

The Seventh Realm: Volume Four

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Episode 40: A Grand Expedition

Bidding adieux to the somewhat shifty Yulan, they watch the spaceman walk alone and down the path toward his ship, taking that time to check their weapons and supplies for the journey ahead. The properly trained Zelkona warriors load and shoulder their SKS rifles, while the fortress dwellers do the same. Aside from his standard gear belt and sidearm, Cy brings his Micro-Uzi and Bushmaster rifle. Zakera takes the Cobray CM-11, with her Kahr CT9 holstered and her H&R 732 revolver stowed in her pack. Yasmin brings her pistol and Beretta Modello 12, while Rico carries Yasmin's Sako rifle for her, only trained with his Colt Detective Special. Unfamiliar in the use of rifles, Chris and Daniel bring only their sidearms, a Colt Peacemaker clone by Pietta in .357 Magnum and a Steyr M1912 in 9x19mm Parabellum respectively.

"Are you sure you don't want to come along? Think of the adventure." Cy turns to Johnny and Minoma.

"I really can't." Johnny shakes his head.

"Come on. Don't pussy out!" Yasmin barks.

"I'm not putting my pledge into that kind of situation. Not in her condition."

Johnny rests a hand over Minoma's belly, her ears flopping forward as she tilts her head down in mild embarrassment. Her hands rest over his own and the pair glance loving at each other. Realizing his reasons are more than valid, Cy and the others immediately

congratulate the couple and leave them be. Slinging his Bushmaster rifle, Cy opens his mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by the launching of Yulan's pod. Turning, they watch the white and black pinstriped ship flying at a forty-five-degree angle into the sky, before turning and heading in the direction of Malevolence Cove.

"I wonder what the inside of his mothership looks like." Johnny thinks aloud.

Having already wasted the first third of the useable day, they leave just past noon. Marching in formation and bearing sturdy machetes, a large detachment of militia, aside from those armed with rifles, joins the explorers. Nearly sixty in total, they trot along the brick streets toward the city proper. Johnny and Minoma follow only until they reach the first block, wishing them well on their expedition before returning to their own home.

"Wait!" A voice calls out to them.

Turning back, they are all startled to see Amanda darting up to them. For the last few months she has been content to fade into the background, often leaving early to hunt and work on the ranch; she was instrumental in Chris' project to capture and domesticate a nearby herd of genashin. Holding an old leather belt that bears a right-handed flap holster and a leather cartridge pouch, she catches up to Chris and Daniel, standing beside him as she attaches the belt loosely to her waist. Opening the flap of the holster, she retrieves a nearly mint condition Nagant M1895 revolver.

"What are you doing here?" Chris asks.

"I haven't been doing anything useful lately." Amanda replies.

"Hunting, keeping away the moltaka and kodana, and protecting the genashin herd isn't exactly 'nothing'." Daniel retorts.

"Even so, I could use a little adventure." She grins.

"Are you sure that's the only reason?" Chris asks.

"... Perhaps." She narrows her eyes.

"I just don't want your judgement to be clouded." Chris adds.

"It took you too long to calm down after your last expedition proved fruitless." Daniel remarks.

"Hey, if she wants to come, let her. The more the merrier." Cy speaks up.

Conceding to his leadership, the others fall silent. Amanda nods her head thankfully before holstering her revolver and standing at the ready. With a wave of his hand, the band of adventurers and warriors continue their march. Soon approaching the edge of the city, Chris walks ahead, catching up to Cy and Zakera who walk directly behind the front lines.

"Do you realize what you are doing?" Chris asks.

"... Perhaps." Cy smirks.

"When we first arrived, Michael and Amanda were living with the Kelanethaka, who spoke English because of her parents and their expedition. They had been here for years, living in that fortress. However, when they were children, their family and the last of their party disappeared." Chris begins.

"We have heard this story." Zakera remarks, cradling Darius.

"Yes, but you might not know that they were leading a tribe of Kaladez away from the fortress. Of the four children left behind, only the Judge siblings survived by fleeing for the Ketlan village. As soon as we arrived and reclaimed their fortress for them, Amanda has been obsessed with knowing the fate of her parents. For the first few years, she would often disappear for days searching for them. Michael was always too afraid and used carpentry as a therapeutic solution to his anxiety." Chris continues.

“What’s your point?” Cy glances to the elder man.

“My point is that she has been much better about this for many years, now she suddenly wants to come along on a grand expedition. I fear that by allowing her to follow us, you’re only exacerbating her anxiety.” Chris answers.

