

The Angel's Descent: Chapter One

Book Four of The Dark Angel series

In the dimming light surrounding the training ground, Byron observed the groups of three or four soldiers and mages working together in an exercise he devised before his reassignment but didn't perfect until recently. The rules involved each team attempting to capture a colored cloth dangling from an opponent's belt. Only a single member carried the rag, but the entire group would be eliminated if another team stole it. Those remaining on the field were the victors, reflecting how their strategy proved to be the best for that particular day. He permitted mages to use magic without the intent to seriously harm their opponents, and soldiers chose between a shield or wooden sword.

The original purpose of the exercise had been to spark their critical thinking, creativity, and defensive skills when facing multiple enemies. As his eyes glazed over the troops, Byron analyzed their positioning and tactics while keeping his mind as clear as possible. With the level of enthusiasm for a new training activity, at least two dozen groups formed throughout the afternoon. Byron alone contained any stray spells, declared fair or rough actions that could penalize a team, and ruled when a cloth had been captured. At the moment, half of the participants remained.

I don't know why I didn't start this sooner, Byron thought with a slight smile when he noticed a team creeping up on another, preoccupied one. *Seeing the different approaches has been enlightening for more than just myself. Most opted to order a mage to hold the cloth while surrounding them. Others separated and regrouped multiple times, giving it to the most skilled among them who could dodge or shield their body. Every time we do this, I learn something.*

Byron couldn't help but wince when a member of the sneaking group snatched the distracted trio's cloth without the target realizing it. "Meghan, Nala, and Uylan, your group has been compromised," he announced, to their surprise.

Although the three women appeared displeased, they accepted the loss and jogged over to where the eliminated participants stood as an audience. That proved to be all the excitement for a while.

The first time we experimented with this activity, it seemed to go by much faster. I suppose everyone understands how risky it is to act on impulse when an opponent has a variety of options.

"Master Byron."

A familiar, expressionless voice addressed him from behind, and he repressed the urge to roll his eyes while glancing over to see General Tont staring at him. As usual, the man's face revealed nothing more than a bored look. His eyes had glossed over to show his master still held control over his mind and body.

Byron knew what the general's presence meant and clapped his hands together to catch the soldiers' and mages' attention. "That's all we have time for today."

Many participants released a unified groan to show their dissatisfaction, though more, especially those on the sidelines, sounded relieved to be dismissed for dinner. They broke apart to chat and hurry inside, bowing or saluting Byron when they passed.

Again, his lips curved upward when most of what he heard were positive comments or constructive criticism. *It's been a few days since the council ordered me to supervise the training ground, yet I feel the troops' bonds strengthening. Perhaps we're closer to becoming connected like General Tio's base than I thought. Would he laugh at me for comparing the two?*

When he remembered who waited for him, Byron turned and followed the general inside the palace. Unfortunately, his step forward became overshadowed by the current, powerful enemies keeping him and his companions from doing much.

Even then, he kept the crumpled notice from Aaron, or rather Hendal, that had been sent to him a few days ago in his pocket.

Master Byron,

Due to your failure to capture and reprimand your former student, who possesses a threat to the safety of the kingdom, you are hereby dismissed from the king's council, per his request. Your reassignment has been taken care of, and General Tont will supervise your duties until further notice.

His hands clenched into fists at the reminder, which proved mild compared to his original, infuriated reaction. *Hendal's keeping Emilea under house arrest, leaving me to handle the mages' training with Tont, who's coincidentally preoccupied with Nim-Vala.*

The general didn't speak a word as he led the way to the private dining hall where Hendal required them to eat meals with King Aaron, General Casner, Grace, and the nobility. Byron's original concern had been hostility when they gathered together; however, with most of the people under the demon's influence, the whole affair seemed bleak.

The lone benefit became seeing Grace's recovery. Her paled complexion, thinner figure, and overall projection of gloom led many to doubt she left the palace of her own volition, yet she needed to play the part in order to protect herself and those under the demon's control. He caught her eyes light up from where she sat next to Hendal when he entered, though the high priest loomed over her like a shadow.

{How did the training exercise go today?}

He ignored the weary strain in her inner voice and smiled from across the room. *All is well, except there's less excitement and action as they grow more cunning.*

Tont moved straight to his seat beside Aaron, so Byron took the chair two seats from his right. The one in between remained empty for Marcus. The assistant general didn't stay in the palace anymore, claiming his mother requested his assistance with their family's business. The real reason stemmed from Byron's cautious nature.

