

**Diamond Tears**

By: Logan D. Bates

*For my family and friends*

*With special mention to my mother, grandmother, and editor J*



THE DARK LANDS  
ARCHANLAND

THE HOLY SEA

WESTERN SEA

THE CURSED SEA

LANDS WILD  
SALAMOORE

GRIM ISLES

SOUTHERN SEA

THE FREE SHORES

FORBIDDEN WATERS

AERO

EMPIRE

KALIKAR

ZAREN

TAUK EMPIRE  
(TAUKA)

BAHREIGN

JOURN  
REPUBLIC

PALATINE

LITHIA

GATENBERG

HAL DORIS

CIROLA

LARDOSA

TA-  
RERDUN

RANSOM

MAGESTAY

THE  
ARROWHEAD

EIRENIS

RILL  
TASHOM

WOODLAND  
REALM

KENTRA

XYLA

KINGDOM

TERRAN

EASTERN  
SEA

THE WIZARDS  
KEEP

AWYN

NORTHERN SEA



# Prologue

It tasted sweet.

The memory of her.

The one that danced and lingered before Alex's eyes like a lost promise. The one so powerful that even as the castle walls shook and his loyal men fell in droves behind beautiful stained glass doors, it remained—ever beckoning. In spite of it all she remained the greatest price. It was the end of an era. *His* era. Yet one woman stole the stage. There was not an iota of melancholic satisfaction to be found in glorious demise. It was mere failure. Failure of the highest accord.

A flickering form flew past the northern windows and crashed with a resounding crack into the castle gardens. A hundred voices he had once been able to name melded together into one disgusting roar, one sweeping and final cry. But Alex's cold gaze did not linger on the smoldering wisteria, nor his ear on the high tone of war that pulsed and faded away. His darling to behold, his first and soon to be final breath, was all that he cared for now, and her memory had begun to sing. Her soft tone was a silver string that you could taste almost like honey. Not in all of Sola had he heard a voice so entrancing. Never before, or since, had he allowed himself to depend on another, to feel empty without their touch. She was his curse. Gods she was beautiful. She had been...

Rising, Emperor Alexander Imre turned to face the sea, navy waves thundering beneath his throne. He knew that she would leave him—that the memory would pass—if he only turned back to what remained, if he only forced himself to recognize what he had become. The moon was purest white and its presence harsh like a god's gaze. It cast light into

the throne room which reached a towering five stories high, coated in tapestries and intricate carvings. Great chandeliers hung down in arching curves and seductive tilts, with wide flames that burned blue and almost black. But there was no warmth to be found from them. Not one fading touch of it.

Golgata castle quivered again under the strike of another catapult, debris and dust raining down onto the carpeted floor. A cool breath slipped between Alex's lips at the impact, his left hand mindlessly reaching for the star pendant upon his neck, a forefinger 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 true name meant nothing, and 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 concealed in the darkness. 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. A servant, who had scrambled in through a side door, cowered at the impact, quickly throwing two pale hands over his head. He approached the steps to the throne, the sound of battle coming 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. Another memory.

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

"My Lord, please," the servant whispered, fear of imminent death leaking through every crease in his brow. "There is still time. 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. More than a mortal, less than a broken half of a man, he was prepared to die.

"We stand for what we believe, my friend." Alex rounded his throne, leaning against it, a bitter smile slipping through. "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."

Alex's 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 man ran a hand over his balding head, his legs beginning to shake and Alex—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 servant. 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 must fall alongside all those who have suffered and died before me." His open hand unconsciously moved to lay on his sword handle, a weapon once held by his most loyal friend. "Eternal judgment is all that remains for me. So go. It is not your time."

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 bitter truth until the silence overtook him. But the light died in the man's weary eyes. 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 thick double doors. 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 Alex's 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 archaic 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. It was almost like embracing 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. He was a powerful mortal, perhaps even a demi-god. But what chance did he stand against a true goddess? One whose power was written into legend?

