

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

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Episode 06: The Survivors, I Presume

The next day, Cy awakens to see that the hut is nearly empty; only Yasmin and Johnny are still inside, while everyone else is absent. He rubs his eyes as he sits up from the grass mat. He stretches, flexing his muscles as he looks at the wall in the direction of Zakera's hut. He can't help wondering how her night went, and what she is doing at the moment. Zakera sits by the small fire in her hut, stirring the stew within a thick clay pot. She watches the entrance intently, Zikata narrowing his eyes as she fidgets. Looking over her shoulder, she glances at her father. Sighing, she suddenly rises to her feet and heads for the entrance.

"Where are you going?" He calmly asks.

"To take a walk." She quickly answers.

"Is that all?" He raises a brow.

"Do not worry. I will be back before dark." She chuckles.

"I hope so..."

She slips outside, heading toward the human's hut. As she walks through the village, she sees that most of the humans are near the central fire and preparing for their journey, but Cy is not among them.

She stands before the hut entrance for a moment, building up her courage.

"It is Zakera. May I enter?" She asks the closed doorway.

"May-"

"Of course!" Cy exclaims through the doorway and interrupting Yasmin.

Zakera pokes her head inside, seeing Cy, Yasmin and Johnny inside.

"Hi!" Zakera happily exclaims, her mouth dropping open.

She waves to Cy and then darts inside, rushing past Yasmin, who leans back in surprise. Zakera drops down onto her hands and knees next to Cy. Shifting, she rests on the sides of her legs while keeping her hands planted firmly on the earthen floor. Her mouth still agape, the corner of her lips curl into a smile as her large, fang-like canines glisten. Yasmin, in a frustrated huff, grabs her gear and storms out of the hut. With Yasmin gone, Zakera turns her eyes to Johnny, keeping her head pointed at Cy. The teenager looks up and sees the Ketlan staring at him. Her eyes narrow as she glares like a stalking predator.

Suddenly feeling as though he is intruding, he quickly stands up, grabs his gear and leaves the hut as well. He doesn't bother with an excuse. Once outside, he walks towards the others, catching up with Yasmin as she stands beside Rico.

"So, they kicked you out too?" She asks Johnny.

“Huh? ... Oh, well... Sort of.” He replies, scratching the back of his head.

“Are you alright? What happened in there?” Gabby asks.

“You should have seen the look she gave me just now. They didn’t actually tell me to leave. I don’t think Cy even noticed, but her glare said ‘get the fuck out before I rip your head off’.” Johnny explains.

“She seems aggressive today.” Gabby comments.

“Yeah...” Johnny sighs, looking back at the hut.

“I don’t trust her. She’s not a human, just a beast that can talk.” Yasmin murmurs.

“And also a woman. That’s just as bad.” Rico jokes.

Yasmin swiftly backhands Rico across the face, her silver ring cutting his cheek.

“Are you leaving soon?” Zakera asks Cy.

“Yeah...” He says solemnly.

She sits near Cy, drawing her knees to her chest with her paw-like feet planted firmly on the ground. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she rests her cheek on her knees as she looks to him.

“Will you be glad to see more of your kind?”

“My kind?” He chuckles.

“More humans.”

“I know what you meant. I learned so much about you and your people already; I don’t think our ‘kinds’ are really all that different.” He explains.

“Really?” She lifts her head.

“We both need to eat and sleep. We both bleed. We have feelings. We uhm... Well, I’ve seen the kids running around here.”

She feels her face flush underneath her fur.

“What really makes us so different?” He asks.

She turns her eyes to her tail, swaying it slowly.

“Oh, that.” He chuckles. “I don’t think that’s a big deal.”

Pleased by his comment, she grins wide and slides a little closer.

“Do you really feel that way?” She asks.

“Don’t you?”

“I...” She hesitates.

He scoots closer, their sides nearly touching. Yasmin suddenly pokes her head inside the hut.

“Come on! We’ve got to go! We’re burning daylight!” She barks angrily before backing out of the hut.

