

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

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Episode 29: Doubt

Walking through the Kelanethaka village, Johnny passes many new faces and some old, weaving between the citizens as he heads for Gomona's family hut. He had joined Daniel and Chris on a trip to trade more knowledge with the Ketlan, presenting scrolls bearing diagrams and Ketlanic instructions for basic irrigation and agriculture. They only plan to stay for an hour or so, but that's all the time Johnny needs. It's been quite some time since he last saw her but he hopes to make up for his ten days of absence. Approaching her dwelling, which is still a conventional hut in the typical Ketlan construction, he is pleased to see her exiting the home as if on cue. He calls out to her and she turns but her expression isn't excited or even pleasant; she looks nervous and sullen.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asks.

"Hi, Johnny... I am alright." She nods.

"It's good to see you. I was hoping to spend some time with you and maybe catch up." He winks.

"That... Would not be a good idea." She says as she looks down at her feet.

"Why's that?" He asks in surprise.

"I will be an adult soon, and once the ceremony is completed I will no longer be allowed to enjoy you as I once did, unless we are pledged... And that will not happen..."

"... What are you saying?" He raises a brow.

"You are human, and I am Ketlan. I do not like the looks that I receive from some after we are together."

"And you're going to let that stop you?" Johnny snickers.

"It is more than that..."

"What else is it?" He asks.

"You also do not live here; you are gone too much. In the time that you have been away I have found a Ketlan male that I would pledge myself too. I envision myself living beside him and bearing his children. I am sorry, Johnny." She says as she looks to him with glossy eyes.

"Oh... A-alright. Well, I appreciate you telling me honestly."

"You are not angry with me?" She sheepishly asks.

"I'm disappointed, but I'm not angry. You deserve a good Ketlan man. I just hope that he treats you right."

"Thank you, Johnny. You are a good man too. You will find a mate worthy of you soon enough." She says with a pleasant smile.

With that, Johnny steps back and waves before turning around and walking through the town. He isn't heartbroken, but he would be lying if he said that he wasn't flustered. It's hard not to feel some rejection, even with the loss of a purely sexual relationship. Reaching the stream that once ran along the edge of the village but now cuts through the center, a result of their massive expansion, he sits on the ground and looks down at the water. He takes a long drink from his canteen before placing it inside of the stream to refill it. Leaning forward, his long and wavy brown hair runs over his shoulders and alongside his face.

He quickly twists his head to throw it over his shoulders, as one hand steadies him and the other holds his canteen. As his head sharply turns, he catches a glimpse of something. Johnny looks over and sees a lone Ketlan female at least ten meters away, watching him intently with piercing red eyes. She appears to be a juvenile about his

age. Standing to her feet as soon as his eyes land upon her, she turns to leave; Johnny swiftly scans her body. With long and pointy ears, a short snout and a small, fluffy tail shaped like a candle's flame, she has a rabbit-like appearance. She's a dainty creature about five feet and one inch tall, with a thin build and a roughly A-cup bust. Her fur is a soft white and with thin, cherry red stripes adorning her body. Her human-like hair is a matching shade of red, the wavy strands reaching down to her mid-back.

"Looking at something?" A male voice abruptly asks.

A startled Johnny looks back to see a warrior standing beside him. Johnny immediately recognizes the orange Ketlan as Muzalfur, one of the warriors who accompanied them on their journey to assassinate Roland the First. With a little grin on his face, the adult Ketlan kneels down beside the boy, using a clay cup to capture some water for a drink.

"Yeah, I... I saw that girl looking at me." Johnny begins.

"I had noticed." Muzalfur replies, chuckling.

"How are you doing?" Johnny asks.

"I am well. And you?"

"I've been better." Johnny sighs.

"Because of Gomona?"

"You knew about that?!"

"Many did. Gomona and Linsor have not made their relationship or intentions a secret." Muzalfur replies.

"Wonderful... Well, I wish them the best." Johnny sighs again.

