

The Seventh Realm: Volume Five

By Mantrid Brizon

Episode 56: Cave, Sweet Cave

With their clothes dry and returned to their bodies, the group sleep around the campfire for the night. The following day, Manny's ankle is already showing signs of healing; the swelling has dissipated and the bruising lightened from a dark plum to a faded violet. Still unable to walk and in considerable pain, he was forced to sit by while the three teenagers, only one of whom classified as an adult, had to maintain their camp. With Sidana the ranking officer of the Sa'kesh military, and the only other legal adult, she takes charge of both Darius and Koleta.

Leading them outside, Manny watches the camp from the mouth of the cave, his Taurus revolver loaded and ready beside him and his Ruger pistol in-hand. Collecting what dry firewood they could and staying within sight of the cave, they scavenge for food, hoping to save their rations for as long as possible. Taking the time to satisfy her curiosity, Sidana abdicates the juveniles for a while to hike back to the ravine. Racing for the hill and retracing their steps, she finds that the water has settled. A wide, deep and fast-moving river covers the entire ravine; it is wholly impassable.

Returning to the camp in time to reveal her findings over dinner, they sit by the fire, preparing for their second night in the cave. With their supply of firewood running low and much of the wood still damp outside from the storm, they keep the flame at a minimum.

“For some reason these nights are much colder than usual.” Koleta comments.

“Yeah. I wish we had more firewood to burn.” Darius remarks.

Leaning back, Sidana notices something from the corner of her eye; Manny sits at an angle, his head turned and his eyes watching her. Often, she finds herself looking at him, only for Manny to catch her, and now she knows how it feels; her lips curl around her snout as she watches Manny watching her.

“What?” She asks with a subtle laugh.

“The land I came from was very cold for nearly half of the cycle.” He answers.

“How did you manage it?” Koleta asks.

“Besides layers of clothing and a warm fire?” He turns to her. “I liked cuddling.” He says, glancing back at Sidana.

“And does holding someone really fight off the cold?” Sidana asks.

“Well that depends.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve found that the more attractive your partner is, the warmer you feel.” Manny smirks.

“Is that so?” Sidana grins sinisterly.

Darius and Koleta glance to each other in an awkward silence.

“Mhm.” He nods.

“Is that why you were staring?”

“Was I?” He feigns ignorance. “Maybe I was just thinking?”

“Hm... So, how warm do I look?”

“That’s kind of private, isn’t it?” He chuckles.

**“It’s a valid question. Perhaps I was wondering the same thing?”
She poses.**

“You look warm enough.” He teases.

“In that case, I suppose you’ll do for now. The first Kaladez I see though...” Sidana fires back.

“Okay, I deserved that. If I were shivering to death and had my pick of anyone...” He says.

Sidana looks to him rather expectantly, but Manny simply smiles. Looking down at the ground, she can see him flush. His eyes turn back to her, and though he never finishes his statement, he doesn’t need too.

“Well, whenever I need a warm blanket...” Sidana speaks softly, leaving her statement unfinished.

“... Is it getting hot in here?” Darius asks.

Turning to him, Koleta slaps his chest with the back of her hand.

“What?” He laughs.

After finishing their dinner and with the night moon rising into the ever-growing darkness, Koleta adds another log to the fire, keeping an extra close at hand. Lying down to sleep, Darius looks at the ceiling, watching the light bouncing off of the rocks above, a thick black patch present above the fire from the countless before it. He turns his eyes and shifts his head, glancing toward Koleta. To his surprise, she lay on her side, watching him intently. Her long tail sways and a smile is spread across her face. Feeling the cold of the air, he buttons his lightweight jacket and scoots a little closer to the flame.

Turning his head again to Koleta, she now lay with her back toward him. Looking her over, he thinks about what Manny said to Sidana. As his eyes burn a hole into the back of her skull, he wonders if Manny had left a part of his equation out. Long ago, when Darius had first asked Koleta to mate with him, he didn't do it because he simply wanted to experience her. Though he still often makes jokes about it, and comments about her good looks, Darius has struggled with his feelings and her initial rejection. She's been such a kind and loyal friend, which he is thankful for, but as the chill of the night overcomes him, he'd do almost anything to hold her.

