

The Seventh Realm: Volume Five

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Episode 54: Who Goes There?

Racing through the darkness, the teens blast through the brush and into the jungle. Trying not to think about the dangers that they both know lie in wait for them, they push onward and without thought or consideration. They run until their muscle burn, or at least Darius'. Though athletic and healthy, Koleta is far stronger and with much greater stamina for such activity. Eager to put distance between them and the capitol city, she pulls one of his arms over her shoulders, while slipping her own around his waist. Holding him close, she half-carries and half-guides him as they briskly walk through the darkness.

When Darius regains his strength, they jog through the jungle, trying not to lose their way by traveling in a relatively straight line. It's a challenge, however, as trees and brush stand in their way, causing the youths to periodically swerve around them. This lasts for nearly seven hours straight. When even Koleta is tired, Darius, who's fur is thoroughly matted with sweat, plops down onto the ground. He looks to Koleta, who leans over, her hands on her knees. Her skin shines in the light of the night moon, reflecting the beams. Perspiration drips over her form, which Darius can't help but find appealing. He chuckles.

"What?" She asks, panting softly.

"If Kazamir and Razela were here... The jokes they'd say." He replies.

“What would they joke about?” She asks, thoroughly failing to understand.

“We’re both gasping and covered in sweat.” He explains.

“Oh...” Koleta feels herself flush. “I-I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Really?” Darius sits up. “I mean, I can’t have been the only guy who’s noticed you before. Are you just not interested?” He asks, genuinely curious.

“It’s just...” She hesitates. “I-”

A crunch in the distance draws both of their attention. Their heads turn in the direction of the sound. Peculiar growling is heard and their hearts sink. Looking to the sky, the night moon wanes.

“It’ll be daylight in a few hours. Maybe we should rest here?” Darius suggests.

“Alright. You build a fire, and I’ll collect wood.” Koleta instructs.

“Okay. Stay within eyesight.” Darius adds.

Using a small ferrocerium rod that was part of J.T.’s men’s gear, he uses the spine of his knife to shave the metal. The bright sparks hurt his eyes, burning as hot as lava. Landing on a small pile of dry leaves, which are not difficult to find in the dry season, it begins to burn. Koleta returns from nearby with an armful of dry, broken branches several inches in diameter and a few feet long. Breaking them with her hands, not even needing a leg for leverage, she preps small logs. Placing them carefully around the fire, the growling grows louder. Looking around, they cannot find the source of the sound, their night vision ruined by watching the growing fire.

Looking back at the burgeoning flame, Darius grows impatient. Taking two handfuls of dry leaves, he heaves them onto the flame which devours the fuel and flares. A bright light grows between the

youths, warming Koleta's skin and Darius' fur. Now illuminated by the light, Darius exclaims and falls back. Koleta turns her head sharply, her fuchsia eyes wide as she stares at a moltaka. The tigersque beast stands feet away, its twelve-foot-long body dwarfing the youths. Aquamarine colored fur contrasts the dark blue stripes running along its back and outer extremities.

Opening its horrifying maw, which lowers and then spreads apart like mandibles, it roars loudly and steps away with its six-toed paws. Three-inch-long claws dig into the ground as it retreats from the flame. The long spikes lining its spinal column, from neck to tail, seem to shiver in terror at the crackling logs that glow a soft orange. Taking a log from the firepit, Koleta swings it at moltaka. It swings its hindquarters toward her, slashing at her with its tail, which has a razor-sharp six-inch, sickle shaped bone at the tip. The claw catches the log and flings it toward dry brush.

A gunshot strikes the beast's right hindleg and it screeches. Glancing over her shoulder, Darius has snapped out of his fearful trance. The Smith & Wesson pistol trembles in his hands, a faint plume of whitish-gray smoke rising from the barrel. A second glow catches their attention and they turn to see a rapidly growing forest fire. Racing toward it, they kick dirt over the burning leaves and collect the logs that are igniting. Placing them in their own firepit and pushing dry brush away, they avoid burning down the jungle by only a thread.

"I know we need too, but I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight." Darius remarks, sitting by the roaring fire.

