



# EMBER WING

11 FLASH FICTION STORIES  
YOU WON'T EXPECT

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C. S. Waters • Maria Pasquale • B. N. Lasseigne • CJ Wolfe  
Mary Rose Kreger • Grace Schroepfer • Dominic de Souza



# LEGENDFICTION

## Emberwing

*11 Flash Fiction Stories from LegendFiction Authors*

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# Foreword

Every season, I like to throw a single strange word into the community and see what catches fire.

This time, the word was **Emberwing**.

We challenged LegendFiction authors to write a flash fiction story between 500 and 1,000 words in only a few days. Invent the idea, draft it, polish it, and post it in the community. The goal is unusual ideas.

And that is exactly what flew in.

Across these pages, Emberwing becomes many things: a warrior's name, a relic, a secret identity, a weapon, a creature, a cure, or a spark of danger. Some race through academies, starfields, caves, towers, palaces, and pirate-haunted harbors. Each one takes the same word and grows it into something wildly different.

What I loved most about these entries was how quickly they moved. Flash fiction has no room for throat-clearing. A character appears. A problem strikes. A world comes alive through one sharp image, one scent, one blade of light, one impossible creature waiting in the dark.

This ebook is a gift from the LegendFiction community to future fans, friends, readers, and wandering story-hunters.

It is also a snapshot of a creative community doing what creative communities are meant to do: accepting a challenge, cheering each other on, and making something together that none of us could have made alone.

Thank you to every writer who entered, and adding your spark to the flame.

Enjoy the stories, meet the authors, and follow them for more adventures.

***Dominic de Souza***

LegendFiction Founder

## Stories include:

1. **“Burning Wing” by Joel Balkovec:** A skull-collecting warlord arrives at Mariburg seeking his hundredth victory, only to find the city’s firebird-born champion waiting at the gate.
2. **“Once Upon a Royal Terrace” by Joseph Leach:** Princess Anna’s ordinary afternoon turns strange when her new maid arrives with unusual manners, hidden loyalties, and a royal secret to guard.
3. **“Ember’s Hope” by K. G. Stevenson:** On a desperate mission against the dragon riders, Laken and Fira search a forbidden vault for a weapon that could save their town.
4. **“Burning Oils” by J. P. Haller:** A lonely cave-dweller raised on fearful stories of burning birds begins to question everything after a mysterious sound enters the dark caverns.
5. **“Rush to the Tower” by C. S. Waters:** Will Trey races through Emberwing Castle’s dangerous academy challenge, where traps, rivals, and one stolen ribbon stand between him and the upper class.
6. **“The Heart of the Mountains” by Maria Pasquale:** Stella follows an underground prophecy into the mountains, hunting for the legendary Emberwing that may signal the fall of a king.
7. **“The Gray” by B. N. Lasseigne:** Forced to serve as an Emberwing in a fungal communications network, Torrund links to a probe near a cosmic fracture and encounters something vast, invasive, and unknown.
8. **“Don’t Ask Questions” by CJ Wolfe:** A young hacker joins an anonymous online crew for a planned cyberattack, then realizes their leader may have a far more dangerous agenda.
9. **“A Fresh Start” by Mary Rose Kreger:** Injured watchman Will Owain considers a phoenix-wing treatment that may ease his pain, restore his strength, and reopen a future he thought he had lost.
10. **“Protocol Ember” by Grace Schroepfer:** A fighter on a frozen

platform prepares for Protocol Ember, carrying grief, a blaster, and a wing-shaped knife named for the one person he cannot forget.

11. **“Change of Plans” by Dominic de Souza:** In the secretive port of Harborcove, a mute operative waits for a contact, only to realize the job may have turned against him.

## Burning Wing

*Joel Balkovec*

**K**hal'kos Haan rides out of the North with his retinue. He has collected the skulls of ninety-nine champions. Clad in black armour, bearing a broad black shield and a great black sword, mounted on a black warhorse, he seeks the champion of Mariburg to claim a hundredth. Zeal for his god has driven him to seek out a hundred battles, a hundred skulls. For when he lays one hundred skulls of vanquished champions at the feet of his god, the Inexhaustible Lord of Combat will glorify him, and he will ascend.

"Hear, Mariburg," he calls to the city. "Khal'kos Haan is come. Send forth your champion, so he may die with honour for the glory of the Inexhaustible Lord. You will give me the hundredth skull I seek."

The city makes no answer.

"Shame upon Mariburg!" Khal'kos Haan roars, riding to the gates to smite them with his sword. "Shame upon your Margrave! Shame upon your gods! Shame upon your name until the very bones of the earth have crumbled!"

He rants and roars and strikes at the gates, furious to be denied his ascension, galled by the cowardice of Mariburg. Ninety-nine cities offered up their

champions. Why does Mariburg deny him the hundredth?

Mariburg's answer finally comes with a wind as warm as summer. The red banners of the city catch the wind and the Firebird that has been the icon of the city from ancient days takes flight on the ramparts. She was the first protector of the city. And her blood still burns strong in her daughters. Aira the Burning Wing, child of the Firebird's lineage, alights upon the city gates.

"Hear me," she answers the black rider. "I am Aira. I stand as Mariburg's champion. I tell you only this: darken the gates of this city no more and seek your skulls elsewhere. For the Firebird still protects her city."

Six tongues of flame leap to life to become her wings, and a seventh is in her hand. Ember-winged, she is slender as the Suns' first rays but unafraid as she descends the walls of her city. Aira is dwarfed by the hulking shadow of Khal'kos Haan astride his warhorse, though dauntless as the rising dawn. As she throws back her hood, the light of the Suns shines upon her brow and blazes in her eyes. Khal'kos Haan's great warhorse rears back with a scream and even the black rider himself flinches in the saddle.

"You dare to face me?" he asks, levelling his sword at her, though his voice and arm both tremble – such as none of ninety-nine champions before ever accomplished.

"I dare," Aira answers. "But I would ask one thing of you, if I am to risk my skull."

"Speak."

"Dismount to face me," she tells him. "Your steed has done me and my city no wrong. I would not punish him on your account."

Khal'kos Haan says nothing, but dismounts from his warhorse and hands off the reins to one of the warriors in his retinue.

"I will remember you, after I have ascended," he tells her. And he comes on in an avalanche of iron.

Aira takes flight, borne on six fiery wings. She sings the Song of the Firebird, the Ember-Wing of Mariburg, of her mothers and the mothers of her mothers. She raises the sword of fire in her hand and spreads her six wings, their flames burning hot in wrath. Khal'kos Haan is washed away in a torrent of flames.

And after the fires of the Burning Wing pass, there is nothing left but ashes.

BURNING WING

\* \* \*

***Joel Balkovec:** I'm a professional writer and editor from Ottawa, Canada. I've been writing the Realmgard series of family-friendly Fantasy under the name J.B. Norman. In the fall of 2024, I established Emona Literary Services to provide publishing and editing services to other authors. I'm currently working on rolling out audio versions of the Realmgard stories and also branching out into the stories, mostly under my real name. [realmgard.com](http://realmgard.com)*

## Once Upon a Royal Terrace

*Joseph Leach*

Princess Anna gazed out across the terrace, her brow creased with worry. What should she wear? Her coming-of-age ball would be a grand affair. Her uncle would see to that. So, it would need to be a new gown, but what style? What colour? She sat back and took a sip of her wine. She decided that she would ask Evelyn, her maid. She had a keen eye for fashion.

