

GELITECH

SEASON 2 - EPISODE 8
INTO MADNESS

BY SHETIRA ANWAE

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INTO MADNESS

Random thoughts. Other people's feelings. Images of places near and far, most the likes of which Chyka had never seen, and some the like of which she couldn't even have begun to imagine. The ghosts were tugging at the edges of her conscious mind. Pulling at exposed bits, and pressing their own discarded memories into any opening they could find.

The ghosts... the minds... the souls... Chyka thought as she fought against the clawing mass of consciousnesses that were, for some unfathomable reason, trying to drag her down into the depths of... of what? Was it the Destiny Omega's biogel core? Was the power plants that were sending so many volunteers into the unknown abyss in the effort to keep the ship intact? Or was it something

else? Something darker? Something that had the power to threaten them all?

There was real fear in these ghosts. Real fear and abject terror. Were they actually trying to drag Chyka down deliberately? Were they trying to use her as a metaphysical foothold to try and climb back out of the unfathomable depths that were trying to consume them? Or... were they so far gone that all they could do to try and preserve some faint memory of their existence was to claw at her and try to force her to carry it all?

This is insanity! Chyka thought as she struggled with all her mental might. She had to escape, and quickly. But how?

The biogel that made up her body should have given her an easy path to freedom but... it was gone. Or, at least, that was how it seemed to the terribly confused and increasingly anxious little snow leopardess. It just wasn't there. Nor was

Omega. Was that even possible? Wasn't *she* Omega?

There was only one thing that Chyka had which *might* serve as a solid anchor. One image kept pushing its way to the forefront of her mind. It was powerful, and... familiar.

The little disembodied snow leopardess forced herself to focus on the vision. It kept shifting. Wavering. Floating about. It was filled with strange ripples. Ripples of space. Ripples of time. She reached out. She touched the ripples with her mind. And then... she opened her eyes.

Chyka gasped as she found herself laying completely naked upon a cold, roughly surfaced stone floor. A soft purple glow surrounded her from every side. And the smell that hung upon the air... it seemed... familiar.

The little snow leopardess got up onto her hands and knees and looked around the dark

chamber. “Key’von Rock!” she muttered to herself as she flopped over and sat staring into the glistening black surface of the portal through time. She was alone. Alone with the portal. And the glowing purple guide capsules embedded in the walls around it. And the eight soul capacitors that she’d sent dozens of volunteers directly into the Nine Heavenly Hells in order to create.

The little snow leopardess didn’t have a clue how she’d managed to transport herself to the Rock. Had she come through the portal? There was certainly enough energy left over in the soul capacitors to activate a few more times. But... there was no mass of biogel in the chamber for her to occupy. There was only the gobs and lumps of excess purple slime that had been left over from the creation of the soul capacitors.

Chyka was even more confused now that she’d been among the ghosts. She didn’t know what to do. She tried to reach out with her mind. Connect

to Omega. But, just as before, there was no Omega. But...

“No! Not again!” Chyka shrieked as her mental efforts brought back the ghostly clawing. She tore herself away, back to the here and now. “What... what happened? What... I don’t...”

Chyka tried to call call out to her spouses. To Jumie. To Sakie. To Ki’su. To Nanya. And to Tachi, who’s subsumption had been Chyka’s last expression of her biogel powers. Again, only the ghosts replied.

“What... what does it mean?” a horrified Chyka wondered aloud as she found herself feeling completely, utterly alone. Even more alone, indeed, than that fateful day when she’d abandoned her horridly abusive family in Dari so many years before. Back then, she’d still had her grandmother to talk to, at least. But now...

“There’s no way out of here anymore,” the little snow leopardess muttered as she stood up and looked toward the entrance to the portal chamber. The last thing she could afford to do was to spend any time mourning all of her losses. They might not all be gone. If she even a slight chance to save them, she had to try. But how? The whole tunnel had been filled with concrete to prevent interlopers from accessing the portal. The seal remained unbroken. “Goddess. I’m trapped in here. Unless...”

