

GELITECH

THE NEW LIBRARIAN

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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SEASON 3 – EPISODE 2

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MIDNIGHT

The silence was deafening.

Well, it was *almost* deafening. Every so often, its all-encompassing peacefulness was quite rudely interrupted by a soft rustle. The hushed sound of a chair sliding on smooth carpet. The low rumble of a wheeled ladder as it was rolled ever so carefully along the meticulously dusted and polished wooden shelves.

The exquisite shelving, along with the rest of the Mashiva Mariners' University Library's furnishings, was all hand crafted from native timarri oak. The wood was stained in a truly lustrous deep brown which glimmered in the light of the brass lanterns that hung over the

aisles. Brass accents were everywhere, from the corners of the reading tables, to the railings of the upper level balconies, to the hinges of the locked cabinets that protected the more delicate and valuable books in the library's extensive collection. Potted plants were placed all around the lower level, specially selected for their naturally humidity controlling properties.

Also located on the lower level was the library information desk. This was tucked in between the lifts on the eastern end of the library and kept staffed all day, every day. The assistant librarians who called their modestly equipped little open office home were mostly graduates with library science degrees who hoped to use the job as a stepping stone to a full fledged academic librarian position, or perhaps to a senior position at one of the city's numerous public libraries. Few intended to stay on for very long. Being a librarian was one thing. Dealing with students who didn't know that they didn't know what they were actually

looking for, 8 hours a day, 4 days a week, however, was something else entirely.

It wasn't that Chyka found the job stressful. Being a night librarian was actually quite boring. Granted, she was never lost for new things to read, but that could only go so far to keep her mind occupied.

Every so often, the little snow leopardess would get a strong yearning to cast off the stuffy mantle of 'librarian' and leave M.M.U. in search of something different. Normally, those moments of yearning would vanish the moment someone decided that they needed her help to find that one book that they'd heard about, but didn't actually exist, because they were remembering something completely different than what they'd been told. Recently, however, those moments of yearning were becoming more frequent. They were also starting to tug in her directions against which her common sense ought to have rebelled.

Chyka had long since become desensitized to the more repellent aspects of transformative xenoexperience, of course, and that was even before one considered all she'd been through in 'that other life'. It had only been a few days since she'd found herself all the way back at this point in time. One would have thought it would have been hard for her to slide back into the life she'd been living before... before all that. In reality, she hadn't had any difficulty at all.

It had only taken a good, thoroughly exhausted night's sleep to leave the little snow leopardess feeling as if 'that other life' really had just been a dream. A dream with a strange premonition of the future. A premonition that had momentarily given her strange powers over things that she couldn't quite comprehend anymore.

So far as Chyka could now tell, she'd never actually been anything besides an assistant librarian. At least, that was how she felt deep

down inside, despite knowing full well that there were real world consequences of that 'dream' still taking place all around her. Perhaps it was for the best that her connection to it all was fading. The less she remembered, the safer she would be. Safer, that is, unless that lost branch reality came looking for her...

Chyka looked at the clock and sighed. It was midnight. She was supposed to be getting a brand new student assistant on the weekends. That student was now two hours late showing up, though given all the stress new freshman were under, even before the start of classes, that was no real surprise. They often forgot, or thought they were supposed to start only after classes had begun. It was just as well. The only thing worse than being bored in the library alone, was being bored with someone else.

PSHHHHHH!

Chyka's ears perked up. A door had opened way down at the far end of the library. With

nothing else to do, she tried to deduce which door it had been. Was it one of the lavatories? No. No echo. It couldn't be the head librarian's office either. She was off on weekends. Stairwells? Perhaps. Most of the students used the stairs. But... it sounded just a tad too sharp. Given the lack of other possibilities, it must have been one of the lifts. But who was wandering into the library on a stormy weekend night, two days before classes were set to begin?

A wave of heavy rain washed over the library's three story high windows. The storm was finally starting to taper off. The thunder and lightning were gone. So too was the constant rumble of heavy rain. This had been replaced by a light patter, occasionally punctuated with a momentary downpour.

