

GELITECH

EPISODE 5

BLACK AND WHITE

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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I

Chyka yawned and closed her eyes. The wind outside rustled the leafless trees, while little wet gobs of slushy snow pocked and pattered against the creaky old windows. A low, simulated fire cracked in the small stone fireplace, filling the little mountain inn bedroom with a warm, soothingly yellow glow. It was peaceful. Quiet. And relaxing. Very, very relaxing.

The old inn was a cold, drafty place. It had been built almost five hundred years prior, of gray mountain stone, darkly varnished wooden beams and slightly off-white reed plaster. There was little to hint that it was the product of a technologically advanced interstellar civilization. A small control panel here. A small holographic display there. And cleverly simulated fire almost everywhere.

All of the light fixtures in the inn were modeled after antique oil lanterns and wax candles. They glowed with perfectly simulated flickering light, and gave off just enough heat to be convincing, without posing any of the hazards of actual fire. They even smelled like their real counterparts.

The fireplaces were even more advanced. Fictional flames crackled upon real wooden logs, flowing and sparking with perfect realism. The heat given off wasn't perfectly consistent, but rose and fell in tune with the visible flames. The wood itself would slowly char, giving off a pleasant, wood oven scent that even the most finicky nose would find pleasing. Outside, atop the mostly blanketed off stone chimney, a steam generator reproduced the appearance of smoke, into which was infused just enough of the charred wood scent to make the illusion almost perfectly convincing.

If there was one thing that Chyka had come to sorely miss living in the big city, it was the

fireplaces. Sure, they had simulated fireplaces, but they just weren't the same. The wood wasn't real. The scent was just dilute essential oils. And there was no faux-smoke puffing from chimney tops to make a cold winter landscape feel warm and inviting.

Chyka curled up into a little ball and savored the silky smoothness of the deep blue sheets. It had been more than a month since she'd slept in a proper bed. She'd nearly forgotten just how wonderfully snug a big, heavy comforter could be, especially in such a chilly place as this. The plush, shimmery-silver comforter provided by the inn was particularly cozy. So cozy, indeed, that there there seemed to be almost nothing in the whole wide world compelling enough to drag her out from her little slice of sleepy, nighttime paradise.

Whatever lingering thoughts Chyka might have had about alien relics and glowing purple goo had long since faded away, and with them all concerns about the immediate future. Sleep, however,

seemed almost as distant now as it had when she'd crossed the old railroad bridge over the Yu'min River early that cloudy winter morning. She'd gotten much too used to spending her nights encased with her tank-like bed of pure, glistening blackness back at Gelitech. It was there that she and her biogel wife could physically interact with relative freedom, and enjoy mutual pleasures so blissfully intense as to be almost unimaginable.

Here in the little mountain inn, however, Chyka and her wife had to content themselves with more mundane sorts of mutual biogel-marital pleasure. By fingers and massaging flow, as it were. It was still enjoyable. But it was just... missing something. Something that she'd come to take for granted. Something whose absence was making her feel completely out of place in normal society.

It wasn't entirely unexpected, of course. The little snow leopardess had given in to temptation precisely because biogel was going to set her apart as something different. Something apart from the

rest of the world. A harbinger of a new kind of society. A new kind of living.

It was supposed to be a philosophical thing. A metaphysical thing. An intangible thing. So why did it feel so direct? So visceral? So personal?

Chyka sighed and rolled over to look at the little wet blobs of snow that were starting to cover the room's two small windows. It was building up in the spaces of the floral cast iron frame that broke up the slightly yellowed glass. It wouldn't be long before the view outside was completely obscured. It seemed such a shame. Even without leaves on the trees, the small lantern-lit courtyard was such a pretty place to behold, and doubly so in the snow.

The wind was getting stronger. The rustling of tree branches was soon drowned out by a whistling howl. The snowflakes were getting smaller, and drier as the temperature dropped. It started to swirl around the courtyard and pile up

along the walls. If the forecast was accurate, it would be up to the windows before the storm ended sometime the next evening. There was a good chance that the little snow leopardess was about get thoroughly snowed in. All things considered, that might be a very good thing.

Chyka snuggled up more tightly among the covers as the faint, snow-muted sound of a train's horn could be heard somewhere across the mountain valley. There, the single track Sky Line Bypass ran along the valley's edge. An old passenger platform served as the only way into little Myalu village by land. A steel girder bridge formerly used by the Brightstone Mine branch line connected the two, it's railed replaced by thick wooden decking for the convenience of pedestrians and lightweight motorized carts.

