

GELITECH

EPISODE 10

THE LAND BEFORE

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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I

"Wha... where... where are we?" Chyka gasped as she followed the key'vin'ta priestess to the edge of the large and nearly overgrown stone plaza. To the little snow leopardess, there was something about the incredible scene which looked oddly familiar. No matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise, she just couldn't shake the feeling that she'd been here before. "I... I feel like... like I know this place."

The ruined plaza stood high upon a solid granite plateau, overlooking the confluence of two raging mountain torrents. The greater of these rivers came down through a broad, wild looking valley to the north. The river itself was swift and, so far as she could tell, completely untamed by the hands of civilization. Tall, deep green pine trees

lined what she could see of the rocky shores, and great granite boulders jutted upwards from the water's surface.

A narrow, well traveled dirt road led up from the plaza, along the western shore of the mountain river, and vanished into the shadows among the trees. It was about as unremarkable as a dirt path could be, save for the oddly familiar course it took as it curved gently off into the trees. The low falls over which the river roared on its way into the rocks beneath the plateau seemed familiar as well, as did the particular way it churned with wild fury down there, before casting itself against the opposing valley wall. And how it vanished downward, and southward, around a sharp bend that hid whatever other hints of civilization might lay beyond.

The lesser of the two rivers was no less of a puzzle to the perplexed snow leopardess. It came down from the northwest, directly across the valley from the plaza, before cascading down into

the raging cauldron below to join its companion on their mutual journey down the valley. The final few meters of its course was blocked, not so much by a dam, as by a weir, its upper surface crenelated to control the flow of water that passed over and down into the valley below. In the distance, in the very middle of the canyon, stood a high rocky precipice that parted the rushing river in two. An oddly familiar precipice, upon which stood a very unfamiliar edifice.

There was absolutely no mistaking the nature of the dark, foreboding shape that rose up from the masonry platform which capped the top of the precipice. The massive, squat obelisk so mind-bendingly black that it seemed to suck the very light out of the air that surrounded it. It was a temple. A key'vin'ta temple. An *intact* key'vin'ta temple. And it was certainly *not* one of the two known to have survived the ancient empire's fall.

Beyond the rocky precipice rose a modest stone dam. Water rushed over spillways to either side,

feeding the streams to either side of the temple. The structure seemed to serve no practical purpose, other than perhaps controlling the amount of silt that might be carried downstream from the river. Why that would be important to a civilization with, so far as the little snow leopardess knew, no downstream settlements, was a mystery.

Chyka was so unsettled by her trip through the portal, and the sights that now surrounded her, that she hadn't even noticed that her body was no longer coated in that wonderful, glistening black substance in which she'd come to feel so perfectly at home. Nor was she still wearing the key'vin'ta ritual necklace and skirt that she'd been wearing before she'd been pulled into the black portal by the priestess. Her ritual staff was gone as well, leaving her as denuded of her ancient, arcane powers as she was of any sort of clothing.

A sharp, stomach turning shudder ran down the little snow leopardess' spine as it all came to her at

once. "What... where... where's my staff?" she stammered, turning to look at the priestess in confused horror. "Where's the... and my biogel wife... and... and... what have you done? What have you done?!?"

"Mi'ta'ti!" the priestess giggled as she gestured toward the staff, which again resided in her own firm grasp. She was wearing the necklace and skirt as well. All of the purple slime 'gems' which adorned the regalia were aglow with a barely tamed power that seemed all too ready to work their foul magics on any mi'ah who might dare to expose herself to the one who controlled them. "That was a different time. A time where you had earned it. A time when the lovely liquid blackness had been created, and you had united with it. But this is a different time, and you are my mi'ah. And... as my mi'ah, *you* will do whatever *I* please."

Chyka was totally taken aback. "I... I don't..."

"Ma'chi'tay!" the priestess laughed. "You don't understand? Of course you don't understand. You are just a silly, silly mi'ah. You need not worry about a thing in this world but your proper place in this era's order of life. You will kneel at my feet whenever I stop. You will speak to no one besides myself, unless I demand it. No one! And you will address me by my proper title and name. High Priestess Ki'su. A'mi'ta Ki'su. Do not forget it!"

Chyka couldn't find words to respond.

"To'ta'si," the priestess went on. "And... you will submit to my every fleeting whim. No matter what it is I command. You will do it. Without thought. Without question. And with just as much willingness and enthusiasm as the mi'ah which fueled the portal by which we came to this place."

