

The Seventh Realm: Volume Five

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Episode 50: Father-Son-Guard Time

Rapping his knuckles softly on the bedroom door, Cyrus turns his ear toward the barrier, waiting for several seconds. It is early in the morning as he knocks again, hoping that Darius will rise on his own. Turning back to his small entourage of guards, he glances at Sidana. He gives her a subtle head-nod and she cracks her knuckles. The guardswoman draws her Cykera falcata, preparing for battle. Tough only seventeen cycles old, Sidana proved to be a competent and serious individual. After saving two other juveniles from a kodana attack with only a spear and a recurved knife left by a wounded adult, she was given a choice of any gift she wanted; she chose to receive her ceremony of adulthood early, at sixteen cycles, a shock to many.

In the two seasons since then, she has proven to be the ideal soldier, a poster-child for all Zelkona and Akzazel. Recently promoted to captain after leading a team that routed a band of tribal thieves, she now serves as one of the leading guard captains, often protecting Zakera or Cyrus; these are considered highly respected and prestigious positions in the Sa'kesh military. Motioning to her underlings, the four, all-male guards hold up their spears and shields. With a series of hand gestures taught in their military training, the guards understand their orders.

Turning back to Cyrus, she nods in confirmation. Taking hold of the door handle, Cyrus holds up his steel falcata sword and quickly shoves it open. The wooden barrier swings wide and slams into the

stone wall behind the hinges, startling a sleeping Darius as the warriors rush into the room.

“Attack! Attack! Grab your weapons!” They yell.

A startled Darius shifts in his bed, grabbing frantically for the nearest object atop his nightstand. Taking hold of the object, he rolls too far and falls out of bed, landing with a thud on the stone floor, his thin blanket tangled around his legs.

“Wha?! Where?! Who’s attacking?!” A nude Darius asks in shock.

Cyrus and Sidana glance to each other and lower their weapons, laughing aloud. Several other guards join them, slinging their shields upon their backs and leaning on their spears for support as they are overcome with amusement.

“What?!” Darius looks between them.

“That’s a fine weapon, son.” Cyrus remarks, sheathing his falcata in the scabbard hanging beneath his right arm.

Looking down at his hand, Darius sees that he accidentally took hold of a comb carved from a genashin rib; his kukri knife sits atop the nightstand, just out of reach and still sheathed.

“Are you serious?!” He growls at his dad.

“You should have seen the look on your face!” Cyrus laughs, holding out a hand to his son.

“I thought your fur was going to turn white.” Sidana cackles.

“That’s just sick...” The teen grumbles, taking his father’s hand.

"It was just a joke." Cyrus says, pulling Darius to his feet. "Besides, you need to be up anyway."

"... Why?" Darius raises a brow.

"We're going on a little hunt. Hurry up and put on some clothes. We'll be waiting right outside." Cyrus answers.

"Uh... Okay."

Darius watches as his father and the guards turn, walking out of the room. A male guard pulls the door closed behind him, leaving the teen standing beside his bed in bewilderment. Though his father has been known to pull pranks on people for his own enjoyment, he has never targeted Darius before, or any of his children for that matter. Furthermore, he has never asked Darius to go with him into the jungle, nor has he gone in many years. Walking over to his dresser, Darius takes hold of his trousers, quickly pulling them on. As he slips his belt on, he turns back to his kukri knife, quickly attaching it to him, as his only piece of equipment.

Taking a beige colored cloth top and his brown, lightweight jacket, mostly for waterproofing, he sits on his bed and slips his feet into his tailored boots. Made of thick black hide, they are modified designs borrowed from Cyrus' old hiking shoes that he had worn. With cord laces running over the tops of his feet and toward his ankles, it is both a comfortable and effective design, and is popular though costly garment worn by many Sa'kesh of both genders. Before leaving his room, he takes a moment to hold onto the pendant that he wears around his neck.