It was one of these downpours that now left Chyka's sensitive ears deaf to what might be happening all the way down at the other end of the library. Granted, she could look at the

video feeds that were displayed on the south wall of her office. Turning her head, however, seemed a bit too much like work. Instead, she looked up from her xeno-kink magazine and down two long lines of old fashioned reading desks that ran the full length of the library. She didn't see anyone.

“Odd,” Chyka remarked to herself as she looked back to her magazine and the fascinating, very well illustrated article on the pleasures of becoming marketable vegetable produce. “Must be one of the cleaners.”

The cleaners had been working on the library's two upper levels for hours. Their job involved dusting, replacing air filters, steaming the carpet, and engaging in all of the other various sundry tasks that were required to keep the library looking pristine. As far as the little snow leopardess knew, they were going to leave the bottom floor for last. That way all the dust that had been blown down the open, three story galleries at each side of the

library could settle before being cleaned up.

Chyka waited for the usual sounds that marked the beginning of that final stage of cleaning. There was, however, no whirl of the handheld vacuum brushes that were used to clean the books. No rolling of the ladders to get them out of the way. No sounds whatsoever, that could be heard over the roaring downpour.

“New student, I guess,” the little snow leopardess murmured to herself as she began to explore the bizarrely tempting wonders of ‘melonification’.

M.M.U.’s maritime book collection was quite popular with new students looking to get some sense of the scope and history of the fields in which they were about to become educated. Of the three sets of shelves to each side of the reading desks, this collection filled all but the outward facing shelves. Those were mostly filled with casual reading and periodicals, made more easily accessible to students who’d

come to the library for some peace and quit among the lush greenery and comfortable seating the library's outer wall.

It was from the collection of recent periodicals that Chyka had acquired her magazine. At the moment, its contents were far more interesting than the mystery of the opening door. The very idea that someone had engineered a plant that could transform someone like herself into a vaguely humanoid, super-sweet watermelon seemed quite ludicrous. The fact that there were plenty of volunteers to undergo the process seemed even more so. But there it was. And there they were. A thousand credits a piece, and if the reviews were accurate, worth every last bite.

“I can't even imagine what that must be like,” the little snow leopardess murmured as she tried to imagine what it must feel like to be a melon. To be getting sliced or cubed and eaten. And what would happen to her soul, trapped in the juicy flesh of the melon? Would

it actually be consumed along with her melon body? “I wish there were some way to know. To just try it. But there never is, is there?”

The downpour abated. New sounds greeted the little snow leopardess’ ears. There was a soft snap. A hesitant squitch. A plaintive squeak. The variety of stretchy, rubbery sounds seemed to have no end as their source wandered their way in her general direction.

Chyka again looked up over the help desk counter. She may not have been able to see who was approaching, but the sounds of their approach were more than enough to give her a good idea of what sort of person it might be. For starters, it simply *had* to be someone who’d only recently been introduced to a neck to toe quit of biogel. Every biogel wearing soul would make some pretty kinky sounds as they walked around, but only a biogel newbie could manage to make that kind of racket. Given that this was M.M.U., that biogel newbie was almost surely a student who’d just gotten

themselves snared by the whole biogel lifestyle thing.

It wasn't just any old student, either. Anyone but a freshman would have much better things to do with their new biogel suit at midnight on a weekend. The more the little snow leopardess thought about it, however, the more she was convinced that even a freshman would have much better things to do with their new coating of shiny black goo.

Chyka shook her head and turned back to her magazine. Still, the rubbery sounds were getting closer. And closer. And closer. Again, she looked up over the counter. As she did so, the rubbery sounds came to a very abrupt halt...

THE HELP DESK

“Uh... hello?” Chyka inquired in her soft, ‘librarian’s voice’ as she looked around to try and figure out exactly where all the squeaky racket had been coming from. “Can I help you?”

The rubbery sounds began again. They were coming from off to the left, several cross-aisles down from the help desk. They seemed much more pensive now, as if their source wasn’t quite sure she actually wanted to be seen. There were several starts and stops before the tan skinned elf-ear poked her head out to look this way and that. As far as the little snow leopardess could tell, the woman had become completely confused with the library’s very simple layout.