Alex 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 his blade. What were a few more? 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. That old friend. The one who truly brought people together.

Emotionless, Alexander 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 bearing. Her broadsword, *Titanis*, was sheathed at her side, rustling with every step. Like Alexander's, it yearned for the blood to come.

As Aetheria's presence drew near, light was gradually cast upon the young 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 two hands..

A second group of adversaries entered behind the queen, soldiers parting like wild grass. Four gray-cloaked wizards entered the scene with steady confidence, each a decorated member of the Councillium Venecus and hand chosen for the hour at hand. They held curving iron staffs with gemstones at their heads and a variety of single-handed swords that were 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 as these.

"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. The clock was counting down.

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.

*They will fall... every last one of them...*

Alex knew very well that his mother had expected as much, but he also knew that his desperation to win 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 his atrocities were numbered like grains of sand, somehow, her affection fought for life. She had raised him, cared for him, and would never lose hope for his redemption. But her despair only fueled Alex's rage. What right did she have? After all she had done? To sit in despair over him? His patience ran dry.

“So this is the end?” Alex motioned around the large room with open arms, his sword swinging a wide arc. “The heroes of men have descended from their places on high to liberate the meager beasts 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?”

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.

He sneered with an overpowering disgust. “It was your fear, fear of losing power, that finally forced the snake from its den. You haven’t fought to liberate those I have conquered or to save Sola from my wrath. You have wreaked havoc across the kingdoms of men 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? Insult their order?

“You brought this upon yourself,” Aetheria whispered. “For even when you had it all, your thirst for power could not be quenched... And when destruction was the only path to

remain, you refused to turn back. You preferred a world—a people—turned to ash than one you could not rule.”

Her voice alone was a force of magic to be reckoned with. It invaded your very bones and made you weak, it cast heaven behind your eyes and promised it, if only you would submit and obey. But Alex could not be swayed by such meager acts, letting loose a mirthful laugh as a flash of fire from the north seeped 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 *crushed* innocent cities under a banner of peace! When they *abandoned* us to disease, starvation, and death for nothing more than profit!” He threw his arms out wide, a handsome face transforming into a vile tapestry of malevolence. “Tell me ‘goddess’ where I have fallen short? Tell me where my loyalties ought to lie. How I should have laid down my sword and bathed in luxury even if only to avoid the dirty hands of the commoner.”

Alex paused, but the same mantra—the half-reasoned lie—that he had told himself for so long could not light the fire in his soul, not anymore. It didn’t matter now. True or not. In the end he had fought for no one but himself.

With a slow and held breath he began his descent from the throne down to floor level.

“I was shown the truth. That I had to protect our people, our world, because you wouldn’t.” Alex 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 last 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?”

Alexander shook his head, refusing 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 her son 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. Salty sea wind invaded through the various gaps in the decimated walls to dance with his black locks of hair as the wings upon his back lilted 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 bitter 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.”

Innumerable hexes and spells were fired toward Alex before the Queen’s final word had finished its arc, but he was more than prepared. Unleashing a storm of countermeasures,

the tragedy of his life began its end. 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. He fought as a force of nature, obliterating almost every remaining part of the palace in flashes of light and swells of oblivion. He knew that the wizards could never match his willpower—the backing force of magic—but the old mages weren't trying to win, they were merely a distraction, stalling for time. Despite his advantage Alex could feel his armor wearing away, blood trickling down his arms, and scorched skin upon his chest beating with the cadence of his heart. But he would win, it was only a matter of time.

Swords were drawn. Blades were crossed. Magic broke open the skies. One head rolled. A second struck a wall—dead. The third was turned to dust. And only one remained, on his knees, fading breath by breath. But Queen Aetheria finally raised her head.

