Standing at the edge of a cliff, she stared down on green trees that faded into the distance, so thick that you could hardly tell that they were leaves and not grass. From up here, it didn’t look too spooky, but Terrin knew this was the very edge of the Dark Forest.

To her right, the river rushed over the cliff and crashed down into a small clearing, but the sound seemed dull, muffled by a steady, buzzing hum. Below, a stream from the waterfall’s base flowed away into the trees.

Beside it lay a black body, cruelly twisted.

She was locked to the spot not by fascination with the body, but by the strange prickling sensation along her back. She had felt that cold tingle before.

Magic.

Four spirits moved out from the trees, pale figures gliding towards the carcass. They formed a half circle around it. Then they looked up at her.

Even from this distance, she could tell they were smiling.

Terrin put her arm out, trying to reach something to steady herself against, but found nothing.

She couldn’t tear her eyes away, and though there were no words in the strange humming, she knew they were calling to her. They were pulling her forward, closer to the edge.

She felt her body sway forward.

Her mind screamed …
HUNTED

THE RIDDLED STONE
BOOK TWO

TERESA GASKINS

TABLETOP ACADEMY PRESS
PART ONE
Terrin crashed through the bushes, thorns scratching at her arms and legs. She stumbled forward as her foot dropped farther than she expected.

She caught herself against the ground with her hands, pulling herself forward. Though she was only eight years old, growing up in the forest had made her agile. She was up and running again in a second, barely breaking her stride.

Underfoot, twigs and leaves crackled. Behind her she could hear a *thump, thump, thump* and the snapping and scratching of twigs against scales as something large leaped through the underbrush.

Wraiths were normally shy creatures. Why was this one so aggressive?

She ignored the cramp that stabbed at her, the sweat stinging her eyes, and the pain in her chest as she gasped for air, struggling to pick her feet up higher and clear the plants that reached to
tangle her ankles.

She burst into an unfamiliar clearing and paused, looking around. The ground dropped away in front of her, how far down she couldn’t see. She was surrounded by woods except for a gap between the trees and the cliff. A river to her right fell off into a waterfall, but Terrin could barely hear it over her own pounding heart.

She turned away from the stream, forcing her weary legs to move. But she was too slow, and before she had taken a step, a great weight slammed into her. She let out a cry as she fell forward to the ground.

Something warm touched the back of her neck.

“Help, help, someone help me,” she yelled.

But the forest people never wandered this close to the Dark Forest. Here the woods were cold and unwelcoming.

There would be no one to help her.

The pressure on her back eased enough for her to roll and face the beast. All she could see was its flat, black head with those gold, cat-like eyes watching her. Its mouth lolled open, pink against the dark skin, and the white teeth dripped with dark gray saliva.

She heard its scaly skin ripple as it crouched closer to her. Its tongue ran over its teeth, and its nostrils flared so wide that Terrin could have almost fit her hand in them.

Then the beast turned its gaze to the left and growled, its nostrils narrowing to slits.

It spun and leaped away, its long, thick tail swinging only inches above her head. The tail disappeared from above her, and she sat up enough to watch as it cleared several bushes. Despite the scales and the lizard-like head, the creature moved more like a huge cat. She supposed its ability to blend with the shadows had
earned it the name wraith.

She hoped her father was okay. He had been teaching her to track when they sighted the wraith and stopped to watch it for a while. Even though they lived in the forest, wraiths were rare and usually avoided people.

Then the beast had spotted them and attacked.

Her father had ordered her to run, and she’d obeyed too quickly to see what he had done. But surely he was all right, surely he’d come and find her, and perhaps he would know why the wraith had acted strangely.

Exhausted by the breakneck run and fear, Terrin felt herself fading into darkness. She struggled weakly to stay awake.

Through the fog of weariness, she noticed the silence.

That was odd.

The forest glimmered with a reddish shade that meant the sun was setting, but where were the cheerful chirps of birds and the rustle of grass as creatures ran to and from their dens? There was nothing, as if some sort of void had sucked away all the life of the forest.

Not even the buzz of bugs stirring about.

And she could barely feel the breeze against her skin.

A tingle ran up her spine, but at the same time it was as if the tingle was floating off to her left.

It was … magic?

