

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 37: Power Is Suffering

Zakera paces the floor nervously. She holds her claws just inside of her mouth, running them between her canines in a strange yet comforting tick. Her tail whips around as she turns. Yasmin and Jack back away from it as she wanders in circles.

“It’ll be alright, Zakera. Mirkon has already made Cy’s capture public knowledge and he and Zia are gathering the militia.” Jack assures her.

“Yeah. The entire city is up in arms over this. No one can stand against us, so just try to relax.” Yasmin adds.

“That is easier said than done when you do not know the fate of your mate.” Zakera mutters.

She continues pacing as a large force of armed militia approach the fortress. Mirkon and Zia lead the army, which appears to be nearly one-fifth of the entire Sa’kesh population. The two leaders soon enter with a group of human and Zelkona warriors. Entering the dining hall, where Zakera and the others await them, Zia and Mirkon both bow to Zakera, who is officially in charge in her mate’s absence.

“We have gathered our forces; all of the militia and many more volunteers. I have counted over two hundred heads.” Mirkon says proudly.

“We are ready to leave whenever you give the order.” Zia adds.

"We should have already left. The day is already half-over." She growls.

"I know, daughter, but it was wise for Jack to fetch Muzalfur and some of the Kelanethaka." Zikata retorts.

"With their help, we can afford a larger force to rescue Cyrus." Zia adds.

"It is what Cyrus would have done." Mirkon nods.

"Cy is not here; I should have ordered us to leave right away." Zakera laments.

"The outpost is a two-day walk from here. If we push hard, we may be able to make it in two nights and one day. We will make up the time." Zikata says.

"So why are we still standing here? Move out the troops!" She demands.

Zakera pushes past them and heads for the door.

"You are leaving with them?!" Zikata looks to her in shock.

"I am not going to sit here in a comfortable fortress while my mate is locked in a cage, alone. I wish to be the one who opens the door to his cell and sets him free." Zakera snaps back.

"Are you seriously considering taking Darius?!" Mirkon gasps.

"I have already ordered Nendath to watch Darius as we travel. When we rescue Cy, he will not have to wait long to hold his son and heir. Now move! We are wasting time!" She growls.

Yasmin and Jack both nod in agreement as they quickly leave to rally the troops. Some of their lieutenants are injured or otherwise staying behind, such as Katero and Johnny. Of their captains, leaders of individual squads, several are pregnant females who are staying behind as well, such as Kanafa. The squads have been formed into two cohesive groups, one led by Yasmin and consisting of the most

experienced veterans. The other group is primarily newer recruits and volunteers; they will be led by Jack. Zakera takes a deep breath as she mentally prepares herself for the trip, taking one last look back at the fortress. She listens to Darius' subtle noises as he shifts in the bundle that is lashed to Nendath's chest.

"Are you sure that you wish to do this? You do not need to be there when they rescue Cyrus." Nendath whispers to Zakera.

"Yes, I do." She quietly retorts.

The Sa'kesh militia and armed volunteers form up and begin their march through the streets. The tails of the Zelkona warriors sway gracefully as they walk quickly down the road. Veering off and into the farmland, they head towards the jungle where Cy and the others had been ambushed. Yasmin and Jack lead them to the sight, leaving the remaining militia and volunteers in awe, especially the humans; with only six male Zelkona warriors and a handful of firearms, they step over nearly three dozen stripped corpses. Moving through the bushes that hid the kidnappers, they find a path. Following that path, it soon turns into a ten-meter-wide trail blazed clear through the forest, cart wheel impressions sinking into the soil and genashin footprints visible.

"Do not worry, Cy. We are coming for you." Zakera murmurs to herself.

Cy sits in silence in the back of the wagon. He had stopped listening to Kincaid hours ago, and only recently has the youth ceased trying to speak to him. Cy's body has been swaying routinely as the wagon hit small bumps and dips in the ground, but soon he feels the cart slowing to a stop. Peering out from a window of the cart, he can see that they are at the edge of what looks like a military camp. It is clearly not a civilian village, as it has no domesticated animals, farmland, or women and children roaming about.

“Outpost, sweet outpost...” Kincaid comments as he peers out a window.

“So that’s it? ... Those buildings will burn nicely.” Cy remarks.

“It is too bad that you were not an ally. You would have enjoyed our grand city, our art, and perhaps even our women.” Kincaid says.