Her eyes were a holy blaze, nothing but the purest sunlight shining through, and a deep incantation that had fallen like whispered love was finally met by a thundering crack as the world bent beneath her will. Ten shimmering gold rings phased through the air in almost erratic quivers and drew together in front of her to aim at her only son. 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, and it was like time itself seemed to stop. Alexander was struck with blinding light, the force hurtling him out of the elegant back windows of the castle with a harmonious trill. His body flew through the air

in a pillar of incarnated sun and he felt his limbs gradually turning to stone. His last view was 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 wave 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.

# Chapter I

“Natalia, hurry!” Rose cried out, rushing into the kitchen.

Natalia jumped at the sudden intrusion along with the other servants who were present, turning away from the soup she had finished preparing to stand upright, her eyes locking onto the opposite wall. Rose bustled about the kitchen, checking each and every young woman and statue-still butler for perfection. She stopped in front of Natalia’s face, delicately straightening the girl's dress and aligning her parted hair.

“Is the food almost ready?” she asked, an obvious facade of calm covering her present panic. Natalia nodded vigorously, her superior awarding her a regretful yet appreciative smile. The younger girls in the room were all watching the pair, awaiting their next instructions. Rose hastily dropped her apron once she reached the end of the line, revealing a finer dress below, one that shimmered like painted glass in the torchlight. Small fairies were stitched into the fabric, dancing or lounging on flower petals. But most stunning of all was the blood red gemstone upon her neck, fastened to a gold chain that matched the color of her hair. It was a sign of the occasion. The important, elegant, deadly occasion.

Natalia knew just as well as the others that this was possibly the most important and potentially dangerous day of their lives, and though many had fallen into the lifeless roles required of them, this particular guest opened even the most guarded floodgates of terror. Rose had moved back to the line to quickly adjust one last butler's collar, but turned to face the staff, a somewhat reassuring smile forced onto her face. She was their superior, but moreover than that, she was an older sister—a mother even—to all of them. Natalia had come

to learn that life outside of *the pens* was terrifying, and she, along with most of the others, wouldn't have lasted long without her.

Rose strode towards the head butler now, leaning in to whisper something that Natalia couldn't quite catch. The man's dark bushy eyebrows narrowed. Casting it aside, she returned to her spiraling thoughts. Their master wasn't cruel. At least, when seen in reference to the others. In fact, she was quite lucky to have been bought by him. The other councilmen had reputations that were far worse than Master Benuvara. According to Rose, the house of Tinale immediately drained all of their talicite servants, as he put no value in beauty, appearance, or whatever powers their race apparently held. Even if it were only to impress and intimidate others, he labeled them a waste, and that was enough.

Natalia cast the sprouting weight from her mind with a quick shiver. The mere sound of guards shuffling outside in the hall made her cold and empty feeling grow. Alas, that was why her training was so important. She wasn't meant to think, only to obey, and then to obey again, until she was no longer fit to serve. Until it was all brought to a fitting end. Rose, concluding her private discourse, began to address the group, one last set of orders and reminders of etiquette for the all-important dinner. Natalia barely caught any of it, lost in a terrible nightmare from which there was no waking. As if viewing her life through a foggy mirror, she watched the servants begin to disperse, picking up trays of food, wine, and expensive cigars as they set out in a line of disgustingly fake smiles and perfected form. One of the butlers gave a kind pat to her shoulder upon seeing her face, a small gesture that shocked her out of her reverie; but she welcomed it in spite of her distress. Every companion that passed her by was a reminder that her entire life was a sick game of survival. She had seen it a hundred times over, but could never ignore it, never accept it as what her life was, and what it would likely always be.

Rose was preparing to leave the kitchen when she noticed a single tray of delicately assembled appetizers still lying on the counter. Glancing back, she saw Natalia trembling in place, her eyes beginning to water. She sighed at the sight, nothing but sympathy and love reaching out from her towards the youngest and most vulnerable of them all. As the majordomo, Rose had wiped away a thousand tears, brought countless nightmares to heel, and given endless words of encouragement to her fellow prisoners, telling them it would all be alright even when she knew very well that her words were nothing but a distracting lie. New servants needed a couple of years to allow their training to sink in. They had known what kind of world was ahead of them since they were bred in the cold iron cages of the Grim Isles. But still, to find yourself in darkness is much more terrifying than to simply observe the emptiness from afar. Even from within those cages there was a security, a safety in being with your people. Walking slowly towards Natalia, Rose's slender legs passed the distance in but a breath.

