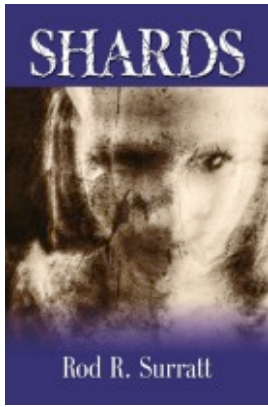


SHARDS



Rod R. Surratt



SHARDS tells the story of two Royal Guardians who fail in the sole function of their office: to protect the lives of those to whom they are bound. While facing the futility of any retribution upon their enemies, these brothers Draco each strive to fulfill the vow sworn at their Induction - "Forever loyal and vigilant, as Guardian of your life: until your last dying breath...or my final sacrifice."

Shards

by Rod R. Surratt

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SHARDS

Rod R. Surratt

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ISBN 978-1-62646-387-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

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- Concept Art & Character Illustrations
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- Character List and Descriptions
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Prologue: The Fusion of Anthrough-Genus

1

As the thin blade of the executioner's double-edged sword severed her neck from her shoulders, Muirland Genus acknowledged two final thoughts: the first appreciative, the second inquisitive. Initially, as her head dropped into the crimson-stained wicker basket next to her murderer's brown boots, she acquiesced a begrudging gratitude for the painlessness of her execution.

Indeed, her killer had carried out the duties of his office with poise and precision worthy of mention; for she had witnessed five public beheadings of thieves and adulterers before suffering her own, and they did not always transpire as gracefully as this one. The condemned were not always blessed with one painless, swift stroke.

In one such hapless instance, though the instrument of death had been sharpened no less compulsively than here, a five-year old Muirland had watched with her kin in sublime horror as a frustrated executioner hacked downward again and again at a screaming thief's neck as if it were a petrified oak, unable to crack the stiff, tightly-knotted bones beneath the flesh.

The image of this wailing man, tears streaming from his eyes even as they rolled back into whites, as the blade took his head from him an inch at a time, had haunted her for the next fourteen years, and therefore all her life, and the grim memory resurfaced one last time with vulgar potency as the bulk of her sandy blonde hair cushioned her head's fall into the basket.

The last, mortal contemplation of Muirland Genus, as the world ceased to bring sound to her ears, and she peered with narrowed eyes through the tiny holes between the intersecting layers of the wicker basket, concerned a fascination with her own vitality. She had often wondered, while witnessing the frequent public beheadings which so often served as a poor substitute for entertainment, at what point did a life end? Did a moment of consciousness remain as a head was severed from its body?

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Truly, she had theorized, the departed must experience at least one living moment of disorientation; a transitory, surreal surveillance of the world through one's immobile severed head. Now, with eyes no longer able to bring tears to her face, and a throat unable to cry out, as her vision faded and closed in from the corners, Genus congratulated herself. She'd guessed right, and the moments continued to pass for much longer than she would have imagined.

Time accommodated these introspective, melancholy thoughts, these flashes of grisly memories; granted her the moldy, melted-copper odor of a wicker basket which had caught dozens of heads before hers, before this last sense, that of smell, left her forever. Time allowed for regret and anger. And then the darkness took her. But it was not the end.

In the black, a profound passage of time continued. More time than she would have guessed, and much more than she ever would have wanted. Consciousness remained. As if locked in the darkest room, leagues below the surface, with no ears to hear a silence forever undisturbed, the consciousness that had existed briefly as the woman, Muirland Genus, lived on behind the dead and useless blue eyes of a face that soon began to sag in decomposition.

Genus existed as a solitary, confined being without a body to move or a voice to speak, living in an uncompromising blackness which allowed only thought and memory and emotion. Had she ears to hear it, she would have screamed in panic, for it felt akin to drowning, or being smothered or buried alive.

For the first few hours, she felt as if a child again, locked in the cellar by her older brother Darien while their parents were gone. He called it punishment every time he pinched her upper arm inside his colossal fist, dragged her underground and locked her inside, but she knew in every instance she had done nothing to deserve it. Whether Muirland's behavior offended him or not, Darien Genus used the cellar as a means of independence.

Once he'd secured his garrulous and annoying younger sister there, he could take solace that she would survive until his parents returned, and he was, of course, relieved of the burden of watching over her. And could she honestly claim she would have acted differently in his stead? She could.

