

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 28: Development

Cy awakens from a deep sleep, taking a moment to stretch before glancing over at the resting Zakera who lay against his left side. He brushes the pink hair from her face, revealing her snout and closed eyes. She stirs, mumbling incoherently as her fingers coil against the flesh of his chest. Unwilling to disturb her, he lay in bed and listens to the sounds coming from down below. It has been a little over a week since they've returned to the fortress and their village. Led by Mirkon in the absence of Cy, Yasmin and Zakera, they continued with their lives and followed his written instructions to the letter.

Working tirelessly to raise a grand city, the villagers have worked in shifts, nearly perpetually. They've been only further aided by the arrival of several small bands of migrating humans, still fleeing through the forest from Roland's now defunct kingdom. The Sa'kesh welcome them with open arms, eager for every new body who crosses their path. With the trees felled and the land cleared, they have begun laying brick roads in the form of a conventional, square city block. In the past several days their efforts have begun to bear visible fruit. Small, multi-story brick homes and workshops are quickly springing up, growing faster than kudzu vine on Earth.

The farms have been tilled and seeded, while the hunting parties have begun mapping the patterns of the genashin herds. It is part of a plan concocted by Chris and Daniel to create domesticated livestock for work, food and hides. With a large ranch being constructed beside

their farmland, they will soon be ready to attempt capture and domestication. Zakera opens her eyes, her lips curling up at the corners of her feline snout at the sight of her mate. He looks to her with his icy blue eyes, gently stroking her cheek. Leaning in, she gives him a long, loving kiss. She yawns, stretches and rubs the sleep from her eyes before sitting upright in bed.

Rising from the bed, Cy slips on his clothing, having kept the villager's garments from their raid on Roland's castle. His original clothes are quickly becoming worn anyway. As Zakera ties her original hide breastplate and skirt to her body, a much more durable form of clothing, Cy steps out onto the balcony of their room and leans over, his hands on the wooden rails. He marvels at the sight of the growing city only a moderate walk away. With a census taken at his request, his tribe houses six hundred and ninety souls, including the original fortress dwellers.

"How long did we sleep, my love?" Zakera asks.

"I don't know. I can't see the day moon, so it must be late. That's what happens when we stay up all night." He turns back to her and winks.

"I could not help myself. I enjoy your company." She coos.

"Yeah. Me too."

Zakera steps up to her mate and slips her arms around his body at his waist, her breasts pressing against his back as she hugs him from behind.

"I enjoy our talks very much. Everything that you share about your past and your life before you came to me only further bonds us together."

"Really?" He glances over his shoulder.

"Yes."

"I feel the same way." He says as he spins around, holding her in his arms. "I love hearing your stories."

"My stories are not nearly as fascinating as yours." She retorts.

"But I still love them. They're yours." He says, smiling warmly.

"How did I find such a male?" Zakera wonders aloud.

"I should be asking you the same thing."

"How you found such a male?! It is not Katero, is it?" She teases.

Cy laughs and kisses his mate, stroking her back. They are interrupted by a loud knock on their closed bedroom door.

"Are you awake yet?!" Lara calls through.

"No. We've both died in our sleep." Cy sarcastically replies.

Opening the door, they step outside where Lara and Mirkon wait for them. With his fully loaded gear belt attached and Zakera's pistol holstered, they follow Mirkon and Lara downstairs and into the courtyard where Cy's new guards await them. The first of their freshly trained militia, who are being taught by both Jack and Yasmin, the squad of sword and spear bearing humans walk on either side of their chieftain and his Ketlan wife. Unlike the Kelanethaka who prefer the khopesh, Cy had presented two different blades for his own blacksmiths to copy. Of the classic leaf-shape and the Iberian saber that they now produce with cykera metal, which has proven superior to all bronze alloys and on part with iron, they follow the preference of their leader; the militia are all armed with falcata swords.

Marching from the safety of the electrified fence that protects the fortress, they follow a newly placed mud brick road that leads to the planned city block. The third building on the block is a school, which at Cy's instructions was prioritized for completion. At this school, many of the original fortress dwellers plan to teach the most

important and useful of knowledge. Basic mathematics, biology and science, as well as both modern English and Ketlanic. The second building on the block is a clinic, a request made by Lara, while the first is an armory and small barracks.