The same breeze, causes Sidana to shiver. Glancing back, she sees that Manny is tense, his muscles holding firm; he is trying to prevent himself from shivering. Catching her staring yet again, she feels herself flush. The sound of him sliding across the stone floor makes her turn. Scooting closer, he leans in.

"Are you cold?" He asks in a whisper.

She merely nods her head. Manny responds by lying just behind her. With an arm bent and tucking beneath his head like a pillow, his outer extremity drapes over her body and tucks just beneath her breasts. His chest caresses her back before fitting snugly against her. She drapes her thick tail over his hips, letting it lie alongside and behind his back. His arm tremors.

"Are you cold?" She asks in a whisper, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"I'm always cold, but it's starting to feel warmer." He quietly replies.

Her smile growing, she rests her head down atop her own, bent arm, taking her outer extremity and resting it over his. Her claws gently rake the flesh of his forearm as she feels him against her. Unlike the previous night, and many others before it, Sidana falls asleep surprisingly quickly. Waking up the next morning, Sidana is still wrapped in Manny's arms. Between their bodies radiates a pleasant heat. If the stone floor of the cave weren't so uncomfortable, she'd want to stay there for a while. Gently raking her claws over his skin, he seems to pull tighter on impulse.

Turning her head, she sees that he's still asleep. Taking her arm from beneath her head, she reaches out to brush several long strands of hair from his face.

"Good morning." Darius says, groaning as he stretches his muscles.

The sound causes Manny to awaken. Opening his eyes slowly, he and Sidana stare at each other for a moment before simultaneously sitting up. He rubs the sleep from his eyes while Sidana stretches.

"Let's take a look at that leg." She says.

Leaning back, Manny pulls up his leg. He doesn't even wince. Beneath his jeans is a nearly healed ankle, with no noticeable bruising or swelling.

"Wow! That's amazing!" Manny exclaims.

"I'm told that healing is faster on Monala." Koleta remarks.

"Yeah, something about the natural harmony from Monala's magnetic fields and the radiation from this class of sun. I already forgot because I'm an idiot." Manny chirps.

“Do you think you can walk?” Sidana asks with a chuckle.

Helping him to his feet, Manny stumbles. Though he feels enough pain for it to impede serious travel, he could probably maneuver around the cave, a fact he reports to his companions.

“Alright then. Same thing as yesterday. Forage for firewood and ripe fruit.” Sidana says to the juveniles.

“Wait, I want to help too.” Manny interjects.

“If you’re certain, you can accompany me.” She says, holding out a hand to him.

“Hold me.” He teases, as she drapes his arm over her shoulder.

With only their gear belts worn and pistols holstered or otherwise stowed, the quartette leave their stone hideaway and carry on with their day, just as they did the previous. Sidana and Manny move away from the juveniles, slowly checking an area that Sidana had ignored yesterday.

“I wonder where they’re going?” Darius asks.

Koleta ignores him, continuing with her task and scouting for firewood. He looks to her, watching her carefully. She seems distant, and it bothers him. Unsure of what to do, Darius continues to search for dry wood and pickable fruit. After some time, Koleta rushes past him, a small bundle of wood in her arms. She looks quite upset, and though he doesn’t know what to say or do, he has to do something. Following Koleta back to the cave with his own meager findings, he enters meters behind her, just in time to see her sitting on the ground and weeping.

"Koleta? Are you okay?!" He drops his sticks and races up to her. "What's wrong?"

Kneeling beside her, he takes her into his arms and holds her gently, as if she were made of glass. Rolling over, she turns to face him and cries. Burying her snout in his chest as she emotionally crumbles, the sixteen-year-old juvenile lets out her pent-up frustrations. Though she may be the strongest and most powerful being among them, she's still sensitive and fragile. His heart breaks at the mere sight of her sorrow.

"I'm so scared, Darius. We never should have left." She cries.

"It'll be okay." He says softly, stroking her hair.

"Will it? Who do you think that was?" She points to the skeleton in the corner. "Someone who lost their way, just like us. I don't want to wind up like that. I miss my parents. I miss feeling safe. I just want to go back home and stay there."