“Doubt it.”

“I forgot. You prefer breeding animals.” Kincaid snickers.

“One day I’m going to rip your tongue out and polish my boots with it... And then I’ll kill you.”

“Still making threats? Just accept your defeat with grace. I would have more respect for you if you did.” Kincaid smirks.

With several guards holding swords and spears, Kincaid personally unties the long rope that holds Cy’s arms to the wall, though his wrists are still tied behind his back with separate ropes. He passes Cy’s weapons to a soldier before pushing Cy from the wagon and leading him through the outpost. After a short walk through a surprisingly small complex, they stop near a unique looking building. It has five sides, all of them sloped and reaching to a point. It appears as a pyramid with an extra wall. Cy had never seen a structure like this before.

“Wow. That’s creative!” He remarks.

“That is the tribunal. We hold trials for our soldiers here. Behind it is the cells where you will be staying. Hopefully you enjoy our dank, musty dungeon!” Kincaid laughs.

“Oh great... A one-star hotel.” Cy smirks.

Kincaid pushes him forward, steering him around the building and toward what looks like a small toolshed. Opening the door, it reveals

wooden steps leading into a cellar. Kincaid walks Cy down the steps and into the darkened room, toward a large, wrought iron cell.

“Damn... You need to hire a new housekeeper.” Cy jests.

“Be silent!” Kincaid growls.

“Watch it, little man.” Cy grumbles as Kincaid pushes him inside.

He holds Cy’s bindings and quickly cuts them free before closing the door of the cell. Without saying a word, Kincaid turns and walks away, leaving Cy alone in the dark room and locked in a cold cell with no furnishings of any kind. Sitting down on the hard ground and bringing his knees to his chest, Cy wraps his arms around his bent legs and rests his head atop his knees. The crushing weight of Gabriella’s loss and the potential, unseen loss of others, finally catches up to him. He softly weeps for them as the pent-up emotions overload his brain. He is so tired from the ordeal. Closing his eyes, he tries to push the grief from his mind, but fails.

Still, he somehow finds himself falling asleep, sitting upright in his less than comfortable position. Without Zakera or Darius near him, his nightmares come back in full force. It is a jarring experience, as he had gone so long without them. Sitting alone in the now rusty, blood drenched cage, Cy grips the bars as it is lifted into the air by a large chain. The end of the chain rises through the clouds, which grasp it like fingers. Could this be the hand of God? The cage is placed into a room that looks like a traditional British court. Many judges with pale skin and horse hair wigs preside over it, condemning him for his crimes and pointing to all of his victims.

Cy turns to see that the jury booth is packed full of the first souls that he had killed. He panics and turns, only to see that the audience is also made up entirely of his victims. The girl he had thrown into the fire, her father whom he had shot dead before her, Roland and his beheaded children; everyone is there. Turning to his defense

attorney, Cy sees the Ketlan queen, her piercing orange eyes contrasting her black fur. None of his victims look rotted or deformed, like in his previous dreams. She smiles, baring her teeth. Hissing at Cy, he stumbles backward and into his cage. As his back hits the bars, hands try to grab him. His heart beats so hard that he fears it will break through his chest as he falls onto the floor.

The cage is pushed in, the bars creaking and squeaking as his angry victims try to reach him. Claws swipe his back and a hand grabs an arm, trying to pull him through the twisted metal. Looking to his victims, their eyes all glow a demonic red, their mouths full of razor sharp, needle-like teeth. Even the humans look capable of devouring him with ease. Cy wakes up as he falls over in his actual cell; the cold ground touching his arms and face jolts him awake. He looks around to see nothing but darkness surrounding him. He feels the urge to cry, but holds it in, though he can't help but sniffle a few times.

"Bad dreams?" Kincaid calls out to him.

Cy turns to the sound, seeing Kincaid in a corner as he lights an oil lamp with a flint and steel. His young form is illuminated by the primitive lantern as he adjusts the cloth wick.

"What do you care?"

"I have them too, sometimes. It was my dreams that made me realize something profound... Do you always have them?" Kincaid asks, his tone bearing a modicum of genuine concern.

"I did, until I met my wife... My mate, Zakera, made them stop." Cy admits.

"I see. You two must have a powerful connection for her to do that for you... Even if she is just a cat."

