

A Shadow Among The Dawn

By : **Genspirit**

A story centering around a young man by the name of Dein and his friends. They start out as students at The Academy but not long before they graduate their land is thrown into turmoil and war breaks out. After they complete their training they take it upon themselves to put an end to the bloody conflict but soon find out its much more than just a war.

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Chapter 1: A Glimmer of Hope

A Glimmer of Hope

They finally had hope again and he had to grasp it. Hope had eluded them for so long, for every trial they had surmounted another rose from its ashes. For too long they had been like ants being forced around by a relentless torrent of events beyond their control. But now it was different. No more trials for them, this was their last stand. He saw a crystal clear tear running down her frozen face. His eyes uneasily followed it as it slowly rolled down her soft cheeks. Apart from the tear her face was emotionless, if he didn't know better he would think she was dead. Perhaps inside she was. The tear picked up momentum as it rolled smoothly across her tanned skin. It wobbled down past her modest nose approaching her motionless upper lip. It briefly paused as if some foreign force had willed it to be stationary, then it lifted itself over her blood red lips. He had expected to see it continue its journey and move on to her chin but it abruptly slipped from her stone-steady bottom lip and plunged to its demise like a man jumping off a cliff into the ocean; except there was no ocean to dive into, only the ruins of a once great cathedral to crash into. As the tear reached the ground it disappeared into the dust leaving nothing a small bit of wet dirt in its wake. The scene brought him some tranquility to counter the chaos raging inside him. A tear of his own almost penetrated his defenses as he remembered their time together, but he stopped it summoning the last of his strength. Memories flashed before his mind's eye despite his attempts to force them out. The memories weren't just of him and the woman standing in front of him, there were others; friends who he had journeyed to this place with.

In front of him she stood. Most of her face was obscured by her long black hair preventing him from seeing her eyes. It didn't matter though; he remembered her statuesque beauty perfectly. He still desperately wanted to see her eyes one last time, not to remember them, but to know that she was truly here with him. The only movement was a perfectly serene tear trickling down her face every so often. She didn't acknowledge them. They fell, one by one, to floor without resistance. Unlike him she wasn't afraid to let her tears flow. He couldn't afford weakness though. Not now. He had to be the shield against the world for those he loved. Somehow even through the raging tantrum of power surrounding him he thought he could hear the gentle drum of the tears hitting the ground.

Behind them the sun was setting. It sat just slightly above the horizon and cast a gentle orange light into the sky around it. Shadows stretched unnaturally far all around them as if reaching to devour them. He wouldn't let the shadows win. For a second he looked past her, cherishing the warm light cast over the land. The dead couldn't feel the warmth of the sun. The sky looked so massive compared to the ruined cathedral they stood in. He couldn't help but wonder if this was the end. He had been told that it would not end. Never end. There were only new beginnings, nothing ever truly ended. But nonetheless it felt like an end.

The ruins they stood in left very few clues to what had once stood here. All that was left standing was half of most of the walls and one large stone arch they were all standing under. He was told that it was once a great cathedral before the madness struck and tore it apart. People flocked from all over to stand in these grand halls. Even from the crumbled ruins he could tell that this entire place was once made of brilliant white marble. The cathedral wasn't the only crowning achievement that now lay in ruins. The world had gone mad and most of it was now reduced to rubble. Every day people awoke to a world that seemed unreal. So much had changed in such short time, only a few of months ago the world was peaceful and thriving.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and he was starting to feel weak. Light danced around his blurring vision as if to taunt him. Despite his will his legs failed him and he collapsed to his knees, convulsing slightly as the uncontrollable power ripped through him. He tried to steady himself but couldn't, the sweet yet tormenting salvation of life poured through him like flaming honey. It filled his every hollow, and made him whole. In that moment he felt so heavy, the burden of his duty crushing down on him. He saw her slowly turn away,

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dropping her head as she turned. He almost felt more pity for her pain than for his fate. Was it easier to die, or watch someone you love die? It had to be one of them and he wasn't about to let her die. Was he a coward for that, or a hero? Was he protecting her or him? It didn't matter either way what had to be done had to be done.

