

Jamie Foley
1106 Main Street #1471
Bastrop, TX 78602
(Phone number available upon request)
jamiesfoley@gmail.com

Emberhawk
a novel by Jamie Foley

about 78,000 words

Chapter 1

Dry leaves crackled behind Kira. A low growl escaped from the lion's throat, betraying its position not ten feet away.

Terror sliced down her spine like a molten blade. The beast was twice as fast as she could scurry in a stupid dress.

Kira cursed herself. She never should have crossed the border. She knew better, but somebody had to put food on the table.

She plowed through a blackberry patch, the thorns drawing blood from her shins. Overripe berries smeared purple across the floral pattern of her kimono. Her breath came in gasps.

Veering to her right, Kira strained to recall the exact placement of the tripwire in her big game trap. It had never caught anything, but then again, the bait had never been so good.

The blackberry bush snapped behind her. Kira ducked under a branch as claws tore through the back of her arm. Adrenaline blurred the pain as she leaped over the tripwire, which flared an instant later.

A young birch tree groaned as tension released. Kira glanced over her shoulder to see the trap's noose tighten around the cat's shoulder. It sent the beast in a flailing, screeching arc to the forest floor.

Kira slowed to a distant birch and leaned on it, gulping in air. She twisted her arm to get a look at her sliced tricep. Warm blood seeped from her dark skin and stained the birch's pale bark.

The trap's young tree whipped the air as it straightened to a height of ten feet. Its noose held the lion by its protruding shoulder and dangled its paws just out of reach of the ground. The beast writhed and focused on Kira with slitted eyes that glowed like the sun.

This was exactly why her father had forbidden her from entering the forest. The fact that it was enemy territory was bad enough, but the man-sized predators were getting desperate in the drought—desperate enough to steal a rabbit from her snare.

Kira might have admired the beast if it hadn't almost consumed her. A coat of beige and brown flowed over jagged muscles. The fur shimmered as Kira watched, and the cat's body vanished from the quiet forest.

Her eyes widened. She knew they were called 'trace' cats for their ability to disappear without a trace, but she'd assumed that was a myth. Just like the scorpion-like d'hakka that her father had made up to keep his children from crossing the border that ran alongside their land.

But the noose still hung from the leaning birch, severed half-way up the rope by light itself, or the lack thereof. Kira spotted the fiery eyes still watching her, floating in mid-air and swaying with the rope.

Kira swallowed. She hitched her kimono up her thigh until it revealed a sheath of three throwing knives. One knife came free but almost slipped from her grip—her fingers were slick with blood.

The trap groaned from the strain of the invisible lion's weight. The noose pulled the young birch at a sharp angle until a sickening crack echoed throughout the forest, and the tree snapped in half with a flurry of shards. The mulch flattened as the trace cat smashed into it, then churned as claws scrambled for footing.

Kira's stomach jumped into her throat. Her blade poised at her ear as the splintered tree twisted toward her, the noose thrusting as if commanded by some supernatural force.

Disembodied orange eyes bounded forward with a wild lopsided gait.

The left eye made the perfect target for Kira's throwing knife. She let it fly, and the blade glinted in the leaf-speckled light before filleting the glowing iris. The trace cat reappeared and collapsed to the forest floor in a snarling heap.

Kira stood frozen, watching the beast twitch with the most surreal feeling... like she'd entered an alternate reality. The burning slices through the back of her arm informed her that she was alive—somehow—but everything she knew about the world insisted that she should be dead.

The predator's writhing slowed, and Kira dared a step forward. Her knife had sunk into the trace cat's eye up to its hilt—the perfect shot. Sure, she practiced throwing knives every day to ensure that the victims of her traps were killed as painlessly as possible. But to have killed a trace cat with a blade no longer than her hand...

Kira tore the ravaged sleeve from her kimono with a loud rip. Her eyes didn't stray from the body as she mopped up the blood on her arm with the azure-dyed silk. The ruined fabric crumpled to the ground. If she didn't dispose of the evidence, the claw slashes would all but prove that she'd been in the forest.

Her mother, Inowae, would be livid that she'd destroyed a third dress. *Now maybe she'll finally let me wear pants.* She didn't really care that the only pants that the tailor made for women were technically sleepwear.

The trace cat lay still on the leaves as Kira yanked a rag from the folds of her kimono. She wrapped it around her arm and pulled at the knot with her teeth and hissing at the pain. The cuts weren't deep, but they seared as if the cat's claws had been made of salt.

Kira steadied her breathing and crept forward, watching the one undamaged orange eye as it stared off at nothing. The throwing knife slipped from the iris as Kira plucked it free. She jumped back, but the beast didn't react. No blood trickled from the wound, indicating that the flow from its heart had stopped.

An unexpected wave of regret washed over Kira. *What do I do with the body?* They couldn't eat a trace cat. Right?

Of course not. Kira took a deep breath, turned on her heel, and hurried east. She didn't have time to clean up the mess now. Each passing second diminished her chances of a clean getaway.

A thrill of victory blossomed in Kira's chest as she ran, but the lack of rabbits in her hand weighed more than the actual bodies would have. Dinner would be another assortment of preserves and cheese since she'd failed to provide anything fresh. The two coneys provided by her traps would have been a welcome break from the root cellar's stores if that trace cat hadn't swallowed them whole.

Light broke through the trunks as Kira hustled over the border. Blonde fields spotted with cattle stretched out as far as the eye could see. The land was flat except for a patch of oaks and the pink-blossomed cherry orchard whose fruit Kira should have been picking instead of trapping in enemy territory.

But the orchard was on the other side of the valley. Kira panted at the squat farm house before her, whose white paint cried out for a new coat. *Oh, no...* She'd crossed over into their neighbor's land.

"Kira?"

She grimaced. *Of course Noa's right there. Of course.*

A young man of her same age—sixteen—sprinted over from a flock of grazing knot-covered sheep. His smooth face was etched with concern. "Are you okay?"

Kira forced a smile. "Yes, I was just—"

"Your arm!" Noa gaped as if her arm was nothing but bone and bloody sinew. "What happened?" He fumbled with the knot of a blue sash around his waist.