"I stopped noticing she wasn't human once we started to connect. Love does that to you." Cy remarks.

"I... Never had a person that was able to help me like that. I have never been so attached to someone..." Kincaid confesses.

"You're still young. You have a lot to solve that problem."

"It must be nice." Kincaid sighs.

"It's all that keeps me going."

Kincaid appears depressed as he realizes how deeply Cy loves his Ketlan mate. He looks down, as though he is reflecting on himself, twiddling his thumbs, his hands clasped together.

"So, what's so profound?" Cy breaks the silence.

"What?"

"'Something profound' that you mentioned earlier. Maybe if I'm lucky you can bore me to death before failing to chop my head off with those toothpick arms of yours." Cy jokes.

"Insolent to the end." Kincaid smirks. "Well... I understand how deeply you must feel for your Ketlan, even though it is still an abomination. I admit that I do deeply regret putting you through this, but... Does it put things into perspective?"

"What do you mean?" Cy raises an eyebrow.

"Suffering... It puts everything into perspective. It is what I realized not long after you came and toppled the great human kingdom that Roland had begun building. It is the most powerful of all emotions. It is stronger than love or lust, more intense than hate, and more useful than fear."

"How so?"

Kincaid stands up and walks closer to the cell, sitting on the dirt floor just on the other side of the bars that separate himself and his prisoner.

“Love is the emotion that most people believe runs their life. Peasants are especially susceptible to this way of thinking. Perhaps you thought it was yours? You see, love makes people do many strange things, even sacrificing themselves for those they care for; it is a wonderful emotion to feel, or so I have been told... However, it has its limits. It can fade over time, or is not strong enough to survive a true hardship. Often, self-preservation takes charge in those situations. Not only that, but the biggest failing of love is that it blinds people; they will risk the greater of a nation to save one child, one wife, one husband. It’s disgusting.” Kincaid explains.

“I see...”

“Hate can make people do things that they never thought they could do. They can become driven towards a singular goal. Perhaps they want to destroy someone or something, or maybe they want to incite change because they believe that their cause is just, and their hate is the energy that fuels them? This is what used to drive me, but it ultimately fails once again, as hate can blind people to what it is that they need to do. They will act as brutes like the Kaladez or Zajak, walking into obvious traps because their rage has left them without true vision. Even powerful hatred can fail to self-preservation; some people do not wish to risk themselves for the greater good.” Kincaid continues.

“What about fear?” Cy tilts his head curiously.

“Fear is a powerful emotion too! It is often used by many rulers to attain their desires, believing that crippling fear will keep the peasants in their place. In a way, this is what facilitated Roland’s downfall; had he been more loved and respected, the villages he had enlisted may not have abandoned him and returned to their ways so easily. Fear, however, is inferior as well, because eventually fear transforms into hate and becomes the catalyst for rebellion. Peasants love rebellion as much as rebels love angry peasants.”

Cy chuckles as he listens to this well thought out speech. Kincaid sounds all too eager to explain it, as though he has wished for the opportunity for quite some time.

"And then we have suffering... The most powerful emotion that beings have; it places everything into perspective. The interesting thing about suffering is that it forces inward reflection. It is like a fire that burns a curious child. They realize the pain and regret the decision, and so they never make it again. Suffering teaches life lessons; people do not truly appreciate what they have, or have lost, until they are crying alone, in a cold prison cell. Suffering is also the only thing that makes you change. No matter what anyone says to you, you will never change your ways until suffering proves them to be flawed. It is simply the way of all sentient life, even humans."

"I have to admit... You make an excellent point."

"Thank you. I had been contemplating that ever since you taught me that lesson." Kincaid stares blankly at Cy.

"I did?"

"Actions have consequences, Cyrus. Without any leaders, the villages went back to the way it was before... Most of Roland's soldiers went back to their homes, but not before taking their share of the spoils."

"I see..."

"Some of the spoils were still in the homes of innocent citizens, or were the citizens themselves. Many women were raped and killed, including my own mother... She was killed by men who I was to lead; they did not respect me and believed me to be too young. Her blood is on your hands, Cyrus... Hers, and all of the others."

"I did not kill your mother, Kincaid. Your men did. Your *human* men." Cy nonchalantly states.

"Do you not care about the innocent lives that you have taken?" Kincaid asks, standing up and grabbing the bars.

