

The Seventh Realm: Volume Five

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Episode 51: Babysitting

Approaching the large castle, the guards are surprised to find a new human walking with their king and company. Bearing more weapons than they had left with, and a large case of a strange material, they stare in awe. Manny does the same, but not at the Zelkona guards who watch the gate of the castle.

“Is that... Is that a Panzer IV?!” Manny exclaims.

“Huh?” Cyrus glances back to him. “Oh, yeah.”

“It looks brand-fucking-new.” Manny remarks.

“It actually about... Nineteen or twenty years old.” Cyrus retorts.

“What?” Manny raises a brow.

“Long story. You’ll know soon enough.”

Walking into the courtyard of the castle, a grizzled looking man in his late fifties or early sixties approaches. With slicked back, gray hair and a pistol belt bearing a flap holster with a German Luger P08, the man looks like the archetype for an old warrior.

“Who’s your new friend?” Jack asks.

“He came during that last storm.” Cyrus answers.

“And he’s staying?” Jack looks apprehensively at Manny.

“He is. I’m taking him to see Agnis after this.”

“In that case, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Jack Carter.”

“That name sounds familiar... Well, I’m Manny. A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carter.” The young man says, shaking his hand.

“I hope you prove your worth, young man.” Jack squeezes his hand tightly.

“Aahhhh-I’ll do my best.” Manny grits his teeth through the pain.

“See that you do... Good day, gentleman. Ma’am.” Jack says to the party.

Racing outside and followed by her children, Zakera leaps upon Cyrus and hugs him tightly. She kisses his face as Jolazar and Vanolza approach. Looking over the children and noticing their features, especially their colorations and feet, he glances back to Cyrus and Zakera, then to Darius; it suddenly makes sense.

“We’re so glad you’re home!” Zakera exclaims.

“That storm had us a little worried.” Jolazar admits.

“Who’s this?” Vanolza asks.

Turning to the human, Zakera narrows her cyan eyes. Though he waves politely and remains silent, she is immediately suspicious of him.

“He’s our new citizen.” Cyrus answers.

“I must say, this is a wonderful city you have here.” Manny remarks.

Motioning to Sidana and the guards, they take Darius’ pack of magazines and climb the stairs to the armory. The courtyard guards

watch with rifles in hand while Cyrus and his family leave Manny standing alone, having instructed him to wait there. Looking around, Manny can see the anxiety his presence is causing everyone. Glancing at the gate, which is sealed behind him, he can't help but wonder if he is about to be executed. He turns back toward the large staircase leading to the second level. Cyrus speaks to his wife at the top, while his children stand idly by. Zakera looks back at him, talking to her husband, though they are too far for him to hear what they are saying.

"I don't trust him, Cy." Zakera says.

"Well, I'd like to give him a chance." Cyrus answers.

"Tell me what you know about him." She says, leaning past him and looking at the lone human in the courtyard. "And please don't lie to me."

"Alright... He used to work for J.T." Cyrus begins.

"Isn't that Uncle Johnny's dad? The one that escaped?" Vanolza asks.

"Yeah. J.T. was originally from a place called Detroit, Michigan. His business started there. I heard that he had a trained killer, a native of that city, working for him. He was actually the first one. He was the only assassin that J.T. had in that whole nation. J.T. lived in a different nation, and that's where Yasmin, Johnny and I were. His codename was Man-something; I forgot what it was years ago. At the time, he was the same age as me, so that would make him twenty-four." Cyrus explains.

"And you think this 'Manny' is the same person?" Zakera asks.

"That's not very likely." Jolazar adds.

"I asked him a question that J.T. used as a code. He knew the answer. It's one in a billion, but I think he's the guy. He must have been picked up by a storm around the same time I was, and because of the delay, only just now arrived." Cyrus theorizes.

"Do you trust him?" Zakera asks.

“Not really, but I only met him once, about twenty years ago, on a different planet, in another dimension.” Cyrus quips.

“Promise me something.” Zakera begins, wrapping her arms around Cyrus’ body.

“Alright.”

“If you think that he’s a threat, you’ll kill him.”

“Okay. I promise.” He softly answers, hugging his wife.

Looking at the ground, Manny kicks a small stone, the only thing that looks familiar in the purple tinted grass beneath his feet. Hearing footsteps on the ground, he looks up to see that Cyrus, Sidana and the previous guards are returning. Darius remains with his family at the top of the steps, watching from a distance.

“So... What’s going on?” Manny nervously asks.

“Now we visit Agnis.” Cyrus replies.

