

The Shadow's Grasp: Excerpt **Book One of The Dark Angel series**

With a sigh, Coura stepped toward the buildings, intent on sneaking into the inn to see where Will might be. In the next instant, an overwhelming sense of magic struck her numb, the very same presence they had been trying to avoid. Her legs gave way, and she sank to her knees and froze. It couldn't be mistaken as anything different because of how terribly close it was. That knowledge alone terrified her, though the energy in her veins hummed in response.

It's here... A sort of despair set over her mind while she considered what she could possibly do. There's no way I can go after it alone, I can't move both Byron and Marcus in time, and Byron's in no shape to fight. Neither is Marcus. Will is...

She spun around to face the woods where she sensed the mage or creature lurking. *What if it got Will? What if it comes for Byron and Marcus next? I have to find out, then maybe I can lead it away from them. That's my only chance until Byron wakes up.*

With shaky legs, she rose to her feet, took a few deep breaths to calm her mind, then entered the forest again. She returned to their camp to grab her sword, which sat untouched in her pack during their journey until that moment, before turning toward the source of the strange, unnerving energy swirling around the entire area.

Her body became tense, so she hurried without trying to make too much noise. In the quiet of the night, the sounds of insects covered her tracks, though they could only do so much. She did find solace in learning the source kept farther into the woods than where Byron and Marcus slept. However, as Coura continued, she heard distant voices cutting through the stillness, one male and the other female. They spoke back and forth too faintly to understand, but a clear cry did carry to her over the distance.

"I don't know!"

She froze again. *That's Will's voice! Oh no, they found him after all. Now what do I do?*

Even as she attempted to process the situation, her body involuntarily moved nearer to the voices.

Why am I still walking? I need to figure out a plan or get help instead!

She screamed at herself for ignoring logic, yet her legs would not obey. What was worse, the trembling sensation from the clashing energies became nearly unbearable until her center steadied the imbalance. Coura stopped shaking and focused with what she could only describe as anticipation. Meanwhile, her heart drummed away and threatened to suffocate her.

At long last, she noiselessly peeled away a branch and stopped in a crouch to see the two owners of the voices huddled over Will. He shrank away from them with his arms wrapped around himself and tears streaming down his cheeks. Spots of blood splattered his clothes, and his nose looked bruised and swollen.

"P-please, I t-told you," he begged.

From the lower angle, Coura could see Will better once her eyes adjusted to the dark. It also helped they wound up in another, open part of the woods, so the moonlight could shine down on the landscape. Unfortunately, she didn't see the strangers' faces nor their bodies because of the bulky, white packs spanning the length of their backs.

"Why do you lie to us? We have seen you and the mages together," the woman cooed. She knelt in front of Will, who tried to shy away when she brushed his face with a hand. "Tell us where they are, and we will let you go. I would hate to cause such a cute boy more trouble."

Will remained silent.

“So stubborn,” the man teased in a sarcastic tone.

“Why do you protect them?” the woman asked after as she stood, all kindness gone from her voice.

Still, Will did not answer.

Coura studied the strangers’ with interest, noticing how the white bulks on their backs seemed to move *with* their own movements. *It’s almost like they’re adjusting themselves. Could they use some secret weapon? I can’t fight them if they have the upper hand. Who are these people?*

In a sudden move, the man reached down to grab her companion by the hair. Will yelped in pain, and his hands flew to the man’s grip in an attempt to claw himself free. Coura watched as the stranger pulled him to his feet before leaning in closer.

“Where are they?” he demanded in a deathly grim tone.

“Please,” Will whimpered, a sound that broke Coura’s heart.

From his other hand, the stranger called forth a flame large enough to brighten up the whole space. She looked away momentarily to let her eyes adjust again. When she returned to the scene in front of her, every thought fled her mind as she took in what the light revealed. The wrapped lumps on the man and woman’s backs, what she assumed were packs, became something else entirely. White feathers fluttered to life, as if the spell awoke them from a deep slumber.

Coura heard her breath catch at the sight; a sense of awe overwhelmed her. *They’re wings, actual wings! That must mean these people are angels. This can’t be... No one has one of their people in decades! Wait, why would they be after Byron? Could they be affiliated with another country? They’re supposed to be our allies. If that’s the case, why are they hurting Will?*

Amid the frantic processing, a voice rang out in her mind, more dominating than any other thought.

