

GELITECH

EPISODE 9

RITE OF PASSAGE

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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I

Key'von Rock. The massive precipice had guarded the entrance to the Yu'min valley for many millions of years. The imposing mass of nearly solid granite was heavily eroded, a veritable maze of knife-like peaks and deep crags by the region's infamously inclement weather. Here and there, black bubbles of volcanic glass could be seen, an obsidian reminder of the area's volcanic past.

In days long past, Key'von Rock had formed a natural choke point where the Yu'min valley met the Mashiva Plain. There, the long extinct key'vin'ta could control access to the lone natural pass which connected the plain and its numerous important religious sites with the heavily populated t'kin'to plateau far to the north. It was this path along which pilgrims would travel to the

myriad temples and conclaves in hope of enlightenment, favor of their darkly magnificent divinities, or perhaps even a deathless passage directly into the gloriously vile bowels of the Nine Heavenly Hells. It was also the route by which invading armies would pass on their way to the great interstellar portals at the Xinta and Xantu temples to the west. So too was it the path by which acquired slaves took on their way to the east, from the temples and toward whatever fate their new masters and mistresses had in store.

In more recent times, Key'von Rock served more as a proper fortress than a simple natural barrier. Along with the ruins of the old key'vin'ta walls, it became the central bastion on the front line of the infamous conflict that raged between the miners and mining communities of the valley, and the organized criminal syndicates that controlled what is now known as Old Mashiva, on the bluffs just to the south of the Rock.

In service of the mines, numerous tunnels had been carved all throughout Key'von Rock, from a dozen meters below ground level, up a hundred meters toward its peak. Foremost among these was the Yu'min Industrial Railway tunnel, a two kilometer, double tracked passage that once carried ore between the valley mines and the old rail yard beneath Mashiva Bluff, on the shores of the Yu'min river. There, the ore cars were transferred to the control of the Maria Main Railroad for their transit to the processing plants, to the east, far from the interference of the criminal elements in the old city.

It was this ore trade that would fuel the many battles that would be fought for control of Old Mashiva, both overt and covert. The mines and the railroad were compelled to pay bribes to get their produce and services safely through the city. Despite this easy money, the syndicates were determined to push their control northward. The mines and railroad were equally determined to push the syndicates out of the city. For over a

century, a deadly stalemate persisted, one that would only be broken when the Imperial Navy took an interest in the area.

The development of the secret, subterranean Macharri Naval Base beneath the new city of South Plains would bring matters to a head. The syndicates wanted control of the new city, but failed to quite comprehend that it was a useful cover for the vast construction work going on below. At first unable to respond effectively without blowing the cover on the operation, new 'South Plains Gangs' comprised of special forces units were deployed whenever the syndicates tried to assert themselves. After a few decades of this, and with the Naval Base complete and operational, the commanders at Macharri had decided that enough was enough, and sent their 'gangs' into Old Mashiva. A new stalemate resulted, now between the new 'gangs' who held the streets, and the syndicates who shifted to less risky, more covert pursuits.

After two whole centuries, a misunderstanding would bring matters to a head yet again. A fight between drunken mine police and members of the Navy 'gang' got out of control. Believing they were on the side of law and order, the mines attempted to take over the city. By this time, Macharri Naval Base had become obsolete due to the expansion of Imperial borders. No longer secret, the 'gangs' were ordered to put on their uniforms, and the base's marine division was deployed to restore order. The mines, already struggling due to increasingly corrupt leadership, lack of demand for their raw materials, and the unfortunate presence of significant quantities of radioactive materials in the deeper parts of the region were shut down. Not one would reopen, save to accommodate a few specific special experimental military projects related to 'natural nuclear power'.

The economic vacuum caused by the closing of the mines, and a reduction in personnel at Macharri resulted in a resurgence of organized

crime in the old city. Gambling, loan sharking, extortion, and blackmail were the new preferred methods, but the threat of violence always followed close behind.

In order to permanently stabilize the area, the Imperial Government would decide to build a new, modern city on the plains to the east of Old Mashiva, to become the capital of the new Marian Drift Prefecture. Simply called Mashiva, this new city would absorb both Old Mashiva and South Plain into a single, massive metropolis, stamping out most organized crime by the application of overwhelming government presence. This had the desired effect, and within two decades of construction's commencement, most organized criminal activity had ceased.

