

The Seventh Realm: Volume Four

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Episode 49: Reconstruction

Marching at their usual pace, the unified armies and the refugees from Kincaid's little city reach the outskirts of the Sa'kesh in seven days. Having been away for just over two weeks, and without word of the battle and its outcome until the morning of the ninth day, the weary warriors are unsure of what to expect. They are pleasantly surprised when they receive a welcoming committee on the cleared path and several miles from their home. With Zia, Mirkon and Zakera all among them, Cy holds tightly to his mate, her tail whipping gleefully from side to side as she squeals with joy. After planting countless kisses upon his face and lips, she finally allows Mirkon and Zia to greet their chieftain.

To Cy's further delight, after expressing their elation over his safe return, they reveal wonderful news. Like Zia's tribe in the beginning, and Jinaso's later on, a wave of Ketlan and Zelkona fleeing northward from either Roland or Kincaid have made their way to the Sa'kesh and Kelanethaka. With word spreading throughout the jungle like a flash flood, many expressly seek out the interspecies tribe. Beginning a few days after they left for war, there has been a steady influx of both Ketlan and Zelkona refugees seeking asylum with the Sa'kesh. Though some Ketlan choose to live with the Kelanethaka, most do not; many hundreds have already set up temporary campsites on the outskirts, awaiting Cy's return.

Even on the day that they arrived, the morning saw another small tribe of Ketlan emerging from the jungle to become Sa'kesh. Keeping

excellent track of the newcomers, Cy had lost 351 warriors, but returned home to an addition 532 Ketlan and 784 Zelkona, not even including the remnants of Kincaid's conquered tribe. With the word rapidly spreading, Kincaid's former citizens are shocked; they did not expect the Sa'kesh to be such a magnet for races as vibrant and powerful as the anthropomorphic animals and raptors. The humans cannot believe they continued the folly of facing such a foe, allowing Kincaid to slaughter them wholesale by sending them against the Sa'kesh.

Many fear what is to become of them, now forced to live among the races that some have never even witnessed in person before the one-day war. With their new human king, Cyrus, walking hand in hand with Zakera, the pink, white and cyan furred feline Ketlan who is his bride and their queen, they are left dumbstruck. Emerging from the cleared path, they enter the fields where the Sa'kesh will soon harvest a large cache of faval grain and many native fruits. Wading carefully through the farmland, they are flabbergasted by the sight of multi-story structures peeking over the stalks in the distance; some of the mud brick structures reach four stories high, affordable apartments designed by Cy and modified from those of ancient civilizations of Earth.

With golden-brown bricks and strange archways, flat rooftops, square pillars and tall, thin doors, the buildings are very foreign in design. Though glass is known among many of the humans and also the Sa'kesh, their conquerors have forgone it in exchange for glassless windows with thick wooden shutters affixed to metal hinges. Cy glances back over his shoulder and chuckles silently at the newcomer's awe. The humans of Kincaid's now burned town lived in a squalid city not dissimilar to those of early-medieval Europe. The tribal Ketlan and Zelkona, however, have never seen structures of stone at all, looking to the homes with wonder in their eyes. Aside from the alien appearance of the buildings, the culture shock of the Sa'kesh strikes the humans even harder.

Vibrantly colored Ketlan with fur of white, yellow, green, orange, red, blue, teal, pink and purple in many shades and patterns are as vivid as a surreal dreamscape; Zelkona women with hides of similar colors and equally numerous patterns do not help matters. Within view of the streets, Cy releases his soldiers with a wave of his hand. Rushing forward, men of all three races eagerly dash home, many into the arms of waiting females who line the streets, some with children standing nearby. It startles the new humans just how many of Cy's human warriors take pregnant Zelkona women into their arms, and how many female Zelkona hold the hands of male warriors who had been fighting beside them in their unit.

They witness a visible disparity between the human and Ketlan couples when compared to the human and Zelkona couples; there is an obvious preference for the latter. Though it isn't a truly massive quantity, any amount above the single digits bothers a substantial number of the conquered tribe. It is clear from the start that they stood no chance against opponents with such close bonds; many tribes, regardless of their race, do not allow mated couples to fight alongside each other. It is often considered a dangerous combination of violence and emotion, though the Sa'kesh seem to prove that belief at least partially inaccurate. This is excluding their already devastating use of advanced weapons, skills, and races with superior strength and senses.

