





A bolt of lightning startled the boy awake, and he nearly fell out of the tree in which he'd been sleeping. His hands scrabbled at the branch. He regained balance just as a peal of thunder rattled the Forest of Bluebriar.

Cold rain matted his black hair to his head. Curled up to make himself as small as possible, he looked up at the night sky. Hidden behind the stinging rain and shadows lurked eyes that always hunted. The boy's heart pounded against his ribs; he breathed faster and harder as he peered into the blurry darkness.

Was it just the lightning that had woken him?

Or had some inner sense detected danger?

He had flown for hours, until his wings ached and his vision blurred. His pursuers had been thorough in their search, checking the underbrush, every gulch and hollow log. They couldn't have caught up to him already.

Unless they had a Hawk with them.

The thought made him shudder. The people of the Hawk clan could see for miles, zeroing in on the tiniest details below. A Hawk would certainly speed up their search.

His body tensed; he was torn about whether to stay hidden or to fly for his life. Making the wrong choice could mean death. His eyes

probed the darkness. It was thick with clouds, and as bad as the men following him were, there were *worse* things that hunted in such skies. Monstrous things, which would kill him without thought. But the boy had no choice. His pursuers drove him relentlessly, and he was forced to risk it.

Suddenly, the tree began to shake as something heavy landed above him. Leaves rained down, and when the boy looked up, he found himself eye to eye with a grinning Hawk clan brute, his dark, striped wings still half extended.

“Got you, worm!” the man snarled.

The boy threw himself backward.

He toppled from the high branch and fell toward the forest floor, branches scraping him as he tumbled. He struggled to grab hold of something but only got handfuls of leaves.

Then, moments from hitting the ground, the boy unfurled his wings.

Nearly six feet wide, shining with wet, black feathers, his wings caught the air. He lifted so suddenly that his stomach seemed to drop. He heard the Hawk man shout, but the boy was out of reach now, the trees too close together for his pursuers’ larger wingspans.

The boy flew dangerously fast through the forest; it was nearly impossible to see the trees in the dark and rain, and he had to zig-zag to avoid colliding into the trunks. Though he couldn’t hear them over the storm, he could sense his pursuers forming a pack above the treetops, following him, waiting for a chance to strike. It was only a matter of time.

Desperation drove him faster through the trees, until at last he ran

out of forest and burst into open air. Fields rolled below, vast and endless and terribly devoid of shelter.

The boy gasped, half from exhaustion, half from despair. Without the protection of the trees, he became easy prey. He beat his wings, angling upward, hoping to catch a strong wind that might give him an advantage.

Rain lashed his skin, his every muscle straining for more speed. The wind tossed him, the thunder echoing between his ribs. In the bursts of lightning that splintered the sky, he saw bright golden blooms of sunflowers in the fields below. But of his pursuers, he saw nothing.

He'd lost them at last.

He began to relax, looking for a good place to land and wait out the storm. He thought he might have seen something in that last flash of lightning, a barn perhaps and some cottages.

He sighed wistfully, hoping for a warm pile of hay he could sink into for the night. His wings shivered in anticipation of rest.

Then he felt the hiss of an arrow by his ear.

He hadn't shaken his hunters at all, and now they were trying to shoot him out of the sky.

Heart pounding, the boy rolled to evade the bolts. A spike of lightning cracked nearby, making his hair stand on end and his feathers shiver with static energy.

He chanced one look back—

And felt an explosion of pain in his left shoulder as an arrow found its mark. His wings folded and he tumbled out of control, head over heels through the storm.

With a scream, the boy plummeted from the sky.