Groaning, Terrin pushed herself to a sitting position. She froze as she met the eyes of a pale, rose-colored ethereal being, floating an inch off the ground at the edge of the clearing. As she stared into its blank eyes, a strange humming started.

The thing approached with gliding strides, just short of the grace of floating, and the tingling sensation grew stronger, like
hundreds of pinpricks in her back.

Terrin fought back tears of fear. She was a forest girl, and she refused to cry.

The being stretched out a hand toward her, and the humming rose in pitch as the thing’s fingers brushed against her cheek. The tingling turned into a chill. Her body locked up. Her instincts told her to run, or defend herself, but she could only tremble.

She realized that this must be a spirit. Raw magic, without need of a magician to uphold it.

Some said that spirits were the souls of strong magicians who had been especially close to nature. But Terrin knew now they couldn’t be—there was nothing human about this creature. Those empty eyes confirmed what the freezing sensation already told her.

Spirits were evil.

Terrin cried out for help again, positive that the ethereal monster would devour her soul.

An answering call came from the forest, “Terrin, Terrin?”
She recognized her father’s voice and screamed her reply.
“Father! Father, quickly.”

The spirit withdrew its hand and turned its shimmering head towards the sound of twigs and leaves snapping under foot. Her father crashed into the clearing, panting. The spirit took a step back, then turned and rushed into the woods. Terrin was sure that the thing really was floating this time.

She scrambled to her feet and grabbed her father’s hand. He pulled her close, his hug chasing away the chill.
“F-Father, did you see it? It tried to eat me.”
“I saw the wraith. It’s gone now. You don’t need to worry about it anymore.”
“No, Father, the spirit. Did you see the spirit?”
Tears pounded at the back of her eyes, but she held them back with slow, trembling breaths.

“No, honey, I didn’t see the spirit.” He frowned and knelt to her level. “Was there one?”

“Yes. It was horrid.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll be fine now, my girl. Come on, let’s go home. We’re late and your mother will be worried,” he said. But he was still frowning as he hugged her again, his hand running through her tangled hair.

She leaned against her father as they walked, still sore from her run earlier. But she was of the forest tribe of Xell, and she would not show weakness. Not until she was home, anyway.

Terrin glanced at her hands. They still had dried blood on them, from her fall, but there was no sting. Frowning, she gave them a closer examination.

The scrapes had already healed.
“So, lad, I reckon yer headed to the capital to volunteer for th’ army?” The villager’s deep voice carried up the hall from the inn’s common room. Terrin paused by the doorway, listening.

“And how do you reckon that?”

Terrin recognized Arnold’s voice and almost laughed when she realized who the farmer was talking to. Despite his boyish looks, Arnold was already a knight.

Though his knighthood would surely be revoked, if they were ever caught. The terms of Chris’s banishment would apply to anyone who dared to help him. And they had been traveling with Chris, until the idiot decided to run off on his own in a misguided attempt to keep them safe.

Now they had to hunt him down, and the rain that had been falling on and off—mostly on—for the past two days didn’t help.

The villager spoke again. “Bah, if yer not headed there now, ya will be soon enough. Soon as the war starts, and we all know that
won’t be long. Personally I think the king’s doing a botched job of it. We all knew another war would be coming any time now, but did he start preparing? No! He waits to th’ last minute.”

“My poor Nessa,” moaned another voice. “She won’t be able t’ handle it. All alone like. She’s been doing alright since her mother died, but I don’t think she could take it if I was called away now.”

“Stop yer groaning, Clark. Nessa’s stronger ’an a pair of ox. She’s as likely t’ be called as ya.”

“Now that’s cruel!”

Arnold broke in. “Tell me, what exactly have you heard about this upcoming war?”

The second farmer, Clark, answered. “Some caravan got burnt up real good. Heard the Crown Prince found it ’imself. They say there’s proof a South Raec lot were the ones attacked it.”

The first farmer gave a snort. “We coulda attacked years ago, got ahead of ’em. Now we’ve let them have the first move! It’ll take months t’ amass a frightful force t’ oppose ’em. As I say, the king shoulda been preparing!”

“Wait,” Arnold said. “Are you saying the king shouldn’t have had hope for a lasting peace? Building up an army would have brought war for sure.”

“War’s coming, boy. Been doin’ so fer a long time. Peace’ll ne’er last,” said the first farmer.

