

# The Seventh Realm: Volume Four

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## Episode 43: Conversion

After two days of hard marching through the jungle, many of the children carried by the surprisingly affectionate female Zelkona, the Sa'kesh and their Ketlan converts arrive at their city. The Ketlan's eyes grow wide, having never experienced such a place. They marvel at the streets of mud brick and the buildings which are so carefully constructed. The prophet had spent years telling them that life in any other form but that of an animal was an abomination. However, as they witness the clothing and craftsmanship of the Sa'kesh, their bustling market bazaar and the genuine content of the citizens, all of whom are elated to see the return of their leader and warriors, they begin to have their doubts in the prophet's rhetoric.

The cheering of the human and Zelkona citizens becomes a cacophony, unnerving the Ketlan. None show them ill-will or prejudice, only further rattling them; this is not how the prophet said it would be, to mix with other races.

"Could you please find Mirkon and Zia? I need to see them right away." Cy asks a Zelkona captain.

"Yes, Cyrus!" She chirps.

Quickly darting off, they continue their march in the direction of the main street which ties the fortress and the city together. Cy intends to have Lara examine the children for injuries, as well as probe for psychological trauma, just in case. Still under heavy guard,

the Ketlan have little choice but to follow; a force that was once roughly sixty is now nearly one hundred and sixty, walking through the streets like a hive-mind. Cy stops and stares in awe, his jaw hanging open as he looks at an impressive sight. Sitting in the grass just beside the main road and facing diagonally toward the fortress is the Panzer IV. Jack sits upon the tank, leaning back against the turret.

"I was wondering when you would arrive. I see you've made new friends!" Jack remarks.

"Well, when you're popular." Cy quips.

"Now *that's* a decoration!" Yasmin chirps.

"I'm glad you were able to get her going again." Cy adds.

"When you use the proper tools, every problem is easily resolved. I remember an old army colonel told me that in 1916." Jack replies.

"You didn't want to leave it near the fortress?" Chris asks with surprise.

"And ruin the new floor? That would be rude." Jack smirks, his eyes turning to the mud brick streets.

Climbing aboard, Cy and Jack examine the tank. Jack confirms that a short learning curve did not hinder him from returning the tank as swiftly and fuel efficiently as possible. As they check the level of fuel left, they perform simple calculations based on the distance between Kincaid's city and their own, knowledge gleaned from Yulan. Both men can't help but laugh as they realize they will have enough to travel there and back again; Cy had hoped to keep the tank as a form of last defense, just as a precaution. Thankfully, this particular unit had either recently been refitted or had never seen combat, as it is still fully loaded, with a complete stock of ammunition for all arms.

Meanwhile, the militia and their Ketlan guests wait, crowding the entire first half of the street. Mirkon and Zia walk past them in

amazement, seeing the tribal Ketlan and the scores of orphaned children standing idly. Cy hops down from the tank and approaches the two liaisons, Zakeria and Yasmin by his side.

“What is all of this?” Mirkon gleefully asks.

“The remnants...” Cy remarks.

“Oh...”

“It did not go well?” Zia asks.

“They were... Primitives...” Zakeria replies.

“They followed only the rules of wild beasts, mated freely and didn’t see age or family bonds as barriers.” Cy explains.

“And you brought them here?!” Mirkon gasps.

“This is probably less than a quarter of them. The rest are feeding the kodana. I don’t think they will be a problem.” Yasmin smirks.

“I hope so.” Mirkon murmurs.

“Just in case, I want you to keep an eye on them. I’m going to give them a portion near the latest addition. A lot of Zelkora are there, and they’ve seen them in action; it might serve to keep the newcomers in line.” Cy begins.

“Understood.” Zia nods.

“We’ll find work for the adults once they settle in. Most of the children are probably ketlan’ezav now, so if you have families that are willing, maybe they can take care of some of them. They deserve real homes after what they’ve been through.”

“I’m sure there are a few who wouldn’t mind.” Mirkon remarks.

“We will raise them all as our own if that will better serve the Sa’kesh!” Zia chirps.

“I’ve come to expect nothing less.” Cy grins.

“Showoff.” Mirkon chuckles.