A gift from Zikata, he never takes it off. It is one of the first cyrians ever produced, the coinage that the Sa'kesh have standardized. Upon receiving a large collection of currency to introduce to the Kelanethaka, Zikata kept the very coin that Cyrus had first shown him, considering it to be a piece of history. When Darius was but a small boy, Zikata revealed the coin to him as one of his prized possessions.

"I want you to have this." Zikata told him.

"Really?!" A young Darius chirped excitedly. "What for, grandpa?!"

"It's a piece of history, just like you. It's only fitting that the first coin should travel with the first py'sel." Zikata told him, giving Darius a loving embrace.

Stroking the pendant, Darius' heart aches for the loss of his grandfather. He has never taken it off, except to fashion new ropes when the old became too brittle or otherwise broke; he's worn the pendant faithfully for over ten years. Stepping outside and into the hallway, Darius finds Cyrus, Sidana, and the four guards, two Zelkona, one Ketlan, and one human. Approaching his son, Cyrus gives Darius a warm embrace.

"I'm sorry for scaring you so early in the morning." He apologizes.

"It's alright."

"Here." Sidana says, passing Darius a rifle.

"Really?!" He asks with an excited grin.

"Mhm." Cyrus nods. "We're going on a hunt, remember?"

"Yeah." Darius says, looking down at the Sako rifle in his hands. "Dad..."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I... You've never asked me to go with you before. It means a lot." Darius shyly admits.

"... Did that hurt to say?" Cyrus chuckles.

"A little." Darius smirks.

Walking with the guards and his father, they leave the castle and head for the fields. The night moon is barely visible behind the treetops, while the day moon creeps upward into the red colored sky over Monala. Darius isn't usually awake so early in the morning, and did not go to bed until late. Using the library of old books from Earth, he stayed up late, reading about ancient human history. He finds it strange that the books only depict humans. The teenage human-Ketlan hybrid sometimes wonders what Earth is like. Wading silently through the faval stalks, they enter the jungle, toward a hunting ground that is well known to the Sa'kesh.

Darius is a little disappointed, as he's heard of this place before. However, considering that Cyrus has always protected him and kept him from exploring Monala's lush jungles, the light-hearted adventure is a welcome change of pace. Walking through the primary jungle, without the need for machetes to clear their way, there are few dangers presented to them; no wakina lay in wait to sting nearby prey, nor is there brush for a moltaka to hide in, ready to pounce.

"So, why are we hunting?" Darius asks with a bored sigh.

"You like adventure, don't you? You read those books all of the time." Cyrus replies.

Darius' heart sinks. Closing his eyes, he is certain that Vanolza snitched on him.

"He told you didn't he." Darius grumbles.

"What did you expect? Vanolza's a good kid but he's... Impulsive. He doesn't think any farther ahead than the next five minutes; He'll have sex with the first girl who winks at him. Sometime before dinner yesterday, I commented on sending scouts to look for that migrating genashin herd and he just blurted it out." Cyrus explains.

"... Are you mad?" He nervously asks his father.

"No." Cyrus chuckles. "I honestly expected as much from you. You're a lot like me... More than you know."

"I'm sorry, dad! I just... It was just a thought and I-"

"Save it. I told you I'm not mad. I just want you to know that it's dangerous out here. Adventure is fun and all, but it's also difficult; you have to be safe too." Cyrus interrupts.

"You didn't think about safety back in the day." Darius quips.

"I didn't have that luxury. I had to act for the good of your mother, and my friends." Cyrus retorts.

"You say that like you hated it." Darius remarks.

"Sure, there were plenty of good times, but I paid for them. Every happy memory has at least one painful one that accompanies it. A lot of my friends died, some of them in absolutely horrible ways." Cyrus begins.

"He's right. My mother and father often speak of friends who died in the early years of our great nation. My mother in particular does not like speaking of her past battles to me." Sidana interjects.

