

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 07: Train Of Thought

Zakera returns to the village center, glancing at the now empty trail, still squeezing the Keffiyeh in her hands. She steps toward the path, her lower lip quivering as she feels the urge to cry. Gently biting her lower lip with her incisors, she takes a deep breath. Sitting on the ground at the edge of her village, she tries to calm herself down. She glances at the keffiyeh, feeling it in her hands. Looking closer, she finds a few of Cy's black hairs. Zakera sits for some time, sinking deep into her own thoughts.

Why do I feel this way? What makes him so special? Is it merely because he saved me? Is it his gentle voice or how well he treated me? Was it how he held me when we slept, or am I just confused? Could it be I have a perverse fondness for humans; a mere physical desire? Or is there more to it? Father says that I should not dwell on him, and he is right. Cy is a human, while I am Ketlan. It is not normal for our kinds to know each other in that way. I am supposed to accept the pledge of another Ketlan and become a mother; *that* is normal for my kind. What do I do when I do not want what is normal? Her mind races as she sits alone, wrapping the scarf between her fingers.

Looking for his daughter, Zikata walks towards the path. He finds her just outside of the village, sitting by the trail. This is the kind of anti-social behavior that made her Vintala in the first place. She

looks down at a strange orange and black garment in her hands, though it is not made from hide. It must have been a gift from that human, Cyrus. Her sullen expression is obvious even at a distance, and she appears lost in her own thoughts.

“Zakera!” He calls out to her.

She jolts, startled, and blinks before looking up from the cloth. Glancing over her shoulder, she turns to face her father.

“What is bothering you?”

“I don’t know.” She answers. **“I’m just not feeling myself.”**

“Is it the human?” He asks.

“What?! No...” She shakes her head.

“Because if it is, you should try and forget about him. He is not of our kind.” He scolds.

“I know that. He is human. They aren’t like us...” She says, repeating her father’s rhetoric.

“Even if you were to see him again, it’s unnatural to consort with humans.” He warns her.

“Father!” Zakera exclaims, embarrassed. **“I did nothing of the sort!”**

“I did not say that you did.” He says, squinting his eyes suspiciously. **“I merely said that it was unnatural for a Ketlan and human to consort.”**

“Oh...” She squeaks. **“But would it really be so strange?”** She poses.

“Mind your tongue!” He barks. “You have quite a future. It is as bright and vibrant as the sun in the sky. You were blessed by the ancestors and are a beautiful female. Many other females are jealous of you. I cannot understand why you turn down every pledge.”

“I am not interested in them.” She murmurs.

“Unfortunately, you are an unclaimed adult, and as my daughter, that is not acceptable. Had you said yes to Sorveta, I would not have accepted Fekolza’s pledge for you. It is the best chance you have to erase your tainted status as Vintala.”

“But father!” She whines.

“Be silent! I do this for you, and for your future. Fekolza is a strong male and honorable man; you will appreciate him in time, and you will love the many children that you will bear for him.”

Zakera shudders at the thought of consorting with Fekolza. Though the Ketlan is well known and liked by many in her tribe, she cannot imagine a life with him. Athletic and tall, standing five-feet and ten-inches, he is considered quite handsome by many females. With light green eyes, bright yellow fur and light green speckles, he stands out in the crowd, much the same way that she does; Zakera is the only one of her tribe with pink fur. What color and patterns would their children even have? She quickly pushes the thought from her mind.

“I am not interested in him, father...” She says softly.

“Maybe not now, but sometimes you have to learn to appreciate someone.”

Zakera rolls her eyes. She doubts that she could ever feel anything for Fekolza. She wonders how there can be a true relationship if he wants to pledge based on her figure. He does not know her, nor has he made an effort to try. Her mind wanders as she

dwells on Cy. What if it could work with him instead? Cy protected her, provided for her, treated her with respect, and brought her home. She also knows that he is truly honorable; she had brought him into bed with her that night and yet he never forced himself upon her, though she may very well have allowed him had he tried. A smile spreads across her lips at the taboo and perverse thought. Zikata notices her expression, mistaking her thoughts for Fekolza.

“There is a place for you with our people.” He says, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly.

“I know...”

“I only want what’s best for you. You are my only daughter, and I love you very much.” He says as he stands up. “Do not stay out too long; supper will be ready soon.”

Zikata leaves his daughter behind as he returns to the village. Zakera stretches out on the ground, folding her hands behind her head as she gazes up at the sky. She uses the keffiyeh like a pillow, resting it in her palms. While staring at the sky, she recalls how when she was younger, she would take long walks around the village with her mother. As she grew older, they would walk farther, even more than the boys would. She would pretend that she was on great adventures and seeing distant lands, and her mother encouraged these games. While the girls were looking at the boys and the boys were looking at the adult’s weapons, she was in the jungle, looking at the distant hills with her mother. They would play these pretend games together, before her mother died.