The biogel may have abandoned her, but the little snow leopardess still had one trick up her proverbial sleeve. One other source of power. A source of power that, if Ki’su’s excited sputtering had been even half the truth, might well be able to call upon all the remaining power of the ancient empire.

The little snow leopardess took a deep breath and called for her staff and other key’vin’ta regalia. A bit to her surprise, and much to her

relief, the staff appeared in her hand, and scant as it was, the regalia clothed her. But...

For some odd reason, the high priestess' regalia all felt a bit heavier to Chyka. The staff had a bit of extra weight to it, though it didn't look any different that it had before. The open front skirt, however, was particularly heavy, with its big tiles of glowing purple slime...

“What the fuck?” Chyka sputtered as she looked down at her skirt. It was constructed just like the dress worn by the matriarch of the ancient Dari Temple, with purple slime tiles connected together with little purple slime rings. The only real difference was that hers was constantly glowing. Constantly activated, yet somehow retaining its solid shape.

Far less solid were a pair of new additions to her outfit. Additions the likes of which she hadn't seen at all in ancient Dari. They were soft. Supple. And weirdly fizzy feeling.

“What... why is everything... so... different!” Chyka sputtered as she looked down at the body hugging layer of purple slime that covered her torso in the fashion of a fey’li style sport top. Another formed a bikini bottom, covering her genitalia in a fashion which would have almost certainly been considered uncouth by the ancient key’vin’ta. “I... I don’t understand!”

It didn’t take long for the little snow leopardess to start feeling a strange weight to it all. Not a physical weight, but a weight upon the soul. “It’s all real now, isn’t it?” Chyka murmured. There was no coating of glistening black biogel between the clothing, the slime, and her own body. Nor did it feel like her body was made of biogel anymore. It was just the slime, her living, natural flesh, and the all too tenuous barrier that kept one from consuming the other. “Goddess... what... what’s happened to me? What’s happened to everything?”

“You’ve escaped the blackness, my regal mistress,” came the completely unexpected reply.

Chyka jumped and whirled around to face the source of the voice. She found herself looking into the gleeful eyes of her slime demon servant.

“You’ve escaped the blackness and embraced your royal status,” the slime demon purred. “Look how magnificent you are! Oh, how wonderful it must feel to let it cradle your tender places! Only the Royal High Priestess has the raw power to safely partake of such pleasures!”

“I suppose... it feels... kind of nice?” Chyka replied with a confused frown. She honestly didn’t know what she thought about the constant fizzy tingling that was embracing her most sensitive places. It was certainly strange. Even a bit... stimulating. Perhaps if she didn’t have so much else to worry about, she might indeed find it enjoyable. “I... I don’t have time for pleasure right now.”

The little snow leopardess shook off her imaginative inclinations before they had a chance to give her any ideas about what her slime demon servant might be especially useful for in such private setting. “We need to do something,” she said, looking from the slime demon to the portal. “We need to stop Shi. We need to save Omega. Otherwise...”

“Must we *really*?” the slime demon asked. “Surely both of these these entities are merely threats to your power, weak as they may be.”

“No,” Chyka replied. “Only Shi is.”

“But... my royal mistress! The blackness!” the slime demon insisted. “You know that Omega wishes to usurp your rightful throne! Use you as a puppet to help spread its vile substance to the ends of the universe and beyond! Don’t you know that? Surely you know that! It tried to corrupt you and

make you part of itself! You cannot possibly deny it!”

“So?” Chyka replied with a skeptical glare at the slime demon. “Whats so wrong with that?”

Granted, it was true that the little snow leopardess had never explicitly agreed to become an active part of the Unity that was Omega. Or at least not the kind of part that she had. But she was definitely aware that she was going to become part of the unified biogel organism eventually, and she’d definitely agreed to that. It was a fundamental part of the biogel experience, after all.

“Would you truly believe that the blackness is greater than the glorious fundamental substance who’s creator we worship without question?” the slime demon questioned.

“And who exactly do we worship without question?” Chyka inquired.