No matter how humanitarian Cy's projects are, or how thoughtfully he leads the Sa'kesh, he has been and always will be a warrior; security will never be forgotten among his people, so long as he draws breath. He glances to the three buildings, the school already finished and the clinic and armory nearly finished.

"Isn't it beautiful?" He says.

"My Lord?" Mirkon looks back.

"The city. Isn't it beautiful?" Cy reiterates.

"It is, my Lord. I have never seen such a sight."

"It'll be like walking through the streets of Egypt or Sumer. And stop calling me that!" Cy chuckles.

"My apologies, Cyrus. Our people do fine work. I can only imagine the kind of trading we will partake in once the shops are finished." Mirkon says.

"Trading..." Cy scoffs. "This will be a hub of knowledge and understanding; true civilization! Medicine, science, even art! All races will be able to enjoy a life here when we're through!" Cy preaches.

"Yes, Cyrus." Mirkon grins.

"When these streets are filled with human, Ketlan and Zelkona, living, working and trading together, it will be as beautiful as a renaissance portrait."

Marching through the rapidly shrinking trail that connects the Sa'kesh and the Kelanethaka, Katero and his party of warriors round the bend and arrive at the fortress. As they step up to the fence, which is protected by Cy's human warriors, they lower their spears

and order them to halt and state their business. Katero is surprised by the sudden show of force.

“Stop! Lower your weapons!” Gabriella exclaims from a second story balcony.

As one of the original Sa’kesh and an inhabitant of the fortress, they obey without question. Gabriella rushes from the study and down the stairs, bolting outside and racing up to Katero and his men. Yasmin is currently away with Jack and Rico, and though Gabriella has some authority as a fortress dweller, she cannot give many orders beyond those already spoken.

“Hi, Katero!” She happily exclaims.

“Hello, Gabriella.”

“You can call me Gabby.” She says with a wide grin.

“Alright. Is Cyrus in?” He asks.

“No. Almost everyone is gone. I’m here with Samantha and Isabella. They’re in town, checking on the construction.” She answers.

“And they have left three females alone? Shame on them.” Katero grins.

“I have guards and a pistol.” She giggles.

“Yes, and I am sure that you are more than a match for any male here.” He adds. “However, I must be going. I have an important matter that I need to discuss with Cyrus.”

“Wait! ... I mean, I can send a runner. You’d spend a few hours just looking for Cy, and the runners know the city better anyway.” She nervously explains.

“Alright, Gabby. I will stay here with you, and you may send a runner.”

Opening the gate, Gabby steps outside and stands close to Katero as one of the guards dashes away, looking for his chieftain. Cy and the others tour the school and the subsequent city block, the chieftain *and* his wife earning reverence wherever they go. As they walk through the streets, a runner swiftly approaches them, gasping for breath.

“What is it, soldier?” Mirkon asks.

“My Lord! The Ketlan are here! One has asked to speak with you by name!” The runner exclaims through labored breaths.

“Relax. I’m sure it’s nothing too serious. Take a break and catch your breath before going back to your post.” Cy says, patting the runner’s shoulder.

“Thank you, my Lord.” He bows.

“I wish people would stop calling me that...” Cy grumbles.

“Apologies, Cyrus.”

Traveling back to the fortress, the group finds Katero as he sits on the laid brick street, Gabriella beside him. His men stand idly in the background, conversing and joking with the human militia who guard the fortress. It’s a scene quite pleasing to Cy and Zakera. Seeing his friend, Katero rises to his feet and greets him as a warrior with the traditional forearm grip.

“It is good to see you, my friend. I have come to ask you for help.” Katero begins.

“One day you should just come by to say hello.” Cy chuckles.

“Perhaps I will, but my duties keep me busy.” Katero replies.

“So, what’s the problem?” Cy asks.

“You recall the tribes that we have conquered?”

“I do.” Cy nods.

“Well, the third was not Ketlan...” Katero pauses.

“Human?!” Mirkon asks excitedly.

“No... Zelkona.”

“I see...” Mirkon murmurs.

“They are not pleased to be living beside their conquerors.”

“Go figure.” Cy quietly quips.

“We have informed them of the arrangement between our tribes, and though they are not fond of living among humans either, they have chosen to join the Sa’kesh instead.” Katero explains.