The afternoon sun was warm but not hot. A cool breeze blew softly across the terrace from the sea, raising the gauzy curtains behind her. She closed her eyes to rest them in the sun.

“You called, Your Highness?” said a quiet voice.

She turned to find a young woman only slightly older than herself. She was dressed in a simple shift and wearing a cloak, even in the heat of the day. It was russet coloured and bordered with gold braiding. “Who are you? I’ve never seen you before.”

“I’m Lucy Mutatis, Your Highness. I’m your new maid.”

Anna’s eyes narrowed and her frown deepened. “What happened to Evelyn?”

“I believe she has gone to marry the Lord of Tilbrook, Your Highness.”

“The lord of where?”

“Tilbrook, Your Highness. It’s a small town in the Northeast, close to the forest of Tilling. I’m given to believe that they were childhood friends.”

“By which you mean that you don’t believe it any more than I do.” Anna sighed and shook her head. This had all the hallmarks of her uncle and her father colluding together, which meant that there was not much she could do about it. Again, she looked at her new maid. “You’re a plain thing, aren’t you? Mutatis? Isn’t your father my father’s private valet?”

“Wolfgang Mutatis is my uncle, Your Highness. My father, Leo Mutatis, is the private valet to your uncle, the king.”

Boring but politically smart. She was being distanced from the social whirl of the palace and placed in the care of a family noted for their discretion. “Very well, come and sit by me and tell me the gossip of the palace.”

“I’m afraid I’m new here, Your Highness, and I don’t have much in the way of gossip. Not many here will talk to me.”

Of course they wouldn’t. Not with those connections. Anna looked at her more closely now, standing in her simple shift and cloak, her face calm and relaxed. She shook her head. “Well, I’m certainly not asking you for fashion advice, that’s for sure. Come and braid my hair.”

“I will gladly give what help I can, Your Highness, but I’m not very good at such things. You may well be better served to do it yourself.”

Anna froze. When she spoke, there was ice in her voice. “What did you just say to me?”

Still calm, Lucy bowed her head meekly. “Your Highness, I will serve you in any way I can, but I am aware of my own limitations in this area. My talents lie elsewhere.”

Anna took a moment to steady herself. Then she sighed. It was no use getting angry. The girl had been sent by her father and her uncle. There was nothing she could do about it. “My father chose you because he thought I was too involved in fashion and the social affairs of the palace, didn’t he.”

“No, Your Highness. He chose me because he thought you were in danger. You have come of age and are now the heir apparent to the throne. That

means that you have enemies.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I live in a castle with guards at every door and a whole regiment of the army not five hundred strada away. I’m very well...” She let out a sudden shriek, jumping out of her chair and knocking it over in her haste. A rat had just jumped on to the terrace balustrade and was running along it towards her. Her shriek froze in the air as the rat jumped from the balustrade, transforming as it did so into a hairy, crooked little man with pointed teeth and a long knife in each hand.

The Princess couldn’t move but stared at the creature in silent horror. Lucy’s reaction, however, was swift. She stepped between the Princess and the rat-man, dropped her cloak and spreading her arms wide. Bright red and yellow flames engulfed her body. Then they weren’t flames. They were feathers, and her outstretched arms were wings. The creature squealed and tried to run, dropping its knives to the floor. It was too slow. Lucy, or rather the thing that she had become, took flight, bright as fire in the sunshine. She easily took the rat-man in her talons and carried him high above the palace, circling once, twice. Always gaining height. Then she dropped her burden, who fell screaming to the palace gardens far below.

Lucy landed softly on the terrace and was human again. She quietly picked up her cloak and put it on. The Princess was staring at her in wide-eyed, open-mouthed amazement. “You... You’re a...”

“Shapeshifter? Yes, Your Highness. My family have, with solemn oath, served the royal blood for many generations. No harm will come to you while I live.” Her voice softened. “To the world I am Lucy Mutatis, but to my family and to those whom I serve, I am Emberwing, a phoenix.”

“Emberwing,” the Princess said softly. “That’s a good name, one that suits you well, but one I think that should not be spoken often. I’m glad to have you by my side, Emberwing.” She walked over to the edge of the terrace. She could just make out the body of her would be assassin lying broken and dead near the edge of a flower bed. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she smiled. “Lucy, please clean away these knives and go fetch me some ribbons. I need to braid my hair.”

Lucy bowed. “Yes, Your Highness.”

ONCE UPON A ROYAL TERRACE

\* \* \*

**Joseph Leach:** *A scientist, theologian, poet and author; Joseph Leach started writing fantasy and science fiction while still studying science at the University of Melbourne. He went on to get his Ph.D. as part of a NASA guest investigation into the Martian polar ice caps. Since then, he has worked as an Air Force intelligence officer, a government research scientist and a university lecturer. In this capacity, he has co-authored six technical books and over eighty scientific papers. An ordained deacon of the Catholic Church, in 2020 his first adult fantasy novel was published by Stone Table Books. [Facebook](#)*

## Ember's Hope

*K.G. Stevenson*

Laken read the marker engraved above the door, then ducked back around the corner. *"Emberwing."*

"We found it!" Fira's awed voice whispered. Her eyes lit up, and her long ears twitched with excitement.

"Don't get too bright-eyed. Once we get in, we still have to find the weapon to use against the dragon riders, assuming the prophet was right," Laken said as he peeked back around the corner.

"Hurry, Laken, they will have found the guards we took out by now."

"Exactly, and I'm not rushing into a trap," Laken said, but did hurry forward, flinging open the door. He entered, and Fira pushed around him to see the room. It was filled with shelves lined with objects ranging from ordinary looking balls to complex machines.

"How do we know which is the weapon we need to defend our town from the dragon riders? Aren't these all failed research projects?"

"If they failed, the dragon riders would have thrown them in the trash. These are embers. They have the potential to light a fire."

"Alright, let's look." Fira started searching. She suddenly stopped and

stared at a very large gun. There was a description underneath, which she read before grabbing it.

"This is it, let's go!"

Laken wanted to argue that they should look at everything first, but Fira was right. They were out of time. As he turned, a flash of white caught his eye. Laken turned and saw a cage opposite him. Something was alive and moving in there! He knew there wasn't time, but he ran to it.

"Laken!"

He ignored Fira and looked in at the creature. '*A dragon!*' He'd never seen a species that small. Its white scales shimmered, and sapphire eyes glowed. He glanced down at its description.

"Ember Dragon. Blood still has potential uses. Weak-willed creature. Best to execute when done with experimentation." Laken sucked in his breath. How could they execute this beautiful dragon? And weren't all dragons allies? Before he knew what he was doing, he grabbed her cage. It was heavy. Thankful for its wheels, he dragged it behind him as he ran to Fira.

"You can't be serious? It's a dragon! They are our enemies!"

"This one's enemies are other dragons. I'm taking it with us."

"The humans were enchanted by the dragon's majesty at first, too; that's why they bonded with them. The bond corrupted every human who took it! If you bring that dragon back to our town, and someone bonds with it, it could be the downfall of the elves!"

