

The Seventh Realm: Volume One

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Episode 15: Something In The Dark

Amanda and Gabby sit in the grass, watching as Cy and Zakera walk together down the path. They stare for quite some time before the two finally disappear from their view.

“They make a strangely cute couple, don’t they?” Amanda asks.

“If they’re happy, that’s all that matters.” Gabby replies.

The two women stand from the purple grass as they see Yasmin, Jack and Richard approaching the fortress, their simple hide packs filled with meat from the game they hunted. Joining the three, the group enters the fortress. Amanda, Gabby and Michael begin drying out the meat to help preserve their rations while Yasmin returns their weapons to the armory. Jack and Richard relax in the dining hall, only to be interrupted soon after by Chris finding them inside. He motions for them to follow him, a wide grin on his face. The men follow Chris from the dining hall and past the steps into Chris and Donald’s shared lab that sits directly across from the dining hall.

As the men pass through the hall and enter the lab, Yasmin returns from the armory on the first floor which is at the opposite end of the hexagonal fortress. Curious, she follows the men inside. Dean and Donald look over a small bundle of pinkish-purple crystals that sit atop a wooden workbench, glowing with an eerie, pale light. Chris dashes toward the table, taking a modern electrical volt meter from the tools brought back from the Malevolence. Touching the positive

and negative probes to different crystals, they oscillate as the meter shows a charge.

“That’s interesting.” Jack says.

“Isn’t it? A device that can accurately show voltage, amperage and wattage in multiple units of measure.” Chris remarks.

“I was talking about the glowing rocks.” Jack retorts.

“Oh... Right! They seem to be able to hold a modest charge. With any luck we can use them as a power source; boost the strength of the electric fence, or perhaps even recharge the portable electronic devices.” Chris continues.

“Each crystal gives off about one volt. This bundle is wired in both series and parallel.” Dean explains.

“George found them near the mouth of a cave a few miles away. I think someone had already tried to mine them and they dropped a few.” Chris continues.

“Up for a dig?” Jack turns to Yasmin.

“Sure...” Yasmin sighs. “Why the fuck not...”

“Don’t look so excited.” Dean smirks.

Quickly dispersing, the group prepares for their rock hunt. They check all of their weapons and ammo as a precaution: Chris his Remington 1875 revolver, Dean his Bergmann 1896 pistol, Jack his Colt 1911 and Lee Enfield rifle, and Yasmin her Bersa Thunder 9 Pro and an MP5K taken from the cache. Donald decides not to go with them. As the sun reaches high in the sky, they head for the cave as a hungover George leads the way armed only with his limited wit and a trusty bolo machete.

“Where are you all going?” Johnny asks, walking down the stairs.

“Out.” Yasmin barks.

“Can I come?”

“Fuck off, Johnny.” Yasmin growls.

Johnny merely shakes his head in frustration and sits down atop the steps.

“Do you have to be so mean to the boy?” Jack asks.

“No.” Yasmin answers in monotone.

Leaving the safety of the compound, they walk through the jungle and follow George’s rather bizarre trail. Though a drunk, George is still an experienced bushman and guide. Marks cut into both sides of trees mark the way. They hike for over an hour, weaving through the trees before finding a path cut clear through the secondary jungle. No one can understand what George was even doing so far from the fortress, and why he would take such a convoluted path. The blazed trail ends in a large, oblong clearing. A rocky mass in the distance appears very out of place. They head for the rocks, gathering around and looking into the abyss of the cave. Only the first five or six meters are illuminated by the daylight; the cave is almost entirely black inside.

“So... Crystals...” Yasmin murmurs.

Chris rushes blindly into the cave. He stands in the illuminated entrance and spins around, noting the total absence of any crystals near the mouth. He scratches his cheek, turning back to the group.

“They must be deeper in the cave!” He exclaims.

As he steps forward into the darkness without even the luxury of a torch, Richard and Jack simultaneously grab one of his arms.

“Let’s get some light in here first.” Jack suggests.

Using George’s machete, they cut a dozen large branches. Soaking leaves in the resin left from the stumps of the severed branches, they fashion crude torches from the live wood that should last nearly an hour. Jack sets two on the large branches on fire. He prepares a third, handing it to Yasmin who raises an eyebrow as she retrieves a small ninety-degree flashlight from her pocket which she clips onto her shirt. Dean carries the remaining branches, holding the bundle in his arms, as Yasmin, Jack and Richard slowly lead the way. They walk deeper into the cave, minding their footing and keeping a close eye on the overly excited Chris. They walk deep enough into the cave that they can no longer see the daylight behind them.

