

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

By Mantrid Brizon

Chapter 11: Proving Ground

It has been nearly a week since Zakera has joined the humans at their fortress, and almost as long since the Malevolence has been stripped of all weapons, ammunition, tools and equipment. The Ketlan girl and the ship's crew have settled into a comfortable routine with the fort dwellers, who quickly grew comfortable with the newcomers, many of whom proved both entertaining and genuinely useful. Though the three Thames siblings have little useful skills in their current environment, all but Isabella are eager to be put to work helping the others. Arrogant and spoiled, Isabella quickly grew attached to Samantha, who is equally difficult and unhelpful.

Norv became the third member of Chris and Donald's debating triangle, in no small part to his age and cultivated personality, which melds wonderfully with the English gentleman. Rico and Richard have become good friends, often swapping stories about their respective time periods and cultures. Yasmin and Cy have proven their skills as marksman, often traveling with Jack and Richard on hunts. Yasmin is the best shot of the entire group, with Cy and Jack tied for second place. Yasmin keeps to herself when not on hunts, though when she scores a kill, she spends the night with Rico, whether he wants her to or not. She's learned to make do without Cy.

Cy gets along exceptionally well with Daniel and Jack, and of course, Zakera, whom he spends much of his time with. Cy and Zakera spend many hours of every day together as she teaches him her culture and the Ketlan language, while Cy recently began teaching

her how to handle a pistol, knife and his chain whip for self-defense. In their mutual interest in one another, both the human and Ketlan also spend much of their time sharing their histories and interests. Not wanting to lie to her, Cy shares his past openly and honestly. Though at first worried about how Zakera would feel about the things he has done, both with Yasmin and as an assassin, she is understanding and comforting; she never once judges him for the actions of his past.

Zakera, in point of fact, is pleased that Cy would trust her with his personal matters so openly. She knows that he doesn't share with the others the way that he does with her, as she can always hear him. She also knows that his current relationship with Yasmin is little more than two associates of the same tribe. With all of the time that he spends with her, Cy has made sure not to forget about his friends Johnny or Gabby, though Yasmin has become aloof and somewhat acerbic. When not with Cy, Zakera has found a friend in both Amanda and Lara. As a medical doctor, Lara is the most interested of the English explorers; always treating her with the utmost respect, and eager to learn from Zakera's detailed knowledge of natural herbal remedies.

It is a rather pleasant but odd existence that most have grown accustomed too. One day, Cy and Zakera walk together along the trail and toward the stream, buckets in hand to refill the water barrel. They slip through the woods and sit together beside the stream for a moment, content to merely enjoy the other's presence.

"I have been wondering... How does the pledge work?" He asks her.

"Why do you ask?" She says with a smile.

"Can't a man be curious?"

"All Ketlan tribes share the tradition of the pledge. An adult male simply pledges his love and loyalty to a female. If she does not accept, he leaves embarrassed and heartbroken, and nothing more becomes of it. If she or her family accepts, then a pledging ceremony

will occur. They agree on a set date for the ceremony, which takes place before their entire tribe. If they are from two different tribes, both must attend the brief ceremony. The chieftain and shaman are both told about the upcoming pledge, and each take part in the ceremony. Pledging is considered an agreement between only two Ketlan, one male and one female; no other Ketlan has a say in the matter." She begins.

"They can't stop them from pledging?"

"No. The parents of either, nor the shaman or chieftain can stop the pledge once it has been agreed upon, as only the pledges are allowed to break it." She answers.

"But you said that family can accept a pledge for a female." He says.

"This is true, but she may stop the pledge at any time, as I did with Fekolza. The pledging ceremony involves both parties meeting with the symbols of their pledge; their tribe act as witnesses. A large fire is built in the center of the village, or at the male's village, if they are from separate tribes. They stand before the fire, their tribe surrounding them, and each Ketlan kneels before their future mate, pledging to love, respect, and remain loyal to them for as long as they draw breath, lest they shame themselves and dishonor their partner."

"Sounds nice." Cy smiles.

"It is. Once the pledge has been made, they place the symbols on their mate, armbands of matching design that are made by the female. The male places his symbol on the female first, then she places her symbol on her mate. Once the pledge is over, the female is considered part of the male's tribe, and lives with him."

