

The Seventh Realm: Volume Two

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 26: With Extreme Prejudice

In the early-afternoon of the second day of their journey, Johnny and Katero lean against the railing while his men lounge on the main deck. Having spent yesterday afternoon and evening cleaning the ship, they enjoy the fruits of their labor. Cy and Zakera emerge from the superstructure and look to their close companions. Cy pats both men on the back as he joins them at the rails, Zakera standing just behind him

“Enjoying the view?” He asks them.

“Very much. I have never been on a ‘ship’ before.” Katero answers.

“I’ve missed it myself.” Johnny adds.

Looking to the beach in the distance, Johnny notices something amiss. Katero narrows his eyes and grips the rails, leaning closer. Atop the massive waves of vibrant yellow sand, they can see little figures in the distance.

“What are those? Kaladez or something?” Johnny asks.

“They do not look like Kaladez.” Katero answers.

Cy returns inside as Zakera strains to see as well. He swiftly returns with a set of powerful binoculars from the pilothouse, holding them out to Johnny who was the first to notice. Taking the binoculars, he gasps and nearly drops them into the water, caught by the strap at the last minute by Cy.

“Watch it, man! I can’t just buy another set of these!” He exclaims.

“I... Look!” Johnny points.

Peering through the binocular’s, Cy’s jaw drops at the sight. In the distance are strange, humanoid creatures. They are bipedal, tailed beings but appear unlike the Kaladez or the Ketlan. Unable to get a clear look, Cy examines the optics, which he is unfamiliar with. On the top plate he sees “10-30x80mm” before a small rotating knob. Turning the knob, he looks through the optics again and zooms in, adjusting the picture until it is clear. He is amazed by the image before him. Eager to look for herself, Zakera asks for the binoculars and Cy is quick to hand them over.

“Oh! They must be Zelkond!” She exclaims before passing the optics to Katero.

“They are exactly as described!” He says rather excitedly.

“You’ve never seen them before?” Johnny asks in surprise.

“No.” Cy answers for them, leaning on the rails.

“Cy is correct. We have only heard of the Zelkond from stories.” Zakera adds.

“They were said to be a common race seen in the cluster of tribes where our forefathers once lived, before the Kelanethaka migrated to our current home. None of us have encountered a Zelkond in generations.” Katero explains.

“Fascinating!” Johnny chirps, taking the optics.

He turns to Cy and slips the strap of the binoculars around his neck, earning a mouthed 'thank you'. Looking through again, Johnny closely examines the figures with the powerful binoculars. A race of beings that could best be described as raptor-people stand on the beach. Their heads remind him of the classic depictions, with a few slight differences; a subtle curve past their eyes leads to a tall and broad snout, and though their eyes look to be similarly placed, both can stare straight ahead at once. Canted teardrop nostrils flare at the top corners of the front of their snouts. None have visible ears, fins, spikes or feathers.

They look at the large and distant object floating past them on the great lake, pointing fingers with long, curved claws. They speak with lips that not only conceal sharp, spikey teeth, but that can form intricate motions. From the way they shape their words, Johnny can almost lip-read Ketlanic. Their hands look humanoid, with four fingers and a thumb, though their feet are digitigrade and have four thick toes, each capped with a frighteningly large claw. A long, whip-like tail runs behind the creatures, tapering from a rather thick base to a pointed tip, that easily reaches the ground beneath their feet. Instead of reptilian scales, they appear to have a shiny, dense hide, like that of a wet dolphin or walrus.

They wear primitive clothes like the Kelanethaka. The males only wear a loin cloth, but the females have a simple hide top that drapes over one shoulder, apparently made of a single hide, and a matching skirt. Some females wear only a loin cloth like the males; their visible, human-like breasts draw the teenager's eyes like magnets. Breaking the hormone induced trance, Johnny continues his examination and can't help but notice the vast differences in the species genders. Though he cannot tell their height from this range, he notes that the females are considerably taller, ranging from six to twelve inches more than the males. Though the females have shapely and attractive figures, they all look toned and athletic.

