

Chapter Seven - Toolin - Part Two

Sam smiled. "Armaments don't necessarily make someone safer. Besides, we won't find any guns and Trigger Switches in this small town. Not legally, anyway. Plus carrying guns would draw further attention to us."

"This'll do for now, anyway," James said.

He looked himself over. He stifled a laugh, knowing it would be inappropriate, and wondered if he looked as ridiculous as the armed men he would see around Tyken Town. Somehow, though, a part of him knew that carrying a sword felt right. Having a grapple hook on his belt, a knife on his side, felt right. He tried to convince himself that he was becoming more of the person he was before, who he was meant to be, however ridiculous it seemed to him.

"Why do they call it a set, if it's just one sword?" James asked.

"They usually make matching knives and staffs to go along with the swords," Sam said. "Some sets also come with guns. But even if you refer to just one of the items, people call it a Set."

James nodded. Sam smiled, his eyes softening.

"It suits you," Sam said quietly.

James nodded again and looked away, growing uncomfortable from Sam's focus.

They saw Evan farther in the market, watching a thin, bearded man who had drawn a small crowd. The tanned man held two pans, pouring an amber liquid from one to the other. He turned and twisted as the liquid shifted from pan to pan. At all times the steady stream of liquid connected both pans.

"An ice tea maker," Sam said to Evan as they came to him. "It's an entertaining way of cooling the hot tea. Good for extra coins."

The tea maker threw a pan in the air, the liquid landing in the other pan, which he held low down. With a flourish, he threw both pans up in a wide circle, the line of liquid rotating before him, before deftly catching them both.

"See anything you like?" Sam asked Evan as the bearded man finished his show.

Evan shook his head slowly. "I did not."

From his tone and the look in his eyes, it was clear to James that something had drawn Evan into a melancholic mood. He told himself there was no way of predicting the young Voarn's shifting emotions.

"Come," Sam said, clapping a hand on Evan's arm. "I have a friend in town we can say hello to. She'll certainly smell better than this place, anyway."

They followed Sam through the rest of the market, farther into town.

A group of Canarrian children played in the street ahead of them. They were bent over a collection of marbles on the ground, arguing excitedly with each other in their language. One threw a marble into the air. They watched it land among the others, knocking a few others away and causing them all to argue and laugh together.

James adjusted the sword on his hip, already finding his steps impeded by its presence.

Around the corner from the market stood a few other stalls along a small wall. A cake stand displayed tasty-looking pastries, next to a flower stall that was currently unoccupied.

Sam stopped by the flower stall and looked around. The strong scent of the flowers on display bombarded them. James rubbed his nose, thinking that they would give him a headache if he had to smell them for too long.

From the side of the building came a dark haired young woman, who was removing thick padded gloves. Her dark hair bobbed with her fast strides, her smooth cheeks red with exasperation. Faint smudges of dirt smeared her white top, and she wiped her bare hands on her dark shorts as she approached the flower stall.

She caught a glimpse of them and stopped, her dark eyes widening and a large smile forming on her full lips.

"Hey! Sam!" she exclaimed. Rounding the stall, she threw the gloves on the counter and ran to them with her arms out.

She wrapped Sam in a tight embrace. Sam grimaced and had to hold her back, a hand on his shoulder. The girl lifted his sleeve and her eyes widened at the scars she could see. She spoke a rapid stream of Canarrian in scolding tones.

Sam shook his head and gave her a reassuring look, placing his hands on her shoulders. When he responded in Canarrian, James recognised the words 'sheng' and 'elapao', meaning 'good' and 'love', and understood the general idea of Sam giving a greeting. While he could just about understand Sam, the woman spoke so fast and in strings of sentences that he couldn't interpret any of it.

Sam curled an arm around her slender waist and turned to James and Evan. He now shared a laugh with the young girl and composed himself as he addressed them.

"This is Tabetha Andora, a friend of mine."

"Hello," she said in accented Standard, nodding to them. "How are you both?"

"Hi," James responded. He was unsure of Tabetha's understanding of the Standard Tongue, and added, "Lis sano bousai ed." At least he knew how to say 'it's a pleasure to meet you'.

Evan nodded to her.

"Tabetha speaks Standard," Sam said to them. "Well, just about."

She nudged an elbow into his side, leaning into him playfully. "Better than most." Curling a stray hair behind her ear, she added, "It is nice to meet new friends of Sam."

"Old and new," Sam told her. "We're on our way to Riondon, and I knew I couldn't pass by Toolin without stopping by your stall."

"Of course you cannot!" she exclaimed, slapping Sam lightly on the chest, appearing to be offended at the idea. When she glanced at James and Evan, her smile remained but her expression hardened. She poured out a string of Canarrian to Sam.

Tabetha's large eyes shone in the sunlight while they spoke. James found himself noticing her slender frame—her wide hips and smooth, tanned legs. He also noticed how her hand remained on Sam's waist, and how their eyes never left each other.

Beside him, Evan was looking over the town, no longer interested in them. He had that distant, withdrawn look in his eyes again.

Sam's tone lowered, and James thought he heard his own name spoken, but wasn't sure.

"She says we are invited to her home for supper," Sam eventually said, turning to them. "And that we cannot refuse." After exchanging a few more quick words with her, he added, "Let's get a drink in the tavern. We have an hour until Tabetha finishes with the stall." After a few more Canarrian words with her, Sam shrugged and nodded.

Tabetha wrapped her arms around Sam and held him tight, this time careful with his shoulder. Then she said, "See you all soon. We will have a nice dinner. I look forward to it."

James smiled and nodded. "Thank you. Bowaiiy." He hoped he had pronounced 'goodbye' correctly, as he usually used the more common 'bow' for a farewell.

Tabetha squeezed Sam's hand and turned back to her stall, smiling and giggling. James thought her laughter came across a little uncomfortable, or forced. He knew some people who laughed when they were nervous. But she seemed cheerful and pleasant enough. Maybe she was genuinely cheery.

When they left her, Sam called back in Canarrian, which made her laugh again. Her breathy laugh this time was more comfortable and genuine. James found her very curious.

They followed the main road farther into the town.

"She seems nice," James said to Sam after a while.

"Aye," Sam said. "One of a kind, is Tabetha."

"She seems to like you a lot," James added. He raised his brows when Sam looked at him.

Sam chuckled. "She's a good friend. Just a friend."

An old Canarrian man in heavy robes approached them. Two heavy-looking satchels were slung across his body. James was comforted by the familiar sight of a Cold Merchant, having seen many of them in Tyken Town. The merchant called out his iced refreshments, in the Standard Tongue and then again in Canarrian.

"Something cold would be good," Sam said to his companions. "But I'd prefer something in that tavern over there." He nodded down the street, to a three-level building with bevelled corners that gave it a curved appearance.

The wooden sign hanging over the double doors read, *The Seven Keys*.

"A drink does sound good," James admitted.

1. This was more of a relaxed chapter, little tension, and mostly served to show the world and the kind of people around. Did you get a good sense of the world?

2. First impressions of Tabetha?

3. Anything else stand out for you? Good or bad?