Cy turns his eyes to Zakera and sighs. Her tail whips to the side, quickly wrapping around his waist. Cy shifts, slipping his arm across her back and pulling her against him. She quickly lowers her head, looking down as though she were a child caught stealing sweets. He strokes her side gently, his wonderful touch causing a tremble to shoot through her body. She rests her head against his shoulder and closes her eyes. They sit in silence for some time, enjoying their private moment.

“Get the lead out of your ass!” Yasmin yells from just outside.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go.” He says softly into her ear.

“I know...” She says sorrowfully.

Cy pulls away, grabbing his pack and rifle. They rise together as he slips on his pack and slings the weapon. Walking outside, they stand at the front of the hut. Cy turns his head, seeing Yasmin waving him over, an angry scowl on her face. He removes his orange and black Keffiyeh, handing the scarf to Zakera. She looks down, but she does not take it.

“What is this for?” She asks.

“For you... To remember me by... And also to keep your neck warm.” He smiles.

Cy grabs the Keffiyeh with both hands, stretching it out. He swings it over her head, draping it across her neck and crossing it at the front.

“I will not need this to remember you.” She says, turning her eyes up to him.

“Keep it anyway.”

“How about we trade?”

Reaching into a small pouch that’s tied to a loop on her skirt, she pulls out a bundle, holding Cy’s shoelaces in her hand.

“There was more cord inside.” She comments.

Cy smiles and takes the laces from her hand, gently stroking her palm with his fingertips, before placing the shoelaces into his pants pocket.

“That’s not a very fair trade; I gave you these.” He laughs.

“Hurry up!” Yasmin growls.

Finally leaving Zakera, Cy rushes over to his companions, shaking his head in frustration as he passes Yasmin. He turns back to see the Ketlan girl. Though she smiles and waves, she looks very unhappy. Rico sits on the ground, playing his acoustic guitar while several Ketlan watch on from a distance. They gaze as if hypnotized by it.

“Ready to go?” He asks the crew.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” Johnny comments.

“I was busy.” Cy replies.

“It’s a long walk.” Yasmin scoffs.

“It was important...” Cy’s voice grows stern.

The group sling their packs and grab their supplies, ready to leave. Cy suddenly removes his pack to take out his water bottle, spotting his cell phone inside. Turning back to Zakera, who stands a distance away, he quickly removes the phone from his back, checks the device’s battery. There is not much life left in the device, but he selects the camera app anyway. Zakera removes the Keffiyeh from her neck, holding it in her hands and feeling the fabric. He palms the phone, leaving the camera lens peeking over his fingers as he holds the device by his side. She glances back to Cy and the others, her hands resting over her groin as she squeezes the scarf tightly, clenching her teeth.

With the phone in his palm, he taps the shutter button, silently snapping several pictures of her as she stands before the empty hut. He looks down only to see a black screen; the battery has died. He slips the phone into his pocket and grabs his gear, following the others as they march toward the edge of the village. Zikata and Hitoren stand a distance away, waiting to point them in the right direction. Meeting with the two men, they walk further and further from the village. Cy glances over his shoulder, looking back at Zakera one last time. She turns her back and darts away. Once at the edge of the village, Zikata wishes them well and sends the humans on their way. They follow the road as it wraps around the village, the Ketlan fading from view.

“Finally! Thank God we got out of there.” Isabella groans.

“Yeah, that place made me feel really... Unwanted...” Norv adds.

“And it was too strange.” Gabby comments.

“Cy seemed fine.” Johnny remarks.

“That’s because he’s a freak.” Isabella quips.

“You know, they are a lot like the tribes back on earth.” Cy begins. “I’m sure that once you understand their culture and language, it wouldn’t be so weird... Besides...” He turns his head and points. “They aren’t all that different from us.”

The group turns and sees a hut beyond the trees. A young male and female Ketlan couple display public affection, nuzzling each other with their snouts. The girl looks around and quickly ushers the boy inside of the hut, as he unties his loin cloth and steps inside.

“Kids...” Cy says with a chuckle.

The rest of the crew cringes.

“I think they liked your guitar.” Norv says to Rico.

“You think so?” Rico replies.

“Too bad I wasn’t playing. Then they’d really get a show.” Johnny jokes.

