

REVEALED

THE RIDDLED STONE
BOOK FOUR



TERESA GASKINS

Nora

Even in the height of August, the air just above tree line on the mountains around North Yorc felt cool and crisp. Seven-year-old Nora pulled back her long, blond hair, and a soft breeze caressed the back of her neck to lift away the sweat. She dropped the hair and stretched her arms over her head, both hands gripping the stick she'd been using as a practice sword. The same breeze ruffled her light brown tunic.

The small mountain meadow gave her and her big brother Carr a perfect few-hundred-foot space for their mock dueling, and perfect for cooling down afterwards. She didn't dare admit that Carr had worn her out. Pretending to admire the view gave her a chance to catch her breath.

And it *was* a view worth admiring.

From here she could survey the whole valley that North Yorc sprawled across, the small city's stone and earth buildings scattered between a half-dozen mountains, finding purchase as expertly as the mountain goats that many North Yorcans kept for their wool and milk. In the lowlands, where heat gathered like a pool and stayed even into the fall, grain fields spread like golden patches on a quilt.

Looking at the peaceful scene, a visitor would never guess that Yorc was home to some of North Raec's greatest warriors. Men who, throughout history, had earned the respect of even the plainsmen's most skilled knights. Warriors like Nora's father.

Perhaps on her way home she'd pick some yarrow for Aunt Rosemary. Then she could spend the evening with her, watching the mesmerizing movements as Rosemary prepared salves and tea mixes. Nora liked the mingling earthy smells of the herbs that hung from Rosemary's rafters. They tickled her nose.

Nora tossed her stick to the ground. Still panting, she hauled herself atop a granite boulder at the edge of the sparse grass. Her dangling legs swung in slow, steady motions.

Carr's face split with a grin as he set his foot up against a smaller rock. He leaned on his knee with one arm while twirling his own stick with the other.

"One day, Nora, I will be the mightiest warrior that North Raec has seen in generations. The king will beg me for my aid. I'll be world famous."

"Me, too, me, too." Nora's words kept rhythm with her feet.

They would be so famous that the king would call for them specifically to aid in the next war. But Nora would only serve him if the fight was just. That was a right the Yorcs claimed years ago, when they declared their independence from North Raec.

But if the war was just, then she and Carr would put it to a swift end. They would protect those who couldn't fight so well.

"Don't be ridiculous," Carr said. "There can only be one greatest warrior. You can be my squire or something."

"No fair. I'm just as good as you."

"Then why do I always win?"

"Because I'm smaller than you."

"Well, then, I will always be the best," he said, "since I'll always be older and bigger than you. That's the definition of big brother."

Grinning, Carr flourished his stick around his wrist, but it slipped from his grasp and went flying. It landed a couple feet from Nora's boulder and skidded over to bump her weapon. She covered her mouth but could not stop the laughter that burst from her chest.

His cheeks flushed red. “That was a fluke,” he said. “It won’t happen when I’m—”

“The second best knight in all the land?”

Nora launched herself from the rock, landing in a crouch next to the sticks. Grabbing them both, she straightened. Then she mimicked his flourish without dropping the sticks.

She knew she’d always be littler than Carr. She had a small frame, even compared to the other girls her age, having inherited the stature of her plainswoman grandmother. She’d just have to make up for it with skill, nimbleness, and speed.

“Hand that here.” Carr stretched out an expectant palm.

She took a step back. “Take it from me, O Mighty Warrior.”

“You know, being a brat doesn’t suit you.”

He tried to snatch the stick from her hand. Nora sidestepped and ran past him, farther up the mountain, giggling as she went.

“Hey, come back.”

Tucking both sticks under her arm, she clambered over a deep cleft in the rock, supporting herself with one hand. Her feet knocked loose some gravel that clattered down the hole.

“Hey,” her brother yelled.

She dashed a few feet before turning to laugh at him as she easily skipped backwards up the path.

“Nora, stop. It’s dangerous. Come back. Mom will be furious if you get hurt.”

“If I get hurt? The mountain is my home. It won’t hurt me.”

“You know better than that. Come back.”

Nora shook her head. She hopped around the corner, following a narrow ledge at the top of the crevice.

Then the gravel shifted beneath her foot, and she slipped.

Her stomach flipped as her legs shot out over the edge, pulling the rest of her body with them. She tried to grab at the rocky lip, and the sticks clattered away below her.

