

# EMBER HAWK

THE KATROSI REVOLUTION BOOK 1

JAMIE FOLEY

# Books by Jamie Foley

## The Sentinel Trilogy

*Book 1: Sentinel*

*Book 2: Arbiter*

*Book 3: Sage*

*Prequel: Vanguard*

## The Busy Mom Guides

*The Busy Mom's Guide to Writing*

*The Busy Mom's Guide to Indie Publishing*

*The Busy Mom's Guide to Novel Marketing*

*Steampunk Fairy Tales Volume III*

## The Katrosi Revolution

*Book 1: Emberhawk*

*Book 2: Silverblood*

*Book 3: Lotusfall*

# EMBER HAWK

THE KATROSI REVOLUTION BOOK 1  
JAMIE FOLEY



FAYETTE  
== PRESS ==

*Emberhawk*

Copyright © 2020 by Jamie Foley



**FAYETTE**  
— PRESS —

Published by Fayette Press

Bastrop, Texas, USA.  
[www.fayettepress.com](http://www.fayettepress.com)

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from Fayette Press.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either used fictitiously or are products of the author's imagination. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

ISBN: 978-0-9982078-9-6 (printed hardback)

ISBN: 978-0-9982078-8-9 (printed softcover)

ASIN: B081HZMDZF (Kindle ebook)

Cover design by Jamie Foley

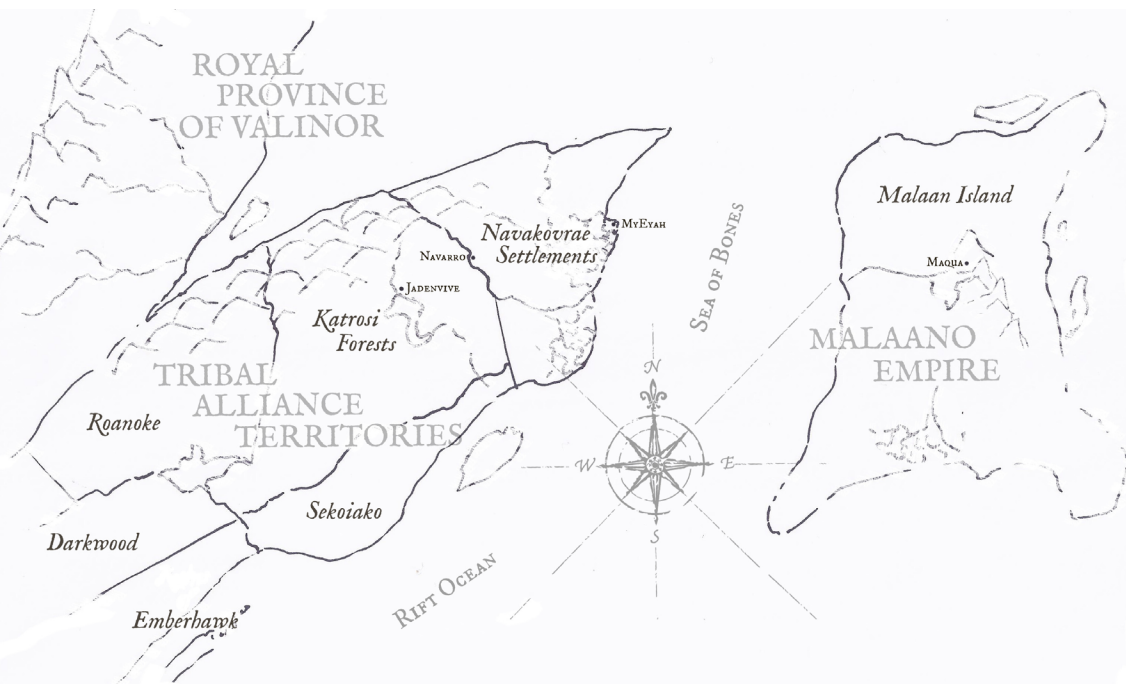
Editing by Catherine Jones Payne, Abi Claire, and S.D. Grimm

