

The Seventh Realm: Volume Four

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 39: Spaceman

The morning of the planned expedition, Cy and the fortress dwellers check their weapons. Among their cache are nearly a dozen SKS rifles with plastic Dragunov style stocks which will be utilized by the Sa'kesh militia who have the proper training. As Yasmin, Cy and Zakera pass the weapons out to the firearms-qualified militia, all of whom are Zelkona and most being female, Cy can't help but chuckle; Johnny would have found this very amusing if he hadn't adopted the life of a farmer and moved into the city proper. Standing with their group in the courtyard, the Ketlan scout prepares to lead them. Nendath checks her harness, prepared to carry Darius, though Zakera currently holds him in her arms.

"Hey guys!" A familiar voice chirps.

Turning, they are all surprised to find Johnny and Minoma standing before the gate, hand-in-hand. The guards immediately open the gate for Johnny and his mate without waiting for anyone's order. His time at the fortress and his previous deeds have permanently labeled the young human male; this generation of militia will always remember him.

"Hey, Johnny-boy." Chris says with a pleased wave.

"What are you two doing here?" Zakera asks.

"Yeah! Don't you have fields to toil in?" Yasmin snickers.

She had never been as close to the Thames children as Cy had, and can't help but harbor some resentment for Johnny's abdication of the fortress and a position among the militia and Cy's council.

"I've toiled enough for the week. We felt like taking a walk together and came to visit; it's always nice to see how you were all doing every now and then." Johnny replies with a pleasant smile.

"It is nice to see you, right Cy?" Zakera turns to her mate.

Cy steps up to Johnny, patting him on the shoulder before giving him a brief hug.

"It's always good to see you, little buddy. How have you two been? Adjusting to city life alright?"

"We're fine, bro. What's with the firepower?" Johnny asks.

"Oh, we've just learned a world-shattering discovery, so we're about to take off for a bit." Cy answers.

"It appears that there is an ancient Babylonian or Samarian temple in the jungle." Daniel adds.

"Would you and your wife care to join us on a little adventure?" Chris asks.

"No thanks. I'm done with that stuff... You know, I knew they'd look badass with guns." Johnny smirks, pointing to the armed Zelkona.

"Yeah, you did." Cy subtly chuckles.

After a moment of silence, Cy turns back to the others and motions with his hand, gesturing for the militia to form up behind him. Turning back to Johnny and Minoma, he prepares to say goodbye, but before he can speak a loud and familiar thunder bellows. Glancing up and toward the sky, the usual purple ball of lightning forms in the

distance. The purple orb of electricity floats in the vicinity of the cove where the Malevolence was beached by Rico, hanging in the sky for some time. Hovering exceptionally high above the ground, they are all certain to see little specks falling to the ground to their death. To their shock, however, something flies out of the orb.

From their distance, they cannot discern exactly what it is, but the small image does not move like a helicopter or an airplane. The sound of the engine is heard from several miles away as the vessel plummets to the ground in a zig-zagging motion before disappearing beyond the horizon. Standing in awe, they wonder what they should do.

“That’s near Malevolence Cove!” Yasmin exclaims.

“It might have crashed in the water.” Cy remarks.

“There is a beach near that cove. Perhaps it will wash ashore?” Zakera suggests.

“It could have easily crashed on land before even reaching the cove. It might have useful equipment and supplies on board, or perhaps even survivors.” Daniel poses.

“I guess we should find out!” Cy grins.

“I’m curious myself. We’ve never had a plane come here before.” Johnny murmurs.

“Then why don’t you ride with me? We haven’t spent time together in a while. Hell, I didn’t even see you when I got back from my little vacation.”

“I guess we could. Wait... Ride?” Johnny raises a brow.

Heading over to the electrical shack that houses the powerful crystalline generators, Cy opens a door to an addition built into the side of the same shack. Inside is his 1975 Honda CL200 motorcycle, cleaned and in perfect working order. The vintage green and black paint of the motorcycle gleams as he draws it out by the handlebars.

"You want to ride *that* to the cove?" Johnny asks in surprise.

"Sure! It's not like I'm ever going to use the fuel on anything else, and it'll eventually go bad. Ten or fifteen minutes and we'll know what's out there, and we can be back in an hour." Cy replies.