“Nora!” Carr’s shout echoed after her, barely audible over her own scream. He threw himself down on the ledge, lunging after her, but not quite reaching.

Her feet hit ground, and her legs buckled, throwing her against the stone wall and knocking the air from her lungs. She

crumpled, glad it had not hurt as much as she expected.

Then she felt herself slip over another edge.

Her hands shot out to catch herself but struck stone walls on both sides, scraping the skin and sending pain burning up her fingers. She grimaced, but continued to scabble for a hold. For a moment, her left hand caught a small niche in the wall. But when her whole weight jerked against the arm, her hand slipped. Seconds later, she hit the bottom.

“Nora?”

“I’m here,” she tried to call, but the swirling dust got in her mouth. She coughed.

Tears had sprung to her eyes, and her throat felt raw. She clutched her arms against her torso, blood from her scraped skin staining her shirt.

“Can you climb out?”

“I think so. Give me a minute.”

She crawled to her feet, shuddering as the walls of the chasm scraped against her shoulders. She swiped the tears from her cheeks. Finding a couple of handholds, she started to pull herself up.

Pain shot through her left arm. She yelped and fell, her back striking the wall.

“I... I think I hurt my arm. I can still climb one—”

“No, wait. I’ll run home and get help.”

“You said running was dangerous,” she protested weakly, but he was already gone.

Nora tried to sit. In one direction she couldn’t bend her knees enough. And in the other, her shoulders were too wide to go much lower. Tears welled back into her eyes. She could barely haul in a breath. The dust refused to settle.

Maybe she could slide sideways along the fissure and find a wider space. But no, the walls only pressed tighter around her.

She was stuck. There was nowhere she could go.

Her lungs choked with panic. Ignoring her brother’s instructions, she tried to haul herself up with one hand.

Her quivering fingers could not grip the stone.

“Please, please, please hurry,” she muttered.

She braced against the rock, as if she could push it back and make more space. Minutes stretched out into eternity, and with each moment, her whole body constricted tighter.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to pretend she was back in the open meadow where she and her brother practiced their swordplay.

But the walls loomed ever closer. Her head started to pound.

“Nora?” Father’s voice reached her, and hope swelled in her chest, making her muscles relax.

“We brought a climbing harness. Put it on, so we can lift you up.”

Nora looked up and saw both her father and brother silhouetted against the sky. Carr was already lowering a rope.

It was hard to pull the harness on in the tight space, but focusing on the task helped her ignore the walls pressing in. Then holding the rope with one arm, she called for them to pull her out.

As the space opened up, she used her feet to push herself along. The last few inches, she released the rope to grab the top of the cliff and haul herself over the edge, collapsing onto the trail.

Father pulled her into a hug.

She had not been as drained of tears as she thought. Rivers tumbled from her eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I just... I didn’t think, and then... I’m so sorry, it won’t happen again. Please don’t let it happen again.”

“I know, Nora. Here.”

Father started to wrap a blanket around her, but as the cloth pressed against her shoulders, her lungs tightened. Her eyes flashed open, but her vision was clouded with a blue mist.

“No!” she shouted, tearing the blanket off and flinging it away from her.

Panting for breath, she collapsed.

“Nora?” Her brother’s voice wavered.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. Her vision cleared. “I just... It felt like it was going to crush me.”

Father smoothed her hair. “I understand, it’s okay.”

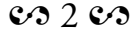
But when she saw his frown, her heart sank.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be careful next time. I promise.”

“I know,” he said. “It won’t happen again, because from now on you’re not allowed to play with weapons. Not with your brother or anyone else.”

“But how am I supposed to train? I want to be a warrior someday, like you and—”

“No. You can’t. You—” Father paused. He set his mountain-rough, gentle hand on her knee. “You’re my little girl, and I’m not going to let you get hurt. There are many things you can be. But a warrior is not one of them.”



Nora, 11 Years Later

Nora awoke to pitch black pressing in around her. By instinct, her hand flew to her mouth to stifle the panicked shout.

It's fine, it's fine, she told herself. *The room wasn't that small.*

Still, she threw aside the blanket and sat, pulling up her knees to curl herself into a ball, as far from the wall as she could get without falling off the bed.

She forced herself to take slow, deep breaths.

She should have realized the torches would go out and leave the room in darkness. Perhaps she could have asked Thomas to keep them lit.

And admit she was claustrophobic? To him, to the traitor? She couldn't even admit that to Terrin.

