. She was beginning to look a bit blush in the face. No doubt the pheromones were starting to have an effect even upon her. That or she was trying her best to hide the fact she was starting to feel a bit of social pressure to go along with her far less inhibited companions. “It looks so... unpleasant.”

“Only if you want to,” Chyka replied with flirty wink. “Biogel is everywhere aboard the ship, but you don’t have to wear it. It comes in more than one variety too, mind you. Most girls prefer the plain obsidian black. It’s less... active, if you catch my drift.”

“Yuck,” the ashiri muttered as she too began to blush. “Getting sexed up by goo and, like, spending all day in your own juices and... that’s... that’s just gross.”

“It’s also quite popular on the net,” Chyka answered with a grin. “You want followers, getting a suit of perfectly polished biogel is definitely the way to go. You want even more,

try a body mod. Maybe go inflato? Come on. It's getting to be summer. You just know deep down that you're all curious to know what putting on an inflatosuit feels like!"

"I definitely do not," the sel'au responded with a sour look and a shake of her head. "And there's nothing you can do to convince me otherwise."

"Well, I tried," Chyka laughed. "But there's so many more options that I'm sure something will pique your interest eventually. But I've gone off on a bit of a tangent, haven't I?"

"You most certainly have," the mitanni replied with a smirk. "And you will pardon my skepticism, but I must wonder if all this promise of seeing a real von'kir collector is just a ploy to recruit our bodies to be converted into products for sale."

"Oh, definitely not," Chyka assured the mitanni with a soft smile. "I'm just... well. Perhaps I'm just getting a bit too ahead of things. There are plenty of things to do while we travel between sources of alien experience and technology that we wish to study. They're

all purely optional, depending on the role you sign up for.”

“I am extremely unconvinced,” the koyoki declared with a frown.

“Well... you won’t really know unless you try it, right?” Chyka said as she gestured toward the gangway. “So... what do you girls say? Wait. No. You know what? Don’t answer. Let’s get you where you want to be first, hmm? You want to see the renaming, right? Take pictures. Vids. Post to the net. That kind of stuff. So how about I get you a front row seat and then we can talk about it once its all done? How does that sound?”

“Well, I can’t really say no to an offer like that, can I?” the leopardess remarked as she looked around at her shipspotting companions. “What about you girls?”

“Agreed,” the mitanni concurred.

“I guess I’m in,” the ashiri nodded.

“Yeah,” the tigress agreed. “Sounds like a fair deal.”

“I’m sure there’s a catch,” the sel’au noted.
“But still... how can I possible argue?”

“I don’t know,” the koyoki murmured. “I mean, there’s no commitment, but... well, if you’re all going, then I will too.”

“Great!” Chyka exclaimed with delight.
“Follow me!”

TWO

CURIOUS TAILS

"I can't believe I let myself get talked into this," the koyoki softly remarked to her lone remaining companion as she stared blankly into the frothing surface of the Destiny Explorer's potent biogel core.

"Oh, hush," the somewhat more enthusiastic leopardess murmured in reply as she leaned against the containment chamber window's heavy frame. "It's gonna be fun. I'm sure of it."

The koyoki sighed and shrugged, her eyes still fixed upon the boiling, deep pink sphere. The windows which offered guests a view of the ship's living biogel heart were the centerpiece of the ship's spacious lobby. The starkly monochromatic room stretched

between the ship's broadside docking ports, with corridor extensions fore and aft, to either side. The ship's two lifts were located in its forward wall, providing easy access for those embarking or debarking via the docking ports, or via the the ship's modest hangar bay further aft. Both the ship's offices and sick bay were directly accessible from the room as well, making it a central location for crew and guests alike to access the more mundane ship's services.

For the moment, however, the lobby was acting as a waiting room for the two dozen new volunteers who'd agreed to join the ship on its maiden voyage. Their already quiet chatter was getting softer by the minute. One by one, the woefully naive supplicants were beckoned away from the comfortable biogel padded benches. Away from the exotic plants which had been so carefully ensconced in various strangely shaped vessels. Away from the disturbingly curvaceous and sharply monochromatic alien architecture that covered almost every surface in the room save the perfectly polished black floor. And away from

the vivid, deep pink glow that had the strange property of attracting uninitiated souls like moths to a flickering flame.

“Li’sho?” a pale blue ashiri called out from a short stretch of corridor that lead forward from the starboard side of the ship’s spacious lobby. Her coating of glistening black biogel shimmered in the throbbing illumination of the ship’s core. It even seemed to take on a luminescence of its own in the form of little purple patches that flowed and shifted along the surface of her biogel coating as she moved. “Li’sho?”