Immediately realizing that they have no choice but to adapt to their new homes or face destruction, the defeated humans swallow their pride and disgust, walking quietly through the city and following their new chieftain and his three racial doyens. After whispering to Mirkon, Jinaso and Zia, the humans are led away to a portion of the city where they can be given temporary dwellings while their new leaders figure out what to do with them. A detachment of firearm wielding guards follow them and keep watch, changing shifts so that the newcomers may be monitored throughout the night. The refugees who were fleeing them in the first place are given no such treatment.

"It is so good to be back home!" Cy exclaims as he enters the fortress.

"I am very pleased you are safe, my love. I have missed you terribly." Zakera coos.

Turning, he takes his lover in his arms, only to feel her trembling. She nuzzles his cheek and neck, sniffing him and whimpering.

"What's wrong?! Are you not feeling well?" He asks with great concern.

"I am fine, my love!" Zakera exclaims before sniffing. "I have just missed you so much! I cannot bear to be away from you for so long. I could not sleep, and I hardly ate. I am just so happy you are home, and in my arms again!"

"Aww, Zakera. You're going to make me cry over here." Cy chuckles, quickly sniffing himself.

They share a series of passionate kisses in the foyer of the fortress. Yasmin did not follow them home, opting to walk the city for a while. Chris, Daniel, Michael and Amanda have continued with more pressing matters, while Jack, who has returned a week earlier, has already caught up with Samantha. As a result, the lovers are left alone to enjoy each other. Cy ceases the excess affection to ask his pledge to show him his son, Darius. Taking her mate's hand in hers and locking their fingers together, she leads him up the stairs, her hips swaying and her tail synched with her body as she moves; it draws Cy's eyes like a magnet. Entering the room next door to their own, which used to belong to Johnny, a Ketlan woman watches a sleeping Darius.

Surprised by the change, Cy looks to his mate, who narrows her eyes lustfully and merely shrugs her shoulders. After looking at his sleeping son, Cy slips an arm around Zakera's waist and pulls her

closer. Resting her head on his shoulder, her tail hooks his side as her fingers gently scratch his skin.

“I am so pleased you are home.” Zakera whispers.

“I am too. It’s so good to see you again. I missed holding you.” Cy whispers back.

“Did you miss anything else?” Zakera softly giggles.

The Ketlan babysitter’s lips curl into a subtle grin as she sits beside the crib, making sure to keep her eyes from looking up at the couple. However, Cy is not remotely embarrassed. Turning to face his mate, he wraps both arms around her, being careful not to pull her too tightly and pressing against her pregnant belly. Kissing passionately, they stumble sideways in an effort to leave before Zakera takes him by the hand and pulls him from the room. Taking him next door and into their own room, Cy quietly closes the door, only to be leapt upon by his lover. With her arms around his neck and both of her paw-like, digitigrade feet hanging in the air, her knees pulled up to his hips, Cy nearly falls over.

Stumbling toward the bed, he quickly lies her down on her back. Climbing over her, he rests his hands upon her waist, which she graciously lifts herself, her feet planted atop the mattress salvaged from the Malevolence. As he attempts to untie her skirt, preferring to remove it rather than upturn it to reveal her loins, the scent of which his human nose can already detect, she tears at the cordage that holds her hide breastplate to her body. Throwing it aside as Cy rather carefully removes her lower garment, enjoying every moment with his wife, she grabs the tunic covering his chest and tears it open with her sharp, white claws that crown her pink, fur covered fingers.

“Careful.” He chuckles.

“We will buy you new clothes.” She growls lustfully.

"I wasn't worried about that, but I'd like to have skin left after we're done."

Gripping tightly to the bare flesh on either side of his torso, she pulls herself up until her nose nearly touches his own, her body curled into a crescent before her mate.

"No promises, my love." She purrs.

With a forceful pull, Zakera drags her mate down atop her. Reaching into the crib, the babysitter gently strokes Darius' little head before lifting him up and cradling him in her arms. She checks his swaddling before walking away from the room as the lover's noises are soon heard.

"Your parents are quite passionate." She remarks, entering the hall. "One day you will be a young man with a mate of your own, embarrassing your parents to no end... One day, you will be the ruler of the Sa'kesh."

Walking through the halls and toward the opposite end of the hexagonal fortress, the young woman enters a room in an attempt to escape the sounds of the lovers across the complex. Finding a balcony, she steps outside and approaches the railing. This particular room faces away from everything, showing only the vibrant, unmolested jungle that covers the planet of Monala. She sniffs the air and feels a warm breeze on her face, her eyes closing. The girl had long since loved the breeze, but it was only about a year earlier when she was merely another villager of the stone age tribe, the Kelanethaka. Opening her eyes, she looks to the forest, realizing that behind her a new city is being constructed.

