

## The Guardian's Deception: Excerpt Book Two of The Dark Angel series

Coura thought a walk might help her body relax before the forest grew too dark, so she wandered around the house until a worn path caught her eye. After confirming it was a trail, she followed the dirt walkway for a while, enjoying the sounds of the insects buzzing and chirping to one another, the birds settling in for the night, and bats catching their meals. Soon, she figured she needed to turn around or risk fumbling through darkness.

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

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

*{That was no normal creature...}*

Immediately after came a girl's high-pitched scream.

Before she understood what was happening, Coura sprinted off the trail and 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 the demon's impatience for urgency. She opened her mind and found two sources of a twisted, dark energy nearby. Within a minute, she burst through a pair of bushes into a clearing at the bottom of a hill. Another, much closer scream sounded, 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, huddled together. The girl sat on the ground while the boy stood in front of her with both hands clenching a hunting knife. Their eyes were locked on the creatures stalking them.

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 wolf-like bodies stretched about six feet long, and their black fur shimmered in the dying light. Everything, from their appearance to their movements, reminded her of the memory she seemed unable to recall, sending a shiver down her spine. They growled before the larger of the two crept 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?}*

Her initial idea was to summon the demonic blade, prompting her to reach inward for the necessary 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 once she realized this, sparking a flood of amusement from Soirée.

*I'll distract them so the children can escape into the woods.*

*{Good luck. These predators divide their attention between prey, which 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 snapped before forcing Soirée's words aside. She tried to swallow and found her throat dry. *Without magic, I'll have to find a weapon and get to the children first.*

Although her instincts urged her to run, she forced her legs to steady and circle around the closest creature. It sidestepped away, observing her moves intently. Being so methodical strained her legs, especially when the beast could pounce at any point, yet neither attempted to attack.

Soon, she stood between them and the children, who finally noticed her. The girl let out a whimper as Coura began backing up to reach the helpless pair. To her dismay, the sound triggered a reaction from the second creature, the one that remained still after she arrived. She spun around as soon as it lunged forward in an effort to go to the children and found them scrambling toward her.

“No!” she called and gestured for them to stop.

The pair slid to a halt with panicked cries, allowing Coura to look back at the beasts. To her amazement, the larger of the two towered over the second while bearing its teeth. This caused the smaller creature to lower its head in a submissive fashion before snapping its jaws in a challenge.

*The one that lunged interrupted the other’s stalking. Even if they take the appearance of wolves, they don’t seem to share the animals’ sense of cooperation.*

Whatever the case, their bickering provided enough of a distraction for her to approach the girl and her brother. They came forward to cling onto her legs out of instinct, but she pulled them off and addressed the boy.

“Give me the knife,” she ordered, showing more confidence than she felt.

They stepped away with some fear directed at her before the boy held out the weapon. Coura swiped it from him and faced the creatures in one motion.

The beasts’ eyes flared to reflect their rage as they growled.

*Great, now what?*

Before she could consider a plan, the smaller one charged again.

“Run!” she screamed at the children, leaned forward, and prepared to stab at the creature.

As she expected, it leaped into the air, so she rolled underneath its belly. The action placed her in between the beasts, though the first twisted around to strike before Coura had time to recover. Its claws swiped across her left thigh, causing her to gasp and retaliate by thrusting the knife toward its head. The short blade sank into its right eye before she yanked it free as it shrieked.

Meanwhile, the second creature charged. She held her position until it lunged. Then, she jumped to the side so it flew past her and into its partner. This sparked another bout of snapping jaws and growls while Coura tumbled away; however, as soon as she rose to her feet, a surge of pain stemming from her thigh dropped her to one knee.

*I’ve been severely cut before, but this burning sensation is much worse.*

*{Hadh’t you noticed their claws are dripping with venom? Our healing magic is stronger, but I wouldn’t rely on it for too many injuries.}*

Even as Soirée spoke, the pain ceased enough for Coura to stand.

The wounded creature rubbed its face with a paw and backed off while the other glanced between her and its original, vulnerable prey cowering nearby. When it averted its eyes, she snuck in a couple of steps to close the distance between herself and the children. Unfortunately, they became so frightened she couldn’t catch their attention. Their behavior prompted her to make a break for them. The movement would draw the creature away and keep it focused on her instead.

As soon as she burst into a run, its eyes darted to her before noticing the direction she moved in. Coura ground her teeth and forced her legs to move faster, expecting an interruption at any time, though none came.

The girl spotted her first, shouted something, then began to crawl away from her brother. Before Coura could order her not to continue, the creature crouched in preparation for another lunge. With what strength she could muster, Coura stretched out her arms upon reaching the pair and shoved each child backward. She intended to spin around with her knife at the ready, but the ground stook as the creature landed right behind her, rose to its hind legs, then swiped at her with both front paws.

This time, she couldn't dodge the attack. The claws swept diagonally across her back one after the other from shoulder to hip. Although the healing began immediately, the resulting stinging made her dizzy enough to fall onto her hands and knees. The children screamed, though she focused on gripping the weapon, her only chance at survival.

The creature pounced after, slamming her face-first into the ground before adjusting its stance to hover over her. Coura responded by rolling onto her back in order to look up at it, though the way her open flesh rubbed into the dirt caused her to involuntarily hiss.

Being so close to such an abomination disgusted her. The oily fur smelled rotten, its unnaturally gray teeth dripped a dark liquid when it snarled, and the violet eyes gazed down at her. When it opened its mouth to bite at her throat, Coura held up her arms for protection. The oversized jaws clamped down on her right forearm, producing a sickening crunch and splattering warm blood onto her chest. She tried kicking the beast in an attempt to free herself to no avail.

Afraid and nearly out of options, she remembered the knife. Using her left hand, she pried the weapon out of her clenched right one and hacked at the creature's exposed throat. Its black blood poured all over her, but the grip on her arm released.

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

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