“Ah! That is me!” a big, bubbly red pan’di exclaimed, turning from the strange, vaguely erotic shapes that covered one of the room’s several pillars. Her long deep blue kimono gently swished along the perfectly polished black floor as she took a somewhat pensive step toward the inquiring ashiri. “Is it my turn?”

“Yes it is,” the ashiri beckoned with a warm, inviting smile. “Are you ready?”

“Oh, yes! Very much so!” the pan’di replied with a brief nod and a look of nervous anticipation that suggested that she might not be quite as ready as her reply suggested.

“Excellent,” the ashiri responded, gesturing back down the short section of corridor, toward a blue-gray door that was deeply embedded in the alien shapes that covered the corridor walls. “Come with me.”

A placard on the sliding door read ‘Volunteer Accommodation, Starboard Side’. It opened with a sharp hiss as the ashiri approached, revealing a dark chamber beyond. “My name is Pirra,” she said as she led the pan’di into almost completely unfurnished room. “I’ll be getting you settled in while you wait to be allocated.”

“It is pleasant to meet you, Pirra,” Li’sho replied with a shallow nod as the door hissed closed behind them. A very puzzled look came over her face as she looked around at the relatively featureless space. There were only a few open bins overflowing with discarded clothing to the left of the door. A rather plain

looking machine ran along the full length of the outboard wall. Everything was painted in a medium blue-gray. The thin commercial grade carpet was just a darker version of the same basic shade.

“Your clothes go into the bins on the right here,” Pirra instructed, gesturing toward the bins. “No need to sort them. Just take them off and toss them wherever.”

The pan'di wasted no time in denuding herself. A quick tug at her loosely tied sash and the whole of her dress fell to the floor around her big furry feet. With one sweeping motion, she snatched up her dress and tossed it into the nearest container. Whether or not she gave more than a passing thought to the widely varied assortment of attire already overflowing from the bins was impossible to tell.

“Wonderful,” the ashiri noted as she gestured toward the machine. In particular, she directed the pan'di's attention to the aft portion of the contrivance. There, a recess was cut into its face, giving access to a set of glossy

black pads mounted on a conveyor system. “Go ahead and lay down.”

“This is all so strange,” the nude pan’di responded with a nervous glance at the ashiri. “I trust that whatever this machine is to do that it will fell... pleasant?”

“Very pleasant,” the ashiri replied, again gesturing toward the padding. “Just lay down and relax and I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

The pan’di plopped her ample posterior down onto the shiny black padding and spent a very short moment contemplating the rather plain looking machine that surrounded her on three sides. Behind her was a blank gray panel whose only features were a trio of small lights that served to illuminate the bed. As she lay back to rest her head on the slightly raised pad that served as a pillow of sorts, she looked down past her feet at yet another blank gray surface. This one was cut at the bottom to allow the conveyor a space to pass through. Above her head was a rectangular sliding door, just large enough to ensure that anyone who fit upon the bed would be able to pass through

with no difficulty, so long as they remained flat on their back. For the moment, this door was sealed shut, making it impossible for her to see what might be in store for her within the bowels of the machine.

“Lay down, close your eyes, and breathe normally,” Pirra instructed. “I’m going to ask you a few questions. First, I want to verify that you signed up to volunteer aboard ship of your own free will. No one else had any say over your decision. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Li’sho replied as she lay back, closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

“Second, in your agreement paperwork, the only restrictions you placed on our use of you and your body are those for... high levels of pain and/or psychological stress,” Pirra inquired. “Are those the only restrictions you wish to place, or would you like to amend the list?”

“I think those are the only items in the list that concerned me,” Li’sho answered.

“Very good,” Pirra noted. “Finally, I wish to doubly confirm that are comfortable with the potential for permanent mental alterations due to your usage in the course of this ship’s voyage. Is that so?”

“Yes, it is,” Li’sho responded.

“Wonderful,” Pirra said as she flipped up a small cover on the face of the machine, revealing a control panel with only a single green button. “I hope you find your stay in our innovative accommodation system to your liking. Enjoy!”

Before the pan’di could reply, the ashiri had pressed the button.

Blrblrblrblglrblrglrblgrp!

Without any warning, and so quickly that the pan’di didn’t have a chance to react, a large mass of crystal clear liquid biogel flowed up from beneath the conveyor. In a mere second, it had surrounded her entire body. A brief wiggle and squirm on the surprised captive’s part caused the solidifying shape to undulate. A

quick bounce. A sudden flop. And then... all was silent and still.

The biogel encasement block had fully solidified into a rectangular, sarcophagus-like shape with beveled edges all around. The doorway in the machine hissed open. The block, along with its helpless captive, was slowly conveyed into the machine's dark interior.

The door closed. There was a whirring sound. Then a new bed, or perhaps it was actually just the same bed, slid out from the foot end of the recess in the face of the machine.