As soon as he suggested spying on his father or Aaron, I knew it would be too dangerous to keep him involved here. I'm just thankful he listened to my advice and is staying far away from Hendal. When the time comes, we'll need whatever help we can get.

The nobility's gossiping filled the hall with enough noise to help settle his nerves, allowing his mind to wander. *It's been six days since the ball. Hendal took advantage of our separation to make sure we remain away from one another. Emilea and her children are under watch with Aimes, Lady Katrina is still housing Marcy, Marcus is in Verona until I signal for him, and Clearshot traveled north in General Casner's company to scout for the Nim-Valan troops. Grace has been safe because she's out of the way, but at least we're able to keep in contact without Hendal's meddling. That leaves Will, who I spoke to during his training. I fear if we start acting suspicious or meet in secret, someone will catch on and silence us before I get a chance to plan accordingly.*

As if sensing his train of thought, the young Yeluthian's presence brushed against his mind, a sensation he was becoming more accustomed to every time they conversed. *How are you feeling, Grace?*

Their connection wavered a bit before she answered in the same, weary manner.

{I am better, though still afraid. My goddess gift is not as strong as it once was.}

So many times, she admitted her fear to Byron. When he discovered her alone and drugged but free from Hendal's clutches, she found comfort and protection with him. Everyone had, though he could supervise her light magic's progress and Will's combat work directly because of his assignment. Although he tried not to, he couldn't stop himself from recalling the instances after the ball when his companions begged him for a new strategy.

I understand it's difficult to relax, but just be patient a while longer. In time, we'll have another opportunity to rescue those who need us.

If that had been the first time Byron said those words to Grace, she probably would start protesting his decision; however, he felt her presence withdraw and chanced a glance over to her side of the table. A sense of pity and guilt rose while her eyes dropped to her untouched plate, and he wished he could suggest a better option.

They knew a second move against Hendal, the demon, or the hidden, rogue angels would hurt their limited group if they acted too soon. Not only did the high priest threaten the king, General Tont, and others under his control, but trouble in Verona could hinder the proposed alliance from Nim-Vala.

The last problem we need now is a war with the northern country when our leaders aren't truly available. It'd be foolish and selfish to risk it by causing an uproar in the palace. I doubt Hendal studied the art of war, so he also wouldn't ruin the chance to strengthen our kingdom. We should recover, regroup, and strike when the odds are in our favor.

As the remains of dinner were cleared for dessert, Byron inhaled slowly and mentally prepared to wait until that time arrived.

The forest outside Verona buzzed at a natural pace, filling the wooded area with the wildlife's chirps and calls. Despite the noise, the only thing annoying Coura happened to be what sunlight beamed down on her from where she had crashed through the canopy. She tried to ease the brightness blinding her vision by turning away, which was a mistake she made each time it peeked through. A surge of sharp pain stiffened her spine and forced her next breath to release in a hiss. While she steadied herself, she noticed her hands trembling and willed them to stop with the last shred of her self-control.

Her situation took a horrible, unexpected turn after she flew into the palace. When she could reflect on the memories, she replayed each encounter and movement over until her head pounded from the strain.

Thankfully, her mind worked better than her body. The fall broke bones, bending and twisting her limbs and wings in the air and only stopping when she slammed into the unforgiving ground. The results she conjured of what could happen if she released the spell on her wings in their condition terrified Coura, so they remained in a misshapen mass beneath her. Soirée's power started the healing process, but another, unknown force seemed to keep it at bay. She begged for it to let the demonic energy tend to her injuries, yet, for some reason she couldn't explain, she trusted the warm force that had been present ever since she escaped the palace.

The sun continued moving west, passing across the hole, and the canopy blocked its rays. A coolness swept over Coura, causing her entire body to shiver. For a while, she stared upward without a thought since they weren't able to develop into any worthwhile ideas.

I can't...stay here... I'll die if...I don't move...

The notion returned more than once during the following hours, though it sparked no motivation to seek help. When she considered her next, potential steps, her friends' possible situations, and what took place in the palace, a surge of emotion rose to bring her close to tears.

I'm too weak... Maybe I should just...stay here until I...

A sound within the regular noise not naturally heard in the woods drew Coura's attention. She strained her ears to listen, and this time she let the tears in her eyes fall when she recognized the distant sound of voices. Their soft, high-pitched quality seemed similar to a child's, and she considered if she began hallucinating.

Even as she wondered, she moved her mouth to call out only to find her throat dry and voice gone. The abnormal noise faded until she couldn't tell if the owners still lingered in the area or if the forest played with her mind. Still, the thought of being alone once more when an opportunity for aid presented itself forced Coura into action.

