

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

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Episode 21: Thunder And Lightning

The men move the corpses from before their gate, stripping them of their iron armor and weapons and setting it to the side. Yasmin leads the women as they strike a large fire in the courtyard, while the others gather inside the fortress. The ground, still charred from the Zajak's massive funerary pyre, will now bear the bodies of the monk and his knights. Yasmin inhales deeply through her nose as she hears the sizzling of their flesh, sighing in relief to the silent horror of Amanda, Samantha and Lara. Inside their room on the third floor of the fortress, Zakera stands next to Cy and wraps her arms around him, clutching tightly to her mate's torso.

"It's not true, what they said. I know it isn't. You and I are the same and our lives are equally valuable." He says, staring down at the floor.

"I love you, Cy." She says softly, kissing his cheek.

"I love you too."

He spins around and holds her in turn, stroking her back softly with his fingertips. Her tail sways gracefully, responding to his every touch.

"You are so good to me. I am very lucky to have you." She says.

"No... I'm the one who's lucky. Without you, life isn't even worth the effort to breathe."

He stares into her cyan eyes, admiring their beauty. Her heart beats rapidly, touched by his love for her. They lean in and kiss each other passionately before embracing yet again, his chin over her shoulder. Suddenly Cy lets out a little chuckle.

"What is so funny?" Zakera asks.

"This whole situation. Every time it settles down, something else happens. Are we ever going to have time to pledge to each other?"

"We can pledge right now, though it would not be the same. Do not worry, my love. We will find the time, as soon as this is done." She replies.

"And if nothing *else* happens to stop us."

"Do not tarnish our luck with such words." She coos, kissing him again.

After taking a moment for themselves, the couple head downstairs and into the dining hall. The others are already waiting on them; Cy had called for a meeting just before they moved the bodies.

"So, what are we going to do about this kingdom?" Samantha looks to the others.

"We'll deal with it." Yasmin assures them.

"How? They have multiple villages. We can't take on the world." Gabriella comments.

"And if we did, we'd probably be fighting a bloody war for years." Jack adds.

Cy walks up to a chair and grabs it, sliding it close to another. He takes a seat and Zakera sits beside him. She wraps her tail around his waist. The group becomes silent and looks to Cy, their De Facto leader.

“The solution to this matter is simple... They have a newly formed kingdom, and most likely formed it by force. If we kill the king...”

“Hold on, Cyrus. Do you realize what you’re talking about?” Daniel interjects.

“You aren’t familiar with feudalism and vassalage, are you?” Cy raises an eyebrow.

“Of course I am! I’m an anthropologist!” Daniel retorts.

“Then why the fuck are you okay with it?! You realize that if we kill this king, the tribes he stole at the tip of a sword will all be set free, right?”

“It’s never that easy, Cyrus.” Jack cuts in.

“I’m not saying it’s perfect, but if even half of them return to their lives as they were before this King Roland stole them, then I think it’s worth it.” Cy preaches.

“And if they don’t?” Samantha scoffs.

“Even if it doesn’t happen that way, we’ll throw them into chaos. We’ll have plenty of time to build up the Kelanethaka and ourselves and be ready for the next one, if and when they arrive.”

“We’re talking about murder...” Jack murmurs.

“Nothing like sending assassins to do assassins work!” Yasmin smirks.

“I don’t know if I support this, Cyrus.” Richard murmurs, nervously resting his chin in the palm of his hand.

“Do you know why there are people like me? People like me exist so that people like you can send us out to do what needs to be done. You can sleep at night, safe in your beds, and not feel as though you

have blood on your hands because it's on mine instead. I'm the necessary evil that allows you to have a safe home *and* a clear conscience." Cy snaps at the dissenters.

A grinning Yasmin walks around the crowd and stands beside Cy and Zakera, showing her support.

"We can do this." She says confidently.

"If they are still gathering strength, killing the king will just make them fall back to the next in line." Norv comments.

"Exactly... That's why we have to kill them *all*. The king, his heirs, and any generals inside wherever it is they lay their heads; we do it while they sleep and by morning, the kingdom will be effectively neutered."

"And you're alright with destroying an entire society?" Lara looks shocked.