**"We are merely dedicated." Zia winks at Mirkon.**

**"We will need to update our census, too." Mirkon adds.**

**"I'm sure you can handle that. As for schooling, the children should learn English first; they have minds like sponges." Cy continues.**

**"Spon-ges?" Zia raises a brow.**

**"Uh... They learn very fast." Cy reiterates.**

**"I see. It is unfortunate that so many have lost their parents. I would assume that parents who love their children would wish better for them and would accept your offer willingly."**

**"Call of the wild." Yasmin shrugs.**

**After making the necessary arrangements, Mirkon and an entourage of humans lead the adult Ketlan away. He gives them a guided tour of their new city as they head for the chosen land where the Sa'kesh can collectively watch them. Lara soon begins tending to the children with her assistants, a task that Nendath also participates in. With the word already spreading and the city now aware of the Ketlan, the militia follow Cy, Zakera and the others back to the fortress. There, they will return their weapons before heading home for a well needed break. As they reach the electrified gates of their dwelling, the guards stand at attention and allow their leader entry.**

**Suddenly, Zakera and Katero turn at the sound of approaching feet. Sighing in frustration, Cy glances down the street, awaiting the visitors. Zikata and a large group of Kelanethaka approach, bearing weapons and shields, their eyes scanning the jungles alongside the path. They appear to be on high alert.**

**"What is wrong, father?" Zakera asks.**

**"Please tell me you have only come to see Darius." Cy begs.**

"I would love to say that, but unfortunately something has occurred."

"Of course." Yasmin sighs.

"It began with thefts from homes on the outskirts of our village a few days ago. At first we believed it to be juvenile mischief." Zikata begins.

"Those no-good hoodlums." Cy quips.

"Uh... This continued for two nights, until the last. On that night, we experienced an attack by a small force."

"You were raided?!" Yasmin exclaims.

"Humans? Maybe scouts for Kincaid?" Cy suggests.

"No. Zelkona and Ketlan."

His words leave them dumbstruck. Yulan's information has proved that there are many in the area, but to be so close as to perform regular thefts and a raid, it must be a migrating tribe. However, to their knowledge, there is no other tribe that includes all three races the way that the Sa'kesh do; like prison, every tribe has been exclusively one race.

"I hope you don't think it was us." Yasmin comments.

"No." Zikata laughs. "Unless Zakera, Katero and Minoma are all capable of changing shape, you have no Ketlan to match the descriptions given, and from what I have seen of your Zelkona, they are the embodiment of loyalty. They would sever their own tails from their bodies if that was the way of the Sa'kesh."

"That's probably true." Yasmin chuckles.

"How many were killed in the attack?" Cy asks.

"None. We believe they were only looking for supplies. However, we do not like feeding those who are not Kelanethaka or Sa'kesh. If you could help us search for these thieves, we would appreciate your efforts."

**“We’ll always help you, no matter how much it annoys or inconveniences us. You know that we can’t turn away family.” Cy answers.**

**“Yes. That certainly influences my constant pleas for aid. That and a deep desire to pester the younger generation.” Zikata grins.**

**Turning back to his troops, Cy asks for volunteers, allowing any who desire to stay in the city and rest to do so; after the long journey that they have endured, they deserve the opportunity to relax. Every single militia simultaneously steps forward. Zikata chuckles, his lips curled up around his snout as he bows his head to them. Cy looks to the two captains who led the forces during their journey to the ziggurat and the Ketlan tribe, Chekona and Muzel. Chekona is a twenty-four-year-old female Zelkona with purple and yellow skin, the yellow covering her feet, ankles, hands, wrists, and from her chest to her groin and with yellow eyes. Muzel is a slightly younger adult female Zelkona with light orange skin bearing lime green stripes and green eyes. Both are roughly five-feet and ten-inches-tall.**

**“Are you sure that you want to do this?” Cy asks.**

**“Would you care to ask a serious question, Cyrus?” Chekona retorts.**

**“You can all stay here and enjoy the city.” Cy remarks.**

**“When are we leaving?” Muzel asks.**

**Realizing that he cannot talk them out of it, he concedes to his warriors, allowing the same band to join him yet again. Though Katero also volunteers to join them, Cy and the others veto his decision; he is in no shape to fight. Forgoing rest, the small Sa’kesh force leave Katero and his men behind, allowing Katero to oversee the village in Cy’s stead and following Zikata and his entourage as they return to the Kelanethaka. During their walk, they share the secrets of the ziggurat, a disturbing story but one that Zikata appeared to expect.**

**"Many years ago, when I first became chieftain, there were elders who were once scouts. They had journeyed further than anyone had before, ever since we left our first home to seek a peaceful land to settle. They had spoken of the stone mountain and the strange and frightening images of our people enslaved to beings without tails. It is what caused us to fear the first humans we encountered. Had they not offered to teach us their language, something we considered of great value in the future, we most likely would have killed them all. The rumors of human dominance are one of the reasons men like Hitoren and Fekolza were able to take power; they breed fear and mistrust, feeding off of it and using it for their own ends." Zikata explains.**

**"I am glad that we can set those fears aside and work together as one. It always warms my heart to see the Sa'kesh and Kelanethaka together." Cy replies.**

