

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 18: We Are Not Alone

It's been a full day since the crystal cave's interior was sealed with the Zajak inside. Johnny sits on the floor of a second story balcony, his legs between the bars that support the railing. He sways his feet in the open air as he looks down toward the courtyard below. Sitting underneath the solitary goshan tree in the yard, he watches as Zakera teaches Cy how to speak Ketlanic, a routine for the couple since she joined them. Cy's arm drapes over her shoulder as she rests her head against his, her snout near his throat as she gently nuzzles him. Her tail sits hooked around his waist, as it often is. He thinks back on Gomona and sighs sullenly. He hopes that one day he can find a woman who will care for him as much as Zakera does for Cy, regardless of whether she is a human or a Ketlan.

"Enjoying the show?" Lara Blond suddenly asks.

Startled, Johnny jolts and swiftly glances over his shoulder. The thirty-year-old Englishwoman and trained doctor stands several meters behind him. She stirs the contents of a pewter mug with a whittled wooden spoon, raising an eyebrow as she awaits his response.

"Where did you come from?"

"From my room." She replies with an amused grin.

"Oh... Right..." He says, turning back to watch the couple below.

"You never answered my question, Johnny."

"Yeah..." He mutters.

"Yeah what?" Lara chuckles.

"Yeah, I like watching them. I take solace knowing that at least *he* isn't alone."

"You know that Cyrus is still your friend, and you have your sisters, Gabby and Isabella. You don't *have* to be alone."

"That's not what I meant..."

"I know what you meant. What I meant was that you can take solace from your friends and family, at least until you find yourself a tribal girl to seduce." She quips.

Johnny subtly snickers but doesn't verbally respond, sitting in silence. After a moment, Lara shakes her head, turns and walks away from the lonely youth, heading for her medical office downstairs.

"Here is your next word... Nadamu." Zakera says to Cy.

"Nah-Dah-Moo." Cy repeats slowly. "That sounds nice. What does it mean?"

"It is a romantic declaration of love, often used between already pledged mates. It is to say 'I love you very much!' or 'You are very special to me!', which you are." She answers.

"In that case, Nadamu Zakera." He reiterates.

Leaning in, he gives her a loving kiss, his hand resting on her cheek at the base of her snout. Ending the kiss, she nuzzles his face, her fingers gripping his clothing tightly as she pulls at him.

"I love you too, Cy." She coos, holding him tightly.

"I can hardly wait for us to pledge. You know I uh... I've never care for a woman so much that I wanted to pledge to her; you're the first." Cy rather shyly admits.

"Really?!" Zaker's eyes light up.

"Really." He nods.

"You are the first man that I have truly loved. I would pledge to no other."

"What about Fekolza?" He teases.

"You know that I never loved him. Even if you had not come from the sky to steal my heart, he could never have earned it." She says rather coldly.

"Poor Fekolza. Hopefully he finds a mate half as good as you."

"Impossible, but he can try."

"Now you're just showing off." He chuckles.

"Only to you, my love." She grins.

He gives her another kiss, stroking the soft fur of her face and brushing back her wavy pink hair. She coos as he caresses her, his arm gently squeezing her slender body. After a prolonged and passionate exchange of saliva, the couple hold each other for some time.

"With today's lesson complete, what would you like to do now?"

"I've been thinking... Now that we're home safe, we really should continue your training. We didn't get very far before." He answers.

"You still wish to teach me how to use weapons?" She asks in surprise.

"Of course! There aren't many of us here in our little tribe. The fortress is strong and I'll do everything that I can to protect you, even die for you!" Cy continues.

"Cy..." Her heart burns at his sincerity.

“But it would better our chances if you knew how to shoot and use some of my close combat weapons. Besides, with nearly three-hundred thousand rounds of assorted ammunition; we might as well use some of it to train you.” Cy continues.

“Can I join?” Johnny suddenly interjects.

Cy turns and glances over to Johnny, who stands not far from the couple only a few meters away. Though he wasn’t expecting company, Johnny is like a brother to him; he would never turn him away.

“Sure! You need training too, actually. I’ve seen you shoot.” Cy teases.

“Ha-ha…” Johnny mutters.

Rising to his feet, Cy takes Zakera by the hand and leads her inside and toward their bedroom, Johnny following behind.