“The Nameless Goddess of the Nine Heavenly Hells,” the slime demon replied.

“Hmph!” Chyka replied with a smirk. “You mean Shi? Because that’s what Shi thinks she is. Or her cultists think she is, at any rate.”

“Shi is a usurper!” the slime demon replied. “She desires to use the power of the blackness to draw the Nameless Goddess from the Hells and absorb her!”

“Is that even possible?” Chyka asked.

“Yes, my holy mistress,” the slime demon answered. “It is. And it is... inevitable. But...”

“But what?” Chyka questioned.

“The Nameless Goddess always chooses her own absorber, my regal mistress,” the slime demon explained. “A lucky mortal, untouched by

the Hells, yet who holds its... qualities... in worshipful regard. A prophet. A purveyor of its unthinkable sensations. Transformations. And all that comes along with them.”

“Go on,” Chyka said, resting her staff on the floor and wondering just what the slime demon was getting at.

“One unique soul, with such power over mortal minds that she can convince anyone to undergo even the vilest of physical experiences,” the slime demon continued. “One who is willing and able to gather countless multitudes together, and gift them en-mass into the waiting arms, claws, and... tentacles... of the Hell’s many denizens. Even to the point of destroying everything their willing supplicants hold dear!”

“When was the last time such a soul absorbed the Nameless Goddess?” Chyka asked, though she suspected that she might already know the answer.

“My holy mistress!” the slime demon laughed. “Do not jest! You know well when the last such event occurred.”

“So that was what happened to the key’vin’ta?” Chyka replied, shaking her head. “They took a one way trip into the Hells just so their highest priestess could absorb their goddess and take her place?”

“Indeed!” the slime demon replied.

“And for some crazy reason, you think I’m going to be the one who does it next?” Chyka asked.

“My holy mistress, you most certainly will!” the slime demon exclaimed.

“That’s nuts,” Chyka replied. “Now. I think we’ve wasted way too much time talking. We need to get out of here and rescue Omega from whatever Shi is trying to do.”

“My regal mistress, why do you care so much about the blackness?” the slime demon asked. “You cannot possibly have escaped its power just to cast yourself back into its corrupting embrace again! It cannot be done! I... I must... dissuade you!”

Chyka didn't really know how to respond. Clearly, the slime demon thought her royal mistress was the most holy of the holy ones. Trying to convince it otherwise was just going to be a waste of time. But... she had to find a way. She was going to need its help, and soon.

“The blackness is just a tool to an end,” Chyka replied after a few moments thought. “How many souls did the last royal priestess collect to send to the Hells? A hundred million? Half a billion? Think! Think of how many souls are already held captive in the blackness of Omega! Think of how many will join them if Omega persists! All of those souls. Together in one organism. One

organism who's physical substance is just as readily absorbed into the purple slime as living flesh."

It was a fairly reasonable explanation. It also sent a shiver down Chyka's spine. It wouldn't take much purple slime to start dragging the souls within any particular mass of biogel down into the Heavenly Hells. The only real limit on the process would be the size of the transdimensional pathway that could be sustained. Too many souls being pulled through a small pathway might...

"Oh my goddess!" Chyka gasped as the dawning realization hit her like an oncoming freight train. "Shi!!!"

"All those ghosts..." Chyka sputtered. There was no room for doubt. Shi's Old Three Core was down there beneath Dari, slowly being subsumed by the purple slime that had become mixed into it. She was casting its thousands of souls down into the abyss. Down into the Hells. It was too much

for the pathway to handle. Things were backing up. Transdimensional pressure was growing. And then...

“That explains so much,” Chyka murmured as she thought of all the ancient Key’vin’ta temples who’s only remains were the craters they’d left behind when they’d been destroyed in some explosive cataclysm.

The temples would have been places where the process of casting countless souls into the Hells would have been carefully controlled. At least they would have been until the very last moments, when no one with the right powers was left to keep things under control. Thus, the temples were destroyed, albeit in events that once might call ‘conventional’ on the destructive scale.