With development of the new Prefectural capital, the old rail yard and the Key'von Rock tunnels became largely disused, with new tracks bypassing it to the west, and leading to a new, much larger rail yard to the south of the river. The

main tunnel would eventually have its tracks removed and it would be converted into a part of the Northway Hiking Trail network. Several chambers along its side had been converted to display a selection of largely benign key'vin'ta artifacts as a tourist attraction, one which would become quite popular as xeno-experience tourism slowly transcended from being a fringe activity toward something a bit more socially acceptable.

The remainder of the old tunnel network, along with a new, isolated entrance for the branch line, was transformed into an examination and storage facility for more dangerous key'vin'ta artifacts. Foremost among these were a number of intact and potentially quite hazardous portal components extracted from the ruins of the old Ja'vok Temple, just to the north of modern day Runai. This little temple had once served as a transit station for pilgrims heading for the larger temples around the Mashiva Plain, though from where these particular pilgrims originated was still quite the mystery. Ja'vok itself was in an odd location, too far the

main temples to the west to make for an easy final leg of a pilgrim's journey, but also too close for it to justify its cost of maintenance as a shortcut to the more desirable destinations down the plain.

What little evidence remained in the ruins suggesting that the Ja'vok temple had once housed about six portal-priestesses and an ever-changing population of slaves who's bodies and souls would have been used to keep the portal open. Such slaves were generally selected for their passive acceptance of their condition, and were treated as favored pets rather than laborers or beasts of burden as less compliant individuals typically were. Despite this treatment, the priestesses were perfectly happy to expend even their most favorite of slaves, transforming them into the infamous 'purple slime' in order to extract their exotic soul energies in order to power the portal and keep it continuously open.

The purple slime that had been produced by so many slaves' expenditure was as long gone as the

priestesses who had created it. What was left behind were the oval shaped wall depressions that served as 'soul capacitors', which could grab and dissolve slave's bodies into more purple slime while drawing energy from the captive souls as they were pleurably sucked, according to key'vin'ta mythology, directly into the Nine Heavenly Hells. Along with these were wall sections containing numerous, capsule shaped depression which once held captive souls who's sole purpose was to keep the portal properly tuned to its desired destination.

The portal itself was a finely carved, though largely featureless granite frame containing a swirled mass that had the appearance of opaque, black glass. Icy cold to the touch, it defied all efforts to study its materials, behaving both as a very real, very solid object, and at the same time behaving very much as an object that simply didn't exist. There seemed to be no reconciling the contradiction without actually reactivating the portal and studying its properties in a more

indirect fashion. The prospect that this might actually be possible had long been one which both excited and terrified scholars of key'vin'ta history. Though it certainly wouldn't be nearly as fraught with peril as attempting to reactivate the sole remaining intact interstellar portal at Xinta Temple, there was no real knowing what might happen, or where the portal might lead. However, absent the vital ability to control purple slime, there had never been a means to do so, making the whole issue entirely academic. Academic, that is, until now.

Many years ago, the wall sections containing the soul capacitors had been embedded on either side of a carefully selected chamber within Key'von Rock. The installation was far from practical, put together more in anticipation that more of the archive might be opened to tourists than anything else. No one at the time could have imagined that someone would come up with the means to restore it all to operation, let alone so soon.

At the far end of the dark, granite block chamber was the portal. This covered an opening into a short, dead-end passage beyond. To either side were the banks of soul capsule holders. These were no longer completely empty. About half were filled with capsules recovered from other key'vin'ta temple ruins, each one glowing bright purple and filling the otherwise dark room with an eerie luminescence that seemed to energize the air itself.

The soul capsules themselves could do little to affect the portal without the activation of the eight soul capacitors. Activating these required some means to create new, fully energized purple slime. A means like a certain, recently discovered staff. A highly singular staff, that was being currently being held in the firm grip of an equally singular little snow leopardess.

II

Chyka bit her lower lip and watched as the tall, slender tigress sat down upon her 'throne' of solidified, though still mildly glowing purple slime. Wherever the woman's stunningly lithe body touched the substance, the glow brightened a bit, creating a rather unsettling and distinctly unearthly aura around her tail and legs. Were the 'throne' composed of new, fully energized slime, the giddy tigress would have been absorbed into its mass in very short order. This slime, however, was far from new. It had been created long ago, back when the key'vin'ta ruled the world, and much beyond.

"It tingles," the tigress giggled nervously as she made herself comfortable on the shiny purple mass. "I kind of like it."

