

## Chapter Eight: The Seven Keys - Part Two

"Likely the most excitement you'll find in this town," Sam told them. He sat back and looked around them. "That's why I've always liked these small little towns. Time moves slower here. Never much excitement."

The bartender slammed a fist on the bar, his suppressed voice yelling out, "Enough!"

The curly haired man shook his head. After some more heated whispers between them, the man held his hands up, shaking his head dejectedly, and made his way through the tables. James saw the desperate look on his sweaty red face as he passed them and stormed out.

"Never *that* much excitement, anyway," Sam added, raising his brows and taking another sip.

"You fellas looking for excitement?" a smooth voice said. It belonged to a broad shouldered man who approached them. He wore a brown leather jacket, his loosely buttoned shirt showing a hairy chest. He unslung the sword over his back as he pulled a chair closer and sat next to them, leaning an elbow on the back of the chair.

"Just so happens I've come from a bit of excitement which might interest you folk." He flashed a broad smile, creasing his tanned skin that almost matched his leather jacket.

"We were just saying how we were enjoying the quiet of the small town, actually," Sam said lightly.

The man nodded dismissively, rubbing a hand over his stubbled cheek. He leaned in closer. "Aye, aye, the peace and quiet. I do love that myself. But what I love more—and what I think you fellas will enjoy more—is some honestly shiny trinkets. You see, I'm a merchant around these parts. A merchant of... exotic wares. I've just come into possession of some never before seen treasures, looted from a cave in the far West Sands. This cave, now, belonged to a Red Monk."

His grey-blue eyes narrowed as he leaned even closer. "An *actual* Red Monk, that had been hoarding the best loot for hundreds of years. And now I've got me that loot. Which I'm willing to sell, to the right people."

He leaned back and looked over the three of them, grinning. "So what say you? After a piece or two of history? Something that could change your lives. I see you fellas are no strangers to dangers." He nodded towards the scars showing under Sam's shirt sleeve and neck.

"The offer sounds mighty fine," Sam said. "But likely far more than we could afford."

The man kept his hard gaze locked on Sam a moment, before his expression softened. "Well I'm sure we can come to some arrangement. You may have things of more value than you're aware of." He flashed another grin.

James noticed the man's breath was sharp, and that his eyes constantly watched them, darting back and forth. His blue eyes, thin lips and fair hair gave him a foreign appearance. Definitely not a Canarrian or Canthian. If he was from Carnan, it was likely from the southern continents.

When the man's gaze settled on Evan, he said, "Perhaps this young lengki has something worth trading."

Evan stiffened across the table. James was not familiar with the word, but he felt the air had changed after the man had spoken it. He studied Evan, whose cheeks had flushed with anger

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Evan's heart raced.

While the stranger had been addressing Sam, Evan noticed that the man's focus was mostly on him. His cold eyes lingered whenever they fell on him. Now this ignorant man had revealed his true purpose.

"Now there, we're just after a quiet drink," Sam said, keeping his voice even. "We're not interested in your loot."

The man regarded Sam. "Oh, I meant no offence, of course. Just don't see many lengki's around these parts, is all. Rumours of them being well acquainted with treasure and all intrigues a man like me."

Evan held himself back from jumping across the table in a frenzy of blows and unleashed sorcery. He considered attempting to read the man, but did not want to risk opening his unstable ability—which was never guaranteed to work anyway. He wanted no part of this man's mind, anyhow.

"You are mistaken," Evan said, his voice shaking a little.

The man kept his focus on Evan a moment longer, then nodded and sat back.

"When I was nine years old, my old pap was given the offer of a lifetime. He had the opportunity to possess a very special artefact. One that would bring him and his family untold riches. Word had it, it was what made a beggar into a king, that went on to build one of the strongest dynasties our world had ever known. This artefact was stained with the blood of its previous users. There was something mighty foul about it, that were for sure. Now, my father was a good man. Some would call him weak, while others called him strong of character. And so he refused the offer, not trusting the man who brought it to him."

He took a moment to look them each in the eye. "And so it was passed onto another. The use of it by its next owner had a knock-on effect that led to the deaths of several people in my town. Including my mamma. On the day she died, I made a promise to myself, to make

the most of any opportunity. To never pass up a good thing. As life can change at any moment. And I've lived that way ever since. My old pap couldn't see the chance he had in front of him. And I'd hate for something bad to happen to you folk for not seeing it also."