"Why? Why are you..." Chyka sputtered.

"Ta'cha!" A'mi'ta Ki'su hissed. "Who am I? Have you already forgotten? And why do you not kneel?"

"A... A... A'mi'ta Ki'su," Chyka sheepishly replied as she knelt down beside the little key'vin'ta. Everything had all happened so fast that she couldn't muster even a fleeting attempt to resist the priestess', her priestess', sudden demand for total, unquestioning submission.

"Ta'mo!" A'mi'ta Ki'su scolded. "Don't ever again forget your place! In this land, in this time, you will either be *my* mi'ah, or you *will* become someone else's mi'ah. And *that* would defeat the whole purpose of my bringing you here. Do you understand?"

"Yes, A'mi'ta Ki'su," Chyka replied softly. She didn't actually understand. How could she? The instant they had passed through that portal, everything had somehow changed. Everything she understood about the world seemed to have been

turned on its head. She didn't know where she was, or what the priestess' plans were, or if she could, or even should, trust the woman. Not that she had much choice, of course.

"Pa'ra," A'mi'ta Ki'su replied, smirking at her confused 'slave'. "Good. Now be silent and follow. And remember to kneel beside me when I stop! You would not want anyone to suspect that a High Priestess is up to some mischief, would you?"

"No... A'mi'ta Ki'su," Chyka replied, biting her lower lip as a sudden cacophony of sound from the back side of the plaza caught her ear. Mischief. It wasn't the first time she'd heard the priestess utter that word. Did it mean the same thing to her as it did to the little snow leopardess? And if it did, what possible mischief could she be up to?

"Ta'cha!" A'mi'ta Ki'su observed with a wry smile. "Ti'ka'ti'o'na'ma'se'na'ta'ru."

Chyka watched the particularly well adorned key'vin'ta priestess who was approaching the plaza from the path to the north. Unlike her own mistress, this one had shimmering silver bracelets and anklets in addition to her necklace and skirt. Was she a more senior priestess? Or was she just more wealthy? Or was there something else the jewelry signified?

The new priestess led her little group of naked mi'ah across the plaza, toward a place where there was an opening in the low wall which surrounded it. She cast a strange, skeptical glance at A'mi'ta Ki'su and her fuzzy mi'ah, almost as if she'd never seen a fey'li before. Surely they knew of the fey'li. Or hadn't they encountered the fey'li yet? Where in time were they?

"Cho'ka'mo," A'mi'ta Ki'su said softly as other priestess led the group of widely varied, furless humanoid women passed by, each gazing upon the little snow leopardess mi'ah with equally skeptical

curiosity. She gestured toward the end of the line.
"We follow."

Chyka rose and followed her key'vin'ta mistress and wondered at the strange collection of people the likes of which she had never, save for a lone, aqua skinned mitanni, seen before. They all seemed quite happy to be following their priestess toward an almost certain encounter with purple slime in the temple. Just as happy, it seemed, as her own group of mi'ah had been while waiting their moment to help in the reactivation of the portal within Key'von Rock. Perhaps they didn't know what was to come. Or perhaps they did. Memories of Ky'tin flickered through her mind. Were they all the same way?

The little snow leopardess began to wonder if the whole modern phenomena of willing mass-participation in potentially quite unpleasant xenoexperiences wasn't nearly as modern as was generally assumed. Were these women slaves captured by forces, from distant places... and

perhaps even times? Or were they here because they wanted to be here? Because they wanted to see what it was like to become a mi'ah and participate in the key'vin'ta rituals? To become purple slime, and discover the horrific pleasures to which that transformation seemed to inevitably lead?

"Mi'no'mu're'na'ti," A'mi'ta Ki'su purred softly as she followed a dozen meters behind the last of the other priestess' mi'ah. "Your people are rare to catch, and much sought after, you know. No doubt I shall be offered considerable sums of gold for such a desirable prize. Such ritual potential. Mmm. How I *shall* enjoy you!"

Chyka again bit her lower lip and wondered exactly what Ki'su was really up to. Was she really going to the temple for some purpose related to their existence in the time and place from which they'd just come? Or had it all been for the sole purpose of catching what Ki'su had already described as a particularly luscious fey'li soul?

