

## Diamond Tears - Prologue

“They have breached the city walls, my lord! The queen and her troops will soon be upon us!”

A timid servant, a mere weasel of a man, fell to his knees before the emperor’s midnight-black throne, the claws of dread barely held back behind his lowered eyes.

“The high council has fled,” he gasped, “and they have requested that you evacuate from the castle immediately to seek shelter in the outlands. There, you will be safe...”

The man swept graying locks of hair from his eyes, pointlessly straightening his tunic and buttoned overcoat—a means of distraction.

“The cause dies without you, my Lord.” His eyes fell once more.

Emperor Alexander Imre looked down at the trembling man, pitying him for the hope he still held. Did he not understand that this was the end? That there were no second chances? Regardless of the moment's impotence, he rose slowly in response to his servant's words, turning to face the daunting glass windows behind and gazing off into the sea. The waves rose like mist to a mountain and yet crashed down with thunderous applause, turning over themselves until there was nothing left. It was as if their momentary peace were nothing but a taunt. For the sea was terrifying. The sea was beautiful. But he had never taken the time to admire it, to appreciate its salty breeze upon his face, his feet sinking in the wispy sand, or the sounds of sweet freedom teasing his ear. It was a bitter shame.

Golgata castle quivered violently under the strike of a catapult, debris and dust raining down onto the throne room floor. A cool breath slipped between Alex’s lips at the impact, his left hand mindlessly reaching for the star pendant upon his neck, caressing its smooth

exterior. He focused onto his own shimmering reflection within the glass windows, his eyes passing over every scar and mark of time. In light of his impending death he could finally admit it: there was nothing left. High emperor, lord, conqueror, and king, were all that remained of him. His first name, his true name, meant nothing. Those who had even known it, who had spoken it with care, were long gone. Reaching behind his shoulders, he threw a black hood over his head, all but two burning eyes now covered in shadow. The war, and his suffering in it, were finally at their end.

An explosion, nearer than the last, shook the eastern wall, cracking the beautiful stained glass windows. The prostrate servant cowered further at the impact, quickly throwing two pale hands over his head, as if that meager act would provide protection. The sound of battle came closer with every second, counted down by wavering breaths and drops of sweat. A bitter taste seeped from Alex's soul and onto the tip of his tongue. A memory.

*"These hands Alex... are not all that you are... Do you really need more than this?"*

"My Lord, if you refuse to leave," the servant whispered, fear of imminent death leaking through every crease in his brow. "What are we to do?"

Roused from his reverie, Alex turned from the ocean's entrancing arms, the moon reflecting rays of wavering white light past his intimidating visage. He was eclipsed in a pale shadow. More than a mortal, a broken half of a man.

"We stand for what we believe, my friend." Alex rounded his throne, leaning against it. "We fight for the better world we were trying to create. And we sink beneath the waves in peace, knowing that we have nothing left to give." His words were spoken with such deep-set conviction that the pale servant was given strength to stand, though certain doom was likely the last thing he had wanted to hear.

The imposing young emperor, fighting through his servant's overwhelming weakness, saw a heart that had been willing to stand by his side for years of violence and uncertainty. He was a loyal man. If ordered to lay down his life he would do so a thousand times over.

"You have served me well." Alex dipped his chin in recognition. "So I release you from your duties, if such an escape appeals to you. But I must stay. My life will fall alongside all those who have suffered and died before me." His hand unconsciously moved to lay on his sword handle, a weapon once held by his most loyal friend. "Eternal judgment, is all that remains."

The young emperor watched as the lowly servant shed a silent tear, bowing before the only man he had ever served. In that moment it was almost as if he were drawing towards the final glory of battle. A desire to bleed the valor of sacrifice and scream truth until the silence overtook him. But the light died in the man's weary eyes as his heart drowned in trepidation. And if there was one thing that Alexander had learned, it was that such a power as fear was near impossible to overturn. The servant swiveled on his heel and fled, a sad, melancholic smile blossoming onto his master's face, shining in an almost charming manner. As if on cue, he heard the haunting cracks and groans of battle gradually approaching the doors to the throne room. It was time.

*Finally... my love... I return to you...*

The young lord's gaze fell upon the garden to his left, the last hedges barely visible from his throne. All the trees and flowers were ablaze, a peaceful sanctuary filled with fallen men, fallen memories. He remembered a day when he had danced in that place, beneath the moonlight, with the ones he loved. A time when his burden was not so great, so lonesome.