The males, though shorter, look very stocky and somewhat muscular; their decreased height doesn't appear to be a handicap when compared against the females. Aside from their difference in size, there is also a striking difference in coloration and pattern. The males appear in conventional, usually solid colors of olive green, tan, brown, gray, and black, with amber, yellow, cobalt blue or jade green eyes. A few males have bland two-tone hides, such as a black body and gray chin, chest and belly. The females, however, often have two or three colors and a pattern or two. Spots, stripes, swirls, two-tone and three-tone are common and sometimes combined, mixed with vivid shades of red, green, yellow, blue, orange, purple, pink, white, silver, gold, teal, etc.

While some females also have hides like the males, they are mixed with vibrant colors, such as a female with orange stripes on a black body, or a two-toned female with a tan hide and purple chin, chest, belly and groin. Johnny couldn't help but gaze at the latter for a few moments. The female's eyes are also quite vibrant, being all of the colors of the males as well as red, orange, silver, gold, violet, cyan, etc. Compared to the Ketlan, the Zelkona, or at least the females, are as vibrant, varied and intriguing. By now, everyone, even Norv, has come out for a moment to take a look at the creatures. As they gain distance from the camp, Johnny silently wonders if he will ever see these being again, close up and in the flesh.

"Well, that was something... Zelkona, huh?" Cy says, turning to Zakera.

"Falling in love all over again?" Yasmin teases him.

"Hell no. I'm spoken for." Cy grins, wrapping an arm around Zakera.

After an uneventful day, the crew turn in for a short rest. The course and speed set by Norv and Rico meant that they would be off of the coast of King Roland's capital once the night moon reached its zenith; it is when they plan to strike, as nearly all of the tribal

inhabitants of Monala sleep at night. Staying within eyesight of the coast, they slow the ship, approaching at a quarter speed. Looking through the powerful binoculars, they examine the edge of the capital city from nearly a half a nautical mile away. The dim light of candlelight in the castle's windows and the torches of patrolling guards are the only sources of light besides the night moon itself.

They note that the castle has outposts on five sides, forming two-thirds of an octagon that leaves a portion unprotected. Cy theorizes that these defenses are new and still under construction. To their surprise, the kingdom does not seem to utilize any form of fishing, but must survive off of farming and ranching. Of course, tribute is probably also given to the king by his satellite, hunter-gatherer villages. The shoreline is almost entirely undefended, and does not even have docks; the portion that views the great lake is the same portion of the castle without outposts. The castle is about five hundred meters from the shore, just over a quarter of a mile. Though undefended, the crew knows that this large field will be a very precarious obstacle.

"It's almost time..." Cy turns to the others. "Get ready, and we'll meet on the deck in fifteen minutes."

The crew disperse as Norv lowers the anchor and Rico shuts down much of the electrical systems. Cy and Zakera head down to their cabin where they put on their disguises and prepare their weapons. Cy puts on a dark gray cloak over a dark gray tunic and matching pants with black hide boots; the clothes of a typical peasant makes for a wonderful disguise. To finish off the costume, he pulls up the hood and wraps a solid black keffiyeh around his face, emulating many revolutionaries. Zakera puts on a maroon and silver dress, but struggles to hide her tail underneath it without it revealing itself. A matching hood covers her head and hides her feline ears.

Cy helps her cut slits into the sides of the dress for her to hide her hands from sight, as her claws prevent the easy wearing of human gloves. The slits also allow her to access her holster and kukri knife. The dress itself is long enough to almost cover her paw-like feet, though it doesn't give her much in the way of movement. Cy prepares the weapons that he's chosen for the job, loading his customized Glock 22 with 9x19mm Parabellum barrel and sound suppressor. He loads the S&W 39-2 'Hush Puppy' and hands the pistol and suppressor to Zakera. Due to the nature of their mission they cannot carry any large rifles or visible blades, hiding everything under coats or cloaks.

As a precaution, Cy brings his Micro-Uzi and three magazines that each hold thirty rounds. Cy brings his cykera metal recurved knife and his chain whip, but wraps the whip tightly in a strip of cloth to prevent the links from clanking together as he moves. Yasmin prepares her only viable weapons, taking her Bersa Thunder 9 Pro and her KaBar knife. While working for J.T. she was never sent out to perform hits in the same manner that Cy was, and did not have any weapons that wouldn't already have been seen in the hands of his men. Katero, having never been trained with firearms, uses only his recurved knife, a gift from his friend, Cy.

