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THE RIDDLED STONE
BOOK ONE

TERESA GASKINS

TABLETOP ACADEMY PRESS
PART ONE
Wide-eyed with curiosity, Chris crept away from the grassy spot where he was supposed to wait. His nurse had turned away to clean up Trillory, his twin sister, who had spilled her food over her front. Chris went quickly as he could with waddling, short steps.

He paused just before a corner of the hedge, his chubby two-year-old hands catching himself on a branch. From around the corner he could hear someone crying in short sobs. He continued forward and was surprised to see Anthony, his eldest brother.

Anthony’s hair, usually so much like Chris’s own slightly-curly black, was in a mess. He was sitting with his back to the stone wall of a gazebo, his knees pulled as tight against his chest as they could be with his head buried in them.

Chris let out a slight gurgling sound. Anthony looked up. His pale blue eyes, also like Chris’s, were slightly hollow, and the top of
his cheeks tear-stained. Chris smiled and cocked his head, much like a puppy. Then he stumbled forward a couple steps before tripping.

He looked up in time to see Anthony’s face go from surprise to anger. His eyebrows squeezed together until they nearly touched, and his lips all but disappeared as he pinched them.

Chris was surprised. His brother had always been smiling, friendly and loving. Last time, Anthony had reached out his hands and laughed when Chris had grabbed his fingers.

Anthony rose and scooped his brother up. Holding him loosely, he carried Chris back the way he had come.

“Naughty child! You should be with your nurse, not sticking your nose in other’s business,” he hissed. Chris gave a small cry at his brother’s roughness.

Then a few steps later they encountered the nurse, carrying Trill and hurrying down the path. She paused as she saw Anthony, and then dropped a curtsy.

“Thank you, young master Anthony, for returning your brother to me.”

Anthony gave a slight humph, and handed her Chris. “See that you don’t lose him again.” Then he turned, leaving as fast as he could while retaining a noble posture.

Chris stared after him for a second, and then buried his face against his nurse, who spoke with a slightest tremor. “Now, now, Christopher. See that you don’t wander off again. It’s time you two were headed inside for your nap.”
Chris caught Arnold as the bigger boy stumbled backwards towards him and Nora. He pushed Arnold back towards Terrin, and the two continued their duel.

Arnold easily regained his balance in time to parry a blow from the grinning, brown-haired forest girl, Terrin.

Nora sat nearly oblivious to the scene. She had long ago stopped being excited at the duels of her friends. Now she hummed quietly, her long, blond hair falling to nearly hide her face. To a passerby, she would have looked completely absorbed in her studies, but Chris could see a hint of amusement in her deep sapphire eyes as she glanced up every once in a while.

Nearly four years had passed since he had met Nora, back when she had first entered the school. She came from North Yorc, a town up in the mountains of North Raec. Yorcs were tough folk; some thought them too opinionated. After the Great Raec War, the war that had really made North and South Raec two different countries, the people of Yorc decided that no longer would they serve the king, except when they agreed with his orders. It was
commonly understood that the only reason the king had put up with such insubordination was that Yorcs were some of the best fighters, and he hated to completely lose their allegiance.

But he had found that Nora was neither opinionated nor did she have much of an interest in fighting. Instead she was shy and studious, and what opinions she did have, she rarely stated. It had surprised him a bit when he first met her.

Arnold he’d known nearly all his life. Terrin he met when he was seven. The four were best friends, doing everything together. Arnold had graduated the year before and had left to continue his training as a knight. Having completed that training, he had come to spend some free time with them. The other three had missed him, but they too would be parting soon.

Terrin would be returning to the forest people of Xell, where she would become a hunter. Nora was going to continue her studies at a small college, to specialize in either history or healing. Chris himself would be going to a more well-known college, where he would finish his training as a scholar.

A bell tolled the late hour, and he sighed. “I need to be getting back now. I’ll see you tomorrow, and then maybe we’ll have a duel, Arnold, to see if you really have earned your knighthood. When do you have to leave, anyway?”

“I might as well go Monday,” Arnold said. “You’ll be back in classes, and with finals... Well, I’ve been there before, and I wouldn’t do it again for the world. I’d rather take on the whole school alone in a fight.”

