



SKYBORN

SPARROW RISING

JESSICA KHOURY

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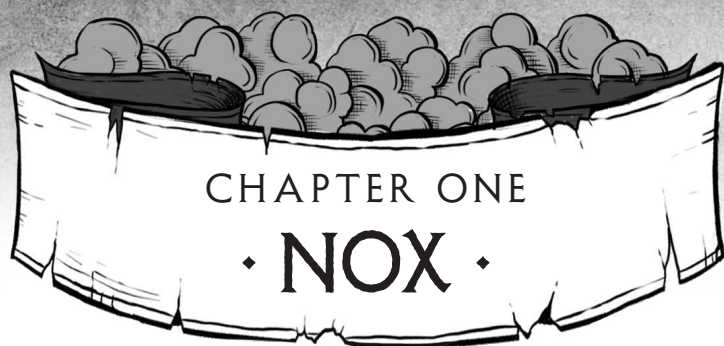
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FOR LESLIEANN



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.

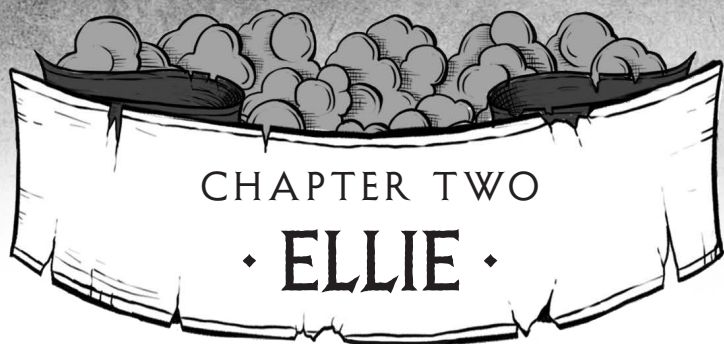
He hadn't shaken his hunters at all, and now they were trying to shoot him out of the sky.

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.



The sky glowed brilliantly blue the morning of the Goldwing Trials, and everyone from miles around the little town of Linden had come to watch the race.

This far out in the country, most were farmers. They came both on wing and in rumbling carts pulled by sullen donkeys and broad draft horses, making a festive procession down the dirt road that snaked through the sunflower fields. Linden could barely hold them all in its square, where a rope slung between two posts swayed in the breeze, marking the starting point of the race. A space was cleared around it, awaiting the contestants.

Ellidee Meadows stood with a dozen other Sparrow clan orphans and breathed in the crisp morning air. Behind her, Mother Rosemarie fanned herself with a spatula and chatted with the town doctor, occasionally poking any of her charges who fidgeted too much. Ellie had already been prodded thrice, and they'd been here less than half an hour.

"Look at that sky," Mother Rosemarie said. "Blue from east to west. I can hardly believe it, after that storm last night. Did you *hear* the thunder?"

The doctor grunted. "Haven't had a squall like that in months."

"You know, I woke up once and—it was the *strangest* thing—I

thought I heard shouting from the sunflower fields, as if someone were calling for help.”

“One of yours?” asked the doctor.

“No,” said Mother Rosemarie. “Everyone was accounted for this morning. Ellie Meadows, will you *stop* fidgeting?” She poked Ellie again with her spatula.

Ellie practically bounced, her body humming with nervous excitement from her toes to the tips of her red-brown wings, which were folded neatly against her spine. Like the other Sparrows, she wore shades of autumn. Her fawn-colored shirt and leggings were belted with a dark orange sash, and her soft leather boots had grippy soles, perfect for making tricky landings on high places. Her shirt clasped around her neck, then swooped low in the back, leaving her shoulder blades bare so her wings could move freely.

She’d lain awake for hours the night before, listening to the thunder crash. She shared her room at Mother Rosemarie’s Home for Lost Sparrows with six girls, and every one of them had snored soundly till dawn, despite the torrents of rain lashing the windows. None of *them* had stayed up all night, worrying that the Trials would be postponed due to the bad weather.

But luck was on her side. Ellie couldn’t have asked for a more glorious day than this.

The Trials were held once a year, but she couldn’t remember ever seeing so many people turn out for them before. There were at least twenty different clans represented. Many of the younger spectators, kids Ellie’s own age, fluttered up to perch on the rooftops of the houses and shops, their wings lazily unfurled behind them. The wind rippled through their feathers with a soft fluttering sound.