They each wear costumes as well, with Yasmin wearing a black and blood red tunic, black pants, black hide boots, and a gray keffiyeh, borrowed from Cy and worn in a very similar fashion. Though Mirkon and the others tried to outfit her with a dress like Zakera, Cy knew that she would die before putting on such apparel. Katero wears a single article of clothing; a dark blue, long and flowing hooded outfit that seems very similar to a Moroccan Djellaba. He too struggles to hide his tail but manages to control it, keeping it tucked close to one leg.

Only these four are going on the mission; Johnny stays on the Malevolence to guard it with Cy's Franchi PA8 shotgun, while Rico and Norv will both be waiting with the dinghy, which they will use to take

the others ashore. They take Cy's Bushmaster XM15E2S rifle and a one hundred round C-Mag for personal defense, should they need it. They meet on the deck of the Malevolence and Johnny and Rico lower the dinghy over the side as Norv sits within. Cy carries a set four, water resistant two-way radio transceivers, equipment kept aboard the Malevolence for emergency use. He turns them on and sets their channels, handing Johnny one, and Emric the second. The last two, he turns the volume down until they are almost silent, handing the third to Yasmin.

"Katero, stay with Yasmin when we make it inside. Zakera will stay with me; we'll head for the living quarters, and *quietly* take out as many as we can." Cy tells them.

They all nod in agreement and prepare mentally prepare themselves for the task ahead. Rico and the four assassins climb over the side and down the rope ladder, carefully entering the dinghy as it bobs with the waves of the pristine lake. Zakera seems a little nervous, as does Katero, but Cy and Yasmin look like statues. If they feel anything at all, they certainly aren't showing it. Norv detaches the dinghy from the Malevolence and pushes off as he heads towards the shore, keeping the engine at a slow, steady and quiet pace. They are careful not to bounce the dinghy in the water too much, and stay as low as possible to minimize their silhouette.

The trip to the shoreline feels as though it takes all night. Zakera grabs onto Cy's hand, her body trembling. He grips her hand tightly and looks to her, only his eyes visible through the opening of his wrapped keffiyeh.

"It'll be okay. I won't let anything happen to you." He says softly.

"I trust you, my love. I am just worried." She replies.

"I am too." He nods.

“Are you smiling under there?” She asks lightheartedly, trying to ease her internal tension.

“What do you think?” He winks.

Katero watches the shore, suddenly motioning for them to lower even further. Norv turns off the engine, letting the dinghy drift closer to the shore in silence; a group of men seem to be walking along the water’s edge, though they don’t appear to be guards. The dinghy drifts closer to the shore and the men stop. They appear to be looking in their direction, but Katero and Zakera peek over and look unworried; trusting their superior eyesight, the humans relax. Soon, they turn and continue walking down the beach. The crew breathes a sigh of relief as they start the engine back up. They head closer to the shore, and soon the dinghy bumps the dark and rocky ground.

Cy steps off first as the wind gently blows his dark gray cloak and hood. The other three leave the dinghy as Rico and Norv hold their positions within. Rico bears the Bushmaster rifle, keeping it hidden just beneath the edge of the small boat. They have finally made it to the capital, and now it is time. The squad of four moves quickly but quietly, making their way across the field of dark purple grasses. The darkness of the night and the color of the grass give the field the appearance of a void, their feet disappearing beneath them as they move closer to the castle. Hopefully, they will remain unnoticed until their task is completed.

They make it to the stone walls and scout around in teams of two. Cy and Zakera move left while Katero and Yasmin take the right. They suddenly spot their first problem; the castle has one heavily guarded entrance, probably near a barracks on the opposite side. Though there are windows on the second level, the only option is to climb. The castle is made of unevenly carved stones with already flaking mortar between them. Some of the stones actually jut out a few centimeters. Cy and Yasmin will have little trouble climbing the ten feet or so to the windows, but Zakera and Katero’s digitigrade feet will have much more difficulty doing so.