“Aye. Not till the king’s got ’em under his belt,” added Clark. “And th’ longer he takes, th’ more we simple farmers suffer fer it.”

“You forget,” said Arnold, “the nobles always have knights in training. And the king has allies he can call upon, if there is a war.”

“Sure, the knights’ll come. But th’ allies won’t. Only ones close ’nough are the Yorcs.” A couple farmers gave low laughs at this. “And th’ Isles. No help from either o’ them.”
Terrin’s sharp ears picked up someone muttering, “Th’ Yorcs need t’ be taught a lesson much as th’ South’ners,” under his breath. Her mouth pulled back into a deep frown.

“Well, as ya can see, we don’ have no allies close ’nough to help. ’At leaves th’ lords and their knights.”

“And,” finished Clark, “th’ lords and knights can’t fight no war on their own. So they’ll be sendin’ fer us farmer folk. You’ll see.”

Terrin almost smiled as she imagined Arnold’s flustered face—being lectured about the ways of war when he’d been taught by real knights. But she was too annoyed by the comment about the Yorcs.

At least Nora was still in their room and had not heard.

Christopher

Chris pulled his cloak tighter and shivered, poking his pitiful attempt at a fire with his foot.

The heavy drizzle plastered his hair flat. He tried to tuck one loose strand behind his ear, but it stuck to his forehead. The black mess was growing long enough to get in his eyes, and he feared the day he would have to comb it.

Beyond the fire, he could see Thomas curled in his blanket. The older man had fallen asleep quicker than Chris would have thought possible in this constant rain.

He himself could not sleep, but it was more than just the rain. How was he supposed to make plans when he had no idea where they were headed? His last dream had shown him five people riding into the early morning sun. So he and Thomas were traveling east—though the sun had yet to show its face.
He had told Thomas of the dream, but he hadn’t mentioned the extra three people. No reason to worry him. Still, Arnold, Terrin, and Nora had been constantly on Chris’s mind since then. He was sure he’d done the right thing when he left them. His presence had brought them nothing but danger.

He sneezed.

Of course, he was also endangering Thomas, but the older man knew what he was doing. The others had followed him on blind faith. They’d expected him to head to Diamond Isles and live a peaceful life in exile. Instead he had dragged them onto a quest to follow magic riddles that sounded like nonsense.

A quest to what?

The cave where King Miles found the Riddled Stone and its five Shards, long ages ago? If he got that far.

And if he did, what good would that do him?

The harpies had shown him the first riddle—the same one that launched King Miles on his quest during the Great Raec War—carved in ancient runes deep in their secret cave. The message had warned that “until the hidden are retrieved, you cannot be free.”

Was he being foolish to hope that he could find the missing Shard, which he was accused of stealing, the reason he had been banished? But whoever had taken the Shard had disappeared without leaving a clue—not one that didn’t point to Chris, anyway.

How could an old cave, even a mysterious, magical cave, have any proof of his innocence?

No, now wasn’t the time to worry about that. He would deal with that when he got there. If that was where the magic was leading him.

For now, he just had to worry about what to do next. He let his mind wander over the maps he’d studied in school. The
challenge would be not to get lost in the forest. Probably their best bet was to swing north and find the cliff that marked the southern edge of the Dark Forest. That would make it easier to keep from getting turned around, and they should be able to pass quickly and unnoticed.

Yes, this was best. He would deal with things as he got to them. Thinking too far into the future or past would only dishearten him.

At this point, he couldn’t give up, or he’d have nothing.
The sun glimmered down, reflecting off the smooth mountain stone and blinding anyone who looked the wrong way. The three companions rode slowly down the switchback road, Arnold’s eyes pinned on the back of Terrin’s head to avoid the shining mountain peaks. Nora followed behind.

Terrin had insisted they leave the inn just after breakfast—she’d almost refused them that—to cross the ridge and head out of the mountains. They would easily reach the forest of Xell before evening.

But in Xell, finding Chris would be like finding a toothpick in a wood pile. If he was even there.

They had tracked him as far as that last riddle cave. Arnold wondered, had Chris been able to read the ancient markings on the stone? It had looked like a jumbled mess—but the first stone had been covered with strange marks, too, and somehow he had understood them.
That first message had warned of danger and death, and the harpy seer Andrea had hinted at something terrible about to happen. Then this morning they heard rumors of war brewing in the south. Was that what the riddles were about?