The 'enthroning' of the tigress seemed completely unnecessary to the little snow leopardess. It didn't seem to serve any purpose other than to provide the tigress with a more convenient perch on which to seat herself and await what was to come. All the same, it was considered a vital first part of the ritual, according to what little was known about the process.

Chyka couldn't help but wonder why she'd agreed to participate in what any rational person should have considered an exercise in pure insanity. Dr. Mika had strenuously advised against it. 'The Key'vin'ta Society is nothing but a bunch of crazies', she'd said. Now, having seen how completely happy their members were to do whatever she pleased, the little snow leopardess couldn't help but agree.

The Key'vin'ta Society were the trustees of many key'vin'ta sites in and around the Mashiva Plain. Best known for their occupation and

maintenance of Xinta Temple in a 'living state', the Society had been founded purely for academic and educational purposes. Over the years, however, they had become more and more interested in restoring more than just the appearance of old sites. In the case of Xinta Temple in particular, the Society very much wanted to restore it to full operation. But that, of course, would require an actual key'vin'ta priestess, a fully empowered convert to the old faith, possessing the proper tools, and the completely, utterly uncaring attitude required to use them effectively.

It was that latter prospect that seemed to upend Dr. Mika's moral sensibilities the most. It was one thing to gently convince genuine volunteers to do things like get turned to biogel objects. That was fun for all involved, and the results were purposefully engineered to be pleasing to the subject's senses. It was a bit of another thing to, say, talk subordinates into doing things like attempt to retrieve dangerous key'vin'ta artifacts. That was science. Dangerous science, of course,

but given the rewards, such risks were acceptable at times.

It another thing entirely, however, to wield such alien powers in such an emotionally detached, arbitrary and capacious fashion as the ancient key'vin'ta ways seemed to demand. And that was why she'd staged her expedition to retrieve the staff. It wasn't to acquire it for research. It was to lock it up someplace where the Society wouldn't be able to access it. She'd never imagined that the staff would somehow 'choose' the little snow leopardess as it's rightful owner. Nor had she ever imagined that other, far less alien powers would insist that she be allowed to keep it.

The staff presented new opportunities, not merely for the Key'vin'ta Society in the advancement of their own goals, but for science at large. Understanding exactly how the key'vin'ta had used purely non-technological means to achieve interstellar travel between habitable planets seemed to be the only way to replicate

their achievements. The ability to open such portals could change the way people traveled. If portals the size of the one at Xinta could be established, whole trains filled with people could pass back and forth between worlds just as easily as they could between neighboring stations. It would be a revolutionary development, and all it seemed to require was for one little snow leopardess to cast her old self aside and embrace the cold, uncaring amorality that her new role as a priestess of the old faith seemed to demand.

Chyka waited patiently as the tigress slid her wrists into the ancient, vertically oriented metal cuffs that were mounted to either side of her, well within the soul capacitor depression. These were designed in the fashion of proper traps, closing over the tigress' wrists as she pressed them into the open jaws, but unable to open back up so long as they were trapped within. Given the tigress' role in the ritual, that was hardly an inconvenience, of course. Now that she was in position, she would

never be leaving the soul capacitor. If the ritual worked, that is.

Chyka wasn't at all clear as to what she was supposed to do next. She knew she had to convert more subjects into purple slime and cast them onto the captive within the capacitor. And that was all she knew. Surely there was some other aspect that had to come into play. Some other manipulation of the powers being unleashed that would be required to effect the desired result. What that might entail, however, was a total mystery.

"I'm ready," the tigress giggled, smiling at her glistening black priestess with such a genuinely pleased look that the little snow leopardess began to wonder if the woman actually understood what it was they were trying to achieve.

An unpleasantly familiar, albeit not entirely unexpected voice prodded its way into Chyka's mind as another of the volunteers took her place between the priestess and her captive tigress.

Uchi'ni'bey'ni'mina'maki, the key'vin'ta priestess' ghostly voice called out to her protege. Your first mi'pa! Your first rite! Your first true possessions! How they bend to your will without the least of questions! Isn't it so perfectly splendid?

The little snow leopardess did her best to stifle a frown. She'd been questioning her role in all this before. The only thing that had convinced her to agree were the pleas from prestigious institutions to facilitate the advancement of science. The reappearance of the ancient priestess' voice now made her feel far less inclined to proceed. Until, that is, she looked around at the waiting Key'vin'ta Society volunteers.

