

The Seventh Realm: Volume Four

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 41: Enigma

It is the morning of the third day, and though Chris, Daniel and Rico have searched every square inch of the device, the surrounding temple and several of the upper terraces, they have found nothing of value. Surprisingly little script accompanies the pictographs, and what little there is reveals no clues as to the location of the sister device that might send the explorers home. Cy had not lied to them when he revealed the few secrets he was able to read; redrawing the text to show the unknown words to the Kelanethaka scouts was equally fruitless. It would appear that some of their language was lost in the time since the temples were constructed. However, Cy saw no reason in abandoning the site right away.

Cy sits beside a campfire on the first terrace of the ziggurat, which is also the largest. This is where the band of nearly sixty warriors have camped for the past several days. He cooks ethakona meat and eggs, working beside several others to feed not only his wife, but also the soldiers of his militia. It is a gesture that all can appreciate; it is clear that he truly cares for his citizens and soldiers, regardless of their gender or race. The ethakona nest was discovered in the treetops near the ziggurat, though not on the temple itself. Chris and Daniel noted that the lack of droppings during the currently dry season was a sign that they do not land on the structure at all, hypothesizing that perhaps the device is somehow keeping them at bay.

This, however, is not true for several moltaka, as a few of the large, tigersque cats with horrific mandible jaws were seen skulking

about; one was shot by a female Zelkona the previous day, from a distance of six hundred meters and using only the iron sights of her SKS rifle, impressing even Yasmin. The same female Zelkona cleans the hide of her new trophy as Yasmin examines several rifles and Cy takes three plates of food so that he may eat with his mate, who sits with Amanda. Having buried the bones of her parents beside the base of the steps of the ziggurat the morning after their discovery, she has spent much of her time examining her father's journal and flipping through the documented flora and fauna that he drew.

"How are you doing?" He asks, kneeling down and presenting the plates.

"I'm alright." Amanda murmurs, taking both plates.

"Just looking over the writings of her father." Zakera says, cradling Darius in her arms.

"Some very fascinating plants are in this book." Amanda adds, passing a plate to Zakera.

Sitting beside his mate, Cy leans forward to look at the page they are studying. They examine what appears to be the cobalt blue ferns that litter the ground, but the book describes an additional flower that sprouts from a rare and poisonous variation of the same plant. Described as yellow in color, it is noted as having killed one of their party who simply smelled the pollen out of curiosity. As they sit and eat together, a frustrated Daniel walks by, heading for the freshly cooked food and muttering incoherently to himself.

"Someone's up early!" Cy chirps.

A startled Daniel stops dead in his tracks and spins around.

"I hope you aren't forgoing your beauty sleep to explore the ziggurat." Cy says.

"I didn't sleep." Daniel grumbles.

"Then sleep well tonight because unless you've discovered something Monala-shattering, I'm ready to bag this one." Cy remarks.

"What?! Why? I mean... We've only scratched the surface of this place, and then there's the surrounding area and-"

"Daniel, before your head explodes, may I remind you that we've got more important things to deal with right now." Cy interrupts.

"How can you say that? Don't you know what this could mean?"

"Of course I do, but Kincaid is out there, and this place isn't going to sprout legs and leave... Or at least I don't think it will. It appears that anything is possible here." Cy replies.

"But Cyrus!"

"We're leaving tomorrow and that's final, so whatever you want to do, do it fast."

With a frustrated sigh, Daniel leaves the group to have breakfast. Cy watches him for a moment, regretting that he does not have the forces necessary to claim the ziggurat outright and make it a proper base. Unfortunately, some knowledge will remain obscured until they have sorted out their other more pressing problems. Sitting quietly and eating with his mate, Zakera breastfeeds Darius while Amanda holds a wooden fork in one hand and her father's journal in the other. She turns a page with her thumb and her eyes grow wide, a look of vindication upon her face.

"I knew it..." She murmurs, taking a bite of eggs.

"Knew what?" Zakera asks.