"A very mature attitude, Johnny." Muzalfur pats him on the back.

"Hey, who is she?"

"Who?" Muzalfur raises a brow.

"The peppermint. The girl who was just here?" Johnny asks.

"She is Ketlan'ezav. I do not know her name."

"Ketlane-what? I'm still learning." Johnny remarks.

"Ketlan'ezav; one who is alone. This unfortunate title is only granted to juveniles and younglings when their parents die and they are left with no one to raise them. They become the entire tribe's responsibility, until they reach adulthood. Thankfully, they are very rare... Or at least they were before..." Muzalfur pauses.

"Oh... So, is she one of the newcomers?" Johnny hesitantly asks.

"No. She is Kelanethaka and was here when you and your group arrived. You simply did not see her before."

"Johnny!" Daniel calls out.

"What?" Johnny glances back.

"It's time to go."

"Alright! I'll see you later, Muzalfur." Johnny pats the orange Ketlan on the back.

"Take care, Johnny." Muzalfur grins.

"You too."

Early the next morning, Katero rises from his hammock, still living in the same hut that he has occupied since his adulthood and long before Cy and the others arrived. Though offered a home like Zikata's, Katero was far more concerned with the state of their tribe than his personal dwelling. As he puts on his traditional attire, he laments his future actions; if not for the recent events steering him, he could never have imagined himself in this position. He exits his home and heads for the path that leads to the Sa'kesh, repeatedly halting several of his men who wish to follow. Telling them that he is merely making a personal visit, he is not entirely untruthful.

He takes his time as he walks the path, now much wider and considerably worn; it's well-traveled these days when compared to

only a season earlier. With slow and deliberate steps, he contemplates his decision, wishing there was another way. If Zikata hadn't been so ambitious in conquering other tribes or been so trusting after the fact, Katero wouldn't consider leaving. He is simply too frustrated with his leader to continue serving as his war-guide. How can he, when Zikata doesn't even trust his judgment half of the time? After prolonging the trip as much as he can, he finally arrives at the Sa'kesh fortress. Gabriella and Isabella sit outside by the goshan tree in the courtyard, startled when he appears without his usual entourage.

"Katero?! What brings you here?!"

"Hello, Gabby. I am here to speak to Cyrus about something important." He replies.

"Is there trouble at your village again?" Gabby asks, approaching the gate.

"No. This is a personal matter."

Katero walks past the guards and away from the gate, knowing that he won't be granted entry without Cy, Yasmin or Zakera to clear him. More than that, however, he doesn't want the human guards to hear him speak. With a subtle hand motion, he urges her to follow him as he walks away from the guards and to an isolated part of the fence near the rear of the fortress. In truth, Gabriella would have followed regardless.

"What's wrong?" She asks in a hushed voice.

"I... Can you keep a secret?" He asks her in a whisper.

"Of course." She nods, leaning close to the fence.

"I cannot stay with the Kelanethaka anymore."

Gabriella is floored. It takes her a moment before she can speak.

“Why not?” She chokes out.

“Zikata often doesn’t take my advice, and the struggle to manage the newcomers has made my life utterly miserable. I liked things as they were before. Zikata is so eager to expand that he does not see the danger that he is inviting, nor does he listen to me when I reveal it to him. I simply cannot take it anymore. Cyrus is a good friend and has always aided me when I needed him... I would rather live here and be just another villager.” He explains.

“Really?! ... I mean, are you sure?”

Isabella stands in the background, an eyebrow raised as she watches with amusement at her older sister’s behavior.

“I have given it much thought.” He admits with a sullen sigh.

“Well, Cy is in town. He left with Zakera to see the new clinic.”

“Clinic?” He raises a brow.

“It’s the second building on the first block on the main road.” She explains.

“Thank you, Gabby. It was very nice to see you again, by the way.” Katero says with a faint smile.

“You too.”

