

# SKYBORN

CALL OF THE CROW



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◆ BOOK 2 ◆

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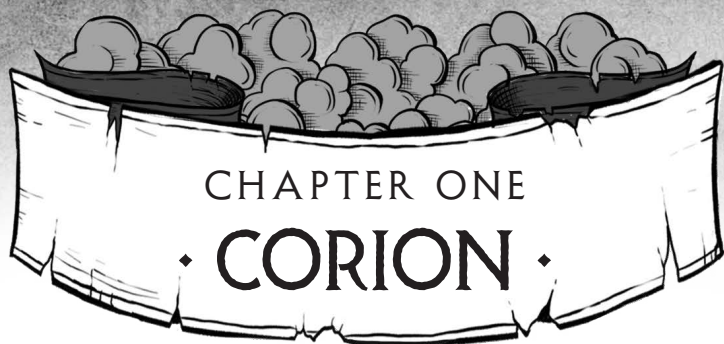
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FOR NANCY,  
BELOVED GRANDMOTHER AND  
FELLOW BIRD NERD



CHAPTER ONE  
• CORION •

**A**s crown prince of the Clandoms, Corion was used to keeping odd hours.

He never knew when his father, King Garion, might summon him before dawn in order to critique the changing of the guard. Sometimes he didn't make it to bed till well after three in the morning because his father wanted to drill him on the names of every Eagle ancestor who'd ever sat on the Aerie Throne. Being the royal heir meant being prepared for all sorts of strange tests, drills, and assignments.

But he certainly *wasn't* used to being woken in the middle of the night by a blade pressed against his throat.

Eyes wide, Corion lay very still, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. His gaze flicked to the door, then all around his grand room, but he saw no sign of his guards. There was only the lean shadow of the man bending over him, his eyes hidden behind a mask of silk. The dark outlines of his wings blocked what moonlight might have trickled through the window; they were spread to their full length, stretching even wider than Corion's four-poster bed.

"Good evening, sweet princely pie," hissed the shadow. Corion saw the pale gleam of his teeth as his lips parted in a savage grin. "What a plump and perfect little pet you are! What must it be like, to be so pampered you can't tie your own boots?"

Every muscle in Corion's body drew taut as he muttered, "Actually, I *can* tie my own boots."

Was the man an assassin? A kidnapper? If so, he was a fool. Even if he cut Corion's throat this moment, he'd never escape the palace before a dozen Goldwing knights had buried their swords in his belly.

Still. How *had* the man gotten in here? How had he slipped past the twenty guards between Corion's room and the nearest palace entrance?

"What do you want?" Corion whispered. "Money? Remove your blade, and we can talk."

The shadow only chuckled.

Then, from the doorway, a deep voice said, "He is here to see me, Corion."

The prince swallowed, his throat touching the edge of the blade as he did. "Father."

"Put down the knife, Hunter," ordered King Garion, stepping into the room. He held a slim candle, its light barely strong enough to illuminate his regal features. "You've made your point."

"Have I?" said the shadow. "I once told you I could cut any throat in the kingdom, Your *Majesty*, and yet you have forgotten poor Hunter, let me languish in boredom for years. I want *work*."

"Why else do you think I've summoned you from your web, spider?" The king's voice simmered with disdain. "Back away from my son or be crushed beneath my heel as you should have been years ago."

With a hiss, the stranger withdrew the dagger. Corion let out a long, shaky breath and sat up.

"What's going on?" the prince demanded, eyeing the tall man who still loomed over his bed. Who was this creature who dared speak to the king of the Clandoms as if he were beneath him? Usually, Garion punished such insolence with a week in the stocks—or worse.

But now his father only walked closer, setting the candle on an iron table. Its light seemed to shrink, revealing nothing of the stranger's features.

"This man is called the Hunter," said King Garion, speaking to

Corion but never taking his eyes off the intruder. “And he is here because I summoned him. But there was no need for these theatrics.”

“What’s the job?” said the Hunter. “A throat to be sliced? A hand to be diced? It’s been so long, *too* long, oh King. You promised work, as much as I could want. But I’m *bored*. You’ve neglected your Hunter. My blades thirst.”

