

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 24: Furtive Union

Standing before Zikata's hut, Katero waits for the chieftain to exit his home. With a tepoztopilli in hand and a copper khopesh sheathed in a hide sleeve and hanging at his side, the war-guide of the Kelanethaka waits with an entourage of warriors flanking him. Though this is a joyous day, the planned pledge between Cyrus and Zakera taking place in only a few hours' time, he can't shake an unsettling feeling. He has chosen to bear weapons out of caution, not for ceremony. In fact, many pledges take place without weapons present at all. Katero worries, as a rift has slowly grown between the villagers; the relationship between the entirely human Sa'kesh and the Ketlan of the Kelanethaka has caused a stir.

While many appreciate and even idolize the Sa'kesh for their generosity in advancing the Kelanethaka, teaching them metallurgy, masonry and battle tactics, some cannot help but be afraid. The Sa'kesh wield guns and still have more advanced technology and knowledge that they haven't offered. The dissenters, however few there are, are becoming vocal in their feelings. They believe that their people are being used by the humans to do their dirty work, and Zakera pledging to Cyrus, the Sa'kesh's chieftain, doesn't put them at ease.

It is often customary for Ketlan to pledge to those who are in similar social circles, though it is not a rule. Love does not care for these matters, and it is not rare for a chieftain to pledge to a common female, or a common male to pledge to a priestess. However, by

pledging and potentially breeding with Cyrus, Zakera has only aided the dissenters in their argument. Some, who do not know Cyrus the way that Katero does, have the audacity to claim that the human does not even love the Ketlan who will be his bride, claiming her to be a political pawn. The fact that many of these rumors were started by Fekolza, the male whom Zakera would have reluctantly pledged herself to had Cyrus not arrived, does not seem to arise the suspicion of anyone but Katero.

Regardless, Katero fears an uprising, or perhaps even an attempt on Zikata's life. Though his own warriors doubt him, as the war-guide, he will take no chances and they will follow his instructions. After a short wait, Zikata emerges and stretches his arms and back, his tail swaying and his cyan and white striped fur bristling. He looks to Katero and gives him a subtle head nod, stepping behind the young war-guide as he turns and leads the way through the village. Many of the villagers follow along, eager to witness the pledge that will only cement the bond between the two tribes. Marching through the earthen roads of the village and toward the trail to the Sa'kesh, a cacophony of voices speak of the event that's about to unfold.

Katero turns his eyes to a group of Ketlan who do not share their enthusiasm. Sitting off to the side in silent protest, they refuse to witness the pledge. Fekolza and roughly two dozen other Ketlan stare with disgust at the horde of travelers. Katero turns his binocular vision toward the ground between Fekolza's paw-like feet. A word is scrawled in the dirt. It's Zikata's name spelled in Ketlanic. A line has been pulled through the script with the blade of a stone knife, which itself has been plunged into the soft soil at the very center of the word. It is exactly the sort of bad omen that Katero was afraid of, made worse by Zikata's own disregard of the matter.

Katero glances back and speaks quietly to Zikata, hoping that the marching of feet and the loud waves from other voices will prevent Fekolza and his followers from hearing him.

"We should deal with that when we return, before it becomes a problem."

"It is not a problem." Zikata replies.

"Do not think that is an idle threat." Katero says.

"They are Kelanethaka before they are Ketlan. They have strong feelings and it shows, but they will not act on them. Do not worry about them."

"I hope that you are right..." Katero murmurs.

Cy stands before his small camp mirror, putting on his best clothes.

"I'm sorry we didn't have much time to ourselves last night." He says to Zakera.

"It is alright, my love. I understand why we could not. It is probably for the best anyway."

"Why's that?" He glances over to her.

"It will make tonight even more enjoyable." She coos, wrapping her arms around his waist as she stands behind him.

"My little Minx." He says as he spins around in her arms, holding her.

"I am a Ketlan."

"Never mind." He chuckles.

"Do you remember all of the things that I told you about the pledge?"

"I'm trying." He nervously sighs.

"Relax. Soon we will be pledged; I will be yours and you will be mine, and all will know it when we wear the bindings."

"I can hardly wait." He says softly.

Embracing one another, they share several kisses before they are distracted by a knock on their door. Daniel calls through, informing them that the Kelanethaka have arrived en masse. Leaving the comfort of their fortress, Cy and Zakera are bombarded by the cheering of both the Ketlan of the Kelanethaka and the humans of the nomadic tribe that the Sa'kesh had liberated. The two races intermingle as though it were normal, a sight that surprises many of the original Sa'kesh. Packing the fortress' courtyard to overflowing, the entire perimeter fence has been deactivated as a safety measure, the front gate temporarily removed for easy access.

