

An Unusual Assignment

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A short story set in The Dark Angel series

Autumn had always been Byron's preferred season because of the cooler weather, but the festivals became an added bonus as the years crept by. Usually, he spent his days at the academy instead of joining his colleagues on their ventures to the capital city for the annual Harvest Festival or returning to Fester to visit his relatives and childhood friends. East Hoover held its own activities to welcome fall anyway, so he chose to relax during the three-week break, which allowed the students to return to their homes or plan a vacation across Asteom.

Unfortunately, his reasoning for leaving the Magical Arts Academy wasn't a positive one. His mother's health steadily declined over the months since his father's passing the previous winter, so he expected this to be the last time he would see her alive. His close friend and the academy's headmaster, Symon, sympathized with his situation.

"You might regret putting this off sooner rather than later," the man warned Byron when he mentioned his dilemma. "No one will think poorly of you for favoring family over your work; you understand that, right?"

Byron had grumbled a response before accepting his losses, packing his bags, and heading south to his home along with dozens of individuals taking their leave of the MAA at the start of the season.

As always, Symon's advice benefited me more than if I ignored it, he reflected while adjusting the pack on his shoulders. I still can't bear to be in Fester for too long despite my connections there. After all, a single day off often leads to piles of paperwork in my profession.

The journey to East Hoover consisted of less conversations in passing due to the lack of people on the road, which he expected given the Harvest Festivals happening across the country that week. Every town and city he visited over the years held their own version of the celebration before frost hinted at winter. As he passed the buildings along the road to the academy, shop owners readily removed decorations from the previous days or went about their business with a lazy attitude, reminding Byron of how quiet the morning after a celebration became.

Soon, he reached the opening gate of the MAA and waved at the guard on duty, who initiated a conversation on affairs outside the town. Although he didn't learn much aside from petty gossip from Fester, Byron shared what he knew would satiate the young man's curiosity. He continued inside after, greeted a few individuals wandering the halls, and entered his quarters. Then, he felt due for a break.

A nap wouldn't help his mentality since he arrived later in the morning with the intent to use the rest of the day to unpack and visit the headmaster's office so he could catch up with his friend; however, traveling usually left him in no mood to socialize.

Perhaps I'm just being lazy, he thought while dropping to sit on the edge of his bed. From there, he scanned over his bags before his eyes wandered the room. *The academy should be quiet what with all our students away or in town enjoying the festivities. Perhaps I can take advantage of the peace to sneak some exercise in. That would tire me out enough to sleep well tonight.*

With an outline for the rest of his day in place, Byron rose, spent time removing the clothing and various items from his packs, then departed for the training ground used for practicing magic. The students were allowed to work without supervision in that space once they reached a specific level in their education; this would prevent any accidents caused by the inexperienced trainees. He hoped most, if not all, of the mages would be away so he wouldn't need to worry about interruptions considering the focus necessary to perform advanced spells at a master's level.

The weather continued to be warmer than normal for fall, and the sunshine seemed to increase his motivation to be as productive as possible during the rest of the afternoon. Byron savored the moment before walking in the direction of his preferred corner of the training ground; however, a silhouette near that space caught his eye.

Who's out here? he wondered and ventured closer before glancing around at the rest of the field. *They must be working alone, so it's probably a fourth or fifth year trainee.*

Despite the claim, Byron had his doubts, and they proved true when he recognized the figure as one of the newer students named Coura Galdwin.

Their paths first crossed four months ago when he stopped in the town of Neston on his return home from Verona. A surge of unnatural, dark power reached him from that place, so he expected to stumble into a demonic creature or two harassing the people who lived there. Instead, he discovered the place abandoned and the source to be the girl with him in the training ground.

From that point on, the two often interacted, though mainly because Byron felt obligated to ensure she successfully transitioned into the life of a mage trainee. He organized her classes, met with Symon to prepare her living quarters, and inquired about the fate of Neston and its residents.

What an odd situation, he reflected while deciding to linger farther behind in order to observe Coura's session. *Nobody claimed her, some mentioned a mother who disappeared, and she can't remember any of it. In a way, I'm grateful she doesn't intend to pursue her past. That saves Symon the effort of locating her guardian and arranging for her to stay should her life in that town interfere with her magical training.*

Byron dismissed the concern in favor of studying her and analyzing her progress. Her teachers often brought her up during various meetings and conversations, and everyone seemed to agree she picked up spellcasting and combat easier than most. Although she didn't speak much or show interest in socializing with her classmates, they all felt Coura remained perceptive of those around her.

As if to emphasize that point, Byron watched as she raised her arms and mustered the dark energy within her center of power in order to shape it into an elemental attack. His skill allowed him to sense a nearby presence and gauge what energy surrounded him, and he used this to predict her next move.

A fire blast, he noted mere second before she released a burst of flame the size of a melon.

The spell had become a regular test for beginners as it required the wielder to control the release and manipulate their energy into a particular form and size. To witness a beginner do so with such ease was no doubt impressive; however, what she decided to do next made Byron's heart drop.

An immense amount of power, likely all she possessed, gathered together before she released it into a wave of fire, which she aimed higher to avoid scorching the earth. Its flow remained consistent and lasted for seconds, a feat most students couldn't achieve until their third or fourth year. Still, the flames poured forth from her hands and even enveloped them briefly until Byron heard her cry out in pain and cut off the spell.

By that point, he already moved to stop her. "Coura! Are you all right?"

