

GELITECH

SEASON 2 - EPISODE 3
LOSING CONTROL

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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LOSING CONTROL

Anyone who knew anything about biogel's fundamental nature couldn't help but see it. It was that obvious. Actually understanding what it meant, however, was something else entirely. Truly comprehending its myriad of potential consequences was something beyond the ability of most, however, even those who were as intimately connected to it as Chyka.

“So, what yer sayin’ lass... is that... eh...” Gorin said as he led Chyka and Dr. Kidan down the poorly lit concrete stairwell. “I mean... well... I dun really know what I mean.”

Chyka shrugged. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what it means either. I just know that I’m Omega. Or a part of Omega. Or... I can become Omega? See! I don’t even know. All I

know is that whenever things start to get out of control, all of a sudden, I'm Omega. I mean. I think. I'm pretty sure. What I'm saying is..."

"That you experience a state where there is no clear defining line that separates you from the entity from which your entire body is now made," Dr. Kidan noted dryly as he looked down into the darkness with a slowly increasing expression of concern. The only light in the stairwell came from a few dim tungsten lamps whose dull light seemed to grossly accentuate every chip, crack and rust stain in the ancient concrete. "Gorin... are you *sure* they brought some of the casks down here? This place is... well, horrifically dangerous. Just the sheer quantity of rusting metal is enough to sap the oxygen out of the air, not to mention the results of that fire down by the old freight tunnels last month on the atmosphere. How do we know that we'll be able to breathe?"

“Lad,” Gorin replied with a deep sigh over his shoulder. “Yer covered from neck t’ toe in biogel, and yer worried about oxygen levels?”

“Uh... well...” Dr. Kidan sheepishly replied.

“Biology was never his strong point,” Chyka observed with a smirk over her shoulder at the slightly embarrassed scientist. Then her eyes were drawn to a very large crack in the stairwell wall. “But seriously. I’m not very keen on this place either. This concrete is... how old is it anyway?”

“Roughly seven hundred years, plus or minus a few decades,” Dr. Kidan responded with an extremely displeased glance at the deep fracture that had drawn the little snow leopardess’ attention. “And it hasn’t been maintained at all for at least the past two or three hundred. Nothing down here has.”

“Lovely,” Chyka replied with a deep sigh. As inured to mortal danger as she had become over

the past few days, that which she'd faced had always been presented by forces she could actually fight back against. People who could be defeated by her powers as a key'vin'ta priestess, or the powers she wielded as, or through the grace, of Omega. Forces of nature were something completely different.

If something big fell on them or, heaven forbid the whole place caved in, sure, the biogel wouldn't let them 'die'. But that didn't mean the whole place wouldn't wind up being their eternal tomb. Or at least Gorin and Dr. Kidan's eternal tomb. She could escape by shifting to some other mass of biogel. They couldn't.

Such power as Chyka had was sure to breed overconfidence. That would lead to misjudgments. Mistakes. And the consequences, harming those who trusted her to protect them, was the one thing that she'd quickly come to fear the most.

“Do you remember that big boom that woke everyone up about a week before the fire?” Dr. Kidan asked. “That mining engineer who came down here to determine the cause said that the carriage holding one of the old incomplete destroyer frames had rusted out so badly that the whole thing just tipped over in one of the side halls.”

“Bound te happen every so often,” Gorin remarked with casual indifference. “But face it, there’s been a lot o stability work done down here. Ye’ve got so much valuable sittin on top of it, after all. West landing way. Anwae Arena. Telyan shipyard. An bout a half dozen city blocks down the far end. Vixanti did a bit too, keep from havin problems down in the south quarry halls.”

“Did the shipyard actually extend all that way?” Chyka inquired, purely out of curiosity.

“No,” Dr. Kidan said, suspiciously eyeing one of the old tungsten lamps as the trio passed by. “It

used to house one of Macharri's main power generation sections.”

“And a very nasty defense array,” Gorin added. “The big round residence hall? Ways back, that used to house a hidden shield generator ring with a set of cruiser class plasma cannons on top. Real urban center defense rig.”