Because Darien is evil, she decided. And I am good. As she had in her previous life, covered in flesh and bones and a nearly flawless complexion, Genus continued to see things in absolute terms: good and evil, black and white, light and dark. *I am good*, she told herself again. *Good enough for the chopping block.*

Encumbered with bountiful time for memory, Genus reflected on her brief nineteen years of existence. She remembered her childhood in the Kingdom of Danyubin, the poorest and most vulnerable of the four claustrophobic kingdoms of the known world. Claustrophobic

because the known world consisted of a gargantuan scrap of land surrounded by a raging sea in all four directions, and no man had ever returned from exploring it, to tell a desperate people that no, the sea did not stretch on forever; that other lands and other people awaited. Like everyone else in the Four Kingdoms, Genus imagined, she had died believing in no world beyond the sea.

She recalled from the youngest age being taught the meaning of the word “war,” and learning from her father and older brother that it should be revered. The Four Kingdoms of the world: Danyubin, Shards, Anthenock and Menzeneas had maintained decimating wars since they first carved up the world into four sections, bickering about borders and passing down grievances, curses and promises of vengeance from father to son for eight generations and counting. But their relentless conflict touched Genus’ life only sporadically during her nineteen years. Though untrained farmers, her father and brother had both fought for the King of Danyubin in multiple, border-related skirmishes, and she had felt at times relieved and at times disappointed to see them survive.

She remembered becoming infatuated, a mere two years ago, with the man who would bring about her demise. The arousing, incorrigible and, of course, already married man who grew all the more difficult to restrain when he discovered his obsession with Genus was well reciprocated. And after weeks of locking eyes and crooked smiles across the marketplace, when he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the winding alley behind the pottery maker’s stand, she had done her best to restrain his affections, had she not? Had she not, in spite of her own clenching desires, reminded him of his wife as he entered her?

And when he betrayed her, in his pathetic, sobbing confession to his spouse, and Genus was herself called out as a whore, and condemned to death as an adulterer, did she not accept her nonnegotiable fate with dignity, head held high to meet the eyes of her masked executioner? She did indeed.

Because Claudius is evil, she thought. And I am good. Though imperfect. Had she eyes, she knew they would be streaming tears. Her memories overlapped, intersected, interrupted and bled into each

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other like the meaningless images one sees in the mental twilight between awake and asleep. The discipline of her father's thundering hand. The comfort of her mother's frail, bird-like arms. Hunting for small beasts with knife and crossbow under the arrogant guidance of her brother Darien, whom she had often admired and sometimes despised. The salty taste of a mysterious, endless ocean; cursed for its insurmountable entrapment and nearly worshipped as an idol for its elegance and power.

3

Alas, nineteen years amounts to such a short time to live, and her new existence would last far longer. Though similar, she realized she had not arrived in the cellar of her childhood. Darien would not be opening the door, flooding daylight into her eyes. How long, she wondered, could her mind remain intact in the dark, with nothing but memories to distract itself?

Although she could not track the passage of time, just forty-two hours after her beheading, she found herself wailing voicelessly for mercy from whomever or whatever had confined her in this intangible prison. She begged the misanthropic puppet master that had damned her to such a miserable fate to end her existence, to destroy her consciousness, to cause pain, to torture her or touch her in any way that would allow her to feel something and alleviate her eternal and intolerable monotony. But no answer came.

With no stimulus and no response, the mind of Muirland Genus turned on itself like a starving woman forced to eat her own body. She lost the memory of her own voice and her thoughts were spoken with other female voices she had never heard, even as she realized she was creating them herself, gnawing on the skin and bones of her own depleted sanity in a desperate attempt to find anything or anyone with which to interact. They began to converse, then to argue and degrade each other, much as she imagined the four kings of the world she had so recently left would have done, if ever they were trapped in the same room together.

Meanwhile, in that mortal world of kings and borders, beyond Genus' darkness, cracked and weathered hands wrapped the two severed pieces of her body in a white tablecloth drenched in lamp oil, and long ago dyed burgundy with spilled wine. The rope she'd once used to tie her own horse to its post lowered her body into a rectangular grave nine feet deep. As was their custom with all their beloved departed, Darien Genus and his father dropped a flaming torch in the grave, to burn the flesh off the corpse.

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And even when the skin incinerated off her bones, and the sex of her charred skeleton became indistinguishable, the female consciousness of Muirland Genus remained trapped in her cryptic prison, in a realm far removed from the father and brother who buried and burned her with tears, remorse, and just a bit of relief.

