

The Seventh Realm: Volume Five

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 53: The Chase

Pacing back and forth in his room, Darius peers out his window, looking down at the ground below. The teenager's heart pounds in nervous anticipation. Locked within his own room while his parents decide his punishment, he feels as though he's wearing a trench in his floor. With shaking hands, he grabs hold of his backpack, staring at the empty bag. Why did he have to tell Koleta his plans? Feeling the pressure, and pushed over the edge by his immaturity and fear, Darius makes a fateful decision. He must go through with his plan and meet Koleta; they're leaving tonight.

Collecting the few belongings that truly matter to him, including Zikata's mosaic and a second change of clothes, he stuffs his pack, leaving enough room for some food and weapons. Taking a small, strangely shaped piece of metal, Darius walks toward his door. With only simple methods of locking doors, most with outer latches, the castle is a rare example of internal mechanical locks. Reinventing the post-hole lock commonly used in the 1800s on Earth, the doors have no visible display of accessibility. It was done in an effort to confuse potential thieves and disorient attackers, who would not understand why the door is locked.

However, as a very simple lock, and having known the man who introduced it, Christopher Tapping, Darius understands how to pick the lock. Inserting his makeshift key into the archetypal keyhole, he very carefully turns it until a loud clicking is heard. He cringes, worried that guards might be outside to hear the shifting bolt. Peering through

the keyhole with its limited view, he waits for a few seconds. Without signs of anyone who might interrupt him, he slings his pack and carefully opens the door. Sticking his head out and glancing to the left and right, no one is nearby. Sighing with relief, he closes the door and walks quietly through the halls.

Darius passes one guard, who merely greets him, as he would during the day. The guard doesn't even question the backpack, as Darius is seen wearing it, often when carrying food outside with him. Walking near a store room, he steps into the unguarded area and collects several emergency rations of food. With Cyrus' and Jack's previous experiences in combat and when they lived at the original tree-fortress at Salashima, they became adept survivors; many weeks of dried food and faval bread sit waiting for emergency use. Taking enough for both he and Koleta to survive several days, he makes his way toward a window.

Looking outside, he watches for signs of a patrol. This is where he must take precautions. Even at night, Darius cannot simply walk into the armory. Often, he is stopped and asked for his business, usually accompanied by a guard. However, now unable to freely take a weapon or ammunition, he must sneak in. As a Sakona, he, like the Akzazel and humans, are adept climbers. The races with digitigrade feet can land safely at higher distances, but his longer, human-like feet and toes allow for skillful scaling of trees, fences, and walls of stone. Taking off his boots, he ties the laces together and slings them over his pack.

Moving through the window, as none of the castle's windows have glass in them, but open ports with metal shutters for defensive purposes, he straddles the edge. Taking a deep breath to prepare himself, he holds onto the jagged stones. Though skilled craftsmen, they do not have the precision that the ancient humans did; using small handholds and a thin ledge that once supported a scaffolding when the castle was first build, Darius moves around the wall, to a window over thirty meters away. Reaching the window, he is thankful

that the shutters are open. If they were not, he'd have to abandon the plan and flee unarmed.

After peering inside to make sure that no guards were within the armory, he slips into the room. Sitting on the floor, he quietly catches his breath and allows his burning muscles the time to relax. Keeping his shoes off, he walks barefoot on the cool stone floor; the soft flesh of his footpads on his hybrid feet are grateful for the experience. Reaching the pistol section, he finds that his favorite is still in place. He takes a Smith & Wesson 5904 pistol, three loaded magazines total, and empties two boxes of spare ammunition into his lightweight jacket pockets, closing the flaps with a button-loop.

With the pistol stuck into his waistband, he quickly browses for Koleta. He finds another pistol, a Glock 17, and takes that for her. Also taking three loaded mags, he ducks down when he hears a guard bump the door, his heart skipping a beat. Though he wanted to gather even more ammo, he fears that the weight will slow them down or even hurt his back. Pocketing the magazines for her weapon and slipping it into his waistband, opposite his Smith & Wesson, he returns to the window and quickly shimmies to another room. Slipping in through the window, he catches his breath while he puts on his shoes.