"No elf has ever bonded with a dragon. You worry too much, and I'm not going to just leave it here."

Fira groaned, but nodded. He was of a higher rank than she, and technically in charge of the mission, although she was the town lord's daughter. That complicated things. The only reason Fira was allowed on this mission was to use her unique gifts to get them out.

"No lifeforms are present here," Fira said over her shoulder, using her soul sense. Laken felt bad letting her take the lead, since he was the better warrior, but she could sense danger, if there were dragon riders, and lead them towards safety.

Breathing hard, he pulled the cage with one hand and held his laser gun

with the other. Fira ran forward in such a fluid motion that it seemed like a dance.

“Ahead, humans!” Fira turned down a side corridor. A red laser flew past his arm, and he glanced behind, seeing two humans pursuing them. Fira ran faster. Laken could barely keep up, dragging the cage.

“Leave it, Laken!” She shouted, then went through another door. She shut the door behind them and locked it.

“That won’t stop them,” Laken said, looking at the dead-end room. Four walls, one window. His heartbeat quickened. *‘We’re trapped.’*

Fira ran to the window. Laken followed and looked out. Straight down, he saw the ocean waves crashing against the cliffs. He also spotted something below on the water.

“It’s our ship. So close, but out of reach. Do we go back out and face them, or wait until they get through to us? More are joining them by the minute,” Fira said, her eyes filled with dread.

Laken’s heart sank until his eyes landed on the cage. An idea occurred to him. It was crazy, but why not? *‘Better than dying here.’* He ducked down and looked the dragon in the eyes. It looked like a large mastiff.

“If I let you out, will you help us?” It stared at him, then nodded. He opened the cage. Fira let out a gasp. The dragon sprang out, landing on the windowsill, then looked back at him expectantly.

Laken looked back at the wide-eyed Fira. He grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder, and jumped onto the dragon’s back. The door behind them burst open. Fira shot her gun wildly in the direction of the invaders. At that moment, the dragon leapt out of the window, and they both screamed.

The feeling of freefall made him cling harder to the dragon, and he forced himself to open his eyes. The waves were rapidly approaching. He hoped the sturdy dragon would take some of the impact.

Suddenly, the dragon’s wings shot out, and their fall turned into a glide.

“There! Head for that ship if you can,” Laken shouted at the dragon. It seemed to understand and flew towards the small ship, gently landing on the wooden surface.

“We need to leave now. The high winds will make it hard for the dragon

riders to launch, but let's not take chances." Fira nodded and followed him. The dragon lay down, with its head alert. *'Just like a guard dog.'*

"You're going to have some explaining to do to my father," Fira said.

"If I get you back in one piece, and we have found a way to defend our town, I think he'll forgive me," Laken said with a grin.

\* \* \*

***K.G. Stevenson:*** *I've always LOVED reading epic fantasy stories, and have read them since I was young. I never considered myself a writer, although I've written some fan fiction for fun in the past. I am now attempting to write fantasy stories with memorable characters and fun plots that aren't too heavy/dark. Game of Thrones I find traumatizing and is not my cup of tea, but I'm up for Wheel of Time (books, not tv show) level of drama and darkness. My first two fantasy novels are in the works right now! Current word count: First Novel: 65,000 words Second Novel: 85,000 words*

## Burning Oils

*J. P. Haller*

I stand still and listen.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I'm closer to the damp parts of the cave, where the mushrooms grow. Some of them also make light—a constant, soft, green light. It's easy to spot, when I turn down my lantern's flame, but the fungal light is so faint that it barely casts a glow around the mushrooms. In that green twilight without my lantern's flame, I would feel like the world had descended into rigor mortis if water echoing through these caverns didn't keep marking the time with its constant *drip, drip, drip*.

Those greenish ones weren't good to eat. And usually any fish that glowed like that weren't good to eat either. But they weren't why I came to the wet caverns.

I usually live higher in the caves, closer to the surface though I never go outside the caves. I was told that things lived outside, terrible things with bodies that oozed burning oils. If one of them found you, they say, it would stalk up to you and take out your eyes, leaving you only feeling its oil against your skin.

I shuddered as I crouched into a hollow in the rock. I dimmed my lantern

and watched the poisonous green fields seemingly materialize as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The birds would never catch me, I figure. The rock around me feels cold, but I snuggled into it. I live a secure life, a lonely life.

Though I never saw one of those burning things, I knew people who did—never saw any of them again once they saw the birds. Well, I never saw any of them again except one. Frank. Frank was always looking around the caverns for things that glowed—I think he had catalogued all the glowing animals at one point—and his favorite question was whether anything could glow brighter than our campfires.

One year when everyone was going down to hide from the birds, Frank told me that he was going to hide in the upper caverns.

“Are you crazy?”

“We don’t really know what they’re like,” Frank said, my lantern’s light shimmering back at me from his clear, blue eyes. “And even if they take my eyes, just to have one glimpse of them in all their fiery glory would be worth it. Face it, these caves are only so beautiful.”

Everyone returned that year and found Frank wandering around outside our homes.

“They’re beautiful,” he said, his eyes darting between every torch and lantern, his face lighting up whenever he recognized someone.

I think the strain of evading those creatures broke him. After that he always slept in the open and seemed agitated whenever we took him with us to go into the smaller, deeper caves. When he left, he told me that he was going to find the birds *outside* the caves.

I slide down in my crevice. The stone ridges of my cradle went over me, and the mushrooms green glow went over them like some sort of bad air that was considering whether to slide down with me and suffocate me. The water drips. *Drip. Drip.*

Endless. Space and time feel endless in here—unlimited, undefined, numb.

I close my eyes and listen. *Drip. Drip. Crumble.* My eyes snap open. Gravel is falling far to my right. Why would anything be falling, there are only fish in here? Something rakes against the stone. I want to put out my lantern and hide, but if I do survive whatever this is, I would then more likely than not

stumble into a black ravine later when I have to leave this spot. Something *brushes* against the stone. Nothing in the caves, according to Frank, has hair or. . . feathers.

I prolong each breath I take to make sure it stays silent and keeps my body from panicking. I won't panic. I cannot panic. Animals don't respond well to panic. The thing moves around out there, and I can only hear it. I want to peek over the lip of my hiding place, but every animal has better eyesight than humans, so it would see me before I could see it, and if I made any sudden movements to go back down into my crevice after seeing it, the creature would likely see my movement and come to me.

I had stopped breathing. I take a slow, shallow breath. With my arms pressed against my body, I can feel my pulse pounding through me.

The creature's footfalls come closer and closer, the tapping of claw against stone becoming more audible. It stops over me. A body of deep golden hues.

I hold my breath. Not fear but awe. Its feathers are black, but the oil on them—oil that smells like flowers and wood and perfumes—shimmers like gold, like ancient gold hidden deep in the caves when firelight falls on it. Its beak isn't crooked for tearing flesh but large and heavy for breaking open nuts.

It turns its head, putting one yellow eye on me. We watch each other. For a few seconds? For a minute? For an eternity? I don't know, but it looked at me with curiosity, not fear, not hunger. It seemed to know me.