"What happens to the in-laws?" He asks.

"In-laws?" She tilts her head slightly to the side.

"Well, after humans' pledge, their parents act as a second set of parents to each of them." He explains.

"I see. After pledging, the family of each becomes pledge-mother, pledge-father, and so on. They can often be quite bothersome; pledges are expected to eventually produce children,

sooner rather than later. Fathers are given the right to name their sons, whereas only mothers can name their daughters. If the mother or father dies before naming them, it is up to their pledge-mother or pledge-father to do so. If they are also dead, then traditionally the child takes the name of their deceased parent. Ketlan who do not ever pledge or produce children are considered wasted.”

“Children, you say?”

Cy and Zakera share a gaze and she subtly nods her head. Her cyan eyes scan his body, running from his eyes and down to his groin. Cy cannot resist either, looking over her toned form and resting his hand over hers. She turns to him, purposefully jutting her chest forward as he looks her over. His hand slides up the soft pink and cyan striped fur of her arm and toward her shoulder. She trembles at his touch as he leans closer. Their eyes close as their lips press together, sharing a tender kiss. He applies gentle pressure, pushing her back onto the purple grass. She grabs hold of his orange shirt, pulling him atop her as their tongues wrestle with each other, moving back and forth between their mouths.

Holding himself up on one arm, his other hand caresses her body, stroking the soft, snow white fur on her toned belly. She pulls at him, directing him between her legs as she slowly spreads them apart, her tail moving to the side. He grips one of her breasts through her animal hide top as they make-out on the warm grass. They both stop simultaneously, gazing into each other’s eyes for a moment. After a pause, he finally speaks.

“We keep ending up like this.”

“I know.” She coos.

Zakera runs her fingers through his black hair as she looks up at him, gazing into his icy blue eyes. As badly as her body desires him, she doesn’t know why she hesitates to ask him to mate. Perhaps it is

her cultural conditioning? Adults should only ever mate with their pledges. Likewise, Cy struggles to push her into sex, even though he greatly desires her. He worries that she might think that is all he wants from her, but he desires much more. His heart burns for her in a way that he never has for any other woman.

“Maybe we should collect the water now.” She says softly.

“Alright.” He sighs.

He leans forward, giving her another passionate kiss. In that moment, the world melts away around them. Sitting up, Zakera pats her fur and brushes away the dirt. Collecting the water in their buckets, they head back to the trail. They glance toward each other as they walk the path back to the fortress, little smiles across their faces. Passing the gate, they hear what sounds like a shotgun blast coming from inside. Hurrying into the fortress, they set down their buckets when they see smoke billowing from underneath a door. Cy can't recall what is stored within the large closet built into the staircase. He swings open the door to see George Jackson inside, his facial hair and eyebrows burned away.

He had been brewing what appears to be a new and more potent alcohol, while also smoking native herbs. The enclosed container caught fire and exploded like a large firecracker.

“What on Monala were you thinking?” Cy demands, examining the scene.

“Uh... I was hoping to drown my sorrows.” He replies.

“You could have burned down the fort!” Zakera yells.

“But I didn't.” George retorts, wiping the burnt hair from his face.

“You better give half of that to Lara for antiseptic.” Cy growls.

"You're the boss, boss. Now leave me alone. I'm busy." George says as he ushers them out of the closet.

"That guy..." Cy shakes his head.

Retrieving their buckets, they head into the dining hall and pour the contents into the water barrel.

"Have a good walk?" Johnny asks.

"We always do." Zakera answers.

"Right." Johnny chuckles, walking toward the archway.

"Where are you going?" Cy asks.

"Somewhere else." Johnny quips.

Stepping outside, he walks toward the goshan tree that he often sits by. He stops at the sight of several Ketlan warriors standing before the gate, spears in hand and led by Katero.

"Hello, human." Katero bows his head. "I must see Zakera right away."

"Cy! Zakera!" Johnny calls out loudly.

Cy and Zakera quickly emerge from the fortress. Seeing Katero and his men at the gate, they open the fence and allow them into the courtyard. Cy greets him with the Ketlan warrior handshake.

"It is good to see you both, but I must speak with Zakera. She has been summoned back to the Kelanethaka." Katero begins.

"Who summons me?" She asks.

"It is Kanoma." Katero answers.