It wasn't that far north along the Sky Line that Chyka had been born, in the old post village of Dari. It was a railroad community as dull and drab as Myalu was scenic and quaint. Only three

extended families called it's damp, gray stone houses home. More than half of the village worked for the railroad. It was hard work by modern standards, maintaining the small yard, general line work, and clearing snow from the line between Dari and Kotani to the north, and Chessa to the south. Fairly thankless too. If the work was well done, no one would ever notice the things that went wrong. If it wasn't, however, then *everyone* would.

The little snow leopardess upbringing, in that unpleasant atmosphere of dark moods and demanding schedules, had left her yearning to escape from a very early age. School down the line in Chessa had given her a taste of the outside world, a taste that her family never seemed inclined to share. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The horn sounded again, and with it came a soft, distant rumble. Chyka could hear the accompanying roar and whoosh in her mind as the massive snowblower sent clouds of white fluff

cascading down in the river below. For a moment she smiled as childhood memories of watching the big snowblowers at work flickered before her tired eyes. Then she frowned as darker memories replaced them. Of a father who's obsessively focused world consisted of nothing but steel, horsepower, and backbreaking toil. Of a mother who seemed to detest everything about the world beyond their mountain-bound home. And of siblings that made fun of just about everything that seemed to interest her. Everything except the railroad. Because to them that was all there was. And all there ever would be.

It had been Chyka's great grandmother who'd gotten her out of Dari and into the wider world. She was the sort of old feyli lady who just didn't give a flying rat's ass about what other people thought about her. She did what she did, and no one dared suggest she do otherwise. She was a Marine, after all, and a combat veteran of three conflicts. She had a drill sergeant's mouth, a brigadier's rank, and a tendency to apply a swift

swat of the walking cane to anyone who dared question her thoroughly anti-authoritarian authority.

Chyka smiled. *You're going to university*, her great grandma had always said. *You're going to university, and you're getting yourself out of this accursed place. And if you don't come back... well, all the better for you.*

It wasn't a hope, of course. Nor was it a suggestion. It was an order. And everyone in Dari knew it. So when it came time for the little snow leopardess to decide on the course of her future, perhaps for the first time in her family's history, no one tried to sabotage it. To university she went. And she hadn't gone back. At least... not yet.

It had always been in the back of Chyka's mind to return home for a visit some day. Once she'd been successful. Just to show her siblings what they'd been missing. And to show her great

grandmother that she'd been right. The outside world *was* a better place to live.

The little snow leopardess began to wonder why everyone else seemed to think of the world beyond Dari as a horrible place. There was so much to see. So much to do. So much fun to be had. How could anyone spend even five minutes in a proper mountain town and not see that?

Chyka shook her head as a final, barely audible blast of the work train's horn found its way to her chilly ears. There was probably no knowing the answer to that question. Her parents didn't seem to know. Even her grandparents didn't seem to know. Her great-grandmother... if anyone knew, it was her. She'd left and come back, but would never say why. Not even to her little black sheep of a great-granddaughter. Perhaps there just wasn't an answer. Dull and depressing a home as it might have been, perhaps it was simply just that. Home.

Chyka's ears twitched in response to a very different sound. There was a light, airy twinkling coming from somewhere close. Somewhere inside the inn. Somewhere... on the other side of her bedroom's ancient, solid wood door. And it was getting closer.

The little snow leopardess had a vague memory of a very old story. An ancient rural feyli tradition going well back beyond the fall of the key'vin'ta and their empire. One that had surely gone out of fashion several millennia ago. Or had it?

In the old days, the tale told, feyli folk living in secluded communities with few prospects of marriage would often visit the closest towns and cast their future to fate. They would wander the halls of traveler's inns in the darkness of night, carrying with them little chimes which simultaneously declared both their genuinely sincere desire and their total commitment, come whatever may. The women would carry light, twinkling chimes. The men would carry chimes

with lower, more sonorous notes. And which those chimes, all carried a silent hope that someone, anyone, would claim them as a spouse, for better or for worse.

Anyone could lay claim to the nighttime wanderer. It didn't matter what sex they were. Or whether or not they were in an existing marriage. Or even what sort of marriage it was. The feyli, with their highly disparate birthrate, often formed little married 'prides' of women, sometimes in concert with a man. The latter wasn't a necessity. Nor, at least technically, did there have to be only one.

For all intents and purposes, there were no hard and fast rules when it came to Feyli marriage. The only condition was consent. Once consent was given, it could almost never be rescinded. Those who dared to wander the inns with their chimes and hopes were regarded as already having consented. All someone else had to do was accept.

All that required was opening one's bedroom door, and inviting the wanderer in.

As the bright twinkle got louder, curiosity began to overcome Chyka's inclination to stay in her cozy cocoon at all costs. She wanted to see if that chime really did belong to some woman looking for a lifelong mate. She wanted to see what kind of woman would be so willing to cast her life into the hands of a random stranger. And, it seemed, her biogel wife was just as curious as she.