How would they ever figure it out, if they couldn’t find Chris? Outside the riddle cave, they had found clear tracks headed down the mountain to the east. He couldn’t have been too far ahead of them. But the sun set before they could catch him, and then the rain had come and nearly washed the whole trail away. Without Nora’s mountaineering skills they would have been stuck until the path dried out.

But the tracks were gone. Arnold had no idea how they would find Chris now, and the longer they rode the less hope he had.

Terrin had decided that Chris was headed out of the mountains into the forest, and this was the quickest path down. Practically the only path that wasn’t washed out. Arnold suspected she was being influenced by the desire to go home.

Few of the forest folk traveled as far as Fredricburg, where the four of them had met and become friends, even though the school was known as the best in North Raec. Terrin had never been at home in the city or in the surrounding plains. She had seemed more comfortable in the small woods north of town, where they had explored as children in their free time, but even then she’d been wary. So Arnold couldn’t help but wonder how different she would be in the forest of Xell, where she had been raised.

He supposed her outward stubborn streak would remain, but he wondered if she might lose some of the angry cheek she had given even the headmaster. After all, she had repeatedly boasted that forest children were taught to respect their elders.

But Arnold knew that her outward confidence and ferocity
were just shields. She was as vulnerable to doubt and fear as himself—sometimes more so. He knew her mind was constantly reeling her behavior towards Chris, wishing she hadn’t been so harsh.

He would never forget that time when he had seen her—
“Wolves!”

Terrin’s voice startled Arnold out of his reverie. Instinctively he started to pull back on Rich’s reins as Terrin pulled to a stop in front of him, but when he realized what she’d said, he nudged the horse forward to stand beside Terrin. Before them on the path stood three large wolves. Behind him, Nora pulled her own horse to a halt.

The wolves were obviously tired. One had its left eye swollen tightly shut, with fresh claw marks over it. All bore several such claw marks in various places and were missing clumps of fur. Some of the scratches still bled.

Arnold hissed through his teeth. “We need to back away slowly.”

“I know,” said Terrin, a bit too sharply.

The largest of the wolves growled.

Arnold glanced back to Nora. She was slowly moving Minty back. The horse’s nostrils flared, and her ears flickered. Nora leaned forward, patting her neck and shushing her.

Terrin was examining their surroundings. A couple yards to their right a rocky wall stood head-high beside the path, while on their left the steep slope of stones and scraggy mountain grasses offered no place to hide.

As she slowly turned forward again Arnold caught her eyes for a second. He saw the flashes of anger behind her glowering eyes. She gathered her reins and signaled Leaf to back. The horse took
two quick steps and tossed its head, snorting.

The third wolf moved past the leader and then crouched low, snarling. Its fur was tinged ginger-red, but Arnold couldn’t tell if the color was natural or if it was blood.

Taking his reins in his left hand, he signaled Rich to move in front of Terrin. His right hand moved almost unbearably slow to loosen his sword.

The three wolves began to spread out. One-eye’s flattened ears almost blended with his head. And his eye seemed to flicker from Arnold to the lead wolf. On the other hand, the ginger’s eyes were locked on Arnold, and its snarl sent a shiver down his back.

“I don’t think this is working,” whispered Arnold. He glanced back at Terrin, who was slowly reaching for her bow. If there was a fight, it would start before she had a chance to string it.

And as the lead wolf began to move forward, adding his own snarls to the ginger’s, it was looking more and more like a fight. He signaled Rich to back with short steps, keeping him between the wolves and the girls. But the leader moved forward with matching steps.

Arnold signaled Rich to keep backing, then loosely wrapped his reins around his saddle’s pommel and slowly reached back for his shield. Too slowly.

The ginger lunged.

Arnold signaled and Rich pulled into a rear, then pivoted. The wolf landed to their right, and as Rich fell back to all fours Arnold swung his sword down.

The blade caught the red wolf’s shoulder and it sprung back with a yelp. The other two quickly charged in. Arnold turned his horse again and his sword flashed in the air between him and the closest wolf—the leader—which pulled back as if stung. Arnold
pivoted Rich, and the horse pranced toward One-eye.