One would have thought that a group of chilly, naked women who were all quite certain that they were about to be cast straight into the Nine Heavenly Hells would have been a bit less pleased about the prospect. But these mi'ah, as the key'vin'ta once called them, they were more than just pleased with the idea. They were positively

enthusiastic about it, and they seemed quite willing to show it.

Ki'pa'ni'mari'mu'ta, the priestess coaxed. Look at them all, so ready and willing. Just like the mi'ah of old, as they looked upon my staff. Upon your staff. You've never refused such mi'ah the blessings of your biogel, have you? No! Of course not! So you surely wouldn't disappoint these mi'ah who desire the blessings of your staff, would you?

Chyka looked at the excited leopardess who was now smiling warmly at her, patiently awaiting her priestess' blessing. She couldn't help herself but smile back. The ghostly key'vin'ta priestess had a point, didn't she? The little snow leopardess had never refused anyone who'd sought her help in becoming a biogel object. Nor had she ever been disinclined to encourage others to participate in other, sometimes much less pleasant looking things as chance opportunity arose. Was there really anything different about this key'vin'ta purple slime stuff?

Chyka took a deep breath and raised the staff. *You're right*, she reluctantly admitted. There was nothing different about dissolving people into purple slime. It was just another xeno-experience, and quite a visually appealing one at that. Who cared what happened to them afterwards? *No one cares when anyone gets turned into a gummy. Or a nasty little rowa thing. Or lots worse. It's just a thing to do. And if they like it, then who cares?*

A'he'ah! the ancient priestess laughed. *You make me proud!*

The little snow leopardess concentrated. Exactly what she was trying to do as she mentally directed the staff's alien energy toward the leopardess was a totally mystery to her. All she could really do was energize the little capsule of solidified slime that the leopardess had slipped into her vagina. That fundamental seed which would trigger the desired sort of transformation.

Then she would have to just wait and hope for the best.

Dai'ami'ma'shuri! the ancient priestess exclaimed as the leopardess floated up off the ground amid an aura of purple luminescence. *Yes! YES! Feel the power! Concentrate it from the one, to the other!*

Chyka could indeed feel the power. It stretched from her chest, up her arm, and into the staff. It flowed out from the gem, and into the little capsule ensconced within the helpless mi'ah's floating body. And then...

"Oh! Oh! OH!" the leopardess moaned with such an empathically sensual tone that it made the rest of the mi'ah visibly giddy. An instant later, the purple glow consumed her abdomen before rapidly spreading throughout her entire body. In another instant, her luminous purple shape began to waver and melt into a shapeless, floating blob.

Chi'va! the ancient priestess commanded. *Now!*
Now!

Chyka pushed the undulating blob away, toward the sitting tigress. She only had a few short moments before the soul within the slime spiraled away into the other-world. An odd whim came across her as the blob approached its target. She imagined it flowing into the existing mass of solidified slime upon which the tigress sat. Surrounding her legs and abdomen. Binding her in place, while letting her experience the feeling of the leopardess' soul as it parted ways with the mortal realm. It was just a bit of entertaining fun to precede the final, ultimate act. Pointless fun, for sure, but fun nonetheless.

The tigress gasped as the new mass of slime merged with the old, surrounding the tigress lower legs and filling up the space between her legs and around her rump. "Oh! That feels so, so... weird. So... so... I just can't. I... I kinda really like it, actually."

A'ma! the ancient priestess laughed as the slime solidified around the tigress' legs and rear. Yes! Wonderful! You understand perfectly! Make her body speak. Make her want it more. Make her want it so much that she will resist the descent, and become the tool that we desire!

As strange as feeling the leopardess' soul caress her flesh might have felt for the tigress, the much more tangible feeling that had come over the little snow leopardess was stranger still. Stranger, and very much intoxicating. She'd felt it before, of course, when she'd cast Kai'tyn into the unknowable beyond. It had felt so incredible. So perversely wonderful. But back then, the need to please the grumpy Dr. Mika had stopped her from going any further. But now...

"You're going to like the next one even more," Chyka replied to the tigress as a tall, pale blue mitanni stepped forward. "And I'm sure she's going to enjoy it just as much."

The mitanni just smiled as Chyka again raised her staff. Again, she directed the staff's power toward the anxiously awaiting mi'ah. Again the mi'ah floated upwards, before being consumed by the slime. And again, she cast the resulting blob into the tigress' perch.