They walk by the Panzer IV and toward the massive compound, just beyond the castle. Manny marvels at the huge black stones and pillars as they climb the ramps toward the supercomputer. It’s obvious to Manny that the structure is as technologically advanced as it is massive. Issuing the same instructions that Cyrus had given Yasmin and Johnny when he sent them into the compound, Manny walks in alone. As he disappears into the darkness, Cyrus turns to Sidana, who stares intently at the doorway.

“Sidana, you’ve been a very good soldier for the Sa’kesh.” He begins.

“Thank you, sir!” She chirps, turning to him.

“You’re a strong warrior, a loyal soldier and a role model to many, so I hope you understand when I make this request...”

"Sir?" She raises a brow.

"For reasons I won't explain, I don't entirely trust Manny. I need someone trustworthy to... Watch him. To make sure that he settles in alright and doesn't get into any trouble." He continues.

"You... Want me to babysit him?" She raises a brow in confusion.

"Just until I feel that he is safe to be left to his own devices."

"Alright!" She eagerly agrees.

"Okay." Cyrus chuckles, amused by her excitement. "This is a serious request, Sidana. Manny isn't one of us, not yet anyway. I want you to remember that."

"Yes, sir." She nods.

After waiting a moment, Manny stumbles from the structure. He leans against the stone of the archway before falling to his knees. Cyrus waves Sidana over; she dashes up to the human and scoops him into her arms, carrying him back.

"We should take him to Nendath's clinic. After he comes too, he can stay at the barracks until we figure something else out." Cyrus instructs.

"Yes, sir!" Sidana chirps, looking down at the human in her arms.

Leaning against the stone blocks that form the thick, waist-high railing on the outer wall of the castle, Darius watches as Sidana and several guards return to the city center with the human. Koleta cocks her head, standing beside her best friend and watching the sight below.

"Those are strange looking clothes." Koleta remarks.

"You should have seen it, Koleta. It was like he was friends with that guy. I was ready for action and everything."

"You sound upset."

"It's just not fair." Darius whines. "I never get the chance to prove myself. My ceremony is coming up and I still feel like a youngling!"

"Hey..." Koleta speaks softly, draping an arm over him. "You'll get your chance. You're going to be a very fine man soon."

"You really think so?" Darius turns to her.

Staring him in the eyes, her arm over his shoulder and their snouts close together, Koleta's heart flutters. His look is so grateful and innocent that she feels herself melting.

"Y-yeah." She subtly nods, pulling her arm away from him. "You're going to be a great leader and a wonderful pledge to... Some lucky female."

"Thanks, Koleta." He says, taking her into his arms. "You're going to make someone very happy, too."

Resting her chin on his shoulder, she hugs him back. As strong as she is, she feels her knees growing weak. Releasing him, she pulls away and leans against the stones, covertly hiding her anxiety. His lips drooping into a frown, Darius watches her for a moment. She always pulls away... Standing beside her, he leans against the edge with her and watches as Sidana and the guards now pass by them, beyond the wall and directly beneath them. Cyrus walks with them, waving to the teens as he returns home.

"One day, I'll finally get some recognition, and then he won't treat me like some stupid kid." Darius says to her, waving at his dad.

"Yeah. Soon enough, Darius." Koleta murmurs, turning her fuchsia eyes toward him.

Bolting upright, Manny gasps for breath. An arm with a smooth, shiny, but dense hide, teal in color and with purple swirls upon it, reaches across his chest. The hand with large, purple claws grips his arm that's furthest from the hand's owner. He turns to see a woman like a raptor looking at him, her vibrant purple eyes appearing to glow in the dimly lit, stone room.

"Lie back." Nendath says, her razor-sharp teeth visible as she speaks. "You need to rest."

"S-Sidana?" Manny calls out.

"I'm here." She answers.

"Oh, thank God." He remarks, turning his head up and looking at her. "It's nice to see a familiar face."

"Are you feeling alright?" Sidana asks.

"A little dizzy. My head feels like it's going to explode." Manny replies.

"That's normal." Nendath says, peering into his eyes. "You're adjusting fine. You just need to rest. You can stay here for the night."

"Oh, uh, actually... I'm taking him to the barracks." Sidana interjects.

"He shouldn't be walking right now." Nendath retorts.

As if to compromise, Sidana ignores Nendath's warnings; with nearly eighteen years of medical training, she is every bit as competent as Lara, who still operates the clinic in their first city of Salashima. She scoops Manny into her arms like a bride, looking to Nendath as if she were ignorant of this option. Grumbling in frustration, Nendath shoos them from her office.

"When I stop by the barracks tomorrow, he better not be working until I clear him, or I'll be treating you for severe head wounds." Nendath warns.

“Understood.”