One-eye retreated with bared fangs, a growl rumbled in its chest. Then it lunged forward, forcing Rich back to avoid its angry jaws. Both the lead wolf and the ginger joined in, pushing the horse back with their snapping teeth.

“Arnold, the edge!” Nora called.

Arnold instinctively glanced at them. Terrin had dismounted and strung her bow.

Rich slipped. For a second Arnold felt the horse begin to slide down the stony slope, then Rich lunged forward onto the path. The wolves scattered.

Arnold didn’t wait for Rich to fully steady himself before turning the horse to rush One-eye, the nearest wolf. It started to pull away, now wary of the horse, but Arnold’s sword caught it behind the ears.

The wolf collapsed, and he pulled his sword free. He turned to face the leader, just as an arrow struck it down.

He swung his head, searching for the ginger wolf, but it came to him. The reddish-gray blur registered in Arnold’s peripheral vision, and he started to pull Rich around to face it. Then pain shot up his left arm as the lunging wolf’s teeth sank into his wrist. The unexpected power of the wolf’s momentum carried him off his horse, giving him barely time to kick his feet free.

He landed on his sword arm, the impact knocking his breath away and causing him to release his sword. He rolled and slid for several feet, ending face down in a patch of dew-soaked grass. The wolf was carried over him, nearly pulling his arm out of joint, but it released his wrist as it passed. It hit the ground and tumbled over, sliding into the mountain wall.

The beast lay still, stunned and maybe even dead. Arnold shut
his eyes for a second, pulling a deep breath. Then he opened them, and the ginger was dragging itself to its feet. Snarling more than ever, it staggered towards him.

Nora

Before the wolf could reach Arnold, Rich spun with stunning speed. His back hooves kicked out, striking the ginger straight on, and sending it flying back into the wall with a crack that made Nora's stomach twist.

Before the wolf slid back to the ground there was a sharp twang. An arrow smacked into the wolf's chest, no doubt killing it—if it wasn’t dead before.

For a moment Nora could only stare at the scene before her. The air seemed eerily silent after the bow shot. Then something clicked in her mind, and she swung off Minty and ripped her bag free from her horse's back. With a quick movement she twisted the reins around the saddle horn before she turned toward Arnold.

She forced herself to walk and to take several deep breaths. Rich turned to face her, his eyes and nostrils wide.

“Whoa, good boy,” she said, gently patting the horse’s forehead before she crouched next to Arnold. The horse was well trained, and now that the danger was gone, he held perfectly still.

“Is he okay?” asked Terrin, kneeling beside Nora.

“I’m fine, and I’m right here,” said Arnold as he rolled to his back and started to prop himself up. But when he put weight on his left hand, he collapsed again with a yelp.

“Stop getting dirt all over it,” Nora said.

She grabbed his forearm and turned the wrist over. Thin, gray
mud smeared over the wound, mixed with the red of fresh blood. As she held his hand, he pushed himself into a sitting position.

“Of course it had to catch you on your wrist,” Nora muttered. Then, louder: “Terrin, get me my water skin. I need to see the wound.”

Terrin leaped into action, but instead of turning to Minty, she quickly detached Arnold’s skin from where it hung over his saddle-horn.

As she handed it to Nora, she asked, “Is it bad?”

Nora splashed the water across his wrist, causing Arnold to groan through clenched teeth. The dirt washed away, exposing the torn flesh for a second. Then blood welled up, hiding it again.

Flowing blood was good—it would cleanse the wound.

But not enough.

“We need to move,” she said. “We have to find a stream.”

She stepped back to let Arnold scramble to his feet. Then turning to Terrin, she added, “An animal bite is always bad.”
Stretching out her arms, Trillory whirled herself in a circle. She loved the freedom of being alone in the north wing’s small common room. The bustling manor of Duke Grith seemed almost empty, now that the king had summoned the duke to a council in Coricstead. Many of the nobles and noble-wannabe courtiers had already scattered, returning to their own homes to prepare for the expected war.

She stopped spinning and let her arms drop. Her father, Earl Fredrico, had always said the rivalry with South Raec was long past, that they were friends now. Others strongly disagreed.

Would there really be a war?

If only Chris was here. Trillory disliked chatting with strangers, but she could talk to her twin for hours. He had studied more about history and politics than she could ever learn, so he would know how to explain what was happening.