“Head up, little sister,” she whispered, gently raising two teary eyes to meet her own. “Today is the same as any other. We will go and serve, we will come back, and at the end of the day, we will all still be here, all in one piece, *together*. Today is no different. It doesn't matter who sits at the end of the table.” Natalia had stopped shaking and wiped the forming water droplets from her face. “Be strong for me, okay?”

“Okay,” Natalia whispered, the word scarcely escaping her lips.

If only she knew how. If only the curses she drew to herself would make her strong. The thought was so sour and baked in loathing that she had to force it down.

Natalia tracked Rose as she exited the kitchen, and turned to examine herself in the mirror in preparation to leave. Her silver hair was sparkling in the candlelight and fell gently onto the back of her shoulders, so light and precious. She hated it. Her eyes were the same

light blue crystals they had always been, geometrically divided and shining with life. A life that she still couldn't understand. Her skin was ever pale, yet not sickly, as it was but the color and tone of her people. The supposed epitome of perfection. And just like all the others, she was a stunning picture, and that was all. Lifeless.

Incoherent conversation began in the hall. Time was running out. It was a strange phantom of an existence. She could speak, but had no real voice. She was a glowing and obtainable treasure in both forms, and yet, could be viciously drained of life on a man's whim. She held the stunning beauty and elegance of the desirable youth, her voice sweet like that of an angel and her physical being the embodiment of wealth, a single hair from her head worth thousands in any currency. But no one cared for who she was. They cared for what she was.

Natalia drew a hand through her soft locks of silver hair. Such a simple thing to kill for. The most valuable objects in the world had always been people, but none could compare to her people. Natalia looked at herself one last time, making sure that not a single tear line could be seen. Such a thing was beyond dangerous. Once satisfied, she straightened herself up, lifted the final platter with practiced expertise, and left for the dining hall, trying valiantly to leave all of her consciousness behind. She had done this a hundred times, and she wasn't a kid anymore. A mere horror story would not deter her from her duty.

“Ah, Malaki!” Lord Benuvara exclaimed, lazily raising his slightly plump form from a velvet seat. “It’s a pleasure to see you again!” He stared down the length of an immensely long dining table to the specially crafted wooden double doors that connected to the main hall. Standing resolute and emotionless in the open doorway was Malaki Tinale. While Master Benuvara was dressed in expensive robes and jewelry, his merry attitude and lifestyle

reflected through every diamond and graying hair; Master Tinale seemed to embody nothing but silence and death itself.

His black jacket and paired pants were tight to his tall and lanky form, his sharp white hair was greased back to create what could almost be icicles behind his head, and his hollowed bone-skinny face was stuck in a permanent line of bored indifference. Benuvara had known the rather hermit-like man for numerous years, so his stature was quite unsurprising. However, the poor servants and staff who had never had the disprivilege of meeting the entering man, saw nothing but a murderous legend standing before them.

“Please please my friend!” Benuvara continued to embellish, motioning to a chair adjacent to his own. “Come and sit! I have prepared quite the feast for this momentous occasion!”

Malaki stared vacantly at his pompous acquaintance before finally moving to sit. His strides were slow and purposeful, and though he was almost inhumanly thin, his presence brought a cold chill of strength. As he finally reached his seat and descended onto its plush cushion, Benuvara clapped his hands twice. Immediately, the table was swarmed with lines of talicite servants. The feast was set down with professional speed, wine was poured smoothly and without a single tremble of hand, and the finest cigars and hash were placed between the two influential men.