*"When it's all over... I want to get away from here, away from everything... I want a house on a hill, overlooking the sea."*

*“That sounds perfect...”*

A silent tear rolled down his quivering cheek. But the fire in his stomach calmed to a mere crackle. He would dance with her again; the sun would shine upon his face and he would not feel ashamed. The iron head of a battle ram cracked through the throne room doors, splinters sailing through the air.

Alexander funneled waves of magic into his lower shoulders, setting free two dark feathered wings of ash-swelling shadow. He mustered a sad smile as they beat lightly against the air, sighing with great relief as his body connected to the fluttering waves upon his back. Their presence felt almost like meeting an old friend.

The ram struck again, cracking like thunder as the door hinges bent in half. He reached down to his left hip and unsheathed his only consistent companion through it all, the blade catching the torch light and reflecting silver beams onto the tall stone walls of the castle. The flames were all but mundane compared to the emperor’s intimidating silhouette. He was a powerful mortal, perhaps even a demi-god. But what chance did he stand against a true goddess?

He continued to admire the pure and perfect sword, running his left hand delicately over its flat surfaces as the throne room doors came crashing down. Countless lives had ended to the song of this blade. He exhaled slowly as the magnificent tall doors, lying half connected, were blown to dust in a great flash of vicious light, opening the floor completely for his new guests. Death had finally come for him.

Emotionless, Alex watched as High Queen Aetheria strode confidently into the vaulted room, shining like a war goddess. Her chestplate was golden-plated and covered in diamond studs, with brilliant white vines that wove from plate to plate, creating an image

worthy of her majesty. Greaves clung to her shins. Pauldrons rested upon her shoulders. And each was crafted of the same gold-coated iron, every plate and stud worked to perfection by the finest aero smiths. She shined brighter than the sun and demanded reverence with every step, radiating regality and wisdom that seemed far too great for one of her youthful appearance. Her broadsword, *Titanis*, was sheathed at her side, rustling with every step.

As her presence drew near, light was gradually cast upon the emperor's once-concealed face, revealing nothing but pure malevolence. Alexander's eyes were blackened ice, the breath between his lips a hellfire, and his hands the incontestable power of death. But his adversary would not be intimidated. Queen Aetheria opened her own grand white wings, extending them to full length, where they seemed to span the entirety of the room. Her feathers drifted and danced on an invisible wind, and long golden hair lay across her armored back and shoulders, complementing the heart-stopping beauty of her timeless face. She was a glorious presence, one that could eclipse even the darkest nights. She was eternal, Alex knew, but not immortal. This goddess could die, and would this very night by his own hands.

A second group of adversaries entered behind the queen, soldiers parting like wild grass. With steady confidence, walking resolute behind the golden goddess, were four gray-cloaked wizards. Each was a decorated member of the Councilium Venecus, and was hand chosen for this very hour. They held curving iron staffs with gemstones at their heads and a variety of single-handed swords sheathed at their sides. Though their presence came as no surprise, Alex's mouth instantly dried. Wizards were revered as some of the most powerful beings in all of Sola. Their acknowledgment during the war could have been a source of pride, but such vanity was unavailing when set against the ultimate truth that he couldn't win. Not against such odds.

“Death to the false king!” one of the soldiers cried from the rear guard. His outburst ignited a bloodthirsty cheer as the wizards encroached upon the Queen’s position.

Behind the walls of the throne room, scattered battles continued to rage on, metal ringing, soldiers roaring, and the ground quaking with reverence. Every man in the city was fighting till their last breath. Their blood belonged to the cause.

Alex knew very well that his *mother* had expected as much, but also knew that their desperation to win and survive was costing her and all of her allies dearly. The queen’s lips couldn’t escape a desperate dip, her son catching the subtle detail. In some twisted way, she still loved him. Even though he had committed countless atrocities, somehow, her affection fought for life. She had raised him, cared for him, and would never lose hope for his redemption.