The bird flaps its wings a couple times before it takes off, pecking at its chest, and a fire jumps from its beak and wraps around its whole body, yet the bird isn't burned because it sheds its oil. Some drips on me, but it is only warm. So much oil drips from its wings that the fire fizzling out for lack of air is more like embers than flames, but the oil still bears traces of having been ablaze, and it smells sweeter for it.

The bird flies away, singing. I stand up from my crevice and whistle its melody back to it.

I know what it called itself: *Emberwing*.

## BURNING OILS

\* \* \*

***J. P. Haller:** Hi! Call me Joe (or JP, I'm easy). I study psychology in college, try to read as much as I can, and enjoy outings in the city. Stories with a touch of weirdness—you know, just a breath of moon-touched air—are my favorite, but I like a lot of other things too. And in what little ways I can as a learning writer, I try to build up other writers :) [Substack](#)*

## Rush to the Tower

*C. S. Waters*

**T**he horn sounded once... twice... ending in a long blare that echoed within the walls of Emberwing Castle. My feet skidded across the marble floor as I made a break down the narrow hall. My eyes darted around me as I ran, looking for any sign of my fellow classmates—now opponents in the challenge that would admit our entry to the upper class of the academy. There was no one in sight. Yet.

I sprinted to the end of the torch-lit hallway and came to a sudden halt. The smell of burnt sage caught my nose. It was strong, but there was something poisonous mingled in its potent scent. A sage bomb. A knockout gas students used in the Emberwing Challenge when compelled to cheat. I covered my nose with my sleeve. Of course, the sage bomb was placed where my red ribbon was. This challenge was no more than a dangerous version of capture the flag.

I took my color ribbon and continued through the labyrinthine route. Luckily, I was familiar with the halls after having tried and failed so many times. The only difference was the traps laid out by students, and if anyone got physical, the only weapon we had was a short, retractable escrima-like

stick.

The exit to the central courtyard was close as the familiar portrait of the founding mage of the school on the wall to my left came into view. Just a few more turns. As I was passing through one of the large sitting areas, I heard movement above me. A student came into sight, running across the loft at the same speed as me. My fingers inched to my side where the stick hung at my belt.

The student jumped off the rail and landed with an acrobatic flip in front of me. I pulled out my stick and placed my feet in a defensive stance as my classmate ran toward me to attack. I parried his strike and resumed my stance. Objects from around the room began to float at his command, and one by one they flew at me.

Crash, duck, crash, hit.

I gripped my shoulder where a brass candelabra had landed.

I rolled my shoulders back and looked for ways to get past without using magic. Performing such powers in the Challenge could get someone in trouble if found out. My eyes searched and found a rope tied on the banister attached to a chandelier. It had most likely been placed there on purpose. I darted back, running for the staircase.

“What are you going to do, coward?” the student yelled after me.

I reached the banister and cut the rope with my pocketknife.

“This,” I said. The chandelier came crashing down on the student before he could flee. That would keep him down for a while. I ran past him and out of the room.

I soon found myself at the archway where many others were already gathered. The courtyard was built entirely of stone, and in the middle of the cobbled road stood the Tower of the Phoenix, where only the skilled could rise as the next Firebearer. From across the way, I could see Jamie McGlum’s sour face—the number one bully of the class and my arch rival. He’d do everything he could to stop me.

I took a deep breath as all the final contestants gathered in each archway around the courtyard. Again, the horn blew, and we all set off toward the tower door, fighting our way through. As two boys swung punches at each

other, I slid underneath them and made it through the door. I could feel Jamie's beady eyes burning in the back of my head, watching my every move. He had tried and failed, just as much as I had. All the anger and jealousy toward me had now come down to this.

I climbed up a few steps as the rest of the stairs began to float and move about. I jumped and grasped the ledge of one in time. I looked down. Jamie was just behind me, scowling as he climbed. I hopped and skipped onto the next few steps and made it to the second ledge with two more to go. I made sure that my ribbon was still on my belt and felt its silky touch. If I didn't have it by the time I made it to the top, I would fail. A rope dangled down from the inner chamber where the Emberwing Master waited.

Jamie was now at my heels, and I jumped, grasping the rope. But it was too late. He grabbed at my ankles and yanked at me. I held on tight to the rope.

"We don't have to do this, Jamie."

"No, Will Trey, we do. Besides, how are you going to win if you don't have this?" He pulled out a red ribbon and grinned.

I checked my belt and found it was not there. He had used magic.

I had to improvise, and looked at my options. Only one stood out.

"Well, Jamie, looks like you will make it to the top."

I yanked the rope and up we went, as Jamie dangled from my boot holding my ribbon. We reached the top and landed in the entrance of the Master's room. I stood up, and before us was the Grand Master of the school. His dark robes hung loosely about him, and a feather pen sat in his fingers.

"Who has the ribbon?" he asked, a questioning eyebrow raised.

Jamie lifted it immediately.

I stepped forward. "It's mine, sir. McGlum stole it."

The Master studied it, then me.

"I believe you're correct. Your color is red."

He led me to his desk and wrote with his phoenix, feather pen. Words etched of fire danced across the page. He blew on them, and the fire vanished, leaving glowing letters imprinted instead.

"Congratulations, Will. You have now entered Emberwing Firebearer Academy."

RUSH TO THE TOWER

\* \* \*

**C. S. Waters:** : *Catherine is a Catholic author who writes primarily in fantasy and other fictional genres. She's endlessly fascinated by the craft of storytelling and can often be found reading, daydreaming, or building new worlds on the page.*

## The Heart of the Mountains

*Maria Pasquale*

**T**he mountains had a heart.

Or at least, that's what had been whispered to Stella.

In the back alleys of Flayum, next to the muddy river Spool.

In the shadowy corners where coins changed hands in return for goods only available through the underground.

In the dark circles of tired, quiet people, those who had long hungered for the fulfillment of the prophecy, those hallowed words: *"When the Emberwing is plucked from the mountain, as the heart from the breast of the Phoenix in the times of yore, those shall be the last days of the king."*

Stella ran the words through her mind over and over again as she made her way through the creases of the mountains. As her boots balanced on moss bulged over tree roots, as sprinkles of last night's rain dripped from the vibrant green canopy above. The young woman dragged a hand across her forehead, flinging away beads of sweat and dew with a flick of her fingertips.

"When the Emberwing... as the heart... Phoenix in the times... shall be the last... of the king... when the Emberwing... as the heart..." she had lost her breath what seemed an eternity before, when the moon was still waxing,

when she was still within day's walk of the outskirts of Flayum.

Yet she still shaped her shallow exhales around the prophecy's words; after all, the one thought fixed in her mind, the one which drove her onward, which forced her to stumble one step after another was that of the Emberwing.

If the old maps where right, if the underground had passed on from the truth from the ancients, if she did not break from her course, she would reach it today.

If...if...if...

She stemmed her repetition of the prophecy to whisper "if" into the green air of the forest. She let hang there for a minute before an involuntary shutter worked its way up her spine.

What a horrible, uncertain word.

Her reverie was broken by the sharp laugh of a plutom bird, somewhere high above the treetops.

She never saw the plutom, with its purple wings, for her eyes landed on the twisted, cracked bark of a massive oak, an arrow shot's up the mountainside.