"It's okay." Kira looked down at her arm and found that blood had soaked through the wrapping. *Shoot!*

Noa didn't ask permission to move to her side and drape his sash over the bandage. His brow furrowed as he affixed the sash to Kira's kimono as if it belonged there.

Kira shrank back from his touch. "What are you..." The delicate way he was placing the sash wouldn't have helped the wound in the slightest.

"Hiding it." Noa stepped away and tilted his head at his work, then nodded. His hunter green eyes met her bewildered blue with a dash of humor. "You were trying to hunt again, weren't you?"

Trying? Kira bit down on her pride. She had half a mind to tell him exactly what she'd caught. "No, I was just going for a walk and got lost."

Noa chuckled. "I love that about you. Did you know your ears twitch when you lie?"

Annoyance roiled in Kira's gut. It was always like this with him.

Her entire family had been trying to match her up with this boy since she was five. Maybe that was the reason that Kira didn't want to be with him. Ever. Even if she was the oldest girl in the Navakovrae territory not to have found a husband yet. Who needed a husband anyway?

Kira cleared her throat. "Please don't tell anyone."

Noa's smile was warm. "Wouldn't dream of it. Would you like me to walk you home?"

A rhythmic thudding sounded from the road that split her family's pastures from Noa's. Kira turned and squinted through the waves of heat that emanated up from the earth.

Five reptilian creatures stirred up a cloud of dust from the path. The beasts stood upright on two thick legs, balancing themselves with long tails that whipped behind. Each one bore a saddle and rider on its back.

Xavi? Kira stared at the colorful array of feathers that protruded from the animals' skulls like crowns. Xavi were ridden by those with the coin to maintain them—a rarity—but these bore the soft blue banners of the Malaano Empire.

Kira broke into a sprint, gathering her kimono above her knees as she flew toward the road. "Thanks!" she yelled back at Noa.

Please let it be him!

One of the xavi screeched and swerved away from its brethren. Its head dipped closer to the ground as its rider leaned forward and spurred its scales.

Tears of joy blurred Kira's vision. Despite the haze, she already knew that her oldest brother was home.

The xavi slid to a halt in front of Kira and snorted as its rider leaped from its back. Kira collided with the man and clung to his uniform. "Tekkyn!"

“Hey, hey! Long time no see.” Tekkyn stumbled back and returned her hug, his voice constricted in her grip.

Kira’s reply was a gurgled mess. Chainmail threatened to imprint itself into her face, even through the blue fabric of his tabard.

Tekkyn laughed. “I missed you, too.” His eyes shifted to Noa’s sash and the blackberry stains on her kimono. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” She blinked the tears back. “You’re here to stay, right? They’re finally letting you go?”

His eyes narrowed into slits. “You’re a terrible liar, Frizz.”

Kira pushed herself away, her mouth drooping into an enormous frown. “Don’t ruin the moment!”

Tekkyn smiled wide and patted her gravity-defying brown locks. “What? It hasn’t changed one bit.”

Kira pressed a hand down on her hair as if she could force the curly strands back into her skull. She opened her mouth to remind him never to call her ‘Frizz’ again, but her vision had cleared enough to reveal a new scar on her brother’s jaw. Just as unfamiliar was his thicker bulk under the silver plate armor that was too heavy for their climate.

“What happened to your chin?”

“Nothing major. I got something for you.” Tekkyn plunged a hand into a pocket behind his tabard. A slim leather holster displayed four knives in a tight row.

Kira’s eyes bulged. She accepted the holster as if it was made of gold and pulled one of the blades out. The thin metal’s etched flowing design reflected a clean glint of sunlight. She balanced it on her finger. The tang was the exact same weight as the longer blade.

How much did these cost? They made her current blades look like folded parchment.

“Are these for me?”

“You’re the only one around here who throws knives.” Tekkyn reached back and took the reins of his xavi as the other riders came alongside them. “I got you one for each eye of a d’hakka.” He winked.

Kira snorted. “Oh, really? How many imaginary forest demons have you slain in your travels?”

Tekkyn’s voice deepened. “No one slays d’hakka. That’s why there are four blades: so you can attempt to blind it and run for your delicate little—”

“Who’re you calling ‘delicate’?” Kira shoved the blade back into its sheath. “If the things were real I’d kill ‘em bare-handed!”

“Impressive.” Tekkyn swung himself back into the xavi’s saddle in one fluid motion, then held an expectant hand down to Kira. “I’ll just return the knives, then.”

Kira realized then that the other newcomers were looking down on her from their mounts. All four bore Kira and Tekkyn’s chocolate skin tone, but a noticeably lighter shade. Only one presented her with a polite smile.

She swallowed and refocused on her brother. “What? Return them?” Her mind raced. “I said, ‘Thank you so much!’ What did you think I said?”

Tekkyn’s eyes brightened to the color of the sky. “Missed you, Frizz.” He scooped her up as if she were a child, causing Kira to squeak like a girl half her age. Tekkyn plopped her on the xavi’s back behind him, dangling her legs off to one side.

Kira cleared her throat. “So you think you can just shower goodies on me and call me whatever you want?” She clung awkwardly to the curvature of the saddle, but her grin was as wide as a bull’s horns. *I’m riding a xavi!*

Tekkyn chuckled and kicked the beast into a trot. “Would you rather I use your full name... Lady Kiralau Spaz-Pants Tomboy the Third of Frizzington?”

Kira slammed her fist into his armored back, grateful that he couldn’t see her smile. “Weirdo!”

“Tekkyn’ashi.”

Tekkyn straightened his back and raised his voice. “Sir?”

The man who had been leading the group was now riding alongside, watching them with an emerald gaze. “Why don’t you introduce me to this young lady?”

“Of course.” Tekkyn cleared his throat. “This is my little sister, Kiralau. Kira, this is Lieutenant Sa’alu, the commanding officer of my border patrol unit.”

Sa’alu gave a faint smile and a bow of his head. “A pleasure, Kiralau. I’ve heard good things about you.”