“Grab your little Sig and meet us outside.” Cy tells Johnny as they reach the second-floor landing.

Johnny nods and darts down the hall toward his bedroom. Continuing upstairs, Cy opens his trunk and removes the upper shelf. He digs out firearm after wrapped firearm, presenting his private arsenal to his mate. Allowing her to choose as many as she prefers for herself, she can hardly believe his generosity with the weapons he so obviously treasures.

“I may have any of these?” She asks in surprise.

“You can have them all if you’d like.”

"I will only take what I need and leave the rest to you. I know how much they mean to you." She says softly.

"Every weapon is precious, but you mean more to me than all of them combined." Cy says without hesitation.

"Oh, Cy!"

She lunges and wraps her arms around her mate, nuzzling his face. After a long and loving embrace, she looks over his collection and soon claims his H&R 732 revolver and his Kahr CT9 pistol. Following Cy's advice, she chooses weapons that feel comfortable in her hand. Though the Kahr is somewhat less comfortable than a S&W Model 39-2 'Hush Puppy' that he also owns, she can't help but feel a fondness for the gun that Cy had used to save her from the Kaladez when they first met. Sentimentality doesn't add anything to the weapon, but it certainly gives her more motivation to train with and maintain it.

With her firearms chosen, Zakera looks over an assortment of short swords and knives that he also possesses, which were stowed deep within his trunk. After careful consideration, she chooses a modern MTech Kukri knife with a nearly foot-long blade and a modern rubber handle. Noting Zakera's height, Cy also offers her his shorter nine-section chain whip, the very same that he had shown her once before in her earlier training. She gladly accepts his gifts, each one only deepening their bond. Cy picks several more firearms from his collection, a Bersa Firestorm .22 and a Taurus 94, opting to train her with lower caliber weapons first.

They pack away the remaining weapons before returning downstairs, stopping only to visit a large, windowless storeroom near the center of the fortress that has since become the armory. After collecting sufficient ammunition, they leave the fortress to find Johnny sitting on the red grass outside, looking over his unloaded Sig Sauer P232 pistol with several boxes of ammunition at his side.

“Finally!” Johnny exclaims, looking over to the couple.

“Sorry about the way. She had to pick out her weapons from my stash, and you know how many I’ve got up there.” Cy chuckles.

“Well, I took the time to prepare the range, so it’s all good.” Johnny replies.

Turning, the couple see that Johnny has indeed built a simple pistol range. Pieces of old fruit and small logs sit atop a shelf made of scrap wood. As a carpenter, Michael often has scrap boards strewn about the fortress and never seems to notice when they conveniently disappear. The old board shelf sits on two pre-cut logs, one on each side and holding the shelf roughly a meter above the ground. The backdrop is strategically placed before a distant hill, which is also near a more open section of fence. With any luck at all, they won’t damage the nearby posts with gunfire. Following Cy’s lead, Zakera and Johnny set up on the range, loading their weapons.

Though Johnny knows this much about his pistol, a weapon given to him by his father at seventeen-years-old, he has rarely fired or even held it. Zakera, however, requires Cy’s careful coaching to properly load the H&R 732, which has a pin-lock system that’s unique among his collection. Cy can’t be sure if she pretends to not understand how to also load the much simpler Taurus 94 or the Bersa Firestorm’s magazine, but as he stands beside his future bride he has no complaints. Proper grip and stance are the first lessons the pair require. While Johnny imitates Cy’s pose, Zakera seems to struggle, acting quite unsure of herself.

Standing directly behind Zakera, Cy slowly reaches forward, pressing his arms against hers. With his chin hovering over her shoulder, he rests his hands over hers. Cy move her hands and fingers into the proper grip and then gently moves her body to perform the correct stance. He stands firmly behind her, his chest touching her back.

"Now line up the front dot with the two in the rear."

"Like this?"

"Mhm..." He says softly into her ear. "Now gently *squeeze* the trigger."

Zakera follows his instructions and squeezes the trigger; she flinches as the little .22 throws a 40-grain slug at her fruity victim. Her first shot hits the target dead-center and splatters it into many pieces. She smiles excitedly and turns to Cy.

"Good job!" He compliments.

