

GELITECH

EPISODE 15

A SNOWVEIL INTERLUDE

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE SNOWVEIL

Twas the night before Snowveil, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Holiday lights twinkled, as they were always wont to do, though no one was there to see them, for they had kinky things to do.

To the Gelarium they'd gone, invited by their friends on the staff, to see all the sights sans tourists, and share some nip and a good sexy laugh.

There were glistenings aplenty, thanks to all that arousing black goo, dozens of glossy new dolls, with a big shiny bow round each neck too.

Who'd have thought that Snowveil, could be such a kinky holiday, but it's really not that big a surprise. After all... it's the Gelitech way!

I

Dr. Mika frowned. It was the night before Snowveil. Almost midnight, to be more precise. All Gelitech business activity was closed for the holiday, including the research and development laboratories. No one should have been working. So who was in the big Dev-Demo Lab? And what in the nine hells were they doing do make all that absolutely ear twisting noise?

To the tigress' delicate feline ears, it sounded for all the world like someone was running a giant tank of mayonnaise through a big, metal bladed box fan. There was a constant, fluid ripping, accompanied by periodic blips and blups, and topped off with a light, sticky splatter. And then there was a low woosh, accentuated by a light, airy flutter. And, if her ears weren't deceiving her, there was a hint of a giggle. Perhaps even a chuckle. And all this audible

through armored doors, and down two hundred feet of broad subterranean corridor.

“Someone’s having fun, eh?” a pale blue elf-eared ahsiri commented as she passed by on her way down the vast subterranean main hall of the former Vixanti Facility Three. She was headed toward the library and archive that separated the cavernous space from the slowly decaying remains of the old subterranean naval shipyard beyond, where the evening’s company festivities were still quite far from winding down. Indeed, one might say, the *real* festivities had hardly begun.

“Yeah,” Dr. Mika grumped. “Fun.”

The tigress paused and watched the ahsiri as she practically pranced down the broad underground boulevard, with its black glass sidewalks and big median decorated with white concrete planters and carved granite fountains. The woman’s perfectly polished coat of obsidian black biogel shimmered and twinkled in entrancingly sublime reflection of the countless tiny points of colorful holiday light that

festooned every shrub, tree, and elevated terrace. It was quite the sight to behold, and not just the luminous glimmer which bounced and jiggled with ever one of the ashiri's enthusiastically confident strides.

All the same, the holiday sights in the main hall hardly matched those of the massive, circular residential cavern, with its six ground-penetrating towers, magnificent central garden, and outer ring of two-story shops and offices. There, the decorations had been specially installed, and their settings carefully tuned to blink, flash, and flow in a wonderfully synchronized show of illumination that carried on night and day, and would continue to do so until well past the new year. It was no exaggeration to say that it put just about any above-ground 'holiday village' that she'd ever seen to shame, and by quite a fair margin at that.

At this hour, on this day, the few people who were still out and about were those who were coming and going from one of the many pre-holiday gatherings, large and small, that were taking place

around the subterranean facility, up topside at the Gelarium, and over at the Mashiva Mariners' University. There former were generally sedate affairs, brief social gatherings for professional coworkers, and just the sort of thing that Dr. Mika preferred, when she was inclined to be something somewhat remotely resembling sociable. At least until the first hints of the inevitable "after-party" began to show themselves. That was usually a good indicator that it was time to head home.

The gatherings in the Gelarium itself were exclusively for Gelarium staff and their private guests. These were sexy events which all too often resulted in most of the guests, not to mention a few of their hosts, getting themselves done up into biogel objects of one sort or another. But the latter gathering were where the real fun was at. At least that was what everyone liked to say after the holiday was done. The socially recalcitrant scientist had no particular inclination to find out if that was actually true or not, and there was little chance of that changing any time soon.

As the glistening backside of the passing ashiri vanished into the soft white glow of the library, Dr. Mika turned her easily distracted attention back to the brightly lit corridor that branched off the main hall. It was located right next to the big vehicle lift that led upward through the facility garage levels, and beyond to the surface maintenance hangar that stood along the Mashiva Spaceport's southwest ramp. It cut a straight path into the natural rock, extending back two hundred feet before splitting in two to surround the main Dev-Demo lab chamber. It was there that staff and guests could watch demonstrations of newly developed biogel products through the giant windows covered all but the very back walls. Right now, however, the windows were gray and opaque. That was how they were generally kept during less public phases of development work that required the use of the large, securely contained space. Unfortunately, that meant that the annoyed scientist had no way to readily determine whether or not the source of the noise was something that demanded her immediate attention.

Nothing had been set up in the main chamber for nearly two weeks, nor were there any experiments or demonstrations currently held in the storage/waiting areas beyond the big access doors in the far wall. In fact, there wasn't really anything in the works that was really appropriate for the large, open space. One of the smaller demo chambers which lined the corridor surrounding the main chamber, perhaps, but certainly not the main chamber itself.