Kira bowed in return, trying not to cringe as the officer pronounced her full name with the utmost formality, as he had Tekkyn’s. His accent was a sure sign that he hailed from Malaan Island, the heart of the Malaano Empire. Kira and Tekkyn’s ancestors had also originated from the island, but they’d settled these new tribal lands three generations ago. The high pitch of the language must have been lost somewhere along the way.

Sa’alu’s xavi trotted back into the lead, aiming for a cluster of buildings standing alone on the plains. The dairy and empty hay barn were uniform, but the ranch house was an architectural menagerie. White rock graced only the kitchen walls; each wing of the sprawling

structure differed in style as each prior generation had added to it. The den ballooned out from the kitchen with slats of dark wood between dozens of tall windows. Garden trellises clung to the rust-colored brick of Kira's grandmother's suite, shading the hitching posts where the soldiers dismounted and tied their panting xavi.

"Mom!" Kira screeched, bursting through the front door before anyone else could. "Tekkyn's home!" If Inowae appeared before her guests without every fleck of crushed copper paint she deemed necessary, the world as Kira knew it would be over.

But her mother was waiting on the den's sheepskin bench with a bright smile and cerulean-tinted eyelids, pretending to be reading a book. Across from the bench and chairs, a blackened stone hearth was topped with a collection of eight small carvings of different animals. A white fox with seven tails in the center represented Lillian, the goddess of water, while the seven water-spirits fell in line below her.

Kira avoided the fox's vapid gaze. The complete absence of rain for the past several seasons caused the locals to fear that the goddess was angry, but she was beginning to doubt that the deity was powerful enough to control the weather at all.

Tekkyn opened the door just in time to cut off Kira's blasphemous thoughts. "My boy!" Inowae choked, lowering her book. Tekkyn crossed the room and embraced their mother before she could stand.

Kira's heart warmed at the reunion, but she worried that Tekkyn's hug would break their mother's petite form. Inowae's skin had fallen more sallow since Tekkyn had left, and her newfound fragility rivaled that of a dandelion.

The doctor couldn't identify their mother's sickness. She was simply dying, he'd said, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Kira believed that about as much as she believed fire was green. During her next trade trip into the border town of Navarro, she'd hunt down the tribal herbalist and beg for a remedy. Inowae's only serious symptom was crippling fatigue. Surely there was a cure.

"How I've missed you, Tekkyn'ashi," Inowae whispered.

"You, too." Tekkyn pulled back and looked down at Inowae's thin shoulders. Kira caught the flash of concern across his features before he rattled through the introductions.

"Would we be able to stay the night?" Sa'alu's formal tone was like silk. "We've been reassigned to the northern border since the south received a fresh troop from Malaan. I should have stopped us at the barracks in Navarro, but I believe the three hour's ride was worth it to Tekkyn'ashi."

"And to us as well." Inowae's soft voice struggled for volume. "We have an old house on the far side of the property that you're welcome to. How long would you like to stay?"

Sa'alu gave a thin smile. "You are most generous. We only need to stay tonight, and will be heading out in the morning."

Kira's stomach flipped. "What?"

The living room grew silent, and all eyes turned to Kira. She swallowed and lowered her voice at Tekkyn. "Sorry. I thought he meant you were leaving with them."

Her brother's face voided of emotion. "I am leaving with them." He looked away. "The government has decided to extend my tour. I'll be serving for another year."

Kira's jaw dropped. "But... didn't..." She collected herself and tried again. "Didn't your tour finish last month? I thought they were dropping you off."

A chuckle slipped from Sa'alu. "I'm afraid Tekkyn is more skilled than most. He'll probably be serving for several more years."

“You can’t do that!” Kira clenched her fists. “The draft is for two years. You can’t just make him—”

“Kiralau!” Inowae’s voice cracked. “You will show respect to our guests.”

“It’s alright.” Sa’alu smiled at Kira as one would regard a smart-mouthed child. “You’ve got quite a fire there. If only you were a young man, you would serve your country well alongside your brother.”

“My country?” Kira burst. “Malaan Island is an ocean away from here! We settled this land on our own. You have no right to draft us and tax us and—”

“Kira!” Tekkyn grabbed Kira’s shoulders and jerked her around to face him. “This *is* Malaan. Navakovrae is Malaano Empire territory. Okay?” His blue eyes bored into hers as if they were screaming, *Take it back!*

Kira’s muscles solidified into steel. Sa’alu was watching her with the intensity of a reptile.

Her pride burned down her throat as she swallowed. “I was just kidding,” she forced through gritted teeth.

Tekkyn’s abrupt laugh shattered the quiet like glass. “You’ve got to stop hanging out with those idiots in Navarro!” He slapped Kira on the back and turned to Sa’alu. “She’s just a girl. She doesn’t know anything.”

Kira reeled as if he’d backhanded her while Sa’alu grew a tight smirk. “Of course,” the officer said. “She’ll learn.”

Inowae breathed like she’d forgotten how to. “Kiralau... go and get... some cheese and jam.” Despite the half-circles under her mother’s eyes, Kira knew she’d bring down the wrath of the heavens if one more word escaped her lips.

Kira turned and marched through the kitchen and out the back door, staggering like a dagger was stuck in her side. Tekkyn had never talked to her like that before.

What happened to him?

She blinked furiously, refusing to allow any tears to fall. Inowae was incapable of preparing a full meal for the soldiers by herself, and Kira's grandmother was likely napping if she hadn't made an appearance by now. So Kira knew she would be preparing the vast majority of dinner by herself, and she refused to let the soldiers see her do anything but hold her girly, know-nothing, rebellious head high.

Smoke stung Kira's nostrils and blurred the evening light. She paused her charge toward the root cellar and inhaled a deep breath. *That's a wood fire... but...* It was mixed with other scents she didn't recognize.

Odd. Her father handled their controlled burns due to the dry conditions, but he was in Navarro for a meeting.

Kira glanced along the horizon and found a pillar of smoke snaking into the sky from the other side of the house. She rounded the corner and followed the black trail.

Her knees went weak. Across the plains, Noa's house was consumed by flame. The inferno glowed like amber in the sun's dying light, and as Kira watched, the entire structure collapsed into smoldering rubble.