Alright, alright, the little snow leopardess thought as she began to unwrap herself from amid the heavy covers. There was no denying the tight, all-encompassing hug of her biogel wife, and the clear intent behind it. *I'll go have a look. But just a look!*

Chyka rolled out of bed and discovered yet another drawback to being clad in nothing but a thin coating of glistening black biogel. Even

though it rapidly formed boot soles under her feet, it didn't quite keep her from feeling just how unpleasantly cold the stone floor was. Or the air in the room for that matter. The chill was intense, and it seemed to penetrate deep into her core.

"Rrgh," the little snow leopardess grunted as she cringed at the icy coldness. Fortunately, it was just a passing sensation. Biogel could retain body heat very well, though it didn't always seem to know exactly how much wintery chill was too much before starting to properly insulate.

I'm coming, I'm coming, Chyka thought to herself as she staggered toward the door, grabbing a soft, cream colored robe along the way. It was provided by the inn, and was the only piece of fabric attire she had access to. It wasn't necessary, of course, but she didn't want to surprise the unknown woman with the appearance of being virtually naked in the darkness.

The door handle creaked as its timeworn brass components rubbed sharply against one another, almost as if they were offering some objection to Chyka's rather spontaneous act of curiosity. The light, airy twinkling came to an abrupt stop as the door slowly opened. A warm, yellow wedge of light spilled out into the narrow hallway, otherwise completely dark save for dimly glowing faux-candles at each end. The little snow leopardess peered out.

Not entirely to her surprise, Chyka's eyes locked with those of another feyli, a beautiful leopardess with long, dark brown hair and glimmering green eyes. She wasn't all that much taller than the little snow leopardess, though her figure wasn't quite as slender. Nor did her fur seem quite as silky looking. She looked very careworn. Indeed, she looked almost worn out.

Just like Chyka, the leopardess was clad in an inn supplied robe. Hers was a pretty pastel green in color. In one hand she held a little silver wind

chime. The other hand was upon the slender belt that held her robe closed tightly around her waist.

For a brief moment, Chyka wasn't entirely sure if this woman was seeking a spouse, or just taking in an errant wind chime before the storm blew it away. Were there wind chimes around the inn? She didn't remember seeing any when she'd arrived. Or hearing any. Had she just not noticed in her haste to get settled in before the storm arrived?

The leopardess didn't seem at all pleased with Chyka's appearance. Nonetheless, she undid her robe and opened it so the little snow leopardess could gaze upon the extremely enticing produce on offer.

Oh... I could have so much fun with that, Chyka thought as her eyes caressed the leopardess' soft tummy fluff and beautiful curves. Fun indeed. But then they'd be married. Permanently married. They didn't even know each other. Or... did they?

There was something about the leopardess that seemed vaguely familiar. Something that invoked a distant memory of life before Gelitech. Before like in the city. Before...

"Jumie?" Chyka blurted out without thinking. "Jumie Sandri?"

The leopardess bit her lower lip and looked down at her feet with very visible discomfort. It was all the answer the little snow leopardess needed.

Chyka was stunned. Jumie was a year younger than she was, a daughter of one of the other families who called Dari home. While her own family had been merely averse to regular contact with the outside world, the Sandri family had seem positively terrified with just the idea of it. They never watched the news. Or video. Or listened to the radio. Or even read the newspapers that occasionally made their way to the village.

Schooling, what little there was, took place entirely at home.

As far as Chyka could remember, none of the Sandris had so much as set foot even one short meter outside of the secluded little valley in which Dari stood. Except for railroad work, that is. Even then, she could still remember her aloof father constantly complaining of their refusal to leave the railroad right of way, right to the point of sleeping in the chilly cabs of the little work engines during multi-day excursions.

Given that, what in the seven heavens was Jumie doing half way down the valley in Myalu? And what was she doing offering her body as a permanent gift to whoever might claim it? Was she hoping to find a weak willed spouse to drag back to that awful place? Or was she looking for a genuinely caring spouse to whisk her away to someplace pleasant and safe?

Of course, Chyka couldn't just ask her. The stories said that conversation was prohibited. One could close the door, rejecting the offer. Or one could invite the wanderer in. That was it. There were no other options. Assuming Jumie knew the old stories as well as Chyka did. All things considered, she might well not.

The old Chyka didn't want anything to do with her former life in that dark, deeply unpleasant place. She didn't want to spend her life surrounded by reminders of what once was, and what might have been if her family hadn't been so irrationally repulsed by the world beyond their little village. It seemed silly even to contemplate bringing this midnight interloper into her life. There was nothing good to be gained by it, and many a good thing to be lost.

