

**Excerpt from Shadow Prey (Fractured Memories Series) by A. Dalcourt
Published 2013**

Astral intentionally slowed her pace as she made her way to Mathias' office. She didn't want to come off as being too eager for the dangerous work that lay ahead, and the fact that Seth was here made her extra cautious of her actions. She waited outside of Mathias' office listening to him argue with Seth.

Their arguments seemed to be occurring more frequently over the past year. She had no idea what had spurred the sudden dislike for one another, but the years of working together wasn't helping them find common ground.

"You're wasting her talents on thievery," Seth sneered, "and now you're wasting them on a delivery job."

"Last I checked Wright, I am her Master and she will perform the duties that I require of her," Mathias replied in the same tone.

"You mean the duties that you would rather not do yourself."

"An apprentice does as they are commanded," he wished that were true in Astral's case. "Oh for Heaven sakes, get in here Daamon!"

"Are you sure?" Astral called from the hall. "I don't want to be involved in this argument." She would have preferred to just listen in.

"Get in here," Seth snapped.

Astral casually entered the office, hands behind her back, as she took a good look around at the artifacts and collector's pieces that Mathias had on display. She had seen them a million times before, but she always enjoyed looking at them. It was her way of becoming invisible. As long as she looked distracted, people had a habit of talking openly as though her presence in the room had been forgotten.

Seth closed the door behind her, preventing further eavesdroppers from listening in. "Did you have any trouble with the security?" he asked after her.

"Some," she replied with a shrug. "It wasn't anything that I couldn't handle." Concern flashed across his cold features. He had been the source of the information and had gone through great lengths to make sure that she had all of the information that she needed for a safe retrieval. At the time of the handover, he didn't think she was going to be the one who would be assigned to the mission. She had chosen to keep her source a secret, even from Mathias.

"The rumours are true then," he pressed.

"That depends on the rumour," Astral dodged. "I'm not sure the defences that I encountered were planned. From what little I could glean of the text and illuminations, I think that the book might be cursed."

Seth cast her a doubtful look. "You buy into these superstitions a little too easily."

"And there's a whole side of this world that you choose to ignore," she added evenly. "You dismiss tall tales and mythology only because of how the story is told. Just think about how your adventures are going to be told hundreds of years from now."

"You assume that his story will survive that long," Mathias interjected. "Sit and we'll get down to business."

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Astral took her seat in front of her Master's desk as she had done several times before. "You've been called to the Capital to meet with Lord Leon. I don't know what it's in regards to, but I do know that you are expected to be away for a week."

"Daamon, you will be staying with your grandfather during this time. Wright, accommodations have been arranged for you."

Seth knew that he hadn't been called away from his work to receive such an invitation from Mathias. He regarded Astral silently. He knew that it wasn't a coincidence that he would be leaving with her. Though he didn't have all of the information, he understood that if both of them were involved in this mission it was likely classified as highly dangerous, or perhaps, as a suicide mission.

"Daamon, you will be required to leave as you are," Mathias continued, "No battle gear, no weapons."

All emotion had melted away from Seth's face. He was impossible to read in this state, and he would maintain it throughout the mission brief, and often for some time afterwards as he worked out how to best handle the mission ahead.

He realized now why he had been asked to coordinate such a simple operation before his arrival at the school.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Astral shouted.

"Officially, you are only visiting with your grandfather. It would be strange if you arrived at the city armed. Seth will be serving as your escort. It's time that you learned to trust someone with your life. Let him do his job and everything will work out, you'll see." There was doubt in her Master's eyes.

"You can trust me to take you to the capital," Seth said, the hint of a question lingering just a moment longer.

"That's not the point," Astral retorted.

"Is there a reason we should be concerned?" Mathias asked.

"I will be delivering the package, isn't that right? As much as I'd like to assume that the Order isn't even aware that it's missing, it does have a certain draw to it." She sat back in her chair, thinking back to the previous night. "I could have found the book without the schematics, at one point I was working blind. I had nothing but that...feeling to guide me."

Mathias' gaze snapped to Seth, checking for some indication that he could feel the power of the book himself. While he had no doubts in what Astral was saying, the young Hunter clearly didn't feel the same way. "You'll be traveling by day, which should be an asset," her Master assured her. "You should arrive at the Capital by sunset; afterwards the shields should do the rest."

"I don't have a choice, do I?" she retorted.

"I've arranged decoys just in case the Order is aware of the theft," Seth told her. "We will also be switching vehicles a number of times throughout the day. Your safety is my top priority."

"And the package?" Astral pressed. Her intuition told her that Seth's plan would only confuse humans, and while they would be venturing to the capital city during the day reducing the likelihood of a demon attack, it was

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not impossible. Both men seemed fairly certain that they had covered their bases. Astral on the other hand remained unconvinced.

"I trust that I'll be escorting her back," Seth asked.

"I believe that's the intention," the Master replied.

He pushed the package that was on his desk toward her. "Don't open it and treat it with care."

When she touched the box she couldn't feel it resonate. She knew that the book was somewhere in this room, just not in this box. Mathias arched a brow, noting her confused expression. "Your senses aren't lying, Daamon. The book is not in this particular package."

Silently she took the box and left the room. She could only speculate what Mathias had in mind at this point.

Mathias nodded to Seth, dismissing him.

Seth followed his charge silently as she made her way through the school corridors while deep in her own thoughts. It was clear to him that something about this mission was troubling her. He worried that there may have been something that he had overlooked.

The main doors opened, washing them both in light. A black car with tinted windows was waiting for them; it was a similar model to Dezmond's, Astral's grandfather. Upon seeing them, the driver got out of the car and opened the door to the back seat.