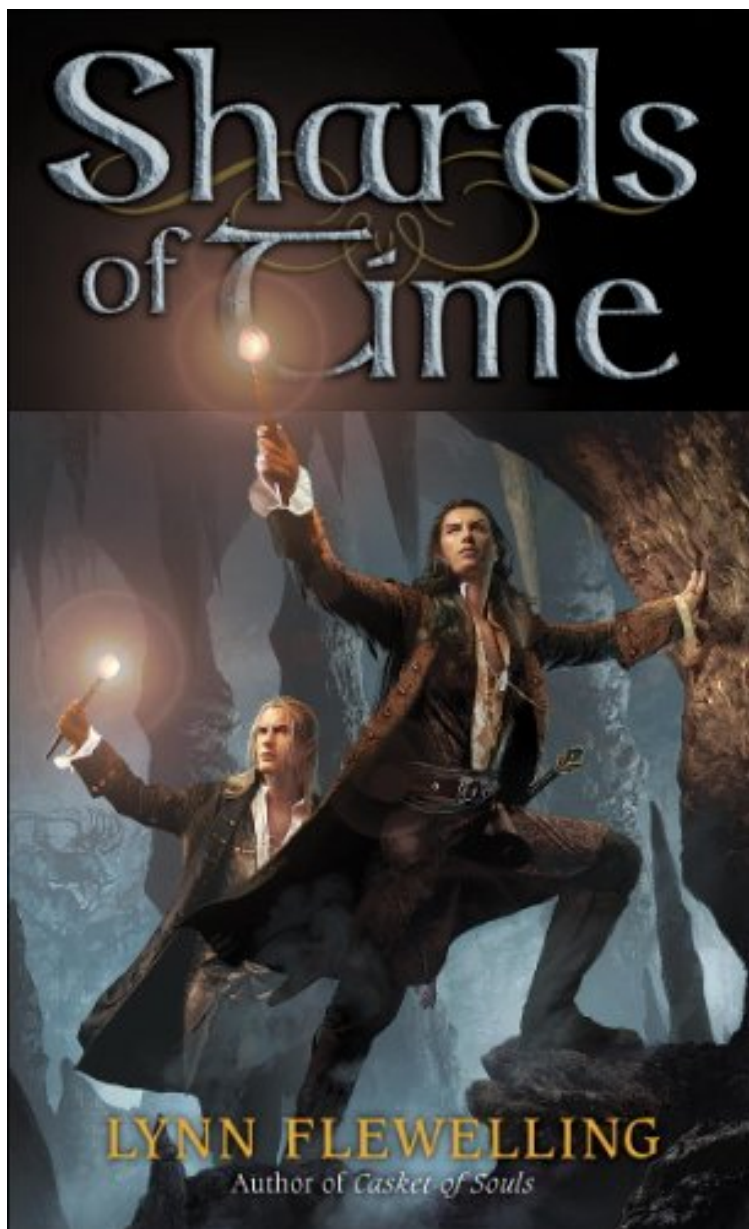


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Shards of Time: The Nightrunner Series, Book 7



Par Lynn Flewelling
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAcclaimed author Lynn Flewelling brings her beloved Nightrunners series to a closeat least for nowwith a thrilling novel of murder, mystery, and magic. The governor of the sacred island of Korous and his mistress have been killed inside a locked and guarded room. The sole witnesses to the crimeguards who broke down the doors, hearing the screams from withinhave gone mad with terror,

babbling about ghosts . . . and things worse than ghosts. Dispatched to Korous by the queen, master spies Alec and Seregil find all the excitement and danger they could want and more. For an ancient evil has been awakened there, a great power that will not rest until it has escaped its otherworldly prison and taken revenge on all that lives. And only those like Alec who have died and returned to life can step between the worlds and confront the killer . . . even if it means a second and all too permanent death. Praise for Lynn Flewelling's *Casket of Souls* Full of intrigue and plots upon plots. RT Book sExtrait

Chapter 1 Rain on the Roof Early-spring rain lashed against the windowpanes next to Alec's chair and drummed on the inn's roof slates overhead. With a fire crackling on the hearth, a good supper just dispatched, and an interesting tome borrowed from the Oreska House library open on his lap, Alec was looking forward to a peaceful evening. His companion, however, had other ideas. Sprawled in a pile of cushions in front of the fire, Seregil had thumbed through a succession of apparently uninteresting letters, discarded several books, and now lay staring up at the ceiling and whistling a sad tune softly--and rather annoyingly--through his teeth. Alec guessed he was composing some new song, as he maddeningly kept repeating phrases and tapping time against the ash shovel with one bare foot. Even Ruetha and her kittens had lost patience with him and had retreated to their basket in the corner. But as distracting as it was, and as melancholy as the tune sounded, Alec felt a certain amount of relief, too. It had been difficult for both of them, losing more people they cared about--Myrhichia, Lady Kylith, Duke Malthus--the previous year. They'd nearly lost Micum Cavish's daughter Illia, as well. Alec had felt the losses deeply, but Seregil was always one to hang on to pain, tinged as it was with guilt. This was the first time Seregil had shown any interest in composing in months, so the interruption was almost welcome, even if it did mean Alec wasn't going to get any reading done. He closed his book. "That's a pretty tune you're working on. Play it for me?" Seregil glanced up at the Aurenfaie harp hanging on the wall. "It's not done yet." "So play me what you have." Seregil cast him a sidelong glance. "I'm annoying you." "Just a little." With an apologetic half smile, Seregil marshaled his long limbs and resurrected himself from his nest. Taking the harp down, he plucked at the strings, tuned them a little, then played a few bars of what sounded like a lament. The melancholy tune together with Seregil's overall restlessness were familiar weather signs. Hoping to lighten his lover's mood, Alec said, "You know, you once promised me you'd never say it again." "I haven't said a thing in the past hour," Seregil said, brows arching over sea-grey eyes. Alec snorted softly. "And we haven't accepted a nightrunner job in nearly a month." "There haven't been any worth our time. They're all so--" Seregil threw up his hands in exasperation. "Go on, then. Just say it." "Boring!" Seregil hung the harp back on its hook and faced Alec with his hands on his hips. "If I have to deliver one more love token or look for any more compromising letters, I'm going to hang myself!" "We spend time at court." "Yes, we do--and as much as I care for our