

THE SHARDS OF EXCALIBUR

TWIST *of the*
BLADE

EDWARD WILLETT

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Four nieces and a nephew – five books
This one is for Keisha



CHAPTER ONE



SLEEPLESS

THROUGH A NIGHTMARE FOREST of black, twisted trees, Ariane ran barefoot, pursued by a demon.

A thin skein of icy snow covered the barren ground, making every step agony, as though a thousand glass needles were piercing her skin. She knew she was bleeding, knew the prints she was leaving behind her were red with blood, knew the demon must be maddened by it, by its smell, by the promise of tasting it, hot and fresh, when at last it caught her...and she could hear it now, hear the heavy thump of its feet, hear the rush of breath from its lungs...

And then she caught her foot on a branch, fell headlong, and rolled into a ball, screaming, as she waited for the demon's teeth and claws to rend her flesh....



Ariane jerked upright to the sound of laughter. Confused, heart still pounding from the terror of the dream, she stared around at a classroom full of amused and scornful faces, then twisted her head to Mrs. Muirhead, who held a copy of *Macbeth* in one hand and was tapping the end

of a ballpoint pen against it with the other. “I asked you a question, Ariane.”

Ariane glanced down at the open book in which her forehead had been planted a moment before. Macbeth’s speech stared back. *Is this a dagger which I see before me...?* “I’m sorry, Mrs. Muirhead I...I didn’t hear it.”

Mrs. Muirhead uttered a noise that Ariane supposed would be spelled in books “Hmmmph,” then added, “If you can’t stay awake in class, Ariane, perhaps you should go to bed earlier. Samantha, would you care to answer?”

Samantha began rattling on about Macbeth’s tortured conscience but, through the cotton wool that filled her head, Ariane couldn’t focus on a single word. She yawned, but snapped her mouth closed with an audible click of teeth when she caught Mrs. Muirhead’s narrowed gaze.

English class ended at last. The other students streamed out. No one talked to her, of course. As a foster kid who had been suspended for fighting in her *first* week at school, she was as popular as poison oak at a nudist colony – and that was *before* the rumors started swirling about her dabbling in witchcraft. With her limbs weighed down by weariness, by the time she gathered her books and moved toward the door the other students had long fled.

But before she could make her own escape, Mrs. Muirhead’s gentle voice stopped her. “Ariane, is there something wrong? Something I can help with?”

Ariane stopped, staring longingly at the open door. *Well, she imagined herself saying, it’s like this: I’m the heir of the Lady of the Lake. I can dissolve into fresh water and magically transport myself through rivers and lakes. A shard of King Arthur’s sword, Excalibur, is strapped to my side right now. I and that funny redheaded kid, Wally Knight, brought it back from Yellowknife just a couple of weeks ago. We’re in a life-and-death struggle with Merlin, aka Rex Major, the fabulously powerful and wealthy*

computer magnate, to recover the other four shards, and he's sent a demon to haunt my dreams. Do you think you could help me with an exorcism?

But of course all she actually said, as she turned her back on freedom to face Mrs. Muirhead, was, "I'm all right. I'm just not sleeping well."

"Problems at home?" Mrs. Muirhead said sympathetically. "Have you thought about seeing Mr. Yasinowski?"

Ariane pictured herself telling the school's incredibly stuffy guidance counsellor, whose pale face and earnest tone always reminded her of an undertaker, about the demon in her dreams, and snorted. Mrs. Muirhead's friendly expression stiffened.

"No, I don't think he can help," Ariane said hurriedly. "Really. It's nothing. I'll be fine." And then, at last, she made her getaway.

In the corridor she leaned her head against the cold metal of a locker, eyes closed. She took no notice of the students brushing past until one slammed into her, spinning her around and sending her books flying from her hand and skittering across the floor. She straightened and glared at the retreating backs of four girls. One looked over her shoulder with a sweetly poisonous smile. Then they rounded the corner by the library and were gone.

Flish, she thought. *It figures.*

Felicia Knight – Wally's sister, no less! – and her three cohorts had made it their personal mission to make Ariane's life at Oscana Collegiate one long trip through Hell. She thought she'd frightened them away for good the last time they'd squared off, when she'd used the power of Excalibur to shape water into a weapon...but *Flish*, it seemed, didn't scare that easily.