"Some things don't need to be remembered; Kanafa, me and everyone who's fought understands that. I did things that I wish I didn't have to do, but I did it all to build a life, for you, Jolazar, Vanolza, your mother, and everyone else living here. I glued together a nation so that others wouldn't have to suffer all of the awful things that the first of us went through. Ask Mirkon, Jinaso, Zia, Katero or Uncle Johnny what life was like before, and they'll tell you. It wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Life has never been better here than it is right now." Cyrus continues.

"What if I ask Aunt Yasmin?" Darius smirks.

"She doesn't see things the way everyone else does. She's been filled with fire since I've known her, and it's just never burned out."

"Maybe I'm more like her? Ever think of that, dad?"

Cyrus glances back at the smug looking Darius. Sighing in frustration, he shakes his head.

“People like Yasmin are very rare, thank God... I was your age too, and I felt the same way, for a while. I just wish you wouldn’t glorify the horrendous and push aside all of the positive.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m glorifying it. It’s just that I-”

A sudden thunderclap startles the hunting party, silencing the group. Looking to the cloudless sky, a purple orb forms before their eyes, near the peak of a hill that has since been cleared by a logging crew. Cyrus and the others know what to expect, though they haven’t seen a transportation storm in over twelve years. The last one occurred when Darius was barely five-years-old, and it brought with it a malfunctioning helicopter; None of the occupants survived the crash. Watching in awe, Darius glances to his father, knowing that a similar event brought him to this world, and invariably led to the hybrid teenager’s existence.

As the orb dissipates, an orange object plummets several meters, landing with a loud crunching sound before gliding down the hill. They hear another loud noise as glass shatters and metal bends, the object crashing into a tree near the base of the hill.

“I think that was a car!” Cyrus exclaims.

“What’s a ‘car’?” Darius asks his dad.

“People used them for transportation.” Cyrus answers. “Let’s check it out. Sling the melee and use your firearms.” He says to his guards.

Putting away their spears in special slings that drape the weapons over their shoulders, Sidana and her four underlings draw pistols that they wear upon their hips; personal guard and castle security are all trained to use firearms, and a crew remains trained and ready to man the Panzer IV. Darius’ heart races at the prospect of

a real adventure. Following his father and the guards with his rifle slung over his shoulder, the seven dash through the jungle and towards the crash. In a matter of minutes, they enter the clearing. Moving around the hill, they can see the blades of purple grass, torn from the ground and leaving deep tracks.

Looking at the tracks, they stop at a small, compact car. The front end is wrapped around a goshan tree. The light-yellow bark of the tree contrasts the vibrant orange color of the three-door hatchback, the spout-like teal leaves swaying slowly. The Ketlan guard narrows his eyes, scouring the location. With the driver's side door ajar, an occupant has clearly exited. With an airbag visibly deployed, Cyrus is briefly overcome with excitement.

"That looks like a Ford Focus! I wonder if this guy was a tuner?!" He thinks aloud as he dashes forward.

"Wait! Someone's here!" The Ketlan guard calls out.

Emerging from behind the goshan tree, Cyrus stops in his tracks as he stands near the opened car door. He stares into the muzzle of a pistol, held by a long-haired, Caucasian human. The silver barrel is lined with powder burns, having previously been fired and not yet cleaned. His eyes shift and follow the slide, over the man's left hand which holds the gun, and heading back toward his eyes. He pauses and his lips begin to curl into a subdued grin. Cyrus brazenly steps forward as the nervous man steps back. The guards take up their positions, but the man is focused solely on Cyrus; he doesn't seem to notice them at all.

"Back off, man!" He warns. "I don't want to shoot you."

"Go ahead." Cyrus says, stepping forward.

All are stunned. They can't understand what Cyrus doing. Darius' heart stops. He begins to raise his rifle, but Sidana stops him, shaking her head in disapproval. Cyrus always knows what he is doing. The man's finger nervously jerks the trigger. Click. He doesn't bother to try again, his eyes closing as if ashamed. Cyrus takes hold of the slide and yanks the blued, Ruger P95 pistol from the man, who brings his right hand up to his face. Resting his brow in his palm, he rubs his temples with his first two fingers and thumb.