Typesetting by Jamie Foley

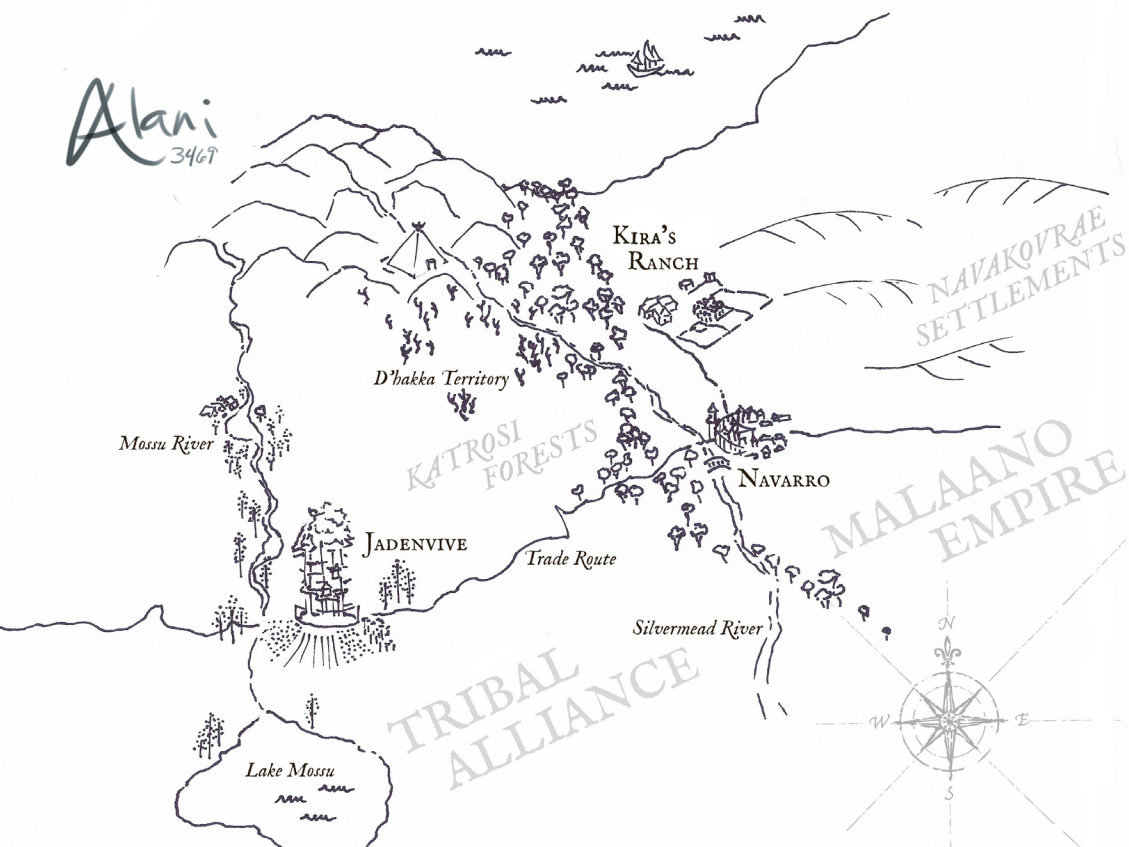
Printed in the United States of America.



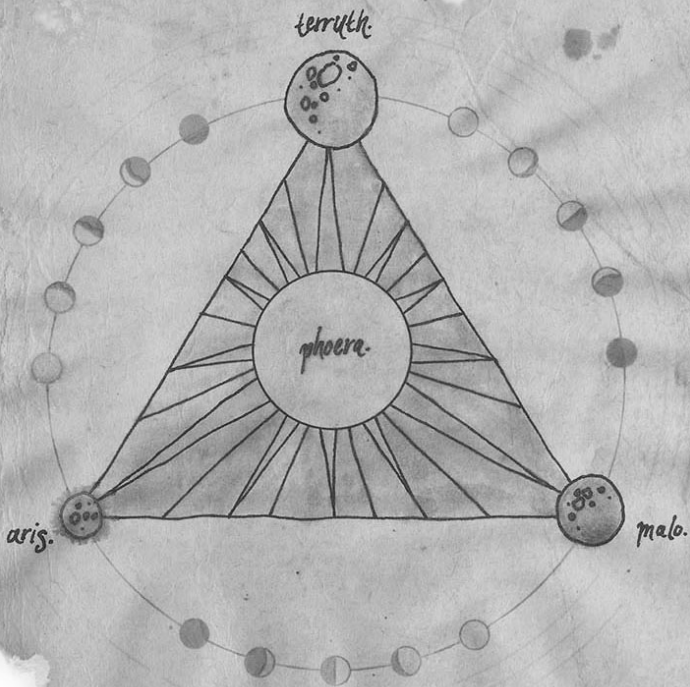
*To my hero and dear friend, Angela,  
and her legendary enchiladas.*