No. She'd just have to handle it herself.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

She carefully unfolded her legs and started to pace the cell. Moving made her feel a bit better, though every time she bumped against a wall, she shuddered.



Christopher

“It’s no good,” Chris said, kicking the base of the cell door.

Keeping one hand along the cold, damp stone wall, he felt his way through the pitch black to his bed. He shoved aside the rough burlap blanket and sat.

Duke Grith had some sort of magic that caused the torches to burn when he and Thomas were around. But once they were gone, the light faded.

Thomas.

Just thinking of the man sent Chris’s stomach churning. If he hadn’t trusted Thomas when they first met. Hadn’t admitted that he could read the riddle, hadn’t let the man join their quest. The duke would never have known Chris’s talent, and they wouldn’t be locked in this dungeon.

But doubt niggled at the edge of his anger.

Perhaps they’d be dead, instead.

He slumped against the wall, massaging his face.

Terrin spoke from the neighboring cell. “Maybe once Arnold’s awake, he’ll be strong enough to kick down the door.”

Chris shifted to face her voice, one leg dangling off the mattress.

“Even if we get out of the cells,” he said, “who knows how big this place is? And we’ll have to find our way through the pitch black.”

“We have to try.”

“Terrin, face it.” Chris sighed, his fingers playing with the fraying edges of his blanket. “The only way to keep you guys safe is if I agree to the duke’s terms. Once—”

“Christopher Fredrico! You are not allowed to give up like that. There’s no way you can help the duke with his plan. You said yourself the magic would get us out of this.”

But if he, at least, was on the outside, maybe he could figure something out.

Maybe that was what the magic wanted.

“If I tell the duke about the dreams,” he said, “I might negotiate Arnold’s release, too. Grith would have to admit I can’t find

the Shards alone.”

“And if he does let you out, what do you think you’ll be able to do? Trying to rescue Trillory got us locked in here. I can’t see how helping *three* people escape would be any easier.”

“Well,” he said, “at least it would give us time to think of something.”

Who knew how long he had before Grith decided to kill one of his friends?

Silence stretched over the blackness.

Chris leaned his elbows on his knees, wishing for just the slightest glow of the torches. Without light, it felt like the world had ceased to exist. Like he was stuck in limbo.

Then again, wasn’t he?

Terrin spoke, so softly he could barely hear her through the thick, stone wall. “If you make that decision to help the duke, you really will be committing treason.”

He bowed his head. Perhaps she was right. Even if he was just trying to trick the duke, after he started down that path, who was to say he wouldn’t give in and hand Grith the Shards himself? If that’s what it took to save his friends?

And could he really say that would be wrong?

Prince Tyler had banished him for stealing the Shards, after all. Sure, he had been framed for that crime. But maybe it was time to live up to what everyone already believed.

Perhaps at this point, he should just strive to keep his choices from harming his friends.

He owed them that, since it was his impulsive decision to sneak into the duke’s manor that had landed them in this mess in the first place.



Arnold

Arnold sat with his back pressed against the rough wood of the door, quietly listening to Chris and Terrin’s conversation.

He knew he should voice his own opinion, even make a play

at getting out of the cell. But he couldn't bring himself to move.

After all, it was his own blasted impulsiveness that landed them in this dungeon. If only he hadn't panicked about that dream. If only he'd stopped to think.

He wasn't ready to listen to Chris berate him, much less Terrin.

He could already hear her:

"You shouldn't have let Chris run off before he made a plan.

"You should have told him his plan was bad.

"You should have dealt with Anthony better, and stopped Chris from hurting Nora.

"If you weren't so cocksure of your ability to handle anything, we wouldn't be here."

It was torture enough, sitting useless in the barren dark. All they'd left with him was the stupid prosthetic, and—of all things—the bag of medicinal leaves Ceianna had gifted him.

As if ghost itch was something to be worried about now.



Terrin

Terrin knew Arnold would hate that she was worrying about him.

Still, she leaned into the door, staring through its barred window as if by force of will she could pierce the mildew-scented darkness and see into his cell.

Of course she was worried.

Who knew how hard Anthony hit him?

He'd been out too long.

Besides, Arnold might be strong enough to break the door and get them all out of here.

Even if he couldn't do that, she needed his help. Chris was working himself up to do something stupid. But surely he would listen to his cousin, his best friend.

If only Arnold would wake up.

Arnold

Arnold didn't know how long he sat in silence before he drifted off to a shallow sleep, leaning back against the door. He awoke to voices and the warm glow of torch light, and it took him a minute to understand what they were saying.

