

# **The Seventh Realm: Volume Five**

**By Mantrid Brizon**

## **Episode 55: Strife**

Riding through the jungle, Manny keeps a swift but steady pace. Periodically forced to stop and circumnavigate obstacles, they try to follow the linear path. Koleta guides him, keeping careful watch for anything that appears to be a trail. With her hands upon his shoulders, she squeezes the left so he'll turn left, or the right to turn right. Though they had not spoken of this system beforehand, both seemed to automatically know what the other was thinking; it came naturally. Riding until just past noon, they stop at the campsite, with a large burned area that was clearly a fire pit, and a second smaller area, possibly an accidental brush fire.

Squeezing both shoulders, Manny slows the bike to a stop. Setting it in neutral and lowering the kickstand, they both climb from the motorcycle, which he leaves running.

"Someone spent a night here." Sidana comments.

"Well, three guesses who that could be." Manny sighs, his eyes scanning their surroundings.

"This fire is cool, but a few embers are still warm."

"Is that good?" Manny asks.

"It means that they were here within the last six hours." She answers, rising to her feet. "They walked much farther in a night than I would've expected. I'd be lucky to get my squad to move that fast."

"Hey, at least I'm good company." He jests.

Sidana glances up to him, her lips curling. Every time he opens his mouth to quip back at her, she finds herself amused. Her platinum blonde hair flutters in an unusually cool breeze, and they both glance upward at the red sky. Clouds begin to form.

“That’s unusual.” She thinks aloud.

“Oh yeah, it is. Clouds in the sky?” Manny looks perplexed.

“Is that another one of your jokes?”

“No.” He says, looking to her. “It’s the dry season. Agnis told me.”

“Uh-huh. Well, we’d better keep going. They’re still on the move.” She says, returning to the motorcycle.

“An ‘A’ for effort.” Manny remarks, straddling the seat.

“Those kids have quite a bit of stamina.”

“Ah, yes, the benefits of youth.” He winks.

“Shut up and get moving.” Sidana orders, her face flushing.

With her arms wrapping around his waist, he pulls up the kickstand and puts the bike into gear. Taking off slowly, for her comfort, he turns his head up as a distant thunderclap echoes throughout the land. Riding through the jungle in the same direction and as quickly as they safely can, some time passes. Stopping the bike for a moment so that she can look more carefully at what appears to be two potential trails, they sit and look around. A faint but powerful roar is heard in the distance, drawing their attention.

“Go!” Sidana orders, pointing toward the sound.

They ride closer toward the noise, only to hear another. Silence follows for some time as they ride through the jungle, their eyes

scanning the area. A thumping is heard and the pair, who share similar hearing, are unsure what to make of it. Taking his left-hand, his dominant, from the handlebars, he reaches for a flap holster. Stitched out of genashin hide and designed to loosely fit all three pistols that he arrived with, his Taurus 66-7 sits within, loaded. Placing his hand back upon the handlebars for stability, he rides around series of thick trees.

Popping out of tall and dense vegetation like a goffer peeking out of its hole, a kodana blasts through and charges them. Roaring loudly, Manny accelerates as Sidana grips him tightly, virtually defenseless.

“Clever girl.” Manny quips, looking to the beast on his right.

“Faster!” Sidana exclaims.

Manny accelerates and whips to the left to avoid a tree. Rain begins to sprinkle them. They find themselves in a small clearing, with the kodana chasing after them. Holding a steady speed of about thirty miles per hour, the kodana catches up to them. Straightening his back and taking his revolver from the holster, he aims the firearm up at the sky and manually cocks the hammer. Using only his right hand to steer and control their speed, he turns left and accelerates slightly, before whipping to the right, aiming across his chest and firing a single shot.

“Wow.” Sidana stares in awe.

The beast falls dead as Manny struggles to stop the bike without stalling it, the revolver in his hand; his flap holster covered the opening, preventing its prompt return. Quickly shifting the bike into neutral, he takes his hand from the throttle, lifts the flap and secures his revolver.

"Damn..." Manny murmurs.

"What's wrong?" Sidana looks to him.

"I missed my target."

"What?" She laughs in disbelief.