"My parents... They *did* become lost in the forest. They fled from the Kaladez for two days, stopping to fight at one point and losing a few of the guides. My mother was injured but escaped with my father. When they stumbled across this place, they had already heard of it before from older Kelanethaka scouts. They decided to camp here and rest. They climbed the peak for the night, sleeping on the seventh

terrace, where my father wrote the last entry. They could recognize the landscape enough to know where they were, and were ready to come back to the fortress after waiting out the night. They must have been attacked by a moltaka before they woke up; it probably smelled my mother's wounds and climbed the steps for them."

"At least you know that they did not leave you on purpose." Zakera says.

"Yeah... At least I know that now. Michael spent all of this time so angry; he always thought that they simply found some interesting artifact and forgot about us. I sometimes thought that too..." Amanda shamefully hangs her head.

"Now you have something to show him when we get back." Cy adds.

Zakera's ears suddenly prick, as does Darius'. Turning her head toward the sky, Cy immediately does the same. A whirring slowly grows louder as he recognizes the already familiar sound of Yulan's ship. The white and black pinstriped craft zooms by, catching the attention of all. Flying over the ziggurat, the craft heads for the opposite end of the first terrace, coming in for a landing as it hovers above the ground. Rising to their feet, they leave the plates behind and walk around the structure that blocks their view, witnessing the craft touch down and the cockpit canopy sliding forward. A full-face helmet with thin slits over the eyes to allow Yulan to see retracts into itself.

Hopping out of his pod, Yulan stops at the sight before him. Many of the Zelkona females hold weapons but bear limited garments, as some had only just awoken and were changing their clothing nearby. Zakera holds Darius, whom she was breastfeeding until only a moment earlier. Yasmin climbs up the steps with a form fitting, olive drab tank top, holding her Modello 12 submachine gun close to her toned belly, the barrel vaguely pointing at the Asian spaceman. Though nudity is not necessarily as common as it once was before Cy formed the Sa'kesh and adopted the clothing of Mirkon's tribe, it is not looked down upon in and of itself, depending on the

circumstances; in this situation, it is almost expected and no one bats an eye at the myriad of visible breasts.

Cy notes Yulan's expression as his eyes scan the raptor-like females, many of whom are still bear chested. Even his own mate briefly catches his gaze before his eyes land upon Yasmin. It unnerves Cy, who recognizes the look; Yulan appears physically interested in merely the female form of virtually every woman he has seen, regardless of their race. It is as if he hadn't laid eyes on a woman in years. The astronaut struggles to maintain his composure, hiding a little smile as best he can.

"So, are you going to offer me breakfast, or should I find another establishment?" Yulan asks, breaking the silence.

With a wave of Cy's hand, the militia stand down and return to their previously interrupted activities. Yasmin heads down the steps and approaches them while Nendath takes Darius from Zakera, who promptly covers her chest with her hide breastplate, tying the cordage behind her neck and mid-back. A suddenly focused Yulan rests a hand on Cy's shoulder as if they were long-time friends.

"So, about that breakfast..."

"Do you have any food allergies?" Cy asks, looking down at Yulan's hand and pushing it off.

"None that I know of." Yulan chuckles.

"Any special reason you decided to come here?" Yasmin asks.

"Just thought I'd drop in and share some interesting information on this other group I have seen."

"Other group?" Cy raises a brow.

"There's a city of only humans about forty miles from here, and fifty-something miles from your city. I know that you know who I'm

talking about, since there's a burned-up outpost almost in between you two." Yulan smirks.

"What kind of information are we talking about?" Yasmin asks, stepping up to Yulan.

"Well... Some big information." He winks.

"And what did you want in exchange for this knowledge?" Zakera asks him.

"Why do I have to want something?" Yulan smiles innocently.

"Because that's the way every world works." Yasmin retorts.

"Well, maybe I'm just a nice guy..." He says, slowly looking over her figure.

An uncomfortable looking Rico stands in the background as Yulan eyeballs Yasmin in front of everyone. Cy, however, knows that Yasmin realizes this as well; he is more worried for Yulan at this point and can't help but chuckle. Taking Yulan to the other side of the terrace, they make him a plate of food before returning to their own. Sitting against the structure of the upper terrace, Yulan eats his food as though he had been starved for several days, devouring it within minutes. Immediately after finishing, he reveals that he had flown his pod over the other city. Though his pod cannot detect the specific number of humans who live there, his eyeball estimate is roughly three or four thousand, including women and children.

