

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 35: 941

Lying in their bed, Cy and Zakera sleep peacefully. They spoon together as they often do, more-so now that Zakera is just over seven months pregnant and is nearly ready to give birth. All were unsure if her hybrid child, born by her union with Cy, would develop faster or slower than others, but it has been about the same as most Ketlan and Zelkona females. Though Lara Blond had moved into a backroom of her clinic so that she may serve the Sa'kesh villagers at all hours, she has temporarily returned to the fortress in preparation. Their py'sel child will be the first addition to the Sa'kesh since the merger of Zia's Zelkona tribe; no females from Mirkon's tribe, the human refugees or Zia's group were pregnant at the time.

Zakera stirs and lies on her back. Her cyan eyes open and glance at the ceiling. She turns her head and looks to her mate, the Caucasian human who rests beside her, his arm draped over her. Feeling her child shifting within her womb, she suddenly winces and sits upright. A startled Cy opens his icy blue eyes and yawns. Running his fingers through his flowing black hair, he sits up with his wife and turns to her.

"Are you alright?" He asks with great concern.

"I do not know... Something is different." She replies.

She rests her clawed hands atop her belly and whimpers. Clear liquid flows from her body, startling the girl. Cy jumps from the bed,

struggling to slip on his trousers as he pulls open the door and bolts from the room to fetch Lara. Within moments, she enters the bedroom with Cy and a Zelkona woman. The six-foot-tall raptor-like female scoops Zakera into her arms, carrying her carefully as Cy leads them by lantern light to Lara's downstairs office. Zakera focuses on the coloration of Nendath's arms, which helps divert her thoughts from the oncoming birth. Lara's assistant, a skilled healer for her tribe before their assimilation, has a teal colored hide with purple swirls running through her outer arms, legs, back and tail.

Nendath glances down to the trembling Ketlan female in her arms, flashing a warm smile. Her glowing purple eyes are soft and comforting and her dark purple claws press gently into Zakera's fur.

"Do not be afraid. We will take good care of you." Nendath assures her.

"Find Johnny at his house and let him know what's going on." Cy says to Yasmin as she rushes down the stairs.

"What *is* going on?!" Yasmin asks.

"Zakera's having the baby."

"Well, shit! I'll drag his sorry ass back here right away!" Yasmin runs off.

"That's not what I said!" Cy yells to her, leaning over the staircase railing.

Ignoring him entirely, she disappears into the night. He steps into the darkened room as Lara activates several powerful flashlights, their batteries freshly charged from the crystalline power source that Chris has constructed for the fortress. Lanterns powered by an oil made from genashin fat, plant resin and a bit of water, a recipe well known to the native Zelkona of Monala, light the rest of the room. Nendath lays Zakera atop a padded table crafted in preparation for this moment. Lara uses a flashlight to examine Zakera, stepping aside for Nendath. Though Lara is training Nendath in her more modern

medical practices, she waits for Nendath to confirm or deny her suspicions. A head nod sets her mind at ease.

“All is well.” Nendath assures them.

“Are you sure?” Zakera nervously asks.

“I have delivered many children before. Trust me.” Nendath replies.

A nervous Cy paces back and forth, his heart racing. Realizing that he may be inadvertently exacerbating Zakera’s own fears, Lara politely shoos her chieftain from the room, asking him to wait in the hall or downstairs until she fetches him.

“This would be a good time for some of Johnny’s banter.” Cy thinks aloud as he sits on the staircase.

Sitting in a wooden chair by a window of his brick home, Johnny stares at the waning night moon. The purple orb sinks toward the horizon as dawn approaches, and soon he will need to tend the fields with the other farmers. It is a life that he has found himself surprisingly fond of; the simple existence has him exercising his body but also leaves him plenty of time to spend with his mate. He looks down from the window, which is on the second floor of his home, a house more luxurious than most farmers. Many assume that one of the perks of being in Cy’s inner circle and a former fortress dweller is having a high-end home, but in truth Johnny wanted nothing of the sort.

He wanted to craft his own life as he saw fit. After his ceremony of adulthood, he pledged himself to Minoma almost immediately; the house was gifted to him by Cy, who has done all that he can to take care of the young man. In his heart, Johnny also believes that it is an apology; Cy has yet to forgive himself for allowing Johnny to execute

Gomona and Linsor. Luckily, he has found his peace in Minoma. Lying beside her and holding her in his arms eases his turmoil and staves off his nightmares, though he does not sleep as long as he used to. Four or five hours a night is all he will get, but it's usually all that he needs.