"I was aiming for its left eye, but I think the motion threw me off." He says, pointing at a bullet hole in the center of the creature's forehead. "I wanted to guarantee a strike to the brain, but whatever. It's still dead."

"You're only human." She teases.

Glancing back at her with a sly grin, they share a gaze. A booming thunderclap interrupts them and rain evolves from a sprinkle to a sudden and powerful downpour. Shifting back into gear, they ride in a circle around the kodana's corpse, using its position to gain their bearings and continue in the same direction. The field ends and they are soon riding through thick brush. Emerging from the brush, they find a massive tree with several large and thick branches. The kodana's tracks litter the ground, circling the tree as if it had been watching someone or something hiding in the branches.

Accelerating in the short field, they soon find another trail. The rain pelts them so powerfully, that it hurts Manny's skin and makes Sidana uncomfortable. The cool air chills them, even though they are in a typically tropical climate. Up ahead is a thick patch of tall, blue ferns. Bent in the center as if recently pushed through, Manny races through the flora only to discover a ravine barely a meter behind the plants. Darius hangs over the ledge, falling back to avoid being struck by their right feet as the motorcycle leaps into the ravine at nearly sixty miles per hour.

Sidana promptly lets go of Manny and pushes off in mid-air, barely landing without hurting herself near the opposite wall; only the thickening mud broke her fall and not her legs. Manny pushes off just before the motorcycle crashes into the wall roughly thirty feet away.

Falling down about five meters and landing on his right foot, it twists sharply and painfully, spraining his ankle. His body thuds on hard soil that has yet to liquify in the pouring rain. He groans in agony, though none can hear him over the downpour. Rising to her feet, Sidana's first concern is Manny, but seeing Koleta as she helps up Darius, she's torn.

She approaches the two teens with an angry scowl. How dare these brats put her and Manny through this. How dare they torture their own parents with their immature misdeeds.

"We're going home!" She screams at the youths.

"No!" Koleta growls, taking Darius' side before he even speaks.

"Don't make me tell you again!" Sidana barks, nose-to-nose with Koleta.

"Just let us go!" Darius cries out.

Turning, both girls are stunned to see that he holds his pistol in his hands, aiming for Sidana. Only as old as Darius, Sidana's heart pounds as she stares into the barrel on a nine-millimeter handgun. Manny looks down at the motorcycle lying by his feet, the front wheel bent, tire popped, forks visibly dented, mirrors snapped off and the fuel tank dented to the point of rupture.

"Rest in peace." He says to the bike.

Glancing up, he can see the standoff. As he struggles to stand, his flailing form catches Darius' attention. No sooner than Darius looks away, Sidana draws her own pistol, aiming the stainless-steel Taurus PT809 at her king's son. Looking back, Darius' hands tremor while Sidana's are like a stone. She struggles to control her fear, but manages it far better than Darius does. Koleta dares not draw her weapon, for fear that Sidana or Darius might panic at the sight of

movement and shoot one or the other, if not both. The youths look back as Manny struggles to pull himself up.

Though they cannot hear his cries in the horrid storm, they can see his pained expression. Curious by their expressions, Sidana looks over her shoulder to follow their gaze. Seeing Manny as he holds himself up, she lowers her weapon and races toward him, ignoring her mission objective entirely. Holstering her weapon, she tries to lift him up. No sooner than he puts weight on his ankle does he collapse again. Approaching them and standing at the end of the ravine furthest away from the capitol city, the teens look at the wounded human. Darius feels a tinge of guilt, stepping closer.

Manny reaches out, grabbing Darius by his jacket and pulling himself up. His green eyes burn with anger as he stares, nose to nose with the youth.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?! Do you know what the hell you did?!" Manny screams.

"Yeah!" Darius screams back, pushing his hand away. "I left to live my own life!"

"You did more than that you stupid little shit! Now, we're going home before-"

They all fall silent, hearing a rumbling sound and feeling the ground shivering. Looking to the muddy walls, chunks are broken free. Is Monala quaking? The three teenagers look horrified, but Manny remains calm.

"Climb!" He yells.

"What?!" Koleta screams, struggling to hear him.