Silence carried on, soldiers shuffling in tension, ready to burst. Taking advantage of the moment, Alex began to cast defensive spells, unspoken words gliding about his mind in acrobatic fashion. The Queen was faltering, and her men knew it. Uncertain glances were passing between them. Silently, tears began to fall from his mother’s solemn and ever-dignified face. But he felt nothing. He had come to terms with his suffering long ago. For nothing comes without a price. And the greater the reward, the more one must pay. Alex had always known, with no mercy to his soul, that the reward he was seeking was worthy of any cost. The fact that she still loved him consumed him with bitter loathing. His patience ran dry.

“So this is the end?” Alex began, motioning around the large room with open arms, his sword swinging a wide arc. “The holiest of heroes have descended from their places on high to liberate the helpless people below. To kill *the false king*.”

His gaze bore into his adversaries one by one, credence in his own ability challenging them to make the first move. But as he had predicted, they stayed in place, awaiting the queen’s orders.

“You’re pathetic,” he continued. “After all this time, finally sacrificing something of your own to stamp out the commoners’ last hope. The famines, civil wars, and struggles of your neighbors were never of concern to you before. Why now, should you care about the people outside of your own walls?” He accused them with ferocity, sneering with an overpowering disgust.

Queen Aetheria’s eyes flashed with righteous light at the threatening warrior before her. There was no shame nor regret left to give. She had created this monster. It was her duty to lay it to rest.

Alexander allowed a moment to pass, inhaling the tension with a bitter grin. A final attack began slithering from the blackest corner of his heart to his dry lips, subconsciously stalling for time.

“It was your fear,” he accused, “fear of losing power, that finally forced you to action. You haven’t fought to liberate those I have conquered or to save Sola from my wrath. You have murdered and wreaked havoc to preserve your order, and to keep those below you in eternal subjugation.”

The wizards narrowed their eyes at the audacious young emperor, mutterings of violence passing under every breath. How dare he insult a goddess?

“You brought this upon yourself,” Aetheria finally struck back. “Even when you had it all, your thirst for power could not be quenched. And when destruction was the only path to remain, you still refused to turn back.” Alex gave a mirthful chuckle as he continued to stare her down, a flash of fire from the window seeming to seep into his jagged black armor.

“You’re right,” he conceded, derision rising with every word. “I brought this upon myself when they slaughtered my people in the streets! When they marched on innocent cities under a banner of peace!” He threw his arms out wide, a handsome face transforming into a vile tapestry of malevolence. “You are right, of course, always right. I could’ve let these sick kings live, I could have let these people suffer, I could have turned my back on a better world! Like you.” He paused to bend his lips into an arrogant and slightly regretful smile, beginning his descent from the throne down to floor level, his black cloak flowing over the steps. “But I was shown the truth, and I had to protect our people, our world, because you wouldn’t.” He imbued his voice with smooth confidence, but it's broken undertone, that he could not hide, was captured by the Queen. Through the flash of her eyes he knew it tore her apart. But he had lost more than even *she* could fathom. Though he tried to force it, there was not a glimpse of resentful satisfaction to be drawn from his final stand.

“I lied to you,” Aetheria whispered, “and that is something I cannot remedy. But Talose manipulated you into continuing this war. And if you still cannot see that, then ask yourself, where is your master now?” She was prodding him earnestly, but Alex refused to give up any ground, for she knew nothing of the truth, nothing at all. The Queen leaned forward, dropping a hand towards her blade as he drew ever closer.

Alex took note of her tension, but did nothing. He had reached the final step and was now directly in the enemy's line of fire. With a deep sigh his cloak wavered in the silver and orange light. The salty sea wind invaded through the various gaps in the decimated walls to

dance with his black locks of hair. The wings upon his back were shimmering in a playful dark mist, tense and ready to move. Though he looked forward to the peace before him, he would still miss the touch of life. It was a terrible struggle, a culmination of misery and regret, but even to feel at all was a blessing he had taken for granted. His work was far from over, a remaining dew drop of despair to torment his soul. But he had come to terms with his inevitable demise long ago. He still had hope, even if only a little, in the dream... though someone else would have to carry it on.

*“Just come home... promise me... promise you will always come home.”*

“I’m coming, my love.”

Under the violent symphony of war his whisper was concealed. In its place, a final order rose from Aetheria, her voice soft like that of an angel.

“End this.”

Alex sucked in a quick breath. Death was nothing, if not predestined.

“Kill the false king!” the first wizard cried, unleashing a swirling pillar of fire towards his still immobile adversary.

