

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SABAA TAHIR



A
SKY
BEYOND THE
STORM

AN EMBER IN THE ASHES NOVEL

PRAISE FOR

AN EMBER IN THE ASHES

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SABAA
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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Razorbill, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2020

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Tahir, Sabaa, author. Title: A sky beyond the storm : a novel / by Sabaa Tahir. Description: New York : Razorbill, 2020. | Series: An ember in the ashes ; [4] | Audience: Ages 14+. | Summary: “Laia, Elias, and Helene must risk everything to defeat their foes—both human and supernatural—and prevent the coming of an otherworldly maelstrom” —

Provided by publisher. Identifiers: LCCN 2020040877 | ISBN 9780448494531 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780448494555 (ebook) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T33 Sky 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at

<https://lcn.loc.gov/2020040877>

Map by Jonathan Roberts

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*A dedication
in two parts*

i.

*For every child of war
Whose story will never be told.*

ii.

*For my own children
My falcon and my sword
Of all the worlds wherein I dwell
Yours is the most beautiful.*



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PART I
WAKING

I: The Nightbringer



I awoke in the glow of a young world, when man knew of hunting but not tilling, of stone but not steel. It smelled of rain and earth and life. It smelled of hope.

Arise, beloved.

The voice that spoke was laden with millennia beyond my ken. The voice of a father, a mother. A creator and a destroyer. The voice of Mauth, who is Death himself.

Arise, child of flame. Arise, for thy home awaits thee.

Would that I had not learned to cherish it, my home. Would that I had unearthed no magic, loved no wife, sparked no children, gentled no ghosts. Would that Mauth had never named me.



“Meherya.”

My name drags me out of the past to a rain-swept hilltop in the Mariner countryside. My old home is the Waiting Place—known to humans as the Forest of Dusk. I will make my new home upon the bones of my foes.

“Meherya.” Umber’s sun-bright eyes are the vermillion of ancient anger. “We await your orders.” She grips a glaive in her left hand, its blade white with heat.

“Have the ghuls reported in yet?”

Umber’s lip curls. “They scoured Delphinium. Antium. Even the Waiting Place,” she says. “They could not find the girl. Neither she nor the Blood Shrike has been seen for weeks.”

“Have the ghuls seek out Darin of Serra in Marinn,” I say. “He forges weapons in the port city of Adisa. Eventually, they will reunite.”

Umber inclines her head and we regard the village below us, a hodgepodge of stone homes that can withstand fire, adorned with wooden shingles that cannot. Though it is mostly identical to other hamlets we've destroyed, it has one distinction. It is the last settlement in our campaign. Our parting volley in Marinn before I send the Martials south to join the rest of Keris Veturia's army.

"The humans are ready to attack, Meherya." Umber's glow reddens, her disgust of our Martial allies palpable.

"Give the order," I tell her. Behind me, one by one, my kin transform from shadow to flame, lighting the cold sky.

A warning bell tolls in the village. The watchman has seen us, and bellows in panic. The front gates—hastily erected after attacks on neighboring communities—swing closed as lamps flare and shouts tinge the night air with terror.

"Seal the exits," I tell Umber. "Leave the children to carry the tale. Maro." I turn to a wisp of a jinn, his narrow shoulders belying the power within. "Are you strong enough for what you must do?"

Maro nods. He and the others pour past me, five rivers of fire, like those that spew from young mountains in the south. The jinn blast through the gates, leaving them smoking.

A half legion of Martials follow, and when the village is well aflame and my kin withdraw, the soldiers begin their butchery. The screams of the living fade quickly. Those of the dead echo for longer.

After the village is naught but ashes, Umber finds me. Like the other jinn, she now glows with only the barest flicker.

"The winds are fair," I tell her. "You will reach home swiftly."

"We wish to remain with you, Meherya," she says. "We are strong."

For a millennium, I believed that vengeance and wrath were my lot. Never would I witness the beauty of my kind moving through the world. Never would I feel the warmth of their flame.

But time and tenacity allowed me to reconstitute the Star—the weapon the Augurs used to imprison my people. The same weapon I used to set them free. Now the strongest of my kin gather near. And though it has been months since I destroyed the trees imprisoning them, my skin still trills at their presence.