Zikata wades through his Ketlan warriors and meets his daughter and her future pledge near the Sa'kesh's central fire. Katero grips Cy's forearm and Zikate does the same before embracing the human who will soon be his son. Giving Zakera a kiss, he rests a hand on her cheek.

"I am so proud of you, my daughter. I have waited for this day for a long time." Zikata says, a joyful tear running down his cheek.

"As have I, father."

"You have picked a wonderful mate." He adds.

"I always had good judgement." She smirks.

"Are you ready?" Cy softly asks her.

"Yes, my love." She nods.

Walking together towards the central fire, Cy and Zakera stand in front of the eight-foot-tall crackling flames. Though it was once the funerary pyre for the Zajak, it has become the ceremonial center of the Sa'kesh village, a cultural symbol they've copied from the Kelanethaka. Turning to face each other, the lovers pause for a moment while the others watch on. Zakera reaches into a hide satchel that's tied to her waist and rests near her buttocks. She hands Cy a

black leather collar with five shaped and polished stones inlaid. Two large stones with the appearance of Mother of Pearl bear sharp, noble cuts, while the three smaller stones have a dark amethyst appearance with trillion cuts. The larger stones sit between the smaller outer stones with one small stone in the center.

“Did you make this?!” Cy asks in amazement.

“Yes, I did.” She nods.

“It’s beautiful! What do the stones represent?”

“The two large stones are us... The three smaller stones are how many I wish to have...” She gazes longingly at him.

Cy can’t help but smile; he had never asked Zakera how many children she desires. He silently hopes that they are capable of interbreeding, also desiring children. After taking a few deep breaths, the nervous human is ready to begin. He motions to Katero, who stands considerably closer to him than all of the others, something rather unusual during a traditional Ketlan pledge; the warrior assumes that he is acting as some form of emotional support for Cy. Turning back to Zakera, Cy drops down to his knees. Holding her hands in his, he looks up at the Ketlan female.

“Zakera, I pledge myself to you. I swear to love, honor, and protect you for as long as I draw breath, and to be a dutiful father to our children.” Cy speaks.

This first portion is a standardized speech that all pledges make. The entire purpose of the pledge, in the eyes of the Kelanethaka, is to bond the mates and create a family. Cy takes a breath and continues, speaking additional vows to the surprise of everyone, even Zakera.

"I love you more than life itself, and I cannot live without you anymore. I don't know how I survived before we met. I will do everything, including laying down my life, to provide and protect you, *and* all three of our future children." His voice trembles as he speaks.

"I accept." She says softly, her eyes welling up.

Zakera pulls at his hands, a subtle gesture for Cy to stand. Dropping down to her knees, she looks up to her mate and takes a deep breath.

"Cyrus, I pledge myself to you. I swear to love, honor, and protect you for as long as I draw breath, and to be a dutiful mother to our children... I was lost in the wilderness, pursued by death. I wished for salvation and you came. You gave me a second chance at life. You gave me hope for the future. I hope to give that same hope back to you, *and* all three of our future children." Her voice trembles.

Cy pulls gently at her hands and brings her to her feet.

"I accept." He chokes out.

Zakera pulls back her pink hair, presenting her neck. In Kelanethaka culture, the male places the collar upon the female's neck, a sign of her loyalty and subservience as his pledge. Cy gently wraps the black leather collar around her neck and ties the cordage carefully at the back. As he pulls his hands away, she lowers her hair and reaches for her neck, feeling the collar with her fingertips. She can't help but smile wide, bearing her sharp canines as her fingertips caress the stones. Reaching back into her satchel, she removes a matching leather armband, the stones identical in size, coloration and placement to her collar.

Turning slightly, he presents his left arm to her; the pledge male wears his band on his dominant arm, a sign of the strength that his mate gives him while hunting and in battle. Zakera carefully attaches the armband high on his left arm, tying the cordage tightly. The leather band clings to his bare flesh, made easier by his lack of a fur coat. Once attached, Cy reaches out and strokes the gemstones of the band, admiring Zakera's craftsmanship. He slips an arm around her and holds her tightly, her tail gently swaying. She clings tightly to her mate, his nose nuzzling her neck. There is only one final step to the ceremony.

Pulling back from the embrace, they look into each other's eyes before kissing each other passionately and in front of the entire group. With the ceremony completed and the couple now pledged, the Ketlan and human villagers let out a cheer. Cy and Zakera walk up to Zikata, who embraces them both.