Johnny takes aim with one of the .22s and fires, but he misses. Cy immediately notes his error; Johnny anticipates his own flinch and pushes forward as he fires. The assassin coaches the boy on a breathing exercise that will help relax him and give him better trigger discipline. Zakera listens intently and follows suit. Cy takes a seat on the ground near the pile of ammunition, watching his students. After 30-minutes using only .22s, Cy steps them both up to their .32 caliber weapons, giving them a taste of recoil. They practice for nearly an hour in total, poking holes in several logs and destroying all of the available fruit that's often found strewn around the edge of the courtyard, remnants that have fallen off of the nearby trees.

"I'm glad we're doing this now, but I really should have trained you back in Belize." Cy says to Johnny.

"It's fine. Back in Belize I was more interested in going into the town and picking up girls anyway." The boy shamelessly admits.

"The women of the Kelanethaka do not use weapons unless the village is being attacked; it is for the men to become warriors. I appreciate the trust and respect that you give me with your training." Zakera says to Cy.

“It’s alright. Where Johnny and I come from, women fight just as hard as the men.”

Zakera looks back and smiles at her mate, the pair sharing a long and loving gaze. Suddenly her ears shift and she spins around. The sound of many footfalls approaching the fortress attracts her attention. She immediately warns her companions, who prepare their weapons. Without seeing who is approaching, they could be the remnants of the cultists who kidnapped Zakera. They breathe a sigh of relief when they see Katero turning a corner and leading his men toward the gates. The trio head toward the gates to grant them access, ever trusting the Ketlan of the Kelanethaka.

“Hello, my friend!” Katero greets Cy. “Good day, Zakera and Johnny!”

“Nice to see you so soon!” Cy chirps.

“What brings you way out here?” Johnny asks.

Katero’s expression, formerly jovial, now becomes very serious; he looks quite troubled. Several others emerge from the fortress at the sight of Katero and his men; Lara, Gabriella, Isabella and Donald.

“What’s the matter?” Gabriella asks, running up to Katero.

“Aren’t we pleased to see someone.” Johnny teases.

“Shut up, Johnny.” Gabriella casually retorts.

“Perhaps we should talk inside?” Katero suggests.

“Stop being dramatic. Just say what’s on your mind.” Cy demands.

“Alright. I am here to warn you.” Katero replies, pausing to look around at the others. “The Zajak have attacked the Kelanethaka.”

“Is my father alright?!” Zakera steps up.

“Indeed, he is.” He reassures her. “We lost a few of the juveniles, and one capable warrior, but we fought them off. At dawn, we tracked them to a cave.”

As he speaks, several others are drawn outside, including Jack and Yasmin.

“We were hoping that you could help us kill the Zajak with your weapons, or seal the cave.” Katero continues.

“Of course we can!” Cy answers.

“Thank you.” Katero nods. “We must go now.”

“Just a moment.” Jack says, turning back to the fortress.

“We need to load up. We’ll be quick.” Yasmin says to Katero.

Katero nods again and stands with his men by the gate as Cy, Zakera, Jack and Yasmin quickly rush back inside. Zakera and Cy are already prepared, merely reloading their weapons. Believing that they might need more firepower, Cy grabs his Franchi PA8 shotgun and slings it over his shoulder, taking a few handfuls of shot shells and stuffing them in his pockets. Meanwhile, Jack collects extra dynamite and Yasmin gathers her own weapons, preparing herself for the worst-case scenario. Katero waits outside for his comrades, quickly growing impatient. Gabriella makes it a point to distract him with small talk, not only to keep Katero calm but also to satisfy her own curiosity.

After a little while, the party of four exits the fortress. Johnny and the others stay behind to guard the fortress while their three most capable warriors and Zakera leave with Katero and his warriors to deal with the Zajak. Michael and Chris oversee the preparation of their defenses, while the others carry out the task of closing and boarding up the main double doors and the window shutters throughout every level. The group makes their way quickly to the cave

as Katero and his men lead them, a journey that takes them nearly two hours.

“How far is this cave from the village?” Jack asks.

“A few hours walk. The cave is between our two villages.” Katero replies.

“They traveled that far to attack you?” Yasmin asks in surprise.

“Yes. We are not sure why. They may try to do the same to you. You should be vigilant.” Katero warns, looking back at the fortress dwellers.