The gates of hell opened. The ally to the first wizard’s right quickly joined the assault, launching himself into the air with a gust of wind, aiming midair to fire a bolt of white lightning at his now fire-encompassed enemy. The next two wizards—to the Queen’s left side—began to rush forward only seconds after the battle began, unsheathing their swords and dropping their staffs to engage... but they were already too late.

Alexander stopped the pillar of fire with a simple but powerful spell, holding it open with his left hand, the shimmering conjuration covered in rotating symbols and ancient dialect. He dropped his sword as the second enemy launched and used his free hand to seize

control of the wind around his airborne opponent. Harnessing the magical gust, he hurled the now doomed man through the weakened walls of the castle and down into the raging battle below. But the wizard's lightning bolt managed to strike home, sending Alex screeching across the throne room floor in a steaming heap. His widely coveted and revered artisans had crafted his armor to absorb such a blast, but it still left him gasping. Lifting himself off the ground with a low growl he summoned his sword blindly to his hand. He regained his footing, but without a second to breathe Alex brought the blade across his body to block the first swipe of a wizard's sword, engaging the second pair of adversaries.

As Alexander was focused on the initial assault, Queen Aetheria continued to mutter one of her most powerful and dangerous incantations, one that required all of her concentration. She stood solemnly in place, beads of hot perspiration slowly gliding down her temples as golden waves of light washed over her body, encompassing her in a peaceful and rotating glow. With every passing minute of battle the waves would grow brighter and pulse with strength, emitting a deep hum that shook what remained of the castle.

From his place across the room, dueling two masterful adversaries, Alex could sense the power rising around him. While battling two of them with his sword, he watched the third wizard circle around, preparing another pillar of spells. The observation almost cost him his neck, a sword gliding a hair's length away. But the attack gave him an opening. Taking advantage of his enemy's movement, he managed to force him off balance. Without hesitation, he loosed a spell of pure death from his open palm into the wizard's exposed and flailing form, shattering what meek defenses he had managed to build. Pivoting on his heel, Alex blocked the next series of strikes, his eclipsing cape knocking out the light of the moon in his rapid turn. All the second wizard saw was swirling darkness until the contact of their dim blades sparked a light of danger upon Alex's indigo eyes.

The only free wizard had quickly reached the top of the stairs that led to Alexander's throne, but yet again, he was too late. As he leveled his staff at the swirling entanglement of a battle before him, a crimson streak exploded from the mass, signifying his comrade's end, a now hatless head rolling across the floor, no desperate cry to resound. Alexander fell down onto one knee behind the forever frozen form, one more soul to hang upon him. The final wizard recognized the immediate threat, and with a panicked inhalation, unleashed a plethora of refined magical power.

Innumerable hexes and spells fired toward Alex and he unleashed a storm of countermeasures. A spout of boiling water was met with a whirlwind, thorny vines were destroyed in a burst of fire, and lightning was absorbed in waves of dark magic. The pair fought on for what seemed like an eternity, obliterating almost every remaining part of the palace in flashes of light and swells of the dark. Alex knew that the last wizard could never match his willpower—the backing force of magic—but the old mage wasn't trying to win, he was merely a distraction, stalling for time.

Queen Aetheria opened her eyes, nothing but the purest sunlight shining through. Hundreds of rings aligned in front of her and aimed at her only son's exposed back. Searing hot tears flowed freely as she spoke her final words to one of the only people left alive that she loved.

"I'm sorry. I failed you."

Alexander turned his head and locked eyes with his mother, his teacher, his savior from so long ago. He kept judgment from his gaze this time, no fear nor regret to break through. There was only a calm sense of sorrowful understanding. That this was the proper end. He deserved defeat. He desired death.

With that unspoken statement, Aetheria unleashed her full power. Alex was struck with blinding light, the force hurtling him out of the elegant back windows of his castle, his body flying through the air in a pillar of incarnated sun. He felt his body gradually turning to stone, his last view that of a burning city. His city. The last of his people. And when he struck the cold water of the sea, he sank to the ocean floor, a subtle wave sent out from the impact.

The water rose slowly, peacefully even, and heightened to peak and crash down in a flourish of white bubbles upon the shore. The wave receded into the ocean with a clawing hand, dragging sand into its depths. And then, there was silence.