“What in all the hells can they *possibly* be doing in there?” Dr. Mika huffed to herself as she contemplated whether or not she needed to investigate. “And tonight of all nights...”

It was getting late, and the frowning tigress' supremely comfortable, glossy black gel-bed beckoned from afar. All she really wanted to do was make her way down the underground boulevard, and through the festive garden to her luxurious top-level staff residence in the north tower. To lay down and sleep off the three glasses of nip that were now starting to feel like two too many.

She wasn't much of a drinker, and it didn't take much to start her getting a bit tipsy. But...

It wasn't that there was really anything fundamentally wrong with someone making use of the demo chamber on the holiday. Not everyone was quite as enthusiastic to celebrate the old feyli Imperial holidays as most tended to be. If they wanted to spend their holiday time off messing about with some personal idea when they could genuinely have the lab all to themselves, then who was Dr. Mika to say otherwise? But still...

Whatever it was that someone was doing in the main chamber certainly sounded like it was something extremely messy. If that was the case, it was almost certainly going to be an absolute bear to clean up. And given how such messy things tended to wind up, whoever was making the mess probably wasn't going to be left in any state to help sort it all out.

"Dammit," the grumpy tigress grumbled at the prospect of having to deal with a massive mess of

potentially hazardous biogel splatter herself, and on the holiday no less. “I’d better go and find out what the hell is going on in there. I just know they haven’t arranged a cleanup plan. I just know it. They never do. Never! And who always has to figure out how to clean it all up safely? Me!”

A distant, low rumble from above made the grouchy scientist glance upward. It was a familiar sound, of course. Dozens of rubber tires thumping over the seams in the concrete spaceport parking pad nearly a hundred feet above, reverberating through the dirt, rock, reinforced concrete, and vast open spaces of the ancient, covered-over quarry in which the facility had been built. It was an odd time for an unannounced arrival of any sort. Doubly odd, considering just how little the old Vixanti ramp saw now that starship modification work had been moved elsewhere. Perhaps someone was shuffling freighters about, and needed to borrow some extra parking space for the moment. That was the most likely answer. But still... *it was a holiday*. Didn’t all the ship handlers have the night off?

Dr. Mika shook off the new distraction. Topside starship traffic had never been much of a concern to her, and now was certainly not the exception. All she was concerned with was that awful noise that was coming down the corridor from the lab. With a deep huff, she started on her way toward the source of the cacophony. Much to her considerable irritation, it just seemed to get worse the closer she got.

“Oh! Dr. Mika!” the Development Division receptionist called out as the irate tigress tromped past the little reception desk that guarded the only public entrance to the biogel development laboratories. The confused, brown skinned kiandi leaned forward as his boss passed by without offering any sign that she’d noticed his presence. “Uh.. Dr. Mika?”

“What... in... the... hells...” the tigress hissed to herself as she thumped down the corridor toward the lab. The tearing sound had changed pitch, bumping up an octave while the low whoosh got considerably louder. So did the sound of girly

giggling. Whatever was happening inside the main demo chamber, someone certainly seemed to be quite amused with it. Not amused enough to want to share it with passers-by, however. Dr. Mika stepped into the two-story high corridor space that hugged the main chamber's windowed wall and stared into the gray that blocked her view inside.

The visual shield was a simple enough thing. Based on ancient technology, it utilized a layer of opaque liquid crystal as a layer between two panes of heavy armored glass. Apply a small voltage to it, however, and it would become perfectly clear with a refractive index exactly the same as the glass. Its primary controls were located in the main lab control room, on the second level right above the end of the straight corridor section. Dr. Mika looked up over her shoulder, into the control room window. The room was dark. There didn't seem to be anyone inside.

There was another, more quickly accessed place to see what was going on inside the chamber, of course. The two stage access envirolock was along

the corridor which led around the chamber to the left. There were windows there that offered views into both the chamber and the demo prep lab behind it.

The scowling tigress huffed and headed toward the envirolock door. As the bright caution stripes and illuminated red hazard warnings came into view, the sound coming from within the chamber suddenly changed. There was no more ripping, or liquid blips and blurps. There was just a gentle whoosh and the enthusiastic giggles, laughs, and giddy chirping of multiple, extremely delighted sounding voices.

“I swear... if I have to...” Dr. Mika muttered as she hit the safety warning acknowledgment button which would unlock the envirolock’s outer door. She didn’t even wait for the door to fully slide aside, eliciting an angry beep from the safety sensors as she charged into the modestly sized room with its lockers, benches, and various lockers, shelves, and racks filled with emergency gear. Headed straight for the window, to gaze upon whatever horribly

messy horror that those voices had brought into being, and that she was almost certainly going to have to clean up when all was said and done.