"Considering that your 'king' wasn't going to allow us to live in peace... No. I could not care less." Cy answers.

"My family... All that I had in the world is dead because of you. I am going to see you executed for it." Kincaid growls.

"I'm sorry they are dead, but that isn't my fault. I simply destroyed a man who would destroy me and my family and friends."

The fact that you weren't man enough to save your own has nothing to do with me." Cy retorts.

"You son of a whore!" Kincaid cries, reaching between the bars.

Cy steps back and watches the youth as he flails his arm like a zombie trying to grasp a distant victim. The boy whimpers and sniffles. For a moment, Cy feels genuine pity for Kincaid. Failing to grab Cy, he backs away from the cage, turns and storms off. Taking the oil lamp with him, he leaves Cy alone in the pitch-black cellar.

"Thanks for the company!" Cy shouts after him.

Struggling to fall back to sleep, and afraid of his own nightmares, he sits in the cage and sits with closed eyes, simply waiting for the night to end so that the guards might take him upstairs for trial.

"We should stop to rest soon." Jack says quietly to Zakera.

Leading them at the front of the line with her personal guards, Zakera marches down the path. With Yasmin to her left and Jack to her right, leading their groups, the long line of militia and volunteers stretches far and wide. Zakera ignores Jack as they walk in near total darkness, the superior night vision of the Ketlan and Zelkona leading the humans among them. Yasmin leans closer as well, whispering to her leader.

"Jack's right. We don't need to camp, just rest. Cy isn't going anywhere. That guy said Kincaid wanted to put him on trial."

"I do not care." Zakera growls.

"Please. Just for a moment." Jack asks again.

Reluctantly conceding to her advisors, she stops the march and takes Darius from Nendath's chest harness and steps into the jungle for a moment of privacy. After a few moments, Chris, who had opted to join them at the last minute, hikes into the jungle to find Zakera, who has yet to return.

"Zakera? Are you here?" He calls out.

"I am."

He turns, finding her sitting beside a silver barked borlan tree, the light blue vines and leaves like a willow hanging around her as she cradles Darius. Chris slowly sits down beside her, looking to Zakera as she softly cries. Looking down at Darius, she sniffles as she strokes the baby's face with her fingertip.

"Forgive the silliness of the question, but are you alright?"

"No. I am afraid for my mate. What if he is gone? How will I carry on without him?" She replies.

"I understand how you feel."

"Do you?" She sniffles.

"I was once married. My wife died long before we came to this world. Honestly, if it wasn't for her loss, I would never have had the courage to make the journey." Chris explains.

"I am sorry. I did not know."

"It is alright. To be perfectly honest, I had assumed that I would not survive the long and arduous journey to that fabled plateau. It was more of a desire to die on a great adventure to be with her again, than it was to prove my theories and attain glory."

"I am just so afraid. He is the love of my life, and I have given him a son. How will I raise Darius without his father? How will I lead the

Sa'kesh and continue Cy's vision if I cannot rise from my own bed from the crushing sorrow?"

"That is why you should not fear." Chris replies.

"I do not understand."

"I have learned something while reflecting on myself and other visionaries of Earth's past; we tend to die tragically, but not until we have made a life-changing discovery, some sort of grand impact on our world. I am still alive because I am not finished with my work. Cy is an even greater visionary than myself; he can't possibly die yet because fate is not done using him to recreate Monala."

"Do you truly believe that?" She asks.

"Of course I do! However, let's not tempt fate by waiting too long." He replies.

"Right." Zakera nods.

Stroking Darius' face, she takes a moment before rising to her feet. They leave the forest and return to the road after only ten minutes of rest.

"Alright! We are moving out!" Zakera orders.

Yasmin and Jack immediately repeat the order and their few captains do the same. The small army rises to their feet and moves away from the trees that they lean against, taking up their arms and falling into formation. Marching through the darkness, they make their way along the almost perfectly straight trail, heading for Kincaid's outpost.

"Please hold on Cy. We are coming." Zakera murmurs to herself.

As soon as the sun gains its full strength, Kincaid returns with a set of guards. The light beams in through the open doors on Cy's darkened cellar. He stands and walks towards the iron door of his cage. He places his wrists together behind his back and slips them through a slot on the door. Kincaid and the guards look confused, pausing and looking to each other for a moment.