She felt the urge to chase her, teach her once and for all what it meant to mess with the heir of the Lady of the Lake...but she fought down the urge, pushed it away from

her. *Save it*, she thought. *Flish isn't your biggest concern. Rex Major is.*

As Ariane bent down to pick up her books, the bell rang...which meant she was late for Algebra – the class she was already doing so badly in that she had to stay late on Thursdays for remedial coaching.

My life just gets better and better, she thought, and set off wearily down the hall.



Walter Arthur Knight the Third, known to friends and enemies alike as Wally, was having a much better day than Ariane. He'd successfully produced hydrogen in Chemistry and had aced a history test. (Although he almost wished he hadn't. The teacher had praised him in front of the class, leading Simon Spencer, the hulking giant who claimed to be fourteen like Wally but looked twenty-five, to loudly proclaim that Wally must have cheated – as if no one could get a good mark on a test simply by paying attention in class and even studying once in a while.)

Ariane had promised to meet him for lunch, but failed to show – again. *Probably fell asleep*. He shook his head. Ever since they'd returned from Yellowknife, she'd looked more and more exhausted each day. *I hope she's not sick*, he thought. Still, without her there – and nobody else willing to sit at his table – he at least had the chance to finish his new favourite book, *The Complete Klutz's Guide to Medieval Swordsmanship*.

Whether because of the book or for some other reason, fencing practice after school went particularly well. Wally had the oddest sensation that everyone else had inexplicably worsened in the two weeks since his adventures with Ariane. Even Nick Barber, the team's top fencer, seemed to telegraph every move, so that Wally knew what Nick

was going to do before he did it. Of course, Nick still managed to beat Wally without much difficulty, thanks to his longer reach. Wally was aware of the fencing coach, Natasha Mueller, watching him closely all practice, and when it was over, while the other fencers were heading to the showers, she pulled him aside.

“You have come a very long way this fall,” Coach Mueller said. A tiny, whip-thin woman, she smiled at him, green eyes sparkling beneath her trademark purple beret. “An amazingly long way. I think spraining your wrist a few weeks ago actually made you better.”

Wally grinned. “Thanks, Coach.”

“You’re welcome.” Coach Mueller gave him a long, hard look. “Okay, we’ll try it.”

Wally blinked. “Try what?”

“The Chinook Open.”

Wally’s heart jumped. “The tournament in Swift Current?”

Coach Mueller nodded. “I want you to compete.”

Wally let out a whoop that made Nick Barber, who was just heading into the locker room, shoot him a surprised look over his shoulder. “I’d love to!”

“There’ll be extra practice,” Coach Mueller warned.

“No problem,” Wally said. He grabbed her hand and shook it. “Thanks! Thanks a lot!”

“Don’t mention it.” Coach Mueller smiled. “Just live up to my expectations.”

Feeling as if the gym floor were three feet beneath the soles of his sneakers, Wally headed for his locker. Ordinarily he’d have gone to the showers with the other guys, but he’d signed up for swimming lessons at the YMCA, and the first one was today, in less than an hour. He didn’t see much point in showering at school when he’d soon be showering at the Y. Sweaty hair plastered to his forehead, he trotted through the hallways. Him, Wally the Klutz,

fencing in a nationally ranked tournament? He couldn't believe it. *Wait until Ariane hears about this!*

He reached his locker, dialed the combination, pulled the door open, and was reaching for his books when he heard multiple footsteps and a babble of girls' voices coming closer.

One voice stood out. *Flish!*

His eyes searched the hallway for an escape route. His sister had been difficult to live with when they'd still shared a house. But since she'd moved out, things hadn't gotten any better. She was constantly hitting him up for money (their parents had cut off her allowance when she'd left home), shoving him around, making fun of him in front of her friends.

There was nowhere to hide. Except....

Thankful for once that his adolescent growth spurt had yet to materialize, Wally took a tip from numerous bullies down through the years and stuffed himself into his own locker. Unlike the bullies, though, he left the door slightly ajar so he wouldn't be locked in.