The opening in the low wall led to a steep, narrow stone stair that descended into a dark, damp tunnel. The tunnel's only illumination came from a series of little holes near the roof, which had been bored through the rock into the cliff face above the river. A vague memory of such a stairway or, rather, the exposed remains of such a stairway, popped into the little snow leopardess' mind. A sense of deep, anxious uncertainty crept into her mind as she became increasingly convinced that she'd been to this place before, and not just for a quick, touristy look at the lovely scenery.

As Chyka's heart began to beat faster, the tunnel opened into a sharp cleft in the cliff face. She followed A'mi'ta Ki'su out onto a small landing, and from there onto a narrow, albeit rather solid looking rope and wood suspension bridge. The wood slat deck was suspended from four ropes on each side, each anchored to give it a unique curve and stabilize the bridge against the winds which

no doubt roared through the valley in times of particularly inclement weather. Under her naked feet, it felt about as solid as stone, neither flexing or swaying in the least, despite the number of people currently crossing it.

"Mi'sa'ru," A'mi'ta Ki'su cooed, looking over her shoulder at her nervous mi'ah. "I suppose you want to know where I am taking you, hmm? Tell me. Do you?"

"Yes, A'mi'ta Ki'su," Chyka replied with more than just a bit of hesitance. The picture that was forming in her mind was already falling under a cast of dark, foreboding clouds. She couldn't imagine having a clearer view of her situation would make it any brighter.

"Pa'ra'ni!" A'mi'ta Ki'su softly chuckled. "You are such a good mi'ah! Very well. I shall tell you. I am taking you to my one, incomparably exquisite home temple, the magnificent and ancient ancient women's temple... of Da'ri!"

II

Chyka's mind was numb. Was it really possible? Was this darkly mystical place really the same Dari where she'd grown up a virtual prisoner of her totally dysfunctional, practically cultish family and neighbors? Was the plaza built upon the same granite plateau on which Dari would be built so distantly in the future? Was the dirt road really the same path that the Sky Line Bypass tracks had been built upon? Was the river really the Yu'min, descending down toward the place where Mashiva would one day rise? Where she would come to live, and love, and...

The little snow leopardess was so consumed in thought that she barely noticed the dozens of key'vin'ta, and hundred or so mi'ah who were going about their routine amid the market stalls

and two story residences that were built into the high temple walls. These walls, in turn were built into the vast, masonry plinth in which the massive, impossibly black obelisk was embedded. This plinth, no doubt, was just as filled with tunnels and chambers as that of the only other key'vin'ta temple that she'd ever visited, the Xinta Temple, which still loomed completely intact over Mashiva's South City, far away in the distant future from which she had come.

"To're'ka," A'mi'ta Ki'su said to a priestess who was clad in an armor-like dress made up entirely of thin purple slime plates, connected together by purple slime rings. "Ar'ma'to'chi'to'ra'mi'ka'mi'o' na'kai'ma'ti."

Chyka had no idea what the words meant. She didn't even bother to try and find some hint in their expression and body language. She was afraid to even look at either of them, lest she find herself facing some punishment. The priestess in her purple slime dress seemed particularly

unconcerned with keeping tight control upon the powers she commanded. The misty purple aura that surrounded her swirled about and flowed along the ground until it surrounded the little snow leopardess' legs and made them tingle in a delightfully terrifying way. Chyka could only imagine one possibly punishment this priestess might be inclined to met out of even the slightest of misbehaviors, and it wasn't something she was particularly excited about experiencing at this point.

"Ga'nu," A'mi'ta Ki'su commanded, gesturing for the little snow leopardess to rise and follow her towards the massive archway that led into the obelisk's hollowed out interior. "The Archon is very pleased with the particular qualities of your soul. She believes it will be quite useful in the service of Da'ri's particular purpose. And, I must admit, I very much agree."

Chyka's already heavy heart sank. Ki'su had really hunted her down, tricking her into giving

herself up for some special key'vin'ta ritual, hadn't she? It seemed like another disaster at Dari was in the offing, and this time there was no one to call for help.

"Pu'ke'rin'da," Ki'su commanded as they passed into the darkness of the obelisk's interior. "Come quickly. The sooner our business is complete, the better."

Chyka dared not contemplate what that business might be. Instead, she focused on what she could see, and hoped that her mistress had something in mind other than casting her straight into the Hells. Or whatever it was they did within such a strange temple as this.

The interior of the Da'ri obelisk was very different to the one at Xinta. There was no round depression in the floor, covered by what looked like a swirled black glass portal surface. There were no statues. No altars. Nothing at all to suggest it had any particular ritual purpose.