“What... what the...” the tigress gasped as barely repressed anger suddenly turned to complete and utter confusion. “Is that... is that... *snow?!?*”

II

A nearly opaque mass of little white flakes blew about the large demonstration chamber with all the fury of a proper Mashiva blizzard. Somewhere within the chamber, something was propelling them upward, dashing them against the high, domed ceiling, where they tumbled about in giant swirls before eventually falling down in a dense cloud to accumulate in heaps against the chamber walls. Vague, dark shapes danced, pranced, and rolled about amid the shimmering white fluff, only discernible to the stunned tigress thanks to their neck to toe coatings of obsidian black biogel.

Dr. Mika wasn't quite sure what to think of the strange, almost eerie vision of biogel clad shapes constantly appearing from within the turbulent storm, only to fade away moments later with the ebb and surge of the falling masses of snow. Her scientific side was almost completely repulsed by

the whole thing. Granted, it *was* only snow. There wasn't going to be anything to clean up once all the shenanigans were done. It was just a matter of letting it melt and run down the drain. But it seemed like such an unnecessary waste of scientific facilities and resources.

The fact was, it was already snowing up quite a storm outside, up on the surface. Why in all the heavens would anyone think it was more fun to have a winter frolic in the confines of the demo chamber than it was to have one out where there was far more room and potential for enjoyable snowy activities? Surely there wasn't anything that would make the demo chamber more appealing, was there?

The more practical side of Dr. Mika's mind immediately turned to the potential uses of a fully controlled winter environment. Would Gelitech systems really stand up to that level of extreme environmental exposure? What about cold weather training for Gelitech personnel going to work in

snow climates? The possibilities seemed too enticing to ignore. But... at what cost?

The contraption that was producing all that powdery snow was barely visible amid the virtual whiteout. There was a large, upward facing fan of some sort, mounted on some sort of frame. There was some sort of trough or tub right beside it. There might also have been a pump, though it was just too hard for the tigress to tell. Was it making snow flakes by spraying water up into the icy-cold air and through fan? Or, far more likely from the sound it had been making, were they throwing ice into the fan where it would be pulverized into little glimmering ice crystals?

The confused tigress grimaced at the thought of standing there in the cold, doing all that hard work of shoveling ice into the machine and dealing with that awful noise for so long, just to turn the demo chamber into a giant snow-cone machine. It was just... silly. Irrational. And just the sort of thing that one might think was a good idea after a long evening's worth of holiday spice 'nip.

Dr. Mika turned away from the test-chamber turned snow-globe. She'd had more than her own share of 'nip already, and sorely wanted to sleep it off. Surely the girls couldn't get themselves into *too* much trouble with something so relatively harmless. But they *were* clearly fooling around with a fan powerful enough to mince ice into virtual powder. Was it really safe? Shouldn't she at least check to make sure?

“Dammit,” the tigress sighed as she turned to the door that led into the inner envirolock. It was this small chamber that led into the demo chamber. She slapped at the buttons to clear the safety warnings. The door slid aside. “I swear, chasing everyone around to keep them out of trouble around here... it ever ends...”

Instantly, Dr. Mika was blasted in the face, not with icy cold, but a weird, silky coolness the likes of which she'd never felt before. The inner door was already open, as was generally the case when hazards within the chamber might make finding the

exit more a matter of feel than sight. That was certainly the case now, as the doorway was completely blocked by an unbroken wall of glistening white fluff. It was held in check by a shimmering purple force field that served to prevent runaway experiments from escaping along with those fleeing their potential perils.

Despite initial appearances, the snow didn't quite look like any snow that Dr. Mika had ever seen before. Maybe it was just the glow of the force field, but she couldn't help but think it was too soft looking. Too uniform in its texture. And somehow... too shiny. Then again, she was about as much a connoisseur of ice science as she was of ship-spotting.

“Goddess!” she mumbled to herself as she pushed through the force field and into the pleasantly cool mass of glistening powder with both hands. “This is... what... what is this even?”

Given the temperature of the air, Dr. Mika fully expected to be wading into a layer of slippery slush

along the floor. Much to her surprise, however, the rubberized, non-skid floor was perfectly dry. The snow itself was impossibly light. Despite the fact that it was piled well over two meters high against the walls, she was able to push through it as if it were a pile of aerogel packing balls. And, much to her considerable consternation, it didn't show any signs of melting when it came into contact with her own warm, biogel coated body. Nor did it seem to have any inclination to enter her nose or mouth as she breathed, something which seemed quite impossible for such a seemingly dry fluff.

What the hell is going on here? Dr. Mika thought with considerable befuddlement as she pushed out toward the middle of the massive chamber. Or at least where she thought the middle of the chamber might be. *Dammit! I can't see a thing!*

“Who's next?” a light, girly, snow-muffled voice called out amid the artificial blizzard.

“You are!” came the reply from a least half a dozen others.

The first voice laughed. “Okay! Here I go!”

