

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 19: Old Habits

The morning after the assault on the fortress, Cy, Zakera, Yasmin and Jack scout the area. They discover a well-used trail; the Zajak had been watching them for some time. Following the trail, they soon discover that it leads to a series of small caves. The mouths of the caves are only big enough for one Zajak to move through at any one time. In no mood to struggle with the Zajak, the melancholy survivors light sticks of dynamite before casually tossing them inside the caves, walking away as each cave entrance is obliterated, one after the other. They scout a large area around the fortress, and find six more caves within a three-mile circular radius of the fortress, promptly destroying every last one, an event that takes the entire day.

They can't afford to stop working, however. The mountain of corpses slowly dwindles as the fire burns day and night; the survivors work in shifts to clean their courtyard. Though the courtyard returns to a state of normalcy after a time, the repairs and cleaning of their fortress takes more time. The blood had stained the floors and staircase, turning them a dark cherry color and causing many of the steps to warp. Michael enlisted Norv, Rico and Johnny to help him make the necessary repairs. Michael, a skilled carpenter who spent years teaching himself through trial and error, passes much of his knowledge on to Johnny and Rico as they assist him.

Michael soon carves out simple wooden slabs to act as new front doors. These new slabs are much thicker than the previous doors at roughly three-inches. Attaching them to the doorframe, they fashion

three pairs of mounts for wooden beams that can be placed across the doors, as well as locking latches on the top and bottom of each door for added strength. Taking a day to return to the Malevolence, the large party led jointly by Norv and Chris hunt for scrap. Taking nonessential electronics, they harvest them for wiring and use it to reinforce the electric fence, attaching the crystalline batteries to newer, sturdier posts.

After five days of constant work, they are satisfied that they have done all that they can to repair their home and reinforce it from future assault. Under the guidance of the vastly more experienced Cy, Yasmin and Jack, each room now contains several loaded firearms atop wall mounts for immediate use. With their work completed, the fortress dwellers mourn their loss in their own way. Chris sits at Donald's grave for hours by himself, speaking to the carved wooden cross that serves as his marker. Cy and Zakera sit beneath the large leaves of the goshan tree in the courtyard; though they were spending time together and planning their pledge, which was put on hold after the attack, they now watch Chris as he rambles to the grave marker.

"Is that normal?" Zakera asks her mate.

"People handle loss in many different ways."

"How do you handle loss?"

He turns to her, his sullen expression lightening as he reaches out and gently touches her face.

"I don't plan on losing anything." He says with a faint grin.

"I do not either." She coos.

As they share a kiss, her ears shift and she opens her eyes, looking toward the road in the distance. Katero emerges from around the corner, approaching the fortress. He waves from the distance,

flanked by several warriors, all armed with spears. Cy hangs his head and sighs in frustration.

“What now?” He wonders aloud.

Cy and Zakera rise from the ground and approach the gate, using a toggle switch concealed within a metal box to deactivate its current. The old gate had wooden beams that could be moved while powered, but the reinforced gate cannot; it's a new feature for added security. Cy opens the gate for them, allowing Katero and his six Ketlan warrior to enter. Zakera turns the gate back on as soon as Cy closes it behind them. Katero and his warriors sit on the ground as the couple returns to the tree, wrapping around them in a semi-circle.

“We've come to ask for your assistance...” Katero laments.

“Don't you ever stop by to say 'hi'?” Cy asks.

“I am sorry, but I consider this an urgent matter and I need your help. Do not forget that we helped you rescue Zakera.” Katero retorts.

“Her father asked you too, and I came to you as a friend.”

“Well, this is similar. I need a friend that I trust to help me. My juvenile brother is only 13 cycles, and he has a female of similar age that he likes.” Katero begins.

“Okay...” Cy looks at him with a blank stare.

“She has gone missing. He does not know what happened to her, and her parents are as in the dark as he. They are very worried about their daughter.”

“Runaway?” Cy suggests.

“Ketlan *do not* run away; Zakera was the first since anyone can remember. I tracked her to where they meet, far from the village. There were signs of a struggle and a new trail heading away. I followed it for many hours...” Katero pauses. “I... I found a human settlement.”

“What?! So close to the fortress?!” Cy exclaims in shock.

“Yes.” Katero nods.

“But the other human tribes are many days walk away, too far to travel. How can this be?” Zakera asks.

“I do not know. The village was made of stone and had many people living there. It appears to be new, as we had scouted that area a cycle ago and it was merely a field then. We did not believe that we could look for her there, without escorts.” Katero stands.

