

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

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Episode 23: Unsettling

Walking along the trail in relative silence, Johnny can feel the eyes burning into the sides of his head. Cy repeatedly glances over, a twisted little smile on his face. Everyone is curious but none want to be the first to ask. Finally, Cy relents and clears his throat.

“So... Johnny...”

“Yeah?”

“Fitting in well with some of the villagers?”

Cy tries not to laugh at his own perverse double entendre, while Zakera and Daniel cannot help themselves. Johnny sighs in frustration before quickly snapping back.

“You know, it’s actually a real struggle. I have to work awfully hard to fit in, but they appreciate my effort.” He smirks.

“Just try not to hurt anyone.” Zakera giggles.

“Johnny always plays hard, isn’t that right?” Cy teases.

“Why don’t you just leave me alone, man?” Johnny growls.

“Hey, relax. I’m just playing with you.” Cy calmly retorts.

“Well I’m not in the mood for games.” Johnny grumbles.

“Do you miss her already?” Daniel asks.

"Not really."

"Then what's the problem?" Chris wonders.

"I don't know..." Johnny murmurs.

"I really hate to be telling you what to do, but do you really think it's a good idea to be sleeping with the village girls?" Cy asks with concern.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Johnny snickers.

"Well, because sex without emotion is just... Sex... There's nothing genuine behind it." Cy explains.

"So?"

"So?! ... Isn't that really unrewarding after the fact?"

"It's all I have, alright! It makes me feel better, so just back off!" Johnny yells.

"Alright. I'm sorry." Cy replies.

He looks to the others who are all quite surprised by the boy's outburst. It bothers Cy a great deal that Johnny's attitude towards something as powerful as sexual intercourse is now on par with Yasmin's. They finish the walk to the fortress in silence. After eating a meal together in the dining hall, where Cy reveals his intentions to pledge to Zakera tomorrow, everyone departs to their rooms for the night. An undressed Cy and Zakera lie in bed together and cuddle. Zakera nuzzles his face and gently kisses his neck. She hopes for progression but Cy seems miles away. She leans up on an elbow and gently takes hold of his chin, turning his head to face her as he lay on his back.

"What is wrong, my love? Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

"No. I'm actually pretty excited about it!" He smiles.

"Then what is troubling you?"

"Do I seem troubled?" He asks defensively.

"You cannot lie to me, Cy. Normally I do not have to work harder than that before you are mounting me." She grins lustfully.

"I'm sorry. I'm just worried about Johnny." He admits, sitting up in bed.

"Why?" She asks as she sits up with him.

"He hasn't been acting himself. I feel like he's depressed."

"Have you offered to comfort him?"

"Of course I have. I was hoping he would talk to me but he just shut me out. Now he's mating with females at random and it just bothers me; I feel like that's the wrong approach to his issues."

"You must remember where you are, Cy. In our culture it is considered healthy and normal for juveniles to mate freely. If it gives him solace, then leave him be." Zakera says, resting her hands on his shoulders.

"He didn't seem all too happy afterward. Besides, you didn't do that. I know." Cy winks.

"Yes, well... I was never normal when compared to the other females of the village." Zakera softly chuckles.

"Well, even if I do back off, what if he gets her pregnant? Humans and Ketlan can have babies, right?"

"I certainly hope so." Zakera coos, raking his back with her claws. "But the Kelanethaka have an herbal tea that prevents pregnancy. It is a recipe that all females are taught at the onset of puberty, which is also the start of their juvenile phase."

"Oh..."

"Please try to relax. Soon, Johnny will not be considered a juvenile and we will have to give him a ceremony of adulthood. At that point, you can't do anything to stop him or interfere in his life. It would be wise to practice restraint now." She continues.

"I know, but it's hard to do that when I worry so much. I don't want him to make mistakes." He sighs.

"You sound like his father."

"I feel like his father. His real father wasn't ever really there for him, and he was a terrible person. After I first met the boy, I felt like I had to watch over him, so I've been doing it for years."

