

The Puppet's Blight: Chapter One

Book Three of The Dark Angel series

The halls of the palace remained silent in the late evening, their stone walls cold to Grace's touch. Her hand grazed one side as she wandered aimlessly, enjoying the peaceful quiet.

Dinner had been strange. King Hernan and High Priest Henda, someone Grace spoke to often, were both absent, leaving her to eat alone, or so she thought. Once the servants brought out the main course, featuring a succulent, roasted boar paired with mouth-watering gravy, the master light mage named Emilea Bayporter joined her. They conversed a handful of times before but had always kept matters strictly professional, so she prepared for a similar discussion. Oddly enough, Lady Emilea asked rather personal questions relating to Grace's home and family before sharing more about her own life. Although the shift in subjects seemed jarring at first, Grace warmed up to the light mage almost immediately and found herself engaged in their talk.

"Is your husband here?" Grace asked while scanning the room. From what the mage shared, the man called Clearshot had an infectious personality, and she wondered what it would be like to meet him.

Emilea shook her head with a sigh, and, as she glanced around, her mind went elsewhere. "I'm afraid he's on an assignment in Dala."

"Oh!" Grace exclaimed when she recognized the name and remembered Coura, Marcus, and Will. Emilea's following, sidelong look caused her to giggle. "My friends were reassigned to Dala as well."

At that, the master mage's eyebrows lifted in surprise before she asked for their names. After Grace explained, Emilea fell silent for a while.

"They are strong and reliable," Grace added. "I am sure if your husband is as likeable as you say, then everyone will get along well."

"Tell me about the one with the... I mean, Coura. How do you know her?" The woman's tone sounded controlled and neutral.

As Grace shared how they met and the meals in Marcus' quarters, she found herself becoming more enthusiastic. Meanwhile, she couldn't read Lady Emilea's facial features. When she ran out of things to say, the mage politely thanked her for the conversation before excusing herself. Grace left a few minutes later and went to her own room. For most of the night, she stared out her window and wondered what her friends were doing.

Did I displease Lady Emilea when I brought up those in Dala? she wondered while recalling the woman's change in behavior at the mention of them, specifically Coura. Then, she remembered her first impression. *I almost forget about the demonic presence I sometimes sense from her. I am sure, as a light mage, Emilea notices the power too and dislikes Coura for it.*

A gentle breeze tickled Grace's face, making her realize just how awake she stayed. After grabbing a shawl to wrap around her shoulders for warmth, she wandered without a purpose, becoming lost in her thoughts. She wondered what Dala was like and when she would see everyone again; however, her mind returned to Emilea's reaction to her friendship with Coura. Over time, Grace began to consider if the master mage was justified in doubting their relationship, and her trust wavered.

Perhaps I had been too impulsive to befriend her because of how lonely I became. Do the others know about the demonic presence? I never heard anyone mention it, even when Coura was not around. But... A longing tugged at her heart at the memory of when they met. Everything about Coura has always been genuine. I might not know what she is, and we have

only known each other for a few months, yet I really like her. I want her to be my friend. No, I want to be her friend too! Could it be a new manipulation spell we are all under? Grace felt like striking her head against the nearest wall for having such an idea.

When she reached the opposite end of the palace, she decided to backtrack to her room. In that time, Grace made up her mind regarding Coura. *I will try reaching out to her tomorrow. Not only will I be able to see how Marcus and Will are doing, but I am going to ask about what she is. I believe her true reaction will reveal if she is lying or not. At least I will have some-*

“Idiot!”

Grace’s mind and body froze at the word echoing through the nearest, empty hallway. She held her breath as a stream of curses followed at a much softer volume before a second voice, one she recognized, hissed in frustration.

That voice belongs to the person who sent out the mysterious orders a few months ago. I could never forget it!

With as little noise as possible, Grace turned on her heel, ignored those farther down who paid no attention to the outburst, and followed the hushed voices. Just like before, they led her into the center of the palace. A metal door shone dimly in the light of a single torch placed just outside with no one nearby. Her heart started beating faster, hammering her chest as she approached and listened to the conversation taking place.

“You had *three* orders, did you not? Yet here I stand, without a prince and with the base still intact!”

Another voice, much quieter than the first, responded barely loud enough for Grace to understand. “I apologize on our behalf.”