“You want human guards?” Cy chuckles, looking up to him.

“Yes. If they are not familiar with Ketlan, they may be afraid and hostile. That was the case for the Kelanethaka when we first encountered humans, though Zakera and I were but children when that happened. Please ask the others if they are willing to help. The village would be very grateful and so would I.” Katero bows his head.

“Alright. I’ll bring this to their attention and get back to you, but I can’t promise anything. They may not be feeling generous.” Cy says as he stands to his feet.

“I hope that I may count on your help, at least.” Katero pleads.

“Always.” Cy grins.

Zakera shuts off the gate as Cy opens it for Katero and his entourage, closing it behind them. He sighs and turns to Zakera as she turns the power back on, draping an arm over her shoulders.

“It seems like saving people is becoming a full-time job.” He chuckles.

Cy and Zakera walk through the fortress, gathering everyone into the dining hall. They speak of Katero’s visit and his request and the group is initially very frustrated, several of the pointing out that Katero only arrives when he needs something from them. Cy, however, reveals the final and most important detail; one of the human tribes of

Monala has made a home dangerously close to their own, and they have stone masonry. The group's demeanor changes in an instant. They talk over the possibility of dealing with more humans, forming an alliance with them, or even moving in with them and assimilating. Cy knows that it is highly likely that these humans are from a vastly different time period; they most likely don't even speak English.

The others agree to help, and a party is formed. Richard, Daniel, Jack, Yasmin, Amanda and Johnny volunteer to go along and investigate with Cy, Zakera, Katero and his men. Cy and his mate head upstairs to pack, taking the necessary precautions.

"What will happen if they join the other humans?" Zakera confronts Cy, shutting the door behind them as they enter their room.

"I doubt that will happen. Chances are they won't even be able to talk to them."

"But what if they can? What if they are English and offer them a place?" She asks softly.

"Then I guess they'll leave."

"But you won't?" She whimpers.

Cy turns around, stunned that she would even consider such a thing. He sets down his gear and approaches his mate, resting his hands on the soft pink and cyan fur of her upper arms.

"I'm not ever going to leave you. I want to pledge myself to you and spend my life with you. I want us to raise a family, and it hurts me to hear you doubt that."

"I am sorry... I... I cannot help but be afraid. You are human and I am Ketlan. I have never heard of a pledge or children between our kind." She replies, staring down at the floor and their vastly different feet.

“That doesn’t mean that we can’t be the first.”

“They will have females there...” She murmurs.

“They wouldn’t be a tribe for long without them.” He chuckles.

“You know what I mean!” She whines.

“I’m sorry.” He says before giving her a tender kiss. “I don’t want any other women. I have the only female that I will ever need right here in front of me, and I can’t wait to see what our children look like.”

“I love you, Cy!” She hugs him tightly, her tail swaying gleefully.

“I love you too. You’re all I have, Zakera.” He strokes her back.

The couple finish collecting their gear, gathering firearms and survival equipment for a multi-day hike in the jungle, just in case. Zakera had taken the time to sew together a hide holster with a flap and a rock-button latch. She stitched it for her Kahr CT9, though it fits her H&R 732 revolver just as well, forming it from the hide of a genashin, a six-legged herbivore with an appearance similar to an Iguanodon. The genashin is the most common game animal for the Kelanethaka and the fortress dwellers. It’s hide range in color from beige to dark brown but it can also be a dull green. Zakera’s skirt and breast plate top, along with the cordage, were made from the hide of a light brown genashin, while her newly made holster is olive drab in color.

Cy can’t help but smile as he watches her decide which pistol to take, eventually holstering the more powerful Kahr. Zakera slips several spare magazines for the pistol into a short but wide pouch that also closes with a flap and matches her holster. Aside from his usual gear, Cy shoulders his brown M1936 style musette bag and an SKS rifle, also packing a matte silver Cobra 9x19mm derringer and a two-tone Jimenez J.A. .22LR pistol. He slips the Jimenez into the canteen pouch and stows the Cobra derringer in a vest pocket. As they are about to leave the room, Cy looks to his wall of mounted weapons. He stares at his decorative reproduction macuahuitl and tepoztopilli, contemplating something for a moment.

"Are you coming?" She turns to him.

"Yeah..." He says, reaching out and taking the Aztec weapons.

"What do you need those for?" She looks puzzled.

"I'm going to give them to Katero." He replies.