“Kanoma? We have not spoken since we were younglings. Is she not Hitoren’s mate?” Zakera asks.

“She is.” Katero nods.

“Wasn’t Hitoren that big scary guy?” Johnny comments.

“What is wrong with Kanoma?” She inquires.

“I do not know. I just know that she wanted to see you. We must leave right away.” Katero answers.

Zakera turns to Cy and looks up at him, resting her hands on his forearms. Giving him a gentle squeeze, she opens her mouth to speak but he holds up a hand, resting a finger over her lips.

“I’m going with you.” He says.

Grinning gleefully, Zakera wraps her arms around him and gives him a kiss in front of the surprised Ketlan warriors. She rests her head on his shoulder as they embrace in front of the witnesses. Cy runs his fingers through her wavy, shoulder length pink hair.

“Thank you, Cy. This means a great deal to me!” She exclaims.

“Of course, Zakera. I’ll always be by your side. Besides, what would I do without you around?!”

Zakera giggles, her heart burning warmly as he comforts her. He is always so sincere and affectionate with her. Clearing his throat, Katero gains their attention. They turn back to him, his arms crossed as he watches the pair.

“Well? Lead the way!” Cy grins.

Katero nods and turns back to the path, motioning to his men. As his friends leave, Johnny spontaneously decides to tag along, joining Cy and Zakera on their journey. Cy turns to the teenager, raising an eyebrow.

“What? You think you can have all the fun without me?” Johnny asks.

Cy smirks, patting the teenager on the back. As they walk down the path, the group passes by Jack, Yasmin and Michael, who were on a short hunt.

“Where are you going?” Jack asks.

“Out.” Cy quips.

“Where?!” Yasmin demands.

“Happy hour.” Cy replies.

“Thanks for the heads up!” Yasmin shouts sarcastically.

As they march down the road, Cy looks over his belt. Had he known he would be leaving so abruptly, he would have been better prepared. He carries only his metal water bottle, Bersa Thunder 9 Pro pistol, two spare magazines, his recurved knife, chain whip, a pouch of essential survival tools, and the pouches and holsters that bear his gear. Hopefully, he won't be needing any of it. He turns to Zakera, who looks over to him. Smiling warmly, she holds out her hand to him. Katero glances over his shoulder at the fortress dwellers, watching for a moment as Cy and Zakera walk hand in hand. Their affection is more genuine than any he has previously seen.

“Thank you for joining me, Cy. I am glad you are here.” Zakera says, breaking the silence.

"You *never* need to ask me to follow you, *ever*." Cy replies with a smile.

"You are indeed an honorable male, Cy." Katero suddenly chimes.

"Did you have any more questions about Ketlan culture?" She asks.

"Yes, actually. What happens if a pledge doesn't work out? Can they be broken?"

"Pledges can only be broken in one of three ways: First, one partner is caught mating with a Ketlan not pledged to them. If this other Ketlan is also pledged, they automatically destroy their pledge as well. This results in public shaming and potentially banishment. Second, a mate, or both mates, agrees that they no longer wish to be pledged, and publicly declare a pledge break. This will also bring shame, but not as much. Third, a mate is killed in battle, or dies of natural causes. If a pledge were to ever be broken or betrayed, the female keeps the home and all property within. Only what the male currently has on him is remains his. If the pledge was broken by the female, however, the male retains the home and property, and the female is left with nothing but what she carries."

"That's hardcore." Johnny laughs.

"Your culture is very thorough." Cy remarks.

"Many generations of trial and error." Katero quips.

A young male Ketlan suddenly appears from a nearby bush. Wearing only a simple loin cloth, he lunges at the group and tackles Katero, slamming him into the ground. Katero rears back, rolling backward and flipping the Ketlan warrior over his body and onto the ground near him. The Ketlan pulls out a small stone knife with a blade about two-inches long. He stands barely five-feet and three-inches tall, appearing to be a younger juvenile. His light brown fur seems dirty, with black tips on his ears, tail, and a streak running down his back, and lighter, tan fur on his chest. Katero's warriors aim their spears at the teenaged Ketlan, who takes a step back.

The thin looking Ketlan, who couldn't weigh more than one-hundred and ten pounds, turns and darts away. He quickly disappears into the bushes, as everyone looks on in stunned silence.