After a Kaladez raiding party slew her, among others in the village, Zakera stayed home for a long time. After mourning, she eventually began to take her walks again, but now she was alone. She soon became a juvenile. The girls still looked at the boys, but

now the boys looked back; Zakera still looked to the hills. She had many potential suitors who wanted to explore her, but she never cared to allow them, to experience them the way that they would have loved to experience her. As time passed, she no longer felt comfortable within the village, instead enjoying her time away from it, never feeling like she belonged with her own people.

Now, however, her own father is forcing her to pledge to a man that she does not want, just to make her belong. Her heart weighing heavy, she sighs. Perhaps he really does want what is best for her? Perhaps this will be good for her? She may not feel that way now, but the pledge is in five days; she can dwell on it until then. Suddenly, her thoughts are interrupted by two faint cracks in the distance. Her ears prick at the familiar sound of the human's guns. She gets up, running a few meters down the path as she begins to panic. Stopping in her tracks, Zakera recalls her father. He would be very upset with her if she were to disappear once more to find the humans.

Though she wants to continue on and see if everyone is alright, she stays put. Fear of her father's anger, judgement and disappointment creeps into the back of her mind. She turns away from the trail, and walks back to the village, slowly. She turns back to the trail one last time, before heading for her family's hut.

"Cy is a warrior of great skill and cunning. He will be alright." She assures herself.

Entering the hut, her father is preparing a meal for them. He places food in a carved wooden bowl, offering it to her. Taking the bowl in her hands, she bows her head respectfully before sitting opposite him in the hut, eating quietly as the fire crackles and pops between them. Zikata attempts to make small talk with his daughter,

but she seems lost in her own mind. Not wanting to press her, he simply remains silent. That night, Zakera lies down on her hammock, a leg dangling over one side. She slowly swings herself, too wired to sleep. She looks up at the night moon, admiring its faint purple glow.

“I wonder if he is looking at this moon too.” She thinks to herself.

For the next several days, Zakera attempts to join in with her tribe. She ceases her usual walks and instead helps the other females. She tans hides, forages for wild edibles and preserves meat brought back by the hunters, all tasks considered fitting for women. Occasionally she is forced to listen to the other females asking about Fekolza, or to sit as her father expresses his joy at her upcoming pledge. Every word they utter claws at her ears and forces her stomach to tighten. The pledge is the day after tomorrow, and her fretful anticipation grows worse, making her feel perpetually ill. Lying down in her hammock, she struggles to sleep. It takes many hours.

Zakera finds herself in a dreamscape, sitting on the yellow sandy beach and looking at the massive lake. The warm wind blows through her pink hair and the sun warms her face. She sighs and leans back on her elbows, stretching out on the soft sand. Her ears shift as she hears the sound of shuffling feet in the yellow dust behind her. Turning her head, she glances to Cy who sits down beside her. The wind blows his shoulder length black hair as he turns his bright blue eyes to her, flashing a warm smile. He leans over onto his side, facing the girl. Extending a hand, he reaches for her, gently stroking her arm.

She shifts to her side, their bodies facing. Her tail drapes over her legs as she looks to him. Feeling the urge to cry, her eyes well with tears, but Cy wipes them away with his thumb. Resting her hand over his, she holds it against her cheek as she strokes him with her

thumb. His touch is so warm and comforting; Zakera would do anything to make this dream last forever. His eyes narrow as he leans in, tilting his head slightly. She leans in to meet him, preparing for a kiss. Suddenly she awakens to her father pushing her hammock.

“It is time to wake up. We have work to do.” He says.

Zakera grumbles as she opens her eyes. Frustrated, she sits up on the hammock; he awoke her before she could receive her kiss. Her father leaves the hut as he carries out his task for the day. Looking around the hut, she sees a wooden plate of fresh fruit that he had left out for her. Though he may not always do what she feels is best, at least she knows that he loves her enough to try. After eating her meal, she changes her clothing and leaves the hut to carry out her daily chores. Many are still not used to seeing the typically reclusive girl among them but humor her efforts. Though she works with the others, she does not speak; her mind dwells on her dream, dissecting it in her mind throughout the day.

Later that day, she brings her father a bundle of long sticks, picked by the women to form into weapons for the warriors. He sees her approaching and motions to her to come closer, bringing her near to him. Setting the sticks aside, he walks with her, away from the others so that they may speak.

“You seem distant today. Are you alright?” He asks.

“I have a lot on my mind.” She answers.

“Fekolza?” He says hopefully.

Zakera nods, unwilling to speak a lie. Her father smiles happily. He embraces her for a moment before waving her away and returning her to her duties. She stands for a moment, looking to the ground as she ponders her situation. Turning her head, she glances to her father as he sits with the other warriors.