“Hi,” Chyka said a little bit louder. She couldn’t help but wonder this new student had imbibed a bit more ‘nip than she should have over the course of the evening. “You seem a bit lost. Can I help you?”

“Oh! Ah... I... uh...” the elf-ear sputtered as she staggered out from between the bookshelves. The expression on her face was strained as if she were struggling with some heavy burden, even though she wasn’t carrying anything. Nor was she dressed in anything, save a glossy black coating of biogel. “I’m... uh... having trouble...”

“Oh!” Chyka exclaimed as the awfully familiar looking elf-ear tried her best to hobble toward the help desk on the high platform ‘soles’ that her biogel coating had put under her feet. “Let me help you!”

“Thank you,” the elf-ear replied with a look of considerable relief on her face as the little snow leopardess opened the swinging help

desk gate and started toward her. “I’m... I’m so sorry I’m late. This... this suit is so hard to walk in. I didn’t realize how long it would take me to get here.”

“It’s okay!” Chyka replied, taking one of the elf-ear’s right arm in her left and leading her toward the desk. “It happens this time of year. A lot. At least you’re working out the kinks before you have to try to walk to classes. Some girls wait to go out for the first time until the very last minute and... well... it’s something to watch, I’ll say that much.”

“I’ll... I’ll bet,” the elf-ear replied, doing her best to feign a laugh as the little snow leopardess got her leaning on the high help desk counter. “I really hope this job doesn’t require any walking right now. Does it?”

“Ah! So, you’re my new assistant, are you?” Chyka asked as she held open the gate for the elf-ear. “Come in and sit down before your legs give out. Shoes that tall are pretty exhausting

for us short girls, aren't they?"

"They really are," the elf-ear replied as she followed the snow leopardess' gaze to one of the several fancy faux-leather office chairs that were located behind the desk. She slowly settled her perfectly polished backside down into the thick cushion amid a new cacophony of rubbery squips, snaps, and squitches. "Sorry! I just can't help it."

"It's okay," Chyka chuckled as she returned to her own chair, right beside the elf-ear. "All the biogel clad girls are noisy like that when they sit down."

"It's so embarrassing though," the elf-ear replied, shaking her head and blushing slightly. "So... um... I... I don't actually remember your name from the message though I was kind of..."

"Tied up dealing with the shiny black goo, eh?" the little snow leopardess replied with a warm smile. "It's okay. I'm Chyka. And, I have

to confess, no one left message letting me know who you were. They just told me someone was going to show up tonight.”

“I’m Nanya,” the elf-ear said with an expression that might possibly be interpreted as something approaching a smile.

Chyka’s heart skipped a beat. No wonder she’d looked so familiar. But... how was it even possible? Hadn’t the Nanya she’d known spent years trapped in Gelitech’s biogel network? Clearly, this Nanya had only just encountered biogel. And... she didn’t look quite as old as the Nanya who’d revealed herself in the bathroom back at Gelitech. Was she actually the same person, or was Nanya just a common name among the shibi?

“Pleased to meet you, Nanya,” Chyka responded as she tried to figure out the puzzle. Perhaps this was the same Nanya, and she’d been sent by Lady Anwae to... what? Ensnare her in the Unity again? Or... had she done

something amid all the time jumping to upset more than just her own path in life?

Try as she might, the little snow leopardess could not, for the life of her, figure out how she could have affected something that took place prior to her waking up aft her the final time jump. She hadn't done anything before that point in the timeline, had she?

A sudden flash of insight came to Chyka. If it wasn't something that she'd done, then maybe it was something that she hadn't. She'd never gone back in time to the ancient Dari temple, had she? But how could her brief time there have affected the present without affecting it in a much larger fashion?

The little snow leopardess sorted through her memories of that trip into the distant past. The arrival at the temple. Her being led down beneath, into that terrifying chamber. The pit. And... the mi'ah who had let herself be dragged down into the Nine Heavenly Hells. The tan

skinned, elf-eared mi'ah. Was it actually possible that the self sacrificing mi'ah and Nanya were somehow related?

Chyka shook the puzzle from her mind. It didn't really matter, did it? This was a whole new reality, and she was just going to have to accept it all for what it was.

“Have you even worked in a library before?” the little snow leopardess inquired.