“The chamber where the facility's biogel core currently resides used to be the location of one of the facility's six large fusion reactors,” Dr. Kidan noted. “There are a number of other such chambers, though you wouldn't really know it the way they've been cut into rooms and floors. The laboratory demonstration section is one example. Next time you're there, see if you can make out how its public chambers and offices all fit into the same space as the core.”

“Mmm. In the main hall,” Gorin went on, “well, that used to be a launch array for full bore

naval torpedoes. Had at least a thousand on hand, just'n case.”

“And probably the most interesting part is that there are at least four more such facilities within Macharri, almost identically laid out,” Dr. Kidan observed. “Though from what I understand, none of them had the luxury of an old quarry space to be built into. Nor have they been completely cleared of their equipment.”

“Aye,” Gorin concluded. “Which is kind o funny when ye think about it. Of all the spots te dismantle, they picked the one right next te the biggest potential target in Mashiva... the spaceport.”

“Land next to a spaceport is expensive,” Chyka observed. “Especially when you need to expand. If they hadn't, there probably wouldn't have been an extension of the old east-west landing way and all the extra space for facilities that came along with

it. So... exactly where did they put those casks down here?"

Gorin shrugged as the trio stepped onto the landing at the level of the main shipyard floor. "Not entirely sure, lass. But I have a sneaking suspicion they're a ways down toward the far end o the main hall, off in one o the keel layin slips."

"Why's that?" Chyka inquired.

"Cuz back when that destroyer rolled over, they did a new survey o the whole place," Gorin replied. "Had a big name minin' engineer down ere te look things over n document it all. Tachi Miyan was er name. Nice lass. Big inte site stabilization an remediation. Very thorough. Way down in the last slip te the left she noted a set o holes bored in the floor that hadn't been noted anywhere before, capped n sealed with pretty new lookin' plugs. Size was right'n te money for the kind o casks they used for the original Old Three core."

Dr. Kidan frowned as the trio approached the open doorway out on the dark shipyard floor. The door itself had long since rusted off of its hinges, and lay just beyond the opening in the wash of soft light cast by another of the ubiquitous tungsten lamps. “Why would they have stored it so close by? And in so easy to find place? Urban explorers can get in here a few ways. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t, does it?” Gorin responded with a shrug.

“You don’t think it could be something else?” Dr. Kidan asked. “Maybe something hazardous that someone decided to seal up? If you want my professional opinion, the old core was almost surely removed via the old freight tunnels, and secretly slipped out through Macharri proper. I’ve been told the navy still maintains an isolated group of old hangars right by the Grand Falls for shady activities like that.”

“Freight tunnels,” Chyka thought aloud as she poked her head out of the door and looked around at the remains of the long abandoned shipyard. She could see that they had come out just to the north of Anwae Arena. The massive reinforced concrete cap that covered the opening of the old ship lift, and formed the lowest floor of the arena itself, was clearly visible in the light coming from the subway tunnels whose six tracks crossed the quarry canyon on a set of three steel bridges. The remains of the lower portions of the ship lift itself surrounded those bridges, towering rails, support structures, and the lift pads which would cradle a new ship from beneath as it was raised into the vast surface hangar above. These bits of machinery were the only view the general public had of the old shipyard, seen for a very brief moment from the windows of trains passing over the bridges on their way between University Station to the west, and the spaceport passenger terminal to the east.

Directly in front of the little snow leopardess, and completely interrupting her train of thought, was the almost comically boxy shape of a long obsolete Enani class patrol frigate. This particular hull was featured in just about every piece of media about the old naval base, and was the only thing that she could recall having seen of the shipyard prior to actually setting foot in it. It had been abandoned in its final stage of fitting out, and from all outward appearances, lacked only a few final patches of paint and a hull number. It's ground boarding hatch was open, though the stairway that should have extended dropped down from it was missing.

The hull itself sat atop a large cradle-like carriage. Each side of the carriage was a separate unit consisting of a long rail to which the actual hull supports were attached. Each of these rolled down the hall on rails which had been embedded in the natural stone floor. Once a ship had been completed and lifted up into the surface hangar, the two halves of the carriage would be separated

and a gantry would lift each over to a separate set of rails on the far side of the hangar. These would return the carriage sections to the beginning of the production line.