"Go," I order them gently. "For I will need you in the coming days."

After they leave, I walk the cobbled streets of the village, sniffing for signs of life. Umber lost her children, her parents, and her lover in our long-ago war with the humans. Her rage has made her thorough.

A gust of wind carries me to the south wall of the village. The air tells of the violence wrought here. But there is another scent too.

A hiss escapes me. The smell is human, but layered with a fey sheen. The girl's face rises in my mind. Laia of Serra. Her essence feels like this.

But why would she lurk in a Mariner village?

I consider donning my human skin, but decide against it. It is an arduous task, not undertaken without good reason. Instead I draw my cloak close against the rain and trace the scent to a hut tucked beside a tottering wall.

The ghuls trailing my ankles yip in excitement. They feed off pain, and the village is rife with it. I nudge them away and enter the hut alone.

The inside is lit by a tribal lamp and a merry fire, over which a pan of charred skillet bread smokes. Pink winter roses sit atop the dresser and a cup of well water sweats on the table.

Whoever was here left only moments ago.

Or rather, she wants it to look that way.

I steel myself, for a jinn's love is no fickle thing. Laia of Serra has hooks in my heart yet. The pile of blankets at the foot of the bed disintegrates to ashes at my touch. Hidden beneath and shaking with terror is a child who is very obviously *not* Laia of Serra.

And yet he feels like her.

Not in his mien, for where Laia of Serra has sorrow coiled about her heart, this boy is gripped by fear. Where Laia's soul is hardened by suffering, this boy is soft, his joy untrammelled until now. He's a Mariner child, no more than twelve.

But it is what's deep within that harkens to Laia. An unknowable darkness in his mind. His black eyes meet mine, and he holds up his hands.

"B-begone!" Perhaps he meant for it to be a shout. But his voice rasps, nails digging into wood. When I go to snap his neck, he holds his hands out again, and an unseen force nudges me back a few inches.

His power is wild and unsettlingly familiar. I wonder if it is jinn magic, but while jinn-human pairings occurred, no children can come of them.

“Begone, foul creature!” Emboldened by my retreat, the boy throws something at me. It has all the sting of rose petals. Salt.

My curiosity fades. Whatever lives within the child feels fey, so I reach for the scythe slung across my back. Before he understands what is happening, I draw the weapon across his throat and turn away, my mind already moving on.

The boy speaks, stopping me dead. His voice booms with the finality of a jinn spewing prophecy. But the words are garbled, a story told through water and rock.

“The seed that slumbered wakes, the fruit of its flowering consecrated within the body of man. And thus is thy doom begotten, Beloved, and with it the breaking—the—breaking—”

A jinn would have completed the prophecy, but the boy is only human, his body a frail vessel. Blood pours from the wound in his neck and he collapses, dead.

“What in the skies are you?” I speak to the darkness within the child, but it has fled, and taken the answer to my question with it.

II: Laia

The storyteller in the Ucaya Inn holds the packed common room in her thrall. The winter wind moans through Adisa's streets, rattling the eaves outside, and the Tribal *Kehanni* trembles with equal intensity. She sings of a woman fighting to save her true love from a vengeful jinn. Even the most ale-soaked denizens are rapt.

As I watch the *Kehanni* from a table in the corner of the room, I wonder what it is like to be her. To offer the gift of story to those you meet, instead of suspecting that they might be enemies out to kill you.

At the thought, I scan the room again and feel for my dagger.

"You pull that hood any lower," Musa of Adisa whispers from beside me, "and people will think you're a jinn." The Scholar man sprawls in a chair to my right. My brother, Darin, sits on his other side. We are tucked by one of the inn's foggy windows, where the warmth of the fire does not penetrate.

I do not release my weapon. My skin prickles, instinct telling me that unfriendly eyes are upon me. But everyone watches the *Kehanni*.

"Stop waving around your blade, *aapan*." Musa uses the Mariner honorific that means "little sister" and speaks with the same exasperation I sometimes hear from Darin. The Beekeeper, as Musa is known, is twenty-eight—older than Darin and I. Perhaps that is why he delights in bossing us around.

"The innkeeper is a friend," he says. "No enemies here. Relax. We can't do anything until the Blood Shrike returns anyway."