Walking through the streets with the conscious human in her arms, Manny notices the continual stares of the diverse citizenry. Many humans, Ketlan and Zelkona raise their brows at the sight, wondering why he isn't walking on his own. He can feel his face flush, a strong desire to wriggle away overcoming him. However, with vertigo still in full effect, he remains still.

“Almost there.” Sidana says, a grin ever present on her face.

“You're always smiling.” Manny comments.

“Only when I'm happy. Is that a problem?” She asks.

“No! It's nice. You have a very pleasant and endearing personality, if you don't mind my saying so.”

“Why would I mind?” She chuckles, looking down at him.

“I don't know. I suppose to some people, it might sound like flirting.”

Turning her eyes away and back up, her grin grows slightly wider. Amused by the human, she is secretly thankful for such a relaxed assignment. Approaching the barracks, the guards look perplexed as Sidana carries Manny toward the door.

“I thought you were hunting?” A female Zelkona guard asks.

“I was.” Sidana replies.

“Are you saying I'm not a good catch?!” Manny quips.

“No, I...”

“Yeah, she probably could've found better. You know what they say, one in the hand or two in the bush.” Manny jests.

“What?” The woman looks quite confused.

“Stop talking.” Sidana says to him.

“Yes, huntress.” Manny murmurs.

Chuckling, she carries Manny inside and heads for a certain portion of the barracks. She approaches a room that contains only two beds; it’s a temporary cell for soldiers who might misbehave. If Manny did notice the sturdy hinges, metal plated door and strong latches on only the outside, he didn’t say anything. Setting him down on the bed, she disarms the human, setting his weapon on the furthest table. She removes his footwear and then pulls him up, taking off his black leather jacket.

“No means no.” He teases.

“If that’s what I wanted, you couldn’t stop me.” She retorts.

“Oh, my.” He grins.

“Rest. You should feel better tomorrow. I’ll bring you something to eat, if you’re hungry.” She says, rising to her feet.

“I’m fine. Thanks though.”

She turns to leave, only for him to suddenly stop her.

“Hey!”

“Yes?” She glances back.

“You’ve been very kind to me, and I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” She grins.

Locking him in the room, Sidana returns to her own quarters within the barracks. As a captain, she has a modest but private room. Per the instructions Cyrus gave her, Sidana periodically checks on Manny, ordering a barracks guard to monitor him throughout the night

as well. Early the next morning, Sidana ignores roll-call; her special assignment overrides it. Taking a plate of food to the cell, she peeks inside through the small window. There on the bed, Manny sleeps peacefully, his pistol exactly where she left it yesterday. As she pulls open the latch, Nendath enters the barracks courtyard.

“How’s my patient? Still alive, I hope.”

“See for yourself.” Sidana remarks, looking back through the window.

Opening the door, both women enter the cell, taking a seat on the bed across from him. Sidana gently shakes the human, who rubs the sleep from his eyes before sitting upright. No longer suffering from vertigo, and after a brief examination by Nendath, she clears him to move around. Taking her leave, Sidana sits in the cell with him, presenting him the plate of food.

“Thanks.” He says, taking the plate. “Where’s yours?”

“I’ll eat later.”

Manny sets the plate on the nightstand.

“Aren’t you hungry?” She asks.

“Sure, but I’ll wait. I’m not just going to eat in front of you. I’m not that kind of asshole.” He grins.

Motioning for him to follow her, he collects his pistol and the plate, walking beside Sidana who leads him into the barracks commissary. Taking a seat at a table in a far corner, many of the off-duty guards watch him, still wearing vishkachay gambesons and leather under-armor. Though they don’t glare, the attention bothers him. Returning with her own plate of food, Sidana sits across from him.

"You don't see a lot of newcomers here, do you?" He asks.

"No. I was only a small child when the last storm occurred."

"And do you mind if I ask how old you are now?"

"Well..." Sidana pauses, chewing a large piece of genashin steak. "I'm seventeen cycles now; I think the last storm occurred when I was four or five cycles."

"Seventeen?!" Manny exclaims.

"Yes. Why?" She raises a brow.

"I'm just surprised. You're very... Strong for your age."

"I exercise." She smirks.

"Yeah, I noticed."

"And how old are you?" A curious Sidana prods.

"Twenty-four."

"Really! Are you wiser than me?"

"Perhaps. I guess you'll just have to judge for yourself." He answers.

As they eat their meal, Manny looks pensively at the food upon his plate. His little smile fades, replaced with a melancholy stare.

"Are you alright?" She asks.

"Don't worry about it. It's not your problem." He sighs.

"If you'd like, you can talk to me." She assures him.