"I forgot the damn safety..." He grumbles.

"Yeah, you did." Cyrus smirks, his thumb flipping the switch upward and into the off position. "I don't like when people point guns at me."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a little jumpy right now. My car is wrecked, the sky is red, and I seem to have crash landed in a Dr. Seuss book."

"I get that... Still, that doesn't mean you should wave guns in strangers faces." Cyrus scolds the newcomer.

"Who's 'Dr. Seuss'?" Darius asks.

The man glances over to the voice, his brow raising in surprise as he looks at what can only be described as a talking cat-man. Standing beside him is a dragon-elf with long, platinum-blond hair, two lizard people, another cat man with animal feet, and another human. All wear strange armor that appears to be golden in color, with faint, light blue swirls. Though the armor appears similar to that of ancient Greeks, and they have swords, spears and shields, they all carry modern firearms as well.

"He asked you a question." The human guard growls.

"Huh? Oh, uh... Just a man who wrote stories for children." The newcomer answers, snapping out of his trance.

"Are you alright? You look a little... Unnerved." Cyrus smirks.

"Me? I'm just fine. I've only been pulled into a bizarro Earth without warning, but you probably don't know what that's like." The man snaps in frustration.

Cyrus stares blankly at him, his lips pressed together and twisted slightly as his head tilts to the side.

"Ah... Or maybe you do... That was stupid. I'm sorry." The man apologizes.

"It's fine, Mister?"

"Uh... Manny?" The man says after a pause.

"Is that a question?" The Ketlan guard asks with a raised brow.

"No." Manny replies.

"I see... And is that your real name?" Cyrus chuckles.

"... Sure." He smirks.

"Alright, 'Manny', I'm 'Dwizzeldorf', also known as 'Cy'..." Cyrus says as he hands him back his pistol.

"Short for Cyrus?"

"Yeah. So, what brought you here, beside the storm? You were driving awfully fast, and those look like bullet holes." Cyrus points to small punctures at the rear of the car's body

Manny flips the safety switch downward, into the 'safe' position and slips the pistol into the front waistband of his pants. Turning his eyes downward, he sighs and scratches the back of his head, running his fingers through his long brown hair. Darius looks toward the guards, eager to copy their level of readiness. He pauses when he notices that, though holding her pistol at the low-ready, Sidana's eyes scan the human. Her mouth slightly agape, her brow is soft and her eyes focused. It's a strange look, but it's familiar to him. He subdues a grin as the teenage Akzazel admires the appearance of the stranger.

"I was... Uh... Dealing with a situation." Manny vaguely answers.

"Well, I'd like a little more than the Reader's Digest version." Cyrus quips.

"I was running from people who were not very happy with me..." Manny shamefully admits.

Cyrus glances over, peering into the car. Without tinted windows, he can see the contents and his brow raises in surprise. Recalling the name the man gave him, Cyrus suddenly has an epiphany. He turns his head back toward the long-haired human, his goatee beard bending in the gentle breeze. With his chest-length hair framing his face and fluttering in the wind with his long beard, wearing a thick, black leather jacket, dark purple t-shirt with no logos, black jeans and tan and black hiking boots, he looks like he'd be at home in a biker bar. At about five-feet and eight inches tall, with an average build, his size and appearance are appropriate, and he speaks English like an American from the east coast.

"A drink makes you small but a cake makes you big. How do you know when you've returned to normal?" Cyrus suddenly asks.

Everyone blinks in confusion. Manny looks surprised.

"When the Mad Hatter asks everyone to change places." He answers.

"What do you know! Another friendly face!" Cyrus exclaims with a little smile.

"Cyrus? ... Cyrus Richter?" Manny asks.

"Yeah."

"You look... Different." Manny remarks.