Climbing up to the second floor, Yasmin enters first and finds absolutely no one. Joining her, Cy is baffled by the lack of sounds coming from the castle. Even at night there should be *some* patrols, especially near the windows. Looking around, he finds a set of tapestries, quietly pulling them down and fashioning a crude rope for their Ketlan companions. Lowering the tapestry rope, Zakera clings tightly to it as Cy pulls her up first. Yasmin returns the suppressed pistol to her once she scurries through the window. Katero is pulled up last, without any of them being seen. The darkness of the night and the distance from the outposts makes the assassins nigh impossible to spot.

They move slowly in their designated teams of two with Cy and Zakera going first, as they have the only suppressed pistols to use and Zakera has become rather proficient. Yasmin and Katero cover the rear with their knives while their companions search for the staircase to the next floor. Without a layout, Cy assumes that the quarters of the most important inhabitants will be on the top floor; the castle has four floors in total. To their shock, there are no guards beyond those who stand in the outposts and at the front gate. After a short search, a spiral staircase is found, again with no guards present. The squad then sticks together, moving silently through the wooden interior of the castle. They continue the search, checking several rooms but all are empty.

“What the fuck is going on here? Is our king in another castle?” Yasmin whispers to Katero.

“Let’s get to the top floor and see what happens.” Cy whispers back.

Reaching a staircase that heads up to the fourth floor, they finally spot two guards, their backs to the walls of the stairwell and facing each other. With no other choice but to eliminate them, Cy and Zakera take out their suppressed pistols. Yasmin and Katero creep

past them and toward the edges of the stairwell, waiting for the others to make their move. Cy takes a deep breath and turns to Zakera. He gives her a subtle head nod and they take aim. They open fire, striking the guards in their necks and heads from nearly ten meters away. The guards slump over but Katero and Yasmin dash in and grab them, keeping them from thudding loudly on the floor.

Dragging the two corpses just out of sight, they hide them in the shadows. They head up the staircase where a single guard patrols in front of the stairwell, a halberd in hand. Yasmin draws her KaBar knife and creeps in. She tosses the knife gently into the air, grabbing the handle as it falls, the blade now facing downward as she holds it in a stabbing position. She crouches near the guard, raising her hand high. She lunges forward and grabs his chin, moving from left to right as she slashes his throat deeply. Arterial spray violently paints the stone walls as he gurgles, briefly struggling before his blood loss causes unconsciousness and death.

She lowers his body down to the floor and drags him from the stairwell, placing him in a dark corner and blowing out a set of candles that would illuminate his corpse. Wiping off the bloody blade onto his tunic, she returns to the staircase and motions for them to finish their ascent. They move through the final level. It is almost too easy. They turn from the stairwell and find a long hallway that is lined with doors. All of the doors are closed, but none seem to have locks, only simple wooden and wrought iron latches. The squad carefully opens the nearest door and sees only a dark room. Katero moves in, drawing his knife as he is able to see well in the dark. He disappears inside.

They hear a muffled groan, as Katero has placed his hand over someone's mouth. Suddenly, they hear other sounds coming from the darkness; a knife stabs into flesh and nicks a bone. Several of these sounds emanate from the darkness before the groaning stops. As the room falls silent, they hear the dripping of blood as runs from the body and spatters on the floor from an elevated position, most likely

a bed. Katero emerges with a confident nod and a sinister smile, his black Schrade knife tinted a dark crimson. They move to another room, but Katero stops as he looks inside. He turns to Cy and leans closer, a worried look on his face.

“Children...” Katero whispers.

“So?!” Yasmin whispers.

She takes hold of Katero and pushes him toward the door, silently demanding that he lead the way. Taking the humans inside, Zakera stays behind. She doesn't wish to see younglings' lives ended. Katero brings Yasmin close to a bed while Cy remains just within the door, standing guard. Yasmin's eyes are starting to adjust to the darkness, and from the faint light of a window. She can barely see a figure laying on a bed before her, and it's quite small. She draws her knife and readies herself. Katero seems uncomfortable and turns away. Yasmin brings her knife to the victim's throat, quickly and forcefully drawing it over the flesh of their neck.

The victim gurgles and squirms as they bleed out, drowning in their own blood. A second person stirs so Yasmin pounces, violently stabbing the pint-sized figure in the dark void before her eyes.

“Damn, I better not have dinged my blade.” Yasmin grumbles.