Dr. Mika stopped within the pile of fluff. It quickly filled the path she’d forced, and before she could even begin to ponder how she should react to the prospect of something potentially interesting and/or perilous occurring in her immediate vicinity, she found herself surrounded with an incredibly pleasing sense of silky, almost dreamy, coolness. The fascinating sensation took her by surprise. It was like floating in a sea of oily wetness, and yet it she was completely dry. It was different than anything she’d ever felt before, but at the same time, it seemed very familiar. She’d felt something like it before, but couldn’t quite place her mental finger on it.

“Ah... oh... OH!” the first voice moaned. Her sensuous song was accompanied by various sloppy wet sounds that continued for several moments after her arousing vocalizations had come to a deep, huffing conclusion. For a few moments there was

silence. Then, without any warning at all, came the horrid ripping.

Dr. Mika gasped at the terrible sound. Something was being torn to shreds, and she could only assume that it was the owner of that lovely voice. She charged forward, pressing through the powder until she burst out into the open center of the chamber. There, the fluff was only about ankle deep, though the sheer volume of swirling flakes still made it hard to see where she was going, or what perils she might wind up bumping into on the way.

The tigress stopped and tried to let her eyes adjust to the weird light. The fluff was diffusing it in strange ways, causing it to shift and pulse in random patterns that were only a few short steps away from being hypnotic to her 'nip fogged eyes. She could just make out the shape of the machine in the middle of the room. She took a few more cautious steps toward it, bringing its dark shape much more clearly into view.

The machine was as simple as it could possibly have been. There was a ducted fan salvaged from

some archaic aerospace vehicle was mounted on a rough frame. Beneath was a rusty old electric bilge pump that had been ‘borrowed’ from the old shipyard’s warehouses full of rusty, centuries out-of-date parts for some past experiment and never returned. It was just the sort of things one would expect to find being thrown together as a makeshift snow-maker. What wasn’t expected was the source of ‘water’ that was attached to it.

“You have to be kidding me...” Dr. Mika muttered in disbelief as she took a step toward the very familiar device, momentarily forgetting that the machine was making its ‘snow’ out of something very different from water. “Couldn’t they have found something more appropriate?”

Physically the device was little more than a large round tub with a clear wall on one side. A pipe rose up from the solid ‘back’ wall and bent over to form an inverted U shape, with the other end attached to the inside bottom. A drain opening along the back was connected to the hose, and through that to the pump.

The tearing noise surged, bringing Dr. Mika back to reality. It was now more obvious than ever that the snow wasn't actually snow, but something else entirely. But what was it? Confusion became curiosity. Was this some commercial product she'd never heard of before? Or was it something that they'd come up with themselves? She walked toward the machine in hopes of finding some clue.

Dr. Mika looked into the tub. "Oh... OH!" she gasped at the instant realization of just what the frolicking figures were doing with the unusual looking tub. They weren't just using it as a convenient vessel to hold the snow-making liquid. They were using it to *create* the liquid!

It all made instant sense to the tigress now. An idea that had probably been festering in someone's mind for weeks, if not months. Just enough 'nip to make it sound sensible. Access to spare parts and disused old equipment. An evening off with no one else around for a test run. And plenty of free 'nip making the rounds to put enough of their friends in the right

state of mind of volunteer their own bodies as the raw material needed to make it work.

One by one they were grabbing onto that tall pipe. Hopping up to press their glistening black toes into the molecular sheen of glistening white biogel that formed a sheet which sealed its top. Down they slid, their bodies being transformed into more white biogel as they descended through the sheen. Liquid white biogel that would drizzle into the tub and be pumped out and sprayed into the fan. There, the non-Newtonian fluid would be torn to shreds, the results forming little crystalline flakes owing to some property of biogel that the scientist had yet to discover, or via some unique custom programming of this particular units biogel sheen.

Then, of course, all those impossibly light biogel flakes would get blown up to the chamber ceiling. They'd swirl around the dome and fall back to the ground just like real snow. Dry snow, that would never melt, never compact, and probably never reveal just which of the tiny flakes actually

contained the life essences of those who'd offered their bodies to the machine.

On one hand, Dr. Mika was impressed. The idea of biogel snow was novel and potentially useful, in the right contexts. The results were also quite pleasant to the touch. But she had a sneaking suspicion that there was more to this experiment than met the eye. She'd experimented with biogel aerosols before... and those experiments had always ended with results that were quite unintended, even if they were periodically quite entertaining to those who had the chance to observe them.

The tigress looked around at the dark shapes that were still chasing one another through the snow along the chamber walls, no doubt as much to savor the strange, silky feel as to engage in simulated winter frolicking. They didn't seem to have noticed her entry into the chamber. Or perhaps they just didn't care. No doubt they'd put out an open invitation to their friends, and given the nature of the evening's festivities, might be expecting new arrivals for much of the night.

Maybe I'll just let them have their fun, Dr. Mika thought, turning back the way she'd come. I need to sleep off this 'nip. I can analyze the data tomorrow. And maybe order a bigger vacuum while I'm at it. Something industrial. Heaven knows, with all this powder to clean up, I'm going to need it!