Zakera's hands run around his sides and sit upon his chest. Her nose brushes his ear as she gives him a tender kiss on the cheek.

"Will you be this protective of our children?" She asks sweetly.

Turning to her, Cy grins and slips an arm around her waist. He pulls at her, bringing Zakera before him. With a hand on her thigh, he directs her movements and makes her straddle him, stretching out his legs. Zakera coos, almost purring as she feels his member against her pelvis. Cy kisses her passionately, their tongues intertwining.

"You know I will... But first we need to make some." He says softly.

"I am ready whenever you are." Zakera smiles, bearing her sharp teeth.

As the lovers prepare to mate, Zakera's attention is drawn to the other room. Cy rests a finger on her chin, turning her head and bringing her back to him. They kiss repeatedly as Cy lies back, Zakera preparing herself as she lay over him. Taking him into her hand, they are suddenly startled by a gunshot from the next room. Zakera rolls off of her lover and grabs her holster in one swift motion, drawing her Kahr pistol. Cy pulls up his worn underwear before grabbing his Bersa pistol and racing outside. Just as he steps out, a bloodied Rico bolts from the room he shares with Yasmin. Naked and visibly terrified, he bears several deep scratches and is drenched in a nervous sweat.

"Get the fuck back in here!" Yasmin growls.

Rico darts off, racing down the hall and past Cy. He nearly runs into the still undressed Zakera as she peeks out from their room, dashing for the staircase. Yasmin emerges from the room wearing only her panties, her blued Bersa Thunder 9 Pro in her hand.

“Where are you going?! I’m just having a little fun!” She snarls.

“What’s going on here?!” Cy angrily demands.

“Hey, Cy.”

Yasmin waves her pistol at him, walking casually up to him as her bare breasts sway gently with each step.

“I asked you a question. What just happened?” Cy sternly reiterates.

“Rico wasn’t up for it, but I was.” She chuckles.

“And you didn’t think to just... Stop?” Cy narrows his eyes.

“What for?”

“Because Rico didn’t want it...”

“Oh, please.” Yasmin snickers.

She scratches her temple with the front edge of the pistol’s slide, the safety off and the hammer cocked. Zakera steps outside of the room, wearing one of Cy’s orange t-shirts. It only just reaches past her groin, covering her enough to join her mate without exposing herself to the others. By now, footsteps stomp up the staircase as Johnny enters the hall with his Sig P232, accompanied by Norv, who sleeps in the room adjacent.

“So, who fired the shot? As if I need to ask...” Cy says.

“Oh, that was me!” Yasmin freely admits.

“What’s going on up here? Who was Rico fighting with?” Jack asks.

He turns to Yasmin and immediately averts his eyes from her visible breasts. Richard and Samantha stand just behind him, with similar reactions.

“I was hoping to scare him into submission, but he took off like a bitch. I tried to hold him down but he just fought me. If he wasn’t so slippery I would’ve had him.” Yasmin rather proudly explains.

“You... Raped Rico?” Norv asks in shock.

“He said no, but I knew he’d be fine once we started.”

“Uh, no. I’m pretty sure he really didn’t want to have sex.” Johnny says, slowly shaking his head.

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Yasmin waves a hand.

“Dramat-... Are you fucking serious?! You nearly shot him because he didn’t feel like being RAPED! What the fuck is the matter with you?!” Cy growls.

Yasmin glares at Cy who immediately looks down at the floor. It is not because he is afraid or because he spoke out of turn; he regrets his words, guilty over questioning her. He knows all too well what is wrong with her, a secret that she hasn’t shared with anyone but him. A year after they met and shortly after their sexual affair began, Yasmin had a moment of weakness. Comforted by Cy’s warm embrace and feeling a tinge of what could be called love, she broke down and revealed everything to Cy. His comfort and guidance only frightened her and made her push him away, emotionally. Physically, however, she clung to him like glue. It had been her escape for longer than she cares to remember; Cy was one in a long list of lovers who took her mind off of her past.