Alani  
3469



the elements



# GLOSSARY

- AEO – The creator god who formed the physical and spiritual realms and all races therein.
- AEO LEYWA AI SHEA – A farewell wish in the Ancient language meaning, ‘Aeo be with you and protect you.’
- AETHER – A spiritual energy generated by one’s soul.
- ALANI – The name of the planet on which the story takes place.
- AMOS – A semi-mortal shapeshifter who serves as the primary source of power for their element. There is one *amos* for each element.
- BALEMBA – A Phoeran word meaning ‘butterfly.’
- D’HAKKA – A giant tree-scorpion with an appetite for large prey.
- ELEMENTALS – Shape-shifting spirits created after angels but before humans, thus their nickname ‘second born.’ There is one *amos* elemental and seven *traí’yeth* elementals for each of the four elements: Malo (liquid), Terruth (solid), Aris (gas), and Phoera (energy).
- RUPERO – Syn-forged coin currency used by the Phoeran tribes.
- SYN – The silvery metal in a human’s blood that allows them to control their element. Elementals control syn itself as well as their element.
- TRACE CAT – A saber-toothed predator the size of a lion. They wield the Phoera element to manipulate light, disappearing without a trace.
- TRAI’YETH – Shape-shifting spirits designed to hold vast amounts of their element. Means ‘sealing vessel’ in the Ancient language.
- TRIBES – The five tribes that immigrated from Illyria across the Rift Ocean hundreds of years ago: the Katrosi, Emberhawk, Roanoke, Darkwood, and Sekoiako.
- XAVI – Like feathered velociraptors with the faces of dragons, xavi are reptiles native to tribal lands used as mounts by the Malaano Empire.
- ZOTH – A frigid region of the spiritual realm occupied by rebel angels, said to be devoid of the creator’s light and warmth.



# 1

## KIRALAU

Kira ran until her heart threatened to burst. She didn't dare look back. She wouldn't be able to see the trace cat anyway—it bent reality around itself in streaks of bleeding light. The beast's footfalls thumped through the dying forest with a lion's gait; it was probably an adult male.

And she was probably dead.

Kira plowed through a joyberry bush and ignored the stinging scratches across her shins. She cried a prayer that the noose of her big game trap still laid in the same spot. And that it would actually work this time. The bait had never been so good.

She ducked under a gnarled oak branch and broke into the clearing, where the merciless sun beat down on starving grasses and decaying stumps. Energy surged through her, flinging her toward the young tree pulled taut with her trap's noose. As she leapt over it, she realized the sapling wouldn't be strong enough to hold a trace cat of this size.

*Water goddess, creator, elementals—whoever's listening, help me!* Kira grabbed for a throwing knife as she flew over the noose. But her leather sheath wasn't in its place on her thigh.

Wood cracked and rope groaned. A high-pitched snarl pierced the quiet forest, and Kira ran a stone's throw before daring to turn on her heel.

The cat that writhed in mid-air was as large as her father's prize bull. It shimmered in and out of existence like a firefly at dusk, with streaks radiating across its pale fur like a tiger that had lost its stripes. Fiery

orange eyes fixated on Kira with wild hunger.

Terror chilled her blood despite the midday heat. It was an adult male, all right, and her trap wouldn't hold the awkward grip on its shoulder any more than her mother's nagging could keep her from Granny's joyberry pie.

She turned and ran straight into umber skin and white cloth. Her brother pulled a lasso from his belt and glared at the trace cat with ice blue eyes.

"Lee!" Kira stumbled back and nearly fell. "What are—"

"Back up!" Lee swung his rope and Kira ducked, barely affording him enough room in the clearing to toss the rope. It circled around the trace cat's neck and cinched tight. The beast floundered against it with a guttural growl.

Lee tossed his lasso's slack over a tall branch. "Help me!"

Kira grabbed the rope and pulled just as her trap's young tree snapped and splintered. The fibers burned against her palms as she yanked down and heard a strangled pop.

The forest quieted to nothing except her panting and the hesitant song of a distant bird.

She looked back at the beast. Its body lay still, pulled between her noose around its shoulder and Lee's lasso around its neck. Light glistened along the length of its fur, which faded to a dull beige.

Lee dashed to the beast, drew his knife, and turned his back to Kira as he finished the job.

Kira's fingers trembled but refused to let go of the rope. Whichever deity had heard her prayer clearly wanted her alive.

"Bleeding stars." Lee wiped his blade on a rag as he straightened. "You ever seen one this big?"

"No." Kira's voice shriveled in her throat. "You might have saved my life."

"Yeah, like that's never happened before." Lee winked over his shoulder, his bright eyes glinting in contrast with a dark smirk. "What the tails are you doin' playin' cat-and-mouse with a trace cat?"

Kira looked down at the empty spot on her thigh where her fanned

sheath of throwing knives should have been. *I'm never going anywhere without a weapon again.* "It wasn't on my agenda for the day." Her bones creaked with resistance as she released the lasso, allowing the cat's body to lay flat across crackling leaves. "How'd you know I was in trouble?"

Lee sheathed his knife and tossed the bloodied rag to the ground. "Your screechin' was a little higher pitched than usual."

Kira huffed and wished she was close enough to smack him, then reminded herself that he'd saved her life. And she had no desire to move any closer to the beast that had nearly made her its brunch. "You were at the edge of the forest already?"