“Yes, yes.” Garion waved a hand dismissively. “You disgusting creature, you’ll have your hunt.”

“He’s the assassin,” whispered Corion, looking with new interest at the Hunter. “Is this him, Father? The secret assassin you always said you kept in your back pocket, for the hour of most desperate need?”

“I am in nobody’s *pocket!*” protested the Hunter.

“Wrong,” snapped Garion. “You are mine completely. Or have you forgotten what you swore to me the day I spared your life?” The king turned to Corion, the dark gold feathers of his wings shining in the light of the candle; they must have been freshly oiled to gleam like that. “Nearly a decade ago this beast set a building on fire—just to watch everyone inside burn. He’s no man, but a killer, who feeds on death as a bee feeds upon flowers.”

“You didn’t execute him for it?” gasped Corion.

The Hunter snickered.

“As far as the public knows, I *did*.” Garion gave him a smug grin. “Here is a lesson for you, son: Never let a bad dog go to waste. Leash it, train it to heel when you call, and the day will come when it will serve you well. My dog here is a secret weapon, capable of jobs even my Goldwings cannot carry out—or should not be *seen* to.”

“Enough chatter!” howled the Hunter. “What’s the job? Is it a duke? Is it a whole garrison of rebels?”

“A boy,” said Garion. “It’s a boy I want, by the name of Nox Hatcher, though he was once called Tannox Corvain. So far my knights have failed to bring him to me. We suspect he’s fled to the mountains.”



Corion withheld a sigh.

*This again.*

It'd been weeks since the Race of Ascension, which had started out in celebration and feasting, and had ended with his father burning down an entire neighborhood in an attempt to capture some low-life thief of a Crow clansman. Since then, his father had become obsessed. Every day he called for a report from his knights, and every day they brought the same news. Not so much as a feather had been found of the one called Nox Hatcher, nor of the three kids he'd been spotted with when he fled Thelantis: a piebald, with one brown wing and one white; a Falcon girl; and a Sparrow.

Corion recalled the Sparrow, for he'd seen her with his own eyes. *Ellie Meadows*. Now, there was a girl worth remembering. She'd won the Race of Ascension, something no low clansman had ever attempted, much less accomplished. Then she'd turned out to be a thief too, having burglarized a fortress and attacked the king's own soldiers. Now she was on the run with the Crow and two other criminals, with the entire force of Goldwing knights hunting them.

And, apparently, this Hunter too.

Corion shuddered. He'd only known the man a few minutes, but he was the most terrifying person the prince had ever met. Rubbing his throat, he eyed the dagger and hoped his father's so-called *leash* was as tight as he claimed. Even if the king did have the assassin under control, Corion wouldn't sleep easy for a while after this.

"A *boy*," sneered the Hunter. "Here I stand, more hearts stilled beneath my hands than all your paltry knights combined, and you send me after a *child*?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing," retorted the king. "Dispose of his cohorts and bring him to me alive, preferably, but if you can't manage it . . . Well, the important thing is, I want him out of the way. For good."

The Hunter cocked his head, as if considering the job—actually

*considering*, not snapping to attention with a crisp “Yes, Your Majesty!” as any sane citizen would have done.

In the end, though, he nodded. “Very well. I’ll consent to this child’s play if only to stretch my wings a bit. But after this, oh high and mighty King, I want *real* work.”

“You’ll take what I give and be grateful,” growled Garion. “Now get out of my palace. Your stench is fouling the air.”

With a hiss, the Hunter flicked his wings and backed away. At first, Corion was confused—the door was on the other side of the room.

But then the man shrank into the tiny barred window, folding himself through the iron rods as lithely as if his bones were made of paper, and then he dropped away into the night. A moment later, he lifted away on broad, silent wings. *Vulture clan*, thought Corion, identifying the man’s feathers at last.

“How . . . ?” Corion stared at the window. It was built to *prevent* intruders, its narrow slats barely large enough for a cat, much less a full-grown man.

“I believe he was a circus contortionist before he turned to murder,” commented the king, scratching his stubbly chin.