Cramped, uncomfortable, and wishing he hadn't forgotten to throw away his uneaten tuna-fish sandwich from last Friday's lunch, he tried not to gag as he waited for Flish and her gang to move on down the hall.

Naturally, they stopped right outside his locker.

Through the door's ventilation slits (which, in his opinion, did not provide *nearly* enough ventilation), he could make out the back of her head, less than a foot away. He did his best not to breathe. The miasma of rancid tuna, mingled with his own sweaty self, made it easier.

"Where is he?" Flish sounded irritable. "Cindy said she saw him down here just a minute ago."

"Probably knew you wanted money," said another voice that he recognized as Shania's. She *used* to be the ringleader of the "coven," as Wally had dubbed Flish's group of friends, until Flish took over.

“Or maybe his witch of a girlfriend spirited him away,” said one of the coven’s other two members, girls whose names Wally could never keep straight. She laughed as if joking, but he heard a touch of fear in her voice. Wally wasn’t surprised: the last time Ariane had confronted the coven she had punched a hole in a locker with a magical spear of ice.

Flish must have heard the fear too. “She’s not a witch,” she snapped.

“Then how does she pull off those tricks?” said the fourth girl.

“I don’t know.” Flish lowered her voice. “But I do know one thing: it’s always around water.”

“So?” drawled Shania.

“So, all we have to do is catch her somewhere *away* from water. No lake, no swimming pool, no drinking fountains.” Her voice was colder than the wind he had ridden his bike against that morning. “I owe her.”

“You got a plan?”

“The tennis courts,” Flish said. “Pavement everywhere. Not even a sprinkler.”

“And how do you plan to convince her to show up?” said Shania. “Send her an invitation?”

“I don’t have to convince her. She cuts across the courts on her way home.”

“Before dark,” Shania pointed out. “Those courts are wide open. Someone will see us.”

“Not on Thursdays,” Flish said. “On Thursdays she stays until 5:30 for remedial Algebra. By the time she leaves, it’s already dark. And this Thursday – tomorrow...” Flish’s head swiveled right. “Someone’s coming. Let’s clear out. My little twerp of a brother can’t be too far away, and I need some cash.” She sniffed. “Besides, it reeks around here. I think something’s died in someone’s locker.”

The coven headed down the hallway. A moment later

a janitor pushed his cart past, whistling tunelessly. Once Wally could no longer hear him, he climbed out of his metal cage. Massaging a crick in the back of his neck and taking deep, grateful breaths of non-tuna-scented air, he stared down the hallway in the direction Flish and the others had gone.

I'd better pay Ariane a visit, he thought...but first he had to get to swimming lessons. He checked his watch – he had just enough time to make it.

He stuffed his books into his backpack, slung it over his shoulders, closed his locker...then paused. Flish was looking for him. And she'd gone the way he'd normally go, toward the front doors – which meant she was very likely lying in wait outside for him to emerge.

He smiled. *Oh no, you don't*. He turned and went in the opposite direction. Students weren't supposed to use the emergency exit at the back of the gym, but Wally happened to know, because Coach Mueller had once sent him that way to get something from her car, that the EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY: ALARM WILL SOUND sign was a bluff.

Coach Mueller was still in the gym, rolling up one of the long, thin mats the fencers used for practice. She looked up as Wally came in. "Forget something?"

"Just taking a shortcut," Wally said. "Is it all right if I go out the back?"

Coach Mueller, despite her tiny size, lifted the rolled-up mat as though it weighed nothing. "Be my guest. But be careful. Last week's snow left an icy patch."

"Thanks," Wally said. He checked his watch again. He was going to be late if he didn't get a move on –

He ran across the gym, banged open the door, and charged through.

Mindful of Coach Mueller's warning, he jumped over the sheet of ice just outside the doors. But he didn't see the even bigger patch, black as the pavement, at the corner of the gym.

His right foot skidded out from under him. As he fell, he twisted, trying to catch himself.

Then his forehead cracked against the concrete, and an explosion of stars and pain blew Wally into darkness.