We are surrounded by Mariners, Scholars, and only a few Tribespeople. Still, when the *Kehanni* ends her tale, the room explodes into applause. It is so sudden that I half draw my blade.

Musa eases my hand off the hilt. “You break Elias Veturius out of Blackcliff, burn down Kauf Prison, deliver the Martial Emperor in the middle of a war, face down the Nightbringer more times than I can count,” he says, “and you jump at a loud noise? I thought you were fearless, *aapan*.”

“Leave off, Musa,” Darin says. “Better to be jumpy than dead. The Blood Shrike would agree.”

“She’s a Mask,” Musa says. “They’re born paranoid.” The Scholar watches the door, his mirth fading. “She should be back by now.”

It is strange to worry about the Shrike. Until a few months ago, I thought I would go to my grave hating her. But then Grímarr and his horde of Karkaun barbarians besieged Antium, and Keris Veturia betrayed the city. Thousands of Martials and Scholars, including me, the Shrike, and her newly born nephew, the Emperor, fled to Delphinium. The Shrike’s sister, Empress Regent Livia, freed those Scholars still bound in slavery.

And somehow, between then and now, we became allies.

The innkeeper, a young Scholar woman around Musa’s age, emerges from the kitchen with a tray of food. She sweeps toward us, the tantalizing scents of pumpkin stew and garlic flatbread preceding her.

“Musa, love.” The innkeeper sets down the food and I am suddenly starving. “You won’t stay another night?”

“Sorry, Haina.” He flips a gold mark at her and she catches it deftly. “That should cover the rooms.”

“And then some.” Haina pockets the coin. “Nikla’s raised Scholar taxes again. Nyla’s bakery was shuttered last week when she couldn’t pay.”

“We’ve lost our greatest ally.” Musa speaks of old King Irmand, who’s been ill for weeks. “It’s only going to get worse.”

“You were married to the princess,” Haina says. “Couldn’t you talk to her?”

The Scholar offers her a wry smile. “Not unless you want your taxes even higher.”

Haina departs and Musa claims the stew. Darin swipes a platter of fried okra still popping with oil.

“You ate four ears of street corn an hour ago,” I hiss at him, grappling for a basket of bread.

As I wrest it free, the door blows open. Snow drifts into the room, along with a tall, slender woman. Her silvery-blond crown braid is mostly hidden beneath a hood. The screaming bird on her breastplate flashes for an instant before she draws her cloak over it and strides to our table.

“That smells incredible.” The Blood Shrike of the Martial Empire drops into the seat across from Musa and takes his food.

At his petulant expression, she shrugs. “Ladies first. That goes for you too, smith.” She slides Darin’s groaning plate toward me and I dig in.

“Well?” Musa says to the Shrike. “Did that shiny bird on your armor get you in to see the king?”

The Blood Shrike’s pale eyes flash. “Your wife,” she says, “is a pain in the a—”

“Estranged wife.” Musa says. A reminder that once, they adored each other. No longer. A bitter ending to what they hoped was a lifelong love.

It is a feeling I know well.

Elias Veturius saunters into my mind, though I have tried to lock him out. He appears as I last saw him, sharp-eyed and aloof outside the Waiting Place. *We are, all of us, just visitors in each other’s lives*, he’d said. *You will forget my visit soon enough.*

“What did the princess say?” Darin asks the Shrike, and I push Elias from my head.

“She didn’t speak to me. Her steward said the princess would hear my appeal when King Irmand’s health improved.”

The Martial glares at Musa, as if he is the one who has refused an audience. “Keris *bleeding* Veturia is sitting in Serra, beheading every ambassador Nikla has sent. The Mariners have no other allies in the Empire. Why is she refusing to see me?”

“I’d love to know,” Musa says, and an iridescent flicker near his face tells me that his wights, tiny winged creatures who serve as his spies, are near. “But while I have eyes in many places, Blood Shrike, the inside of Nikla’s mind isn’t one of them.”

“I should be back in Delphinium.” The Shrike stares out at the howling snowstorm. “My family needs me.”

Worry furrows her brow, uncharacteristic on a face so studied. In the five months since we escaped Antium, the Blood Shrike has thwarted a dozen attempts to assassinate young Emperor Zacharias.