“When they discover electricity, they’re going to have some wicked looking metal bands.” Cy says with a smirk.

Marching in silence for under an hour, they turn a corner and are stopped dead in their tracks by a strange creature. It stands at least seven feet tall, with a nearly foot long snout lined with razor sharp teeth. A spiky fin runs down the center of its head like a mohawk, while three spikes, each about an inch long, jut out over each eye on the brow ridge. Its eyes are a deep but vibrant red that seem to almost glow as it roars. Its tail is at least as long as it is tall, and its two feet are considerably large, with four toes, each capped by a nearly four-inch-long claw. Its scaly skin appears a glossy carbon black, with red tiger stripes lining its back. Though it has small hands with two fingers and a thumb, the arms are surprisingly long.

Cy grabs his SKS and swings the rifle around, raising it up to the creature. He flips off the safety as the monstrous creature roars again, taking a step towards them. Slowly stepping back, he hopes that it will back down, as the moltaka did. Instead, it suddenly charges. Cy squeezes the trigger, firing a single round which hits it in the neck. He dives to the side as it quickly bears down on him, firing a second round and striking it in the head. Its body immediately goes limp and it falls to the ground, sliding forward from the momentum. Yasmin impulsively picks up the spent shell casings as Cy approaches the carcass, keeping his rifle trained on it.

“Interesting...” He remarks, looking it over.

“Can we go now?” Norv asks.

“Yeah, sure.” Cy says, slinging his rifle. “I’d love to know what this animal is called...”

“Any excuse to have her around.” Yasmin scoffs.

“She’s probably feeling the same way.” Johnny laughs.

“You think so?” Cy asks.

"Bro, she followed you like a puppy and didn't talk to anyone but you, even when she came home." Johnny says.

"She talked to her father too!"

"You're missing the point." Gabby chimes in.

"I think she was just really grateful that I kept her from being *raped to death*. Little things like that tend to make people like you." Cy says sarcastically.

"She was an ice queen to everyone else." Yasmin snaps.

"I bet deep down, she has a very warm, pleasant side hidden away."

"Yeah, I bet she does..." Yasmin snickers.

"Why does everything have to be sexual with you?!"

"Because I'm normal, and normal people think about sex at least seventy percent of their waking existence." Yasmin answers.

"I doubt that." Cy scoffs.

"You're one to talk, checking out a cat-woman. Do you want to make her purr? Maybe pull her tail?" She teases.

"I imagine that would hurt quite a bit." Cy thinks aloud.

After walking for several hours, around mid-afternoon, they reach a clearing. What appears to be a thin fence of two copper wires runs in front of them. Carefully approaching, the bushes rustle on their right. Cy turns to the bush, then quickly spins to his left. Bringing his rifle to his shoulder, he points it at the head of a human male who attempts to ambush them, a pistol in his hand. The well-built man stands still and raises his hands in surrender, his light green eyes level with Cy's. His light brown hair is combed back, and his mustache thin and point like a western gunslinger. Yasmin draws her own pistol

and aims to the right as two more humans, a man and a woman, appear from the brush.

The woman is rather tall, standing about five feet and seven-inches, with long brown hair in a single, long braid at the back. She is much heavier than Yasmin, with a sturdy build and D-cup breasts. She raises her hand, holding up her weapon. The man beside her quickly follows suit. He stands the same height as his female companion, with pale skin, short ginger hair, trimmed sideburns and freckles. The three strangers are stunned that their ambush was so easily thwarted.

“Nice try! ... Drop the weapons...” Cy orders.

“Who are you?” The gunslinger asks.

“I’m curious... Curious wonders why you tried to draw our attention?” Cy asks back.

“To get the advantage. We thought that we were the only ones with guns.” The gunslinger replies.

“We don’t mean you any harm.” Johnny steps in. “We were looking for a human village. We just arrived here in our ship, and we thought it would be best if we stuck together.”

“Like an alliance?” The woman asks.

“Yeah, something like that.” Cy says as he lowers his weapon.

