

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 05: We're Not In Belize Anymore

He rises from the bed, noting that his shoes are sitting on the floor. Did he take them off last night and simply doesn't remember? He rubs the sleep from his eyes as he stands from the bed. The floor is icy cold on his feet, even through his socks. He turns to the porthole, looking at the red sky and a low hanging, blue-tinted moon.

"Is that normal?" He asks her.

"Yes, it is. You can tell the time by the position of the moons. It is several hours past dawn." She explains.

"I guess we're late for breakfast." He chuckles.

He runs his fingers through his hair, brushing back his raven locks as he stretches the muscles in his arms and chest. He turns his head to Zakera, surprised to see her eyes looking him over and focusing on his chest. Clearing his throat, she blinks and turns away. Reaching into his pack, he takes out a black military web belt with a brass buckle, a nylon holster and double magazine pouch. He slips the belt through the loops and attaches the accessories, slipping his Bersa pistol into the holster on his left hip, before strapping his recurved knife to his right. Sitting on the bed, he slips his feet into his shoes. Bending down to tie them, he realizes that Zakera has his shoelaces. He sighs, turning his head up to her.

“Buy you lunch?” He grins.

“What?” She tilts her head.

“Are you hungry?” He asks again.

She smiles and nods her head. Rising from the bed, he walks to the door and opens it for her. The pair walk side by side down the hallway, heading for the Galley. There they find Yasmin, Johnny, Gabby and Isabella inside, the siblings sitting at one table while Yasmin sits alone at another. Yasmin is eating an apple from the fruit bowl that Cy left out. Zakera and Cy sit where they had yesterday. Looking at the contents of the bowl, Cy reaches in and grabs an orange, peeling it with his left hand.

“You’re left handed too...” Zakera murmurs.

“Mhm.” He nods.

“That’s unfortunate...”

“Why is that?” He chuckles.

“Ketan believe that the left hand is favored by our ancestors. Being born using the left hand is rare; it is a great honor and blessing.”

“Well that’s different.” Cy remarks. “I hope they have these on this planet.” He thinks aloud, taking a section of the orange.

“What is it?” Zakera asks.

“That’s a no.” Yasmin smirks.

“It’s an orange.” He answers, holding up the section for her. “She’s eating an apple, and this is a banana.” He continues, pulling one out of the bowl.

Zakera looks at the banana, her lips twisting into a strange, subdued smile.

"And you eat it?" She asks.

"Yeah. They're really good!" He says, setting down the orange down and peeling the banana instead.

"I did not know that males would eat those." She giggles.

"Sure they do. I like them." Cy says as he takes a bite.

He suddenly stops. Looking at the banana and then everyone around him, realizing he played right into her claws.

"Do you enjoy it?" Zakera teases.

"Not anymore." He mutters quietly.

"Aww... Is it to big for you?" Yasmin winks.

"Like *you* would know what a big banana is like." Johnny snickers at Yasmin.

"Give me that." Yasmin growls, snatching the banana from Cy.

There is a brief moment of silence as Yasmin devours the banana nearly whole, as though she had something to prove.

"So, what do you call this world?" Cy hastily changes the subject.

"Monala." Zakera answers, eating a section of orange.

“Mo’na’la...” He repeats slowly, as if to practice the word.

“Yes.” She nods.

Zakera’s face lights up at the taste of the orange. Cy silently chuckles, amused by her fascination of an otherwise mundane food. After they finish eating, Cy cleans up the kitchen as he often does, setting the leftover seeds aside. Without saying a word, the group disperses; they already know what to do. Zakera follows closely behind Cy as he returns to his quarters. There he collects his pack, dumping the contents out onto the bed. He collects only what he thinks he’ll need on the journey. He compulsively shoves his cell phone, MP3 player, power pack and accessories into his pack. Next, he packs his chain whip, a pouch of basic survival gear, a small medical kit, stainless steel water bottle, compass, and the spare pistol magazines and extra ammunition from the desk.