On the other hand, the new Chyka couldn't help but ponder the possibilities of snatching up this offered body and introducing it to all the wonders

of the real world beyond the mountains. All the fun of the big city. And biogel. Beautifully magnificent biogel. And then, once she'd thoroughly 'corrupted' her catch, she could rub it all straight into the noses of all those insular, hidebound prudes back home.

Chyka's biogel wife seemed quite keen to have another partner in the mix. She hugged the little snow leopardess from neck to toe, and even began to flow and rub in places sure to make her host quite keen to seek further erotic pleasures. Erotic pleasures offered by the body of the leopardess who seemed to be having considerable second thoughts as she stood there waiting for her prospective spouse to make up her mind.

A seed of doubt remained. It didn't seem quite right for to just straight up lay claim to the nervous leopardess. Chyka had to offer a way out, even if it was against the spirit of the whole ritual. "Why not?" she murmured, backing away from the half-

opened door as if to allow the leopardess inside.
"You want to be my wife?"

Jumie sighed deeply, but didn't say a word. She grasped the chime firmly in her hand and stepped forward.

Chyka smiled and beckoned the leopardess into her room. "Alright then," she purred softly. "Come on in."

II

Chyka gazed out into a sea of pure, unadulterated whiteness. The snow was still falling, though the lightening sky foretold of the storm's impending passage, and clear, starry skies later that evening. It was all so clean. So pure. So... natural.

The little snow leopardess couldn't avoid the contrast between the pure white snow and the glistening blackness that coated her body. It was an aberration against the proper order of nature. Clean, yet starkly sterile. Inert, yet all-consuming. Alive, yet...

A rustle of the shimmering silver comforter brought Chyka back to reality. Her new spouse had finally woken after their excruciatingly long night of awkward nothing. They'd spoken not a word. Nor had they so much as touched one

another. The highly displeased leopardess had straight away curled up under the covers and gone to sleep. Or feigned going to sleep, that is.

Chyka was quite sure that Jumie had been awake almost the whole time. At least until the little snow leopardess had gotten up at dawn to watch the snow falling, and get some breakfast. Only then did her new spouse actually drift off to sleep. And even then, it was hardly of the restful sort. If the state of the covers were any indication, she'd spent the morning tossing and turning.

The little silver chime lay on the floor beside the bed, along with the pastel green robe that the leopardess had been wearing. She had cast them aside, even as she hid herself away among the sheets. Hid herself away from the wife who lay down beside her. And, perhaps, from the world she represented.

Chyka couldn't help but feel guilty for claiming the leopardess as a wife. Clearly, the woman had

been expecting to be claimed by a very different sort of traveler. But what sort of traveler could she possibly expect to find in little Myalu at the onset of winter? The tourists were all gone. No one wanted to get snowed in for days. No one except a Gelitech model sent on an unexpected involuntary vacation, and a rural mountain girl looking for a spouse in the least likely of places, it seemed.

As far as Chyka knew, they were the only ones in the inn. When she'd arrived in the morning, she'd been given free choice of bedrooms, save one. The one that Jumie was staying in, no doubt. There was no one else except the innkeeper, and she already had quite the family of her own to look after.

I wonder, the little snow leopardess thought to herself as she glanced at the sullen looking woman who was trying hard to simultaneously glare daggers at her new spouse, and to avoid anything coming close to eye contact. *I wonder if she came*

here looking for a way out. And this whole marriage thing was just an excuse. But...

Chyka wondered if it was only supposed to have been an excuse. A reason to move further and further afield until she was too far away for any of her family to brave the world long and far enough to come after her. But if that was the case, then she never actually intended to get married. But along came the little snow leopardess who had to get curious and screw everything up.

"You know, we don't actually *have* to be married," Chyka said, breaking the many hours of silence that had passed since the leopardess had stepped into her bedroom. "It's not like anyone knows. And if anyone *does* know, we can always say we knew each other in Dari and decided to have a long night's chat."

Jumie huffed sharply and rolled over, away from Chyka.

"Well, what was the whole point of offering yourself to any random mate who might be interested if you don't actually seem to want one?" Chyka asked. "And you *had* to know it was just you and me here. You saw me come in around breakfast time this morning. And there was no one else. So why did you come by my door?"

Jumie responded with nothing but silence.

"I seriously hope you don't expect me to go back to that hellhole with you," Chyka said, frowning at the recalcitrant leopardess. "I seriously hope you didn't expect *anyone* to go back to that hellhole with you."

Jumie remained silent.

"So why are you here?" Chyka questioned. "Are you trying to run away?"

Jumie still remained silent, but it seemed to Chyka that she was starting to shake.

