

## Tears for a World

### Prologue

Synicia Lizeel smiled at the bloodbath around her. Enemy soldiers lay twisted in piles, their bodies charred, beaten, or cut to shreds. The slaughtered men and women littered the hard packed dirt streets as far as she could see. “I finally did it,” she said with pleasure. “The Kenlin and Durrinch provinces have fallen. They belong to Trykanion now, and to me.”

In the bright midday sunshine, the sorceress stood near the edge of Popton Lake in Durrinch. She squinted her eyes against the wavering glare from the lake’s surface and observed her warriors at the dock raising a Trykanion flag over the community, one of a long string of towns lining the eastern rim of the grand lake. The smell of burnt wood and flesh drifted from the smoldering remains of a warehouse. Synicia inhaled deeply, then let out a long breath. With her victory, an immense satisfaction filled her.

“Congratulations, my Lady,” said Colonel Duvynim, one of her best commanders. Sweat beaded his forehead as he clutched his helmet in the crook of an arm. Drying blood caked an ugly gash on his cheek. “The rest of the enemy has surrendered. Everyone else is dead.”

A moan sounded from one of her rival troops in the street. Covered in battered, scratched armor, the man attempted to crawl away.

“Not everyone,” Synicia corrected her colonel. She approached the soldier and pushed him onto his back with the heel of her boot. Weakened and pale, the dazed man stared with eyes dark and glassy. “You’re a handsome one,” she said lovingly. “For that, I’ll leave you with a little spell I like to call Heart Break.”

Synicia knelt and placed her hand over the man's chest. Perhaps thinking her gesture one of comfort, the man's eyes softened and he gazed at her with hope. Disgusted by the pathetic look on his face, Synicia rose. A moment later a sharp crack and the soldier's terrible cry of pain shattered the stillness. In the shape of her hand, a hole appeared through his armor and penetrated his chest. Synicia glanced into the hole and spotted his heart, crushed into jelly as blood oozed into the street from underneath his lifeless body.

"Bring me my horse," she said to the colonel. "I'm going into Frethingath Forest to explore my new playground."

Colonel Duvynim, appearing anxious after witnessing Heart Break, lifted his eyebrows in surprise at her command. He glanced at the soaring treetops just behind the long line of towns. "Frethingath?" He shifted his feet and swallowed. "My Lady, that forest is haunted. No one ever comes back from there. It's one area of Durrinch you should leave alone."

Synicia looked at him in surprise, then laughed. "You mow down the enemy without a shred of fear, but you quake over old stories about some trees? Never mind that. I want to explore what I've conquered. Now, get my horse unless you wish to be a lieutenant again."

Well into the trees of Frethingath, Synicia slowed her trotting mount to a walk. The afternoon sun barely trickled through the dense canopy; only a few mote-filled rays penetrated. The mare's hooves brushed through dew-speckled grass and scattered patches of moist leaves. The air hung thick, the smell of old wood and moss abundant.

The horse suddenly reared, its shrill neigh breaking the silence. Synicia tumbled from its back and landed hard on the ground. The animal bolted off into the woods, sprays of turf flying

in all directions. “Stupid beast!” Syncia shouted, wiping dirt from her red blouse and black leather pants. “Get back here.”

“You should follow its example and leave the forest,” a voice called.

Syncia froze as an odd, but amazingly beautiful woman stepped out from behind a tree. She stood tall, her large eyes the darkest green Syncia had ever seen, glittering as if on the verge of tears. Her white skin gave off a faint, attractive glow. Instead of hair, hundreds of overlapping yellow, red, and pink rose petals covered her head. The vivid petals grew from her scalp and formed a thick curtain of colored fluff, which fell to her waist. Her words rang with the rich, clear tone of an ocarina.

“Leave now, or die,” the woman continued. “You have no right to be here.”

After recovering her composure, anger swelled inside Syncia. She clenched her fists and stepped toward the woman. “Die? Not today, and most certainly not by you,” she said through gritted teeth. “You spooked my horse and I almost broke my neck. And this is my forest now. Who are you to tell me otherwise?”

“My name is Anessil, and you’re wrong. This is my mother’s forest. But it’s obvious you have no intention of leaving, so I’ll just have to kill you.”

Syncia heard a creak above her. She glanced up and saw a tree branch bend down a moment before it struck her. The hard, knotted limb sent her flying. She crashed into a distant trunk and sat dazed, her breathing difficult from the wind knocked out of her.

The ground beneath her rumbled. Syncia gasped and rolled to her left. A sharp, hardened spike of earth ruptured from the ground and ripped her blouse just as she escaped being impaled. Heart beating wildly, she scrambled to her feet and stared at Anessil, shock and a terrible realization overcoming her.