Taking his leather vest, he slips it over his back before also putting on his pack. Finally, he slings his SKS rifle over his right shoulder as they both leave his quarters. They make their way up to the bridge, where everyone else is already waiting for them. Norv glances at his rifle and sidearm.

“Not one word.” Cy warns him.

“What kept you?” Yasmin asks, impatiently tapping a foot.

“I had to make sure I packed everything. It took longer to unbolt the kitchen sink than I thought it would.” He jokes.

“Alright, smartass. Let’s do this.” Yasmin smirks.

Leaving the bridge, the group climbs down to the main deck, securing the doors behind them. Cy, Zakera, Yasmin, and Johnny

leave first, while Rico pilots the dinghy. Pulling close to the shore, the first group departs, pushing the dinghy away before heading inland. Cy sits on the beach, watching the little boat bob in the water. A shadow passes by him and he turns, Zakera sitting beside him. She turns her eyes to him, smiling faintly. The rays of the sun warm his clothes and his chest; it's much like his dream. He grabs a handful of yellow sand, letting the warm dust flow through his fingers. He turns, looking over his shoulder to see Johnny and Yasmin wandering nearby.

"What will you do when we return to my tribe?" Zakera suddenly asks him.

"I don't know. I guess we leave to find the other humans." He answers, looking sorrowfully at the sand.

"And when you find them?" Her voice softens.

Cy merely shrugs. Turning his eyes back to the Malevolence, he watches the dinghy approaching in the distance as Rico returns with the others. He looks down and takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. Beaching the craft on the sand, they promptly exit the dinghy. Taking turns, they drag the boat all the way to the tree line, tying it to the trunk of a distinctive tree with silver bark, and hanging vines bearing light blue leaves. Rico pulls out his acoustic guitar from the bottom, draping it over his back.

"This kind of looks like a weeping willow." Cy remarks, feeling the rough silver bark. "What's this called?"

"That is a borlan tree."

"Borlan... I like it." He murmurs.

Zakera leads them through the jungle. It's a hot and humid day, the red sky is clear, and the blue moon hangs directly overhead. They walk in silence, gazing at the beautiful world around them. Strange insects buzz around, though none come close to them. Bird song echoes, but it's unlike any that they have heard before.

"This place is so strange." Gabby comments to Johnny.

"I'm sure she would say the same thing about earth." Cy remarks.

After walking for quite some time, the trail suddenly stops. Zakera looks overhead to the day-moon, then scans the forest. To the others, she appears to be gaining her bearings. Without warning, she begins blazing a trail through the jungle, pushing dense secondary forest aside as she powers through it. The others quickly follow, thorny brush and jagged wood tearing at them like clawed hands. They struggle to keep up with the native girl.

"Is this the way you came?" Cy asks.

"Yes."

Forcing her way through the brush, she leads them into a tiny clearing, barely large enough to fit them all. Continuing on, she pushes a plant aside, moving the large purple fern out of her way. As the leaves shiver, a large insect crawls out from underneath. The body is roughly the size of a school notebook, roughly four inches thick and covered in barbs. The shell of the creature is violet, with a pattern of yellow diamonds running along each side. Its head appears cylindrical, with eye on both sides that can see one-hundred and eighty degrees on either side, and a mouth that appears as a circle of

razor sharp teeth, cut into the very center of its face. It's a bizarre looking creature.

Zakera is visibly afraid on the insect, stumbling back and falling into Cy, who catches her and wraps his arms around her waist. The insect crawls towards them slowly on six large legs, its bizarre joints appear broken.

"Don't let the wakina sting you!" Zakera shouts.

"Sting?!" Isabella panics.

Cy moves Zakera aside, taking out his recurved knife from the sheath as the creature crawls towards him, almost apprehensively. He holds the handle at the base with only his thumb and two fingers. The creature rears back, revealing what could only be called a giant bee stinger. It withdraws from its underbelly and bends backward, hovering over the creature's back and pointing directly at him. The stinger is nearly as long as the creature's body, over one inch in diameter at the base, and tapers to a pinhead. The creature crawls towards them with amazing speed, but Cy throws the knife, spearing the creature in the back of the neck, just behind the head.