The center of the square was filled with taller, more muscular figures—representatives from the high clans of Hawk, Falcon, and Osprey. Warriors and lords and wealthy landowners, it was their children the rest of the town had come to watch.

Clustered around them were the majority of Linden's inhabitants, the low clans of farmers and craftsmen: Grosbeaks, Robins, Jays, Finches, Doves, all distinguishable from one another only by the patterns and shapes of their wings, which ranged from plain gray to bright blue to dark gold. A small group of Cardinal clan members stood out brightest of all with their long apple-red wings, which they continually extended and fluttered vainly; their feathers gleamed from fresh oiling.

But most of the spectators were from Ellie's own clan—the tawny-winged Sparrows. Theirs were all familiar faces to Ellie, because she spent every day with them, out in the sunflower fields, harvesting the seeds that were their livelihood. Ordinarily, after schooling and lunch concluded, Mother Rosemarie would herd the orphans, or *Lost Sparrows*, out of the large house and into the fields their clan had been tending for generations. But they all had today off for the race, and spirits were high.

Glancing back at Mother Rosemarie, Ellie made sure the woman was completely engrossed in her conversation with the town doctor. Thank the sky the woman was sweet on him. Taking advantage of his unwitting distraction, Ellie began edging sideways, away from the other girls.

"What are you up to *now*?" hissed Prina, her freckled wings ruffling indignantly. "You're going to get us all in trouble, as usual."

Ellie grinned, put her finger to her lips, and slipped into the crowd

like a minnow darting through a school of trout—small, unnoticed, agile. She kept her wings pulled tight to her back so they wouldn't snag on anything.

Everyone fell silent as the mayor of Linden strode to the starting rope. Davina was from Oriole clan, her wings dark but for a bright stripe of orange along her coverts—the feathers that formed the middle rows of her wings. Her hand clutched a small horn with a bright red tassel.

“Clans of Linden, welcome to today's Trials. As you know, a race like this one is being held in every town and city across the Clandoms on this day. And the top three finishers of each of these Trials will go on to compete against one another in the capital city of Thelantis, in the great Race of Ascension.”

The crowd cheered, and Ellie kept moving, trying to get as far from Mother Rosemarie as possible. Her heart drummed in her ears.

“And the top fifty fliers in *that* race,” continued Davina, “will be made Goldwing initiates, joining the mighty host of knights who defend our great king and all the Clandoms from the threats above.”

Everyone's eyes flickered skyward. Just because there were no clouds didn't necessarily mean the skies were safe. Even Ellie couldn't stop her wings from unfolding a bit, her survival instincts kicking in, urging her to fly to safety.

She knew better than anyone how dangerous that sky could be.

“The time has come,” announced Davina, “for those of you twelve years of age, who would prove your bravery: Step forward and speak your names.”

The crowd became completely silent, waiting. It took only a moment before the first contestant stepped forward.

"I am Zain of the Hawk clan," said a tall boy with long brown-and-white wings. "I will race."

Ellie grinned. Zain was her oldest friend, and she cheered as he strode to the starting rope, spreading his wings to the roaring approval of the crowd. He was a favorite to place in the top three and advance to the Race of Ascension.

"I am Tauna of the Falcon clan!" rang out a voice, and a dark-skinned girl with black-and-white-striped wings joined Zain. "I will race!"

Three more stepped forward—the Osprey clan twins, Laida and Lowen, and Zain's Hawk cousin Ordo. Davina smiled warmly at them before calling out, "A fine group. Now, will any others put forth their names?"

Everyone began chatting and turning away; there were no more high clan children old enough to enter. The race was ready to begin.

But then Ellie cleared her throat and stepped forward. "I am Ellie of the Sparrow clan!" She had to shout to be heard over the rising noise of the crowd. "And I will race!"

Silence fell again, only this time, it was filled with confusion and disbelief. Every eye in the town settled on Ellie's small frame, as if no one was sure they'd heard her correctly. She swallowed hard but kept her head high.

Then, across the square, came the sharp words she'd been dreading. "Ellidee Meadows! Come back here *at once!*" Mother Rosemarie's face had gone red. The feathers of her wings shivered with fury.