The tigress sighed and turned back the way she'd come. Or was it the way she'd come? She could roughly judge by the angle from which she'd approached the machine, but given all the biogel snow piled up against the walls, every direction looked exactly the same. The best she could do was to just pick a direction and go until she hit the wall. Then, perhaps, she could go right until she either found the envirolock or ran into the big doors that led into the prep lab. In the latter case, she could just go back the opposite way to find the envirolock.

It seemed easy enough as Dr. Mika headed back into the deep fluff, but no sooner had she gotten in

waist-deep than she found herself tumbling forward over an unseen and oddly soft feeling obstacle. She yelped and reached forward to try and cushion her inevitable collision with the hard floor. But then... something strange happened. As she accelerated downward, the resistance of the biogel snow increased. By the time her fingers came into contact with the floor, she was hardly moving at all.

“What the...” the tigress gasped aloud as she slowly sank through the now quite ‘thick’ feeling fluff, eventually settling gently down onto the floor with her lower legs resting atop the unexpected obstacle. “What just... what just... I never... just... this is... so... fucking... bizarre! Just... why? And how? I don’t understand! It’s all... impossible!”

III

Dr. Mika sat up inside her pile of biogel snow and tried to get her head around just what it was that the still happily frolicking revelers had actually created. Never in a million years would she have imagined that little biogel flakes could possibly act in the manner of a non-Newtonian fluid when assembled in a large mass, let alone flakes crafted using such an absurdly crude method. There must be something special about the particular batch of white biogel that they'd used to reactivate the sheening pole prototype. Something totally unique, not to mention something that someone had to have gone through an awful lot of intensive effort to engineer.

But who had created this snow-white biogel? How had they managed to expend so much effort without scheduling lab time? Or requisitioning any material resources for the project? Had they hidden

their work in the context of a different project? If they'd done that... why? Did they think such a novel idea with significant potentials for useful developments wouldn't get approved? Or was there some other reason that the puzzled scientist just couldn't quite fathom at the moment?

As much as Dr. Mika might have wanted to explore her many questions, there were more pressing matters close at hand. Foremost among these was figuring out exactly what it was that she'd just tripped over. Unable to see more than vague shapes and shadows through the dense white fluff, she didn't have much choice but to explore the unusual object with her hands. A lighter object against a darker floor, a cool, and silky smooth to the point of feeling almost oily. Enticingly soft in places, and endowed with curves that seemed to invite considerably more than just a casual exploration.

The tigress tense as she recognized the all too familiar shape. It was a gummy. A female gummy, who's curves were so immediately familiar thanks to

the fact that each one was perfectly identical in physical shape and feel to every other. How many had she touched in her years working for Gelitech? Hundreds? Thousands?

The virtually inanimate doll might have been made of one hundred percent pure biogel, but it was still very much a living thing. The woman who it had once been could still feel the scientist's caress. The totally anonymous woman, whose identity the scientist would likely never know. Nor did she particularly care to know. Being 'glistened' was all about casting aside one's personal uniqueness and identity, after all, and becoming an object with qualities perfectly identical to every other of its kind.

What Dr. Mika did care to know, however, was just what had triggered the unknown woman's transformation. A shudder ran down her spine as a mental image of the most likely cause began to form in her mind. The biogel snow itself had triggered the glistening. While most of the vast quantity of flakes were perfectly inert, some carried

the potent ability to insinuate themselves into the symbiotic biogel suits worn by the frolickers. Once that happened, the suit would liquefy, cover the unfortunate subject's head, and convert her whole body into more biogel while simultaneously shifting the resulting biogel mass into the generic gummiform shape.

Who could possibly know how many of these insidiously potent flakes were hidden in the piles of biogel snow? All it would take was the most fleeting of touches to trigger glistening. Wade through the fluff was an exercise in peril, and one who's consummation was almost certainly less a matter of chance as it was a matter of time. And the increasingly perturbed scientist had already spent more time amid the biogel fluff than seemed prudent. Or even sane.

“Dammit!” the tigress hissed as she scooted herself back through the pile of fluff in a near panic, toward where she assumed the open envirolock door to be. The quicker she got out of the chamber, the better, though there was some considerably

doubt in her mind as to whether or not such quick, snow disturbing move would decrease her peril, or actually make glistening more likely. “Dammit. Dammit. DAMMIT!”

“Aw, come on!” one of the frolickers called out in the first clear acknowledgment of the tigress’ presence in their midst. “Don’t you wanna join the fun?”

“Fun?” Dr. Mika exclaimed. She had her own ideas of fun, and they rarely aligned with what everyone else seemed to enjoy, at least so far as biogel was concerned. Those ideas might occasionally hamper her understanding of the marketing departments more esoteric ideas, but they’d done well to keep her out of trouble. There was never much chance of her getting caught up in experiments if she couldn’t understand why anyone would find them enticing enough to try. “What about any of this is fun?”

