

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

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Chapter 10: Realization

Cyrus swings gently in his hammock, staring downward at the floor as though peering through the wood grain and into the second story room where Zakera and Amanda will both be sleeping. Swaying back and forth, he drifts off into his own thoughts, his foot dragging on the ground. A soft rapping on his closed door snaps him back to reality. Calling to the person beyond his door, it creaks as a pink fur covered hand pushes it open. Zakera pokes her head inside as he quickly sits up on his hammock.

"I am not disturbing you, am I?" She asks.

"No, of course not!" He replies.

"Good." She steps inside. "I wanted to thank you for speaking out for me earlier."

"What for?" He asks, standing up from the hammock.

"You respect my wishes, and you made it known to everyone. I appreciate that."

Stepping up to her, he rests a hand on her upper arm. With her head bowed, she glances over at his hand, his touch making her tremor nervously. They stand in silence for some time before Cy can finally think of something to say.

"So, uh... A-are you settling in alright?"

"Yes. Soon I will harvest and weave a grass bed, but until then we have hung a net bed for me." She answers.

"A hammock?" He chuckles, stroking her fur with his thumb.

"Y-yes." She murmurs.

"Are you cold?" He suddenly asks.

"What?" She turns her eyes up to him.

"You're trembling."

"Oh... It's nothing." She feels herself flush.

"Is it?" He takes a step closer.

Gazing into each other's eyes, he feels his heart thumping violently in his chest. Zakera's fur bristles as her tail swings to one side, the tip flicking visibly in his peripheral vision. Resting his other hand on her arm, he can feel her shivering and gently strokes her arms. She seems to melt, her mouth hanging open as she breathes harder, her eyes slowly narrowing. He feels as though she is inviting him to act, and soon he can no longer control himself. Pulling her closer, she tilts her head back as her eyes glance down to his lips. He leans forward, the tip of his nose gently brushing hers as their lips inch ever closer. For a split second their lips touch, gently caressing each other.

They both jump at the sound of a sudden loud thud emanating from the hallway. Realizing what they are doing, Cy releases Zakera who simultaneously steps back from him. She reaches across her chest, grabbing an arm with her hand as she looks to the floor. As a male's voice groans in pain from the hallway, the pair rush from the room. They dash down the hallway and turn to the main staircase, seeing George lying on the landing halfway to the third floor. Sighing, Cyrus shakes his head as he walks down the stairs to help George from the ground.

"Is he sick?" Zakera asks.

"No. He drinks. This happens a lot." Cy replies, hooking an arm around George's and pulling him from the floor.

"Water does that to him?" She asks in surprise.

"No." Cy chuckles. "It's a drink that he makes himself."

"Nearly one hundred proof!" George boasts, stumbling as he stands. "I was going to ask you something, Cyrus... What was it?" He belches.

Zakera takes George's other arm, helping Cy lead the intoxicated George back to the second floor and into his bedroom. Cy rather coldly shoves him down onto his bed, before turning and leaving the room. Zakera is quick to follow him. They stand in the hallway just outside of George's open door. After a tense moment, Zakera finally speaks, telling Cy that she should return to her own room. Though he doesn't want to leave her side, he escorts her down the hall. They walk in utter silence, though they glance between each other several times. Zakera stops at the closed door to the bedroom, resting her hand on the latch. After a short pause, she turns to face him.

"Thank you, Cy. I uh... Goodnight." She says.

"Goodnight, Zakera. Pleasant dreams."

Nodding, she pushes down the latch and opens the door before stepping inside and closing it in his face. He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair, looking down sullenly at the floor as he slowly shuffles his way back up the stairs and into his bedroom. He sits on his hammock, an aching in his chest as he glances back to his door. Zakera walks toward her own hammock, quickly stretching out on it as Amanda sits on her weaved grass bed, reading a badly weathered book. Though she holds the book, Amanda's eyes watch the Ketlan girl. Visibly disappointed as she stares back at the ceiling, Zakera's eyes are focused in the direction of Cy's bedroom.

“Are you alright?” Amanda asks.

“I am fine... Just tired.” Zakera replies, closing her eyes.

She lies in her hammock, struggling to fall asleep. Her mind dwells on the kiss that they shared for less than a second. She can still feel his lips over hers, his hands caressing her arms as she trembles like a leaf. What would have happened if George hadn't interrupted? Would she have stopped it if it progressed beyond a mere kiss? Would she have even wanted it to? Her thoughts keep her awake for some time. Meanwhile, upstairs in his room, Cy shifts as he sleeps. In his mind, he sits in the jungle of Belize, rain pouring down on him as he stares sorrowfully at the thick, black mud beneath his knees. Thunder claps overhead and a gust of wind blows a chill through his body.

