

As Coura continued on, keeping close to the palace's wall, there were echoes of whacking noises and chatter from the group nearby. That was when she could make out their movements and the weapons in their hands.

This must be their soldiers' training grounds, she realized with genuine interest and paused. There were no doors that she could see, aside from one with people constantly coming and going. *If I get close, they are sure to notice. I don't think they would let a stranger roam in from out of nowhere. So, what can I do?*

After weighing her chances of sneaking by or backtracking around to the other side before dark, Coura straightened and suppressed a grin. *Byron is going to kill me. I'm going to be in trouble regardless of which option I choose, so I should satisfy my curiosity before his punishment.*

Instead of moving toward the door leading inside the palace, she went straight to the group nearest to the stable. There were about thirty men and several women all practicing sword work with wooden practice blades and a partner. Coura recognized the moves from a distance as basic defensive maneuvers and wondered how educated they were.

She flowed around each pair to observe their work without comment. Most didn't care and focused on their own partners, but some stared at her with either arrogance or irritation. She ignored their looks, concentrating more on the exercises and comparing them to what she knew.

Like I would let any of these soldiers intimidate me, she thought as she noticed many flaws and uncertainty with their skills.

"What are you staring at?" a man who appeared to be a few years older snapped at her. She had been watching him at the moment his partner successfully parried a blow on accident.

"Your swords," she admitted without taking her eyes off of his practice blade. At the academy, her original weapons master started them out with wooden swords too until they were competent enough to work with actual, deadly ones.

"Yeah, well, this isn't the place for strangers, especially little girls," the brute sneered and turned back to his partner.

Coura thought about letting it go but could not stop the words from tumbling out after his comment. "That probably is for the best. I wouldn't want anyone to see me either if I were bold enough to pretend I was skilled with a sword."

Those around who heard halted, suddenly invested in the argument. Their stares were not directed at her, she noticed, but at the man she insulted to see his reaction. He did not disappoint.

With an audible, animal-like puff of air through his nose, the man spun to face her. Coura lifted her eyes, kept her face neutral, and met his glare. "Who are you?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

She wondered what would happen if she told the truth and revealed that she was a student from the Magic Arts Academy. Would they think of her as an ally, a threat, or not worth tolerating? In the end, she shrugged and decided against it. "I just know a thing or two about sword work."

He raised an eyebrow and glanced to those around him who also showed a mixture of doubt and surprise. To her own amazement, he backed down and grumbled, "Whatever," at her before facing his partner again. That seemed to be the others' cue to return to their own training and ignore the stranger.

Despite her luck, Coura felt more offended than relieved that no one paid her any attention. "You're a lot less aggressive than I gave you credit for. It's no wonder you're no good at fighting with a sword," she teased with arms crossed.

Any self-restraint he had vanished as he turned around fuming. “I was trying to be nice because you’re a woman, but I see you must not be worth wasting manners on!”

Without hesitation, Coura approached his partner as the man was yelling. “May I?” she asked, extending a hand toward his wooden sword.

The boy, for he was no older than Coura, whispered, “Are you sure?” She ignored him, and he eventually gave in.

All eyes fell on the stranger taking on an older male. She reveled in it, savoring the attention as she weighed the wood in her hands and spoke. “I’ve seen children pick up weapons and learn to use them without having the heart to match the progress. Skills take time and effort to develop, but if you are not able to put your emotions, your *being* into them... Well, let’s just say it’s not going to work out for you.”

Coura raised her sword and pointed it at the man, who watched her intensely. Then, without warning, she charged, intending to swipe right. He was caught off guard but responded well enough to raise his sword. The crack that resulted echoed around the training ground, followed by silence. The man stood gaping at the sword, which had nearly split in two along the length of the blade.

“How did you... It’s broken!”

As casually as she had taken the practice sword, she handed it back to its owner, who watched her with wide eyes. Not full of fright, though. In fact, as she leveled a glance at each trainee, Coura saw only curiosity and awe, but no fear. That surprised her more than she was willing to admit.