"That's a one-seater though."

"Since when?!" Cy laughs.

"... You're really going to make me ride bitch?" Johnny whines.

"That's where bitches go. Why do you think I asked you?" Cy teases.

"Hah! God damn, I missed that shit!" Yasmin exclaims.

After a brief verbal struggle, Johnny fails to talk his way out of the offer, nor does anyone else assist him. Passing him her Beretta Modello 12 submachine gun, Yasmin jokingly smacks Johnny's butt as he climbs aboard the motorcycle. Kicking the engine over, Zakera and Minoma cover their ears with their hands. After revving the engine a few times and adjusting the choke, Cy kicks the bike into gear, his fingers gripping the clutch handle.

"You're going to want to hold on, princess." He teases.

Cy pops the clutch as he revs the motorcycle, racing through the open gate and startling even the well-trained guards who stand there. He shifts into second as they ride on the grass beside the main road, the red blades swishing and brushing the underside of the vehicle and their pantlegs as they head for the trail that leads to the vast field between the city and the cove. Upon reaching the field, Cy accelerates and pulls back, forcing the bike into a brief and awkward wheelie that nearly throws Johnny from the seat. Reaching around his waist and gripping tightly, Johnny panics.

“What the fuck, man?!” He yells.

Cy doesn't answer. He stares straight ahead as he keeps changing gears, picking up speed as he races through the field and towards Malevolence Cove. The closer they come to the cove the more they are able to see a smoke trail rising from the ground. Following the smoke trail, which is now as white as a cloud and quite thick, they divert away from the cove and in the direction opposite of the Kelanethaka, heading for the beach that Zakera had mentioned earlier. Decelerating, Cy cuts into the jungle as he rides toward the shoreline, where the beach should be. They ride for barely a mile before they emerge, looking at a wash of sand.

Crushed rocks and decaying seashells of strange crustaceans litter the area, contaminating the sand and altering its color. Unlike the yellow sand near where the Malevolence first arrived and which lines the beach through to Roland's burned out castle, this sand has a strange, light pink hue. They arrive at the beach in barely fifteen minutes, as Cy had estimated. This same trip would have taken half of the day if they had decided to walk there and back. Cy stops the motorcycle, shutting down the engine as they sit on the dividing line of hot pink sand, just within the tree line. He looks ahead at a strange object that sits on the beach.

“In my pack is a small pouch with binoculars in them.” Cy says, looking directly ahead.

“... Okay?”

“... Get them out, please?” Cy glances to Johnny over his shoulder.

“Yes sir...” He grumbles.

He takes out the binoculars and hands them to Cy who looks at the object, studying it for a moment before reaching over his shoulder

and handing Johnny the binoculars. He takes a look for himself, his jaw hanging open.

“Definitely not a Boeing 747.” Cy quips.

“... The fuck?!” Johnny exclaims in shock.

“It looks like some sort of fighter... Or maybe an escape pod...” Cy thinks aloud.

“From what?!”

The craft looks like an oversized cigar, painted solid white and with thin and offset black pinstripes. It has a landing gear consisting of three retracting legs with feet that have three pivoting toes in the shape of a triangle. The body of the craft, though relatively long, at about six meters, is actually quite thin. It reminds Cy of the fuselage of a twenty-first century fighter jet. There is a cockpit near the rear of the little ship that appears to have a bubble-like window that slides forward to allow entry; the cockpit is open and there is no one in the single seat of the craft. It has no wings, but an upright stabilizing fin is behind the empty cockpit. Black smoke rises from what appears to be a turbine jet engine at the rear.

The pillar of white smoke emerges from what can only be a crashed spaceship, futuristic and almost alien in design. It sits with over three-quarters submerged beneath the crystal-clear water, which has a faint teal coloration. The remainder of the vessel appears undamaged, the smoke possibly being steam from the water touching the hull panels, warmed by the friction of the air as it flew in at an incredible velocity. Johnny puts Cy’s binoculars back into the pouch and places it into his pack as Cy starts and revs the motorcycle. He pops the clutch once again and they race toward the pod. As they approach, Cy rides to the left, keeping the ship to their right.