"Yeah, I came to give you somethin' to sell in town." Lee wiped sweat from his brow and stomped closer to enter the spotted shade. "Though this cat's pelt will make us ten times as much."

Kira's frantic mind calmed enough to wonder exactly how late she was for this week's trade run to Navarro, and how Lee could possibly tan such a large hide without their mother or grandmother noticing. She clenched and unclenched her fists to stave off the trembling in her limbs, unable to tear her gaze from the body. "Since when have they come so close to the border?"

"Maybe since the drought got so bad." Lee made a show of looking her up and down. "Must be pretty desperate to hunt a gangly thing like you, Frizz."

This time he was close enough for her to hit him. "Don't call me that! Just because you're taller than me now doesn't mean you're older."

"No, but I'm better-lookin'." Lee dodged her strike with that devilish grin. "You get anything for dinner?"

"That cat stole everything my traps caught," Kira grumbled. "Too bad we can't eat carnivores." Or maybe they could try. Desperate times called for desperate experiments in the smokehouse.

"So they've found a source of free food. Great." Lee strode past her, sending a shower of dry pine needles to the earth as he pushed a branch aside. "You'll have to stop trapping."

“What? We just killed it!”

“Trace cats of this size tend to travel in pairs,” Lee said. “There’s probably a female nearby.”

Kira charged after him. “So I’ll trap her too. What would we eat without the rabbits and branch runners? We can’t slaughter another calf.”

“We will if we have to.” Sunlight brightened Lee’s short curly hair as he stepped from the forest and into amber plains. “It’d be better than teachin’ trace cats there’s free food at the edge of our property. Next thing you know, they’d be leavin’ the forest to eat our livestock. Or us.” He gave her a meaningful look.

Kira scanned the rolling hills for any soul who might witness them crossing the border. She couldn’t just stop trapping. The mechanics, the thrill of the catch, the reward... they made life on a withering border ranch bearable. The more efficient her contraptions became—from the irrigation system in Granny’s garden to the pulley system in the barn—the easier life was for her family. Even if Mom would never admit it.

“I’ll just set up my traps deeper in the forest, then,” Kira said, ignoring the way her gut churned as the words left her mouth. She wiped clammy palms on her tunic and frowned at a new tear in the fabric.

Lee snorted as he approached his mangy saddled buffalo, which nuzzled the dusty earth for anything to munch. “Yeah, ’cause Dad’s not gonna whip our rear ends bad enough already.”

Kira narrowed her eyes. “If you’ve told anyone I’ve been crossing the border—”

“Course not.” Lee flipped a pouch on his buffalo’s saddlebag open and withdrew a stack of branch runner hides. “Think you can sell these discreetly enough in town?”

Kira’s spirit leaped as she snatched the skins. The brown and beige furs were flawless—his skill as a tanner was improving. “It should be enough,” she murmured. “Finally.”

“Tell her you got the medicine from the town doctor,” Lee whispered, as if their mother could hear him from the ranch house on a distant hill.

“She won’t take anything from a tribal herbalist.”

“I’ll slip it in her tea.” Kira grabbed her brother and held him tight. “Thank you.”

He hugged back, then pulled away with a raised eyebrow. “No more wrestling matches with predators five times your weight, okay?”

Kira’s face flushed with heat. “You’d better not brag to your latest fling about this.”

Lee’s mischievous grin made him look eight rather than sixteen. “No promises.”

Kira rolled her eyes and took off toward the house, whose roof gleamed like the surface of their dying pond. If Lee got married before she did, she’d never hear the end of it. But while he wasn’t picky about the selection of beautiful girls in Navarro, Kira refused to marry a guy who was dumber than a sack of rocks. Of which there were plenty. And the more her mother and grandmother pressured her, the more she despised every starry-eyed suitor.

She held the skins behind her back as she passed through the white-blossomed cherry orchard, scanning the trellises for her mother’s hunched back or her grandmother’s frazzled hair. Neither were in sight. Had they gone inside to escape the midday heat already?

Kira cursed and hurried her pace until she spotted their cart brimming with crates and barrels. The ranch hands had roped the covered wagon to a pair of buffalo near the beehives—thankfully far enough from the kitchen windows. Kira ducked away from the foggy glass and slipped the hides between crates of cherry jam and smoked jerky.

She released a breath of relief and straightened, picking a bundle of pine needles from the bandana across her forehead that held her curls at bay. The overripe cherries for the vintner were already loaded, as were the small ones for the candy maker and the shriveled pits for the inkmaster. All she needed was the shopping list, her wide-brimmed hat, and Granny’s fan, and her escape to Navarro would be flawless.

The back door betrayed her with a loud creak. The kitchen still



smelled of eggs, cheese, and cactus syrup from breakfast, but the wooden counter and skillet over the fire pit were scrubbed clean. Kira ducked under bundles of drying herbs and a garlic braid, then nearly swallowed her tongue when her mother stepped out from the dining room.