All that Chyka could really see of the production line were the first few boxy Enani class vessels. More than forty carriages were arrayed in a line beyond, but the perfectly straight hall was so long, and so poorly lit that she could only see vague shapes of the many varied hulls upon them. More hulls could be seen poking out from the many side halls where specialized installations or processes like painting would be carried out. Everything was covered in rust, ruddy red dust, and in places a fine coating of black soot that had no doubt come from the aforementioned fire.

“This is amazing,” Chyka murmured as she stepped out into the open and gazed in wonder at the sight. “Absolutely amazing.”

“It is, innit?” Gorin responded with a smile. “Imagine what it was like back when they were buildin ships down here. Things goin on everywhere ye’d look.”

“So many footprints,” Dr. Kidan noted, gazing down at the floor with considerable suspicion. “New footprints.”

“Well, with the tip-over n the fire, I’m not a bit surprised,” Gorin replied.

“It’s a long way down,” Chyka observed as she led her companions past the first of the old warships. “You mentioned freight tunnels. Did you mean the old subway tunnels that lead to that old passenger station in Macharri? Or are they something completely different?”

“All of the subway tunnels are connected,” Dr. Kidan explained. “Being able to move things around while blending into normal civilian traffic was part of the method for maintaining secrecy

back in the old days. Of course, nowadays most of the surviving old subway system is just used for postal shipping services, and the actual base freight tunnels are mostly abandoned. Well, except for a section out by the South City sorting facility, right near South City Junction. It all connects to the modern system there, hence the Junction part, though most people don't realize why it's called that."

Chyka raised one eyebrow as a picture began to form in her mind. "So... this whole shipyard has a direct connection to a set of freight tunnels, which have a direct connection to the old subway line through Macharri, which just happens to have a direct connection to Xinta Temple. The old portal beneath Xinta Temple. You know. The one that was occupied by that cult up until a couple of days ago?"

"Oh fer goddess' sake, lass," Gorin responded with a deep frown. "I really dun like where yer

goin

wit

this...”

“Neither do I,” Chyka responded with a grimace. “But we can’t deny that the cult would have had direct access to shipyard, and through it straight to Gelitech’s own back door.”

Dr. Kidan hesitated a few steps behind his companions. “Do you think we should maybe go back and point this out? Maybe get an escort? That seems like the safe thing to do. I mean, a lot safer than finding out if the cult is still hanging around here...”

“No,” Chyka replied. “I doubt they’d hang around so close. The marines...”

“Ye mean *those* marines, lass?” Gorin replied with a stifled laugh.

“No,” Chyka answered. “I mean my grandmother’s unit. They’re actively patrolling down here. If the connection with the shipyard is

close enough to the tunnel leading to Xinta, I wouldn't be surprised if they've been poking around here."

"Let's hope so," Gorin responded with a shrug. "Not bettin on it though. Not after what jus happened up topside."

"Whatever," Chyka sighed. "Lets get moving. It's a long way down to the end, and the sooner we see what's there, the better."

"What the fuck is going on down there?" General Riyalli demanded as she leaned over the briefing table, where a map of Brightsone Mine and its immediate environment had been laid out, along with detail maps of each of its two dozen levels, and hard copy readouts of the conflicting sensor readings that continue to come in from its most dangerous depths. Overhead, a complete 3D

model of the mine hovered, with a focus onto the portions closest to the Dari shaft. “Well?”

“We don’t know!” Tachi replied with a deep frown. The tigress had been leading the team assigned to find a plausible explanation for the new criticality event at Dari. They had been working most of the previous night and then half the current day, to no avail. None of the data they were receiving made any sense. It defied the laws of unified physics.

“There’s no known or even plausible physical process that could be fueling the outburst,” Dr. Lae, the world’s leading physicist. If General Riyalli was beyond perturbed, there were no words sufficient to describe just how unthinkable exasperated the tall, lanky ashiri was. His normally pastel blue skin was nearly white, though whether or not that was from exasperation or fear of the potential consequences of the incomprehensible process he’d been asked to explain was impossible to tell. “The Dari natural

reactor core mass was poisoned far past any point of reactivity recovery. It was cooling at exactly the expected rate, right up until the moment that the excursion began. There is absolutely no way that it could have achieved criticality again. No way at all! It simply defies all physical theory!”