As they worked, Benuvara grinned from ear to ear with pride. There was almost no greater show of wealth and power than what had just occurred. He could topple entire cities with but a word. Malaki remained neutral as the servants bustled about, his eyes never once wandering to his host as he analyzed the methodical mass of movement and those who were within it. Master Benuvara grabbed a cigar as a majority of the servants lined the edge of the

hall, standing at attention. As he was preparing a match to light the foot, refusing a butler's aid, Malaki spoke his first words, ghastly and covered with fog.

“They are as impressive as always, Lord Benuvara. But you know such subtle shows are beneath me.” The smiling man stopped the flame right below the tip, raising his eyes to meet those of his tenuous ally.

“I know that you don't find them impressive, but I assure you that their presence has helped me to close many deals that otherwise would not have happened.” The flame caught and Benuvara inhaled deeply, releasing a deep swell of silver smoke from his puffy lips.

“Simple men are controlled by simple things. The talicites are the most stunning servants on the market, and are unobtainable to all but a few. The commoners believe them to be nothing but a fantasy in fact. When they see them, they can't help but fall to kiss my boots, knowing that I have a power and stature that they will never be able to obtain.” Malaki stayed silent, only sipping lightly at his blood red wine. “And in that lies our only true ally, and that is control.” Benuvara chuckled to himself and inhaled once again, accompanying its release with a deep and contented sigh, his rosy cheeks puffing out. “And they are not only for my guests, you know.” At this he laughed heartily, though to a truly good man or woman, it was a vile sound.

“Very well,” Master Tinale deadpanned. “I simply prefer my valuables in a vault. But let us speak of the more pressing matters.” Malaki voiced his opinion with the utmost arrogance, sipping at his wine once again. Benuvara nodded and took a deep drink of his glass, practically inhaling it in its entirety, the effort almost spilling the contents over his expensive red overcoat. Rose, one of the few permitted to move without prompting, quickly walked forward with a bottle of wine, seamlessly refilling his drink. Her face was pleasantly

calm as she worked, no breaks in the act. Benuvara all but ignored her, continuing his conversation.

“Indeed my friend, we have entered what could possibly be the greatest era in *three hundred years!* There is no time to waste.” Benuvara’s previous grin reappeared as he launched into his account. “According to my informants, the boy's body was recovered near the western shore of the Talik Empire, drawn in by deep sea fishermen. Lord Pato was able to scramble his forces in time to seize him, and is holding him at Golgata castle within the old ruins.” Malaki nodded ever so slightly as the previously cryptic news was explained. Truth was dangerous, and even in their own halls they had to be cautious. “General Cadek heard about the recovery a couple of years ago, which baffles me beyond belief. He has been, and will continue to be, deeply involved in the affair—an unfortunate reality, I might add. But in more recent news, he has called for a meeting with the greater lords and is advocating for the council to refrain from freeing him until, as I can quote, ‘*the opportune and properly timed moment*’.”

Malaki showed the briefest glimpse of humanity with a scoff. General Cadek was possibly the most feared councilman, but his ideals were quite old-fashioned and outdated, as they liked to say.

“Yes, yes,” Benuvara continued. “My reaction was the same. And that is why the council ignored him and began the restoration process not three years ago. But now I have been informed—though most attempts have failed—that a new process has shown promise and is almost complete! His prison has become weak! I was assigned to notify you and a couple of select others who were previously unaware, in order to prepare for his arrival!”

Natalia posed like a statue against the tall and daunting walls of the mansion’s dining hall, barely daring to breathe. The other servants were all a mirrored image of her own stance,

delicate and pleasant smiles never venturing from their soft lips. She had initially tried to listen in on their conversation, her curiosity temporarily overpowering her fear. But nothing they had said made any sense. It was all an incoherent hum of sinister intentions and larger-than-life plans. Though they were never meant to remove their gaze from whoever was opposite of them, Natalia had to steal a look at Rose. Her nerves were spiking and she needed that serene face to bring her back down to earth, before she began to sweat.