“Kiralau, where have you been?” Inowae’s steel blue eyes blinked from dark, sunken sockets and flicked to Kira’s hands. “No luck this morning?”

“Sorry. A raccoon raided my traps in the orchard.” Kira slipped past her, snatching the list of charcoal-scribbled parchment from a nail on the wall as she went.

“So it was a raccoon that took another hen from the coop last night?”

Kira halted mid-stride. “What?”

Her mother sighed. “I’m going to send a ranch hand to Navarro so you can figure out why your traps don’t work.”

Kira’s jaw fell open. “They do work. I just...” She bit the inside of her cheek before she could spill what she’d just trapped on the wrong side of the border. Inowae wouldn’t understand that the traps in their drought-starved plains hadn’t caught anything in months, so she had no choice but to lay snares in the forest.

Kira pursed her lips. “Whatever it is, it’s just too smart.”

Inowae’s expression was as flat as her humor. “Then you won’t mind watchin’ the coop ‘til it shows up again.”

Kira reeled in her frustration before it spilled out in a jumbled mess. “Whatever’s eating the chickens only hunts at dusk. I have a full load to sell in town, and we need the ranch hands here. Lee thinks that heifer’s about to give birth, and he might need help pulling the calf—”

“I don’t want you going into town by yourself anymore.”

Kira felt like her frail mother had punched her in the gut. “Why?”

“You know tensions with the tribes are worse than ever.” Inowae pulled a mortar and pestle from a shelf below the counter. “It’s not safe for a young girl.”

“Mom, I’m eighteen, and I’ve been making the weekly trip since I was twelve. I’m the one who knows all the vendors, and I speak Phoeran

better than anyone.”

Her mother pulled a bundle of dried rosemary from the overhead rack. “Well, we’re not going to trade with tribesmen anymore, regardless.”

Kira balked. “Mother! How can you—”

“Did you forget about the girl who disappeared last week?” Inowae ran bony fingers down the rosemary stem, letting the thin leaves fall into the green-stained mortar. “They say it was a Katrosi man.”

“Is there any proof of that?”

Inowae gave Kira that sidelong glance she knew all too well. “Kiralau, take your father’s bow, get on the barn roof, and sit there until that chicken-killer shows up.”

“Mom, seriously, I think your illness is—”

“Do I need to remind you of what will happen if we lose any more livestock?”

“Do I need to remind you we wouldn’t have food on the table without tribal irrigation designs for our garden and orchard?”

Her mother paused halfway down another stem. “Have you been readin’ their scrolls again?”

Kira paused long enough to forcefully calm her voice. “The tribes lived in a desert before their ancestors sailed here. They know how to survive in this drought, and they even have schematics for cooling air—”

“Kiralau.” Inowae pointed to the door, looking like a ghost of herself. Exhaustion hung from her every movement, as if breaking down dried herbs would crush her instead.

Pushing her any further would only send her to Grandpa’s graveyard faster.

Kira brought her hat, Granny’s fan, and Father’s bow to the barn roof. She watched her cart leave without her, then Lee deliver a fluffy white calf by himself, then the workers retreat to the house for lunch. After midday nap, her grandmother appeared to tend the garden, and her mother the orchard. The heat finally began to abate when everyone retreated again for dinner.

Kira bit off a mouthful of jerky and washed it down with stale water from her water skin. Maybe marrying some idiot from Navarro would be best, or one of those rich guys from the island with their lighter skin and fancy accent. Maybe then her mom wouldn't treat her like a kid. Maybe she wouldn't have to work so much. Or maybe she'd be forced to have children and her work would double.

Maybe war with the tribes would break out and she'd never feel the embrace of a loving husband regardless.

Kira squinted at the chicken coop and pen, where heat from the earth waved upward like steam from an overcooked roast. If her mother knew she'd cried out to any god other than the water goddess that morning, she'd be locked in the root cellar for a week.

She glanced at the shrine to the seven-tailed fox on a nearby hill. *Was it the goddess who saved me or the creator?* She flapped Granny's fan harder, but it only served to push more hot air into her face. Everyone knew the creator was dead—the elementals had killed him thousands of years ago. *Or was it just random chance that Lee heard me scream?*

Something flickered beside the coop, warping light in a familiar distortion.

Kira gasped and set the fan down in favor of her father's bow. An arrow's feather tickled her cheek as she pulled it back, shaking with strain as she squinted for the perfect shot.

There. The figure was big enough to be a trace cat, all right—surely the missing female.

She opened both eyes and released the arrow. It arced over the distance and disappeared as if she'd fired into a void. Then a figure shimmered into existence.

A human.