Instead, there was just a broad, spiral stairway leading downward into a glowing purple unknown.

Between the stark, utilitarian interior of the obelisk, and the plain, unadorned features of the courtyard and walls, it all struck the little snow leopardess as being far less a temple than it was something far more functional. It was very much a fortress, of a uniquely key'vin'ta sort. Imposing. Unapproachable. And steeped in arcane energies which might, if properly directed, spell glowing purple doom to any who would dare to assail it.

But what had this temple-fortress been built to protect? Was it just there to watch over the pilgrim road? It seemed plausible. It was a very important road, after all, leading through the only routinely traversable pass northward from the Mashiva Plain. Exactly what such a fortress might be protecting the road *from* was another question entirely.

"Cha'ru," Ki'su instructed, gesturing toward the top of the stairs. "It is time to delve deep, my pretty little mi'ah! You will do exactly as I tell you. Nothing more. Nothing less. And don't touch anything! You wouldn't want to ruin all the fun, now would you?"

"No A'mi'ta Ki'su," Chyka replied softly as she followed the darkly mischievous priestess down into the purple glow. The little snow leopardess had assumed the light to come from the same sort of purple slime orbs held in the hands of the statues which were located all throughout the Xinta temple. She certainly wasn't expecting to find it coming from the stone walls themselves.

Little specks in the particular granite forming the staircase walls were not mineral, but were purple slime instead. It was the so-called 'natural' purple slime, no doubt. A thing native to the world of Maria, and of Maria alone. A thing so rare that it might be found by chance once in a dozen years, and in quantity perhaps once in a hundred.

If the little specks of natural purple slime weren't enough to amaze Chyka, their slow transition into little bubbles, threads, and webs as they delved ever deeper beneath the obelisk left her absolutely astonished. There was nothing like it in the museums, let alone in even the most esoteric text on the subject. During those long, mind numbingly boring nights at the MMU library, she had read more than her share of those.

All of this natural purple slime throbbed with the same alien energy that she'd felt as she'd sent souls spiraling down into the abyss with the staff. The same sort, but less refined. Fizzier, in a way. And far, far more primal.

Chyka couldn't help but want to reach out and touch the stone. But what would happen if she did? Would she merely feel the energy flowing through her body? Or would she be subsumed and sent on her way straight to the Heavenly Hells?

The more she thought about the key'vin'ta belief that souls could be cast down into some permanent afterlife in a domain like the Heavenly Hells, the less it made sense to the little snow leopardess. The immortal soul was anchored to its own fundamental realm via an unbreakable thread. A passage. A tunnel. Whatever it was. Massage it, and you could draw immense amounts of energy from the fundamental realm, and direct it to useful purpose in the mortal one. But detach it from its mortal end, and the thread would just snap back to its eternal home, an act that would simply disconnect the soul from its mortal body. No amount of energy could alter the equation.

It was one of the few hard and fast laws of trans-dimensional physics. Ta'kay's Law, to be exact. There was no way around it. Period. Not that it kept nutters from trying, of course.

But... what if you could break Ta'kay's Law? What if you could somehow shift the connection point from the current mortal body to a new

mortal body in some other domain? It would still be anchored to its fundamental realm, just as before. If that were the case, the Heavenly Hells would be a different mortal domain, and not the immortal afterlife that the key'vin'ta seemed to believe it to be. It would make more sense from a practical standpoint, though. At least it would in the mind of the little snow leopardess.

Steeped in her own wandering thoughts, Chyka barely noticed as they passed the stariway's first landing, and a side passage that lead off into darkness. It was certainly an odd time for her to be pondering theology, let alone the basic principles of soul oriented trans-dimensional physics. But ponder, the little snow leopardess did. It was a good way to distract herself from the ever-present prospect that she might be soon be on her way to discover the truth in a very personal and intimate fashion.

"Mi'ra'shi'so," Ki'su murmured as they delved deeper, and deeper beneath the temple. Finely

hewn blocks of stone gave way to exquisitely carved natural rock. Rock that was as full of purple slime as the blocks above. The air was starting to get warmer, and the energy that seemed to permeate everything began to feel closer. Heavier. More potent. "Just a bit further."

Chyka nodded as she followed the priestess down at least a hundred more feet before the staircase came to an end. A passage led inward into a circular chamber, directly beneath the obelisk.