The crushing weight of his combined guilt and loneliness shatter his heart and spirit. The wind grows stronger as the torrential downpour envelopes him. His body shivers uncontrollably as he struggles to remain upright, covering his ears to block out the deafening noise. His strength sapped, he falls back and lands against a pair of legs. Hands covered in pink fur reach down, resting atop his shoulders. As soon as they touch his body, the wind stops and the rain eases, turning into a gentle mist as the jungle grows eerily still. He turns his eyes up to Zakera as she stands behind him, her wavy pink hair hanging alongside her face as she smiles down at him.

He rests his hands over hers, stroking her tenderly. She steps from behind him and kneels down in the fetid mud, wrapping her arms around him as she rests her head on his shoulder. He takes hold of her, pulling the Ketlan close to his body. Her fur is soft and smooth, like a cat's, and her intriguing scent is sweet to his nose. As he runs his fingers along her back, she coos, gripping him even tighter. The clouds spread apart by an unknown force, allowing the sunlight to shine down on the two. His clothes dry instantly as they embrace. He turns his head and kisses her cheek, giving her a rather benign peck.

She glances over to him with her beautiful cyan eyes before turning to face him. He leans in, giving her the kiss that he wanted to earlier.

“I’m so glad you are here with me.” He says as they end the kiss.

“I will always be here for you, Cy.” She says softly.

“Whenever we’re together I feel so warm inside, so peaceful, but when we’re apart... Why do you do that to me? Why are you always on my mind?”

“Don’t you know?” She giggles.

Downstairs in Zakera and Amanda’s room, Amanda sits upright on her grass mattress. Her book sits closed atop her lap as she listens carefully to Zakera, who mumbles quietly in her sleep. The Ketlan’s native tongue is hard to make out with her pronunciation so muddled, but she sounds as though she is speaking to someone in particular. Dreaming, Zakera walks through her village, calling out to Cy as she looks for him. Every Ketlan male watches her intently as she passes by, raised loin clothes visible as some of the men adjust their erect genitalia. The females glare in jealous envy, their narrowed eyes burning her fur as she frantically searches for the human.

Dashing through the village and toward the path to the human’s fortress, she passes by a hut and slams into the chest of a taller male. He grabs hold of her arms as she briefly struggles, before opening her eyes to see that she is standing before Cy. Her eyes wide, she latches onto his chest and squeezes him tightly, burying her face in his shirt. She sniffs his clothes, her lips curling into a smile as his masculine scent fills her nose. His arms wrap around her, squeezing her body. He gently strokes her back with his fingertips, causing her to tremble. Reaching up with a hand, he softly caresses her cheek. The tip of her tail flicks happily as she gazes up and into his eyes.

A deathly silence shrouds the pair and Zakera glances behind her. The village sits empty and lifeless as she stands alone with Cy. He takes her by the hand, leading her through the empty village and into a newly constructed hut. It is then she notices that he is wearing a Ketlan armband of pledging. She glances over to her own arm to find a matching armband tied around it, a symbol of their eternal and monogamous union with each other. He sits near the central fire, a large, weaved grass mattress lying barely a meter behind him. She kneels down beside him, her eyes locked on him. He slips an arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

“Cy... I feel so comfortable when I am with you. You are the first male who did not look at me and only see a female form to enjoy or breed with. When you held me that first night...? I have never felt so safe before.” She confesses.

He reaches a hand over and strokes her cheek. She rests her head on his shoulder, nuzzling his neck with her snout.

“I always want to be by your side, and I hope that you feel the same.”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have pledged myself to you.” He grins.

Leaning forward, he plants a kiss on her lips, his hand on her cheek. To her surprise and delight, the kiss takes on a life of its own. Her jaw hangs open as his tongue enters, gliding over hers; he tastes wonderful. She grips him tighter as her body burns for him, her loins growing moist and her breathing quickening. She turns to the mattress that lies behind them, clearly made for two. Sliding backward, she lies down on the mattress, pulling at his shirt. He lies over her and between her legs, gazing down longingly at his lover. She lifts her skirt, exposing herself to her mate. His hands explore her body, gripping a breast through her hide top before moving down to her aching flesh, all the while he nuzzles and kisses her neck.

She groans at his exquisite touch, one hand gripping tightly to the back of his neck while the other rests over his groin. Though he was wearing his pants only a moment ago, she feels the weight of his burning hot flesh in her hand. Too nervous to look down, she bites her bottom lip and stares into his bright blue eyes. He shifts to penetrate his bride, only for her to be jarred awake. Zakera's eyes open as a groggy Amanda accidentally bumps her hammock. Gritting her teeth, she glares at the human who quickly apologizes for the mistake before slipping out of the room and leaving Zakera alone. Sitting upright, Zakera rests her forehead in her palm as she sits in stunned silence over the dream that she was having.