The tigress’ protest was met with giddy laughter.

Dr. Mika continued to scoot backwards. It seemed to be taking far longer to reach the door than she would have expected. Or any part of the chamber wall, for that matter. Had she gotten turned around when she'd tripped? Was she actually moving in a straight line? Or was she going around in a circle underneath the piles of biogel snow, with no clear path to anything other than an inevitable meeting with one of those little glistening-flakes?

“Isn't it obvious?” a second frolicker finally answered as the laughter died down. “Become the snow, or become the snow-girl! Come on! Join us! It's about time someone else slipped themselves through the winter sheen. How about you?”

Dr. Mika was about to reply in a firmly negative fashion when she somehow miraculously managed to find the envirolock door frame, albeit with the back of her head and with considerably more force than she would have preferred. “Ow!” she hissed as she groped about to see which side the door itself was on. She could feel the faint, fizzy feeling of the doorway force field to her left. “Finally.”

“Yeah! Go on! Do it! It’ll be awesome!” another frolicker giggled.

“Don’t you want to know what it’s like to be snow?” yet another frolicker cooed, the clarity and volume of her voice through the mass of fluff making it clear she was much closer to the tigress than her companions. “Hmm? Don’t you? Come on and try... oh... oh... ah...”

Dr. Mika bit her lower lip as she slid sideways and backwards into the open doorway. She could feel the force field making her hair feel all frizzy as she began to slide backward through the portal. There was no mistaking the frolicker’s sudden gasping, and the subtle, liquid bubbling that accompanied it.

Without any warning, the tigress found herself falling backward and becoming thoroughly entangled with the newly glistened, snow-white gummy. Together, they flopped into the inner envirolock chamber, hitting the floor with a dull, rubbery thud. For several intense moments she

rolled back and forth in a desperate effort to separate herself from the helplessly inanimate shape. “Goddess... dammit... get... off!”

As Dr. Mika dragged herself and her uninvited companion fully into the envirolock chamber, she couldn't help but note the biogel body's residual warmth. It was the last, quickly fading vestige of the gummy's formerly mammalian body. A brief reminder of what she had been, and a stark reminder of what she had become, and would, for the rest of mortal eternity, almost certainly remain.

“I don't think she's gonna try it,” the voice of the first frolicker to speak came filtering into the envirolock chamber.

“So... then who's gonna find out what it's like to be snow next?” the second asked.

“You know how it works!” the first answered.

The second giggled. “Oh, I know! You ask, the answer's always ‘you’! Okay! Here I go!”

It took some effort, but Dr. Mika finally managed to disentangle herself from the new gummy. She sat it up against the wall next to the chamber control panel just as the sound of the second frolicker's passage into the biogel sheen and subsequent pumping into the big fan began. "Augh! That sound! Dammit. This is all... crazy. Just... crazy!"

The tigress staggered to her feet and turned to the envirolock's outer door. Given her previous override, it should have slid right open. It didn't.

"Oh, you son of a..." she hissed as she slapped at the locked control panel. "Override! Disengage lock!"

The panel beeped in object. "Demonstration program still underway," the smooth, feminine voice of the demo lab control computer declared with dispassionate disconcert that it was addressing the facility's Director of Research and Development. "Participant exit not permitted by program parameters. Please reenter the demonstration

chamber and continue your participation until the demonstration program has concluded.”

“What?” Dr. Mika huffed with frustration. “What are the parameters?”

“Demonstration program will conclude a zero-two-hundred local time,” the computer replied. “Entrance to the demonstration chamber is permitted to any individual clad in biogel. All individuals who enter the demonstration chamber are registered as participants. No participant is permitted to exit until the demonstration program has concluded. Envirolock chamber access to demonstration chamber set open with force field protection as per standard safety parameters for the demonstration type. No further parameters set.”

“Executive override!” Dr. Mika snapped. She really couldn’t have cared less about anyone else inside the chamber. If they wanted to stay locked in until they made themselves into biogel snow, or got made into biogel snow-girls, that was more than fine with her. But there was no way in all the

heavens or hells they were going to keep her cooped up in the envirolock until two in the morning. “Program parameter exception. This individual, exempted from all program parameters!”

“Exception request registered,” the computer replied. “Commencing mandatory delay for director review.”

“Dammit!” Dr. Mika hissed. It was during times like this that she rued the day she’d agreed to having all such rules for experiments and demonstrations apply to her with the same force as they applied to everyone else. Yes, she could still override them, just as she could for anyone else, but there was always a delay to give her time to consider, and potentially reconsider, except in the case of genuine emergencies. But if there wasn’t a fire, an explosion, or some imminent hazard to the labs, or facility in general, citing an emergency was just asking for disciplinary action. And disciplinary action at Gelitech could be very creative, potentially permanently transformative, and never,

ever anything that the tigress would consider worth risking a questionable emergency declaration over.