“How many?” Zakera asks.

“All of them!” Katero chirps. “We do not know their numbers, but they are considerable.”

“Wonderful!” Zakera remarks.

“Would you help us move them to your village?”

“Absolutely!” Cy gleefully exclaims.

“Zikata and I both worry that the Zelkona are bitter with the Ketlan in general for their current situation. He and I both hope that the influence of you and your people will ease their hostility toward the Ketlan. We both desire to see a time when all of our races may coexist peacefully.” Katero adds.

“Fully converted to the dark side, eh?” Cy chuckles, draping an arm over Katero’s shoulders.

“I do not consider your vision to be very dark. Contrary, it is quite a pleasing thought to see us attain true harmony.”

“Indeed.” Cy laughs. “I will do all that I can, and you know it.”

“Still, it does not hurt to ask.” Katero grins.

Turning back to his mate, Cy and Zakera wish each other well. Though she is comforted by his continual presence, she understands and accepts his request; Cy would never order her to do anything, a

fact that she appreciates. Unwilling to risk her health and safety, especially when she is carrying their unborn child, she will stay behind in the safety of the fortress while Cy leaves with an envoy, returning with Katero to the Kelanethaka. He instructs Mirkon to fetch more militia and any number of volunteers who aren't actively working, hoping to complete the Zelkona's migration in a days' time. He darts off, eager to carry out his chieftain's orders.

During that time, Cy and his small entourage of guards accompany Katero and his men, walking along the trail that leads to the Ketlan village. The march is significantly shortened by the expansion of the Kelanethaka, and in just over an hour the party have arrived. A cacophony of noise greets them and Katero grows concerned. Hastening his pace, he and his men rush toward the voices, Cy and his own men following suit. They arrive at the village to see something of a standoff, a horde of Zelkona surrounded on three sides by an even larger horde of Ketlan. A female Zelkona seems to be the leader and barks at the Kelanethaka in Ketlanic.

It is the first time that Cy and his human militia have seen the Zelkona up close. Now able to witness their height, Cy is amused that the male Zelkona are actually rather short, on par with the average Ketlan female. The tallest male is around five feet and four inches, while most are a few inches shorter. However, there isn't a single female below five feet and six inches tall, some reaching six feet tall. Only bearing simple spears of sharpened and fire-hardened sticks, as well as their own claws, the Zelkona are a dangerous adversary, even when compared against the sword-wielding Ketlan. Cy briefly wonders how a raiding party managed to conquer the whole tribe.

The Zelkona stand in a triangular formation behind the imposing female, who towers at five feet and eleven inches tall. Wearing a hide top and skirt like the others, her glossy, dense and vibrant flesh is exceptionally alluring. Corvette red and sun yellow in color, she has a two-tone pattern with the yellow flesh running from her chin and down through her front, stopping at her inner thighs; this is similar to

Zakera's white fur. Her whip-like tail sways, allowing Cy to see that she also has yellow running along the underside. Though her form is exceptionally attractive, downright voluptuous, she seems to be as strong an opponent in combat as Hitoren was. If Cy hadn't killed the powerful Ketlan some time ago, he might be more worried as he stands before her.

"Fota fi?" Cy asks.

"Zia." The female answers.

"Zee-ah?" Cy reiterates. "Fi kavay?"

"Vo." Zia nods.

"Litay vidab?" Cy asks.

"Vay volo ogo ziv. Zuj kebina ka zefugu. Vay vaba zuj."

Cy turns to a Ketlan warrior who appears to be leading the others. Cy doesn't recognize the man, but knows that he is an original Kelanethaka from the look of recognition that he receives.

"Why are you trying to take their weapons?" Cy asks.

"They are not Kelanethaka, and not yet Sa'kesh. We do not trust them." He answers.

"They think you are trying to *kill* them." Cy retorts.

"Maray ketlan!" Zia urges, unable to understand their English.

"Shona fuju kebina." Cy says reassuringly to her, holding up a hand. "Now I want you to put down *your* weapons first so that they see that you are not a threat to them. You will then allow them to keep theirs until we can move them to my village. Is that in any way unclear?" He asks the warrior.

"I do not believe that a wise decision." The warrior grumbles.