Darius shifts in her arms, making soft cooing noises. She glances down at the new hybrid life-form and smiles, gently shushing him and bouncing him in her arms. She speaks to the boy in a language that she had not known as a child.

“So much has changed since those like your father have arrived. Nothing is as it was, but it is for the better... I wonder... What will this place look like when you are my age?”

Cy and Zakera lie naked in their bed, snuggling and relaxing. After a morning of passionate bonding, they often take a moment to recover. The Ketlan nuzzles the flesh of her lover's human neck, giving him a few soft kisses before finally speaking.

“Should we get up now?”

“I'd rather not.” Cy answers, turning his head and kissing his mate tenderly. “I'm fine right here.”

“So am I, but the kingdom won't run itself.” She says.

“Oh, fine...” He says with a heavy sigh. “I expect a reward for my good behavior, though.”

“Story time?” Zakera quips.

“Yay!” He says in a childish and highly exaggerated tone.

“Go lead our people, you oaf.” Zakera giggles.

Rising from their bed, the pair walk across the stone, sand-colored floor and toward a custom-built, wooden dresser that bears their clothes. As is their routine, they chose their garments the night before. After dressing, Cy stretches his back and groans. Zakera looks to him as she ties the cordage of her hide breastplate behind her mid-back, her cyan eyes looking him over and a little smile spread across her face. Noticing her gaze, Cy groans and stretches again, his long black hair reaching down as he bends over.

"You're not *that* old." Zakera giggles.

"One day I will be. I'd better get into the habit." He jests.

Walking through the halls of their dwelling, lit by torches and guarded by trained Zelkona, Ketlan and human warriors wearing suits of cykera metal armor, Cy meets with Mirkon, Jinaso and Zia, as he does twice a week, every week. It is a routine that he had begun shortly after their return from Kincaid's city and that he and the racial doyens have maintained faithfully for nearly eighteen years. New teachers were appointed to the Richard O'Neill Memorial School, and yet another new addition is planned in the sprawling capital city which Zia oversees. With her work completed, Zia rises from her chair in the conference hall.

"Leaving so soon?" Jinaso asks.

"Yes. I'd like to return home to my mate and daughter." She answers.

"Tell Katero and Koleta that I said 'hi'." Cy says with a smile.

"I will tell Katero, but I'm sure you will catch Koleta roaming about the castle. I'm fairly certain she won't be home when I return." Zia retorts.

"Yes, her and Darius are thick as thieves, as I've heard you say." Mirkon remarks.

"Don't remind me." Cy murmurs.

"How do you think I feel? She's *my* daughter, but such is the life of a parent." Zia remarks as she collects her things.

"We were no better at their age." Jinaso interjects.

"That's what worries me... I'll see you later, Cy. Good day Jinaso, Mirkon."

Continuing with their business, Cy looks at plans that Jinaso had drafted for another addition to their second city, which is built around the first ziggurat they have discovered; this is the city that Jinaso oversees. After approving the addition, Jinaso also departs. Now left with Mirkon, he looks over the now massive census tome, which has been Mirkon's personal project for many years. In nearly two decades the Sa'kesh have grown considerably; with many tribes eager to join them, and a boom in childbirths coming from many years of peace and prosperity has thoroughly expanded the list that forms the tome. They have only recently caught up with the census after a tragedy the season before last.

After nearly seventeen full years of peace, Zikata, the chieftain of the Kelanethaka, passed away of natural causes. Having died in his sleep, he had made a will with many witnesses, including his war-guide, priestess, daughter, pledge-son and their three children. Though the Kelanethaka had been a haven for Ketlan who did not wish to integrate with the other races, Zikata's will could not be disregarded; upon his death, his pledge-son, Cyrus, was to take control of the Kelanethaka, who would drop their own affiliations and become Sa'kesh. After a gargantuan funeral attended by nearly every villager of both tribes, the former Kelanethaka honored their leader's wishes.

Overnight, the Sa'kesh gained roughly 10,000 Ketlan. In honor of Zikata's memory, the somewhat disorganized spiral of a city that Zikata controlled was named after his tribe, with a town hall also bearing his name in both English and Ketlanic script. His second, the priestess Linusa, was tasked with overseeing the city at its doyen. Cy never required the Ketlan to leave their homes or assimilate into any of his cities, if they did not wish it. They did, however, have to accept the integration of humans, Zelkona and the py'sel children of interspecies couples if they chose to move into Kelanethaka City. Though it was a somewhat difficult transition, hampered by the pain of their loss, nothing negative ever came of it.