“No,” Nanya replied, shaking her head. “It's not very easy, is it? And all the walking...”

“Don't you worry about walking!” Chyka replied with a chuckle. “This isn't like a public library. Students are expected to re-shelf their own books.”

“Ah,” Nanya responded with a shallow nod.

“Typically, if they need more than a few for something, they'll just snag copies from the book-fab,” Chyka went on, gesturing toward

the large machine that took up about a quarter of the office frontage, between the gate and the left wall. “Day staff takes care of any of the bulk returns from the academic staff and whatnot. We only have to run around if there’s a problem that needs to be documented, or someone’s looking for something that isn’t where it’s supposed to be. Stuff like that. We also do any paperwork on books that have gone properly missing, though that pretty much never happens around here. Unless it’s something that’s valuable in and of itself, we just use the book-fab to make a new one.”

“So, basically, we just sit here and wait for someone to come looking for help?” the elf-ear asked with a raised eyebrow.

“More or less,” Chyka responded. “It’s honestly the perfect time to do assignments and study. Well, for you. For me... I kind of just read a lot. There’s really not much else to do.”

“Ah,” Nanya replied. “So... why do they need

me to help you?”

“No idea, really,” Chyka responded with a shrug. “I guess it’s just supposed to be part of the maritime education. Everyone has a job aboard ship, even when they’re still training. Speaking of which, have you perused the library layout and orientation book yet?”

“Not yet, no,” Nanya answered.

“They didn’t send them to you, did they?” Chyka replied, shaking her head as she got up from her chair. She turned to the overhead cabinets on the right side of the office. She slid a pair of particularly worn looking book copies to the edge of the desk with one foot, before stepping up onto them in lieu of a step-stool. “Don’t worry. They never do. It’s not like there isn’t plenty of time to read it here, though. It’s really well written too. It’ll get you oriented with everything in no time.”

“Sounds good,” Nanya responded as she watched the petite snow leopardess stretch to

open one particular cabinet door.

“Almost...” Chyka muttered to herself as she pulled the door open before reaching inside to grab at a small blue binder which was quite helpfully labeled ‘Library Orientation’. It wasn’t proving very easy to pull out, however, and the little snow leopardess found herself needing to get up and kneel on the desk to get a good grip on it. “Almost...”

As the little snow leopardess pulled the recalcitrant binder out, it snagged on an unlabeled cardboard box. Someone had jammed the box in between the binders and office supplies, and now the changing pressure on it caused it to pop out with considerable force.

“Ah!” Chyka exclaimed as the box went tumbling over her shoulder. “Dammit! Look out!”

The box hit the floor just behind the surprised snow leopardess’ unoccupied chair

and immediately burst wide open. It's contents, tightly wrapped in a strange, glistening black bubble wrap, bounced clear across the office. As it tumbled, the bubble wrap started to unroll. By the time that it came to a rest, by back of the self-service book-fab, it was almost completely unwrapped.

“Oh! I hope that didn't break! It looks important!” Chyka exclaimed as she climbed down from the desk and raced to pick the unusual object up off the floor. It was a mask of some sort, with a sensuously curved clear face plate mounted surrounded around its edge with a thick, shiny black seal. It reminded her of a face hugging dive mask, or the face plate of an envirosuit, minus the rest of the helmet. “What... what the heck is *this*?”

The mask had clearly been designed to seal onto the face of an average humanoid. The thickness of the seal meant it would conform to just about any facial structure, and there was plenty of room under the clear plate for a

feline muzzle. What really caught the puzzled snow leopardess' attention, however, was the lack of any means through which the wearer could breathe. There were no air holes. No artificial gills. No hose connections. Nothing at all.

“There’s no way to breathe in this, is there?” Chyka commented as she lifted the mask up to her face. Surely, there had to be some way for the wearer to breathe. Were the materials porous? Was there something hidden in the thick seal? She just couldn’t help but want to know, and there was only one way to find out.

“Oh,” the little snow leopardess muttered as she the scent of fresh latex rubber filled her nose. She hesitated. The smell of the soft black seal was virtually indistinguishable from the scent given off by Nanya’s biogel suit. Was the seal just made of natural rubber, or was it actually biogel?