"What was the whole point of you coming here and looking for a spouse if you aren't okay with it?" Chyka begged. "Please, tell me!"

Jumie began to sob.

Chyka shook her head and took a step toward the bed. Had Jumie actually expected her new spouse to go back to Dari with her? Or was there something else wrong?

"You came here for something," Chyka said, lowering her voice. "I can't help you find it if you won't tell me what it is."

"I... I don't know!" Jumie snapped.

"Then why did you come here?" Chyka asked, sitting down on the end of the bed.

"She told me to come here," Jumie sobbed, pulling a pillow over her head to hide her face from Chyka.

"Who told you to come here?" Chyka inquired softly.

Jumie ignored the question, sobbing into the pillow, and shaking so badly that Chyka started to get very worried.

"Can't you tell me who told you to come here?" Chyka asked as soothingly as she could.

"Your... your great ma-ma," Jumie finally replied with a shrill whine. "She told me to leave and never come back!"

Chyka was struck silent as the leopardess began to full-on cry. No wonder the leopardess had been so displeased to see her. Of all the people in the outside world to open that door, it had to be the

one living member of the Riyalli family who'd left Dari.

"Why?" Chyka asked after several long minutes had passed.

"She said something bad was gonna happen if I stayed," Jumie cried. "She said to get out. Get out and never come back!"

Chyka was again struck silent. Her great grandmother could be harsh, for sure. This, however, seem almost cruel. Unless there was some good reason, of course.

"She told everyone to get out!" Jumie sobbed. "Everyone! But no one would! They said she was crazy. Crazy!"

"Then how did you get here?" Chyka asked.

"I... I got scared," Jumie cried. "She was so... so frightening! I just... I just ran. Down the tracks.

Until a train saw me and stopped and took me here and I don't know what to do and I don't have anyplace to go and..."

"Did she say what was so bad that was going to happen?" Chyka asked.

"No!" Jumie replied with a long, choking sob. "Not... not to me. I don't know. I don't know anything!"

"If you really believed her, then why did you spend the night looking for a spouse instead of looking for help?" Chyka inquired, momentarily forgetting that a daughter of the Sandri family had no idea how the world outside of Dari worked.

"Because that's what people do when they go away," Jumie sobbed. "When they go away and don't come back. It's what people do..."

"Shh," Chyka said as she got up to grab her comm from the nightstand. "It's alright. It's going to be alright. Don't say another word."

Her great grandmother might have been old, but she wasn't a nutter, or a fool. If she thought something was wrong, there probably was. And if she thought there was enough of a reason to abandon Dari altogether...

"Mashitran," Chyka said to her comm. She might have called someone else, but Dari was a railroad town, and the organization tended to take matters along the line more seriously than the police or other emergency services. In this weather, that might make all the difference if something catastrophic had happened up there at the peak of the line. "Operations. Operational security."

It could have just been a coincidence, but the timing was certainly suspicious. Dr. Mika starts digging around in a key'vin'ta ritual cave. Digging

around that leads to the little snow leopardess summoning the spirit of a long gone key'vin'ta priestess. At right about the same time that something happens up the valley that's enough to set her Marine combat veteran great grandmother into a panic. The events might not have been connected at all. But if they were...

"Mashitran operational security," the harsh, grating man's voice replied. "Please state the nature of your call."

Chyka took a deep breath. "I have someone from Dari here, on the Sky Line Bypass," she explained. "We're in Myalu and..."

"What does this have to do with the railroad?" the security officer replied. "We only..."

"She's here because the residents were told to evacuate," Chyka interjected before turning to Jumie. "When was it it? When did she tell you leave?"

"Two days ago," Jumie sobbed.

"Evacuate? Seriously?" the security officer replied with a distinct tone of sarcasm. "There is no evacuation order in effect for Dari."

"Seriously! Issued two days ago," Chyka replied. "Did you tell the conductor on the train why you running down the line?"

"No," Jumie sobbed.

"Didn't he ask?" Chyka questioned.

"I said I was running away," Jumie cried.

"Two days ago? Trains have been running right up until eighteen-hundred yesterday and there have been no reports of anything unusual in Dari," the security officer snapped. "Listen lady, we don't have time for this! If you want to..."

Chyka clenched her teeth and tried to think fast. What could she say that would make the security officer listen? "Dammit... they... they all were told to evacuate... by Brigadier General Takka Riyalli, IMC! The woman with me never heard the reason, but she's the only one who made it to Myalu after the order. Two days ago. Before the storm. Before the trains stopped running. Just because passing trains didn't see anything out of the ordinary doesn't mean there wasn't trouble. Hell, the fact that no one came looking for this woman after she ran off down when told to evacuate means that something definitely was wrong up there. Someone needs to check on Dari's status. Like... *now!*"

For a moment, there was no response on the other end of the line. "Yeah, fine," the security officer replied with a huff. "I'll call in to the office at the Dari yard. But they're all probably out clearing snow right now, so don't hold your breath."