They soon come upon the cave. The mouth of the cave is caked in blood, as though the Zajak have been dragging their kills into it and on a regular basis for months. There are three paths that lead away, and they are well traveled. One seems to head towards the distant shore, while one leads toward the Kelanethaka village and the other heads into the wilderness. Turning on their flashlights, Jack and Cy take up positions with their long guns. Yasmin slowly looks into the mouth of the cave, holding a Beretta Modello 12 submachine gun close to her body, the muzzle pointed into the dark void. The flashlight mounted onto her chest, attached to a simple shoulder rig, is a barely adequate substitute.

She slowly steps inside as she carefully scans the interior. There are dozens of partially devoured corpses, their putrid flesh rotting in the darkness. The stench is horrible. Some are human, some are Ketlan, some are even Zajak, but many more are Kaladez, with various body paintings, as though from multiple Kaladez tribes. She motions for the group to enter. Jack heads inside slowly, slinging his Lee Enfield rifle and drawing his vintage Colt 1911 pistol. Cy enters after him, shotgun at the ready. Zakera and Katero enter last while Katero's men guard the mouth of the cave. Zakera holds up her little .32 revolver as they creep inside.

“There.” Jack whispers, pointing at a location to plant the dynamite. “That should cause a substantial cave in.” He assures them quietly.

Cy, Zakera and Katero take up cover positions as Jack creeps up and plants multiple sticks of dynamite. He slowly uncoils the fuses, cutting them to equal lengths. He coils them together before setting them down near the large opening of the cave. Jack takes out his gold plated lighter and prepares to light the fuses. Turning back to the others, he motions with a hand for them to leave the cave. They begin to back out as Jack brings up his lighter and flips the lid, quickly spinning the wheel and sparking a flame. Before he can light the fuse, however, the entire group stops as they hear the shrieks of the Zajak deep inside the cave.

They horrible creatures sound as though they are swiftly approaching the mouth of the cave, possibly to collect the horrid leftovers heaped within the entrance. Cy, Zakera and Katero quickly rush out of the cave. Yasmin stays just inside the mouth of the cave, waiting for Jack as he lights the fuse. Once the sparks begin to fly, he closes the lighter and dashes for the mouth of the cave. The shrieks rapidly grow louder. He rushes past Yasmin, who steps out of the cave backwards, keeping her submachine gun trained on the opening. They retreat to a large fallen log and hide behind it as Jack seems to count down. After a few more seconds, the multiple sticks of dynamite explode.

The ground shivers as the dust and gore fly out of the mouth of the cave. They hear the tunnels collapsing as the rotting flesh turns into a red mist, mixing beautifully with the off-white smoke of the stone and turning a faint pink. They turn back to the mouth of the cave, hearing nothing more.

“Well... That was easy!” Yasmin remarks with a smirk.

“Too easy...” Jack mutters.

“They must have more caves around here.” Cy thinks aloud.

“We’ll have to search for them at dawn.” Zakera comments.

“In either case, this cave was well traveled, and now it is no more. Thank you for what you have done. I hope to return the favor someday.” Katero says to the fortress dwellers.

“We’re going to have to start running you a tab.” Cy jests.

The group stands and examines the cave. As the dust settles, it’s clear that the tunnels have indeed collapsed. Katero suddenly parts ways with them, taking the Zajak trail that heads back to his village, his men following loyally behind. The group watch as he and his men leave, disappearing beyond the brush.

“Well... That’s that!” Yasmin sighs.

The four turn back to the trail that they had blazed through. Much of the grasses are still bent over, so they simply follow their path home. That afternoon, they return to the fortress and share their story with the others. The group seems to feel secure, but Cy hesitates. He keeps watching the main doors of the fortress as Jack regales them. Zakera leans onto him, wrapping her tail around his waist. He looks to her and smiles, moving a strand of her pink hair away from her face.

“Is something bothering you, Cyrus?” Chris speaks up.

“Yeah... The Zajak traveled for miles to get to their village. They had paths leading in multiple directions.” Cy begins, looking back at the fortress doors. “They seemed intelligent enough to scout out the Kelanethaka... What if they have a path leading here?” He proposes.

“I may have a solution to that problem.” Chris says with a confident grin.

He gets up and motions for the others to follow. He leads them outside, to a small shed that Michael had constructed for him. Inside are many osculating pinkish-purple crystals taken from the previous cave. The crystals are separated into segments, like the cells of a conventional battery. Two large groups each seem to have six segments, with six sells in each. The crystals have thin wires wrapped around them, linking each cell together, and each segment is wired in series. The two groups seem to be connected in parallel.