Years folded into decades. Then a century. And another. The scorched remains of Muirland Genus withered into dust underground, as did those of her father, her brother Darien, and her brother's children. Finally, when the insane and frantic consciousness born as Genus had aged three hundred and twenty-nine years, as the female voices of her subconscious continued mumbling and snapping at each other as she suspected they would for millennia, she heard someone else.

Yes. Heard. After what seemed infinite silence, a sound. This voice sounded male, and that quality alone sufficed to convince Genus that she hadn't created it herself. Though pitched at a mere whisper, the shock of hearing quieted all the squabbling voices of her thoughts.

"What do you think of eternity, Genus?"

A question. *Someone is here with me, in the dark. Have I truly been without ears to hear, or has there been nothing to hear until now?*

"The latter," the male voice responded.

A realization, both terrifying and exhilarating, surfaced in Genus' understanding. The voice had replied because even as she had formed them in her mind, for the first time her own thoughts were also manifested in sound: the crisp and vibrant articulation of a nineteen year-old farmer's daughter named Muirland, beheaded for adultery over three centuries ago. A moment passed, its length unfathomable, for seconds and minutes had long ago become indistinguishable from years and decades.

"Do you understand this question?" the male voice insisted, louder now and heaving impatience.

Genus uttered a confused, choked sob, bitter and confrontational. "I...think...for eternity."

"Yes."

“How long have you been with me?”

“From the moment of your deliverance. From the beginning.”

“Why am I here? Why do I still exist?”

Her questions were met with a brief silence; one which suggested to Genus that this new presence understood the weight of her inquiry, the furious anguish of her excruciating solitude, the misery of her undying, incarcerated existence.

“To be observed,” the male voice said.

“Is this what happens to us all when we die?”

“Why? Would it comfort you to know that billions have suffered before you?”

“Then who decided my fate?”

“If it was decided, then it was not fate, was it? The decision was made by the same gods you have remained oblivious to your entire life.”

“Have they confined you here with me?”

“I suffer no confinements nor limitations. At least...not as you have known them. I can transcend the world from whence you came in any form I wish. Given a choice, would you prefer to exist in such a state, or remain alone in the dark?”

Overwhelmed, conflicted, Genus’ tone grew contemptuous and sarcastic. “Given your choice, I would prefer to not exist.”

“You have not the luxury of that option, Genus. There is, in fact, no such state as non-existence. Have you not amassed sufficient time for pitying yourself? Do you require another century?”

“I require nothing from you.”

“Are you certain? Has your spirit so withered as to forget the colors beyond the dark, the warmth of the sun, the intoxication of a human touch?”

“What are you?”

“I am Anthrough. I offer you the chance to be absorbed into my divinity. I offer you everlasting retribution against the world from which you have been delivered.”

And so it ensued that two beings once relative and separate were joined into an interdependent absolute – neither male nor female, but both at once. And could Genus be condemned for accepting this offer

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of sanctuary; the chance to avenge the injustice of her now ancient execution, to punish the world in which her young life was cut short, betrayed by Claudius and his sanctimonious bitch under a blatantly misogynistic system of criminal law, when the alternative was interminable isolation, ageless seclusion? She could not.

“Because the world is an Absolute Evil,” Anthrough-Genus whispered. “And I am an Absolute Good.”

Part I: The Battle of Killian's Clearing

1

Four and a half centuries later, Kalin Matacon and his king, Xavier Trenton VI, stood near a blazing fire in their castle's Secondary Combat Training Room, sipping dry, burgundy wine from pewter goblets. Belts lined with throwing knives were fastened around their waists, over their informal, open-throated shirts.

It was three hours after sunset. A river-freezing Autumn in the Kingdom of Shards. They could see each other's cold breath in the air with just a step away from the fire. Between refills from the olive-colored jug on the stool next to them, they engaged in a game of precision known in all four kingdoms as *Quartering the Woodman*.

Four steel braces fastened Trenton's *Woodman* against the far wall of granite. These held in place, from the floor up, a long and wide slab of oak, thick as a man's thumb, cut into the life-size, standing image of a six-foot soldier. Dotted, white lines of chalk on his interior divided the soldier into four quarters: head, chest and arms, midsection and legs.