“Have you ever thought that this might be exactly what she needs? I can’t even remember the last time I spoke to her, and now she’s pro-actively joining us. Whether we find anything or not, at least she is a part of the crew again.” Cy rationalizes.

“Yes. She may simply feel left out. When I do see her, which is not often, I do not witness her socializing with any men.” Zakeru adds.

“Leave her be. If she becomes a liability, I’ll deal with it. Honestly, for all we know this will ease her anxiety.” Cy assures him.

“I hope you’re right...” Chris sighs.

Marching through the trail that leads to the outpost, they walk even after darkness falls, bearing torches to frighten away any nearby predators. After taking the extra time to partially make up for their late start, they make camp for the night, sleeping in shifts. The next morning, after only resting for about six hours, they carry on. Reaching the ashes of Kincaid’s former outpost, Cy glances to the burnt and rotting corpses, reflecting on the day that he nearly died. The Kelanethaka scout leads them at this point, taking them into the jungle and toward his group, which camped near the ziggurat to guard it and await their return. The runner was not a part of Katero’s team, who are still deep in the jungle and hunting the young rival.

Marching through the jungle, they follow the runner who heads directly for the location of the temple and his team, using a blazed trail to find their way. The foremost militia swing their machetes to cut the dense underbrush as they walk through what could be classified as secondary forest growth. When the first line of warriors tire, which takes some time for the impressively strong Zelkona, they trade cutters. The large force slashes their way through the jungle for many hours each day, their progress slow yet steady. To speed up the

process, a third shift cuts through the jungle during the late evening, returning to their campsite just before dark, only to begin again at dawn.

After a five-day journey, four of them spent hacking and slicing through the jungle, they finally reach their destination. Many miles away from their city they see a distant structure peeking through the jungle canopy. As they gaze up at the reddish-gray stones that form the structure, Zakera and the runner turn toward the jungle, bearing their weapons. The humans and Zelkona, trusting the Ketlan's superior hearing, prepare for combat as the scouting party sent by Zikata suddenly emerge from the brush.

"You have finally returned!" The leader exclaims.

"We arrived as swiftly as we could." The runner bows his head.

"... Cyrus?! Zakera?!" The leader's eyes grow wide.

"Hello!" Cy chirps.

"How are you today?" Zakera asks.

"Uh, very well, thank you... What are your orders, Cyrus?"

"Let's check out this ziggurat!" He giddily answers.

"The what?" The leader raises a brow.

"The building. Let's explore it." Cy reiterates.

"Yes, Cyrus! Right away!" The leader bows.

After giving Darius a tender kiss upon his forehead, Zakera turns to Nendath and passes her son to the Zelkona woman. Slipping the heir to the Sa'kesh throne into her chest harness, guards immediately swarm her; they are under orders to protect the child at all costs, an order they take very seriously, as does Nendath herself. Following the scouting party, the front of the band slice their way through the forest and toward the ancient temple. Hidden in the thick brush and nearly completely overgrown with vines and the perpetually colorful and

bizarre vegetation, they discover the foundation of the structure. It is indeed a traditional ziggurat that, purely from looking, stands nearly 250 feet tall, 350 feet deep, and 500 feet wide.

It is utterly massive in its design, the eight terraces reaching high into the sky. If not for the denseness of the canopy, they might have seen this structure several days ago. The party begins hacking at the vegetation as Cy stands at the base of the steps. Zakera stands beside him as they look at faint Ketlanic writing and heavily faded carvings. They are exactly as the runner described. Though Zakera is unsure of what she is seeing, Cy and the other fortress dwellers are not; the Ketlan and Zelkona are depicted using heavy machinery such as cranes to build a structure, possibly the temple itself.

“Amazing!” Chris says with bewilderment.

“Are those what I think they are?” Yasmin asks.

“Seems that way.” Rico seems just as mesmerized.

“Let’s take a closer look.” Cy grins, looking up the long flight of steps.

He places his hand at the small of Zakera’s back, guarding her as they slowly climb the steps. They look at the carvings that run along the side, a primitive form of thick, stone railing. They now depict humans as well as Ketlan and Zelkona, painting a very telling picture. The almost hieroglyphic images show humans standing behind the beast races who seem to be building the temple, simply watching them work. Further images show them performing all manner of slave labor for their human masters, working fields and herding genashin. A startling depiction of Zelkona males mining with industrial tools such as augers causes Cy to pause.