For their lack of skills, these soldiers sure are made of tougher stuff.

“Remember what I said before?” she responded calmly. “When you fight with a sword, you have to fight with intention. I charged you with the full intent to break your arm.” The man’s mouth dropped, and there were murmurs from behind.

Coura turned to see those around parting for another man. He was very plainly dressed in all brown, which matched his clipped hazel hair and eyes. Unlike her opponent, this man appeared to be around her age.

“What’s going on here?” he asked with some authority.

She kept silent while the boy she borrowed the sword from blurted out an answer before anyone else. “Marcus, it was incredible! This girl showed up and took my sword and then struck a blow at Remy that split his sword. We all saw it!”

Around the group the soldiers nodded eagerly, even Remy. All the while the newcomer watched Coura with narrowed eyes, sizing her up. Against her urge to do or say something, she remained silent with a bored expression.

He smiled at the younger boy. “Thank you, Jorge. Would you get me two blades from the armor station?”

While ‘Jorge’ scuttled off toward another stable, Coura stood across from the stranger as the group surrounding them chattered to one another. Finally, she decided to break the tension.

“I take it you are in charge of their training?”

The man, Marcus, didn’t reply, which irked her.

“Usually you introduce yourself when you burst into the center of a group.”

“All right, go ahead,” he countered her words with a sly smile.

The boy returned then with two polished *real* swords whose blades shone in the sunlight. Marcus took one and weighed it in his hands. “Very good. Now, give the other to...”

“Coura,” she supplied and grabbed her own without taking her eyes off of her next opponent.

I'll be glad to knock that smirk off of his face, she thought as she took her stance. Marcus mirrored her movement fluently. *So, he knows how to fight. I can tell right away he will be more of a challenge.*

She chose to take the offensive first, but before she could move, her opponent charged, sword raised. He grunted and brought it down diagonally, intending to slice at her neck. Coura blocked the blow with ease and pushed his blade away. He followed with three more swings at her sides. She ducked around the first two and knocked the third away with her own sword before countering with a strike to his thigh that was deflected.

That last attack had strength behind it, which means he either thinks I'm causing trouble and wants to teach me a lesson, or he believes I actually know what I am doing. Either way, he's too strong to take head-on. I'll have to use a lighter technique.

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“There are three main categories of weapons work I've seen over the years,” Coura's beginning teacher explained. “First, and the most common, is strength-based. When you are on the offensive, you put a good majority of your muscle behind attacks. For some people who are stronger and physically larger, this is the best way to knock your opponent off their balance. It's also intimidating for fighters without too much experience. The blows are direct. You cannot hold anything back. This category is for blunt weapons and swords.

“The next is the swift-based, for those of you who make up for a lack of strength with speed and agility. Usually fighters skilled with daggers, knives, or other small weapons find this to be the best for them. Lastly, there's the distance-based fighters. If you don't like close combat, this one's for you. Most of the time you have a preference for strength or agility, but this category focuses on avoiding all of that with precision. Of course, you will have to be trained in close combat too, but this adds an extra means of fighting with throwing knives, a bow and arrows, and even javelins.

“Now, there are two rules to follow with weapons work. The first is that you're all fit to wield a certain weapon or two based not only on your physicality but also by your own preference. I've seen sprouts who think they are tough enough to stab a man with a sword who did not have the heart to put their weight behind blows. Likewise, there have been brutish students who exploded when their throwing knives couldn't hit a target because they expect them to obey, like they have that control. You *must* find the balance you are comfortable with and go from there. That's why your later years here will focus on what you can and want to work with.

“The second rule is why we train you in them all right away. Each weapon can be used in multiple ways, but you'll never be well-rounded unless you're flexible. If you lack strength, there's no reason for you to fight with a mace, and if you're too muscular, don't you dare think you can dance around with a dagger only. You will have your specialty, but what if you lose your weapon or don't have access to one? Then what will you do? A competent fighter can pick up anything and figure out how to use it to his or her advantage. This requires finding your strengths and weaknesses, then adapting.”