"Yeah, I bet." He mutters.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know you have better things to do than sit here with me. Cyrus probably asked you to watch me, and I don't blame him. I'm being vetted to see if I fit in, but you don't have to pretend to care or baby

me, and my own problems are my own problems; you have enough of your own to worry about.” He answers.

“I didn’t ask because I was told to. I asked because you look sad and I wondered if I could help you.” Sidana retorts, visibly offended.

“I’m sorry.” Manny lowers his head. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’ll help you adjust. I know it must be difficult.”

“It’s more than difficult. It’s like waking up one day to find out that your parents aren’t your parents, your friends were all pretending to like you, and your whole identity was made up. You’re standing there confused, not even sure if the ground beneath your feet is real. I have all of this knowledge in my head; my whole history has been erased by it. I know that Earth isn’t home, but Monala doesn’t feel like it either.” He explains.

Reaching out, Sidana rests her clawed hand on his forearm, her touch soft and comforting. Lifting his head, he turns his green eyes up to her.

“I’ll help you, but you have to try. It’ll be alright, and I’m not saying that because I was told to. I say it because it’s true.” She speaks softly.

Nodding subtly, he feels the cloud slowly lifting, his burden lightening. After eating their meal together, Manny spends the day with Sidana. She shows him around the city and the outlying lands that are under their direct control. Speaking with the human, she asks him many questions about his background and skills, attempting to carry out her task as professionally as possible. After a day devoted almost exclusively to showing him around, having failed to find him a trade that he has the skills to participate in, they return to the barracks and eat dinner together.

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow will be better.” She assures him.

"I hope so."

Several guards murmur, looking at the Akzazel as she sits alone with the human for the second time that day. Sidana glances over her shoulder, silencing the guards with a death glare.

"Jealous boyfriend?" Manny asks facetiously.

"I'm an adult, and I'm not pledged."

"Oh..."

"What about you? Are... Where you pledged before you came here?" She asks.

"Uh... No."

"And why is that?" She asks with surprise.

"At the risk of sounding pathetic, I'd rather not say."

"Are you not a skilled lover?" She teases.

"Hey, I'm adequate!" He replies, his face flushing.

"Hm... Then perhaps your standards were just too high."

"It wasn't that, it... It wouldn't be fair to someone else. My job didn't really allow me the time or stability to devote to a relationship. I wanted one, but it wouldn't have been right to drag some poor girl into my life if I couldn't be there for her... So, I just... Went without." He explains.

Taken aback by his answer, she sees a sorrow in his eyes. Reaching out, she touches his forearm again.

"You're sensitive. That's not a common trait for a male."

"For all the good it's ever done me." He smirks.

After dinner, the duo part ways at the cell.

“If you’re going to lock that door, you might want to hold onto this.” He says, presenting his pistol to her butt first.

Reluctantly taking his weapon, Sidana locks Manny in the cell, watching him through the window for a moment as he sits on the edge of his bed. Returning to her own room, she finds herself restless. She eagerly awaits the next day, so that they can continue their quest. It perturbs her that she enjoys his company so much, having only known him for less than two days, but she cannot help finding the newcomer intriguing. After struggling to sleep that night, she awakens the next morning and returns to Manny’s cell. To her surprise, he sits awake on the bed, watching the door.

He waves to her as she takes hold of the latch, peering in through the window. Smiling, she opens his cell and steps inside. As he scoots toward the edge, resting his feet on the floor, Sidana sits beside him rather than on the bed across the room.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” He asks.

“Breakfast?” She suggests.

“That works. Are there other places to eat here, though? Your cook is... A little...”

“I know. He’s terrible, but everyone likes him, so we put up with it.” Sidana explains.

“I admire your fighting spirit.” He quips.

“There’s an inn that also has a kitchen.” She says.

“Lovely. I get to see how your currency works.”

Chuckling, she rises from the bed and extends a hand, leading him from the cell. Several guards entering the mess hall take notice as the pair exit the barracks courtyard. They walk through the streets and make their way to the inn, Sidana leading the way. Though it is still very new to him, he is thankful that this city has a well-defined grid pattern. Entering the inn, which is moderately busy at that time of morning, they seat themselves and are quickly waited on by one of the staff.

"I'll pay this time." Sidana says with her now trademarked smile.

"Thanks. I forgot my wallet on my other planet." He quips.

"Tell me about Earth."

Manny regales her of the details of his home-world, the planet and dimension where he was born. Unlike Cyrus, who'd seen deserts, jungles and foreign cities, Manny stayed close to home. With only a decaying city to share with her, he chose to speak of childhood memories to places that he remembered being beautiful. Describing the grass and the sky, the brown trees with green leaves that seemed so bland to him at the time, Sidana sits in awe. She has only known Monala, a vibrant world as colorful as it is dangerous.

