

Excerpt from Arcanum Mutatio (Fractured Memories Series) by A. Dalcourt
Published 2013

Summer had been good to the small village of Clear Water. The farms were thriving, which meant that it was likely going to be a prosperous year for its citizens, bringing with it an economic boon. They attributed their good fortune to the Red Order's Hunters who managed to keep the number of demonic incidents at a record low.

In fact, the incident reports hadn't been this low since Adora Mathers, the village's unofficial spokesperson, was alive some fifteen years prior. Since her death, the people agreed to allow the Red Order to erect their temple in a heavily wooded area north of the village in exchange for the protection of their trained Hunters.

Like his mother before him, Mathias was now the unofficial spokesperson for the village. And, like his mother before him, he routinely patrolled the area without asking for a single credit in return.

It was on one such night that William knew that this was an opportunity to take advantage of.

He had learned over the course of his school year that the Red Order often acquired books of a questionable nature. His friends theorized that the contents of such books were either educationally naughty or black magic.

Ear pressed to the door, William fiddled with the lock mechanism. He had taken every opportunity to work on picking the lock since his return home. Tonight he would succeed.

Click went the lock and, with a final twist, the door slowly swung open revealing the cluttered mess that was Mathias' workspace. In the darkness, he relied on the hall light to reveal the contents of the room. Boxes were stacked to the ceiling, blocking off a large part of the room; this pile would slowly decrease over the summer giving the room more breathing space. At this time, there was only a narrow path to the desk, which sat next to the window.

William dashed across the room to close the curtains, hoping to block some of the light from reaching the outside world. He made a mental note to return them to their original state before he left the room, even if it was in haste.

He moved slowly at first, considering which box to open, which book to riffle through. Overall nothing jumped out at him. It all looked so boring; so old. He bent over the nearest box that lay open. A stack of its contents were set in various piles on his father's desk in some unknown, regimented order.

He pulled an old book from the box and looked it over. The binding was coming apart and the cover had long lost its sheen. He flipped through the book looking for some interesting illustrations to peak his interest and found none. Judging by the length of some of the words, it was probably a book on some old science.

There were several volumes. The language was old; some of the lettering, though familiar, was difficult to understand. He guessed that these were here for translation work to, perhaps, reveal what the world was like pre-demon invasion.

He was aware that much of the world's history was lost over the past couple hundred years. He just found it hard to believe that, one day, all the databanks just mysteriously crashed and that the people just forgot everything.

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He moved on to another box. Another set of books, but these seemed older. He could tell immediately that the books had been maintained over the years. He rifled through the contents of the book, revealing hand written passages and diagrams. The language was impossible to understand, but the pictures seemed to tell a story.

He settled on an image of a man, arms and legs spread out. Around him there were three circles with a series of symbols in each circle; he figured that they were there to indicate the name of each one. In a triangle shape, there was a glyph in each pinnacle. The inverted triangle bore the faces of a bear, wolf and eagle.

He heard the front door open, followed by the sound of his father entering, dropping his gear and closing the door behind him.

William didn't waste any time. He tore the page from the book, stuffing it into his back pocket, hastily opened the curtains and, in as few long strides as he could manage, covered the space from the desk to the door. He shut the door behind him and tested it to see if it was locked again.

Satisfied, he steadied his breathing before trying to play off his presence, as his father would no doubt be on his way up.

He heard voices. William went to see who had come. "I apologize for the short notice, Mathias," said the older gentleman. He was dressed in a fine coat belonging to a man of stature. He was older than he sounded. He had neat grey hair and a finely trimmed beard. He had age lines all over his face.

Next to him was a bald man in a black uniform and sunglasses. William thought everything about the man was cool. Especially the way he stood like a solid wall, giving off the impression of strength and durability. He had no doubt that this bald man was this old guy's bodyguard. He wondered if there were more patrolling the area.

William entered the room with a casual hello, unknowingly breaching the private bubble that the older man was maintaining with his charge.

Then he saw her. Shoulder length, ebony hair and piercing blue eyes, set in a fair skinned face. Astral was taller than William by a couple of inches without the help of any heeled soles. He hoped that this trend would stop soon. She wore the clothes of the upper class city dweller whose preference lay in practicality instead of fashion. This had the effect of making her appear to be far too serious for her age.

She stood quietly next to her grandfather.

"What are you doing here?" he reacted loudly to her presence.

"Training," she replied. She was good about keeping their communication short. It was hard to tell what she was thinking behind that crystalline gaze. Her voice was sharp and even as though she was speaking to a subordinate.

He grimaced. "Dad," he turned to Mathias, "You've got to be kidding me. How come we always get landed with her."

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William thought that he looked nothing like his father. Mathias was six feet tall, in his early thirties and bore a head of dark brown hair and soulful brown eyes. He had a solid build in contrast to his son's lanky structure. William had light brown hair and green eyes. He was always told that he got his mother's looks.

Dezmond, the older gentleman, arched a brow as he regarded the young man. His grey features glanced to his grand-daughter who, while mirroring his expression, seemed far more amused by her rude play-fellow.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, Mathers," Dezmond replied courteously, "I will see to other arrangements for next year. However, my expertise is urgently required and I cannot compromise my grand-daughter's safety."

He regarded Astral once more. Her slight smile betrayed an underlined playfulness. Dezmond chose to indulge her. "I'll tell you what. For your inconvenience, I shall pay you a sum of 2 credits a day."

"You're paying me to be friends with her?" William said, surprised by his good fortune. He couldn't wait to tell everyone at the Academy.

Dezmond smiled sweetly. "Oh heaven's no! I trust that you have far more integrity than that. I merely expect that my grand-daughter will return to me in good condition and her reputation intact."

William considered this. This meant that the only way he could get paid is if he didn't tell anyone. He reasoned that he could wait until he saw them in the fall term. As though sensing this, and having been a clever young man himself at some point in time, Dezmond added, "The contract stipulates that no one is to ever know that she was here, meaning that, should you tell after you are paid, the credits will be refunded. Are we in agreement?"

William's thoughtful expression turned sour. "Make it 10 credits and you have a deal."

"Eight," Dezmond challenged.

"Deal!" He shook the old man's hand as though it solidified their deal. He could feel his father's gaze burning into the side of his face. He hadn't thought that his father's babysitting the grand-daughter of a Councilman had been tremendously beneficial to their family. It's something that he would not reflect upon for several years to come.

Dezmond kissed his grand-daughter's forehead and bade her good-bye. It was clear that Astral thought the action was more of a formality as she did not return the sentiment, much to her grand-father's dismay.

He left without another word.