Pinned to the earth, the wakina squeals, its tail flailing about. After a moment of frantic thrashing, the stinger turns toward Cy, though not aiming directly at him. Zakera reaches out and grabs him, violently yanking him toward her. As the pair topple over, the stinger flies from the creature at an upward angle. Swooshing past the startled crew, the needle buries itself almost completely into the wood of a green barked tree with pink leaves.

"Woah..." Cy mutters, looking at the tree.

He turns to Zakera, whom he is lying over. Looking down at her, her eyes narrow, their legs interwoven. Reaching up with the hand that does not face the others, she rests it on his side. Gently scratching him with her white claws, he feels his face flush. Quickly rising to his feet, he holds out a hand to her and helps her up from the ground. Yasmin turns to the tree, then back to where Cy was standing.

“Thank you.” He says softly to her.

“You are welcome.” Zakera bows her head, brushing off her fur.

“Uh, it didn’t even shoot the tree behind you.” Yasmin points out.

“Whatever. That was some scary shit.” Cy retorts.

They continue through the clearing and back into the dense jungle. Cy stops to draw his knife from the dead insectoid, running the blade on a leaf and wiping away the strange, dark purple blood.

“Good throw.” Johnny comments.

“Not good enough.” Cy murmurs.

They walk through dense jungle for at least a half hour. Cy wonders why she would walk through this kind of bush for so long, and without more gear. What was she running away from? His curiosity claws at the back of his mind, but he holds his tongue. This is not the time or the place. Reaching for his compass, he opens the black plastic lid and glances down. The compass spins wildly in various directions, seemingly picking up multiple false signals as they walk only a few feet.

“Figures...” He mutters.

“What’s wrong?” Rico asks.

“The compass doesn’t work here. Big surprise, right?”

“Com-pass?” Zakera asks curiously.

“On earth, it always points in the same direction. It helps to keep you from getting lost.” Cy explains as he hands over the compass.

She pauses to examine it before quickly handing it back to Cy. Her hand remains over his for some time as she seems to look around. She hesitates, seemingly unsure of where she is going, but soon picks a direction. Zakera moves quicker, nearly jogging as her lead grows. The others, even Cy, begin to lag behind.

“What’s going on?!” Yasmin yells ahead.

“I don’t know!” Cy answers, his eyes fixated on Zakera’s back, trying not to lose her. “Slow down!” He calls out.

“Are we lost?” Norv asks, struggling to catch his breath.

“I fucking hope not...” Yasmin grumbles.

Cy says, rushing ahead and grabs Zakera’s shoulder, stopping her and gaining her attention.

“I’m sorry.” She says, looking back. “It’s hard to find the way.”

“It’s alright. I trust you.” He smiles, gently squeezing her shoulder. “Just relax and take your time.”

Yasmin shakes her head in disbelief. Zakera pauses, her eyes scan the horizon carefully before looking up at the sky. Basing her direction on the position of the moon, she turns slightly. Walking more slowly, she passes through dense jungle while the group follows behind her. After a few minutes of pushing through thick brush, they exit the jungle and find themselves in a large crimson field that stretches for miles. Zakera's eyes light up, smiling cheek to cheek and bearing pearly white teeth. Cy stands beside her and glances to her; it's obvious from her expression that they are on the right track.

"This is the way." Zakera says confidently.

"Are you sure?" Gabby asks in a worried tone.

"Of course she is." Cy answers for her.

They continue their hike through the field of red grasses, which easily reach to their hips. The plains are tall and densely packed, making it difficult to wade through. Norv struggles to keep up, sweat soaking his clothes as he pants. Johnny reaches out to Cy and grabs his shoulder. Turning back, they share pantomime as Johnny silently pleads for them to stop, for Norv's sake. Cy taps Zakera's shoulder, gaining her attention. The group stand still in the field, nearly two-thirds of the way through.