Suddenly, four more strangers come out of the bushes, their guns lowered but still in their hands. An older man steps forward, his salt and pepper hair long and full. Dressed in antiquated clothes, he holds an equally outdated revolver.

“So, you’re not here to rescue us, I take it?” The old man says.

“Sorry. We’re pretty selfish.” Cy jokes.

“What he means is, we don’t know this world or how to get back, but it’s safer to stick together.” Johnny quickly interjects.

The older man turns to his group, looking back at them. A few give subtle nods, and a few shrug their shoulders. He clears his throat and then holsters his weapon. He steps up to Cy, who slings his rifle, and they shake hands. He introduces himself as Christopher Tapping, a fifty-three-year-old Englishman and scientist, the leader of their expedition. He introduces his party, pointing at each one as he shares who they are. Lara Blond, the brunette from the bushes, is a thirty-year-old English medical doctor. Dean Anderson, the ginger, is a twenty-four-year-old Englishman. He is their resident mechanic and electrical technician.

Lord Jack Carter, the gunslinger, is a thirty-five-year-old Englishman and hunter. He is the only member that Cy had heard of before, a famous explorer who vanished nearly one-hundred years ago in the Amazon rainforest. Donald Hammond is the oldest of the group, at sixty-four-years-old. Also an English scientist, the five-feet and six-inch tall man is a botanist with dark blue eyes, short white hair, and a full white beard. Richard O’Neill is a twenty-one-year-old Irish-American, standing barely five-feet and five-inches tall, with short blonde hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, and very thin. He is a freelance journalist, who joined the expedition to write their story first-hand.

The last member is Daniel Shanks, a thirty-four-year-old American anthropologist. At five-feet and eleven-inches tall, he is the tallest man in their group, with a sturdy build, blue eyes like Cy’s, short black hair that he parts down the middle and a thin black mustache. Cy and his party introduce themselves in kind. With the introductions complete, Chris leads them past the copper fence, which has a faint electrical current running through it and protects

their village. As they walk, Chris regales them with the story of their arrival. Originally, they sought a legendary plateau that was deep in the Amazon jungle, rumored by other tribes to be blocked on all sides and filled with strange creatures. Chris describes saber tooth lions and woolly mammoths, as well as Neanderthals and even dinosaurs.

“I think I saw that TV show...” Cy murmurs.

Using two hot air balloons to reach a mountain peak, a storm appeared suddenly and swallowed both craft. By pure luck it spat them out above a clearing not far from their current home. Though they at first thought they were still on earth, they quickly learned otherwise when they saw the two moons, and first encountered the Ketlan. To the ship crew’s surprise, they were *not* the group that taught the Kelanethaka English; a previous group had already done so. They soon reach the village, which is not a village at all, but a massive, solitary wooden fortress. They stare in awe at the structure, the likes of which they have never seen before.

Built around three large trees that grow around each other, the fortress is hexagonal in shape and nearly three stories tall; the trees are easily double that. The fort has windows and balconies everywhere, and appears almost professionally designed, with only small sections of somewhat crude workmanship. Simply judging by the number of windows and balconies, the fortress may easily have two dozen bedrooms. Chris leads them inside through a set of thick, double doors that lead into a foyer. A large hall with wooden floors greets them, with a winding staircase on one side that leads to the second floor. Calling out to other occupants within, Chris enters the hall and takes a left, entering a large dining area.

A crescent shaped table is built around one of the tree trunks. There are seats for nearly twenty people. More of Chris' party enters the dining hall, and he gives short introductions for them, as he did before. Samantha Davis is a twenty-five-year-old English woman who used her wealth to fund the expedition for Chris. Standing a diminutive five-feet and three-inches tall, she has pale skin and long, naturally curly blonde hair that reaches to her mid-back. She scans the room with her dark blue eyes, glancing to the newcomers with disinterest. Her dainty, thin frame is actually quite plain, with a minimal figure and A-cup breasts. Cy wonders why should would bother joining the expedition in the first place, all things considered.