These numbers far exceed the combined forces of the Sa'kesh and Kelanethaka. Cy, however, remains confident in the skills of their militia, the incredible strength of the Zelkona, and the secret weapon in the form of the Panzer IV. As Yulan continues, he reveals that the city itself is not following the same path as the trail that is cut toward the outpost that lies between them, but is in a more southerly direction; the outpost is actually several miles out of the way and heading eastward. Built primarily out of wood but with some houses made of stones, all with thatched roofs, they are centered around a military outpost with a small stone keep.

From the scanned holographic image that Yulan presents them, it is not exactly a castle as it is far too small. Primarily a square, but rectangular due to its height, the keep has a single turret that faces toward the direction of the Sa'kesh. Considering the age of the structure and their lack of machinery, that is purely coincidental. Though they cannot be certain that it is Kincaid's city, it is the only logical conclusion that they can arrive at with the information presented to them. Around this keep is a barracks that houses roughly one thousand active soldiers, all of whom wear a combination of armors made of bronze or iron.

The barracks is guarded by a thick palisade and patrolled often. However, it has no siege weapons such as ballistas or catapults defending it, both of which Cy has introduced to the Sa'kesh and Kelanethaka. As Yulan speaks, it becomes clear to Cy that a surgical strike with the tank, and a heavily armored force of primarily Zelkona warriors may prove devastating; he has personally witnessed six of the raptor-like beings successfully fighting as many as twenty human warriors without losing one of their own. After speaking on the enemy's base, and the armor and weapons used by the force, all of which are inferior to their own, firearms excluded, Yulan sits back with an arrogant smirk on his face.

Though Yulan appears to be sharing his knowledge freely in exchange for a meal, Cy cannot help but feel reserved about the newcomer. Something about his personality does not sit right with the former assassin. Zakera admitted shortly after their first encounter with him that Yulan bristles her fur in a fashion similar to hearing a kodana's roar in the jungle at night; something about him makes her nervous and fearful. That very night, Zakera made her mate swear an oath to her, the second one after their own pledge. If Yulan proves to be a genuine threat, regardless of his technology or skills, Cy will not hesitate to eliminate him.

"You know, doing this has me thinking... I could help you out with my pod, scouting for you." Yulan offers.

"And why would such a capable man like yourself do that?" Yasmin coos, leaning closer.

"Honestly, I didn't like what I saw flying over that other group..." Yulan answers with a perturbed stare.

His disturbed expression is the first look that feels completely genuine to Cy. Perhaps Yulan would have rather worked with Kincaid's forces, as he is clearly not a fan of the Zelkona or Ketlan, but something he witnessed there made him reconsider. Kincaid's almost pathological obsession with the merits of suffering could easily make him a very brutal and tyrannical leader.

"And what do you want in exchange for these efforts?" Cy asks.

"My ship is intact and makes a great little house, but it wasn't set up for deep space travel. I didn't have more than emergency rations to eat."

"So, you'll work for food?" Cy chuckles.

"If you want to phrase it that way..." Yulan murmurs. "There happens to be something giving off a strong energy signature in your village, similar to fusion cells. Something like that I could definitely use."

"The food, sure... The power source we'll have to think about." Cy answers, arms crossed before his chest.

Yulan's brow rises in surprise. He was certain that they would hand over whatever he asked for in exchange for his knowledge and the continued use of his pod. Bringing a hand to his face, he scratches his clean-shaven chin as he contemplates his options.

"Would you like to phone a friend?" Cy quips.

“What?”

“Never mind...”

“I admit I thought you would be all for my offer.” Yulan remarks.

“Well it doesn’t help that you told us what we needed to know before making the deal.” Cy replies.

“Well, not everything.” Yulan smirks.

“Whatever else you didn’t mention, we can figure out along the way. The ball is in my court, so to speak, and I am only offering you the food because I’m a nice guy and you already did us a service.” Cy explains.

Yulan sighs and runs his fingers through his frosted hair, keeping the spikes upright as he ponders what to do next. He looks to Cy, then to Yasmin and then back to Cy. Nodding his head subtly, he reaches out a hand.

“Alright... I’ll accept your offer.”

They seal the deal with a handshake. Yulan then promptly excuses himself, heading for a second helping of food, while the others stay seated.