Katero is shocked at her coldness, but that is why he is not lo'kan, and why he has nightmares. The trio creep back outside, but Zakera is gone. Cy silently flies into a panic, looking left and right for his mate. As he turns his head to look down the hallway, he can see her paw-like feet and swaying tail as she kneels just beyond a doorway. He quietly moves towards her to see that she has slashed the throat of a guard who nearly caught them. She killed him so quietly, they didn't even notice from under twenty feet away.

“That’s my girl.” Cy whispers to her.

She turns back and grins, bearing her teeth happily as they head back down the hall. Cy drags Zakera’s victim and slides him into the first room to keep him out of sight. They slowly open up another room, but this one is well lit. Taking out their pistols, Cy and Zakera shove the door open and charge in as quietly as they are able, startling an older man at a desk. He bolts to his feet, his chair sliding loudly across the floor. They both fire at center-mass before he can yell out. His body slumps back against his table and nearly slides off, but Cy rushes up and grabs him before he can fall onto the wooden floorboards. Cy lays him down onto the floor as he puts the smoking suppressor of his Glock to his head, pulling the trigger one last time.

Brain matter leaks out of the exit wound, pushing out of his skull and dripping gray ooze and thick, ruby colored fluid onto the floor. Cy leaves his eyes open, turning his head to face him for a moment. He gets up and they quietly exit the hall. A man suddenly emerges from the door across the way, as if drawn to the sound of the sliding chair. Katero pounces on him instinctively, dropping him to the ground with a loud thud as he bites into his neck, not having had the time to take out his knife. As the man squirms beneath him, unable to scream, Katero takes the knife and jabs it deep into his side several times. The man dies in slow agony.

“Shit...” Cy mutters quietly as he holds his pistol down the hall.

Just then, another door opens and a woman appears, wearing a silky looking night gown. She gasps, but Cy fires repeatedly, striking her three times in the chest as she falls back, slumped against the door. The squad shifts into high gear. Cy and Zakera rush up to the fallen woman. Yasmin watches behind them with her unsuppressed Bersa pistol drawn. Katero steps out of the room, blood trickling down his face and running from his chin as he walks towards Cy and

Zakera. Suddenly, a door flies open and another man grabs him from behind. Katero spins around, pushing him back and dropping him with a solid kick to his chest.

The naked man falls back into his room, where he was sleeping alone. Katero steps in with his knife now drawn, flipping it over to hold the knife with the tip aimed downward. He steps on the man's stomach as his claws dig into his flesh. The man groans as Katero leans in.

"Wretched beast... Who art thou?" The man grumbles.

"Sa'kesh..." Yasmin answers as she walks in.

Katero smiles as he jams the knife into his chest. He groans and chokes on his own blood as Katero turns the knife slowly inside of his wound. Yasmin steps up to the body, clutching her knife as Katero heads for the door. He peers down the hall to see Cy and Zakera creeping towards the dead woman. Looking inside, they see a very nice bed with a carved wooden frame. They enter the room and look around but don't see anyone else inside. Katero enters the room and glances to his comrades. Cy spins around and looks to Zakera, shrugging his shoulders. Heading for the hall to continue the search, Cy is startled by a man's face peaking around the corner.

Yasmin laughs as she holds the severed head of the man that Katero had just killed, using it as a prop for her practical joke.

"The fuck, Yaz..." Cy gasps.

"Don't be such a baby. Come on. Roland's got to be here somewhere..." Yasmin replies.

"There aren't many rooms left." Cy sounds worried.

"Wait..." Zakera grabs his shoulder.

Cy turns to her, looking at her as his bride as she sniffs the air. Katero joins in, noticing the same unique smell. They both turn toward a large wardrobe and casually approach it. Katero stands beside the armoire, holding his knife at the ready. Cy stands at Zakera's side with his pistol aimed at the doors. Zakera flings the door open, startling a fat, pasty and meek looking human male who trembles inside.

"Nay, prithee! Spareth me!" The man calls out.

Yasmin drags the woman's body inside and closes the door behind her before dropping her corpse to the floor with a thud.

"Nay! Thee hast hath killed mine own jointress!" The man cries.

"Who art thou?" Cy calmly asks.