George Jackson is a thirty-year-old American, and the group's guide in the Amazon. At five-feet and six-inches tall, with an average build, he looks like a stereotypical dirty cowboy with shoulder length brown hair, brown eyes, and a face full of beard stubble. Michael Judge is twenty-seven-years-old and has lived in this world most of his life, along with his sister Amanda. It was, in fact, the Judge's parents who traveled to Monala first, while on their own expedition. They built the fortress and taught the Kelanethaka English, but along with their own group, they have all since died or disappeared. Both Michael and Amanda have hazel eyes and long brown hair, though Michael is five-feet and eight-inches tall and well built, while Amanda is five-feet and four-inches tall, with a dainty figure and B-cup breasts.

The substantial group of survivors are all very interested in the crew's story. Cy spins a notably edited version of their arrival, leaving out the fact that they all formerly worked for a dangerous crime lord, and that they are thieves who stole his ship. Taking over for Cy, Norv begins to describe how the ship's instruments acted in the storm that brought them there. At the mere mention of radar and GPS, the others become perplexed. It is readily apparent that they have no idea what the captain is talking about. Cy glances over their clothes and weapons, then back to the man who claims to be Lord Jack Carter.

“What year do you think it is?” Cy calmly asks the group.

“What kind of question is that?” Donald scoffs. “Why it’s 1927! Or perhaps now it’s 1928. We’ve been here at least six months, so it’s hard to tell exactly.”

Cy and his group collectively raise their eyebrows. Isabella laughs aloud and Norv takes a seat on a simple wooden stool by the crescent table. The fortress dwellers immediately grow concerned by the newcomer’s reaction.

“Well that was the year we left on our expedition.” Donald sheepishly adds.

“You guys are off...” Yasmin snickers.

“Yeah, by about ninety years.” Johnny interjects.

“What?!” Donald laughs.

“That’s impossible!” Dean exclaims.

“And I thought I was the visionary.” Chris mutters.

The two groups begin arguing over the year, bickering back and forth for several minutes. Suddenly, Cy has a brilliant and simple solution to end the debate once and for all. He sets his bag on the table, pulls out his power pack and charging cable, then takes his cell phone from his pants pocket.

“I’ll prove it to you!” Cy exclaims to the others, plugging in his phone.

“How can you possibly prove the impossible?” Samantha scoffs.

“With this.” Cy calmly replies, powering up the phone.

“What is that?” Dean asks.

“This is a telegraph, telephone, gramophone, camera, daily newspaper, and a friend to play games with, all wrapped into one.” Cy begins. “It can perform mathematical calculations, play motion pictures, *in color and* with sound, and with the right programs, two people who speak different languages can translate in textual form.”

“Ha! Rubbish!” Jack scoffs.

“Someone enjoys reading Jules Vernes.” Lara remarks.

Cy holds out the activated cell phone. The group appears almost frightened of it, as if merely touching it will confirm their worst fears. Richard looks around at his friends, and then at the cell phone in Cy’s hand. He takes a seat near Cy and motions to him.

“I’ll bite. How does it work?” He asks.

“Touch the screen with your fingertip. Try tapping a picture.”

Richard looks over the main menu page and sees the ‘Gallery’ button, which looks like a framed picture. Following Cy’s previous instructions, he taps the button and the photo gallery appears. The fort dwellers look on in amazement, crowding around them. Cy shows Richard how to scroll through images. Flipping through the pictures, he admires the photos on Cy’s phone, many of which show futuristic looking cities; all of the images were of target’s locations. He continues to scroll and sees pictures of Cy’s motorcycle, a primitive jungle camp, and other technological devices that they don’t recognize. Laptops, cell phones, televisions, and MP3 players are in regular use by everyday civilians. As he scrolls, an image of Zakera appears on the screen.

“Well now!” Yasmin remarks.

“Doing some anthropological research?” Chris asks.

“Uh, see? Wasn’t that neat?” Cy quickly snatches the phone.

“Hey!” Richard exclaims.

“How did you come across such a magnificent device?” Dean inquires.

“Everyone has them in 2018.” Cy answers.

“There are literally millions of them. Teenage kids get them for Christmas all of the time.” Yasmin quips.

“Yeah. I had at least six of them.” Isabella remarks.

“That’s because you kept breaking them whenever a new model came out.” Johnny snickers.