As the golden and black-spotted Ketlan leaves, his feline tail swaying, Gabriella stares intently and bites her bottom lip. Isabella walks up to her sister, looking up at the young woman. Gabriella doesn’t even notice her stare as they both stand there for some time, saying and doing nothing.

“Do I need to get the hose?” Isabella finally speaks.

“Huh? What?” Gabriella snaps out of her trance.

“There you are! You looked... Interested.” Isabella snickers.

“I haven’t had a man in like... Five or six months.”

“And him not being a man doesn’t bother you?”

“He looks like a man to me! Not a human one, but a man nonetheless.” Gabriella retorts.

“A talking cheetah-thing with a penis isn’t a man.”

“Oh, you don’t like my taste?” Gabriella chuckles.

“Hey, you do you. I just assumed you had standards...” Isabella jeers.

“After seeing Cy and Zakera together for a while, I found it surprisingly easy to overlook their racial differences.” Gabriella says.

“Cy’s a freak.” Isabella snaps.

“Well then forgive me for also being a freak.” Gabriella grins.

“I just don’t get why you can’t find a human dick to ride. There are plenty of them now. Have a few of those, like /do!” Isabella taunts her.

“Yeah, well, I’m not a slut; I’d rather have a single, loyal, caring guy to be with, human or otherwise.” Gabriella replies.

Sitting at a simple wooden desk at Lara’s newly constructed clinic, Cy sits in a chair with Zakera atop his lap. Her tail hooks his waist while his arms wrap gently around hers, careful not to put too much pressure on her belly and its cargo. Lara sits across from them at the desk, while Chris and Daniel stand on either side of her, looking like her personal bodyguards.

“Quite the place you have, Doc.” Cy says.

“Yes, it is. The construction crew worked overtime to finish it for me. Thanks, by the way.” Lara replies.

“So, I assume you wanted to show us more than just the building?”

“Yes, actually. It’s about the Zelkona.” She begins.

“We’ve been conducting interviews and observing the race and have learned quite a bit.” Daniel interjects.

“Well, since we’re here, bore us with the details.” Cy quips.

“Well, you may be interested to know that despite their appearance, they are not actually reptilian, but mammals! They reproduce through sexual intercourse like humans and Ketlan do!” Chris exclaims.

“Really?!” Zakera sounds stunned.

“Yes. They have unique physiological traits, besides their appearance, dense hide and claws. Though their hearing and smell seem to be marginally better than humans, they have dramatically increased strength when compared to humans and Ketlan, which are about the same in that regard. They also have even better vision than the Ketlan, which we’ve tested by placing signs out at various distances and asking them what they said. Every Zelkona could read the furthest sign. In previous tests, humans could only read the first few signs, while Ketlan could read all but the last two.” Lara explains.

“That is a test that I engineered shortly after we first arrived.” Chris chirps.

“You know, I do recall seeing two Zelkona males lifting a pallet of finished bricks that would have taken at least four humans or Ketlan.” Cy remarks.

“Indeed. I’ve done a bit of anthropological research on them as well.” Daniel comments.

“Finally, the interesting stuff.” Cy chuckles.

“They seem to be matriarchal, with Zelkona males always looking to the females for direction. It’s a good thing that you allowed

Zia to remain relatively in charge of her tribe; she clearly respects your authority. It's odd because the females seem to appreciate the aggression and leadership that many of the Sa'kesh males show. After a human foreman barked orders to other workers, I noted the intrigued and... *Interested* looks that he received from a few passing Zelkona females. They also have strong tribal loyalty."

"It's made it very easy to work with them, as they are conformists; they seem to put the tribe first and pay considerable attention to tribal structure, social mores and rules." Chris interjects.

"Yes. They've taken their new status as Sa'kesh to heart and strive to assimilate as best they can. They all work tireless throughout the day and study both English and our culture on their off-duty time in an effort to be better Sa'kesh. Initially, Richard was nervous about teaching them. As you know, he was a journalist before the expedition. He actually quite enjoys being their English teacher, though I suspect that has a lot to do with the somewhat disturbing speed at which they learn." Daniel continues.