A shuffling draws his attention, and Johnny turns back to see Minoma's red eyes looking at him, half-opened as she steps up to her mate. He extends a hand to her and slips it around her slender waist, pulling the dainty, white and cherry red striped female down atop his lap. She kisses him tenderly and wraps her arms around him, holding him tightly. Johnny rests his head on her shoulder, his face near her neck. Nuzzling her, he enjoys the feeling of her soft fur against his flesh.

"You woke up early again." She says softly.

"Yeah. I'm sorry if I woke you, peppermint." He replies.

"Do you often sit here to think?" She asks.

"Sometimes."

"Would you be able to think lying next to me? I would enjoy that very much." She coos.

"I suppose if I have too." He teases.

Minoma gently pushes his shoulders as he grips her even tighter. They share a kiss, and then another. She slides off of his lap and tugs at him, directing him back to their bedroom as she gives him a very familiar gaze. Suddenly, they are startled by a knock on the front door downstairs. Heading below, they open the door to find Yasmin standing with several militia by her side, some wielding falcata swords and other wielding bows and arrows, with their cykera bearded hand-axes as sidearms. The bowmen's weapons were introduced to the militia and Kelanethaka upon Zikata's full recovery from the attempt on his life.

“Hey, Johnny. Minoma.” Yasmin greets both of them with a nod.

“Hello, Yasmin.” Minoma chirps.

“What brings you here so early?” Johnny asks.

“Zakera has gone into labor. Cy wanted you to know, but I figured you’d want to be there with him.” Yasmin answers.

“Of course! We’ll be right there!” Johnny exclaims.

“I would love to see what a human and Ketlan py’sel looks like as well, to know what to expect.” Minoma coos, hanging on Johnny’s arm.

Early that morning, Zikata rises from his bed and dons a simple woven garment made of vishkachay. He chuckles every time he wears their clothing and feels the pouch containing their currency. Like him, more and more of his people are conforming to the ways of the Sa’kesh, so much so that he often feels as though he is merely the baron of a village; a high-status leader controlling an extension of Cy’s kingdom. As the husband of his daughter and father of his grandchild, however, this does not bother him in the least. He has been planning on visiting his daughter and pledge-son, as he knows that Zakera’s delivery would be soon.

Stepping outside where a half dozen guards wait for him, he heads for Muzalfur’s house to give him the day’s orders to carry out in his absence. Meeting his war-guide, Zikata instructs Muzalfur before promptly leaving. As he steps out of the home, a runner from the Sa’kesh arrives. The diminutive male Zelkona’s black and tan two-tone hide weaves between the vibrantly colored Ketlan villagers, the few who are even out and about this early in the morning. Zikata stands at attention and waits for the runner, who immediately recognizes the leader, darting up to him.

“Zikata!” The runner exclaims.

“Yes?”

“Cyrus has sent me to find you. Zakera has begun to give birth. We must go.”

Without delay, Zikata and his men follow the Zelkona, speed walking through the town. The injury that nearly claimed his life has left him with mild nerve damage, though exertion only exacerbates whatever mild pain he often feels. As a result, he can only run in short sprints before the burning in his back halts him. Moving as swiftly as he can through his town, Zikata, who had forgone breakfast that morning, sees a shopkeeper opening their stand. Laying out dried meat, they place several small, placard-like signs made of carved wood. The types of animal that their product was harvested from is written upon the signs, etched deeply and painted with blue dye.

“How much for the genashin jerky?” Zikata asks the merchant.

“Kavay ka hotoka.” The merchant answers, bowing to his chieftain.

“Nonsense. How much?”

“... Five cyrians.”

Reaching into his little pouch, Zikata takes out a cyrian with a Ketlanic number five on the face. Holding out the coin, which is made of a secret blend of cykera metal, he hands the sky-blue coin with a thin yellow swirl in the center to the merchant. The man promptly stuffs a satchel with more jerky than Zikata had paid for.

“Alright.” Zikata says, taking a bite of a strip of jerky. “Let us not delay further.”

Standing in the hallway just outside of Lara’s office, Cy paces nervously. Her cries of pain as she struggles with her labor worry and terrify the man. In the back of his mind he screams at the thought of losing his bride and their child, a constant fear in their primitive

setting; if they were on Earth and with modern medical equipment, this would not be so. Of course, if they were on Earth, Zakera would be vivisected mercilessly by scientists and twisted government officials who would see her as less than Cy does. Johnny, Minoma, Yasmin, Rico, Katero and Gabriella swarm around the office with him, attempting to comfort the soon-to-be father.

“Don’t worry, Cy. She’s going to be fine.” Johnny assures him.

“Lara and Nendath are skilled. They will take excellent care of your mate and child.” Minoma adds.