“Dr. Mika. A request for demonstration parameter exemption has been registered for... Dr. Mirri Mika,” the computer noted. “Do you wish to grant an exemption for all active demonstration parameters to... Dr. Mirri Mika?”

“Yes!” Dr. Mika replied.

“Exemption approved for... Dr. Mirri Mika,” the computer replied. “You may override this exemption at any time during the remaining... four minutes and sixteen seconds... delay.”

“Ha ha! You’ve still got time to join us!” one of the frolickers called out.

“You really should! It’s so much fun!” another giggled. “Don’t you want to be a... oh... OH!”

Dr. Mika cringed and bit her lower lip as she listened to yet another frolicker’s rapid

transformation into a snow-white gummy amid the piles of biogel fluff. The fact that two had been glistened in such a short time seemed to confirm her assumption that there were enough transformative flakes floating around in there to make glistening almost inevitable for anyone who dared spent any real time among them. Of course that begged the question as to how close she herself might have been to a compulsory one way ticket to gummydom.

It wasn't a question that the tigress wanted to spend too much time thinking about. Clearly she'd been close enough to at least one of those insidious biogel flakes that one of the frolickers had been glistened pretty much right next to her. So, a meter? A half a meter? Or was it more like a few very short centimeters?

The scientist looked down at the snow-white gummy and couldn't help but imagine that she'd been the one who'd been glistened. She could only speculate on what it might have actually felt like. There was only one way to find out, of course, but

why anyone would consider doing that willingly was completely beyond her comprehension.

IV

Without any warning, the envirolock's outer door opened.

“Oh! Uh... hello,” a very surprised Dr. Mika sputtered as she suddenly found herself looking into the faces of half a dozen biogel clad ladies. “Um... don't mind me. I'm... just... observing.”

Five of the women were elf-eared ashiri of varying shades of pastel blue and purple. Their faces were cast in expressions that seemed quite enthusiastic on the surface, but belied a nervous anticipation that suggested a complete lack of foreknowledge about what they were getting themselves into. Given their odd body language and the fact that the tigress didn't recognize a single of of them, they were almost certainly guests of the sixth, a slender, glossy copper skinned ch'varri called K'j'ta.

K'j'ta worked down beneath the Gelarium in the largely automated biogel product shipping facility as a liaison to the Imperial Postal Service. That mostly meant that pallets of gummies and other biogel items created in the Gelarium were properly secured for loading onto the postal trains at the Gelarium's small subway freight platform. It wasn't nearly as glamorous as modeling in the Gelarium proper, but it did bring her into contact with lots of underground transit and infrastructure workers.

Mashiva rock-hogs were just the sorts of folks who could find a suit of symbiotic biogel to be a very useful safety tool in their respective lines of work. Bad air? Flood? Cave-in? Encounter with subway slime and can't resist the temptation? No problem! Biogel will completely cover its wearers and protect them from all those hazards and more. And if it can't, it'll automatically glisten its wearers so they can live on for the rest of mortal eternity.

Rock-hogs were also the sort of folks who worked hard, played hard, and considered being in imminent peril just another aspect of normal daily

life. Dr. Mika had always suspected that they were also the sort of folks who were far more open to novel new experiences that could enthrall their senses to the same sorts of extremes that their jobs could so often make them burned out. That was the rumored reason that subway slime was allowed to infest so many abandoned tunnels and stations beneath the city, though MashiTran's official position was that it just wasn't worth the time and effort to clean up. More solid evidence to support the tigress' speculation seemed to come in the form of these five guests that K'j'ta had brought to the lab in the middle of the night, to participate in this unofficial demonstration which would almost certainly result in their permanent transformation into biogel snow, or snow-girls as the case might be.

“Are these friends of yours?” Dr. Mika asked as the ch'varri ushered her guests into the envirolock chamber.

“You might say that,” K’j’ta replied. “Orange line ladies from down the old city, looking for some wintry glistening fun, if you catch my drift.”

Dr. Mika nodded as the five slowly passed through small chamber. All of them cast little glances down at the snow-white gummy leaning against the wall, but if any of them actually understood that they were almost certainly going to become the same, they didn’t give even the slightest hint. They just kept going, pushing through the force field and into the heaps of biogel snow beyond.

“Do you have any idea...” Dr. Mika began as the ch’varri stood in the outer doorway, watching her friends vanish into the white fluff.

“Oh yeah,” K’j’ta replied. “They’re gonna be biogel snow-girls. Or snow. Neat, isn’t it?”

“Aren’t you going to join them?” Dr. Mika responded. When one invited guests to participate in demonstrations or experiments, it was considered almost obligatory to join them. It was more a

custom than a rule, however, but it was regarded as very bad form not to. “I’ve been told it’s quite the unique experience.”

“Oh, no,” K’j’ta replied with a smirk. “I didn’t invite them. Well, not directly. It was more of an officially sanctioned recruitment.”