"Anyone else want to rest for a minute?" Cy asks the others, pulling the rifle from his shoulder.

Norv raises a hand, but quickly slumps back into the tall grass, toppling over. Rico and Johnny tend to the middle-aged captain while Cy pushes the crimson grass over and sits down atop it. He is immediately amazed at how supportive and comfortable it is. Laying his rifle down at his side, he leans back into the soft blades. While the

rest of the group sits close together, resting and taking drinks from whatever canteens and containers they had brought with them, Cy lays some distance away. He looks up at the sky, admiring the moon. The grasses suddenly shift and he looks over. Zakera emerges from behind him and sits down beside him.

“Well hello there!” He says cheerfully, sitting up.

“Hello.” She answers. She looks at Cy for a moment, tilting her head. “What are you thinking?”

“That this is better than a Lay-Z Boy.” He jokes. Zakera looks confused. “Never mind. This grass is very comfortable.”

“We use it for bedding.” Zakera comments. “It is best to harvest it when it is fully grown and still living, before the cool seasons.”

“This planet has seasons?” Cy looks to her.

“Yes. Warm with little rain, warm with much rain, cool with much rain, then cool with little rain.” She explains, scooting closer to him.

“What season is this?”

“Warm with little rain. The second cool season just ended. Each season is ninety days long.”

“I see.”

Her tail slides behind Cy’s back, just underneath his pack. He feels the tip gently hooking his side and looks down at her tail. He turns his head to her, flashing a warm smile. She smiles back, the tips of her sharp, white teeth visible behind her lips.

“Why do you do that?” He suddenly asks.

“Do what?!”

Her eyes grow wide and her brow shifts, her expression confused. Her tail remains in place, the tip gently swaying as it brushes his side.

“Never mind.” He chuckles.

Sitting with her for a moment, he is careful not to lean back and crush her tail. Norv eventually catches his breath and seems to calm down. Yasmin looks to him, receiving a confirming head nod as Norv sits upright. She walks through the field to collect Cy, stopping when she sees him sitting beside Zakera. Her eyes narrow, her brow scrunching near the bridge of her nose as she glares at the pair, focusing on the pink tail with cyan stripes that runs across Cy’s back. She loudly clears her throat, gaining their attention. They turn towards each other, looking over their shoulders and glancing at Yasmin.

“He’s ready to go. Move it.” Yasmin barks.

“Yes ma’am.” Cy murmurs.

Standing up, Cy adjusts his pack and then grabs his rifle, slinging it back over his shoulder. Zakera takes the lead once more and the group continues their hike. They wade through the tall grasses before leaving the field, marching for hours through the spacious primary forest. The day-moon begins to inch towards the horizon as the sun creeps ever lower; they have been walking for most of the day. They enter a well-worn trail, and though Zakera seems confident in her direction, her lips curl down into a noticeable frown. They follow the trail, trampled flat by many feet, over the course of many years. As they turn a corner, Zakera stops in her tracks, a bizarre creature standing in their path.

A large feline-looking creature stands on the trail, its side facing the travelers. It appears to be a tiger, or a mane-less lion, but much larger at nearly twelve feet long. Its aquamarine colored fur is contrasted with dark blue stripes running along its back and outer extremities. Cy can't help but notice how similar its pattern is to Zakera's. The large cat stands on four strong legs with six toes per foot. Three-inch-long, white claws, similar to a Grizzly's, jut out from the front of each toe. Along its spinal column are equally long spikes that protrude from the flesh and run to the tip of the tail, which has a razor sharp six-inch bone at the end, with a slight sickle shape.

The creature turns its head to face them and roars; its mouth opens and the bottom jaw splits, spreading out into the shape of an 'A'. Three rows of frightening teeth gleam in the sunlight. Cy grabs his rifle and quickly swings it around, pressing the butt-plate tightly against his shoulder. He flips off the safety with his thumb, his finger gently caressing the trigger.

"No!" Zakera exclaims.