After that, he had them all choose the weapon they felt best suited for. Coura never hesitated when she picked up the sword first.

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Coura and Marcus traded blows, meeting each other with precision honed through years of effort. They huffed in the afternoon sun, and both bodies began gleaming with sweat. Never

once did Coura take her eyes off of him or think of how much time had passed. Marcus struck at her right side while she rolled into his sword, sweeping under the blade and parrying with a similar blow. He was too slow. Her sword scratched his left hip. The cut was not deep but enough to distract. A hand went to that side and his sword lowered. Marcus was now breathing deeply. Coura licked her lips in anticipation.

This is it. He let his guard down. She charged, planning to strike his right arm hard enough to have him drop his sword and for her to claim victory. As her blade rose, she met his eyes and saw the corner of his mouth turn up. *Something's not right,* she realized frantically. However, it was too late.

Her sword began to fall as his rose to meet it. At the same time, Marcus sprung straight up and launched himself at her. His left shoulder slammed into her chest, knocking the breath out of her, while the flat of his sword smacked her right elbow. Coura released her weapon and fell backward.

The stranger's blade's metallic clang on the ground was the only sound for what felt like minutes. No one around Marcus seemed to be breathing.

I'm sure they're loving this, he thought, as he relaxed a bit to wipe the sweat off his brow. *They've never actually seen any serious fighting from me before now.*

He kicked the young woman's sword behind him and out of reach, waiting for her to rise. After a few seconds, she still did not move. His comrades murmured around him, and Marcus's stomach twisted.

I thought I pulled that blow. I had no intention of harming her or laying her out. What did I do?

With growing panic at the consequences of hurting an innocent person, he walked over to where she lay on her back with her limbs spread out. Marcus noticed immediately the welt on her elbow beginning to swell. He hesitated to kneel beside her, not wanting to startle her awake.

"Should I get a healer?" someone in the crowd asked him. Their presence made him decide to take the professional route and not leave her in the dirt.

"Yes," he began, kneeling beside her. "Tell them it is not urgent, but—"

Without warning, her right arm shot to his side and struck him on the spot where she had scratched him earlier. It was not a serious wound, but was deep enough that the blow had him clutching his side. That was when one of her legs reached up to kick him in the back of the head, sending him face-first into the dirt, seeing stars. When Marcus pushed himself into a sitting position, his opponent was standing over him with his sword in her hand and the tip at his chest.

He was stunned, as were those around them, until their audience began shouting insults.

"Disgraceful!"

"Where's your honor in a fair fight?"

"That's not how you duel!"

"How could you fake an injury like that?"

To her credit, she ignored the jeers and continued to keep her focus, and his sword, on him. Marcus sighed and raised his hands in defeat, careful not to let his annoyance show too much.

"I give," he said, pushing the blade away as he rose to his feet and brushed off the dirt now covering him. She eyed the others around them. Most were still fuming, but the voices faded away when he was on his feet again.

“Cheater,” someone muttered under their breath loud enough for him to hear, and the rest nodded in agreement.

She shrugged indifferently. “It’s not cheating. A fight is a fight. You go until one person forfeits, is *actually* knocked out, or dies.” The last words hung in the air, and Marcus hoped his comrades would take them to heart after his experience.

He cleared his throat to draw their attention, intent on breaking their group apart before questioning the stranger. “Now then,” he began. However, a booming voice cut him off and startled most of them.

“There you are!”

A middle-aged man looking very tired and upset shoved his way to the middle of the circle, glaring at the girl. She was obviously taken aback as well but dropped Marcus’ sword and moved to meet him.

“Byron, I—”

“Come. Now!” he ordered. Reluctantly, she moved to his side. He gripped her arm tightly enough that everyone could see his fingers indenting her skin and pulled her into the palace.

Marcus remained where he was, not wanting to interfere, and ordered the group to pair up again to practice their basic exercises again. The rest of the afternoon he fielded various questions about that fight, not sure himself if being chivalrous had been the right thing to do with the stranger.