**"Yes. I cannot express how joyous I was to learn that you and Zakera could also make children. It confirmed the truth behind the images on the stones I had heard of as a youngling." Zikata continues.**

**"Would that not make you more afraid?" Zakera wonders.**

**"I do not believe that history is a circle. Simply because it has happened before does not mean that the next humans would be the same. This was a lesson my father instilled in me as a youngling, a message I that assume was meant to prevent a fear of strange Ketlan or Zekona. While not everyone in the Kelanethaka believed that, they trusted my judgement as chieftain and I have not been proven wrong yet." He answers.**

**"Why have I not heard of the stone mountain as a child?" Zakera asks.**

**"When I became chieftain, only two elders still lived who had seen it and it was not our history, only a story that they had told. I doubt many others even remember the story. I had forgotten myself, until I was told that you had left to explore it."**

**"Fair enough. I already forgot the story." Yasmin quips.**

Marching through the rapidly shrinking path, they soon arrive at the now sprawling Kelanethaka. With record births and an excellent harvest, the village is certainly a prime target for hungry bandits.

“Do you have a plan to help us catch the thieves?” Muzalfur asks.

“As a matter of fact...”

Taking a page out of the prophet’s book, Cy and his captains oversee the construction of simple wooden platforms, borrowing cykera pegs and wooden mallets. The maximum height that a Zelkona can fall and land on their feet without injury is roughly twenty feet. Being the best climbers of the three races, as a result of the shape of their feet, the few humans among them, including Cy, climb up the trees to install the platforms at between twelve and fifteen feet. The plan is to wait until nightfall with Zelkona waiting on the perches. When the thieves strike, they will leap down from the trees and capture them. Using a simple rope system, they install a primitive pulley to allow the Kelanethaka to hoist the Zelkona up and into their perches.

After finishing the construction of the platforms, it is barely evening. Working in shifts, Chekona and her team are the first to wait, sitting in the perches from evening until they are relieved at three o’ clock in the morning; they use Chris’ pocket watch to keep track of time. With Chekona and her team in place, the others retire to a series of empty houses nearby to rest and prepare for their own shift. Zikata agrees to watch his grandson as Darius’ parents also lie down for a rest. Exhausted from their ordeal and compounded with the sleep that Darius has so gleefully stolen from his parents, Cy and Zakera pass out as soon as their heads strike the pillows.

“I remember those days.” Zikata chuckles, cradling Darius in his arms.



After many hours of waiting and diligent observation, Chekona and her team do not see a thing. Sitting in the darkness atop their perches, the night is proving uneventful. Waking to Chris shaking them, Cy and Zakera rise from their bedrolls, shocked to see that they somehow have slept until Muzel's shift.

"Well, there goes our sleep schedule." Cy remarks.

"Do not worry. Darius will fix it right away." Zakera giggles.

Heading for the nearby house where their militia rest, the couple wake them up. After giving them a moment to put on their clothing, armor and weapons, Muzel and her warriors head for the wooden platforms. Using the pulley system, Chekona and her team trade places with Muzel before being led by Yasmin, who was their shift commander, into the same house to rest. Sitting inside of a vacant house near the edge of the Kelanethaka and waiting for a signal, Cy and Zakera simply sit and cuddle. They are unable to speak to each other, as any Ketlan thief might hear them and be frightened away before even leaving the tree line.

Muzel and her warriors sit atop their perches as the hours tick by. Cy and Zakera nearly fall back to sleep as they sit up in the corner of a brick house, their backs to the wall and their arms around each other. Muzel stares at the purple night moon, her eyes glossing and her head leaning against the tree that bears her perch. The boredom is palpable. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of waiting, dawn is less than an hour away. The day brings with it a chance to leave the perch, though she knows that she will only have to repeat this again should the thieves not reveal themselves. She takes a deep breath to sigh, but holds it when she suddenly hears the rustling of bushes.

Hushed voices murmur too quietly for her to understand them as several beings walk carefully through the jungle directly beneath her perch. Her lips curl around her broad snout, bearing her sharp teeth. Zakera's ears prick and she opens her eyelids, her cyan orbs peering into the darkness. Cy and Zakera rise to their feet as the unknown beings approach. Drawing ever closer, the footfalls sound rather heavy. The door of their vacant home slowly opens as a snout carefully pushes its way inside. To their dread, the face of a male Zelkona peeks into the home. Immediately seeing the pair, the man's eyes grow as wide as old silver dollars, his emerald green eyes glowing faintly in the darkness.