young queen, I've made about as much polite chitchat as I'm capable of." Alec couldn't argue that point. It had been a long, hard winter, burying Rhiminee in treacherous slush and ice that had curtailed riding and outdoor shooting; the last hunt had been just after Mourning Night. They were relative newcomers in the royal inner circle, and favorites of Queen Elani despite their lowly rank, so naturally they were despised by a good many of the more established members of the entourage. Seregil won so consistently at the bakshi table, and Alec so consistently defeated other would-be archers--soft-handed nobles who'd never had to shoot true or else starve--that few would take them on anymore. Some had taken to calling them the queen's lapdogs behind their backs. Their detractors might have had a great deal more to say if they could see them now, lounging in their hidden rooms at the Stag and Otter in decidedly unfashionable Blue Fish Street behind the Harvest Market. Seregil secretly owned the place, and it was their true home and refuge from the endless round of social obligations their public reputations demanded: entertaining at the Wheel Street villa, attending salons of their remaining friends, evenings at the Oreska House with Thero and Magyana, the requisite keeping up with the latest fashions via their tailors and jewelers. With the end of the war a year and a half earlier, luxuries were once more abundant and the black-market dealers were going hungry. Many people still decried the state of theater, since Master Atre and his marvelous company had abruptly disappeared near the war's end. The Golden Crane stood empty, but the other companies around the city were still suffering by comparison. "Well, what do you want to do?" asked Alec. "Get out of the damn city!" "Then let's go out to Watermead. We haven't seen Micum and the family in ages." Seregil looked out at the rain, and his thin lips tilted into a doubtful line. It would be a wet, cold ride, and he avoided being wet and cold as much as possible. "Maybe in a few days, if the weather breaks. Anyway, we're due back at Wheel Street in time to appear for Korathan's birthday." He threw a few logs onto the fire and subsided back among the cushions with one of his scattered books. Peace at last, thought Alec, returning to his own book--until Seregil started

whistling again. Chapter 2A Timely Offer They returned to Wheel Street and public life a few days later, attending the prince's birthday gala, and the social whirl began again. The foul weather continued--with sullen rain giving way to dank fog. They went to the theater, to gambling houses, and to a few salons, including that of Marquise Alania, a fashionable dowager who'd taken quite an interest in them since Seregil's risqué display at the Three Dragons nearly a year ago. To her credit, her circle was an interesting collection of well-educated nobles, philosophers, artists, and amusing ne'er-do-wells like Seregil. The food and wine were always exquisite. Even Seregil had to grudgingly admit that life was a bit less tedious than it had been. The weather improved at last, rain giving way to bright sunshine and brisk winds. They were at Alania's house one night during the Festival of Flowers when Alec noticed Seregil blinking and rubbing absently at his left temple as he lost a bakshi game to the court painter, Vireus. Finishing his game of Blue Goose with Alania and two flirtatious young noblewomen, Alec laid his cards aside and went to sit by Seregil. "What's wrong?" he murmured as Seregil conceded the game. "Headache," Seregil replied. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to make an early night of it." "I'm so sorry to hear it," said the marquise, coming to join them. "I can have Evers prepare you a willow bark tea." "That's very kind of you, but I think a good night's sleep is in order." Seregil bent over her hand and kissed it gallantly. "I promise you a fine dinner at Wheel Street to make up for this." The wind had blown out many of the street lanterns, and those few left cast uncertain shadows at the edges of the street. It was a good night for footpads, even in this fashionable district of guards and walls, but Seregil seemed unusually distracted, often raising a gloved hand to his brow as he rode. "You're in real pain." "Must be the change in the weather." As soon as they got home Seregil went to bed with a cup of willow bark infusion. When Alec came to bed later, he was asleep but restless. Alec touched Seregil's brow and was relieved to find it cool. He didn't wake when Alec blew out the night lamp and climbed into bed to pull him close. That seemed to calm him, and Alec soon drifted off. A buffeting wind yanked persistently on his cloak and whipped his hair across his eyes as Seregil bent to inspect the lock on the huge oak door. The moon was high, casting enough light to see the rusted plate and enormous keyhole. Nothing in his tool roll was large enough to pick the lock. Surrounded by lichen-blotched stone, the door stood between him and Alec, and he had to get to Alec. The thought made his head and his heart pound painfully: must find Alec! Thrusting his hand into the keyhole, he felt for the tumblers. They were razor-sharp, cutting the sensitive pads of his fingertips, but he could not stop. The pain was unbearable, but at last he felt the lock give. Withdrawing his bloodied hand, he swung the door open and found himself in a long corridor. "Alec!" His voice came out strangled, barely audible. He tried again but could only force out a hoarse whisper. As he started down the corridor, however, he heard his name called from a great distance that had nothing to do with stone walls. The corridor was long, and at the far end stood Alec, facing away from him. "Alec!" Seregil croaked, knowing there was no way that Alec would hear. As he'd feared, Alec disappeared around a corner to the right. Seregil ran to the turning, only to find another equally long corridor and, once again, Alec with his back to him. He called out, but Alec disappeared again--to the left this time. It happened again and again, as if they were playing some strange and frustrating game not of Seregil's choosing. Rounding a final turn, he could see Alec crouched against the wall that dead-ended at the far end of the hallway. He had his face in his hands but Seregil knew him by his blond braid and his clothing. When his lover looked up, his once beautiful face was nothing but an empty-eyed skull. Suddenly a door opened behind him and Alec fell through it. The door disappeared as suddenly as it had come. "No!" Seregil screamed. "Alec! Tali, come--""--back!" The desperation in Seregil's voice jolted Alec awake in time to catch something hard and blunt in the face. With a grunt of pain and surprise, he automatically reached out to fend off an attacker, but instead felt Seregil sitting bolt upright in bed, trembling and covered in cold sweat. His voice was ragged and eerie as he whispered over and over, "Come back! Please come back!" "It's all right, tali." Alec gently pulled him back down, settling with Seregil's head on his shoulder. It was too dark to see him, but Alec could feel his lover's heart hammering against his ribs, and the clamminess of his skin. Seregil was no stranger to nightmares, but it had been ages since he'd had one like this. "What was it?" "A bad one." "What about?" "I--I can't remember." "You talked in your sleep. You were begging someone to come back." "Really?" Seregil drew a shuddering breath. "I don't know. I can't remember anything except being terrified." "Maybe you will in the morning. How's the headache?" "Still bad." "I'll get you something." But when he tried to leave the bed, Seregil's arms tightened around him. "Please, stay." Alec pulled the sheet up to Seregil's chin and rubbed his back, as he had so many nights after Nysander's tragic death. It was a long time until he was certain Seregil was asleep. The following morning they woke late. Seregil looked positively haggard. "Does your head still hurt?" Alec asked. "No, thankfully, but I don't think I slept well." Seregil