The tree was ancient, its trunk split into two, stretching away like a pair of massive wings, a black hole in the center leading down into the stomach of the partly hollow tree.

Without a second thought, Stella took off in a stumbling sprint up the mountainside. Her pack, almost empty of food and supplies now, slipped off her shoulders, and she let it tumble down to the mossy ground. The hill grew steeper; she grasped at roots and rocks with her hands, sharp stones cutting into her palms, leaving red streaks on the hillside.

The inside of the tree was damp, a faint bitter scent of something like mold and age and memories hanging in the air. Even in the darkness, Stella could feel her way down the steps carved into the earth, remembering the old diagrams she had so long studied.

Light still poured into the tree from the entrance behind her, but as the passage grew deeper and smaller, Stella's shadow blocked out the sun. She felt her way, each hand on one of the earthen walls. She could feel the dirt and roots and winding passages of little living things at her fingertips. Tendrils of moss brushed across her cheeks as she passed under them, and water dripped

from somewhere ahead, softly plunking onto the floor before slipping down into the cracks of the world.

They beat a tattoo like a distant drum, like the quiet repetition of the word “if” in the back of Stella’s mind.

Like the sound of her heart beat, loud in her ears.

All at once, the passage turned and plummeted away into endless blackness, like a mouth open, hunger, waiting to devour. Stella windmilled her arms, pitching forward and backwards, her balance lost in the pit before her as her boots fought to stay on the edge of the precipice.

At last her arms came to rest, her feet planted firmly on the ground, a few inches away from the crumbling edge.

But she never caught her breath.

For before her was the Emberwing, suspended on distant wall across the abyss. It practically glowed in the darkness, its red and gold stone—for stone seemed to Stella the closest earthly substance to that other worldly mass—pulsing.

It was carved or formed or grown or created in the shape of a full-spread wing, its feathers holding every tiny detail of the creatures that circled the skies.

“The heart of the mountains...” Stella whispered, the old tales and drawings and instructions all ready and waiting in her mind, ready for the next step.

She would reclaim the Emberwing; she would follow her mission to the end, until the heart of the mountains and its power rested in her hands.

Stella smiled before she jumped.

\* \* \*

***Maria Pasquale:*** *A Catholic teen who has been writing for as long as she can remember. She loves all things J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J. Austen, and L.M. Montgomery. If she isn't buried in a book, you can find her playing violin, sewing, or wandering in the forest, on the search for an adventure. Her motto is, as said by*

THE HEART OF THE MOUNTAINS

*St. Teresa of Avila, "Life is to live in such a way that we are not afraid to die."*

## The Gray

*B. N. Lasseigne*

**T**orrund settled into the rhizolith bed. He smeared synaptic sap on his neck and palms and positioned them on the transceivers. He wiggled slightly until he felt the familiar jolt. Now part of the mycelium network, there was the sudden rush that came with linking his nervous system to a megabios, especially one as large as this.

Torrund expanded, tasting vibrant green and loam, soaring up into the galvanic array, bathed in the peppery scent of the trillions of luminescent electrocytes that studded the fungal radio array. Their light pulses pop pop popping, mirroring Torrund's tingling.

"Emberwing, report!" Marrett barked.

The massive sensory input from linking wasn't enough to suppress Torrund's irritation. Marrett knew Torrund's name.

When a literal crack had opened in the universe near their home planet, Harvest, it had wreaked havoc on the entire star system. However, it had also provided a means for escape. The Kin had learned to use energy from the crack to form dimensional bubbles around ships and perform rocket-sled maneuvers. Marrett had won a lottery slot to migrate to Clarity on the Aevum, which made the 42-light-year crossing in under 3 years. Torrund had

used his companion ticket to bring his older sister, Micha. They met Marrett on the trip over and practically adopted him into their small family.

Somehow, the trip had made the Kin immune to aging and disease; Embers left to smolder, an ability that had not extended to their children born on Clarity. It was Marrett who had been by Torrund's side, physically locked at age 29, when his oldest child had died at age 91. That was over twelve hundred years ago.

Torrund said, "Galvanic array link verified. Awaiting orders."

After Torrund had led the failed Static Rebellion a hundred years ago and, as punishment, he had been forced into biosubmission as an Emberwing. Only Embers could withstand the gruesome body modifications and linking process. Micha's torture was enough to ensure Torrund's complicity. As Clarity was much earlier in its biological evolution, it lacked the immense fossil fuel reserves that had enabled technology on Harvest. Emberwings facilitated the long-range transmissions required for a space program. Anytime anger, pain, or grief surged over his situation, Torrund could hear Micha's voice: "Store it away. Be patient."

Marrett continued to pace. "Link to Spore-247."

Torrund sifted through the signals, mapping active probes orbiting Clarity, on the moon, and on outer system missions. Four probes were stationed near the crack, and 1 was poised to enter: Spore-247. When the Aevum had arrived at Clarity, they had been surprised to find their new planet had its own small crack nearby. After a millennium of study, the Embers knew nothing more about why these discontinuities in vacuum energy existed, only that the one near Clarity was growing increasingly unstable.

Torrund locked on, thoughts flowing through his fingertips and into the array, jumping through space, and then signaling the probe. The roughly 5-light-second signal lag between the probe and Torrund made the link taste thick and sluggish, as if it were submerged in chestnut-flavored molasses.

"Probe acquired. Entering tensor fault."

Torrund took a moment to orient himself. Simultaneously, he smelled the synaptic sap, felt the breeze rustle the galvanic array, and saw the dark purples and greens of the probe interior.

“Rhizomorphic fluid pressure at  $-107.49$  Planck scale value, temperature at 1.3 electron volts.”

Torrund felt something akin to static from the probe and, for a brief moment, thought he had lost connection. Then a flat, heavy, metallic gray tang slid in, making his teeth ache. Gray swallowed him, methodically, as if digesting each of his atoms in sequence. At first, he was paralyzed. Torrund was used to expanding into megabios, but this was something different, and it pushed back.

Torrund's body twitched except for his palms and his neck, locked on the receptors. He could hear Marrett yelling his name. He grunted once, but then extreme pressure boomed through his skull, followed by scraping. It felt like he was being skinned alive from the inside. He struggled to retain his wits against the pain, pulling power from the probe to try and push the gray out, but it was endless. Against his will, Torrund started to see flashes from his life. His breakfast plate full of grilled ferns. Micha rubbing her nose to his and giggling when they were children. The last sunset he ever saw on Harvest. The room he was in now. His berth on the Aevum. The galvanic array. The planet. No. No, no, NO. It was trying to find him.

He fought for control, vaguely aware of Marrett screaming, “Torrund! Torrund!”

Torrund surged himself, gaining a few seconds' reprieve. That shouldn't have worked with the time delay. It was here in his head. Torrund grunted, “It's here. It's coming. It's finding me.” He sucked in breath, “I'm...trying...I...can't...I...,” but it was back like a metal cloud smothering, invading, violating. Scraping. Scraping. Scraping.

Torrund had to do something. He reached down, seized the millennium of stored anger, pain, and grief, and used it as an amplifier. He flashed a brilliant light, stunning it long enough for him to turn electricity into fire and burn their connection before blackness descended.