Zakera doesn't question him further, grinning at the gesture he plans to display for not just their mutual friend but for her former tribe as a whole. As they exit the fortress, they see the others waiting for them by the gate, armed and ready for an extended journey.

"What's with those?" Jack asks, tipping the barrel of his Lee Enfield rifle toward Cy's strange weapons.

"I'm giving these to Katero." Cy replies.

"Why? I mean... Do you think that is a good idea?" Johnny asks.

"What if they reproduce them?" Richard asks with a worried tone.

"Yes. We're interfering enough as it is; they already depend on us too much for our weapons and combat proficiency." Daniel warns.

"What do you mean 'us'?" Yasmin scoffs.

"You know what I meant. This isn't wise Cyrus." Daniel replies.

"If these humans aren't friendly, then I'd like our *actual* allies to have an edge." Cy smirks, wielding the jagged wooden and obsidian sword.

"I don't think you should be playing with the native tribes like this either." Amanda chimes in.

"Noted." Cy casually retorts.

"Giving a tribe an unfair advantage could have dangerous and wide-reaching repercussions, Cyrus!" Daniel pleads.

"Good! Now shut the fuck up and start walking!" Cy growls as he loses patience.

Yasmin silently chuckles and steps closer to Cy, backing his play. This is the man that she remembers, the devious and strong-willed assassin. It is obvious from her expression that Zakera takes offense to the other's objections. She wonders how can they live with themselves as they keep the Kelanethaka trapped in the stone age; with all that they have and take for granted, they should have been the first to help her former tribe. Cy's actions only make Zakera trust and desire her mate even more. The party hike to the Kelanethaka, reaching them barely an hour after Katero had returned. They walk through the village as its inhabitants take immediate notice of the large and imposing looking weapons that Cy bears.

They soon find Katero as he reports to Zikata, his squad of loyal warriors gathered outside of Zikata's hut. Zakera calls out to her father, who emerges with Katero. His joyous expression soon turns to surprise as he looks at the artifacts within Cy's hands. The Ketlan have seen the human's firearms often enough; they know that they cannot possibly recreate them, but these weapons are different and look as though they could have made them. Cy presents the weapons to Katero, who is humbled by the exceeding generous gift. Though they appreciate the tepoztopilli, as it is a spear, they are especially interested in the sword-like macuahuitl.

"What is this one called?" Katero asks as he looks it over.

"Just call it 'sword'." Cy remarks.

"Is that its name?" Katero looks to him.

"No. That's a broad classification. Anything with a long blade like that is a 'sword'; the earth name is just difficult to pronounce." Cy laughs.

Katero hands off the weapons to Zikata. After a brief examination, he too turns the weapons over to a young male warrior, whispering into his ear before the warrior promptly whisks them away.

The original fortress dwellers all look to Cy, hoping that he knows what it is he's doing. Zakera, Yasmin and Johnny, however, trust him implicitly. Katero waves away the guards, then begins leading the group out of the village.

"How far away are these humans?" Jack asks.

"At least a six-hour walk." Katero replies.

"It'll be nearly dark when we get there!" Richard exclaims.

"Yes... Hopefully, they are friendly and will shelter us." Katero comments casually.

"And if they don't?" Johnny speaks up from the back of the line.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Cy answers for Katero. "Stop worrying about 'plans'. Let's just walk in there and see how far honesty gets us."

"That's not much of a plan." Yasmin mutters.

"It isn't!" Cy grins.

"And what if that does not work?" Katero asks.

"Then we come up with a plan." Cy replies.

"How American of you..." Jack snickers.

They hike for many hours, first through a dense secondary forest near the village before walking beneath a shaded canopy covering soft, loamy soil; a primary, old growth forest. Almost exactly six hours into their hike they reach the end of the primeval jungle, coming upon a large clearing that's easily a few square miles in size. In the center is a village of stone houses with thatched roofs.

"That looks like... Greek architecture!" Cy exclaims with somewhat geeky excitement.

"I agree. Fascinating!" Daniel steps closer.

“Too bad I don’t speak Greek, if that’s even what they speak.”
Cy remarks.

“I speak German.” Jack interjects.

“Me too, and some French.” Richard chirps.

“I only speak English, Spanish and Latin... Oh, and also Greek!”
Daniel smugly grins.

“Really?!” Cy seems genuinely surprised.

“Showoff...” Yasmin murmurs.