The old scaffolding ledge does not reach the ground, nor would he be able to safely land if he jumped from the third floor; even Koleta wouldn't want to try it. He lifts and pulls his beige shirt to hide the pistols and walks out of the room and into the hall, holding his heavy pockets in his hands so that the loose rounds don't rattle. Passing another guard, he nods his head and continues walking. No one seems to notice, nor were they apparently told of the trouble he was in. Reaching the second story and looking down the grand staircase toward the courtyard and gate, he knows that he cannot simply stroll out at night; the guards will stop and question him, as he is the underage son of their king.

Walking around the wall, he acts as if he is merely admiring the night sky, his head and snout pointing slightly upward but his eyes turned down towards the ground. Waiting for a patrol to pass, he turns his head to check for witnesses. With a brief opportunity presenting itself, he climbs over the wall, hangs with his arms fully extended over his head, and lets go. Landing with a hard thud, he rolls as he is supposed to, a trick he was taught by Jack in brief tutoring sessions. Rising to his feet and brushing himself off, he slips away and into the darkness, heading directly for Koleta's home.

"Where are you?" Koleta whispers almost silently to herself.

Pacing back and forth, she knows that her parents are asleep, as she can hear Katero snoring. Zia groans softly as she rolls over in bed. Sitting on the floor and with her back to the wall, the shuttered window to her right slowly opens. Startled, she nearly exclaims before Darius pokes his head inside, looking around for her.

"You came!" She whispers loudly and excitedly.

"Of course. I always will." He whispers back and with a little smile on his face. "Are you ready?"

"Mhm." She nods.

"Good. I brought a weapon and ammo for you, plus some food. We'd better get moving." He quietly tells her.

Her heart flutters as she collects her pack, glancing back to Darius who sits in her window. Having climbed to her second-floor bedroom in her upscale home, the youth committed a crime that, if caught, could see him executed by her parents. Even Cyrus cannot and would not violate their own rules and regulations, and though she is certain that Katero and Zia would not actually kill Darius if he were caught, she finds his willingness to risk himself somewhat romantic. The thought alone makes her flush.

“I’m ready.” She whispers, adjusting her pack.

“Shall we?” Darius teasingly asks, extending a hand to her.

The following morning and just before roll-call, where Manny and the other guards would announce their presence and await orders from Sidana, who attends her own roll-call for officers, the human sits up on his modest bunk and looks at his trunk. With the other guards at breakfast, Manny opens the case and peers inside. Collecting a heavy, wrapped package, he somewhat nervously carries the object as he enters the dining hall. There, Sidana carries a plate and sits at one table, alone on her side but across from two of her underlings. Forgoing breakfast, he approaches the table.

“Hey look! Your shadow came back.” A soldier teases.

“Shadows are dark, you idiot.” The other retorts.

“Yeah, but she’s got light hair and eyes, so I thought-”

“That doesn’t make sense.” The second interjects.

“How about you both shut up and keep eating?” Sidana glares at them.

“Yes, ma’am.” They reply.

Sitting beside Sidana, she looks curiously as he doesn’t have a meal before him.

“Are you alright? You look troubled.” She says.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Manny asks.

“Of course.” She grins.

Leaving the table, the two guards watch them leave the commissary.

“You think he’s going to ask her?” One wonders.

“If he did, she’d probably say ‘yes’.” The other chuckles.

Standing outside and in the courtyard, Manny turns to Sidana.

“What’s wrong?” She asks, growing concerned.

“I’m not very good at this...” He sighs.

“Manny?”

“Here.”

Handing her the wrapped package, she looks curiously at it. There is enough weight for it to be mentionable, and she slowly removes the wrappings.