"What was that?" Johnny asks.

"I do not know. He was not Kelanethaka." Katero replies.

Continuing on, they hike along the trail to the Kelanethaka village, arriving by the early afternoon. As they approach the village, a sea of Ketlan are gathered around the central firepit, which is unlit and stacked with fresh cut logs. Katero's brow rolls forward and Zakera's eyes grow wide; they both seem to know what is happening, and it is not good. They rush toward the crowd, leaving the others behind. Cy, Johnny and Katero's men struggle to catch them. Zikata holds an unlit torch in one hand as he stands by the stacked logs, As Zakera pushes through the crowd, he hears her calling and turns to face his daughter.

"What happened?!" She cries out.

"I am sorry." Zikata says as he opens his arms to his daughter.

"Who has died?!" She asks, rushing into his arms.

He gives her a gentle hug, trying to calm his daughter who repeats her questions several times. As Cy approaches them, Zikata glares at the human.

"Why have you brought your human with you?" Zikata asks.

"Cy followed me on his own, father. He is an honorable man." Zakera says in Cy's defense.

Katero and Cy both walk past Zikata and Zakera, looking at the firepit. A body lies within the pyre, buried beneath intricately stacked bundles of wood. The only portion of the corpse that is visible is the tail, which juts from between the wooden bundles and hangs limp toward the ground.

"This is the ceremonial funeral for a Ketlan." Katero quietly comments to Cy.

"We have a similar practice on Earth." Cy replies.

"Who is that?!" Zakera demands, growling at her father.

"Kanoma..." Zikata begins.

Zakera begins to cry as Zikata tries to comfort his daughter. She pushes past him to gaze upon the mound of wood. She reaches out and grabs Cy's arm as she cries. He quickly turns and wraps his arms around her, holding her tightly as she buries her face in his shirt. Cy lovingly strokes her back and kisses her cheek as she weeps, her arms gripping his torso tightly to her father's chagrin.

"Who did this?" Katero asks, turning to Zikata.

"Hitoren..." Zikata sighs sorrowfully. "He was certain that she was unfaithful to him, though he had no proof. Kanoma had asked for a pledge break and wanted Zakera to be a witness to it. Hitoren killed her in a rage and then fled, injuring his own men as he ran. I would ask you to bring him back, Katero, alive or dead. If you succeed, you will take his place as war-guide of the Kelanethaka." Zikata declares.

"I am going with you." Zakera mutters.

"No, you are not! I forbid you!" Zikata yells.

"I am no longer Kelanethaka, and I am not yours to command!" She barks.

"I'm going with her, Zikata, and I won't let anything happen to her. You have my word; I will protect her with my life." Cy chimes in.

“Should I be so fortunate.” Zikata grumbles.

He walks past the group and toward an already lit torch, using it to light the one in his hand. Cy, Zakera and Katero look between each other, nodding in acknowledgement. Katero orders his men to stay behind, honor bound to prove himself without their assistance. Cy orders Johnny to do the same, as he is unarmed and untrained; he would be a burden in their search. The three depart for Hitoren’s hut, Zakera glancing back over her shoulder as she watches her father lighting Kanoma’s funerary pyre. Starting at the hide doorway of the hut, Katero kneels down, looking over the scattered tracks. He follows them slowly, weaving through the village before reaching the edge.

His eyes glued to the ground, Katero leads them deep into the jungle. Cy and Zakera walk behind him as Katero slows his pace, taking great care to scan for his target’s trail. Though it becomes increasingly faint, he never seems lost. He pauses to confirm the trail, his eyes scanning the ground. Glancing over his shoulder, he can see Cy and Zakera standing beside each other, their fingers locked as they hold hands.

“I hope you realize what you are getting into, Cy.” Katero says.

“I do.”

“When we find Hitoren, there may be a grand fight. You may become injured in the battle.” Katero adds.

“Well, my people use to have a saying. ‘Pain is just weakness leaving the body’.”

“If that were the case, we all have quite a bit of weakness inside of us.” Katero replies.

“So, Katero... You have very good hearing...” Cy asks.

“Extremely.” He answers.

“How do you tune out the things that you don’t want to hear?”

"Such as?" Katero raises a brow.