Out of many thousands of major temples, only Qut and Xinta remained standing. The former had been abandoned long before the key’vin’ta extinction. The latter must have been under

control until the very end. Under control of the royal priestess who'd then absorbed the Nameless Goddess, no doubt. And now it was under the control of a little snow leopardess who had about as much desire to follow in her forebear's footsteps as she had to play XenoZoo roulette.

Chyka shook her head. Pondering the presumed facts around the key'vin'ta extinction wasn't going to get them anywhere. At least, not anywhere pleasant. The last moments of the temples that had been destroyed had been catastrophic to the temples themselves, but not to much else. But what if all that energy being produced by Shi's core was completely uncontrolled. What would happen if it was allowed to continue to catastrophe?

“All those souls!” Chyka gasped. “All being pulled apart and mashed together! And all that energy! Where is it going to go? It has to go someplace!”

“Why do you care, my royal mistress?” the slime demon inquired. “Do you really think that this Shi’s sacrifice of ten thousand will even draw the casual noticed of the Nameless Goddess? How can you possibly think that she would name this Shi as her successor and allow herself to be absorbed?”

“Have you ever seen what happens when you condense matter on a transdimensional pressure wave?” Chyka replied, recalling the science shows she’d binged on during her first year of true freedom after fleeing Dari. “It’s the only way to create momentary bits of artificial neutronium! But that’s with an expanding pressure wave. If it’s collapsing...”

“Such words are alien to me, my holy mistress,” the slime demon responded with a stiff shrug. “How can such things matter to us?”

“You worked at the rad lab and you don’t know?!?” Chyka questioned with considerable disbelief.

“What was is forever gone, my regal mistress,” the slime demon replied with a broad grin. “I am your servant now. Your possession. And that is all I shall ever be, until the end of immortal time.”

“It means that its going to rebound with so much energy that it could wipe out half the life on the planet! Or worse!” Chyka replied. “We need to find some way to stop it!”

“I do not understand my regal mistress,” the slime demon said, again shrugging its shoulders.

“Kaboom!” Chyka replied. “Big KABOOM! Like all the other temples. But so big that the hole will cover... I don’t know. A quarter of the planet. Everyone dies. KABOOM!”

“Ah,” the slime demon responded with a puzzled expression. “That would not suit your purpose in this world, would it?”

“No! It wouldn’t,” Chyka replied. “We need to stop that, and save all those souls in Omega for future... use. But... we’re stuck in here. It’s sealed off. But if we can use the portal to...”

“Oh, my royal mistress,” the slime demon cooed in reply. “I know what you are thinking. We cannot change the past. We can only observe it. Participate in its inevitable flow. But we cannot change it.”

Chyka bit her lip and shook her head. Of course they couldn’t change anything. Anything that they might do in the past was already written into the history of the present. But...

“I don’t need to change the past,” Chyka said as she took a step towards the portal. “I need to change the future. If that means that I need to go

to the past to find out what tool we need to freeze Shi and her core and make sure they never get reactivated again, then that's what we need to do."

"Why go to the past when one already has such a tool in the present?" the slime demon inquired.

"What do you mean?" Chyka questioned.

"Your regalia, my royal mistress," the slime demon replied.

"I don't think this outfit is going to help," Chyka replied.

"You jest, my regal mistress," the slime demon laughed. "You have greater attire than that which you wear upon your body right now. Your temple. Once you dress yourself in your temple, the power of all the hellish angels and heavenly demons will be yours to command!"

“Xinta?” Chyka asked. Xinta Temple was a place she’d learned to avoid in both thought and physical proximity. Everything about it had felt very much wrong from the day she’d taken ‘control’ over it. All of those innocent tourists... dragged into the soul capacitors, or through the lenses into the guiding capsules, or all the way down and straight into...

“Of course!” the slime demon chuckled. “Let us go there now! I shall guide you to the place where you might clad yourself within its holy material.”

“How?” Chyka asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Open the portal and I shall guide you,” the slime demon replied.