"I don't care whether it looked serious. Go in there and make sure he's okay," Terrin snapped.

"Fine," said Thomas resignedly.

Arnold shifted, scooting over to the wall beside the door before standing.

A key rattled in the lock. The door swung open, with Arnold behind it.

Thomas entered the room, key in one hand and a small drawstring bag in the other. He stared at the empty bed.

Arnold's throat felt dry. He had given this man his trust, his friendship even, and for what?

Finally, the traitor pivoted and met his eyes.

Thomas smiled weakly.

"How's Nora?" hissed Arnold.

"She's healthy enough to not need my help anymore," Thomas said evenly, lifting his chin. "It's fine if you hate me. If I were you,

I'd want some revenge."

Then he turned to leave, pulling something from his pocket as he went.

Arnold lunged, wrapping his arms around the older man and then throwing him back into the cell, so his head struck the wall. Thomas collapsed, and something dropped from his hand. A small, carved fox hanging from a loop of string. Terrin's charm. She'd been wearing it since they left the forest of Xell.

"Arnold!" exclaimed Terrin and Chris together.

He grabbed the little fox and took his things from the table before kneeling to snatch the key that Thomas still held. Then he crossed the hall and unlocked the other two cells.

When he swung open Terrin's door, she stood with her arms crossed tightly, her mouth set in a grim line.

"How long have you been awake?" she demanded.

"What?"

"How. Long. Were. You. Awake?"

"I don't know. I was just—"

"I was *worried* about you. I thought you were seriously hurt. Why didn't you say anything?"

"This is not the time, Terrin," Chris interrupted. "Can you tell if the spell that triggers the lights is on Thomas himself, or something he carries that we could bring along?"

Terrin shoved past Arnold into the other cell. She pulled a pendant from Thomas's neck and held it up.

"All the magic seems bound to this."

Arnold's throat constricted. He recognized the necklace from one of his dreams. The silver animals glinted orange in the torchlight, around a white stone that glowed ever so slightly.

Terrin picked up the drawstring bag, running her fingers lightly over the cracking paint that decorated it.

"That's Nora's," Chris said. "Let's lock Thomas in and return it to her."

Terrin slammed the door and started down the hall. Sure enough, the torches brightened as she approached.

Arnold quickly locked the door.

*Terrin*

With each empty cell she passed, Terrin's jaw clenched tighter. Finally she saw Nora's pale face at the end of the hall, peering through her bars, and she broke into a run.

"Terrin!" Nora exclaimed, "Chris. How?"

Terrin glanced at Arnold, expecting a mock-hurt comment about her forgetting him, but he held out the key in silence.

"Arnold jumped Thomas and got the key," she said.

When the door swung open, Nora grabbed Terrin and pulled her into a hug. "I was so worried about you guys."

She stepped past Terrin to also hug Arnold and started to hug Chris, then stopped. "Chris, how's your back?"

"Not great. But the sooner we're out of here, the better it'll be," he said.

Nora shuddered, but nodded. Then she saw the bag in Terrin's hand. "My bag! Where did you find that?"

"Thomas had it." Terrin said, handing it to Nora.

Nora smiled as she tied it to her belt.

Arnold coughed and held out the carved fox to Terrin. "Thomas also had this," he said.

She snatched it, then cradled it in her palms. "Why didn't you give it to me before?"

"I would have, if you hadn't shouted at me."

"Sorry. I overreacted," she said, slipping her wrist through the loop of string.

They started back down the hall, pausing only to check that Thomas was still unconscious.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" asked Nora, peering in at his still form slumped against the wall.

Arnold frowned, but Chris patted her on the shoulder. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

Not much further, the corridor opened up into a wider hall with a high ceiling. They could see just far enough in each direction to know that it was huge, with several more small corridors

branching off to each side.

Terrin wondered what these rooms were normally used for. This couldn't be the duke's public prison. He wouldn't have risked someone finding them and discovering his treachery.

"Where do we even start?" Nora whispered, her sapphire eyes dropping.

"Left," said Chris, taking Thomas's pendant from Terrin's hand. "It's as good as any other direction."

Terrin watched as Chris led the way down the hall. He stood straighter than normal and moved with long, resolute strides. There was no hint of pain from the gash along his back, or from the knowledge he might never see his sister alive again. No sign of the doubts that had haunted him since they began this journey.