"If I had a problem with it, I wouldn't have said anything." Cy quips.

"How do you plan to do all of this?" Chris asks Cy, genuinely curious.

"I'll work it out in time. We've got two weeks before their army marches out of their kingdom and another two before they knock on our front gate." Cy says with a confident smile.

"We don't even know where their kingdom is." Isabella speaks up, her first words uttered to someone other than Samantha in weeks.

"In time. Trust me." Cy assures them.

He and Zakera turn and leave the large room, making their way up the staircase. They reach the second-floor landing before Cy suddenly pulls her closer. She grips his hand tightly as he turns to face her. He kisses her passionately and wraps his free arm around her waist, tugging at her athletic and lithe body. Her tail flicks

excitedly and her body burns with desire. Cy's strength and assertiveness with the others only make him even more irresistible as a mate, and his undying love and loyalty to her are the icing on the cake. Reaching around his back, she grabs his buttocks tightly. He opens his mouth to speak, but Zakera is one step ahead of him.

"I will *not* be gentle." She winks.

"That's my girl." He grins lustfully.

The others sit around downstairs as they hear the couple dash up to the third floor and slam their bedroom door closed. Yasmin chuckles and heads for the staircase.

"So... That's it?" Lara speaks up.

"Yup. Don't worry about it. It will all work out the way it's supposed too. Hey Rico..." Yasmin replies.

"Yeah...?" He looks to her.

Yasmin merely motions for him to come to her and leaves the room. Rico obeys, as he always does. The others sit around for a moment, and then slowly depart, heading off to their own rooms. The day passes quickly and night eventually envelopes the fortress. Cy and Zakera sit on their bed as she tends to the scratches on his back, the fruit of an exceptionally long and passionate moment with her mate.

"Ow!" He shutters as she dabs an alcohol-soaked cloth on his cuts.

"I am sorry." She says with a smile.

"No, you're not." Cy looks over his shoulder. "It's okay. I liked it."

"Good. So did I." She coos.

Zakera continues treating his wounds when their relatively peaceful night is interrupted by the sounds of thunder in the distance. Cy doesn't seem to notice a difference, but Zakera stops and stands up. She looks to the balcony and slowly approaches. Cy stands up and turns to her. In the distance, there is a large dark gray cloud forming, filled with lightning flashes. They seem to strike the ground.

"What's wrong?" He asks her, placing a hand on her bare shoulder.

"That thunder... That is what I heard the day you came. The cloud looked just like that one." She says as she stares at it.

Cy looks closer and sees what looks like a ball of purple lightning inside of the cloud, hovering a distance above the ground. The ball suddenly disappears and a tiny black object slams into the ground. They hear the faint sound of metal striking the soil from where they stand, easily several miles away from the unidentified falling object.

"Interesting..." Cy mutters, gently squeezing Zakera's shoulder.

"What will we do, my love?" She asks him.

"It's too late to head out there tonight. We'll check it out in the morning."

The couple stay in their room and return to their bed, They are soon disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Did you see that, bro?!" Johnny calls through the door.

"Yeah!" Cy answers, lying beside his mate.

"What do you want to do?!"

“Nothing tonight! We’ll check it out tomorrow!” Cy instructs.

“Okay! I’ll let the others know! Goodnight, bro!”

“Goodnight, Johnny!”

The couple try to sleep, though the night passes slowly as the pair contemplate who or what could have arrived in the storm. Eventually, however, they drift off to sleep. Cy sleeps peacefully beside his mate, as he always does now; Zakera brings him a peace that he could not have found elsewhere. Likewise, Zakera dreams pleasant dreams about her future with her lover, comforted by his constant and warm embrace. The next day, the fortress dwellers gather in the dining hall and discuss the thunder and lightning. The entire group seems to already know that others have arrived; this is semi-routine for them.

“This was what happened the day before you came to us.” Jack confirms Zakera’s statement.

“It was quite a distance away, though.” Chris laments.

“A few miles at least.” Amanda adds.

“That’s quite the hike in a jungle like this.” Jack nods in agreement.

“We can make the trip!” Yasmin boasts.

“Indeed, we can. We may be caught out there at night though.” Cy remarks.

