

The Seventh Realm: Volume Three

By Mantrid Brizon

The Birth Of A Kingdom

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Episode 27: Homecoming

Over the next two days the Malevolence makes a solemn journey back to the cove. The entire crew take turns at the helm, even Katero. On the morning of the third day, the Malevolence nears the cove; Rico slows the ship to a crawl as he examines the natural port from a distance with the ship's binoculars. Setting them aside, he turns the ship away from the cove and shuts down the propellers. Taking a deep breath, he pulls the lever slowly into reverse. Johnny and Cy stand on the catwalk just outside of the superstructure, one of them on either side.

The ship creeps backward into the cove, bobbing gently with the waves as Rico carefully adjusts the wheel. Keeping the ship as centered as he can, he backs the Malevolence slowly between the rocky walls. The ship pulls deeper into the cove as sweat beads on Rico's forehead. He lifts his arm, wiping it away as the ship shudders; the hull screeches as rocks brush against the side. Johnny nearly stumbles, but Katero grabs him by the shoulders, steadying him.

"Shit!" Rico calls out, quickly adjusting the wheel.

He pulls further away from one side of the cove as the ship twists, backing in diagonally. The aft of the ship bumps more rocks as he tries to adjust again. Rico begins to panic as he quickly reaches out and pushes the lever forward, turning off the propellers. Whipping the wheel, he adjusts the rudders as the ship glides backwards, straightening out.

"Come on, baby..." Rico pleads with the Malevolence.

He whips the wheel again as the ship floats in, becoming perfectly straight with the walls of the cove.

“Pull forward!” Johnny yells out.

Rico looks back, seeing the rear wall quickly bearing down on them. He reaches out and throws the lever forward, turning the propellers back on. The ship slows as it tries to pull away from the rock wall. The aft of the ship is mere feet away from the short cliff when they feel a hard jolt. Another loud scraping sound echoes from the hull and the rocks; the ship doesn't move. The engine roars, but the Malevolence stays put. Cy darts in and yanks the lever back, turning off the propellers again.

“We're here...” Cy says calmly.

“What happened?” Rico looks to him.

“We are sitting on a large rock. It is perched, but we are still here.” Katero answers.

Rico shakes his head in regret and disappointment.

“I'm not as good as Norv. I'm sorry.” He apologizes.

“It's alright. Don't worry about it.” Cy assures him.

“You brought us home safely. That is all we can ask of you.” Katero adds.

Rico slowly nods, looking at the floor. Johnny pats his shoulder gently.

“Let's go home, man.”

With their gear packed and the Malevolence rather crudely moored in the cove atop a series of rocks, the group extend the gangplank and head for land. Rico can't help himself and ties down the ship before returning the gangplank, as if the vessel were still useable. None of the others bother to stop him; he needs to do it, for his own sake. Crawling across the ropes, Yasmin pulls him up and brushes him off. Seeing the sorrow in his eyes as he turns back to the beached ship, even she feels a modicum of pity for the man. Yasmin gives him a gentle embrace, a shock to all who know the woman. He returns the gesture. They march in silence through the field and toward the Sa'kesh village, only to see villagers darting away from the copper mine.

Racing up to them and readying their weapons, believing that they may be under attack, they are relieved when they catch a miner and he reveals the truth. Word has spread to them that the first conquered village has arrived; a wave of new Ketlan will soon be flooding the Kelanethaka. Cy turns to the others with an amused look on his face.

"What do you think? Detour?"

"Why?" Yasmin asks.

"Why not?" Cy retorts.

"We're only going to be in the way." Rico remarks.

"Where's your sense of adventure?! Johnny... I bet that girl would like to see you." Cy winks.

"... I'd very much like to see these new Ketlan!" Johnny chirps.

Katero, Rico and several of the other Ketlan warriors chuckle.

"At-a-boy. Come on! It'll be fun!" Cy pleads.

"Were you go, I go." Zakera steps up to him.

“Oh, alright...” Yasmin smirks.

Following Katero, who knows a shortcut, they pass through the jungle and find themselves back at the Kelanethaka village amidst a wave of new Ketlan faces. The original villagers pay no attention to the sudden emergence of humans, but as they stop to witness the pilgrimage, several new Ketlan point at the humans and speak quietly amongst themselves in Ketlanic. It is obvious to the humans that these Ketlan have probably never seen humans before and certainly would not know English, in any of its incarnations.

“Hello my children!” Zikata exclaims, startling the party.

They turn to see him emerging from a recently constructed brick home a short distance away. He approaches Cy and Zakera, greeting them both with a warm embrace, to the shock of the uninitiated Ketlan villagers. Not only have they never seen humans before but they have never seen Ketlan treating another race so affectionately; the newcomers suffer a massive culture shock.

“It’s good to see you father. There are a lot of new faces around here!” Cy comments.

“Indeed! This tribe was quite large, possibly larger than our own, but our new weapons and training ensured our victory. Nearly half of the men of fighting age were slain, while the rest surrendered, and to a force of only thirty.” Zikata proudly explains.

“Do any wish to join the Sa’kesh?” Zakera quickly asks.

“... No.” Zikata laments.

“I don’t blame them. Us humans aren’t the prettiest race to live with.” Cy jests.

“I beg to differ.” Zakera coos.

The couple share a few kisses as Johnny slips away, passing between a pair of gawking Ketlan females.

“Sano loda’ketlan rabu davo’ketlan?!” A green and yellow striped female asks.

“Loda’ketlan zavaj ka ek.” A red and white speckled female answers.

“Kezkoka.” Green replies.

With Zakera’s arm fused to Cy’s waist, he turns back to Zikata, who is eager to show them the extent of the progress made in the few days that they’ve been away. While touring the swiftly expanding village, they speak of King Roland’s kingdom, revealing his lie of a grand army, and the fate of the man and his castle. Zikata and his fellow Kelanethaka rejoice at the news; as word of their deed spreads like wildfire, many of the new Ketlan look fearful of the humans. That does not stop a small group from following and staring, however. A band of curious onlookers follow their new chieftain and the odd, mixed race couple as they pass through the village.

The other two humans, Rico and Yasmin, attract far less attention than Cy and Zakera, though the pair expected that. To their knowledge, there has never been a pair like them on Monala in quite some time, if ever. Resting her head on her mate’s shoulder, Cy strokes her arm lovingly. Her tail hooks his side as a show of affection, a gesture he cannot make in return. However, he answers in his own way, nuzzling her face with his nose before kissing her yet again.

“Gulo kath.” A voice scolds someone behind them.

Glancing over her shoulder, Zakera notices the same two gawking females from before, the green and yellow striped female

and her red and white speckled friend. The green furred female covers her mouth with her hand.

“Ja juzovo oma kezkoka shakiva vizay. Ja nevlan sano shakiva.” Green murmurs, within earshot of the couple.

“Bel davo’ketlan vithlana. Pekmazay chashako loda’ketlan.” Red casually replies at speaking volume.

“Kuzem! Kadlem, zuj kima! Ja kayva kelitho kima!” Cy growls.

The two Ketlan female’s eyes grow wide and green takes a step back. Neither woman was aware that humans could speak their language. Green is awash with embarrassment. Her companion, Red, feels ashamed for her cruel accusation as she sees the anger in their eyes. Zakera’s balled fist tremors from her growing rage. How dare they view her beloved mate as merely her personal slave. Their inability to comprehend the love that the two share sickens her as much as the side effects of her pregnancy.

“Ja bijka...” Red lower’s her head.

“... Ja halnad fi. Rota.” Cy softly replies.

Zakera’s vibrant cyan eyes grow wide in surprise, as do those of the two females. None can understand why Cy would be so quick to forgive them and send them away. Returning to his mate, Cy slips an arm around her waist and gives her a tender kiss on the cheek.

“Why would you forgive them?” Zakera asks.

“They don’t know how we feel about each other. This is all new to them and they have a lot to learn. I wanted them to know that just because I’m human doesn’t mean that I’m not capable of feeling or compassion. Maybe my mercy will help them learn that we are not so different?” Cy answers.

"You have chosen a fine mate, my daughter." Zikata comments.

"I know." She grins.

"You should consider teaching your new villagers how to speak English." Cy adds.

"I will get right on that." Zikata chuckles. "Any more advice for me?"

"No." Cy smiles.

"Actually, father, we did have more news that we wanted to share with you." Zakera adds.

"Oh?"

"Yes..." She nods.

Though they had planned to share with Zikata when they next saw him, Zakera finds herself nervous at the prospect of telling her father that he will soon have grandchildren. She looks to him and sees the look of wonder on his face; it's as though he is expecting it and is already overflowing with joy. Looking to her mate, Cy gives her a subtle nod, his hand gently squeezing her arm reassuringly as he stands by her side. She takes a deep breath.

"Well, what is it?!" Zikata asks excitedly.

"Father... Py'sel are real." She says, resting a hand over her toned belly.

Walking through the now bustling village on his own, Johnny soon finds Gomona near the center, carrying a load of water. She nearly drops the clay buckets at the sight of him. He steadies her load before taking it off of her shoulders entirely, setting the clay containers and wooden yoke down on the ground. Gomona gives him a hug, her bushy tail swaying. It draws just as much attention as Cy and Zakera do, and though Johnny doesn't really care, Gomona isn't fond of it. He helps her carry the water to its destination before they slip

away entirely. Leaving the water at a building designated for making mud bricks and pottery, they heading back for her family hut, eager to catch up with each other.

Gomona has been quite lonely without him, and though she still experiences other boys when he is gone, they aren't quite the same. Johnny, aware that she has never offered her loyalty, merely wants to relieve his stress and alleviate his sorrows.

"I have missed you, Johnny." She says between kisses, walking backward toward her hut.

"I have missed you too, Gomona. It's so good to see and touch you again." He says, fondling her breasts as he gently pushes her inside.

"I have missed your touch... You know my body so well." She coos.

"So do you."

Disappearing inside, he removes his shoes and pants in seconds. Gomona knows that her partner prefers to see all of her, so she strips her hide breastplate and skirt from her body, exposing herself in time for him to remove his last article of clothing. He takes her into his arms and they share a passionate kiss. Their tongues entwine before he slowly moves away from her lips at the front of her snout. He nuzzles and kisses her cheek and neck, his hands fondling her perky breasts. Leaning forward, he licks the flesh of her nipples as his hands move ever lower.

"Oh, Johnny..." She groans.

She gasps as he slips a finger inside of her, feeling the warmth of her loins. Impulsively taking hold of his endowed member, she strokes him just how he likes. Gomona is keenly aware of how to

please him, though they don't get to do this often. She has honed her skills with several other boys, none of whom are up to par. Before long, she can no longer stand it and steps back. Dropping to her knees, she turns around and glances over her shoulder at him, a hand reaching back and resting on her buttocks as her tail moves to the side. He takes his position behind her, teasing her loins with his swollen phallus. Just then, Gomona has a realization.

"What of your family?" She asks.

"What about them?"

"Will they soon be looking for you?"

"Don't worry. They will be busy talking to Zikata for a while. I don't think they even noticed that I left." He replies.

"AlriiiIII!" She squeals, her claws digging into the soil as Johnny quickly inserts himself.

Zikata stands in shock as he looks at his daughter and her pledged mate. It is clear from his expression that he must have been expecting other news. His cyan eyes turn slowly downward, aiming for his daughter's stomach. With gaping maw uttering only silence, he takes a moment to snap himself out of his bewildered trance.

"That is amazing! I did not believe that py'sel were real!" Zikata exclaims.

The utterance of the Ketlanic combination word draws the attention of all within earshot of the chieftain. Gasps and similar exclamations are heard by the couple. Zikata gives his daughter a gentle embrace, as though worried he might damage her.

"Oh, they are real." Zakera nods.

"I cannot believe that I will soon be a grandfather! This is like a wonderful dream!" Zikata gushes. "Wait... You left with Cyrus while pregnant?! Why would you allow her to do such a thing?!" He barks at Cy.

"I didn't know! I was upset too! I never would have let her come with me had she told me when she first found out!" Cy exclaims defensively.

"It is not his fault, father. I wanted to be by his side should anything bad happen. I am sorry, and it will not happen again." She says, bowing her head.

"I hope not!"

"It won't. I won't let her take any risks, not with our children." Cy assures him.

"Cy!" Zakera whines.

"Got to protect the queen bee until she lays those eggs." Yasmin quips.

"Yaz!" Zakera flushes beneath her fur.

"Good. Those are *my* grandchildren, after all!"

"Father!" Zakera exclaims in embarrassment.

Zakera buries her shoulder into Cy's side, as though trying to hide herself beneath his arm. He holds her close and strokes her cheek with his fingertips, brushing her wavy pink hair from her face. His soft touch, warm embrace and the tender kiss he bestows upon her melts away her embarrassment, quickly returning her to a state of normalcy. Zikata, eager to end the tour and continue an entirely new conversation back at his recently finished brick home, leads the group through the village, maintaining a brisk pace.

"I'm noticing quite a few more homes are being constructed since the last time we were here. Why is that?" Cy asks.

“Oh! As it happens, this tribe we conquered was quite large, as were the others.” Zikata answers.

“Others?” Yasmin raises a brow.

“Another village less than a day away from the first was targeted by our warriors. However, they joined us without a fight. I assume that is because a survivor or two ran past them before we arrived, warning them of the great warriors who would soon pay them a visit.” Zikata chuckles.

“Makes sense.” Yasmin nods.

“They will soon be joining us, as will a third village. We need the homes for all of the newcomers.”

Arriving at Zikata’s brick home, he invites them all inside, holding Zakera’s hand as she steps up into the building. The mud brick floors are cool on her paw-like feet and form the foundation of the building, leaving them a few inches above ground level, unlike a typical hut with a dirt floor.

“Have you thought of names for your child?!” Zikata excitedly asks.

“I have a few!” Cy chirps.

“Hey, where’d Johnny go?” Rico suddenly asks.

Sweat coats the teenage human boy’s tanned flesh like a layer of fine oil. Gomona’s soft fur absorbs the moisture from his pelvis and thighs as she sits atop him. Her coat is matted and damp all along her body from her own sweat as she exerts herself. Her claws rake his chest and she stares down at her partner, her green eyes nearly glowing in the dim light of the hut. Bushy tail swaying with delight, she tosses her head back and gasps for breath as she straddles her lover and feels his exceptional endowment within her. Grunting and groaning, she swivels and bucks her hips as he holds tightly to her

slender waist. Though she has already cum once, Johnny wants her to finish again before he will allow himself to join her.

He sits upright and rests his hands on her firm butt, giving her a quick smack and forcing a pleased moan. Licking and sucking on her nipples, she takes hold of his head and runs her fingers through his hair. She kisses and necks her lover as she holds her position, taking a moment to swing her legs, wrapping them around his waist. Now both sitting upright and with her body weight pressing her down against his phallus, which is completely enveloped by her loins, she slowly continues her work. It's a struggle for the girl as her body begins to convulse, feeling her peak right around the corner. Her clitoris rubs against the moist flesh of his pelvis, teasing her almost as much as the large penis that repeatedly caresses her spot.

With hands gripping his back tightly, she grunts and gasps as Johnny uses his hands to move her. Having lost the ability to continue on her own, he slides her back and forth and rocks her hips for her. She has become his living puppet. Gomona's legs shiver and she can't help but squeal as she coats him with a second layer of thick, white cream. Feeling the fluid, the warmth and tightness of her loins, Johnny leans forward, resting Gomona on her back as he looms over her. Holding onto him like a koala, she nuzzles, licks and kisses his neck as he places her on her back, resting on his hands and knees above her. He drives his considerable girth into and out of her body with long, swift and powerful strokes that drive her wild.

It doesn't take long for Johnny to push himself over the edge, and only a few minutes after taking this position is he burying himself completely within her. Grunting loudly through clenched teeth, his fingers tear at the soil while hers tear at his flesh. Jet after powerful jet fills Gomona with the human's fertile seed, the sensation triggering her body and giving her a third and final wave of pleasure. Lying over his sexual partner, the teen kisses her with a level of passion that she isn't accustomed too. Leaving himself within her, he holds her tightly

and rests his chin atop her shoulder. Gomona doesn't stop him, rather comforted by his embrace.

It takes a moment of resting before they both remember and Johnny extracts himself. Gomona has already prepared the tea, something she does on a daily basis, which is about as often as she uses it. He slowly dresses himself as she drinks the liquid that will render her infertile, at least long enough to prevent his seed from planting itself. Glancing over to her as he ties his shoes, Johnny is still surprised by how casually Gomona acts after they are finished. No matter how passionate he is, she is quick to say goodbye to him when their session is over; it makes it easy to stay detached. They exit the tent, and though many Ketlan see the human leaving with the girl, whom they must have heard mating, they say nothing and draw no attention to the juveniles.

"Well... I hope to see you again, soon." He says to her.

Gomona merely smiles, not answering him verbally.

"Johnny!" Rico calls out.

Turning, Johnny sees that the others are looking for him and Rico is the first to spot the youth. Dashing up to him, Rico waves at Gomona, who waves back. He stops in front of Johnny and rests a hand on his shoulder.

"We're heading out. Let's go."

"Alright." He says to Rico. "Take care, Gomona."

She nods her head and watches as they leave, sighing sullenly as Johnny walks away. Gomona is always frustrated by the fact that

she doesn't know when she will see him again. If she could have her way she would most likely mate with him exclusively, but only if he lived in their village and it drew no unwanted attention. Turning her head, she stops as she sees a Ketlan boy. New to their tribe, the juvenile who is close to their age watches her. He stares intently before nervously waving. Gomona waves back.

Episode 28: Development

Cy awakens from a deep sleep, taking a moment to stretch before glancing over at the resting Zakera who lay against his left side. He brushes the pink hair from her face, revealing her snout and closed eyes. She stirs, mumbling incoherently as her fingers coil against the flesh of his chest. Unwilling to disturb her, he lay in bed and listens to the sounds coming from down below. It has been a little over a week since they've returned to the fortress and their village. Led by Mirkon in the absence of Cy, Yasmin and Zakera, they continued with their lives and followed his written instructions to the letter.

Working tirelessly to raise a grand city, the villagers have worked in shifts, nearly perpetually. They've been only further aided by the arrival of several small bands of migrating humans, still fleeing through the forest from Roland's now defunct kingdom. The Sa'kesh welcome them with open arms, eager for every new body who crosses their path. With the trees felled and the land cleared, they have begun laying brick roads in the form of a conventional, square city block. In the past several days their efforts have begun to bear visible fruit. Small, multi-story brick homes and workshops are quickly springing up, growing faster than kudzu vine on Earth.

The farms have been tilled and seeded, while the hunting parties have begun mapping the patterns of the genashin herds. It is part of a

plan concocted by Chris and Daniel to create domesticated livestock for work, food and hides. With a large ranch being constructed beside their farmland, they will soon be ready to attempt capture and domestication. Zakera opens her eyes, her lips curling up at the corners of her feline snout at the sight of her mate. He looks to her with his icy blue eyes, gently stroking her cheek. Leaning in, she gives him a long, loving kiss. She yawns, stretches and rubs the sleep from her eyes before sitting upright in bed.