He approached to stand beside her hunched figure until she stood straight, spun around, and hid her arms behind her back. An alarmed expression told him she didn't expect anyone to catch what she did, and she even retreated a couple steps.

"Master Byron," she began and dipped her chin in a shy manner. "I-I thought you were out of town. When did you return?"

"Don't change the subject," he admonished before pointing to her arms. "Let me see your hands."

"It's nothing, really..."

When he frowned at her attempt to avoid revealing the damage, she caved in and reluctantly held them out with the palms down. Both sides of her arms appeared crimson with burns that extended above her elbows, though several blisters swelled and oozed a clear liquid as well.

There are old burns here, and the blisters didn't appear just now. She's been practicing this for at least a couple days, if not more.

The notion concerned him given the holiday break, meaning she not only performed magic unsupervised but also didn't plan to give her body and mind additional rest. He even wondered if she spent time outside her classes honing her spells and skills.

Before he could demand answers, Coura looked up to meet his eyes and startled him with a proud smile.

"You saw the blast, right? I've been building my tolerance in order to maintain the spell's shape for longer. That's the most I've ever done at one time!"

Byron's lips instinctively curved downward. "As remarkable as that is for someone at your level, you need to understand how dangerous such behavior can be. You should work your way up to that point in order to avoid harming yourself in the process, not produce greater spells and adjust to the pain. Those who follow such a route will find themselves with less skin and limbs once they graduate."

Although her smile softened to show her understanding, the brightness of her sapphire eyes remained. "Thank you. I'll try to remember that next time."

"You better. The other instructors won't be as lenient if they catch you acting so recklessly. Now, let's get your arms looked at in the medical station."

Again, Coura attempted to downplay the damage, but a stern look from Byron had her clamping her mouth shut and trailing behind him. The two entered the building, crossed several hallways, and finally reached their destination where a pair of light mages on duty greeted them before gaping at Coura's wounds. Thankfully, neither bothered to inquire about her exercises or scold her because of Byron's reputation as a man who does both regularly enough to keep up with his students' training.

The older of the two, a woman he knew as Healer Merium, led Coura to a cot, ordered her to lie down, and began a spell to repair her arms. During that time, Byron could only consider the girl's behavior when he confronted her in the training ground.

This is the first time she's shown enthusiasm toward anything since she got here, he realized after wondering why she seemed different compared to their previous encounters. Perhaps spellcasting is acting as an outlet for her to express herself in this new world. I only hope she learns to open up and befriend others her age. The life of a mage definitely has moments of loneliness, so building positive relationships helps keep us sane.

His optimism waned when Healer Merium flipped Coura's hands over to reveal calluses and blisters along her palms and fingers, which he recognized from his years of sword work.

"Would you like to tell me where you got those?" he asked and crossed his arms with what he hoped was a disapproving glare.

Coura glanced at her hands before looking across the room in order to avoid his gaze. "They're from my combat exercises," she explained, though it sounded as if she didn't believe she would be in trouble.

In a way, she's not, Byron reminded himself as he released a sigh. Overworking herself isn't cause for punishment; however, I'd like to understand why she feels the need to push her body so hard, and during her time off.

"I'm starting to worry you don't know what a break is." Although he intended for the remark to be a joke, her resulting, blank expression when she looked at him didn't raise his confidence. "You *have* been doing other things besides training, right?"

Coura shook her head.

“Why not?”

When she shrugged, confusion replaced his concern, and he fumbled for a response.

She isn't breaking any rules aside from spellcasting alone, but no student ever wants to keep working when they have the opportunity to rest, travel, visit with others, or celebrate the holiday. Even those who stay at the academy rarely use their free time to train. This is just...unusual.

“Is there something else I’m supposed to be doing?” she asked after a moment in an innocent manner.

Byron rubbed the back of his neck. “No, but breaks are healthy for the mind and body. Working every day at every opportunity wears a person down, and that can bring potential risks.”

“Like what?”

“For one thing, you won’t be as prepared to focus on a problem or task if you aren’t completely rested. For another, your body can’t keep up with the demands of an assignment. Remember what I said about building up your strength instead of tolerating the pain and damage?”

Coura nodded while the healer finished her work and left the two alone.

“You should also view this time off as a reward,” Byron added a bit more sympathetically as his student stood to stretch her arms and flex her hands. “It’s okay to use your free time to socialize, explore, or do whatever you want to have fun. You should not feel obligated to train during these weeks.”

“I think I get it,” she replied hesitantly before glancing away. “I don’t know what I used to do when I lived outside the academy, but I guess I should find something to keep myself occupied.”

Byron noticed her press the heel of one hand against her forehead, as if staving off a headache, and decided to address the issue in a professional manner. *Perhaps if I treat this like an order, she'll be inclined to obey.*

“How about I assign you to take the next couple days off from combat and magic training?” he began with a smile. “In order to pass, you must explore East Hoover and tell me about the shop you enjoyed exploring the most. I’ll give you extra credit if you speak to five different people, either from your classmates or the townsfolk.”

In response, Coura shot him a perplexed look that reflected a new, normal side of her personality. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s that simple. Do not enter either training ground for two days, learn the layout of East Hoover, and converse with multiple individuals. After that, come see me and report back. I’ll make time to assess your spellcasting as a reward. Does that sound fair?”

The pause following his question hung in the air between them while she seemed to be contemplating his offer, or whether or not he was being serious. Then, ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth rose.

“I suppose I could give it a try.”