"Well, it's been a long time." Cyrus quips.

The guards lower their guns as the two men, who seem to know each other, shake hands. Manny's car suddenly catches fire, the engine block crackling and the hiss of steam heard from underneath the hood.

"Well, that's not good." Manny calmly remarks.

"You should get that looked at." Cyrus quips.

"Know any good repair shops nearby?"

With a wave of his hand, the short but burly Zelkona males take out cykera axes with crescent shaped blades, which were hung on their sides in a simple frog. Standing beside the flaming car, the fire growing rapidly, they begin hacking away around chest level at the goshan tree that Manny's car struck. With incredibly powerful strokes, they bury their axe heads to the shaft, and in only about a dozen hits, have gouged a massive chunk out of the tree. Walking around the tree and casually stowing their axes, the two men walk backward as the fire begins to creep toward the dashboard.

Leaping nearly five feet simultaneously and landing against the top half of the tree, they push it toward the cut and cause it to break. Leaping from the falling trunk, they land on the ground while as much as fifty gallons of stagnant water, having been collected by the tree's cup-like leaves, spills out, drenching the car and snuffing out the blaze in an instant.

"... Impressive." Manny remarks.

"We have our moments." Cyrus quips.

"Well since it isn't burned up, I have some things in that car I'd like to keep." Manny says, using a key to open the rear hatch.

“Do you have a place to stay?” Cyrus facetiously asks.

**“I’m pretty sure I can’t hitchhike back to my house from here.”
Manny smirks.**

**“You should just come live with us then. The more the merrier!”
Cyrus chirps.**

The guards and Darius are stunned, but as the king of the Sa’kesh, and the founder of their nation, they don’t bother to question his judgement. Unlocking and lifting the hatch, they are met with a compelling sight. Two backpacks sit fully packed, one beside the other. One pack is a smaller, M1936 style musette bag in earth brown; this same design was used by Cyrus and Zakera for years. As a result, it’s widely copied by the Sa’kesh, replicated in the supremely durable, native vishkachay fabric. A much larger, olive drab rucksack appears to be a custom-made accessory, bearing three outer pockets, which are held closed with belts and buckles, like the main flap covering the primary compartment.

These two packs sit beside a single, massive, military grade case. Beside the case is a Cobray CM-11/Nine rifle, Bushmaster XM15E2S rifle, a Savage 10 FLCP-SR, and several dozen loaded magazines for all three rifles. A smaller pistol case with a tiny padlock has masking tape, with permanent marker labeling the contents as a Taurus PT809 S/S, and Taurus 66-7. Darius reaches in and swiftly snatches the loaded Cobray rifle.

“By all means, help yourself to my things.” Manny sarcastically remarks.

“Give me that!” Cyrus exclaims as he swipes the weapon from his son’s hands.

Manny walks around and leans into the car through the opened driver-side door, taking a blue, four-inch barreled revolver from the passenger seat. Walking around to the back, he opens the case and

sets the seven-shot, .357 magnum beside a polymer framed semi-automatic pistol with a stainless-steel slide and barrel. The scent of gun smoke is detectable even to the human's noses. Many of these weapons were fired recently.

"What's in the big Pelican case?" Cyrus asks.

"About 20,000 rounds of ammunition. Half of it is 9x19mm parabellum. The rest is assorted rifle ammo, plus some magnum rounds for my wheelgun." Manny answers, locking the pistol case.

"I hate to tell you this, but we're going to need these." Cyrus says.

"Seriously?" Manny whines.

"That's the cost of admission." Cyrus replies.

"Well... Can I keep my pistols and adequate ammunition?"

Cyrus looks Manny over, silently contemplating the request. Stepping up to her king, Sidana suddenly speaks.

"Pardon my saying so, sir, but he's a not a strong looking human."

"Hey!" Manny exclaims.

"What's the harm in letting him keep the small weapons?" She poses.