The tigress giggled as the slime more fully surrounded her thighs and abdomen. It solidified around her waist, making it virtually impossible for her to move anything save her neck and head. "Oh! That feels so amazing! It's like... like... your massaging my... my soul! Wow! Just... wow!"

Another mi'ah approached, this time a slender, tan-skinned, elf-eared ashiri. "Me next!" she chirped as she took her place before her priestess. Her priestess was more than happy to oblige.

Di'a'ma'nur'a'ki, the ancient voice instructed. *Do not make the mistake of surrounding the bound*

one, and crushing the life from her body. Finish the task, and move on to the next.

Chyka smiled as the ashiri melted into a blob. For a moment, she didn't quite understand what she was supposed to do to 'finish the task'. A distant, fleeting awareness of the tigress' soul came into her mind. A desire to project one into the other. The blob, not into the waiting body, but somehow into the waiting mind. The waiting soul. Into it, and through it, washing it clean of everything that was no longer required. Preparing it for its new role as a self-acting conduit for further souls and their exotic energies.

The little snow leopardess sent the blob into the soul capacitor, where it completely surrounded the tigress. She focused on the tigress' increasingly luminous soul as the whole mass of purple slime crawled up into the capacitor depression, filling it completely, until only a shallow, domed surface extended beyond its rim.

As the ashiri's soul spiraled down into the beyond in a wobbly, whirly way that made Chyka's own soul feel blissfully liquid-like, the tigress' soul bounced to the top in a stretchy, bendy, snapping fashion. There, it was bound by the power within the slime, trapped in its place and knowing nothing but its duty to snatch up the bodies of other mi'ah, holding them captive and partially converted into slime until their energies were required by the captive souls in the soul capsules, in order to power and direct the portal itself.

Chyka stepped back as the astoundingly visceral sensation of having been in the two transformed mi'ahs' places faded. There was something so incomprehensibly revolting about the way it tugged at the edges of her own soul's anchor to the moral realm that she almost didn't want to feel it again. But... it just felt so, so good. It was just like the first tingling arousal at the commencement of foreplay. A promise of greater pleasures to come, if only one cast aside their

inhibitions and let it carry them away. A powerfully physical sensation, but not one of her world. Or even her body. She didn't understand it. She couldn't understand it. She also couldn't help herself. She wanted to feel it again.

Abi'aru'ina'mi'pa, the ancient priestess cooed. Superb! Now the remaining seven capacitors. But do not be stingy with the mi'ah! They enjoy it, after all. Let them all feel the caress of your power. Then... well. You shall just have to see what happens. I'm quite sure you'll find it... most amazing!

III

Chyka staggered back as the last, supremely intoxicating wave of absolutely revolting arousal stretched the boundaries of her soul nearly to their limit. She began to feel as if her own body was beginning to transform into purple slime. Indeed, her coating of glistening black biogel was glowing as brightly purple as the slime that now filled all eight of the fully activated soul capacitors. All it would take was one more tiny little playful toke, and she would join her mi'ah in the bowels of Nine Heavenly Hells, where the remainder of eternity would be steeped in such utterly vile pleasures as she couldn't even begin to imagine.

A strange, floral scent began to fill the chamber, as the little snow leopardess hung on the precipice between her current mortal life, and the horrid

glories of the looming key'vin'ta afterlife. Her mind whirled, as the mere imagination of what it might be like to join her mi'ah seemed enough to send her following in their footsteps. She could feel the whirlpool coming. She could see hints of the darkness beyond. It looked like hell. But it also looked like it might, possibly, feel like heaven.

"Ki'ta'ka!" a sharp, powerful voice called out as the staff fell from Chyka's melting hands. "Ma'ti'ka'mo'te! Mi'ko'da'sen'ta'ki!"

Chyka's wavering form solidified. She fell to the ground. She panted as her heart seemed to race circles around her chest. She looked at her reflection on the palm of her glistening black, biogel coated hand. Nothing seemed amiss. Had the melting away just been her overactive imagination?

"Ma'chi," the key'vin'ta priestess laughed. "Fey'li. Such perfect mi'ah. So willing to cast aside

their bodies, just for the chance to feel something new."

Chyka yelped and scrambled away from the glossy-gray, two-toed feet that had come to rest only a half of a meter from her nose. The creature to whom they belonged was diminutive by feyli standards, not quite a meter and a half tall, with big black eyes and a flat, barely existent nose. Its extremely thin lips were oddly shaped, following a line that resembled something vaguely feline, rather than the usual straight line of a typical furless humanoid.