Rose had just finished pouring wine for Master Benuvara and slowly strode back to her place at the head of the room. She turned on her heel once she had reached the wall in order to face the table once again, her golden strings of hair whipping around in a whirlwind of sparkling wonder. She proceeded to run a quick scan of the room, and immediately identified the one stone that was just out of place. Her eyes met Natalia's and she tried to nod towards the wall opposite of her, hoping that neither of the lords would notice the brief imperfection. Natalia understood and quickly complied, but her legs were beginning to quiver. The uncontrollable reaction itself was frustrating. She wasn't afraid... she wasn't a kid anymore.

"That is quite the plan." Master Tinale scratched absentmindedly at his face. "I will admit that you have exceeded my expectations with both your cunning ventures and kind hospitality. Though, I must cut our meeting short, as I now have innumerable tasks that must be accomplished in order for the ceremony to go as planned."

Benuvara, nodding solemnly at Malaki's remarks, allowed him to stand from his seat and prepare to depart. However, he had barely raised himself up when Benuvara remembered his final obligations.

"Ah, I almost forgot!" he exclaimed, hurriedly pushing back in his chair. "Your parting gift! Which I must supply as the honorable host I am! Especially considering the fine

Scipan emeralds you gave to me on my last visit to your... estate, I suppose it must be called.” Malaki growled at the unnecessary remark, as he was quite fond of his desolate home; but Benuvara took no notice, glancing around the room.

“There is no need, my friend,” Malaki turned to exit. He has a great deal to do in a short amount of time. Feigning agreement with his dull companion was simple enough, but General Cadek would want to know of the council’s betrayal. If he failed to inform him... hell would become an escape. He was rushing their already brief meeting, but he had no other choice.

“No, dear friend! This is common courtesy,” Benuvara insisted, “and I recently purchased four new servants, so I am rather overstaffed, you could say.” At this particular mention, Master Tinale turned back, his interests immediately rekindled. “I know how you like to experiment with talicites and other like rarities, though as you know, I find such short use of them to be a terrible waste.” Malaki licked his dry lips at the thought of finally procuring another subject. It had been quite some time. The other council members had avidly purchased all of the rather limited stock last year. These particular slaves were extremely difficult to find. They could not be procured, they were exclusively produced. Unseen, Natalia’s already pale skin went a ghastly white, with even a tint of green. She watched a small fairy that was free to wander the mansion hid behind a tapestry, her small head poking it with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Oh how she wished she were so small, so insignificant.

“I would appreciate such a gift, though I truly must depart.”

Benuvara glanced out the rear windows, where the sun was beginning to set, sensing his guest’s determination to leave. He would need to change his strategy.

“My friend, night is falling. Please stay so that I may select an adequate gift for you, and so that you may sleep in the safety of my home. I trust your security, but you and I both

know that true enemies are never further than an arm's reach.” Malaki frowned as he realized the ironic truth behind Benuvara’s statement. There was no way to refuse now without appearing to distrust his host. More than a fair share of bandits and creatures of the night would be about.

“Very well. Though I shall be gone before first light.”

“Wonderful! I will have everything prepared before then!”

## Chapter ???

Alexander entered into the castle gardens, running a hand over the soft petals of an evening primrose. The flowers glowed in the navy arching sky as a gentle brushing breeze laughed through every thin bush. Liata was waiting in starlight, sitting upon a stone bench while staring up at a clear shimmering moon. Her long brunette hair swayed gently with the breeze and her smile put every iridescent flower to shame with its glow. Her skin was clear and slightly pale in the yellow light and her brown eyes swirled with constellations as she soaked in deep thought. Alex stood for a moment at the entrance to the central clearing, leaning against a blossoming pink cassia tree, hidden in its subtle shadows. Liata slowly lowered her chin with a cool exhale. She spotted him out of the corner of her eye and couldn't contain her laughter.

“Is it polite to stare in capital culture?”