“That’s not a good idea.” Amanda speaks up.

“It *can* be done. When Ketlan get lost in the jungle, or track game for too long, they often build a large fire and sleep close to it. It keeps the predators and Zajak away.” Zakera retorts, ever supportive of her mate.

“Sounds like a plan then!” Johnny steps up.

“Alright. Volunteers only. Who wants to come and see what the lightning brought us?” Cy smirks.

Zakera and Yasmin step forward in unison, followed by Johnny, Jack, Rico, and Lara. The group looks to Lara, who they've never seen leave the fortress before.

"What? ... I can handle myself. I might as well come along for once." She says adamantly.

"Well, it's settled then. We'll leave as soon as possible. Meet at the gate after you've all collected your things." Cy orders as he stands.

The search party breaks off, heading to their rooms to gather their things. Cy and Zakera quickly arm themselves with their usual gear. Cy gives Zakera his Cobray CM-11 rifle and places a few spare magazines in his pack, taking his Micro-Uzi and Bushmaster rifle.

"I have never seen you use that one before." Zakera comments as Cy slaps a loaded magazine into the AR.

"Yeah. I figured it was about time." Cy gently rubs the fore-grip.

He turns the rifle over and presses the bolt release with his left index finger; it sits on the left side of the weapon. The action quickly snaps closed, loading a round into the chamber. He shuts the dust cover with his right thumb, flips the safety on with his left, and slings the rifle over his shoulder. Cy makes sure his pack has enough spare magazines, ammunition, survival gear and food. He checks Zakera's pack as well; she wears one of his spare brown musette bags. Cy secretly keeps her pack light, so as not to tire her out or make her shoulders sore, putting the extra gear into his pack instead. They promptly head outside and meet Yasmin and Johnny by the gate.

"I've never see you use that rifle before." Yasmin comments.

“Yeah, Zakera said that too.” Cy replies.

“I didn’t even know you *had* an AR.” Johnny quips.

“I have one of just about everything.” Cy smirks.

Cy sets his rifle down and adjusts the straps on his pack, shifting the weight and becoming more comfortable. Johnny notices some blood on Cy’s shirt near his left shoulder.

“Are you alright?” Johnny asks.

“What?” Cy turns, his thumbs underneath the shoulder straps.

“Blood.” Johnny says as he points.

“Oh... That happened last afternoon... And night.” Cy explains.

“Oh...” Johnny’s face turns red.

Zakera and Yasmin both hold in their laughter as the others make their way outside. Jack slings his rifle and Lara checks both of her handguns, wearing a holster on each side of her hip, one for each pistol.

“What a strange looking rifle.” Jack comments as he sees Cy’s AR.

After a quick check to make sure that they have everything, the search party leaves the safety of their fenced courtyard, walking towards the direction of the lightning. They are forced to blaze a trail through dense jungle, as they never had a reason to walk that way before. They use the blue, day moon to maintain their direction as they march, a tactic that works as well on Monala as a compass does on Earth. The hike takes nearly the entire day, though they are forced to stop before twilight in order to have enough time to prepare a proper campsite. They build a large fire, as Zakera had suggested, and keep

their weapons close. Zakera sleeps with her arms around Cy, though he hardly sleeps at all, holding his Bushmaster close with the safety set to 'Off'.

Nothing attempts to attack them during the night, although they can hear the sounds of wild animals in the distance. Cy is certain that he heard a moltaka circling the camp at one point. The next morning, they tear down the campsite and eat their breakfast while hiking. Continuing their trek, they walk until the jungle begins to thin out, which takes until about noon. They slowly move through the now primary jungle for an hour before coming upon a large clearing. If the jungle had not been so thick, they may have been able to quickly march there in one evening. A human tribe seems to live in the clearing, their dwellings being nomadic style yurts. Cy looks around with a set of small binoculars, noting the layout and construction. That's when he sees it.

Just beyond the yurts and near a dip in the landscape extends a large barrel; it looks like it may belong to an artillery piece, or a tank. It appears almost new, but is quite outdated. Cy motions for the group to stay low as he creeps around the edge of the tree line. He finds a spot where he can look into the little valley behind the yurts. There, partially buried in the ground is a Panzer IV tank from WWII. It appears as if it had been sent to Monala above the ground and crashed into it at a slight angle, digging it deeply into the soil; the tracks are almost completely buried at the front, with the rear gear protruding.