With another small tribe of humans fully assimilated into the Sa'kesh and the denizens of Kelanethaka City now tallied, Mirkon reveals the new count to his king. The Sa'kesh consist of 51,874 humans, 101,653 Zelkona, 124,941 Ketlan, and 8,126 children of which 5,015 are py'sel, most between the ages of 8 and 16. The total count of the Sa'kesh now stands at 286,594. It is the largest tribe that any have ever heard of or recorded since Monala was populated by the ancient humans, the genetic engineers who constructed the anthropomorphic races and the interdimensional gates.

"Who ever thought..." Mirkon begins as he closes the tome. "One day we'd be standing here and looking at such a large number."

"When I first came to this world, I never expected anything. Instead, I found a wife and had children. If that lesson taught me one thing, it's that you never know what the future might hold for you." Cy says with a smile.

"You also built a grand kingdom out of nothing." Mirkon remarks.

"I didn't build anything. A *nation* formed around my ideals, not a kingdom; everyone here brought themselves, and *they* built this place." Cy sternly replies.

"In any case, you were a catalyst. You 'changed the game' as I've heard you put it before."

"Yeah, I guess, but it was a team effort... Have a good day Mirkon. I've got a date and I'm not going to stand her up."

"Alright." Mirkon chuckles. "Good day, My Lord."

Cy murmurs to himself in frustration over the gifted title as he walks the halls. With so many looking to him for guidance, he has still never grown used to being considered a king; speaking the words himself leaves a foul taste in his mouth, but he allows the Sa'kesh that right, should they wish to grant him a title. Passing many rooms, he soon approaches a closed door, knocking softly with his knuckles.

"I can hear you! Just come in!" A young female voice yells from beyond the hinged barrier.

Opening the latch, Cy is almost immediately tackled by the slender frame of a teenage girl. He laughs as he stumbles, his arm slipping around his daughter, Jolazar. Named by her mother, as all daughters are, 'wise-fang' earned her name early. Introducing many games such as checkers, chess and Chinese go, Jolazar quickly bests her father at all of them, but this does not stop the two from playing. She found herself favoring go, its simple layout and few rules allowing for true strategy, unlike chess. The fact that Cy had freely admitted using the game as a foundation for his battle strategies in the past only made his children more curious, especially the intellectual Jolazar.

"I have the board set up!" She excitedly exclaims.

Sliding down from her father, she lands on the ground, her thick hide sandals tapping on the stone floor as her human-like feet with five, claw-tipped toes support her. At sixteen-years-old, Jolazar stands five-feet and five-inches tall, with a slender and athletic build much like her mother's when she first met Cy. With an identical, B-cup bust and an attractive hourglass figure, Cy always worries about her. With a vishkachay fabric pull-over blouse with very short sleeves that also bears her midriff, and a similarly short skirt, he knows that every male she passes looks at least twice. With a smile on her face and a glint in her vivid, cobalt blue eyes, she motions to her father to follow her with a finger tipped with a black claw.

Covered with dark purple fur on her body, medium-gray fur on her front from her chin and down between her inner thighs, and bearing thin, dark blue stripes on her outer arms, legs, sides, back and tail, with blue specks on the tip of her feline ears and tail, her pattern is identical to her mother's. With shoulder length, wavy hair that's parted at the middle and a purple that matches her fur, Cy

always chuckles at the sight of her. For all intents and purposes, Jolazar is a clone of Zakera from twenty years earlier, with her colors darkened as a result of Cy's natural black hair, her humanesque feet aside. Even her personality is similar. Approaching a table in her private quarters, the father and daughter sit across from each other as they prepare to play a game of go.

"So, are you going to let me with this time?" Cy asks with a smirk.

"And miss the chance to gloat... Again?" Jolazar grins back.

"That's my girl." He murmurs.

After playing only a few turns, a rather deep yet feminine voice calls into the room. Jolazar leans over while Cy turns his head, glancing over his shoulder at the doorway just behind him. There stands Koleta, the daughter of Zia and Katero. At sixteen-years-old, she was born only a few months after Jolazar. Koleta is a very unique py'sel; her species, dubbed 'Ekzel' or 'fur-skin', is the only known in all of Monala, let alone the Sa'kesh. Just as he had learned from the Agnis supercomputer, her birth was a fluke, the luckiest roll of the dice; Katero and Zia have never had another child, no matter how vigorously and passionately they've tried.