With a sigh, she wandered towards the balcony and looked
out at the pouring rain. Chris was gone. There had been nothing she could do to save him.

She pushed through the doors and onto the balcony.

Lady Joline—the graceful socialite who tried to mentor Trill in courtly manners—was distracted with official business as ambassador from the Diamond Isles. She’d gotten a message from her government this morning and had locked herself in her room to write a response. She would be leaving soon to follow the duke to the capital.

For once Trillory had the afternoon to herself, and she planned to enjoy it. Striding across the balcony, she leaned against the stone balustrade, inches from the rain. She would have preferred to be outside, exploring the grounds, but Joline had insisted on her staying out of the rain.

Of course she saw the wisdom in this. Even besides escaping the threat of a cold, none of the maids would have appreciated the puddle she would make coming in from this downpour.

The rain made it impossible to see anything more than a few yards away, much less the city of Charlon that rested below. But she still couldn’t resist reaching out her hand to feel the cool spray of water on her fingers. She smiled. Quickly she glanced behind her and then pulled back her hand. Tilting it forward, she watched as the water on it collected into a large drop and rolled off, launching itself straight out and back into the rain.

She ran her now-dry hand through her hair, and turned to continue exploring. The manor was quite big, and Trill had barely seen half of it.

She wandered down one of the branching halls. The architecture of the duke’s manor was marvelous—especially the north wing, which seemed to be the oldest part of the building. Trill
wondered if even the king’s palace could match it. Of course, there 
was a rumor that Charlon had once been the capital, so this would 
have belonged to the king.

Not that she minded the oversizing. It was nice to be alone. 
Even the servants weren’t here today.

She pushed open the first door. The room only held one simple 
bed tucked in the corner, with a chest at its end, and a small table 
and seat by the window. A smaller door led to a closet. Had it not 
been raining, she would have opened the window and tried to get 
some air circulating. She had always disliked rooms—whether in 
use or not—without proper air flow.

But it was raining, and she left shortly. She found nothing 
in the next three rooms and was just opening a fifth door when 
someone spoke.

“They’re all the same. And if there was anything special, I 
would know.”

Trill spun to face the voice, and the door clacked loudly shut 
behind her. She found herself facing Eric, the duke’s son.

She couldn’t help blushing a bit, which was rare for her. How 
long had he been watching? Though she had seen him several 
times in the weeks since she’d arrived, she had not actually talked 
to Eric. He must think she was daft. No normal person would be 
so absorbed with checking empty, stuffy rooms as not to notice 
someone walking up behind her.

She dropped a quick curtsy, and murmured under her breath, 
“Sir Eric.”

He bowed slightly. “Lady Trillory. Tell me, how have you been 
enjoying your stay here?”

“Very well. I’m honored that your father welcomes me so 
warmly.”
“He’s always had a fondness for your family.” He smiled down at her. “Would you like me to escort you anywhere?”

“It is not necessary.”

“I insist. I would not leave you to wander alone on such a dreary day as this.”

Eric extended his arm, practically sealing the deal with the motion.

Trill’s shoulders slumped a bit. She would rather have kept exploring.

“Very well, then. I’d been planning to return to my quarters soon, anyway.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer the warmer atmosphere of the hall?” His eyebrows pulled into a puzzled frown, but his smile remained.

“I— I’m sure. I want to rest before tonight’s party.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

She took his arm, and they started back to the main wing. They didn’t talk much. She was relieved when the walk was over.
Terrin

Terrin sighted a squirrel. In one smooth movement she raised her bow, aimed, and fired. The squirrel, who had been busily snacking on a nut, came alert at the twang of her bow, but she had expected the reaction. A millisecond later, the arrow slammed into its left eye.

She started forward to collect her kill. She hadn’t hunted since the previous fall, so she should have felt some sort of joy. But instead she could only chide herself for not shooting that well earlier. If she had been faster, if she had just taken down the wolf before it reached Arnold…

She removed the arrow, wiped it on the grass, and then started to clean the squirrel.

Behind her, she heard a twig snap. A twig more akin to a small branch, by the sound of it. Terrin froze, then slowly turned her head towards the sound. Seeing nothing through the underbrush, she stood, knife in hand.
There! She caught a glimpse of a face—an old woman with angry eyes, dried mud on her face and in her hair. A swamp woman?