She grabs the top of the fore-grip, lowering Cy's rifle. He turns to her, and to the amazement of the crew, backs down. Pulling the rifle toward his chest, he points the barrel at the ground, his finger running beside the trigger. Zakera takes a step back, her hands raised and palms facing the creature. Cy and the others follow her lead.

"Ka hajun, moltaka. Rota." She says softly.

The creature turns its head, growling deeply as its jaws closes. It steps to the side, then turns and darts away with incredible speed.

“Wow.” Cy mutters. “What did you say to it?”

“We meant it no harm, and to move.” She answers.

She continues walking the path. Cy can't help but smile, thoroughly impressed. He flips the safety switch on his rifle and slings it back over his shoulder. After walking for at least another hour, they begin to hear more sounds, though these are the sounds of voices and the laughter of children. It echoes through the jungle, growing louder with each step. Zakera seems nervous, her hands balling into fists as she looks toward the direction of the sounds. Cy can't help but notice her change in demeanor.

“Are you okay?” He whispers.

“I will be.” She answers.

“I hope so.”

She turns her head to him, her eyes scanning him quickly as a little smile spreads across her face.

“I thank you.” She murmurs.

As the path bends it passes a patch of trees, revealing a substantial village on the other side. As they approach, dozens of other Ketlan begin to stare, point, and talk amongst themselves in a

language that the humans can't understand. Zakera turns back to the others.

"You are outsiders here, and though you may be curious, under no circumstance enter a Ketlan's home unannounced and without permission. Announce yourself first and wait for someone who lives there to invite you inside, or you may be attacked and killed as a trespasser. Allow me to speak to the tribe on your behalf, and please follow my instructions." She urges them.

"Alright. We trust you." Cy nods.

Though he doesn't speak for the others, and he knows it, he certainly speaks for himself. The others don't disagree, and they wouldn't dare; they are foreigners in an alien world. Zakera leads them from the path and through the village, keeping her head low as she walks through the village. A large central fire is surrounded by huts. It appears to be used communally. Near this fire are two large wooden slices of a single log, covers with strange carvings; possibly written laws or religious rituals for the tribe. Cy is fascinated by the village's construction, glancing at several homes as they walk by, many with open entrances.

The surrounding huts are larger than a typical Tipi or Wickiup, with a narrow base that grows wider as it gets taller. After about six feet high, the roof tapers drastically towards the center of the hut, with a pole in the center, but off-set. A ring of bent live-wood tied to the pole acts as both a chimney and to support the massive leaf shingles. From the exterior, the huts look like spinning tops that are embedded partially into the ground.

"Zakera?" A voice calls out, stopping her in her tracks.

“Hello father.” She replies, turning to the voice.

An older Ketlan male walks out of the crowd of onlookers. He stands about five-foot and seven-inches tall, with vibrant green eyes, cyan colored fur with white tiger stripes, and white fur on his chest, a pattern identical to Zakera’s. He also has human-like hair; a dark teal that reaches down to his mid-back and twisted into dreadlocks.

“Who are these?!” He demands.

“They are friends. They helped me return home.” She answers sheepishly.

Another Ketlan steps out from the crowd. He is absolutely monstrous in both size and appearance. He easily stands six-foot and two-inches tall, with reddish-orange eyes, black fur and light red speckles dotting his body. Unlike Zakera and her father, he appears canine. A thinner, longer snout, taller ears, and a shorter, bushy tail. His ears and the top of his tail are covered in red fur, as are his fingers. He is muscular like a body builder, with thick arms, strong legs, and pronounced pectoral and abdominal muscles.

“They are not a threat, Hitoren! They saved me from the Kaladez!” She pleads.

Hitoren, the canine Ketlan, walks up to Cy and glares down at him. Cy looks back up at him with his cold eyes. They gaze suspiciously at one another, and Hitoren looks over Cy’s figure. He seems to growl at Cy who stares blankly back. Hitoren turns to the others, looking them over as he walks a circle around them. Returning to Zakera’s father, he stands beside him.