"That's not good..." Cy thinks aloud.

"What's wrong?" Jack turns to him.

"That's a tank from World War Two... A German tank..." Cy answers.

"Fucking Germans..." Jack grumbles.

"Nazis?" Johnny remarks in surprise.

“What now?” Rico asks.

“Let’s get this over with...” Cy suddenly stands up.

Following his lead, the group makes their way down from the tree line. They keep their weapons slung and their fingers away from the trigger. As they approach the camp, a man comes out of a yurt. He falls before the group as a Nazi soldier comes out, yelling at him in German. The man turns to see the group and draws a Walther P-38 on them, screaming at them. Jack shouts back, fluent in the language as a result of his service during World War One. They stand there looking at each other. The man stumbles back into the yurt, leaving his terrified victim outside, prostrate on the ground.

“What just happened?” Rico asks.

“He ordered us to surrender in the name of someone called ‘Hitler’. I told him to fetch me an officer or I’d cut his calls off and feed them to him.” Jack replies.

“Nice!” Johnny remarks.

“How generous of you to let him keep them.” Cy chuckles.

The soldier returns with another soldier, who appears to be an officer.

“English?” He asks.

“Yes, please.” Cy jokes.

He shouts to his subordinate who quickly holsters his pistol.

“What are you doing here?” The officer asks with a thick accent.

"We came to see what the lightning brought." Cy answers honestly.

"Well... I'm Hans Müller." He looks at the group.

"I'm Cyrus Richter." Cy replies politely.

"Richter?" Hans' eyebrow rises. "A fine German name. I could see your Aryan blood as soon as I laid eyes on you."

"Right... So, who's he?" Cy points to the man bowing into the dirt.

"Ah... Yes... Well, it has become apparent that we are no longer on Earth anymore. A storm engulfed our tank while we were patrolling for Americans. Once we realized our situation, we emerged to find ourselves among these." Hans says, arms outstretched as he looks around the camp. "We are far superior in both breed and technology to them."

"And...?" Yasmin says impatiently.

"And we did what any superior being would do." Hans smiles. "I see you've done something similar." He chuckles, pointing to Zakera, who stands close to Cy.

"Watch your tongue. That's my mate." Cy immediately defends her.

"Really?" Hans seems mildly surprised. "Interesting... It seems human, although it is quite inferior. Does it speak?"

Cy's blood boils and he brings up his rifle. Hans looks to their weapons for a moment.

"I'm warning you... Fucking Nazi... One more word!" He grumbles.

Zakera quickly places a hand on his arm, lowering his rifle. Cy looks to her in shock, but concedes. Hans chuckles and places his wrists behind his back as he strikes a strong soldier's pose.

"So, you are clearly not German. You appear to be. You have magnificent Aryan features. What is your motherland?" Hans asks.

"America..." Cy smirks.

"I see... Then you have me at a disadvantage." Hans slowly and calmly lifts his hands in surrender.

"What are you doing?" Jack asks.

"I am your prisoner of war. I and my men cannot be mistreated." Hans answers.

"Right..." Jack snickers.

"Is this not an American base? I had assumed perhaps some of our fleeing scientists completed their projects for you. We've all heard the rumors about the secret weapons and crazy experiments; an interdimensional gateway was my favorite story, though it doesn't appear to be that anymore."

"Sorry, Hans. We're as in the dark as you." Johnny remarks.

Hans narrows his eyes and looks to the party before him. He pauses for a moment as he glares with considerable suspicion.

"Is this some sort of American trick? That's an advanced new weapon isn't it? Some futile attempt to stop the Third Reich?!" Hans tries to rationalize his situation.

"This?" Cy lifts the rifle. "This is a modern variation of the M-16, developed by Eugene Stoner. The first models saw major use in the nineteen sixties. A lot of Americans have these babies in their closets at home." He smiles.

"Americans?" Hans repeats slowly.

"Yeah... Germany lost again." Cy smiles wide.