"I don't have enough wire to run it to the fence just yet, but after more scrounging, I should be able to make do. Right now, the fence can only give a good shock, but I think that with this crystalline battery, we may even stop the heart of an intruder!" Chris explains.

"What do you need? Can we get it ready tonight?" Cy asks in a worried tone.

"Oh no! I still need to build the smelter to melt the copper ores we've found and then mold that into wiring. With God's Grace it will be ready the day after tomorrow." Chris replies.

"We should be fine for the night." Donald assures the others.

"Indeed!" Chris nods.

"I hope so..." Cy murmurs.

As they head back for the fortress, Cy places his hands on Zakera's shoulders, leaning in and whispering into her ear. She nods and quickly darts upstairs as soon as they head inside.

"What was that about?" Yasmin asks, watching Cy intently.

"Plan B."

"I ran out of that already... Sorry." She says sarcastically.

Cy and Jack barricade the front doors, performing a sweep of the fortress no less than two times to make sure that everything is

sealed tight. As the pair enter the where several of the others are sitting and eating a late dinner, Chris and Donald glance over at the men. Zakera returns downstairs and approaches her mate, whispering into his ear. With a faint smile, he turns to face her and strokes her cheek, giving her a kiss.

“Don’t worry. We should be fine tonight.” Donald speaks up, hoping to ease the tension in the room.

“Yes. We don’t even know if they will come here.” Chris assures them.

“We’ll start work on the new clay furnace first thing in the morning, then we can make enough wire to reinforce that fence.” Donald cheerfully adds.

“I certainly hope so...” Jack murmurs, glancing at an equally worried Cyrus.

Taking one last look at the barred front doors, Cy and Zakera take a bit of food from the dining hall and head upstairs to their room. Cy closes the bedroom door behind them and Zakera begins to undress. She glances over her shoulder at him as she unties her top, surprised by how he focuses on the bedroom door. Having already loaded all of the firearms that she could for him, at his request, she had hoped it would ease his mind. Zakera reaches out and touches her mate’s arm, drawing his attention.

“I think I’m going to stay up and keep watch.” He says, a look of concern on his face.

“Are you sure?” She says as she stops.

“Yeah...”

“Are you so worried that the Zajak will come?”

“I hope I’m wrong, but I don’t want to take the chance.” He answers, looking back at the door.

Zakera reties her top and sits on the bed that lies on the floor, holding her revolver in her hand as she gets comfortable.

“You don’t have to stay up.” He assures her, walking to their floor mattress.

“I want too.” She smiles, patting the space beside her.

Cy smiles and begins to sit down but suddenly stops. He walks over to the extra weapons, grabbing his Ruger MP-9 submachine gun, Micro-Uzi machine pistol, Franchi PA8 shotgun, and several magazines for the semiautomatics. He walks back to the bed and sets down the magazines, Micro-Uzi and shotgun. He hands Zakera the MP-9, which she sets on the floor on her side of the bed. Cy takes off his canteen pouch, but leaves the rest of his gear his belt, leaning back and trying to get comfortable. He stares at the door as he sits with his mate. She leans into him, cuddling with him as he drapes an arm over her.

He tilts his head, resting it over hers as he keeps watch. An hour goes by as they cuddle and talk. As a second hour passes, Cy feels his eyelids becoming heavy. He looks to Zakera, but her eyes are no longer open and she seems to be asleep. Cy gently lies her down and pulls his arm away from her.

“I guess I was wrong...” He thinks to himself as he begins to remove his belt.

Suddenly, he hears a strange noise; the sound of electrical static is followed by a shrill cry as something touches the fence. His blood runs cold and he freezes in place. Hearing the static shock again, it too is followed by a similar shriek. He bolts out of bed, startling Zakera, who promptly sits up.

“I think they’re here.” He says quietly to her.

He swiftly collects the Micro-Uzi, spare magazines and the Franchi shotgun. With the safety on, he slips the Micro-Uzi into the front waistband of his pants and places the spare magazines into his back pants pocket. He holds the shotgun by the fore-grip, his pockets still full of shot shells. Zakera seems to be listening, then bolts out of bed, grabbing the MP-9 and spare magazines as she hears the shrieks. Cy swings open their bedroom door and races into the hall, leaning over the railing.