“I-I know you don’t have your own; you borrow from the cache, so I just thought...” He nervously explains.

Opening the package, she finds Manny’s Taurus PT809 pistol, fully loaded and with a half-dozen spare magazines. Her lips curl into a grin and she turns her golden eyes to the human.

“You know I don’t need this.” She comments.

“I know! I just... I want you to have it. You’re my best friend and I just... I wanted to say thanks you for all you’ve done for me. Most people wouldn’t have.” He replies.

At a loss for words, she merely reaches out and hugs him. Though rather benign, they hold the embrace for some time. Finally letting go, they step back and look at each other.

“As sweet as you are, I’m surprised you haven’t given more gifts. You looked so nervous.” She chuckles.

“Yeah, well... Most people didn’t know me for very long.” Manny retorts.

Returning inside, Manny eats breakfast with his crew and captain. The gift is a continuous source of teasing for the others, especially when the entire squad is present. After their breakfast, the team prepares for their separate roll-calls before Sidana will rejoin them. Walking into the courtyard with several other active-duty squads, a runner wearing an official Sa’kesh tunic arrives.

“Sidana?” The runner asks, stopping them.

“Yes.” She nods.

“I need you and a soldier named ‘Manny’ to accompany me to the castle, right away!”

“Get your armor.” She turns to Manny.

“No time. This is urgent. Collect weapons only and please return with me.” The runner replies.

“Alright.” She concedes.

Leaving her squad with another captain, Sidana races into her quarters while Manny darts into the guard’s bunkhouse. Opening his trunk and collecting his small musette pack, he haphazardly stuffs his firearms into it before slinging on his pack. Collecting his sword and shield, he races from the building around the same time that Sidana does, her pistol and weapons stuck into a shoulder bag as she wears her sheathed falcata sword, and holds her spear and shield.

Returning with the runner and jogging at a moderate pace, they reach the castle in only minutes. The runner leads them to the Master bedroom.

“What was he thinking?! How could he do something so foolish and reckless?!” Zakera rants, pacing back and forth.

“Damnit, Darius! I knew I should have left a guard outside his door!” Cyrus growls.

Turning to her husband, Zakera sits at the side of his bed. She rests a clawed hand on his chest and looks at him as Cyrus struggles to hold back tears. Shaking in fear of his son’s fate, his eyes well up. As angry and fearful as she is, she can see the pressure rising in her mate. For all those years Cyrus was the one who bore the burden and protected her, but now it is he who needs her protection and love. She takes a breath, calming herself. Leaning in, Zakera kisses his cheek and lips several times. Holding him like she did on the day that he saved her from the cultists, she nuzzles her husband’s face.

“Shh... It’s alright, my love. Darius is strong and capable. He’s our son, and he will be okay.” She assures him.

“You’re right.” He sniffles.

“Of course I am. I’m your wife.” She coos, hoping to amuse him.

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “I’m just so scared.”

“Don’t be. Everything will be alright. Just consider all of the clever punishments we can humiliate him with when he comes home.” She adds.

“I love you.” He says, holding her tightly.

“I love too.”

Entering the room, Zakera sits up and looks at the runner and the summoned guards. Cyrus sniffles, visibly distraught. Sidana has

never seen him like this in her time in his service, and Manny, who knew of Cyrus from before, is equally surprised. Zakera too, is noticeably upset, her bottom lip quivering and her eyes glossy. His heart aches for the couple, who appear on the verge of crumbling before them.

“Reporting in.” Sidana murmurs.

“What happened?” Manny asks.

“It’s my son... Darius.” Cyrus chokes out. “He...”

“He ran away.” Zakera takes over for her husband. “We left him alone, locked in his room for the night. When morning came, our other son, Vanola, visited his room. He was going to take him breakfast and bring him back to us so that we could talk to him.”

“He wasn’t there!” Cyrus blurts out. “Picked his damn lock and took off.”