“He put a *knife* to my throat!” cried Corion, slinging himself to his feet and facing his father. His hands were still shaking. “And you acted like it was nothing!”

“Bah.” Garion flipped his hand. “He wouldn’t dare harm you in truth. He knows I’m in control. With a word from me, he’d be due straight back to the gallows.”

Corion was not soothed.

“At any rate,” said Garion, “that’s my little problem settled. The Crow boy will be mine within the week.”

But as the king took his candle and left the room, Corion couldn’t help thinking that his father had said much the same words back when he’d first dispatched the knights to find the Crow boy and his friends.

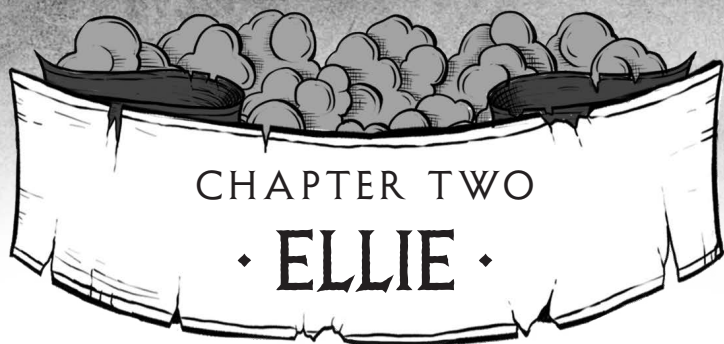
*He'll be mine within the week!*

That had been nearly a month ago.

Whoever the Crow really was, he was proving to be anything but ordinary. Corion couldn't remember the last time a criminal had evaded the Goldwings for this long.

But then, remembering the fire in that Sparrow girl's eyes, he wasn't surprised.

If *she* was involved, he'd bet the Hunter was in for the chase of his life.



*T*hwack!

“Ow!” yowled Ellie, stumbling back and falling hard on her rear. She clapped a hand to her forehead, already feeling the knot that would swell there. “You cheated!”

Across a courtyard of stone, a tall boy in a blue tunic laughed and twirled his staff. Like Ellie’s, it had a large hook on one end, with a smaller one protruding opposite. The boy’s hair was dark and long, tied in a ponytail, while his wings were the glossy white of the Swan clan. “No, *you* were overthinking your defense again. Every time you do that, you get slower.”

With a huff, Ellie took the hand he offered and bounced back to her feet. She shook out her reddish-brown wings, shedding dust and leaves.

“Again,” she said.

“We’ve been sparring all morning,” sighed the boy. “Don’t you ever *rest*?”

From atop a carved bear statue, a small, freckled kid let out a snorting laugh. His wings—one brown, one white—spread to steady himself. From the collar of his shirt peeped a tiny furred face with two white horns between its ears. “Rest? Ellie Meadows? She’s never even heard of the word!”

“Nobody asked you, Twig!” shouted Ellie. She blew a flop of hair out of her eyes and dropped into a defensive stance, her lockstave lowered like a sword. “C’mon, Charlo. Let’s go again. I’ll be ready this time.”

“Well, *I’m* tired,” said Charlo. “And hungry.”

With that, he plopped down and snagged a nearby satchel with the hook of his lockstave, dragging it to himself and taking out oatbread, goat’s cheese, and lavender honey. Ellie rolled her eyes and continued practicing on her own, swishing her lockstave.

The village of Cloudstone was so well hidden that Ellie still had trouble spotting it when she was out on her morning flight. She and her friends had been lucky the night they’d found the place. They’d been fleeing Goldwing knights, with no idea where they might hide. Usually, they’d been told, the clouds blanketed the mountain slopes, concealing Cloudstone entirely. But that rare night had been clear, and the lamps in the windows had guided Ellie’s little band of fugitives to safety.

They’d had no idea what they’d find when they landed, and to Ellie’s initial alarm, they soon learned nearly all the people in Cloudstone were members of the Restless Order.

