

Chapter Eight: The Seven Keys - Part One

The heavy doors of the tavern gave way to a large, open room. A dull, red-brown wood made up the floorboards and the walls, with slow-moving fans on the high ceiling. A staircase was in each far corner, curving up to a second floor walkway lined with doors. A few people sat at the round tables that made up the bulk of the tavern floor.

James, Sam and Evan descended several steps from the doorway to the lowered ground. High up on the walls, tall windows let a dull light into the room, swarms of dust motes revealed through the sun rays. The air smelled of stale beer and sweat, reminding James of a long-abandoned distillery he had helped re-develop in Tyken Town.

"I'll get us some drinks," Sam said as he headed towards the bar at the far end, between the staircases.

James led Evan to a square table against the side wall, near a pillar. His sword bashed a chair as they passed, and he had to adjust its position, almost knocking over another chair. The shifting sounds drew a few looks, which caused James to turn away embarrassedly. He would have to get used to carrying a sword.

He sat down opposite Evan, and immediately became aware of being alone with the Voarn. He wondered if Evan would even talk to him. A corroded section of an engine hung on the wall by their table, one of many peculiar adornments around the tavern.

Looking around, a sense of calm came over James. He appreciated the quieter, slower-paced atmosphere in the old-town tavern.

The way Evan was sitting, shoulders high and palms pressed against the wooden table, reminded James of a cat ready to pounce.

He considered making small-talk with Evan, but still did not know where he stood with him. Evan had made it clear that he thought little of James, whom he had once considered to be his saviour and chosen hero of the gods. James had never been good with talking to people. He had spent so long hiding his memory loss from people, that he had found it hard to really speak openly with anyone, and he had kept them all at a distance while being polite and helpful. That's how Tam had taught him to be. Polite and helpful.

"What do you think of the place?" James asked, deciding to try a conversation.

Evan gave him a blank look. "It is... very local."

James wasn't sure what to make of that. "And.. how about everything else? I know this is all new for you. First time on this planet, Carnan. First time seeing what it's like outside of Tyken Town. Toolin is a lot less built up."

Evan nodded. "I do appreciate it's simplicity. And I do find it all..." He regarded James, perhaps assessing whether it were worth his time to share his thoughts or not. Finally he said, "It is a far cry from my homeland. Many oddities are here. And I must say, the air of this land is thick and odorous. I had read of such places as this, planets of humans, although had never thought I would visit one like this."

An old Canarrian man was sat with a board on a nearby table. Coloured pieces covered the wooden board, along with two stacks of cards. His gnarled fingers drew a card, which caused him to frown, and then moved several pieces around the board, grumbling under his breath.

"You speak Standard very well," James said to Evan. "I mean, there's no accent or hint of another language. You speak it better than I do."

Evan gave a slow, accepting nod. "We are well educated in Therapia."

James tried not to take that as an insult to the people in Medrapon.

Sam came to them with three metal tankards. He placed them on the table and sat next to Evan.

"Let the cool waters of the broth soothe your weary souls," Sam said to them.

James thought he had heard a colleague say that line once before.

"What is it?" Evan asked, eyeing the foamy liquid.

"Beer, we call it. Or mohv, as the Canarrians call it. Yeast, malt, hops, and spices."

Sam raised his tankard up to them and then drank.

The cold brew revitalised James. Beer always reminded him of after-hours, when he would spend time with co-workers after a long shift in the sun.

Evan sputtered and slammed his tankard down, coughing and heaving.

Sam patted Evan's back, smiling. "Easy there, fella. Small sips to start with. It might be an acquired taste to your folk."

Evan blinked through bloodshot eyes, taking several attempts to clear his throat. He finally managed to say, "Gods be good," before inspecting the drink once more. "Beer, you say?"

Evan's throaty voice caused James to laugh. When they looked at James, he reddened. But then he smiled, and couldn't help but laugh more. Sam also chuckled. When Evan's large, uncomprehending eyes stared at them, they both laughed again, louder.

James noticed that Sam drank with his left arm. His other arm—the one with the bloodied shoulder—rested limply in his lap. A pang of guilt stabbed at James. He hated how weak he had been in the caves.

Raucous laughter came from a nearby table. Several bo'Breih's slammed their hands on the table, laughing at a joke one of them had made. The lower portions of their faces, covered in a thick fur, shook and bobbed with their boisterous speech. Their yellow, dust-strewn jackets and muddied boots marked them as labourers, reminding James of his old work.

"Does Tam know that we've left Tyken Town?" James asked.

Sam nodded, swallowing a mouthful. "Den Keenosh has told him everything."

And just how would you know that, Sam? James thought. Den Keenosh, the mysterious Oneron General that had explained to James that his memory had been taken away. Den had been the one to finally answer the question that James had been wondering for two years: did he have a past, or had he been born a fully grown man? Either way felt like the same thing to James.

"What did Tam say?" James asked.

