

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

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Episode 32: Healing

With a powerful downward thrust, Zakera grunts and clenches her teeth. She pushes until she can feel the tip pressing firmly against the inside and glances down at her handiwork. It's an incredible sensation. Her lips curl into a sinister grin, around the corners of her feline snout. The Ketlan's cyan eyes are locked onto his as she leans in closer, her pink and cyan striped fur bristling as she arches her back forward. Her hands rest upon his face as she strokes his cheeks tenderly, her tail swaying with glee.

"Having fun?" Cy asks with a raised brow.

"Of course, my love." She coos.

Standing straight, she takes her hands away from Fekolza's severed head, which she so violently impaled atop a spear jammed deeply into the ground. It will be a display for all to see; you do not betray your people. Slipping an arm around his mate, Cy leads Zakera back into Zikata's house where their father waits inside. They follow several villagers who bear large clay bowls and plates full of food; second helpings for the weary hunters. Seated at his small table, Yasmin, Jack and Katero, the primary leaders of the group, have been debriefing the wounded chieftain for some time. Having marched throughout the night and with virtually no sleep in the past three days, it was the last task that they needed to accomplish before retiring for an extended rest.

“I am very grateful for all that you have done. You have performed a great service to myself and my people.” Zikata says, subtly bowing his head.

The others bow back, soon waved away by the chieftain.

“Go and rest. You need it.”

“Finally!” Yasmin exclaims through a yawn.

They head for the doorway, taking a few of the bowls, plates and individual pieces of food with them on their way out. Katero stops only a meter from the table, his back turned to his former chieftain.

“Zikata...” Katero speaks up.

“Yes?”

“I apologize...” Katero says as he spins around.

“For what?” Zikata raises a brow.

“I should not have left the Kelanethaka. I could have done something to prevent this. I-”

Zikata raises his hand to silence Katero.

“Do not be sorry. You did what you believed you had to do. In fact, I am the one who is sorry. If I had listened to you sooner, when Fekolza was but a minor annoyance, none of this would have happened. Gomona would be alive, as would Linsor and the others, Johnny would not have blood on his hands, and I would not be in the pain that I am now... It is my fault, and do not apologize for my failure. I sent you away with my own ignorance, and I apologize.”

A heartbroken Katero looks to his former leader, who appears so feeble as he sits atop a carved wooden stool in the shape of a goblet, leaning against the table for support. The scent of his blood fills the nostrils of even the humans among them. Left speechless, he simply nods once and then leaves, following the distant trail of his companions as they head for the town hall building where they will rest until tomorrow morning. Cy and Zakera help Zikata from his stool, each of them holding an arm. They lead the Ketlan slowly and methodically to his bed. Even though they heal at an increased rate on Monala, a possible side-effect of the quality of the food and water, or perhaps the magnetic field of the planet, Zikata will remain virtually bed ridden for some time.

"I am not used to feeling so helpless." Zikata says as he slowly lies back, grunting through the pain.

"If you would like us to stay with you, we will!" Zakera interjects.

"No. I will be fine." He retorts.

"Are you sure?" Cy asks.

"Yes. Return to your village. I am sure that they are falling apart without your guidance." Zikata chuckles.

"Probably." Cy smirks.

"Please rest, father." Zakera strokes his head, running her fingers through his hair.

"Alright." Zikata sighs.

"You must live long enough to witness the birth of your first grandchild... Then you may die!" She teases.

"You always know just what to say." Zikata laughs.

"I should probably find Johnny and bring him back to the village center." Cy thinks aloud.

Walking slowly through the bustling streets of the village, Johnny patrols the far edges of the town. Walking beside him at an

almost crippled pace is Minoma. Her vivid red eyes look toward the ground as she takes slow steps, shuffling her feet. She has been rather sullen and quiet since the return of the hunting party, not at all like how she usually behaves around him.

“What a beautiful day it has been today.” He comments.

“Indeed...” She mutters.

“... So, I’ve noticed that the base word for ‘bird’ in Ketlanic is ‘akona’, but the Zelkona don’t really look birdlike...”

“True...” She murmurs.

He stops his already slow gait, turning to face Minoma. Though she stops with him, she does not look to him. Her eyes are fixed upon the soil just before her digitigrade feet.

“Minoma... I’m going to miss your company. I really like talking to you and taking these walks. It’s all I really have to look forward too. Would it be alright if I came to see you whenever I come back?”

Her tall and pointed ears shift, focusing on him as he speaks. With her head held low and locked in place, she turns her eyes toward him. Her lips curl ever so faintly around her snout, forming into the minutest of grins; Johnny would not have even noticed had he not been focusing on her face for clues to her mood.

“D-do you mean that?” She sheepishly asks.