“Yeah. Her and her golden furred baby are just fine.” Yasmin teases.

“What?!” Katero turns to her.

“If her baby is gold, I volunteer to raise it. I’ll need a hobby after my husband dies.” Gabriella quips, leaning against Katero.

“I just wish it was over already so I knew how they are.” Cy murmurs.

“Hey, I bet she’s thinking the same thing.” Rico retorts.

“That and how much she wants to kill Cy for knocking her up.” Yasmin smirks.

Nearly six hours after she had awoken in the night, the Zelkona runner enters the fortress with Zikata and his entourage, who immediately take positions within the foyer. The runner point Zikata up the stairs as Cy leans over the railing, calling out to his pledge father.

“I came as swiftly as I could, my son. When did she begin?” Zikata asks, embracing Cy.

“Early this morning, before the sun came up.”

“Why did I not hear about it until after dawn?!” Zikata sounds offended.

"I sent a runner as soon as I had collected myself. I'm sorry."

"Cyrus! It is almost time." Nendath says, poking her head out of the office.

The tall Zelkona ushers both Cy and Zikata into the office. Lara stands between Zakera's legs, waving them over. She coaches Zakera, who's fur is matted with her sweat from the exertion and pain. Cy dashes up to her side and takes hold of her hand, leaning in close and comforting his mate. She gasps for breath, but as she has some time left, she turns her head to him.

"Have you thought of a name?" An exhausted Zakera weakly asks.

"A name?"

"If I give you a son, what will his name be?"

"I like the name 'Darius'." Cy replies, moving her hair from her face.

"That sounds nice. What does it mean?" She asks, closing her eyes.

"I don't know, but it was the name of a great king from Earth, just like mine." He smiles.

"Then it will be a very fitting name for our son." She says softly.

"So, I can name him Darius?" He asks excitedly.

"You are his father. Only you can choose the name of your son." She reminds him.

"You could name him 'Zikata' after another great king of Monala." Zikata quips.

"I'll save that for our next son." Cy retorts.

"Is it too late to change my mind about how many children I want?" Zakera asks with a faint grin.

“You made the pledge bands, my love.” Cy grins, kissing her forehead softly.

Zakera’s expression becomes pained and she grunts and groans, her hand gripping Cy’s like a vice. Lara calls Nendath over, warning the two males that Zakera has finally begun. Cy tries to keep her calm and comfort her as Lara waits beneath her and Nendath talks Zakera through it. The minutes tick by like hours as the air becomes heavy; it’s grown dense from the scent of sweat and blood, while the fires of the lanterns cause all parties within to perspire to some degree.

“Just a few more! You’re almost done, Zakera!” Lara chirps.

She grunts as she struggles through the last hard push, gasping for breath and slumping back atop the table. Cy strokes her head and kisses her cheek as Nendath takes the child very carefully into her clawed hands. Lara clips the umbilical and wraps the newborn; all the while Cy praises his wife, stroking her tenderly and kissing her cheek and snout.

“Well, are you ready for the big reveal?” Lara teases.

“Yes.” Zakera says with a sigh, her breathing still labored.

“You have... A son.”

Lara lays the child atop another desk, taking a moment to clean the baby before presenting him to his parents. Cy can hardly wait and briefly leaves his mate’s side. Wrapping the child up in a new, clean blanket, Lara passes the infant to Cy. Cradling him in his arms as though he were built like a champagne glass, Cy walks back to Zakera, who is helped into a partial sitting position by Nendath. Passing their son to her, Zakera removes his blanket so that they may view their child in his entirety. They are both awestruck at the sight

before them, their eyes taking in the form of the first py'sel to be born in what might be many generations, if ever.

The baby's head is virtually identical to his mother, with a snout that looks proportional to hers, and ears to match. His little nose is feline in appearance and charcoal black in color, softly crying with his toothless maw. His fur pattern is also identical to hers. Though her primary color is pink, the child's is as black as his father's hair. White fur runs from Zakera's chin and through her chest, ending at her groin and the upper portion of her inner thighs. On the child, this is a medium-gray. Thin cyan stripes line her outer arms, legs, sides, back and tail, as well as a cyan speck on the tip of her tail and atop her ears.

Her child's stripes and specks are an interesting shade of teal, leaning heavily toward blue. As the parent's eyes scan further downward, they notice an immediate change, proof of the child's parentage and genetic diversity. Instead of his mother's digitigrade, paw-like feet bearing five, clawed toes, his skeletal structure has lower legs and feet identical to that of a human. His tail coils between his legs and he shifts, as though chilled without his covering. Wrapping the blanket around him once more, Zakera leans in and kisses her baby on the crown of his head. Cy leans in, very gently stroking the infant's face. The boy's eyelids open, revealing vibrant teal eyes, nearly matching the colors of his stripes.