The child has enemies among the Karkauns as well as Keris's allies in the south. And they are relentless.

"We expected this," Darin says. "Are we decided, then?"

The Blood Shrike and I nod, but Musa clears his throat.

"I know the Shrike needs to speak to the princess," he says. "But I'd like to publicly state that I find this plan far too risky."

Darin chuckles. "That's how we know it's a Laia plan—utterly insane and likely to end in death."

"What of your shadow, Martial?" Musa glances around for Avitas Harper, as if the Mask might appear out of thin air. "What wretched task have you subjected that poor man to now?"

"Harper is occupied." The Shrike's body stiffens for a moment before she continues inhaling her food. "Don't worry about him."

"I have to take one last delivery at the forge." Darin gets to his feet. "I'll meet you at the gate in a bit, Laia. Luck to you all."

Watching him walk out of the inn sends anxiety spiking through me. While I was in the Empire, my brother remained here in Marinn at my request. We reunited a week ago, when the Shrike, Avitas, and I arrived in Adisa. Now we're splitting up again. *Just for a few hours, Laia. He'll be fine.*

Musa nudges my plate toward me. "Eat, *aapan*," he says, not unkindly. "Everything is better when you're not hungry. I'll have the wights keep an eye on Darin, and I'll see you all at the northeast gate. Seventh bell." He pauses, frowning. "Be careful."

As he heads out, the Blood Shrike harrumphs. "Mariner guards have nothing on a Mask."

I do not disagree. I watched the Shrike single-handedly hold off an army of Karkauns so that thousands of Martials and Scholars could escape Antium. Few Mariners could take on a Mask. None is a match for the Blood Shrike.

The Shrike disappears to her room to change, and for the first time in ages, I am alone. Out in the city, a bell tolls the fifth hour. Winter brings night early and the roof groans with the force of the gale. I ponder Musa's words as I watch the inn's boisterous guests and try to shake off that sense of being watched. *I thought you were fearless.*

I almost laughed when he said it. *Fear is only your enemy if you allow it to be.* The blacksmith Spiro Teluman told me that long ago.

Some days, I live those words so easily. On others, they are a weight in my bones I cannot bear.

Certainly, I did the things Musa said. But I also abandoned Darin to a Mask. My friend Izzi died because of me. I escaped the Nightbringer, but unwittingly helped him free his kindred. I delivered the Emperor, but let my mother sacrifice herself so that the Blood Shrike and I could live.

Even now, months later, I see Mother in my dreams. White-haired and scarred, her eyes blazing as she wields her bow against a wave of Karkaun attackers. She was not afraid.

But I am not my mother. And I am not alone in my fear. Darin does not speak of the terror he faced in Kauf Prison. Nor does the Shrike speak of the day Emperor Marcus slaughtered her parents and sister. Or how it felt to flee Antium, knowing what the Karkauns would do to her people.

Fearless. No, none of us is fearless. “Ill-fated” is a better description.

I rise as the Blood Shrike descends the stairs. She wears the slate, cinch-waisted dress of a palace maid and a matching cloak. I almost don’t recognize her.

“Stop staring.” The Shrike tucks a lock of hair beneath the drab kerchief hiding her crown braid and nudges me toward the door.

“Someone will notice the uniform. Come on. We’re late.”

“How many blades hidden in that skirt?”

“Five—no, wait—” She shifts from foot to foot. “Seven.”

We push out of the Ucaya and into streets thick with snow and people. The wind knives into us, and I scramble for my gloves, fingertips numb.

“Seven blades.” I smile at her. “And you did not think to bring gloves?”

“It’s colder in Antium.” The Shrike’s gaze drops to the dagger at my waist. “And I don’t use poisoned blades.”

“Maybe if you did, you would not need so many.”

She grins at me. “Luck to you, Laia.”

“Do not kill anyone, Shrike.”

She melts into the evening crowds like a wraith, fourteen years of training making her almost as undetectable as I am about to be. I drop down, as if adjusting my bootlaces, and draw my invisibility over me between one moment and the next.