"I don't know. I haven't heard from Tam or Den. Tam knew what was happening when he handed you that package yesterday morning, to deliver to Den Keenosh. He knows the path you're on now."

James shook his head, still trying to make sense of everything. He'd had time to come to terms with the fact that his foreman and mentor, Tam Borral, had secretly been watching over him in Tyken Town—along with Sam and Den—but thinking about the revelations still caused his stomach to twist. "What will Tam tell everyone at Rimas?"

"That's up to him," Sam said. "I wouldn't worry about what others in Tyken Town think of you, James. That life is behind you now. It's best to look ahead, and concentrate on the present and the future."

"Well that's all I've got, ain't it? A present and a future." James's voice lowered as he looked away. *That's all I've ever had.*

"You're making a past, now. Your time in Tyken Town has helped shape you into the person you are now, and that's no bad thing. But you have a lot ahead of you, and its best you keep your focus there."

"Those are wise words," Evan said. "Our minds should be on the way forward. To discover who is responsible for abducting people across the galaxy, and to the man responsible for seizing my homeland."

"About that," James said, looking at them both. "What is our plan moving forward? So we know that people have been going missing all over the galaxy, forced into what could be a

hidden army. And that the guy we're going to see in Riondon is supposed to be working for the organisation who we think is building this army?"

"Right," Sam said, "Higero Jaxx is using the Riondon iron forge for more than just producing local tools and equipment. Den and I think he's creating weapons and armour for this secret army."

"So they would have licensed Trigger Switches for all those weapons?" James asked. "No, wait. Trigger Switches don't get made alongside armaments. The same planet can't produce both armaments and switches, right?"

"Correct," Sam said. "axx's company, Dyna Core, are a government licensed organisation. But if they don't want to log all the weapons they produce, and provide them to a secret army, they can find ways to cheat the system."

James frowned in thought. He still couldn't believe he had been caught up in all this. Just a few days ago he was paving the floor of a new office building, worrying about an upcoming contractor's exam. Now he was meant to be a soldier—the soldier he once was—who carried a sword and fought spiked beasts in dark caves.

"And once we meet this Higero Jaxx," Evan said. "What do we intend to do with him?"

Sam shrugged a shoulder. "Hopefully just talk to him. Find out what he's doing there. And then decide how to act once we know more."

"And he will talk to us?" Evan asked. "He is expecting to meet with Dr. Velome from Tyken Town, not the three of us."

"He won't be meeting a Voarn Prince and two Oneron soldiers," Sam said. "He will run into three metal miners who are interested in doing business with him."

"Miners?" James asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Owners of a mining company," Sam said. "We can get him talking by discussing possible business ventures together. That's the idea, anyway."

James nodded, taking in the information. "So that's your plan. Well, as long as we don't go in with swords swinging."

Evan regarded his tankard, taking it with both hands and tentatively sipping. He coughed and rubbed his throat, making a sour face.

"You'll find a taste for it in no time," Sam said. "Actually," he added, "I should've asked this earlier, I guess. Ah, how old are you, Evan?"

Evan cleared his throat. "I am in my eighty-fifth year."

"That would be the equivalent of... a teenage boy, for human years?" Sam asked.

Evan seemed to consider the comparison. "I believe that would be correct."

"How long are your lifespans?" James asked. "For the Voarn?"

"We live over a thousand years. Gods willing."

James let out a breath. "That's some time."

"The longest known to records is fourteen hundred and fourteen years," Evan told them.

Sam sat forward, addressing James. "That brings up another good point. Something I just realised that you wouldn't know about, James. The Oneron lifespan is longer than an average human."

James raised his eyebrows. "How much longer?"

Scrunching his face, Sam said, "We can live up to two or three hundred years."

James's eyes widened. "Sam. The revelations just keep on coming, don't they?" He felt his stomach tighten as he tried to process things. "Okay then... so tell me. How old am I?"

Sam smiled ruefully. "You are sixty-five years old. I'm sixty-nine."

James shook his head, unable to hold back a bemused smile. "Really? Really?"

Sam leaned back in his chair. "Slow release of the valve, James, prevents an onslaught of uncontrolled pressure."

James drank from his tankard. "Okay then," he said dully. "I'm sixty-five then."

"I know it's a lot to take in," Sam said.

"No, it's okay," James said. "It's all a lot. But I want to know, everything. I guess the more I know, the better." He swallowed some more beer. "Sixty-five... I would have guessed late twenties. Before I knew I was an Oneron."

"That'd be about correct for a human, aye."

"It appears we all have more years than may appear," Evan said.

Loud voices brought their attention to the bar area.

James looked over to see a man speaking animatedly to the rotund bartender. The customer had a mess of dark curls that hung over his red-skinned face. He held his palms out to the bartender in a calming gesture. The bartender glanced around the tavern before

lowering his voice. They continued to speak heatedly, with hushed voices and sharp hand gestures.

"Someone's in trouble," James noted.