Chapter 2

Smoke clogged the air. Kira covered her mouth with her kimono and coughed. Even from fifty feet away, she had to squint through the stinging heat emitted by the flaming ruins of Noa's house.

Was he inside? Streams of tears evaporated from her cheeks. *Please let them be okay... Please let him be okay!*

She rounded the inferno to find Sa'alu pointing and yelling something she couldn't make out. Soldiers dashed around at his command, somehow discerning his words over the wailing of Noa's mother. Her cries shredded Kira's heart.

"Kira!"

Tekkyn was suddenly in front of her, grabbing her shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

"I..." Kira coughed. Her gaze flicked from person to person, trying to identify them through the smoke. "I have to help! Where's Noa?"

Tekkyn looked back over his shoulder at Noa's mother, who slouched on the ground like a sack of rice. Kira now realized that she was holding something. A body.

No!

Tears stung her eyes. "Is he—"

"He's having trouble breathing, and his grandfather is burned." Tekkyn turned back to Kira and lowered himself until he could look her straight in the eye. "Does Granny still keep aloha vera in the garden?"

Kira's eyes were locked on the body in Noa's mother's arms. *Trouble breathing?*

"Kira!"

"Y-yes. There are two plants—"

"Go and get some. Run!"

She turned and ran. Something scratched at the back of her mind... a thought wondering how aloe vera would help Noa breathe.

Kira ignored it and flew back down the road. Her lungs burned and her feet screamed, but she moved faster than she ever had.

#

The distant squawking of hens was the only sound in the ranch house. Kira sat slumped across the dining table from her mother. Both stared at knots of wood in the table. Neither spoke.

Cherry jam had been spread across fresh rice wafers, but the platter remained untouched and cold. Kira folded her arms and buried her head in them, not caring that the movement agitated the cuts on the back of her arm. A day had passed, but she still couldn't believe that Noa was gone.

Would it have killed me to let him take me on one date?

He'd died a hero, the soldiers had said. He'd run back into the flaming house to save his grandfather, and both of them had made it out alive before the collapse.

But the smoke had taken its toll. Noa hadn't been able to breathe properly. His lungs were burned, and no herb or remedy could have done anything about it. He hadn't survived the night.

Kira watched a dust particle float past the window's viridian curtains. The memory of his laughter was still crisp. *"I love that about you. Did you know your ears twitch when you lie?"*

She felt like a millstone was strapped to her shoulders. *If I'd have known...*

The front door's hinges gave their familiar creak, and Kira shot upright. Tekkyn, Sa'alu, and Kira's father entered in a cloud of dust. Each man's Malaano military uniform was smeared with soot.

Inowae's face contorted at the sight of her husband. "Oda'e," she whispered, and he strode to her side and embraced her. A fresh wave of tears broke over his shoulders.

Kira frowned at a black stain across the officer's patch on Oda'e's shoulder. Her father was taller and thicker than both Tekkyn and Sa'alu, but the redness of his eyes indicated he'd wept harder than either of them.

"This will all be over soon," he murmured to Inowae. "I promise."

Kira cleared her throat and looked to Sa'alu and Tekkyn. "Did you find out what happened?"

Sa'alu nodded while Tekkyn glanced away. "We found this in the wreckage," the lieutenant said in his strange accent. He produced a long, thin instrument and balanced it in his palm.

Kira crossed over the threadbare rug and took the metal device. “A spyglass?” She pulled on the lens, and each segment stretched out. Kira squinted through it to find the carved seven-tailed fox above the mantle to be magnified in perfect clarity. Only a fleck of ash distorted the image.

“It must have been made by an Emberhawk,” Sa’alu said. “Only the fire-mages can melt sand into glass that smoothly.”

Kira blinked and held the spyglass away from her. She didn’t recall Noa’s family owning something as expensive as this... nor something as controversial.

“The tribes?” Inowae’s voice warbled. “But they’ve been so friendly with trade in Navarro.”

“Not the Emberhawk,” Sa’alu said, and Kira caught his meaning. Of the five native tribes of the Tribal Alliance, the Emberhawk were the most independent. They were also the smallest tribe after they’d started a war between the tribes ten years ago... and lost.

“Why?”

Kira hadn’t noticed her other older brother, Lee—the one between her and Tekkyn in age—when he’d entered from the hall. He stood there like a ghost, his dreadlocks flanking his face in shadow.

“Why would they do this?” Lee’s throat was as dry as the plains.

“I would like to know,” Sa’alu crossed his arms across the white emblem of a flower on his tabard. “But the tribes are savages. There’s only one way to communicate with them.”

Kira frowned. The Tribal Alliance wasn’t any collection of savages any more than the Navakovrae settlers were. But for the past few years, war had been a rumor whose whisper had grown into thunder. When word of this reached Navarro, tensions would be higher than ever.

The thought made Kira uncomfortable. Maybe because she was the one to trade Granny's cherry jam or cheese every week and forge friendships with the natives in Navarro. Maybe it was because she held an admiration for the strange tribal language, or their addicting dish of flatbread and spiced meat, or the medicinal tree sap they harvested from the darkest parts of the forest.

Maybe it was because they had no real reason to fight each other.

Lee strode to Kira and she handed him the spyglass. Between the blue fire in his eyes and the whitening of his knuckles, he might have broken it. "Emberhawk, huh?"

Oda'e pulled away from his wife, leaving black fingerprints on her kimono. He held out a hand for the spyglass, which Lee surrendered. "As much as I don't want to leave again so soon, I need to report this to Navarro," Oda'e's eyes were dark as he considered Inowae. The evidence disappeared behind a row of gold buttons on his uniform.

Inowae blinked, then looked to Tekkyn. "Can't you...?" she asked, but the soldier looked away.

"Apologies," Sa'alu said. "My unit has been reassigned to the northern border. We need to get into position right away so this doesn't happen to another family."

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Oda'e turned and clapped a hand on Lee's shoulder. "You're in charge 'till I get back. Don't let your guard down." He stared his son in the eye, and Lee gave a terse nod.

