



“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.

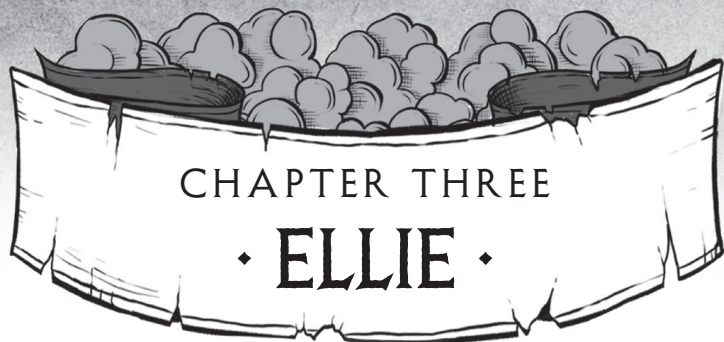
“He’s not my—oh, *shut up*.” She shoved the Crow and then launched into the air, meeting Charlo halfway.

“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*.”



Her heart beating fast, Ellie landed in the courtyard in a swirl of leaves, her lockstave held close to her side. Behind her, the monks gathered curiously. Apparently a vision was news worth interrupting their meditations for.

Gussie, Nox, and Twig stood off to the side. The Falcon girl lifted an eyebrow when Ellie glanced her way. Of the four, Gussie was the most skeptical about the Order and their so-called ability to glimpse the future.

Twig, who was a total believer, gave Ellie an encouraging thumbs-up.

Drawing a deep breath, Ellie turned to the great stone door that had so tempted her. Now it stood open, revealing a dark passageway into the mountain.

“Hurry, girl!” snapped an old monk behind her. He scowled and waved his hands as if to push her in. “How rude to make the elder wait!”

“All right, all right,” she muttered. She handed her lockstave to Twig, then walked into the tunnel.

The coldness of the mountain’s interior closed around her. She shivered and glanced back, just as the stone door began to shut. It groaned before sealing with a loud *thump* and leaving Ellie in total darkness.

That thump echoed through the passage ahead like an ominous drumbeat.

“Okay.” She squared her chin and shook out her wings. “Just because it *feels* like a tomb doesn’t mean it is one, right?”

Her nervous laugh fluttered weakly into the dark.

She followed the tunnel with one hand dragging along the wall, wondering how many nervous people had walked this same path before her. Did she even believe in these visions the Restless claimed to have? Charlo had told her only the oldest, most devout monks even had them. And who knew what a lifetime of staring at rocks did to a person's mind?

The darkness was so deep it felt surreal, like she'd fallen into a dream. It had been two months since Ellie had left her hometown of Linden and her clan, on a quest to join the Goldwing knights. And it had been one month since she'd learned those knights were not the heroes she'd always imagined, and that the king she'd hoped to impress was really a monster. Now here she was, a fugitive, walking deep into the heart of a mountain to hear some old seer's vision of her future.

Ellie began to giggle.

When she rounded a corner minutes later, to find a sudden gleam of light ahead, she was still giggling. Not because it was particularly funny, but because it all felt so nerve-racking and impossible, like she'd fallen into someone else's story, a place she didn't belong.

*Then where do I belong?* she wondered.

That sobered her up. It was a question she'd been dodging, a hole in her heart she hadn't quite looked directly into ever since fleeing Thelantis. She knew, vaguely, what she *wanted* to do—use the skystone to heal people suffering from wingrot. But she had no idea where to start, or how one small rock could make a real difference when so many people were sick. And she still wasn't sure where *she* fit in, specifically. Should she take the stone and travel around in disguise, finding the sick and healing them with its magic? Or should she stay in Cloudstone, and entrust it to someone older and stronger—and *not* wanted for high crimes—to see the job through instead? Charlo had been pressing her to do just that, though she had told him nothing about the skystone.