"You've conquered their tribe and forced them to march here and now you're asking them to give up their weapons while wielding your

own... Think about that for a moment. You aren't even showing them respect."

"Do they really deserve it?" The warrior scoffs.

"Mind your tongue, Fekolza!" Katero growls.

"Fekolza?! ... I'll tell you what... Find Zikata and tell him what I said. If he tells you to do something else, then do that. I will never go against my father..."

Fekolza grumbles before darting off. Cy turns back to Zia and bows his head respectfully.

"Shona halnad vay. Vay zefugu."

Zia looks Cy over with her golden eyes, her combative stance relaxing. She bows her head back to the human who shows such concern and respect for her kind. They stand there in silence for a moment as they wait for Fekolza to return with word from Zikata. Zia tilts her head curiously, her eyes scanning Cy as he stands and looks up to the sky, a little smile on his face.

"Fi Sa'kesh kavay?" Zia asks.

"Vo. Ja 'Cyrus'." He answers, still looking up.

"Fi fanush devana. Ja devana fi." She adds.

"Fi janalo devana." He says, never once glancing to her.

The crowd of Ketlan move aside as Zikata returns with Fekolza. Upon seeing Cy, he grins from cheek to cheek and embraces the human.

"So good to see you, my son. How is my daughter?"

“Just fine. I left her at home to rest.” Cy replies.

“Smart. Take no chances.” Zikata nods. “I understand you are here to take your new villagers home!”

“Indeed, I am.”

“Fekolza thought it wise to try and take their weapons, and while I understand his position, I agree with *you*, my son.” Zikata continues.

“Thank you. May I ask that you tell them that? They may not believe me.” Cy asks.

“Of course.” He nods. “Iza fi ziv!” Zikata says loudly to the Zelkona tribals.

The horde of raptor people collectively relax, standing at attention. Cy thanks Zikata, and the family-by-marriage embrace before a thoroughly embarrassed and humiliated Fekolza. Katero reclaims command of the Kelanethaka force, returning Fekolza to his humble rank of ‘warrior’. Just then, the human volunteers arrive en masse to assist with the move. At first surprised at the sight of the Zelkona, they are waved over by Cy and the others. With their help and that of Katero and his men, they pack up the Zelkona’s meager possessions for the short walk back. Before leaving, Zia finds Cy near the front of the convoy and darts up to him. Gaining his attention, she presents him with a symbolic gemstone charm, a symbol of her status.

“Cyrus... Fi ge vul zuj.” Zia says to Cy, holding out the charm.

“Iza. Fi Sa’kesh. Zuj ge vul riskanay.” Cy replies, rejecting the charm.

Zia can’t help but grin at the peculiar human standing before her. He turns and walks away, leading them down the path and toward their new home, a spring in his step from the exquisite turn of events. Zia is perplexed by their new chieftain and is quickly overcome by curiosity. Approaching the front of the line without fear, she is startled when a human guard tells her to stop in Ketlanic. However,

Cy immediately glances back and rescinds the order, allowing her to approach. Walking beside him, she takes a moment to think of something to say.

“Paloth tathazay zuj ketlan. Ketlan labo.”

“Kelitho kima ketlan.” Cy replies with a smirk.

“Ja bijka!” Zia exclaims in embarrassment.

“Halnad.” He chuckles.

“... Shima maray ketlan?” She asks.

“Vo. Zuj rintobo English.” He glances to her.

“Havo.” She nods.

Once they arrive, Cy introduces Mirkon, Zakera and a few of the others to Zia before allowing the villagers to continue. Zia finds the human and Ketlan’s visible affection both shocking and inspiring, realizing that there may yet be hope for harmony among their races. Johnny stares in awe at the Zelkona villagers as they march into the city to claim their rightful place among them, finding some of the females alluring. Cy takes a head count, aided by the thinness of the initial path between the Sa’kesh and the Kelanethaka. As the last Zelkona villager passes by, he counts two hundred and fifty more souls, bringing the Sa’kesh population to nine hundred and forty.