"I'm sorry, Koleta. This is all my fault."

"No, it's not. I chose to follow you. I just didn't know how hard this was going to be, and I want it to be over." She says.

"Hey, we're going to be okay. We're going to stand tall and walk out of this jungle together; I'll walk you home myself."

"What if I don't have the strength?" She whimpers.

"Then I'll carry you. Koleta... You have all the strength you need and more, and even if you didn't, I'm not ever leaving you."

"You won't?" She asks with a sniffle.

"Of course I won't. We do this together or not at all. Don't you remember what you asked me?"

"What?" Her brow furls in confusion.

"A month before we left, I was sitting alone at Agnis and you found me there. We talked with the twins about leaving. Vanolza was an asshole and we chased him off. Do you remember that day? We

hugged, and you asked me something. 'Will you always be there for me?' you said. I said 'you know I will'."

"You remembered that?" She asks in surprise.

"How could I ever forget it?" He says with a smile.

Brushing her hair away from her face as he holds her in his arms, she has a revelation. His consistent kindness and friendship were often overshadowed by his immature and jovial behavior. Could he have simply not known how to better express himself? Does he feel the same emotional connection to her as she does for him? Leaning in, Darius nuzzles her snout with his own.

"We're going to be okay. I'll do everything I can to protect you." He says softly.

Her claws stroke his arms as he envelopes her in a warm embrace.

"Darius?"

"Yeah?"

"When you first asked me to mate with you... Did you ask because you wanted more than just my body?"

Looking into her eyes, his pulse races. Gulping nervously, he feels a cloud hanging over him. His nervousness is palpable.

"... Yes." He answers.

"Why didn't you ever ask me again?"

"I... I wanted to earn it. I wanted you to like me back first."

Leaning in, the two share their first kiss. Her fears wash away, replaced by the comfort of a boy she has long since cared for. Though at first, she denied him because she believed that he only wanted to use her, when she herself had deeper feelings. His lack of real interest thereafter only made her believe that she had blown her chance to be with him. The prospect of having a true, meaningful relationship with Darius brings her a new sense of hope and an inner strength that she was lacking only minutes earlier. Their ears suddenly prick and a shadow darkens the entrance.

“What the?!”

Using the trees for support, Manny looks up for pickable fruit, while Sidana collects what little dry wood she sees. With the pain in his ankle still a presence, he rests his back against a tree and slowly sits down. Growing concerned, Sidana joins him, setting down her bounty and sitting beside him.

“Are you alright?” She asks.

“Just taking a little break.” He replies.

“Last night was very cold, wasn’t it?” She attempts to make conversation.

“Not that I recall. It was pretty warm to me.” He says with a smile.

“Um... Did you sleep well? The cave floor isn’t very comfortable.”

“I was actually quite comfortable last night.” He retorts.

“Manny... I’m your captain.” She says, taking a deep breath.

“Uh oh. What’d I do?” He sits straight, his smile fading.

“You didn’t do anything!” She assures him.

“It sounds like I’m about to have a stern talking too. You had ‘the tone’.”

"It's nothing like that! ... I... We're... Grr..."

"I think I know what this is about..."

"You do?" She looks to him with wide eyes.

"Did you want to see other squads?" He teases, gently rubbing her back.

"Shut up. You're not making this easier." She grumbles.

"I'm sorry. I just try to lighten the mood with humor, especially uncomfortable situations. I want you to be able to talk to me about anyth-"

"I know I'm your captain, but I care about you far more than I probably should, and I really think you should know that!" She blurts out, speaking a mile a minute.

Manny blinks, staring in surprise. Frozen like a statue, he watches as Sidana looks down at the ground. Her eyes wide, she runs her fingers through her long, platinum blonde hair, her elf-like ears protruding between her thumb and index finger on each hand. The light blue dragonesque woman with violet swirls and a cream-colored chest and belly appears to tremble with nervousness.

"I can't believe I said it. I've wanted to say it for days and it just came out." She speaks as if he isn't even there.

"Sidana..."

"This wasn't supposed to happen. You were just another assignment."

"Sidana!"