The women fluttered about the kitchen, preparing satchels with water skins, dried beef, jam, and cheese. But when the door closed, a vapid silence fell upon the ranch house, and Kira wished for more work to do. Something to take her mind off of the charred husk that still smoked across the valley. Anything.

“Hey.” She took a seat next to Lee on the living room’s bench, just out of reach of the window’s soft light. He was snarling at the dark wood floor as if it was to blame.

“I shouldn’t have taken that exemption from the draft,” Lee muttered. “I’m almost twenty, for crying out loud. I could have been serving for years now.”

That exemption for acting as the sole provider of their household was the only thing that had kept their ranch alive. Oda’e’s position as an officer had him away from home too often to care for their herds and land, and his rank had also helped in granting the exception for Lee’s draft.

Kira decided against putting a hand on Lee’s arm. He looked so angry that his skin might have burned her. “Even if you were a soldier, it wouldn’t have saved Noa,” she whispered. “We’d have lost all the cattle if you weren’t here to tend to them.”

Lee cursed low in his throat. “Who cares about the cattle if they’re picking ranches off the border one by one?”

Kira winced. “What do you mean? Was there another fire?”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “On the southern border, two weeks ago. You didn’t hear about it?”

“No—”

The back door opened with a screech, and their grandmother’s voice rang through the house. “That dang fox!” Her voice descended into an unintelligible scramble before becoming understandable once more. “... two more chickens!”

Lee furrowed his eyebrows at Kira. “Again?” he called.

“Again, boy! Didn’t ya hear what I done just said?” The woman rounded the corner, and Kira noted that her plump kimono and graying hair were even more frazzled than usual. Her Granny’s weathered face was lined with deep creases. “Their feathers are everywhere!”

Both Granny and Lee glared at Kira, who leaned away. “I put fresh traps out—”

“Your traps obviously don’t work, Kira.” Lee’s voice was as stern as their father’s.

Kira bit her lip to prevent herself from boasting that she’d trapped a trace cat just yesterday in the forest. But whatever kept plaguing their chickens was smart. Too smart.

“My traps work.” Kira stood up from the couch. “It’s probably a fox—”

“Then get out there and check the fence,” Lee said. “If we lose one more chicken under your watch, you’re not going to Navarro.”

Kira’s mouth fell open. Her weekly trade trip to the southern border town was her only glimpse of the outside world... but more importantly, it was when she’d planned to search for tribal medicine for Inowae. *Can’t say that now, though.*

Her mind raced for another excuse. “But I’m the only one fluent in Phoeran. How do you expect to trade for rice?”

“We can survive for a week without rice. What we can’t afford is to lose our entire flock. And I can’t lose you to some bloodthirsty Emberhawk in Navarro when Dad left me in charge.” Exhaustion tugged on Lee’s eyelids. “Please, Kira. There’s been enough death around here already.”

A breeze flitted through the pasture's dried grasses and chilled the dew on Kira's skin. She jerked back to attention, oriented herself on the barn's straw roof, and peered through the morning fog.

The chicken coop was just as quiet and still as it had been yesterday and last night. Kira had woken up earlier than usual and scaled the barn in the first faint rays of sun. She glanced over her shoulder at the horizon. The northern road that Sa'alu's unit had departed from a few minutes ago was now empty.

"Kira, I'm sorry," Tekkyn's last words echoed from a related memory.

He'd tracked Kira down despite her every attempt to avoid him. A few minutes before the soldiers had left, he'd grabbed hold of her shoulders. "Listen! I'm sorry. You've got to forgive me. I didn't mean it at all. I just said that to get Sa'alu off your trail."

Tekkyn had looked back at his commanding officer over the pasture, as if he suspected that the man could hear him over the hundreds of feet between the chicken coop and the house. When he'd looked back to Kira, his blue eyes had been urgent. "Promise me you won't say stuff like that anymore. To anyone, okay? There's a rebellion brewing, and the Empire is serious about stamping it out."

Kira shifted on the barn's roof, hugging herself for warmth. *What was he talking about? I haven't heard anything about an actual rebellion.*

Of course nobody liked the Empire. Not the locals or anyone she knew in Navarro, whether they shared her dark skin or the tribal olive hue. But everyone was just complaining, like

people always did. The Empire was far too broad and powerful for settlers like them to do anything about it.

Besides, they had their own troubles. Like a chicken thief with an immunity to traps.

Kira turned back to the coop and scowled at its silhouette. She was counting on it to distract her from thoughts of Noa that swarmed her like a flock of crows. The shabby little hen house wasn't doing the trick.

She tightened her grip on the bowstring. *Keep it together. You can't feel guilty for your whole life for not liking him. How can someone choose who they like, anyway?* But she was experienced at feeling guilty for situations beyond her control and was quite skilled at it.

Kira sighed at the mist. Her eyes flicked between the two spots she suspected the most: one corner of the pen where the fence was lower, and a spot near the gate that was barren of grass. Her snares at each point should have been able to snatch up anything that even looked at them sideways, and yet they were empty.

Still empty.

Kira shifted her weight back onto the thatched roof and wiped dew from her palms onto her pants. A strip of smoked beef jerky emerged from her pocket and tore between her teeth. *At least Mom doesn't care what I wear anymore.*

Fog twirled around a figure that slunk toward the coop. Kira dropped her breakfast and leaned forward, squinting. Whatever it was, it was huge.

Kira's bow curled around her as she rose from the roof. She peered at the figure as she lifted an arrow and nocked it on the bowstring. *Must be a trace cat*, she concluded from its size.

That explained why it had eluded her traps designed for foxes. But normally the cats didn't venture from the trees... *The drought must have hit the forest worse than I'd thought.*

The figure had reached the thin picket fence and melded its shadow with the coop. Kira focused on her balance and took an archer's stance, stretching from the roof like an oversized weather vane.

Kira gritted her teeth as the cuts on the back of her arm protested. Fletchings trembled between her fingers. The bowstring might as well have been an eighty-pound weight. If she was closer, she could hit it with a throwing knife, but the odds of her hitting anything from half an acre away with Oda'e's bow weren't good.