They examine the village for a moment as the sun sets behind them, many of the inhabitants bearing torches and small oil lamps. On either side of the village are large tents made of white fabric, as though they are having a festival. They see people walking in what appear to be white sheets.

“Are those togas?” Cy thinks aloud.

Unwilling to wait any longer, Katero leaves the jungle’s edge, immediately followed by his men who march toward the village. Cy and the others rush to follow, taking the lead. Knowing that their purpose is to quell any fears the villagers might have, Zakera stays near the rear of their group, walking just before Katero and his men. They all keep their hands away from their weapons, with the exception of the spears that Katero and his men are carrying. Walking through the vast field, the party earn a closer look at the village; the buildings look Greco-Roman and the inhabitants are indeed wearing togas, held together with metal clasps.

The villagers look to them and stop, speaking quietly to each other in a foreign language. Cy notes that he can see both bronze and iron tools, but doesn’t see a single weapon. He notes something else about them as well; there are only women here. All of the tents seem to be temporary homes, and every child, adult and elder is female.

Suddenly, three men approach from another direction. He speaks to them in his foreign tongue, though Cy can distinguish it as classical Latin. The leader asks them several questions and points to the Ketlan.

“Time to earn your bread.” Cy jests, patting Daniel on the back.

Daniel steps forward and clears his throat. In fluent Latin he begins to speak.

“Nos vultus pro aliquem.” He begins.

“Aliquis?” One of the men looks to the others.

“Ita. Ketlan puellula. Puella vidisti?” Daniel asks.

“Non.” The first man replies.

He begins to speak a mile a minute, Daniel visibly struggling to understand his little speech. After a moment the man stops and Daniel looks back at the others.

“He says that they haven’t seen a Ketlan girl and that they are celebrating a festival for their goddess of the harvest. They also invited us to stay with them for the night.”

“Really?” Yasmin raises a brow.

“Yes.” Daniel nods, visibly as skeptical as her.

“I’m sure they have some special request or certain rules.” Cy remarks.

Daniel turns back and speaks with the man, nodding as though agreeing to something. The man responds by speaking another short

speech, his words blurring together. After another pause, Daniel turns back to his companions.

“There are three rules. No males or females in the other’s camp, no violence, and no weapons.”

“So, what if I have a problem with one or more of those rules?” Cy smirks.

The leader of the men suddenly extends his hand, pointing towards the tree line.

“The fu-... He understood me, didn’t he?!” Cy exclaims in frustration.

“No, but I think he knew what you meant by looking at your face.” Daniel retorts.

“Right...” Cy looks back at the others.

“So... What’s the plan?” Yasmin smirks.

Cy shrugs before turning back to the Roman villagers. He doesn’t know if they even realize that it’s a weapon, but he takes off his SKS rifle anyway, quickly dumping the rounds from rifle’s internal magazine and pocketing them before handing it over. Yasmin looks shocked as a man walks up to her to take her Modello 12. She hesitates, but the others glare at her. The entire party follows suit, remove the ammunition from their weapons and keeping it as they hand over every weapon. Even the Katero and his men willingly turn over their spears and stone knives. Zakera silently notes that her mate does not hand over his concealed Jimenez pistol, Cobra derringer or his chain whip; Zakera keeps her whip in turn.

The man motions to the men as the women approach the females, seemingly eager to bring both the humans and Ketlan into their village.

"The fuck is going on?" Yasmin growls.

"I suppose now the males head to the male camp and the females will stay here." Daniel says, not entirely sure himself.

Cy turns to Zakera who is already watching him. He motions for her to come closer. She rushes up to him and embraces him, clinging tightly to her mate.

"Meet me at the town center just after dark." He quickly whispers before kissing her cheek.

Zakera nods and kisses him back as the Roman villagers look on in surprise. A female asks a question which prompts Daniel to answer. Several gasps are heard and at least one woman chuckles.

"Is there a problem?" Cy asks.

"I don't think so. I just explained that you and the Ketlan female were married." Daniel replies.

"Figures." Cy grumbles.

"Guess who's coming to dinner." Yasmin teases.

The males turn and follow the Roman men to a separate camp, while Yasmin, Amanda and Zakera stay behind with the women. Cy looks with wonder at the stone village and sees a well near the center. His wonderment morphs into a suspicious curiosity as he witnesses the men holding their weapons walking into a house near the well, an armed guard standing by the door. Once at the male

camp, the men who escort them promptly depart. Using Daniel as an interpreter, they tell them that they may eat and drink, and sleep wherever they like.