The ashiri smiled and turned away from the machine. "One overly curious tail down," she mused to herself as the chamber door slid open, "and nine more to go."

THREE

MISCHIEF

Chyka dangled her legs over the foot of her massive biogel bed and smiled. The finishing touches on her large private suite had finally been completed, and not a moment too soon. The ship was only a few hours away from departing on its maiden voyage.

Everything was just the way she'd wanted it. A large bedchamber with high windows offering an exquisite view aft. A massive biogel bed capable of accommodating a dozen or more occupants within its glistening black mass. A circular living room just like the one in her luxurious Gelitech apartment, complete with biogel seating and a selection of glistening black decor crafted from the bodies and minds

of several dozen Gelarium guests. Beyond, an office, small kitchen, and storage. The only thing missing was the mingled scent of six mutually infatuated lovers embedded in the dark blue carpets.

Chyka's smile faded as she pondered what had become of her home life. Memories of what once was still haunted her dreams. She yearned for the concrete bonds that had united them all into a single organism. The certainty that all five of her lovers would never part ways with her. That their bodies and minds would always be available and free for the using.

While the little snow leopardess might have won back the companionship of her former biogel wives, things just weren't quite the same anymore. They were no longer bound to her the way they'd been before. They were free to be themselves and to do as they pleased, no matter how deeply they chose to steep themselves in biogel. Somehow, some way, they could always free themselves from its thrall.

Chyka had no idea how her companions were able to defy the rules that seemed to

govern everyone else who dressed themselves in a biogel coating. Perhaps they'd somehow inherited her own inherent duality when it came to being a creature of biogel. Perhaps biogel itself had somehow changed in the shifting of the timeline. Who could possibly know?

All the little snow leopardess knew was that she was left feeling almost powerless in their combined relationship at times. Despite her incredible individual power, she had no more say in their daily lives than they had in hers. To her, it was unsettling on so many levels. On the other hand, the sheer entertainment value produced by their unfettered ability to do virtually anything with no actual consequences made her feel that she'd at least broken even in the deal.

Fssssssssh!

"Kisu!" Jumie moaned softly as the giddily grinning key'vin'ta casually walked up and sprayed her legs with a quick squirt of vanilla scented instant inflatogummy. "Again?"

Ki'su giggled as she watched the leopardess' legs turn black and shrink away beneath the clear biogel membrane that had taken the place of her skin. This membrane presented the perfect imitation of a cheap blow up doll, faux seams and all. It was this complete artificiality that fascinated the little key'vin'ta to no end. She never tired of watching the transformation corrupt its victim's beauty, especially when that victim was the one who didn't seem to mind having her body suddenly transformed into whatever might strike the little key'vin'ta's latest whim.

"She makes such a nice body pillow, doesn't she?" Nanya chuckled as watched the action from from a safe distance. If there was one thing that she enjoyed the most out of the relationship, it was trying to get Ki'su to more and more outrageous things to her unfailingly compliant plaything. "Don't be shy. You know how much she likes it. Give her another good squirt."

Fsssssssssssssssssssssh!

“Ah!” Jumie exclaimed as the key’vin’ta proceeded to spray a small cloud of instant inflatogummy onto her body, from her soft, fluffy butt all the way up to her neck, tail and arms included. Within a few short moments everything from her neck down had gone the way of her legs, leaving her looking like the cheapest of cheap fey’li blow up dolls. Her only ‘premium feature’ was a clear tube that connected her esophagus with the disturbingly shoddy blow up doll mockeries of her former pussy and anus. Her voice became strained and took on a rubbery, vibrating quality that made it sound just as artificial as her body looked. “Oh... oh... why does it have to feel so... good?”

“Be careful where you’re sending that cloud,” Tachi remarked as she looked up from the latest issue of Abandoned Mines Monthly and watched the shimmering mist wafting out of the bedroom with with a deep frown. She could tolerate her other companions, but her patience for the little key’vin’ta’s constant mischief was always one short step from running out.

“Aw, come on,” Sakie prodded. If she had one mission in life, it was to get the stuffy tigress to start acting a lot more like the hapless Jumie. She didn’t really have a reason for it, of course. She just thought it’d make things a bit more entertaining. “Live a little. Embrace the chaos.”

“Why don’t you?” Tachi replied with a scowl. If she had her way, it’d be the cougaress getting all done up by the little key’vin’ta.

“Maybe I will,” Sakie replied with a smirk. “So, how about that photo shoot tomorrow, huh? You could be the next Stoned centerfold you know. You’d look perfect in jadeite. That’s your favorite mineral, isn’t it? What do you say? Yes?”