"This isn't the first time I've been in this situation... Cuff me and let's get this over with." Cy says as he glances over his shoulder.

The guards look to Kincaid who motions for them to proceed. They bind Cy's wrists together and push him away from the door before opening it. Two guards stand beside Cy, each one taking hold of a forearm as they lead him away from the cell, up the stairs and out of the loamy dungeon. They march around the five-sided building and enter a set of double doors. Inside, it appears as a Christian church, but with three podiums and two pews that sit aside from the others, one on each side. The guards set Cy down on the pew to the left as Kincaid takes the pew to the right. Cy looks around the building, admiring its sturdy wooden construction.

Three men appear from a back room and stand at the podiums; they appear to be military officers or judges presiding over Cy's trial. They stand patiently behind the three podiums as a crowd of Kincaid's soldiers gathers inside, watching as though this were Court TV. The judges motion to Kincaid who introduces himself, as though they did not know him. After his introduction, he turns to the crowd and begins to speak.

"I am here today to bring you a criminal of the highest order. He is the one and only 'Cyrus the Terrible'!" He points his finger as the soldiers gasp.

"Cyrus the Great sounded a lot better." Cy says to Kincaid with a smug grin.

“This man is responsible for the collapse of Roland’s great kingdom. He is the personal assassin of King Roland the First. He is a murderer, a torturer, a consorter of Ketlan and Zelkona, a cannibal, and a monster!” He says without missing a beat.

The crowd gasps as Cy looks around, visibly amused.

“I’m sorry, may I speak?” Cy politely asks the judges.

“Go on.” The center judge nods.

“First, I have never ‘consorted’ with Zelkona; I pledged to a Ketlan woman and she is the only Ketlan I have ‘consorted’ with. Second, I’ve never cannibalized anyone. I have only ever eaten the body of a Ketlan warrior I killed, to gain his power. That’s technically not cannibalism by your law, since he isn’t human.” Cy says.

The crowd chatters amongst themselves.

“You have eaten Ketlan?” Kincaid turns to him.

“Just that one... And also my wife.” He jokes.

The soldiers behind him laughs as they turn and talk amongst each other. Kincaid looks offended, and the center judge bangs a wooden block onto the top of the podium as a primitive form of gavel.

“Watch what you say in here, Cyrus.” The judge grumbles.

“My apologies.” Cy nods respectfully.

The crowd talks amongst themselves as Kincaid corrects his charges. Though he removes cannibalism from the list, he continues with a long and detailed string of other crimes. He speaks for over an

hour, simply reading the charges. Many of them sound disingenuous. Cy sits back in his pew, struggling with his bound wrists. The guard to his left notices and takes pity on Cy. He suddenly grabs Cy and pushes him forward, removing his bindings. Kincaid watches, but doesn't stop talking. The guard reties Cy's hands together, but with less tension and with his hands placed in front of him.

"Thank you, mister...?"

"Samuel." The guard replies.

"Thank you, Samuel." Cy nods.

He rests an arm on the back of the pew and gets comfortable. Kincaid reads charge after charge. He uses five paper scrolls to list them all. The judges and crowd appear bored as the youth rambles endlessly. After hours of talking, Kincaid finally begins his opening statement, only to be cut off by the center judge who breaks for a recess.

"Keep this up and you won't need to cut my head off; you'll bore me to death right here." Cy jokes.

The moving crowd laughs at his comment as Kincaid's face flushes with anger. He storms off as Cy stretches out on the pew. His guards slide over, allowing him to lie down as he stares at the ceiling. Cy wonders how the others are doing and how far away they are. He starts to doze off, only to be rudely interrupted by Kincaid as he kicks the side of the pew.

"You can sleep when you are dead." Kincaid smirks at Cy.

"That will happen soon enough if you start talking again." Cy teases.

"That's enough!" A judge growls.

The guards and crowd of soldiers seem surprised that Cy isn't more monstrous, considering the charges against him. He is friendly, polite and often times downright charming. Kincaid seems to enjoy tormenting his prisoner, who merely responds with either silence or amusing quips. The trial continues all day as Kincaid rambles on about Cy's crimes, as though he were trying to convince the crowd that the Sa'kesh chieftain deserved to die. Soon, evening approaches and the judges call a recess until the next day. The guards lead Cy back to his cell, but he does not struggle. Samuel lets go of Cy's arm, and he continues to walk without attempting to escape.

