

The negativity regarding her was something Coura was growing accustomed to and tried to ignore. In order to ease the tension, she decided to attempt a dismissive approach as she had been doing ever since acquiring the demonic power. If she acted normally, the light mage might realize how dramatic her behavior was and calm down. "Maybe it would be better if I give you a moment," she said in a bored tone to no one in particular.

"Coura," Byron warned when she opened the front door.

"Don't worry, I'll be right out here getting some fresh air. The food smells delicious by the way." Once outside, she breathed easier. Soirée was at the back of her head bristling with a predatory instinct while Emilea was powerful enough to intimidate her. What was worse, she could still hear their words beyond the walls.

"I will *not* welcome someone like that into my home!"

"I'm sure you heard the rumors, and that's all they are."

"A wolf in sheep's skin is what I see, and if the rest of you aren't smart enough to notice, I will have to be the responsible one."

One of the men said something too quietly for Coura to make out, but she was restless enough not to stay and eavesdrop. She thought a walk might help her body relax before the forest grew too dark, and as she wandered around the house, a worn path caught her eye. A brief glance proved it was a trail, and she followed it for a while, enjoying the sounds of the insects buzzing and chirping to one another, the birds settling in for the night, and bats preparing to catch their meals. It was peaceful, though Coura figured she needed to turn around soon or risk fumbling through darkness to make her way back.

I'd hate to worry Byron and Will, too. They probably feel terrible about this.

A sudden, shrill cry in the distance made her halt.

{That was no normal creature...}

Immediately after was a girl's high-pitched scream. Before she understood what was happening, Coura found herself sprinting off the trail into the twilight-filled woods after the sound.

Where did it come from?

{Over to the left. Use your senses.}

Soirée was right, though Coura mistook her impatience for urgency. She opened her mind and found two sources of a twisted, dark energy nearby. Within a few seconds, she burst through a pair of bushes into a clearing at the bottom of a small hill. There was another, much closer scream, and her eyes shot toward the source.

On the far end of the clearing, two children, presumably the ones she caught heading out when they arrived at Clearshot's home, were huddled together. The girl was on the ground while the young boy stood in front of her with both hands clenching a thick hunting knife. Their eyes were locked on the creatures stalking them nearby.

When Coura appeared, the demonic creatures, for they were definitely not regular wild animals, swiveled their heads with glowing, violet eyes to see who disturbed their hunt. Their bodies were about six feet long and wolf-like, except for their black fur that shimmering slightly in the dying light. Everything, from their appearance to their movements, reminded her of the memory she was unable to fully recall, sending a shiver down her spine as it had when she was young. They growled before the larger of the two slowly crept forward toward her.

As Coura's heart pounded, Soirée's presence remained unaffected. The demon spoke without a hint of fear or concern to steady her mind and body.

{What will you do now?}

Coura's initial thought was to summon the demon blade, and she reached forward, preparing to dive into her power.

{You sure are careless. If someone were to see you using magic, specifically the children, they would surely report it to those in charge of you. How well do you think that will go over with the master light mage? Not to mention what they might assume once they know you were around demonic creatures to begin with.}

Coura's heart sank as she realized Soirée was right, causing a flush of amusement from the demon.

Fine. I can distract them long enough for the children to escape into the woods.

{Good luck. These predators divide their attention between prey. It makes sense since they don't need to eat. Demonic creatures entertain themselves before slaughtering. What a mess you've gotten yourself in.}

Is there anything positive you can tell me? Coura forced Soirée's words aside and tried to swallow, only to find her throat dry. *Without magic, I'll have to find a weapon and get to the children first.*

Although her first instinct was to run, she forced her legs to steady and pace around the closest creature. They watched each other closely, waiting for the other to strike. It strained her legs to move so painfully slow when at any point the creature could pounce, yet they only circled each other.

Finally, she was between it and the children who had noticed her. The little girl let out a whimper as Coura carefully began backing up instead of sidestepping any more. At that moment, the other creature, who remained still, leapt for her.

Coura spun around and ran for the children, only to find them going to her. "No," she called and gestured for them to stay away.

They stopped and let out a panicked cry. Instinctively, Coura looked back to see that both beasts were snapping at each other. *The one that lunged interrupted the bigger one*, she thought absently.

Whatever the case, it provided enough of a distraction for her to reach the girl and her slightly older brother. They both clung to her legs out of instinct, but she pushed them off and glared down at the boy.

