

Shard Warriors: Origins

Part 1

"I never," his assistant panted, "pictured you as a stargazer."

Norman smiled, kept his eyes – and his flash-light - on the rocky terrain in front of him. "Oh? Why's that?"

"I don't know," Robert Finnegan answered, short of breath. "You're in the lab so much, I guess I must've assumed you lived there. Doctor Venitus going *outside*? Preposterous!"

"Hah!" Norman barked, smile widening to a grin. "That's exactly *why* I like stargazing so much. Gives me an excuse to get out of the laboratory."

Neither spoke as they descended a steep, rugged slope. Both were too focussed on the desert and the dark, the threat of slipping and breaking their necks, to converse. But, as soon as the danger was passed and they were on solid, level ground again, Norman turned to his companion.

"Coming out here, it reminds me of how vast our universe truly is. In the lab, it's easy to lose sight of things. We mix chemicals and observe reactions and, inside those four walls, we're practically gods – making magic happen. But out here? We're nothing. Just tiny specs. It's humbling."

"Okay," Robert sighed, hunching over and massaging his legs. "Okay, I get that. But why come so far out of the city? Why not find a nice, warm rooftop somewhere and set up there?"

"Light pollution," Norman shrugged. "You'd be surprised how far it travels. Even if you can't see the city's glow with your naked eye, it's up there. If you want a good, true view of the night's sky, you have to come out here – where there are no lights for miles and miles in every direction. New Moon, no clouds. This is a perfect night for it."

It was an hour later, after the telescopes had been set up and the flash-lights turned off, that *it* happened.

A red glow in the sky, a falling rock that lit up the night.

"It's impossible," Norman breathed, looking down at the crater and the car-sized rock in the centre of it. "This... It doesn't make any sense."

"A meteorite that size," Robert nodded in agreement, "this hole should be *massive*."

Norman pointed his flash-light down at the bowl of earth the meteorite had created. Sniffed the air. Pointed the light back at the car-sized space-rock. His brain danced between the pieces of information before him. *None* of which made any sense.

The crater should be bigger, yes. *Much* bigger. But, more than that, the meteorite itself should've buried itself in the ground upon impact. By the look of things, the rock was resting *on top* of the crater's surface. And the air – it wasn't filled with dust or dirt or debris, it was as clear and fresh as any other part of the desert. And the crater's ridge. It was all wrong. Too sharp, too clean.

"I'm going down there," Norman said.

Before his friend could complain, Norman turned to look him in the eye. A bold, confident look.

"Stay here," he told Robert. "And keep the light on me."

As he climbed down into the crater, Norman's heart beat a rapid rhythm against his ribs. He patted the earth gingerly, frowned at how cold the crater floor was. And that frown only deepened as he approached the meteorite itself.

It radiated no heat.

For an object that'd just gone through re-entry, that was impossible. But then, so much about this discovery seemed unreal.

When he reached the meteorite, he tapped its surface.

Cool to the touch.

"Peculiar," Norman whispered. "What are you?"

Then he saw it. The glowing cyan gemstone. And, not too far away from it, another glowing gem – this one purple.

Slowly, he circled the rock; saw more and more of them. Glowing crystals; each the length and width of a small fingernail, each a different colour, each embedded in the surface of the meteorite and seemingly unharmed by the heat and force of atmospheric entry.

Glowing... Perhaps they'd absorbed the energy somehow, were releasing it as light?

Norman stopped in front of a glowing white gemstone that was at perfect eye-level. He tilted his head, considered. He raised his hand, reached out with his index finger, gently touched the glowing white gem.

The instant his skin came into contact with it, the small white gem latched onto Norman's flesh – dug into it.

Norman screamed.

The Gemshard carved its way down his finger, leaving a line of torn flesh in its wake. It cut a line to the palm of Norman's hand, continued to move down to his wrist and beyond – under the sleeve of Norman's coat.

Norman dropped to his knees, roared as the white gem cut its way along his arm, over his bicep and his pec to the centre of Norman's chest.

He collapsed on the floor, felt a tingling heat as the white gem came to a halt. A flare of agonising heat before the world went black.

He awoke in the passenger seat of his car, clothes torn and makeshift bandages wrapped around his right arm and hand and chest.

Robert was in the driver's seat, pale-faced as he drove max-speed down an abandoned desert road.

"What happened..." Norman murmured. But, even as he spoke the words, the memory came flooding back to him. "The white gem..."

"I couldn't get it off you," Robert said quickly, voice filled with panic. "It wouldn't budge. Fucking thing carved you arm up good. Don't worry, I'm taking you to a hospital. Everything."

"No," Norman groaned. "Stop. Pull over."

Robert ignored him.

"Pull over!" Norman repeated, louder and firmer.

Robert looked over at him, didn't slow down.

"Stop the car," Norman growled, sitting up straight. "Now."

His friend hesitated for a moment longer before finally slowing down, coming to a stop on the dark, desert road.

"No hospitals," Norman sighed. "Not while that thing is still attached to me. We can't."