“Keep an eye on him...” Cy says to Yasmin.

“I was planning on it.” Yasmin replies.

“Business, not personal.” Cy quips.

“... He’s not exactly my type. At least not without restraints.” Yasmin winks.

Walking with a clay plate of food and a matching goblet of water toward his small ship, Yulan turns his head, looking at the group

as he passes by. His eyes focus on Yasmin, a strange grin on his face as his gaze takes in her form. Rising from the ground, she also collects seconds. Taking a seat upon the steps, she leans back and watches Yulan eat his meal. Setting his plate aside as he finishes, he begins playing with his electronic equipment. With his back turned to the Columbian woman, he does not even notice that she is there as he presses several buttons. Using a small 5x monocular that she keeps in her pocket, she watches the spaceman who appears to be learning how to operate his own devices.

Yulan examines a specific button on his bracer device, nervously holding out a finger. Carefully pressing the platinum button, it begins to beep loudly and flashes red, startling the man. Zakera, Darius and the other Ketlan are drawn to the sound; even the Zelkona and humans can hear it. Yulan struggles with the forearm computer, smashing several buttons in a panic before silencing it. As he tries to shut down the alarm, he accidentally brings up a green holographic map of the area of Monala. Red pinpoints oscillate on the landscape and Yasmin can see that there are five points instead of four. Immediately recognizing the Kelanethaka, Sa'kesh and burned outpost, the furthest point must be Kincaid's city, but what is the spot in between them?

She wonders if the point that Yulan did not mention is the knowledge he claimed to hold back. Does Kincaid have a second outpost or even another city? He is clearly withholding information. She pockets the monocular seconds after Yulan controls his devices, glancing back only to see the beautiful human woman eating and paying him no attention. A few Ketlan and Zelkona peek around corners to see what the noise was. Yulan merely waves as though it were a normal byproduct of his equipment's function. He heads back with the empty plate and goblet, his eyes focused on Yasmin the entire time. As Yulan passes the steps, he stops and walks backward, standing before her.

"Hey there." He says, setting his plate and goblet down.

"Hi." Yasmin turns her eyes to him.

"So... What's an exceptionally beautiful woman like yourself doing here?" He asks as he sits beside her.

"A pickup line would have been better." Yasmin giggles.

"That isn't a pickup line?" He grins.

"Not on Monala. Here that's a valid question."

"Well, do you care to answer? I'd like to know."

Yasmin regales Yulan with a severely edited version of events, lies that she weaves on the fly. In her story, Cy is still an assassin fleeing his boss in a stolen cargo ship, however, he has suddenly become her lover, the Thames children are not mentioned at all, and all of Yasmin's previously psychopathic behavior has been either attributed to Cy or completely omitted. The Ketlan can overhear the conversation but realize the game that she is playing. Zakera and the others walk away and to the furthest end of the terrace so as not to blow Yasmin's cover.

"So, if you were with Cy, why aren't you anymore?" Yulan asks.

"A pink cat stole him from me." Yasmin grumbles, turning her eyes away.

Yulan glances from side to side as though afraid they will be seen conversing with each other.

"Aren't you worried that they'll hear you?" He quietly asks.

"Who? The Ketlan? They just look that way; they're no different from humans, at least in their senses; the pussy must be amazing for it to convert Cy from me." She answers, running a hand over one of her breasts and down her side.

“Oh...” Yulan clears his throat. “Well, I’m new here so I have to err on the side of caution.”

“So, what brought you here?” Yasmin sweetly asks, scooting closer.

“Aside from the storm?” Yulan grins.

“Yes. Aside from that.” Yasmin giggles.

“Well, I wanted to do some deep space exploration but I decided to pick up a contract first. I was hauling textiles to a space station and-”

“I thought you were a freelance miner?” Yasmin raises a brow.

“Er... I was. Am! I just decided to run cargo first for some extra money and then I was going to mine asteroids... Then do some exploration.”

Yulan’s eyes shift around, his right foot suddenly tapping softly as he turns his head away, looking at the horizon. Yasmin scans him with her eyes, seeing several of the tell-tale signs. Reaching out a hand, she rests it on his shoulder. He turns back, his eyes looking down at her hand as she gives him a very gentle squeeze. She scoots even closer, slipping an arm around his waist. In the distance, Rico watches the two, his blood boiling in jealousy.