"Roland..." The man chokes out.

Without hesitation, Cy and Zakera reach in simultaneous and drag the man from the armoire. He screams, but there are no guards on this floor. Cy punches Roland in the face and throws him to the ground. He holsters his pistol and draws his knife, waving it in the king's face as he crawls away from his assailant, hugging the floor as though it can protect him.

"Who art thou?! What doth thee wanteth?" Roland begs.

"We art the Sa'kesh... And we rejecteth thy offers."

Cy kneels down, pulling the knife across the man's stomach as hard as he can. Roland cries out in terror and pain as he bleeds profusely from the wound. Cy savors his pain, eager to slowly kill this king who would destroy the Ketlan and his burgeoning tribe.

"I shouldst hast known twas thee at which hour I saw those filthy beasts! Only the Sa'kesh wouldst constort with such lesser beings. Bid me... Art thee Cyrus? The one who hast amorous rites with beast maidens?" Roland arrogantly taunts Cy.

**"I am, but I only mateth with one mistress." Cy says proudly.
"How doest everyone knoweth yond?"**

"Ask him where his army is, if he is really the king." Yasmin says.

"I doth not hast an army..." Roland answers, understanding her question.

"But thy envoy..." Cy thinks aloud.

Roland chuckles as he turns his eyes to the confused assassins.

"Mine own castle wast hath brought to this landeth whole. Many of mine own vassals were not there at which hour the storm cameth. The sight of mine own castle and mine own few guards did spread terror. The first tribes did bow to me without having to square. The rest did see mine own tribes and surrendered. I doth not hast an army." Roland explains.

"He was fucking bluffing the whole time..." Yasmin shakes her head in astonishment.

"Thou art the first who hast not hath believed me." Roland chuckles.

"What an ass hole." Cy scoffs.

"Why are you doing this to the Ketlan?" Zakera suddenly asks.

"What does it matter?" Katero snaps.

"The Ketlan art but vile, talking beasts. Ketlan breedeth freely, doth not bethink, and cannot work together without killing each other."

"Just like the tribes back on Earth." Cy quips.

"Have you never thought of coexisting, like the Sa'kesh?" Katero asks, tilting his head in confusion.

"If it be true we couldst, liketh the Sa'kesh, many may tryeth to interbreed. Thee and thy mistress art an abomination. A human and Ketlan doth not birth human or Ketlan children, but mongrels." The king replies.

"Py'sel?" Zakera murmurs.

"Half-mixed..." Cy grins.

"You've seen half breeds?" Yasmin asks.

"Nay, but we hast hath heard of their existence. In any case, py'sel art a threat to humanity." Roland coughs as he speaks.

"Enough of this... Behold the visage of thy executioner." He smiles as he pulls the keffiyeh from his face.

Cy stabs the knife into the king's side. Roland begins to chuckle through his pain as blood leaks from his mouth. Cy brings the knife up to his throat, ready to simply be rid of this man. Cy pulls hard, slashing his throat open. As he falls back and chokes, Cy stabs the knife into his stomach and draws it across, exposing his intestines. Katero averts his eyes from the gore, but both Yasmin and Zakera watch on. Cy rises from his knees, only for Yasmin to take his place and begin sawing at the king's neck with her KaBar knife, sloppily beheading Roland.

"I am glad that he is dead..." Zakera says as she embraces Cy.

"Me too, my love." Cy replies, kissing her cheek.

"Do you think we should keep it as a trophy?" Yasmin jokes, holding up Roland's head.

"I think it would be more useful if we displayed it." Cy smiles.

"Good idea!" Zakera chirps.

They move from room to room, chopping off the heads of all of their victims and placing them into a large sack. The heads of the small children seem to bother Katero considerably as Yasmin dumps them into the sack in the light of the hallway. Cy takes a torch and looks at the wooden floor, walls, and the tapestries hanging from the walls.

“It’s dark in here... Let’s brighten it up a little.”

Zakera and Yasmin both smile as he slowly extends his hand, tilting the torch and touching the center of a tapestry. The fabric quickly catches fire. Cy stays there long enough to see it fully engulfed in flames before the assassins race downstairs. They fly through the stairwells, passing the dead guards as they rush to return to the second-floor window that they had originally entered. Cy holds out his suppressed Glock, just in case.