“Well I wanted it!” She snaps.

The fort dwellers are flabbergasted. As if rubbing salt in the wound, Cy explains that aboard their ship anchored in the great lake, his motorcycle, fuel, a large cache of modern firearms, and ammunition in the tens of thousands wait for them. The fort dwellers look to each other for a moment, though they don’t speak; they promptly invite the ship crew to live with them in the fort.

“It’s better if we all stick together here.” Jack comments.

“Besides, this fort was built for nearly thirty people. It’s been more than half empty for a long time.” Michael adds.

The fort dwellers seem almost too eager to have them stay there. Cy is quietly apprehensive, as is Yasmin. The large group disperses, and Michael gives the crew a tour of the fort. He reveals that the second floor is almost entirely claimed by the others, but the entire third floor and a few rooms on the second are unused. The crew of the Malevolence wander around, each claiming their own space. Cy finds a smaller room with an old hammock hanging in the corner and a moderately sized balcony overlooking the courtyard. He envisions the room decorated with his trunk and belongings. He sets his pack beside the hammock and his rifle against the wall, running his finger through his hair as he sighs.

Walking to the balcony, he leans on the railing, gazing into the jungle. A knock on the door frame causes him to turn. Entering the room, Johnny approaches him. He leans on the railing beside Cy and stares out into the vast wilderness.

“So... What’s bothering you?” Johnny asks, concerned.

“What do you mean?”

“You aren’t yourself. You hardly made any snide comments down there. I was waiting for a ‘primitive screwheads’ or ‘boomstick’ joke.” Johnny smiles.

“Now I wish I had thought of that.” Cy chuckles. “I guess I’m just off in my own little world.”

“Is it about that animal girl?” Johnny asks.

“Her name is Zakera.”

“I knew it! I’m not going to judge; you’re entitled to be a freak.” Johnny jokes.

“She just got under my skin.”

“I don’t see any blood.”

"This is why I can never talk to you." Cy smirks.

They stand shoulder to shoulder, leaning on the sturdy wooden beam and glancing toward the horizon. Strange creatures hoot, howl and screech in the distance. After a long and awkward pause, Johnny takes a breath, turning his head to Cy.

"Hey... Why did you take her picture?" He asks.

"I doubt you'd understand."

"Try me."

"I took her picture because... I wanted to remember what it feels like to be normal." Cy answers, glancing to Johnny.

"... You're right, I don't understand."

Cy pats Johnny on the shoulder, wishing him a good night as he walks toward the hammock. Slowly sitting down and testing its strength, the old hammock easily supports his weight. Johnny leaves the room as he stretches out, resting his hands behind his head as he dangles a foot from the side of the net. Lying there, he feels tired but cannot fall sleep. Monala is warm, even at night; it's nearly twenty-one degrees Celsius, and yet he feels a chill within him. He pulls out the nearly charged phone, thinking back on Zakera. Sighing, he flips through her many images, swinging the hammock gently from side to side. While many of her images were blurry and unfocused, one is perfect. He is careful not to delete it, erasing the others entirely.

Cropping the picture, he brings her closer to the screen. A tiny smile forms on his face, but the chill does not subside. If anything, he feels even colder. He spreads apart his fingers, zooming in even closer and gazing at her beautiful cyan eyes.

"How are you doing?" A voice suddenly startles him.

"Huh? ... Oh. Fine. Just looking at some pictures."

"Do you miss it?" Lara asks.

"Yeah, I do. I'd really like to see her again." He replies.

"Her?" Her voice peaks.

"Yeah... Gaia, earth, home, etc." He plays it off.

"Ah... I see." She answers. Lara saw Zakera's image, as most did, but has no desire to embarrass the man. "Well, maybe you will see 'her' again someday. Anyway, I just wanted to make sure that you were all settling in. Have a good night."

"Yeah... Goodnight."

Lara backs out of the doorway, leaving him to his thoughts. Cy sits back up and walks toward the balcony again. Setting his hands on the rails, he peers up at the sky, gazing at the night moon.

"I wonder..." He thinks to himself. "Is she looking at this moon right now?"