Ariane trudged up the broken walkway to the crumbling steps of the house she shared with Aunt Phyllis, weighed down by her book-filled backpack, a shopping bag containing two two-litre bottles of Diet Coke, and her own inescapable weariness. Her breath formed clouds in the cold air. In the last two weeks the temperature had plunged. Daytime highs barely rose above freezing; nighttime lows were a frigid ten degrees lower. In January, similar daytime temperatures would feel almost like a heat wave, but right now they were a pain.

Literally. It felt like a small rodent was biting the tips of her ears.

Ariane glanced up to the window of her room on the second floor, wishing she was already in bed. Aunt Phyllis's house looked as if it hadn't been painted since it was built. On the roof, turned orange by the light of the setting sun behind her, shingles curled up like rose petals. But the house did boast two brand new features: gleaming metal mesh blocking every window, and a white reflective triangle on a metal post by the front steps that bore the words "Protected by SecureTek."

Ariane fished her keys out of her pocket. Like the bars and the security system, they were new, fitted to the heavy-duty locks that had also been added after Rex Major's district sales manager, acting under Merlin's power to Command, had broken in through her bedroom window. Ariane supposed the additions provided some protection against Major's human henchmen, but she suspected her

enemy hadn't sent anyone else mainly because he still had to maintain a scandal-free public persona. A second kidnap attempt by yet another person linked to Major would raise awkward questions.

But his fear of embarrassment wasn't much of a hook on which to hang their security. Which was why Ariane wore the shard strapped to her midriff beneath an elastic bandage at all times. That was their real security. With her own abilities bolstered by the extra power from the shard, she hoped she could drive off any attack.

Except for that damn sleep-stealing demon, she thought. She sighed, a sigh that turned into a yawn, then unlocked the front door, walked into the small enclosed porch, turned and locked the door again, unlocked the inner door, went through, turned and locked *that* door, and finally faced the dim entrance hall of Aunt Phyllis's house.

"You're late, dear," her aunt called from the living room. "I was beginning to worry."

Ariane walked through the French doors and found her aunt reading the newspaper in her favourite seat, an ancient, overstuffed armchair upholstered in giant pink roses. "Sorry," Ariane said. "I went down to 7-Eleven to get some pop. We ran out last night." She held up the plastic bag.

"You should have phoned," Aunt Phyllis said, peering over the tops of her reading glasses.

"Sorry," Ariane repeated.

Aunt Phyllis nodded, closed the newspaper, and put it aside. She removed her glasses. "How was school today?"

"Not great," Ariane said. She plopped down in one of the smaller armchairs on either side of the fireplace. "I fell asleep in English class."

Aunt Phyllis looked concerned. "Still not sleeping well at night?"

"No," Ariane said. Ariane hadn't told her aunt about the demon, instead claiming she kept having "bad

dreams” about Rex Major. After all, Aunt Phyllis could do nothing about the haunting and would just worry more than she already did.

“It’s been two weeks,” her aunt said in a reassuring tone. “Major would have come after you if he was going to.”

Ariane said nothing. Merlin had waited millennia to claim Excalibur as his own. What were two weeks? *He’s biding his time*, she thought.

“Any...hint...about the next shard?” Aunt Phyllis asked.

“It’s out there,” Ariane said. “But I can’t tell where. Not yet.” She slumped and closed her eyes. She was so tired, so drained. She’d started hearing the song of the second shard the night she’d returned home with the first one...but then the demon had appeared, and she hadn’t heard it since. And in her current exhausted condition she didn’t think she could summon enough power to travel through water even if she did know where to find the second shard.

If I went down the drain I might get as far as the sewage treatment plant, she thought. *But that’s about it.*

But the shard *was* out there. She thought – hoped – that Major didn’t know where it was either. As she understood it, he’d expected to find the second shard using the power of the first. Since Ariane had claimed the first, he would have to wait and hope that the second revealed itself the same way that one had...not that she and Wally had any idea how it had happened.

“Did you see Wally today?” Aunt Phyllis asked.

Ariane nodded. “Just in passing.” Ariane had promised to meet him at lunch, but had fallen asleep at the library again. Guilt mingled with her exhaustion. Wally was her ally, her partner in this quest...and yet, lately, she hardly saw him. “He said he was starting swimming lessons tonight at the Y.”

Aunt Phyllis laughed. “Guess he wants to be prepared next time.”