“So how long is this harvest festival?” Johnny asks.

Daniel repeats the question to a man, before translating the answer.

“It is a weeklong festival.” The man answers.

“And what day is it right now?” Richard takes a cup of wine from a tray.

“Four. Tomorrow is the fifth day.” Daniel translates again before taking a drink of wine.

“Two days to get drunk...” Johnny nods with a smile. “I can do that!”

Cy looks around the camp and one of the men who escorted them notices. He speaks to Cy and chuckles, though Daniel seems apprehensive to translate.

“What the fuck did this prick just say?” Cy asks in an eerie monotone.

“He uh...” Daniel hesitates and clears his throat. “He asked if you were looking around for your pet...”

“Uh-huh...” Cy grits his teeth, contemplating what to say.

The man speaks again, and again Daniel hesitates.

“He asked how good a Ketlan woman is in bed...”

“Oh this guy...” Cy chuckles through his growing rage. “Tell him ‘Yes, I am, because Ketlan women are the best lovers on this planet’.”

“Don’t worry. You will see her again in a few days.” Daniel translates as the man chuckles behind him.

Walking away, their escorts leave the men to their own devices. Richard sits down and takes a plate that looks to have some form of bread on it, though it is not faval bread. Beside the strange, faintly pink bread is a sauce mixed from various plants. Cy walks up to Katero, who reaches for a slice of bread.

“Did you hear what he called her?” Cy leans in and whispers to Katero.

“Yes.” He replies, taking a bite.

“That doesn’t seem odd to you?” Cy looks surprised.

“Cyrus.” Jack begins as he sits near Richard, taking a bronze goblet of wine. “Many people don’t share your open-mindedness. I don’t think that he meant to offend you.” He takes a drink.

“And his views are little different from our own. Many Ketlan do not consider your race up to our level either.” Katero adds.

“I bet that went over well when she came to live with us.” Richard remarks before downing a goblet of wine.

“It did not. It was as if she went off to live with the Kaladez.” Katero remarks.

“That seems a little harsh.” Daniel remarks, taking a bite of bread.

“Whatever. I still don’t trust him.” Cy replies. “They’re letting us, outsiders, wander around their harvest festival completely unattended. I’ve been watching, and no one seems to care that we are here.”

“Well we are unarmed.” Richard remarks.

“And you’re just going to eat and drink their food...” Cy looks to the others.

Katero stops and looks at the half-eaten bread. He seems to shrug, and then takes another bite. His men don't even bother to stop. Richard dips his bread in the sauce and then offers it to Katero, who tries it as well.

"Unbelievable." Cy remarks. "I'm going to take a walk."

"We'll be here." Jack laughs, refilling his goblet from a matching bronze pitcher of wine.

Cy wanders the camp, noting the attitudes of all of the males. They all seem considerably intoxicated, and are all eating only the bread, sauce, and some relatively harmless fruits. They are also drinking copious amounts of wine. He looks over the camp, taking a close look at the tents and noting that they are sewn with considerable skill. They have the ability to weave and embroider cloth, aside from their metal tools and flatware. Cy carefully wanders toward to the edge of the male camp, though no one tries to stop him. He looks through the town and is amazed to see that their homes are exceptionally well crafted, using no mortar to hold them together. Many homes even have lightly tinted glass windows.

Leaning over the edge of the well, he peers inside. He draws his canteen from the pouch and shakes it. It's only a quarter full, but he wonders if the water is safe to drink. Cy can't shake the feeling that something is terribly wrong here, and is thankful that he didn't surrender his compact firearms of chain whip. He looks back towards the male camp, soon deciding against taking their well water, just in case. He wanders through the empty village, coming upon the female camp. He looks at the camp and watches, hiding near the corner of a house. After a few moments, he sees Amanda, Yasmin and Zakera. Amanda and Yasmin are both drinking the wine and eating the bread, but Zakera seems to be avoiding all of the food and drink, sitting down with her knees drawn to her chest.

“That’s my girl.” Cy says quietly to himself, grinning as he watches.

He tucks himself close to the building as a group of village women walk nearby. As soon as they pass without detecting him, he backs away and returns to the male camp. Walking through the village, he spots several guards with bronze, leaf shaped short swords; they guard the house where their weapons are stored. He immediately backs against the wall of another house to avoid detection. Not wanting to risk looking when he is so close to them, he uses the reflection of a nearby window to see the men, an old assassin trick. They hold their post for some time, never leaving it or even talking to each other.