The naked creature held in its three-fingered hands a staff. Chyka's staff. Or was it? Had it actually ever been?"

"Mo'ka'tu'ri," the key'vin'ta priestess chuckled. "What are you afraid of, sister-priestess? That I shall make you my mi'ah, and use your soul to power my own particular purposes?"

Chyka's voice failed her. She could only sit and stare. How could it even be possible? The key'vin'ta were extinct! Dead. Gone! Or... were they?

"Ti'ma'pu'ri," the key'vin'ta priestess went on. "No. You have accepted the gift. Understood its power. You are a priestess now. You can only become a mi'ah if you wish to. Wouldn't that be fun?"

The little snow leopardess bit her lower lip as the key'vin'ta approached until their feet were nearly touching.

"Ka'mi'ma'ri'ta," the priestess continued. "It certainly would be, wouldn't it? How good it would feel for me to bask in your soul's descent! But no. No. That is not your purpose in this world, is it?"

"My... my purpose?" Chyka barely managed to choke out. If her occasionally prophetic dreams

were to be believed, her purpose was to spread biogel all over everything and everyone. They'd never said anything about purple slime, or anything else for that matter. Even after she'd found the staff. "I thought... biogel was my... purpose..."

"Di'chu'ma'ti," the priestess responded. "I did not think you could hear my blessings, many as they have been. Such a pleasant surprise to know that all my mental efforts were not in vain."

"That was you?" Chyka asked, her voice starting to return. "But... why? I don't understand!"

"Mi'ta'ru'a'pa'ki," the priestess answered with a low chuckle. "To be honest, because you pleased by whimsical fancy. Such a small, curious creature, so ready to learn and experience new things. And with a soul... ah. Such a luscious, ripe young soul. How I really would love to feel the pleasure of it swirling about and draining away!"

Ah... to have you as a mi'ah. That was *my* dream. But then... I thought... what if?"

"What do you mean, what if?" Chyka questioned. "What if... what?"

"Ki'ma'pa'ti'oh," the priestess replied. "What if I offered you the gift? What if I made you my sister? A sister that could open the ethera-gate and make me real again!"

"Ethera-gate? Real again?" Chyka sputtered. "I'm so confused. What do you mean? You weren't real? But... how is that even possible? Didn't you all die or something?"

"Di'cho'ta'wa," the priestess chuckled. "Die? No. Of course not. Don't be silly! Isn't it obvious where my people all went?"

"Not really," Chyka replied.

"Sho'ri'ta!" the priestess exclaimed. "You have heard nothing of the Mi'ah'ta? The end of my people's keeping of time and days? What do you call it... a calendar? When all became mi'ah before the Empress of the Heavenly Hells, and offered themselves up in the temples to become her eternal servants?"

"No," Chyka replied with a shake of her head. In retrospect, the priestess' explanation really was quite obvious. If you believed that the whole key'vin'ta mythology was real, that is. "That's... interesting and all. But it doesn't explain you, does it?"

"Chi'ma'ta'ma'ki," the priestess responded. "There were too many pilgrim mi'ah for the temples to handle. So some of us went up into the mountains along the pilgrim trails, and set ourselves up to convert them as they came. Like you, I enjoyed myself just a little too much, and found myself spiraling down into the glorious embrace of hellish pleasures untold. But just as I

was about to enter into my new eternal existence as a toy to angels and demons... something stopped me. Some foolish act by the priestesses who once maintained this very portal. This portal which allowed priestesses such as ourselves to move between very special places."

Chyka listened and nodded. She was still having a very hard time believing that she was actually speaking to a real key'vin'ta priestess. It was hard not to think that she might actually be dreaming it all up. Was she even in the chambers beneath Key'von Rock, or was she still at home cuddled up with her wives, all together within the warm embrace of their gelbed's thick mattress.

"Cho'ki'wa'ma," the priestess went on, gazing off into space as she continued her tale. "With utter idiocy, they forced the portal closed before the appointed time. As it happened, at the very moment that my soul was leaving this mortal realm on its way to the glorious nightmare beyond. It sucked the energy away from the liquid

husk that had been my body, forever trapping me in a state between here and there."

Chyka nodded. Impossible as it sounded, it made sense.