She has never had such a dream before and is surprised by how upset she is to have been awoken from it. The Ketlan girl did not realize that being near Cy would affect her so dramatically, though she doesn't dislike it. Her heart aches for him and her body burns with desire. She bites her bottom lip as she fantasizes about the human, continuing her dream while awake. Her hand slips down, resting on her inner thigh as she imagines what it would be like to mate with him. Unable to control herself, she moves her hand up and underneath her skirt, breathing heavily as she feels her tender flesh. "Could I bear his children?" she wonders. The thought makes her loins burn hotter.

Upstairs, Cy leans against the wooden railing around his balcony. Staring off into the distant horizon, he ponders his dream. No one makes him feel so comfortable and so normal as Zakera does when they are together. His previous relationship with Yasmin, if it could even be called that, only made him feel more corrupted and lost. "Zakera's here now." He thinks to himself. "I'm going to spend as much time with her as I can get away with." Returning to his steamer trunk, he takes his holstered Bersa pistol which balances carefully atop the curved lid. Slipping it on his belt, he pulls open the door and heads downstairs and toward the dining hall. Stopping at the second floor, he heads directly for Zakera and Amanda's room. Zakera's ears prick as she hears a sudden knock on the door.

“Y-yes?” She calls out.

“Hey, Zakera. It’s Cy. I was going downstairs to get something to eat. Did you want to join me?” He asks through the door.

“A-alright. I will be down shortly.” She says, gazing at the door, her hand still between her legs.

Cy dashes down the staircase and into the dining hall. Stepping inside the hall, he sees a hungover George resting his head on the crescent shaped table, while several others sit nearby. Chris and Donald debate endlessly at one end of the long table, while Jack sits with Johnny, Norv and Rico near the other end. Amanda and Michael sit together at a separate smaller table, while Richard writes in his journal as he sits in a stool across the room, most likely documenting the events of the last few days. Cy takes a seat beside George, taking native fruit from a wooden bowl near his head. He takes a bite out of the kiwi sized fruit of a goshan tree, the soft, blue flesh exploding with sweet juice. George lifts his head and turns to Cy, looking him over.

“I remember what I was going to ask you yesterday.” George begins.

“Shoot.” Cy murmurs, taking another bite.

“Have you fucked the cat yet?”

Cy stops mid-bite and the room becomes silent. Jack, Chris and Donald look visibly embarrassed by George’s behavior, while Richard and the ship crew appear more amused. Cy turns in his stool, glaring at him.

“I beg your pardon?!” Cy exclaims.

"I said, did you make the little whore purr?" George laughs. "Did she stroke you like a good kitten and give you her pus-"

Cy grabs George by the throat, mid-sentence, and shoves him against the table in furious anger. Startled by his sudden action, the others stare in shock as Cy slams his back into the edge. George winces and cries out in pain as Cy draws his pistol. Jack and Richard quickly rush toward them. Before they can grab Cy, he pulls George away from the table and throws him to the ground. Stepping toward him with his gun in hand, Cy casually points the weapon.

"Don't *ever* talk about her like that again, or I won't be nice next time." Cy warns.

He holsters the weapon while Jack and Richard lift the fallen George. Glancing to the others in the room, he can see that they all look toward the archway leading to the main hall and foyer. Yasmin, Gabby, Isabella, Samantha and Zakera all stand in the archway. Zakera glances toward Cy, a strange little smile on her face. It is as though she had heard everything and was flattered by him defending her honor.

"Is there a problem?" Yasmin asks.

"No. George just said some unkind things about someone." Cy answers.

"What a gentleman." Samantha chuckles.

Samantha walks into the room, glancing to Jack as she passes her companions and approaches a large wooden box. Yasmin and Zakera step inside, sitting on either side of Cy, who has since returned to his stool. Samantha lifts the lid of the box and pulls out a small loaf of pale yellow bread. She extends a hand to the curious Cy, offering him a loaf. He takes the bread and examines it carefully as Samantha

passes out more loaves to the others in the room. Carefully taking a bite, Cy is surprised by the somewhat sweet flavor of the bread.

“I wonder what this is made of.” He thinks aloud.

“Faval.” Zakera answers, taking a bite of her loaf.

“I don’t know what that is.” He chuckles.

“It’s wheat.” Samantha says.

“There’s wheat on this planet?” Gabby asks, sitting beside Johnny.

“Yes. It would seem that it is the only plant native to both Earth and Monala.” Donald answers.

“Though here it grows much larger and is a bright yellow color.” Chris continues.

“The bread also lasts several seasons without molding or turning crusty.” Michael adds.

“Fascinating!” Cy exclaims. “I would love to know more about this world.”

“Well if you’d li-”

“I can teach you!” Zakera exclaims, interrupting Michael.

“I would love that.” Cy grins. “Care to start now? I have nothing else going on.”