Something about the security officer's remark struck the little snow leopardess with dread. She'd been able to hear the snow clearing train passing by late the previous night. She hadn't heard one since, even though they should have been running up and down the line all night and all morning too.

"I... I don't think so," she murmured mostly to herself.

"What?" the security officer said. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes. I said I don't think they're clearing snow," Chyka replied. "I don't think they've passed Myalu since... since about midnight, maybe. That was the last snow blower run I heard, and I've been up all night with the woman from Dari."

"Say again?" the security officer responded, finally sounding interested in the issue. "You believe the last snow blower passed Myalu at midnight? None have passed since?"

"As far as I can tell," Chyka responded. "Even with all the snow falling, it was pretty loud at the inn when it passed by. I didn't hear another one go by after that."

"Uh... uh... fuck," the security officer snapped. "Listen, I'll get back to you... I need to..."

"Wait!" Chyka yelled. "Don't go straight up there! Don't send anyone up there until... I..."

The line was dead. The security officer had hung up.

"SHIT!" Chyka snapped. For a few moments, she wasn't sure what to do. Should she call the railroad back? Or should she try to reach someone better able to deal with a potential exoscience crisis?

"Gelitech," Chyka finally said to her comm. If anyone knew who to contact, it would be Dr. Mika. "Sciences. Dr. Mika. Extremely urgent!"

"You're on vacation," Dr. Mika scolded through the comm almost immediately. "Go back to..."

"Who do I contact if our messing with that artifact might have had serious unintended consequences?" Chyka asked.

"What are you talking about?" Dr. Mika questioned. "Have you gone and turned purple or something?"

"No! I... something happened up in Dari and the railroad might be sending people up there," Chyka replied. "But whatever it was, there was some warning. Two days ago. When you were messing around in that cave! It could be..."

"Have you been drinking?" Dr. Mika demanded. "How much 'nip have you had?"

"None!" Chyka replied. "This is an emergency, dammit! An *emergency!*"

"Fine! Fine!" Dr. Mika huffed. "I'll contact the local Exo unit right away. Where are you right now?"

"Myalu, at the inn," Chyka replied. "Where you sent me. To get snowed in. On purpose."

Dr. Mika didn't reply. She cut off the line as abruptly as the railroad security officer had.

"Fuck," Chyka said, sitting down on the bed beside the sobbing leopardess. "Fuck. I hope everyone's alright and it's just a misunderstanding. That great-grandma was wrong. But... I don't know. I just... don't know."

Jumie said nothing.

"Just... just stay here," Chyka said, rising from the bed. "I'll go and get you something to eat. I have a feeling we're in for another very long night."

III

Chyka could hear the snow blower train struggling to make its way up the icy rail line past Myalu. She stepped out into the hallway and to the little bow window where she could get a clear view across the dark river valley. She could see the bright lights of the snow blower, and the two big freight engines helping to drive it up the steep grade from behind. A long, white plume of snow blasted out the side of the snow blower, and down into the icy river below. It would probably be hours before the unit made its way up into Dari. Hopefully they would have better luck coming in from the other direction.

It was almost midnight, and by now nearly everyone in little Myalu had heard there was serious trouble on the railroad, though nothing about Dari itself. Instead, the last snow blower

down the line the previous night had been found derailed off the passing siding just to the north of Jatner bridge, very close to where the little group from Gelitech had been exploring the key'vin'ta ritual cave. It hadn't been a violent derailment. The blower was still upright, just off the track. But despite the presence of a well equipped, well marked, and well lit storm shelter nearby, the crew was nowhere to be found.

The line itself hadn't been cleared since, thus the difficulty the snow blower coming up out of Mashiva was having in making headway on the relatively steep uphill grade. The line northward, on the other side of Dari, hadn't been cleared at any point during the night. The grade there was less problematic, and it seemed likely that the unit coming up from Kaiune would make it to Dari first.

A special Marine unit trained to identify and contain exoscience crises had arrived by air just over four hours prior. They had briefly

interviewed both Jumie and Chyka before heading north into Dari. Mashitran operational security had joined them shortly afterwards. So far, however, there was no word as to what they'd found.

The soft steps of the innkeeper padded along the hallway's heavy carpet. "Did you hear?" the careworn pantheress inquired, startling the little snow leopardess as she stood transfixed on the bright lights across the valley. Her voice was wavering. She looked as if she was about to start crying. "Did... did you hear?"