Kira's pulse stalled. She stared as a young man cried out and stumbled toward the forest. He wore dark leather with a green sash—the regalia of a soldier of the Tribal Alliance.

# 2

## RYON

Pain blinded Ryon in a white-hot sear. The Phoera element scattered in his blood and the flows of light abandoned him with a warped flicker.

He gasped at the thin stick that protruded from his shoulder, ending in a trio of cut feathers. *An arrow?*

*I've been shot!*

He swayed as agony branched out like lightning inside his bones. The arrow entered his chest at a sharp angle and ran back to his left shoulder, where it felt like his shoulder blade had stopped it.

Ryon gritted his teeth as his vision darkened and refocused. *I'm on the wrong side of the border...* He forced himself to his feet and breathed through the pain. At least he had his mask on, but that wouldn't last long if he couldn't get to the safety of the forest.

A figure emerged through the haze of pain, running toward him.

Ryon forced himself to sprint for the tree line. A cry escaped as his gait grinded flint against bone. He steeled his mind and focused on the fast-approaching trees. The chieftess had trained him for this.

He glanced over his shoulder at the figure. It was faster.

Ryon slid his dagger from its sheath as he ducked into the forest.

A woman's voice behind him cried something in the Malaano language, which he knew well, but his mind garbled her words in a smear of shock. She sounded young. Since when did the Empire post young women as border guards?

Or maybe she was just the girl who lived at this ranch, and he'd stolen

from too many of her traps.

She crossed over the border behind him as if it were nothing but a simple tree line.

Ryon cursed. That light-forsaken fox had warned him about hitting the same quarry twice. But the fact that he had to steal in the first place was the chieftess' fault—he'd told her he needed more rations. And normally the traps at this ranch were placed on the Katrosi tribe's side of the border. His side. Fair game.

Ryon ducked under a branch and summoned the Phoera element again. Energy swam around him, but he distorted it, disappearing into the forest like a distant star on a cloudy night. He only allowed light to touch his eyes so he could dodge joyberry brambles as he sped past.

The arrow's end snagged on a pine branch, wrenching it into his wound. Ryon choked on a scream as the horizon tipped and darkened. He clung to his element, barely maintaining invisibility as he stumbled to a dying oak and slid down its trunk.

Running through the forest with no sunlight was a fool's game, made all the more impossible with an arrow shaft waving like his enemy's victory flag. But what choice did he have?

Just because his pursuer couldn't see him didn't mean she couldn't hear him. And every leaf and twig in this forest was dry enough to snap and crackle like a bonfire waiting to happen.

Ryon closed his eyes and breathed through the agony. His gasping was just as loud as his pulse pounding through his ears. Hopefully he hadn't left a trail.

He cracked one eye open and glanced behind him. Swaths of disturbed earth dragged through cracked leaves in the most obvious trail anyone could have left.

*Syn!*

He didn't want to kill her. He'd turned down contracts on the most deserving war criminals the Malaano Empire had to offer. And this girl was probably just a civilian defending her own land. If she were the same



young woman he'd spotted from a distance a few weeks ago, she hadn't looked much younger than him, with a petite frame barely capable of constructing the high-tension snares she laid out. How she was apparently an archer as well was a mystery.

"I'm sorry!" Her words came in Phoeran now with a thick accent. "I thought you were a trace cat. Let me help you!"

Ryon couldn't calm his breathing any more than he could will away the pain. If he accepted help from an umber-hide, he'd be a prisoner of war in a heartbeat. He banished light from his eyes and redoubled the focus of his element, plunging his vision into a black void. She shouldn't be able to see him unless she was familiar with the subtle distortions. Unlikely.

Brush crackled behind him. Too close.

Ryon gripped his dagger tighter as sweat slicked his palm. *Turn around. Just walk away.*

"It's all right..." Something brushed his shoulder, and his invisibility shattered.

Ryon whirled, grabbing the girl by the neck, but he stopped his blade before it could plunge into her gut.

Blue eyes stared up at him, wide as the Sea of Bones. Terror colored her round face and set her full lips to trembling. Wild curly hair bounced as she struggled in his grip, and her desperate cry pierced his heart.

Naive, beautiful, stupid girl.

She grabbed the end of her arrow and twisted, and Ryon's world snapped into darkness.

# 3

## KIRALAU

“**W**atch his wound. Careful! He’s not a calf!”

Lee harrumphed and adjusted the soldier’s limp body on his shoulder. “I’m gonna have to break the arrow’s end off.”

Kira turned her back with a shudder. She clenched sweaty fists and waited for the bone-jarring snap of the arrow shaft. Guilt tumbled with some unidentified anxiety in her stomach, threatening to evict her lunch.

Why should she feel guilty? That tribesman had nearly gutted her like a pinkgill tuna. And his orange eyes were as bright as a demon’s.

And he was trespassing. And stealing.