Johnny grabs the Modello 12 that dangles near his right hip from a one-point sling, holding it with one hand and pointing it toward the

craft. Cy slows the bike to a crawl, parking on the soft sand as Johnny climbs off. Cy puts down the kickstand but the bike begins to sink. Struggling to keep it upright, he moves the motorcycle to the edge of a large dune, using the angle of the dune and a wide, flat rock to keep the bike from tipping over. Climbing off of the bike, he pulls the keys and draws his Bersa pistol, quickly walking up to Johnny who is looking over the pod. He pockets the keys as Johnny leans into the cockpit, examining the strange controls within.

The Modello 12's sling snags on the rail that the windscreen rides in, annoying the young man. He takes the weapon from his body and sets it down on the fuselage. Though it sits still for a moment, the angled body causes the weapon to soon slide down the hull, over the edge and landing atop the pink sand. Rushing up to the unsecured weapon as Johnny turns back, a man lunges out from behind and underneath the ship, grabbing the submachine gun before Johnny even knows what has happened. He rolls forward and brings the weapon to eye level.

"Shit!" Cy exclaims.

He takes a knee and points his two-tone Thunder 9 Pro at the man in a classic Weaver stance. The man glares at him, the Modello 12 unshaking in his grasp; he appears to have had some form of combat training, or at the very least has been exposed to enough action to keep calm under pressure. Johnny turns and pulls his Sig P232 from his pocket, flipping off the safety and aiming it at the man's back as he rises to his feet.

"That would be a very bad idea..." The man calmly remarks.

The man is wearing a strange outfit that appears to be made out of a thin, golden film. His uniform is form fitting, as though it was designed as a mechanical space suit, holding his body together

through constant tension. A ring around the collar seems to be some sort of expanding helmet that has been retracted, the back of which covers his spine and a portion of the back of his head. The man is of Asian descent and stands roughly five feet and eight inches tall. From his figure, he seems to have a moderately athletic build and weighs roughly one-hundred and sixty pounds. Staring with expressionless brown eyes, his short, spiky black hair is frosted at the ends with golden dye.

“You wouldn’t want me to accidentally kill your friend here, would you?” He asks Johnny while staring directly at Cy.

The man points Yasmin’s Modello 12 at him as he takes up a better position; he steps back, keeping Cy directly in front of him and placing Johnny to his right, well within his peripheral vision. Cy keeps his pistol pointed at the man. It is clear to both of them that the newcomer is preparing for battle.

“So... Do you have a name?” Cy calmly asks.

“I think I’d be more concerned with being shot by your own weapon.” He replies.

“If you could shoot me, I would be.” Cy smirks.

“What?” Johnny looks confused.

“I can and I will, if you don’t put that down.” The man sternly warns.

“You could, if the safety was off and there was a round in the chamber.”

Trusting Cy’s word, Johnny rushes the man, who turns and tries to pull the trigger; it won’t budge. He grabs the Modello 12’s magazine near the well and pushes it to the left as he sticks the barrel of his Sig pistol into his chest, his finger on the trigger. The submachine gun flies from the astronaut’s right hand, dropping to the ground and

kicking up sand as the spaceman begins to panic. Cy races up to the pair, keeping his weapon drawn on the pilot, and where the astronaut can see it. Cy hopes that he will be dissuaded from attempting to escape or continue fighting Johnny, and he soon surrenders.

“The chamber was empty?!” Johnny exclaims.

“Yasmin likes to Israeli carry when she isn’t expecting real trouble. Once, she lost her rifle in an ambush and an enemy nearly shot her with it. When she has two guns, only her pistol has a round chambered, just in case.” Cy explains.

Drawing back the hammer of his pistol, Cy appears ready to execute the nameless man.

“Wait!” He cries out as he lies helpless on his back.

“Would you care to answer my original question now?” Cy casually asks.

Holstering his pistol, he walks up to the Modello 12 and retrieves it from the pink sand. After dusting it off, he brings it up to his shoulder, flips off the safety, racks the bolt and aims the now charged firearm at his target as he lies helpless in the sand.

“Okay! Take it easy! ... My name is Yulan... Yulan Corin Byr.”

“Well, that’s different.” Johnny remarks.

“I’m Cyrus Richter, and this is Johnathan Thames the Second.”