"What year do you think it is?" Yasmin asks the officer.

"1943."

"You're off by a few." Rico remarks.

“Explain.”

“Well, my crew and I came here in 2018. Their expedition got here in 1926, all of 6 or 7 months ago.”

Hans seems floored by the revelation, quickly falling deep in thought. He looks over the mixed group, the strange cat-like female, and the primitives behind him. He notes their clothing; some of them wear strange apparel made out of materials he has never seen before, while some wear clothing his father wore as a young man during The Great War. He takes a deep breath and stands at attention.

“This doesn’t change anything.” Hans begins.

“Doesn’t it?” Yasmin looks confused.

“No. I’ve taken this village, and I think I’ll keep it. Instead of doing it in the name of Hitler, I will do it for myself, and my men. I’ll give you this one opportunity to leave.” Hans demands.

As he stands there, awaiting their reply, a young village girl runs around a corner. Quickly tackled to the ground, she is promptly dragged into a yurt by one of his men. They hear him tearing at her garments as she screams. Yasmin takes a step forward but the first soldier draws his pistol. Zakera hisses at him, startling the young man. Two more of the officer’s crew emerge, bearing MP40 submachine guns. With four out of five accounted for, the fifth actively raping the girl in the yurt, the two groups have a tense stand-off.

“I’m waiting... Do not make me ask you again...” Hans reiterates.

“We can’t start a firefight right here.” Cy turns to the others, speaking quietly. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Zakera looks to Cy, then at the tent where the young woman is screaming. She shakes her head, to Yasmin’s and Lara’s shock.

"You don't want to do something?" Lara turns to Cy.

"If we start shooting, one or more of us could die." Jack speaks up.

"These are trained soldiers who belonged to the most bloodthirsty regime of the last century. They'll kill us without thinking twice." Cy adds.

"Indeed..." Hans grins.

"Let's back down." Rico says.

Johnny nods in agreement. Yasmin turns to Lara, who seems to be thinking it over as well. Lara looks to her sorrowfully, but nods to Cy. Cy turns back to Hans.

"Have a good day..." Cy says through clenched teeth.

Hans smiles, waving his fingertips mockingly. The hatred Cy feels is almost palpable as the group turns and leaves. They head for the tree line, turning back as they hear the Nazis having their way with the helpless villagers. As they reach the trees, several gunshots are heard; resistant villagers are publicly executed.

"What are we going to do about that?!" Yasmin demands angrily.

"There's nothing we can do without risking our lives." Jack says.

"Actually, there is." Cy remarks.

"I knew you had a fucking plan!" Yasmin exclaims.

"We can't do anything, Cyrus." Lara laments.

"Not without getting innocent people killed. Those are trained soldiers armed as well as we are." Jack adds.

“Shut the fuck up!” Yasmin barks at them. “We’re going to do something! So, what is it?!” She turns back to Cy.

“We wait until nightfall. When they’ve finished pillaging, we’ll take them out in their sleep, disable the tank, and set the villagers free.”

“Fuckin’ A!” Johnny exclaims.

“How many people *are* you going to kill, Cyrus?” Jack asks, disgusted.

“As many as it takes...” Cy stares at the village.

“Can’t we just let them be?” Jack suggests.

“What is your fucking problem? Why are you such a pussy?!” Yasmin growls at Jack.

“I’m tired of all of the blood...” He answers.

“If they dig out that tank, they will be a much bigger threat than that entire kingdom. We can shoot through iron armor, but that tank can shoot through the fortress and the Malevolence at once. If it has even half fuel, it can reach the fortress and the Kelanethaka in barely an hour. That’s unacceptable.” Cy turns back to the others. “You don’t know just how ruthless these people are, Jack. They *wrote* the book that guys like me use. You haven’t seen a god damn thing yet...”

The group wait just within the tree line. Dusk can’t come soon enough as they listen to the screams echoing out from the nomadic village. Yasmin checks her MP5K over and over, anxious to use it. Johnny holds his Sig Sauer P232 and sits with Lara and Rico. Cy and Zakera sit together, watching the village through binoculars as Jack paces in the background.

“This is a bad idea...” He mutters repeatedly.