“What the fuck...” He mutters.

“What is wrong?” Zakera asks him.

"I don't know. I have seen tools like this on Earth..." Cy answers.

Climbing ever higher, they eventually reach the first level. After a short rest, they walk around the terrace and to a staircase that climbs to the next level. More pictures line the walls and continue to change. Ketlan and Zelkona are depicted in various, sexually graphic ways with humans; many of them bearing children with tails, hair, and pointed ears while standing beside their lovers. Other humans stand with raised arms, as though in shock or anger. Near the top of the staircase, a mural of human figures bearing weapons unsettles the explorers. As they walk through a hallway, following it toward more steps that reach the third level, the images visibly trouble Zakera, the Kelanethaka and even a few of the Zelkona militia.

The Ketlan and Zelkona are shown breaking their tools, while fighting each other. Humans are shown running away, only to return with powerful weapons. The Ketlan and Zelkona collectively turn against the humans. They reach the third level and climb toward the forth. The humans, Ketlan and Zelkona attack pairs of mixed couples and their children, pushing them all into flames. Climbing to the fifth, the humans resume their war with the other races. Reaching the sixth level, the humans are shown stepping through a circular gate, a tiny carving of a planet visible in the center. No one can be sure what to make of these images, but all look disturbed.

Reaching the steps for the seventh level, they stop to examine a series of stones that are not like the others. These stones bear carvings with images showing Ketlan and Zelkona pushing human prisoners into flames, possibly sacrificing the humans to their gods and goddesses. All are visibly affected by the etched pictures; Zakera turns her head away.

"It's okay. It's all in the past." Cy says softly to his wife.

"This does not bother you at all?" She asks him.

Cy rests his hands on her cheeks, turning her head up to face him. He leans in and kisses her lovingly before holding her tightly. Her tail sways gleefully at his comforting grip, despite the uncomfortable history revealed to them. Glancing to the others as he holds his pledge close, Cy sees the rift forming between the humans, the Ketlan and Zelkona of their party.

“Why would this bother me?!” He replies loudly and with a chuckle. “This is not who we are today, my love. This is merely what we were. Knowledge of the past is important. If anything, this should bring us closer together, knowing that this has happened and that we overcame it. This is a new age, our enlightenment; the Sa’kesh and Kelanethaka will not fall. We are not to be divided, but to become one; Darius is proof of that.”

“Nadamu, Cy.” She coos, gripping him tightly.

“Nadamu, Zakera.” He says, kissing her again.

Cy’s speech, and the display of genuine affection between their human leader and his Ketlan pledge, who is also the second in command of their tribe, eases the tension amongst the groups. Looks of nervous apprehension and even fear of a repeat of the depictions now becomes pity; verbal lamentations that the ancients could not overcome their differences are soon heard.

“It is sad that they did not learn to love the py’sel children as their parents did, miracles from the otherworld.” A Zelkona female remarks.

“Our children will be loved and raised to know that there is no separation between our races.” Zakera says in response.

“As will all of the others. These horrible days will not happen again.” Nendath adds.

“Not after we deal with Kincaid...” Cy murmurs.

Standing at the base of the steps, they look up toward the final terrace. Planted atop that terrace, a smaller rectangular structure with pointed waves carved along the edges, like a king's crown, waits for the explorers. Placing her foot on the step, Zakera's ears prick. A familiar thunder echoes in the distance. Turning back, they can see a tiny ball of purple lightning many miles in the distance. It hovers over the great lake, far along the coast and toward Roland's burned castle.

"Another one, so soon?!" Daniel exclaims.

"Well, this is one swinging place." Cy quips.

"No matter. If they survive, we'll probably meet them sooner or later. Let's press on." Chris says.

As they climb the steps they notice that the carvings vanish entirely. As they reach the peak, Cy and Yasmin turn back. Yasmin whistles and brings a hand to her brow, looking down at the tiny trees that sit nearly twenty-five stories below them.

"Now that's a view!" She chirps.

Heading for the temple, they are surprised to find that there is no visible door before the steps. Instead of a door is an archway that is blocked off, as though it were carved from a single massive rock and left behind to taunt whoever ascended the many hundreds of steps. Similar useless archways decorate the structure at far ends and ostensibly wrap around the building. Exploring the terrace in search for an entry to the temple, a Zelkona kicks a small object. It flies into an archway and startles them as they turn. Lying in the archway on the right side of the building atop the ziggurat is a small pile of strewn bones. Approaching the bones, the experienced fortress dwellers immediately recognize them as human; the Zelkona woman had kicked a broken femur.