When Torrund woke later, he couldn't see. He couldn't hear. He was alone in the black into which he had fallen. Panic surged, and he scrambled to sit upright, but was seized by vertigo. He reached out, but his hands were wrapped. He fell over, grunting.

## THE GRAY

Then Torrund felt a hand on his shoulder, and one on his cheek. He stiffened, relaxing only when he felt a nose gently rub his.

Micha.

Relief swelled, but gave way as his memories flooded back.

“It’s coming. It’s looking for me. I think I stopped it from finding us, but...but it knows we are.” Torrund croaked.

Micha hugged him tenderly, her tears soaking through his shirt while his own rolled onto the bed.

## Don't Ask Questions

*CJ Wolfe*

**E**mberwing says we move tonight, so we'll move. I was the only one who voted to wait. We should watch this guy and see if he leads us to someone higher up the chain of command. They all shut me down.

Maybe I should bail. They couldn't do this without me. If I'm out, the whole thing collapses. And Emberwing would flip.

No names, that's how we do it. Don't know who anyone is – not even an age or a gender. Just a faceless username in an encrypted IRC server. Think they'd still trust me if they saw my face? They all speculate, but no one ever asks a direct question. That's the implicit rule – you don't ask questions. We deal in hypotheticals: "Your coding knowledge runs deep, AngelFury. You must be forty something. Probably work in the industry IRL." No one ever expects an answer. It's safer that way.

I tell my roommates I'm cramming for finals so don't expect me for dinner. When I reach my bedroom, I make sure to lock the door and leave the lights off. I cross the room in the dark and switch on the color-changing LED desk lamp. It glows red – vendetta-energy crimson. The lighting makes my anime figurines look like creepy dolls about to come to life. Video game posters

obscure the popcorn texture on the walls.

I settle into my gaming chair and open my laptop. The desk rattles on uneven legs as I log into the IRC server. Everyone's already gathered in the # pregame channel, our little inside joke. It really is a game to some of them.

**\* AngelFury (~AngelFury21 @ 111 . 215 . 37 . 49) has joined**

*Ryuukaze*: welcome **AngelFury**

*AngelFury*: thx

*aid3N*: u stoked for this or wut

*palantir*: settle down children

*Ven0m*: didn't think you'd show, angel

*AngelFury*: shut it **Ven0m**

*Ryuukaze*: chill dude not worth it. Let's go over the plan one more time from the top

*Ven0m*: not without ember

*aid3N*: bro's always late to his own party lmao

*palantir*: are you going to take this seriously **aid3N** or do we need to leave you with a babysitter while the adults work

*aid3N*: shut up nerd

*palantir*: I rest my case

**\* Emberwing (~Emberwing @ 323 . 740 . 21 . 3) has joined**

The chat falls silent as Emberwing enters. I wonder if he has that presence when he walks into a room in the real world too.

*Emberwing*: Good evening, everyone.

*palantir*: evening ember

*aid3N*: sup

*Emberwing*: I will only say this once: anyone who does not wish to join us tonight should leave now. No one will hold it against you. You are still free to join for future attacks.

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms, refusing to acknowledge the game he's playing. There's dead silence in the chat for a good minute or two.

*Emberwing*: I'll take the silence as a statement of full and willing cooperation from all present.

*aid3N*: roger that

*Emberwing*: Now that those pleasantries are out of the way, here's the plan for tonight.

Emberwing lays out the strategy we already know by heart: classic SQL injection hack. Dox the victim, shame him, blow up his socials with hate speech. Simple enough. Too simple. Almost *childish* (palantir's favorite word). That's when it hits me, what's felt wrong about this the whole time.

This isn't like Emberwing.

Cold doubt creeps into my stomach. A feeling like I've been doused with ice water inside-out. Then the pings start to come in, one by one:

\* *Ryuukaze has quit (Remote host closed the connection)*

\* *Ven0m has quit (Remote host closed the connection)*

\* *aid3N has quit (Remote host closed the connection)*

\* *palantir has quit (Remote host closed the connection)*

And suddenly it's down to Emberwing and me, alone in the channel. There's that awkward hesitation; the implicit question: *Why are you still here?*

Then Emberwing starts to type. He stops and starts again.

*Emberwing*: We know who you are, Selena.

*Emberwing*: You work for *us* now.

*AngelFury*: what about the others

*Emberwing*: They didn't take my offer when they had the chance.

My fingers move on instinct, closing the chat window and killing the software entirely. I do a hard shut off on my laptop and bolt for the bedroom door, stumbling on a pile of books in the dark. I fall to my knees and push myself up again. My hand grasps the knob as the doorbell chimes downstairs.

## DON'T ASK QUESTIONS

\* \* \*

**CJ Wolfe:** *Currently seeking representation from a literary agent for my psychological/sports thriller, and learning all I can about the publishing industry. Some of my favorite authors include S.A. Lelchuk and Jordan Harper, which is reflected in my style of gritty thrillers with a deep emotional core. I'm honored to live near the vibrant city of New Orleans where creativity is a way of life. When I'm not reading or writing, I spend as much time outdoors as possible, kayaking through the majestic (albeit alligator-ridden) bayous of Louisiana and fly fishing with my husband. [cj-wolfe.com](http://cj-wolfe.com)*

## A Fresh Start

*Mary Rose Kreger*

“**H**ave you decided to take the Emberwing?”

Will Owain glanced up at the Healer Proficient, his expression doubtful. He’d tried many new-fangled treatments these past few weeks, and had suffered greatly from most of them. Why should the Emberwing be any different?

“Will it mend the nerve damage?” He flexed his right hand, winced at the sharp ripple of pain coursing through his injured wrist and arm. Six weeks had passed since his ordeal, and yet nothing had changed. He awoke each day to a relentless ache, dragged his way through a demanding healing regimen, collapsed each night in his infirmary cell, stiff and sore and hopeless.

The Healer Proficient, Lady Agnes, studied Will’s pensive expression. She was a tall Faerie woman with golden skin and sensitive, sky-blue eyes.

“The Emberwing can help with nerve damage. Over time. Most patients feel the difference right away.” She frowned. “Do you need more time to consider? I know this choice can be...difficult.”

Before answering, Will uncoiled the bandage around his right hand, examining the uneven hole that his tormentor had drilled through his wrist. Clean pink skin surrounded the hole: a “healthy” wound. To Will, it signified

only agony.

“It’s just pain, yes?” he whispered, in defiance of his disfigurement. “A young watchman like me should be able to endure this.”

Lady Agnes raised her embroidered linen sleeves to her elbows, then scrubbed her hands in the wash basin. The sweet aroma of lavender and honey wafted off the soapy water as she scoured the spaces between each finger. Will envied her ease of movement.

“You know it isn’t just pain, Sir Owain.” The Healer returned to Will’s place at the examination table, a damp cloth in hand. “Lord Amaranth’s magic wreaked lasting harm on the nerves and muscle in your right arm and back. The continuous pain steals your energy and strength, making it impossible for you to focus.” She pressed her lips into a determined line. “You cannot train. You cannot perform your watchman duties. This is not ‘just’ pain.”

Will turned to one side. He accepted the truth of the Healer’s words, and remembered one thing more: his wounded state isolated him from his beloved Philia.

Philia was the reason he had gone to Amaranth in the first place. His sacrifice had healed her from the Curse. But now, he might lose her once again.