Ellie met the matron's gaze. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

From the back of the crowd, laughter sounded.

It spread quickly. Soon, half the crowd was guffawing. But worse

was the silence among the Sparrow clan. Ellie's own people, it seemed, were too mortified to be amused.

Clans were almost as close-knit as families. Embarrass one, embarrass them all. The Sparrow clan chief, a bearded elder named Donhal, shook his head at her, disapproving.

Ellie didn't falter, though her face grew hot and her palms began to sweat. Her wings clamped against her spine.

"Go home, Sparrow!" a Hawk clanner called. "Stupid girl. You'll get hurt!"

She walked straight up to the starting line and took hold of the rope, same as the other contestants. Tauna was the shortest of them, and Ellie only came to the girl's shoulder. Skies, but high clan kids were *tall*.

Zain blinked. "Ellie . . . you're not really going to race, are you?"

Ellie stared at him, wondering if he was joking. "Of course I am. We've been talking about this day since we were five, Zain."

He ran his hand over his spiky dark hair. His eyes darted to the other racers and back to her. "Ellie . . . I thought you were, you know, joking. We were kids."

"We're still kids."

"You know what I mean. Being a Goldwing . . . that's not for . . ."

Not for Sparrows was what he meant.

Ellie's heart fell. None of the others' jeers had gotten to her—at least not too deeply—but Zain's words impaled her like a sharpened stake.

"Not you too," she whispered. "I thought of everyone in this town, *you* at least believed in me."

"I do!" he said. "That is, I think you're a great flier and all, but . . . No Sparrow has ever entered the Trial for a *reason*, Ellie."

Ellie felt like he'd punched her. She saw their entire friendship in a new light now. All those years, the nights she'd sneaked out of the orphan home to build forts with him, the plans they'd made to join the Goldwings together . . . he'd never meant it. Not any of it.

Had they truly been friends at all? Had he ever taken her seriously?

"Just . . . stay out of the way, okay? I don't want you to get hurt." He flicked his wings; like the other high clans, Hawks' wings were long and tapered, perfectly shaped for fast flying. Ellie's Sparrow wings were rounder and stubbier, more suited for short flights. Ellie knew this, but she didn't care.

She said stiffly, "King Garion himself said *anyone* can become a Goldwing, if they're fast and strong enough. That's the whole point of the Race of Ascension. It's not about what clan you're from or how rich or connected you are. It's about how hard you work. You *know* that, Zain."

"Yeah, but . . . Ellie, *why* are you doing this?"

"You know why." She looked him evenly in the eyes.

Zain turned away, his face uneasy. Everyone was still laughing, and Ordo and the Osprey twins glared at Ellie witheringly.

"This is supposed to be a noble test of speed and will," pouted Laida. "And now it's one big *joke*. Go back to your clan, Sparrow. You're a farmer. You don't belong here."

Ellie stared straight ahead. Her jaw ached from being clamped so tightly.

"Enough!" the mayor called out, trying to quiet the crowd. She gave Ellie an exasperated glance but didn't try to dissuade her. Ellie was right about the rules—anyone could enter the Trial. Just because a Sparrow had never raced before didn't mean they *couldn't*.

Across the square, she saw Mother Rosemarie pushing through the crowd, surely intending to drag her back to her clan.

Ellie turned to the mayor. "Please," she whispered. "Start the race."

Mayor Davina had seen Mother Rosemarie too and looked conflicted. On the one wing, Ellie was under Mother Rosemarie's authority, as all Sparrow clan orphans were.

On the other, she knew Mayor Davina was *also* sweet on the town doctor.

"Mayor," Ellie said. "*Please*."

Ellie had spent her whole life in the sunflower fields, harvesting seeds until her fingers were raw and her cheeks sunburned. It was what her family had done for generations, what her clan was expected to do. It was what her parents had *been* doing, the day they were killed.

No one would ever see Ellie as anything other than a farmer, no matter how much she begged to be taken seriously.

So she would have to do things the hard way.

She would just have to *show* them.

Mother Rosemarie was steps away. She lunged for Ellie.

At that moment, Mayor Davina blew the little horn. At the sound, Ellie exploded off the ground with the other racers in a fury of wings.

Mother Rosemarie's hand closed on empty air.

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