“Not only did you manage to disregard my initial orders,” the angry man continued, “but you screwed up the last!”

“I take full responsibility for the demon,” a third, more rich voice added.

“I don’t need a reminder of where the blame should be placed,” the first man growled.

“I did not know the blade should not be removed,” the third voice replied, as if the first said nothing.

“Of course you didn’t. Do you know why? Because *you* were not the one who was supposed to use this dagger to seal the demon. *You* had your orders, and *you* failed to complete them!”

A heavy pause followed before they mumbled too quietly for Grace to catch the words. She heard three footsteps and a painful-sounding slap after. Another moment of silence and more shuffling made her concerned they were preparing to leave.

Without another thought, she tiptoed to her quarters, never glancing behind even as she closed the door to her room and leaned against it. Then, she sank to the floor and listened with her breath held. She remained that way for a ridiculous amount of time before crawling into bed and pulling the covers over her head. While her body feigned sleep, her mind raced.

Those must have been the angels sent to Dala! Why did it take this long for them to return? The man claimed they failed to take the base and capture Prince Aaron. That is positive news, so why am I frightened? “Demon” someone said... Could he have meant Coura? I cannot wait. I must try reaching out to someone!

Grace closed her eyes and stretched her mind as far as it would go, yet she still remained too far from Dala. After another moment, her head began to throb, which meant she had used too much of her power at once.

I cannot do it, she admitted on the verge of tears while reeling in her mind. *How else can I speak with them in time?*

An idea came to her once she relaxed her tense muscles.

Master Emilea is a light mage. I wonder if she would be able to lend me her energy. That would mean revealing some of what I learned though...

She contemplated her next move with growing confidence until the excitement of the evening caught up to her, and she fell into a deep sleep.

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The first rays of sunlight peeked through the window in Grace's room, a characteristic of the space she initially didn't care for when she moved to the eastern side of the palace. Today, she felt grateful for the signal to rise. With more enthusiasm than she'd had in days, Grace washed up, threw on a lavender gown, and tied her hair into a tight bun before hurrying out the door.

She greeted each person she passed with a polite smile; some were surprised to hear her speak to them and babbled a response while bowing. Grace made it a point to see if she recognized any voice among the people on her way to the mage's quarters.

Since she didn't know where Emilea could be, she stopped several of the younger humans wearing colored robes to ask. Most claimed the master mage never arrived at the palace until mid-morning, and others couldn't tell her where the woman lived in Verona. Grace prepared to give up hope until she recognized the high priest heading her way.

"Good day," she greeted him with a curtsy and smiled up into his jolly face.

"Why, Lady Grace! It seems like ages since I've seen you," he replied and chuckled in his gentle manner. "I suppose that's what I get for squeezing business in place of meals and gatherings."

Grace laughed too before continuing. "Would you be able to help me find Master Emilea? I have only received mixed answers all morning."

High Priest Henda's eyes widened a bit, and he glanced at the ceiling to consider her request. "No wonder you haven't had any luck. Lady Emilea and her family own a home just outside of Verona, to the west. Where exactly, I do not know."

"I see." Her eyes lowered to stare at the floor.

"If you would like," he added and placed a hand on his chest, "I can assist."

She looked into his face and found his cheeks raised so high by his smile that both eyes were nearly squeezed closed. *Should I tell him? I am not even sure if I will share what I heard with Lady Emilea...*

"Thank you kindly," Grace answered. "I appreciate the offer, but I am afraid it is something I think only the master mage can help me with."

"Oh." Henda paused, as though startled by her answer, then he opened his mouth to say more before rethinking his words.

"Good day, High Priest," she decided to add before slipping past him to hurry to her room. In the next few minutes, she carried a cloak in one hand and strolled outside of the palace and into the streets of Verona.

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What am I doing? Am I lost?

Despite her concern, Grace continued along the slim path leading her deeper into the woods beyond the capital city. Because of her early departure, she felt confident enough to explore until the sun crept higher in the sky. Besides the beautiful day, which seemed unnatural for the middle of winter, she felt reassured in her course by the well-worn trail branching off Verona's main road. She wandered on a while longer, taking pleasure in the peaceful surroundings and the fact that the guards posted at the palace entrance trusted her on her own after months of supervision.