General Riyalli slammed her fist on the table. “I’m not concerned about theory. I’m concerned with what’s actually happening and how we stop it!”

“The entirely first stage emergency recovery system has already been deployed,” Major Eld, the leading nuclear safety officer for the Dari site replied. “Two tons of depleted uranium weighted boron carbide darts have been dropped down the shaft and into the mass with absolutely no effect.”

“Which is beyond impossible,” Dr. Lae noted. “Which leads me to another point. The rate of heating of the mass doesn’t match a criticality

event. At least, not a criticality event within, or immediately local to the mass itself.”

“But the reaction byproducts making their way into Brightstone Mine do,” Major Eld observed, furrowing his dark violet brow.

“And if this weren’t a complicated matter enough, there appears to be some biological event taking place in the affected areas of the mine as well,” Tachi stated with a deep sigh, pointing toward one of tunnels nearest to the Dari site. “One of the video feeds on the ninety-four hundred level, that’s about nine hundred and forty meters below the uppermost adits, showed a shiny, luminous substance growing on the walls before rising radiation levels caused the camera to fail.”

“Seriously?” General Riyalli snapped.

“Seriously,” Major Eld replied.

“The growth may or may not be a kind of semi-engineered, reaction byproduct isolating bacteria related to what’s colloquially known as subway slime,” Tachi explained. “This might have deployed within the mine way back when it was finally closed back in 4492. In combination with moisture, also in ample quantity in the mine, it forms a slimy coating on surfaces, and its bioluminescence was intended to warn potential victims of radiation in the area. And I say might have been deployed, because we have record of its shipment to the mine, but closure and remediation records have no mention of its actual use.”

“Now, I should probably add that there *is* a very minuscule possibility, and I mean *very* minuscule, that the criticality event producing the reaction byproducts is distinct from the heating of the natural core beneath the Dari shaft, which may itself have nothing to do with the transdimensional flux variance readings,” Dr. Lae noted. “As to the former two matters, it should be noted that there was more than one naturally critical uranium mass

in the immediate vicinity of Brightstone, or intersected by its workings. One other active mass still burns several hundred meters past the westernmost of the mines tunnels, at the eighty-one hundred level.”

“I should note there are no changes to readings in that area,” Major Eld noted.

“There are three known extinct natural reactors intersected by the workings,” Dr. Lae continued, pointing to various features on the 3D model. “One at the forty-one hundred level to the west. Another at the fifty-six hundred level to the south. The final example is of more interest, as it lays just across the canyon from Dari, right beneath the river about seven hundred meters past the falls.”

“Go on,” General Riyalli responded.

“To be honest, we don’t think it’s involved in any way,” Tachi replied. “There’s hardly any two-thirty-five left in the vital central area of that mass,

at least according to the final recorded assay prior to mine closure. That one burned hot, and burned out. In fact, there's a fair hypothesis that the remaining reactive portion of it migrated at some point in the distant past, becoming the existing natural reactor mass under Dari. It was the heat and infiltration of reaction byproducts from that mass that ended mining in that area, after all, which suggests at least a marginal geological connection."

"Would the introduction of water provide sufficient moderation to restart that extinct reactor across the river?" Genral Riyalli questioned.

"Not even heavy water," Dr. Lae replied. "The mine tunnel opens up quite a bit directly in the center of the former core. A lot of material was removed for study of sustained fission processes in nature. Most of it came to the Maria Nuclear Energy Institute, and is still stored in the vaults."

“Not to go all conspiracist or anything, but we’re all assuming this is an all-natural process,” Major Eld noted with a frown. “What if someone went in there and started adding fissionable material in hopes of restarting it?”

“Getting the right composition and configuration with respects to the remaining natural material would be virtually impossible,” Dr. Lae answered. “At least with the grades of natural uranium ore material that could be acquired in sufficient quantity by a non-governmental body to fill the space sufficiently.”

“There’s no way just to move all that material into the mine without setting off all the seismic detectors in a hundred kilometer radius anyhow,” Tashi noted. “Forget the amount of blasting it would take to get past all the reinforced concrete plugs that were put in place when the mine was closed. There have been collapses, and increasing instability in the intervening areas as well. All that

would take a lot of noisy explosive effort to correct or bypass.”