The little snow leopardess gasped as she took in the sights of a space that was clearly meant to be forbidden in almost every sense of the word. The rock from which the chamber was made lacked the inclusion of purple slime that permeated the stone in the stairway walls. It was roughly hewn, and its walls took the form of gear teeth, the inward facing teeth rising up to support the perimeter of the low, domed ceiling. In the ceiling between each of the teeth were holes that led upward, like

vents or chimneys. And, in the face of each gear tooth, was mounted a single, glowing soul capacitor, identical to those that she herself had ritually activated within the chamber in Key'von Rock.

The centerpiece of the forbidden room was an open pit. A dull, orange glow shone up from this opening, periodically brightened by little flashes of yellow and white. There was nothing at all to prevent anyone from falling into the pit, though a pulley mounted in the ceiling above suggested that things were meant to be lowered into it for some unknown purpose.

"Ka'di'ra!" Ki'su chuckled softly as she gestured toward a pretty, elf-eared mi'ah who seemed to have been left alone in the chamber. "The most willing supplicants whose souls are deemed most fit for this particular purpose are permitted to take their own time in this special place. And only the most willing supplicant are brought here, regardless of the quality of their souls. Because

only they will do to keep the deadly sickness of the Forge at bay."

The lone mi'ah turned to look at the newcomers, and in doing so turned her back to the soul capacitor she'd been standing in front of. The slime within reached out and snatched her up. She let out a little yelp as it drew her into its mass until only her head and chest jutted out in a fashion that looked very much like some of the biogel 'wall art' pieces that Chyka had seen, and even helped create, back at Gelitech.

"Mawa nori! Mawa... mawa... mawa," the mi'ah huffed in her native tongue as the purple slime slowly subsumed the remainder of her exposed body, at first converting it into more of its own substance before letting it melt into its own mass. For a brief moment the capacitor's slime glowed brighter, as the soul's latent energy was released. A soft, swirly gurgle could be heard. Then there was silence. The mi'ah was gone.

"To'va'ri," Ki'su remarked quite casually.
"Good. No witnesses."

"What... what do you mean?" Chyka asked softly as she hesitated to follow the priestess toward the edge of the pit. "What are we doing here?"

"Cha'ni'k!" Ki'su snapped. "Did I say that you could speak? Come here! Come here and gaze into the heart of the Forge! And tell me... for you must know with your future knowledge. Tell me. Tell me its secret!"

Chyka bit her lip and slowly advanced until she could look down into the extremely deep pit. There, far past an ethereal shimmer of purple luminescence, was a boiling pool of molten rock. Red. Orange. Yellow. And with far too many bubbling rolls of searing hot white to be natural magma. "What... the..."

A sudden, brief burst of blue light brought out a shriek from the little snow leopardess. She fell backwards, away from the pit and scrambled for the closest wall. How she managed to avoid getting within reach of one of the soul capacitors, not even she really knew. Avoid them she did, however, though in retrospect it was hard to justify the effort. She'd seen the light. There'd been nothing to shield her. It was too late.

III

"To'ka'n'ti'pa!" Ki'su scolded with a bemused sneer on her increasingly hostile looking face. "What are you afraid of, mi'ah? Is the supremely potent magic of the fundamental ooze too much for your delicate eyes?"

"Do you have any... fucking... idea what that is down there?" Chyka panted, half out of fear and half out of the disbelief that even the relatively primitive key'vin'ta would knowingly expose themselves to such a potent source of highly radioactive substances. There was no way that they could have built something capable of keeping the cocktail of hellishly radioactive reaction byproducts at bay, let alone the radiation itself. "Do you have any... fucking... *idea?!?*"

"Ca'ta!" Ki'su answered with a roll of her eyes. "Silly, silly mi'ah! Of course I know what it is. It is the fundamental slime, energized by the souls who are cast into the Hells in this very chamber! The Dark Power made substance, that burns and sickens all who dare to steep their bodies in its terrible energies! The Vile Beast that can barely be contained by the combined power of all this temple. The Supreme Magic! The..."

"It's not magic, you idiot!" Chyka hissed. The key'vin'ta may have conquered a hundred planets, using their rather effective understanding of the trans-dimensional physical properties of a substance they encountered, no doubt, completely by chance. When it came to real physics, however, they'd clearly never advanced beyond the practical basics of physics typically known to a bronze, or even iron age society. "It's uranium! And other radioactive crap in the rock! It's deadly just to be near, let alone get close enough to look at!"