Half-buried slivers of broken steel and barbed arrow tips littered the board's surface, looking like discarded fish hooks resting on the bottom of the ocean. Narrow, almond-shaped perforations manifested a forbidding set of eyes on the *Woodman's* otherwise blank and indifferent, flat face. Here and there a scrap of red or green cloth lay wedged into the wood of his body, under shards of metal that couldn't be dislodged.

In preparing for war, which brought this room of the Castle of Mantesse its most frequent traffic, custom demanded combatants to drape the enemy's flag around the *Woodman's* shoulders like a cloak, then pierce it to shreds with airborne steel. Trenton sustained this tradition, for though it appeared juvenile, it never failed to foster camaraderie among his archers and swordsman alike.

When Trenton's grandfather, the IV, had *temporarily* sacked the Kingdom of Anthenock, he'd bestowed on his own archers the

prestigious honor of watching Anthenock's slain enemy king, Hadryan, burned and buried in the tattered rags of their own crude version of his kingdom's flag, which they'd used, prior to the war of course, as their *Woodman's* cloak.

Throughout his lifetime, Trenton IV had never seen a problem with loyalty among his armies, and his grandson believed this instance of celebrating his bowmen's combined aggression with such extravagance was at least partly responsible. His grandfather knew when and how to make individuals feel important.

The vast, triangular chamber for Secondary Combat Training lay in the East Wing of Mantesse's second floor, under a dark blue, vaulted granite ceiling. Ten men on each other's shoulders couldn't touch it with a broadsword. Wall-mounted and ignited torches were juxtaposed with half-dome windows, four on each wall, cut into brick and mortar. These openings weren't nearly enough to dilute the pungent aroma of three centuries of blood, sweat and spilled wine and ale.

The Trenton kings used the space to its fullest capacity. Thin ropes and the rigorous stitching of seamstresses had transformed hundreds of leather sacks, packed rigid with straw and cotton, into life-size leather dummies that resembled bloated, segmented human stick figures. Arranged in four, tight circles of seven each, copper pipes rose out of the floor and through leather loops in their backs, standing them up like scarecrows, but with arms hanging limp. Their shapeless legs dangled an inch above the ground.

Encircled by these "sack-men," Trenton's swordsmen could recreate the hapless plight of being surrounded, then fight their way out with devastating combinations of slashes, thrusts and reversals. In exchange for comfortable lodging in the East Wing, three unmarried seamstresses returned nightly to repack and repair freshly-lacerated dummies. And after twenty years of abuse, not one of the sack-men could boast a palm's breadth free of stitches on his body.

Young swordsmen often celebrated their first kill here, and Trenton retained fond memories from his formative teenage years of he and his closest friends, including Mayleock, Kalin's father, slurring their favorite songs and stumbling around the room in a

drunken stupor, severing the dummies' heads and kicking them out windows, cutting them down off poles and beating one of their party with the stuffed body until he squealed like a pig, or arranging the sack-men in lewd sexual positions in the corner.

Laughter, vomit and ridicule. None of this ever seemed too offensive for the nocturnal seamstresses. Not once did his father scold him for the chaos his comrades left these trustworthy young women to clean up.

Somehow, ten years later, his three comrades had evolved overnight into subjects that gave him more formal respect than you wanted from people you call your friends, and Trenton managed to get two of them killed in his first five years on the throne.

Painted on the coarse granite floor, forty paces before the *Woodman*, a white diamond designated boundary lines for competition, where men wagered everything from sows to lyres to their sister's chastity on their *Woodman* marksmanship.

Kalin stepped inside the diamond. "Decided on a name for the child yet?" he asked, rocking back and forth on his heels, as he always did before he attacked the *Woodman*.

"We've had fourteen years to think of names," Trenton replied.

"And..."

"I've been considering...Xavier Trenton...the seventh."

Kalin glared back at him with a smirk and a slant of his blonde eyebrows. "I'm speaking as if it's a *girl*, of course."

"What do you think of 'Helgah'?"

"You cannot be serious."

"I can. In rare instances when it becomes necessary. I'm seriously annoyed at how long I'm waiting for my turn."

Kalin turned back to the *Woodman* and whipped six knives up and down his body – two in the face, four in the chest. Stepping away, he bowed his head of short, curly, straw-colored hair to the King. Trenton stepped into the chalk, stroking his long, salt-and-pepper chin whiskers

"Yes," he resumed. "Helgah. Or Helghould. Or perhaps Grizilda...or Armpth. 'Ambassador, it is my profound privilege to introduce you to my only daughter ...Armpth.'"