She’d only ever met one other member of the Restless—an old woman named Granny Tam who had nearly burned Ellie and her friends alive in an attempt to rob them. But as it turned out, she’d been an exception, and the other Restless monks were quite welcoming. In fact, most of them were fugitives, people who’d fled their lives in the Clandoms for a thousand different reasons. Here in the safety of the mountains, they lived just out of King Garion’s reach.

Ellie spun through the air, using her wings to thrust herself farther, then landed in a crouch at the edge of the courtyard, in front of a tall stone door carved with spiraling patterns.

“When are you going to let me go in there?” she asked.

“Not my call,” said Charlo. “Only Elder Rue can invite you into the Sanctum.”

“What are you people hiding, anyway?” She rapped the door with her staff.

“Skeletons and hoards of gold.”

“Liar.” She’d been poking around the big, solemn door for weeks, trying to sneak inside to spy on its secrets. Anything worth locking up was worth discovering, in her opinion, and her curiosity only grew stronger every day.

Charlo laughed. “The others will be down here soon for noon meditations. You gonna join us this time?”

Ellie shook her head. “I still don’t understand this whole Restless Order thing. How do you stand it—all the sitting still and staring at nothing?”

“We don’t stare at nothing. We stare at nature.”

“It’s just so . . . *boring*.”

“That’s because you’re not staring properly.”

The courtyard was surrounded by short, gnarled trees. From their branches fluttered many white ribbons, filling the air with a soft susurrus. The mountains rose sharply on every side, rocky cliffs dotted with cleverly concealed doorways leading to the villagers’ homes.

Ellie whirled and spun her lockstave over her head, striking at an invisible enemy. From the ground, Charlo called, “Too slow again! If you’re going to use our weapons and way of fighting, at least *try* to do it right.”

“I am trying!” She wiped sweat from her forehead and performed the move again.

She was about to fly off to find lunch of her own but had to wait as a stream of Restless monks began swooping into the courtyard for their noontime meditation, all dressed in matching blue tunics and white leggings. Each carried a lockstave just like Ellie’s, which they wielded with practiced ease. She paused to admire how they flew, using the hooks of the staffs to grab hold of poles anchored in the stone, allowing them to change directions in a blink. She’d been practicing that for weeks but still wasn’t nearly as agile as the others.

Twig happily jumped down to join them. They nodded politely at Ellie, then seated themselves around the outside of the courtyard, facing away. Each one focused on a different object—a rock, a leaf, a crooked tree growing out of the stones—and let their gazes go vacant as they meditated.

Ellie still didn't understand most of what they did, or *why*. Still, she did appreciate their style of nonlethal fighting, and their unique weapons, the lockstaves. What she'd first taken for an odd staff she'd come to learn was a tool with many different uses, from disarming opponents to changing directions without losing speed.

Once the sky above was clear, Ellie took to the air, leaving the acolytes to their ritual. Charlo waved from the ground, where he sat cross-legged with the others.

Ellie spiraled upward, slipping from breeze to breeze; the winds around the mountains were narrow and always shifting. Flying on them was like leaping across logs floating in a river. But she'd gotten the hang of it pretty quickly, and enjoyed the challenge of reading the air around her before she maneuvered herself into its flow.

She spotted Gussie perched on a stony ledge, tinkering with her collection of odds and ends as usual. No point in waving; when Gussie was inventing, it was better to leave her to it rather than risk getting your head bitten off for interrupting.

At the peak of the highest mountain, she found Nox.

The Crow boy sat against a jagged rock, out of the worst of the cold wind.

Ellie recognized the look in his eyes and was careful as she dropped beside him. He said nothing, not even looking at her. He was staring at the eastern horizon with an intensity that made his black eyes seem to smolder, like coals that might crack open at any moment to reveal hidden fire. Out of habit, she glanced at his back, where his shirt opened around

the joints of his dark wings. There was a fresh pink scar over one of them, where he'd nearly had a wing sliced off the day they'd fled Thelantis.

In his hand was the blue skystone that had caused them all so much trouble—the magical rock that had once been the eye of a gargol, the stone monsters who roamed the skies on cloudy days. That bauble was the reason they were on the run, the reason they'd lost everything. Its mysterious ability to float like a soap bubble and heal the terrible disease called wingrot made it more valuable than any gem in the world. And she knew if King Garion ever got hold of it, he'd destroy it without hesitation.