"I'm sure you're right," Sam said to him. "We really don't know what will happen next, and all we can do is make the best choice we can with the information before us. For instance, you see three people at this table with swords, but you don't know who we are. Where you see opportunity, others might see danger. I suspect that's where you differed with your father."

The man eyed Sam, his hard expression unmoving. Evan watched them both, ready for his hands to move to his sword at any moment.

"Aye, aye, I'm sure you're right, there. Right you are," the man said. His hard edge softened as he stood, slinging his sword over his back and straightening his jacket. "The name's Audlin, by the way. Audlin Yalsune. I'll be around town for the next few days, if you change your minds. Until then, you folks enjoy your quiet drinks."

He grinned once again to them all, flashing his white teeth, and walked out of the tavern without looking back.

They sat in silence for a moment in the charged air.

"What was that about?" James asked.

Evan searched for the spark within him, hoping to sooth himself with the familiar feeling. Sometimes even just knowing his sorcery was within him was enough to ease his tension. He stopped suddenly when he thought he might find a dark shadow instead.

"Trouble, that was," Sam said. Evan noticed him watching him closely. "Some people are just ignorant, Evan. I wouldn't let it worry you."

"Do you know what that word means? Lengki?" Evan asked them. He continued without waiting for a response, his voice trembling with anger. "It means 'disposable life'. An old term given to my people, by slavers and vile people like that man."

"No one says that any more. No one thinks that," Sam said reassuringly. His words meant nothing to Evan.

"Forget about him," James said. "He was just angry that we didn't barter with him, and lashed out. He's just a simple minded local. And he's gone now."

Evan no longer paid attention to them.

He had delved into his memories—to a specific moment in time—and now walked beside his father in their Kingdom of Therapia. He remembered his excitement at spending time alone with the King, who rarely left the castle during his free time. Evan wanted to show his

father all the wonders of the Pellaeian Fields, beyond the gates of Bewlery, west of town. On their way there, Evan pointed out all the inane things that seemed so important and wonderful to his young mind, and his father appeared suitably fascinated at his every word. He had been so young and care-free.

At seeing a crowd gathered ahead of them, his father had become rigid. The common folk were whispering amongst themselves and watching a stranger pass through. The stranger was a heavysset, bearded human in close-fitting foreign clothing.

His father was hesitant to say what the issue was with the stranger, but when Evan pressed the issue, the king had explained. The human was a known descendant of a Voarn slaver, from the olden days. Evan had not even known that the Voarn were once enslaved. King Goodheart told him that their people were once a slave race, and treated with derision by many species. Although this was a very long time ago, and the Voarn had progressed a long way since then. But, the old wounds were not easily forgotten.

Evan was fascinated by the foreigner. He didn't appear so dangerous or exceptional. Just a regular man. Perhaps even a kind one with bright eyes. What was more troubling to Evan were the looks of disgust on the faces of the usually friendly town folk. He couldn't understand the depths of their hatred at the time. He just remembered feeling very uncomfortable. Like a shadow had been cast over the street.

His parents had taught him that forgiveness was a powerful gift—that the past should not shape the present. They had been such loving and forgiving people, to all their subjects. But even knowing this, Evan struggled to sooth his restrained anger. There had been an arrogance from that racist merchant that caused Evan's heart to race.

He looked down at his own tankard, which was still almost full of the intoxicating brew. He considered taking another sip, hesitated a moment, before deciding he would try one last time. He took a large gulp and squeezed his eyes shut, battling the fiery liquid attacking his throat and stinging his nostrils. Blinking through the bright spots dotting his vision, he attempted to focus on the room and his companions, finding the task more difficult than he thought.

"Right, then, Sam." James said. "I think it's time to test out my new sword." He nodded to the sword hanging over his chair.

Sam watched James and nodded, a small smile forming.

Evan sensed the internal vibration of a quickening heart, although he couldn't be sure which person it came from.

"Maybe it's not the smartest thing to do after a beer," James went on, "but we have some time to kill, right?"

"We do," Sam said. "Nothing fancy, but I can show you how to hold it at least. If you're sure you're up for it?"

James nodded. He held Sam's look for a moment, his expression sobering. "I am. Let's do it."

"Let's do it," Sam said. He pushed off the table and stood.

Evan's head swam a little as he stood; a curious, muddled sensation flushed his cheeks. He channelled a sprinkling of Healing sorcery that blossomed in his chest and throat, but frowned when his head remained heavy.

"Feel like sparring?" Sam asked Evan as they exited the tavern.

Evan's eyes thinned at the bright sunlight. He realised his hands had balled into fists. "Aye. That I do."