“Not everyone here is an angel. We all have a past.” Yasmin says softly.

“Some are worse than others...” Yulan remarks.

“So, you think you’re worse than Cy?” She asks.

“Maybe...”

“And what could a stud like you do that’s so bad?” Yasmin whispers into his ear.

He turns his eyes to her but remains silent. Sitting across from them beside Cy, Zakera and Nendath, who assists the new parents with their son, Darius, Rico stares at his long-time lover and the astronaut. He grumbles to himself, not speaking actual words but only parts of words as he thinks aloud.

"Hey." Cy taps Rico on the shoulder.

"What?"

"Just relax. She isn't trying to get in his pants, man." Cy explains.

"I know. If she wanted too, she'd have torn them off already and they'd be at it right now." Rico replies.

"Then why are you so upset?" Zakera asks.

"Because... I just... Never mind. It just bothers me."

"Could it be because you love her?" Zakera suggests.

Rico spins around and looks at his companions, his brow furled and his eyes glancing nervously between them. He doesn't answer in words, but all have long suspected that his feelings for Yasmin ran deeper than a purely physical attraction. Rico and Yasmin have spent over a year in a committed sexual relationship, though none have ever audibly declared emotional ties to one another; that does not mean that they haven't formed for at least one of them.

"Yasmin may appreciate it if you expressed your feelings to her." Nendath says.

"Yeah. She may even feel the same way." Cy adds.

"What makes you so sure of that?" Rico asks.

"You shot her, and you're still alive. When J.T. first hired her, she stabbed one of her own men in the gut for mouthing off to her in her first week. No one was even there to see that shit; she told me later when I found the guy's body." Cy explains.

"I don't know... She's not the kind of woman you say that too."
Rico scoffs.

"Every woman is the kind of woman you say that too. The harder the woman, the more she really needs to hear it." Cy retorts.

Rico nods his head but says nothing. Cy leans over and pats him on the back.

"Say it whenever you're ready." Cy says.

"That is not something that should be rushed." Zakera adds.

He turns his eyes up as Yasmin approaches the cooking area, bearing the empty plates and goblets. She sets them aside for later cleaning, turning her eyes to Cy and subtly shifting her head, drawing him over to her. Taking his own goblet, Cy approaches Yasmin, looking toward the steps to see if Yulan is watching, but he is nowhere to be seen.

"So, what did you learn from Mr. Spaceman?" Cy asks.

"Not a damn thing. He probably wouldn't tell me shit, even if I fucked him." Yasmin sighs.

"So, is he trustworthy?"

"Hell no. We talked about how we both came to be here and he changed his story on the fly after a detail slip-up. Something isn't right about that guy." Yasmin answers.

"I kind of figured. Well, at least we know what we need; Kincaid is next on the list of villains to stomp out." Cy quips.

"We might want to hold off on that."

"Why?"

"Remember that god-awful beeping? Yulan was struggling with his own wrist-computer-thingy." Yasmin begins.

"I wondered what that was..."

"It brought up a map of our area and I could see pinpoints on it; the Kelanethaka, our village, the outpost and what looked like Kincaid's city were there." She continues

"So, you know where Kincaid is on a map?!" Cy chirps.

"Yeah, but there was an extra pinpoint on it. It was over to the left and just between us and Kincaid."

"He didn't mention that at all."

"We might want to check that out first, Cy."

"You're right. Thanks for doing this for us." Cy rests a hand on Yasmin's shoulder.

"Anything for you, Cy." She teasingly replies.

"You should probably spend some time with Rico, by the way."

"Why?" Yasmin raises a brow.

"He misses you." Cy answers.

Yasmin's lips curl upward around the corners of her mouth as she struggles to subdue her grin.

"He's a sentimental weakling and he shot me." She retorts.

"And yet he's still alive and sleeping next to you."

"For now..." Yasmin winks.

"Well, say hi to him anyway and then get some sleep. We'll be leaving tomorrow for that new location you saw. Maybe we'll find something nice there." Cy says, taking a drink of water from a clay goblet.

"Yes sir."