“I don’t want to disappoint the Princess,” he confessed. “She-she threw a party for us last week. Here in the infirmary. All our friends and family came to celebrate the Princess’ healing from the Curse. And my...recovery.” Will swallowed, staring at his feet. “But I’m not any better. The party exhausted me. I left early, before I collapsed in front of the Princess’ guests.”

He remembered the disappointment on the Princess’ face. His shame in having to leave.

*You failed me, Will,* her expression said. *You abandoned me.*

He loved and could not be with her—the one he had suffered and died to save.

“No, I don’t need more time,” Will said. “I wish to take the Emberwing.”

Lady Agnes instructed Will to remove his button-down shirt, then carefully cleaned his shoulder and arm with ingelewort. The antiseptic stung ruthlessly over his many scars. She left the room, returning shortly with a long,

cylindrical package bound in leather. The pungent scent of vellum and woodsmoke filled the room as she unwrapped each layer. Inside the leather wrappings lay a delicate bird's wing. It was the color of burnt umber, like something burnished and tested in fire.

"Did this truly come from a phoenix?" Will asked.

"This is the burned remains of a phoenix's wing," the Healer confirmed, "taken from the ashes just before a new phoenix was reborn." She raised the wing aloft, displaying its gorgeous, deep bronze feathers. "It holds the phoenix's healing qualities, and something more."

"What do you mean, my lady?"

"It is said to cultivate new beginnings." She met Will's gaze. "Perhaps even...a fresh start?"

He wondered at her words. Could the Emberwing give him a fresh start? Could it help him become something new?

Lady Agnes circled the examination table. "It will extend from your right shoulder, wrap about your arm, and end at your wrist."

He nodded his consent.

At first, the Emberwing felt cool against his scarred skin. But the longer the Healer pressed it against his shoulder, the more the wing glowed and gave off heat. It melded into his skin without causing Will any discomfort. Rather, the Emberwing's touch brought a gentle release, a sensation which increased as Lady Agnes wound the wing over the curve of Will's shoulder and around his right arm. Its embrace brought warmth and healing and comfort—the perfect counters to his battered state. Anything good might happen to him now. Anything bad might happen, too, and he'd be better able to face it.

*Is this what it feels like to have no pain?*

Will couldn't remember. It had been a long time, and his life was so different from what it had once been. In a time before Amaranth and the Curse. In a time before Philia Pendragon.

Lady Agnes murmured words in the Faerie tongue, massaging the Emberwing deeper into Will's skin. She checked every point of connection, to make certain each feather was properly adhered.

More warmth. Less pain. Will felt dizzy from the sudden relief.

At last, Lady Agnes stepped back and smiled.

“Go on now,” she said. “Stretch out your hand.”

He inhaled, breathing in the faint, burning scent of the Emberwing. Like a cloud of incense. His right hand stretched forward, fingers extending to full length. His shoulder pulled taut.

Will rotated his shoulder, swung his arm, turned his wrist. Nothing hurt.

“How does it feel?” Lady Agnes asked.

Will rose, his face catching the sunlight from the eastern window.

“Better. By far.” He offered a cautious smile. “Perhaps even like a fresh start.”

\* \* \*

***Mary Rose Kreger:** Author of YA fantasy and creative nonfiction. I craft fantasy for teens and blog about my spiritual journey before, during and after the convent. In February 2024, I released AVALON LOST, my debut YA fantasy adventure novel. Now I am working on the sequel while also exploring the world of self-publishing, mostly by trial and error. So if you have any self-publishing questions, I may be able to assist you! :) [maryrosekreger.com](http://maryrosekreger.com)*

## Protocol Ember

**S**tatic on the radio crackled. I reached down, trying to get my numb, gloved fingers to work, and put it to my ear as the message came in. Calling all personnel positioned on platform A. Engage protocol Ember. I repeat. Engage protocol Ember.

I lifted the radio to my mouth with a sigh and spoke.

“Copy.”

The static faded, and I stood, stretching as I looked over my position.

Cold mist drove over the metal platform, pale blue and ghostly. The wind mumbled to itself around the sharp black rocks. Above the mist and rocks, the abyss of the night sky shrouded the earth in a cloak of black ink. Only the thinnest stars burned in its depths, and they were far, far away...

I looked down at my faintly glowing watch and tapped the face. Welp, it was time.

*Remember me, world.*

I rolled my shoulders and climbed off my cramped perch among the slate-grey rocks. My black combat boots met the metal platform with a clank. My hands drifted down to the black blasters strapped to my belt out of habit, I fingered the sturdy, cool metal. Ahead of me, a triangle-shaped metal door, carved out of the face of a cliff of obsidian stone, gaped like an ancient portal to another world.

It was so strange. I took this position years ago, just praying for a chance

to drown away everything I had ever known. But now...

Pale blue mist spiraled across the metal planks and bolts, and the wind whispered in my ear, making my ears cold. Crew cuts did that. Made your ears cold.

"This is for you, Lark." I said to myself. It was my ritual. Going on a suicide mission. *For you, Lark.* Going out to rescue some slaves. *For you, Lark.*

Going to blow up the last base with me in it.

*For you, Lark.*

I smiled a little, like I always did when I said her name. She had very nice grey eyes. They sparkled when she smiled. Brown hair, plain, perfect. And her knife skills? Let's just say when she was on a battlefield, she *soared* as if she had wings.

She told me never to cry. That ruined my handsome face. I had everything, what was there to cry for?

I traced my fingers over a small silver knife tucked next to my blaster. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing, my dear."

My boots clanked as I crossed the platform. A few feet away, the edge dropped off into an endless abyss. Planet Neigera was definitely a big hunk of black cliff. And it was here that the squadron had its last base, settled directly over the slave-trader's biggest storehouses.

Make this place go boom, and the whole trade collapses. The whole racket. Big crime lord-boss chokes on his drink, and his soul departs as a tiny, wailing ghost.

I pulled the silver throwing knife, shaped as a wing with spreading feathers, and rolled it over my fingers as I approached the massive triangle-shaped door. My other hand reached down and pulled out my blaster.

The timer was ticking on my watch. Thirty seconds.

I pulled out my blaster and checked the mag. Purple light lit up the little glow-worm things that lived in the cave for a second, so that I could see my target. I was going to 'wing' it. I grinned. They thought I would blow up the place and die with a big slab of rock hitting my head?

No way, I wasn't going to die *like that*. How boring, and then up in heaven, Lark would tease me about always having a rock-brain.

Nah. I was going to die falling through the butt-freezing winter air of my least favorite assignment ever. Falling and falling past the endless cliff and rock...

My smile curved wider.

*Flying.*

“You always wanted to fly, huh, Lark?” I grinned, lifting the blaster and taking aim at the center of the triangle. I glanced at my watch.

Ten seconds.

My heart started to pound. I could feel my pulse rushing in my ears. This was real. My finger slipped down to the trigger, and I slid my other thumb over the silver wing-shaped throwing knife. There was a name scratched onto the surface.

*Emberwing.*

She named all of her knives.

A pang hit my heart, sharper than any knife could ever cut. It sank in deep and twisted. I *missed* her. So much. What if this didn’t work? What if I screwed up? Memories swirled up from the past, danced with the pale mist, and laughed at my pain.