"Well... Let's say that two juveniles are together and decide to spend 'quality time' doing... Well..." Cy hesitates.

"Oh... That... You simply practice ignoring it until it no longer bothers you." Katero explains.

"I bet you get a lot of practice." Cy jokes.

"Quite often, yes." Katero replies honestly.

"Oh god." Cy chuckles.

Zakera giggles and squeezes Cy's hand tighter, her thumb stroking his soft flesh. Katero's eyes scan the ground as he looks carefully for any tracks. They have walked for several kilometers into the dense jungle, and they seem no closer to finding the murderer. Suddenly picking up on Hitoren's the trail, he follows it through thick brush and into a moderate clearing. In this clearing is the entrance to a small cave system. This patch of jungle serves no purpose and isn't often visited. The trio head towards the cave and Zakera calls out to the rogue war-guide.

"Hitoren... Are you here? We just want to talk to you."

Hitoren slowly steps out of the cave, standing upright as he exits.

"Wow... I think he grew since we last saw him." Cy remarks.

"We do not wish to hurt you, Hitoren." Zakera says sincerely. "We just want to know why you killed your pledge, Kanoma, and to bring you back to the Kelanethaka with us."

"Hello Katero... Zakera." Hitoren begins. "I see you also brought your human pet."

"He remembers me!" Cy chirps.

“He is here to help you, just like we are.”

“Come with us.” Katero says sternly.

“I would like to believe you, but I do not. Even if you are telling me the truth, it does not matter. Maybe if I was not going home to face execution for willful murder... I would have probably returned with you... But since I am dead either way...” Hitoren cracks his knuckles. “That is the only way that I will allow you to take me!”

Hitoren charges and Katero immediately attacks. He lunges at Hitoren but is thrown aside by Hitoren’s immense strength. Shoving his arms forward, he throws Katero back several meters, causing him to tumble several times. He glares at Cy, who picks up a large stick, twirling it like a quarter-staff as he prepares to fight him. Hitoren turns and suddenly charges at Zakera, moving between her and Cy. Cy darts at Hitoren and lunges at him, slamming the crooked shaft into Hitoren’s back and knocking him over. Hitoren quickly spins around and grips the branch, trying to crush Cy’s larynx with the shaft of his stick. They struggle over the weapon for several moments as Katero climbs to his feet.

Holding the branch, Hitoren places a foot onto Cy’s chest and flips backward. Cy flies over Hitoren’s body as the crude staff is pulled from him, but Hitoren loses his grip as well. The branch flies away from them, landing towards the mouth of the cave. Cy rolls and lands on one foot and knee. Standing, he turns to Hitoren, who calmly stands up and faces him.

“Human...” Hitoren grumbles.

“Ass hole...” Cy replies.

Cy pulls open the Velcro top of a belt pouch, grabbing the bundled metal of his chain whip. He pulls out the weapon, his thumb holding the handle tightly against his palm. Opening his fingers, he

allows the body of the whip to unfold, extending and dropping it to the ground in a heap.

“Someone’s been a *very* bad kitty.” Cy grins as he taunts Hitoren.

“Do you really think that you can defeat *me*?” Hitoren laughs, flexing his bulging muscles.

“I’m not going to lie... It’s going to be fun putting you down.” Cy smiles, taking one step back as he blades his body.

“You are only going to die. This is your last chance to save yourself.” Hitoren takes a step forward.

“That’s impossible. I’m already on clearance.”

“I am twice the male you are!”

“Not where it counts. Is that why Kanoma wasn’t happy with you?” Cy smirks.

Hitoren roars angrily as he charges Cy, but the human swings his arm forward. With a flick of his wrist, the bolt flies straight ahead, the five-foot and six-inch length reaching for the Ketlan. He cracks the bolt of his whip against his shin, dropping him to his knees. In a split second, he swings the whip up and across, gashing Hitoren’s face. Flicking his wrist again, he throws the bolt forward and plunges it at least a half of an inch into a pectoral muscle. Hitoren grabs at the bolt as it sticks out of his chest. Katero uses Cy’s distraction to keep fighting. He lunges onto Hitoren’s back and bears his teeth, growling as he viciously bites his left shoulder. Cy yanks back, pulling the bolt from Hitoren’s chest and retracting his whip.