The cave slopes downward immediately beyond what is visible in the daylight, driving down into Monala’s surface at a roughly forty-five-degree angle. Yasmin uses a light-colored rock found lying on the ground to mark their way should the cave break into multiple tunnels, drawing large chalky arrows that lead back toward the surface. Searching high and low for the crystals, Chris grows frustrated as all they see are the usual stalagmites and stalactites.

“I don’t understand. This IS the cave!” George shouts as his voice echoes.

“What did the crystals look like when you found them?” Yasmin asks.

“What do you mean? They were a pinkish-purple. You saw them.” George replies.

“No dumbass... I mean, were they in a large pile? Were some of them in a pile and the rest scattered around?” She elaborates.

“Uh... I found them in a pile in front of the cave, with a few crystals a distance away.” He answers.

“In a straight line...” She murmurs.

“Yes... How did you know?”

“The crystals didn’t come from the cave, or at least not this one... Someone dropped them, or they fell out of a pack as they were dragged inside.” Yasmin points to a corner.

Moving closer, the group sees what looks like a human arm tucked behind a large rock, a portion of the hand jutting from behind. Jack slowly approaches, holding his 1911 and flipping the safety switch off. Looking down he moves the torch above and before him to illuminate around the corner of the rock. His expression turns blank and cold as he slowly steps back from the hand.

“What is it?” Richard asks.

“We have to leave, right now...” Jack calmly replies, glancing to the others.

Yasmin steps closer to find a severed arm with crusty, coagulated blood around the shoulder socket. In its hand, which seems to be in rigor, is a small pinkish-purple crystal. Yasmin casually picks up the arm as the group watches. She tries to pull out the crystal, but the hand won’t let go. Grabbing near the severed end, she swings the arm like a baseball bat at the wall. With a dull smack, she strikes the back of the hand against the wall. On the second strike the crystal pops out of the hand’s grasp and falls to the ground with a loud ping. Yasmin throws the severed arm over her shoulder, the limb thudding onto the rocky floor. The others watch her in stunned silence, including Jack, a WWI veteran.

“If I had a dollar for every one of those I cut off.” She chuckles.

She kneels down, picking up the crystal and wiping away the blood before pocketing the gem. Turning back to leave, they stop

when they hear a strange noise. Though hard to make out, it sounds like a gargled scream. Yasmin spins around and brings up her MP5K, taking hold of the vertical foregrip with her off-hand.

“No!” Chris quietly exclaims. “We can’t fire our weapons in here. We are too deep in the cave; we could cause a cave in, and at the very least become permanently deafened.”

They turn to the wall, following Yasmin’s arrows as they struggle to climb back up the sloping ground. Damp and dark, with loose rocks and marble-like pebbles, the hazards are many as they struggle to return to the surface. Though they are already moving slow, Dean lags behind. Richard stops and turns to Dean.

“Come on!” He calls out.

“I’m trying. This isn’t easy!” Dean barks back.

“Do you need my hel-”

Richard stops cold as his torch illuminates a horrific sight; a face glares at Dean from just behind his left shoulder. The creature shrieks into Dean’s ear and he falls over, landing on his hands and knees on the wet and rocky earth. It reaches for him and grabs at his legs, trying to pull him down into the cave. Yasmin and Jack both turn to see Richard struggling with Dean. Jack throws his torch towards the creature. The flames reveal nearly a dozen identical creatures, some of whom have fresh blood on their faces, poised to assault the explorers. The demonic creatures appear to be a carnivorous race of hybrid bat or mole-men.

Their skin is a sickly, pale blue color and looks somewhat withered as though about to fall off of their bones at any moment. Their eyes glow a hideous yellow tint and their bald heads are guarded by long and pointed ears that each have two peaks,

somewhat reminiscent of check marks. They shriek in a form of primitive echo-location. Their lipless faces bare sharp teeth, not dissimilar from a mole-rat. Their hands have three long and skinny fingers and a prehensile thumb. Each of the four appendages is crowned by a thick black claw at least three inches long. Their feet look almost lizard-like, with equally deadly claws. They are certainly not Ketlan, as they have no tails, snouts or fur on their bodies.

