

Unnamed Duology Excerpt

By Courtney Lillard

The woods where Coura found herself could hardly be viewed as such due to the trees being lean, stone structures and their leaves nothing but shadows. All around, unseen creatures laughed in place of chirping insects, setting her on edge as she crept along a dirt road. Every out-of-place sound had her glancing around until a stranger's silhouette blocked her path farther ahead. Although she had no indication of their intentions, a sudden, strangling fear caused her to spin around and run.

For a while, she continued in that direction, stumbling over puddles of a dark liquid and fallen debris that sliced open her hands and bare feet. Her eyes fell to the wounds spewing blood before raising and spotting a wide boulder in the middle of the road. Why she could not go around, she didn't know, yet she slid to a stop before the object. A moment later, a force from behind shoved her hard enough to slam her body into the stone wall where she reached upward for a ledge or crack to grab on to.

{Face me.}

The voice in Coura's mind sounded foreign, yet the growing cackling of the unseen beings off the road distracted her from considering the presence. She shifted herself around while keeping her back as pressed to the chilly boulder.

The figure came within reach and morphed into the appearance of her younger self, complete with the demonic markings and a serious expression. In the doppelganger's hand was a golden sword, yet unlike the real one, this did not produce any light to counter the surrounding darkness.

Her vision blurred and refocused.

The stranger's lips curved into a glee-filled smile, but a pair of endless voids replaced the eyes. Before she could consider more, the figure lunged with the point of its sword at her heart.

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A crack of thunder pierced through Coura's nightmare just as the imaginary blade slid into the middle of her chest. She sat up abruptly in bed and found her hands clinging to the sheets tightly enough to make them ache. As she gasped for air, her whole body sweat profusely, even though she'd grown cold and trembled.

It was only a dream, she told herself once her mind could work again. After months of similar experiences, the resulting shock became a familiar sensation. It's been so long since I had one of those nightmares...

Another rumble from outside reminded her of the storm from the previous night, which still lingered. As she stretched her stiff legs to stand and wander over to the window, a line of clouds indicating the end of the rain became visible. She noticed some light beyond and realized dawn

wouldn't be too far off. Sleep always evaded her when she woke like that, so Coura took her time getting dressed before moving outside to the training ground.

For months after sealing the demon away, along with its borrowed power, she had difficulty sleeping on her own. Even when she drank all the medicine the healers' claimed to be safe to consume in a single day, every once in a while a nightmare snuck up to remind her of what she lived through.

The best method for her to recover had been to find something that would distract her from thinking, which became weapons work. As usual, she proved to be the only person outside so early, aside from the regular soldiers on patrol. That morning, it probably had to do with the sprinkling at the end of the storm while the last flashes of lightning trailed off.

After selecting a stack of hay used for long-distance practice sessions and dragging it from the stable, Coura procured several knives kept in one of the iron bins inside before standing near her target. Because of her natural skill with a sword and elemental spells, she never considered learning to wield another weapon until her magical power disappeared. What light energy she possessed remained untrained.

This led her to find alternate methods of fighting to compensate for that loss. Thankfully, the Magical Arts Academy required its students to exercise with a variety of weapons in order to explore what they felt most suited for. Coura's leaner build limited her use of heavier items, such as maces, spears, or broadswords, though she rarely explored long-distance combat until recently.

Clearshot directed her through archery, which she wasn't too fond of, but she became rather accurate and grew confident that she could survive with only a bow and quiver of arrows. Because of her preferences, he recommended she try throwing knives next.

For at least an hour until the sun fully rose and people gradually made their way into the training ground, Coura continued to focus on the hunched bundle. She had no intention of stopping, though, until a voice from behind addressed her.

"You're getting scarily accurate with those."

She expected Marcus to make an appearance around that time since he began combat instruction courses most mornings. The last knife in her hand flew after she positioned herself to flick her wrist mid-swing, and the two watched as its blade sank into the top right corner of hay.

"I think it helps when the weather cooperates. That, and no one is around to distract me," she explained with a raised eyebrow at him.

His resulting chuckle lifted her spirits a bit, as did the humor reflected in his hazel eyes.

"How else are you going to get better without having to actually concentrate?" he asked while sliding a dagger out of its sheath located on the opposite hip from his sword. After a second to study the target, he released his weapon in one, swift motion, causing it to land in the center of the bundle's lower half with nothing more than a muffled thump.

Coura rolled her eyes. “Show off,” she muttered before jogging over to retrieve the weapons.

Marcus attempted to hide a smirk as she moved away, yet he wore a suspiciously calm expression when she approached to hand him his dagger.

“You’re out earlier than usual. Couldn’t sleep?”