General Riyalli huffed with considerable frustration. She turned to the Dari site commander, Colonel N’syne. “Deploy B Company to the main Brightstone works, with qualified engineering and health physics support, to examine the site for recent activity, and with extreme caution. Once that is complete, commence survey of all secondary access sites.”

“Yes ma’am!” replied the brutish, yet disarmingly soft spoken woolly mitanni.

General Riyalli turned back to the small team in the monitoring room. “That should rule out potential deliberate activity in relatively short order. Meanwhile, I want you to keep looking for possible natural explanations, no matter how unlikely they might seem at first glance. If you need any further resources, don’t hesitate to ask! We need to get this under control... because if we

don't... I'm not sure I want to have to explain it to the Empress... and I'm sure you don't either!"

“Those footprints look a lot different than these,” Dr. Kidan noted as the trio approached the end of the foot-achingly long trek down the seemingly unending shipyard canyon. Each abandoned hull that they passed was in a less complete state than the one before. Hull plating gave way to frames chock full of equipment. These gave way to progressively emptier hull frames. Now, these empty skeletons were themselves becoming less and less complete, and the massive maze of machinery which loomed overhead was becoming more complex, and much more intimidating to the eyes of anyone who might worried about something breaking free and falling on top of them.

Down on the floor, among the rust covered, partial starship skeletons were countless footprints

who's density seemed directly proportional to the distance that they'd traveled down the building hall. Most of those that could be seen were fairly recent tracks. Some wandered here and there in a strangely orderly fashion. Chyka assumed that these particular tracks were the result of the survey that had been conducted when that destroyer hull had tipped over. Others beat a more or less strait path between the access to Old Three and the far end of the hall. These were likely part of the response to the fire whose sooty evidence become more and more visible the closer they came to the end of the canyon.

There were plenty of older looking tracks as well. These were no doubt evidence of prior surveys, urban exploration, and the production of those documentaries on the history of the old naval base and shipyard. But one set of tracks looked very different from the others. It was older than the most recent, but much newer than most of the others, at least by the looks of them. But their shape... their shape was... positively singular.

“What species do you think those came from?”
Dr. Kidan asked.

“I have no idea,” Chyka replied. She’d never seen anyone with three long, splayed toes facing forward and two facing back and slightly off to each side before. In her mind she imagined some sort of exotic primate, whose feet were as much hands as their hands. The apparent stride of the track’s creator suggested that it had been a humanoid of some sort, and a very tall one at that. But they didn’t seem to have dug too deeply into the thick layer of dusty sediment on the floor, suggesting someone very tall, but very light in proportion. Then again, she was no detective. They could have come from a quintipedal robo-bug for all she really knew.

“Hmm...” Gorin hummed as he bent over to look at the prints a bit more closely. “No. Can’t be.”

“Can’t be what?” Chyka asked.

“I... eh...” Gorin responded with uncharacteristic recalcitrance.

“What? What is it?” Dr. Kidan questioned.

“Yeah. Come on. Spit it out,” Chyka said. It wasn’t like the engineer to hide anything from her. Not even the sort of less than pleasant truths about life, engineering, and Gelitech of whom he seemed to be an almost unending source.

“Well, y’ever hear about...” Gorin hesitated.

“About what?” Chyka insisted.

“About Nuva Exi Shi,” Gorin finally answered.

“You mean that *creature* that directed Vixanti Three up until the Omega Incident?” Dr. Kidan responded. “I didn’t know socari had five toes like that.”

“Yeah, they do,” Gorin replied. “Trust me. I know. Like. I know, I know.”

Chyka frowned. “I’ve heard about the sovari before. Something about their religion and wanting to somehow combine the fundamental essence of all people into a single, greater entity.”

“Aye,” Gorin responded with deep sigh. “Sound familiar, lass?”

Dr. Kidan shook his head. “Oh dear...”

“Yeah,” Gorin said, standing up to look gaze down the line of tracks as they vanished around the final ship carriage with its keel and first bits of framing attached to it. “Accordin te their philosophy, they were supposed to go around collectin sperm and eggs from all the galaxy’s sapients and somehow combine them int’a some new, better species te replace them all. But then... well... a group had this grand idea te skip all the

middle bits and make a life form that would jus absorb everyone. Not just their genetics, mind ye. Their bodies. Their souls. Everythin.”