"I was talking to Gussie this morning about leaving," she said. "She says it's too soon."

Nox's hand tightened on the skystone. "We should have left weeks ago."

Ellie picked at her thumbnail. "I've been thinking. This place is special. It's . . . like a clan all its own, made of people of every feather."

She saw his jaw clench harder, but he said nothing.

"Charlo said if any of us chose to stay, they'd let us."

"So you're staying."

"I . . . haven't decided yet." Why did she feel so guilty? How could she make him see she wasn't like him—born to fly alone? "But I am thinking about it."

"What about the skystone? You said you wanted to use it to heal people?"

"I do! I just don't know *how* to do that yet, without attracting the king's attention. He's dead set on destroying it. So for now . . . I don't know. I guess I just want someplace to call home for a while."

She thought sorrowfully of Linden, her hometown, and the Sparrow clan. As much as it pained her to admit, she knew she could never return there, not after being branded a thief and thrown in King Garion's dungeons.



“Do what you want,” said Nox stiffly. “I don’t care. But I’m not sticking around much longer.”

“I know what you want to do. And I understand. But it’s so dangerous, and you’re still healing.”

“I made a promise to my mother. And I still haven’t kept it.” He finally looked at her. “I have to get her out of that prison, Ellie.”

“I know.”

They sat in silence for another few minutes, listening to the wind whistle over the peaks. Nox resumed staring at the horizon, in the direction of the island prison where his mother had been held for years.

She felt for him, she really did. And Ellie wasn’t one to shy away from danger or noble missions—far from it. But *this* mission . . . it felt too big, too fast. The Crag was the most secure prison in the Clandoms. They were lucky *they* hadn’t ended up there themselves.

A sudden flutter to Ellie’s left drew her eye. It was Charlo, winging frantically toward them.

“Oh, look, it’s your boyfriend,” intoned Nox, his eyes narrowing. He quickly dropped the skystone under his shirt, out of sight.

“He’s not my—oh, *shut up*.” She shoved the Crow and then launched into the air, meeting Charlo halfway.

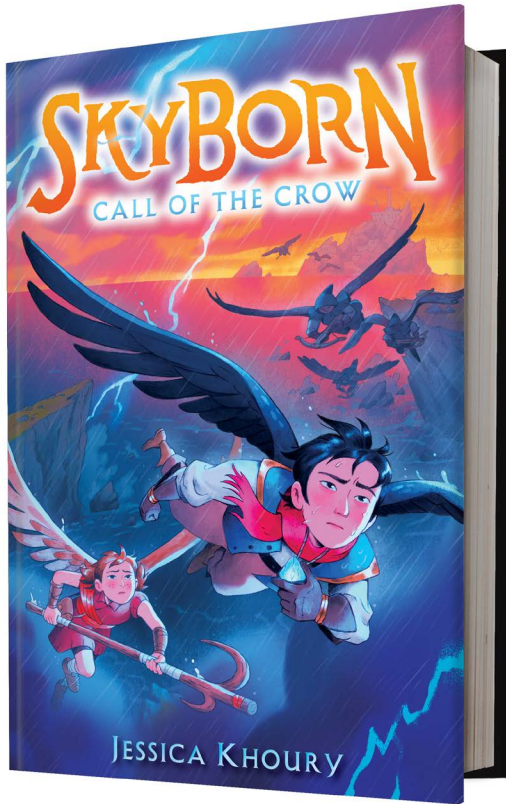
“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He was panting, his wide wings spread on the wind. “It’s Elder Rue! She wants to see you.”

“*Me? Why?*” Ellie had only glimpsed the leader of the Restless Order twice in all the weeks they’d been in Cloudstone. Her impression had been of a severe, humorless old woman best avoided, which wasn’t hard to do since she spent most of her time locked away in the Sanctum, doing who knew what.

“There’s only one reason Elder Rue sends for anyone lower than a novice,” he replied breathlessly. “It must mean she’s had a vision of the future—a vision about *you*.”

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