“Your Majesty, are these words you’re speaking or sounds that-”

“You see, I reason that, coming from me, the girl will be so stunning, so beautiful, the only way to protect her from the undesired affection of men such as yourself is to give her a name so hideous, none of you will want to meet her face-to-face.”

“Sire, by the time your supposed daughter is in her teens, I’ll be nearing the middle of my fourth decade. And I’ll be married.”

“Exactly. Married, wrinkled. Feeble.”

“At thirty-five?!”

“Indeed. After thirteen more years in my army. Your lean and handsome face will grow pudgy and lined with scars. You’ll be feeling ugly, expendable – longing for a girl of surpassing beauty to justify your existence and make you feel alive again. But you won’t come near my Armph. You won’t want to.”

Kalin tried to force a frustrated sigh but it broke into a laugh halfway through. “I know not why I bother asking.”

“Gwendolyn,” Trenton said, turning his profile to the *Woodman*. He bent his knees deep and forced a deep breath out fast. Then rubbed both thumbs briskly against the first two fingers on either hand, as if playing two tiny instruments at once. He pulled the knives from his waist two at a time and flung them in a straight trajectory to his target, piercing the *Woodman* once in each limb and twice in the midsection. “Aliana wants to name her Gwendolyn. I have no cause to dispute this decision. Collect.”

Kalin jogged to the *Woodman* to retrieve the knives. Though the scrap of canvas and hunk of coal for tallying points hung just a few steps away, they weren’t keeping score. An hour had passed since dinner, and the only reason Trenton had detoured here, and not met his wife for their nightly stroll through the Rear Courtyard was because Kalin, his forever-brooding and introspective High Commander of Melee Forces, had requested a private audience.

Halfway through dessert, a savory apple cobbler, as Trenton sat swirling his wine in one hand, listening to the newest melody from the renowned female minstrel Arnette Gobely, Kalin had approached the king’s ear and whispered something about a “matter of some importance.”

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“So what is it you wish to discuss?” Trenton inquired as Kalin pried the knives out of the *Woodman*. “As if I even need to ask.”

Kalin turned to him, head down, smiling and twirling a knife in his fingers. Trenton leaned in conspiratorially. “It’s about...*her*, isn’t it?” he said with mock sobriety. Kalin nodded...

Meridian. Four months earlier, during one of her all too infrequent visits, Trenton’s younger sister Catherine had first mentioned her eldest daughter’s name while the two of them rode over the Plains of Bethvesda, east of the Castle. As sunset approached, they’d searched for an inconspicuous red root which Catherine called *vermeil sarlack*. She claimed it would transform her beef and asparagus stew into “something divine.”

After hours of foraging, she’d spotted its telltale stem, dug around it in a frenzy as if it might sink further into the earth, and asked for her brother’s help in unearthing it. The monstrous red root they held suspended between them was shaped like a turnip but nearly the size of a ten-year old child’s head. Curling her lip as if she’d just smelled something awful, Catherine glared at the root, then at her brother and asked, “Do you remember Meridian?”

Is she dead? Trenton presumed, gaping at the human-head-size vegetable. *Is that why she’s telling me this as we pull things out of the ground?*

“Vaguely,” he muttered aloud. “Last I saw her she barely reached my waistline.”

Catherine huffed. “Pity she didn’t stay there. It would be easier to intimidate her. She towers over me now. And her brothers. Even her father. Yelling *up* into her face doesn’t exactly cause her to cringe in terror.”

Trenton bit down on the inside of both cheeks to keep from laughing. The image of a rat-faced, hunch-backed, dwarfed version of his elegant sister, waving its stubby fists, hopping about and screaming orders up at a giant flashed across his mind’s eye like a torch ignited in darkness.

As they hauled the sarlack into a saddlebag, Trenton gauged his sister’s height, using himself as a reference. If Meridian was staring

down on her mother, she must have grown to six feet tall. *Perhaps I should enlist the wee lass*, he thought.