But she'd set up on the barn roof on the slim chance that it *was* a trace cat. She wasn't eager to come face-to-face with those dagger-long fangs again. *At least I can scare it off.*

She hissed in a breath, held it for a second, and let the arrow fly.

Mist swallowed the streak, but a soft noise indicated the arrow's impact. Kira crouched and squinted.

The figure became upright and dashed away from the coop... on two legs.

A human? Kira choked. *Thank Lillian's tails I didn't hit it—*

A shrill cry shattered the morning quiet. The thief staggered in its flight to the tree line.

Guilt plunged into Kira's chest. *No!*

She dropped the bow and nearly fell off the roof in her haste to meet the ground. Her ankles burned with the impact of landing.

The shadow made a break for the forest, and the fog concealed it more deeply with each stride.

"Wait!" Kira yelled. She burst into a sprint.

Her target slipped between the trees, and Kira cursed herself. It was probably one of the homeless... if they would have just asked, Inowae would have gladly cooked them a meal.

“I’m sorry!” Kira shouted as she ran. “I can get you some help!”

The forest gulped the light of dawn and contorted it. Kira jumped over the first shrub and ducked under a branch, then jolted to a stop. She’d come within inches of plowing into a trunk. Even if it had been daylight, she wouldn’t have been able to run through the dark woods.

Movement caught Kira’s attention ahead. She must have closed the gap some, because Kira recognized the form as that of a young man before it vanished into the dying mist.

She froze, staring at the empty space and breathing hard. *Did he just... disappear?*

Her eyes darted from tree to tree, desperately seeking a human form, but the man was simply gone.

There was no wind or sound. All was still, like the landscape of an aged painting. She was surrounded by nothing but thorns and branches draped in shadow.

Fear dropped into Kira’s mind like a spider descending from the pine needles above. The emptiness closed in on her... so much so that she wondered for a split second if the thief had never existed in the first place.

But if he did still exist, maybe he could hear her. “I didn’t mean...” Her voice skipped, and she swallowed. “I didn’t mean to hurt you! I thought you were a trace cat!”

The pines stared back at her, unforgiving.

Kira squelched the urge to slink back to the border. *Where did I hit him?* She raised her voice. “There’s nothing in these woods for miles, but I can get you some help!”

Not even the insects responded.

How in the goddess’s seven fluffy tails did he do that? Kira focused on the spot where the figure had vanished and clenched her jaw. *Just make it there and yell one more time.*

A twig snagged her hair and pulled. Kira untangled it and glanced at the ground, where long lines of black dirt had been revealed under the layer of mulch. *He's dragging his feet.* Guilt carved through her like a blade.

The trees stared as she inched toward the location from her memory. A cluster of spots darkened needles near the base of the pine's trunk.

Something grabbed Kira's hair and ripped her head back, exposing her neck. A young man materialized beside her. Wide eyes the color of flame seared behind a tribal mask.

Kira gasped and writhed. A dagger glinted, angling for her throat.

She grabbed the incoming wrist, halting the blade not a foot from her jaw.

The man pushed against her grip, but he was no stronger than she was. Kira's eyes flashed to his shoulder. Her arrow was embedded there, hindering his strength.

Kira screamed and grabbed her arrow's fletchings with her free hand. She twisted, driving the arrow further in.

The fiery eyes winked out with a gasp. The man released her hair and collapsed to the forest floor.

Kira lurched forward and recovered her balance. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she stared down wide-eyed. The thief was clothed in leather from boots to terrifying mask, where two extra eyes were painted with green, white, and black. The design formed the wild snarl of a d'hakka—a forest demon.

She swallowed hard. *It's not a demon. It's not a demon.* She pried her eyes from the mask and found her arrow. It was protruding at a sharp angle, entering near the collarbone and piercing back to the left shoulder blade. The sight of it made her stomach flip.

The young man's dagger laid innocently on a bed of pine needles. Kira snatched it up and held it ready, then kicked his ribs with her boot.

No response.

Kira's knuckles turned white around the knife as she circled him. A longbow and pack clutched to his back while a quiver and belt full of equipment clung to his waist. Ribbons extended from either side of the mask before joining behind his head.

Her fingers trembled as they pulled at the knot, careful not to touch his short silver hair. The mask flopped forward and lolled on the ground.

The face beneath was human, but the tanned skin was several shades lighter than her own. The eyes were closed and the face placid, but she could still discern that their shape was a different style than hers—the thin almond shape that assured a tribal heritage. He might have been anywhere from eighteen to twenty-one.

Kira commanded her breathing to calm. *He's one of the natives. What's he doing here?*

A symbol was etched into the interior of the mask's wood. Kira's eyes grew wide at the carved circle behind the forehead.

She'd seen that five-pointed star on trade carts in Navarro: the emblem of the Tribal Alliance's military.

Chapter 3

Dry soil erupted from the earth when Kira yanked at a fistful of weeds. *Great. The only things that don't mind the drought are weeds.*

She smeared dirty fingers on her thighs and focused on a barbed aloe vera—the same one that had failed to save Noa. But this time, it might actually help the Tribal Alliance soldier instead of just serving as Tekkyn's tactic to keep her away from tragedy.

A mature leaf with twin rows of spines slipped into Kira's basket. She ducked under a trellis of aging vines and set a hurried pace out of the garden. *I wonder if this'll be enough...*

It probably wouldn't. Her grandmother had been working on the tribal soldier's wound since Kira had dragged him in that morning. Now it was noon. If the arrow had finally been removed, a lot more than aloe vera would be needed to repair the damage she'd caused.

Kira kept her eyes to the ground so the chicken coop wouldn't slide into her peripheral vision. On the bright side, she had saved their flock, but no one cared about that anymore.

She allowed her hand to pause for a moment on the barn door. Guilt grappled so vehemently with anger in her gut that she'd felt sick for the past hour.

Was it him?

If the man she'd shot had been the one to set Noa's house on fire, he deserved whatever he got. Kira knew that Noa's mother would never be the same, and nothing could change that, but surely bringing her son's killer to justice would bring her some measure of solace.

The native's eyes seared in Kira's memory, crackling like embers under a fire's dance.

With eyes that bright, he could easily be an Emberhawk.