"I'd love to see Earth. It sounds pretty." She comments.

"It can be, in its own way. But if you did, the humans there would probably panic. If they didn't kill you, they'd captured you and treat you like an animal." He laments.

"You'd protect me." She says, narrowing her eyes.

"You're a good person, Sidana."

The two look at each other, sharing a silent moment. A commotion inside of the inn's dining hall interrupts them. Rising from their seats, a fight has broken out between several patrons. Though not wearing her full armor, Sidana's under-armor is enough to show her

authority. Pushing herself into the middle of a fight between two older Ketlan, and a younger Ketlan and human, she holds out her hands.

“What’s going on here?!” She snaps, glaring between the two groups.

“Tell these sons of whores to stop picking on my friend.” The young Ketlan growls.

“Is that what’s going on here? Anti-human Ketlan?” She turns to the older men.

“And who are you supposed to be?” The older Ketlan asks.

“I’m an off-duty captain, and I’m ordering you to stop.”

She turns back to the younger men to hear their story first. Manny narrows his eyes, squaring off as he stands just behind and to the side of the older Ketlan.

“I don’t take orders from little girls...” One grumbles.

Drawing a dagger from a hidden sheath stuck into his trousers, he prepares to stab the young female Akzazel in the back.

“Sidana!” Manny yells, grabbing the Ketlan from behind.

Spinning around, she grabs an attacker by his throat, the other having also drawn his own blade. She throws him back and turns to Manny. Knocking the blade from his attacker’s hand, he grabs him by the wrist, spins his body, and yanks him over his shoulder, dropping the Ketlan onto the ground. He climbs atop him, pushing one of the Ketlan’s arms across his chest and into his own throat, pinning him. The younger men and two more patrons take the men prisoner, lifting

up one of the older Ketlan fighters and binding his wrists while Sidana aids Manny with his prisoner.

“Thank you, Manny. I owe you my life.”

“No, you don’t.” He says with a smile.

Wincing in pain, he slides from the man.

“What’s wrong?!” She asks with fear in her voice.

“Oh, nothing. He just cut me.”

Rushing up to him while the other patrons bind the old Ketlan’s wrists, she kneels beside him and looks him over. On his underarm, she finds a slash, left from Manny’s first, sloppy attempt to disarm the man. A smaller stab wound has punctured his shirt near his left side, a result of briefly facing his attacker as he wrestled him for the knife.

“We need to take you to the clinic!” She exclaims.

“No, I’ll be alright.” He says as he stands up, promptly falling back from the pain in his side. “Ow, shit. No, I’m not. Definitely hurt.”

Unwilling to be carried outright, she slings his good arm, draping it over her shoulders. Guards rush in, summoned by bystanders who witnessed the attack. Taking over for her, they cart away the perpetrators as Sidana effectively carries Manny back to Nendath’s clinic for treatment. Entering the clinic only moments later, she explains the situation to an angry Nendath, who always takes her patient’s health personally. Checking the depth of his stab wound and the tissue of his gash, nothing vital has been hit. Retrieving antiseptic, soothing ointment and a sewing kit, she begins to suture his wounds.

“Where are you going?” Manny asks, lying atop Nendath’s table.

“I need to report this. I’ll be back for you.” She assures him.

“Oh... Does this make us even for breakfast?” He asks with a little grin.

“Yes, it does.” She giggles.

Leaving the clinic, she does not return to the barracks, but instead walks directly to the castle. Well known among the guards, she is immediately granted access, seeking an audience with Cyrus. Sitting in his study with Jolazar, Sidana apologizes for her interruption, but assures him of the importance. Allowing her to speak freely, the king and his daughter listen with intrigue as Sidana quickly reveals the events of the previous day, ending with his wounding in the tavern brawl.

“An interesting turn of events, to say the least.” Cyrus remarks.

“Indeed.” Jolazar nods.

“So, I suppose you have an opinion on your findings?” He asks.

“I do.” Sidana nods.

“Then by all means.” He says, urging her to continue.

“Manny is not a threat, sir. He’s kind hearted, thoughtful and sensitive. I’m not sure what made you mistrust him before, but I don’t believe it was well founded. I think he should be free to carry on as Sa’kesh.”

“I agree. Now he just needs a job.” Cyrus replies.

“Unfortunately, I haven’t found any skills that would blend well with the tradesmen.” Sidana adds.

“He helped you today. That’s a trade, and we could always use more guards. Is there any room in your squad?”

Sidana can't help but grin, nodding her head in response.