Rising from the bed, Cy slips on his clothing, having kept the villager's garments from their raid on Roland's castle. His original clothes are quickly becoming worn anyway. As Zakera ties her original hide breastplate and skirt to her body, a much more durable form of clothing, Cy steps out onto the balcony of their room and leans over, his hands on the wooden rails. He marvels at the sight of the growing city only a moderate walk away. With a census taken at his request, his tribe houses six hundred and ninety souls, including the original fortress dwellers.

"How long did we sleep, my love?" Zakera asks.

"I don't know. I can't see the day moon, so it must be late. That's what happens when we stay up all night." He turns back to her and winks.

"I could not help myself. I enjoy your company." She coos.

"Yeah. Me too."

Zakera steps up to her mate and slips her arms around his body at his waist, her breasts pressing against his back as she hugs him from behind.

"I enjoy our talks very much. Everything that you share about your past and your life before you came to me only further bonds us together."

“Really?” He glances over his shoulder.

“Yes.”

“I feel the same way.” He says as he spins around, holding her in his arms. “I love hearing your stories.”

“My stories are not nearly as fascinating as yours.” She retorts.

“But I still love them. They’re yours.” He says, smiling warmly.

“How did I find such a male?” Zakera wonders aloud.

“I should be asking you the same thing.”

“How you found such a male?! It is not Katero, is it?” She teases.

Cy laughs and kisses his mate, stroking her back. They are interrupted by a loud knock on their closed bedroom door.

“Are you awake yet?!” Lara calls through.

“No. We’ve both died in our sleep.” Cy sarcastically replies.

Opening the door, they step outside where Lara and Mirkon wait for them. With his fully loaded gear belt attached and Zakera’s pistol holstered, they follow Mirkon and Lara downstairs and into the courtyard where Cy’s new guards await them. The first of their freshly trained militia, who are being taught by both Jack and Yasmin, the squad of sword and spear bearing humans walk on either side of their chieftain and his Ketlan wife. Unlike the Kelanethaka who prefer the khopesh, Cy had presented two different blades for his own blacksmiths to copy. Of the classic leaf-shape and the Iberian saber that they now produce with cykera metal, which has proven superior to all bronze alloys and on part with iron, they follow the preference of their leader; the militia are all armed with falcata swords.

Marching from the safety of the electrified fence that protects the fortress, they follow a newly placed mud brick road that leads to

the planned city block. The third building on the block is a school, which at Cy's instructions was prioritized for completion. At this school, many of the original fortress dwellers plan to teach the most important and useful of knowledge. Basic mathematics, biology and science, as well as both modern English and Ketlanic. The second building on the block is a clinic, a request made by Lara, while the first is an armory and small barracks.

No matter how humanitarian Cy's projects are, or how thoughtfully he leads the Sa'kesh, he has been and always will be a warrior; security will never be forgotten among his people, so long as he draws breath. He glances to the three buildings, the school already finished and the clinic and armory nearly finished.

"Isn't it beautiful?" He says.

"My Lord?" Mirkon looks back.

"The city. Isn't it beautiful?" Cy reiterates.

"It is, my Lord. I have never seen such a sight."

"It'll be like walking through the streets of Egypt or Sumer. And stop calling me that!" Cy chuckles.

"My apologies, Cyrus. Our people do fine work. I can only imagine the kind of trading we will partake in once the shops are finished." Mirkon says.

"Trading..." Cy scoffs. "This will be a hub of knowledge and understanding; true civilization! Medicine, science, even art! All races will be able to enjoy a life here when we're through!" Cy preaches.

"Yes, Cyrus." Mirkon grins.

"When these streets are filled with human, Ketlan and Zelkona, living, working and trading together, it will be as beautiful as a renaissance portrait."

Marching through the rapidly shrinking trail that connects the Sa'kesh and the Kelanethaka, Katero and his party of warriors round the bend and arrive at the fortress. As they step up to the fence, which is protected by Cy's human warriors, they lower their spears and order them to halt and state their business. Katero is surprised by the sudden show of force.

"Stop! Lower your weapons!" Gabriella exclaims from a second story balcony.

As one of the original Sa'kesh and an inhabitant of the fortress, they obey without question. Gabriella rushes from the study and down the stairs, bolting outside and racing up to Katero and his men. Yasmin is currently away with Jack and Rico, and though Gabriella has some authority as a fortress dweller, she cannot give many orders beyond those already spoken.

"Hi, Katero!" She happily exclaims.

"Hello, Gabriella."

"You can call me Gabby." She says with a wide grin.

"Alright. Is Cyrus in?" He asks.

"No. Almost everyone is gone. I'm here with Samantha and Isabella. They're in town, checking on the construction." She answers.

"And they have left three females alone? Shame on them." Katero grins.

"I have guards and a pistol." She giggles.

"Yes, and I am sure that you are more than a match for any male here." He adds. "However, I must be going. I have an important matter that I need to discuss with Cyrus."

"Wait! ... I mean, I can send a runner. You'd spend a few hours just looking for Cy, and the runners know the city better anyway." She nervously explains.

"Alright, Gabby. I will stay here with you, and you may send a runner."

Opening the gate, Gabby steps outside and stands close to Katero as one of the guards dashes away, looking for his chieftain. Cy and the others tour the school and the subsequent city block, the chieftain *and* his wife earning reverence wherever they go. As they walk through the streets, a runner swiftly approaches them, gasping for breath.

"What is it, soldier?" Mirkon asks.

"My Lord! The Ketlan are here! One has asked to speak with you by name!" The runner exclaims through labored breaths.

"Relax. I'm sure it's nothing too serious. Take a break and catch your breath before going back to your post." Cy says, patting the runner's shoulder.

"Thank you, my Lord." He bows.

"I wish people would stop calling me that..." Cy grumbles.

"Apologies, Cyrus."

Traveling back to the fortress, the group finds Katero as he sits on the laid brick street, Gabriella beside him. His men stand idly in the background, conversing and joking with the human militia who guard the fortress. It's a scene quite pleasing to Cy and Zakera. Seeing his friend, Katero rises to his feet and greets him as a warrior with the traditional forearm grip.

"It is good to see you, my friend. I have come to ask you for help." Katero begins.

"One day you should just come by to say hello." Cy chuckles.

"Perhaps I will, but my duties keep me busy." Katero replies.

"So, what's the problem?" Cy asks.

"You recall the tribes that we have conquered?"

"I do." Cy nods.

"Well, the third was not Ketlan..." Katero pauses.

"Human?!" Mirkon asks excitedly.

"No... Zelkona."

"I see..." Mirkon murmurs.

"They are not pleased to be living beside their conquerors."

"Go figure." Cy quietly quips.

"We have informed them of the arrangement between our tribes, and though they are not fond of living among humans either, they have chosen to join the Sa'kesh instead." Katero explains.

"How many?" Zakera asks.

"All of them!" Katero chirps. "We do not know their numbers, but they are considerable."

"Wonderful!" Zakera remarks.

"Would you help us move them to your village?"

"Absolutely!" Cy gleefully exclaims.

"Zikata and I both worry that the Zelkona are bitter with the Ketlan in general for their current situation. He and I both hope that the influence of you and your people will ease their hostility toward the Ketlan. We both desire to see a time when all of our races may coexist peacefully." Katero adds.

"Fully converted to the dark side, eh?" Cy chuckles, draping an arm over Katero's shoulders.

"I do not consider your vision to be very dark. Contrary, it is quite a pleasing thought to see us attain true harmony."

"Indeed." Cy laughs. "I will do all that I can, and you know it."

"Still, it does not hurt to ask." Katero grins.

Turning back to his mate, Cy and Zakera wish each other well. Though she is comforted by his continual presence, she understands and accepts his request; Cy would never order her to do anything, a fact that she appreciates. Unwilling to risk her health and safety, especially when she is carrying their unborn child, she will stay behind in the safety of the fortress while Cy leaves with an envoy, returning with Katero to the Kelanethaka. He instructs Mirkon to fetch more militia and any number of volunteers who aren't actively working, hoping to complete the Zelkona's migration in a days' time. He darts off, eager to carry out his chieftain's orders.

During that time, Cy and his small entourage of guards accompany Katero and his men, walking along the trail that leads to the Ketlan village. The march is significantly shortened by the expansion of the Kelanethaka, and in just over an hour the party have arrived. A cacophony of noise greets them and Katero grows concerned. Hastening his pace, he and his men rush toward the voices, Cy and his own men following suit. They arrive at the village to see something of a standoff, a horde of Zelkona surrounded on three sides by an even larger horde of Ketlan. A female Zelkona seems to be the leader and barks at the Kelanethaka in Ketlanic.

It is the first time that Cy and his human militia have seen the Zelkona up close. Now able to witness their height, Cy is amused that the male Zelkona are actually rather short, on par with the average Ketlan female. The tallest male is around five feet and four inches, while most are a few inches shorter. However, there isn't a single female below five feet and six inches tall, some reaching six feet tall. Only bearing simple spears of sharpened and fire-hardened sticks, as well as their own claws, the Zelkona are a dangerous adversary, even when compared against the sword-wielding Ketlan. Cy briefly wonders how a raiding party managed to conquer the whole tribe.

The Zelkona stand in a triangular formation behind the imposing female, who towers at five feet and eleven inches tall. Wearing a hide top and skirt like the others, her glossy, dense and vibrant flesh

exceptionally alluring. Corvette red and sun yellow in color, she has a two-tone pattern with the yellow flesh running from her chin and down through her front, stopping at her inner thighs; this is similar to Zakera's white fur. Her whip-like tail sways, allowing Cy to see that she also has yellow running along the underside. Though her form is exceptionally attractive, downright voluptuous, she seems to be as strong an opponent in combat as Hitoren was. If Cy hadn't killed the powerful Ketlan some time ago, he might be more worried as he stands before her.

"Fota fi?" Cy asks.

"Zia." The female answers.

"Zee-ah?" Cy reiterates. "Fi kavay?"

"Vo." Zia nods.

"Litay vidab?" Cy asks.

"Vay volo ogo ziv. Zuj kebina ka zefugu. Vay vaba zuj."

Cy turns to a Ketlan warrior who appears to be leading the others. Cy doesn't recognize the man, but knows that he is an original Kelanethaka from the look of recognition that he receives.

"Why are you trying to take their weapons?" Cy asks.

"They are not Kelanethaka, and not yet Sa'kesh. We do not trust them." He answers.

"They think you are trying to *kill* them." Cy retorts.

"Maray ketlan!" Zia urges, unable to understand their English.

"Shona fuju kebina." Cy says reassuringly to her, holding up a hand. "Now I want you to put down *your* weapons first so that they see that you are not a threat to them. You will then allow them to keep theirs until we can move them to my village. Is that in any way unclear?" He asks the warrior.

"I do not believe that a wise decision." The warrior grumbles.

"You've conquered their tribe and forced them to march here and now you're asking them to give up their weapons while wielding your own... Think about that for a moment. You aren't even showing them respect."

"Do they really deserve it?" The warrior scoffs.

"Mind your tongue, Fekolza!" Katero growls.

"Fekolza?! ... I'll tell you what... Find Zikata and tell him what I said. If he tells you to do something else, then do that. I will never go against my father..."

Fekolza grumbles before darting off. Cy turns back to Zia and bows his head respectfully.

"Shona halnad vay. Vay zefugu."

Zia looks Cy over with her golden eyes, her combative stance relaxing. She bows her head back to the human who shows such concern and respect for her kind. They stand there in silence for a moment as they wait for Fekolza to return with word from Zikata. Zia tilts her head curiously, her eyes scanning Cy as he stands and looks up to the sky, a little smile on his face.

"Fi Sa' kesh kavay?" Zia asks.

"Vo. Ja 'Cyrus'." He answers, still looking up.

"Fi fanush devana. Ja devana fi." She adds.

"Fi janalo devana." He says, never once glancing to her.

The crowd of Ketlan move aside as Zikata returns with Fekolza. Upon seeing Cy, he grins from cheek to cheek and embraces the human.

“So good to see you, my son. How is my daughter?”

“Just fine. I left her at home to rest.” Cy replies.

“Smart. Take no chances.” Zikata nods. “I understand you are here to take your new villagers home!”

“Indeed, I am.”

“Fekolza thought it wise to try and take their weapons, and while I understand his position, I agree with *you*, my son.” Zikata continues.

“Thank you. May I ask that you tell them that? They may not believe me.” Cy asks.

“Of course.” He nods. “Iza fi ziv!” Zikata says loudly to the Zelkona tribals.

The horde of raptor people collectively relax, standing at attention. Cy thanks Zikata, and the family-by-marriage embrace before a thoroughly embarrassed and humiliated Fekolza. Katero reclaims command of the Kelanethaka force, returning Fekolza to his humble rank of ‘warrior’. Just then, the human volunteers arrive en masse to assist with the move. At first surprised at the sight of the Zelkona, they are waved over by Cy and the others. With their help and that of Katero and his men, they pack up the Zelkona’s meager possessions for the short walk back. Before leaving, Zia finds Cy near the front of the convoy and darts up to him. Gaining his attention, she presents him with a symbolic gemstone charm, a symbol of her status.

“Cyrus... Fi ge vul zuj.” Zia says to Cy, holding out the charm.

“Iza. Fi Sa’kesh. Zuj ge vul riskanay.” Cy replies, rejecting the charm.

Zia can’t help but grin at the peculiar human standing before her. He turns and walks away, leading them down the path and toward their new home, a spring in his step from the exquisite turn of

events. Zia is perplexed by their new chieftain and is quickly overcome by curiosity. Approaching the front of the line without fear, she is startled when a human guard tells her to stop in Ketlanic. However, Cy immediately glances back and rescinds the order, allowing her to approach. Walking beside him, she takes a moment to think of something to say.

“Paloth tathazay zuj ketlan. Ketlan labo.”

“Kelitho kima ketlan.” Cy replies with a smirk.

“Ja bijka!” Zia exclaims in embarrassment.

“Halnad.” He chuckles.

“... Shima maray ketlan?” She asks.

“Vo. Zuj rintobo English.” He glances to her.

“Havo.” She nods.

Once they arrive, Cy introduces Mirkon, Zakera and a few of the others to Zia before allowing the villagers to continue. Zia finds the human and Ketlan’s visible affection both shocking and inspiring, realizing that there may yet be hope for harmony among their races. Johnny stares in awe at the Zelkona villagers as they march into the city to claim their rightful place among them, finding some of the females alluring. Cy takes a head count, aided by the thinness of the initial path between the Sa’kesh and the Kelanethaka. As the last Zelkona villager passes by, he counts two hundred and fifty more souls, bringing the Sa’kesh population to nine hundred and forty.

No sooner has Cy entered his fortress with Zakera and begun eating a meal, a guard rushes in with news. The Zelkona are struggling to find a place to settle as many of the humans are not speaking to them, or only speaking English, knowing that the sentient raptors have no comprehension of it. Mirkon, fearful of a confrontation, has sent the runner to find Cy so that he may handle the matter personally. Grumbling in frustration and bolting from his chair, he

takes a single loaf of faval, eating along the way. Zakera joins her mate this time, sticking to him like glue as they search for the Zelkona in their growing city. It takes virtually no effort to spot the horde of primarily female Zelkona, their vibrant hides like a living neon sign.

Zia sees Cy and immediately waves him over. She turns her eyes to Zakera before nodding to her as well, showing her acceptance of the Ketlan who is her leader's wife. A group of humans speak to Mirkon, who is failing to calm them. Using only English, they demand that the "lizards" be sent further away from the center of town. Many appear fearful of the newcomers, not even bothering to hide their facial expressions. It only further alienates the Zelkona, who only days earlier were living their lives amongst their own, in a land they knew. Mirkon attempts to appease them, but the villagers don't listen, and soon the humans stand on one side and the Zelkona on the other.

They bark back and forth at Mirkon, who appears quite feeble when faced with the mob. A sudden gunshot startles everyone; the Zelkona collectively jump, left in a haze from the loud report of Cy's pistol. It's the first time they've ever heard it. Turning, they look at Cy who stands atop an unfinished mud brick wall, his Bersa raised high above his head. Zakera removes her hands from her ears, which spring back up into place. Cy lowers his weapon and glares at the human villagers, his pistol trembling slightly from his seething anger.

"How *dare* you behave this way! ... You are a disgrace!" He begins.

Zakera approaches Zia and translates, per Cy's request.

"But they are not Ketlan or human. They are Zelkona. A step above the Kaladez or Zajak!" One villager declares.

"They have not worked for any of this, so why should we accept the lizards?" Another barks.

“Can we even trust a race so primitive?!” One questions.

Zakera quietly translates their complaints to Zia, again at Cy’s request, while he hears them all out. After nearly a minute of continuous complaints, he holds out his hands to silence the group. He stands there without speaking for a moment, looking at all of them. Cy takes a deep breath.

“You all should be ashamed... I left with those who live with me in the fortress... *The fortress!* We traveled to King Roland’s land to meet the *human* tyrant who sent you fleeing in terror from your homes. I killed him with *my own two hands*, and I did it so that we could build a great tribe; a nation inclusive to *all* races! I did not kill Roland just so you could come here and continue his bigotry!”

Heads begin to lower as their chieftain speaks.

“Blood stains *my* hands, not yours, and I did it for all of you! If *they* can accept me but you cannot accept them, then *they* are my people, not you. One day this tribe will have thousands of Ketlan, Zelkona and humans. If you don’t wish for that day to come, then go back into the jungle, where you belong... The Sa’kesh don’t need or want you.”

Without uttering a word, many of the human villagers quietly disperse and return to their work. Cy jumps down from the unfinished wall and embraces Zakera while Mirkon praises his brief speech and swift action.

“Zia over there is going to be the Zelkona representative. She’ll be the Zelkona version of you.” Cy begins.

“Yes, my Lord!” Mirkon chirps.

“And let them set up wherever they want.” Cy continues.

“... Even in the city?” Mirkon sheepishly asks.

“I did say ‘wherever they want’.” Cy smirks.

“Yes, my Lord!” Mirkon bows.

“Good. They’re Sa’kesh now, and I want them to feel welcomed, because *they are*... And stop calling me that!”

“Apologies, Cyrus!”

Leaving with his pledge and his small entourage of guards, Cy eagerly returns to the fortress while Mirkon passes along the information for him. Zia watches the human chieftain and his Ketlan bride heading back to their wooden fortress, amazed by the power he holds over his people. It is a combination of reverence and terror that she has never seen before, though she hasn’t seen much in her life among her tribe. Having heard his speech and been granted a position of power among her race, Zia can’t help but feel a growing admiration for the human. His calm and pleasant demeanor, sincerity, and the strength of his conviction quickly convert her to his cause.

Looking down at the mud brick streets beneath her digitigrade feet, she spots something unusual before her large toe-claw. Squatting down, she picks up a little brass cylinder with an unusual scent. Realizing that it must be related to her new chieftain’s small but powerful sounding weapon, she saves the article in a little hide pouch sewn into her skirt. It will make a wonderful charm to commemorate a most historic and special day; the day that her and her tribe became Sa’kesh.

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 sniffles. 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."

Episode 30: Obsidian Edge

Zikata climbs out of bed and stretches his muscles, air rushing into his gaping maw as he yawns. Two weeks have passed since the burning of the protesters, and thirteen days since Katero had left to live with the Sa'kesh, leaving Muzalfur to act as the war-guide in his place. As he had hoped, the newcomers have made a concerted effort to assimilate with the Kelanethaka. They strive to learn English, have ceased asking for sacrifices and many have abandoned their old god altogether. The fact that they were not struck down by the deity for

their defection has only made it easier to convince the holdouts to do the same.