“Hmm,” Chyka murmured as she reached

down for the long sheet of tangled up bubble wrap. “Is there anything else in here to say what this is?”

“I thought I saw a folded up paper or something when it was unrolling,” Nanya helpfully noted. “I didn’t see where it went.”

Chyka shook the bubble wrap, but nothing fell out. She then took a good, hard look around the office floor. “Ah!” she exclaimed as her eyes were drawn beneath Nanya’s chair. “There is it!”

The little snow leopardess cast the bubble wrap aside and knelt down to grab the plain looking little booklet from beneath the elf-ear. For the briefest of moments, her nose brushed against Nanya’s right leg. A new smell filled her nose. It was... faintly musky. Oddly sweet. And... it was making her feel kind of... sexy.

Chyka quickly grabbed the stray booklet and returned to her chair. The last thing she wanted to do right now was to start getting the

hots for her new assistant. Who knew what would happen if she started emitting her own pheromones? Would there be a biogel fueled feedback loop leading to a virtually involuntary round of lesbian loving under the desk where no one could see it? Granted, it wouldn't be the first time the carpet down there had been graced with sweet midnight lovemaking... or so the rumors said. She didn't have any real reason to doubt them.

“What does the cover say?” Nanya asked as the little snow leopardess thumbed through the small booklet.

“It says... Gelitech!”

THE MASK

“This is sooooo weird,” Chyka said as she perused the booklet with a mixture of fascination and consternation. The former came from the astonishing nature of the mask. The latter from the fact that she’d been so close to falling victim to its biogel driven powers. “Can you even believe this? It says that if you put this mask on, it’ll instantly transform you into a biogel coated, VixNet controlled Vixie Personal Assistant!”

Nenya didn’t seem to be particularly impressed. In fact, she seemed to be rather put off by the concept. “What’s a Vixie Personal Assistant?” she inquired with a slightly raised eyebrow and deeply suspicious glare at the mask which now lay on the desk between

them. “Is that anything like that stupid VixNeta thing I have to deal with in my dorm room?”

“Sort of,” Chyka replied as she read further. “Wow. Like... it literally turns you into a computer controlled zombie and uses your brain to add ‘organic’ interpretation of requests and results. Complete corenet network integration. Information. Domestic work. Bedtime entertainment. Like... who would willingly do this to themselves?”

“Network integration?” Nanya asked. “Getting turned into a computer controlled zombie? Don’t tell me that’s what they meant...”

“What *who* meant?” Chyka asked, looking up from the booklet to see that something she’d said had made the shibi visibly uncomfortable.

“I got this message about joining the university’s biogel network,” Nanya replied, nervously clasping her hands together as she

glanced up at the little snow leopardess before looking back down to stare at the mask. “It was an invitation. It was really strange. And when I asked VixNeta about what it all meant, it... it tricked me into letting it cover me with this biogel stuff while I was sleeping.”

“Tricked you?” Chyka questioned. There were lots of rules about what Gelitech stuff could and couldn’t do at the University. Tricking people into letting it do things to them was strictly off limits. “I mean, I’ve been told the thing can be pretty cryptic at times, but actually tricked? Are you sure you didn’t mishear something and agree to it by accident? Though... it’s supposed to verify that once or twice afterwards, isn’t it?”

“How would I know?” Nanya replied. “All I know is that it wanted permission to explore the answer to my question about what joining the biogel network really meant, and then it did this to me. And it never gave me an answer, either. All it keeps telling me now is

that I need to explore the possibilities myself. Does that mean I have to go to the network place and see for myself?”

“Uh... right,” Chyka responded with a frown. Was this just an aberration, or had something about Gelitech changed as a result of all the time shifting? “Don’t do that. It’s really not good for your mental integrity.”

“Why?” Nanya questioned.

“Because that involves getting your whole body melted into a mass of liquid biogel, complete with your soul stuck inside, and then getting pumped into the physical biogel network,” Chyka explained. “Then you’ll spend the rest of forever all mixed up with every other mind in there, stripped of your individuality, doing the bidding of whatever particular soul is in charge.”