Manny points toward the surface. Darius looks down the long ravine, seeing a wash of water as far as a quarter-mile away. Racing for them like stampeding genashin, millions of gallons of a chocolate colored river blast through the ravine. They all struggle to climb, with Darius actually managing a foot before sliding back down. Remember the tree, Koleta suddenly grabs him by the armpits. Pulling him close so that her breasts smoosh against his back, she squats and jumps. Though her jump is hampered greatly by his added weight and inability to use her arms, they manage to reach the edge, landing half-over the ravine's muddy ledge.

"You might as well go, before we're both dead!" Manny shouts to Sidana.

"No! I won't leave you!" She yells back.

Taking Manny's arm and draping it over her shoulder, Sidana tries the same move. However, not as strong as Koleta and in an even worse position, they barely make the ledge. Both teens, however, were leaning over the edge. Reaching out, Koleta and Darius manage to snag an arm, each holding Sidana and Manny by a wrist. With her incredible strength, Koleta pulls Sidana up and throws her a foot farther than the ledge, before leaning over and helping Manny. No sooner than he is pulled over the edge, the water blasts through the ravine, sweeping away Cyrus's motorcycle.

The water chips away at the edge of the ravine, actually growing taller than the earthen canal. Scrambling to his feet, Darius turn to Koleta, both sharing a fearful look. Turning to Sidana and Manny, they see that she's already brought Manny to his feet and helps him limp away from the rising tide. Joining the guards, they flee the monstrous water, finding a distant hill that might provide escape. Walking even further away from home just to seek shelter, they stand atop the peak of the hill and witness the magnificent destruction. Entire trees are swept away behind them as the water rises to a river nearly a quarter-mile across and washing rapidly over the land.

Leaving the hill, they continue toward the ziggurat, walking slowly into a field that is lower than the hill but still above water level and somewhat protected from the rising waters. Walking for nearly an hour in pouring rain, they can feel their core temperature dropping, and it isn't even evening. A rocky outcrop is visible in the distance. They immediately change direction. Reaching the outcrop, they find an opening, about one meter tall and half of a meter wide. Using a flashlight from Manny's pack, they scout the location and head inside. Slipping into the cave, they escape the biblical storm that rages outside.

Looking around at the cave interior, they find that it isn't a cave system but a single, large room, and possibly carved. The interior is substantial, with signs that creatures have lived there before, specifically a small family of Kaladez. Though typically in larger groups, it isn't rare for new tribes to form from families, and a cave of this type would make a wonderful home. In the center of the cave is a carved firepit, however, only sand remains; it hasn't been used in many years. The beam of the flashlight illuminates something, amusing Manny and startling the three non-humans. Though all three teenagers are py'sel, half-breeds of every type, none saw the Ketlan skeleton sitting upright in the corner.

"Well... The more the merrier, right?!" Manny chuckles.

He groans in pain as Sidana very carefully sets him down, the skeleton sitting in an identical position about two meters away. Turning his head, Manny looks at the corpse.

"If his ankle is broken..." He says, shaking his head.

"At least you'll have company when you're dead." Sidana says with a little grin.

**"And here I thought you were staying with me forever." He teases her.**

**Looking around the darkened room with his now adjusted eyes, Darius finds a stack of logs, as old and dried as the skeleton in the corner. Koleta searches the body and the articles nearby while Sidana checks their weapons and watches the door. Darius builds a small fire, being very frugal with their wood. Koleta shivers, as does Darius. Sidana and Manny both handle it better. Looking to each other, Manny has a worried look on his face; a man from a cold climate, he's all too familiar with hypothermia.**

**"What's wrong?" Sidana asks.**

**"We need to dry our clothes and warm up."**

**Seeing the urgency in his eyes, Sidana adds a few more logs to the fire as Manny scoots closer. Darius begins to protest but is immediately silenced when Sidana glares at him and points a clawed finger, her silent warning of what will follow if he continues speaking. With the fire growing larger and fully illuminating the room, she sits beside Manny. Taking off the backpack, she suddenly reaches for his clothes and pulls at his shirt.**

**"Hey, all you had to do was ask." Manny jokes.**

**"We need to dry our clothes and warm our bodies." She replies, repeating what he'd told her.**

**"Should we leave?" Darius teases.**

**"Warm our bodies by the fire..." She glares angrily at him. "Also, I want to see how badly you're injured."**

**Stripping down to his bare flesh, the three are stunned by the sight of his ankle. Swollen and purple, it's severely sprained. Feeling**

the injury, Sidana is confident that it isn't broken, though she has only a basic understanding of anatomy. No sooner than she finishes examining him, Sidana also removes her clothing. Following her lead, Koleta and Darius strip down, setting their clothing around the fire to dry and sitting as naked as the day they were born. Though he had heard and seen much since he'd joined the Sa'kesh, including their comfortability with nudity, Manny can't help but chuckle.