"So how long have you been goons?" Cy asks lightheartedly.

"I have been a guard for two years." Samuel answers.

His comrade seems hesitant to speak.

"I see. Well, you're good people. You're more civil than Kincaid is." Cy comments.

The guards leave Cy in his cell, removing his bindings and giving him a large bowl of stew and a pitcher of water. They sit with him in the cellar, leaving several oil lanterns and lamps for their light sources. Cy eats quietly as he sits in his cell. After devouring the contents of the bowl, he fills it with water from the pitcher. He brings the bowl up to his lips and takes a drink. He pauses to look at his reflection in the water, seeing the bars above and behind him in the rippling liquid. He sighs sorrowfully as he sets the bowl down. After a while, Samuel and his companion leave, trading shifts with another pair of guards.

Cy sits in silence and waits. He struggles to sleep, but after a mind numbingly long time, he finally feels the haze of exhaustion

washing over him; his body grows weary and his eyelids heavy. As soon as he dozes off, he is awakened by Kincaid who clanks a small knife against the iron bars.

“Is there any particular reason why you won’t let me sleep? I have a trial to go to in the morning.”

“Oh? Do you miss your beauty rest?” Kincaid mocks him.

“I just want to have the strength to walk myself to the chopping block. There’s no dignity in being carried.” Cy smirks.

“That’s the spirit.” Kincaid grabs onto the bars. “But if I leave you with any strength to stand on your own, you won’t appreciate your suffering.”

“You and your suffering fetish...” Cy grumbles.

Cy leans back as Kincaid rambles on for what feels like hours, preaching to him about his misdeeds and regularly shaking the bars and jeering at him. As Kincaid himself grows tired, he brings Samuel back in for his shift. He instructs the guard to do the same, hoping to weaken Cy’s will by depriving him of sleep. Samuel seems hesitant, but Kincaid holds the knife to his chest as he politely asks him again. Samuel nervously agrees. Kincaid glares at Cy, then storms off and returns to his quarters. Samuel watches the doorway for a while before turning to the prisoner. He sits down on the ground, his back to a support beam.

“You may begin now.”

“No...” Samuel shakes his head. “Kincaid cannot force me to keep you awake, the little bastard that he is.”

“If you don’t obey and I look rested, he’ll probably punish you, so you might as well. Don’t worry about it. You’re just doing your job.” Cy assures him.

Samuel seems floored by Cy's concerns, but doesn't torment him.

"So... You don't like Kincaid either?" Cy asks.

"None of us do. He was only in charge because of his father, who was a chieftain of a powerful village. He took ill and died not long after, leaving Kincaid as the Lord of his lands." Samuel explains.

"Figures. I knew he couldn't earn it."

"Do not underestimate Kincaid. He has an aura about him. Though I have yet to meet a man who can respect the brat, he has a terrible presence and the villagers fear him, as do most of the men." Samuel retorts.

"How terrible of a presence?" Cy raises a brow.

"He has somehow tamed a kodana, which he rides."

"A kodana? ... Seriously? Those are the most dangerous creatures besides the Kaladez and Zajak, and they're meaner than the moltaka."

"I do not lie. I have seen it." Samuel assures him.

"The kodana. Black scaly skin, red eyes, red stripes along its back, short arms, and a long snout of razor sharp teeth. Looks like an overgrown velociraptor?" Cy asks.

"Yes... What is a 'velociraptor'?" Samuel responds.

"Never mind... Don't worry about Kincaid. Twerps like him eventually get what's coming to them." Cy says as he lies back.

"Good... You should get some rest." Samuel mutters.

"Thank you, Samuel."

Samuel sits silently as Cy soon passes out. Though he still has his nightmares, they are milder tonight, possibly due to his incredible mental exhaustion. Cy awakens the next morning to the sound of Kincaid berating Samuel for disobeying him. Kincaid backhands

Samuel, who is much larger than him, before ordering the older soldier to take Cy to the temple.

“I told you to listen.” Cy quietly comments to Samuel.

“The look on his face was worth the yelling and the feminine slap.” Samuel quietly remarks.