Hitoren roars in pain and anger as he flips Katero over his body, a chunk of flesh coming off of his shoulder. Katero quickly rolls as he lands, standing upright and spinning towards Hitoren. As he spins, Hitoren backhands him, dropping him to his hands and knees. Hitoren draws a stone knife and swings, gashing the side of Katero’s chest.

Cy swings the chain whip and wraps it around his wrist before he can stab Katero again. Yanking hard, Hitoren drops his knife as Cy simultaneously retracts his whip, ripping it violently from his wrist. Blood seeps out of cuts as the links scratch him and pull out tufts of fur. Using his elbow to gain momentum, Cy swings the whip in a circular motion.

Moving the bolt closer to Hitoren, he gashes his arm and then his stomach. He swings again, but Hitoren turns and charges. He grabs Cy by the sides and pushes him to the ground as he kneels over him, holding him down. Bearing his teeth, Hitoren quickly leans in to bite Cy's throat, but Cy draws his recurved knife and jabs it into Hitoren's abdomen. He stumbles back and stands as the blade sticks almost three inches into his side. He places a hand around the blade as blood gushes from the wound. Cy stands and swings the whip again, but he is quickly caught off guard with another vicious charge. Hitoren grabs Cy by the throat and lifts him off of the ground.

He throws Cy against a tree, before turning to Zakera. Still untrained in real combat, she is left to merely watch the quick skirmish; up until this point, she had never fought before. She steps back as she looks to Cy, who stands up slowly beside Hitoren. Katero stumbles to his feet, clutching the deep bleeding gash on his side. Taking a step forward as if to taunt her, Hitoren reaches out a hand to her, positioned to grab her throat. He grunts as the bolt of Cy's whip wraps around his wrist.

"Don't touch her!" Cy demands. "Don't even go *near* her!"

With the whip's length pulled tightly, he smirks and yanks his arm towards him, pulling Cy to the ground. He holds tightly to the handle of his whip and is dragged into the dirt, lying face down. Barely a meter from Hitoren, he is in his clutches before he can stand. Hitoren punches Cy in the stomach, then grabs his face. He holds him in the air, one hand on Cy's face and the other under one of his arms.

Looking into Cy's cold eyes, he takes a claw and cuts Cy's cheek as if he were trying to draw the fear out of him. Cy stares blankly back, puzzling the massive warrior. Hitoren suddenly roars in pain and throws Cy away from him; Cy had grabbed the handle of his knife, ripping it out of Hitoren's body.

Kneeling on the ground, Cy throws his knife into Hitoren's stomach, causing him great pain. Katero jumps on his back and tries to slash his throat with his own stone knife, but Hitoren quickly brings up an arm to shield it. Katero slashes his arm several times, before Hitoren reaches behind him and grabs the back of Katero's neck. Quickly leaning forward, he flips Katero off of him a second time. He then stomps on Katero's chest and kicks him back. Katero lies motionless. Hitoren approaches Katero and is about to stomp his neck when Cy tackles him and pushes him against a tree. He grabs the handle of his knife and jams it in deeper, before trying to pull it out.

Before he can, he is struck hard in the jaw by the incredibly strong warrior, then thrown several meters away with both hands. Sliding backwards in the dirt, Cy rolls onto his side. The warrior looks down at Cy, and then turn to Zakera, determined to hurt her next. He stomps toward her as she backs away in fear.

"Now it is your turn, little girl." He growls.

Zakera looks to Cy, who lies behind Hitoren. Quickly closing the distance, she suddenly dives out of the way; he is shot in the back twice, dropping to his knees.

"I told you not to go near her." Cy groans, blood running from his split lip.

Hitoren turns back to Cy, who fires once more. The matte silver slide of his two-tone pistol flings back, ejecting a brass shell casing from the chamber. The round smashes into Hitoren's skull, burrows through his brain, and drills an escape route out of the back of his head. His body goes limp, slumping over lifeless on the ground. Cy's handgun twitches in his hand as he struggles to hold up the weapon, a small piece of wood sticking out of his upper left arm. Zakera dashes toward him, kneeling at his side.

"And to think you would have had all this fun without me." Cy jokes as she strokes his cheek with her fingertips.

"I am so sorry, Cy!"

"Don't be. I'm glad I was here." He grins.