“Everyone, get up! They’re here!” Cy calls out.

Cy and Zakera dart downstairs as they hear thudding against the heavy double doors at the front of the fortress. Doors swing open as drowsy fortress dwellers emerge.

“They’re at the door!” Cy yells.

Yasmin and Rico emerge from his room as she slips on her shirt. Rico holds the Colt Detective Special while Yasmin has a Tec-9 and her Bersa Thunder 9 Pro. Jack emerges from his room with his Colt 1911, and Chris steps out while holding his Puma Westerner. Johnny appears half dressed, holding his Sig Sauer P232. Cy makes it to the first floor, to see the door bulging inward as the Zajak slam against it. He looks at the logs beneath the knobs and the bars across the door and sees that they appear to be holding. He looks into the dining hall, and while most of the first floor is windowless, the few shutters within seem to bounce, pushed from the outside.

He rushes to the second floor, barging into the room above the main entrance. It is merely a storage room. He removes the bolt and

pushes open the shutters, leaning over and peering outside from one of the windows.

“Oh my god...” He chokes out.

The courtyard seems almost filled to capacity with Zajak, easily 200 strong. Zakera, Yasmin, Jack and Johnny enter behind him. With two remaining windows in the storage room, Yasmin and Jack peek over as Zakera stands close to Cy.

“Get the full autos up here!” Cy orders.

He aims his shotgun at the horde below and fires round after round as the Zajak scream their blood curdling screams. They seem to be trying to climb the walls to reach him as he continues firing. Running dry, he quickly reaches into his pockets to retrieve more shells. Yasmin pushes Jack out of the way and takes a window. Zakera takes the window opposite Cy, Yasmin in between then. The two women fire, taking short and controlled bursts as the Zajak are whipped into a frenzy. Some of them seem to bear down upon the fallen and feed on them, ignoring the door entirely. Jack rushes out as Johnny looks to the three at the windows, Cy reloading his shotgun with the shells from his pocket.

“What do I do?!” Johnny exclaims.

“Collect ammo from the armory downstairs! 12 gauge and 9mm! All that you can carry!” Cy yells as he continues firing.

Johnny nods and turns to the door, only to be stopped by Jack who is holding a Bergmann MP-18 in one hand, and a vintage Thompson M1921 submachine gun with a fifty round drum magazine in the other.

“Where did you hide those?” Cy turns to him, reloading yet again.

“I have my own cache too.” Jack smiles.

Jack takes Cy’s place as he backs away from the window, firing wildly at the Zajak as they press against the door. His Tommy gun soon runs out and he sets it down, taking up the MP-18 instead. The door beneath them starts to crack as the Zajak claw and slam against it. Wood fragments chip away and they soon hear more gunfire from downstairs. Jack’s MP-18 runs out of ammunition, so Cy hands him his loaded shotgun. He rushes over to Zakera who is reloading the MP-9 with her last magazine.

“I’m going to help downstairs. Stay safe.” He says to her.

She nods and they share a brief kiss before he darts out of the room. Downstairs, Michael, Daniel, Donald, Chris, Lara, George, Dean, Richard, Gabriella and Amanda all hold side arms. Cy takes out his Micro-Uzi, flipping the selector switch to fully-automatic fire. He jogs down the stairs and sees the cracks in the door. The Zajak scream at them, their eyes glowing faintly as they peer into the fortress from outside. The others follow Cy down the stairs and take up positions, checking their weapons and watching the door.

Cy aims towards the door as Dean stands beside Cy, aiming his Bergmann 1896 pistol. Cy turns to Dean and looks at the primitive weapon he bears. Reaching for his holster with his right hand, Cy takes out his Bersa Thunder 9 Pro pistol. Flipping off the safety, he twirls it around and hands it to Dean. He then grabs his spare Uzi magazines, holding them in his right hand. Donald stands behind Dean, near the entrance to the dining hall, holding out his Mauser C96 ‘Red 9’. At the base of the stairs, Lara holds a Luger P08 and Remington 51 in .32 ACP, holding a pistol in each hand. Gabriella

holds a COP .357 derringer; all four barrels ready to fire. Lara turns to Gabriella who stands beside her.

