

◆ BOOK 3 ◆

# SKYBORN

PHOENIX FLIGHT

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-65246-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1      22 23 24 25 26

First edition, August 2022  
Printed in the U.S.A. 23

Book design by Maeve Norton



CHAPTER ONE  
• THE HUNTER •

Stone made for an unforgiving pillow. As he woke, the Hunter groaned and turned his head, feeling as though his skull had been split by a sledgehammer. The hard rock beneath him was cold and indifferent to the pain thrumming through his body. When he peeled his eyes open, he saw nothing but muddy shades of gray all around. He was in some kind of crumbling palace, walls of great stone blocks that were half collapsed, dead vines clinging to everything. Beyond that was nothing but mist.

A sudden burst of pain in his leg made him squeeze his eyes shut again.

He struggled to recall what had happened.

His last memory was of his quarry—the smug little Crow and his Sparrow friend. The Hunter had been about to set to work, his fingers tingling with anticipation of their screams, when . . .

*I was attacked!*

A burly high clanner had come out of nowhere, wielding a sword. They'd tussled, and the Hunter's thigh had been cut. He'd taken off, vowing vengeance, swearing to make them suffer for his pain as none of his past victims had suffered before.

Then what?

Vague memories skittered just out of reach: gray skies, rolling fields drenched in thorns, and . . .

*Grrrrnnnch.*

The Hunter's reverie was broken by the sound of grinding stone.

He wasn't alone.

He opened his eyes again, hissing through his teeth. Perhaps that was his prey now! Perhaps they thought to sneak up on the Hunter, to finish him off . . .

All at once, he sprang up, or tried to, anyway. The pain in his sliced thigh cut through his abdomen, and he gasped and fell back.

Then he saw them.

Not the Crow, nor the Sparrow, nor the high clansman who'd cut him.

He saw *gargols*.

Dozens. Scores. Gargols of every shape and size, with snouts and tails and horns and spines and claws. The grinding sound was the noise their heavy bodies made as they shifted their weight, dragged a leg, lowered a head to peer at him. Each one had a pair of glowing blue eyes, which the Hunter realized must be the *skystones* the king was always going on about. What had he said of them? That they were filled with evil magic, yes. The Hunter hadn't paid much attention.

Now he wished he had.

He lay very, very still, as still as the stone slab upon which he was sprawled, and felt, for the first time in his life, true terror. Like an animal in a trap, like one of his own pathetic victims, he was immobilized with fear. It burned on his tongue. It knotted in his throat until he couldn't breathe.

Suddenly, the gargols shifted, moving aside to make space for someone, ducking their heads and tucking their tails.

What sort of creature made *gargols* recoil like beaten dogs?

No part of the Hunter moved except his eyes, which rolled in his head, looking for escape, for a weapon, for *anything* that might end this nightmare, as a man stepped through the crowd of gargols.

At least, the thing was *shaped* like a man. The features were all there—a heavy brow, clean-shaven jaw, long hair that hung over each shoulder. He had his hands tucked into opposite sleeves, held before him in a dignified manner, as the Hunter had seen many of the hateful courtiers walk in the king’s court. This one had such a look—aristocratic and scornful. Which was odd. His wings were too short and round to be those of a high clan courtier.

Also unlike the courtiers, he was made entirely of marble.

Even his clothes were carved from the same cold gray stone as his skin. He should have been standing on a pedestal in a garden, perhaps holding up a basin of water in a fountain, a proper statue. His feathers were flat gray, their barbs as hard as a porcupine’s quills. What clan he was, the Hunter could not tell, for there was no color to his wings, no defining patterns or markings.

He should *not* have been moving around as if made of flesh and bone. But there he was, leaning over the Hunter and gazing with eyes of brilliant blue skystone.

“*Vermin*,” hissed the gargol man. That had to be what he was—some kind of gargol.

The Hunter flinched upon hearing the creature speak. Sweat rolled down his neck, cold as melting snow. “What are you?” he rasped.

The man looked him over as if he hadn’t heard. He moved as the gargols did, grinding and slow, living stone.

“*Trespasser*,” he spat, with even more venom. “You think to invade *my* sky? You think to violate my decrees?”

“The Hunter goes where he likes,” the Hunter snarled, but his voice wobbled, which filled him with fury. If he hated to be made a fool of, he hated even more to feel afraid. Whatever this . . . creature was, how *dare* he treat the Hunter as if he were prey? “Freak! I will split your stony skull and drink from it!”

He lunged up again, this time pushing through the spasm of pain, and reached for the man.

A gargol pounced with phenomenal speed, swatting a claw and striking the Hunter on the chest. He screamed as he was tossed through the air, landing hard on the cobblestone floor. Scrambling up, he put all his weight on his uninjured leg and looked around in horror as gargols crept toward him from every side.

Spreading his wings, the Hunter crouched, preparing to launch himself into flight.

But when he thrust up, his feet did not leave the ground.

Instead, the soles of his shoes seemed to congeal to the stones. He jerked his legs, to no avail. He may as well have stepped in wet tar; he was stuck fast.

“What the—” His head snapped up, his eyes finding the stone man. “What are you doing to me?”

The stone man’s eyes glowed brighter. He held out his hands, palms toward the Hunter. “I see you have grown bold in your ignorance,” he said harshly. “Is a thousand years so long a time that the Skyborn should forget my warnings?”

The Hunter yelped as his shoes began to turn to stone, his ankles hardening as if stuck in drying clay. “What—what is this?”

“I issued but this one decree: That you should crawl the earth until the end of time, like cockroaches. That if you dared spread wing in my skies again, my fury would wipe you from existence. And yet you heed me not? You think to try my might again? You think I have not seen your kind sneaking through my islands, creep-creeping through my cities, stealing what is not theirs?”

“I don’t even know you!” howled the Hunter. He beat his wings furiously, but he could not pull himself free from the man’s spell. Staring down in terror, he watched as his legs turned grayer, changing to

stone beneath him. The magic rose slowly, consuming his thighs, his hips. He lost all feeling below the waist, even the pain of his wound erased—replaced by terrible numbness.

“Then know me now!” roared the stone man. “The clans will pay dearly for their trespassing, and this time . . . I will not be so merciful.”

He thrust his hands forward, and the magic accelerated. The Hunter could only scream as his torso, then his arms, turned to stone. His hands froze in the air, outstretched, reaching for a sky in which he would never again soar. His head was the last to turn, his mouth open in a howl, his eyes wide with terror—until the light in them faded and his gaze turned as blank as the mist.