"Hear what?" Chyka responded with a deep, apprehensive frown.

"They've... they've called a... goddess.... they've called a... a nuclear emergency," the innkeeper replied, her voice turning hoarse about halfway through the statement. "Something about Brightstone Mine."

"That's nowhere near Dari," Chyka replied with a shrug. "And I wouldn't be surprised if they noticed something wrong with the seals on the mine, what with all the government people up here now. They've broken before."

"Brightstone Mine extends more than twenty kilometers into the mountains," the innkeeper whispered. "There are dozens of entrances and ventilation shafts all over the valleys here. And... and I heard one of the government people say that Dari was built on the cap of a big, deep shaft that led directly into the lowest parts of the mine."

Chyka was deeply skeptical. Even the idiots in Dari understood just how dangerous Brightstone mine was. If there had actually been a problem related to the mine, they would have been the first to raise the alarm, and not just to each other. It was a threat to their lives. And a threat to the railroad. The railroad was the only thing that really

mattered to them. They wouldn't conceal anything that might place it at risk.

And then, of course, there was Chyka's great grandmother. She would have gone straight to the proper authorities if there was even the slightest hint of trouble with the mine. Just like she did the last time that she suspected the seals on a ventilation shaft across the valley were going to fail. There was absolutely no question in the little snow leopardess mind about that.

"What's down there can't just come up of its own accord without setting off every radiation alarm in a fifty kilometer radius," Chyka responded with a shake of her head. Even disregarding everything she knew about Dari's residents, she simply couldn't understand how anything happening in the old uranium mine could have anything to do with the mystery. There were quite literally radiation monitors *everywhere*. If there had been even the hint of a bump above a normal reading, the government would have been

straight out there scrambling to look for the cause. If there had been enough of an indicator that there was a danger from the old mine, then surely her great grandmother wouldn't have been the only one to know about it. "If there is some problem with the mine, it has to be a coincidence."

"I don't know," the innkeeper replied. "It's what I head. And... and I just... I just wanted you to know. Because. Because it doesn't sound good."

The more that Chyka thought about it, the less likely it seemed that there was actually a nuclear emergency. Surely, they were just calling it that in order to ensure that people stayed away. More likely it was something related to her own recent adventure. Something key'vin'ta. Something...

Chyka's comm beeped.

"Hi?" the little snow leopardess responded.

"Hello," answered the soft, male voice. "Chyka Riyalli? My name is Major General Tchan Kadanni, Prefectural Chief of Radiological Security. We... we need to talk."

"Um... okay," Chyka replied as sudden dread filled her heart. "What... what's going on?"

"First I need to ask you a question," the General asked. "Do you know anything about the old experimental power station in Dari?"

"I've never even heard of such a thing," Chyka replied. The only power in Dari came from the hydroelectric dam down the river in Onita. In intakes were just below the village, however, but there was nothing experimental about those. "Do you mean the dam downriver?"

"No," the General replied. "In order to help you understand what's going on, and what direction the situation in Dari is headed, I need you to pay close attention to what I'm about to tell you. Not all of it

has been public knowledge, though that, obviously, is about to change."

"Okay," Chyka replied softly.

"Dari was built more or less on the roof of an experimental thermal power plant that had been built to make use of the heat generated by one of the natural uranium reactors that were discovered in the depths of Brightstone Mine," the General explained. "And that power plant was built on top a large shaft carrying the water pipes that used to transfer heat between the vicinity of the natural reactor and the thermoelectric power units in the power plant above."

Chyka bit her upper lip. She'd never heard of such a thing, let alone seen any evidence of it. At least, she didn't think she had. But even if she had, how would she have known what it was?

"The plant never worked as well as intended," the General continued. "It was kept operational for

a time, mainly to facilitate study the natural reactor below, while Brightstone itself was shut down and sealed as a result of the natural reactor's highly radioactive byproducts spreading out to contaminate most of the mine. As to the power plant, it was eventually decommissioned, the mine shaft beneath sealed, and its ten meter thick roof covered over and blended into the terrain. When Mashitran took over the railroad line to refurbish it into the Sky Line Bypass, they built a small yard and worker village there, mostly directly on top of the plant."

Chyka was silent. It seemed virtually impossible. She'd lived eighteen years of her life in Dari. Surely, she would have seen something.

"You need to understand that the plant was never just abandoned and left to deteriorate," the General went on. "My office has overseen routine inspections for structural integrity, and reinforced on two separate occasions, more out of an abundance of caution than any definite threat of

structural failure. Your great grandmother most recently supervised these inspections, and to those of other mine infrastructure in the immediate area around Dari. Her last annual report was posted only three weeks ago, after a team from my office conducted detailed scans of all critical structural elements. No deficiencies were found at that time."