But even as Terrin registered her appearance, the woman was gone.

Terrin took two steps forward and stared at the now-vacant space for several minutes. Her mind told her she must be crazy—they were in northwest Xell, and the swamp was far to the south. Her instinct told her to get away, head back to camp. And her curiosity bade her to investigate.

There was another snap, and she spun, looking for the woman. This time she saw a wraith slinking out from under a thicket. Its flat, disk-shaped head with its yellow-green eyes stared at her from barely a yard away, and its elbows jutting up above its body gave it an awkward look.

“Hello there,” she said slowly, tightening her grip on the knife. She’d been attacked by a wraith once, and though every schoolbook claimed they were peaceful creatures, she didn’t trust them.

The wraith lunged forward. She moved into a fighting stance, but the wraith was already backing away. Its mouth seemed to be pulled back into a wide grin—and in its teeth was her freshly caught squirrel.

“Drop that!” Terrin said, stepping forward.

The wraith hissed as it straightened its legs. In a few seconds it went from being inches from the ground to being the size of a large pony. Terrin stared at the beast. She had never seen any animal do such a thing before, and she couldn’t help taking a step back.

The wraith’s grin seemed to grow even larger as it shrunk back
to its normal, flat position. It turned and scuttled away through the underbrush.

“Stinking thief,” Terrin called after it, then sighed.

Glancing reluctantly back at where she had seen the woman disappear, she turned and headed away from both the wraith and the woman. She would have to settle her curiosity another day. She didn’t want to go back to camp empty-handed, but any nearby prey would have been scared off by the noise.

She had been stalking quietly through the woods for only a few minutes when the smell of blood and rotting meat touched her nose. Dropping even lower into a crouch, she moved upwind towards the scent.

She didn’t travel far before she found the scene of a battle. Six wolves lay around the trampled clearing, some torn almost beyond recognition. At first she thought two wolf packs had been fighting for territory. But she noticed a few unfamiliar tracks, too big for wolves or a wildcat, but not the right shape for a bear.

Then it struck her: the wraith.

With new interest, she stepped out of the shadows to examine the fight scene closer. There were more of the strange tracks. Two wraiths, at least, maybe more? She had never heard of wraiths traveling in a pack. The battle appeared to have been one-sided, since no wraiths had fallen. The tracks were so jumbled that it would take some time to work out exactly what had happened.

“The wraiths entered over here. They fought for a while, and then the last of the wolves fled.”

T errin spun to face the voice, sliding her knife free.

A forest woman was leaning against a tree, her arms crossed. “The wraiths have grown more aggressive recently,” she continued. “I can’t pretend to understand their habits, but many of
the territorial creatures are being driven away. Guess this wolf pack decided to fight.”

A smile spread across Terrin’s face, and she sheathed her knife as fast as she had drawn it.

“Dyani!”
The Story Continues …

Follow Terrin and her friends on their adventures. You can buy *Hunted: The Riddled Stone, Book Two* in paperback or ebook format at Amazon.com (and all the other Amazon stores). Coming soon to other online retailers worldwide, or order it through your favorite bookstore.

Be one of the first to know when Teresa Gaskins publishes her next novel. Join Teresa’s update list on her blog or at the Tabletop Academy Press website:

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About the Author

Homeschooled teen author Teresa Gaskins was creating stories before she could write. She enjoys a wide variety of fiction, fantasy has always been her favorite genre. She finished *Hunted* (her second published novel) when she was fifteen years old.

Teresa has recently picked up archery, shooting with a recurve bow much like Terrin’s. Other interests include horse riding, computer programming, and making videos. She lives with her cat Cimorene (and the rest of her family) in rural Illinois, surrounded by corn and soybean fields.
Crow Prince Tyler raised his hands. The crowd fell silent at once. “I have made my decision,” the prince announced. “From this moment forward:

“Christopher Fredrico is banished from the kingdom of North Raec. If he is found within our territory, his life will be forfeit.”

All Chris wanted was to be a peaceful scholar who could spend a lot of time with his friends. Now, falsely accused of stealing a magical artifact, he is forced to leave the only home he knows. But as he and his friends travel towards the coast, they find a riddle that may save a kingdom—or cost them their lives.

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