"Give me the knife," she ordered with more confidence than she felt. Obediently, they stepped away with some fear directed at her, and the boy held out the weapon. Coura swiped it from him and turned back to the creatures. Their eyes flared with rage as they growled and bared pointed teeth.

Great, now what? Before she could think of anything more, the smaller one charged.

"Run!"

She heard the children shuffle back farther, and Coura leaned forward in anticipation of stabbing the creature. As she expected, it leaped into the air. She rolled forward underneath its belly and found herself in between the two once again, but the smaller one lunged forward before Coura had time to recover. She gasped as claws scratched across her left thigh yet somehow remembered to stab with the knife. It let out a deafening shriek as the knife sunk into its right eye.

Behind her, the other creature ran forward. She was nimble enough to pull out the knife and jump to the side in time, tumbling away as the larger one crashed into the second. While they again snapped at each other as if they were bickering, Coura felt a surge of pain from her thigh that sent her to one knee, followed by a tendril of demonic energy.

I've been cut badly before, but this pain is double.

{Hadn't you noticed their claws are dripping with venom? Our healing magic is stronger, but I wouldn't rely on it for too much more.}

Even as Soirée spoke, the pain ceased enough for her to stand. The injured creature rubbed its eye with a paw and backed off while the other glanced between her and the children.

While its head was turned, Coura snuck in a couple of steps to close the distance between. If it came down to killing, the children were easier to catch and defenseless. What was worse, they were so paralyzed with fear that she couldn't catch their eyes to get them to do anything besides huddle together.

That was when she chose to make a break for them. The movement would draw the creature's attention away and keep it on her instead of the vulnerable children. As soon as she burst into a run, its eyes went back to her, and it crouched its body as if waiting to pounce. Coura couldn't help her head from darting between the creature and children, which is what the former noticed. Her heart sank as it bared its teeth at her, then turned toward the girl and boy.

"No," she let out weakly and forced her body to move faster. That burst of speed allowed her to reach them as the creature leapt. With what strength she could muster, Coura stretched out her arms and pushed each child backwards while she fell forward. The creature landed where they had been, but without hesitation, it sprung up again as if it expected them to dodge the pounce. Coura jumped to her feet and was prepared to twist her body around when the beast stood on its hind legs to swipe at her with both claws.

This time, Coura wasn't fast enough to dodge its attack. The claws swept across her back one after the other from shoulder to hip in an X shape. The sting made her dizzy, though this time the healing was immediate, but she still fell onto her hands and knees as the children screamed hysterically. Somehow, Coura managed to hold onto the dagger.

The creature pounced this time to land on top of her and slam her down face-first. By some good fortune, the creature's chest was wide enough that she was able to roll over and look up at it instead of leaving that side open. She hissed as the adjustment caused her to rub the wound on her back into the dirt.

Being so close to such a creature was disgusting. The oily fur smelled rotten while its unnaturally gray teeth and violet eyes looked down at her. Then it opened its mouth to snap at her throat. With a grunt, Coura held up her right arm in defense. The teeth sunk into her forearm and made a sickening crunch sound as blood fell onto her face, warm against her skin.

She tried kicking the beast with her free legs to no avail. Afraid and nearly out of options, she remembered the weapon. Using her left hand, she pried the knife out of her clenched right one and slashed at the creature's exposed throat. Its black blood splattered all over her chest, and the grip on her right arm released.

The beast recoiled off her body with a gurgling noise as more liquid poured out of the wound. Like its partner, this creature rubbed and clawed at it, unsure of what was wrong. Finally, it backed up until it was against the trees, turned, and disappeared into the night.

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Coura pushed herself up from the ground and waited, clenching the knife in her left hand while her right arm and back throbbed. Her whole body shook violently as the darkness made it impossible to see anything around them clearly. Subconsciously, she opened her mind and sensed only one of the creatures' presence far enough away to no longer be a threat. The shaking subsided, and Coura was able to relax her head against her knees for a minute.

What just happened?

{I think you're beginning to get the hang of killing things.}

The pride in Soirée's voice was haunting, and Coura ignored the sickening feeling it arose. "We need to get back," she muttered as she got to her feet.

Behind where she stood were the children, who watched the woods where the creature disappeared with frightful eyes. *They're okay. Thank goodness!*

Coura let out a sigh of relief and approached them. "It's all right now. Those creatures are gone."

They blinked at her momentarily, uncertain whether to trust her or not.