"Pa'te'ra!" Ki'su grunted as a dark smile spread across her face. "Of course it's deadly. No mortal can survive its powers for long. No mortal can control it. The fundamental slime..."

"Fundamental slime?" Chyka snapped. "It's just rock! Molten rock made of unstable elements that... that are... that are always breaking apart into tiny little bits that are so small you can't see them. And those little bits are flying off so fast that they'll break little bits off your body. Enough of that and it'll kill you! And it doesn't take much!"

Ki'su smirked. "Mi'ta. So you *do* know the inner workings of the magic! Magic that *can* be controlled. Magic that your people *have* controlled. I have seen it in my dreamy visions of the great city on the plain. Such magnificent magical prowess! And you..."

"It's not magic!" Chyka growled. "It's called radiation! It's physics! Like... like water flowing downhill. It just happens all by itself, because

that's how the world is built! You can't stop it from happening, and you sure as hell can't change what it does. You can't just wave a staff and make it do what you want. It's nothing like purple slime. It's not even trans-dimensional! "

"Cha'ka!" Ki'su scowled. "Then how do your people control it? How do they make the Vile Disease do their bidding?"

"We don't," Chyka replied with a sneer. "Because we can't. Sure, we can put a bunch of it in one place and get it to make heat, to make steam, to make electricity. You have to do some other things to keep it from melting. Inside a massively thick structure to keep the radiation from getting out and killing everyone. None of that is magic. It's just engineering!"

"Ki'ka'ru," Ki'su growled. "How dare you attempt to hide your truths from me! How dare you try to trick me into thinking this fundamental slime is just... rock! How dare you try to dissuade

me from seeking it's power! It's power so much more potent than the purple slime! I have seen it with my vision. I have seen it taken and made into things that kill. Things that see the invisible. Things that destroy the invisible too. And... things that even heal the most dangerous diseases! Tell me! Tell me the secrets! *NOW!*"

Chyka was confused for considerably longer than she probably should have been. What could the irate little priestess possibly be talking about? "Wait... are you... are you... you *have* to be kidding me! Right? Please tell me you're kidding me?"

Ki'su scowled. "Ti'ki'map! Stop playing games with me! Tell me the secret of the fundamental slime!"

"I can't," Chyka replied. "I'm not a physicist. You need a physicist to tell you all about that. Maybe a physics professor. You know, like at a University. Where you can learn all the ways they use radioactive stuff in medicine, in sensor

systems, and even in sterilizing stuff to kill off other diseases."

"Ki'pa'te," Ki'su hissed. "Do I look like I desire to be lectured in the low arts by some unenlightened simpleton? Enough games! Tell me the secrets! Or... perhaps you'd like to join the other mi'ah in the Hells? I'm *sure* the Mistress would be most pleased to reward you for your failure to submit to a paragon of her chosen people!"

"No!" Chyka replied, standing up to face the sneering key'vin'ta. No matter how preferable it might have been to dying of radiation poisoning, she wasn't going to do anything to please the traitorous priestess. Quite the opposite, in fact. "I don't think I'd like that at all. But I can't change what I know and don't know just to please your ridiculous desire to mess with shit that people in my world stay the fuck away from unless they can't."

"Da'ki'ra'ti," Ki'su snapped, raising her staff toward the little snow leopardess. "Then you have no further use to me."

Chyka contemplated rushing the priestess. Grabbing the staff. Knocking her into the pit. But she could already feel the energy starting to surround her. Lift her up. Push her toward one of the soul capacitors.

Even as the priestess worked her glowing purple magic, another power reached out to surround the little snow leopardess. Whatever the priestess, or the portal, had done to remove the living liquid blackness from the outside of her body hadn't actually removed in from within her. It suddenly regrew, spreading out from her womanhood to coat her from neck to toe in perfectly polished obsidian wonder. But it didn't stop there. It spread over her head, forming a featureless 'helmet' of sorts. A helmet that conferred an extraordinary amplification of her senses.

Chyka could see all around her, all at once. She could smell every minuscule scent that was carried in the warm, subterranean air. She could even hear the particles of dust as each wafted its way onto the chamber floor. And, far more importantly, she could see the myriad fields of trans-dimensional interaction that surrounded her.

The sudden saturation of unfamiliar and amplified sensation should have completely overwhelmed the little snow leopardess' mind. A dim, distant awareness crept into the back of her mind. An awareness that she was not alone. She was just one, in a vast, impossibly black mind-space that stretched out to touch a countless many, no matter how distant they were in space... and in time. Her senses were the senses of the whole. The Unity of all souls who were one with the biogel.