Dean kicks and screams as one creature pulls at him. The others back away from the fire, too afraid to climb after them. Richard grabs onto him with both hands and pulls hard, dragging Dean with sheer muscle strength, a result of the adrenaline that his fear has dumped into his system. Chris takes another stick from the bundle that Dean had dropped, lighting it with the torch Richard had discarded. He passes the new torch to Jack, who faces the creatures. Swinging the torch, the single monstrosity refuses to approach, while the others are held at bay by the torch he had thrown to the ground. The explorers use the opportunity to ascend to the surface as quickly as they can.

Sitting in damp earth, the torch at the base of the cave begins to burn out. The dying flame is soon stomped out by the creatures who swiftly climb after the group. Their speed is astounding. Chris and Jack begin dropping torches behind them. As one man drops a torch, the others lights a new one and then drops his. They continue this technique to buy them the time they need as they begin to see daylight in the distance. Yasmin reaches the surface first with Chris close behind. Yasmin stays near the mouth of the cave, standing just inside as she points the MP5K downward toward Richard, Dean and Jack. The three men make it to the daylight as the last torch is stomped out by the creatures.

“Hurry! They’re coming!” Chris calls out.

“You’re goddamn right they are.” Yasmin laughs, a large grin on her face.

As the men pass her, they all draw their weapons and turn to face the entrance. Yasmin, still standing just inside the cave, opens fire on the creatures. A brilliant yellow-orange flashing illuminates the mouth of the cave as she fires short, controlled bursts at the monsters. They shriek and squeal as she drops target after target. The men can hear the sound of bodies sliding and tumbling back down the slope in between the piercing volume of her gunfire. Soon, the weapon clicks empty and she backs away, drawing her Bersa Thunder 9 Pro. The entire group stands in the clearing and facing the mouth of the cave, their weapons trained at the entrance.

The creatures dart out of the cave, spreading out and forming a two-pronged fork as if they were trying to corral them. They fire as the monsters make their doomed assault. Body after pale blue body drops to the ground, crimson fluid draining from the many open holes left by the gunfire. Slowly backing up, Jack and Yasmin take careful yet swift aim with their sidearms, while the more inexperienced members fire much more rapidly and wildly. Soon, Richard, Chris and Dean are reloading their weapons. Jack swaps out a magazine, and then another. Yasmin reloads her pistol, and takes out her last mag, holding it in her off-hand.

As the other three bring their weapons to bear against the monsters, Yasmin and Jack reload their last magazines. The wave of creatures dies down, and soon they stop attacking altogether. Yasmin and Jack both hold empty pistols, their slides locked back. Richard and Chris' revolvers click empty, leaving Dean with the only loaded firearm, besides Jack's rifle. The creatures scream and shriek from deep within the cave, though soon another sound echoes from within; the creatures are feeding upon their own dead. Cracking bones, tearing flesh and dripping blood makes the group sick to their stomachs, except for Yasmin, who remains unphased.

"Let's feed them the others." She calmly says, pushing some of the corpses inside and rolling them down the cave's slope.

"Wait." Chris begins. "Let's take a couple back home for study!"

“Are you serious?” Richard asks.

“This is an entirely new creature. We shouldn’t be so quick to destroy every last one. These are dead, so we can safely study them.” Chris explains.

“We’ll keep two. Push the rest in.” Jack says to the others.

Following his lead, they throw in a score of bodies, leaving only two behind. There must be as many as sixty creatures both dead and alive within this cave. Jack reaches into his weather, leather safari vest, pulling out a half-stick of dynamite from an inner pocket. Using his gold plated lighter, he ignites the fuse.

“You carry that around with you?!” Dean asks in shock.

“You never know when explosives will come in handy.” Jack smirks, tossing the dynamite into the cave opening.

Stepping back, the group covers their ears as the dynamite explodes with a loud boom. The cave entrance crumbles, sealing in every creature and corpse with the except of the two bodies they are claiming for study. Dragging the bodies like stalked game, they return to the safety of the fortress as the smoke and dust settles over the collapsed cave.

“Rico better be home when I get back. Yasmin murmurs, a twisted grin on her face.