To remedy this, she knelt with some effort and extended her left hand to them. "Come on," she urged reproachfully. With a sob, each child wrapped their arms around her neck and cried. She didn't say anything, even though the added pressure hurt her shoulders.

Eventually, when it was nearly impossible to see beyond a few feet, Coura pulled them off. "We'd better get you home now," she said with a smile as she stood up.

"W-W-We don't even kn-know where we are," the boy stuttered as he wiped his nose.

"Don't worry about that. Just hold onto me."

Each child took one of her hands and followed obediently. Her back no longer throbbed, and only a slight amount of pain came from her right arm, though she felt exhausted. Coura opened her mind and located two powerful sources of energy. *Byron and Emilea. Good. Let's get going.*

It became apparent as they moved through the trees that the girl wasn't able to keep up without falling over everything in the dark. Coura decided to carry her on her back while the boy held a tight grip on her hand. For what seemed to be the entire night, they trekked through the woods, but the insects' noise filled their ears and made her comfortable again.

Another sound began to blend in with the forest. They were voices.

"Mother," the boy said hopefully and tried running forward.

Coura held him in place. "Not yet. Wait until we get closer."

Soon, they could make out the calls as the children's names.

"Mace? Lexie?"

"Here, here we are!" the children yelled back, but they made no attempt to hurry on ahead.

Lights through the trees brought them to the front of the house where Clearshot, Emilea, Byron, and Will stood in their cloaks as if they were about to head out into the forest. Once they spotted the three figures, Emilea and Clearshot rushed forward.

"Mace, Lexie, where have you been?"

This time, Coura made no attempt to stop the boy, Mace, from running into their open arms as the parents fell to their knees in the grass. His sister, Lexie, wiggled on Coura's back until she lowered herself to let the girl down, then she joined her family. Emilea questioned her children on their whereabouts and asked what happened while Byron did the same to Coura. When she stepped closer they all fell silent, and she realized just how horrifying she looked in the tattered, blood-soaked clothing.

Lexie gasped dramatically and pulled on her mother's cloak. "Mother, the monsters hurt her! You have to heal her!"

"Their claws were huge, and they had big, purple eyes," Mace threw in. While the children rambled on about the creatures and how Coura fought them off, injuring herself in the

process, the others looked at her in disbelief. Emilea still glanced at her with the same hatred, yet it was softened with either surprise or gratitude.

As the story continued, Coura began to feel incredibly weary, both physically and mentally, at the notion that she would probably be asked to clarify the incident. She rubbed the back of her neck before remembering the pond in the back of the house. The thought of its cool water on her skin was enticing enough to drive her in that direction, away from the group.

“Where are you going?” Byron asked with an edge to his voice.

“I’m going to wash up. I’ll be inside shortly,” she answered without looking back.

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The impromptu bath seemed to be exactly what Coura needed. There wasn’t much left of her shirt to salvage, so she tore it off and tossed it to the side, along with every other article of clothing, then slipped into the water. The crusted blood, both hers and the demonic creature’s, slowly came off as she scrubbed, leaving her to marvel at the flawless skin underneath. While she studied her right arm in particular, a pair of footsteps approached in the grass, and Coura was shocked to hear Emilea’s voice behind her.

“Are you really hurt?”

The resentment in that voice told her the woman still did not think highly of her. “Not anymore,” she answered and listened to the steps move away.

It’s not great, but hopefully she will let me inside now.

As Coura crawled out onto the ground, she found the woman had left her a towel and a new set of clothes. She dressed in the brisk evening and found herself exhausted from the effort.

I must have done more than I thought.

{Remember when I said not to exert our healing powers? Our core of energy is strong and full, but healing puts a strain on your physical body. You can’t replace flesh with magic without exhausting yourself, and you are most certainly not used to that.}

How come you never told me this before?

{I like to think we’re capable enough to avoid major injuries.}

Coura yawned and entered through the nearest door that led to the hallway in front of the kitchen. The others were beginning to eat and make conversation at the table while Clearshot hung up their cloaks. Although there was a seat open in between Will and Byron, she was more tired than hungry, prompting her to snatch a couple of rolls off the table and sit in an armchair near the fire in the seating area. She was thankful no one tried to stop or say anything to her as she desired nothing more than to relax at the moment and collect herself. The bread proved to be just enough to settle her stomach, and the heat from the fireplace lulled her to sleep within minutes.