Cy takes his seat in the same pew and gets comfortable. Kincaid stands before the crowd and begins his long diatribe against Cy. After the first few minutes, he seems to lose the crowd and even the judges as they fidget and look around the room. Cy slides down in the pew, resting his head on the back and staring at the ceiling for a moment. He closes his eyes as he waits for Kincaid to finish. By noon, Kincaid is done speaking and a judge offers Cy a chance to reply in his own defense, for as long as he feels that he needs to. Cy stands in front of the pew and looks to Kincaid, the crowd, and then the judges.

“I know he said a lot of bad things about me. I know a lot of people think I’m a monster... And I am. Most of what you were awake for is true.” The crowd gasps and some chuckle. “I’m good at what I do, and it’s not a good line of work. My only defense is that I love my friends and my Ketlan wife. I care about the people that I am with and I would do whatever I can for them. I am building my own kingdom with different beliefs and values to Roland’s, and I did what I did to protect it, the citizens within, and their way of life. I sacrificed my own life, dreams, and possibly my very soul so that they could have peace. My hands are permanently stained with blood, for their sake. Do with me what you will, but I cannot apologize or ask forgiveness; I did what was necessary for them, and as a result, none of my actions feel like crimes to me. I’m not even remotely sorry.”

Cy takes a seat on the pew, his brief speech over. The crowd and judges appear both shocked and touched by his words. He looks over to Kincaid, who looks even more furious; his face turns as red as hot coals.

“We now move to the sentencing phase.” The center judge says.

“What is your desired punishment?” Another judge asks Kincaid.

“Death by beheading!” He exclaims.

“Very well. We will take a moment to deliberate.” The center judge declares.

Cy sits back and relaxes, waiting for the verdict as the judges whisper amongst themselves, behind their podiums. Samuel leans in and whispers to Cy.

“Is your wife really a Ketlan?”

“Yeah.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Samuel asks.

“If it did, I wouldn’t have pledged to her. They aren’t much different from humans anyway.” Cy answers.

“Are you so sure about that?” Another guard asks, eavesdropping on their quiet conversation.

“You people can’t seem to grasp the concept. Just because they don’t look like you on the outside, you automatically assume that they aren’t as good as humans. They have language, writing, culture, traditions and families. They make clothes and they love their children. They have feelings: fear, anger, joy, sorrow, jealousy... They have music and art. They learn new skills and adapt just like humans. The only difference is on the outside, and when you come right down to it, that’s about as insignificant as it can be. Why do I have to keep explaining this to everyone?”

Cy shakes his head, visibly annoyed by their opposing viewpoint. The guards look to each other and sit in silence for a moment.

“So, what was it like, living with the Sakesh?” Samuel asks, genuinely curious.

“It was nice. They’re a good people. Humans and Zelkona work together for a common goal there. We don’t have Ketlan there yet, but we will one day. They’re all a bunch of friends and families, building a city. It always warmed my heart to see them.”

Samuel seems to lament the last few days as he watches Cy, knowing that his fate was sealed as soon as the net fell upon him. Even if he is not sentenced to death, he will suffer another punishment. The judges eventually return and gain the crowds attention with the gavel block.

“We have decided that although Cyrus has acted in the interest of his own people, he is still a criminal by our law, and will be executed with his own sword. The sentence will be carried out immediately.” He speaks.

“Oh goodie...” Cy remarks, staring up at the ceiling.

The crowd gasps and talks amongst each other. Kincaid looks to Cy with a sinister grin, but it immediately fades when he sees a total lack of emotion on Cy’s face. He is visibly angry that he can’t relish Cy’s fear and storms off to fetch the sword. Samuel and his comrade take Cy up by his arms but he pulls away.

“I can walk myself to the chopping block! ... Where is it?”

Samuel points the way with a frown upon his face. The crowd stares as Cy leads his two guards from the building and outside. The unarmed witnesses follow along at a distance as Cy and his two guards walk toward the edge of the outpost and in the direction of the Sa’kesh village. Kincaid approaches with the sword from a far-off building and Cy turns back. He takes a deep breath, preparing

himself for the end. The crowd of men suddenly turn and cry out in fear. Looking back toward the forest, Cy sees a swarm of arrows, easily over one hundred in number, flying in an arch and toward the crowd about fifty meters behind him. They scream in pain and scatter as the arrows strike.