Standing five-feet and nine-inches tall, she is slightly shorter than her mother and nearly eye-level with Darius, her closest friend. With a figure like many Zelkona females, she has a very attractive hourglass frame, a toned belly, firm buttocks, athletic looking arms and legs, and with a C-cup bust that is very adequate for her size and build. Her hair is very long, easily reaching down to her mid-back. Full and wavy, her locks are naturally crimson in color, with some strands that seem naturally brighter, giving her a unique look as though her hair were streaked. Her head has a unique shape, not like either her mother or father; she appears like a cross between a dragon and a wolf.

With a wolf-like head, her ears are tapered and pointy, made of dense hide. Though ears are synonymous to half-breeds like Akzazel, hers are higher on her head, and not elf-like in appearance but more wolf-like. Everyone found this trait astounding, as Katero has the appearance of a jaguar, with shorter, rounded ears. Koleta's jaw is like that of a Zelkona. Her snout, long and broad, has a very subtle jaw-line, with lips that reach nearly as far back as her eye sockets. Even Zelkona do not have such a wide bite radius, and the Akzazel certainly do not either. Her maw of razor-sharp teeth, hidden only by her thin lips, terrifies many as much as her abilities do.

As an Ekzel, Koleta has even further enhanced abilities: Capable of a ten-foot leap, a terrifying pounce, and the ability to fall over two stories, only to land on her feet without injury, these abilities nearly shroud her hulk-like strength, which exceeds even the strongest Zelkona. With Ketlan hearing and sense of smell, Zelkona eyesight and learning speed, and with human/Ketlan ingenuity, she is quite possibly the most capable sentient life-form on all of Monala. Unlike her mother and father, both of whom have golden colored eyes, Koleta's are fuchsia; it only adds to her already imposing and oft considered frightening visage. In many ways, Koleta appears as a dragoness.

Her smooth, sleek hide, nearly as dense as her mother's, is a unique blend of black, gold, buttercream yellow and shades of red. With buttercream as her body's primary color, golden hide frames her torso and lines a crimson fur mane that runs along her spine and over the top of her long, raptor-like tail. Golden flesh covers the back of her head and runs under her jaw and toward her chin, down her neck and both over and below her navel. Black, elongated spots dot her sides, back and along either side of her tail. Her shoulders, hands and forearms, digitigrade feet and lower legs are covered in red skin, nearly Tyrian purple on her feet and hands but growing lighter as it reaches closer to her body. Her hands and feet bear claws, those upon her toes even more menacing than a Zelkona's or Akzazel's, and all of them the same color as the flesh on her extremities.

With an Earth-sky blue vishkachay tank top that hugs her frame and bears her midriff, tightly fitting, black fabric shorts, and a black hide belt with a brass buckle, her outfit is eerily familiar to Cy. Tank tops are a fashion trend worn almost exclusively by females as a result of Yasmin's own preference, as are shorts, recreated by Yasmin as her original pants became severely worn near the lower legs. It's become a source of many jokes among the remnants of the Malevolence's crew that Yasmin, of all people, inadvertently sets every female fashion trend in Sa'kesh society. With a hand on her hip and gray, hide bracers attached to Koleta's forearms, she peers into the room, a clawed hand gripping the wooden doorframe of their tan, stone castle.

"Where's Darius? I can't find him anywhere." She complains.

"Maybe he's hiding?" Jolazar teases.

"From what?!" Koleta asks defensively and with an offended tone.

"I don't know. Darius is popular; he has a few stalkers competing with you." Jolazar explains.

"I don't stalk him! He's just my friend!" Koleta whines.

"Check Agnis. He's been hanging out there lately." Cy says.

"Thanks!" Koleta exclaims.

Gleefully darting away, her claws click on the stone floor, the sound growing more faint as she gains distance. Turning back to his daughter, Cy examines the board for a moment.

"Why do you always tease her like that?" He asks, his hand holding a piece.

"Like what?" Jolazar asks innocently.

"It's obvious she likes him, but you insist on embarrassing her. She's self-conscious enough as it is, being the only one of her kind."

He continues, trying to decide where to place the piece. "You should leave her be."

"Is that a request?" Jolazar raises a brow.

Cy turns his icy blue eyes to his daughter, a faint smile spreading across his face. Looking back to the board, he places a piece. Jolazar sighs and nods her head, quickly placing her own piece on the board.

"Alright. I'll be nice."