Alex smiled as he swept from the darkness. With but a step he was out onto the mossy stone square, approaching the center fountain adjacent to the beautiful maiden, his eyes never leaving her. Stopping at the bubbling water, he stuck his left hand into the chilling waves. Then, without a word, he accessed just a little of his power and fired a spray of misty water at the girl before him. She cried out, covering her face. It was now Alexander's turn to laugh as Liata swept wet and heavy strands of hair from her face. He leaned against the edge of the dark-stone structure and caressed the magic runes that made it possible, feeding a little extra power into it. The fountain grew in size.

“Would you like some more water?” he chuckled.

“No, I believe I am quite refreshed.” Lia drearily rose and approached Alexander, with eyes of golden desire. He opened his arms as she approached and held her close by the waist. Standing on her toes, she stood face to face with him and leaned in. Alexander closed his eyes. Then he was falling, crashing into the water behind him. Lia was bent over laughing as Alex pushed himself up from the thin pool, his clothes now dripping wet.

“Now, we are even,” she stuttered through her spasms of laughter, “I don’t need unfathomable power to get my revenge. And you shouldn’t forget it.” Alex frowned as he looked at his clothes, but it only took one look at Liata for his frown to transform. He couldn’t look at her without his soul raising a cheer. Without wasting any more time, he lifted himself out of the fountain and approached his true place of belonging. She looked at him with a playful nervousness, as if she were expecting a retaliation. The thought did cross his mind, but he elected to go another direction.

“How about a dance?” he said, raising an eyebrow. Lia scrunched up her face in suspicion, expecting a trap.

“I don’t see why not. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” As soon as she spoke the truth out into the open air, any thought of childishness vanished. Suddenly they both wanted to dance with an urgency, with a passion. The last time they had done so had been years ago, when she knew him not as an emperor but just a boy, a boy of purest heart. Alex opened the palm of his hand and sparkles of purple light jumped from his skin. Seconds later, a small band appeared from deeper within the garden. They were not royal entertainers, but rather, local bards brought in by special request. They immediately struck up a lively tune. She had expected at his request that the music would be elegant and slow, but instead she was reminded of home. Alexander’s hands were warm as he took hers. She looked at him and realized he was completely dry from head to toe, and sure enough, after a quick examination, she was as well.

“That’s a neat trick,” she scoffed, poking him. Alex couldn't remove his smile, shaking his head in amusement.

“Can we dance now?” Lia rolled her eyes and stepped closer.

“You are so dramatic sometimes. Fighting a war seems to come easy to you, when a minor inconvenience like sleeping on the floor had you complaining for weeks.”

Alexander blushed with embarrassment, in spite of his astounding strength. But Liata was smiling, and on her prompt they began to sway and swing about the square, circling the whispering fountain with elegance. They danced for what felt like hours, both wishing for the moment to last for eternity. What good was the war, was freedom, if they couldn't dance alone under the stars? The music drew to a close, the end of a song, and Alex gave Lia a passionate kiss, one that took her by surprise. A red flourish was drawn onto her cheeks, and she sputtered out an almost unintelligible response.

“You shouldn't do that here, the musicians are watching.”

“And?” was his only response, smiling as her eyes grew.

“I can't sleep,” a new voice declared, interrupting the tension. Laura, standing at the entrance to the garden, accused the pair as if it were their fault. Liata blinked, not entirely processing that her little sister was indeed standing right there.

“I can't either,” Timothy suddenly cried out, appearing from behind Laura, crossing his arms, “and it's no fair that you get to hang out with Alex while we have to sleep!” Lia sighed, a motherly smile now taking over.

“Well, come on, then. What did I tell you about sleeping late?” Timothy and Laura ran from the fiery entrance and into the delicate garden light, both embracing Alex just as they had done before. He laughed, but also gave Lia a look of pain and regret. The look made her join in his laugh, and soon enough they were all sitting in the grass beneath the colorful trees.