Cyrus looks Sidana over, noting her posture. With a little grin, he takes a deep breath, sighs and holds up his hands.

"Alright, fine. Keep the pistols and a few boxes for yourself." Cyrus says to Manny.

"Killer." Manny remarks with a grin.

"I declare this hunt successful! You two." Cyrus point to the Zelkona. "You'll need to carry that case. It's going to be heavy. Everyone else, collect what you can." He orders.

Stepping before him, the five-foot and eleven-inch tall Sidana looks down at the human. Her long, platinum blonde hair is swept back, reaching over her shoulders, and elf-like ears that stick up like antenna, the tips a few inches above her head. Manny's eyes briefly and impulsively scan the female creature's form. Sidana's smooth, shiny hide is light blue, with soft violet swirls upon her back and outer extremities, and cream-colored flesh upon her chest. Her bust is ample, easily a D-cup. Leaning in closer, the thin lips of her long and broad, raptor-like snout curl up into a sinister grin. She shows off her omnivorous teeth, with sharp and exaggerated, fang-line canines plainly visible.

Her long tail is thick at the base, but tapers toward the front, and has a fine stripe of platinum blonde fur running along her spine and through her tail. The whip-like tail sways as she eyeballs the human, her proximity making Manny uncomfortable. He leans back, but she leans closer.

"Would you like me to watch the newcomer?" Sidana asks, narrowing her golden colored eyes.

"Grab a pack. I'll worry about our guest." Cyrus answers.

"Aww..." She whimpers, approaching the trunk of the car.

As ordered, the Zelkona each take a handle on either end of the large case. The incredibly strong men pull out and carry the incredibly heavy case with only mild difficulty. Manny watches in amazement; the car raises an inch as soon as the Pelican crate is removed. Sidana and the human and Ketlan guards sling Manny's packs and collect his rifles, while Darius is made to wear a hide pack, originally intended for game meat, but now carrying the loaded

magazines strewn about the back of Manny's car. Cyrus keeps Manny close to him, as he said he would. As they begin their march back to the capitol city, Darius eyes the Cobray rifle in the Ketlan guard's hands.

"What were you doing? You didn't even check it. You have to assume firearms are loaded, remember?" Cyrus scolds Darius.

"It is. It's modified for select-fire too." Manny boasts.

"See? Think... Please be more careful son." Cyrus says, resting a hand on Darius' shoulder.

"Son?" Manny raises a brow.

"I'm sorry, dad. I just got overly excited." Darius murmurs.

"It's alright." Cyrus replies, patting his shoulder.

"Oh, I see the family resemblance now!" Manny facetiously remarks.

"People always tell me how alike we look." Cyrus quips.

Darius notes how comfortable his father acts with the young human, though he knows that his father is prepared for anything. A hand hovers over his sidearm the entire time they escort the newcomer, Manny, back to their home.

"So, what is this place? It's obviously not Earth." Manny comments.

"Correct. It's a different world altogether; a place called Monala." Sidana answers before Cyrus can take a breath.

"That sounds peaceful." Manny remarks.

"It can be, but it can also be quite harsh." She replies.

"I'd love to learn more about Monala. I don't suppose you have a local library where we're going, do you?" Manny asks.

“No.” Cyrus replies.

“Oh... Well, can I ask you a million questions about it then?”

“I can teach you!” Sidana chirps.

“Really?!” Manny looks surprised.

“Of course.” She nods.

Noting his genuine interest, Cyrus has a thought. Though few have been to Agnis, the truth of Monala has since become common knowledge to all. Tribes many miles in the jungle probably now know that they are the creation of the human race, the first to exist on Monala, the human’s home-world. Manny, however, is totally unaware.

“If you really want to know so badly, we can help you.” Cyrus says.

“I do!” Manny exclaims.

“Let’s hook you up with Agnis.”

“I’m not a fan of blind dates.” Manny quips.

“This one you’ll thank me for.” Cyrus smirks.