

Chapter 22

TAP CODES

Cato and his team finally entered Doriva after running at full pace for over half an hour. Immediately, the situation appeared to be more severe than he had initially anticipated. There wasn't a single sign of life in the city. Either all the citizens had been brought to some secret hideout, or it was indeed as he already feared; everyone had left Doriva.

What could be the reason for such a drastic course? he thought pensively. What would it take to convince every single citizen to abandon their homes and livelihood?

The fog had grown so dense, he could barely see the steam leaving his own nostrils. He couldn't even recognize the streets they were running through anymore. Everything was shrouded by a cloud, and if he hadn't already memorized Doriva's layout by heart, he surely would have gotten lost before too long. The city was hard enough to navigate even without the fog, but he knew exactly where he stood. Perhaps not necessarily by sight, but the smell was unmistakable. He was in the street where the tavern called 'Your Mother' was located. Somewhere to his left was the narrow alleyway where he got mugged by three scantily clad prostitutes a couple of years ago.

Were they all forced to leave? What catastrophe could cause that to happen? And where would they even go? Like Raven said, we haven't come across a single person on our way to Doriva. Not one. But if this place truly is abandoned, why would Jada have used her aura to signal us? It's not like her to be careless with her abilities. Have they run into trouble or was the vision simply too poor to do it any other way?

Fearing that his team might get separated in the haze, he made everybody hold each other's hands to form a chain. Their first objective was to meet up with the other half of the team. On the list that he gave to Raven, he wrote down twelve potential locations for a reunion. Having already run past ten of them, the next building on the list was a stable, not too far from the main street.

Cato was in front, leading the chain as they moved deeper into the city. He felt like a bird, soaring through a massive cloud; all he saw was a solid white that never seemed to end. It reminded him of one of the dreams that Cain had put him in, but he quickly removed that thought from his mind, still fearing that simply by thinking about it, he would summon the specter somehow.

He held one hand in front of his face to make sure he wouldn't bump into something. His other hand held tightly onto Maya. It was a feeling he could get used to, but that, too, was a thought he forcibly evicted from his mind. He had to remain focused. The situation in Doriva was nothing the realm had ever seen before.

"This doesn't feel right, my lord," Koba whispered from the third position of their chain.

"No talking," Cato whispered back without turning to face Koba.

"It's too quiet . . ."

Cato abruptly stopped and spun around, almost bumping face to face into Maya. His eyes went directly to the healer, however. "Koba, shh!"

He immediately lowered to the ground when he heard a second shushing that couldn't have been an echo due to the density of the fog. He put a finger to his lips and gently removed himself from Maya's clutch. "Someone is out there," he signaled with his hands.

"Could it be the others?" Maya signaled back.

"What if it's not?" Koba also said with his hands, though his snuffles undid the absolute silence of the conversation.

Cato took a deep breath and gave his team a severe look. "Wait here," he signaled. "I will check out the sound on my own."

Those few tiny flicks with his hands seemed to upset Maya. "It is too dangerous to go alone, Captain," she gestured wildly and Cameron backed her up with similar gestures.

"This is not a discussion," Cato answered sternly, though his authority was difficult to convey through sign language alone. "Stay here," he whispered instead and got to his feet. He motioned his team to hide in

the narrow alleyway that felt like a home away from home at one miserable point in his life, and disappeared into the haze on his own.

Staying as close to the ground as possible, he crouched toward the direction of the other shush he heard. A couple of barrels provided a cover for him to crawl behind. In the distance, perhaps less than thirty yards ahead of him, he heard a few muffled voices. He leaned in to try and get a better hearing, but he couldn't even tell whether the voices were male or female. He had to find out somehow, so he picked up a pebble he happened to be kneeling on and ran his fingers over the smooth edges.

He took a deep breath and tried to stabilize his heartbeat. If his memories served him correctly, the stable that he wrote down on his list shouldn't be too far off from where he was. If Raven and his team were hiding there, they might be able to hear him if he tried to communicate using tap codes.

Tick. Tick-tick. He softly tapped a cobble with the pebble in his hand. *Tick. Tick. Tick-tick. Tick.* He carefully raised his head above the barrels. The sound shouldn't have been loud enough for the people in the street to hear, but all of the sudden, the muffled voices stopped talking. It stayed eerily silent, although he did imagine hearing a whisper calling out his name through the wind. His fingers slid closer to the hilt of his sword to make sure he was ready to deliver a swift strike if need be.

Tick tick-tick. Tick, tick-tick, tick. Tick-tick-tick, tick-tick.

His eyes widened. Someone answered his sign with a countersign. It instantly brought him to high alert. The coded language was originally invented during the 'Great War' between Onyran and Meralysian forces and had remained a well-guarded secret ever since. No Dorivan would be able to decipher the meaning of the taps without inside information, which made it far more likely that he was communicating with someone from his own team. *What are they doing out here in the open street?* He couldn't take any risks by assuming.

Tick-tick. Tick-tick. Tick. He tapped his pebble on the cobble again, but it remained silent.