“If you have such a problem with this, then stay here. We can do it without you.” Yasmin snickers.

“I’m sorry...” Cy says to Zakera.

“For what?” She looks to him.

“I hate how the other humans keep picking on you. I wanted to kill him right then and there... I almost did.” Cy rests his head gently against hers.

“It is alright. I have heard many Ketlan say the same about humans, and you. I feel the same way when they speak. I know your feelings and you know mine. That is all that matters.” She reassures him.

Cy holds her tightly and kisses her cheek. Staring back, she grins as her mate, her eyes glowing in the darkness. The screams soon fade as the Nazis seem to head into a single yurt in the far corner of the village. Cy counts nine in total.

“That’s too many... Panzer IV’s only had a crew of five.”

“Maybe some were riding on the tank when it came here?” Johnny suggests.

Two soldiers are left at the front of the tent and one at the back. The remaining six seems to be inside, resting after their devious fun.

“Alright. Hopefully they’ll be asleep in the next hour. That’s when we make our move.” Cy says quietly to the group.

The time comes and they quietly creep toward the village. The soldier guarding the back of the yurt is the very same one who raped the young woman earlier during the stand-off. Yasmin immediately claims him as hers. She draws her KaBar combat knife, handing her MP5K to Rico so it won’t get in the way or make noise. Zakera follows closely behind. The women flank the soldier, staying just out of eyesight. Yasmin moves closer, but the guard can see her movement and turns toward her. Zakera leaps out from her position and grabs the young man, placing one hand on his throat and the other over his

mouth. He mumbles as Yasmin rushes in and stabs him in the chest repeatedly, Zakera still holding him from behind.

Zakera pushes herself off of the man's back as Yasmin drags him to the ground, slashing his throat deeply before continuing to stab him. The Columbian is in a frenzy as she soon slashes her already dead victim. Zakera steps away from her slowly, startled by the glee she sees in Yasmin's eyes. Finally done, Yasmin stands up and slides her forearm over her forehead, wiping away the sweat as she looks at the exposed intestines of her victim. On the other side, Cy holds his knife and Johnny holds his. Johnny has never killed anyone before, but he doesn't want to let the others down, especially his best friend Cy. Cy creeps in, mere feet from one of the guards.

Johnny moves in on the other side but bumps into something sitting in the grass. Several empty tin cans of food rations clank together, catching the guard's attention as they both spin around and look. Cy rushes in and stabs his victim in his kidney, before slashing his throat from right to left. Johnny hesitates as the guard turns and sees Cy dropping the body of his comrade. The Nazi falls to the ground as he tries to cry out, his mouth muffled by dirt as Zakera sits on his back. She jams his head into the ground, breaking his nose as Cy rushes in. He tips his knife upside down so that the blade faces the sky, quickly jamming his knife underneath the man's throat. He gurgles and struggles for only a few more seconds before expiring.

With the three guards dispatched, the entire group quietly enters the yurt. Somehow, the struggles just outside of the fabric walls did not awaken anyone, or perhaps they were too exhausted from the raping and pillaging. Cy finds Hans and kneels beside him as he lay on his side. Johnny takes a random soldier, determined not to fail again. Yasmin, Zakera, Lara and Rico pick out their targets. Jack can't bring himself to do it, so Lara decides to take his place. Cy counts down from three with his fingers. Three: they raise their knives high in the air. Two: their arms tense up. One: the blades glisten. Zero: they all strike down, stabbing into their victims.

Johnny jams his knife into the neck of his target and arterial spray shoots out, startling him as the man twitches and gurgles. Cy jams his knife into Hans' heart. The other four men die quickly and without a struggle. Jack begins collecting the Nazi's weapons as Cy walks outside. He calls to the entire camp, which slowly emerge from their yurts. He holds up his bloody knife, telling them that their captors are dead and that they are free. The villagers stand there and stare.

"I don't think these people speak English, Cy." Rico remarks.

"We do." An older man says, surprising the group.

"Oh! Well... Your captors are dead!" Cy reiterates.