They marched down the hall, glancing along each corridor they passed. Each looked identical to the one they'd come from. In the third corridor, they spotted an open door.

Chris held up a finger to his lips. Crouching, he crept to the door and peered around the frame.

He straightened. "This must have been Thomas's room."

Terrin and the others followed him to the door. The room was larger than theirs. Shelves lined the back wall, filled with herbs, bottles, and bandages. Instead of a rickety table and chair, Thomas had a pine desk lined with cedar that overpowered the mildew scent of the stone halls. His pack and bedroll sat next to the bed, which was complete with blankets and pillows.

"Lucky him," grunted Arnold.

"We should take what we can," said Chris. "Nora, gather whatever medicines you can use. Arnold and I will roll up the blankets. Terrin, check his bag. I want to know what we have to work with."

In the pack, Terrin found half a dozen strips of jerky, a nearly empty water skin, a pocket knife, more herbs, seven hardtack biscuits, and a length of rope they could use to tie up the two blankets.

When they left the room, Chris had Thomas's bag—now stuffed with food and medicine. Arnold carried one of the tied blankets under his arm, Terrin the bedroll, and Nora the other blanket.

They continued down the main hall until the last flickering torch lit up, revealing a solid wall. They'd reached the end of the passage.

"Blast it," Chris said, the loud words echoing down the hall.

"That would indeed open the way," said a deep, slimy voice behind them. "Though I do believe you're lacking explosives."

Even before Terrin pivoted to see the speaker, she knew it must be Duke Grith. Her heart sank. If they couldn't defeat him when they had weapons, how would they manage without?

Chris stepped forward, his fists clenching. "Grith."

"Christopher," the duke said, smirking. "Did you really think you could escape? I do hope you haven't hurt Thomas too seriously. He hasn't moved in a while"

"Let us go," said Chris. "You won't gain anything by keeping us here."

Grith laughed.

Arnold howled with rage. The blanket flew from his hand as he lunged.

Terrin no sooner felt the wave of magic than it wrapped around them, pinning her arms to her sides and her legs together. Arnold fell to the ground, the magic tied around him like a bundle. Only their heads remained free to move.

Nora whimpered.

"Now, Christopher," Grith said. "I've known you your entire life. Anthony even more so. Believe me, I know what your friends mean to you. I know that you would never abandon them. But perhaps you need to be convinced that I'm serious. Who shall I take? Perhaps Arnold? He *has* been a troublemaker."

The muscles in Terrin's hands tightened, but she couldn't even make fists.

"Or Terrin?" Grith said. "Your voice of reason, the one who keeps your head on straight? Or maybe Nora? I hear you're extra protective of her."

Terrin sensed a buzzing magic that wrapped itself around the duke's hands.

Gathering for another spell.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, Terrin noticed Nora.

The York girl's head hung and her long hair draped around it, yet Terrin could see tears spilling from her eyes. And there was something off about her, something Terrin couldn't quite place.

"Nora?" she whispered.

The duke continued his rant. "Or, perhaps, I'll turn out the lights and take a random shot. Shall we just see whom I hit?"

With a wave of his hand, the torches began to go out, one by one.

"Your choice, Christopher."

Another torch went out, casting a shadow over Nora.

Terrin's throat tightened as she realized what was wrong. There was magic, not just around Nora, but also swelling from within her, taking her shape. But it was a strange magic. Not controlled like the duke's, or even the spirit's, or any other magic Terrin had ever felt.

Normal magic buzzed. This magic sparked and snapped.

Grith had noticed it, too. He reinforced the bounds holding Nora in place. His magic squeezed tighter and grew thicker, covering her like a cocoon.

"Stop," said Chris.

Terrin's head snapped back around.

Chris's face was pale, but his jaw was set. With his head bowed and eyes shut, he had not seen the duke's furrowed brow or realized that Grith's focus had shifted to Nora.

Chris continued, "Don't—"

"No!" Nora's wail echoed through the hall.

And the snapping magic exploded from her, shredding the duke's magic like paper...

A GIFT SHE NEVER WANTED. A CURSE SHE CAN'T ESCAPE.

Alone in the dark, Nora of York feels the dungeon walls pressing in. Even worse, the duke's sorcery weaves itself around her, unseen and deadly. But as the spell tightens, shy, fragile Nora breaks—and something new takes her place.

Or something old beyond memory.

Nora joined this quest to help her friends. But can she stop herself before the wildness within destroys them all?

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