“I’m a prospector...” Yulan looks towards the pod. “I was uh... I was leaving Earth to survey a nearby comet for my company. I was caught up in a storm, and the next thing I know, my ship is crashing into an ocean that wasn’t there when I launched.” He explains.

“It’s actually a lake.” Cy corrects him.

"Whatever." Yulan mutters.

"What's the name of your company?" Cy asks.

"Why?" Yulan raises an eyebrow.

"Just wondering if it's anyone I might know."

"I'm freelance. I was just contracted." Yulan replies.

"And what does that have to do with anything?" Johnny asks.

"I didn't bother to check..." Yulan turns to him.

"Really? You don't know who signs your checks?" Johnny chuckles

"What's a 'check'?" Yulan asks.

"Forget it..." Johnny murmurs.

"So, where am I? What is this place?" Yulan asks his captors.

"This planet is called Monala. It's in some other galaxy, or universe. No one really knows. We all came here in a similar storm." Cy answers.

"And from different time periods... It was 2018 when we came here nearly two years ago." Johnny interjects.

"Really?" Yulan asks in disbelief, his head tilting slightly.

Cy nods as he lowers his weapon. Johnny looks to Cy and lowers his, but turns his wrist to keep it pointed at Yulan, his finger gently caressing the trigger. The astronaut rises to his feet, dusting off the pink sand from his golden spacesuit.

"Well, it was 2160 when I left." He adds, walking past them and towards his pod.

"Your ship doesn't look too badly damaged." Johnny comments.

"It's not my ship. This is just a scout pod that doubles as an emergency escape craft." Yulan begins, reaching into the cockpit. "The actual ship is seriously damaged. Lightning struck it and shorted

out the fusion cells in the engine. Most of it sank underneath the water. I left just after that. Lucky for me the hull wasn't damaged, otherwise I would have drowned." He continues as he digs out a strange looking pack.

"You came out of the water... With that?" Johnny appears perplexed.

"Yes, I did. This type of craft can actually operate within the atmosphere, in deep space, and also under water and up to a depth of one mile."

"Now I really want one." Cy mutters as he looks over the ship.

"Yeah, I bet..." Yulan smirks.

He slips on the rigid pack. It appears to be made of a silver plastic material with a hinge at the top, as though it expands or opens. He looks around at the vibrant sand, the vivid jungle flora behind it, the red hue of the sky, and then at the visible, blue day moon.

"Leaving?" Cy asks.

"Just to do a bit of scouting before I go home for the night... Whenever that is." Yulan replies, pointing at the moon above.

"That's the day moon. You've got almost a full Earth day ahead of you." Cy explains.

"If you'd rather not do all of that, you could come to our city. It's only a few miles that way." Johnny says, pointing toward their village.

Cy glares at Johnny, surprised that he would share that information so freely. He hasn't been as security minded recently, making obvious mistakes such as leaving his weapon unattended for Yulan to steal it. Perhaps Johnny's time as a peaceful farmer has eroded his skills? Cy is torn between being happy for Johnny, who can escape the life of blood, violence and death that he has endured, and being upset for the danger he has placed them in.

“No, thanks. I prefer to make my own way.”

“A lone wolf... Normally I would respect that, but this is Monala, and you have *no idea* what’s out there.” Cy remarks.

“Regardless, I think I’ll be alright.” Yulan confidently retorts.

“So, where’s ‘home’?” Johnny asks.

“The hull of my ship isn’t damaged. It’s watertight, so I’ll just live there. My pod has plenty of fuel, and the backup cells will keep my life support systems in my ship running for years.”

Yulan walks back to his pod and climbs into the cockpit. He flips a few switches and presses some buttons as the ship comes to life.

“Well, if you ever change your mind!” Johnny exclaims over the whirring engine.

“Right! I’ll keep that in mind! ... How desperate do they think I am? ... Primitive screwheads.” Yulan quietly remarks with clear disinterest.

The engine begins to burn a faint green light as he straps himself into the seat with a four-point harness. The cockpit window slides closed over him as the small ship begins to hover. The feet slowly lift off of the ground as sand is kicked up in all directions. Cy and Johnny cover their faces, shielding their eyes from the pink waves. The feet retract and pull into the body of the pod as small doors close behind them. The ship tilts up, floating in mid-air as it hums loudly. The green light of the engine glows brilliantly as the ship takes off, shooting diagonally into the air before it disappears, becoming only a faint twinkle in the sky.