Still, she’d shot him. Just looking at the wound made her gut flip.

*Snap.*

Kira tried not to heave. At least the young man had been unconscious for that. She heard the rustling of fabric and dared to turn back around.

“I’ll haul him to the barn for Granny to look at.” Lee hoisted the limp form back onto his shoulder and grunted at the weight. “Run and find Mom. We need to send someone to the barracks in Navarro right away.” His eyes sparkled with a clash of excitement and dread. “Tell ‘em we’ve got a Tribal Alliance soldier.”

# 4

## VYLIA

**T**raveling silks felt so much better than a dress. No rib-snapping corset, no toe-crushing shoes, no scalp-stabbing hair designs.

Princess Vylia wanted to dash out the palace's grand entrance like a songbird from an open cage. She forced herself to slow to a near-skip, lest the nobles chatting beside the towering marble pillars look at her as if she were a child. Again.

"There's the smile I've missed so much," Wavesinger Uma called from gold-inlaid double doors. The elder stood tall with hands folded perfectly over her kimono, her expression radiating the motherly kindness that Vylia treasured so dearly. "All ready to go?"

"Yes, please, for the love of the stars!" Vylia modeled her new silks with a flourish and the pose of a victorious swordsman. "How do I look?"

A hoarse chuckle escaped Uma's pale lips. "Like you've never worn common clothes in your life."

Vylia's pose fell along with her grin. "Accurate." She stomped past Uma through the palace doors and squinted down the flights of rounded stairs. Morning sun glinted from a silver statue of a seven-tailed fox atop a fountain, encircled by polished granite steps as they descended to the street. There, a carriage waited as the city bustled in the valley below, adorned with vined trees and tropical flora swaying in the breeze.

"One moment, Princess," Uma said as she touched Vylia's arm.

Vylia turned back and raised an eyebrow at her.

Uma withdrew a smooth stone from her kimono sleeve and held it out.

Vylia blinked at the colors that swirled beneath the surface of the water

opal. Shades of cerulean, jade, sapphire, and emerald shone amid streaks of diamond-like radiance.

“The Malo stone?” Vylia whispered, stiffening as Uma slipped it into her hands. “Shouldn’t this be in the temple?”

“We believe you’re ready,” Uma said.

Vylia was suddenly terrified that she’d drop the stone and send scattered remnants of the national treasure clinking down the palace steps. “I... But we’re just about to leave. And I haven’t mastered the water dance yet. Last week the high priestess said I looked as graceful as a drunken bear.”

Uma fought a grin and lost. She tucked her hands inside the sleeves of her kimono. “What better place to improve your wavesinging than aboard a boat amidst a tranquil sea?”

Vylia stared into the stone, lost inside its depths. Some called it the ‘mirror of the goddess,’ and now she could see why. “The Sea of Bones is anything but tranquil.”

“The weather is perfect now, and thus our present departure. Now come and leave your excuses behind with your royal gown.” Uma inclined her head to the steps and offered a mischievous smile.

Vylia bit her lip to contain a squeal of excitement. Her first solo diplomatic mission *and* her chance to become a wavesinger, thereby inheriting the stone her mother and all empresses past had wielded? It seemed all of her life’s luck had concealed itself for her eighteen years, then finally released in a sudden burst.

She tore her gaze from the Malo stone and slipped it into a pouch on her belt. *I’ll make you proud, Mother.*

“Vy!” a masculine voice called behind her.

Vylia glanced over her shoulder as Uma dropped to the floor in a formal bow. The guards who held the doors opened them wider and stood straighter. Her father strode through, not bearing his crown but the sash and pendant of a white lotus across his tunic.

“You weren’t going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?” A rare smile graced the Emperor’s lips, cutting his sharp features in an

oddly gentle manner.

Vylia bowed her head, feeling at once worried and hopeful at his friendly approach. He looked like a rabid dog who wanted to snuggle. She wouldn't be fooled again.

"I bid you farewell last night, Father." Maybe he'd been too drunk to remember.

*Please don't let him take this from me now. I was seconds away from leaving!*

"I've decided to make one change." The Emperor flicked his hand at Uma, who rose with her head still bowed. Then he gestured at a man who stood in his shadow. "This is Aoko, one of my personal guard. I trust him implicitly. He will replace one of your men." His grin seemed genuine. "So I can sleep easier while you're gone."

Coiled tension released Vylia's heart but lingered like a bruise. Each of her four bodyguards had served her for years, and she loved them like family. But replacing one was a small price for a diplomatic mission to Jadenvive, the capital city of the Tribal Alliance. She still couldn't believe her father had approved.

She bowed her head once more. "Yes, Father. Thank you."