“If it’ll get you to stop pestering me to try out every imaginable type of stone there is for at least a week, then fine,” Tachi sighed. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d let the cougaress treat her to the not-so-tender mercies of her digital gorgon collection. She was a mining engineer, after all. If there was

one fetish she could find it in herself to embrace, it was petrification.

“Alright then!” Sakie replied with a wide grin. “I’ll be waiting for you at thirteen hundred. It should only take an hour... or two. Or maybe three. We’ll see.”

Fsssssh!

“Oh!” Jumie sputtered as Ki’su finished her off with a quick spray to the head. In a virtual instant, she had been rendered a completely inanimate blow up doll, with a face as horribly cheap looking as it could possibly be. With no ability to stay upright of her own accord, and no inclination of anyone else in the room to help, she slowly toppled over onto the floor in front of the extremely delighted key’vin’ta.

Chyka looked on with considerable bemusement and not just a little twinge of curiosity. What did it actually feel like to be transformed into an inflatogummy? Despite her best efforts to take a taste of various exotic experiences in preparation for the Destiny Explorer’s maiden voyage, she’d yet to try going inflato. It was, perhaps, a bit of an

oversight on her part. It was one of the more popular Gelitech products, and everyone who used it seemed to enjoy it right up to the moment they were stripped of their ability to express themselves. Now, watching Jumie transform for at least the fifteenth time, she found it more than just a little tempting. Were it not for the ship's upcoming departure from Mashiva, she probably would have had her little key'vin'ta priestess give her a nice big squirt.

Just the thought of letting herself become involved in such mischief got the corrupting blackness starting to well up within her coating of pearly white biogel. It formed along her spine at first, before starting to creep in little sinuous threads over her shoulders and around her ribcage. The further it spread, the more of her body it covered, the more she felt the urge to make some transformative mischief of her own.

The little snow leopardess was usually inclined to keep her corrupted side in check. She only let it show when it might serve some useful purpose. Sometimes it was a show of

power. At other times it was just to create an alien appearance.

Now, however, she allowed the corruption to take deeper root. She let it give her ideas. Guide her toward their fruition. And it made well and sure that she was going to enjoy every moment that it held her in its sway.

Chyka looked at the clock which was mounted over the open archway that connected the bedroom and the living room. There was more than enough time for her to go out and have a little fun. There were so many souls close at hand to toy with. Not all of them were required for ship's first journey.

Most of the spare personnel aboard ship were slated to depart back to the Gelarium before the ship was slated to depart. Just like everyone else who had signed up for the project, they'd all consented to 'arbitrary use'. That included arbitrary use by the little corrupted snow leopardess.

"You girls have fun," Chyka said as she leaned back and let herself melt into the glistening black surface of the biogel bed. "I'll

see you upstairs for the departure. Assuming Ki'su hasn't turned you all into pool toys. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Little stringers of glossy white biogel spread out across the bed as the little snow leopardess sank into its obsidian black surface before being slowly absorbed along with the rest of her vanishing body. She closed her eyes as she let the bed swallow her up, body and soul. After a few short moments, the last stringers of white biogel disappeared. It was if she'd never been there.

Chyka hadn't merely entered the mass of gooey slime, as one would do when using the bed for rest or play. Her body had been completely dissolved, leaving her mind free to wander through the vast network of conduits that connected nearly every mass of boigel aboard the ship. The reactor core. The power plants. Furniture. Even much of the alien looking biogel decor was accessible to her as she wandered, looking for the perfect plaything to toy with.

One of Chyka's favorite tricks was to exude herself from among the twisted alien decor as liquid biogel. Then she could become whatever she wanted, and do just about whatever she pleased with the unsuspecting targets. Now, the question was, where to go? Who among the many spare personnel was she going to choose to have her fun with?

There was only one individual who stood out as a perfect target for the mischievous snow leopardess. She had finished her duties, and had just exited one of the volunteer accommodation induction chambers. She was almost certainly on her way to the leave the ship via the nearby docking port and gangway that was still being used by those last few departing Gelarium volunteers.

Chyka directed her mind into the twisting shapes that lined the starboard side forward extension of the ship's lobby. She collected herself into the black biogel shapes that lay beneath and around the pearly white, spine-like tubes, esoteric organs, and partial, vaguely humanoid shapes that covered the corridor walls. Then she willed herself to ooze out from

these black crevices, furiously bubbling and spurting forth as white liquid biogel, dribbling and splattering herself into a thick pool of glimmering white slime upon the polished black corridor floor.

“Oh!” Pirra exclaimed as she watched the gurgling mass of slime swirl about and begin to rise like a ball of pearly white dough. “What the...”