A gunshot from the forest strikes Samuel in the arm and drops him to the ground, while a second strikes his companion in the head. Cy ducks down by the chopping block as a massive horde of Sa'kesh militia charge in. The Zelkona warriors rush past the others, leaping upon their defenseless and fleeing victims. They stab, slash and even bite their unarmed targets, slaughtering the remnants of the crowd in mere moments. A horn blows in the distance as the soldiers arm themselves for battle. Turning to the skirmish taking place just behind him, Cy can see an utterly terrified Kincaid dropping Cy's still sheathed sword and running away, disappearing behind a building.

Running up to him, Yasmin holds her Sako rifle while Jack holds his Lee Enfield. Yasmin notices Samuel, who is still alive.

"Jack, you ass hole, you didn't kill him! What if he stabbed Cy before we got here?!" She growls angrily.

Aiming her rifle, she prepares to fire but Cy stops her.

"Wait! Not this one. I'll vouch for him."

"Are you fucking serious?"

Cy merely nods. Yasmin lowers her rifle and glares at the terrified human. Cy sits down atop the chopping block and looks around, the sounds of melee combat raging behind him. His lips curl as he sees Zakera strolling casually toward him, her hips swaying with each step and her tail swishing elegantly through the air. The light of

the sun makes her pink, white and cyan fur glisten, her pink hair fluttering in the breeze. Taking out her kukri knife from the sheath tied to her waist, she points the blade at him. Cy holds out his bound hands.

“I missed you so much.” He says to her, his eyes watering.

“I have missed you too, my love.” She says, cutting the bindings.

He immediately takes hold of his wife, nuzzling the soft fur of her face with his nose. She rests her hands on his shoulder blades and softly kisses his cheek and neck, giving him a somewhat lustful lick.

“I would have been here sooner, but our troops needed to sleep at least once during the trip.”

“Those lazy militia.” He chuckles.

“Cy, before you get too comfortable, we should really mop this up.” Yasmin interjects.

“Right.” Cy reluctantly agrees.

Cy follows Yasmin, Jack and Zakera as they wade through the corpses of the crowd. A few soldiers take Samuel away to be treated, honoring Cy’s request and sparing his life. Stepping over the corpses of the fallen, it is impossible to notice that every courtroom witness was killed without a single Sa’kesh being slain. The human and Zelkona militia fight what’s left of the small outpost while a few drag the judges out of the courthouse before setting it on fire. A Zelkona leans in and bites the throat of one judge, while another is impaled with a sword and the third thrown onto the burning rooftop.

“What a shame... That was a nice building!” Cy remarks.

Walking up to his sword, Cy takes the weapon. Scanning the battlefield for a moment, he is surprised to find that Kincaid must have also been carrying his gear belt. It sits in the open, every piece still in its rightful place, even his chain whip. Approaching the belt, he hears something that catches his attention. Among the sounds of battle, he hears the men crying out 'kodana' several times. Turning, he finds Kincaid sitting atop a saddled kodana and riding into the forest, heading in a perfectly straight line as he flees for his life. Arrows and javelins fly past him, and though one strikes the youth in the right leg, he soon disappears into the tree line.

"I'll get you next time, you little shit." Cy murmurs.

The skirmish soon fades, with the Sa'kesh the obvious victors. Cy walks among his troops, who cheer at the sight of him. They hold up their weapons; those with shields clank their blades against the wooden barriers. With an arm around his mate, he walks back to the center of the outpost, glancing toward the chopping block.

"Now that was quite a battle!" Yasmin chirps.

"I can't believe it... We hardly lost any soldiers! A few wounded, and one missing, but that's it!" Jack exclaims.

"Caught them by surprise and with superior firepower." Yasmin smirks.

"Find that missing soldier. We won't leave until we do." Cy orders.

"Right away!" Yasmin nods.

Cy sits down on the purple grass before slumping back. He looks to the faint red sky as the blue day moon inches slowly overhead. The strands tickle the sides of his face as the wind slowly blows the long blades. Zakera kneels beside him, leaning over and

looking down at her mate. Reaching up, he strokes her face, admiring her beauty.

“Hi, pretty eyes.” He smiles.

“Hello, my love.”

She leans in and kisses his lips passionately before rising to her feet and holding out a hand to him.

“Come. Your son wishes to see you.”

“You brought Darius?” He bolts upright.

“Yes. I am sorry, but I knew that you would want to hold your son again.”

“I do.” He murmurs.

“Then we should not keep him waiting.” She says, taking hold of his hand.