“Well... That was something...” Cy mutters.

“Yeah...” Johnny sighs.

"I think I heard him make the 'primitive screwheads' joke... Now I wish I said it when we got here." Cy grumbles.

"I told you, bro."

"When we tell the others about this, don't mention losing this, or Yasmin will tear your dick off; I'm pretty sure Minoma won't appreciate that." Cy says, passing Johnny the submachine gun.

"You have no idea." Johnny smirks.

Cy takes the keys from his pocket and walks back to his Honda motorcycle, leaving Johnny behind as he stands there, looking up at the sky. Mounting his motorcycle, he turns the key before kicking the bike on, revving the engine as it roars to life. Johnny seems hypnotized, staring up at the sky. Growing impatient, Cy twists the throttle of his motorcycle, revving the engine again and gaining his attention.

"Sorry!" He exclaims.

Rushing up to Cy, he climbs onto the bike but takes one last look at the impression that Yulan's ship has made in the sand. Returning home in roughly the same time that it had taken to ride there, they cruise into the courtyard where an eager group await them. Cy parks the motorcycle and seals it in its tiny garage while Johnny regales them of the story, only for Cy to then confirm Johnny's astounding tale. Though it is hard to believe their anecdote of a man from the distant future, flying a spaceship that also doubles as a submarine, none of the fortress dwellers would have accepted the existence of the Ketlan or Zelkona either, before coming to this world. Monala is clearly a wondrous place where virtually anything is possible.

Temporarily skipping the trip to the ziggurat, they return inside and crowd into the dining hall. As they speak in greater detail on the

spaceman and his craft, a strange humming noise reverberates throughout the jungle, growing steadily louder.

“Did that sound familiar to you?” Cy asks Johnny.

“Damn right it did...”

“What is it?” Zakera asks.

“I think that was his ship.” Cy answers.

Rising from their seats, they collectively race outside. Looking up and into the sky, the craft lowers to the ground in the distance, landing on the now well-worn dirt road that leads between the Sa’kesh and Kelanethaka. Holding Darius in his arms, Cy strokes his face as Zakera grips his bicep, clutching him tightly. Everyone besides himself and Johnny appear to be either frightened, curious, anxious, or some combination of all three. The whirring of Yulan’s engine slows and grows quieter; it sounds as though he is shutting down the ship in the distance. Cy and Johnny didn’t realize how loud his craft was, as they stood next to it when he launched.

The Ketlan’s ears collectively prick as they hear the sound of someone approaching, walking along the road. Zakera and Minoma are already looking to the path, as is everyone else, though this only confirms Cy’s suspicions. The militia who guard the fortress gate draw their cykera falcata swords, readying for the approaching stranger.

“It’s alright. It’s just the spaceman. You may open the gate.” Cy orders.

Yulan Corin Byr steps around the distant corner, walking casually toward them. He stops dead in his tracks when the militia, who are primarily Zelkona, come into view. Glancing to Zakera and then Minoma, Yulan is visibly startled by their appearance. Minoma narrows her vibrant red eyes, the wind fluttering her white fur with

cherry red stripes and flowing red hair. She turns away, somewhat offended by Yulan's terrified expression. Johnny is quick to comfort his mate. This visual, combined with the opened front gate, pulls Yulan in. He takes slow and methodical steps as he approaches the fortress, entering the courtyard to meet Cy, Johnny and the others.

"Wow..." Yulan murmurs to himself.

"It's okay. No one is going to bite you. Come to tour the humble lives of the primitive screwheads?" Cy jests.

The militia stand down and sheath their swords as they stand at attention. Yulan walks past them, almost gawking as he passes by the vibrantly colored, female, raptor-like beings who guard the gate. They don't pay him any attention.

"I noted the bizarre life signs but I never saw them up close before." Yulan says as he stands in front of Cy, looking Zakera over with fascination.

"You noted?" Yasmin asks curiously.

"My ship has advanced bio-scanners. I can detect and render three dimensional models of all life forms within a five-hundred-mile radius of my ship." Yulan replies.