Emberhawk. The wild ones. The fire-mages. The ones who'd crafted the spyglass found in the smoking wreckage of Noa's house.

But she didn't know for a fact that the Tribal Alliance soldier was from the Emberhawk tribe. All of the tribes shared their physical attributes, to a certain degree. And the Emberhawk territory was far to the west, stretched across a strand of tropical paradise along the continent's southern coast. Their numbers were few after the Sacrificial War ten years ago, so the odds of one being all the way out here on the Navakovrae border were low.

He could be from another tribe and just happen to have bright eyes. Or even if he is an Emberhawk, that doesn't prove that he did it.

What Kira did know for a fact was that he'd almost ended her life. Kira bit her lip, her hand still hovering on the barn door. *He probably could have killed me if he really wanted to...*

Doubt scratched at the back of her skull. Something was out of place. If he could turn invisible, did that mean he was a fire-mage? If so, why hadn't he used his magic on her in the forest?

Kira shook her head as if the movement could tussle the conflicting emotions from her head. She felt like a hammock swaying in the wind—ashamed one second and livid the next.

Calm down. Just give Granny the stupid aloe. Kira took a deep breath before the door slid open with a screech of protest. She ducked into the shade and squinted until her eyes adjusted.

The barn was devoid of hay—as it had been all season—leaving only a cavernous interior. On the left was a long work bench occupied by her grandmother and the sleeping native, who laid as still as a cadaver. On her right, Lee was uncoiling a thick rope with practiced speed.

Kira rounded her grandmother until the woman's slight shoulders blocked the native from view. She set the basket down next to a pile of dried herbs. "Are these enough, Granny?"

Granny's mass of white-speckled curls bobbed with the motion of her arms. Her mortar and pestle furiously ground an assortment of leaves into a green paste. "Prob'ly is..." Her voice descended into an unintelligible mutter. Kira strained her ears to catch: "...some fadeleaf, quick. He's stirring."

Kira peeked over her Granny's shoulder. The young man's bloodied jerkin was crumpled over a hill of equipment and weapons. His painted mask jeered at Kira from the pile's summit.

She grimaced and dared to glance along the bench. The native's right arm was tied to a graying oak support of the barn wall. His left dangled off the bench with a clean, white bandage around the shoulder.

She got the arrow out. Kira let out a small sigh of relief.

She dove into her basket.

"Is this fadeleaf? I forgot..." Kira produced a cluster of round violet leaves puffed full of liquid.

Granny inspected the offering with clear blue eyes—Kira's inheritance. She smiled faintly. "Yes! Thanks, sweets. Never thought"—the words jumbled again—"a use for it besides my sleeping tea." Gentle fingers plucked at the succulent leaves and crushed them between mortar and pestle.

"Just let him wake up," Lee called as he tossed rope over the rafters. "He needs to answer some questions."

The cord hit the dirt with a puff of dust. Kira frowned at it. "You're going to string him up like a deer?"

“Nope. If he was a deer, I’d tie him upside-down.” Lee picked up the rope’s end and snaked it behind him, then moved to the prisoner and began tying his wrists together. Kira cringed when the movement shifted the damaged shoulder.

“You can’t hang him any which way!” Granny said. “I just got his wound closed.”

Lee pulled his knot tight. “I’ll put him down as soon as he admits what he was doing on our land.”

“Have you tried asking him?” Kira muttered.

Lee’s gaze was hard as turquoise. “You realize that this is the guy who murdered Noa.”

Kira swallowed and decided against disputing the claim. A good part of her wished that she could know for sure that it was true; at least then she’d know how to feel about it.

“Don’t go too hard on him.” Granny turned from the bench. “That wound is nasty... and he won’t tell you nothin’ if he’s dead.”

“I’ll be careful.” Lee crossed the barn and pulled down on the far side of the rope. The prisoner’s arms began to rise in response. Kira’s stomach churned, and Granny muttered something and slipped out the door.

“But I just got these... herbs...!” Kira called after her, but Granny didn’t turn back.

Kira felt like a mouse in a butcher’s shed. A curious streak urged her to stay, but instead she dropped her basket and made a break for the door.

“Wait! You should stay,” Lee said. “He’s a native; he probably doesn’t speak Malo.”

Kira’s weight was on her toes. “You can speak basic Phoeran—”

“Well, yeah, but you’re fluent.” Lee pushed a wayward dreadlock from his face. “I need to be able to understand everything he says. Could you translate?”

Kira went stiff. Being the only one in the family who was fluent in the natives' language had always been a good thing up until now—it had ensured that she was the envoy for their weekly trade trips to Navarro. The trade town was nothing exciting, but it sure beat doing chores at the ranch.

Well... she thought, the better they can communicate, the faster this'll be over.

She turned to face her brother and folded her arms. "I will if you promise not to do anything horrible."

"Nothing I do will be anywhere near what he did to Noa." Lee wrapped the rope around the length of his arm with a furious pace.

Kira frowned. After watching her brother for a moment, she cleared her throat. "You don't *know* that he did it..."

Lee stared at her. "I *know* that he almost killed my little sister."

Kira shifted her weight onto one leg. "I kind of shot him."

"He was *kind of* trespassing and stealing," Lee's dreadlocks waved when he shook his head. "Just because you think he's pretty—"

"He's not pretty! I'll probably have nightmares for the rest of my life because of him."

Well... I guess he's a little easy on the eyes, Kira realized, now that Lee had brought it up. *For a thieving, trespassing, possibly murderous enemy soldier.*

Kira rushed her next thought out. "I just think you should talk to him before you yank his toenails off. Or better yet, just wait until Dad gets back."

"Dad left me in charge."

Kira unfurled her arms and lowered her voice. “Look, I grew up with Noa too, okay? I miss him just as much as you do.” She took a step toward her brother. “Please, just wait for Dad.”

After a long moment of fighting with the rope, Lee’s expression melted. He took in a breath and released it. “Don’t worry, okay? This is all just for show. If he cooperates, I’ll let him down.” He pulled on the rope.

Kira reached a hand out as the rope slid over the rafters. It hauled the prisoner up until his back lifted from the bench.