Ariane's smile faded. *If there is a next time*, she thought. She yawned hugely once more. *Merlin doesn't have to attack. He can just sit back and let sleep deprivation do me in.*

Aunt Phyllis stood. "I think you should take a nap," she said decisively. "I'll call you for supper in an hour. Then straight to bed again after that. I'll put away the pop."

Ariane nodded obediently, hauled herself to her feet and climbed the stairs to her room. She collapsed on her bed. Her eyes closed. In seconds she was asleep.

The demon was waiting.

The landscape in which she met it could be anything. The twisted black wood of her afternoon nightmare was one she had seen before. Sometimes they met in a desert. Sometimes they met in downtown Regina, ruined and deserted as though ravaged by war. And sometimes they met in swirling fog, like now. And those times, the demon talked.

As usual, she sensed it rather than saw it. She had *never* seen it, except for a glimpse of red eyes in a swirling fog. That didn't lessen her dread.

You cannot ressst, the sibilant voice said softly, seeming to come from behind her as always. No matter how fast she turned, she could never see it, never get more than a glimpse of burning red eyes out of the corner of her eye. Dread choked her. She wanted to run, but if she did, the demon would just chase her, as it had that afternoon and on many occasions before.

It had never caught her. When she was awake, she didn't think it *could* catch her. But in these dreams, more often than not, her fear overwhelmed her waking reason.

She forced herself to stay put, but she couldn't stop turning in place, knowing she could never see the demon, but unable to stop trying. The fog swirled around her, thick, choking fog, tinged yellow and smelling of sulphur.

You cannot sssleep, the demon hissed at her. *Where are your powersss now, young Lady? I have ssstolen them from you...without sssleep, you are nothing. My massster knowsss thiss. My massster laughsssss...* The hiss moved closer. She felt a hot breath on her neck, as if a furnace door had opened behind her. Her heart jumped and in a moment she would have run, would have dashed blindly through the fog...

Instead she jerked herself awake, gasping, pulse pounding.

She glanced at her bedside clock. She'd slept less than ten minutes.

Fatigue pressed down on her, filling her head with fog as choking and deadening as the one in which the demon spoke to her, weighing down her heart with despair. She closed her eyes again, but she didn't sleep.

Instead, she wept.



Rex Major, eyes closed, let the glorious “Flower Duet” from the first act of *Lakmé* wash over him. He sat alone in his box in Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. Opera had not existed in the era of Camelot. He had originally purchased his season tickets to present the image of a community-minded businessman, but to his astonishment, he had discovered he loved opera.

Musicals, on the other hand, he couldn't stand. Although he liked *Spamalot* better than *Camelot*. He chuckled at the thought.

His cell phone buzzed. Major debated ignoring it, but knew he couldn't. Before the opera had started, he'd configured his phone so only high-priority messages were allowed through. He sighed, opened his eyes, and pulled the phone from its holster.

He glanced at the screen. *She sleeps not*, it read.

He smiled and put the phone away. *Text messages from a demon*, he thought. *What a wonderful age this is.*

The demon couldn't physically harm Ariane. But by disrupting her sleep, it was disrupting her power, keeping her reserves of energy so low that she wouldn't be able to sense the location of the second shard of Excalibur. He smiled more widely. *And keeping her reserves so low she doesn't realize she has the power to push the demon away.* The real Lady, his *beloved* sister, tucked away on the other side of the barely open door to Faerie, had failed to tell her heir and protégé many, many things that might have helped in her struggle against Merlin.

The "Flower Duet" ended, but Major hardly noticed. Few things could distract him from opera, but thoughts of Excalibur were among them. Thinking about the girl in Regina who held the sword's first shard – temporarily – also brought to mind the boy, Wally Knight. A youth, a stripling, barely more than a child...and yet he had resisted Major's Voice of Command, the Voice that no *adult* had ever withstood before: no adult save one.

Arthur.

The King had never been Merlin's to Command. Had he been, he would have been a far lesser King than he became. Arthur had been an extraordinary leader because he had aided Merlin of his own free will.