"Hi, Darius. Welcome to the world." Cy says softly.

"He has flat feet, like his father." Zikata remarks.

"Hmm... 'Sakona' is an interesting name for his breed." Cy comments.

"New species should have their own name, and 'half-breed' isn't much of one." Lara adds.

"Darius, the first Sakona. That sounds nice." Zakera says weakly.

“Then is shall be so. What shall we call the other py’sel breeds?” Zikata asks Cy.

“I don’t know, but a lot of Zelkona women are expecting children from humans. Kanafa will be the first; she’s two months behind Zakera. I guess when we know what they’re like, we can name their breed too.”

“I am quite curious myself.” Zikata murmurs.

After returning to the hallway to make the announcement himself and receive the congratulations of every fortress dweller, Cy spends his day with his mate and their son, as does Zikata. Word spreads rapidly throughout the city, which seems to erupt in rapture at the word of a successful py’sel birth. It is as if Darius’ mere existence confirms all of Cy’s beliefs; a nation where all races may live freely, intermingle and even intermarry is not only possible but just over the horizon. Within hours of Darius’ birth, Mirkon and Zia both arrive to pay their respects and congratulate the new parents.

Informing them that their new baby is perfectly healthy, they are granted a brief look at the half-breed. Both are amazed at Darius’ combination of his parent’s traits, noting his skeletal structure and the similarity he has with his father. Returning the boy to his mother’s arms, Cy leaves for a moment to take care of a few final matters. Mirkon presents him with a tome. Bound in genashin leather and bearing a pressing of the Sa’kesh logo, Cy opens the book that is the census of the village. Using an ethakona feather and ink made from a combination of fermented fruits, he carefully writes in the tome.

“Citizen #941. Name: Darius, Race: Sakona, Parents: Cyrus (human) & Zakera (Ketlan)”

A proud tear runs down his cheek as he hands the red feather pen to Mirkon. Mirkon sets the book to the side to allow the ink to dry while Zia looks at his writing.

“Sakona?” She asks him.

“Yeah. It’s the new name for the race of py’sel born from a human and Ketlan.”

“What will we call the py’sel born from human and Zelkona?” Zia asks.

“Well, come get me when Kanafa has her child and I’ll tell you.” Cy grins.

Sitting in the study with Zikata, Mirkon and Zia, Cy takes a familiar book from the shelf. Inside of this book are designs of many ancient weapons from Earth. Every time something significant happens, Cy grants them a new design. Zikata’s recovery saw the revelation of both the bow and arrow and bearded hand-axe. Cy flips to a page, his lips curling into a pleased grin.

“This one looks right. Nothing but the best after the birth of my son.” He remarks as he sets the book down on the small table before them.

Peering inside, they look at a strange weapon. It appears to be a bow and arrow, but the bow is mounted to a rectangular shaft. A second image shows a man holding the weapon in a manner similar to how the Sa’kesh hold their rifles.

“Is that a powerful weapon?” Mirkon asks.

“Oh yeah... We can make handheld versions too.” Cy replies.

Walking away from a crowd of excited humans and Zelkona, Katero and Gabriella walk to the outskirts of town for a moment alone. They pass the domesticated genashin and enter the farmlands, heading for the furthest and therefore quietest edge.

"I have been thinking." Katero begins.

"Uh-oh." Gabriella teases.

"If Cyrus and Zakera can have children..." He stops, turning to her.

"Oh... I don't know, I..."

"We are pledged. Why not?" He asks.

"I'm just a little scared." She admits.

Katero wraps his arms around Gabriella and gives her a kiss upon her forehead, holding her tightly.

"Whenever you are ready." He coos.

Katero's ears suddenly perk and shift. He releases Gabriella and steps back, spinning toward the forest. The bushes shake and he draws his steel recurve knife, a gift from Cy. From behind the blue fern emerges a human man, his body bearing several deep wounds as he drips blood. Stumbling toward them, he reaches out a hand but falls over. Katero cautiously approaches before sheathing his knife and rolling him over.

"Kin... Kincaid..." The man gasps.

"What happened to you? Who did this?" Katero asks.

"Run..." The man chokes out.

Too injured and weak to move on his own, Katero and Gabriella carry him through the fields. A male Zelkona farmer sees them and rushes to their aid, easily carting the man and taking him to Lara's clinic while Katero and Gabriella race back to the fortress to warn Cy

and fetch Lara. Regardless of the current situation, they need her help. They need to know who this man is and who he was running from.