“Of course I do. I’m not asking to mate with you or anything I just... I like talking to you.” He replies.

“I enjoy speaking with you too, Johnny, and I will miss you terribly... In truth, you are already my closest friend.” She begins.

“Really?!” He asks in surprise.

“Yes. I had more friends before my father died, but things became... Difficult. I have become something of an outsider, and I now only speak to a select few females every few days.” She rather shamefully explains, turning to face him.

“I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

“It is not your fault.”

Johnny reaches out, taking Minoma in his arms and giving her a comforting hug. His gentle embrace somewhat startles the girl, who had yet to touch the boy. Johnny’s heart aches for her, feeling a kinship with the girl he grasps. Suddenly, he has a thought. Were he not already so destroyed from his nightmarish deeds, and his filter deactivated by the crippling loneliness within, he would probably hold his tongue.

“Since you’re ketlan’ezav, would you rather live with the Sa’kesh?”

“... What?”

“I just wondered if maybe you would like it better living with the Sa’kesh instead of here with the Kelanethaka.” Johnny answers.

Minoma cannot believe her ears. She pulls back from the boy, her eyes looking him over. Glancing at his eyes, she finds them firmly affixed on her own, while his groin does not show the obvious signs of interest. Her mind races at the proposal. Does he consider her to be some sort of pet to drag around for his amusement? Does he want more from her than he has said, or is he truly interested in her for only her friendship? She cannot be sure of his intentions, but she would be lying if she said that she was not interested in having a regular companion. It is also true that she has not enjoyed her time with the Kelanethaka for at least a season.

“And what exactly would I be as a Sa’kesh?” She asks, hinting at their status.

“I don’t know... You’re a good person and I just like talking to you. I don’t really have any friends there yet, so I’m usually by myself. I’m sure if you wanted to help out, the others could find you something to do.” He explains honestly.

Looking him over one last time, the human boy appears to be genuine. With a warmth in her heart, she nods her head, locking eyes with the boy.

“I would like that.”

“Oh! Good! Uhm... Let’s go find Zikata and ask him if it’s alright for you to leave with us tomorrow.” Johnny says with a smile.

“No! I... I do not want to hear the answer. I will wait for you by the torlan tree were we first spoke.” She replies.

“Alright. I’ll find you as soon as I know if you can come with us.”

Johnny steps back from Minoma, who stands idle as she watches him turn back and leave. Walking casually at first, Johnny turns back to face her and steps backward around a corner. Once he is out of sight, he twirls around and bolts as fast as he can through the streets, weaving past and wading through the villagers who wander in his way. It takes only a few moments before he finds himself racing toward Zikata’s hut, stopping for a moment to look at Fekolza’s severed head as it sits atop the spear, eyes still open. Angered by the deceased, whom he blames for his nightmares, he pulls up a hand, balling a fist and erecting his middle finger at the lifeless prop.

“I hope it hurt, you mother fucker...” Johnny grumbles to the head.

Stepping inside of the house without asking for permission, a high crime in Ketlan culture, he nearly slams into Cy as he heads for the door to find the boy.

“Oh, shit! Watch it, man!” Cy exclaims.

“I’m sorry!” Johnny replies.

“You hope what hurt?” Zikata asks.

“I was talking to Fekolza’s head. I hope his death was painful.” Johnny answers.

“Knowing Yasmin, that is a guarantee.” Zakera giggles.

“Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to walk in unannounced!” Johnny suddenly exclaims.

“Do not worry about it, boy. Come here.” Zikata waves him over with his fingers. “Are you alright? I have heard that you do not sleep well lately.”

“I uh... I have nightmares.” Johnny admits, standing beside Zikata’s bed.

“Why?” Zikata raises a brow.

“I don’t know... I just feel like it was all unnecessary.” Johnny shrugs.

“But it *was* necessary. Please understand that what you did was not wrong. You proved yourself as a male, and I am very proud of you.” Zikata begins.

“... You are?”

“Yes. You see, until a juvenile reaches adulthood and receives their ceremony, they are not capable of pledging. Regardless of how Gomona felt about that boy, she was not bound to him. They had mated, but they were not mates. She owed him nothing, but *chose* to help him and aid Fekolza. Gomona betrayed her people for a boy who was not even her mate. You spared a Ketlan the fate of having to execute a juvenile, and I know you must bear a terrible burden.”

Cy's balled fist tremors as he listens to Zikata's words, his chest stinging as he feels the crushing guilt of allowing Johnny to act that day.

"If there is anything that I can do for you, to repay you, name it and I will do what I can to make it so."

"Anything?" Johnny reiterates.

"Yes." Zikata nods.

"Well... I, uh... I was speaking with Minoma."

"The ketlan'ezav?" Zikata asks.