“You should take a walk...” He sternly recommends, turning his eyes up to her.

“It’s fucking night!” She snarls.

“I said take a walk, god damnit! Take your pistol, your MP5, whatever... Just cool off for a bit.”

Yasmin grumbles incoherently as she steps back into her room, swiftly slipping on a shirt, pants and her combat boots. With her pistol in her waistband, she storms out of the room and down the stairs. Reaching the second floor, she can hear Rico whimpering from Lara’s office as Lara and Amanda treat his deep cuts with alcohol-soaked bandages. Accompanied by Cy and Jack, she powers down the gate and darts out of the courtyard in the dead of night, not even bothering to shut it behind her. Jack powers the gate back on, opting to stay and wait for her. Cy, pained by guilt and pity, does the same.

Running into the wilderness, Yasmin follows the trail toward the Kelanethaka, turning off and following a narrow path that leads to the stream where they gather their water. Tears well in her eyes and make it even harder to see in the darkness of the night. She feels utterly alone, even frightened as her sprint takes her back to a horrible night in her childhood. Only 11 years old, a dainty and downright frail Yasmin darts away from her older brothers. She weaves through large potted plants in their backyard as they give chase, but this isn’t a childish game. At 14 and 15 years old, her larger and faster brothers quickly catch her.

“What are you running for?” Diego, the eldest, asks.

“Yeah, we just want to play.” Angel, the younger, laughs.

“Please! It hurts!” Little Yasmin whimpers.

“But women like it! Aren’t you a woman?” Diego teases, unbuckling his belt.

“She isn’t a woman yet, bro. That’s why we don’t have to wear condoms.” Angel snickers.

Yasmin shakes the memory from her mind as she runs toward the stream. Sitting down beside the crystal-clear water, she watches the light from the purple night moon bouncing off of the rippling surface. With her pistol in hand she draws in her legs, pulling her thighs against her chest. Her arms encircle them as she sets her chin atop her knees. Staring into the flowing water’s reflective surface, it breaks up the light of the moon and her own reflection. She taps the loaded handgun against a calf muscle. Closing her eyes tightly, she flashes back in time again. 14-year-old Yasmin sits in an identical position, huddled behind her bedroom door and carefully listening in.

“I told you stupid fuckers to wear condoms, like I do! If she gets pregnant again, I can’t afford another doctor visit. Now which one of you was it?” Her father, Felipe, snarls at her brothers.

“Neither of us!” They plead with him.

“Don’t fucking lie to me!” Felipe smacks one of the boys. “I had her after I came home from work and she wasn’t fucking clean! Now who was it?!”

“Maybe she gets around!” Diego barks.

“Yeah, we heard about her from the other boys at school.” Angel chirps.

“My little girl would never betray me like that!” Felipe screams.

“But it wasn’t our fault!” Diego pleads.

“You fucking liars!” Felipe growls.

As he assaults her brothers, Yasmin can’t help but smile. She hates all three of the abusive males. Diego and Angel were innocent this time; Yasmin snuck off with a boy after school, sleeping with him behind someone’s toolshed only an hour before her father came home. She has discovered that the pleasure of sex somehow makes the pain

of her abuse go away, though she doesn't even understand why. Felipe stomps her brothers into a bloody pulp, believing one of them to have been responsible. Snapping back to the present, Yasmin lays down atop the red colored grass, tears running over the bridge of her nose and alongside her face as she huddles in the fetal position.

Her thoughts return to Rico and what she had done. Rico had eaten some old fruit from the bottom of the bin at dinner. It wasn't until after taking a few bites that a more experienced fortress dweller saw the coloration and told him that it was bad. Succumbing to food poisoning, Rico spent most of the evening and night lying in bed and keeled over in pain. However, Yasmin had killed a genashin earlier, providing them with several days' worth of meat. Unable to control her urges, she demanded sex from him. After forcibly stripping her partner, she found him unable to perform in his condition. Flying into a rage, a frightened Rico tried to leave the room.