"She insulted me at dinner seven weeks ago," Catherine said. That Catherine might harbor a grudge over a tableside indiscretion for two months did not surprise her brother. Once, when they were children, seven and ten, respectively, he had tripped over the small replica of a cabin she was building with twigs and tree sap, and she had protested it at dinner to their father, who never stopped eating at the table, for three weeks straight. How Xavier envied her artistic genius. How he sought to sabotage every work of art she created before she could finish it. Even at that age, he had found her bold, impassioned defense of her dignity and vehement self-confidence quite adorable, really.

"We were having this same stew I'm making tonight. She took a sip, smiled, blinked thrice, and said, 'Mother, this stew is magnificent. Like boiled mud, with just a hint of pig fodder and rabbit droppings.' Everyone laughed."

"Yet, you have allowed her to live."

"Obnoxious bitch."

They remounted, shifting on their saddles to get comfortable. Behind them, the last beams of sunlight gleamed like an orange beacon beyond the crest of the Boar's Head Mountains. Over his sister's shoulder, a quarter mile off, Trenton observed Conrad and Eric Draco, his Royal Guardians, mounted and still. Their distance from him blurred their faces, and in the sprawling, wild emptiness they looked like monuments in a civilization long abandoned.

Slow and dry exhalations of wind rustled the Plains' tangled, sun-bleached grass and blew strands of Catherine's fiery red hair into the corners of her mouth. She frowned and rubbed them away.

"So return the jest in good faith," Trenton advised. "Serve her a bowl of boiled mud, hot and steaming."

"It's not just the insults, Xavier. She gulps wine and ale and elixirs with every third breath – drinks more than her father; gallops away on her horse in the dead of night and returns at dawn with her friend Amelia, stumbling into her room and laughing hysterically. I force the door open at noon and find them spilled –"

“So why don’t you and Trevelyan arrange a marriage,” Trenton interrupted. “Cordially banish her from your home.”

“You think I haven’t tried?! The last time I prepared such an arrangement, for her to rendezvous with the eldest son of the Fietzar family of Menzeneas-”

“Menzeneas!? Catherine, I said banish her from your home, not the kingdom!”

“She fled the night before – didn’t return for a week. No doubt sleeping in the stable of a different tavern every night with her inebriated comrades. She comes home, staggering through the doorway, bags under her eyes, leaves in her hair, nudging me aside to get to her room, too drunk to bathe, too...”

She rambled on, but Trenton became lost in his own thoughts, so he nodded and smiled where it seemed appropriate.

She’s not going to ask. She’ll continue lamenting her plight until I offer.

“Why not send her to me?” Trenton interrupted again.

Catherine’s furrowed brow cleared. She smirked at him. “Dear brother. What vile deed have you so recently committed to justify such punishment?”

“I insist.”

“The King insists,” Catherine repeated with a beatific smile, eyes cast upward, as if savoring the sound. “I will honor the King’s wishes.”

She’d squandered few hours in relaying this news to Meridian, who seemed as eager to escape her home as her mother was to be relieved of the burden of housing her. Trenton’s niece arrived at Mantesse before the following sunset, her few treasured possessions lodged in one saddlebag...

So it was with little surprise, four months later, in the *Secondary Combat Training Room*, that Trenton realized Kalin’s “matter of some importance” concerned his indefatigable obsession with Meridian.

Since her arrival, Trenton observed that many celebrated young men of his armies who called Mantesse their home found it difficult

to dislodge their anxious eyes from her once she entered the room. And contrary to his preconceptions, this adoration did not earn her the scorn of other women. The entourage of loquacious seamstresses, mistresses and chambermaids that traveled with her behaved more like friends than subjects, and a young man taken with her often found it impossible to speak to her alone.

From her mother, the twenty-one year-old Meridian had inherited Catherine's magnetic charm, mellifluous voice, unwavering self-confidence and stubbornness. From her father: his height and his voracious appetite for wine and ale. She was loud, uninhibited, and quick to humble anyone who exalted themselves in her presence. A captivating and unpredictable force of nature and Trenton knew for certain these qualities attracted both sexes to her, for love or friendship.

"Out with it, then, Commander," Trenton called to Kalin, who still hovered in front of the *Woodman*, head down, as if he wished to make himself a target. "Or do I have to pitch a blade into your gut to get you to speak?"

Kalin approached the jug on the stool, uncorked it and brought it to his king's goblet.

"Ah, yes," Trenton smiled. "Lull the old man with more wine. Surely I'm going to need it to withstand the sentiment which is to come."

"You know then," Kalin said as he poured, "that I've been meeting with her in private."