Cy moves around the house to stay undetected. He returns to the male camp without arising any suspicion whatsoever. He sits with Johnny, Richard and Jack, who are already acting extremely bizarre. Looking around, he can see that Daniel, Katero and his men are all behaving similarly. They seem to be severely intoxicated, though he didn’t see Jack drink more than two goblets of wine. Johnny crawls over to Katero who laughs on the floor, leaving Cy stunned as the pair wrestle playfully with each other like small puppies, while Jack and Richard giggle.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Cy murmurs as he watches them.

Darkness can’t come fast enough for him as the others try to involve him in their bizarre shenanigans. Cy eats only the faval bread that he packed from home, drinking the last of his water. As he returns his canteen, he looks at the back of the Jimenez pistol. He excuses himself, though the others don’t even seem to notice at this point. Walking towards the camp, Cy struggles to see in the dark without the use of a flashlight or torch. He looks for the well, but the houses all look the same, and none have lights coming from within.

“Hi.” Zakera calls out softly.

A startled Cy turns around and sees her open her vibrant cyan eyes in the darkness. They glow hypnotically as she steps out of the shadows.

“Been here long?” He asks, walking up to her.

“Too long.” She replies, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly.

“I have something for you.” Cy remarks.

“Oh good.” She says with a smile. “Should we go somewhere private?” She winks.

He chuckles as he opens his canteen pouch, taking out the Jimenez pistol and presenting it to her.

“Oh... Well later then?” She leans into him, taking the pistol out of his hand.

“Okay. When we get back home.” Cy kisses her.

“Promises, promises.” Zakera checks the pistol, racking the slide. “So, what is the plan?”

“Something weird is going on here. Everyone is acting like they are on something. First, we get our weapons back and then I guess we search the town.”

“There is a house with guards at the door. I already scouted the village.” Zakera adds.

“That must be where they must have our guns. Lead the way, beautiful.” He smiles.

Zakera gives him a quick peck on the lips before turning and leading the way to the well at the center of the village. They both look around, trying to get their bearings. Cy turns back to where he believes the right house is located. They walk for a moment but suddenly duck down as they see two guards walking by, one bearing a burning torch. They head directly to the house that Cy thought he saw them take their weapons, watching as these new guards relieve the original set of guards that Cy saw standing at the door earlier.

As the first set of guards leave the house, Cy pulls back and takes his chain whip into his hands, trying not to rattle the metal links. He wraps the segments over each other, holding the body of the whip in his right hand, with the handle held against his palm with his thumb. He takes out his Cobra derringer and cocks the hammer, pushing the safety button into the off position. He looks to Zakera, who looks him over with a somewhat lustful grin.

“My eyes are up here.” He jokes.

“What?” She asks innocently.

“Follow my lead, okay? This is going to be interesting.” He says with a subtle chuckle.

Zakera nods and readies her weapons, literally taking a step back until she is just behind Cy. Standing up, he turns the corner and approaches the guards, chain whip clenched in his right hand. His Cobra derringer is clenched tightly in his left hand and concealed just behind his empty holster.

“Hello there! I’ve never used this gun before and I wonder how hard it kicks! Want to help me out?!” Cy cheerfully asks, knowing full well that they don’t speak English.

As they approach, he aims the derringer and fires at the leftmost guard, killing him with a single shot to the head. As soon as he fires the shot, he opens the fingers of his right hand, letting the chain drop to the ground while tightly grasps the handle with his thumb. Swinging the whip, he cracks the bolt against the head of the second guard, then swings it back around and wraps it around his neck. Pulling him closer, the guard stumbles and Cy breaks his nose with the aid of the derringer, using it as a support for his fist. As the guard falls to the ground, Cy drops the derringer to the ground, grabs his chin and head, and quickly breaks his neck.

As Cy is about to get up, another guard darts out from the house, bearing a bronze short sword above his head. Zakera, who stood away from Cy and to his right, uses the Jimenez pistol and shoots the man in the temple from several feet away. He falls to a heap on the ground, giving Zakera her first kill. Cy collects his derringer and his chain whip, before they drag the corpses into the house. The house is full of their weapons, as well as the weapons of the entire village. It's not even a house, but a form of warehouse that simply looks like one. Swiftly rearming, Cy and Zakera exit the house and creep through the town. Somehow, no one has bothered to investigate the loud, foreign bangs of gunfire, not even their friends. Cy keeps out his derringer for the moment.