"What?" Sidana asks, turning her head to him.

Glancing over at the young female who sits unclothed beside him, Manny struggles to not immediately scan her body. Turning back toward the fire, he sighs.

"I feel like I'm on a beach in California."

"Is it nice there?" Sidana asks.

Turning back to her, they stare for a moment, peering into each other's eyes.

"Nowhere on Earth was ever nicer than this place." He answers.

"I bet. Not with scenery like this." Darius remarks.

With frustrated glares, Manny and Sidana both stare at him.

"Shut up. Don't talk." Sidana grumbles.

"It was just a joke." Darius remarks.

"Of course it is..." Manny sighs.

"Oh, like you didn't notice the attractive women sitting right here."

"Boy, you couldn't even handle one." Manny retorts.

"What?! I've actually 'handled' a few." Darius proudly proclaims.

"That doesn't make you man." Manny says as he shakes his head. "Any boy can have sex. You're just like every other overprivileged kid. I bet everything's a joke to you. Every decision is made through a warped fantasy or your penis, and whenever you make a mistake, it's not your fault, is it?"

"Don't judge me like you know me!" Darius growls, standing to his feet.

"I judge you based on your actions, and all you've shown me is how fucking worthless you are."

Sidana and Koleta look in shock as Manny lays into Darius, still seated comfortably by the fire.

"You opened a wild genashin pen and forgot to close it, nearly killing a little girl *and* your father, who broke his leg. I had to shoot and kill two of them to clean up *your* mess. Then, you stole some guns and food, grabbed your girlfriend and ran off into the night."

"Hey, she's not my g-"

"Shut the fuck up!" Manny barks. "Do you know what you've even done?! All the pain you put your family through?! Put *us* through?! Have you seen your father *cry* before, because that's what he was doing when he sent us out here to find you. Her mother was insane with fear and worry, and it's all your fault for pulling her out here. I didn't want to come and get you, but they asked me too, so I did it."

Darius slowly sits back down, hanging his head in shame.

"A real man knows how admit his mistakes, learn from them and make amends. A real man doesn't charge into the wilderness to escape punishment, or to seek personal glory. A real man knows how

to take responsibility. A real man protects and provides for the people he cares about, even if he'd rather be doing something else. Until you can do that, you're still just a little boy."

Sitting there and looking down at the fire, Darius contemplates all that Manny's said. After tallying their rations, Manny passes out food to both Koleta and Sidana, before passing some to Darius. It only drives his points deeper into the youth's mind. Taking his hand and resting it on the cyrian medallion around his neck, he feels the artifact with his fingers. Remembering his grandfather, Zikata, and all of the stories he'd heard, it becomes painfully clear. Darius hadn't seen the forest for the trees. Looking at each story as an almost episodic adventure, he couldn't see the bigger picture.

Cyrus, Zikata, Katero, Johnny, Mirkon, and everyone who had fought and even died had done so with a goal in mind. They built a nation from a wooden fortress constructed around a tree, founding a kingdom on his father's ideals of inclusivity and equality. Thinking back, he recalls that his father doesn't even like being considered a king; he hates it with every fiber of his being. Everything was done to build a home, where they could have lives and prosper. Sitting in a cave, naked and with limited supplies, accompanied by his best friend who followed him, and two loyal guards who are merely obeying their orders, Darius crumbles.

"I'm sorry..." Darius says with a sniffle.

Everyone stops eating their simple meals and turns their head or eyes to look at him.

"I didn't mean for this to happen. I wasn't thinking any further than the next step. I made this all up as I went along and I caused so much trouble, but I didn't mean to. When your ankle is healed, which shouldn't take long here, we'll find our way back home."

**“Good.” Manny murmurs. “Now eat your food. You’re going to need your strength.”**