"I am so proud of you, my daughter, and of you, my son!" Zikata exclaims.

As the tribal humans from the nomadic group celebrate the marriage, they bring out a large wooden banner. Against the silver wood of the banner is a purple colored painting. The canopy of a massive tree with three trunks that swirl around each other before merging at the base, which is clearly representative of the fortress. Underneath the banner is the word "Sa'kesh" written in Ketlanic. Seeing that banner, Zikata grins, showing his teeth. He pats Cy on the shoulder, leaving his arm draped over him.

"I had always hoped my daughter would one day claim a male worthy of her. You have proven yourself to be that male. It warms my heart to know that Zakera will spend her days with you, Cyrus." Zikata speaks, sniffing.

"I'm honored, father." Cy bows his head.

"The fact that you are also a chieftain is... How have I heard you say it? ... 'Icing on the cake'? Is that right?"

"Yeah, it is." Cy chuckles, nodding his head.

"As my daughter, her pledge to you not only binds both of you together, but also our tribes. You will always have my support, Cyrus." Zikata says rather proudly.

"And you will have mine." Cy grins.

"Come and dance with me Cy!" Zakera pleads, taking her mate's hand.

"I'm not a good dancer." Cy nervously replies.

"Please!"

"Do not keep your pledge waiting. A male can never make a more grave mistake than that." Zikata smirks, patting Cy's back.

Zikata steps back as the couple join a growing ceremonial dance near the central fire, resting his back against the fortress wall. Katero stands beside him and watches, a little smile across his face.

"She reminds me so much of her mother; how she and I behaved when we were together." Zikata sighs.

"I remember." Katero nods. "You were quite a loving couple, as they are."

"Indeed."

"I only wish that everyone knew the weight of their love for each other as we do." Katero turns to Zikata.

"Still worried about Fekolza and the others?" Zikata chuckles.

"I do not think you should take them lightly."

While dancing with his mate, Cy spins her. She falls against him and nuzzles his neck with her pink nose, now free to show him as much

public affection as she desires. Cy, however, cannot help but see a concerned looking Katero speaking with Zikata from across the courtyard. The expression of his friend does not put him at ease.

“Is something wrong?” Zakera asks.

“Huh? Oh, uh... No. I just saw Katero and Zikata talking.”

“Did it look important?” Her lips curl downward.

“No. Not in the least.”

With a warm smile, he rests a finger on the white fur of her chin before leaning in and kissing her. Pulling back, her face once again radiates joy. Cy keeps his attention focused on his bride, opting to settle the matter with Katero later. After the ceremonial dance, the Sa’kesh and their human villagers, who have settled in a small clearing barely a quart of a mile away, host a feast for their guests. As they set the tables and present the food, Katero claims a seat beside Cy for a moment. Though this is where Zikata will sit when the feast commences, he doesn’t wish to wait. Leaning in, he whispers at length into the human’s ear. Though whatever was said seems to bother him, Zakera is pleased when Cy quickly returns his attention to her.

After enjoying a large feast, the Ketlan and humans intermingle for some time at the Sa’kesh village. They marvel at the human’s fabrics and woven clothes, as well as the magnificence of the wooden fortress that looms over the village in the distance like a primitive, jungle castle. Zikata and Katero accompany Cy and Zakera to their home, receiving a considerable tour. Sitting in the study with the pair it is the first time that they’ve had to really speak privately. Zakera knows that there are more important things than their pledge, and during the dance had told Cy that this would be the place to discuss those things.

“Well, if you have things that you would like to discuss, this is as good a time as any. I made sure to receive my mate’s permission.” Cy grins, holding Zakera’s hand.

“A wise decision.” Zikata chuckles.

“Yes. There are a few things.” Katero sighs sullenly.

“I have many plans for the future!” Zikata cuts in, avoiding the unpleasant topic. “With homes being built day and night, weapons being produced in large numbers and many volunteers for the scouting parties, I plan to expand in the direction of many other Ketlan tribes.”

“I didn’t know you knew where they were.” Cy looks surprised.

“We do not, in truth. The Kelanethaka once lived in a cluster of many tribes, many weeks away. Those Ketlan were much like the ones you have encountered, but the Kelanethaka were different. We have never sacrificed or sought war, nor do we mate freely once we reach adulthood. Our pledge was very different and they often targeted us. One day, before my father’s father was born, our people simply left to seek a better land and to live away from all other tribes.” Zikata explains.

“I don’t blame you. I would have done the same.” Cy remarks.