"How will we know which house is the right one?" Zakera whispers to him.

"I'm open to suggestions." He turns to her.

Suddenly, they spot guards carrying a large pole with metal shackles attached to it, eerily reminiscent of a giant spit. They walk around a corner with the pole, so the pair follow them. The Roman villagers enter a building that also looks like a home, but with far fewer windows. Cy and Zakera look to each other; Cy shrugs his shoulders and the pair wait. After a few short moments the guards leave but they aren't carrying the pole. Cy and Zakera sneak up to the building, Cy quietly creeping inside. Suddenly, he is grabbed by a

guard who was standing just inside of the darkened doorway. He throws Cy to the ground as a second guard brings up a sword.

Cy aims the derringer and fires his last round. The round penetrates his skull through his bottom jaw and slams its way through the top, splattering a dark gray and crimson ooze all of the far wall. The first guard enters, drawing his sword, but is suddenly thrown to the ground by Zakera who leaps upon his back. As he falls to the ground, she straddles his back, taking his hair in her hand and drawing her Kukri knife. Yanking hard, he briefly screams as she pulls his head back, only to be silenced as she runs the blade across his throat from right to left. Cy smiles at Zakera as she stands. The guard gurgles as twitches on the ground as she reaches a hand out to him.

“Thank you for saving me.” He says as she pulls him up.

Zakera smiles before turning her eyes and leaning to one side, looking past him. She points a clawed finger and he turns around. A juvenile Ketlan girl stands tied and gagged to a support beam, her hands suspended above her head. She’s awake and watching them with orange glowing eyes. Zakera walks up to her as Cy shuts the door of the prison. He slips the derringer into his pocket and takes out his recurved knife, standing behind the pole. Zakera removes her gag as Cy begins cutting at the thick ropes.

“You are Zakera!” The girl exclaims.

“You have heard of me?” She seems surprised.

“Of course she has. You’re the president’s kid.” Cy remarks, cutting the girl’s hands free.

“You are the daughter of Zikata. You left to live with the humans. I did not know that you were so close to one though. I am Kechana.” She says to them.

“Well, can you keep a secret?” Zakera asks her with a subdued grin.

“She’s a teenager.” Cy chuckles.

“I will not tell anyone about your human.” Kechana replies.

Cy stops cutting for a second, recalling Katero’s statement. He quickly finishes and releases the young girl. He wonders if Katero was right, and that if he and Zakera are the only ones who *don’t* have a problem with their relationship. It doesn’t bother him so much as angers him; no matter what, he will still pledge to her. As the three creep outside, Cy draws his Bersa pistol, and Zakera holds her Kahr. They attempt to escape to the female camp, as Yasmin is the next most dangerous warrior that they have, but the villagers have already found the corpses of the guards. As they walk towards the well, they see the villages dragging the clearly drugged fortress dwellers toward the town center.

The three quickly duck down behind the well and watch the crowd. A large fire has recently been constructed and only now starts to glow brightly as it catches. A priest stands before the fire on a stone platform, and looks to the crowd. He speaks to them with arms outstretched, but the three cannot understand him. Daniel, the least intoxicated of the group, slurs his words as he speaks.

“Our sacrif-fice to the great... G-goddesss wasss stolen.” Daniel says.

“What is it with people here and sacrifices?” Cy look to Zakera.

The priest speaks loudly and incites the crowd. Daniel is barely heard over their shouting.

"These came with them, and though they are not yyyouthfull and innocent... They will have to do. We will start with the cat." Daniel translates.

"Oh shit..." Cy murmurs.

The priest motions to guards who bring out Katero. He seems out of it and doesn't struggle as the priest brings him near the flames. Cy stands up and aims into the crowd, his body burns with anger and his cold eyes are like a powerful blizzard. Zakera stands with him and joins her mate as they rush the villagers, firing several rounds into the crowd. Kechana runs with them, following closely behind Zakera. At least one villager falls to the ground dead, and several scream in pain as they are shot. The crowd scatters like bugs in the wind, leaving a large patch of ground for the ground to run through, rushing up to the priest.

Their drugged friends make a feeble attempt to fight back, pushing away from the priest and the few guards near him. The guards most likely could have held them, but they fear the weapons that Cy and Zakera are using and immediately release them. The priest stands firm before them. Cy grabs Katero's wrist and pulls him away from the priest.

"*This* cat doesn't belong to you... Or your bullshit 'goddess'." Cy mocks, his words immediately translated to the best of Daniel's ability.