"What was I thinking? 'Of course I'll babysit the handsome human!' I say to Cyrus, and look at what's happened."

"SIDANA!"

"What?!" She turns her head to look at him.

Slipping his arm around her waist, he pulls them closer together.

"I like you too." He admits.

"Really? ... You're not joking?" She asks sheepishly.

Leaning in, he kisses the side of her snout, near her cheek.

"I'm not joking." He says.

"Oh!" She sighs with relief. "Well... I feel better!"

"That's good. Any more confessions? Maybe some nice dreams that I may have been in?" He asks. "Please don't spare me the details; I can handle it."

Chuckling, she sits back and looks at the sky. She leans into Manny, whose warm presence drapes over her like a comforting shroud.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. If I had the nerve to admit it before all of this, maybe things would be different." She says.

"Everything works out the way it's supposed too... And don't apologize. I'm glad you said it right here." He replies.

"Really? Why?"

"Because it was authentic. No planning or preparation. You couldn't make yourself comfortable first; you had something to say and you said it. I can appreciate that. It took strength."

"Then why do I feel weak?" She asks.

"You don't see who you're sitting next to?" He waves a hand over himself as if presenting a grand prize.

"Shut up." She giggles.

"Does this mean I'll be promoted?" He teases her.

“What did I just say? ... Look at me; I’ve become my mother. This is exactly how my parents met.”

“History seems to be repeating itself.” He silently chuckles.

“Who says it will?” She glances back at him.

“You’re lost in the jungle with a man you care about and who cares about you back... That and you don’t have many options right now.” He winks.

Looking to Manny, his eyes are genuine and his smile unfading. She leans closer, her heart pounding. Resting a hand on her cheek, just beyond her snout, Manny leans forward to meet her halfway. The pair share a rather benign kiss, both hoping that it’s the first of many. Leaning back, Sidana can hardly contain her excitement. She’s never found a man quite like him. Both turning to face each other, they embrace, her ample breasts pressing against his chest. Manny nuzzles her face, giving her cheek a kiss. It’s clear to her as he tightens his grip that he truly does care for her.

Her fingers coil as she squeezes him tighter. Pulling back, she gazes to him and the pair share another kiss. Much more passionate than the first, their tongues briefly caress. Pulling back again, she rests her snout near the nape of his neck. As if to tease him, she gives his neck a lick with her pointed tongue.

“I’m glad we’ve admitted our feelings, but think about this. If I had shared them earlier, we could be doing this in the privacy of my quarters... In my bed.” She coos.

“True.” He says, his breathing heavier.

Just as they’re about to continue entertaining each other, they’re both distracted by a gunshot. The sound echoes throughout the jungle and the pair rise to their feet. Gritting his teeth, Manny struggles through the pain. Sidana, having already admitted her considerable

infatuation with both words and actions, takes him by the arm and helps him walk. As selfish as it is, she won't leave her prospective mate in the jungle just to reach the juveniles quicker; she cannot make herself feel guilty for this. Nearing the cave, they can hear a barrage of gunfire as at least a dozen rounds are expended in a matter of seconds.

Drawing his Ruger P95 with his left-hand, Sidana leans him against a tree and draws her Taurus PT809 with her right. Before them is a family of Kaladez. Having found the cave, they attempt to pour inside, where they can only assume Darius and Koleta are. With nearly six Kaladez outside, they line against the wall, like patrons waiting to attend a nightclub. Turning at the sight of movement, Manny and Sidana both take aim. Bang, bang, bang. Manny pulls the trigger three times, striking two in the head and one in the throat. His aim is faltering from his condition and poor choice of perch.

Sidana fires six shots, two groups of three striking two Kaladez in the chest. With one left standing, another emerges from the cave. Rushing them like the wild beasts that they are, they raise primitive clubs made from torn branches. Firing two shots into the torso of a Kaladez, Sidana aims for the second as it barrels toward her. She jumps as Manny fires a round beyond her, losing focus. Killing a Kaladez as it burst through nearby brush to her left, Manny takes aim as he slides down the tree trunk, firing three shots into the chest of the remaining creature. Taking him by the arm, she pulls him up.

"Check on Darius and Koleta." He tells her.