Chyka took her time reforming her body from the pool of slime. Upward it grew into a wavering humanoid shape. Over the next few seconds, this vague shape slowly resolved into that of the petite snow leopardess’ natural physique. As a final act, the thick gel pulled away from her face. She smiled at the stunned ashiri. “Ah! There you are!”

“Oh! Hi!” Pirra exclaimed as the blackness that writhed within the little snow leopardess’ glossy white coating rapidly spread until it covered most of her arms, legs, and back. “I didn’t... I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Neat, isn’t it?” Chyka responded with a sly smile as she stepped forward until she was

standing quite close to the surprised ashiri. Black tendrils writhed beneath the remainder of her pearly white biogel surface as the urge to conduct mischief shifted into a definite intention.

“It’s kind of scary, to be honest,” Pirra replied with a nervous look on her face. “But I guess... well... I guess it’s kind of cool too.”

“So... what *are* you up to?” Chyka asked as the tendrils of blackness beneath the surface of her biogel coating began to rub and toke at her tender places. It was the corruption’s way of making sure she was completely into whatever it was she was about to do to her hapless target. Once it began began its nefarious pleasure-making, she had almost no choice but to follow through, and to thoroughly enjoy every moment of it. Not that she generally minded. If she’d already gotten to the point where they were taking control, then she was already quite ready to proceed.

“Oh, I was just... uh... finished up with the last batch of volunteers,” Pirra replied, biting

her lower lip. "Do you... need me for something else?"

"You might say that," Chyka purred as she pondered just what sort of transformation would best suit both target and environment. There wasn't really much at hand for inspiration. Not unless one counted the alien decor. That gave the little snow leopardess a very interesting idea. "What would you think of spending some real, quality time here? Hmm? Taking in the ambiance? Steeping yourself in the decor?"

"Uh... I... I don't know," Pirra responded with an anxious shrug. "I mean... it's... interesting and all. But... oh. You mean..."

"Mhmm," Chyka replied with a wide, almost toothy grin as the ashiri realized exactly what sort of thing she was proposing.

"Oh... goddess," Pirra gasped with an expression that was equal parts horror and resignation. "You're... you're going to... really?"

“Why not?” Chyka cooed. “You... that beautiful face, cast in immortal biogel and preserved in youth for all eternity. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“I... I don’t know,” Pirra responded with a deeply recalcitrant shrug.

“Now... decisions, decisions,” Chyka mused. “I was thinking something along the lines of... well... something more alien than artistic. Bizarre. Unsettling, even. Something that will invoke both horror and temptation in equal measure. Mmm. Don’t you think that would suit you nicely?”

“I... uh...” Pirra sputtered. “I... I guess?”

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Chyka purred as a pair of thick, glistening black tendrils stretched out from the wall behind the nervous ashiri. “This is going to feel amazing. Really.”

“Really?” Pirra questioned before freezing like a deer caught in headlights as the tendrils brushed against both of her shoulders. “Ah! Uh...”

“Yes, really,” Chyka replied as the tendrils pressed firmly into and then merged with the glistening biogel upon the shocked ashiri’s shoulder blades. “Now just relax. Take a deep breath. Let it take you. It’ll be done before you even know it.”

Pirra gasped as the tendrils pulled her back against the wall, and against one of the disturbingly spine shaped tubes in particular. This white structure turned obsidian black as its sharp, protruding elements stretched out to penetrate her back and merge with her own vertebrae. She gasped and wiggled against the hardening connection. After a few seconds, her entire spine was rendered completely immobile. “I... I... can’t...”

The wall lifted the sputtering ashiri up by her spine. A pair of deep black openings formed within the twisted structure of the wall, just to either side of the spine, and at about the height of her knees. Bony black biogel tentacles burst forth from these holes. They grabbed her by the ankles and, in concert with further movements of the spine, contorted her until they could pull her feet into the shallow

openings. Her legs slowly followed, absorbed into the biogel as the spinal element pulled upward and curved until it held her at a shallow outward angle.

“Unh!” the shocked ashiri grunted as her arms began to melt into the sides of her torso. Glistening white biogel began to overtake the black as her belly began to shrink inward. Before long her entire midriff was gone. There was only her upper body and her lower abdomen, connected together by nothing but her glossy white spine.

New tendrils now stretched out from the wall, toward the back of her head. They sucked up her short, deep purple hair before pressing into her head. Skin and skull transformed into biogel as the tendrils delved inward. Each then split into countless microscopic filaments which insinuated themselves into her living brain, for no reason other than to make her intensely aware of her transition from person to object.

Pirra panted and gasped as two thick phalli slid out from the wall and into her pussy and

anus. Up they drove, stretching the biogel that now made up what was left of her abdomen into the open space that had once been her tender belly. In and out, ever so slowly, they began to pump in perfect synchrony with the throbbing faux-organs elsewhere amid the alien shapes on the wall.