Yasmin clawed at him in an attempt to keep him inside, outright begging him to try. Disregarding his feelings, she grabbed her pistol as soon as he said no. He then questioned their relationship, throwing fuel onto the fire of her rage. Taking aim, she fired at Rico, only missing because he stumbled back in terror. Had he not dropped to the floor, she would have struck him in the chest and probably killed him. Yasmin knows that it was best that she didn't hurt Rico; Cy would never have forgiven her and she would have rather died than see Cy angry with her. He's the only one that she's ever felt could understand her, though she herself was unable to reciprocate his feelings.

She knows that she was wrong for what she did, but she often cannot help how she behaves. Her atrocious childhood has warped her into a twisted and perverse monster that even she often hates. If only she could erase the damage they'd done and carry on like everyone else. She brings her pistol to her head as she lay on the ground, her finger teasing the trigger. Her hand trembles and her nerves crumble, dropping the pistol to the grass before her. Gritting her teeth, she is disgusted that she isn't even strong enough to kill

herself. She lets out a brief scream and fires a single round at the nearest tree before dropping the gun back onto the ground and quietly sobbing.

She tries to recall exactly when she fused violence and sex, self-analyzing as best she can. It comes to her after only a nanosecond of thought. She was 16-years-old and a beautiful young woman. All of the boys noticed her, many had experienced her in some form or another, and none of them respected her as a result. Her father was asleep in her bed that fateful night, exhausted after the routine abuse. Tired of being her family's plaything, passed between her father and two brothers, she slipped away from the sleeping Felipe. Taking a cheap .32 caliber revolver that he owned, the teenaged girl crept back into her own bedroom.

Placing a pillow over his head and pulling the trigger twice, she murdered her father. Felipe's body promptly urinated on himself, twitching for a moment. Angel walked into the hall, awoken by the sounds of the gunfire. His eyes grew wide as he stared down the rusty barrel of the 5-shot revolver. Yasmin didn't hesitate, putting a single round into his skull. Diego, who had somehow slept through it all, receive two rounds, one in the skull and the other in his groin, as he was the first to violate her. Realizing that she was in serious trouble, Yasmin used the cover of night to conceal her actions. Ransacking the house for money, valuables and more ammunition, she broke in the back door with a hatchet before pouring gasoline on the bodies and the floor, setting the house ablaze.

Fleeing the burning house, Yasmin decided to take her chances on the streets of Columbia. The massacre was blamed on a cartel hit, as she had duplicated the methods used by a local group. With herself presumed kidnapped or dead, money in her pocket and a loaded revolver in the other, she walked to the nearest bus stop. Passing a boy on her way, he called her pretty. That was all the invitation she needed, and she soon found herself naked atop him in a field, barely a quarter of a mile away. The pleasure of sex with that

boy melded with her elation from killing her family, who had abused her for so long. After she began killing for money, only a few months later, she found that sex shortly afterward simulated that euphoria from that first time; the closest she has ever come to feeling normal.

Yasmin's mind races a mile a minute and she finds it difficult to organize her own thoughts. Why is she like this? Why can't she just be like everyone else? Yasmin weeps as she feels genuine regret for what she's done to Rico. It isn't because she cares for him emotionally, so much as because she has done to him what her family had done to her for years. She can only imagine the fear and the pain that he is experiencing, something she wouldn't have wished upon anyone else, and yet she's still done it. Rico had been nothing but kind and affectionate to her, even after she began using him for his body. A sudden flash causes her to sit up as she has a horrifying realization.

Lying on her bed and stripped of her clothes, a young Yasmin stares at the lamp atop her nightstand. Her drunken father holds himself above her as she lay paralyzed with fear. After learning of her first rape at the hands of Diego, Felipe flew into a rage. It was not because his eldest son sullied his only daughter, disgracing and harming her, but because he was working up the courage to do it himself and missed his chance. After a short chase and an even shorter struggle, he dragged her into her bedroom, tearing her clothes from her body as she kicked and screamed. The rusty .32 caliber revolver clicks faintly as the barrel presses against her head.