The little snow leopardess wasn’t supposed to know anything about biogel networks, of course. More importantly, she wasn’t ever, *ever*

supposed to let anyone else know that she knew those things. Her safety depended on it. A sane, rational future for herself and those she'd once known probably depended on it too.

By the time she caught her error, it was much too late for Chyka to correct herself. The best that she could hope for was that her warning might simply dissuade Nanya from getting turned into a digital nutcase in the biogel network. Of course, if Nanya started telling everyone else about it...

“That’s... awful!” Nanya stammered.

“I guess it could be worse. Anyways, everyone who decides to do that knows exactly what they’re getting into beforehand,” Chyka replied in an effort to make the shibi’s being targeted for inclusion in the biogel network seem far less significant than it was. “There’s lots of paperwork and all that. You’re safe as long as you don’t actually start down that path.”

Safe, the shibi almost definitely wasn't. There had to be some reason that they had picked her for the purpose. Some quality they'd judged would make her the perfect member of the gestalt. Some trait that seemed to justify starting her on the path against her will. They weren't going to give up on her easily. Not unless someone else got a hold of her first and made it impossible.

"So... this Vixie mask thing," Chyka said in an effort to change the subject. "This is so strange and fascinating. It says here that this particular version of the mask doesn't actually transform its wearer's body into biogel. It's just a mask, and it can actually be taken off by its owner. I mean, the mask's owner, not the wearer. Hmm..."

"What do you mean, hmm?" Nanya inquired, eyeing the little snow leopardess with suspicion.

"It makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Chyka

responded as a pang of that yearning for change forced its way into her mind. “What it’s like and all that. And... you can actually just try it to find out. There’s no commitment. Well, except for having to wear biogel for the rest of your life bit. And having someone trustworthy to ‘own’ you. But still. You have to wonder what it’s like, right?”

“I suppose,” Nanya replied, eyeing the mask with visible disdain.

“I don’t mean you, specifically,” Chyka replied with a laugh as she started to wrap the mask back up in the shiny black bubble wrap. “And anyway, this thing isn’t mine. The last thing I want to do is mess with it and wind up being told that I get to be Vixie as punishment.”

Chyka wrapped the mask back up as best as she could, tucking the booklet in between layers as she went. It took a few minutes, but she managed to get it wrapped in a reasonably

acceptable fashion. She was no professional packer, though. Getting it back in its box was completely out of the question, no matter how much packing tape she might try to use. She was just going to have to tape a note to it and hope no one was too upset that she'd accidentally opened it.

“You know, I kind of remember something about us maybe getting a Gelitech assistant for the library at night,” the little snow leopardess remarked as she set the mask back down on the desk between the two. “I thought they meant something like VixNeta. Then when I saw you all covered in black goo, I figured maybe it was you. But now... I really have to wonder if it's this Vixie thing. But who's going to wear it? It's not like any of us librarians are into the whole biogel thing. I mean, except for you.”

Nenya shook her head. “I don't think so.”

“Are you sure?” Chyka asked, half-musingly.

“It’s not like it would change your actual job here, would it? It’d keep you out of that whole biogel network mess too, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess,” Nanya replied, shrugging her shoulders. “But... I just... I don’t know.”

“It’s not like you have to commit to it, right?” Chyka responded with a mischievous smile. Her new assistant’s failure to offer a clearly negative response had gotten her thinking. If the shibi was the library’s Vixie, then they couldn’t just make her vanish into the biogel network, could they?

Here I go, messing with the timeline again, the little snow leopardess thought to herself as she pondered the possibilities offered by the mask. Nanya was the only thing she had right now that connected her to experience is that alternative timeline. She really didn’t want to lose her to the biogel network, even if there was still the chance that she’d be taken back out. Even then, it would likely still require

Chyka to don her as a biogel suit, with all the complications that would inevitably result. It just wasn't worth the risk.

The other option was to just let the matter go and risk losing Nanya before she could entangle her in some other way. Given how aggressive they'd been to get her on the road into the biogel network, that path seemed very much out of the question. She had to do something soon, and the Vixie mask seemed like the perfect solution.