“Uh... uh... uh...” the ashiri huffed as what little was left of her legs parted from the wall and melted into an enticingly erotic roundness that stretched over her rump and merged seamlessly into her hips. Her white biogel chest pulled taut over her ribs, and black biogel appeared between. Her breasts became firm lumps, ideally poised to attract the attention of curious hands. The blackness then welled up around her neck, before spreading through her mouth and lips.

White biogel spread over and through Pirra’s face as she gasped and shuddered. After a few short moments only her quivering, dark gray eyes were left. She could only gaze into her corrupt mistress’ eyes and wait for the biogel to take these final fleeting vestiges of her mortal flesh.

Chyka smiled as the ahsiri's eyes grew wide for a moment before the blackness took them from within. "So... strangely beautiful, aren't you?"

The new work of art couldn't reply. It had fallen completely still. Its eyes were frozen wide open. Its expression was fixed in a state of horrified delight. Whether or not the mind captive within felt the same was something only the little snow leopardess could know, and she didn't really care enough to bother asking.

Chyka hummed softly as she reached up to run her fingers over the frozen face. It looked so... serene. So... perfect. But was it really finished? Was there something more she could add? Could it use some... functionality?

The little snow leopardess reached down to take hold of the throbbing phalli that continued to thrust within the open space of the transformed ashiri's abdomen. She let them stroke her right hand from within the biogel that made up her artwork's abdomen. An insidious, and insidiously kinky, idea popped into her head.

The biogel that coated the phalli melted away, allowing them both to thrust out into the open. "That's better," she mused as she caressed the huge throbbing cocks. "Now you can ejaculate on anyone who tries to give you a hand job. Aim well enough and they'll get a full coating of shiny white biogel just like ours. Won't that be fun?"

Chyka laughed as both phalli squirted her with their biogel ejaculate. It was the perfect snare for the unwary. And to make it even more perfect, she willed the alien walls a very complementary, and very perilous property. Anyone who had any amount of ejaculated biogel on their body might find themselves being snatched up by the walls, just as the ashiri had been.

"Why make just one when I can have a whole collection?" the little snow leopardess chuckled as she imagined the myriad ways new victims could be incorporated into the twisted architecture. She could choose them herself, or perhaps she could let the soul within the ship's biogel reactor core decide. It was they who'd been given free reign to compose the walls as

they already existed. Surely they'd be able to do far better with a supply of unwitting subjects to incorporate into the structures.

"Why didn't I think of this before?" Chyka hummed as she took a step back to look over her new creation. "It's such a perfect complement to the style, isn't it? I can't wait to see the whole lobby filled with them. The whole ship. It's going to be amazing!"

The little snow leopardess leaned back against the opposite wall and contemplated her work of art. Time slipped past as she imagined what others might look like given similar treatment. Jumie. Tachi. Sakie. Nanya. Even little mischievous Ki'su.

A sharp noise brought Chyka back to reality, and back from the thrall of the corruption. The black biogel vanished from her body, leaving her clad all in pearly white. She took a deep breath and a moment to regain her composure.

Another sharp bang could be heard, coming from the other side of the ship's lobby. This was followed by a clatter of chains. They were

disengaging the gangway. It was almost time for the ship to depart.

FOUR

TRANSDIMENSIONAL

The Desinty Explorer rose up out of the water with a smooth, subtle grace that belied its impressive twenty thousand ton mass. It floated skyward, trailing little streams of refreshingly clear mountain water like some archaic airship fresh out of the shower. Its glistening white sails shimmered in the noonday sun, drawing the curious attention of all who were near enough to see it.

One had to wonder what those puzzled spectators were thinking as they watched the strange vessel turn eastward, toward the vast floodplains beneath the vertigo inducing Mashiva bluff. Were they wondering just what sorts of glossy biogel madness had been stuffed

into its shapely hull? Were they pondering what sort of mischief that its crew was sure to be contemplating for whatever lucky destination that they had selected for its maiden voyage? Perhaps they were wondering what sort of captain had dared to take command of the ship, and whether or not he, or she, was just as crazy as all the rest of Gelitech's biogel addicted staff?

The Destiny Omega's conventional field effect thrusters thundered to life, spitting brief lances of bright yellow fire aftward before settling into an intense orange glow. If there were any potential spectators who hadn't noticed the ship thus far, they were certainly looking at it now. They all watched the ship as it rumbled overhead, like an old fashioned jet airplane, annoying elderly curmudgeons and uptight librarians all along its route to the ascent zone over the vast floodplain beyond the bluffs along the city's eastern edge.