“Officially sanctioned?” Dr. Mika questioned with considerable skepticism. If the whole biogel snow affair had been officially sanctioned, why hadn’t she heard a peep about it? “By who? Who invited them?”

“Sandy Claws!” K’j’ta answered with a flourish.

Dr. Mika was not impressed. “No, really. Who’s responsible for all this?”

“I just told you,” K’j’ta replied with a laugh. “Sandy Claws. You know, the randomly selected holiday leopardess who presides over the festivities from her winter throne in event hall, from the beginning

of Firelight, and all the way to mid-Snowsong. You know. Sandy Claws!”

“Shouldn’t Sandy Claws be giving her throne its Snowveil-eve transformation in preparation for tomorrow’s gift-giving?” Dr. Mika replied with a deep frown. As far as she knew, this year’s Sandy Claws was an administrative assistant from the office up in Northwestie. There wasn’t a chance she had any sort of knowledge on biogel R&D, let alone the sort of intensive work needed to create something like biogel snow. Or had it just been her idea, and someone else had done all the work?

“Oh, she is,” K’j’ta replied with a grin as the sounds of yet another glistening could be heard filtering through the biogel snow. “And this year, it’s going to be a very, very Gelitech throne.”

Dr. Mika crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

“Now, I’m not going to spoil it for you,” K’j’ta responded with a chuckle. “But... let’s just say she had this idea of snow-girls dressed in holiday attire,

illuminated with the usual colorful lights, and lots and lots of biogel snow. Because what fun is Snowveil gift giving at Gelitech if there isn't a chance of becoming part of the festive décor in the process?"

Dr. Mika rolled her eyes.

"It's going to be so awesome!" K'j'ta cooed. "Two whole weeks of gifts and glistening before Sandy Claws puts on her big show and goes to join all the previous Sandy Claws. Clawses? Whatever. It's going to be incredible! You'll see!"

Dr. Mika sighed. "So... if this is all Sandy Claws' idea, then who actually made this white biogel?"

"I don't know," K'j'ta replied as she turned to leave. "As far as I can tell, no one does. According to what I've heard, it just showed up a week ago with specific instructions. Something about making a holiday spectacle special for the visit of Princess Lanja of Diruni, or something like that. I've heard she's arriving some time tonight. I've also heard

she's really into biogel. Like proper, gonna get herself suited up and then glistened kind of into biogel. Maybe she'll become a snow-girl. Wouldn't that be the sight to see?"

"That still doesn't explain where the biogel came from," Dr. Mika huffed as the ch'varri turned to leave. "As the R&D director, I need to know who created it. What its properties are. What its hazards are. I don't know anything yet, and now you're saying it's going to be deployed in public without any controlled testing?"

K'j'ta shrugged. "Can't help you there. Like I said, people are saying it just kind of showed up by itself."

"What people?" Dr. Mika demanded.

K'j'ta again laughed. "Can't help you there, either. I have a feeling anyone who knows anything is in the demo chamber, though. In one state or another."

Dr. Mika groaned.

K’j’ta took a step away from the door. “I guess we’ll just have to call it a Snowveil miracle and leave it at that, hmm?”

“Snowveil miracle my ass,” Dr. Mika muttered, shaking her head as she followed the ch’varri out of the envirolock. She wanted to say more, but the horrid drone of biogel being pumped through the big fan made trying to be heard quite pointless. All she could do was think as passed through the envirolock and into one of the little emergency isolation chambers attached to it. There, she sat down on the firmly padded hospital style bed and rubbed her horribly tired eyes. All she wanted to do was sleep now, and this seemed as perfectly acceptable a place as any.

The biogel snow might not have been a miracle. It might not have been tested to the tigress’ satisfaction. But it was a holiday gift, to please a special someone who, for some strange reason, had chosen the holiday as the best time to pay a visit to the former Vixanti facility. Or was it?

As Dr. Mika laid down on the bench and stared up at the ceiling, she couldn't help but wonder if the gift was actually for her. Not to use herself, but to relieve her of the stress of having to come up with something appropriate for a special guest when she should be relaxing for the holiday. It was a pleasing thought, though one without any evidence to back it up. She was, however, going to find out. But that would require time best spent sleeping off the night's adventure.

"Alarm, oh-eight-hundred," the tigress ordered.

"Setting alarm, oh-eight-hundred hours," the computer replied.

Dr. Mika closed her eyes and drifted off into wintry dreams of floating snow, colorful lights, and bright, festive music. Of holiday spice 'n'ip, and books filled with fantastical tales of ancient alien civilizations, strange monsters, and mind boggling technologies. But all these dreams pales in comparison to the one that she'd hoped to find a

reality when she woke. The proof that the gift had been for her. A vision of the main demonstration chamber, spotlessly clean, and not a single biogel snowflake in sight.

TO BE CONTINUED...