

This Fleeting World

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Denae finds more than she bargained for on her journey to safety.

one shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A Star at Dawn

Denae lay on the damp ground, looking up at the sky. A single star twinkled in the mist of the dawn. Another day to endure. The dawning of a new day held no new hope for Denae. It hadn't held any hope since Gareth left. Oh, she knew that to pin all one's hopes and dreams on another person was a dangerous precedent to set, but she truly had thought that Gareth was worth it. In the end, she wasn't sure that he had been. He'd left her as all the others had before. And she was left an empty shell yet again. The dawn star twinkled out in the face of Denae's gaze. She sighed and stood up, tall and proud, rolled up her sleeping blankets and stowed them in her pack. She ran a hand over her body, cleaning herself with a thought and changing her clothing with a whim. She was now dressed in brown fabric leggings and a leather vest that laced up the front. She pulled on her worn and comfortable boots and tied up her long auburn hair with a strip of leather. Reaching into her pack, she pulled out a waycake and absently nibbled at it while she planned out her day. The plan was simple. Travel. Move on. Leave this place and the memories behind. Start anew. Denae hoisted her pack onto her back and set off.

A Bubble in a Stream

Noon approached, and Denae felt the heat rising off the bare dirt pathway she traveled. She had journeyed a great distance and felt herself wilting in the heat. Shielding her eyes from the bright summer sun, she spied a stream running parallel to the path, well hidden by the overgrowth of the forest. She slipped off the main path and found a small clearing through which the stream ran. Denae knelt by the stream and cupped her hand, drinking a little of the water. Satisfied that it was potable, she ran her hand over it as an extra precaution, purifying it. She splashed some of the water on her face and allowed it to dry, cooling her off. Denae opened her pack and took out another waycake and some dried meat. She ate, conserving what she could. She had the ability to transform her food into whatever she wanted it to be but chose not to. Some of the simple ways were the better ways, in her opinion. She stripped off her clothing and immersed herself in the cool stream, washing the travel dirt off her old fashioned way. She sat in the hollow of a rock, the stream rushing around her body. She was taken by the sight of a large bubble of water. Slipping her hand under it, she lifted it out of the water and gazed into it. Denae found her vision meandering back to the last time she had seen Gareth. He had stood there, staring at her as she had told him the way it would have to be. He hadn't been the man she needed. He had been lacking. He'd stared at her as she had spoken the words, "This can never be. You are not worthy of me." He had turned his back to walk away. Denae lifted her other hand and, with a finger, popped the bubble of water and spilled the memory of Gareth turning his back on her into the rushing water of the stream.

A Flash of Lightning in a Summer Cloud

Denae shouldered her pack and once again struck out on her journey. The sky was blue with a few clouds on the horizon. The day was sweltering. The best she could hope for was a summer storm to break the oppression. It was well within her powers to create a storm, but it would not have the same effect that a naturally occurring storm would have. She sighed and continued down the dusty path she found near the stream. The way by the stream would take a little longer, but the proximity to fresh water was well worth it. Not that Denae knew exactly where she was headed. She just knew that she had to put distance between her and the memory of Gareth. It wasn't easy for her kind in the world anymore. Where once the Magi were regarded with respect, now they were regarded with fear and sometimes loathing. It was better

sometimes to mask the powers inherent in the Magi. As a Mage of the Fourth Kingdom, Denae had been used to being placed on a pedestal. But following the Kingdom Wars, that pedestal had toppled. There was talk of an island where deposed Magi had relocated, forming a society that none could compare to. That was where Denae was headed. If the place existed, she would find it, regardless of the path she had to travel to get there. Denae felt the wind shift and lifted her eyes to the sky that was visible between the leaves of the trees. A dark cloud loomed over the canopy. Finally, there would be a storm and a break in the heat. Denae hurried along the path, looking for a break in the trees or a fork in the path. Finally finding a divide in her way, she took the path leading out of the forest. The sky rumbled and she looked for shelter. Spying a small cave in the rock formation ahead, she rushed to it as the skies opened up and the rains washed down. Denae sat on the ground in the shallow cave and watched the skies darken. The world around her turned as dark as night for a short while, lightning streaking the sky. She started as one bolt of lightning traveled from the billowing, light gray cloud to the ground in front of her, briefly illuminating a figure standing in the rain. Denae peered through the raindrops to see Gareth. She blinked in disbelief, but he was gone by the time she opened her eyes. As quickly as that bolt of lightning, the skies cleared and the rain stopped. But far from feeling cleansed by the summer storm, Denae felt soiled from within and had no way to explain the feeling to herself.