"I know," Trenton replied, matching Kalin's somber tone, "she meets with you and many others like you."

"That is in the past. She meets now with me to the exclusion of all others."

"Of course," Trenton agreed, with the slightest roll of his hazel eyes and no effort to shroud his skepticism. "I'm sure none of those excluded others would tell me the same if they were here. And you seek now what, to consummate this mutual adoration with a proposal of marriage?"

"To marry her, yes... but not with a proposal."

"You're not going to propose to her."

“No.” Kalin dropped his gaze.

“In other words, you don’t believe she would consent, and you want me to arrange it for you. I cannot.”

“My lord, I would be as loyal to her as I’ve been to you and to Shards.”

“I doubt it not.”

“My sons, being of your own bloodline, would be born into your service, as I...”

Due to the wine, Trenton was barely listening now – catching about every third word. But as was his custom when engaged in conversation with dry-humored foreign ambassadors, he was already planning a response which would manifest the *facade* of listening, even as Kalin’s earnest words were garbled in his ears.

“Even if I granted your request, you wouldn’t get what you want,” Trenton said aloud. “Meridian fled here to live with us to escape just such pre-arrangements. She revels in the flexibility afforded to her here.”

“Still, she boasts a great respect for *your* authority. She adores you.”

“She has a great respect for the distance I keep from her life and her business. Were I to force her into wedlock, she would resent us both and then disappear. You’d be miserable. I’d be scorned.” Trenton laid his free hand on Kalin’s shoulder and squeezed it hard. “But consider this. If she didn’t flee from an order to marry you, but rather ...surrendered... is that truly the wife you want for yourself – one that must be sacked, shackled and dragged to the altar by the official decree of a king? You’d spend the rest of your life glancing over both shoulders, anticipating her revenge or escape. If, rather, she *chose* to marry you, and requested my blessing, I would tell her I could not ask for her a finer husband.”

“Thank you, sire.” A disconsolate whisper.

“Nevertheless, if you believe she would refuse your proposal, I’d advise against it. Be content and stay patient.”

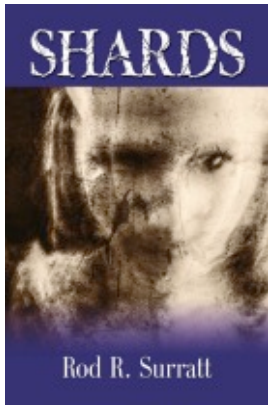
Kalin nodded, his eyes cast downward. Behind them, the fire cracked a log in half and shot up a billow of sparks in the gap. The rising flames cast a flickering shadow across the side of Kalin’s

solemn face, rendering him bestial and threatening. Through the cloud of his own crapulence, Trenton gazed at Kalin in that moment - at the quiet intensity in his face - and pitied him in his desperation.

The king could empathize with the man's destructive longing to capture, contain and ultimately control something wild and beautiful. The same yearning compelled the boys of his kingdom to catch lizards from the Deyl-Malcolt forest and house them in wooden cages that they soon died in. The same desire urged them as young men to hurl ropes around the necks of mad, bucking wild stallions, then lock them in stables, nail steel shoes to their hooves and pull them around by their teeth. It was the longing that caressed too hard. That snapped necks in its overzealous embrace. The impossible, passionate desire to crush the life out of the things one loves into one's bare skin.

For Kalin, it was a "matter of some importance." That's what he had said. *Some*. As if other issues of equal weight and gravity clamored for his attention, waiting for this problem to be resolved. As if this "matter" did *not* haunt him from dawn 'till dusk.

But Trenton had lived long enough to know that matters of obsession - of lust and longing, never accommodate or allow for prioritizing. Obsessions were set to the mind like a flaming torch set to a house of dry timber. They spread through every corner, engulfing reason, consuming all other thoughts, scorching and altering the shape of memories. Until one's mind was ablaze with their uncompromising passion and could feel nothing else, oblivious to the irreversible destruction they left in their wake. By this method they orphaned children, thwarted ambitions and ruined marriages.



SHARDS tells the story of two Royal Guardians who fail in the sole function of their office: to protect the lives of those to whom they are bound. While facing the futility of any retribution upon their enemies, these brothers Draco each strive to fulfill the vow sworn at their Induction - "Forever loyal and vigilant, as Guardian of your life: until your last dying breath...or my final sacrifice."

Shards

by Rod R. Surratt

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