"I'm not leaving you behind." She replies.

"And I'm not falling behind. Check on them. Please."

Leaning him against a tree, she races for the cave. Rushing inside, she can see the bodies of five more Kaladez lying on the floor. Three remain alive, struggling with Darius and Koleta. One straddles

Darius as it tries to strangle the life from him. The other two wrestle with Koleta. With one behind her, its arm holding hers in a painful looking hold, the other tries to grab her legs as she slashes at it with the claws on her toes. It appears as if it wants to rape her. As the filthy beast manages to take hold of Koleta's left ankle, Sidana pounces upon it's back. With her sharp toe-claws she digs into its back, causing it to flail about and release the juvenile.

Her hand grips it by the chin, the claws crowning her fingers digging into the flesh of its face. The bizarre humanoid hybrid cries out. With features like a bull and an alligator, it makes a strange noise, like a cross between a roar and a moo. Wrenching as hard as she can, she breaks the creature's neck.

"Darius! Head!" Manny shouts.

Darius pushes against the Kaladez's throat, running his hand up and under its chin. Forcing its head to tilt upward, a gunshot rips through the cave, making his ears ring. Blood splatters over his face and the beast's body falls limp, shot through the back of the head by his human companion. Turning to Koleta, they see her violently clawing the corpse of her remaining attacker. Tapping into her survival instincts, she handily defeated a single creature, slashing its throat open with the claws on her hand before kicking across its belly and disemboweling it.

They watch as she angrily stomps, slashes and strikes the corpse; at this point, she's merely venting her rage at their brutality. Taking hold of the beast's head and stomping hard on its chest, her arm and back muscles flex as she growls. Yanking hard, she tears the head from the creature's body, throwing it violently down to the ground.

"Wow..." Manny murmurs.

"What the hell happened?!" Sidana asks, looking at the mass of bodies.

"We were spending time together inside. I was comforting her." Darius begins.

"Out of nowhere these Kaladez came in. They saw us and rushed inside." Koleta chimes in.

"I took out my gun and fired, but there were a lot of them, and I never shot at a living thing before... They rushed us."

"I didn't even have my gun. I left it by my pack... I didn't think I'd need it." Koleta shamefully admits.

"They attacked Koleta in a group. I think they wanted too..." Darius pauses.

"That's not unheard of, unfortunately." Sidana murmurs.

"I could fight two easily. I didn't realize they were so weak, but in such a small space and with them surrounding me, they grabbed my arms and held them sharply behind me." Koleta says.

"That's when the last few focused on me. I had been shooting at them the whole time... But I missed a few shots. I'm just a Sakona; I'm not as strong as a Kaladez. It wrestled me to the ground, and that's when you found me." Darius finishes.

"Well, at least you're both okay." Sidana says to them.

"No thanks to these." Koleta growls, stomping on a Kaladez corpse.

"We shouldn't stay. I think we should leave right now." Manny interjects.

"Are you sure you can walk?" Sidana asks with great concern.

"I'll manage. There might be more of them. We took over their home after all."

"What makes you think they didn't just stumble across us?" Darius asks.

"Look." Manny points at a corpse.

Leaning against the opening of the cave, Manny had noticed a faded marking, like three claw marks with a semicircle above it and two dots on either side. As he points to the corpse of an adult Kaladez, painted ochre markings are identical to that found on the cave entrance. This place was the Kaladez's home at some point, and they were simply coming back to it. Quickly collecting their packs, they take a moment to search the bodies. They find fresh and uneaten raw ethakona meat in a large sack, gleaned from a recent kill, and a basket of fresh fruit.

Taking the supplies and reloading their weapons, all four keep their firearms handy. Helping Manny walk, Sidana looks toward him. Looking back, he flashes her a warm smile. In front of both Darius and Koleta, Sidana turns kisses him. Giving her a kiss back, they stand before the cave for a moment, looking to the horizon.

"Ahem... Are we leaving now?" Darius asks.

"Which way should we go?" Koleta asks.

"Boss?" Manny looks to Sidana.

"Let's return to that new river. Our canteens are nearly empty and we haven't found a water source. Maybe we'll find a crossing..."