*This woman's attacks...what in the world are they? She is not using sorcery. She's also much, much stronger than I am. I need to get out of here, fast!*

Motioning with her arm, Syncia conjured a strong current of wind the width of her body. Raking the funnel through the branches above her, hundreds of twigs and leaves tore free. A spinning, clattering cloud of debris formed and sped toward Anessil. The violent column of wind enveloped the woman, but Syncia didn't wait to see if it had any effect.

She took off in a sprint, nearly falling due to the uneven terrain. She leapt over mossy logs, picked her way through loose stones, and tore through thick foliage.

Ahead, the ground trembled and a hole split the turf. Before Syncia could react, Anessil leapt out of the opening and snatched her by the throat. The strong woman lifted Syncia and slammed her onto the ground. The earth moved beneath her back. If she didn't do something, another of those hard dirt spikes would impale her.

Anessil held Syncia down, squeezing her neck. With her air growing short and her mind in panic, Syncia couldn't concentrate on a spell. She instead fumbled blindly for a fallen branch, a rock, anything. She felt a rough stone and clutched it, then struck Anessil on the side of the head. The woman cried out and loosened her grip enough for Syncia to shift her body. The spike of earth burst forth and sliced her shoulder.

Blood flowing down her arm, Syncia tried to scramble away. Anessil pounced and flipped her over. Helpless, she could do nothing as the woman choked her again, this time with both hands. Syncia flailed her arm for the rock, but couldn't reach it. Glimpsing the earth spike near her foot, she kicked out and broke off the tip. Using her heel, she pushed the shard close to her body.

Losing consciousness, Synicia fumbled weakly for the sharp object. Her lungs screamed for air. A hammer pounded in her skull. Vision fading, Anessil's large green eyes and stern white face grew blurry. With a last ounce of strength, Synicia grabbed the shard and plunged it into Anessil's abdomen.

The woman screamed and released her grip. Sweet, life-giving air rushed into Synicia's deprived lungs. The black flecks of unconsciousness cleared from her sight. Coughing harshly, she jerked herself into a sitting position and twisted the weapon in Anessil's gut. Blood poured over Synicia's hand and wrist. She wrenched the shard free and heard a sick tearing sound. What appeared to be a length of cord partially wrapped the tip of the earth fragment, the ends of the cord dangling.

Anessil threw her head back and screamed louder. Hands pasted over her belly, she fell over and curled into a fetal position. Utter fury twisted her face as she stared at Synicia. Loose, colorful rose petals stuck to her sweaty cheeks and forehead.

A clump of bushes a short distance away rustled. "Sister, over here," Anessil called weakly. "Help me."

Gagging from a painful, swollen throat, Synicia turned and fled on rubbery legs. Somehow she found enough air to maintain a good run, fear driving her legs until she spotted the hazy form of a man on horseback. She collapsed in a half-conscious daze. A voice that sounded like Colonel Duvynim's called her name. She felt her body being lifted. Before blacking out, she sensed the shard of earth still clutched in her hand.

The cord pulled from Anessil's body turned out to be a vein...and a source of incredible power. Roughly thirteen inches in length, somehow the blood inside didn't leak out of the ends,

as if magically sealed. Syncia discerned the vein contained an astonishing hidden force, yet for days she had failed to unlock its potency using various trials.

In a secret chamber deep in the bowels of her fortress, Syncia paced the length of the stone room, the vein dangling in her fingers. For the past hour she had been trying to think of a new experiment to obtain its power. Floating overhead, a conjured sphere of light painted her moving shadow on the cracked, dusty wall. Her high-heels clicked on the flat rock tile, the long dress rustled with every pass around the area.

Holding the vein aloft and using various incantations had produced nothing. She then tried to pierce it to release some of the blood for a potion, but that method only resulted in broken knives. Trying to tear the vein with magic proved futile as well. The shard of earth had ripped the thing from Anessil's body, but the weapon turned to dust the instant Syncia removed the vein from its tip.

What could she try next? She *had* to have this power. Fantasies of increasing her status and conquering more lands swam in her head. Syncia had no idea who Anessil was, nor did she care; she only desired the woman's level of skill and strength. But the stupid vein taunted her. It laughed at her misfortune. It teased of unimaginable might she would never have.

Syncia cried out in rage and threw the vein against the wall. It hit with the sound of a wet plop and lay on the floor. Throwing herself on the ground, she scooped up the vein and shoved it into her mouth. Fighting off nausea and dry heaves, she swallowed the thing and sat still, waiting for something miraculous to occur.

Her stomach lost the battle. The vein came up and shot from her mouth in a grotesque splash of vomit. Tears streaming, she picked up the vein and swallowed it again. After another

bout of retching, she lay on her back and screamed in frustration. She writhed on the floor and pulled her hair. Standing, she stomped on the moist vein several times with her heel.

Syncia finally stepped away and leaned against the wall, panting. “I refuse to give up,” she said to the empty chamber. “I don’t care what happens. I will either go mad...or die trying.”