"How dare you! You doubt the power of the great goddess? Hand over the cat so that our harvest will be fruitful." The priest speaks to Cy, immediately translated by Daniel.

"You can't doubt what isn't real." Cy smirks.

"Do you not have any faith?" The priest asks him.

"God doesn't demand human sacrifices. Only people do." Cy remarks.

“He is Ketlan. They aren’t human. They are only good for sacrificing, and from what I hear, personal pleasure.” He retorts.

“Maybe God doesn’t see it that way? Maybe only you do?” Cy poses.

The priest raises an eyebrow, as though amused. Zakera shakes Yasmin out of her state, smacking her across the face. The others quickly come around as they realize what is going on, but are not in complete control of their faculties, swaying as though struggling with vertigo. Cy hands over their weapons as the crowd starts to come back, quickly surrounding them.

“You may as well surrender now.” Daniel translates as the priest smiles smugly.

Cy turns to the priest, pointing his pistol at his head. Without hesitating he pulls the trigger and the priest falls dead to the ground before the crowd.

“Fuck you.” He says to the corpse at his feet.

The stunned villagers look at their dead priest in silence and then look at each other. They appear to be contemplating whether or not to attack, but they know that they are incapable of defeating these strangers.

“Well?” Cy looks to them, holding his arms out to his sides, as if challenging them.

The villagers stand silently.

“Fucking cowards. I knew you people didn’t have any balls once I saw that you wanted to kill a kid!” Cy scolds them.

“We need a sacrifice. Innocent blood pleases our goddess.” Daniel translates for a nameless woman shouting from the crowd. “We don’t want to kill a human. Give us the cat and you can leave. Their lives aren’t as important.” Daniel translates for a yelling man.

Cy’s eyes grow wide in a mixture of rage and disbelief. He steps up to Kechana, standing between her and the crowd.

“You can’t have her. If any of you think you are good enough, come and take her.”

Zakera holds Kechana by the shoulders and pulls her to the side, protecting her as if she were the girl’s own mother. A random male takes a step forward, but Cy quickly pulls his chain whip, dropping the body to the ground as he grips the handle tightly.

“I fucking dare you...”

Cy glares to the man, his icy eyes looking through him. The man backs down.

“But we *need* a sacrifice, regardless. If not the cat... We simply can’t go without one!” Daniel translates for another random woman.

They sound as though they are begging for one of them to jump into the fire for them. Cy can’t help but laugh. He looks at her, and then around the crowd. He turns back at Zakera; her fingers gently squeeze Kechana’s shoulders.

“Okay...” Cy begins. “You want a sacrifice?” He steps down before the crowd.

He takes a step into the crowd, his pistol pulled tightly to his left side. Reaching out, he grabs a young human girl, barely 11 or 12 years old. She screams as Cy drags her by her hair, to the horror of the entire village, as well as some of his own. A man steps up, rushing Cy. He promptly turns and shoots the man in the chest, dropping him to the ground with a thud.

“Atta!” The young girl screams.

It’s one of the few words that Cy can recognize on his own; he just murdered the girl’s father. Yasmin and Zakera point their weapons at the crowd as Cy steps closer to the fire, undeterred by her cries. He seems to be taunting the villagers.

“Sacrifice!” Cy calls out as he pushes her into the roaring flames.

Her clothes immediately catch fire as she screams in agony. Her hair burns away in seconds as she tries to crawl out. Cy swings his chain whip, smacking the metal bolt against her arms to keep her in the fire.

“There’s your sacrifice!” Cy yells as he swings the whip again and again. “You wanted a child, so use your own!”

His rage at its peak, Cy turns and opens fire on the unarmed crowd with his pistol. Zakera and Yasmin immediately follow his lead. The crowd runs in terror as Cy jumps down. Zakera aims at a woman and her child, shooting them both in the back. Yasmin opens fire with

her Modello 12 and kills a half dozen in a matter of seconds. Cy takes aim, firing a round every few seconds and never misses a mark. The others watch in abject horror, even Jack. Cy simply turns to them, his pistol empty, and casually reloads. Zakera performs a tactical reload and stands beside Cy. Yasmin is still enjoying herself as she shoots into the unarmed crowd.

“We’re going home now... Or maybe you think we should vote on it?” Cy asks, his fingers flexing over the grip of his pistol.

“Lo’kan...” Katero mutters, almost admiring Cy’s ruthlessness.