"We can try. If we can't by the time the fire burns out, we'll just keep walking, night or day." Koleta says, smiling at her friend.

"Right. Sounds like a plan."

The pair sit together for some time, eating a snack from Darius' pack and sipping their water rations. Koleta lays down on her side,

her back toward the jungle. Worried about the moltaka returning, Darius lies down with his pistol in hand, his back against Koleta's and her tail protruding between his legs. Overcome by their exhaustion, they soon fall asleep. Waking up only a few hours later to an unusually brisk breeze blowing over them, they glance toward the sky and see that the day moon is half-risen over the treetops. It's only then that they notice their positions.

Having rolled over in the night, and after the fire began to die down, Koleta looks down to see Darius' arm slipped around her waist. Her own arms seem to cradle his, as if she had held him close to her. Immediately uncomfortable and having slept enough, they both bolt upright, turning away from each other.

"S-so, we should keep moving. I'll take out some food for us to eat on the way." Darius says nervously.

"Right." Koleta murmurs, her heart beating rapidly.

Making sure that the fire is truly dead, Koleta spreads dirt over the campsite with her digitigrade foot. Darius reties his boot laces, which had become loose during the night, taking out some food as he said he would before slipping on his pack. Taking his pistol from the ground, he flips on the safety lever and slips it back into his waistband, where he can easily retrieve it. Koleta checks her own pistol, keeping the first half of the Glock 17 tucked into the front pocket of her black, skin-tight shorts. Glancing nervously at each other, the youths share a gaze, remembering their positions when they awoke.

With a silent nod shared between them, they continue their hike, moving even deeper into the forest. Using the night and day moons as guides, it's proving easier than they'd thought to stay on course. After they finish eating their breakfast and drinking the last of their water, they begin to jog. They keep this steady pace for some time, before slowing to a walk to catch their breath. Resuming their jog, they

continue through the jungle until the day moon sits high in the sky, well past noon. Finding a large tree, they sit beside each other, their backs to the trunk.

“What do you think Vanolza or Jolazar are doing right now?” Koleta suddenly asks.

“I don’t know. Jolazar’s probably building some contraption with Chris or playing a stupid board game with dad. Vanolza’s probably busy with a female his age.” Darius replies.

“Oh...” Koleta’s feels herself flush. “But you don’t think they’re looking for you?”

“Why would they? I mean, my mom and dad, sure. They still need to drag me home so they can kill me, but my brother and sister?” Darius silently chuckles.

“They’re still your family though. Don’t you think they love you, or care?”

“Sometimes I feel like only three people really like me at all, and only one of them actually knows me, and she’s sitting right here.” Darius says with a little smile.

Smiling back at Darius, she’s surprised when he drapes an arm over her shoulders. Contrary to her imagination, however, he doesn’t try to move closer or use it as a romantic ploy. Resting his head on her shoulder, she then rests her head against his. Looking to the vast expanse of the jungle before them, they enjoy the view. A gust of wind blows and a faint thunderclap is heard in the distance. Looking up at the red tinted sky, they see that there are clouds forming.

“That’s strange. It’s not supposed to rain for months.” Darius remarks.

“A freak storm?” Koleta shrugs.

“We’d better find shel-”

A loud roar interrupts Darius. Bolting to their feet, they turn toward the sound as a familiar beast roars yet again, making its presence known to all within earshot. A kodana, perhaps the most dangerous of all beasts on Monala, besides the humanoid Kaladez or Zajak, stomps around the jungle nearby. Knowing that they could never outrun the beast, and forgetting their own weapons from the fear that overcomes them, they turn toward the tree. Scrambling up, Darius climbs it with minimal difficulty. Koleta, however, struggles. The anatomy of her smaller digitigrade feet makes the climb exceptionally difficult.

Reaching a branch nearly ten feet high, Darius lies flat on his stomach. Hugging the branch like a koala bear, he reaches a hand down to Koleta, who is only a few feet from the ground. She looks up at him, panic in her eyes. The kodana roars again. This time, it's much closer.