"What took you so long to shoot him?" She asks, a puzzled look on her face.

"I guess I forgot that I had it... As soon as he threatened you though, I was done playing around." He looks up at her.

Zakera leans in and kisses Cy on the cheek, grinning at him.

"That's all I get?" He chuckles.

Her eyes narrow and she leans in, kissing his bloody lips. She sits back on her legs as her knees become weak. He sits up, sliding an arm around her as she places her hands on his face, holding the kiss and drawing it out for as long as possible. Once their faces pull away, Zakera licks his blood from her lips. She then hears what sounds like water dripping onto leaves. She looks around Cy's body to see the stick protruding from his arm.

"Oh no! We need to treat your wounds!" She exclaims.

"It's fine. I didn't really need all that blood." He chuckles.

"This is serious, Cy. I cannot let you bleed out; I need you!" She exclaims.

Katero finally awakens as the sun dips closer to the horizon. Sitting up, he glances at his surroundings. Several meters away, Zakera treats Cy's wounds as they sit next to Hitoren's corpse.

"Look who decided to join us." Cy jokes.

"I did not realize that I had left." Katero replies.

"Well, that's okay. At least you had a nice nap." Cy smirks.

"I apologize for my failure." Katero laments, grabbing his side.

"It's alright. You didn't die."

Zakera removes the stick from Cy's arm and presses fresh leaves against it, her tail swaying from side to side as she sits beside him. She carefully ties the leaves against his wound with borlan tree vines. He slips his arm behind her back as she leans against his side, resting her head on his shoulder. She buries herself underneath his arm as he strokes her gently, his fingers running over her soft pink fur and cyan tiger stripes. She turns her eyes up to him, gazing at her human companion.

"Zakera..." Cy begins, gently brushing strands of her pink hair from her face.

"Yes?"

"You have beautiful eyes. Have I ever told you that?" He smiles.

"Yes." She grins.

"Good."

He leans in and kisses her lips as Katero stumbles up to Hitoren's corpse, sitting down across from the pair. He moves his hand away from his side, revealing the gash. Cy motions to Katero to come closer. Sliding near the two, Cy and Zakera take a close look at his wound.

"The blood isn't dark, and it isn't deep enough to have hit anything vital. Stitch that up and you'll be good as new, but you need keep pressure on it until then." Cy hands Katero a bundle of leaves.

"Thank you." Katero nods.

The trio look at Hitoren's body for a moment. Unable to carry him body in the condition that they are in, they wonder how they can prove his death.

"Perhaps I should take a finger?" Katero thinks aloud.

"You could remove his penis." Zakera suggests.

"Woah." Cy mutters.

"I would rather not." Katero grimaces.

"Heads make good trophies." Cy remarks.

Katero raises his brow as he considers the option, scratching his chin as he looks over the corpse. Cy unsheathes his knife, flipping the weapon and handing it handle-first to Katero. Using the large blade, he carefully removes Hitoren's head, setting it aside before using the knife to cut off a piece of flesh from Hitoren's right arm. He sticks the blade into the ground as he brings the raw meat to his lips, eating a portion of it. He looks to Cy, blood surrounding the golden fur on his face and snout. Cy raises an eyebrow but does not say anything.

"It is a Ketlan warrior tradition..." Katero comments with his mouth full. "It is to gain his power; he was a strong enemy."

Katero takes the knife and cuts another piece of flesh from the corpse, presenting it to Cy. He doesn't hesitate, reaching over and taking the chunk of meat. As he takes a bite out of the raw tissue, Zakera is surprised at how readily Cy adopts Ketlan customs. Katero hands the knife back to its owner before returning to his feast. Cy glances back to Zakera, who grins cheek to cheek as she watches him. He cuts another piece from Hitoren's body, presenting it to her. This is a warrior custom, yet Zakera is not a warrior; she is a female. Katero stops mid-bite, his eyes wide. Cy's gesture places her on par with him in their social status, unheard of for Ketlan women.

Zakera is flabbergasted at the incredible honor he is giving her. She nervously takes the flesh, hesitating for a moment before also taking a bite. Cy sheathes his knife before slipping his arm back around her, holding tightly to the female he cares for. He honors her in so many ways; she cannot imagine a more worthy male to be with.

"I like picnics." Cy jokes.