Leafless trees allowed beams of light to break through and shine upon the dead grass below. In the distance, she spotted another color besides the grays and browns. It turned out to be a brick-colored maroon, and Grace hurried toward the nearby building. The path opened into a wider space where a two-story home sat adjacent to a shallow pond.

“This must be it,” she told herself against a growing anxiousness.

She went to what she assumed was the front door and knocked three times as firmly as she could. No response came, forcing her to swallow her nerves and pound a fist on the thick wood again. Her heart leapt when a voice on the opposite side told her to wait a moment, and she saw a shadow beyond the curtain in the nearest window.

“How can I help you?” the master light mage asked as she opened the door. A blanket had been wrapped around her shoulders, and, at the sight of Grace’s awkward smile, her mouth fell open before she raised a hand to cover it.

“Hello, Master Emilea.” Grace curtsied while the woman gestured for her to enter.

“It’s an honor, Lady Grace. Please, take a seat. I will fetch you some food and a drink.”

Emilea disappeared into the kitchen at Grace’s right, so she hung up her cloak before smoothing down her hair and dress.

“Who are you?”

She froze and glanced over at the room to her left. Seated on the arms of a leather chair were a boy and girl, who watched the stranger with curious expressions.

“H-Hello,” Grace stammered and curtsied, unable to select a proper greeting for the children.

They continued to stare as she entered the room and accepted a spot in another armchair placed across from theirs. Her body sank into the cushions, relieving most of the tension in her body. Moments later, Emilea returned with a cup of steaming tea and a sandwich Grace discovered contained slices of ham and cheese.

“I prepared extras for lunch earlier,” the master mage explained and handed the dishes to Grace.

She thanked the woman for her hospitality before sipping the drink. The boy and girl hopped off the chair as their mother took a seat.

“Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

As the voices from the previous night echoed in her mind, Grace lowered her eyes. Emilea did not press for an answer but only waited with a friendly smile.

“I...” She cast a glance at the children lingering behind the furniture.

The light mage seemed to understand the importance of the matter then. “Mace, will you please bring your sister upstairs while I talk with our guest?” Emilea asked and patted the boy’s head.

He pouted yet grabbed the girl’s arm and led her away. Once they were gone, the master mage met Grace’s eyes, as if urging her to go on.

“You see,” she began again, “our talk at dinner last night reminded me of how long it has been since I spoke with my friends in Dala. You are well aware of my goddess gift, I presume, but I am unable to reach them from this great of a distance. I am hoping you can lend me your energy.”

While she sat holding a controlled expression, her palms grew sweaty. Emilea assessed Grace, then tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

“You’re lying.”

“What?” she squeaked out, shocked by the accurate accusation. Even as she did so, Grace realized that gave away her innocence.

Emilea's smile stretched wider. "I'm a mother. I have plenty of experience from when my children and husband lie. Also, you're not good at it."

"I see." Grace's chin dipped as she contemplated her next move.

Without any sort of prompting, the master mage rose and came over to kneel in front of where she sat. Then, the woman held her hands in a comforting gesture.

"My Lady, I would be honored to work with you so you may speak to your friends; however, I sense there's more to your request. You can be honest with me."

The sincere nature of the light mage and her willingness to help snuffed out any doubt in Grace's mind. She returned Emilea's smile and nodded. "I will tell you what I know."

"It's been *three days* since we sent a messenger to Verona and *still* no response!" General Tio pounded a fist on the oval desk in the conference room to emphasize his frustration.

Byron wisely remained silent and let the man vent.

The past few days had been stressful for everyone at the base and the people in Dala. News of the angels' trap and plans to destroy the area spread around the city, causing panic. Since Tio and his outer squad were injured, the remaining two groups traded shifts guarding both locations. The fear became so strong Byron thought he could feel it in the crisp air.

Meanwhile, the general, his troops, and Marcus had been treated by the non-mage healers and volunteers from the city. Dala never experienced such serious conflicts and didn't expect to host the recruits for another couple of months, so requesting light mages ahead of time hadn't been a necessity, according to Tio. In their current situation, letters and messengers were on their way to Verona and Twindela, the two cities they knew for certain contained magical healers.