“It’s done. We’re coming out.” Yasmin says over the radio.

“Copy that. Hurry up. The castle’s burning.” Rico replies.

“Damn straight.” Cy chuckles.

Reaching the second floor, several guards stand by the window, examining the crude rope ladder. Cy begins firing, killing one guard as the others scatter in terror. They throw the sack of heads from the window as Cy and Yasmin climb over the edge, trying to get closer to the ground. Zakera and Katero each leap out of the window, landing gracefully on the grass below their human companions. A few feet below the window and six feet above ground level, Cy pushes off, dropping down and rolling as he lands. Yasmin follows suit, but lands hard on her ankle, spraining it. Katero grabs her arm and pulls it over his shoulder, helping her walk as they return to the dinghy.

Yasmin is quick to grab the sack of heads with her free hand. Cy turns back for a moment to admire the flames that push out of the windows. The castle is quickly engulfed, soldiers and citizens running in terror. The light illuminates them as they flee and attracts the attention of several soldiers, who yell out to them and warn the others.

“Shit...” Cy pulls out his Micro-Uzi.

“Stop right there!” Yasmin yells, pointing a hand while holding the heavy sack.

The soldiers stop, looking at them for a moment. One of them looks to the sack, which drips blood from the bottom.

“Would you like to see what we have here?” Yasmin grins sinisterly.

Holding the sack before her, Katero takes a bottom corner, allowing Yasmin to release the bag. She legs go and the sack turns over, dumping the contents onto the grass between them and the soldiers. The severed heads roll out, including that of their king, his wife, two children, and what they assume is a general or two. The soldiers drop their weapons as they stare at the heads in shock.

“What hath thee done...” A soldier chokes out.

“Set you free... Go home.” Cy answers.

The soldiers slowly step back before turning around and running. Katero and Yasmin hobble towards the dinghy as Cy and Zakera keep watch. It takes some time to walk to the coast. More soldiers appear, most likely brought by the two that Cy had allowed to live. Still loyal to their dead king, they give chase with swords,

slings, a ballista mounted on a set of wheels, and a few bows and arrows. The soldiers sling rocks, shooting arrows and bolts at the assassins but missing the dark figures who run through a darkened field. Cy and Zakera turn and open fire, striking a few from a great distance and frightening the others back, the loud noise and muzzle flashes terrifying their pursuers. They make it to the dinghy without injury and hop inside.

Katero and Rico push the small boat into the water as Norv opens fire with Cy's Bushmaster. Cy follows suit with his Micro-Uzi while the Ketlan and human climb into the boat. As it drifts back, Norv sets down the rifle to take control of the engine, steering the boat away from the shoreline. Rico takes up the Bushmaster and continues firing, but falls back into the boat as a large ballista bolt flies right past him. The boat suddenly turns violently as they all roll into the bottom, pressing against each other. The boat circles in the water, creeping closer to the shore as the soldiers keep firing bolts and arrows. Cy takes up the Bushmaster and Zakera takes his Micro-Uzi as Rico looks to Norv.

The ballista bolt that Rico dodge sticks out of Norv's chest, having plowed straight through him. He lays dead across the stick of the engine, pushing the dinghy in circles. Rico yanks his body off of the engine and takes the stick, quickly turning the boat away from the shore and opening up the throttle. Everyone flops back as the boat picks up speed. They soon move out of range of the stones, arrows and bolts of the soldiers, escaping nearly unscathed. Cy sets down his rifle and turns to Zakera, checking her for injuries.

"Are you okay?!" He asks.

She nods, shaken but unharmed. Yasmin and Katero check themselves for injuries as Rico steers the dinghy. They collectively turn to Norv who lays still on the rubber floor of the small boat. Cy gently rolls him over.

“Damn you, Norv.” Cy says, his voice shaking.

“Looks like he found a way out.” Yasmin callously quips.