He saw another tear hit the floor, glimmering in the golden light until it met its doom as it hit a stone and burst apart into a thousand smaller glossy tears, which would only fall to their demise as well. He had to remain resolute. One last pull was all it took. He silently gasped. His mouth froze open wide, deadlocked by the simultaneous pain and euphoria of the energy of life. The power inside him ignited and burned like a holy flame. It consumed him. One moment he was whole and the next he was hollow. More than hollow. He wasn't just empty, he was the emptiness. Despite the overwhelming pain his tongue would not betray him. Perhaps that was simply because his tongue could not function. Silently he burned away in a blazing white inferno of power. Flames of the purest energy whipped around him dangerously daring someone to challenge their power. She stood unmoving as the power climaxed and then imploded upon itself, fizzling out into nothingness. He felt purified by flames in his last moments of life. It was as if all his burdens had burned in that inferno with him. He knew that wasn't true though, his heaviest burden would follow him through death and back to the world of the living.

Her head twitched slightly to the side, her eyes still closed. There was a moment of pause where she seemed to gather herself. Her shoulders rose and fell as she took a deep breath. She slowly turned around to the pile of white ash that lay before her. Her tears had been wiped away. She turned back to the crowd gather before her. In a silent yet graceful voice that somehow carried across the masses she said one thing.

"And now we wait."

Her face betrayed no emotion only duty. She waited like a statue as time passed. Her emerald eyes pierced through each and every individual who stood waiting with her. Waiting for death to return to the world of the living. It could have been seconds or minutes or even hours no one was sure. The world felt silent as it awaited the return of its savior, its last hope.

Chapter 2: Just A Dream

Just A Dream

Dein abruptly awoke from the dream to a spacious chilly room. He sat up as the sweat on his brow fought the cold, waging a war on his bare skin. He took a deep breath and shuddered as the icy air made contact with his lungs. It felt like he had just inhaled an icy dagger. If he was not awake before, he surely was now. Through the small window on the far side of his stone room he could see it was still dark out, the sun hadn't even risen yet. It was happening more and more often, the same dream. He would always awake from it drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. He didn't even know who the woman was that he was with in the dream. His heart was pounding like a bird trapped in a cage with some vicious beast desperately trying to break free. In truth it was a rather frightening dream, but not the sort of jumpy fear of a nightmare, more of a cold stony dread. For a while he simply sat there staring out into the night while the icy air slowly eradicated his sweat and his heartbeat calmed. The tree outside his window swayed hypnotically in the blowing wind.

He gingerly ran his hand across chest, feeling the bumps forming from the cold. That dream always left him on edge. It always felt so unsettlingly real as if it was some sort of vision. He brushed back his thick brown hair with both hands and took another deep breath.

When he finally felt at peace again he laid back down. Tonight more than any other night he needed all the sleep he could get. He had to be prepared. Tomorrow was his first judgment, the initiation test to get into the Academy of Aeol. The Academy of Aeol was one of many such institutions strewn across the land that trained young channelers and knights to join The Order. The Order was a coalition of leaders, channelers, and a massive army that watched over the land and kept peace. Ever since he was young he had wanted to join The Order. The one thing he knew about his parents was that they had been in The Order as had most of the other orphans. Many channelers of The Order gave up their children because of the stress of trying to raise a child and keep up on their duties. And many others simply died, orphaning their young children.

In his mind he could see the giant shining white walls of The Academy towering over him like a palace, each stone reaching closer to the sky than the next. Except the walls weren't exactly shining they were sort of glowing? It sat there at the far edge of town in all of its majesty. He felt The Academy pulling him in, daring him to imagine deeper. It kept pulling at him, seducing him. Strangely enough it was dark outside in his mind, and no matter how much he wished it he could not bring light to his imagination. The only light was the pale shimmer of the full moon hanging in the sky. Despite his strange lack of control over his own dream he pushed further opening the grand doors into The Academy's courtyard. Despite their massive size they seemed almost weightless. The courtyard was massive made of the same glowing marble stone of the walls surrounding The Academy. Dying autumn leaves rolled across the stone floor in response to the gentle night wind. One bright red leaf fell from the sky slowly twirling downward. It paused every now and then to flutter to the right or left before continuing its descent. When it finally hit the stone floor it stopped for a moment before jumping back into the air and riding the wind shortly only to end back up on the same stone floor.