Surprisingly, they have also almost entirely abandoned their former sexual practices. Though the occasional pair of adults slip off to clandestinely mate, most now live as the Kelanethaka do. A slew of pledges were made, with forty new pairs of mates now needing to perform the ceremony. For the last week they have held mass pledges, trying to prevent the culturally significant ceremony from interfering with their daily lives or the construction of much needed new homes. Though it has made life at their village rather hectic and interesting, it is also decidedly more peaceful. The tension between the original Kelanethaka and the newcomers has dissipated considerably.

Even Fekolza's group has lost many members, however, Fekolza himself maintains a small, cult-like following. Zikata doubts that even Katero would consider him a threat at this point, as few bother to hear him out anymore. Life has finally begun to smoothen for Zikata and his tribe. After eating a simple breakfast of seasoned genashin meat and a boiled ethakona egg, he leaves his home and greets the guards that stand outside. With four soldiers to guard him, he heads for a building that he had designated as something of a town hall. It is at this building that he conducts tribal business and speaks with his advisors, such as the priestess, Linusa, and his new war-guide, Muzalfur.

As he walks along the recently laid brick streets that weave like snakes around the buildings, which were not uniformly placed, he looks to the sky and breathes in the warm air. It is another beautiful day in the village, and it will eventually become a beautiful night.

"Keka!" A guard yells, reverting to Ketlanic under duress.

Zikata looks for the danger called out by his men. They form a line to fight another group of men, all loyal to Fekolza. Watching the struggle and with his back undefended, Fekolza charges in and grabs Zikata by the throat, his arm around his neck. He jams a black stone knife into his back, and prepares for another strike, but Muzalfur and his men swiftly approach. Muzalfur had a gut feeling that something might occur and decided to meet Zikata half-way. Startled and unable to finish, Fekolza drops Zikata to the ground and darts off, while his few remaining men fight to the death, which does not take long.

All of Fekolza's men were merely citizens, facing the trained warriors, some of whom have combat experience. The skirmish lasted on a minute or two longer than it took for Fekolza to strike. Muzalfur kneels beside Zikata as his men attempt to give chase. He calls out to a guard and orders him to fetch Linusa, who will have a thorough understanding of herbal medicine in her capacity as the village priestess. He then demands that another run as fast as he can to the Sa'kesh. Cy, Zakera and Katero need to be made aware of the attack. He holds tightly to his back to maintain pressure, trying to control the bleeding. Others soon arrive and help him move their leader to safety.

"Be strong! Do not die, Zikata! We need you!" He pleads with him.

Cy and Katero stand outside, throwing their knives at a wooden target and enjoying a friendly competition. Zakera and Gabriella watch the pair from a short distance behind them as they sit atop a carved wooden bench that Michael had made, trading small talk. Cy throws his knife and it lands a half-inch from the blue painted bullseye. After retrieving the blade, Cy stands beside Katero, who looks over his knife as though he hasn't a care in the world, humming an old tribal song.

"Think you can beat that?" Cy asks.

"Perhaps."

He holds out the knife by the point, takes careful aim, pulls back his arm and then throws. It spins through the air before landing dead-center. Katero turns his eyes and smirks.

“Was that better? I cannot tell from so far away.”

“Show off.” Cy chuckles.

Katero and Cy walk toward the target, both to retrieve his blade and adjust the distance. As Katero is within feet of his knife, a silver bolt flies past him and smacks against the handle, driving the blade even deeper into the wood. Cy’s chain whip lands onto the ground and rattles as he coils the links and folds the bars together.

“Oops... I wanted to pull it out.” Cy comments.

“You are a terrible liar.” Katero laughs.

Shrugging his shoulders, Cy and Katero spend the next several minutes trying to pry his knife from the target. Freeing the blade, Katero stumbles back, only to stop and turn at a familiar sound. Zakera joins him, rising from the bench. The guards at the gate, a mixture of human and Zelkona, do not have the enhanced hearing that the Ketlan do, standing at attention only when Cy orders them too. He has come to trust his mate and close friend’s senses and never ignores any warnings that the give, however subtle. A single Kelanethaka runner dashes from around the bend, gasping for breath after a mile-long sprint.

“What is going on?” Katero asks the runner.

“Is everything alright?” Cy adds.

“Zikata... Attacked...” He says through labored breaths.

“What?!” Zakera approaches the gate. “What happened to my father?!”

“Zikata... Was attacked by... Fekolza and his group... Stabbed... Badly hurt...

“Oh no!” Zakera whimpers, her eyes welling with tears.

“Guards, find Lara at the clinic and send her back here, then collect a captain and a team of militia to join us!” Cy orders.

“Yes, my Lord!” The chirp.

Cy grumbles at the honorary title, but has since tired of constantly telling people to stop using it. He turns to Zakera and comforts his mate while Katero slumps back, falling to the ground and landing on his buttocks. Cy pets and shushes Zakera as she begins to cry, her body trembling in fear, while Katero stares into space. Gabriella sits beside him and takes his hand. He grips her hand tightly and his breathing shivers as he too struggles with tears, but of guilt and not sorrow.

“I should not have left. If I had stayed I could have protected him. This is my fault.” He says to himself.

“You didn’t know this was going to happen, Katero.” Gabriella says softly as she strokes his hands.

“Don’t blame yourself.” Cy says.

“But it is my fault!”

“No, it fucking isn’t!” Cy growls. “It’s Fekolza’s fault, and he’s going to pay for it.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Gabriella adds before hugging him.

“Oh Cy, what if he does not survive? What if he is already dead?!” Zakera cries.

“Don’t think that. Zikata is too strong to let a bitch like Fekolza kill him.” Cy assures her.

“I need to see him, Cy. In case he-”

“Shh... I know.” Cy holds her tightly. “We’ll see him together. You’ll be safe with me.”

Zakera grips his clothing tightly, the fur of her cheeks and around her snout damp from her tears. By now, several of the others have exited the fortress, which was nearly fully occupied for once. Yasmin, Jack, and Johnny are eager to join them, while the others elect to wait for their return. In only a matter of minutes, two of the gate guards bring Lara back. Having already apprised her of the situation, she heads for her old office to collect her belongings; her medical pack, Browning Hi-Power and a medical field journal accompany her outside. By the time Lara exits the fortress, a team of militia arrive. They number twenty-one in total, with eight of them being Zelkona.

Led by Kanafa, a young-adult female around five feet and nine inches tall with a white chest and belly, dark blue body and dark purple swirls upon her back, the team of warriors stand at attention and await Cy’s instructions. Frighteningly swift learners, many of the Zelkona are already capable of conversational English. Quite a few are eager to serve in the militia, and some have even begun tattooing the word ‘Sa’kesh’ in Ketlanic or branding themselves with their symbol, a tree canopy with three entwined trunks. Bearing simple, round wooden shields, a pair of javelins, falcata swords as sidearms and recurve knives identical to Cy’s, they are ready for whatever orders their leader could possibly give them.

Cy often wears his original steel and brass handled falcata sword, considering it a symbolic accessory rather than a true weapon, though it always was battle ready and sharpened. Drawing the sword, which he wears in a traditional manner, slung underneath his weak arm, he holds it high and waves it in a small circle to draw the militia closer. At his command, they begin a swift march toward the Kelanethaka to aid Zikata both medically and politically. Keeping Zakera near the center of the formation, Cy walks with Yasmin,

Katero and Kanafa. He glances over to the Zelkona female, who stares straight ahead.

“You must be one of the first Zelkona captains.” He begins.

“I *am* the first.” Kanafa replies.

“She showed a lot of promise. I promoted her myself!” Yasmin chirps.

“Thank you.” Kanafa bows her head.

“Well, I hope you are ready for whatever we might be walking into.” Cy remarks.

“I am, as are the rest of us. We are Sa’kesh now, and we live to serve and honor our tribe, kavay.”

“Your English is excellent! You learn so fast!” Cy can’t help but comment.

“Thank you, kavay!” Kanafa sounds flattered. “It is the language of our tribe; we work to master all aspects, in order to better serve the greater good.”

After a brisk march, they arrive at the Kelanethaka to a cacophony of voices. Citizens wonder what happened while warriors try to keep the peace and hold them back from Zikata’s house. With his only child a female and her having pledged to Cy, that means that without a spoken heir to take over, they will be leaderless and have no reason to stay. Typically, when chieftains die without leaving someone in charge, the tribe either evaporates into the forest or spirals into chaos as several others try to claim control. The panicking villagers, uncertain of their future in what is the most stable and technologically advanced tribe that any of them have ever seen, demand answers from the warriors.

The runner leads them through the growing crowd. Many recognize the Sa’kesh and begin to cheer, parting to allow them entry. They clearly believe that they have some special knowledge that will

save Zikata, though unfortunately this is not the case. Ushering them into the house, the runner introduces Cy and the leaders to Muzalfur, not realizing that they already know who he is; were it not for Cy's suggestion, Muzalfur wouldn't even be the war-guide at the moment. Looking around the room, they find Zikata lying atop an elevated wooden platform with six legs, a bed of red grass sheaves spread over the top of the wooden beams. He is face-down.

His cyan and white striped fur is stained with crimson at his lower back and a considerable pool of blood sits below the platform. Cy immediately worries that Fekolza struck a kidney or similarly placed vital organ, but is relieved to see that the color of his blood is too light. At the foot of Zikata's bed and tending to his wounds is an older female that Cy had only seen several times before in all of his visits. Linusa, the village priestess and healer, presses a powder of herbs into Zikata's wound before pouring water over it.

"What are you doing?!" Lara demands.

"Easing his pain. The powder will soon dissolve and prevent him from suffering." Linusa explains.

"I need your flashlights." Lara turns to Yasmin and Cy.

They hand them over without hesitation and Lara darts over to the bed.

"Try not to get blood on mine." Yasmin smirks.

"Shut up." Lara swiftly and casually replies.

Standing in Zikata's blood, she looms over him and peers into the wound. She grumbles to herself and she takes many tools from her bag, setting them aside as she prepares for field surgery. The green furred priestess with white tabby stripes and jade green eyes cocks her head as she watches Lara curiously.

“What are you doing?” Linusa asks.

“I need to look inside and make sure that none of his vital organs were cut” Lara answers.

“Why would you do that?!” Linusa asks in horror.

“If they are cut, I need to fix them first.”

“But-”

“Do you want him to die?!” Lara snarls.

“No...” Linusa murmurs.

“Neither do I. Now shut up and help me, or get out.” Lara growls.

“Damn... I like her.” Yasmin smirks.

“That goes for all of you, actually. Zakera can stay and help too, but everyone else needs to leave. And be quiet outside! I need to concentrate!” Lara orders.

“Wait...” Zikata chokes out.

Lifting a hand, he weakly motions for everyone to approach. Zakera takes hold of his hand and comforts her wounded father.

“Try not to speak. Save your strength.” Lara softly instructs her patient.

“No... This is important... You are a good man, Cyrus, and a wise, strong leader. If I should die, I want witnesses to hear me...” Zikata coughs.

“We hear you.” Muzalfur replies.

“Maray, kavay.” Linusa adds.

“If I should die, my pledge-son will rule the Kelanethaka as well as his own tribe. They should become one, as he and my daughter have. That is my wish...”

“Please do not say such things.” Zakera whimpers.

"You aren't going to die, father." A tearful Cy remarks.

"I have said my peace..." Zikata groans.

"Alright, enough. He's done talking and we have work to do, so get out." Lara sternly demands.

They follow her instructions and leave the house, except for Linusa and Zakeru, who stay behind to aid her in the operation. Heading outside to meet the crowd, Cy looks to the now silent masses. He opens his mouth and takes a breath, about to speak, but a random female villager beats him to it.

"Zuj banila. Tathazay Zikata kelane."

Sometimes even he forgets how well the Ketlan's hearing is. Cy nods and the crowd disperses, knowing that Lara and Linusa will do all that they can for their leader. Katero pulls Muzalfur to the side, and the young, inexperienced war-guide is quickly encircled by Cy, Yasmin and Jack.

"How are we going to handle this situation, war-guide?" Katero asks Muzalfur.

"Fekolza's men were already slain in the battle, though Fekolza escaped. I would have pursued him, but we thought it wise to focus on Zikata first." Muzalfur replies.

"And what about the others?" Jack asks.

"What others?" Muzalfur raises a brow.

"This kind of assassination had more involved. I doubt that Fekolza is the only one still alive who was a part of it." Cy begins.

"He must have had scouts watching, to signal when to attack." Yasmin continues.

"At least as many people who fought you will be involved." Jack finishes.

"You have much to teach us." Muzalfur somewhat shamefully admits. "Is that why you have been staying with them for so long?" He asks Katero.

"... Yes."

"We can search for more conspirators." Jack says.

"After this, I don't think many will hide them." Cy adds.

"We might even learn where that little fucker ran off to!" Yasmin grins.

"Then let us begin right away."

Muzalfur organizes search teams while Kanafa and the Sa'kesh militia guard Zikata's house for the Kelanethaka warriors. Johnny sits with them, the only one bearing a firearm. Yasmin, Cy, Jack, Katero, Muzalfur, and a few of Muzalfur's most trusted warriors lead the teams as they wrap around the village. Half of them start at the outskirts, while the other half start at the center. The outer teams move clockwise and the inner teams move counter clockwise. After over an hour of questioning villagers, the teams meet in the middle, each holding more conspirators captive. With eight more having been discovered, they march them through the streets, passing Zikata's house.

Johnny looks on in horror as Gomona and a boy that he doesn't recognize are pushed forward, their hands tied at the wrists and behind their back. He takes a few steps forward before Kanafa asks him to halt. He turns back and then bolts, disregarding the order. Kanafa drops her shield and javelin before racing after the boy. Cy turns back at the commotion. Kanafa leaps at him from a distance of nearly six feet away, landing upon his back and forcing him down to the ground. He cries out and squirms. Cy can't help but be impressed, having never seen his Zelkona warriors in action before.

"Kavay ordered you stay... Do not disobey." Kanafa growls in his ear.

"But I know her! Get off!" Johnny yelps.

"Kuzem!" Cy exclaims, gaining their attention. "Chitho."

Kanafa stands to her feet and grabs Johnny by the shoulders, rather violently yanking him up from the ground. Their eyes grow wide at the sight; had she pulled any harder, she would have thrown the young man clear over her shoulder.

"Both of you come with us. The others stay and guard the house." Cy instructs.

"Vo... Err, yes, kavay." Kanafa bows her head.

It is clear that she places great effort in speaking only English. Johnny pulls away from Kanafa and races up to Cy, while Kanafa retrieves her shield and javelin before calmly following along. Johnny stares at Gomona and the boy, who Muzalfur identifies as Linsor. Katero and Cy lead them to the same part of the village where Zikata performed the burnings, lining them up and forcing the conspirators to kneel.

"Why did you do it?" Johnny finally asks Gomona.

"Don't speak to the victims." Yasmin reprimands him.

"I follow my mate..." She softly answers.

"Zikata burned my mother. I want him to die." Linsor snarls.

"Do you have any idea what you have done, boy?!" Muzalfur growls.

Cy nods to Yasmin, who promptly draws her pistol. Jack, who has long ago lost the stomach for this kind of act, turns his back and

steps away. Suddenly, Johnny draws his own pistol, the compact, .32 caliber Sig-Sauer P232. Cy looks to him with shock and fear. He never wanted this life for Johnny or his sisters; they deserve better than the bloody existence he has endured.

“Well, look who’s stepping up.” Yasmin smirks.

“Johnny, we can handle this.” Cy remarks.

“I can do this, Cy.” Johnny retorts.

“I know you can but...”

“You don’t want to do this, Johnny. You will have to live with this for the rest of your life. You don’t want to see their faces when you sleep.” Jack explains heartfelltly.

“I don’t, but I *need* to do this.” Johnny reiterates.

“Just watch Zikata’s house with Kanafa. Please.” Cy begs.

Kanafa rests her clawed hand atop Johnny’s shoulder, awaiting Cy’s order like a good soldier.

“Revenge isn’t going to make you feel better.” Jack pleads.

“This isn’t revenge! They betrayed Zikata! They betrayed their own people! They betrayed us! They need to pay...” Johnny explains, glaring at Jack.

Yasmin rests a hand on Cy’s chest, drawing his attention. She nods and the pair share a silent conversation purely through their eyes. Cy turns back to Johnny and closes his eyes, sullenly nodding his head.

“I don’t want your help, but I won’t stop you...”

Kanafa removes her hand and stands at attention. Johnny's fingers coil around the grip of the little pistol as he breathes deeply, preparing himself for the arduous task. Stepping before Gomona, the small handgun feels as though it weighs one hundred pounds. Yasmin takes the furthest side and aims her pistol, turning her head to Johnny and waiting for him to start. He raises the weapon, staring at her with watery eyes. He never truly loved her, as she never gave him the chance, and yet still the act of ending her life weighs heavy on his heart and mind. She turns her eyes to him and the pair stare at each other for what feels like an eternity. Not even Yasmin dares to interrupt them, waiting patiently for Johnny to make his move.

"I'm sorry, Gomona." He murmurs.

With a subtle head nod, she closes her eyes. Johnny pulls the trigger, a slug from his pistol smashing through her skull and burrowing into her brain. She slumps forward, collapsing like a sack of bricks being dropped to the ground. A tear runs down his cheek as he turns his pistol to Linsor. Yasmin still waits for Johnny to finish, quite curious to see what he will do next.

"God damn you." He growls.

Linsor spits on the ground at his feet and Johnny quickly executes him. He turns his weapon to another conspirator, an adult female, shooting her in the face without hesitation. Yasmin joins in, but Johnny has had enough. He steps back and spins around, tears streaming down his face as he dashes away. Kanafa turns to chase him, but Cy grabs her shoulder. Glancing back, her leader shakes his head; they allow the boy to run off to deal with his pain on his own.

"He has no idea what he's just done..." Jack laments.

"He's a fucking man now." Yasmin chirps.

"Having blood on your hands doesn't make you a man..." Jack retorts.

"I'm so sorry, Johnny." Cy murmurs to himself.

"Hey, Cy! We should try 'the bargain' with these three." Yasmin suggests, looking at the remaining conspirators.

"Sure..." He sighs.

"What is 'the bargain'?" Kanafa asks.

"I'll show you!" Yasmin giddily exclaims.

Yasmin aims her pistol at the next one in the line, their entire body trembling visibly from fear.

"You better start telling me what I want to hear and I *might* allow you to live." She says to him.

"What do you want to know?!" He asks.

"Where did Fekolza escape to?"

"I... I do not know." He laments.

"Wrong answer."

Yasmin shoots him in the head and side-steps, standing before the next one. She looks to the crying female and squats down. With the hot tip of her handgun, she rests the slide beneath the woman's chin and applies pressure, forcing her to turn her head up to Yasmin.

"You're next... Same question."

Johnny races through the village, heading for the outskirts where he hopes that he can be alone. He stops and looks around at the undeveloped forest before him and sits by a large torlan tree, a lime green barked tree with pink leaves and an appearance similar to an

oak. Slamming his back against the tree, he slides down and sits upon the ground, tears streaming down his face. The realization that Gomona and the others will never breathe again sinks in. A tightness in his stomach feels like a fist made of molten lead. He turns and vomits, his hands pressing into the soft ground.