"I can't climb! I can't reach you!" She exclaims.

"Jump and grab my hand!"

In her own fear, she had forgotten her own agility and strength. Squatting down, she rests her hands on the short branch beneath her. Springing upright, she leaps into the air nearly six feet, her clawed hands grabbing his forearm. Just as she leaps, a kodana emerges from around the tree, snapping its jaws at the place she stood. Koleta squeezes his forearms and Darius pulls. He yanks her into the tree with pure adrenaline, dropping her over the branch. Lying on her belly and across the branch, rather than along it, her crimson hair hangs alongside her face as she watches the beast below.

The dinosaur-like carnivore with a black hide covered in bright red stripes stares at her with sinister, red eyes. It bares its teeth, snapping at the air without moving, as if to taunt her. Her heart races

in her chest as she struggles to maintain balance. Slipping forward, Darius reaches out as she slowly tilts further over to one side. His hand rests over her chest, but as she tilts it nears her throat. Fearful of choking her, he leans even further over and quickly lowers his hand. Both teenagers flush as he firmly grasps one of her ample, C-cup breasts.

“I’m sorry, but I won’t let you fall!” He exclaims.

Placing a hand on her hip and very near her firm buttocks, he pulls her back. With all of the strength he has, he straightens his back, drags Koleta along the branch and realigns her. With her back against Darius’ chest, they effectively spoon with each other, sitting upright and high up in the tree. He looks over her shoulder and down at the beast that paces beneath them. It glares at him, as if silently warning him to never come down.

“Thank you.” Koleta pants, her voice trembling.

“You’re alright.” He coos, stroking her arm comfortingly.

“You saved my life, Darius.” She cries.

“Hey, don’t cry.” He says softly. “It’s going to be alright, okay?”

Sniffing, she nods her head and turns it slightly, glancing back to him. Their eyes lock for a moment. A faint noise suddenly catches their attention. Furthermore, the kodana notices as well. They can’t place the sound, but it’s consistent and gradually increasing in volume. Waiting a few moments to make sure that the kodana is gone, Darius and Koleta both jump down from the tree. Weapons in hand, they look around for the beast. A roar in the distance confirms that it has left, seeking other prey. With the noise still growing louder, they decided keep moving and to make as much distance as they can, before it’s too late.

Stowing their weapons, they begin a mad dash through the jungle, moving even deeper and gaining distance from the capitol city. As they run, thunder claps even louder and rain begins sprinkling down. They run as fast as they can, not even bothering to slow down or look back when a faint gunshot is heard, followed immediately by the kodana's thudding corpse. Now certain of the sound, they are even more frantic to escape than they were before. The rain pours harder as the freak storm grows in intensity until it's as powerful as the torrential downpours of the rainy seasons.

Dashing through a thick patch of blue ferns that stand as tall as they do, Darius nearly falls into a large trench. Nearly ten meters across and with a sloping depth, like a giant pipe once sat within, the deepest portion is nearly the same as the width across. Koleta slides to a stop and loses her balance, rolling forward. Reaching out, Darius grabs her wrist. Spinning her like an acrobatic dancer as she swings before him, he too falls forward, landing on his stomach. As the two grip each other's wrists, Koleta dangles like an ornament, her chest and legs pressed against a sheer drop of six meters.

The muddy soil begins to crumble, the brown, slimy chunks tumbling over her. She looks down at the ground below, and then back up to him with fearful eyes. It's not a steep enough fall to hurt her, though Darius runs the risk of injury.

"I can't pull you up!" Darius yells over the cacophony of the storm.

"What?!" She yells back.

"I said I can't pull you up!"

"Darius!" She cries out.

"We need to cross!"

Grimacing, she nods her head and reluctantly agrees. Letting go, she grinds the claws of her hands and toes into the mushy soil to slow her descent. Turning around and backing over the edge, Darius does the same thing. As he begins to lower himself, a noise, drowned out by the storm becomes evident. A split-second later, a motorcycle blasts through the thick and tall blue ferns at blistering speed. Startled, Darius loses his grip and falls backward into the little ravine below.