"Ta'pa'ka," the priestess continued. "For countless generations, I simply was. Bound within the very mass from which you found my staff, it was the only thing I could sense and focus upon. With it, and over the many dark years of my existence, I took countless new mi'ah who so naively entered my presence. Oh, how I toyed with them as you have just done! Binding them and simulating their bodies until they wanted nothing more than for me to cast them into the pleasurable abyss! It was fun. But never so much fun that I could collect the energy to break myself free."

"I can't even imagine what that must have been like," Chyka responded, sitting up and pulling her knees close up to her chest.

"Fi'na'ma'ra," the priestess replied. "You certainly cannot. It was so many years before I would start to sense new presences beyond the confines of my cavernous prison. New souls touching the barrier between this realm and those beyond. Souls who's bodies were encased in a new substance that was capable of bridging the divide. Blackness made material. The liquid essence of that place which hangs so perilously between life and afterlife. Yes. You know what it is. Biogel!"

"Wait... are you suggesting that biogel is kind of like purple slime? Or something like that?" Chyka questioned.

"Ka'pi'ta'mo'ki," the priestess laughed with a broad smile and a sweeping nod. "It seems to be, doesn't it? Of course, certain souls held in the embrace of this biogel stood out over others. Yours. It was just like my most favorite mi'ah. A beautiful, tan lioness who called herself Kahure. Oh, how I savored the feel of her passage into the

Heavenly Hells! Ah... so... so magnificent! I so badly wanted to feel it again. So I drew your Doctor Mika here, knowing that she would bring you. And she did indeed bring you, didn't she? And then you..."

"If you want to feel me going to the Hells so badly, then why don't you send me there?" Chyka asked. "Surely you could have gotten someone else to open the gate for you and make you real again."

"Ta'pa'ni'ti," the priestess answered. "It was a whim. A flight of fancy. A dream that my favorite sort of soul might offer me more than just another mi'ah. And you have, haven't you?"

"I guess," Chyka replied with a shrug.

The key'vin'ta priestess chuckled and handed the staff to the little snow leopardess. "No'tai'da," she said. "Arise, my sister priestess. Take your well earned staff. It is truly yours now, and with it

all of its many, myriad powers. Powers of which you have barely begun to discover."

Chyka stood and took the staff from the priestess. It felt oddly different now. Lighter. Less constrained. More at one with her mind. Her body. And, of course, her soul. It felt pleasant. Good. Right, even, as if it had always been part of her, in a perfectly natural way. Almost as right as her coating of biogel felt. Her coating of biogel, and the soul within who seemed just as pleased with its newest acquisition.

"To'pa'ni'cho," the priestess mused with a smile. "Now. What a life shall we live, without all the old rules and ways to bind our freedom? What wonderful mischief shall we make together?"

"Uh... I... uh... well. This whole temple thing was just a side-gig for me," Chyka noted with a nervous smile toward the chamber's entrance. "I've got a job and a couple of wives to get home to at some point today. And we might be alone now, but

at some point, someone's going to come to see if I've been successful in opening the portal. And..."

"Mi'ah'ta'pa'ki?" the priestess chuckled. "You mean you have two mi'ah, don't you? What do you call them?"

"Uh... Jumie and Sakie," Chyka replied with considerable hesitation. They were certainly no mi'ah. Perhaps the priestess didn't understand the concept of marriage. She almost certainly wasn't aware that the biogel bound them together into a single unified organism either.

"Pa'nu'ni'ma," the priestess replied. "Favorites, no doubt. A ball of compulsively amorous fey'li, as one might say. Enjoyable to watch at play. So open about their carnal inclinations. I certainly never expected them to become the masters of my own people's former domain, let alone so much more. But, I digress. Do I sense the coming of others? How might they react to my presence? No. They

mustn't see me. Not yet, at any rate! Come! Quickly!"

"Huh? What do you mean? There's no other way out..." Chyka began.

The priestess gestured toward the portal. "Ki'pa!" she replied. "You've made another way out. Only for sister priestesses. They can't follow. Come! Let me show you!"

"But..." the little snow leopardess sputtered as the key'vin'ta grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the swirling blackness.

"Ta'ti!" the priestess exclaimed as she pulled Chyka into the portal. "No buts!"

Chyka's body slid through the gelatinous membrane. The world vanished into pure, unbroken blackness. Forward. Forward. Forward, the key'vin'ta pulled her. But to where, she couldn't even begin to imagine.

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TO BE CONTINUED...