Glancing at her weapon, she holds out the Remington 51 to her. Gabriella does not refuse. Amanda stands a few steps above them, holding her Nagant M1895 revolver. Beside her, Richard holds his Webley Bulldog revolver. At the top of the stairs, aiming diagonally at the door, George holds his S&W M1917 .45 ACP revolver. His hand trembles, from both fear and lack of alcohol. Beside George, Daniel aims down with his Steyr M1912 9mm Parabellum pistol.

The team upstairs fire continuously, though the pauses between shots grows longer and longer as their ammunition depletes. Johnny stomps up the stairs with an armful of boxes of 12-gauge shotgun shells and 9x19mm cartridges. Yasmin darts into her own room to retrieve her MP5K and loaded, spare magazines before returning to the storage room above the front door. The wood splinters as Cy and Dean stand within feet of the weakening door. As a chunk of wood flies out of the door, Cy opens fire, shooting short bursts of two to four rounds each with his Micro-Uzi. The group holds firm as Cy is effectively blocking their shots.

Cy performs a tactical reload, swapping a fresh mag for the empty and slipping the empty mag into his back pocket. He cycles the action with the blade of his right hand and keeps firing. A large crack forms in the center of the leftmost door as the logs wedged underneath begin to move back and the board across it creaks from the strain. Cy performs another reload, his right hand now free. He switches the Micro-Uzi to semi-automatic fire and steps back. Dean and Don both begin firing as Cy retreats to the staircase, left with only that last magazine, his recurved knife and chain whip. Dean fires Cy's Bersa Thunder 9 Pro until it's empty.

He holds it out to Cy as he uses only his Bergmann 1896 pistol. Cy reaches for the Bersa pistol, but the left door panels finally break.

Dean stumbles back and drops Cy's pistol. His foot touches the base of the stairs and the others begin firing as Zajak wedge themselves into the doorway, struggling to get over the corpses of the fallen. The right door suddenly gives in and several Zajak stand before them as the entire first and second floor send out a volley of fire. Dean and Donald retreat. As Dean tries to reload his pistol, a somewhat complicated process, he is struck in the left shoulder by a .45 caliber round, fired from George's unsteady hand.

He hesitates and several Zajak pounce upon him. Donald fires at them, but they surround Dean as he screams in agony. Donald's Mauser locks back; he ran empty. He pulls a stripper clip from his shirt pocket and reloads as he steps backward into the dining hall. Cy stumbles up the stairs as Lara, Gabriella and Amanda provide cover fire. Gabriella is soon out of ammunition and runs up the stairs towards the storage room. Lara and Amanda each pull on either of Cy's arms, bringing him to his feet as they quickly retreat.

Cy's Micro-Uzi runs empty, as the swinging arm of Lara's P08 locks upward. Amanda struggles to reload as Daniel pushes more rounds down into his Steyr M1912 and George reloads his S&W M1917 with two half-moon clips. The women reload and return fire as Jack and Chris come around the corner. Chris cocks the hammer of his Puma as Jack takes aim with his Colt 1911. They open fire as Cy reaches the storage room. Rico, Norv and Johnny are frantically reloading magazines. Cy hands them his empty Micro-Uzi and magazines, and is given the freshly loaded Ruger MP-9 in return. He turns back to the firefight taking place on the fortress's staircase.

Daniel and Lara both run out of ammunition while Chris and Amanda are already reloading their revolvers and Jack looks for another magazine in his pockets. He doesn't find one. George, having seen what he had done to Dean, steps to the top of the stairs and fires all six rounds of .45 ACP from his revolver, then charges down the staircase. He heaves his weight against several Zajak and swings his bolo machete like a caveman wielding a club. He screams as they

attack him, tearing him to pieces in short order. Yasmin and Zakera appear from around the corner. Yasmin holds both her MP5K and the Tec-9 while Zakera has Cy's Micro-Uzi, loading a fresh magazine into it and charging the weapon.

The trio stand at the top of the stairs and send out a hail of gunfire, quickly emptying their magazines into the horde. As Cy's MP-9 clicks empty, Norv comes out with Cy's shotgun and fires in his place. The Zajak scream and fall into a heap. The pile of corpses grows ever larger at the base of the staircase. Suddenly, the firing stops. Their ears all ring as their weapons sit empty in their hands. The entire lower level is filled with gun smoke and a faint red mist. The rest of the survivors appear as they look in shock at the pile of corpses on the ground level. Dean and George are barely visible amongst the pile, shredded like wet tissue paper.