rubbed at his eyes, then frowned up at him. "Bilairy's Balls, what happened to your face?" "You did, tali. You thrashed around while you were dreaming." Alec went to the tall looking glass and ruefully examined the small bruise under his right cheekbone. "You're a hazard to sleep with sometimes." Seregil came over and gently kissed the bruise. "I'm sorry." "Maybe it was just the rich food last night. Alania's cook uses too much spice and butter." "That's probably it," Seregil said with a chuckle, but it sounded a bit hollow, for they both remembered a time when his nightmares had been more than mere dreams. Late-morning sunlight streamed in through the dining room doors. In the garden beyond, the crocuses had already vanished and jonquils and fragrant hyacinth were in bloom under the budding lilacs. Fresh green leaves adorned the rosebushes. Seregil and Alec were lingering over a late breakfast when Runcer ushered in Thero and his young apprentice, Mika. Ten years old now, the sandy-haired boy had grown half a hand span since Thero had rescued him from the sleeping death. Bright and inquisitive, and a bit mischievous at times, Mika was utterly devoted to Thero. His wide grey eyes shone with pride and adoration at every approving word. Runcer went off to the kitchen to fetch extra dishes and milk for Mika. "What brings you two out so early?" asked Alec, pouring a mug of strong Aurenen tea for Thero. "Early?" Thero scoffed. "It's nearly noon and you're still in your dressing gown. Did Alania keep you two out all night again?" "No, we finished early, as it happens," said Alec. "I like her," Mika informed them, reaching for a spiced bun. "She kisses me, but she gives me sweets, too." Thero moved the buns out of reach without touching the plate. "Manners!" The wizard's relationship with the boy was that of a teacher, mentor, and guardian since Mika had moved from his parents' house to Thero's tower rooms at the Oreska House. Despite being a rather strict disciplinarian, Thero clearly cared deeply for his apprentice, and Seregil continued to marvel at the transformation of the man--once rival, and now valued friend. The "cold fish" of old had matured into a reasonable human being, concerned with more than just his prowess with magic and thirst for knowledge. Mika did his best to look contrite. "May I have a bun, please, Lord Alec?" Alec grinned and nudged the plate back within reach. "Have as many as you like." While the adults chatted about various social doings, Mika ate his fill of buns and bacon, managing to slip a few morsels to the pair of white Zengati hounds lurking under the table when he thought no one was looking. When the meal was over, Thero suggested the boy take the dogs into the garden. Seregil whistled Zir and Marag out from under the table and found a well-gnawed wooden ball for Mika to throw for them. When he was gone, Seregil gave the wizard a questioning look. "You look uncommonly tired, Seregil," Thero noted. "Don't tell me your roistering life is starting to catch up with you?" "I didn't sleep well." "He had a nightmare," Alec added, earning himself an annoyed look from Seregil. "I'm sorry to hear that," said Thero. "You used to have them quite often, as I recall." "Everyone has one now and then," said Seregil, brushing it aside. "So, what brings you here?" Thero helped himself to more tea. "What's your opinion on ghosts?" "I'm not fond of them." Seregil took a sip of tea and glanced at Alec. There were only three things Seregil knew of that the younger man actually feared: losing Seregil, heights, and--since feeling their cold touch the day Alec had killed the dyrmagnos on a distant Plenimaran shore--ghosts. "Why do you ask?" Revue de presse Praise for Lynn Flewellings Casket of Souls Full of intrigue and plots upon plots. RT Book s