"Sounds like a useful tool." Chris remarks.

"Yes. My pod can't make such detailed scans, though it can detect signs of civilization; I flew around the planet to check for just that. My ship, however, has already scanned this entire area. Would you like to know how many of these creatures there are around here?" Yulan smirks.

"Showoff." Yasmin mutters.

"So, what brings you here? I didn't think we'd see you again for days, if ever." Johnny asks.

"If I could be so lucky." Yulan grumbles.

Zakera narrows her eyes, immediately disliking the strange new human who stands before them.

“Perhaps we can talk inside...” Yulan says in a serious tone.

Entering the fortress, Yulan seems unimpressed by the sturdy and intricate wooden structure. He appears perplexed that the doors require manual operation. Stepping into the dining hall, Yulan sits atop a table as though he owns the place, resting his boots on the seat of a nearby chair. He brings up his wrist, which bears a strange device. About four inches wide and two inches tall, he wears it like a gold-plated bracer. A series of platinum buttons line the bottom and just below a short but wide screen. Pressing a button, a holographic image of a planet that they assume is Monala appears, the red image hovering in mid-air just above the device. All but Cy and his original crew are amazed by the sight; they have seen far too many science fiction movies to be impressed by holograms.

Yulan begins by explaining how he has briefly scanned the solar system and scouted the planet, confirming many things that the former Earthlings already know. There are exactly twenty-four hours in each day, three-hundred and sixty days in a year, and four distinct seasons. Each season changes every ninety days exactly. All of them tropical, the seasons range from cool to warm, dry to rainy. The cool seasons are roughly seventy-five to eighty degrees Fahrenheit, and the warm seasons are roughly eighty-five to ninety degrees Fahrenheit, respectively. The temperature drops from five to ten degrees each night, with night lasting roughly eight to ten hours, with the remaining time being daylight, depending on the season; the rainy seasons have longer nights. At this point they all grow increasingly disinterested.

“Look man, we know this shit already.” Yasmin suddenly interrupts.

"Well, aren't you feisty." Yulan coos, his eyes scanning her form.

"What she means is, we've been here for almost two years, some of us much longer than that; we've had the time to figure all of that out." Cy interjects.

"I see... How about this then? The solar system is utterly void; aside from Monala and her two moons, which are somehow perfectly identical, the only thing here is a K class star." Yulan begins.

"Versus the Earth's G class star..." Cy thinks aloud.

"Correct. Monala's sun is approximately three-fourths the size of earth's sun, but also much older and denser. Whereas Earth has a radius of 3,959 miles, Monala is much larger, at 5,490. The moons are 1,655 miles. Monala has three continents, of which two are void of intelligent life, inhabited only by simple animals; my pod detected exactly zero signs of civilization over them. Obviously, we're on the populated one, which is also the smallest of the three. Monala is also riddled with strange magnetic fields. A primitive compass can't navigate this world."

"What about the solar system itself?" Cy takes a seat in front of Yulan, enthralled by his information.

"Well... Unfortunately, none of the stars seem to match my ship's charts. This isn't even a known galaxy. We're not in the Milky Way anymore. No ship ever made could travel out here to get us, even if they wanted too." Yulan chirps.

"You don't seem too upset about that..." Cy comments.

"I was a broke freelance miner with too many bills. I have no wife, kids, siblings or parents. What am I missing back home? Nothing!" Yulan retorts. "Besides, this place is... Interesting." His eyes scan Yasmin.

"You'll get use to the Ketlan and Zelkona." Daniel speaks up from the back.

"Is that what you call them?"

"Yes." Chris nods.

"The Ketlan are the furry ones." Yasmin adds.

“Well, I have interesting news about them too. My bio-scans of the area revealed exactly 365,941 humans living within 500 miles of my crashed ship. However, there are roughly 1,235,000 ‘Ketlan’, and 1,085,000 ‘Zelkona’. Beyond 500,000, I just get a rough estimate. Combined, that’s a six to one ration for these creatures. Then there are these things...”

“So many?!” Chris exclaims in disbelief.

“How have we not seen them?” Johnny raises a brow.