Blood. Blood on my hands. Her blood. Her grey eyes clouded, her lips parted, her strong grip on my face. She had been a slave, and she died a slave.

My watch beeped, and my trigger finger slipped. The bolt of purple light curved through the air, and instantly the tunnel behind the door lit up like a space hanger. I didn’t hesitate. I saw the explosion. I pressed the cold steel to my lips and then cocked my wrist, just like she showed me...

Emberwing flew from my gloved fingers, straight and true.

Fire blossomed out from the heart of the earth and rushed toward me. Deliciously warm, a billowing, blistering inferno of scarlet fire, like blood rushing with the golden heat of the sun. Ash and debris flew through the air as the whole platform exploded in a breathtaking rumble.

I spread out my arms as my ears rang and I was lifted off the ground, flying backward.

For just one moment, I was with them, with Lark, falling, falling, falling. She was smiling, wrapping her warm, brown arms around my neck.

“You have so much in you,” She whispered. “I just know, one day, you’ll save us.”

I pressed a hand to my lips and blew a kiss at the brightest star.

“I did.”

As I fell, I reached down and pulled out my radio; the gravity was tugging me down, and fire and metal fell with me twisting downward in an intricate dance. I heard the static and pressed my mouth to the receiver as my clothes whipped about me and the air felt like liquid, sliding over my skin.

Nobody could deny the smile in my voice as I whispered. “Protocol Ember accomplished.”

I’m coming home, Lark.

\* \* \*

**Grace Schroepfer:** *I am a teen writer with a passion for dramatic, soul-rending stories with the themes of hope and finding your true self. I love animals, martial arts, weapons, watercolor art, singing, windy days, and a good story. You will find me in my favorite little corner, typing up my latest world or, occasionally, dancing in the rain. [gschroepfer.substack.com](http://gschroepfer.substack.com)*

## Change of Plans

*Dominic de Souza*

**T**he bays of Harborcove look like a delightful, pleasant getaway, with white-capped waves crashing into blue lagoons, and the waves turning glass-clear as they lap the white sand. The beaches are white, freckled with stunning, ink-blue starfish, and dazzled with greenery. If you didn't know better, the crab-encrusted docks, salted from centuries of storms and sunlight, looked like stilted arms welcoming you into a world of terracotta roofs, white-washed walls, and hand painted doors. A world where homes perch in every nook and cranny of these islands, brace against each other with bridges and beams, and constantly repairing netting or tiles from a recent storm.

Like I said... *looks*.

Because everyone knows Harborcove harbors secrets. Lots. And I don't even know that many, and I'm already cranky. And my meet is already late.

It takes a lot of willpower to sit calmly, to look calm, while the open cafe around me bustles with buyers. It's on the edge of the market, and I can see lobsters, squid, and colorful flat fish flapping near surgical chopping blocks.

My kind of place.

But not when I'm on a deadline.

## CHANGE OF PLANS

And not when a no-weapons policy means only the soldiers get to throw their weight around, and everyone else leaves knives, swords, and recognizable weapons locked down on their ships.

The mug of coral-strained coffee is now cold. That should have been refilled. A chip of a brass coin twirls on the table for the waiter. I check the sundial down in the bay, a massive ring of statues with a tall menhir marking the time. Children and dogs play in the surf around it.

And I'm out of time.

I get up, gather the folds of my heavy cloak, look pointedly at the waiter, who suddenly realizes he'd ignored me for too long and tries to cover his embarrassment with a grin. I drop his chip in the dregs of my mug. Then throw the cloak up over my shoulder, and pull the hood over my face.

I'm not exactly an assassin, even though I can get a job done.

I'm not a delivery carrier, but you could pay me to do it.

And I don't usually truckle in information, even though I can't actually speak.

I'm not kidding. I was born mute. That, plus a fast run, strong arms, and a mean streak, meant I could walk into any room, and pretend I didn't need to to say anything to get respect. A few fast punches, and everyone backed down.

Today, my empty coin pouch tells a different story. It's waiting for payment, and my contact on this bright island is bringing it. An island packed with pirates, privateers, and escapees, is a haven for half-memories and furtive friendships, and losing things like coin pouches.

I keep walking. Perhaps I'd been made. Perhaps he'd been delayed. They never told me who he was, only that he'd recognize me by my cloak.

My contact should have had a name for me. I was supposed to quickly end them, and then their coin would have been my reward.

Someone shouted.

My ears perk up.

Keep walking.

Shouting again.

I turn and look around.

A platoon of soldiers racing for the cafe. Behind them, a man in silks and brocade, wrapped in chains of layered silver. Looks like a mayor. Pointing wildly. Sees me at the edge of the plaza. Stabs his finger wildly at me and yells.

Was that my contact?

The soldiers about face and come running. Boiled leather, hammered bronze, short swords and pole axes.

I sigh.

So that's what this is.

I was set up. This was a trap.

Anger seethes up inside me like a wave crashing into a coral barrier.

They didn't plan on *this*.

I rip the cloak from my shoulders.

The no-weapons ban was for recognizable weapons.

Mine passed right by in broad daylight.

I flex my arms in a fighting stance, bouncing lightly on my feet. There's no way this goes down easily, and there's no way I'm not walking out of here.

I'm probably swimming to get away. Solve that later.

I pull the drawstrings on my sleeves, and they drop away from my wrists. My bracers blaze in the sunlight. They look like folded feathers, glossy, hard iron with copper edges. Then they start shimmering, the feathers flex and flare up, and ignite into a hard, red light. Following the lines of my bones, blades of coral-red iron glass.

The soldiers register fear, swinging toward me.

Bracers up like a shield, the sword melts and splits like wax. Swing with the other arm. A solder melts and splits like wax.

A spearhaft clobbers my jaw, blood rushes round my teeth. That just sends heat into my head. It takes seconds, and I've cut through them. Splinters of wood fall through the air, flickering with flame. The few at the back wave their poleaxes like madmen, and turn and run like panicked children with crabs on their toes.

The mayor stares slack-jawed at me.

I just point at him, as if to say he's next. The red light crackles and hums in

## CHANGE OF PLANS

the air like a living thing.

His knees give out from under him, he screams, and scrabbles backward to get through a doorway and out of sight.

I spit to clear my mouth, and let the sleeves drop. Without sunlight, the bracers instantly cool off, the feathers collapse.

That's right.

You don't send an Emberwing to a swordfight.

Someone coughs.

I look around.

The marketplace is still, staring at me. Nothing but the breeze plucking at the nets, the lobsters clacking their claws on the crates, and the gulls squealing overhead.

I need a change of clothes, and an exit plan.

So much for an easy job.

\* \* \*

***Dominic de Souza:*** *A dad and novelist nuts about worldbuilding, helping friends find their freedom, and build a future we believe in. I'm a graduate from the Writer's Institute for Children's Literature, self-publish my novels because I'm impatient, serial entrepreneur because no one can stop me, and work full time in marketing and design. I am married, with a small girl and a smaller corgi. I write epic fiction for children and young adults, blog to sort my thoughts, and host podcasts to chat with cool people. LegendFiction is my passion. [dominiclesouza.com](http://dominiclesouza.com)*

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