“Why did you have to do it, Gomona... You could have just stayed out of their bullshit.” He murmurs.

The sunlight bounces off of the silver finish of his Sig pistol, drawing his attention. He resents the inanimate object; his anger and sorrow forcing an impulsive reaction. Rising to his knees, he spins and heaves the weapon at a nearby tree. The metal clanks as the slide bounces off of the tree’s bark. Slumping back, he runs his fingers through his hair and rests his palms over his eyes as he tries to rub away the tears. A breaking branch catches his attention. He snuffles and rests his hands on the ground, expecting Cy or Yasmin to walk around a large tree trunk at any moment. Instead, a clawed hand reaches around, standing near his fallen pistol.

Leaning over, they pick up Johnny’s weapon. The white and red furred girl looks to him with her piercing red eyes. She turns them toward the handgun, which she grips from the side. Approaching him slowly and somewhat apprehensively, she presents the pistol, her arm outstretched before her. Johnny looks down at the gun and turns away, resting his back against the torlan tree.

“I don’t want it.” He says to her.

She stops, seeing the sorrow on his face. Looking down at the weapon, she lowers her arm and steps up to Johnny, slowly sitting down beside him a few feet away.

"I am sorry." She says softly.

"For what?"

"Did you not love her?" She asks.

"I could have... I wanted too." He murmurs.

"Why did you not?"

"She just... Wouldn't let me." He shrugs.

"Then why are you so sad?" The girl tilts her head.

"I didn't love her, but I also didn't want her to die." He sighs.

"But she betrayed her people. She was bad." The girl remarks.

"She wasn't bad. She was just... Mismatched." Johnny retorts.

"She was also trying to kill our chieftain, and was a threat to our people." The girl retorts.

"Does that make what I did alright?" He asks.

"No, but it may make it easier to accept that it had to be done."

The girl slides closer to Johnny, looking him over. Reaching out a hand, she drops the pistol between his legs.

"I said I don't want it."

"You are a warrior, like your chieftain. Your weapon did not kill Gomona. You did. You acted as you should have, and you still need it." The girl explains.

"Maybe... I just wonder if I can live with myself." He murmurs.

"What choice do you have?"

She rests a hand on his shoulder and gives him an assuring squeeze. Johnny turns to the girl whose expression is unusually soft and inviting. He looks down at the pistol and picks it back up, brushing off a few small blades of red grass before flipping on the safety lever

and slipping it into his pants pocket. He rests his head against the tree trunk and stares up at the light red sky, his eyes fixed upon the blue day moon. He closes his eyes and a tear runs down his cheek. She has never seen a male so disturbed and vulnerable before. Though some of the females that she knows would not appreciate his display, she finds herself even more curious about the human juvenile, who is clearly a passionate male.

Torn between a desire to speak to him and her own self-consciousness, she merely sits there and stares. Sitting with the girl in silence, he looks to her several times; she is always watching him.

“Why are you out here?” He finally asks her.

“I... I wondered if you were alright.” She sheepishly admits, glancing down to the ground.

“And no one will be looking for you?”

“I am ketlan’ezav...” She replies.

“I know. I just thought that you might have a male somewhere.” He explains.

“No... I am not a well-known female, and I have not found a male I could spend my time with. I believe that there is more to me than just my body.” She answers.

“Good. You should believe that.”

She grins at him, finally turning her eyes away. Johnny can’t help but appreciate her self-respect, already finding an incredible resemblance in her personality to Zakera. As he looks to the girl, he realizes that he doesn’t even know her name.

“My name is Johnny.” He says.

“I know. My name is Minoma.”

“Red eyes? That’s a very clever name.” He smiles.

“My parents were very creative.” She says facetiously.

“Thank you for coming out here and talking to me, Minoma.” He adds.

“You are welcome. I was glad to do it.”

“I’m glad you did it.”

Katero and Muzalfur stack the bodies for an impromptu cremation, while Yasmin prepares her team. The last two conspirators knew much, and revealed the direction that Fekolza and a few of his men would be heading. It did not buy them their lives. Kanafa and her militia are under Cy and Yasmin’s command, and Cy had already told them to go along. Jack volunteers to leave with her, while Katero doesn’t consider it a choice. He will also be the only Ketlan in the group, and the Ketlan’s sense of smell and hearing will aid in tracking the would-be assassin. Cy, however, will remain behind to guard Zikata and await the outcome of his surgery, while also providing direction to Muzalfur in Zikata’s stead.

Once the last body is thrown into the fire and a large pile of wood is set aside to keep the flames stoked, the hunting party prepare their weapons. It has been nearly an hour since they’ve executed the conspirators and Johnny still hasn’t returned. Though Cy is rather worried, he is thankful that he hasn’t heard a gunshot in the distance. Sitting in front of the house, Zakera emerges from inside and turns her head from side to side, looking for him. She spots her mate as he rises to his feet and leaps upon him. Zakera trembles and cries, burying her snout beneath his chin and her eyes against his neck. Her hot tears fuel a growing tension within him.

As he comforts his wife, she sniffles and Lara emerges from the house, followed by Linusa. Muzalfur and Katero rush up to them, eager to hear the news.

“Well?!” Katero asks.

“He’s lucky to be alive.” Lara remarks.

“Oh, thank God.” Jack sighs.

“I have only been this afraid once before.” Zakera remarks.

“He’s going to be fine, my love. Don’t worry.” Cy says as he strokes her back and pets her head.

“We’ll make sure that nothing like this can happen again.” Yasmin assures her.

“Your medicine is strong. I admit that Zikata would most likely be dead if you had not come to help us.” Linusa adds.

By now, the Ketlan within earshot have heard their conversation and have emerged from their homes and places of work. They gather around the house for confirmation while Muzalfur stands before them.

“Zikata lives!” He shouts.

A great wave of cheering deafens them and Zakera kisses her mate more times than he can count. Every time something terrible happens, he proves again and again that he will be there for her. She only hopes that one day she can prove that she will do the same for him in a heartbeat. As the lovers embrace and the crowd begins to celebrate, Johnny emerges from the crowd, followed by a white furred female with cherry red hair, eyes and stripes.

“I take it Zikata’s alive?!” He asks over the cheering crowd.

“Yeah! Who’s your friend?!” Cy asks.

“This is Minoma!” Johnny answers.

“She is pretty!” Zakera adds.

“Thank you!” Minoma bows her head.

“So, when are we going to kill Fekolza?!” Johnny asks.

Episode 31: Three

Running through the vibrant and lush jungles of Monala, Johnny gasps for breath. His muscles scream in agony as he tries desperately to escape. He stumbles over the half-eaten corpse of a wakina, it’s purple viscous blood coats what’s left of the bizarre insect. Though it appears as a scorpion-bee hybrid, the stinger has been devoured, as was the head and two of its six legs. He scrambles to his feet as the bushes tremble, a charred hand jutting out as it beckons to him. A burnt claw nearly hooks the side of his shoe before he can turn and run.

“Where are you going, Johnny!” A gruff and sepulchral voice growls.

“Oh God, no!” He screams.

“Look at what you did!” The voice shrieks.

“Please! I’m sorry! I didn’t want to do it!” He pleads.

“Join me, Johnny! Hell is warm!”

Glancing over his shoulder as he runs, he sees the charred body of Gomona, embers still glowing in her muscle tissue as she stares with hollow eye sockets. He runs right into a tree and falls back, scrambling to turn away as she looms over him.

“No!”

Sitting up on his bedroll, Cy looks to Zakera who he holds in his arms. They often sleep spooning together. He blinks several times as he looks around the darkened room of the town hall building, where he and the others are camping for the night.

“No... Pleh... Nnn...” Johnny mumbles in his sleep.

Tossing and turning, the teenage boy is in the throes of a nightmare, a scene all too familiar to the assassin. He sighs and looks back to Zakera, who by now has awoken with her mate. A very light sleeper, she often rises whenever he does, as if they were psychically linked. Tilting her head to the side as she lay on the bedroll, she glances to Johnny with an equally sullen expression. Neither of them speak; they simply listen to his barely coherent and agonized cries for salvation. Cy rests his nose against her shoulder, feeling her soft pink fur on his face. He tries to return to sleep, knowing that there is nothing that he can do for Johnny and regretting not ordering Kanafa to stop him. Johnny would have been better off.

The following afternoon, Johnny walks aimlessly through the village, still groggy from a poor night's sleep. Yasmin, Katero, Jack, Kanafa and the militia, the team of hunters, had left shortly after Zikata's life was spared; they've been hunting Fekolza and his men for the past twenty-four hours. Tasked with patrolling the village by Cy, he knows that it's busy work; Cy simply didn't want to put Johnny in harm's way. Weaving around the disorganized village layout, he inadvertently passes by Gomona's hut. Johnny's blood runs cold as he hears the weeping and wailing of her parents from inside. Their suffering stabs him like a thousand knives and rakes at his soul.

Looking down at his feet, he feels the pistol in his pocket as it seems to grow hotter, as though reminding him of his deeds. He slowly backs away, turning around and trying to remember this location so that he might avoid it in the future. Sitting atop the reinforced roof of her father's house, which he had intended to expand upon, Zakera

sways her feet and watches the village below; her perch provides an excellent view. Her ears shift as she hears her mate's shoes striking the wooden planks of the ladder used to reach the rooftop. She turns her head and smiles at Cy as he approaches her, two full bowls of stew held precariously in his hands.

"How did you climb up here with those?" She asks.

"Very difficultly." He smirks.

Handing her a bowl, he sits beside her and hangs his feet over the side. Sipping the stew, they both notice Johnny as he passes by, alone. The boy shuffles his feet as he walks at an unusually slow, zombie-like pace. Turning her cyan eyes to her mate, Zakera's heart breaks at Cy's expression. He is visibly haunted by Johnny's troubles. Though the bowl of stew doesn't appear to move, the contents subtly ripple as his hands tremor from the force needed to hold back his emotions.

"Are you worried about him?" She softly asks.

"I never wanted this for Johnny. I spent the last few years trying to keep him away from all of the awful shit his father did and made Yasmin and I do. I wanted him to live his entire life without ever spilling any blood, unless he cut himself or something... I failed him." Cy laments, sniffing.

"You did your best; you did not fail. He made the choice, and like a good parent, you allowed him that choice. It is not your fault, and all that you can do now is be there for him to guide him through it." Zakera explains, slipping an arm around him.

"Yeah... You're right." He nods.

"Of course I am. I am female." She grins.

"True. I just wish I could spare him the suffering..."

"As beautiful as this world is, it is full of suffering. One day it was bound to catch him." She rationalizes.

"Also true, but that doesn't make it any easier to accept. He's the closest thing I had to a son. I just worry that..." He pauses.

"Yes?" She urges him to continue.

"I just worry that if I can't save Johnny, how could I possibly be a good parent to our children?"

He turns to her, revealing glossy eyes. A tear streams down his face as he tries not to cry. Setting the bowl aside, Zakera embraces her mate and holds him tightly, comforting him as best she can. He quietly sobs for a moment before sniffing and apologizing for the display. Though she says nothing to her mate, she kisses him on the cheek and wipes away his tears. They then finish their stew in relative silence, before it grows cold. Setting the empty bowls aside, they lie back and glance toward the sky, admiring the day moon together as it dips toward the horizon.

"How is my father doing?" She asks.

"He doesn't like being bedridden, but it hasn't stopped him from leading his people. Muzalfur is a very good errand boy!" He chirps.

"That is good. And what of the other situation?"

"They're taking care of it. Don't worry."

"I wanted to go, so I could kill him myself..." She whines.

"Then I would have had to go with you and do it because that's far too much stress for a soon-to-be mother, and Zikata needs my guidance."

"No, I do not!" Zikata yells from inside.

"Anyway..." Cy clears his throat.

"But we might not have a recognizable trophy if Yasmin is in charge of the hunt!" Zakera whimpers.

"As long as it's done, I don't care." Cy replies.

"I do. I want to see Fekolza's head on a spear." Zakera growls.

“Fi zakado tozay vita.” He teases.

“Nadamu, Cy.”

“Nadamu, Zakeru.”

They lean in and share a long kiss before looking back up to the sky. Cy extends his arm, slipping it underneath Zakeru’s head as she scoots herself closer to her mate. She quickly snuggles up to him.

“I hope the hunt is going well.” She thinks aloud.

Cobalt blue eyes stare through the brush, looking through a large and equally blue, fern-like plant. Kanafa crouches beside Katero who was using his skills as a hunter, as well as his enhanced senses of hearing and smell to track Fekolza and his men. As dusk swiftly approaches, they have finally found the group who hide deep within the jungle. It has taken a full day and night of walking to catch up to the rebels, who look exhausted. The human militia stay far away from their opponent’s campsite, guarding the rear. The strike team now consists of Kanafa, Katero, the Zelkora militia and both Jack and Yasmin, who are highly skilled at remaining silent during a hunt, or in Yasmin’s case, an assassination.

They wait until dusk is nearly over before sneaking up on the already sleeping rebels. There are even fewer than they were expecting. A lone guard stays up to watch but is visibly sick and exhausted. Katero recognizes his symptoms as the results of being stung by a wakina. Kanafa takes up her javelin and readies herself. With a powerful throw, the small spear flies out of the forest and pierces his chest, plowing straight through him and impaling him to the tree that he sits against. With swords drawn, the militia prepare themselves. A rebel emerges from a debris hut shelter and cries out, raising the alarm.

The Zelkona pounce from the bushes, leaping upon several of the guards and shoving them violently to the ground. While some Zelkona impale or behead them with their falcata swords, easily cleaving through them with powerful strokes, a few lean in and bite chunks from their throats. Even Yasmin is startled by the vicious and animalistic attacks of her raptor-people; she is thankful that they are under her command and not her enemies. Without having to lift a finger, the two humans and lone Ketlan emerge to search for Fekolza. Scrambling out of a debris hut, like a rat running from a compromised nest, he tries desperately to escape.

Kanafafa leaps in front of him, rolling as she lands on a foot and knee before him. She quickly stands and shakes her clawed finger, silently reprimanding and taunting the Ketlan as she blocks his path, blood dripping from her lips and chin. It is a frightening sight. Fekolza turns back to the camp, stopping yet again as Yasmin stands before him. She holds up her falcata sword but notices that Fekolza is unarmed. Looking down to the ground, she kicks a cykera metal khopesh toward him with her boot.

“Let’s see what you’ve got!” She grins.

“Are you serious?!” Jack exclaims.

“We should just kill him and be done with it.” Katero urges.

“Not until I’ve had my fun.” Yasmin grins sinisterly.

At her command, Kanafafa and the Zelkona militia stand guard, allowing her to sword fight with Fekolza, purely for her amusement.

“Do you expect me to kill a female?” Fekolza asks, holding the sword before him.

“I expect you to try. I’m certainly harder to kill than some old man.” She retorts, side-stepping.

“I will not fall easily.” He adds.

“Good! I’d like to break a sweat.”

He lunges at her, but his technique is quite sloppy. Fekolza nearly falls over as Yasmin jumps out of the way, swinging her falcata and slashing his sword arm near the shoulder. He turns and swings, but she blocks his strike with the side of her blade. Swinging her arm wide, she turns the blade and directs his sword away from his body before shoving him in the chest with her free hand. Pulling her left arm behind her back, she tucks her fingers behind her waistband to keep it in place.

“Sorry. Let’s make this fair!” She chuckles.

Fekolza rushes her, jumping to the left and to the right as he tries to confuse her. His elbow swings out, warning her of the strike. Spinning to the right, their swords meet as she blocks his strike with little effort and even trips him with a foot. Falling forward, Fekolza spits out some rotted leaves and dirt before climbing up from the ground. He swings and slashes like a barbarian, yelling loudly. A downward-left slash glances off the side of her blade before she parries an upward-right. Fekolza’s fur begins to grow damp with sweat as he exerts himself. The blades ping and clank over and over as Yasmin duels with the Ketlan.

Finally tiring of playing with Fekolza, Yasmin parries a slash, twirls her sword with a flick of her wrist and cuts deeply into his hand. He drops the khopesh and cries out in pain before Yasmin kicks him to the ground. Stepping on one of his shins, she holds the sword toward his throat. Though the short blade doesn’t quite reach, she dares not lean in and give him an advantage.

“That was quite impressive.” Jack remarks.

“Thank you. I spent as much time with a machete in my hands as I did a rifle or a pistol.” Yasmin replies.

"Now what?" Katero asks.

"Question time... Where are the rest of your men?" She asks Fekolza.

"What men? These are all that I had!" He frantically answers.

"Don't lie to me, or I will slice you into pieces while you are still alive." She coolly warns.

"I do not lie! Zikata's actions turned many of my group against me. The few who remained loyal are dead. A few were injured as we fled and succumbed to their wounds, while a few we left behind. One was also killed by a moltaka and our sentry was dying from a waking sting. All you see is all that is left." He explains.

"Oh... Good!" Yasmin chirps.

Pulling her arm back, she leans forward and jams the edge of her falcata into his neck, killing him instantly and nearly cleaving his head from his shoulders. A second swing finishes the task. Picking up the Ketlan's head by the hair, she wipes her sword blade clean on the fur of his chest and sheaths it. With a hand on either side of Fekolza's face, she looks into his still glossy eyes.

"Are you still in there? How about you blink for me." She snickers.

Fekolza's severed head closes its eyes, to the shock and horror of everyone but Yasmin, though they never reopen.

"Damn... One of these days I'll get one to actually blink!" She remarks.

"Well... That is that." Katero sighs.

"Yeah... Collect their weapons and gear first, and then we'll go back." She orders Kanafa.

“As you wish.” Kanafa nods.

After following her orders, they walk through the jungle and toward the Kelanethaka. One of the Sa’kesh militia turns to his commander. The human male looks to Kanafa, who glances up at the sky as they hike back, retracing their steps.

“Halnad ja. Litay fi ragato?” He asks.

“English only.” She sternly replies.

“Alright... Forgive me for asking, but what are you thinking?”

“It was a beautiful day, and now it is a beautiful night. Tomorrow will usher in another beautiful day.” She answers, her lips curling into a subtle grin.

After suffering through another night, a tired Johnny, who had awoken from his nightmares no less than four times, sits before Zikata’s house. He glances to the morning sun and then the blue day moon, which contrasts the light red sky. Sighing as he rests his head against the cool, mud brick wall, he hears Cy walking through the house and toward the wooden door. Stepping outside he hands Johnny a clay plate bearing seasoned genashin meat and some fruit.

“Hard night?” Cy asks.

“No... Just a hard floor.” Johnny quips.

They sit and eat together in silence, looking at the villagers as they pass by. Cy stares into his bowl at the red flesh within, his heart aching for the teenager whom he had watched over for so long.

"Look, I never should have let you do what you did. You shouldn't have done it, and you don't deserve the aftermath. I'm sorry." Cy laments.

"Forget it... I finally pulled my weight, and plus now I know what it was like to be you, at least before..." Johnny retorts.

"It wasn't pretty, but I found my peace." Cy says as he glances back to the home where Zakera sits inside. "I don't know where I'd be if I didn't..."