{They are evil.}

The claim made her uncertain. *What? How can an angel be evil?*

{There’s no more time. Act now or let your friend die.}

Just then, Will cried out as the flame came closer his face.

“Unless you *want* your eyes to be burned out, you will tell us what you know,” the male angel shouted ferociously.

Before Coura knew what to do, she found herself entering the clearing to approach the strangers. “Stop!” she ordered with surprising firmness, as though the voice did not belong to her. “Let him go.”

The angels cast her suspicious glares when she emerged before looking at one another. Then, the man released Will. While her companion dropped to the ground gasping for air, the angel continued holding his flame.

“And who might you be?” he asked with no small amount of irritation.

“It doesn’t matter,” Coura heard herself announce. “Neither of us is worth your time. Let him go, and we can be on our way.”

What am I saying? I shouldn’t be so easygoing with them. They’re still within distance to harm Will. I’m not strong enough to fight an angel, let alone two of them! Her fear threatened to swallow her until the voice returned, hot with anger.

{Enough! Quit cowering and fight!}

Any emotions were snuffed out by an unseen force and replaced with a sickening eagerness hiding underneath. Coura drew her sword and forced a challenging smile.

The woman took a step forward before glancing at the other angel. "Shall I, Brother?" He nodded. "Of course, Elsa. However, make sure to keep this one alive. I am rather interested in interrogating her once she has been beaten into submission."

The woman drew a slim, shiny blade, like quicksilver, and walked over to meet her.

"Who are you looking for?" Coura ventured to ask, hoping to stall for time. While the woman answered, she made sure to study every feature of her opponent. Like in any tale of the Yeluthians, the woman had blonde, nearly white hair, and she guessed her eyes were blue as well. The angel wore black, leather padding that covered her torso and thighs instead of armor. Her 'brother' possessed similar features, but Coura felt sure he wouldn't interfere unless necessary. This brought all of her attention to the person in front of her.

Her limbs are exposed. Maybe I can try tiring her before injuring them. Otherwise, her wings are an option. The image of crimson staining the clean, unmarred feathers seemed blasphemous, yet Coura knew it might save her life, and Will's. *No matter the consequences, I'll need to give it my all. Our lives are on the line.*

"We are looking for a dark mage named Byron Rinod. He was last seen leaving Verona and heading to the Magical Arts Academy in East Hoover." The woman paused, as if waiting for Coura to respond. When she didn't, the angel raised her sword. "We have been told to find him through any means necessary, so your cooperation could save your life."

Coura shook her head, keeping a sympathetic smile on her face. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know anything about him."

"Then leave."

"Not as long as you're going to torture him," she replied and jerked her chin at Will, who watched with a look that reflected a plea for her to run.

"So be it, intruder."

Will could only look on hopelessly as Coura stayed to defend him, fighting with the female angel named Elsa. His head spun because of the male who introduced himself as Devan, who nearly knocked him unconscious after punching him twice in the nose. He was sure it broke during the second blow, yet he became too distracted to consider such trivial concerns. Silently, he begged Coura to flee. He *knew* she had seen his expression and dismissed it. Until that moment, he had been skeptical Coura would be the type of person to risk her life for someone she just met. She was definitely not one to back down from a fight, though.

The angel leaped forward and, with a push of her wings, covered the distance between herself and Coura in seconds. Swords clashed, the sound ringing through the now-silent woods. In the dark, and with his face throbbing, Will couldn't comprehend much of what happened, but he did notice the angel moved faster. *Much* faster. Coura blocked each blow, sometimes sending sparks into the air, yet she couldn't attack.

Will bit his lip and sent up a silent prayer. *What should I do? She looks tired. She can't keep this up. I don't think I can get away, at least, not with him here.*

He shifted his gaze to the other angel standing over him, like a wolf guarding his injured prey. The male's face remained impassive, though his eyes followed every motion. Will struggled to catch Coura's movements again while contemplating how he could help.

It occurred to him then that Coura hadn't used magic yet. *She's a mage like Byron, so why hasn't she done anything? That's right... She said she didn't know me. Maybe they would see the connection if she used spells, or at least think she knows Byron. This isn't good...* He jumped when Coura let out a cry as the angel's blade swept across a spot on her left arm.