“Biogel,” Chyka murmured.

“Aye,” Gorin replied. “An so the story says they used all those bedroom connections te fool the government inte funding their project. Sold it as a way to protect sailors from death in battle. Even use it as a weapon that could reproduce te results of killin without actually killin. Of course, it couldn stay secret fer long, so they set it all up as a xenolifestyle product. Nex thing ye know, they’ve got themselves their all-consumin monstrosity, and enough of a public ready te go an feed themselves to it, just cuz’ it looked so sexy.”

“Heavens,” Dr. Kidan muttered.

“An then, somewheres along the line, their fey’li chief scientist had the novel idea of settin herself up as the soul in charge of it all in place of

Director Shi,” Gorin added. “You all know how well that worked for er. Lady Anwae wound up becoming the monster in both their places and here we all are, captive to er siren call, livin in er body with no a care in the whole world, right?”

“So what was this Director Shi doing down here, I wonder?” Chyka asked.

“Escapin,” Gorin replied.

“I was under the impression that Sarva took care of all of the loose ends in the wake of the Omega Incident,” Dr. Kidan noted. “Director Shi was loose end number one.”

“Shi got away,” Gorin answered with a shrug. “Prob’ly someone she was sexin got her out. Vanished into thin air, that woman did. Well, vanished into the shipyard, it seems. Heaven knows where she went from ere. Not sure I really wante find out, te be perfectly honest.”

There was something odd about the engineer's tone that caught Chyka's ear. Something a bit too strained. Too earnest. Too personally invested in the event that he'd been describing.

"Eh. It doesn't matter, does it?" Gorin sated as he stood up and turned toward the last of the side halls. "Done n over with."

"It was *you*, wasn't it?" Chyka asked.

Gorin froze.

"*You* helped her escape, didn't you?" Chyka demanded.

"Lass, it's done n over with," Gorin replied. "Never claimed te be a saint. Jus... didne want te see er... suffer."

"Suffer?" Chyka questioned. "And exactly how was she going to suffer? By facing fair justice for trying to take over the galaxy?"

“Don’ be foolin yerself about Sarva, lass,” Gorin answered as he stared blankly off into the darkness. “When it comes to organized crime n such, he couldn give a shit about the law. Oh, sure. He arrests lots o no-names n secondary characters. The real targets? They all just go away, don they? ‘In hiding’, my ass. Ye really think he lets em’ get away?”

“Clearly, he let Director Shi get away, and go into hiding,” Chyka snapped. “Why the hell would think any of the others are any different?”

“Ye really think she got far enough away fer that?” Gorin growled in reply. “No, lass. I’m under no illusions. She’s dead. I just... I just... wanted to give er a chance. Even if was jus wishful thinkin.”

“You... idiot!” Dr. Kidan groaned. “She can’t be dead. It’s impossible. She was wearing mark six biogel! I mean, she might be a gummy, but

she's not dead! And there's nothing Sarva could have done to kill her!"

"An the torture beforehand?" Gorin hissed. "What about that?"

"You have no fucking idea what kind of information she could have supplied on the whole plot!" Dr. Kidan swore. "How do we know the whole thing was really put on ice? There could be a whole organization out there, biding their time, trying to find some way to supplant, or maybe even take control of the mark seven biogel, and Omega! Some contingency plan that only she knew about that... that could be out there, just waiting for their moment to strike and turn us all into their shiny black slaves!"

"You call me an idiot!" Gorin yelled. "That's the most idiotic thing I've ever..."

"Shut up!" Chyka ordered.

Gorin glared at the little snow leopardess. “Oh, dun tell me ye ack’chilly believe im!”

Chyka hesitated. Gorin was her best friend within Gelitech. Her most trusted friend. She never hesitated to tell him anything that was bothering her. He’d been right next to her through thick and thin. He knew everything. *Everything.*

I don’t know what to do, Chyka thought into the void. I don’t know what to do. Was he just too stupid to realize? Or is he... is he...

An image flashed through Chyka’s mind. A harsh face. Pale blue eyes. And words that only she could hear. *Stay where you are. I’m coming...*

TO BE CONTINUED...