The Vixie mask was also the perfect solution to Chyka's boredom and curiosity about xeno-kinks. It would be so much more fun to toy with a brand new Vixie than to sit there reading kinky magazines while the shibi just stared off into space with virtually nothing to do all night. All she had to do was convince the woman to give it a try.

"It's not permanent," Chyka mused. "I'll bet the nights will just fly by too."

“Even if I wanted to,” Nanya said with a deep sigh, “how could I know that you wouldn’t do anything to me when I’m wearing it?”

“Because I’d get in lots of trouble, that’s why,” Chyka replied. She didn’t really know how much trouble she’d actually get into, but she was sure that, at the very least, it would involve getting her own body back into biogel. “You just know I’d wind up with the mask on *my* face if I did anything you wouldn’t want. Or worse.”

Nanya looked down at the wrapped up mask with a slight frown on her face. Several long minutes passed as her expression shifted between displeasure, disdain, curiosity, and uncertainty. It was obvious that she found the mask tempting, though not quite tempting enough to try it without some serious thought.

Chyka opted not to press the issue. She turned back to her magazine and its lurid

article about tourists being turned into giant, succulently sweet melons. If her new assistant was going try on the mask, she was going to have to convince herself to take the last step on her own. Otherwise, she'd probably never trust the little snow leopardess to take care of her while she was wearing it.

More long minutes passed before Nanya reached out to pick up the mask and begin to unwrap it. She pulled out the little pamphlet and began to read it for herself. What was left of her disdainful look slowly faded as she flipped through the pages. "This sounds more like a toy than something serious, doesn't it?" she asked. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to try it, could it? But... but only for a little while. You'll take it off me after a little while? Yes?"

"Sure," Chyka replied, doing her best not to sound too happy with her assistant's decision. "Maybe an hour? How about an hour? Or two if you look like you're enjoying it? Or three if you look like you're *really* enjoying it? How does

that sound?”

“Okay, I guess,” Nenyā replied as she fully unwrapped the mask. She ran her fingers over its thick, jelly-like seal. Countless little rubbery squeaks and snaps ensued. She began to blush ever so slightly, no doubt recalling the rubbery cacophony her own suit of biogel like to make whenever she moved.

Chyka bit her lip as she watched her companion lift the mask up and gaze into the inside surface of glass faceplate. For a moment, the shibi hesitated. Then she pressed the mask home with both hands.

The seal fit snugly around Nenyā’s face. It covered everything but the area between her eyebrows and her chin and extended halfway out over her cheeks. For a very brief moment, it looked like the shibi couldn’t breathe, but then the biogel seal began to liquefy. So too did the biogel around her neck.

Nenyā looked quite shocked as the liquid

biogel from both sources quickly spread over her head, completely sealing it in a perfectly smooth, exquisitely polished, and disturbingly featureless coating. She looked even more shocked as the glass faceplate began to darken. After a few short moments, it had become as shiny black as the biogel that coated her body.

Chyka gawked in curious fascination as the shibi's face vanished behind the darkening faceplate. It was almost instantly replaced by an illuminated faux 8-bit style computer face which reproduced the shibi's expression with uncanny accuracy. Shock became alarm as her body shuddered. Alarm became horror as her body began to fall limp. The 8-bit eyes then closed and the mouth vanished as her body again shuddered a few times.

The little snow leopardess was on the verge of assuming that something had gone horribly wrong when her companion suddenly sat bolt upright. "Uh... are you okay?" she inquired as the 8-bit face switched to a perfectly neutral

expression. “Hello? Is anybody home in there?”

“Hello! My name is Vixie!” the computer controlled shibi replied in a voice just like the shibi’s, only smoother and more ‘idealized’ in tone. “In order for me to perform my duties, I require a registered owner. If you wish to claim ownership of me, please state your name now.”

“Chyka,” the little snow leopardess replied, conveniently forgetting that she wasn’t actually the one who owned the mask. “Chyka Riyalli.”

“Thank you Chyka!” Vixie replied. “In accordance with all applicable laws, I am now no longer a person, but an object in your personal possession. You may utilize me in whatever manner most pleases you, so long it is within my physical and digital ability. Please state your desires at any time, and I shall do my best to fulfill them!”

TO BE CONTINUED...