The dinghy rubs gently against the Malevolence as Johnny lowers the rope ladder and the harness. The occupants slowly and silently climb out of the boat, making their way up to the main deck. Rico and Yasmin hook up the dinghy to its harness before climbing up themselves. Johnny looks over the side and sees a body in the bottom of the small boat. He turns his head away and steps back, seeing everyone but Norv. He doesn’t bother to ask the first and least intelligent question that pops into his mind. Cy and Katero begin pulling up the boat as Yasmin draws in and rolls the rope ladder. No one speaks. They pull the dinghy from the side, setting it on the deck. They remove Norv’s body and set it on the deck before locking the dinghy back in its place.

“I can pilot the ship back to the cove...” Rico says quietly, breaking the silence.

“I know.... Take it slow if you have too. Let’s just go home.” Cy murmurs.

Yasmin and Johnny wash Norv’s blood out of the bottom of the dinghy, pouring the crimson pool into the crystal blue lake below. Cy, Katero and several of his men carefully wrap his body in old sheets. Rico climbs up to the bridge and takes the helm, turning the ship around while staying within eyesight of the coastline. He looks down from the bridge as he watches the others on the deck. They stand around Norv’s body for a while as several of them speak; Rico wishes that he could be down there to perform his own eulogy, but holds the wheel in his hands. Lifting his body to the side, they gingerly push it over the edge, surrendering it to the water.

It is a burial that a lifelong sailor like Norv would have wanted. Rico looks away as the wrapped corpse of his captain slips away beneath the waves. His eyes glance towards the shoreline. He doesn't blame Cy for this, but King Roland the First. If he hadn't shown up and threatened to kill the with his army, this never would have happened. With the brief burial at sea now over, the crew slip into the superstructure and head below deck. Yasmin and Johnny join Rico on the bridge, while Cy, Zakera, Katero and his men all retire in their respective rooms.

"I can't believe he's dead..." Cy mutters, his face buried in his hands.

"It is not your fault, my love." Zakera says comfortingly.

"I know... It's that bastard Roland's fault. Why can't we just be left alone to live in peace?"

Cy lays on his side, his head resting upon her lap.

"I just want it all to stop... I just want us to enjoy our lives."

"We will soon, but it will take work. I trust that you will create a great nation for us and our children." She says, stroking his hair.

"Py'sel... I hope that wasn't just a rumor."

"It... It isn't." Zakera nervously begins.

She takes her hand from his head and Cy immediately sits up, staring at her.

"But... You've never seen one." Cy remarks.

"Yes..."

"Then how do you know?" He sounds perplexed.

Zakera realizes that Cy has no idea that she is hinting at her own pregnancy. She trembles nervously, though she doesn't know why. Her mate has told her many times that he wanted to become a father to their children, and she believes him. Still, speaking the words is hard. She takes a deep breath.

"I know because... I am pregnant with our child."

"What?" He blinks, his eyes growing wide.

"It is why I have been ill in the mornings."

"Oh, Zakera! Why didn't you tell me?!" He asks as he embraces her.

"I knew that if I did, you would not let me join you." She answers.

"You're damn right I wouldn't have."

"I wanted to be with you, my love." She says, stroking his back.

"And I want to be with you. I'm glad you came, but... I just worry about our baby." He says, nuzzling her cheek.

"I am sorry."

"It's okay. Wait... I thought that it normally takes longer to get morning sickness?" He says.

"Perhaps Ketlan females are different?" She shrugs.

"That's entirely possible... How long does it usually take before a Ketlan female gives birth?"

"A whole two seasons and about half the third."

"That's about seven or eight months!" Cy exclaims in surprise.

"It is different for humans?"

"Yeah. It takes a full three seasons."

"Those poor human females." She laments.

"So, when did it happen? Do you know?"

“Morning sickness starts before twenty days. Ketlan girls are taught this because we can count it with our fingers and toes; all we have to do is count each day after mating, and if we hit twenty without falling ill, we are not pregnant. It must have happened during our first mating, after you saved me from the others.” She explains.

“Then in less than eight months we’ll have our first child! I still wish you would have told me earlier, though.”

“I am sorry. Are you mad at me?” Zakera whimpers.

“Mad?! I’m happy! We can actually start a family together! One down, two to go!”

The lovers embrace tightly and a joyful tear runs down Zakera’s snout and toward her chin.

“I love you, Cy!” She says with a little sniffle.

“I love you too, Zakera! My one and only.” He coos, rubbing her back.