"Fascinating!" Cy exclaims.

"Cyrus, are you here?" Katero calls out.

Turning back, the five inside watch as Katero steps into the clinic from outside.

"I apologize. There is a sign that explains that entry without permission is allowed." He says, pointing a clawed thumb at the doorway.

"It's alright. What's wrong, buddy?" Cy asks.

"Just came to visit..."

"Right..." Cy glares suspiciously.

"So... How are the Zelkona adapting?" Katero asks.

"I'm sure you heard; like fish to water." Cy answers.

"That is very good." Katero remarks.

“Indeed. Did you want to tell us why you’re really here?”

“... Please walk with me.” Katero sighs.

Cy gives Zakera a quick kiss before tapping her butt with his hand. She slides off of her mate, who quickly stands to his feet and takes her by the hand. He approaches the door with Zakera right by his side, unsurprising to Katero.

“Let’s walk, buddy.”

Waving goodbye to the others, the three step outside and wander the streets of the village, heading for the farmland so that few ears will overhear them. No sooner than he believes that they’re alone, Katero confides in Cy and Zakera everything that he shared with Gabriella. The pair are flabbergasted by the revelation. Neither could ever imagine that Katero would want to abandon the Kelanethaka for their tribe, regardless of the circumstances.

“Of course you may live here! You didn’t even need to ask.” Cy says.

“Thank you, my friend. I was hoping that I could count on you.” Katero bows his head.

“In fact, if you want to be the Sa’kesh war-guide, all you have to do is say the word.” Cy adds.

“I do not know about that, Cyrus.”

“It won’t be exactly like when you were the Kelanethaka war-guide. After Zakera, my beautiful queen-”

“Cy!” Zakera flushes beneath her fur.

“Yasmin is the second in command. You would more or less share authority, or possibly work right under her. I’ll figure it out later.” Cy finishes.

"I will consider it..." Katero sighs.

"Really though... Why do you want to leave the Kelanethaka so badly?" Zakera asks.

"Speak to your father and you will find out." Katero answers.

"*You* need to stay home and rest. I don't want you dealing with any stress or exerting yourself." Cy says to his mate.

"So worrisome and protective." Zakera giggles.

"Damn straight." He replies, giving her a passionate kiss. "I'll take a few militia and go back with Katero to speak with Zikata. It'll be nice to see how he is doing anyway. We don't ever talk about anything other than politics."

"Alright, but please be careful! If anything happened to you..." Zakera whimpers.

"So worrisome and protective." Cy chuckles

"Damn straight." She replies, giving him a passionate kiss.

After returning to the fortress, Cy gathers a few militia to accompany him and then says goodbye to his mate. Leaving with Katero for the Kelanethaka, they march casually along the path as though nothing were out of the ordinary. Reaching the village, Katero returns to his duties while Cy visits his pledge-father, who is quite surprised to see him arriving unannounced.

"Hello, father!"

"Hello, my son! What brings you to our humble village?" Zikata asks as he embraces Cy.

"Katero came to visit and it occurred to me that I haven't ever done the same. We always seem to find ourselves speaking about tribal matters, exchanging knowledge or citizens, or dealing with bloodthirsty creatures and racist kings. For once we should just sit and talk about nothing in particular." Cy explains.

“While I would love to do just that, I find that I have little time for such pleasantries.” Zikata laments.

“I hope I did not waste the walk!” Cy laughs.

“Exercise is never a waste, but you may accompany me while I carry out my tasks for the day, if you’d like. You are family and are always welcome.” Zikata offers with a warm smile.

“That would be nice.”

Cy and his small group of guards follow Zikata and his entourage as he continues his daily routine, maintaining small talk throughout. Zakera and the pregnancy, the loss of their friends, their favorite foods, and the history of the Zajak and Kaladez are all spoken of. It isn’t until Zikata asks about the Zelkona and how well they are adapting to life among the humans that the conversation takes a productive turn. Cy regales him of how well the Zelkona are adapting; how eager they are to work with them, how swiftly they learn English, and how readily they adopt the ways of the Sa’kesh, which are simply copied over from the Kelanethaka.