Could it actually be true? Could her great grandmother actually have known about this place? Been responsible for it? But if that was true, why did it seem she'd never told anyone? And why didn't she warn the world that something was wrong?

"And now, for what we know about the current situation," the General continued. "When the responding Exo Unit arrived over Dari, they discovered that the entire structure of the power plant had collapsed in upon itself. More alarmingly, the mine shaft cap was missing, along with most of the shaft's contents. This has resulted

in the exposure of the natural reactor below to the open atmosphere, though owing to contamination control systems elsewhere in the mine, airflow has thus far been kept flowing into the shaft, rather than rising out of it. This has limited the spread of radioactive contamination, and hopefully ensured that survivors haven't been exposed to hazardous amounts of radioactive materials."

"Okay," Chyka replied.

"However," the General said, "it has been discovered that at least a portion of the natural reactor is now in a molten liquid state, and has infiltrated into the structure supporting the shaft from below. This may or may not be the root cause of the incident itself, but the threat of further collapse, and the potential compromise of the contamination control system means that all activities right now need to be focused on the introduction of as much neutron absorbing material into the molten uranium as possible, as

quickly as possible in order to prevent further catastrophe."

Chyka sighed. It just couldn't be true. It couldn't be real. It had to be just a story to cover for something else.

"On a very cautiously positive note, however, we have not found any evidence that the residents of Dari were present during the event," the General concluded. "At the same time, besides Jumi Sandri, we have yet to find any of the residents of Dari, even those some residential structures not built atop the power plant were still standing. We will begin searching in earnest once the initial emergency containment phase is complete. The moment we have any information..."

Chyka knew her great grandmother all too well. If the people wouldn't leave, then neither would she. And if there was a disaster to be stopped...

then she would do everything in her power to stop it. Or die trying.

"They were in there," Chyka said, choking back tears. "There were in there trying to keep it from collapsing. All of them. Weren't they?"

The General was silent.

"Don't lie to me!" Chyka snapped. "There were all in there trying to stop it because they were all too stupid to know better, too proud to ask for help, and too pig-headed to walk away! Don't lie to me! Don't you fucking lie to me!"

"We don't have any evidence one way or another," the General replied softly. "But... that is certainly a possible scenario given what we know so far."

"What about the snow plow? They found one of snow plows from Dari down the line, didn't they?" Chyka asked.

"We have no explanation for that at the current time," the General replied. "It may have been unmanned and set off on its own when the plant collapsed. The other plow in the yard was found running, but still parked on its siding."

Chyka felt numb in a way that not even the warm embrace of her biogel wife could soothe. As much as she hated the majority of her own family, she couldn't process the idea they might really all be gone. Least of all her great grandmother. Her hero. Her hero who surely couldn't have failed to notify the authorities that something was wrong.

"I'm sorry. I wish I had more to tell you," the General said. "We'll be sending someone to speak to you in person in the morning. Hopefully we'll know more by then."

"Alright," Chyka replied. "Bye."

The whole world seemed like a dull gray bank of fog to the little snow leopardess as she made her way back into the bedroom. The sleeping leopardess had already woken, and had apparently heard enough to know that the news was catastrophically bad. She started to cry.

Never before in her life had Chyka felt so impossibly helpless. Nor had she ever felt so terrifyingly alone. The whole world that she thought she knew was shattered. If a drab little depressingly ordinary mountain railroad village was hiding such secrets... if it wasn't a safe place to live... then was there anyplace in this world that was actually safe to live?

Chyka couldn't help but wonder what dark hazards were hidden beneath Mashiva. Her own home at Gelitech stood atop the warren of tunnels that made up the old and largely abandoned Macharri Naval Base. Tunnels that extended far and wide beneath the spaceport and the rest of the south city. Who knew what had been left there to

rot and potentially unleash its dangers into unsuspecting city?

The little snow leopardess lay down on the bed beside her crying companion. She wanted to give in to tears herself, but for some reason the tears never came. There was sadness, for sure. But also anger. Anger that threatened to turn into pure, unbridled rage. Someone must have stopped her great grandmother from calling for outside help. It was the only possible explanation!

The only thing stopping Chyka from losing her temper was the leopardess beside her. For the first time, Jumie reached out to touch her companion. To take hold of her in a tight embrace. To cry freely upon the little snow leopardess' chest, as the impossible weight of total loss tore her apart inside.

Again, Chyka felt as if the story about the power plant and the nuclear emergency wasn't the truth. Or at least not the entire truth. But there was

nothing she could do. Nothing she could do but wait for dawn, and hope beyond hope for some miracle to occur.

CONTINUUM

TO BE CONTINUED...