He could see such amazing detail in this dream: the veins on the leaves, the vibrant green blades of grass growing up in between the glowing marble stones, even the individual scratches and marks on the stone from being walked on. He walked up to the closest wooden bench in the courtyard and reached out to touch it. When his hand made contact with it just sort of blurred. He couldn't feel the bench but he was strangely aware that he was making contact with it. He slowly pulled his hand away unable to make sense of the bizarre feeling. He saw the initials JR and MS inside a heart scratched into the wooden bench. He looked towards the door leading to the central hall. It was a massive wooden door on a thick metal hinge. It somehow called out to him. It tugged at his attention pulling him closer to it. He couldn't resist, he didn't want to resist. He didn't remember moving, only intending to, but next thing Dein knew he was right in front of the door pushing it

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open. Again he felt that strange sensation of contact but no touch.

The central hall was glowing just like the rest of the dream. The floors in here were wooden though. There were many wooden tables orderly fashioned around the room for the students to eat their meals and do their work. On the far side of the room there was a massive stage and the most elegant podium Dein had ever seen at its center. Everything in the hall, short of the podium, was rather simplistic in design until he looked up towards the ceiling which was incredibly high in itself. Some sort of matrix of magic had been fixed onto the ceiling and definitely the largest chandelier Dein had ever seen sat in the middle of it. The matrix changed every few seconds, it seemed to never repeat as far as he could tell. One second it was the ocean with hundreds of colorful fish jumping out of it, their scales glimmering every color imaginable. The next second it was clouds with lines of birds weaving in and out of its creamy white froth, disappearing and reappearing all at once as they danced through the sky. At one point it even became a raging inferno of white fire, completely illuminating the room leaving no shadows. Dein recognized the moment he saw it that it had to be an incredibly complex spell. He couldn't imagine the time and effort that would have to be put into producing such an amazing feat.

As the matrix shifted and the penetrating light faded, he noticed a corridor towards the back of the hall. He felt the pull coming from it teasing him but at the same time pushing him to it. Again he shifted to that hallway without actually taking any steps that he could remember.

The hallway was significantly darker than the main room as there was no lighting. The other room had been illuminated by the glowing matrix of aeos. This hallway was dark with no lighting, but then again it was night time. Dein cautiously made his way down the hallway feeling the stone walls to prevent an awkward encounter with the walls or even worse the ground. Feeling but not actually feeling. It was a fairly short corridor leading to a stairwell that descended down. The light from the main room didn't reach to the stairwell at all leaving it in pitch black darkness. He slowly descended the stairs, cautiously taking one step at a time. He could feel the force pulling him, it was growing stronger. Suddenly a thought occurred to him. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes focusing. He opened himself to the flows of energy around him. He smiled inwardly at the warm sensation as aeos poured into him. His palm, held upward and open, slowly began to glow as a heavenly globe of light formed above the center of his palm and illuminated his surroundings. So he was able to channel aeos in this dream but unable to will it to change. Very strange. At the bottom of the stairs there was a thick wooden door. Dein figured this must be the door to the dungeons, judging by all the locks. Despite there being many locking mechanisms on the door it was actually completely unlocked which puzzled Dein. He looked behind at the stairs before pushing the door open.

On the other side of that thick door his dream just got a lot stranger. There was a woman in a very fancy dress and a man in what appeared to be some once rich rags. The man had shackles around his hands and appeared to be a prisoner. The woman though was something else. She was quite possibly the tallest woman Dein had ever seen which was further exaggerated by the look in her eyes which made her appear to tower over Dein despite the fact that she actually a bit shorter than he was. She was wearing a strange layered silken dress that clung to her body like moss to a tree. Her face was almost perfectly proportioned. Her eyes were a very dark brown almost black. Her skin was a very light milky brown making her bizarre red dress stand out even more. She had wavy black hair that fell just past her shoulders. By the way she was dressed she appeared to be someone of importance. One thing was for certain though: she was not from around Aeol.