“The guards searched the castle but they didn’t find him. One came forward to say that he saw Darius walking the grounds at night.” Zakera continues.

“He didn’t know that Darius was being punished?” Sidana asks.

“No. That was my fault. In my anger, I neglected to tell anyone but my family.” Cyrus shamefully admits.

“Another guard informed us that two pistols went missing...” Zakera says with a horrified look.

“You don’t think he...” Sidana falls silent.

“Where is my daughter?!” An angry and frantic Zia asks, charging in.

“I’m sorry! I tried to stop her, but she insisted and I didn’t want to harm Zia!” A guard pleads with Cyrus and Zakera.

“It’s fine.” Cyrus assures him, holding up a hand.

“Koleta’s missing?!” Zakera looks surprised.

“Yes, she is. She left me a little note telling me not to worry and that she would be home soon. I wouldn’t normally be so angry if I

hadn't discovered it at dawn, and she hadn't said that she was with Darius." Zia explains, holding up a small, rolled parchment.

Taking the letter from her, Zakera reads the contents, shaking her head slowly. Closing his eyes, Cyrus leans back in the bed. It's obvious to all in the room what's happened. Darius and Koleta ran away together, fleeing deep into the jungle.

"Does Katero know?" Zakera asks.

"Not yet. He left for the fields before I awoke, as he often does."

"Don't worry, Zia. We'll find them." Cyrus assures her.

He glances at Manny, staring intently for a moment.

"I know you're new here, but you proved yourself to me yesterday, and Sidana spoke up for you long before that. I need to know, and please don't lie... Did you work for J.T., doing what I did?"

"Yeah..." Manny shamefully nods.

"Then you're ready for what's out there. Can you ride a motorcycle?"

"I never liked cages anyway." Manny quips.

"Good. In a store room near the courtyard is my '75 Honda motorcycle. Take that and one person to help you track them, then bring them home. I'm sorry, but I have to take back your soldier, Sidana."

"Wait! Shouldn't I go with him?" Sidana asks, a worried look on her face.

"I'm sorry, but it should be a Ketlan. Someone with a better sense of smell and hearing would make it easier to track." Cyrus replies.

"Not with a motorcycle running." Manny retorts.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but a Ketlan wouldn’t be a good choice. As an Akzazel, I am very strong; I can best any Zelkona. Koleta is an Ekzel, and the only one of her kind. If she doesn’t wish to come willingly, my strength might prove more useful than a Ketlan’s senses. As Manny pointed out, they won’t be as effective with this vehicle.” She theorizes.

“Koleta follows Darius like a pet.” Cyrus replies.

“Unfortunately, he’s right.” Zia reluctantly agrees.

“Convince Darius or bring him back by force and she’ll follow.”

“In that case, my strength is even more important. Should Manny have to hold Darius, I can attempt to prevent Koleta from freeing him.” Sidana argues.

Turning to his wife and then to Zia, both women nod their heads in agreement.

“Fine. You can go with him. Just bring our children back.”

“Do you even know which direction they’ve gone?” Manny asks.

“I have an idea...” Cyrus replies.

Without heavy armor or typical melee weapons to weigh them down, the duo carry only their holstered firearms, sheathed knives and their canteens on their belts. They collect enough food for several days from the same store room that Darius raided the previous night. In Manny’s pack, the only one they’re taking and which Sidana must wear while they ride, he has his loaded Ruger P95 pistol, seventy-seven extra rounds of .357 magnum, and three hundred rounds of 9x19mm parabellum. Along with the loaded, extra magazines for his Ruger P95 and Sidana’s Taurus PT809, he has a small amount of wilderness survival tools, and a small hiker’s medical kit.

Guards pull out the dusty, black and lime green Honda CL200, while an elderly man who appears to be in his mid-seventies checks the tank.

“Here, let me help!” Manny says, taking over for the old man.