There was no real need for the ship to make use of its backup engines as it soared over the city. They could have just as easily been tested before it had taken off. As to why they hadn't...

well... not even the ship's ruling mistress knew that. She might have been in charge, but she wasn't really in command.

The Destiny Explorer had no captain. Nor did it have a crew, in the conventional sense. Besides a small cadre of engineers and security staff, everyone aboard were models, scientists, and volunteer test subjects. Instead, the ship was controlled entirely by its biogel core and all of its various connected systems. That core was controlled, albeit in somewhat indirect fashion, by none other than Omega herself. Those aboard were just there for the ride... and to deal with whatever might be located at their destination, as best as they could manage, and with what resources they already happened to have at hand.

Exactly what their destination was, well, that was a mystery. All they knew was that they were going somewhere distant in order to meet up with a grand von'kir collector ship. Their mission was to acquire the secrets behind their transformative artifices, and the means to craft new ones in forms more suitable for biogel compatible entertainment purposes. What it

might cost was reflected in the number of volunteer test subjects brought aboard prior to launch. There were just over three hundred of them, each of whom had been encapsulated in a block of glistening crystal biogel and left to dream as they waited to discover just what fate had in store for their bodies and their souls.

As the ship roared past the rocky bluffs and over the floodplain, its nose lifted skyward. Again the engines flared and began to jet a searing white energy from their exhaust ports. Up the ship went, racing past birds, aerospace liners, and a ponderous old heavy freighter that seemed quite a bit less than enthused with its crew's desire to head spaceward.

Clouds flashed past and the curvature of the planet became clearly visible. The light blue sky became darker and darker. After a few fleeting moments, the ship had burst free of the atmosphere and into the blackness of space.

"That was sooooo cool," Sakie murmured as she leaned on the polished wooden railing and watched the planet fall away in the distance.

“Pa’sho’ni’ka,” Ki’su responded as she stared at her receding homeworld with eyes so wide that they looked like they might pop out at any moment. “How... how is this even possible? It is madness! And all to make transaction with those vile von’kir! Insanity!”

“I’m sure they’re going to feel just the same way,” Chyka mused as she gazed out the high windows that covered the aft side of the ship’s uppermost deck. “But really, don’t you think you’d like to know their secrets? Imagine the creative ways you can come up with to shrivel Jumie. I’ll bet she’ll love it as much as she does getting turned into a balloon.”

“Ka’pa’ti’ka,” Ki’su sighed. “They are still the von’kir. They want slaves to stoke their fragile egos, not deals with competitors who want to deny them their supply of pets!”

“We’ll see,” Chyka responded with a mischievous smirk as she pondered the numerous promises she’d been allowed to make in exchange for the critical information that they sought. “I’m sure we can present a

very compelling argument that our business can be good for their business.”

“Ma’ta’mph!” Ki’su exclaimed in reply.

The rumble of the ship’s conventional engines faded as Maria IV became little more than a bright blue spot in the distance. In its place rose a low, liquid throbbing sound as the ship’s primary biogel field coils began to energize. Ensnared within the ship’s two huge biogel power plants, one hundred and twenty-eight captive souls were having their fundamental essence sucked upon with such vigor that all were at risk of experiencing unintended and potentially quite bizarre consequences. The resulting energy was flowing through the ship’s complex network of biogel conduits, much of it finding its way into the exotic field coils that had taken the place of the conventional engines in adhering the ship to the very substance of space in which it was traveling. Adhesion provided traction, and by varying the and this allowed the ship to move in almost arbitrary fashion.

Mere movement, however, wasn't the object of such power being pumped into the coils. Adhesion soon transitioned into repulsion as the generated field began to slip and slide against the substance of space. The ship was, quite literally, losing its grip on reality. Like a giant walking on slowly thinning ice, and eventual break through the spatial-dimensional barrier was virtually inevitable.

GLRRRAUUAUAGRLAGCH!

The sound thundered through the Destiny Omega as a hole in space suddenly appeared, allowing the ship to fall bodily into the transitional realm. This half-way domain wasn't the familiar domain of real space. Nor was it entirely a higher order dimensional space. It was a non-space in between the planar border between one and the other. As long as the ship's field coils remained active, the ship could move through this place, and even 'dive down' to a place with far less fundamental resistance, and thus a far, far higher speed of light.

There was always the risk of going too far, though. Diving into the transitional realm was as much a climb as it was a descent. There was a hump in the middle. The closer one got the peak of the hump, the less power it required to remain in the transitional space. As long as one remained on the entry side of the hump, a loss of power would result in a slide back to an equivalent point in real space. Going over the hump allowed for the fastest speeds, but carried with it the risk that loss of power or control might well result in falling away into higher order space.

No one really knew what happened when a normal space object entered the higher order space as-is. No one really wanted to know, either. There only seemed to be one way to find out, and that was just too risky a proposition even for the most irresponsible of modern scientists.