Racing up to the bones, Amanda's eyes grow wide. She drops to her knees as she examines the remains of clothing that cover the skeletonized torso. Chips in the nearby bones appear to have been made by a moltaka's teeth. Cy motions with his hand, his militia spreading out and searching the terrace for more clues. Within moments, a female Zelkona approaches her leader, a human skull in her hands. In the archway beside the first body is a second set of remains and more. As a Ketlan scout retrieves a custom-made leather pack with impeccable stitching, Amanda finds an old locket lying near the skull of the first body, her hands shaking as she holds the artifact.

"Oh God, no..." She murmurs, her eyes watering.

She struggles with the locket for a moment before finally popping it open. Staring back at her in the one-inch oval images on either side of the jewelry are brown and white photographs of her mother and father. Cy takes the pack from the scout, nodding thankfully for his discovery. Kneeling adjacent to Amanda, he sets the pack where she can see it. Her eyes turn to the pack. Closing the locket, she pockets it and swiftly tears into the rucksack, frantically looking for evidence to disprove her theory. As she retrieves a journal bearing her father's name, her heart sinks and she begins to weep. After so many years, she now looks at the bones of her missing parents.

Zakera sits on her legs beside Amanda, while the others who had spent more time with her crowd around and behind her.

"I am sorry, Amanda." Zakera says softly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"When I was a little girl Michael said that he heard mother and father talking about a stone temple in the jungle... When they left to

lead the Kaladez away, I always wondered if they came here to hide. When we left to see this place, I thought this might be it. I never expected to find them here..." Amanda says with a sniffle.

"Now we know..." Daniel remarks.

"I always told myself that they were capable explores; they could have survived and simply been lost or hiding all this time... How could I have been so stupid?" Amanda sniffles again.

"At least they died together, and they would be proud to see the woman you have become today." Chris assures her.

"My parents were so stupid, running off instead of fighting. They might still be alive." Amanda grumbles.

"Your parents did what they had to do to protect you. Any true parent would have done the same. This was not their fault." Rico remarks.

"But why didn't they come home?!" Amanda whines.

"Perhaps they couldn't?" Daniel poses.

"Did they even try? They came so far; did the Kaladez stalk them for that long?"

"Let's find out." Cy says as he rises to his feet.

As Amanda tosses her father's journal angrily into his old pack, Rico notices that it is full of other items. Reaching in, he finds a second book that appears to be a catalog of flora and fauna that they had discovered. As a necessity, many explorers from their time became competent artists; the book is full of drawings in black ink, the pictures and detailed descriptions of sizes and colors penned by Amanda's father's hand. He passes the book to Chris, who flips through more images. Glancing over his shoulder, Cy notices something strange. Images of smaller animals, many of which he has never seen before; they bear striking resemblances to the Ketlan and Zelkona.

“Come on... Let’s look around and see what’s inside of this temple.” Cy says.

Following his order to the letter, as they always do, the militia scour the temple, soon finding an archway that isn’t blocked. For whatever reason, it is perfectly opposite of the decorative archway that sits before the final flight of steps, as though the temple was placed atop the ziggurat facing backwards. Stepping inside, their eyes grow wide in amazement at the magnificent sight before them. A faint blue-purple light strikes their skin and fur, emanating from a strange device. It is advanced well beyond anything that Cy has ever seen, except for his collection of science fiction movies. A very faint hum is audible to human and Zelkona ears, but the Ketlan all seem bothered by it.

“What the hell is this thing?” Yasmin thinks aloud.

The device appears as three obelisks made of a black stone, each eight-feet-tall and in the form of a triangle. In the center of the triangle is a platform that is carved as a miniature Egyptian mastaba. With a strange sphere placed on top of it, it sits in a small depression in the carved stone platform. The orb is not perfectly spherical, but appears almost polygonal, as though it were made of dozens of octagons that were layered over and around each other. One obelisk stands before the platform and perfectly centered, while the other two are on either side and behind the platform. The body of the orb, which is easily two-feet across, glows a faint blue; the sharp lines of the orb glow a light pink.

Crystals run along the front of the platform, osculating various colors as the orb’s light does; they flash in unison like a beautiful aurora. Approaching the obelisk, Cy, who is one of the few fortress dwellers who can also read and write Ketlanic, wipes away the dust. Zakera steps beside him, though she is wincing from the sound. Little Darius begins to cry as Nendath stands just beyond the doorway. She

quickly whisks the child away, to protect his hearing from whatever it is that he can detect and which she cannot.