“Thank you, my dear boy. These old fingers aren’t as dexterous as they used to be.” The man replies.

“It’s alright.” Manny says as he checks the petcock. “So, are you the resident mechanic, Mr...?”

“Tapping. Christopher Tapping. I’m a little bit of everything. Mechanic, engineer, electrician, plumber, scientist, philosopher.”

“That’s quite the resume.” Manny smirks, glancing to the old man as he checks the fuel line and carburetor bowl. “Wow... This gasoline still smells fresh. You didn’t get this from my car, did you?”

“Oh, no. I mean, we did send a crew to siphon it, but that is from an old cache. Nearly twenty years old and it’s as good as it was when it arrived. That’s thanks to a chemical compound I made; keeps it stable.” Chris answers.

“Impressive. You forgot ‘inventor’ in your resume.” Manny chuckles.

“As old as I am, I’m entitled to forget a few things.” Chris smirks.

With the motorcycle’s battery charged from a crystalline power source stored with the bike, the fuel tank filled and the carburetor primed, Manny straddles the seat. He takes a moment to admire the dusty, yet perfectly original motorcycle. Turning the key to the on position and pushing the starter, the bike roars to life in a millisecond. Sidana jumps, as do many of the guards. The motorcycle hasn’t made a sound in at least ten years, and none remembered what the noises were like. The Ketlan and Sakona’s sensitive hearing makes them wince, though they manage it.

Reaching out a hand, Manny waits for Sidana. Though his captain and superior, the nervous younger woman approaches the long-haired human almost frightfully, looking down at the vehicle.

"It's alright. Just hold on tight when we start moving." Manny says with a smile.

"Hold on to what?"

"Me." He chuckles.

Climbing over the bike, Sidana holds up her whip-like tail, keeping it away from the hot exhaust pipes. She adjusts Manny's pack on her shoulders and leans against his back, her ample breasts pressing against him. Slipping her arms around his waist, she feels herself growing nervous, resting her chin on his shoulder. With a confirming nod, Manny slips the clutch and the bike begins to roll. Taking off a little too fast for her comfort, Sidana grips his waist tightly, causing him to cough.

"Okay. Too tight. Air is my friend." He glances to her.

"I'm sorry, I-"

"Relax. Everything's going to be okay." He assures her.

Starting even slower, Manny controls the bike and rides a circle in the courtyard, looking back to make sure that Sidana is comfortable. He rides through the open gate and around the castle, ever increasing in speed. Heading in the direction of the second ziggurat, which is many hundreds of miles away, it is their only lead. With a nearly twelve-hour head start, everyone hopes that the youths simply camped in the woods for the night after an hour of walking, and are still nearby. Riding along the edge of the jungle, they find a very faint trail; Sidana's powerful eyes spot bent and broken brush.

"That looks like a trail." Sidana says as he parks the bike.

"That?" Manny asks in surprise.

"Yes. Don't you see it? I know your human eyes aren't as strong, but it's plain to see."

"If you say so." He sighs.

"Were you not a hunter, like Cyrus?" Sidana raises a brow.

"Oh, uh... Most of my prey lived near cities." Manny replies.

"Is that still a hunter, then?" Sidana poses.

"More like an exterminator."

He glances back, seeing the apprehension on her face. It is clear to him that she doesn't fully understand his or Cyrus' line of work and now questions whether he should be sent on this mission.

"I can handle myself, alright? And I'll watch your back." He assures her.

"While I'm thankful for that, I'm more concerned with my front."

"I can watch that too, if you want." Manny says with a little smirk, quickly revving the motorcycle afterward.

"What?" She asks in surprise, feeling her face flushing.

"Let's get moving. This jungle's pretty thick so we won't be able to ride fast." He says, ignoring her question.

"Good." She says, her arms tightening around his waist.

Slipping the clutch, they brace themselves as the bike enters the dense forest before them. With any luck at all, Darius and Koleta will be only a few short miles away, if that.