With the tunnel's damage, the general deemed it too dangerous to send for help from the southeast. Four of the injured soldiers teetered on the brink of death while the colder weather brought on the threat of disease and fevers. Fortunately, all except the four could be patched up, though Byron wondered how long the break in action would last.

Not to mention Coura...

A surge of emotion tugged at his heart. How Marcus, Aaron, and Will had noticed her appearance upon their return from the Valley Beyond remained a mystery, yet he became indebted to them for alerting the rest of the squad.

Her condition hadn't changed since they carried her to the base's the medical station. The healers tended to her outward wounds, but Byron sensed something wrong underneath the surface. He detected no magical energy in her, and her pale complexion resulting from more than the physical wounds baffled him.

He closed his eyes and shifted away from where he stood looking absently out the window. "We just need to be patient," he told the general while forcing his mind to deal with the matter at hand.

The man growled in response. Together, they minded their own business for a few minutes.

Just when Byron picked up a new wave of strength, Tio spoke in a sympathetic tone of voice. "I have yet to tell anyone about your student."

The reminder stung, though Byron tried to remain composed despite his weariness. "That's probably for the best. As I mentioned earlier, there's enough tension and paranoia in Dala. An update about how one of our strongest fighters is out of commission would bring on more."

"I agree," the general added. He pushed himself to his feet and approached to put his left, and only, hand on Byron's shoulder in a reassuring manner before moving toward the door.

Although his breathing shortened and eyes itched, Bryon grew determined to act as a leader first and foremost. He followed Tio into the empty hallway, which seemed gloomier than ever. His appetite never returned over the past three days, and he knew if he stayed somewhere alone he would sink into a steady depression.

On the other hand, he wanted to be away from his companions. As soon as they returned to the base, Marcus demanded to be placed where Coura stayed. The prince refused to leave either of their sides, though the general ordered *him* to remain inside at all times, Clearshot volunteered to guard the city, and Will locked himself in his room. Byron hadn't spoken to them since exiting the tunnels.

He became so detached as he trailed behind the general that he didn't notice someone calling out his name until Tio stopped and gestured with the stub on his right arm.

"Byron, wait!"

It was Will who shouted and doubled over to catch his breath when he reached them before lifting his head to reveal a bewildered gaze.

Byron leaned forward a bit, fearing the worst. "What is it?"

The young man shook his head and stared at the general.

"Out with it," General Tio responded. The man's voice boomed with an authority that told them he wouldn't be left out.

Will's eyes darted back to Byron. "It's Grace. She wants to talk to us."

At first, Byron's mouth worked without sound as he processed the news. Then, he hit his forehead with the heel of his hand once he remembered the ambassador's ability. "That's right! Now how should we..."

Will stepped away and began moving down the hall toward the staircase. "She specifically requested to speak with Coura," he added.

As the two hurried to the medical station, Byron noticed the general following behind. "There's a lot to explain," he began.

"I'll catch up sooner or later," Tio replied, and that was that.

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Once outside of the room Coura and Marcus shared, Byron ordered Will to find Clearshot and bring him there as well. The herbalist scampered off without a word, leaving Byron to internally thank him for his obedience as he pushed open the door. Two cots rested below a pair of windows with a nightstand in between, and a table stood off to the side. Its wooden surface had been littered with bottles and papers, but the space appeared rather plain otherwise.

In front of the nightstand in his own chair sat Aaron. The prince glanced up, revealing tired, reddening eyes, and stood to greet each of them while Marcus pushed himself up into a sitting position from where he lied on the leftmost bed.

"By all the gods, it looks like you two haven't slept in days!" the general rumbled loud enough to startle everyone and cause the young men to blush.

In order to cover some of his embarrassment, Aaron offered his seat to Byron, who declined and walked to the farthest wall near Marcus' cot. His eyes avoided his student resting in the second bed the entire time; her pale skin blended in too well with the white sheets, and his gut twisted at the reminder. Tio also moved out of the doorway and crossed his arms.

After a moment, Marcus and Aaron shared a look.

"Pardon my curiosity, but is there a reason you're visiting us?" the assistant general asked Byron in an innocent manner.

"Will didn't tell you?"

The two shook their heads.

