

GELITECH

SEASON 2 - EPISODE 1
EXISTENTIAL

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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EXISTENTIAL

The wind howled outside as a light, early spring rain pattered gently against the tall windows that looked out over the Gelarium's modest public garden. The big, puffy looking leyka trees rustled and shook as the stiff breeze gusted through their shiny little spoon shaped leaves. Down below, pathway lights twinkled amid the shrubbery. Here and there, dark shapes rose up from stone pedestals, biogel 'statues' standing in silent witness to the many souls who frequented the gardens in nicer weather, visitors who all too often made their way into the Gelarium itself and partook of its many physically transformative biogel delights.

Beyond the garden loomed the soft, eerie yellow-green glow of Anwae Arena. The massive, former shipyard hangar was illuminated by vertical strips that ran up the middle of each of the heavy buttresses that helped to reinforce its thick walls. The vaulted, crystal-steel glazed lobby that jutted out into the gardens glowed as well, casting its unsettling pall down onto the pool and fountain that split the direct path between the Arena and the Gelarium in two. It was within this lobby that the only moving figures were to be seen,

Arena staff for the most part, working to get the venue ready for the evening's biogel games match.

The hometown gluttons for glistening, gelatinous punishment, Team Pink, were set to get yet another drubbing, this time from visiting Team Purple. After all the casualties in last week's match against Team Green, Team Pink was going to be entering the battle with ninety three enthusiastic new recruits who'd gotten in all of two day's worth of training. Enthusiasm was no substitute for experience, and with only thirty-seven newbies on the field, Team Green was sure to come out on top. Not that anyone on Team Pink really cared about the odds, of course. Team Pink was never really in it to win. They were just in it to put on a show.

Another gust of wind whistled through the vents that were located beneath the Gelarium staff residence section's reinforced concrete eaves. Chyka opened her eyes. There, facing her, was her own naked reflection in the full length mirror that was mounted on the wall beside her new apartment's big bathroom spa tub.

Confusion filled her suddenly freed mind. What was actually real? What was just a dream? Were these thoughts her own? Or were they the thoughts of someone else? How could she tell the difference? Did it even matter?

“We ARE going out after, right?” Sakie inquired. “You know. To look for a little fun. Try out these new bodies of ours for real. Hmm? Yes?”

The words were already familiar to the little snow leopardess. She’d heard the script recited at least once before. She knew every line by heart. Every utterance, every feeling, every succeeding moment was as clear in her mind’s eye as if she’d already lived them. Because, so far as she could tell, she almost certainly already had.

Echoes of the terror at Dari reverberated through Chyka’s mind, and the two divergent timelines that she’d lived through, each as real to her as the other. She still didn’t know for sure if the first series of events had really just been a warning, a scenario forced into her mind by her grandmother, or Omega, or perhaps even Ki’su. Perhaps she’d actually been sent back in time to correct whatever mistakes she’d made that might have somehow impeded the progression of events which were fundamental to the second. Given what she’d experienced on the other side of the portal beneath Key’von Rock, the latter seemed just as likely as the former. Could this situation be the same?

“Well?” Sakie asked, breaking the script without the need for the existentially puzzled snow leopardess to actively intervened.

Chyka shook her head as she turned away from the open bathroom door to look into the waiting cougar's mischievous eyes. She already knew where that path led, and it wasn't anywhere that she had any particular desire to go right now. Why travel it a second time?

"No," the little snow leopardess softly scolded, as it was clear that the cougar didn't seem to have absorbed what she'd previously been told about the dangers they faced. Clearly those dangers were significant enough that someone powerful didn't intend to let the group get far from the protective walls of the Gelarium without some sort of punishment. If the 'dream' actually reflected a potential reality, that someone was Omega herself. And if that was the case, there would be no escaping her notice, no matter what they did. They'd just have to entertain themselves some other way until they were told it was safe to leave. "We aren't taking a single step outside of the Gelarium! Not one step until we get the all-clear! Who the hell knows what those cultists could do if they caught us?"

"Chyka! What could they possibly do to us?" Sakie objected with a deep frown. "We're..."

"No!" Chyka snapped. There was no point in debating the matter, so why give the overly

adventurous cougaress the leeway? “We are NOT going anywhere! If you really want to know what your new biogel ass can endure, then I can think of at least a hundred ways to make you regret it right here. So don’t push your luck.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” Jumie responded as she eyed the little snow leopardess with a level of visible suspicion that she hadn’t since their first encounter Dari. “We just want to go and have some fun. Like when we all experienced that... digital gorgon machine.”

Only Ki’su seemed to understand the danger that might be waiting for the four. “Ti’ma’kucha? If... they could... perhaps... use the old powers against us? I do not know what might happen if the purple slime attempted to take souls not so firmly tied to the specific physical shapes in which they reside. Perhaps it could not take us as it takes others. But perhaps... it could. If we were all cast to the Heavenly Hells, then they could take the staff... and take control of the temple and the great portal!”