“Zikata, I do not trust them. Him most of all.” His deep voice bellows as he points to Cy.

Cy struggles to keep from making a Darth Vader joke, glancing over to Zakera.

“Father, *he* is the one who saved my life.” She exclaims, her head bowed forward.

“I see...” Zikata walks up to Cy. “You saved my daughter’s life from the Kaladez?”

“I did.” Cy responds.

“How many were there?”

“Three.” He holds up three fingers.

“What is your name?” Zikata looks him over.

“Cyrus.”

“You saved my daughter’s life. As chieftain, I will help you in return. I will not heed Hitoren’s warnings... For now.” He begins, speaking loudly. “What do you ask of me in return?”

“There are other humans. Can you show us the way to them?” Yasmin asks.

“I can.” Zikata nods, “But you will not be able to make it tonight; it is far away, and it can very dangerous outside of the village, especially at night. I will allow you to stay here for one night, and then you may leave in the morning. Hitoren will show you to your shelter.” He taps Hitoren’s chest.

Hitoren grunts in anger, bearing his teeth as he glares at Cy. Walking towards the group, he growls. Cy jestingly waves his hand in front of his nose. His jovial demeanor only serves to further anger Hitoren. Turning back to Zakera, she looks over to him, her head bowed before her father. Zikata pats her on the shoulder before approaching Cy.

"Come with me, Cyrus. I would like to speak with you. Show the others to their shelter, Hitoren." Zikata says.

"Yes, Zikata."

Cy briefly bows his head. The others are lead away to a large hut near the center of the village. Hitoren points at the entrance, standing silently at the side of the door made of reinforced hide. They push their way inside as Hitoren appears to stand guard, though not to protect them. Inside Zikata's hut, he sits near a fire in the center. Motioning with his hands, Zakera sits close to her father, while Cy sits across. He notices that Zakera keeps her distance and doesn't try to stay close to him.

"I thank you again for saving my daughter." Zikata begins. "She is my only child, and I do not know what I would do without her." His eyes gloss over, as he tears up. "I was very worried when she did not return from her walk yesterday morning. Tell me, how did you find her?"

"I was walking a trail with my friends. We were lost and I fell behind. I heard a struggle and-"

"I was being dragged to a Kaladez village and-" Zakera interrupts.

"I would rather *he* tell me, Zakera." He says, his eyes narrow as if suspicious of her.

“Well...” Cy pauses, looking at Zakera. “I... I heard a struggle and found three ‘Kaladez’ trying to carry her. She was tied and being carried by two of the creatures. I got their attention, so they dropped her and attacked me. I shot and killed them, then stopped to untie her and see if she was okay. She was very scared, but I stayed with her until she calmed down.” Zakera smiles as he tells his story to her father. “She said it was too late to make it back to her village, so I brought her back to my ship.”

“Ship?” Zikata raises a brow.

“Sana numchaku.” Zakera explains in Ketlan.

“You arrived on water? ... How far away were you?” Zikata asks with a surprised look on his face.

“Almost a day’s walk, near a yellow beach at the ocean.”

“Ocean?” Zikata chuckles. “That is no ocean, but a very large lake. Why would they take you so far, my daughter?” He turns to his daughter.

Zakera shrugs her shoulders and Zikata waves his hand, as if to disregard the question. Leaning forward, he grabs Cy’s forearm, who instinctively grabs his back. Meeting him halfway, they lean over the fire.

“I thank you for what you have done. You truly do not know how much this means to me.” Zikata says.

“It’s alright. I just did what was right.”

Zikata motions to his daughter, who promptly rises and collects food for them. She sits down beside Cy, setting out the food. Her tail rests behind his back, though he doesn’t even notice as it doesn’t touch him. The tip flickers gently just past his other side, drawing

Zikata's attention. Though he doesn't say anything, he looks over at his daughter, narrowing his eyes.

"I thank you, Cyrus. You may return to your hut now. Zakera can lead you there." Zikata states sternly.