Despite their situation, Byron huffed a laugh. “It seems he was in too much of a hurry,” he commented before filling them in. At the mention of Grace, they instantly became alert. He knew they became friends over the months since her arrival and how the prince informed his father of her goddess gift.

All they could do once he finished was wait. Fortunately, it didn’t take long before Will and Clearshot burst in. The latter murmured a curse when he noticed Coura, then Byron watched as his friend sat on the end of her bed and analyzed her appearance. If it wasn’t for the slight rise and fall of her chest, she could be easily mistaken as dead; the thought threatened to break Byron’s resolve. He tore his gaze away while Will slammed the door shut and paced around as much as he could in the remaining space.

“Will, what’s going on? Did Grace reach out to you?” Aaron was the first to ask.

“Just hold on,” came the impatient response when the young man knit his brows together in concentration.

Byron didn’t understand how the Yeluthian’s mind-to-mind communication worked and prepared to inquire until an unexpected voice chimed in his head, causing his spine to stiffen.

{Hello? Are you there?}

Grace? Byron wondered as he felt a warm, though faint, magical energy fill the room. The sensation reminded him of the instances when a noblewoman wore perfume everyone in the immediate area could smell.

They all stared at one another, and he grew amused at seeing the general’s eyes widen with awe. The silence lingered, both internally and externally, before her voice returned.

{Please, one at a time! I cannot hear you when you send me your thoughts at once. There is a lot I must share with you; some of it I told Coura. Where is she? I cannot reach her mind.}

No one spoke.

{Did you hear me? Where is Coura?}

Tio threw up his arms and shot a frustrated glare at each person present. “You’re acting like a hopeless lot, aren’t you? Start focusing on the task at hand! We got a way to reach the capital, and who knows how much time we have. I’ll be the spokesperson since we can’t coordinate our heads. Tell me what you want me to say.”

Byron was so taken back he could only look on dumbly while Clearshot instructed the man to begin by sharing their encounter with the angels and what befell Coura. It took the general a few minutes to do so. Once he finished, Grace’s sorrowful voice rang out again.

{I cannot imagine what you are going through, but what I know might relieve some of the stress from your situation. Last night, I overheard a group discussing their failure to capture a base and the prince. They must have been the Yeluthians I saw leaving the palace those months ago. I did not catch any other orders being issued. Since I would guess it is a four-day flight between Verona and Dala, you should be safe for a couple of days, at the very least.}

“General, can you ask her how she’s able to speak with us from at a distance?” Marcus requested while his face remained set in an impassive expression. “We were led to believe it would be too far.”

As Tio closed his eyes to repeat the question mentally, Aaron echoed what was also on Byron’s mind.

“They’re in the palace.”

Despite their growing concern, Grace’s voice sounded more alive.

{Lady Emilea is here lending me her energy. I am filling her in as well. She urges you to stay in Dala until everyone is healed and the base is back to normal. Once Byron returns to the capital, the mages assigned to the southern base will leave and introduce a magical presence there.}

“She would say that,” Byron muttered to himself.

Clearshot repeated his wife’s name and gazed upward as his lips curled into a loving grin before he requested their spokesman to express how greatly he misses her.

“This isn’t the time for pleasantries,” the general grumbled yet presumably relayed the message.

The Yeluthian must have only spoken to Clearshot then, for the man chuckled and settled down.

{That is all I needed to share at this moment. We can hold the connection if anyone would like to talk with one or both of us.}

Everyone opened their mouths to pounce on the opportunity.

“I’ll return to my duties, thank you,” Tio interrupted before taking his leave. “Keep me updated on any more news from the palace.”

“Who should go first?” Marcus asked after the door closed.

When no one volunteered, Byron figured he should resume his leadership role. *Grace? Can you hold on for a moment while we sort this out?*

{Of course.}

He cleared his throat to get their attention. “I understand we have a lot on our minds given how much has happened in three days, but it hindered our need for a proper night’s rest.”

No one denied his words, so Byron continued.

“We’ll be safe tonight, so, once you speak with Grace, it’s off to bed for *each* of us. No arguments.” He half-expected at least one person to protest, yet they nodded in agreement. “Who would like to start?”

“I can,” Will offered. The herbalist kept his conversation brief and let them know when he finished.