Zakera nods and Cy rises to his feet. Her tail swishes through the air, the tip flicking as he holds out a hand to her. Taking his hand in hers, she follows him out of the dining hall as the others watch with amused smiles, except for Yasmin, who narrows her eyes mistrustfully, staring at the Ketlan.

“Yeah, he hasn’t fucked her yet.” George mutters, under his breath.

Walking through the front doors of the fortress, the two head for the solitary goshan tree that sits in the courtyard.

“What would you like to know first?” She asks.

“I don’t know. I just want to know more; about this world, your people, your culture and language.” He answers.

“You wish to learn Ketlan?” She asks in surprise.

“Is that okay?” He turns to her.

They stop, standing beside the tree. She gives a subtle head nod as a warm breeze flows between them, fluttering her wavy pink hair. Still holding his hand, she reaches out with the other and grabs hold of his, gazing up into his eyes. He takes a step closer, his chest only centimeters from her breasts. As they lean closer to share a kiss, her ears shift and she turns her head, looking toward the gate of the copper wire fence. Walking along the path toward the gate, several Ketlan approach them. Their tails and tall ears are visible in the distance as they walk in formation, spears in hand. They marching of feet attract the attention of the others inside the fortress, as Cy and Zakera approach the gate. To her surprise, the group of warriors is led by Katero and not Hitoren.

“Katero! What are you doing here?” She asks.

“A friend?” Cy looks to her.

“I knew him when I was a youngling and a juvenile.” She answers.

“Stopping by for a visit?” Cy turns to Katero.

“No. I have been asked by Zikata to bring you back to the Kelanethaka.” Katero says to Zakera.

“I hope not by force...” Cy comments, glancing at their spears.

"You are an adult, Zakera, and you know that I cannot force you to return. I was hoping that you would respect your father's wishes, as I do not wish to return empty handed." Katero says in a respectful tone.

"What about the life debt she owes him?" Jack asks, standing behind the two.

"What life debt?" Katero raises a brow.

Realizing that the façade is now over, Zakera lowers her head in shame. She turns her eyes to Cy, expecting him to be angry with her for lying to him. To her surprise, he squeezes her hand gently, his smile unfading. His presence is calming and gives her strength.

"I am an adult and I make my own choices. I chose to leave and live with the humans. I am no longer a part of the Kelanethaka." Zakera replies, turning to Katero.

"Is that what you want me to tell your father?" Katero asks sternly.

"It is." She nods.

"When we leave, you will not be able to recant your words. You realize that even if you change our mind later, Zikata may never again accept you as one of the tribe." He warns.

Zakera nods again, taking a step back from the fence.

"Fine. Would you speak with me for a moment?" Katero looks to Cy.

Cy releases Zakera's hand and opens the gate. Katero rests a hand on Cy's shoulder as he leads him away from the fence, walking nearly thirty meters. Yasmin rests her hand on her sidearm as she stands beside the gate, expecting the Ketlan warriors to turn and

attack Cy at any moment. Glancing back, Katero suddenly stops and turns to Cy. He stares, though he isn't glaring; he has the look of a soldier, loyally carrying out his orders.

"Zikata is a good and honorable man, and though he is a strong leader, Zakera is his only child. I do not wish to see him crumble were he to hear that she was ever mistreated or taken advantage of. That would make me very angry; She was as a sister to me when we were much younger." Katero speaks.

"Katero, I would *never* do anything to harm her, nor would I take advantage of her. I would *never* allow anyone else to mistreat her either, so long as I live. She is *very* important to me, Katero." Cy admits, their eyes locked.

"I am certain she is as pleased as I am to hear that." Katero says, placing his left arm across his chest, his hand held open.

"What?" Cy's eyes grow wide as he glances back to the fortress.

"She can hear you from this distance, but the others cannot. It is why I stopped this far." Katero reiterates, extending his right arm with his hand held open. "I believe you are an honorable man, Cy. Do not make me regret my trust in you." He whispers.

Cy looks back to Katero, glancing down at the intriguing hand gesture. Imitating his posture, he takes hold of Katero's forearm. Holding his forearm, Katero bows his head, while Cy gives him a subtle nod in kind. Releasing his arm, Katero motions to the other warriors who stand in a sloppy staggered formation behind him. The warriors march away from the fortress and down the path while Cy returns to the fence alone. Walking past Yasmin, who stands near the front gate, he approaches Zakera. She grins cheek to cheek, confirming what Katero had told him; she heard every word that he had said.

"Do you know what just happened?" Daniel asks in amazement.

“We talked and he left.” Cy answers, holding out a hand to Zakera.

“That was a Ketlan warrior handshake.” Daniel explains.

“Katero saw you as an equal.” Zakera says proudly, taking Cy’s hand.

“I like him. He’s a good man.” Cy remarks, smiling at Zakera.

“Yes, he is.” She smiles back.

“So, ready for that lesson?” He asks.