**"Huna!"** The thief yells as he stumbles backward.

Immediately the others begin to scatter. Cy and Zakera are relieved, as this one Zelkona juvenile could have easily overpowered them both. It is clear to them that the thieves have not killed anyone because they have no desire to do so; for whatever reason they are abstaining from violent confrontation, even when caught in the act. The thieves, of which there are five in total, race toward the jungle. A Ketlan boy with red fur and dark colored stripes like a zebra's, runs toward Muzel's perch. Leaping from the platform, she misses her mark by landing just before the juvenile instead of on top of him. He stumbles back, visibly frightened. She reaches out for the youth, but is suddenly tackled by an unseen foe.

**"Taka!"** The assailant shouts.

A male Zelkona, also a teenager, leaps from atop her and into the jungle rather than staying to fight. He merely used the time to allow his comrade the chance to escape. The other Zelkona leap from their hiding places, racing after the thieves as they flee into the darkness of the forest.

**“After them!” Cy yells.**

**With Zakera by his side and Muzel quickly joining him, a large group of Kelanethaka scouts emerge from other vacant houses and similar hiding places. In a matter of moments, the five thieves are being pursued through the jungle by as many as thirty Sa’kesh and Kelanethaka. The bandits run through the forest, disoriented by their own fear. The Kelanethaka close in, flanking their left and right. With Cy and his team in the very center, the group to the left closes in, while the right opens up, steering the youths. Seeing their pursuers gaining on them, they spot an opening to their right and take it, dashing through a patch of brush and right into a pit.**

**This pit was created not as a trap for the thieves but as a byproduct of the Kelanethaka’s creation of mud bricks to build their homes. Tumbling down the slopped side of the pit, they are left with a nearly eight-foot-tall vertical wall of dirt on three sides. The Kelanethaka and Sa’kesh surround the thieves, blocking their only means of escape.**

**“Fi sivo?” Cy calls down to the youths.**

**“Ka.” Several voices answer.**

**“Havo. Maray ja?”**

**The youths hesitate for a moment, whispering to each other.**

**“Ja ka sivo fi. Zuj volo maray.” Cy assures them.**

**The red furred Ketlan with dark stripes is pushed forward by the others. Looking up at their captors, he clears his throat.**

**“Bijka!” He exclaims.**

**A second Ketlan boy smacks him alongside the back of his head, a stunned look on his face.**

**“Sano venshu?” Muzel asks.**

**“Sid. Zuj rota nastako. Echma raz tymeza.”**

**“Sano ka tyno tathazay?” Cy raises a brow.**

**“Fi voka tymeza.”**

**“Well, he is right about that.” Zakera remarks.**

**“Venshu koto tymeza.” Cy adds.**

**“Bijka! Fota zuj venshu wys?” The boy asks.**

**“Kelanethaka. Sa’kesh.” Cy points to the Ketlan, then the Zelkona beside him.**

**“Sa’kesh? ... Fota fi?”**

**“Ja Cyrus Richter, Sa’kesh kavay.”**

**The boys look stunned, their lips curling into collective grins. They murmur back and forth before turning to Cy.**

**“... Fi Sa’kesh?” The red Ketlan nervously asks.**

**“Vo.” Cy nods.**

**“Zuj echma Kincaid. Zuj vyn Sa’kesh!”**

**Cy looks to Zakera, Muzel and then the others. Turning back to the boy, he raises a hand.**

**“Vyn tuvu.”**

A wide grin spreads across the thieves faces. Approaching the adult warriors, they help them from the pit. Daylight creeps over the horizon as the youths are pulled up to ground level. Brushing themselves off, they take a moment to stare at the tribe whom they claim to have sought for so long. Motioning for them to follow, they suddenly dart into the jungle, regularly turning back to see that their former victims are following behind them. Though apprehensive about trailing the strangers into the woods, the Sa'kesh and Kelanethaka watch them from a distance, their weapons at the ready and eyes scanning the tree line for possible ambushes.

The thieves stop, standing by a thick patch of jungle foliage. The red furred Ketlan slips his hand into the brush, pulling it away and presenting the view to them. Standing beside the thief, Cy peers through the flora and into a clearing on the other side. His eyes grow wide at the sight before him. In the clearing are many hundreds or even one-thousand mixed Ketlan and Zelkona, all carrying their meager belongings in a fashion similar to Zia and her tribe when Cy first encountered them. As more emerge from the distant tree line with hunted game and others carrying baskets of foraged fruit, Cy is flabbergasted by their sheer numbers; at this very moment there are more of this group than his own tribe.

"Zuj thano kicha fota taka wys Kincaid. Zuj volo jish Sa'kesh." Red explains.

"Well now... Things are looking up." Cy remarks with a little grin.