A Flickering Light

Denae stopped for the night, making camp in a larger cave than the one she had sought shelter in earlier. With a wave of her hand, she set up sleeping blankets and lit a lantern. She pulled another waycake, dried meat, and an apple from her pack. It was all the food she had and all the food she deserved. She also pulled out a small vial of red liquid. She placed the vial on the ground next to the lantern and ate her evening meal. When she finished, she picked up the vial and uncorked it, dipping her finger in the viscous liquid. What she saw earlier was not possible. Gareth had left her, she thought as she rubbed her fingers together, smearing the liquid between them. With her finger, she painted an "X" across her heart and lay on her blankets. Looking up at the ceiling of the cave, she watched the shadows dancing by the flickering light of the lamp. She raised her hands and watched them dance on the ceiling. As she played with the shadows, she became aware that there was a shadow not her own. Slowly she sat up and turned her head. She was alone in the cave, yet the second shadow still danced on the ceiling. She closed her eyes to block out the familiar form.

A Phantom

When Denae opened her eyes, he was standing over her, looking down at her with a strange look in his blue-green eyes. She gasped. It was Gareth. But how? He had left her. Why was he here? How was he here?

"Gareth..." she said.

"Denae," he replied coldly.

"Why are you here?"

"Don't you mean *how* am I here?" he said, echoing her thoughts.

"Yes. How are you here? You left me."

"I left you?" he scoffed. "Did I have a choice?"

"You could have been what I needed."

"You mean I could have been what you wanted," he said, "but I failed to conform to your wishes and became yet another of your victims. Is that mine?" he asked, pointing to the red mark across her chest. "Is that what I was reduced to?"

Denae trailed her fingers across her chest, feeling the stickiness of the mark she had made. She looked at Gareth, his eyes glittering in the lamplight.

"Yes," she replied, "it's yours."

"I hope you at least got something good out of it. I mean, the heartblood of a warrior is supposed to be quite powerful."

"It can give great protection to a Mage," she said quietly.

"Protection from the living, but not from the dead, Denae. You have no protection from me."

"You wouldn't harm me."

"I wouldn't?" he asked. "After what you did to me? After stabbing me in the back and collecting the blood from my broken heart for your nasty little collection of Mage toys? You're heartless, Denae, and you will never find the peace and happiness you seek. Peace comes from within, and what's within you is too dirty to breed tranquility. Before I dispatch you to the hell you deserve, let me show you what could have been."

Gareth put his ice cold hands on her, one over her eyes and one over the mark drawn on her in his blood. Denae felt her heart slow and circulation stop. She felt her eyes roll back in her head, and she saw...

A Dream

The sky was a vivid blue. The sun shone brightly in the summer sky. Denae was smiling up at Gareth. Between them stood a little girl, auburn haired and blue eyed. It was a picture of extreme happiness. Denae could feel the warmth between them. She sat on the green grass, the little girl jumping in her lap. With a wave of her hand, Denae released a swarm of multicolored butterflies. The little girl chased after them, Denae watching with laughter. Gareth sat behind Denae and pulled her back to him so she was leaning against him. He nuzzled her neck and whispered in her ear.

"What could have been, Denae, but no one could live up to your expectations and no one could give you what you wanted. So you took it. You took my life for the protection my blood could give you. You took the lives of others for what they could give you," he laid several vials on the ground, "the heart blood of a warrior, the tears of a bard, the brain fluid of a healer... How many more would have had to die to give you what you wanted? No one else will die now. No one, that is, but you. This world is fleeting, Denae, and your time in it is done."

Denae felt her heart beat its final beats, then nothing.

"Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:

A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;

A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,

A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream."

~Buddha