For a second all three of them stood frozen. Dein's gaze shifted from the woman to the man. The man was definitely nothing like the woman was. He was short and huddled and wearing filthy clothes that were for the most part falling to pieces. On top of that he was at least twice her age. The man definitely looked like a prisoner but Dein had trouble affixing the role of escape artist to the exotic woman in the red dress. Dein didn't have much time to continue thinking on the subject before the woman started to move. She moved extremely fast, much quicker than Dein had expected. He hadn't really considered this woman a threat but he

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quickly began to realize his mistake. She quickly slid her arm out like the head of a snake and shot a bolt of arcing power at Dein. Clearly she meant to shoot first and ask questions later. On second thought, judging by the expression on her face she probably had no intention of asking questions. Dein barely had time to channel his aeos into a shield. Luckily he had quite a bit of practice channeling aeos even though the academy discourages individuals from practicing without the supervision of a trained channeler. Unfortunately he was not very adept at shielding, and even if he was he had next to no time to react, so the resulting shield was just barely above pathetic.

The bolt of power slammed into his shield, knocking him off his feet and into the stone wall behind him. His world spun for a second before settling and the first thing he saw was that woman readying for another attack. Strangely enough he was not scared. He felt no pain when he was thrown into the wall and didn't even ache slightly when he stood back up afterwards. Dein wished all his dreams could be as convenient as this one. That was probably not the best thing to be thinking when a woman adept at channeling is attempting to kill you. The woman threw another more powerful bolt shouting something at the older man as she struck out. This time Dein was prepared though and quickly threw himself to the right to dodge the blast. The bolt of energy exploded into the ground blowing bits of rock up into the air and leaving a sizable hole in its wake. Dein's mind was racing. It was just a dream but even so he would prefer not to die here but he could think of no way to defeat this woman. She was clearly stronger than him and more practiced. He shifted his focus from his thoughts for a split second to gather as much aeos as he could, pulling the succulent magic of life into his being. Anything he threw at her she would be easily able to shield. Though... Dein had seen fully trained channelers dueling before and it looked nothing like this. Throwing simple bolts of energy at someone was rather amateur, something that he would probably do.

Even if the woman had only just begun her training she was still quite a bit ahead of him, he had to think of something. Dein glanced at the woman as he was running through the dungeon dodging blasts of energy. It was strange he was running yet she only walked throwing death after him. Abruptly she stopped moving in front of an open cell and lifted her hands above her head. Dein could feel her pulling strongly at her aeos. For the first time in this dream he felt fear. In between her hands she produced a ball of white fire like a small sun. It made the air around it ripple with its ferocity. Just before she could loose it Dein lashed out with all of his aeos. With lightning speed he wrapped the force of the aeos around the cell gate behind the woman and pulled with all his force. The gate slammed into the woman's back throwing her a good way across the dungeon. With her focus broken the ball of energy fizzled out. She didn't get up but Dein didn't really wait to find out if she would or not. The second she was down Dein bolted for the way he came in. He quickly conjured enough aeos to reignite his palm light. On his way out he noticed that unlike the woman the man, the prisoner, was glowing that strange glow like the rest of the dream. He also realized that man had slipped away while he was fighting the woman.

The strange force that had been pulling him to the dungeons was weaker now, or maybe it was just being suppressed by his fear. The entire dream had been rather devoid of feeling and fairly emotionless until that woman appeared. He still hadn't felt any pain but for some reason she seemed more real than the rest of the dream. He ran up the stairwell that lead up back to the central hall two steps at a time. He couldn't hear anyone chasing after him but he wasn't sure he would be able to hear them over the sound of his heart beating. Dein was sure his heart was about catch on fire. After what seemed like forever but was really about half a minute Dein reached the top of the stairs.

At the top of the stairs he noticed the dream was glowing even more than before. It was now a very blurry glow. He stared at the wall beside him intently sure that it was swaying as if it was the surface of a pond.

"Dein!" It was a woman's voice. It didn't come from anyone in particular or even any direction but rather from everywhere all at once.

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"Dein! Wake up or you will be late for your testing you lazy lout!" The dream rippled gaining more and more speed till it just produced white light that engulfed the entire dream.

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