“Is there a problem?” A warrior asks.

“Yes. She is just nervous.” Zikata replies.

“Understandable.”

“I would be more worried about Fekolza. We may never see him again once he beds her.” Another jests.

“Watch how you speak of my daughter!” Zikata barks.

“I apologize.” The bow their head respectfully.

“She will grow to love him.” Zikata nods.

“That’s it...” She thinks to herself. “I cannot go through with this; I cannot spend the rest of my life not knowing. I cannot and will not stay here any longer, and they will have to live with my choice.”

Darting away, she does not return to her given duties but instead looks for Katero. He an honorable male her age, one of the few males that she once knew well. Katero is one of the only males who had never asked her to mate with him while they were still juveniles, a time in a Ketlan’s life when polyamory is acceptable, though only with other juveniles. He has always treated her like a younger sister, though they have not spent much time together recently. When a rumor spread that Zakera was nearing adulthood and was still virginal, Katero agreed to lie for her, claiming to have bed her. When they had their ceremony of adulthood at the same time, the lie kept Zakera from ridicule.

She sees Katero in front of his family's hut, knapping a spearhead out of a large stone. The budding warrior sees her rapidly approaching, his yellow-orange eyes growing wide in surprise. He had not spent time with her or spoken to her at length in many seasons. Setting the stone and tools aside, he rises to his feet. Standing roughly five-feet and eight-inches tall and with an athletic build, his noticeably thick fur is golden in color, with black jaguar spots. He has naturally straight, black hair that he cuts short and presses up at the center and holds with natural wax, forming a vaguely bladed shape between his pointy ears, which have tufts of gold hair atop them.

"Katero!" She calls out, waving to him.

"Hello Zakera."

"I apologize. I know that we have not been close in a long time, but I would like to ask you for help. Its is very important to me, Katero." She pleads.

"Of course. How may I help?"

"I need to leave here. I cannot go through with the pledge." She says.

"What?!"

"Please keep watch for me as I prepare to leave." She asks, looking side to side.

"Are you serious?" He quietly asks.

"I will never be happy if I pledge to Fekolza. I do not feel as though I belong here. I cannot fight it any longer, so I must leave." She explains.

"This does not sound like a good idea, and I may find myself in much trouble if I help you leave."

“Long ago you were like my brother. If you still care for me at all, please respect my decision. This is the only thing I will ever ask of you.” She says.

Katero takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he looks at her. His eyes glance around at the village. No one seems to pay attention to their conversation.

“Alright.” He nods. “But we need to be swift.”

Zakera grins cheek to cheek and darts toward her father’s hut. She casually enters the hut, thankful that her father isn’t inside. As chieftain, he may help with the daily chores, but is not required too. Katero walks a distance behind, casually looking around as he posts himself near the home. Zakera quickly grabs a few belongings that are important to her, especially Cy’s Keffiyeh. She stuffs them into a small leather pouch that she ties onto a small loop on her skirt. Taking several other garments, she bundles them together and places them into a leather breastplate, tying it closed. She carries it by the cordage like a handbag.

Walking outside she carefully looks around. Katero leans against a wooden rack that holds drying meat. Seeing Zakera emerge, he motions with his head. She quickly follows behind as they make their way for the edge of the village, Katero stopping every so often to make sure that they are not being watched by any villagers. Leaving the safety of the village, they walk together along the path to the human fort.

“Do you really think this is a good idea? It is not too late to turn back, and I would not betray you.” Katero says.

"I am certain. This is what I want." She replies.

"This is about the humans who brought you back, isn't it?"

She stops in her tracks, silently confirming his suspicions.

"They saved your life, but you do know owe them anything. Why would you risk your status for a human?" He asks.

"You would not understand." She speaks softly.

"Could you at least attempt to explain it to me?"

"I have always been noticed for my fur and my figure; I am the chieftain's daughter. I have long felt as though I have lived my entire life for others, and I do not like it. Cy is different. When he looked at me, he was not afraid, nor did he see me as only a woman to mate with." She explains.

"What about me?" He raises a brow.

"Before we knew each other, I saw you look." She chuckles.

"Oh... Right... But he is a human." Katero remarks.

"I do not care that he is a human."

"Zikata says that it is not natural." Katero says.

"Only if nature has a say in the matter." She sternly remarks.

"I have done what you asked, but I do not want to go further. The road should be clear. Good luck."

She gives him a single head nod, an appreciative smile on her face. He turns back and walks down the road, his long tail swaying with each step. Zakera prepares herself for the long trip, taking a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves. She is more nervous over the

prospect of seeing Cy again than she is over the journey through a potentially treacherous jungle.