"I'm going to take a walk, man... Patrol the streets or whatever..." Johnny grumbles as he stands to his feet.

"Okay..." Cy nods.

He watches as Johnny walks away from the house, leaving a nearly untouched bowl of food behind. He knows that Johnny hasn't eaten since yesterday, and even then, it was light. Johnny has lost both his nightly peace and his appetite.

"I hope that you find your peace, Johnny." Cy murmurs.

As he shuffles through the mixture of mud brick and compacted dirt streets, he passes a simple hut. It is the home of Minoma. He had walked her back to the hut after they had spent several hours simply conversing with each other on the night of Gomona's death, though he hadn't seen her at all yesterday. He had never asked her to stay with him, but Minoma followed him of her own volition and Johnny found her presence quite comforting. They had talked almost non-stop since she approached him at the outskirts, and spoke on nearly every subject. Life at the Sa'kesh fortress, their favorite colors and foods, his past life on Earth, and her parent's passing all became viable topics between the two.

No sooner had they parted ways did the horrors of his actions return to him, and now as he shuffles through the town, he silently

yearns for a reprieve. After what he did, however, he doesn't feel as though he deserves the respite that he so desires. He can't fathom how either Cy or Yasmin could survive with this level of torment for so long, or that they could ever recover from it. Johnny stands like a statue for a moment as he contemplates whether he even has the right to initiate contact with Minoma. He immediately feels even worse, as he just wants someone to talk too, as though he were using her like he used to use Gomona. After a brief pause, he decides to pass by the hut and continue his rounds.

"Johnny?!" Minoma calls out.

"Huh?!" He jumps and spins around.

"I am sorry! Did I scare you?" Minoma apologizes, emerging from the hut where she lives alone.

"A little."

"I did not mean to." She bows her head.

"It's fine." He sighs.

"You did not leave with the others two nights ago?"

"Cy didn't want me to go. There are plenty of people looking anyway."

"I am glad, though I did not see you yesterday." She comments.

"I was around, patrolling the streets."

She steps up to him, her cherry red hair swaying in the breeze. They stare at each other in awkward silence for a moment before Johnny is finally able to speak.

"I'm patrolling the village again... Did you?" He points a thumb over his shoulder.

"Yes!" She swiftly answers.

"Okay." He smiles faintly.

Her eagerness to join him again eases the sting of his guilt. Even if she is using him for her own comfort, at least he doesn't feel as though he is dragging her along as a living sedative. Picking up almost exactly where they left off, Minoma finishes her story of her father's passing. Her mother died in the same Kaladez raid that claimed Zakera's mother, leaving her with only her father to care for her. Two seasons ago, while hunting for genashin, they found an abandoned ethakona nest. As her father climbed a branch to reach the nest, to see if it had any abandoned eggs inside, a moltaka leapt from the bushes and grabbed him. Biting through his neck and crushing his spine, he was dead before their bodies landed together on the ground. The hunters scared away the beast and returned the body for a proper Ketlan funeral.

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Johnny says, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you. He was a good man, but this is also a good tribe. I have been well cared for since then." She replies, resting her hand over his.

"I only wish a moltaka or kodana would kill my father..." Johnny remarks.

"Why would you wish such a thing?!" Minoma asks in shock.

"It's a long story..."

"There is nothing happening. I believe you have the time to share it, and I am always listening." She replies.

Johnny sighs and concedes. He spares little details as he shares his resentment for his own father, a result of the life of crime and violence that he perpetrated. Johnny can't help but speak at length of Cy and Yasmin's duties as they worked for Johnathan Thames Senior; without them, as much as two-thirds of J.T.'s story could not be told. He regales her of how he met Cy, following through with J.T.'s planned assassination of his most loyal and dependable assassin,

and ending it with him joining Cy and Yasmin as they fled in the stolen Malevolence, where the bizarre lightning storm brought them to Monala. The detailed story lasts until they walk back to the outskirts, and for at least another hour as they sit beneath the same torlan tree they had two days earlier.

“What an awful man... My father could be stern, but he was never so evil. I am glad that you are not like him.” Minoma says to him.

“Am I?” He asks.

“From what you have said, you are nothing alike.”

“But what I did...” He laments.

“It was not an evil act, punishing those who would destroy us. The fact that you are so bothered by it shows your heart.” She says, tapping a claw against his chest. “You have a good spirit, Johnny, and not everyone can say that.”

“I guess... All I *can* say is that you were lucky to have good parents for as long as you did. I sometimes worry about my soul...”

“I do not think that you need to worry... Are you glad that you no longer live on Earth?” She asks.

“I am.” He nods. “It’s better here, for the most part.”

“You sound hopeful for the future. That is good.”

“I suppose... Do you think about the future at all?” He asks.

“I *only* think about the future. Many say that is why I am not a popular female, though many males look at me. I do not live in the present as they do, but in tomorrow.” She answers.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It keeps me distracted. I rarely find myself drinking ‘the tea’, if you understand my meaning.” She continues.

“Oh...” Johnny’s face flushes.

“I-it does not mean that I have never done it! I just... Don’t...”

“Relax. You don’t have to explain yourself, especially to me. I’m not judging you; I don’t have the right.” He assures her.

“Alright...”

The pair rise from the ground and continue the patrol, heading back for the village.

“Do you think about the future?” She sheepishly asks him.

“Well, I, uh... I admit that I never thought much about the future. Not until Roland...”

“You were there?!” Her eyes grow wide.

“I went with them, but I didn’t enter the castle. One of us died that day. I didn’t even learn until just before that he had a family on Earth. All that time together and I never asked him... After he died, and then the protests and the burning, I found myself always thinking about the future.” He rambles.

“And what do you think about?” She pries.

“Just what I want out of life.”

“And what is that?”

“I want someone that I can spend my life with. Someone that I can share it with, like Cy and Zakera. I want peace. I... I get a little jealous of them sometimes.” Jonny shamefully admits.

Minoma grins wide, turning her head so that he might not notice.

“That is not bad. You realize what they have and you want the same for yourself. You just need to find your mate.” She says.

“Maybe I should go house to house and ask?” He jests.

“What would your first question be? ‘Would you like to mate with a human?’ Or perhaps you would ask if they want children?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” He retorts.

Minoma stops in her tracks and stares at him with a strange expression that Johnny cannot place. He looks back at her with confusion. Flashing a little smile, she continues walking beside him, though now they step in a somewhat awkward silence. Weaving around the disorganized village layout, they inadvertently pass by Gomona’s hut, though this time it is silent. He stops and stares at the hut as he realizes where he is. Minoma sees the change in her companion and gently tugs at his wrist, pulling him away from the hut and turning back to the way that they came. Standing atop her father’s roof and watching the horizon, Zakera notices Johnny with his female companion.

“They have spent much time together, lately.” She comments.

“I didn’t even know they were friends.” Cy remarks.

“And you call yourself his guardian.” Zakera teases.

“You’re my mate. That makes you his guardian too.”

“I believe that she likes him.” She adds.

“Hopefully he bounces back fast...”

“Cy, look!” She suddenly exclaims.

He looks to the horizon where his mate is pointing as he sits on the roof with his legs over the edge. Climbing up, he stands beside his wife and squints his eyes. In the distance, he can see the hunters returning. They look exhausted and carry far more weapons and gear than they had left with. Yasmin leads the group and holds up something; a round object that looks to be about the size of a bowling ball. As she draws closer to the house, the couple is elated to see that it is Fekolza’s head, proof of his defeat.

“Well done.” Cy grins.

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 where 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 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 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.

Episode 33: Salvage

Early in the morning, several days after returning to the Sa'kesh village and settling in, Cy speaks with his principal advisors, Chris, Daniel, Lara and Yasmin. Each is the agent for a separate but specific matter: Chris handles logistics and infrastructure, Daniel handles public relations and smooths out cultural misunderstandings, Lara runs the Sa'kesh version of the public health and safety department, and Yasmin, the official war-guide of the Sa'kesh, is Cy's right-hand and acting general of sorts; Katero refused the post. Her entire goal in life is the safety and security of their tribe and the people who live within, regardless of their race. Zakera, acting as Cy's wife and queen, is the de facto second in command, with Yasmin ranking third below her.

"So, what's up? Who called the meeting?" Cy asks as he enters the library.

"We both did." Chris says, waving a hand between himself and Daniel.

"Alright. What's going on?" Cy asks again as he takes a seat.

"Well we've been thinking about all of the planned expansions to the city and the upgrades Yasmin has asked for the fortress." Daniel begins.

"We have decided that there is only one way to make this viable in the time allotted." Chris continues.

"We... Need to strip the Malevolence." Daniel sheepishly finishes.

"Woah, what?!" Yasmin growls.

"That ship is *the* most technologically advanced thing on this planet... That we know of... With enough manpower, we might even be able to unstick it." Cy interjects

"We don't need to take everything out of it, and we did not mean we wanted to remove the hull panels. Just the copper wiring and most of the non-essential electronics. Maybe comfort items as well." Chris retorts.

"Everything non-essential to the actual sailing of the ship." Daniel adds.

"I don't know about that..." Cy murmurs.

"She will probably never sail again anyway, Cyrus. The position of Monala's moons does not allow for tidal fluctuations like on Earth, but the last time we looked, nearly the entire propeller was exposed and above the water." Chris says.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, Cy. We might need that ship..." Yasmin interjects.

"Maybe... But we need to make these upgrades and continue expanding. A dead ship is useless to us at the moment, even if we can fix her later... Do what you have to do, guys." Cy orders.

"Thank you, Cyrus!" Chris chirps.

"Oh, and there's one more thing." Daniel says.

"Yeah?"

"We've come up with a form of currency that we think will work. We've based the coinage on the Roman Denarius."

"Money? ... You want to invent money? One of the single worst ideas since we crawled out of caves..." Cy snickers.

"Barter is only good for so much, and it's inevitable with a nation like the one we're creating. Besides, Roland introduced money already. I've seen Mirkon and some of his original villagers trade with it. All we'd be doing is creating a standard for everyone to use." Daniel rationalizes.

"And anything with the Sa' kesh brand would be advertising. Imagine where one of our coins might end up?" Lara adds.

"Around the neck of a Kaladez or in Zajak shit?" Yasmin laughs.

"I'm serious. If merchants travel far enough, someone might get their hands on a coin, see our logo and think 'I wonder where that came from. I want to go there!'" Lara retorts.

"That's a good point. Besides, with coins I can finally bathe in it and not get papercuts." Yasmin quips.

"Alright." Cy chuckles. "Put it out there."

"Right away, Cyrus!"

“Wait... What *is* the design on the coin?”

“The Ketlanic numbers of the coin’s value for the face, with the Sa’kesh tree logo for the back.” Chris answers.

“Hm... That sounds nice.” Cy smirks.

With currency now planned to enter production, Daniel and Chris recommend a treasurer to Cy. To his surprise, they nominate Samantha Davis. Samantha, like Isabella, had been content to simply exist with her companions. Her only actual duty seemed to be consorting with Jack, who is very obviously fond of the dainty blonde human. However, it was brought to Cy’s attention that Samantha’s fortune was created by her father, but managed by the girl as early as fourteen-years-old. He assigned her that task and oversaw her duties to teach Samantha proper finances. As the Davis fortune tripled after she began managing the family’s accounts, Samantha is an easy choice for a treasurer.

With their business completed, Cy heads downstairs where Zakera waits for him. He takes time out of his day to spend with his mate, whom he often leaves at the fortress for her own safety. After Zikata’s stabbing, he takes even less chances, and Zakera doesn’t blame him. They eat together and speak with each other before returning to their room to snuggle and make-love. It’s almost routine now. Dashing up the stairs to the third floor, Cy gives Zakera’s firm buttocks a little smack. Minoma, who stands in the hall beside Johnny, watches with an amused grin as they dart down the hall and toward their room, where they will lose at least an hour or two of the day.

“They are very cute together.” Minoma comments.

“You think so?” Johnny asks.

“Yes.”

“So... Are you ready to take that walk now?” He asks, holding out a hand to her.

“Always.” She replies, smiling at him and taking his hand.

Heading outside to carry on with their own time together, Johnny and Minoma exit the fortress and enter the courtyard. There, they find both Katero and Gabriella sitting on the wooden bench. Both Katero and Minoma have become permanent residents of the fortress, a fact known to all Sa’kesh militia, and though Katero refused to be the war-guide, he is still an acting captain in the militia and under Cy and Yasmin’s command.

“Where is the second-best knife thrower?” Katero teasingly asks.

“Who? ... Oh! Cy is upstairs with Zakera. They’re... Busy.” Johnny responds.

“Or at least they will be soon enough.” Minoma giggles.

“Heading out for your usual walk?” Katero asks.

“Of course!” Johnny grins.

“Yeah. Who needs to work.” Gabriella jests.

“Hey, I’m still a juvenile. Until my ceremony, I might as well enjoy not being a full-fledged member of the tribe. No work, long walks, and free food.” Johnny smirks.

“We will be responsible when we are adults.” Minoma chirps.

With that, Johnny takes a moment to check his Sig P232 pistol before once again taking hold of Minoma’s hand. They head for the gate where designated guards, who understand the procedure, deactivate the electrified gate before opening it for them. Katero and Gabriella watch as the pair head for the small city a short distance away. They often wander the streets together, admiring the buildings and watching the construction. When that grows tiresome, they walk toward the farms and ranches on the outskirts, where they spend hours together just talking. No sooner than Minoma is out of earshot, Katero turns to Gabriella.

“Do you think that Johnny has mated with her yet?” He asks.

“I have teased him about that a few times already. Johnny denies ever touching her, but they *are* juveniles. Who knows! I’m just glad that he found someone that he can actually relate to.” She answers.

“I wonder if mating with her would make his nightmares go away.” Katero thinks aloud.

“I didn’t know that he had any.” Gabriella looks surprised.

“After Gomona... Sometimes I can hear him at night.”

A short pause ensues before Katero and Gabriella pick up where they left off; they return to a conversation about their parents. Both of them find comfort in the others company and often spend many hours simply talking with each other and sharing details about themselves. After what seems like only a few short moments together, they are surprised to see Chris marching up with two squads of militia and a band of civilian volunteers. Kanafa leads one of the squads, the same unit that helped Katero hunt down and slay Fekolza. Together, with the other Sa’kesh citizens, they will help dismantle certain portions of the Malevolence and carry the supplies back.

“Why are you back so fast?” Gabriella asks.

“I have been gone for nearly two hours.” Chris replies, holding his antique pocket watch.

“... Really?!” Katero raises a brow.

“Relativity, Katero.” Chris smirks.

The guards deactivate the gate and pull it open for Chris as he walks through the courtyard, trailed by a small entourage.

“Isn’t Cyrus coming?” He asks the pair on the bench.

“Oh!” Katero jumps up. “He is busy at the moment and does not wish to be disturbed. I will bring him when they... Er... He’s done.”

“Oh.” Chris laughs. “Well as soon as he’s done polishing his gun, he can join us. We can’t wait around for too long though. We have work to do.”

Turning back, Chris and the others head for the growing city. There, the once dense jungle trail leading to the grass field and the cove has since been cleared; a wide-open path now occupies that land. Gabriella stands from the bench and rests her hand on Katero’s forearm, gaining his attention.

“So... Now what?”

“I suppose I will wait and tell Cyrus that Chris and the others are waiting for him.” He replies.

“Alright. I’ll be reading in the library if you decide to skip that.” She says with a warm smile.

Lying atop the purple grass mattress, Cy and Zakera snuggle, relaxing as they catch their breath. He kisses her cheek and holds her, his muscles softening and his eyelids feeling heavy. She growls sweetly and strokes his head, her fingers running through his matted hair. Arching her back as she presses tightly against her mate, she returns each kiss two-fold. It is always a comforting feeling for her, being in his arms.

“Nadamu, Cy.” She coos.

“Nadamu, Zakera.”

“Finally...” Katero grumbles.

Sitting on the staircase near the third-floor landing, which is on the opposite end of the fortress, Katero rises to his feet. He had been

waiting for the pair to finish for nearly ten minutes, and it was growing tiresome. He turns to begin climbing the remaining steps to the third floor.

“Are they done y-. Oh wow...” Gabriella suddenly stops.

“Hm?” Katero turns his head to her.

Climbing the staircase from the second floor, she stands parallel from him, her mouth agape. Her eyes look down at his groin, staring intently. It is only then that he realizes his display. With only the traditional hide loin cloth of the Kelanethaka for his garment, there was nothing to pull against him. His focus to try and tune out the sounds of the couple’s mating further prevented him from noticing. With a quick turn, he inadvertently reveals his length and girth for her before his back faces her. It is more than she expected. Gabriella feels her temperature increasing slightly. She slowly continues up the stairs.

“I apologize! I...” He turns his head down, visibly embarrassed.

“Did it sound that good?” She asks.

“It has been some time for me; as you know, I am not pledged.”

“Did you want me to take care of that?” She jests.

“I beg your pardon?” He raises a brow.

“I mean! ... That’s not what I wanted to say. I don’t know why I said ‘me’...” She flushes.

“You know that unpledged adults should not do that.” He replies.

“I know. It was a stupid joke. I’m sorry. I... See you later?”

“Alright.” He nods.

As they lie together in their bed, Zakera turns her head toward the door. Cy immediately prepares himself, unsurprised by the subtle knock that soon follows.

“Are you busy, Cyrus?” Katero asks.

“You already know the answer to that.” Cy chuckles.

“Right... Well, Chris and the others are preparing to leave for the Malevolence. We should hurry if we want to go with them.”

“Alright. I’ll be there in a moment.” Cy replies.

He says goodbye to his mate before dressing in his black trousers, tunic, cloak and keffiyeh; he prefers the peasant clothing of his human citizens over his old garments. They are not made out of linen or cotton, as neither exist on Monala, but from a plant called ‘vishkachay’. A lightweight material, it’s as strong as traditional denim, as water resistant as thick canvas, softer and more comfortable than cotton, and highly breathable. Vishkachay woven clothing is superior to all but the highest quality synthetic materials produced back on Earth. In fact, many Zelkona are learning to appreciate the woven clothing that the humans produce. Quite a few have ceased wearing their primitive hide clothes, opting to assimilate and wear clothing similar to their leader, with notable alterations made to accommodate their tail and clawed feet.

Zakera is the one exception. Not only does she not enjoy the feeling of woven clothing, Cy is quite fond of her hide skirt and breastplate. As Minoma also prefers her traditional clothing, Katero had long continued to wear only a loin cloth, however, now he questions that decision. Standing in the hallway, he waits only a few minutes before the bedroom door opens and Cy steps out. Closing the door behind him, he pats Katero on the arm as he walks by and the pair soon glide down the staircase and toward the ground floor. They pass Gabriella, who looks unusually nervous and refuses to join them, though Cy had given her the option.

Heading outside, Cy's human guards open the gate for him. Unlike Zikata, who was unarmed and living with dissenters, Cy always has his steel falcata sword, chain whip, cykera recurve knife and a pistol; he is competent in their use, though some more than others. Being both beloved and feared by his people further ensures his safety. The two friends walk the streets and toward the path that leads to the large field and eventually the cove. Workers and villagers stop to look at Cy and Katero, both of whom are dressed far more humbly than many of them. Reaching the path, they find that a single squad of militia stand there. They are led by Kanafa and wait for them, as the others have gone ahead. With the militia stand Johnny and Minoma.