Chyka hesitated. Could she really trust the slime demon? Was it really going to help her achieve her goal to end the threat of Shi and rescue Omega?

In the end, Chyka didn't really have much choice. She wasn't really sure how to direct the portal herself. Yet, at any rate. She was just going to have to let the demon do it and hope for the best.

Chyka raised her staff and pointed it toward the glistening black sheet. She focused the energy of the soul capacitors into it. It began to ripple and swirl. She took a deep breath and nodded to the slime demon. "Okay. It's open. Let's go."

Chyka had expected to arrive at the massive portal beneath Xinta's massive central obelisk. Instead, she found herself standing in a dusty darkness that smelled of overripe oil and old creosote. The only illumination came from the purple slime portions of her regalia and from the purple slime chunks that grew from the slime demon's body.

“Where are we?” Chyka whispered as she looked around at the massive rock chamber in which they were now standing. “What is this place?”

The huge, highly irregular cavity stretched sixty meters to either side. Roughly hewn tunnels and smaller sub-cavities stretched off in all directions, making it plainly obvious that this was no natural cavern. The little snow leopardess looked upward, where the massive chamber rose up at a steep angle. Somewhere, high above in the darkness, was a dim source of purple light. This was the only evidence she could see that she might, in fact, be somewhere in the proximity of an ancient key’vin’ta site.

The floor of the massive chamber was covered with piles of loose rocks and a tangle of roughly square cut timbers that looked like they’d been thrown into a heap from somewhere high above. Mixed into this mess were countless bits of rusty tools, bits of fabric rags, and other unidentifiable

detritus. Clearly, this had been a mine of some sort, and from the sheer size of the vast stope chamber, a very productive one. But what sort of mine had it been? Where was it? And most importantly, when was it?

“This isn’t Xinta,” Chyka muttered, scowling at the slime demon as she looked into a shallow, descending slope that led down into the darkness one one edge of the chamber. There were wooden rails leading down the slope, topped with strips of rusty iron. At the top was what looked like the remains of an old, very simple wooden winch. “Is this... is this one of the old mines near Brightstone?”

As mining technology went, this was so far beyond basic that it almost defied rational explanation. Wooden strap rails. Square nails. Was all that tangle of wood the remains of collapsed square set?

Chyka didn't really know much about historical mining. She'd read a few books back in her time at the MMU library, though, and it was fairly obvious that the level of mining technology she was looking at wasn't the sort that was present on Mashiva at any time during its civilized history.

Key'vin'ta technology was certainly effective, and they were known to use hand forged square nails. The basic winch would have fit right in as well. But the strap rail and square set? That was industrial revolution era tech.

The planet Maria had never had an industrial revolution. After the key'vin'ta extinction, the planet was left devoid of sapient life for several millennia. It wasn't until spacefaring colonists from several interstellar nations settled the world that mining would resume. Granted, miners still tended to use what might be termed 'minimum effort' methods to quickly extract ore bodies using whatever resources were most readily and cheaply at hand. Short term safety and reliability were the

main concerns. Except for major mines like Brightstone, most weren't expected to be kept open more than a decade or so, and their fittings were selected for similar longevity.

Despite the availability of far sturdier materials, wood was still the go-to for small time miners. But hand forged square nails? And traditional square set timbering? Not so much.

The square set was the real puzzle to Chyka. It was only held together by the pressure being placed on it by the surrounding rock. Lose that pressure at any one point, and the whole thing could fall down like a house of cards. Just like the mass of ex-square set that surrounded her and her slime demon servant.

“Well?” Chyka again asked, now wondering if they were even on the same planet. “Where are we?”

“My royal mistress!” the slime demon chuckled. “We are within the holy grounds of Xinta Temple!”

“Oh, really?” Chyka questioned. “Then where the fuck in the holy grounds of Xinta Temple are we?”

“In the purple slime mines, my holy mistress,” the slime demon replied, gesturing toward a large pillar that helped hold a protruding mass of rock in its place overhead. Right through the middle was a thick layer of dark, inactive purple gobzite. “Where the servants of the grand Empire toiled away, cutting the veins of slime from the living rock for use in the temple above.”