"Don!" Chris suddenly calls out.

He starts to climb down the stairs, struggling to make his way over the small mountain of corpses. Chris stops at the base of the stairs, slipping on blood as the others do their best to follow. Cy kicks something as he walks through the wake of chaos while following Chris. He looks down to see his Bersa pistol, covered in blood. He holds it in his hand and grabs a spare magazine, quickly performing a tactical reload. Holding his pistol out in front of him, Cy enters the dining hall just behind Chris. Inside, two Zajak are kneeling over Donald's body, feeding on him. His empty 9mm Mauser C96 lies next to him as he twitches.

Chris grits his teeth and aims his Puma Westerner, but the .357 Magnum Colt Peacemaker clone is empty. Cy calmly steps around him and takes aim, firing two rounds and killing both in seconds, each with a shot to the head. He walks up to Donald as Zakera turns the corner. Chris looks down at Donald and drops to his knees as tears well up in his eyes. Lara and Jack are not far behind, and soon most of the

fortress' survivors are in the dining hall. Donald twitches as he tries to speak. He isn't dead; the Zajak were eating at his flesh while he was still alive. His internal organs are exposed by the faint light of a hanging oil lantern as Cy looks down at him.

Lara sees his injuries and closes her eyes, turning away. She shakes her head as Jack kicks a chair over in anger. Donald looks to Chris, his eyes focusing on Chris' Puma Westerner. Chris looks down at the gun in his hand, but stands up, shaking his head.

"I can't do that. You're my best friend." He chokes out, looking at Donald.

"I'll do it. He's in too much pain." Cy murmurs.

Chris rushes to leave the room but is stopped by Jack and Richard.

"Stay with your friend." Jack urges.

Chris turns back as Cy looks down at Donald's injuries once again. He brings up his pistol and places the muzzle of the blood drenched gun to the elderly man's forehead. Cy closes his eyes and turns his head as he slowly squeezes the trigger. With a loud bang, he's ended Donald's suffering. The room falls quiet. Cy slumps back, sitting down as he stretches out his legs. He looks as though he might cry at any moment. Zakera walks up to him and kneels beside him. The others slowly depart the room as they examine the damage, except for Chris; he sits opposite Cy and Zakera, weeping over Donald's body.

The fortress itself doesn't seem seriously damaged, as most of the rounds were pointed at the ground outside or toward the main door. The doors are destroyed, but the frame is intact, and the

structure is sound. The fence outside was ripped down by the Zajak, and their bodies line the outside. Johnny, Norv, Rico, Michael, and Daniel begin dragging the corpses to the far end of the fence where they set them ablaze. Lara, Gabriella, Amanda, and Zakera soon help as Cy, Jack, Yasmin and Chris search the fortress. They find Samantha and Isabella hiding in a small room on the third floor. Samantha appears moments away from committing suicide with a nickel-plated H&R Safety Hammer in .32 S&W.

Cy scoffs as he walks back outside to help the others remove the bodies. Jack shakes his head in disappointment, while Yasmin and Chris don't stay to comfort them either. The group collectively works through the night, armed, piling the bodies to be burned. Daniel had started a count, which Cy continued. As they finally move the last body outside into the pile, which stands nearly eight feet tall and considerably wide, they reach two-hundred and seventeen Zajak corpses. Their own dead bring the count to two-hundred and twenty. George, Donald and Dean are given proper burials along the edge of the fence. Michael quickly works to repair the front doors, enlisting Johnny, Rico and Norv to help him.

They soon have boards holding the doors together, though Michael prepares to carve entirely new ones. Cy sits by the burning corpses as Zakera sits with him, his shotgun, sidearm and a submachine gun all loaded and attached to his body. It's the dead of night, and he knows that they won't be sleeping any time soon.

"I don't like the smell." Zakera comments, leaning up against him.

"You get used to it." Cy says, leaning back.

"It's certainly not my preferred fragrance." Jack quips.

"I kind of like it." Yasmin says with a smile.

She stands behind the interspecies couple, admiring the blaze, her hand resting on the grip of her MP5K as it sits slung across her shoulders and hanging before her stomach. For the first time since they've arrived at this strange world from Belize, Yasmin finally feels at home.