"Well, what a pleasant surprise! I didn't think I'd be seeing you two here."

"Hey, Cy. We're going to come with you!" Johnny chirps.

"Whose idea was that?" Cy chuckles.

Johnny and Minoma simultaneously point to one another.

"Really?" Katero raises a brow.

"Well, we've walked all over the town already and Minoma has never seen the Malevolence before. We've got so many guards and both one-man armies, with you and Yasmin going." Johnny explains.

"If that's what you want to do, but don't get too distracted." Cy warns with a smirk.

"Don't respond to that." Johnny says to Minoma.

"Distracted with what?" Minoma asks.

"I warned you." Johnny chuckles.

"We're bringing the mattresses home, so those bedrooms aren't available." Cy teases.

“And I have excellent hearing...” Katero adds.

“Oh...”

Minoma flushes beneath her fur, her head lowering slightly from embarrassment.

“Dude...” Johnny glares at Cy.

“I’m sorry. I was only teasing.”

“Yes Cy. Do not tease her.” Katero says.

“Thank you!” Johnny exclaims.

“... That is *his* job.” Katero continues, making a provocative gesture with his fingers.

“You guys are assholes. Let’s go, Minoma.” He says, taking her by the hand.

Her grip is exceptionally tight as they walk near the front of the squad, beside Kanafa and her second, a human male. Johnny grins in amusement at Minoma’s expression as she walks with him. It is obvious that she has never been so far from either tribe before; every tree, every rock and every blade of colorful grass is a new experience for the girl. After a moderate hike toward the cove, the silhouette of the Malevolence comes into view. Minoma stops, staring in awe at the vessel.

“You came in that?!” She asks with bewilderment.

“We sure did.” Johnny replies.

“I have never seen anything like it. It is beautiful.” She says in reverence.

Approaching the vessel, they are amazed to see that the first team have already begun to remove the excess gear from the ship. A large stack of mattresses sits in a neat pile, arranged into a pyramid. Beside that pile is one of the full fuel drums that Cy had stolen when they fled J.T.'s compound. The original fortress dwellers never helped them remove the barrels due to the incredible weight and the fact that there wasn't a functioning dolly on board the Malevolence. Cy's eyes grow wide as he witnesses a five-foot and one-inch-tall Zelkona male carrying a fuel barrel precariously in his arms, unaided. Katero notes his expression and raises a brow.

"What is the matter, Cyrus?"

"I can't believe they can carry those..." Cy chokes out.

"What do they weigh?" Katero asks.

"Fifty-five gallons of unleaded gasoline, plus the barrel... About three hundred and forty pounds."

"What are 'pounds'?" Katero still looks perplexed.

"Oh, right... I'm about one hundred and eighty pounds. Those barrels weigh as much as two of me." Cy explains.

Now with context, Katero is equally amazed and somewhat fearful. Though the Zelkona male appears to struggle with the container, the fact that he can walk at all with the heavy object in his arms is a feat in and of itself. Chris, Jack, Yasmin and Rico, carry jerry cans and assorted electrical components. Neither Cy or Johnny recognize any of the parts, but as a permanent crewmember, Rico is trustworthy; he would never pull anything from the ship that would even remotely inhibit its function.

"Nice of you assholes to finally show up!" Yasmin growls, sweat beading on her forehead.

"Glad to see that you're in a good mood today." Cy grins.

"Abso-fucking-lutely... Feel free to pitch in anytime."

Climbing aboard the ship, Minoma stares in awe. She turns her eyes toward a strange device; even on board this wonderous craft, she cannot fathom what this artifact is.

“Hey, you dug it out for me!” Cy chirps.

“Yeah. It was in the way. I almost threw it over the side, but I didn’t feel like dying today. Maybe tomorrow, instead!” Yasmin grins.

Cy approaches his 1975 Honda CL200 motorcycle, wiping the dust from the fuel tank. He straddles the small vehicle before looking into the tank, checking the fuel lines and the petcock. Everything is still in perfect working order. Climbing off of the bike, he gently pets it as though it were a beloved dog or cat.

“What is it?” Minoma asks.

“It’s a lot of fun.” Cy cryptically replies.

“Just stay out of the way when it’s moving.” Johnny warns.

“It moves?!” Minoma gasps.

“When I ride, it does. Johnny never liked giving her any throttle.” Cy quips.

Walking toward the superstructure, Kanafa stops, her cobalt blue eyes scanning the vessel. Her thick, fleshy tail sways heavily as the blue raptor looks over the craft.

“It seems like it was only yesterday...” She murmurs.

“What’s that?” Cy asks.

"My tribe was marching away from a rumored kingdom of humans. Zia led us to a beach to rest for a night. There, we saw this very ship sailing toward where we came." Kanafa explains.

"That was your tribe?!" Cy exclaims.

"Yes." She nods.

"I've been meaning to ask you... How did you end up with the Kelanethaka, if you are so strong and such capable warriors?" Yasmin interjects.

"Zia met with a group of Ketlan who bore strange weapons that were not made out of wood or stone. She spoke with the leader of this group, who explained that they were scouts for a tribe with powerful allies who held the knowledge of these weapons. Worried that these scouts and their tribe might be a dangerous foe, and seeking a new home for our people, she simply agreed to follow them without conflict." Kanafa explains.

"Just like that?" Yasmin raises a brow.

"Yes. At first many did not want to obey and we nearly fought them, before Cyrus arrived and prevented that. Zia did what was best for us, and it has proven to be a wise decision; none of us are bitter. Zelkona pride strength, but we pride our tribe more. The Sa'kesh are strong and yet noble, powerful and yet generous, idealistic but not naïve; it is everything that we seek in ourselves. We are proud to call ourselves your kin." Kanafa replies.

"Well, we're honored to have you with us!" Cy chirps, ending the dialog.

Entering the superstructure, Cy and the team assist Chris and Rico in dismantling and carrying out the materials and equipment. Even Johnny and Minoma lend a hand, carrying bundles of wire, pillows, textiles, and other miscellaneous items from the ship and piling them outside. They maintain idle chatter, never having more than a few moments of silence between them. Down the hall and inside the cargo hold, another team works to dismantle a bundle of electrical wiring that Rico has deemed nonessential, while also collecting power tools that they had left behind from the first time they collected

supplies from the ship. Jack, Chris, Cy, Yasmin, Rico and Katero pile tools into old crates and pulls wires, bundling them for removal.

“What’s going on with Johnny? Him and his new friend aren’t here with us.” Rico suddenly asks Yasmin.

“I think he’s sweet on that Ketlan. They’re always off doing their own thing.” Yasmin says nonchalantly.

“Oh. I wondered about them.” Rico comments.

“Him too?” Jack mutters quietly in disgust.

“Are you alright, Jack?” Cy asks.

“I’m just fine... I’m perfectly happy with all of these mixed couples running around.” Jack sarcastically replies.

“I’m glad, since that’s not your business anyway. People can live their own lives.” Cy retorts.

“She also appears to like him considerably.” Katero adds.

“And that makes it right?” Jack snaps.

“Easy Jack...” Chris says, looking to Cy.

“No... She’s a Ketlan, and there are human girls in the city.” Jack barks.

“There are Zelkona girls too. I saw him gawking.” Cy smirks.

“Oh, dear God...” Jack sighs in frustration.

Katero glares at Jack and Cy suddenly steps up to him.

“I like you, Jack... You’re a skilled hunter and a valuable team member... Hell, I read about you in history books and thought you were a cool guy; someone to look up too... But you’re trying my fucking patience!”

“Oh?” Jack raises a brow.

“You need to drop this bullshit right now. So what if Johnny likes a Ketlan girl? Maybe she likes him back? Maybe she understands him? Maybe they actually have a genuine connection beyond simple hormones?” Cy poses.

Jack takes a step back but seems unmoved.

“Or maybe he’s just living in the moment? Maybe seeing Norv die and killing Gomona and Linsor had a real effect on him? Whatever his reasons are, it doesn’t really matter; it’s his life. We live utterly surrounded by Ketlan, Zelkona and humans. Whether you like those first two or not, you need to learn to adapt. Here, in this jungle, there’s absolutely no place for that kind of attitude.” Cy finishes.

“Are we finished?” Jack asks.

“You are... Shut up and get back to work.” Cy orders in an eerie monotone.

Jack takes a crate of power tools and leaves the room. Chris glances over to Cy, visibly worried at the potential implications of his words. Taking a bundle of wire and slipping it over his body like a bandolier, Cy glances to Chris. His silent stare reveals his fears to the chieftain and former assassin.

“What? I meant that he was done talking. I’m not going to hurt him, and I won’t order anything done to him either.” Cy assures him.

“Good.” Chris murmurs.

“I will, however, burn him alive if he tries to pull a Fekolza on me.”

“Jack is passionate and set in his ways, but he isn’t a fool. You don’t have to worry about him, Cyrus.” Chris assures him.

“Good.” Chris murmurs.

Taking a crate of spare parts for his motorcycle, Cy walks past Chris and the others, following Jack down the hall. Minoma narrows her eyes as Jack passes the room that she occupies with Johnny. Having heard their entire conversation, she now has cause to dislike the man who already makes her feel rather uncomfortable. Returning to the surface with all of their supplies, the band of warriors gather their things and prepare to return home. For the sake of efficiency and safety, two Zelkona will carry each fuel barrel, one at either end. With his motorcycle parked on the deck of the ship, Cy orders the others to leave without him.

Only the militia have trouble with this order; even the original fortress dwellers had seen or heard of motorcycles by 1926. With Yasmin and Katero affirming Cy's safety, Kanafa and the rest of the militia reluctantly leave him behind. Cy will secure the gangplank and head back on his own time. Marching away from the ship, Kanafa looks back several times, worried for her chieftain.

"Relax. Everything will be fine." Yasmin tells her.

They march through the field for nearly thirty minutes before Katero stops and turns back, his ears perking. Minoma soon follows and the entire group stops to look back.

"Do you hear that?" Katero asks her.

"Yes." Minoma nods.

The Zelkona narrow their eyes as a figure quickly comes into view. Soon, the two Ketlan can see it clearly as well. Within moments Cy races up to the others, his motorcycle at full throttle as he flies past them at over eighty miles per hour.

"What was that?!" Minoma asks in shock.

“That was Cy and his motorcycle.” Johnny explains.

“Is it always so loud?” Katero ask.

“Loud?! I thought that model was always kind of quiet.” Johnny remarks. “Oh... Right.” He chuckles as he looks at Katero’s ears.

Cy looks over his shoulder, a little smirk on his face. He eases up on the throttle, allowing the bike to coast at a comfortable fifty-five miles per hour. Reaching the fortress in barely seven minutes, he makes excellent time. Luckily the field is relatively smooth and the grasses bend easily for the motorcycle. He rides slowly through the mud brick streets of his city, drawing awe from absolutely everyone. Riding the bike up to the fortress, his guards take a moment to stare before opening the gate for him; Cy has to order them twice before they snap out of their daze and take action. Parking the bike beside the shed that houses the crystalline batteries, he walks inside where Zakera waits for him.

“What was that noise, my love?” She asks, hugging him tightly.

“Just one of my many toys.” He replies.

After waiting for a little over an hour, the rest of the group arrives, marching up to the fortress and carrying the supplies. Sitting on the bench with his mate, Cy waves to the others.

“What took you so long?” He chuckles.

Episode 34: Negligent Discharge

Yasmin opens her eyes, her body still weary even though she has slept through the night. Ever since swapping her old grass

mattress for one taken from the Malevolence, she has had trouble getting out of bed, though she wouldn't consider this a serious problem. Sitting up, she yawns and stretches, glancing over to Rico who sleeps peacefully beside her. Footsteps pass by their door, the clicking of claws accompanying the softer footfalls. Cy and Zakera climb down the stairs to eat breakfast before starting another day.

"You do not need to do that, Cy." Zakera remarks.

"Yes, I do!" He chirps as he helps her into her chair.

A full month has passed since the first of several visits to the Malevolence, stripping it of all but the most important components. Johnny and Minoma are already awake and sitting together in the dining hall. Both of them watch the couple with amused grins as they eat their breakfast. At just over two months pregnant, Zakera now shows her condition; Cy treats her like a delicate flower, doting on her and refusing to allow her to do any physical labor of any kind. Though the attention often embarrasses the girl, Zakera enjoys the affection of her mate. Cy fetches their food and places it neatly before Zakera, kissing her lovingly on the lips and stroking her snout. He takes a seat beside her and her tail hooks his side. Glancing back, he looks to Johnny.

"Oh, before I forget, there's something we need to talk about later. Bring Minoma too."

"Alright. When's later?" Johnny asks.

"I don't know." Cy shrugs.

"So helpful." Johnny subtly chuckles.

Finishing their breakfast, Johnny and Minoma stand up to leave. As they head for the archway leading into the main hallway, Katero, Gabriella, Amanda and Daniel enter the room.

“Now’s a good time to talk.”

Directing the juveniles toward the main, crescent shaped table at the innermost wall, a table which wraps around one of the three primary tree trunks that give the tribe its name, the adults sit around them.

“So... What’s this all about?” Johnny asks.

“We have been thinking about all of your past deeds; you have done far more than can be asked of most juveniles.” Katero begins.

“I guess...” Johnny murmurs.

“Minoma is also seventeen cycles old. That’s old enough.” Amanda adds.

Minoma’s face lights up, her red eyes growing wide and her lips curling up around the corners of her gaping maw.

“Old enough for what?” Johnny raises a brow.

“You didn’t think you could stay young forever, did you?” Cy quips.

“I figured I’d give it a shot.” Johnny smirks.

“There’s a ceremony of adulthood for the juveniles of the village. It will take place in a few days.” Daniel says.

“We wish for both of you to take part in it.” Zakera says.

Minoma squeals with delight, to the amusement of Johnny and several others. The Ketlan all desire this moment in their lives; with adulthood comes responsibility, the pledge and children, but also respect, personal freedom and property rights, not including other cultural benefits. Though they both except the honor and agree to partake, Minoma is visibly excited while Johnny is less enthusiastic.

“Now that you’ll be an adult, you’re allowed to pledge and everything. Maybe even move out into your own brick house... Then I could walk around in my underwear again.” Cy teases.

“Ha-ha...” Johnny grumbles.

“Is this not wonderful, Johnny?!” Minoma happily exclaims.

“Yeah...”

Patting him on the shoulder, Daniel and Katero congratulate the boy. Amanda and Zakera embrace Minoma, and Cy does the same for Johnny, who is like a younger brother to him, or perhaps even a son. Continuing about their day, Minoma has a spring in her step, but Johnny is aloof. He glances to Minoma, who radiates joy; she doesn’t even notice his melancholy. They have been close friends almost since the moment she spoke to him, as he sat crying beneath the torlan tree. However, for the first time he feels as though he cannot speak his peace, though he desires nothing else. They have had all of this time to experience each other, as juveniles are permitted, but simply have not. Johnny has never asked, for fear of ruining their friendship, nor has Minoma pushed him.

Back inside the fortress, Cy and Zakera watch as Johnny and Minoma walk down the brick street and toward the ever-growing city, which is being constructed day and night by multiple shifts of diligent workers.

“They grow up so fast.” Cy feigns tears in jest.

Chris trots down the stairs, humming what sounds suspiciously like Beethoven.

“Oh, hello Cyrus! Zakera!”

“Hey.” They say in unison.

“Ready for that meeting with Mirkon and Zia?” Chris asks excitedly.

“That was today?!” Cy replies in disappointment.

“Yes... I told you yesterday... Three times.” Chris explains.

“He knows. He was just hoping that with your age you would have forgotten.” Zakera giggles.

“I’m not *that* old. My mind will be the last organ to fail me.” Chris smirks.

“Alright... Fine... Let’s go introduce money to our people.” Cy grumbles.

Cy slips an arm around his mate and leads her carefully outside. Normally she wouldn’t go, but she has insisted on some fresh air and demanded more time with her mate. Though worried for her health and that of their child, Cy was not going to deny Zakera her wish. As they take their leave and are followed by Chris, Daniel and a portion of the fortress guards, Gabriella watches from the top of the staircase, on the third floor. Peering over the side, she had been spying on them since Chris’ feet touched the second-floor landing. With the two other Ketlan residents now gone and no one to disturb them, she continues down the hall and toward Katero’s room.

It’s her intent to spend quality time with the Ketlan male, who she finds herself infatuated with. Rushing up to his room, which is beside Johnny’s, one away from Cy and Zakera’s, and two from Yasmin and Rico’s, she coils her fingers and raises her hand. Before she can knock softly upon the door, he opens it. His lips curl into a pleased grin and he steps into the hallway, closing the door behind him, wearing only his black cloth trousers.

“Hello, Gabby. It is very good to see you today.” He begins.

"You too, Katero. D-did you want to spend some time with me?" She sheepishly asks.

"Of course!" He chirps.

She grins from cheek to cheek. Without dressing further, the athletic warrior walks down the hall as he follows Gabriella toward the staircase. His toe-claws click on the wooden floor as they walk in an awkward silence.

"Did you want to catalog flora again?" He finally asks her.

"Yeah. That would be a nice walk... Oh! I need Donald's book from the library!" She exclaims.

They race down the stairs and toward the second floor, heading for the library. As they reach the landing, however, Katero suddenly stops. He turns away from the hall and clears his throat. Gabriella stops and looks back to him.

"What's wrong?"

"Perhaps we can go without the book." He suggests.

"I won't know what I'm looking for if I don't have that." She giggles.

"Gabby, wait!"

She runs down the hall and Katero gives chase. Before he can catch her, she hears it. Now only feet from the door, the thick wooden walls and barrier muffle sounds from inside. She can very faintly hear what sounds like Samantha moaning and Jack grunting. Her face flushes as she realizes why Katero was acting so strangely; the pair had just begun having sex in the library and his superior hearing detected it. Gabby turns to Katero and opens her mouth to speak, but no words come to her. His head tilts downward as though ashamed for

failing to save her from the embarrassment. Turning his golden eyes toward her, they stare at each other for a moment, listening only to the sounds of Jack and Samantha's lovemaking.

They look to each other as if to ask what they would rather do instead, but neither speaks. Gabriella notices that Katero's breathing hastens, a hand balls into a fist and he suddenly turns away. Stepping up to him, Katero now appears more embarrassed than she is. Forcing herself in front of him, she stands with her back mere inches from the wall. As she opens her mouth to speak, she glances over Katero who attempts to turn away again. That's when she notices what is bothering him. Katero spins around to hide his growing erection from her, a side effect of being unable to tune out the passionate exclamations that come from the room just behind them.

Her eyes lock on the bulge, which arouses her even more than Jack and Samantha's vocalizations. With her loins burning and her body trembling, Gabriella steps before Katero again, trying to gain his attention. She attempts to maintain her composure, but as he looks to her with obvious desire, she does something that she did not anticipate. Without thought, her hand reaches out, but not for his face. As if powered by an unseen force, her palm rests over the considerable girth within his black trousers, her fingers coiling and giving the warm member within a gentle squeeze. Reacting to her touch, Katero spins around to face her.