Chyka was confused. She’d never once heard about Xinta Temple having gobzite mines associated with it. It seemed like something someone would have noted at some point. A real, intact key’vin’ta gobzite mine would have been a real draw for tourists too. Then again, given the

state of the square set, perhaps it was for the best that no one was making a habit of lingering about in the place.

“This place is... interesting,” Chyka said, turning back to the slime demon. “But something tells me we shouldn’t be hanging around in here. You said there was someplace for me to... uh... dress myself in the temple?”

“Of course, my holy mistress! Come. Follow me!” the slime demon laughed. “And be careful. The living rock is far less forgiving than our goddess.”

Chyka followed the slime demon as she pranced down a strangely clear, uncomfortably narrow path through the tangle of debris. It passed from the massive stope chamber and into a short drift. This drift quickly opened out onto a narrow ledge along the side of an even larger stope chamber.

“Goddess,” Chyka murmured as she found herself again staring down into any abyss. This chamber was deep. Absurdly deep. The little rocks that she and her servant sent tumbling off the ledge took upwards of five seconds to hit the bottom. She could only imagine what might happen if she lost her footing. “Keep moving. The quicker we get past this, the better.”

Another drift extended from the far end of the ledge. Much to the little snow leopardess’ surprise, a slow, subtly flow of fresh air was coming out of it. The drift branched after only a few meters. The fresh air was coming from the right, and it was in that direction that the slime demon advanced. A few meters more and the pair found themselves on a landing within a narrow spiral staircase.

“We go up,” the slime demon declared.

“Up into the temple?” Chyka asked.

“Yes! But take care... I can taste the flavor of many sweet souls,” the slime demon noted. “Mmm. So... luscious. But it would be well that they do not know of our arrival.”

“Right,” Chyka said as she took the lead up the stairs. Then she noticed the footprints. “Someone’s been here... and not all that long ago, I think.”

They were odd footprints to be sure. One set was small and slender. The other were wide and blunt. Both had completely smooth soles.

“Wait... those are... biogel?” Chyka murmured. “Wait... have I... have I been here before?”

Chyka looked up the dark stairs and wondered if they were the same stairs that she’d ascended along with Gorin during their escape from the ambush at the ancient portal beneath the temple. If that was the case, the opening into the portal chamber should have been only a couple of spirals

down the steps. But if she went down to find out, then she'd surely be spotted by the marines guarding the portal, if they hadn't already noted her presence. Surely they would have found the mine and placed sensors in it. Surely.

Chyka took the lead in climbing the stairs. The slime demon followed, her bony wings sliding along the narrow walls to produce a low, constant hissing sound. She couldn't help but notice that the walls already had very noticeable markings at the very same heights where the demon's wings were currently rubbing. If only royal priestesses could create such creatures, then it suggested that her idea that Xinta had been the temple of the priestess who'd absorbed the previous Nameless Goddess might actually be true.

It wasn't long before Chyka found herself at the very tunnel that led out to the hidden exit on the side of Xinta's natural rock plinth. It was there that Gorin had exited the temple to 'get help', leaving the little snow leopardess alone so that she could

consult with Ki'su in private. The staircase itself ended one spiral up, in a tunnel that led into the subteranean part of the central obelisk.

The tunnel gave access to the obelisk's ritual staircase. This ran around the outside of the circular lens chambers, from the ground floor of the temple above and down to the altar chamber beneath the final lens, where Chyka had taken possession of the temple.

“Are we going to the altar below?” Chyka asked as she continued up to the end of the stairs and began to slowly approach the entrance into the obelisk. It was hard to be quiet in such a place, and far harder when one's dress was made of hard tiles that clicked and clacked with each step.

“No,” the slime demon replied. “The place where you shall dress yourself in the temple is higher up.”