"Thank you." He says softly.

Sitting atop a black stone railing at the Agnis complex, Darius looks down at a mosaic, inlaid into a wooden board and depicting his late grandfather, Zikata. Intricate and carefully constructed by a skilled artisan, it is one of his few prized possessions. Though peace has allowed the arts to flourish and both sketching on parchment and natural oil paintings have emerged, some as detailed as a photograph, the mosaic has sentimental value to Darius; Zikata gave him the mosaic early in the year of his death. Taking a deep breath, he sighs and sets the board into a pocket of his custom tailored, brown jacket.

"I miss you..." He says with a sniffle.

"I've missed you too." Koleta replies.

Quickly turning around, he sees Koleta sitting atop a pillar to his right, having silently leapt upon the structure and perched herself like an ethakona. Taking a black furred finger, he wipes a tear away from his blue eye, and along a thin outline of blue fur that shrouds the socket like Egyptian make-up, a coloration that developed suddenly and shortly after his first birthday. Koleta's elbows, covered in fur that matches her hide, rest upon her legs as she leans over the edge. Seeing his bereaved gesture, her back straightens and she quickly

pushes herself off of the pillar, landing gracefully on her feet in the courtyard mere feet away from Darius.

“What’s wrong?” She asks with great concern.

“Nothing. I was just looking at Zikata’s mosaic.” Darius replies, his head down.

“Hey...” Koleta says as she steps up to him. “It’s alright. You’ve got me here; what more could you want?” She teases, giving him a benign hug.

Wrapping his arms around her body, Koleta’s heart races. Resting the gray fur of his chin atop her shoulder, Darius keeps her in his arms for a moment, still greatly distraught over the loss. Backing away, he releases a melancholy sigh. Motioning for her to follow, the pair walk along, through the Agnis complex, within view of the tan brick castle that now houses his family, within the capital city of the Sa’kesh nation. Well-worn roads attach the cities together. Walking away from the complex and toward the jungle, the duo sit by a large rock at the edge of the tree line, gazing into the intrepid expanse that awaits them.

“Want to tell me what’s wrong now?” Koleta asks.

“I was thinking about Zikata and remembering how it was when we were little. I used to do a lot of traveling, back and forth between Kelanethaka City and the fortress. When we still lived at Salashima, back before the castle was built and when it was the capital city, I remember the jungle being bigger. It was like the trees were reaching for that old wooden fortress.” Darius begins.

“Salashima was a fun place to live. That wooden fortress made you feel like you were living amidst the kodana.” Koleta says with a grin.

“I used to love walking the road and seeing my grandfather, wandering the beach near Malevolence Cove and seeing that old

ship... I felt like I had adventure and purpose, but now... Now Zikata's gone, and I don't have purpose." Darius releases a sullen sigh.

"You do have purpose. You're the heir to a kingdom and you can take all of your friends to the top, right beside you. That makes you even stronger than me!" Koleta chirps, a little grin on her face.

"That's not the kind of purpose I want. Zikata used to tell me all of those stories about my mom and dad, Yasmin, Johnny, Jack, and your dad... Even my grandfather! They had... Excitement!"

"I don't think they saw it as exciting. Didn't Zikata get stabbed in the back?"

"Yeah! It nearly started a war, but they pulled through... They always did..."

"But not without cost. My mom and dad talk about Kincaid like he was the worst thing that ever happened to them." Koleta says.

"Maybe." Darius murmurs.

Koleta scoots closer to Darius, her thick tail wrapping around his side and an arm draping over his shoulder rather casually.

"They built all of this. What are we going to do? Grow old and die in castles, temples or barracks and live mundane lives? I've heard people call my dad 'Cyrus, the Great'. Your clothes are copies of Aunt Yasmin's, and she hates pretty much everyone. Hell, I saw Uncle Johnny recently and the looks that people give him when we walk the street; he's a farmer, and they are utterly reverent of him." He sighs once again.

"What if we had an adventure?" She suddenly poses.

"... Really?"

"Yeah. We might even get our name out there." She answers.

"You'd want to do that?" Darius asks in surprise.

"Sure! Why not?! We might as well enjoy the jungle before it's gone!" She chirps, flashing a toothy grin with narrowed, fuchsia eyes.

Opening his mouth to speak, Darius suddenly stops when his ears detect a sound. Glancing over their shoulders, Koleta does the same and turns to the source; the twins, Razela and Kazamir, emerge from around a corner, the children of Johnny and Minoma, born not long after Darius and Sidana.