While she staggered backward and grabbed her bicep, the female laughed, a sound equally charming and sinister. “Do you give up yet? I mentioned this earlier, but if you tell us where the mage is, we will let you both go.”

“Keep him out of this,” Coura shouted. “He’s got nothing to do with me!”

Elsa fell silent for a moment before letting out a long whistle and glancing in Will’s direction, causing him to instinctively freeze in place. “I remember now. Do you, Devan?”

“I did not think you would, Sister.”

“Remember what?” Coura snapped.

“How foolish of me,” the female angel continued. “Our leader informed us the dark mage traveled with a medicine boy and provided details on his behavior.”

A shiver ran down Will’s spine. *Leader? How could they possibly have heard about me when I traveled with Byron for such a brief amount of time? Unless... It has to be someone in the palace!*

He forced the revelation aside to listen as she went on.

“He also said a young woman with raven hair accompanied them, but that had been the only detail.” She admired her blade and waited for a reply.

Although Will could not see Coura’s reaction to the news, he expected it to be similar to his own. A lack of confidence tainted the denial in her next words. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The angels laughed together in response.

How do they know about Will and me? Could they be bluffing, or is there someone in the capital city with other intentions? Coura tried unsuccessfully to recall the servants, soldiers, and nobility in the palace, but her memories were drowned out by the angels’ harmonious amusement.

She ground her teeth in frustration. *This is a problem. I am at my limit blocking her attacks. I’ve never fought anyone so swift. There’s no hope of keeping up with her long enough to wear her out.*

The angel didn’t look like she had even broken a sweat, while Coura stood panting. She removed her bloodied hand from where it rested on her left bicep, certain the woman had sliced through at least a quarter of her arm, and braced herself for another attack when the two quieted.

“In that case, we shall continue until you *do* remember,” the female angel concluded before charging once more.

Here she comes! Again, Coura raised her sword to meet the other’s blow for blow. This time, though, the strikes came slower yet more powerful. It worked to her advantage since Coura’s speed began decreasing far too soon. She blocked the attacks without worrying too much about them landing, but the force behind each pushed her back.

I just...have to keep...going...

The fear that retreated minutes ago started to creep up on her as her mental strength chipped away. Somehow, Coura was able to stop the woman’s sword during a vertical slice and hold it above her head, keeping the angel still. However, her opponent leaned closer until their faces were almost touching.

“Last chance,” the angel purred.

With a grunt, Coura shoved the sword away and stepped backward to prepare a horizontal swipe at the woman’s exposed mid-section. However, she lost her balance.

What’s going on?

As her foot moved, it hit an above-ground root, and she found herself falling. Coura's back slammed against a tree directly behind her, and then it proved too late to escape. She had been caught off-guard; her sword lowered as she fell. This gave her opponent the perfect opening.

Instead of striking with the blade, the female angel rushed forward, reached across the space, and grabbed Coura by the throat, pressing her against the tree. In the next instant, Coura let go of her weapon in an attempt to claw herself free with both hands until the angel dug her nails into Coura's throat. She felt a trickle of warm blood drip down her shirt and started seeing stars.

"How about now? Will you answer our questions?" her opponent asked in the sweet voice.

"I...don't know..." was all Coura managed to spit out in gasps. After that, her body stopped responding, and the grip on her throat tightened.

"Fine, have it your way."

That's it then. She's going to choke me to death. I can't...

"Elsa, hurry up!" Coura heard the second angel yell, though she couldn't see him through the dazzling stars.

Just when she felt about ready to lose consciousness, a sharp pain in her chest made her body scream, then the pressure on her throat released. Coura tried gasping for air only to find herself coughing up blood in the process. Her sight returned enough for her to glance down in horror at the blade sticking out of the middle of her chest.

Her opponent spun around to return to where her partner and Will waited. The female angel had pinned Coura to the tree with her sword, letting her bleed out while knowing she could not free herself or produce a sound. Coura's body ached from the pain and her pity for Will, for how she hadn't been able to rescue him.

How...could I...