"Yes. We have been talking a lot the last few days. She isn't very happy here, and she would rather join the Sa'kesh, but being an orphan, a ketlan'ezav, I thought I should get your permission first..."

"It is true that my permission would be required. As ketlan'ezav, she belongs to the tribe; as the chieftain, her fate is in my hands." Zikata explains.

"So, what is your answer? Can she join the Sa'kesh?"

Zikata turns to Cy, who nods his head in approval as he stands in the background. Zikata then turns back to Johnny and sighs. He holds up a single, clawed finger and takes a breath.

"Answer one question, and do so honestly... Why do you care to help a female that you have never mated with, and whom you do not know?"

"She's a good person, and talking to her makes me feel better." Johnny swiftly answers.

Chuckling softly, Zikata closes his eyes and takes another deep breath. Opening his eyelids, he glances to Johnny and subtly nods his head.

"She shall be free to leave, if that is what she desires. Please, take care of her." Zikata answers.

"Thank you, Zikata. She'll be safe with us. I promise." Johnny answers.

"I am sure she will be." Zikata grins.

Turning for the door, Johnny bolts past a surprised Cy and Zakera without so much as a word. He heads through the village toward Minoma's hut to share with her the good news, stopping immediately when he realizes that she would not be there. Jogging down the mud brick streets and toward the outskirts of town, he stops dead in his tracks at the sight of a small crowd near the furthest edge of the village. Approaching the crowd of all juvenile Ketlan, he does not see Minoma, but he can hear their words.

"Kezkoka! A human lover!" A male taunts.

"Fi volo ka ek davo'ketlan! Ganado!" A female exclaims.

"It is no wonder you do not mate with us. You prefer humans!" A second boy says.

"You are just a burden, ketlan'ezav." The first boy adds.

"Gomona kelane, ka fi!" Another boy growls.

"Kuzem! Rota, fi bel, ganado kana!"

The crowd stops and turns around, facing the lone human. Some of the Ketlan step aside, leaving a lone male to face Johnny; he is most likely their ringleader. Johnny can see a frightened Minoma with her back against a tree, the dainty girl's pitiful expression pulling forth a seething rage; how dare they treat a female in such a disrespectful manner.

"Oh look! Her human has come to save her!" The boy laughs.

"How sweet of him." A female snickers.

"You leave her alone. She didn't do anything to you!" Johnny growls.

"And what will you do if we do not?" The boy asks.

"You want to find out, you son of a bitch?! Fi volo min?! Ja fanush min!"

Johnny's tone startles the others, almost as much as the knife he draws from his belt. The boy looks down, seeing the glint of the blade as Johnny turns it, daring him to make a move.

"Stop, Zanopes. He is lo'kan."

"Killing a girl *and her lover* does not make him lo'kan." Zanopes scoffs.

"Maybe I'll just kill you then? Want me to put your head next to Fekolza's? It would look great on the other side of Zikata's door; get some symmetry going." Johnny grins sinisterly.

Johnny takes a step closer, the tip of the blade pushing into Zanopes' lower abdomen. He can feel the tip as it begins to pierce the flesh that lies beneath his fur; Johnny makes no attempt to stop as he slowly sticks the knife into his belly. Visibly unnerved by his demeanor and the sensation of the blade, Zanopes jumps back.

"Fine. Minoma is not worth the effort anyway. You keep her." Zanopes says, his voice shaking.

As the entire crowd walks away, looking back at Johnny with an expression that can only be described as pure terror, he cannot help but feel empowered. Turning back, he sheathes his knife and

approaches Minoma, who sits at the base of the tree and softly cries, her face hidden in her palms. He kneels before her, reaching out to gently touch her arm. No sooner than the skin of his fingertip touches a thin, cherry red stripe of fur, she lunges for him. Throwing her arms around his neck, she hugs him and trembles, crying rather loudly. He strokes her back and shushes her, trying to calm her down.

“Thank you for saving me, Johnny! I do not know what I would have done had you not arrived. I was certain that they would hurt me again.” She says.

Her words cut into his heart like a knife; they’ve done this before and no one was there to save her. His fingers coil from the rage, but her presence calms him.

“Shh. It’s alright, Minoma. They won’t ever bother you again, because I’ll be there for you.” He says.

“But when you leave...” She whimpers.

“They won’t bother you again, because Zikata said you can live with us, and Cy agreed.”

“Really?!” She happily exclaims.

She pulls back, looking Johnny in the eyes and sniffing. Her white fur is mildly discolored from her tears, which Johnny is quick to wipe away with his thumbs.

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” He replies.

“Thank you so much, Johnny. I...”

“Hey, it’s alright. You’re my friend, and I’m here for you. Let’s go and pack your things. We’re going home tomorrow.” He says with a smile.

“Alright.” She says, smiling back.