Using what dwindling strength remained in her aching limbs, she felt for the ground beneath her wings and pushed her upper body away. The spots where the frail pinions tucked under her legs and feet responded to the movement with furious shots of pain. Gradually, she shifted into a sitting position. Next, she pressed her wings to her back as tightly as possible in order to scramble around easier; that created the worst discomfort. Breathing came in short gasps as she grabbed onto the nearest tree trunk to pull herself up to stand. A grunt of frustration and agony escaped, and her legs trembled from the lack of use, but she made it.

Despite the need to hurry after the voices, Coura spent precious time catching her breath as she hugged the trunk until a tickle along her forearm had her staring at the source. A ladybug crawled down to her hand, avoiding the bruise-like markings before flying away.

Keep going, she ordered within her empty mind.

One wobbly step became two while her arms clung from one tree to another, and her nails dug into the tough bark. The aching throughout her body grew numb before a rush of demonic energy swept over every part of her. In response, the second, warm presence cut across her veins to halt the start of the healing spell once again. The sensation prompted a tightness in her chest, making her cough and taste blood.

If my body isn't recovering on its own, then these injuries have been worsening for days. My only chance is to find whoever wandered around here and hope they can help.

The distance stretched from where she started, so the mess was soon left behind. Unfortunately, the childlike voices didn't return to guide her.

Coura became preoccupied with staying on her feet and progressing forward to the point where everything outside of her direct line of vision blurred. Her uncontrollable panting burned her throat, yet nothing distracted her more than the struggle in her center. Both the demonic energy and additional presence rolled around, extending and recoiling at various moments in some sort of argument; she had never experienced anything like the clashing powers.

All of a sudden, a root above the grass hooked her outstretched foot, sending her face-first into the ground before she knew what happened. The world darkened as her nose and head throbbed, and her exhausted, hurt body refused to be pushed through more. She relaxed on the forest floor, letting out weak groans until she passed out.

Emilea kept a close eye on her children while they jogged ahead along a dirt path just north of their home. Behind her, one of their guards hid in the shadows of the surrounding trees, and at her side stood Aimes. She swallowed around the lump in her throat and yelled.

“Mace! Lexie! It’s time to head back!”

Against her better judgement, she glanced to the shaded man in the crimson uniform. His hollow eyes remained glued her, noting every movement, and she faced forward. Aimes studied her too with concern etched into his wrinkled features.

Nearly a week went by since she last spoke to her husband or Byron because the two had been forced to stay in the palace while a pair of soldiers escorted her home to resume her position as Henda’s pawn. The high priest’s inhumane behavior after the ball and how easily he threatened anyone under his influence rattled her. She hadn’t felt comfortable informing Aimes of what took place for three days and didn’t allow him to travel to Verona, not that he seemed inclined to do so. The older man’s decision became a blessing, though. He understood her fear and preoccupied himself with watching out for her and the children.

It’s obvious we’re in no position to stand against a demon’s power. At least, I’m not. Henda never commented on how I assisted Byron. His guards just ushered me home, like the first time, and patrol during the day.

Both of the men who observed her searched for rebellious intent, yet Aimes went unnoticed. The soldiers lingered outside of her home during the day to monitor the area, then they disappeared toward the capital at dusk. Where they slept and when they ate, she didn’t know, but they returned to their duty when the sun rose.

Emilea would have already submitted to Henda’s orders and acted obedient in order to keep her family safe, except Coura was still missing. The younger mage’s familiar energy stemmed from somewhere nearby and continued emanating ever since Emilea’s return.

Byron’s plan included her retreat to my home if the situation grew too dangerous, which it no doubt became. So, she should have been here or met up with Aimes. The energy I sense isn’t quite right either...

Hurried footsteps approached from farther ahead, and she moved to meet her children. To her relief, the guard seemed willing to give her some breathing room. With Mace and Lexie’s lives at less of a risk, she trusted them to explore during their morning and afternoon strolls. The two could also pick up Coura’s power and agreed to search for her without attracting any attention.

“Mother,” came her son’s voice as he emerged first to meet her before leaning forward with his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

“Where’s your sister?” she asked a bit impatiently. When he glanced up, Emilea noticed his concerned expression.

“Lexie tripped and hurt her ankle up the trail.”

While her son pointed behind him, she bit her lip. *Lexie should be able to take care of a minor sprain, or Mace could support her. Is it worse than that?*

Aimes moved to Emilea’s side and shot her a knowing look. “I’ll wait with the boy while you help Lexie,” he offered.