“Hey guys! What are you two up too?” Razela asks.

“Hey. Just thinking.” Darius replies.

“About slipping off and mating again?” Kazamir teases.

“What?! No!” Koleta exclaims with a nervous chuckle, her gaze darting away.

“Actually, we were thinking about something else for a change.” Darius teases, pulling Koleta even closer to him.

“Oh yeah?!” Kazamir remarks.

“Yeah.”

“Like what?” Kazamir asks, testing him.

“We’re thinking about having a little adventure. Maybe we’ll stroll off into the jungle with just our wits and a few guns.” Darius says with a grin.

“Bullshit... Really?” Kazamir looks stunned.

“Maybe.” Koleta answers with a decidedly confident tone, her arm slipping around Darius’ side and pulling tightly.

“I-I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Razela says with a nervous tone, her eyes darting to and fro.

The twins approach the pair on their sandaled, human-like feet, as they both turn around atop the stone to face them. With Kazamir, the male, standing five-feet and seven-inches tall and his sister, Razela, standing five-feet and five-inches, both teenagers bear beige colored fur with cranberry red stripes and hair, hazel eyes, tall and

pointy rabbitesque ears and little fluffy tails shaped like a candle's flame. Sitting as a group, the teenagers enjoy a fanciful adventure and the wondrous possibilities, the likes of which they cannot experience until their quickly approaching ceremony of adulthood. As they speak about what they would do and how, it becomes readily apparent to the Thames twins that their friends Darius and Koleta are not just speaking idle fantasy.

"I wonder if there are other sights to see out there? Maybe another Agnis that we can find? Or if we walked far enough to find the other Ziggurat?" Darius poses.

"I'd love the exercise." Koleta says with a sly grin.

"Yeah, but it's dangerous out there. Even with the four of us it would be a risk." Kazamir says, trying to steer the conversation.

"I've heard my dad say that 'there is no value in the reward if there is no risk in the journey'." Darius retorts.

"Besides, I'm the strongest one here and both Darius and I know how to use weapons. We'll just 'borrow' a few firearms from the lockup in the castle." Koleta adds.

"I already know where my favorite is stashed." Darius says excitedly.

"There's more than just animals. I heard my mom and dad talk about hostile tribes, diseases, starving villagers who came out of the forest begging Cyrus to take them in..." Razela sternly explains.

"Yeah, and when they were young they tamed a lot of that jungle. Untamed wilderness is where I want to go." Darius chirps.

"You're missing the point..." Razela sighs.

"They had all kinds of great adventures back then. I've heard my dad's stories." Koleta quickly defends Darius, disregarding her own previous warnings.

"Like the one-day war that got a lot of their friends killed? I never met 'Uncle Rico', I've only ever heard about him." Kazamir quips.

"I'd assume those are cautionary tales that are inadvertently riveting." Razela interjects.

"Maybe, but we'll never know for sure until we take that first step." Darius says with a little grin.

"Well, have fun with that. When a kodana eats you, can I have your sword? It's nicer than mine." Kazamir teasingly asks.

"Koleta gets all of my stuff." Darius laughs.

Lowering her head, Koleta's lips curl upward at the corners in a barely subdued grin, her fuchsia eyes glancing toward Darius.

"Some friend you are." Kazamir chuckles. "Come on, Razela. We should get back home before mom and dad realized we aren't working in the garden."

Splitting up, the twins return home to their parents while Koleta and Darius wander the edge of the castle. Glancing up at the walls, he sees a guard peering over the outer wall from nearly three stories up. With a hand wave, the human guard waves back at the figures before resuming his patrol. Stopping near a front corner of the castle, Darius pauses. Koleta stops in her tracks, staring intently at the youth.

"... Would you really do it? Go into the jungle I mean..." Darius suddenly turns and asks Koleta.

"Of course!" She chirps, her eyes wide. "I mean, I'm always looking for something more fun to do beside watching grass grow."

"There's board games." Darius shrugs his shoulders.

"*More* fun, Darius..." Koleta giggles.

"Silly me." Darius murmurs, his lips curling into a faint smile. "Well, there's always that *other* thing juveniles can do." He winks at her.