Zakera nods eagerly as Cy rises to his feet. She quickly hops up, smiling as she motions to him before walking outside. She walks slowly, staying close to him as she leads him towards the hut, their hands occasionally brushing against one another. Zikata peers out through the doorway, paying close attention to his daughter's behavior.

"I hope that you sleep well, tonight. It will not be as comfortable as your bed." She says softly.

"It's alright, I normally don't sleep very well... Except for last night." Cy grins, gazing at her.

She turns her head away, her lips curled up into a wide grin. She gently bites her bottom lip, turning her eyes to him.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He says.

They stop in front of a hut, standing on either side of the doorway.

"So..." He says.

"This is your hut."

"Okay."

"S-should I visit you tomorrow?" She asks, looking down at her feet.

"You don't have too, but I'd like that, Zakera."

Glancing up to him, their eyes lock for a split second before she quickly darts away. He turns and pushes the hide door aside, stepping into the hut.

"But I'd like that." Johnny mocks him.

"Fuck you." Cy mutters.

"I didn't realize you were so smooth." Johnny teases.

"See answer 'A'." Cy coldly responds.

"You know you don't have to play her anymore. We've got what we came for." Yasmin remarks.

"Right..." He sighs, sitting on the ground by the fire.

"That *is* what you were doing, right?"

Cy glances over to her.

"Seriously?!" Yasmin exclaims.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have too."

"Whatever." Cy mutters.

"Are you blowing me off? Did you forget who you're talking too?" Yasmin snaps.

"I don't need to explain myself to you." Cy barks.

"... Fucker..." She growls.

Rico, Johnny, Gabby and Norv glance between each other over the somewhat heated exchange, though Isabella doesn't seem to care. Setting his rifle down on the earthen ground, Cy stretches out on a mattress made of the harvested crimson grass. He removes his musette bag and uses it as a crude headrest, keeping his rifle close to him as he stares at the ceiling. No one speaks again throughout the night, allowing the small fire inside the hut to die down. Cy looks up at the small hole in the ceiling of the hut, looking at the stars, and glimpsing the purple night-moon. He takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he closes his eyes. Zakera enters her family hut, her father sitting unmoved by the fire. He motions for her to sit; she complies.

"What do you think of them?" He asks her, placing a small log into the fire pit.

"They are good people. They helped me." She answers quietly.

"And what of him?" He pokes the fire with a well charred stick.

"What do you mean?" She looks up.

"I am your father and I know you very well, but I am not blind." He begins. "You are Vintala; Since you were a child, I have never seen you so pleased with anyone."

"He *saved* me, father. I was about to die, and *he* was the one who came out of the jungle. I am just grateful to him..." She bows her head.

"I hope so. If you did like him, I feel I should tell you that it cannot possibly work. You are Ketlan, and he is a human. In the

morning he will be gone, and you will most likely never see him again.” He casually explains as he stokes the fire, adding another small log.

“I do not wish to discuss it further...” She replies, standing to her feet.

Forgoing dinner, she moves over to her hammock and sits down. Zikata looks to her, noting her expression as she glances at the door. Zakera lies down on her hammock and stretches out, looking up at the small hole in the ceiling and watching the stars. She sways a foot, letting her claws dig a thin trench into the soil. She finds it harder to sleep than last night, but after a brief struggle, she passes out. In their own hut, Cy and the others also slowly succumb to their exhaustion. The night-moon raises high in the sky as the darkness rolls over the village. The sounds of the villagers and children have long faded; only the sounds of strange insects and the wind in the trees are heard.

Johnny struggles to sleep; he had spent nights in the jungles of Belize with Cy many times, but these sounds are simply too foreign. As he rolls over, he hears a noise. Sitting up, he looks over to see Yasmin groaning lightly in her sleep, tossing and turning as she suffers a nightmare. Lying back down, he then hears Cy doing the very same thing. Johnny looks back and forth between them.

“Look at what my father has done to them...” Johnny laments.