The Destiny Explorer slid through the luminous purple haze. Bursts of energetic lighting flashed all around as the haze got darker and darker. The ship was approaching the peak of the hump. There, just on the entry

side was the so-called 'green zone', where the ratio of power to speed to safety was considered the most acceptable for routine travel.

Despite its incredible speed, to the eyes of Chyka and her companions, the ship seemed to be going quite slowly. The bursts of lightning seemed almost stationary relative to the ship, when one would expect them to be little more than momentary flashes or fleeting streaks dashing by outside the windows. Relative to normal space the ship was actually moving the equivalent of roughly thirty thousand times the speed of light. This was just about as fast as one could hope to go without going over the hump, sufficient to cross the whole of the galaxy in about two years.

Thankfully, the Destiny Omega didn't have nearly that far to go. A few days would suffice to transit the two hundred and fifty light years of space between Maria IV and the starless 'dark system' where the von'kir collector was believed to be lurking. A few very long days, during which the ship's highly energetic biogel

systems might well attract all sorts of strange transdimensional mischief.

“What’s our stats?” Chyka asked, turning toward her favorite Vixie personal assistant.

“This vessel is trans-space at a depth of four thousand, nine hundred, and fifty relative kilometers, and holding steady,” Vixie replied in her vaguely feminine monotone drone. “Power plants are providing full power to the field coils. Trans-space speed is a highly favorable thirty point nine five eight. Time to destination is currently three days and four hours. Estimated time of arrival in oh eight hundred and thirty six.”

“Thank you,” Chyka replied with a bemused smile at her personal assistant. Nenyra always insisted wearing her mask in public, no matter how long that meant being a virtual slave to the ship’s core. Perhaps she just liked giving up all control of her body and mind. Or perhaps it was just a convenient way to avoid the random attentions of Ki’su. Either way, the little snow leopardess couldn’t help herself but enjoy imagining what the shibbi must be feeling as

she lived the life of a puppet. Perhaps some day she'd try it herself. Just for a little bit. Just to see what it was like.

A chime sounded.

"Trans-space stability achieved," the deep, womanly voice of the ship declared. "Trans-space variance level is high. Please exercise diligence in observation of potential anomalous biogel-trans-space interactions. Thank you."

Sakie grimaced. "That doesn't sound very reassuring."

"Ma'ra'ki'ta?" Ki'su muttered as she shifted about uncomfortably. "Why do I feel so... tingly?"

Chyka could feel it as well. It strange, tingly sensation that spread through the whole of her body. It reminded her of a warning she'd received more than once as a child living in the mountains north of Mashiva. A warning about the dangers of being outside during a thunderstorm. More specifically, the one thing that nature might deign to offer as a warning

that one was about to be the target of lightning strike.

“Lightning...” the little snow leopardess murmured as the electric tingling intensified.

Outside in a field, the only potential chance to evade a strike was to lay down and hope the lightning would find an easier path to ground. In transdimensional space, coated from neck to toe in a transdimensionally acting substance, however, there was simply no place to hide. Fortunately, the ship and its biogel network had been designed to mitigate the worst of the effects.

A searing flash of blue-white energy enveloped the Destiny Explorer. The whole ship shuddered as a loud, metallic thump echoed through the hull. The lights flickered. The fans that circulated air through catalyst filters sped up for a brief and very audible moment before fading back into background.

“What the...” Sakie sputtered with shocked disbelief as she stared out into the strange, dark gray blankness beyond the windows. “What just happened? Where... where are we?”

"The Destiny Omega is still on course through trans-space," Vixie replied as the auto-darkening windows slowly regained their transparency.

"Damage?" Chyka asked as the tingling seemed to bounce back and forth through her a bit before fading away altogether.

"No damage to hull integrity or systems recorded," Vixie replied. "Cosmetic delamination of the upper layer of the ablative hull coating amidships port and below the waterline aft starboard has been detected."

"Crew?" Chyka inquired.

"Variable trans-space flux was recorded within the Destiny Omega's field envelope," Vixie replied. "Unpredictably interacting echoes remained well past the primary event. Biogel systems not affected. Integrated biological organisms status acceptable for continued mission profile."

"Acceptable for continued mission profile?" Chyka questioned. There was only one reason for the ship's core to use that kind of wording,

and it didn't bode well. "What do you mean by that?"

A chime sounded.

"Chyka? Alluwa here," the slightly annoyed sounding voice of Dr. Anshi Alluwa called out. "Can you come down to deck five? We've got a bit of a... well... an issue here."

Chyka groaned, shaking her head as she turned to head forward toward the lifts. "On my way..."

FIVE

COMING SOON...