Koleta feels herself flush and her eyes grow wide. Quickly turning away, she reaches an arm across her chest and beneath her breasts, her clawed hand gripping her upper arm. A cultural norm since their creation and carried over from the Kelanethaka, Sa'kesh juveniles are free to sexually explore with each other until their ceremony of adulthood. Once adults, they should then choose a mate and pledge for the remainder of their lives. Darius has had several lovers in the past that she has known of; considered exceptionally attractive, more-so because he is a Sakona py'sel, that's to be expected. However, as the only Ekzel, Koleta finds that few males want to mate with her; she's far too intimidating to them. Though interested in and desiring Darius, he's only ever asked her once. Unsure of how to respond, and caring for more than his body, she rejected the offer rather harshly. He's never asked seriously again.

"We've talked about that..." She sternly replies.

"I know you don't like me like that. I was only kidding. I'm sorry. I just wanted to make you laugh." Darius replies.

"Mmm... S-so, h-how far would you go?" She sheepishly asks him.

"What? With *that*?" He raises a brow.

"No, you idiot! Traveling! How far did you want to go?"

"Oh, I don't know. Until I felt like turning around, I guess."

"It's hard to get lost with a straight line." She adds.

The two gaze at each other for a moment, a breeze fluttering Darius' long black hair that's pulled into a high ponytail, and pushing Koleta's red waves over her shoulders. Continuing on their walk, Darius and Koleta round the corner, stopping and looking at the sight before them. Sitting perched upon the barrel of the Panzer IV, Vanolza, Darius' little brother and Cy and Zakera's youngest son, watches the two, clearly eavesdropping. Given a Ketlanic name to commemorate the abnormally dark-red tint of the normally purple

night moon that hung in the sky when he was born, the fourteen-year-old Sakona climbs down from the barrel.

He leaps from the tank, which had been moved with a quantity of biodiesel once the castle was constructed and the capital city moved, landing just before his older brother and his female companion. Sized appropriated for a boy his age, the swift and athletic juvenile stands shirtless with only long, black trousers on. His straight, black hair drapes over his shoulders, reaching down to his mid-chest. He watches with violet eyes that are unlike either of his parents. Vanolza's fur is very similar to Darius' in pattern. Black fur is lined with thin, purple stripes, much like his brother's blue stripes, and purple fur tips his ears, tail and lines his eyes like Egyptian makeup.

The notable exception differing him from his family, aside from coloration, is that the boy does not have a lighter fur color on his front. From his chin, over his chest and belly and down to his groin, is black fur lined with purple stripes, like that covering the rest of his body.

"Making plans?" Vanolza asks.

"None of your business!" Darius growls.

"What are you doing out?" Koleta asks in a soft tone, leaning over and resting her hands on her knees.

"Scouting." Vanolza answers, his eyes scanning Koleta.

"For?" Koleta asks.

"Girls." Vanolza freely admits. His eyes lock onto her bust as she leans over. "You should do her." He suddenly says to Darius.

"What?!" Koleta stands upright, a shocked expression on her face.

"Bro!" Darius barks, resting a palm over his eyes.

"I only just got started as a juvenile, but I heard that Zelkona girls are great mates, so she should be pretty damn good!" Vanolza teases.

"You little shit!" Koleta snarls, reaching for the boy.

"Woah!" He yelps, lunging to the side and darting off.

"Come here!"

"I'm just playing! Don't let her get me!" Vanolza pleads, running around the tank as Koleta rather methodically pursues him.

"Koleta. Please. Stop." Darius says in a dry and comedic monotone.

"Asshole!" Vanolza growls as he climbs atop the tank. "I heard what you said about running away! You better stay on my good side or dad might suddenly find out!" He barks, pointing a black-clawed hand at his big brother.

"Wait!" Darius pleads.

Vanolza leaps from the tank and zig-zags from Darius' and Koleta's grasp, reaching the front gate where he knows the city guards will protect him. Vanolza greets the guards respectfully, who nod back and open the gate. Before entering, he turns back and sticks his tongue out mockingly at the older teenagers.

"Well... If you're still alive tomorrow, we'll talk about this traveling thing again. You might actually need to, now." Koleta jests to Darius.

"Way to instill me with confidence." He sighs, running a hand over his hair and feline ear.

"You'll be fine, Darius. You always are." Koleta grins.

Parting ways, they say goodbye with another benign hug. As they embrace, Koleta asks Darius a question, and he answers. Her

lips curl into a visible grin at his response. Smiling back, he nods in assurance. Walking toward the gate, Koleta pauses.

“Hey!” She calls out.

“Yeah?” He glances back to her.

“If you die, can I really have your stuff?”

Darius chuckles and nods his head.

“Hell yeah! And we have witnesses.” She chirps, pointing toward the guards at the gate.

“See you tomorrow, Koleta.”

“You too.” She says with a wide grin.