Placing his hands on her upper arms and leaning in, he kisses her roughly and presses himself up against her, her plump breasts smooshing against his chest. As Samantha squeals in the library, Gabriella melts in Katero's arms in the hallway before the door. Jack grunts as he works his female companion with what sounds like considerable vigor; Katero matches him as his hands explore Gabriella's clothed body, their tongues entwining. She taps him on the arm repeatedly to gain his attention. Pulling back, the golden furred feline Ketlan with black spots looks down at her.

“My room.” She whispers.

Taking his hand, they race upstairs, unnoticed by anyone else within, though at this point the fortress is nearly deserted. Gabriella’s room is on the third floor and on the furthest side. She does not share it with her sister Isabella. The room is away from both the stairs and those occupied by their companions. No sooner do they enter her room does the door slam and Gabriella finds herself pinned against it. With his hands on the door and above her shoulders, Katero kisses, neck and even licks her in ways that she has never experienced. He is almost animalistic in his enthusiasm, and in many ways she appreciates it.

She kicks off her shoes before pushing down her pants and panties with one motion. Katero kneels down. As her arms reach above her head to remove her top, she is startled by Katero’s touch, which is soon followed by his tongue. He presses his snout between her legs as she stands with her back to the door, licking her loins. The human girl has never felt a sensation quite like this, and her body quivers. Taking the lead, Katero rises to his feet and drops his trousers before taking Gabriella’s bra in his claws and simply pulling it over her head; he does not bother attempting to find the clasps, if he even knew they were there to begin with.

Looking down, Gabriella gasps at the sight before her eyes. His member, a glossy charcoal black, is quite thick and with considerable length. Though fully erect, it appears to be rather heavy and looms over the golden fur of his scrotum like a rounded, obsidian obelisk. She impulsively takes hold of the organ, feeling the heat radiating off of the taut flesh. He is just over three of her fingers in width and his length runs from her fingertips to nearly two-inches beyond her wrist. Katero sees her expression and is quite pleased by her reaction. With his ego bolstered, he leans in and licks the brown flesh of the girl’s nipples, teasing her bare breasts.

Gabriella wraps her arms around her male companion, who promptly grabs hold of her firm buttocks with both hands. Her leg lifts, the bottom of her foot stroking the soft fur of his calf muscle. With an opportunity presented, he shifts, bending his knees. After a few rather clumsy attempts, he presses the head against her flesh before carefully driving it in. The hot and drenched vagina is more than willing to accept him. Gasping, she grips him tightly, her loins stretching to fit the first phallus that she has experienced in at least seven months. He grunts as he drives himself deeper, sheathing himself inside of Gabriella's aching flesh. It has been even longer for him, as he has been an adult for over a cycle and has never pledged.

"Beh... Bed..." Gabriella gasps.

"Alright." He nods, his breathing labored.

Holding her with his hands, which grip her butt firmly, she wraps her legs around his waist and keeps her arms over his shoulders. With careful steps, he takes her to the grass mattress; Gabriella had chosen to keep the firm bed as opposed to trading it for one from the Malevolence. He kneels down carefully before leaning forward and plopping his lover down atop the bed of tied and woven sheaves, resting his hands over her shoulders and taking a comfortable position. He licks her neck as he pumps into her tight hole, enjoying every ridge and curve within her as he stretches her to fit. She struggles to keep from squealing, instead moaning into his shoulders. Lying back, she enjoys every thrust from her male, wondering why she hadn't done this with him sooner.

Downstairs, Yasmin and Rico clean and examine the arsenal of weapons in the armory. It is one of the few tasks that they perform together, though Rico is not very experienced with firearms, only ever using them on a handful of occasions. Setting the last SKS rifle onto the custom carved, wooden rack made by Michael Judge, they sit back and relax.

"This is nice." Rico comments.

"Yeah? You like this?" Yasmin raises a brow.

"The quality time. I sometimes wish we spent more of it together." He adds.

"Rico, you romantic sap." She chuckles.

"What?" He grins.

Yasmin takes out her Bersa Thunder 9 Pro pistol and checks the magazine and chamber. Rico, perhaps in an effort to impress her, or out of genuine curiosity, takes out his Colt Detective Special from his pocket. The pistol he took from Juan after his suicide, he carries it primarily as a tribute to his fallen friend, who had never seen this world the way that he has. He opens the cylinder, which contains six live rounds of .38 Special ammunition. Rico always leaves the weapon loaded. He swings the cylinder closed, as he has seen in the movies.

"Don't do that." Yasmin sternly scolds.

"Do what?" He asks.

"That. Closing the cylinder like that is bad for the crane and the locking mechanism, especially on an old gun like your Colt." She explains.

"Sorry."

"And get your finger out of the trigger guard!" She adds.

Rising from their seats, a sudden loud bang on the door startles the pair. Rico visibly jumps, his finger jerking. The revolver fires, startling him further. He drops the gun to the floor in shock.

"What the fuck?!" He exclaims.

The door swings open and Richard pops in. Yasmin slumps back and slowly sits down.

“I’m sorry, I stepped on my bootlace and fell against the door!” Richard explains.

“Rico... I’m going to fucking kill you...” Yasmin says rather calmly.

Turning to her, they see her gripping her left thigh tightly. Blood oozes from between her fingers as she applies pressure to an entry wound.

“Oh, God!” Rico cries out.

Each man takes one of the Columbian woman’s arms, holding her up and taking her outside. The armory, which sits on the ground floor, is near the rear of the hexagonal fortress. As blood runs down her leg and Yasmin grunts in obvious pain, Rico soon stops their walk. Swinging an arm beneath her legs while keeping one behind her upper back, he swoops her off of her feet and carries her like a bride. Dashing outside, several startled guards open the gate and escort them to Lara’s medical clinic on the first block of the budding city.

“You’re going to be okay, babe! I am so sorry!” Rico exclaims as they dash down the street.

“You’re not going to be.” She growls.

Upstairs and in Gabriella’s room, Katero rolls his lover over. Having brought her to climax surprisingly quickly, he places her on her hands and knees. Weak from the orgasm, she rests her upper half on her pillow, drooling on the animal hide case and groaning. It takes all of her energy to make a single request.

“Please... Nng. Don’t... Hhf, don’t cum in me, ahh.”

“Nng, what?”

Forgetting that Katero, as a Ketlan native to Monala, does not understand some of her 21st century Earth phraseology, reiterates the request.

“Hhf... Spill your, nng, seed, hhf, outside of me, nngaahhh.”

“Nng, alright.” He nods.

With his clawed hands gripping her glistening, sweat drenched flesh, he pumps harder and faster into her loins. It does not take long before Gabriella is squealing into her pillow from a second orgasm. Katero grunts louder as he draws near his own end, the peak of his pleasure swiftly approaching. His furry scrotum slaps her clitoris as he works harder and faster, now focusing on himself, though he keeps her words in the back of his mind.

“I am, nng, about, hhf, to finish, nng!” He warns.

With the end only seconds away, he prepares to withdraw himself and release his load onto Gabriella’s back, thinking that she might enjoy that. Suddenly, a loud bang startles the Ketlan as he is in the midst of a final thrust. Gabriella turns to look as well. She closes her eyes tightly, squealing and cumming for a third time as Katero, who remains fully sheathed within her loins, blasts jet after powerful jet inside of her body. He roars and leans forward, his eyes closed tightly as he instinctively pushes in even harder. The charcoal colored penis fills the taut pink flesh of her body with a copious amount of his fertile, white seed, which races to complete a very specific quest.

“Ahh, oh God... Hhf, shit...” Gabriella gasps for breath.

“NNNGGHHF! ... Oh Gabby... You are so tight and warm. I have never mated so well.” Katero says through labored breaths.

“You are great at mating, Katero.” She giggles. “Oh wait... No!”

She looks down and between her legs to see Katero’s golden fur covered scrotum pressed firmly against her groin. Pulled tightly toward his body, the empty testicles seem to taunt her. Gabriella then looks over her shoulder as Katero pulls out. He withdraws his member from her body, which springs up, still fully erect and as hard as a rock. A minute amount of cum leaks from the tip and covers the black flesh of the head and upper shaft. Looking back between her legs, she leans back as she sits on her calves. With a hand placed beneath her, she catches a massive flood of semen that nearly fills her entire palm, and she is certain that she can feel more, deep inside of her body.

“I am sorry! I heard that noise and it distracted me!” He apologizes.

“Yeah... It distracted me too. I could have pulled away.” She sighs.

Though she won’t admit it, she is quite pleased that she felt her lover’s flood, but now she must deal with the aftereffects.

“Well... There is ‘the tea’.” He says.

“That works on humans?”

“I do not know. You would have to ask a female Ketlan or Zelkona. Only they know the recipe and dosage.” He explains.

The couple quickly dress themselves as Gabriella prepares to head out for the city below. With Zia in a meeting with Cy and Zakera,

among others, and Minoma almost certain to share her and Katero's business with Johnny, she can think of only one other person to call upon. Hopefully she is trustworthy enough to ask. She leaves the fortress, passing a startled looking Jack and Samantha, who are now also fully dressed and looking at a small trail of blood that leads out of the fortress.

"What happened?" Samantha asks.

"Who was shot?" Jack interjects.

"I don't know. I'll go find out. Be right back!"

Inside of Lara's medical clinic, Rico paces back and forth as a drugged Yasmin lies back on a table. Lara digs a slug from her leg, checking to make sure that no arteries were damaged before sewing her wound closed.

"You were lucky. Missed pretty much everything, and that is rare. Leg wounds are often fatal without immediate treatment. I didn't even need to amputate!" She chirps.

"Hooray..." Yasmin grumbles.

"I am so sorry, babe. I just... I-"

"Stop apologizing for being a fucking idiot..." Yasmin mumbles.

"Are you mad at me?" Rico whimpers.

"Furious..." She sighs.

"Now Yasmin, remember our sessions. Remember what I told you." Lara cryptically states.

"Okay, Doc." Yasmin weakly nods.

"Well, at least she's going to be alright. I should find Cy and tell him about this." Richard remarks.

"I just want you to know that it was an accident though. I didn't know that would happen." Rico continues.

“Shut up, Rico... I’m too busy being high to listen to you right now...” She says.

“Okay...” He squeaks.

Walking past the clinic, Gabriella wishes that she could go inside and find out what happened, but she needs to take care of something first. Though the city is still under constant construction, the first of a dozen planned blocks are finished. In four rows of three blocks, the first row is entirely industrial. With the exception of the militia’s armory and active-duty barracks, Lara’s clinic and the schoolhouse, the rest are set aside for craftsmen such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and brick masons. These buildings all face the outer street, which serves as a main road and heads directly for the Sa’kesh fortress. The second, inner half of the first row and the first half of the second row are designated solely for merchants and tradesmen. Jewelers, tailors, potters, food markets, etc.

All of the remaining rows will be brick houses and apartments. The first row of houses has been completed, as have all of the industrial and market buildings. Heading directly for the first street of houses, Gabriella hopes that Kanafa is home and not on-duty. She is one of the only Zelkona whom she knows by name, and who knows her in kind. Knocking on the front door of her home, the door swings open and a blonde-haired human male answers.

“Oh... Is this Kanafa’s house?” She asks.

“Gabriella?” Kanafa says as she steps up to the door.

“Hi... Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Of course!” Kanafa ushers her inside.

Once within the building, Gabriella finally recognizes the man. He is a human militia whom she has seen several times before. Though

she doesn't know his name, she recognizes him as part of Kanafa's squad and her second-in-command.

"So... You two are friends?" Gabriella asks.

"Something like that." Kanafa replies.

"I see..."

"Please do not tell anyone yet, but he has asked me to pledge to him and I have accepted." Kanafa confides.

"Well, in that case, I need to ask you for a favor." Gabriella says.

"Yes?"

"Can you show me how to make 'the tea'?"

"Tea?" Kanafa reiterates, raising a brow.

"You know which one I mean..."

Kanafa nods and heads for a wooden cupboard. Taking out a small satchel of strange beans, she dumps them into a little pile atop a waist-high wooden counter with more storage space. Reaching back into the cupboard, she takes out a much larger sack and scoops out several handfuls of teal colored powder. The blue raptor female pours the teal powder from the bottom of her clawed hand like sand until the small satchel is filled. Returning the large sack to the cupboard she approaches Gabriella, holding out the satchel for her.

"Mix with hot water until it becomes as colorful as the powder. It should take three or four fingers of powder. Take it immediately and then again before bed tonight." Kanafa explains.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to ask, but are you sure this will work on humans?" Gabriella nervously asks.

"I have heard of humans using it, but for some reason it makes them quite ill. Ketlan and Zelkona, however, are unaffected in that way. I am sorry." Kanafa replies.

"It's alright. I won't tell anyone about you two either; you can when you're ready."

"Thank you." Kanafa bows her head.

Leaving the home as quickly as she came, she waves goodbye to Kanafa before heading back for the fortress. As Kanafa lives at the end of the first row of homes, she simply follows the end road until she reaches the main street. Walking along that street, she nears the clinic when Richard suddenly steps outside.

"Oh, hey Gabby!" Richard exclaims.

"Hi, Richard. What are you doing out here?"

"Oh, we just had to take Yasmin to Lara's office." He replies.

"What happened to Yasmin?"

"Rico shot her."

"... Why?" Gabriella raises a brow.

"Because I tripped on my bootlace." He answers.

"... Oh... Well I'd better be going. See you later!"

"Hey, what is that?" He asks, pointing at the satchel in her hand.

"Oh, it's tea!" She inadvertently answers honestly.

"I love tea! Can I have some?"

"It's uh... Medicinal. For... Cramps." She explains, lying on the spot.

"Oh... Sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better. Take care, Gabby."

"You too, Richard."

With the conflict averted, she walks swiftly home while Richard diverts and heads directly for Mirkon's home. Zia, who lives next door, will be there with Cy, Zakera, Chris and Daniel as they prepare to

introduce their new Sa'kesh currency. Chris and Daniel jokingly refer to it as 'the cyrian' knowing that it flusters Cyrus, who hates being treated like royalty. Cy had nicknamed it a 'zakerian'. As he heads for the row of homes, he races past Johnny and Minoma as they walk slowly back toward the fortress.

"Well, he's in a hurry." Johnny remarks.

"Johnny... Are you mad at me?" She asks.

"What?! No!" He exclaims.

"You have not been acting yourself since our breakfast this morning."

"I'm sorry." He murmurs.

"Please, tell me what is troubling you." She stops and turns to him.

Perhaps from embarrassment or for a desire for privacy, he takes her by the hand and walks her away from the road. Marching directly toward the fortress, they head through a grassy area that has been set aside for domesticated animals who have yet to be caught. Cutting through the grass, they reach the main road and return to the fortress. Johnny doesn't utter a word during this time, though he appears to be ready to speak at any moment. The guards open the gate for the juveniles and they head for the fortress. Johnny looks around in the lab, then the dining hall across the way, before taking Minoma inside.

"I'm sorry I haven't been myself, I've just been thinking a lot." He finally begins.

"About what?"

"Life, I guess. Life as an adult." He sighs.

"Are you not excited?" She tilts her head in confusion.

"Not really. I'm scared." He quietly admits.

“Whatever for?” Minoma slides closer.

“Things will be different.”

“We will have more responsibilities, but those are not bad.” She says.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant it will be different between us...”

“How so?” She sounds genuinely perplexed.

“We’ll be able to pledge, and...”

Minoma’s brow softens, her eyes turning downward. Her tall, rabbit-like ears begin to sag forward. She reaches a clawed and across her chest and grabs hold of her white fur, her claws running repeatedly along her cherry red stripes. It’s a nervous tick she often employs for comfort.

“Is that why we have never mated? Because you do not desire me?” She asks.

“What?! No, I... We...” Johnny stammers.

He reaches out and takes her in his arms, holding the young Ketlan girl. She reaches up and rests her hands on his shoulder blades, burying her face in his chest for a moment before turning her head and glancing up to him with her piercing red eyes. Reaching out a hand, Johnny gently brushes her wavy red hair from her face, softly tapping her black nose with his fingertip. Minoma grins, as she always does when he binks her nose.

“We never mated because I was scared of ruining what we had.” He begins.

“Really?” She sheepishly asks.

"I have never shared so much with anyone before. The only reason my sisters and Cy know as much as you do is because they were there for most of it. I trust you with so much, and I thought that if I complicated it with sex, we might not be good friends anymore. This friendship is very important to me and I just don't know what I'd do without you. It's not that I never wanted to mate with you, because I do." He continues.

"I did not want to pressure you. I thought that if I simply waited until you were ready, you would ask me, but after so long without doing so and us about to become adults, I worried that you simply did not see me that way." She speaks softly.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't what I wanted. I didn't know how to say it until now, because in a few days I might not be able too. I just don't want you to have never heard me say how I fe-"

Minoma interrupts him with a tender kiss upon his lips, holding her position for a moment. After pulling away, she gazes up at her companion, who looks down at the girl, easily six-inches taller than her.

"Ask me, Johnny." She coos.

"Do you want to mate?" He nervously asks.

"Yes."

Taking him by the hand, she leads him up the stairs and toward her bedroom. It is the first time that either juvenile has experienced the other. Minoma leads Johnny to her room on the second floor, passing by Lara's old lab where a nervous Katero watches as Gabriella mixes the tea. The pair do not even notice the juveniles, nor do the juveniles notice the adults inside the room.

"Now remember, you're covering for me. I just caught food poisoning." She reminds him.

"I will not forget. I am very sorry about this." He whimpers.

She looks to him and subtly chuckles, her lips curling into a little grin as she stirs the tea. Using an old-fashioned burner, part of Lara's rather primitive laboratory setup, she'd quickly brought the water to a boil.

"It's alright, Katero. I liked it. It was nice."

"... Really?!" He asks with a subdued grin.

"Yeah. This won't be though..."

After waiting for it to cool and drinking the tea, which has a surprisingly pleasant citrus flavor, she retires to her room where she awaits the painful symptoms known to befall the humans who consume it. Sitting with her in her room, Katero pets her head and the pair share idle banter. He struggles to tune out Johnny and Minoma, but promptly warns Gabriella, just in case. Having already released, however, he is better able to ignore the juveniles downstairs, sounds that his sensitive hearing is unfortunate enough to pick up. Within the hour, Cy returns home with his entourage and immediately calls a meeting in the dining hall. By then, Johnny and Minoma have since finished.

"So, it's come to my attention that someone, Rico, did something really stupid with a loaded gun... From now on, anyone who wants to carry a firearm has to be properly trained in the safe handling of firearms, and certified by both myself *and* Yasmin... Once she's healed of course." Cy begins.

"Fucking stupid..." Yasmin grumbles as she sits in a chair with a bandaged leg.

"Until then, keep your weapons handy but be careful! Fingers *off* of the triggers until you are ready to fire! We don't want anything going off by accident again." Cy continues.

Gabriella and Katero both share quick glances.

“When Yasmin’s ready, we’ll find a new area to target practice, since the city is so close to the fortress. Actually, I think we’ll train selected militia to use rifles and pistols too, since we have the ammo for it.” Cy adds.

“Now that would be cool to see; a Zelkona with an AR-15 or an SKS rifle.” Johnny remarks.

“Alright. Everyone but Zakera go away; I’m sick of looking at you.” Cy jokes.

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 too. 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 for 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 it 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) & Zakeria (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.

Episode 36: Kincaid

Bursting into the fortress, Katero and Gabriella dash up the stairs and head for Lara’s old medical office only to be stopped by Nendath.