The question reminded her of the nightmare, causing her to grow tense and avert her eyes after shaking her head. At some point over the months following her life-threatening injuries two years ago, the assistant general had been one of a few people to catch on that she had difficulty sleeping through the night and came outside before the sun rose as a result. He would find her in the training ground and sometimes spend a few minutes listening to her explain the dreams or share her thoughts.

Over time, the incidents became less frequent; the last nightmare took place nearly three months earlier at the beginning of spring.

“You should visit Will or Emilea,” Marcus continued in a sympathetic manner. His words coupled with the knowing look he wore confirmed his understanding.

“I will,” she added before deciding to change topics. “What are you doing here? I thought you were leaving for the northern border.”

“We pushed the departure back to tomorrow morning. The general wants to be sure no rain hinders our progress, which I guess I should be thankful for considering we’ll be sleeping outdoors.”

“That’s true. It’d be unpleasant on the road, though if you’re with Casner, you might feel miserable anyway.”

He shot her an unamused look. “Just because you two didn’t get along doesn’t mean he’s incompetent or heartless. I’m glad to be able to spend time with him on a practical assignment.”

Coura considered mentioning how the expedition might give Marcus valuable experience when a new general would be needed, but that remained a touchy subject.

Her friend had been overlooked for the promotion twice due to his father’s lack of faith in his ability to lead, and she remembered hearing an assistant general could only move up in rank if their supervising general deemed them worthy. Both of the previously empty positions were filled by older soldiers under Casner’s command, which infuriated Marcus. Now, he seemed more determined than ever to earn his father’s respect. She just made sure to keep her opinions to herself, especially since she dealt with an opposite experience regarding her parents’ approval.

“Whatever,” she said dismissively and inspected the knives in her hand. “Make sure to fill me in on the Nim-Valans when you return. I’m still curious about that message.”

“So are the rest of us,” he muttered.

She expected him to drop the conversation, yet as she went over to the hay bundle to bring it into the stable, he followed and continued, seemingly mumbling more to himself than to her.

“We hear nothing for over a year, but now that their capital city is a mess, they request Asteom’s help. Did I tell you our spies returned all at once because the outer ring started ransacking their people’s villages?”

Coura nodded. “This has to be the third or fourth time you mentioned it.”

“Out of all the actions they could take, their leaders send a plea to Aaron requesting mages and troops. It sounds suspicious; at the same time, an alliance is on the table.”

“They mentioned the alliance in their message?”

“Yes. In fact, it sounded like the only leverage they possess. My father said the council doesn’t want to turn away the opportunity, even if it means risking the lives of a hundred or so Asteom soldiers and mages.”

“That must be why Aaron requested volunteers for your assignment,” Coura concluded.

Over the last month or so, several documents had been posted around the palace asking for a certain number of soldiers and mages to head into the northern country. Most everyone learned about Nim-Vala’s inner turmoil then, though the details remained private.

Nothing about the journey appealed to her except the idea of exploring the area. Of course, if anyone with wings went along, they would not be allowed to fly unless the general gave his permission, which she doubted he would grant her in any situation.

They chatted about the squad until Marcus seemed to remember his group waiting farther away.

“Am I going to see you at dinner?” he asked by way of ending their conversation.

Despite her desire to disappear for the rest of the day, Coura assured him she would be there. She hurried to return the bundle and knives before moving inside for breakfast while contemplating the remainder of her day.

Evern, Paulina, Odell, and Jackie would be arriving with King Arval, Commander Detrix, and other Yeluthian guards and city leaders to assess the progress of the recent changes to the palace based on the angels’ permanent place in Verona. Most revolved around new trading routes to be established or needing adjustments, as well as policies for citizens like her parents who wish to travel or live on the surface. The final additions were already in progress and include another training space to the south of the palace for mages and soldiers to use without crowding the northern one and the construction of a building to house the growing number of troops.

For the time being, the Yeluthian guests stayed in the palace on the fourth floor near Grace’s quarters where their frequent visits provided them with enough knowledge of the capital to feel comfortable. She had no doubt they would move freely around the palace by the afternoon, ready to inspect every place with an outsider’s eye.

When the Yeluthians’ completed their business, Coura would be thrown into training with Evern until her parents’ time in Verona ended.

As much as she loved her father, she dreaded those moments more than any others. Their combat styles proved to be drastically different, and he refused to be in the air until the ground maneuvers sharpened. Still, sword work remained easier to deal with than trying to cast light spells. Something seemed wrong with her magic, yet he could provide no direction and barked at her about continuing to practice.

She tolerated the exercises and what he attempted to accomplish with strengthening the magical energy from his bloodline because of their relationship. As the weeks flew by and Evern made his intentions to become her mentor clear, she learned the security of her family ties relied on keeping any negative emotions locked within herself.