Terrin rolled her eyes, and Nora smiled.

Chris waved and departed. He walked with his head down,
trying not to draw unwanted attention. He was the youngest child of Earl Fredrico, and he hated when people felt the urge to bow and say, “Honorable Christopher,” when he would rather be treated like a normal person.

He was about halfway to the manor house when someone grabbed his arm and tugged. He turned his head to see his twin sister, tall as him but with strawberry blond hair flowing in waves down her back. He thought Trill had a regal look, with her straight pose and her bright eyes, like a younger version of their mother.

“Anthony is home,” she whispered, barely audible.

He knew what this meant and started walking again quickly. Anthony was his eldest brother, who spent most of his time out looking for quests or courting at the Dukedom of Grith, where he had lived in Chris’s childhood as a squire and later as a knight.

Anthony was not really bad, but Chris and Trill thought that he was overly ambitious and more interested in power than anything. Their father, on the other hand, considered him the crown jewel of his collections, and, in his own words, “one worthy of kingship.”

Chris himself was scared of his eldest brother, who had often teased him about being the youngest—even younger than his twin by several minutes. And Trill, the only one who knew, hated Anthony because of it.

He groaned, straightening his coat, and hurried on with Trill at his elbow, preparing himself for his brother. He probably wouldn’t be allowed to leave the house over the weekend. He’d have to ask one of the servants to give his regrets to Terrin, Nora, and Arnold.
As the music ended, Chris pulled Arnold back against the wall of the ballroom, hoping to avoid attention while the various young ladies sought their next partners. Voices rattled in the background. The feast had been finished hours ago, and now it was eleven and he was sick of dancing, and his feet agreed.

Anthony had brought the news that Crown Prince Tyler was coming. Four days later the prince had arrived, and now, of course, there had to be a party. All sorts of people had accompanied the prince, or arrived slightly before him. Chris wasn’t even sure how they all found out the prince was coming.

Arnold, as a knight, had been invited to the banquet, and though he had planned to leave town yesterday, he decided to “stick around for the food,” as he’d phrased it. But Chris wished the two girls were with them as well. He had danced most of the dances, but the ladies were snobbish or boring. He wished Terrin...
was there to roll her eyes at their fancies, and Nora to at first stare in awe, but then giggle with him about their faults.

A slim lady, more elegant than most, stepped forward. She held her chin high, showing off her pearl choker, and causing her pearl circlet to catch the light.

“Honorable Christopher,” she said in a high voice, with a bit of an accent, “you probably don't remember me. We met when we were young. I was a bit older, so I remember, but you were just five. I'm Lady Joline.”

He half bowed, then said, “Lady Joline, I think I remember you a bit. Your parents were the ambassadors for Diamond Isles, right? This is my cousin, Sir Arnold, recently titled a knight.”

Arnold bowed deeply, and Chris saw a slightly sappy grin on his friend's face.

Lady Joline beamed. “Sir Arnold. An honor to meet you. Yes, my late parents were the ambassadors, and I have recently taken my mother's place. Duke Grith has been very kind to accommodate me when I'm in North Raec.

“But enough about me. Arnold, come dance with me. And can I claim the dance after from you, Honorable Christopher?”

“I do not have any previous engagements,” he said.

Then Arnold stepped forward to take Joline’s arm. Chris bowed his head to them as they departed. Arnold glanced back, and Chris played the game, grinning at him and winking.

But the grin vanished quickly as he wondered how mad his father would be if he simply left. He looked towards the high table. Prince Tyler was chatting merrily with his father, who no doubt was slipping in compliments to his children whenever he
could. Chris shook the thought from his mind—with the crown prince here, there would be no hope for escape.

Anthony himself was nowhere to be seen, but Chris suspected he was among the dancers, winning favor with the most important of the young ladies, or at least the richest.

By the time the bell tolled midnight, he had been made to dance with almost every lady in the room. His feet ached, and he happily retired to a corner as his father stood to make a speech, and then the prince after him.

Midway through the prince’s speech, there was the sound of footsteps from the hall. Everyone’s eyes shifted to the door, and the prince paused. Then the door swung open, and an old man appeared, accompanied by five younger-looking guards.