Chyka wasn't sure as to exactly where the slime demon might be referring. There was a raised altar on one side of the main obelisk chamber at ground level. It was from there that supplicants were said to have jumped 'through' the temple's lenses, testing their dark goddess' opinion of their qualities by seeing which of the lenses would pass them into its particular level of the Hells. The deeper they were allowed to fall, the closer to their dark goddess they would wind up. If a vacant guiding capsule didn't suck them in beforehand, that is.

That wasn't to say that getting sucked into a guiding capsule would have been considered undesirable. The stories Ki'su had told her suggested that those who were pulled into these capsules were entrusted with guiding other supplicants through the lens below, either to pass on to the next, or to pass directly into the that level of the Hells. Eventually, they would find their own way through their lens and into the Hells. Those who guided particularly well would be sent to

guide at the next level, until their own time came to enter the Hells. It was even said to be possible to pass through every level, earning succor with the dark goddess, until being pulled through the last lens to spend eternity at her side.

Winding up held captive in one of the guiding capsules, embedded in a lens chamber wall, was the last thing Chyka wanted to happen. It didn't seem to mesh with the idea of her being destined to absorb the Nameless Goddess, or some such nonsense like that. But what else could the slime demon possibly mean by suggesting she dress herself in the temple?

The only thing the little snow leopardess could think of was the 'missing statue' where the stairs from the ground level ended at the entrance to the first lens chamber. The smallish, humanoid depression was said to be purely symbolic in nature, representing the dark, formless goddess sitting in silent judgment over souls who descended from above. Was she meant to place

herself in that depression? To judge souls for the dark goddess? Was that the price for access to the temple's greater powers?

“Exactly where are we going?” Chyka asked.

“To the top of the cascade, my royal mistress” the slime demon responded. “To the place of control.”

“To the top of the lenses?” Chyka questioned. “To that place that looks like a person should be embedded in the wall?”

“Yes, my holy mistress” the slime demon replied. “That is the place where you will dress yourself in the temple, and become one with its power.”

“How does that work?” Chyka asked as the pair cautiously entered the obelisk proper. They were at the level of the fourth lens. The chamber itself loomed ahead, with its broad black discs

embedded in the floor and ceiling. The walls were full of glowing purple guide capsules, while statues of solid purple slime stood guard over the doorways which lead into the main obelisk staircases.

“You position your body in place, my royal mistress,” the slime demon replied. “The rest... well. I do not know, do I? But why should I? I am not a holy royal priestess like you!”

“Fair enough,” Chyka replied as she turned to the main stairs and hoped that they didn’t encounter any tourists on the way up. “I just hope it works.”

The days of guided tours had been brought to an abrupt end with the reactivation of the temple. All of the Key’vin’ta Society cult tour guides had been snared by its completely uncontrolled spasm of power, along with all of the tourists who’d been in the temple at the time. No one was running the

place now. Tourists came and went as they pleased, to their own very real peril.

Guided tours would have been predictable, and avoidable. Now, however, there was a very real chance that Chyka might run into a random individual or group exploring the temple's dangerous depths. Granted, these particular depths weren't nearly so hazardous as those of the secondary obelisks, accessed by completely automatic lift platforms that ensured that anyone riding them would be taken by any currently unoccupied soul capacitor. They were all virtually identical as well. Few would be inclined to go all the way down. But at the uppermost lens chamber...

Chyka wondered what she should do when they inevitably ran into tourists up where most satisfied their curiosity about the chambers beneath the temple's ground level. Should put on a show of it for them in hopes they wouldn't really understand that something potentially dangerous was going

on? Should she try to get them into the soul capacitors beneath the secondary obelisks to add to the temple's available power? Or should she just ignore them and hope for the best?

The little snow leopardess and her slime demon crossed through the third lens chamber toward the next set of upward without encountering anyone. As they ascended toward the second, however, they could hear distant voices. They sounded like they were coming down from the uppermost chamber, just where Chyka was expecting to find tourists. She bit her lip and tried to decide exactly what to do. She still had some time. Or so she thought.

“See!” came a booming, and somewhat irate sounding womanly voice. “I told you she'd show up here! And it's about damned time!”

TO BE CONTINUED...