“Really?! I would have assumed that they would struggle to adapt to our ways.” Zikata admits in astonishment.

“You would think that, but the Zelkona seem more than eager to conform. They will be the most Sa’kesh out of all of us!” Cy chuckles.

“And their English?”

“Soon, I believe they will push to ban the use of Ketlanic altogether, as it isn’t ‘Sa’kesh enough’.”

“Amazing.” Zikata remarks.

“Are your new villagers not adapting as swiftly?” Cy asks.

“To a point. They are learning English, albeit slowly, but...” Zikata pauses.

“But what, father?”

"The new Ketlan whom we have brought back are finding our customs to be somewhat... Difficult." Zikata sighs.

"Is there anything that I can do to help?" Cy offers.

"I doubt it."

"We can always just talk about it. You're family, so don't hesitate to call upon me for anything." Cy says, reassuringly resting his hand on Zikata's shoulder.

Zikata glances around before looking back at Cy and his men. He motions for them to follow and leads them away from the center of the village, heading for the edge of his territory. They walk in silence until they are out of earshot; the range of a Ketlan's hearing far exceeds humans and Zelkona.

"I have many growing problems as a result of the expansion. I did not realize that conquering foreign tribes would have such challenges *after* the battle. Perhaps if we have conquered them with superior numbers and not advanced weapons and training, we could handle it." Zikata speaks a mile a minute.

"Woah, relax. Calm down, father." Cy grabs him by the shoulders. "Take a deep breath and tell me what's wrong."

"Alright... The newcomers resist our ways. They practice polygamous and public mating as adults; they do not wish to pledge to a single mate, instead mating randomly as the animals do. Females do not even know who seeds which child, raising them all on their own and without a father! It insults our race and degrades us! Many of them want a ritual sacrifice to their tribal god and I have heard rumors that they would prefer to kill a child, and *not* one of their own."

"What?!" Cy cannot help but interject.

"Some of them have even begun protesting their right to sacrifice a child. All of this has bred discontent among *my* people, some of whom no longer have faith in my decisions. It has created a dangerous group of Kelanethaka who are led by Fekolza. Every confrontation

sees another join his ranks, and I fear that if I cannot control this situation, I may be eliminated and replaced.”

“A coup... Shit...” Cy murmurs.

“Though we have better weapons and training, the new blood nearly match us in number, and I would hate to have to use the sword to control or eliminate them, but if I do not... Fekolza may do it anyway, *after* he kills me. I have no idea what to do...” Zikata whimpers.

The elder feline Ketlan sits on the ground and hangs his head, his cyan hair falling forward as he softly weeps. With his face buried in his clawed hands, he snuffles. Both Cy and Zikata’s guards look unnerved or heartbroken. Taking a seat beside his pledge-father, Cy drapes an arm over his shoulders and leans against him.

“Do not fear, father. I have an idea, but you *must* trust me.”

“I am listening, my son.”

Crying out at the top of their lungs, a group of over a dozen male and female Ketlan, all newcomers, hold up fists and chant.

“Fanush kana! Fanush kana! Fovela! Fovela!”

Katero approaches in a rage with his men on either side of him. He struggles to hold back his anger as it tells him to act against the protesters, but he is under orders from Zikata himself. He is sickened by their calls for a child to be sacrificed, but relishes in their inevitable doom. Drawing their copper and cykera metal swords, they hold the blades of the sickle-shaped khopesh at the protesters. Knowing the power of their weapons, they grow silent, staring back at the warriors as Zikata approaches the group. By now, a large force encircles them, all under Zikata’s control.

“Fovela... Sacrifice.” He grins sinisterly.