She expressed her gratitude and nudged Mace toward the older man. As she hoped, the guard in the shadows stayed where he was with a blank expression as Emilea held herself to a walk. Soon, she moved beyond his line of sight.

“Lexie,” she shouted and slowed when she still couldn’t see her daughter.

“Over here!”

Emilea froze at the worried cry off to her right within the brush. Once she realized how tense the energy around her felt, her eyes went wide. *Coura? Did the children really find her? This power is definitely strange enough to come from her.*

It took precious time to maneuver around the overgrown bushes and branches clinging to her dress, yet she became more certain of her destination. Her thoughts were cut short once she made out Lexie kneeling in front of a silhouette on the ground.

Her daughter spotted her then and reached out, displaying the tears streaming down her face. “Mother!”

“What happened?” Emilea inquired as she continued forward.

The injured, black wings revealed the figure’s identity. Both ends bent backward at an awkward angle, several spots had feathers broken or missing, and a handful of arrows were still embedded in them. When she knelt and touched one of the wings, it didn’t move.

Why hasn’t she dismissed the spell?

Emilea mumbled Coura’s name before examining the body. What she could see and touch were not nearly as heartbreaking as what she sensed with her magic. Meanwhile, Lexie fidgeted at her side.

“Can’t you heal her?”

“It would take too much time to do something worthwhile if I start now,” she explained and remembered the guards. “Her left arm and right foot broke in multiple places, along with her wings. It will be impossible to move her unless I can fix them. I’m not sure why her wings haven’t disappeared, but that’s not a positive sign. Her energy is already trying to heal the internal injuries, though, so we should return another time.”

Lexie began to whine until one of Emilea’s displeased looks hushed further protesting.

“I don’t like leaving her here either,” she reassured her daughter while rising and offering a hand. “We just need to believe in her will to live.”

Together, they prepared to trek back to the trail, but not before Lexie spoke over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. We’ll help as soon as we can!”

*

Emilea always found it difficult to lie to her children, but she refused to put them at risk even more than she already did. Aimes supported her caution after mentioning the possibility of the guards watching at night from a different location. She served dinner around sundown, and Mace and Lexie became too preoccupied with saving Coura to notice the sleeping potion mixed into their bowls of stew. Emilea tucked the two in early, promised to organize a rescue in the morning, then initiated her own rescue. Aimes waited at the bottom of the stairs with his travel cloak wrapped around his shoulders and a lamp in one hand.

“Ready?” she asked.

The older man nodded and turned to head outside. “Don’t you dare think of leaving until I return,” he warned.

Emilea agreed, so he snuck outside. Throughout the evening, Aimes volunteered to wander around the home’s perimeter in order to keep an eye on their guards. If Henda could really communicate with the soldiers like he claimed, he would learn if she left and give the command to capture or kill her children.

She forced her beating heart to steady despite the nightmare her imagination conjured. *I need to calm down. Aimes saw the guards walking on the road toward Verona at sundown, so he should be able to follow them. I’ll be safe to work on Coura then.*

Their one concern had been that Henda or his companions would sense the demonic energy.

“If they didn’t act before, what would prompt them to do so now?” Aimes had wondered earlier in the day. “When the creature attacked on your property, wouldn’t the high priest, demon, or their lackeys try to eliminate the threat if they sensed magic being used? That right

there makes me think they can't from this far away, especially since you mentioned Coura's power has been noticeable ever since you returned."

Emilea agreed and commended his ability to assess the situation.

An hour flew by before she heard a light knock on the front door. Aimes opened it a crack as she rose from her favorite armchair, then he gestured for her to join him.

"Those men went straight on to Verona, even after I showed myself. I'm guessing their minds are set on returning to their master or resting someplace. Of course, I didn't expect to follow them all the way into the city, but we're alone tonight."

When he limped toward the path leading north, she hesitated to go and called his name.

"You can wait here to rest if you need to. I won't force you to accompany me."

Indeed, he breathed heavier from the stroll and favored his right side, but he let out a dismissive huff, puffed his chest, and held his chin high. "Don't you worry about me! If I can't keep up, I'll catch you eventually. What's more important, you can't carry her back here on your own. In fact, why don't you run on ahead and start the healing. Time is precious tonight, unless you can wait until tomorrow."

Aimes would protest if she suggested leaving Coura in her condition and knew Emilea would too if their roles were reversed. After offering a nod, she jogged along the path with enough attentiveness to avoid tripping over herself while focusing solely on the demonic energy lurking deeper in the woods.