No sooner has Cy entered his fortress with Zakera and begun eating a meal, a guard rushes in with news. The Zelkona are struggling to find a place to settle as many of the humans are not speaking to them, or only speaking English, knowing that the sentient raptors have no comprehension of it. Mirkon, fearful of a confrontation, has sent the runner to find Cy so that he may handle the matter personally. Grumbling in frustration and bolting from his chair, he takes a single loaf of faval, eating along the way. Zakera joins her mate this time, sticking to him like glue as they search for the Zelkona

in their growing city. It takes virtually no effort to spot the horde of primarily female Zelkona, their vibrant hides like a living neon sign.

Zia sees Cy and immediately waves him over. She turns her eyes to Zakera before nodding to her as well, showing her acceptance of the Ketlan who is her leader's wife. A group of humans speak to Mirkon, who is failing to calm them. Using only English, they demand that the "lizards" be sent further away from the center of town. Many appear fearful of the newcomers, not even bothering to hide their facial expressions. It only further alienates the Zelkona, who only days earlier were living their lives amongst their own, in a land they knew. Mirkon attempts to appease them, but the villagers don't listen, and soon the humans stand on one side and the Zelkona on the other.

They bark back and forth at Mirkon, who appears quite feeble when faced with the mob. A sudden gunshot startles everyone; the Zelkona collectively jump, left in a haze from the loud report of Cy's pistol. It's the first time they've ever heard it. Turning, they look at Cy who stands atop an unfinished mud brick wall, his Bersa raised high above his head. Zakera removes her hands from her ears, which spring back up into place. Cy lowers his weapon and glares at the human villagers, his pistol trembling slightly from his seething anger.

"How *dare* you behave this way! ... You are a disgrace!" He begins.

Zakera approaches Zia and translates, per Cy's request.

"But they are not Ketlan or human. They are Zelkona. A step above the Kaladez or Zajak!" One villager declares.

"They have not worked for any of this, so why should we accept the lizards?" Another barks.

"Can we even trust a race so primitive?!" One questions.

Zakera quietly translates their complaints to Zia, again at Cy's request, while he hears them all out. After nearly a minute of continuous complaints, he holds out his hands to silence the group. He stands there without speaking for a moment, looking at all of them. Cy takes a deep breath.

"You all should be ashamed... I left with those who live with me in the fortress... *The fortress!* We traveled to King Roland's land to meet the *human* tyrant who sent you fleeing in terror from your homes. I killed him with *my own two hands*, and I did it so that we could build a great tribe; a nation inclusive to *all* races! I did not kill Roland just so you could come here and continue his bigotry!"

Heads begin to lower as their chieftain speaks.

"Blood stains *my* hands, not yours, and I did it for all of you! If *they* can accept me but you cannot accept them, then *they* are my people, not you. One day this tribe will have thousands of Ketlan, Zelkona and humans. If you don't wish for that day to come, then go back into the jungle, where you belong... The Sa'kesh don't need or want you."

Without uttering a word, many of the human villagers quietly disperse and return to their work. Cy jumps down from the unfinished wall and embraces Zakera while Mirkon praises his brief speech and swift action.

"Zia over there is going to be the Zelkona representative. She'll be the Zelkona version of you." Cy begins.

"Yes, my Lord!" Mirkon chirps.

"And let them set up wherever they want." Cy continues.

“... Even in the city?” Mirkon sheepishly asks.

“I did say ‘wherever they want’.” Cy smirks.

“Yes, my Lord!” Mirkon bows.

“Good. They’re Sa’kesh now, and I want them to feel welcomed, because *they are*... And stop calling me that!”

“Apologies, Cyrus!”

Leaving with his pledge and his small entourage of guards, Cy eagerly returns to the fortress while Mirkon passes along the information for him. Zia watches the human chieftain and his Ketlan bride heading back to their wooden fortress, amazed by the power he holds over his people. It is a combination of reverence and terror that she has never seen before, though she hasn’t seen much in her life among her tribe. Having heard his speech and been granted a position of power among her race, Zia can’t help but feel a growing admiration for the human. His calm and pleasant demeanor, sincerity, and the strength of his conviction quickly convert her to his cause.

Looking down at the mud brick streets beneath her digitigrade feet, she spots something unusual before her large toe-claw. Squatting down, she picks up a little brass cylinder with an unusual scent. Realizing that it must be related to her new chieftain’s small but powerful sounding weapon, she saves the article in a little hide pouch sewn into her skirt. It will make a wonderful charm to commemorate a most historic and special day; the day that her and her tribe became Sa’kesh.