Immediately the man, whom Chris recognized as the Shard’s caretaker, knelt and bowed his head. The guards quickly did the same. The prince bid them rise, and the man, Darwin, explained.

“Hail, Crown Prince Tyler Coric. Hail, Earl Diard Fredrico. Hail, honorable knights and ladies. I’m sorry that I must ruin your fun, but I have found the Shard stolen, and proof that one of the Earl Diard’s family is involved.” He held up a brooch, marked with the seal of the earl’s house.

Chris bit his lip. Making a quick decision, he stepped forward before anyone else could. “I have been missing my brooch since the early afternoon. I noticed it was gone when we were walking back to the house from meeting the prince. I didn’t go out after that.”

Then Anthony stepped forward and said, “I hate to accuse my own brother, but I have not seen him for at least the last hour. I
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His father’s face looked red and angry as he spoke above the noise. “And how do you suppose an eighteen-year-old boy, even the son of an earl, stole a Shard?”

“With the Crown Prince at the manor, we thought it best to move most of the guards here. Only these five were at the Shard, and I found them fast asleep.”

“What will you have us do, Crown Prince?” asked the earl. His hands gripped the table, his knuckles white.

Tyler rose. “Search Christopher and his rooms for further evidence. If none is found, we will let him go. If proof of his involvement is found, then I will send a message to my father.”

Chris stiffened, but then relaxed. They couldn’t prove anything against him, because he hadn’t done it. And the only people who could have planted something in his room were his family, the servants, or maybe a few of the guests.

And why would any of them do that?
Terrin

The crowd milled around the courtyard outside the earl’s manor. Most belonged to the party Crown Prince Tyler had brought along, but there were others, too. They were all waiting for the prince and the earl to finished talking, waiting to hear Chris’s fate.

Terrin felt ready to punch something—the face of either the caretaker, the prince, or Earl Fredrico would have been fabulously satisfying. Especially the caretaker’s.

She glanced at Nora, whose expression looked gray and stony as she tried to keep from crying. Terrin’s eyes softened, and she took her friend’s hand. She saw Arnold, on Nora’s other side, do the same with Nora’s left hand. She turned her attention to the scene before them.

Two weeks had passed since Chris had been arrested. A small disk had been found in his room, and the caretaker, who was
something of a magician, had claimed that it was a teleportation device, big enough for the Shard but not anything much larger. The guards and caretaker had checked everywhere they could think of, and had still not found the actual Shard.

Terrin cursed mentally. She was sure this was some kind of mistake, or a setup.

Finally the prince and the earl stepped out onto the veranda. The prince raised his hands, and the earl coughed a bit. The crowd fell silent at once.

“I have made my decision, and I have received approval from my father,” Prince Tyler began.

She pressed her lips together. Next to her, Nora shuddered and squeezed her hand. Terrin squeezed back, but kept her gaze on the prince.

He continued, “I have decided that as the Shard cannot be found, nor any traces of it, we cannot truly prove Christopher Fredrico guilty on the circumstantial evidence of a teleporter and a missing brooch. However, he has no alibi, and it seems certain that he is involved, so I have decided to banish him from the kingdom of North Raec until such time as completely solid proof for or against him is found.

“From this moment forward, Christopher is to have nothing of his father’s, not even his last name. He will be given only enough money for passage beyond our borders. If he is found within the territory of North Raec after this month is out, his life will be forfeit.

“If any of you find fault with my decision, speak now.”

The silence fell like a brick.
She wanted to yell that it wasn’t just, that Chris wasn’t a criminal, and therefore he should have no punishment. However, she held her peace and looked hard into Tyler’s face, as if trying to telepathically pass the message instead.

“Finally, I wish to add that any who go with him, or offer him assistance, will share his fate,” continued the prince.

Terrin raised her eyebrow a bit. So he thought some of them might choose to go with Chris? Or was this merely protocol, informing everyone of the exact rules? Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arnold biting his lip.

“If no one has any comments, then you are dismissed. Christopher, I will grant you tomorrow to prepare, but you must leave no later than the morning of the following day.”
THE STORY CONTINUES …

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