Orange eyes slurred open as the young man raised his head. He blinked and groaned, then found Kira watching him. The eyes narrowed.

Kira flinched and looked at the ground. Her heart leaped into a rapid rhythm. *Don’t show fear!* Kira nudged a small stone in the dirt, as if anyone would believe she was interested in it. *Could he set the barn on fire right now?*

Silence hung with the dust in the air until Lee cleared his throat. “You’re up.”

“Oh. Um, hello.” Kira kicked herself and started over in the Phoeran language. “Hello.”

There was no response. When Kira dared to look at the native again, he was watching her with a steeled face.

Just get it out! Kira lifted her chin. “We don’t want to hurt you, but we would like to know what you were doing on our land.”

The prisoner’s eyes flickered like a candle’s flame, but he made no movement at all.

Lee tugged on the rope, which in turn tugged on the man’s wrists and stretched his bandaged shoulder. A hiss slithered through the barn as the prisoner gritted his teeth.

“Hey! Put him down!”

“It’s just a little leverage,” Lee murmured. “Get his name.”

Kira glared at her brother and slapped a wayward curl that tickled her eyebrow. *He’s playing with fire!* But they hadn’t imploded into a fiery mass yet, so maybe they were okay.

She forced a smile and offered it to the prisoner. “I’m sorry. Please tell us your name, and he’ll put you down.”

The native shifted his jaw and spat something onto the dirt. Kira blinked at what appeared to be crushed fadeleaf.

But his tongue still didn’t move. The prisoner watched the wall as if it might begin to sing and provide some slight entertainment.

Kira frowned. “What tribe are you from? Surely there’s no harm in saying that.”

The weary orange eyes closed and rested for a long moment. Only the mooing of a bull sounded somewhere beyond the barn.

“Come on, we don’t want to hurt you. But you have to say something. Do you know anything about the fire on the ranch next to this one?”

The prisoner might as well have been asleep. Lee abruptly jumped and let his entire weight come down on the rope.

The cord burned over the rafters and hauled the prisoner several feet into the air. He slipped off the bench and swung under the roof, his knees dragging lines through the dirt. A stifled cry escaped and echoed from the walls.

“Lee!”

“He’s an enemy soldier, Kira.” Lee tied his end of the rope to a support beam. “He’s not going to talk if we ask him nicely.”

“Why are you doing this? Just go after Tekkyn and turn him over to them!”

“Do you have a way to communicate with Tekkyn? They’re long gone.” Lee yanked the rope end to seal his knot. “Before Dad brings the soldiers from Navarro here, I need to find out what he was doing on our land and why he started that fire.”

“You don’t *need* to! You really don’t.” Kira clenched her fists. “How do you *know* it was him? Do you have any proof?”

“Yeah. We found an Emberhawk spyglass in the wreckage, and he’s an Emberhawk.” Lee dipped his head at the prisoner. “Look at those eyes. Do they look natural to you?”

The last place Kira wanted to look was into the prisoner’s eyes. She remembered their eerie glow all too well.

She fidgeted. “You can set a fire without being a fire-mage. But if he could use fire magic, he would have used it on me in the forest.” She chewed on her lip. *Invisibility doesn’t count, right?*

Lee opened his mouth to speak, but Kira cut him off. “And I’ve met people from other tribes in Navarro who have bright eyes like that, too. It doesn’t mean he’s Emberhawk.”

“Yeah, it pretty much does,” Lee said, and Kira knew the odds were in his favor. “Why would he be on our land unless he was spying? I’ve checked his bag. There’s no spyglass. Guess why?”

Kira’s heart sank. She glanced at the soldier’s pack and didn’t see a spyglass on the pile, but she did spot three glass jars of Granny’s cherry jam. *He must have swiped them from the root cellar...*

“He’s a spy, Kira. An Emberhawk spy. Who else would leave an Emberhawk spyglass at Noa’s house?”

But Lee might as well have been talking underwater. The world was spinning.

Kira swayed. Was she supposed to feel proud that she'd shot Noa's killer? Shouldn't she be livid? Would it be right to just go back to the house and pretend everything was alright?

"I'm still not going to let you hurt him." Kira's voice was hoarse.

"Kira..." Lee strode to her and placed himself between her and the native. He cradled her shoulders between gentle hands, but his eyes were hard. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have involved you."

Kira didn't respond. She stared at a red smear on her brother's tunic.

"I have to do this," Lee said. "Hopefully when he decides to talk, I'll understand it. But if not, I'll call for you. Okay?"

She took a fistful of cloth below his neck and pulled his face down to hers. "I said I'm not going to let you—"

The barn door creaked, and Kira dropped her hand.

Their grandmother hobbled through the breach, crossed the dusty floor, and pressed a trio of red-spiked leaves into Lee's hand. "Use all three and I'll get you fresh ones if you need 'em."

Kira's eyes widened. "Granny, what are those?"

Granny took Kira's arm and pulled her toward the exit. "Let's go, sweets. This isn't something for a lady's eyes."

Kira's feet turned to lead. She looked back over her shoulder at the prisoner, whose head hung beside the bandage that was turning scarlet. "What did you give—"

"Something to end it quickly." Granny's knuckles lightened as she gripped Kira's arm and pulled her forward. "Gotta show mercy how we can."

"Granny!" Tears welled in Kira's eyes. "How is this mercy? Just tell him to stop! Can't you—"

“You don’t understand, girl.” Granny dragged her through the barn door and scurried down the path toward the house. “That Sa’alu had a dark light in his eye. The military’s methods would be far worse. If Lee can get the information they’d want before they get back—”

“That’s insane!” Kira’s voice warped as she stumbled behind.

“Now you listen here!” Granny’s fingernails clawed into Kira’s arm. “I know this is hard. But that man murdered my Noa, and he’d do the same to you in an instant. And he almost did, didn’t he? So you’re going to sit quiet and pretend everything is right as rain, and it’ll all be over soon.” Her grip loosened. “Now, what do you want for dinner? How about I get out some of your favorite pear jam, okay?”

Kira clenched her jaw and fought to keep the tears from falling. The first scream lashed across the plains before they made it back to the house.