“I’ll speak next,” Clearshot said, raised his hand, then bent his upper body forward over his hands, as if in prayer.

Will prepared to exit and opened the door only to find one of the medical workers bearing a tray of mugs standing in the way.

“The general ordered me to deliver sleep medicine for your group,” she explained. “He also mentioned he’ll slice off your hands to replace the one he lost if he catches any of you awake at all during the rest of the day.”

Byron noticed the younger men grimace upon hearing the ridiculous threat despite the woman’s wink when she set the drinks on the table.

Reluctantly, Will picked up a cup, swallowed the contents, and set it down before leaving.

Clearshot savored his time until he stood, stretched, and excused himself.

“I’ll go,” Marcus threw out next. While he relaxed against the bedframe, Clearshot tiptoed to the door.

“Not so fast,” Byron snapped and pointed at the tray.

“I’m technically on duty,” his friend joked with a shrug.

When Byron raised a doubtful eyebrow, Clearshot snatched up a drink, tipped it back right away, then tilted the mug upside down to show it was empty before returning it to the table. “Get some rest,” he suggested after.

Byron turned his attention to Marcus and Aaron as soon as the door closed. The former remained deep in thought while the prince fiddled with his fingers anxiously.

"I'm sure if anything is amiss Grace would have told us," he said to ease their nerves.

Aaron's eyes met his. "I know. It's difficult to be away, though. We need to figure out who their leader is or their motives."

"It's too much to ponder over now, let alone carry on your shoulders alone."

Before either of them could continue the conversation, Marcus faced Aaron. "You're up."

The prince grunted in confirmation and bent forward just as Clearshot had done. Byron brought Marcus his medicine so the assistant general could lie down once again.

"I asked Grace and Emilea about the soldiers and mages," the young man began in between sips. "Everything is exactly the same. I assume no one is aware of what happened in Dala yet."

"It is a seven-day trip on foot. Besides, the palace is one of the safest places in any situation," Byron added.

Marcus finished his drink and handed the mug over before wrapping himself up in blankets and shifting to his side. In another minute, he was snoring.

"Good luck thinking clearly with *that*," Aaron startled Byron by joking with his eyes still closed. The prince blinked for a few seconds after, rubbed them, then rose to take his mug and exit.

"Not a bad idea," Byron muttered, complimenting Aaron's method.

{Byron, are you the last?}

She sounded as exhausted as he felt.

Yes, and we are all thankful for you and your gift.

There came a tickling sensation in his mind, as if she were laughing.

Byron stood, grabbed the lone, untouched mug, and left with a brave glance at his student. On the way back to his room, he realized he didn't have anything pressing to bring up.

Grace, my questions were answered for the time being.

{There is something Lady Emilea wishes you to know regarding Coura.}

An idea popped into his head as he sipped from his drink. *Would she be able to help us learn what's ailing Coura?*

{I believe that is what she intends to try. Can you describe what Coura was like when you found her?}

There's not much to tell, Byron answered. His heart hurt while he recalled her injuries and lack of dark or demonic energy. A pause followed as she clued the master light mage in on the situation.

{Interesting... If you remember, those I overheard yesterday evening mentioned a dagger. Emilea and I both believe they are related.}

I've never heard of a weapon that drains away magical energy.

{Me neither, but Emilea says she will do some research.}

Would you two be available tomorrow at the same time? Another pause.

{Byron, there is something you should know. Lady Emilea requests only you, her husband, and General Tio be made aware of it. She will be leaving Verona tomorrow morning to head south and meet you in Dala.}

Byron nearly dropped his empty mug when he approached the door to his quarters. *What? Why?*

{She is bringing several healers and dark mages assigned to be stationed there, and she hopes to study Coura's condition.}

What about her children? And the students at the palace?

{Emilea says not to worry. She will have that business taken care of before she goes. If you sent a messenger, then they should be here soon enough, so she may go with a primary reason. I am sorry, but she has not shared the details, and our connection is fading.}

Byron bit off a curse before responding. *Thank you, Grace. Please be safe; do not go looking for trouble anymore.*

The spell disappeared entirely before she could reply, leaving Byron alone with his thoughts. Then, sleep took over until the next morning. If it wasn't for the medicine, he would have continued to ponder what they discussed for the rest of the day.