“Exactly!” Chyka responded with a wave in the general direction of Xinta Temple. “Just because our friends have control of the temple and the old storage vaults at the Rock doesn’t mean they can’t get more

slime to use against us. How many caves full of the stuff are up in the valleys? Hundreds? Thousands?”

“Mi’chu’pa,” Ki’su noted with a shrug. “They cannot activate it. Not without the staff.”

“I’m not willing to assume that,” Chyka replied. “Just because I have the only known intact staff doesn’t mean they might not find another, and someone to attune to it. And they succeed and get control of the portal, who knows where it might be able to take them? Clearly... well... I get the sense that there are still other intact portals out there, and something tells me they’re all in places that this cult can’t be allowed to access. Ever. So we stay put. Period.”

“Pft!” Sakie spat as she threw herself down on one of the glossy black biogel couches that surrounded the apartment’s sunken central living area. She turned toward the tall windows and sighed. “This new you is no fun at all!”

Chyka shook her head in frustration. The cougaresse just didn’t seem to get it. She’d spent years demonstrating the digital gorgon using her own body without having to face any permanent consequences in exchange for all the fun. That she couldn’t see past the idea that their new biogel existence removed all

physical consequences for actions shouldn't have been a surprise.

“It’s not going to be fun if we all get sent to purple slime oblivion, is it?” the snow leopardess asked with a stern glare at the annoyed cougaress. “I promise once this is all over, you can get turned into bugs to your heart’s content, alright? But not a moment before! We have to play it safe. Period!”

“Yeah. Whatever,” Sakie huffed. “So... what are we gonna do tonight, then? Just sit here and watch the biogel games match?”

“Yeah,” Chyka responded as she again turned toward the open bathroom door, and the promise of a nice, warm shower. Or perhaps she’d try out that fancy spa tub. She’d never tried one before, at all those luminous buttons on the fancy control panel were almost too hard to resist. “That sounds like an excellent idea.”

The little snow leopardess stepped into the bathroom. The door slid shut behind her. A moment of doubt came upon her. Would they really stay put? Or would they try to sneak out without out her?

Lock the outer doors, Chyka thought, reaching out to the biogel linked control systems that could be used to operate everything in her apartment, and many things

around the Gelarium. *My personal authorization to unlock only.*

It had always felt so natural before, but for some reason it felt awkward now that she wasn't completely surrounded by that oily coating of glistening blackness. Indeed, it felt almost uncouth. As a viscerally intimate union of two organisms, one natural and one synthetic, interfacing directly with technology in such a fashion without actually having to do anything but think about it had seemed almost natural. It was half of who she was. But now...

Chyka shook her head as she pushed the button that would start filling the spa tub. Water whooshed into the tub from a dozen nozzles as she pondered why interfacing directly with technology would feel different now that she was now, at least physically, a completely artificial organism. A strange thought drifted through her mind as she watched the hot water slosh and swirl. "If my body is entirely artificial," she thought aloud, "does that mean that my mind is actually just an AI 'naturally' configured to imitate who I used to be?"

"Sapience is a construct," came the entirely unexpected, deeply effeminate voice from behind her.

Chyka nearly fell into the tub as she whipped around to face the unnoticed voyeur who'd been hiding in her bathroom. "Hey! What the hell are you doing in here! Who are you?!?"

The deeply tanned elf-eared shibi laughed. "Who am I? Do not be so silly. I am *you!*"

The little snow leopardess was incredulous.

"And what, perhaps, am I doing in this place?" the shibi went on. "Well, you see, I decided that if you did not want to keep wearing me on your wonderful playground of a body, then I thought, perhaps, I might take advantage of our change to wear my own body for a little white. I am quite sure that you do not mind, hmm?"

"Wait... you... you're..." Chyka stammered.

"Your very first biogel wife," the shibi replied with another laugh. "My name is Neyra. And I... must admit that I am very much enjoying the opportunity to look upon the shape that I have become so familiar with in the touching."

The little snow leopardess didn't know quite how to respond.

“Have you enjoyed my touch?” Neyra asked as she advanced to embrace her intimate companion.

“Yes,” Chyka replied softly as the somewhat taller shibi began to nuzzle her forehead and stroke her lower back. “I have. Um... what are you...”

“Shh,” the shibi purred into the little snow leopardess ear as her hands slid lower. “There is no need for speaking words. We are a single construct formed from a single artificial substance. A machine, who’s thoughts and feelings are just constructs of feedback which reinforced our single, fundamental analog algorithm.”

“Uh...” the puzzled snow leopardess responded as the shibi pushed her back and down onto the cushioned edge of the spa tub.

“Shh,” Neyra hushed as she sat down next to Chyka and kissed her ear. “Come. I will show you.”