Wally Knight had the beginnings, at least, of the same power. True, he had succumbed to the Voice of Command at first, but almost at once he'd begun to push back. The second time Merlin had used it, it hadn't worked at all. The Lady didn't have the power to counteract his magic so directly, so *she* couldn't have given Wally that ability.

Wally must have *inherited* it.

Major believed in coincidences. But not where magic was concerned. Magic seeped through everything it touched, like water carving a cave out of limestone,

smoothing and shaping the rock. Arthur had been born with the ability to resist Command, just as Merlin had been born with his abilities, and the Lady with hers. Where magic had come from originally was a matter for theologians. Major wondered about it but didn't really care: Magic was a fact, it operated according to its own natural laws, and those who best understood those laws...like him...could make the most effective use of it.

Wally, Merlin thought. *Walter Arthur Knight the Third.*

If Merlin was right, then even the boy's name was not a coincidence. Ariane was the heir of the Lady of the Lake. And Wally, Major had slowly come to believe, could be none other than the heir of Arthur himself.

Arthur had had several sons; the most notorious of them had been Mordred. When he had come to court he had been presented as Arthur's nephew, but in reality Arthur had fathered the boy with his half-sister, Morgause, before either of them knew they were related. Mordred eventually led a rebellion against his father. In the final battle, at Camlann, Arthur slew his own son...but only after Mordred had mortally wounded him.

All of Arthur's *legitimate* sons had died childless. But Mordred had had sons of his own, who had continued rebelling against Arthur's successor. Ironic though it was, Arthur's bloodline had continued only through the son who had slain him.

Arthur had had other magical gifts besides the ability to withstand Command. Men had begged to follow him, begged to join hopeless battles against overwhelming odds...and then won those battles, because of their love for their King. And with Excalibur in his hand...Major shook his head, remembering Arthur striding across long-ago battlefields, Excalibur flashing in the sun, blood running like water from its silvery blade, the sword singing a terrible, magical song that only he, Merlin, could hear.

Warriors fell like wheat before a farmer's scythe when Arthur took the field. Yet neither Excalibur nor his physical prowess had saved him when he faced Mordred, whose skill had been nearly equal to his own; and that, too, told Major something: Mordred had inherited some of his father's gifts.

Which meant Wally, if he *were* Arthur's descendant, might have those gifts as well, though masked by his youth.

The first act of *Lakmé* ended. The audience moved to the exits for intermission, but Rex Major stayed put. *When I have Excalibur, he thought, I will need someone to wield it, someone to lead the army I will raise, someone to command and rally my troops as we march through the door into Faerie and I take back my world from the tyrants who oppress it.*

Could Wally be that someone? After proper grooming, proper instruction, could he lead Merlin's army of liberation to victory?

He's loyal to his friend now, Major thought, but that doesn't mean he'll stay that way. He doesn't know what he is, or could be. When he does, why would he be content to serve the Lady of the Lake, to help her erase magic from this world, to go back to being an ordinary boy, sentenced to become an ordinary man?

Even in Camelot, magic had never been the *only* tool Merlin used to bend people to his will. Threats would work with some; he didn't think they would work with Arthur's heir. But good old-fashioned bribery, the lure of greatness, of glory...*that*, Major thought, had possibilities.

And there was something else. He smiled as he thought of it. The young Arthur had been orphaned at fifteen by the death of his father, Uther Pendragon. Aware of that, Merlin had deliberately set out to become a father figure to the youthful King. He had wielded far more influence through that personal connection than he ever would have

as a mere wizard, no matter how powerful.

Wally Knight's father still lived, but he had all but abandoned the boy, as had his mother. Wally's sister Felicia, not unlike Arthur's other half-sister Morgana, was more foe than family. *Those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it*, Major thought. He smiled to himself. *But those who do remember history can cause it to repeat, if it suits them. And I think it will suit me very well.*

The audience was filing back in. He decided to put thoughts of Excalibur out of his head for the rest of the evening. But just as the lights dimmed, his cell phone buzzed again. He glanced at it. What he saw brought him surging to his feet. The door of the box closing behind him cut off the opening notes of the second act. Two minutes later, texting his chauffeur as he walked, he was striding through the glass-walled members' lounge to the cloakroom.

Rex Major had just discovered the location of the second shard.