“Now, however, with the weapons and training that you and your people have given us, we plan to go back. We will make them live as we do and adopt our ways, and those who resist will feel the metal of our blades.”

“And for that, you have my full support!” Cy chirps.

“Though I have wondered...” Zikata murmurs.

“Yes?”

“We are already much stronger, but victory is not guaranteed. If you were to teach us more, such as how to make armor or give us even stronger weapons, we would be certain to prevail. In exchange, we would be at your service, to defend the Sa’kesh from all foes.” Zikata offers.

Zakera turns to Cy, wondering if this would be a solution to the kingdom that seeks to destroy them. The human strokes his chin for a moment, contemplating the possibilities.

"These other Ketlan tribes you would conquer... Their people would join you?" Cy asks.

"Yes." Zikata nods.

"As our tribes are so closely linked, I wonder if you would agree to something."

"Name it." Zikata grins.

"We allow our people to live in whichever village they choose, to support whichever tribe they choose, including your conquered enemies. Ketlan and human could pick their home between the Sa'kesh and the Kelanethaka." Cy offers.

Zikata's eyes grow wide in surprise, as do everyone else's.

"What would be the purpose of that?" Zikata asks, questioning Cy's motives.

"How many Kelanethaka are truly fond of our pledge?" He begins, turning his head to Zakera.

"Oh..."

"How many other Ketlan can even speak another language besides their own? How many truly see humans as their equals? If I help teach you and make you as strong as the Sa'kesh, you will conquer them all and they will know that Ketlan are strong. They won't see a human face, except as your neighbors as they come to your village. If your entire tribe are fond of the Sa'kesh, who's to say that your new villagers would feel the same? You may soon command an army who don't approve of your connection with humans, or that your own daughter has pledged to one. By allowing our people to mix at will, I hope that we can prevent an uprising in your village, or even a war between our people in the distant future." Cy explains.

Zikata is at a loss for words. Cy clearly isn't ignorant of the world around him. The gravity of their alliance only now begins to sink into Zikata's mind. The decades of only knowing his own people has made him ill-equipped for the reality of the road ahead and he becomes abruptly and acutely aware that Cy and Katero's worries are justified. Lowering his head, he sighs and nods.

"Katero had already brought up similar fears. I did not believe that my people would ever be a threat, but I admit that I did not consider the prospect of hundreds or even thousands of new Ketlan disagreeing with our relationship as they join my tribe and adopt our ways. It is a distinct possibility that they will reject the Sa'kesh." Zikata begins.

"Is there anything that I should know about? Any dissent or rumors of dissent that you'd like to share?" Cy asks.

It becomes clear to Zikata that Katero must have told him about Fekolza at some point. He can't help but chuckle at the realization. He looks to Cy and sits back in his chair, pressing his fingertips together before him.

"There *is* a group of Ketlan who have opposed our connection with humans from the start. Hitoren was the most outspoken, and urged me to break contact with the fortress long before you arrived. I shamefully admit that in private he urged me to kill you and your friends while you slept that first night. Even now, there is a growing group who disagree with my daughter's choice of mate, and though they are very small in number, Katero worries that they are dangerous. The other Ketlan, however, see how you have advanced us. Brick homes, roads, swords, and hopefully more. They adore the Sa'kesh, and I do believe that if given the chance, many would join you freely and embrace your banner as their own." Zikata sighs.

"That is my hope!" Cy exclaims.

"I beg your pardon?" Zikata raises a brow.

"I want to build a great tribe that is inclusive to all races."

"Even the Kaladez and Zajak?" Zikata quips.

"All *intelligent* races." Cy chuckles.

"Human, Ketlan and Zelkona all living together?" Zikata asks.

"Zel-who?" Cy sounds confused.

"Another race. There are no Zelkona in this area. I will teach you of them later." Zakera swiftly answers.

"Oh, well then yes! I want to build a great nation where we can all live in peace, help each other, and prosper together. If you intend to conquer these other Ketlan tribes, I don't want you to build an army that might one day crush us. Agree to allow our peoples to live with whatever tribe they choose and we'll teach you much more than just how to make weapons and fight."

"What else is there?" Zikata tilts his head in confusion.

"We'll change you whole world. Trust me." Cy grins.

He holds out his hand to the chieftain, who looks down at the gesture. Scratching his chin with a white claw, he turns his jade green eyes up to the human. Zikata glances over to Zakera and then Katero, who both nod in agreement. His lips curling around his snout in a pleased grin, he takes Cy's hand, gripping tightly.

"It shall be done." Zikata answers.

"Good. This is the beginning of a whole new age... We have a lot of work ahead of us."