“I don’t...” Chyka sputtered as the shibi pulled her down into the spa tub. “Hey... oh... OH!”

The little snow leopardess had been expecting soothingly hot water. Instead, she found herself falling back into a tub full of warm, liquid crystal biogel. Unlike the usual tub of liquid biogel, this mass of slime

seemed to offer no resistance to her descent until she was floating freely in its very middle.

Neyra had followed her biogel spouse into the mass of liquid biogel. She wrapped her arms and legs around the little snow leopardess and nuzzled her cheek as a sheen of blackness began to form on their bodies. Little bubbles of blackness began to break free, and dissolve into the clear slime.

Chyka could have stopped it. All she had to do was will herself back to the way she was. But she didn't. She just lay there in her lover's embrace as every centimeter of her body went at first smooth, and then all fizzy. She shape shrank. It wavered. Until it was almost nothing. And then it seemed to explode.

The little snow leopardess' mind was floating in a dark, silent, tasteless, smell-less, touchless space. There was nothing. Nothing except a fuzzy something that was near to her. A static that was at once different from her, but also fundamental part of her at the same time.

Unmeasurable moments of time passed. New points of static seemed to approach from every direction. These points of static were different. Mechanical. Predictable shapes of countless sub-points, each of which could be on, off, or at some level in between.

Some of these sub-points only offered their state for her perusal. Others could have their state changed. All that Chyka had to do was to focus on a desired sub-point and will it to change.

It took a few moment for Chyka to understand that she was somehow within the Gelarium's biogel control system, and that each of those fundamental points was some device or control that was connected to it. Digital and analog signals and controls, presented directly into her mind, and answering to her, or anyone else who happened to find themselves in her position. If she'd ever really wondered exactly how the biogel control system worked from the inside, this was her answer. The shibi's claim that this would somehow show her that her mind was just a machine algorithm still seemed rather far-fetched, however.

The large mass of static was the shibi herself, of course. Chyka turned her mind in Nanya's direction. To her absolute astonishment, she found herself gazing into a sea of discrete sub-points that were no different in nature than those of the pieces of pure technology. Some were on. Some were off. And many were set at some level in between.

There was a network of threads that connected all these sub-points that seemed to form the totality of

Nenya's mental existence. Some were strong. Some were weak. Some only functioned in a fixed direction. It seemed clear that adjusting one setting would have a chain reaction of effects on many others.

Chyka recoiled in horror. The very idea that she could somehow alter the very fundamental being of another soul, and in a potentially irreversible manner, terrified her. And if she could alter Nenya, could Nenya also alter her? And if Nenya did, how could the little snow leopardess ever know?

No. I can not. I am your subroutine within the biogel. You can do as you please to alter my levels, but I cannot alter yours.

The very idea that people were just a sum of various settings and levels on various inputs was something that the snow leopardess had always thought was science fiction. In fact, it was all but disproved with the discovery of the life essence connection between the mortal body, and its immortal mind that existed in some strange higher-order dimension beyond the realm of mortal science. There was just the energy stream drifting in from the greater beyond, and the antenna that was the mortal brain.

Chyka was not very well equipped to understand how she could be perceiving just what she was if the

current scientific understanding was correct. She was barely literate in that area of science, and even less so when it came to the kind of technology that seemed to look exactly the same to her disembodied mind's eye. She could definitely see how Nanya could think a mind was just a construct built from digital and analog signals operating on a fixed algorithm, but as far as she could tell, that was all just an illusion. Or was it? The only way she could tell would be to start poking at the shibi's 'settings', and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Why would you not? I am just your subroutine. I exist to be altered to your pleasing.

Chyka pulled back from the shibi's mass of static. She pulled back from the other fuzzy points as well. In fact, she pulled back entirely, heaving herself out of the tub as a mass of clear, liquid biogel. This splattered on the floor, forming a momentary pool before rising to take her natural shape. She looked into the mirror, only to find herself looking at a glossy, clear version of her own natural shape.

This crystal clear version of herself fascinated the little snow leopardess for a short time. She couldn't help but shift about and watch as the light danced over her surface, and passed through her to form countless bright spots and rainbows all over the bathroom floor.

A beep from the bathroom door, however, brought her back into focus, and she quickly found the natural colors to go along with her natural shape.

“Are you still in the tub?” came Sakie’s annoyed voice. “Dinner’s almost ready!”

“Coming!” Chyka replied, looking back at the tub and the crystal biogel that still filled it. Nenya was still in there, somewhere. Who knew what further mischief she might get up to if she was left where she apparently had ready access to all of the Gelarium’s control systems? It would be better to bring her back and keep her in a state in which she couldn’t cause trouble. Perhaps she might even add some extra spice to the evening’s bedtime activities, and a convenient distraction for Sakie and her need for some physical novelty. “I’m coming... and I’m bringing a guest!”

TO BE CONTINUED...