Her hands weakly tugging on the hilt of the sword before finally dropping to her sides. The strength in her neck went next. She hung her head with tired eyes, forcing her to stare at the pool of blood forming like a shadow along the base of the tree.

She closed her eyes to hide the sight, wheezing while she fought a losing battle to stay alive. Somewhere in the night, the voices continued as though nothing had happened.

*

Coura found herself floating amid a gray space, looking at the nothingness above. She didn't see a ground in this place, or clouds, or...anything. She also didn't feel pain and closed her eyes in contentment. Her mind seemed at rest, but she couldn't remember what brought her here.

After a moment, she sensed another presence. Her body twisted into a sitting position to face a shadow standing at eye level with her.

"So, you're finally here," the feminine voice said, teeming with delight.

"Where are we?" Coura asked while glancing around, unafraid of the stranger.

"This is your *chi-alve*."

"*Chi-alve*?"

The shadow nodded. "Yes. It translates to 'soul space.' All creatures have one. It's the center of your being where your conscious resides. However, you should only be able to enter through a meditation of sorts."

“Why am I here?” she asked next against the fear starting to penetrate her peaceful mentality.

Although the shadow had no mouth to frown, Coura could hear its disapproval. “Because you are weak. You allowed yourself to lose, thus sacrificing your body and forcing your spirit here as a last resort. Most mortals experience this before they die.”

“I’m going to die?”

The shadow shook its head. “Not as long as you allow me to help you.”

At the mention of death, Coura wished to be saved so badly her chest ached, yet she wondered why this other person stood in *her* soul space. “Who are you?”

“I can’t tell you now; not here. You must decide. Will you die here or let me bring your body back from destruction?”

If Will had been afraid before, he became petrified once he saw what the female did. He understood Coura didn’t stand a chance against an angel’s speed and strength, but he let her fight. *I should have told them about Byron. I should have tried to run. At least I would be doing something other than sit here uselessly!*

Tears streamed down his cheeks through eyes glued to Coura’s limp body hanging from the tree trunk. Somewhere in the recesses of his sane frame of mind, he felt grateful it was too dark for him to see her in detail, or else he would vomit.

“It really is a shame she did not have much stamina,” the female commented as she walked over to rejoin them. “Not many humans can hold their own for that long. I was beginning to think she would be entertaining.”

“A pity humans are not tougher beings,” her companion added to echo her disappointment.

After hearing their insults, Will’s temper slipped. “*Shut up!*”

Both angels stared down at Will.

“Oh, now he talks!” the female exclaimed while shaking her head.

“I said, *shut up!*” Will squeezed his eyes closed, unable to bear their presence.

He wanted to scream and cry and run to Coura’s side. The hiss of a sword being drawn had his eyes shooting open and darting to the male. A moment later, the metal tip of the blade touched Will’s throat. His anger melted away, leaving him staring at the pair, who lost all hint of pleasure.

“Now then, enough of that. It is going to be dawn in a couple of hours, so I would rather not drag this out. If you do not tell us where the mage is, you shall share the same fate as her. Actually, it will probably be worse since I like to keep my playthings *alive* much longer than Elsa.”

Will swallowed though his mouth and throat were dry. No sound came from lips, which attempted to form words. He prayed again but knew his death would be imminent because deep down, beneath the fear, weakness, and pain, remained his commitment to Byron. Will would not sacrifice his freedom for Byron’s life, not for the life of anyone dear to him.

Anyone except Coura...

He gazed up into the angel’s face, hoping to convey his resolve.

It must have worked, for the male appeared confused at first, then resigned. “Pathetic,” he mumbled and raised his sword.

A sort of contentment settled over Will at that moment, as if accepting his fate brought satisfaction in his final breaths. He closed his eyes and prayed one last time for his death to not be in vain.

Seconds ticked by, drawing out what he expected to be a brief execution. However, when he opened his eyes, he saw both of the angels' attention fixed elsewhere. They watched the tree where Coura hung with narrowed eyes. Suddenly, the female charged it, her fists illuminated by lightning sparking around them.

"Elsa, wait!" The male reached out for her, startled by the unexpected action.

Will couldn't understand what they saw until the lightning brightening up the farthest part of the open area. Then, his jaw dropped. Coura's hands were not only on the hilt of the sword in her body, but the blade steadily slid out of her chest.