With its terraced levels and brightly painted homes, Adisa is charming during the day. But at night, it dazzles. Tribal lanterns hang from nearly every house, their multicolored glass sparkling even in the storm. Lamplight leaks through the ornamental lattices that cover the windows, casting gold fractals upon the snow.

The Ucaya Inn sits on a higher terrace, with a view of both Fari Bay, on the northwest end of Adisa, and Aftab Bay, on the northeast. There, among mountains of floating ice, whales breach and descend. In the city's center, the charred spire of the Great Library lances the sky, still standing despite a fire that nearly destroyed it when I was last here.

But it is the people who make me stare. Even with a tempest roaring out of the north, the Mariners dress in their finest. Red and blue and purple wools embroidered with freshwater pearls and mirrors. Sweeping cloaks lined in fur and heavy with gold thread.

Perhaps I can make a home here one day. Most Mariners do not share Nikla's prejudices. Maybe I, too, could wear beautiful clothes and live in a periwinkle house with a green-shingled roof. Laugh with friends, become a healer. Meet a handsome Mariner and swat at Darin and Musa when they tease me mercilessly about him.

I try to hold that image in my mind. But I do not want Marinn. I want sand and stories and a clear night sky. I want to stare up into pale gray eyes filled with love and that edge of wickedness I ache for. I want to know what he said to me in Sadhese, a year and a half ago, when we danced at the Moon Festival in Serra.

I want Elias Veturius back.

Stop, Laia. The Scholars and Martials in Delphinium are counting on me. Musa suspected Nikla wouldn't hear the Shrike's plea—so we plotted a way to *make* the crown princess listen. But it will not work unless I get through these streets and into the palace.

As I make my way toward the center of Adisa, snatches of conversation float by. The Adisans speak of attacks in far-flung villages. Monsters prowling the countryside.

"Hundreds dead, I heard."

"My nephew's regiment left weeks ago and we haven't had any word."

"Just a rumor—"

Only it is not a rumor. Musa's wights reported back this morning. My stomach twists when I think of the border villages that were

burned to the ground, their residents slaughtered.

The lanes I traverse grow narrower, and streetlamps more scarce. Behind me, a tinkle of coins echoes and I whirl, but no one is there. I walk more quickly when I catch a glimpse of the palace gate. It is inlaid with onyx and mother of pearl, selenic beneath the snowy pink sky. *Stay away from that bleeding gate, Musa warned me. It's guarded by Jaduna and they'll see right through your invisibility.*

The magic-wielding Jaduna hail from the unknown lands beyond the Great Wastes, thousands of miles to the west. A few serve the Mariner royal family. Running into one would mean jail—or death.

Thankfully, the palace has side entrances for the maids and messengers and groundskeepers who keep the place running. Those guards are not Jaduna, so slipping past them is simple enough.

But once inside, I hear that sound again—one coin sliding against another.

The palace is a massive complex arranged in a U around acres of manicured gardens. The halls are wide as boulevards and so tall that the frescoes painted upon the pale stone above are hardly visible.

There are also mirrors everywhere. As I turn a corner, I glance into one and catch a flash of gold coins and vivid blue clothing. My heartbeat quickens. A Jaduna? The figure is gone too fast to tell.

I backtrack, heading to where the person vanished. But all I find is a hallway patrolled by a pair of guards. I will have to deal with whomever—or whatever—is following me when they reveal themselves. Right now, I need to get to the throne room.

At sixth bell, Musa said, the princess departs the throne room for the dining hall. Go in through the southern antechamber. Place your blade on the throne and get out. The moment her guards see it, Nikla will be evacuated to her chambers.

No one gets hurt and we have Nikla where we want her. The Blood Shrike will be waiting and will make her plea.

The antechamber is small and musty, the faint scent of sweat and perfume mingling, but it is, as Musa predicted, empty. I slip silently through and into the shadows of the throne room.

Where I hear voices.

The first is a woman's, resonant and angry. I've not heard Princess Nikla speak in months and it takes me a moment to recognize her intonations.

The second voice stops me cold, for it is laced with violence and chillingly soft. It is a voice that has no business being in Adisa. A voice I would know anywhere. She calls herself Emperor Invictus—Supreme Commander—of the Empire.

But to me, she will always be the Commandant.