“Where are you going?” She asks.

“We need to find Lara.” Katero says, gasping for breath.

“I cannot allow you to simply burst in. You will startle little Darius.”

“Please, tell Lara that it’s important.” Gabriella pleads.

“A man came out of the forest, a human from another tribe. He was wounded and spoke of ‘Kincaid’.” Katero adds.

“Wait here.”

Nendath slips back inside of the room and within a few moments, Lara emerges, along with both Cy and Zikata.

“Are you sure you wish to go?” Zikata asks.

"If there is a threat to our people, then it's even more important and I need to investigate. Please stay here with my mate and child. I'll be back soon." Cy assure him.

"Alright. Take care." Zikata nods.

Zakera sleeps inside, unaware that her mate has left her. Heading upstairs, Cy collects his gear, putting on his duty belt with holster, magazine pouches, chain whip and then slinging his steel falcata sword. Heading downstairs and into the courtyard, he marches toward Lara's office with an entourage of only six Zelkona warriors, all of them males. In front of the office sits Johnny, Minoma, Jack, Yasmin and Rico. Leaving his guards behind, Cy enters the office to find Lara and a human female assistant stitching the wounds of the unconscious male.

Gazing at his body and the wounds he bears, Cy has a flashback to one of Yasmin's torture victims from when he still served as J.T.'s prime hitman. It jars the leader, who briefly turns away.

"Where did you find him?" Cy finally asks, shaking himself out of it.

"He was near the farmland." Katero replies.

"So close?!" Cy sounds horrified.

"Yeah. We'll show you." Gabriella adds.

Katero interjects, telling her to stay behind, but Gabriella is having none of it. She has never ventured far since they have arrived, and she has always felt like a fifth wheel. However, now that she is pledged to Katero, she wants him to see her as more than just a mate; she can handle herself as well as the others. Leaving Lara to her work, they exit the office and draft a plan to search the area. Minoma, with even less experience than Gabriella, is sent next door to fetch a

squad of militia and bring them to the farmlands. Rico is tasked with waiting for word of the man's condition.

In the meantime, Cy will personally lead his six militia, Yasmin, Jack, Johnny, Katero and Gabriella into the forest at the edge of the farms to investigate. They rush down the road, drawing all manner of attention as they head into the fields. Everyone knows that Cy is a man of action, but few are so accustomed to leaders who push themselves to the front of their forces; few chieftains and kings are so eager to endanger themselves. Pushing through the faval stalks and racing past small goshan trees and other assorted fruit bearing plants, they find themselves standing where the man had fallen. His blood still stains the tilled soil.

"This is where he came from." Katero begins.

"Yes. We saw him coming from the woods here." Gabriella adds.

She darts ahead, startling the others as she dashes into the woods. Cy and the Zelkona race to catch up to her as she slips into the jungle. Catching her first, Cy grabs her wrist and pulls her back.

"What the hell are you doing running off like that?!" He growls.

"I was jus-"

Blood spatters across Cy's face as a javelin flies from the forest ahead of them, piercing Gabriella's chest and killing her mid-sentence. Left in shock, he stands idle for a moment, only to feel a net dropping over him. As many as a dozen men rappel down from the trees, taking hold of the net and dragging it off. Near the very front of the line, Katero, Johnny and a few of the swifter Zelkona reach them. An unarmed Katero charges and tackles a man who holds Cy's net while the Zelkona leap six feet and land on the backs of several

others. As quickly as they fall, nearly twenty more human warriors emerge from the distance, fighting to maintain control of the net.

Cy tries to cut his way out, but has failed to bring his recurve knife; his sword, though rather short when compared to other European style blades, is still too long to draw from the confines of the net. Realizing what he is doing, his captors club him with truncheons and try to pull the weapons from the holes, still struggling to drag him away. Looking back, Cy can see Johnny shooting several humans with his little .32 caliber Sig pistol before taking an arrow in the shoulder and falling back. Katero claws a man in the face and roars, taking his club and bashing his skull in before several rocks from primitive slings pelt him and knock him unconscious.

The Zelkona fight fiercely as nearly twenty men rush the six. With a vicious spin, one Zelkona breaks a man's back with his tail, then pounces on another and tears his throat out with his teeth. Another swings a falcata sword diagonally, breaking through the human's wooden shield and cleaving his arm off with one swing. A second swing jams the blade from his shoulder and nearly through his body on an angle. The power of the Zelkona terrifies the other humans, who appear ready to scatter at any moment. For some reason they continue to hold their ground. Jack and Yasmin fire at a group who charge in, using only pistols to kill six of his captors without once being touched.

"Get him to the cart! Fight to a man!" A voice bellows.

Cy tries to shift within the net to see who is speaking.

"Kincaid needs him alive..." The voice adds.

A hard thump to his head knocks Cy unconscious.

“No! Please! I surrender!” A human warrior cries out.

Yasmin walks up to him as her Zelkona warriors stand aside. All six are alive, bearing only mild injuries and covered in the blood of their inferior human foes. Without hesitation or an ounce of mercy, Yasmin aims her pistol at his abdomen and fires, striking his liver with deadly accuracy. He wails in pain, the last of the nearly three dozen warriors who have captured Cy.

“Where are they taking him?” She asks in an eerie monotone.

“Ahh! Please! It hurts!” He exclaims.

“Where are they taking him?” She repeats the question slowly.

Frustrated by his lack of an answer, she places her boot against his stomach and presses hard onto his wound.

“You foul wench! Kincaid will rape you to death if you even come close!” He arrogantly spouts.

“Sounds like fun.” She grins.

Leaning forward, she draws her own knife and places the tip against the side of his neck, pressing it against his jugular.

“I will not ask you again...”

The human spits in her face, only for his eyes to grow wide in shock and horror. It is clear from his expression that he did not believe that Yasmin would so easily kill him. The blade scrapes the spine as she rather slowly pushes it through before ripping it from his neck and

allowing a six-foot jet of arterial spray to fly from the wound. He passes out from blood loss within seconds and dies a moment later.

“Should’ve just told me, you stupid fuck.” She sighs.

Katero’s cries draw her attention and she looks back. Johnny is helped up by Jack, his hand covering the shaft of the arrow that juts from his body. Crawling on all fours, Katero sobs as he rests his head over Gabriella’s, his clawed hands holding her softly, as though she might break. The javelin pierced her chest on an angle, driving through just beneath her right breast, piercing her heart and leaving the tip jutting out from the leftmost side of her back. Johnny forgets his pain and even Yasmin finds her heart aching at the pitiful sight. Gabriella had been with them since the beginning and stuck by them for the nearly year and a half that they have lived on Monala.

“No! Please do not leave me! I need you!” Katero cries.

The Zelkona warriors all lower their heads in reverence and Yasmin drops her gun in the dirt. Johnny walks slowly with the arrow in his shoulder and Jack kneels beside Katero.

“I want to kill them... Kill them all for you...” Katero says softly.

Jack and Yasmin carry Gabriella’s body as the Zelkona collect the weapons and salvageable equipment from the dead, returning to the Sa’kesh to prepare. Many villagers recognize the human female. As they carry her through the streets, all are left speechless. They notice Cy’s absence, but do not question it. Militia meet them half-way through the city, guided by Minoma. Her red eyes grow wide in horror at Johnny’s condition and the sight of his older sister’s body. Now under heavy guard, they move through the town for Lara’s clinic. Rico sees them turning the corner and stands to his feet.

“What the fuck happened?! Is that Gabby?!” He exclaims.

“Go to the fortress and tell Zikata that Cy was captured by enemies. I also want you to go to Mirkon and Zia and tell them to prepare. I need all of the militia ready as soon as possible.” Yasmin orders.

“Alright.” Rico nods.

“I’m not waiting.” Jack growls.

“Excuse me?” Yasmin turns to him.

“We need to warn the Kelanethaka, in case these people show up there too. While Rico warns Zikata, I’ll tell Muzalfur so that they can be ready.” Jack explains.

“Good idea. Get moving.” Yasmin demands.

Using the brief walk back to the city to rest, Jack reloads his pistol and dashes off to warn the Kelanethaka, while a rattled Rico heads for the nearby homes of the human and Zelkona leaders before returning to the fortress. Yasmin and Katero lie Gabriella’s body on a second table inside of Lara’s office while she tends to Johnny’s shoulder, Minoma by his side and comforting her mate. Yasmin walks over to the man who lies unconscious on the main table.

“Can he speak yet?” She asks Lara.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, let me know as soon as he recovers enough. I need every answer I can squeeze out of him.”

Opening her eyes, Zakera is surprised to see that Cy is not by her side. She looks to Zikata, who talks to Darius and waves a finger before his face, playing with his grandson. Nendath rushes to her side to tend to the woman. Her ears prick as she hears loud footfalls rushing through the fortress.

“Where is Cy?” She asks Nendath.

“Please rest. You need to regain your strength.” Nendath replies.

“Where is Cy?” Zakera reiterates her question.

The door suddenly opens and a sweaty, out of breath Rico waves Zikata over to him. Exiting the room, they leave to fortress expressly for the purpose of preventing Zakera from hearing what they are saying. Her heart sinks and she begins to panic. Looking to her son who lies in a wooden basinet atop a counter, she worries for Darius’ father and the love of her life. The commotion from outside bothers her and her breathing quickens. The door suddenly opens and a tearful Isabella pokes her head in.

“What is going on?!” Zakera asks.

“Lara won’t be back for a while. She... She needs you to stay here.” Isabella instructs Nendath.

“Understood.” The teal raptor nods.

“Wait!” Zakera exclaims before Isabella can leave.

The teenaged girl looks into the doorway at the Ketlan, sniffing softly.

“Where is Cy? What is going on?” She asks.

“Cyrus is gone... A man came from the forest after being attacked. They went to investigate; Gabriella is dead and Cyrus was captured.” Isabella answers.

Nendath glares at Isabella, enraged that she would stress the weakened mother with such knowledge, though in her heart she knows that not knowing and panicking would have been almost as bad.

Zakera begins to cry, covering her face with her hands. Her snout sticks between the blades of each hand as her clawed fingers covers her watery eyes. Nendath does what she can to comfort the woman, but to her shock and horror, Zakera tries to climb up from the table.

“Stop! You must rest!” She exclaims.

“I cannot!” Zakera yells.

Darius begins to cry in the background, startled by their volume. Nendath rushes to the child, trying to calm him as Zakera leans against the table, trying to gain her bearings.

“You need to regain your strength.” Nendath adds.

“I have all that I need. I must find out what happened to my mate.”

“But what of your child? You mustn’t leave him alone. Do you want him to become ketlan’ezav?” Nendath argues.

Zakera stops, her eyes closing and lips pulling up, revealing her sharp canines as she lowers her head. Her hair sways back and forth as she struggles with her tears, finally releasing her pent-up emotions. She slumps against the table and sits upon the floor, crying in a manner almost as childlike as Darius.

“I cannot live without knowing. I know that I should think of my son, but his father is still my world. Without his strength, I do not believe that I can make it, even with Darius. What would *you* do if your mate was taken from you in such a manner? I just want to learn what happened to him, and have him back.” She pleads with Nendath.

Looking to her with glossy eyes, the distressed Nendath turns to Darius. Reaching into the bassinet, she swaddles the baby in his

blanket, careful not to touch him with her sharp, purple claws. Walking over to the fretful Ketlan, she takes her by the arm and pulls her from the ground with incredible strength. She slips her arm around Zakera and holds her up, while Zakera reaches up to hold onto Nendath's shoulder. With Darius cradled in one arm and her mother supported by the other, Nendath leads her to the door. Stepping out into the hallway, the fortress is nearly deserted. On high alert, the guards immediately stop them as the exit into the courtyard. As Zakera is their chieftain's wife, she merely orders them to aid her.

The last of the fortress guards abandon the structure so that they can take the young mother to Lara's clinic. Yasmin rises to her feet, her mouth dropping open as Nendath leads Zakera inside.

"What the hell is she doing out?! She needs to be resting!" Yasmin growls.

"Take her back right now!" Lara demands.

"I have come for information, and I will not leave until I get it." Zakera snaps back.

She turns to Gabriella's body, a tear running down her cheek for the woman as Katero, Minoma and a bandaged Johnny sit by her corpse. As Nendath holds Darius in her arms, Yasmin leads Zakera toward the table where the unconscious man lies.

"Wait, you can't just wake him up and talk to him!" Lara growls.

"Get out." Zakera orders in a dry monotone.

"That's my patient!"

"Not anymore. Take her outside." Zakera orders.

The militia grab Lara and pull her from the office as she tries to snatch away, detaining her by force. Yasmin smirks as she watches

the Ketlan taking charge, impressed by the sudden show of force. Taking smelling salts from Lara's shelf, something she had seen her use once before to wake Richard after passing out from heat stroke, she waves it beneath the man's nose. He comes to, his pain numbed by herbal remedies made by Nendath. He turns to Zakera and his expression changes, as though he recognizes her. This is not lost on either Yasmin or Zakera.

"Who are you, and where is Cy?" Zakera asks.

"I-I don't know." He nervously replies.

"You know me from somewhere... Do not lie to me. You will not enjoy the consequences."

Denying all knowledge, Zakera nods to Yasmin. Taking medical tools from Lara's bag, she waves them before the man's face. His breathing hastens and he begins to sweat nervously, but he continues to deny knowing anything. Disbelieving him, Zakera instructs Yasmin to 'persuade' him. With a pair of medical pliers, she pulls out his fingernails, one by one. Lara struggles with the militia outside as the man screams in agony. Nendath stands outside with her, carefully trying to shield Darius' ears, as though he might somehow remember this moment. The man begs for mercy, still denying all knowledge, but the women persist and none of the others inside care to stop them.

Distraught over Gabriella's death, Katero joins in. Before Yasmin can extract every nail, he simply takes his knife and stabs it through the man's hand, pinning it to the table above his head.

"This will not stop until you tell me *everything*."

"Alright! I just want to live!" He pleads.

"Then speak and we shall see..."

"I... I'm a soldier for Kincaid..." He whimpers as he speaks.

“... What?” Yasmin’s eyes grow wide.

“I volunteered to pretend to be a victim of bandits to lure Cyrus out into the forest, but Kincaid did not think it would look genuine. They tortured and cut me for days until I begged for death, then sent me free only to hunt me down. I tried so hard to escape to safety. They used me to frighten him into searching for Kincaid; many know that Cyrus leads in the front. He even killed Roland himself. Kincaid saw this as a means to attain him.” The man explains.

“Who is Kincaid?” Zakera asks.

“He was the last of King Roland’s lieutenants, and next in line to become a general. He was the only one not killed when you destroyed Roland’s castle. He has taken many months to gather humans and build a large town deep in the jungles. They use domesticated genashin to travel the distance.” He answers.

“Is that where they’re taking him?” Yasmin interjects.

“No. There is an outpost about two-days walk from here. Just beyond the forest where you were attacked is a cleared trail that leads straight to it. It is where he will go for trial. Kincaid wants to execute Cy and ship his pieces back to his village, the Kelanethaka and the Sa’kesh.”

Enraged, Zakera grabs the man’s throat.

“That will not happen while I still draw breath!” She growls.

In front of everyone, she strangles the man until his face turns dark blue, holding until her fingers become weak. Taking hold of Katero’s knife, she rips it from his hand and jabs it through his neck, severing his throat and spine. Turning back to the others, her cyan eyes are like a terrible blizzard of rage and hate.

“If they desire war, then that is what we will give them.” She says.

His head thumps against a floor board as Cy feels his body shift. Looking around, he sits upright to find that his arms are tied behind his back as he sits on the floor of a carriage.

"I see someone is finally awake..." A male's voice says.

Turning to the voice that comes from behind him, he witnesses a teenaged boy, probably only sixteen years old, holding his Falcata and chain whip in his hands. The tip of his sword is buried into a wooden floorboard of the covered wagon. Beside him on a bench seat is Cy's gear belt and loaded pistol, though the boy does not seem to know what it is. The wagon moves quickly enough, and Cy can hear the sounds of a domesticated Genashin as it pulls them along. They maintain a steady pace of roughly ten miles per hour along a jungle trail as they head toward Kincaid's outpost. Cy moves his wrists; the ropes around them have a thick cord leading away and tied to a ring along the inner wall of the wagon.

"Excuse me..." The boy says in a stern tone.

"And who might you be?" Cy looks to him.

"I am Kincaid. I am the last lieutenant of the great King Roland the First; your captor, judge, and soon your executioner." He spins Cy's sword slowly into the wooden floor.

"Are you serious?" Cy laughs.

"What is so amusing?" Kincaid asks in a frustrated tone.

"Boy... You have no idea who you are fucking with..." Cy begins, looking down at his sword. "If you were smart, you'd let me go right now, before the Sa'kesh free me and I jam my sword up your ass and turn you into a scarecrow."

"Such big talk for a hostage. That is why I wanted to be the one to take you down. Everyone knows who you are... 'Cyrus the Great'... You are a menace to the entire human race; the Sa'kesh are the

abomination that you spawned from your sick and twisted affair with a lesser being, just as Roland said.” Kincaid smiles as he gloats.

“This again? What is it with you people? If you aren’t sacrificing children you’re hating other races and calling them inferior.”

“We are not savages, like those animals who kill their children. I am surprised that you would even allow yourself to become attached to a beast woman.” Kincaid snickers.

“Watch what you say about my wife...” Cy looks up at him, his icy blue eyes burning.

“Wife!” Kincaid laughs. “Those pets are not fit to be anything more than a slave to till fields or a place for a man to plant his seed for his own pleasure. I would bed one, just to relieve some stress, but that is all.”

“You have some serious problems, kid.” Cy scoffs.

“No, I think you do. You are going to be put on trial for crimes against human kind, and then I will behead you with your own sword.”

“You might want to use an axe instead.” Cy remarks.

“Why?”

“An axe is heavier. That blade might hang up in my neck if you don’t use enough force...” Cy looks at Kincaid’s arms. “And you don’t look like you have it in you, kid.”

“Insulting me already?! Are you not afraid to die?!” Kincaid raises an eyebrow.

“If you were capable of doing it, I might be.” Cy answers.

“You underestimate me...” Kincaid grumbles.

“Your soldiers killed one of my friends, shot another, and who knows what else. I’ve been taken from my wife *and* half-breed child, and now I’m sitting on this splintery wooden floor listening to some teenager gloat about how tough he is. I’ve got you all figured you little bitch, and I’m not scared of you at all. I’ve murdered children younger than you for far less.”

Kincaid backhands Cy across the face, shaking his hand out before balling it into a fist,

“As soon as you are executed, I will have the reputation and authority to build the glorious human kingdom that you so quickly eliminated in its infancy. You really ought to be proud, you know... You are going to save the human race.” Kincaid says, pointing a finger in his face.

“I never really liked that race...” Cy looks at the scenery outside.

Kincaid stares at the older warrior who outright ignores him. He cannot fathom why he behaves in such a manner. These tactics have worked on the tribal humans he has conquered in the many months since Roland’s death; Kincaid has been slowly building his own nation in Roland’s image.

“I do not understand you. What will it take for you to take me seriously?” Kincaid demands.

“Your entire village...” Cy replies, still staring out of the carriage window.

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, bearing 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 snuffles. 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.