“What is it?” Chris asks.

“I keep telling you to learn the script too; language by itself isn’t enough.” Cy retorts.

“I offered to teach him.” Daniel interjects.

“This... This object... It brings people here.” Zakera says, feeling the text.

“This is the cause of the storms?” Rico asks.

“I do not know.” Zakera replies.

“It only says ‘return [to] sanctuary’.” Cy adds.

Zakera suddenly leans against the obelisk, her knees growing weak. Panicked by the sight of his wife collapsing, Cy grabs her and immediately carries her in his arms like a distressed damsel, taking her outside of the temple. She immediately regains her strength once she is brought outside.

“Why, hello there.” She coos.

Her clawed fingers run through his hair at the back of his head, gently scratching him as she smiles lovingly at her mate who carries her.

“Hi. What just happened?” He asks, sitting her down onto the ground.

“I do not know, my love. The sound inside of that room is quite painful.” She answers.

“Then I want you to stay out here. I’ll be right back.” He says.

“But I wish to stay by your side!” She whimpers.

Turning back, Daniel waves Cy over.

“Just a few moments, alright? I’ll be right back.”

“Alright, but do not leave me here for long!” She cutely pouts.

“That’s my good girl.” He smiles before leaning in and kissing her.

“What do good girls get?” Zakera sweetly asks.

“Ahem.” Chris clears his throat.

They share another kiss before Cy reenters the temple. Cy and Daniel look over the obelisks, carefully examining the text for clues. Cy rushes himself, and as the most fluent in Ketlanic, he easily deciphers the text before Daniel has finished with the first side.

“I think this is the machine that brings people to Monala from Earth.” Cy says to the others.

“Are you serious?!” Yasmin exclaims.

“Very.” Cy nods.

“How do you know?” Rico steps closer.

“I don’t, but Ketlanic isn’t the most complex language. Many of the words have multiple meanings. This first portion, for instance, just says ‘when danger over, use’.” Cy begins, pointing at the front.

Cy looks back as the others who stare in awe. He steps around the obelisk, translating the rest.

"According to this, it is the second device that brings people to Monala. A first device sends people away. It doesn't say where the first device is, or where it actually sends them." Cy continues.

"I'm assuming Earth." Rico grins from ear to ear.

"Maybe, but we can't be certain of that... These rear obelisks appear to have simple instructions to turn it on or off. Someone activated this thing and left it running. These instructions also have words that aren't in the Ketlanic dictionary that Daniel and I have been piecing together, but I think it tells you how to calibrate it."

"What does that mean?" Yasmin asks.

"It means that whatever this thing is, it's been bringing people from Earth at random since someone turned on the lights and walked away. There might be a way to pinpoint specific times and places." Cy answers.

Rico and Chris scour the temple with Daniel for clues, but as Cy had said, there are no descriptions or directions to the first device. The disappointment sets in but their hopes for one day returning to Earth have yet to die. Walking outside, Cy sits with Zakera who is quick to cuddle with him, burying herself underneath his arm. Nendath approaches and kneels before the couple, carefully pulling Darius from her harness and handing him over to his parents. They hold their child, sitting beside each other and looking to the horizon.

"What a beautiful day it's been." Cy comments.

"What will happen if we ever find the device that sends people to your world?" Zakera sheepishly asks.

"I suppose those who care to leave will use it." He answers.

"But not you?" She looks to him with her cyan eyes.

"Do you really need to ask that question?" Cy raises a brow.

"No, but I wanted to ask anyway; I like hearing you say it." She grins.

Cy smiles, silently chuckling as he looks down at their son. Gently tapping his nose with his fingertip, Darius giggles. Cy turns his head to Zakera, locking his icy blue eyes onto hers.

"I am waiting." She coos.

"I'm not going anywhere, pretty eyes. My whole world is in my arms and sitting beside me." He replies.

"Nadamu, Cy."

"Nadamu, Zakera."

Leaning in for a kiss, their lips lock and time feels as though it has stopped. Zakera rests her head on her mate's shoulder, her tail hooking around his waist as he drapes an arm over her. With Darius cradled in his arm, the parents talk to and play with their son for a moment. They look back at the horizon and sit in silence. There is only more to discover on this world, and one day they will brush the dust from each and every mystery.