Chyka was no longer quite the same being as she was before the biogel fully surrounded her. She had become a greater organism, a higher life

form in tune with not just the universe as it was observable my mortals, but with the whole of the united trans-dimensional interactive space. A whole different kind of vision surrounded her along with that which mortal eyes could see. A rainbow of force fields, energy threads, and even the ley lines that passed through time itself to connect her to the Unity.

Were the little snow leopardess merely an average biogel wearer, what she saw in the ethereal rainbow might not have had meaning, let alone use. But, having learned what she did of the key'vin'ta purple slime magic, and having wielded it herself, manipulating it with her own mind, allowed her certain novel... liberties. If she could sense it, she could reach out to it. And if she could reach out to it, then she could touch it. And if she could touch it, then she could manipulate it. And if she could manipulate it...

Chyka yanked the staff from the priestess' hand purely by force of will, using it's own trans-

dimensional power emanations to fuel the act. It flew through the air and into her own outstretched hand. "FINE! You want magic... then let me show you magic!" she said, her rubbery, artificial sounding voice vibrating its way through her gelatinous encasement.

"Ti'ta!" Ki'su yelped. "Give that back... give that back to me..."

"No!" Chyka replied as she floated a meter off the floor in glistening black magnificence. "No. Not after you tried to betray me, your own sister-priestess. After you tried to sacrifice me, like some common mi'ah!"

"Pa'fo'ni!" Ki'su hissed, stepping forward, but not so far as to get within the darkly angelic figure's reach. "You... you..."

"Bitch?" Chyka completed the priestess' protest for her. "Yeah. I'm a bitch, aren't I? But after all I

did for you... just to have you try and stab me in the back? Deal with it!"

Ki'su seethed in silence.

Chyka was tempted to cast the key'vin'ta into one of the soul capacitors. It seemed like the most logical course of action, at least until her thoughts turned to those of escape. How could she possibly get out of the temple without Ki'su leading her out? Surely, not even the biogel could fully protect her from the wrath of so many priestesses, all at once.

Rainbows within rainbows revealed the answer, though it didn't seem to be her own mind doing the analysis. Somewhere in the Unity, someone was trying to lead her back to her own time. Someone with a strange, deeply unsettling influence over the whole. Someone powerful. Someone... vaguely familiar.

Chyka had bigger problems than worrying about who was trying to guide her. Only the information provided was important for the time being. And the course that information suggested was surprisingly easy. Almost too easy, in fact. With the staff that had opened the portal in her hand, she merely had to will it. But... there was a catch.

Returning to the future meant bringing back everything that one had entered the portal with, and nothing more. The staff would have to come with her, of course. And the ritual accessories that Ki'su was still wearing. The problem was the key'vin'ta priestess herself. Everything had to go back. And everyone. And there was no getting around it.

Chyka didn't have a choice. She had to return to the future, lest she be disposed of by the priestesses. Or, perhaps worse, be worshiped by them as a dark demigoddess, spreading her new living slime all over their bodies and starting a

new, glistening black era for the Key'vin'ta Empire... and completely breaking the timeline in the process. Neither option was remotely palatable. She had to go home, and she was just going to have to bring Ki'su back with her. That too seemed like a really bad idea, but what could she do?

"I think it's time we went home, don't you?" Chyka asked with a wave of the staff. It was a rhetorical question, of course. The decision was already made.

"Da'ra!" Ki'su yelped. "What. Wait. No! No! I've waited so long to come back to this place. So long! So..."

"Tell me something," Chyka mused. Or perhaps it was the Unity doing the musing, for the idea clearly hadn't come out of her own train of thought. "Have you considered what will happen when you finally encounter the *real* A'mi'ta Ki'su in this time? And in this very place, no doubt?"

Have you considered how you will be treated, as an impersonator, and rogue priestess, in this most holy of places?"

Ki'su fell to her knees in silence.

"You aren't the *real* A'mi'ta Ki'su anymore," Chyka, or the Unity, continued. "But you can still be Ki'su. Not here, but in *my* time, as *my* supplicant. And you will. Because you have no other choice."

The little snow leopardess called out to the portal. Together, she and Ki'su were surrounded by the blackness of the portal passage. A one-way blackness, that lead straight back to the time from which they'd come.

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TO BE CONTINUED...