They hesitate to believe the strangers, so a few enter the tent. Cy approaches the tank and opens the hatch, peering inside. As he looks in, a German pops out, screaming as he fires a round from inside of the vehicle. He nearly hits Cy in the face as he stumbles back and falls off of the tank. Before he can draw his pistol, a burst of machinegun fire sprays the driver who drops in mint condition, Nazi made FN Hi-Power. Cy looks up to see who just saved his life, surprised to find the rounds came from Jack, who holds one of the Nazi's MP40s. In the background, Yasmin seems to have been struggling to draw her pistol; Rico still bears her MP5K for her. Zakera rushes up to her mate to check on him, kneeling beside him and looking him over.

"You scared me!" She yells at him before giving him a tight hug.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that there would be a guy in there." Cy says.

"There's always a guy in there." Yasmin laughs.

"Right. Silly me!"

Zakera helps Cy up as he leans over and takes the Hi-Power from the ground.

“I always wanted one of these...” He thinks aloud.

Lara finally steps out of the tent; she seems concerned with what happened, but appears disoriented. She repeatedly looks down at her bloody knife and her stained clothing. It's obvious that she hasn't ever killed anyone before, at least not on purpose. Cy immediately feels a tinge of guilt for allowing the doctor to come along with them on such a dangerous journey. With Zakera under his arm, he approaches the Englishwoman and calls out to her. She turns to look at Cy after the second time he speaks her name. He presents her with the Hi-Power.

“Here... Take it, Lara.”

“Why?” She looks puzzled.

“Think of it as a souvenir...” He smiles.

“For killing someone?” She looks offended.

“For helping your friends and saving some villagers.” He sternly replies. “Take it...”

She smiles faintly, though it appears forced, and takes the pistol from his hands. She looks it over, before flipping on the safety and slipping it into the waistband of her pants. Cy turns back to the tank and climbs aboard. He and Yasmin remove the German's corpse. Cy goes to work, disabling the tank; he removes several important looking components from inside and pulls wiring and hoses from the engine; he is intent on keeping the parts, on the off-chance that they may want to use the Panzer themselves in the future. He makes a note of where each piece belongs before packing them into his bag. By now, the villagers are rejoicing as they yell happily. They thank the

group and praise them, offering gifts of food, clothing, and various valuables. Cy refuses all offerings and the others follow his lead.

“Please. At least tell us who you are!” A rather important looking man pleads with them.

“We are the *Sakesh*.” Cy replies proudly.

Only Chris and Zakera have heard this word before; the others are somewhat surprised that their little tribe now has a name.

“Praise to the Sakesh. We owe you our very lives. Is there anything we can do?” The man bows before Cy.

“You can always join us.” He replies.

Jack and Lara turn to him with shock. The fortress can’t possibly fit them all; what is he planning?

“The Sakesh welcome human *and* Ketlan. I leave it up to you.” Cy continues.

“You... Are you Cyrus?” The man sheepishly asks.

“You’ve heard of me?!” Cy asks in surprise.

“Yes. From the kingdom.”

“Is that why you speak such fluent English?” Jack asks.

“We spoke English long before our people came to this world. I’m certain that Roland and his cohorts are from a time older than our own.” The man explains.

“Fascinating!” Cy exclaims.

“The Sakesh are the humans who live with the Ketlan. We did not know that your tribe has a Ketlan name.” The man says.

“Is that a problem?” Cy looks at the villagers.

“Not at all! We’d be honored to join the Sakesh! Our tribe was conquered by the kingdom and many of our people enslaved. We were fleeing anywhere that we might find suitable; a place to live in peace.” He replies.

“Then you know where the kingdom is?” Yasmin asks.

“Yes. We came from there. It’s a very long journey.”

“Can you show us?” Cy walks up to him.

The man looks nervously toward Cy, but soon rushes off and into a yurt. Cy turns back to his companions and shrugs. The man emerges moments later holding a large cloth scroll. He unrolls the scroll on the metal shroud that covers the Panzer’s tracks while the group gathers around. It’s a map of the tribe’s travels. They are nomadic merchants and artisans.

“Here. This is the kingdom’s capital city. The king lives there in a castle of stone.” He points to a strange crest-like symbol.

“I told you not to worry.” Cy smirks, looking to Jack and Lara.