Suddenly, the horses in the stable started neighing all at once in fear of something. He flinched in surprise, knocking over one of the barrels. The next thing he knew, he heard footsteps approaching him at a frantic pace. The whistling of a blade cutting through the air made him instinctively draw his own sword and perform a defensive strike above his head. The piercing sound of colliding metals reverberated through the narrow street.

He tried to get a better look at his assailant, but instead, found himself blocking and dodging two slashes and one thrust at lightning speed. He never had the chance to clearly see his attacker, who instantly disappeared back into the fog.

It was obvious he was dealing with a highly-skilled swordsman. He only managed to avoid taking damage, because he had already seen every imaginable combination of sword strikes during his countless hours of training with Principal Aeron. Still, to perform that particular sequence of attacks with such fluidity was no small feat. It required a level of athleticism neither he nor Principal Aeron possessed. For a second, he entertained the possibility of having to use his aura to defeat his foe, but that would only alert any potential seeker, and in turn, attract even greater problems.

He closed his eyes and focused solely on his hearing. With fog so thick, his vision only became a distraction that brought along doubt. And as one of his former teachers, Lady Minari, would say; 'doubt precipitates mistakes'.

He sharpened his ears and carefully listened to the rhythm of his opponent's movements. It sounded familiar somehow. He counted three footsteps and then nothing. The last footstep was clearly louder than the first two, which meant that the assailant had leapt into the air. A downward strike was the next logical move. He heard the whistling of the blade and timed his retreat perfectly. Almost within the same motion, he lifted his knee and stepped down on his opponent's sword, pinning it to the ground.

The assailant disappeared again before Cato could open his eyes. He glanced at his boot and saw the birthday present he had given to his pupil almost three years ago. "Raven," he whispered and held on to his breath, ready to strike if his call went unanswered.

It remained silent for far too long, but he was eventually allowed to gasp for air when he finally heard a welcome voice.

"Cay? Is that you?"

Cato took a few deep breaths out of relief. "I could have killed you," he said with more confidence than he felt and handed over his pupil's sword.

"Cay, I'm so glad you're here. Something bad is happening in this place."

Cato immediately noticed the blood on Raven's hand. "What the hell is going on? Where are the others? Where is Rayne?"

"Right here, my lord," Rayne said quietly, stepping out of the fog, nervously wringing her hands.

"Thank god, you're safe." Cato reeled her into his arms. "It's alright, Sunshine," he added in a whisper and turned back to Raven. "You were answering my tap codes just now. Why the hell did you lunge at me?"

Raven only stared back with a puzzled frown.

"We heard no tap codes," Rayne said, visibly more at ease now that Cato was back.

"What?"

"Yeah," Raven said. "I only attacked because I heard the barrel getting knocked over." He lowered his head in shame. "Cay, we messed up. There was this long-haired bald guy from Meralys who came out of nowhere. He was just—"

"Meralys?" Cato interrupted and sank into his thoughts. Somehow, Master Kaius was at the center of every one of them.

"Captain, are you alright?" Maya said, running toward them with Koba and Cameron following shortly behind. "We heard swords colliding one moment, and then nothing."

"We're fine, my lady. Raven was throwing a fit."

"Cay, listen to me," Raven said, grabbing Cato by the elbow. "This guy was wearing the outfit of a Dragon, I'm telling you. He was just idling in the middle of the street. I couldn't allow him to stay there in case Jada and Peyton would return from the wall—"

"You guys split up?"

"We had no choice," Rayne said in her brother's defense. "The situation changed the moment we entered the city. We had to find out what was going on here . . . My lord, everyone has *fled* this place."

"We don't know that yet," Raven grumbled.

"Jada used her aura to signal us," Maya said. "Where is she now?"

Raven looked stunned by that revelation. He turned to his mentor with tension in his eyes. "Cay, I explicitly told them not to use aura."

Cato shook his head. It didn't matter who was to blame, though he could have told Raven beforehand that letting 'Jade and Peyt' wander off on their own was a big lapse of judgment. "Why haven't they returned to you? She sent us the signal over an hour ago."

"Oh no . . ." Rayne said. "Do you think they're in trouble?"

Raven put his hand on his sister's shoulder, but kept his attention on Cato. "Like I said, we were dealing with our own problems. We captured the Meralysian and brought him back to the stable. Something was seriously wrong with him, Cay. He didn't respond to *anything*. I tried to force some answers out of him, but he was like a lifeless puppet; never even blinked. And then, out of nowhere, he started flailing around and snapping his jaws like some rabid beast. We got distracted by a sound from outside and he jumped through the window. Next thing I know, I was fighting you."

Cato nodded thoughtfully with a wrinkly frown. "And you are sure you didn't hear any tap codes?"

"Absolutely."

Cato turned to Rayne for confirmation.

"No tap codes, my lord."

"Look!" Koba said louder than he meant to and pointed at the sky in the distance. Even through the thickness of the fog, they could see the flashes of a purplish pink.

"Master!" Rayne shouted and took off without giving it a second thought.