“Well, a third of them live on the other side of the lake, which is only about three miles wide but about one hundred miles long. The other two thirds are spread out in small tribes of a few hundred, with a couple of exceptions, over a *500-mile circle*. That’s 785,398 square miles...”

“Ask a stupid question...” Cy chuckles, glancing to his compatriots.

Continuing on, Yulan presses another button. A colorful holographic image bears another beast-like race; the figure is not a human, Ketlan or Zelkona. Standing on two digitigrade legs with hooved feet that have a bizarre, three-pronged shape like a ‘W’, it has the elongated face of a goat, with large and pointed horns atop its head and black fur covering its body. A scaly but stubby tail, like that of a crocodile, is a glossy black and juts out above its buttocks. It wears no clothes, with animal-like genitalia hanging visibly between its legs. Their blood runs cold as they look at the still image; it’s a Kaladez. Yulan notices their worried expressions, smirking arrogantly.

“Not friends, I take it?”

“No...” Zakera bluntly replies.

“Understatement of the year.” Yasmin mutters.

“Then you have about 800,000 enemies scattered around here. Like the others, they don’t seem to be in big groups like this; mostly smaller bands in the fifties, or maybe low hundreds.”

An uncomfortable silence settles over the group. Yulan looks to Zakera and sees her cradling Darius in her arms. As the baby shifts, Cy stands and steps closer to comfort his son. A flabbergasted Yulan watches the couple for a moment as little Darius grips at Cy's extended trigger finger with his tiny hand, clearly enjoying the attention of his father. The couple share a gaze that is strikingly familiar to Yulan; somehow this human and Ketlan are lovers.

"Is that *your* child?!" He asks.

"Oh yeah." A grinning Cy nods.

"The first mixed child that we are aware of." Zakera adds

Yulan looks back and forth between the pair and then opens a small hatch on the device mounted onto his wrist.

"Could I get a sample of her fur?"

"Her name is Zakera, and you need to ask her." Cy replies.

"Uh, alright... Same question." Yulan turns to Zakera.

Shrugging her shoulders, she rubs a free hand over her arm, collecting some loose pink and cyan colored fur. Reaching out, she hands Yulan the sample. Placing the fur inside of the open hatch on his device, he closes the lid and presses a few buttons. It beeps for a moment as blue lights flash across his screen.

"Amazing." Yulan mutters.

"What?" Chris asks.

The astronaut merely stares at the screen, mouth agape at whatever the device is revealing to him.

“... Yulan? ... Hey!” Cy snaps a finger.

“Huh?” He snaps out of his daze.

“What is it, boy?” Chris asks again.

“Oh, uh... I’m not sure. May I?” Yulan points a finger at Darius.

Zakera looks back at Cy, who is clearly suspicious of the newcomer. They share a brief but intense gaze.

“... It’s up to you.” He tells his wife.

Zakera steps closer to Yulan, showing him her son but keeping him close. Yulan gently strokes Darius’ head with his fingertips, as if petting a small dog. He shifts in Zakera’s arms as Yulan takes a few strands of black fur from their baby. He steps back, reopens the device on his wrist, places the fur into it and tests the sample. His eyes grow even wider.

“Ninety-two percent...” Yulan murmurs.

“Percent what?” Cy asks impatiently.

“Oh, uh... Nothing.”

“Right...” Cy remarks with narrowed eyes.

“So, what are your plans?!” Yulan asks, quickly changing the subject.

“There’s a structure in the forest that we are looking for.” Daniel replies.

“That temple thing? The one that’s about 20-something miles that way?” The spaceman asks, pointing in the direction that the runner had indicated.

“You saw it?!” Chris asks.

“You can’t miss it. It sticks up above the canopy. Even from the ground you’ll probably see it from a few miles away.”

Yulan provides a red holographic image of the structure as it was scanned by his ship. Though the hologram is not detailed enough to show carvings or advanced architecture, it is indeed a ziggurat with a surprising number of terraces, eight in total. While all are interested in the structure shown to them, Cy is the most visibly enthralled. Eyes wide, like a child left alone in a candy store, he admires the glowing image of the building. Though he knows that Yulan is hiding something from him, he is content to let that go for the moment; perhaps whatever it is will be revealed when they travel to the ziggurat? Only time will tell...