He turns to Katero and waves a hand, prompting his war-guide and soldiers to rush the protesters. Taking them by force, they drag them to the edge of the old village, right at the line where the expansion begins; many of the newcomers live in this area. Lashing the protesters to large stakes that Zikata had jammed deep into the soil, they splash natural oils and resin on the cultists before tossing kindling beneath their feet and building a small pile of firewood around them. Taking a torch, Zikata holds the flame himself. He struggles to prevent his arm from shaking as he holds out the deadly flame. Zikata wonders if he can go through with it, but closes his eyes and remembers what Cy had told him.

“Never show fear, father. If they see you afraid, it will make your people afraid and your enemies emboldened. Don’t hesitate for long either. A short pause will look menacing, but a long pause they might mistake for fear.”

Tilting his head slightly to the side, Zikata opens his eyes and grins a toothy grin, his canines gleaming in the sunlight as he gently tosses the torch to the ground. The new Ketlan watch in stunned silence as their friends and family scream in agony, their fur burning and the flesh beneath charring. This is not the method that the newcomers use for sacrifice, but it doesn’t matter. It’s an excruciating death and a powerful message to all. To the newcomers the message is ‘conform or else’, and to the original Kelanethaka it is that Zikata is still in charge.

“Ka fovela! No sacrifices!” Zikata exclaims.

The cheering of the Kelanethaka is overwhelming as Zikata swiftly ends the debate with blood. The terrified newcomers back

down, many intending to simply fall in line. Zikata nonchalantly returns to the edge of his lands, where Cy and his men wait for him. They had remained out of sight so that none would know that this was all Cy's doing; it's better that they believe Zikata to be the strong and capable leader that he wishes he was. Only Katero and his inner circle know the truth, and Cy has sworn his militia to secrecy. They all understand the gravity of the situation; while he is still alive, Zikata's rule cannot be undermined in either of their villages, and his death must be nothing other than natural causes.

"How did it go?" Cy asks.

"Very well, my son. It was just as you said it would be." Zikata replies.

"After that display, most will be too afraid to challenge your leadership, and I'm sure your men will show much more respect for you now."

"Thank you for your help, my son. I owe you a great deal." Zikata bows his head.

"You owe me nothing, father." Cy bows back, even lower. "I will always take care of my family and friends, and you are both."

Katero takes a deep breath and prepares himself, ready to speak the words that weigh so heavily on him. He clears his throat.

"I hate to interrupt but... Zikata... I..." Katero hesitates.

"Yes? What is wrong?"

"I do not wish to be the war-guide any longer."

"What?! Why?!" Zikata asks in shock.

"I do not want this anymore. I enjoyed my life before all of the added challenges, when I was just a hunter. I cannot stomach this; I am haunted at night." Katero explains.

"What will you do, then?"

"I wish to leave and return with Cy to join the Sa'kesh. There, I will be just another hunter, as I was before, and in a place where people won't know my former position and bother me with my past." Katero answers.

"Is that *really* what you want?"

"It is."

"... Fine... You may go." Zikata somewhat angrily waves a hand.

"Now it is important that we prepare a proper story." Cy begins.

"Why?" Katero pauses.

"If you leave now, it will undermine Zikata's rule. Those who don't agree with what he's done will see your leaving as defection; abandoning your leader because you disagree." Cy continues.

"But that isn't true!" Katero exclaims.

"It doesn't matter. It's how they will see it."

"What shall we say?" Zikata asks.

"Tell everyone that you are sending Katero to spend time with the Sa'kesh on some kind of mission. Make something up that sounds good and be sure to let me know what that is so that I can say the same thing. In the meantime, Katero will pick someone he trusts and that you approve of to act as his temporary replacement. When Katero decides not to come back after a few weeks, the replacement will become permanent." Cy explains.

Zikata subtly chuckles as he looks down at the ground and the red grasses beneath his feet. He glances to his pledge-son with his cyan eyes and smirks.

"You think of everything." Zikata remarks.

"As much as I possibly can."