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Tio took it upon himself to inform his soldiers about the news from Verona. At first, they were thrilled because the rogue angels fled, so they could rest easier for a couple of days; however, the general's commanding fist still demanded guards posted at attention.

No one from the capital heard from Grace over the following three days, though the consistent nights' sleep resulted in clearer heads and more energy. Aaron and Will felt active enough to practice and work out in the training ground, leading to Marcus begging to join until one of the healers assisted him to a bench outside. Even then, the assistant general requested a sword in order to demonstrate motions as he sat. Byron also rested better knowing the base steadily returned to normal, if not a more defensive state.

Between himself, Will, Aaron, Marcus, and the medical station staff who checked in once or twice a day, Coura was never left alone, not that her progress changed. She remained unconscious, growing paler and weaker, in Byron's opinion. Often he would talk to her about what went on in the base to keep her company. He believed it helped, or at least succeeded in keeping himself sane.

As he sat in the chair at her bedside six days after speaking with Grace, he began recalling their former lives at the Magical Arts Academy. He chuckled to himself over some incident involving his student's stubborn behavior before noticing several pairs of footsteps echoing down the hallway. Without warning, the door flew open and there stood Master Emilea in her travel pants and vest, sporting a riding cloak and windblown hair.

Byron rose in preparation to greet her, but she gestured for him to stay seated.

"It's been a while, Master Byron," she said abruptly, entered, then stopped at the foot of Coura's bed. Behind her, Clearshot, Will, Aaron, and Marcus trailed inside to observe the light mage.

"What do you think?" Clearshot asked after a moment before wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

Emilea shook her head, and a baffled expression replaced the initial concern. "This can't be the same person, can it?"

Hesitantly, she moved to the side opposite Byron and knelt next to Coura. She placed a hand on the colorless forehead, lifted the closed eyelids, and checked for a pulse on the wrist. "You claim she appeared out of nowhere?" the woman asked, focusing her attention on her patient.

"Yes," Aaron answered with visible apprehension. "We noticed a flash of light from where we passed in the tunnel system. When we backtracked, we found Coura on the ground just like this."

"Her condition hasn't changed since?"

This time, Byron replied. "Not at all. The wound on her left side and the other cuts and bruises are mending on their own."

Emilea pulled the blanket down to Coura's waist before inspecting the injury. After the squad brought her to the base, the healers torn off the mangled clothing in order to clean up the blood and bandage her body. They then dressed her in a loose shirt and pants meant to limit discomfort.

Everyone besides Emilea politely turned away when she lifted the clothing covering Coura's midsection. Byron sensed magical energy flowing and chanced a glance. The woman's palms hovered over the wound as a faint glow emitted from underneath. Within another minute, she removed her hands to reveal only unmarred skin. The master mage repeated her healing about a dozen more times, each lasting a shorter duration, until there were no more visible scratches or bruising. It might have been his imagination, but Byron swore he noticed a bit of color return to his student's face.

Emilea covered Coura again and wiped her forehead. "That takes care of her outward condition. Byron, have you been able to sense any energy from her?"

He shook his head. "It's the same for me. Nothing except a kind of mute sensation, as though her center of power cut off."

The light mage dipped her chin while everyone else continued staring.

"What should we do now?" Clearshot asked from where he stood next to his wife.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I have never seen a case this complicated. Besides, no one really has any experience with demonic energy and possession. The likeliest cause is the demon gave up its hold on her body, resulting in a physical stasis and mental isolation."

"That can't be!" Will exclaimed. His voice reflected his emotional pain.

"It's some of what I *think*."

"What else?" Byron pressed, catching on that she withheld more.

"It's what Grace told us, about the angels who attacked you discussing their failures. One mistake happened to be how they stabbed *someone* with a special dagger, but it wasn't supposed to be removed. I never heard of a weapon with such a restriction. Have any of you?"

No one answered.

"I assumed as much," Emilea finished. "I brought a few texts along that might reveal relevant information. We can skim through them later. For now, there are other serious injuries I must attend to."

Clearshot helped his wife to her feet, and they left. With a grunt, Marcus rose, gestured to his two friends, and the three were gone soon after. For hours, Byron considered Emilea's diagnosis, racking his brain for a way to wake his student.