“I figured it out, mother,” Timothy said, aiming his big eyes at Lia. “I thought really hard under my covers, and I couldn’t sleep because Alex wasn’t there, and so, I knew that I would only be able to sleep if he *was*.” Lia nodded slowly and allowed him to crawl into her lap.

“Well, your mother and I couldn’t sleep either,” Alex interjected, poking Timothy on the nose. The boy frowned and turned away, not at all empowered by the gesture. Alexander used to feel discomfort when Timothy called Liata his mother, as it aroused a sort of jealousy towards an imaginary man. But once he had realized that he was but an adopted orphan, he fell in love with the idea. By connection he had become like a father to both he and Laura, and he loved them truly as if they were his own children, his own flesh and blood. As he thought about it more, subconsciously toying with a strand of Lia’s hair as the two children rested between them, he realized that sometime soon they could truly be a family. When the war was over, when he no longer had to bear the weight, they could get married, have a home, and live freely.

“When it’s all over,” Alex began, Liata’s head descending to rest on his shoulder, “I want to get away from here, away from everything.” She said nothing, but his words were vague, almost ominous, and caused her brow to furrow. “I want a house on a hill, overlooking the sea. A green field and a forest that belong to us. A small town where I know everyone’s name. And a hole in the ground where I can bury my sword forever.” Laura shifted so that her head lay against Alexander’s chest, breathing slowly as she drifted into a new realm, her still slightly chubby cheeks puffing out with every exhale.

“That sounds perfect,” Lia whispered, swinging an arm around both the children so that they were all connected.

“Timothy and Laura will play in the trees,” Alex continued, “and I will tell them to be careful. You will finally be able to swim in the sea and taste the salt. And I will be the happiest man in all of Sola.”

“So I am also a part of this dream?” Lia asked, a dew drop of her mischief returning. Alex positioned himself so that he could see her face and freed a hand to caress her face.

“You are the dream, Lia; you, these two kids, and our life together. If you are still willing to have me.” Liata was on the verge of tears, water circling her vibrant irises. She closed her eyes as the warmth of his hand continued to hold her, inhaling deeply through her nose, the tickling scent of flowers enlivening the night.

“You really are dramatic, aren't you? How can you say all of that without the slightest shame?” Her concealed emotion broke through as her voice cracked, and Alexander kissed her once more. The movement woke up the children, but both Liata and Alexander knew they couldn't stay there all night.

“I was having a good dream,” Laura cried, frowning.

“Oh? What was it about?” Alexander asked, lifting her back onto his lap.

“We were all back home, and the flowers came with us!” All her previous grogginess faded at the opportunity to share. “I wore a bright blue dress, and we danced in a town where the sun never sets. Dishes were washed by magic! And I lay out with the daisies.”

“That's quite the dream.” Lia adoringly fixed Laura's hair, rising to her feet. “So how about we all go to bed so it can continue just a little while longer?” Both children pouted at the attempt, hiding behind Alexander's legs, who had also risen from the soft grass.

“How about one last dance, Lia?” Alex requested, giving her a pleading look as if he were also a child and not the emperor. She gave a false groan and a wave of her hand.

“All right, just one.”

The music pranced from every lyre and violin, battling with the delicate instruments of the night. The children leapt into action and began to twirl and jump to the tune, squinting their eyes as vibrant smiles overtook them. Alex, with a guiding hand, placed Laura onto his feet and held her hands, waddling along in a slow circle. She cherished every moment and found her dream partly coming to fruition.

Timothy, wanting to follow Alex's example, danced with Lia, standing on his tip toes and stiffening his face to appear as manly as possible. She played into his act and curtsied before dancing slowly along. What was meant to be a moment lasted for hours, until the children's legs died underneath them and they napped—all but exhausted—on the pillowy lawn. Liata and Alexander were left alone once again, dancing ever so slowly by themselves in the silence of the night, nothing but the beat of their own hearts to guide them.