"Stay still. I'm just having a little fun." He snarls.

That was the very line she found herself saying to Rico as he ran from their room in terror. Yasmin slams her fists against her skull and cries, trying to force the memories from her brain. She looks toward the pistol and stares, her hand slowly reaching out for the weapon.

"I can do this..." She murmurs.

Cy darts from the fortress with Zakera close behind. With his clothes and hiking shoes on and his pistol in hand, he bolts for the door.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Cyrus?" Jack asks.

"She's becoming unstable, bro. It's only getting worse." Johnny adds.

"We heard the shot! I sent her out there!" Cy snaps.

"I don't think it's safe." Jack says.

"It's not, but if she did anything..." Cy hesitates.

The guilt he feels is overwhelming as he looks back to the others. Zakera steps up and takes hold of his hand, comforting her mate. With a subtle head nod, she reaches out for the power box, throwing the switch. Cy turns on his 90-degree Energizer Romeo flashlight and clips it to his belt.

"Are you sure about this?" Jack asks again.

Looking to the explorer, it is obvious that he hesitates to trust Yasmin with the others. She has only proven her instability as time went on, and is one of the more competent killers among them. It's a dangerous and frightening combination.

"You don't know her, Jack. She's troubled but she isn't hopeless." Cy replies.

Johnny steps over to Cy and looks down at his compact Sig pistol. Glancing up at his friend and mentor, the teenage boy nods in agreement. The trio dart into the wilderness, Cy and Zakera at the front with Johnny just behind and between them. Following her trail, Zakera's superior senses make it easy for them to find her. Sitting upright and staring at the night moon, Yasmin marvels at its beauty. It's a perfect last image as she strokes the trigger with her finger. She only hopes that Cy and the others will survive without her.

"Yasmin!" A familiar voice calls out.

Startled, she lowers the pistol and glances over her shoulder. Cy's cries are soon accompanied by both Johnny's and Zakera's. A tear runs down her cheek, touched by their concern; leaving to find her in the dead of night is exceptionally dangerous, even for an armed group. She sets the pistol down and waits, unable to answer back, lest they hear the shaking of her voice. A light appears in the distance and soon Zakera emerges from beyond a series of bushes, following the Columbian's trail. Cy and Johnny emerge right behind her. Yasmin slowly rises to her feet and is surprised by an immediate embrace. Cy hugs her, soon joined by both Johnny and even Zakera. The show of affection rattles her, but she puts on her strongest facade.

"We heard the shot and thought..." Cy begins.

"Thought what? I'm not some pussy who's going to off herself!" Yasmin growls.

"I know." Cy murmurs.

"We just thought that something might have happened to you. We were worried for your safety." Zakera continues for him.

Ending the group hug, Cy picks up Yasmin's gun from the ground and returns it to her.

"I'm sorry. I never should have sent you out here."

"Don't worry. I get it. If I were you, I would have just shot me."
Yasmin smirks, slipping the pistol into her waistband.

"We'll help you, alright? You're one of us and you always will be." Cy adds.

"Don't start crying now. I don't want to lose even more respect for you." Yasmin chuckles.

Walking back to the fortress with her companions, Yasmin's heart burns from their compassion. Even Zakera, whom she's never really liked and been rather jealous of, stays close to her and says reassuring things. Returning to the courtyard, she sees several others standing beside Jack. Rico, Lara and Amanda are among them. Yasmin quietly apologizes to Rico, telling him that she regrets what she did and will try to be more understanding of his needs. To her surprise, Lara approaches and offers her private council. Aside from her medical training, Lara has studied psychotherapy as a hobby, offering to aid her with her anger problems. The entire fortress, save for an apprehensive Jack, seem to be extremely supportive.

"There's no pressure. It's an open offer." Lara remarks.

Yasmin turns to Cy. Smiling warmly, he gives her a subtle head nod.

"Yeah... Alright." Yasmin turns back to Lara. **"We can talk, Doc."**