"You're bleeding!" Robert half-shouted. "You need to see a doctor. Your arm!"

"Calm down," Norman said as calmly and confidently as he could manage. "My arm is fine. I think the bleeding has stopped."

He reached for the torn piece of shirt that was wrapped around his hand, tugged it away while Robert whined a complaint. After giving it a quick check himself, he showed his hand to Robert.

It was covered in dried blood, sure. Not the prettiest sight. But the bleeding *had* stopped. The cut wasn't *too* deep. It'd leave a scar, but Norman's life wasn't in danger. He'd need to disinfect the wound, rest up for a few days, but he'd be fine.

"If anyone sees the glowing white gem in my chest, they're going to ask questions. And, for now, we need to keep that meteorite a secret. It's big, Rob. *Really* big. Until we

know exactly what we've discovered, best not to get anyone else involved."

"Still have no idea what purple or white do, and we haven't tested most of the others, but the ones we have..."

"I know," Norman grinned. "Told you it was big."

"Big? This is world-changing!" Robert shook his head. "What the fuck are these things?"

"No idea. But whatever they are, we need to keep them a secret. No one can know until we've learned everything we possibly can about them. It's too important."

"Still," Robert spoke hesitantly. "Shouldn't we inform *someone*? Maybe we could get more funding. Enough to *really* start testing these Gemshards. Mice and rats are one thing, but what if we could get some monkeys in here. Or hell, maybe even some human volunteers."

"The moment people find out about the Shards," Norman stated simply, "the government and military will swoop in and take everything. The combat advantage Shards could provide will ensure that every bit of information on them will become highly classified. For the sake of science and free public knowledge, we have to learn everything we possibly can now – before our ability to study these Shards is taken away."

"I... I suppose."

"Besides," Norman smiled. "The moment the military swoops in to take everything, they'll grab me and my White Shard up too." They couldn't take it from him. A bonded Shard being separated from its host always disintegrated. Always. "Don't want to leave my son without a father now, do we?"

"How are you so certain it's a boy?" Robert asked.

"A father knows," Norman laughed. "Wife's convinced it's a girl, but she's wrong. I'm gonna have a son. I can feel it."

"Bitch!" Norman slammed his fist into the wall, immediately regretted it. "Fuck!" He swore, clutching his hand against the sudden burst of pain.

They were cutting his funding!

That bitch – his higher up at the labs, a whore who'd only gotten the damn job by being pretty and laying on her back for the boss – she had it out for him. So what if his 'official work' had lagged behind. That wasn't his fault! He was busy researching the Shards.

Not that the cunt knew about them.

If she did, she'd probably fire him for wasting lab time and equipment on personal pursuits. The gravity of the Shards, what they meant for humanity, would fly right over the ignorant whore's head – even if she did discover the truth.

Of course he was lagging behind with work. He *had* to.

The Shards. He was so close to understanding them.

Mice and rats? They just weren't enough. It was obvious from the lacklustre way the Shards bonded to their bodies. The lack of finesse and awareness they had with their newfound powers. No, creatures like those – rodents with small brains, unable to comprehend the fragments of Godhood they'd been blessed with – would never allow him to truly study and understand the Shards.

He needed human test subjects.

But... That wasn't possible. Not without much more funding. And his funding was being *cut*.

Bitch.

Norman walked over to one of the locked cabinets, opened it up and plucked out a test tube. Inside the tube, a Purple Shard.

Still, after so many weeks of testing, they had no idea what the purple ones did. All

the mice that'd been given Purple Shards to had acted the same. Standing in their cages alone, doing nothing special or interesting.

For you.

Perhaps it was a dud. Perhaps purple did nothing at all, or maybe it acted as an amplifier for other Shards. Useless on its own, but paired with another...

Control, a white voice whispered in his mind.

Or, perhaps, only a human could utilise purple's power. He needed a test subject. A stranger. He'd have done it himself, if not for the fact he already had a useless, powerless Shard bound to him. Two Shards in one creature led to... unfortunate results. And, though he'd tried numerous times, his cowardly assistant refused to bond with any of the Shards. He needed a willing, human test subject.

You.

But, if purple and white were duds, did he really have to worry about mutation? Perhaps that was the power of one of them. Preventing mutation.

Yes...

With funding being cut, he was running out of options. Sometimes, a man had to take risks if he wanted the rewards.

Do it.

He pulled the cap off the test tube, tilted it upside down and watched the Purple Shard slide into his own, gloved hand. With his free hand, he opened his lab coat, unbuttoned his shirt.

"Purple, huh?" Norman took a deep breath. "Power demands sacrifice. Knowledge is never free."

The Purple Shard held between his index finger and thumb.

Power.

His hand moved, Shard moving towards his chest and the glowing white stone already embedded there.

Take it all.

The moment the Purple Shard came into contact with his skin, it attached itself. A burning, agonising instant. And then it was over.

A second whispering voice joined the first.

Norman buttoned up his shirt, stood up straight.

"I think," he smiled, purple power pulsing through him, "I'm going to go talk to the bitch about my funding again."