"And one more thing." The Emperor stepped close enough for Vylia to smell his rosewood oil incense. He lowered his voice. "I'd like for you to spend a little time in Navarro as well. My spies report a potential uprising among the Navakovrae settlers." His expression hardened into its familiar chiseled carving. "Wave for the locals. Remind them of our kindness."

Vylia hid her surprise with a nod. What could drought-starved farmers hope to accomplish by defying the Malaano Empire?

*He means to remind them of his power.*

"The commander of the garrison in Navarro should have more detail. Speak with him and return to me with your thoughts."

Vylia's surprise doubled. He cared what she thought?

"I can't emphasize how important this is, Vy." The Emperor put a hand on her shoulder and smiled as she looked up at him. "Can I trust



you with this?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. She’d been training in diplomacy her entire life. And rumor had it that the tribes didn’t want war any more than they did. So it probably wasn’t much more than a border dispute or a difference in customs or language.

Otherwise, there was no way in Zoth her father would have allowed her to go. Especially with only four guards, a single wavesinger, one handmaiden, and a translator.

“Good.” The Emperor kissed her forehead and gave one last awkward smile. He turned, patted Aoko on the shoulder, and strode into the palace.

Vylia relaxed and glanced at her new guard as he bowed to her. Aoko’s chainmail and azure tabard with the lotus crest matched the armor her other bodyguards wore. He seemed all ready to go, so she’d just have to choose which of her beloved guards to dismiss. None of them would be happy about it.

“It is an honor to serve, your Highness,” Aoko said.

“Call me Vy.” She turned and trotted down the steps before anything else could delay her. She determined not to treat Aoko poorly because of her father’s orders. He was just doing his job, as her mother used to say.

*Vy. May I call you that as well?*

Vylia nearly tripped and stumbled headfirst into the fountain. That voice... it reverberated in her head as if underwater, and yet it rang as clearly as her own thoughts.

She looked around, but only a concerned Uma watched her. A bird of paradise sang from the courtyard as if nothing had happened.

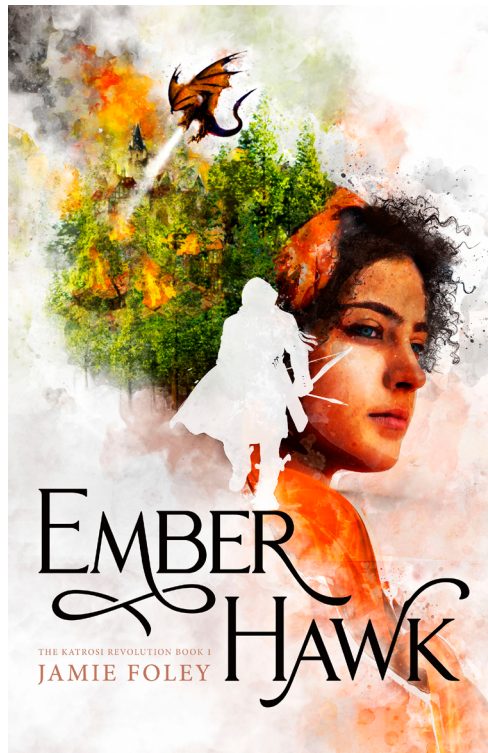
*Don’t be alarmed, my dear. I mean you no harm.*

Vylia’s heart slammed against her ribs. Her hand went to the pouch where the Malo stone rested. Could it truly be the voice of the water goddess, echoing through her mirror?

“Lillian?” she whispered.

*You know my name.* The soft voice seemed to warm inside her head, like laughter on a spring day. *A pleasure to meet you, Princess.*

THE STORY CONTINUES  
IN HARDCOVER, PAPERBACK, KINDLE,  
KINDLE UNLIMITED, AND AUDIOBOOK



*The elementals have decided  
they're gods, and humans are  
nothing but fuel for their fire.*

WWW.EMBERHAWK.COM



Jamie Foley loves strategy games, home-grown berries, and Texas winters. She kills vipers with her great-grandfather's rifle but she's terrified of red wasps.

As a graphic design ninja and marketing guru, Jamie loves helping other authors when she's not writing. She's the typesetter for Enclave Publishing and the creator of Fayette Press. Her books have been featured in Amazon Prime Reading, finaled for reader's choice awards, and selected as #1 New Releases on Amazon.com.

Her husband is her cowboy astronaut muse. They live between Austin and the cattle ranch, where their hyperactive spawnling and wolfpack roam.

Get a free short story when you sign up for Jamie's email newsletter at [www.jamiesfoley.com/newsletter](http://www.jamiesfoley.com/newsletter). You'll get monthly behind-the-scenes goodies, giveaways, and exclusive opportunities like first dibs at joining Jamie's beta team or ARC team (free swag, anyone?), and cover reveals.

@jamiesfoley on Instagram, Facebook, & Twitter

[www.jamiesfoley.com](http://www.jamiesfoley.com)