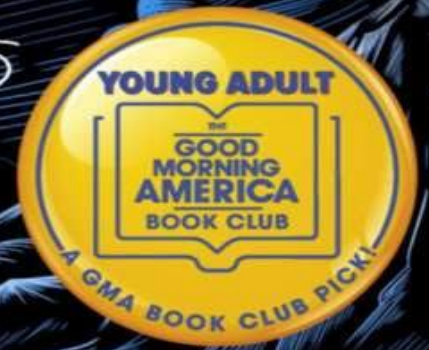
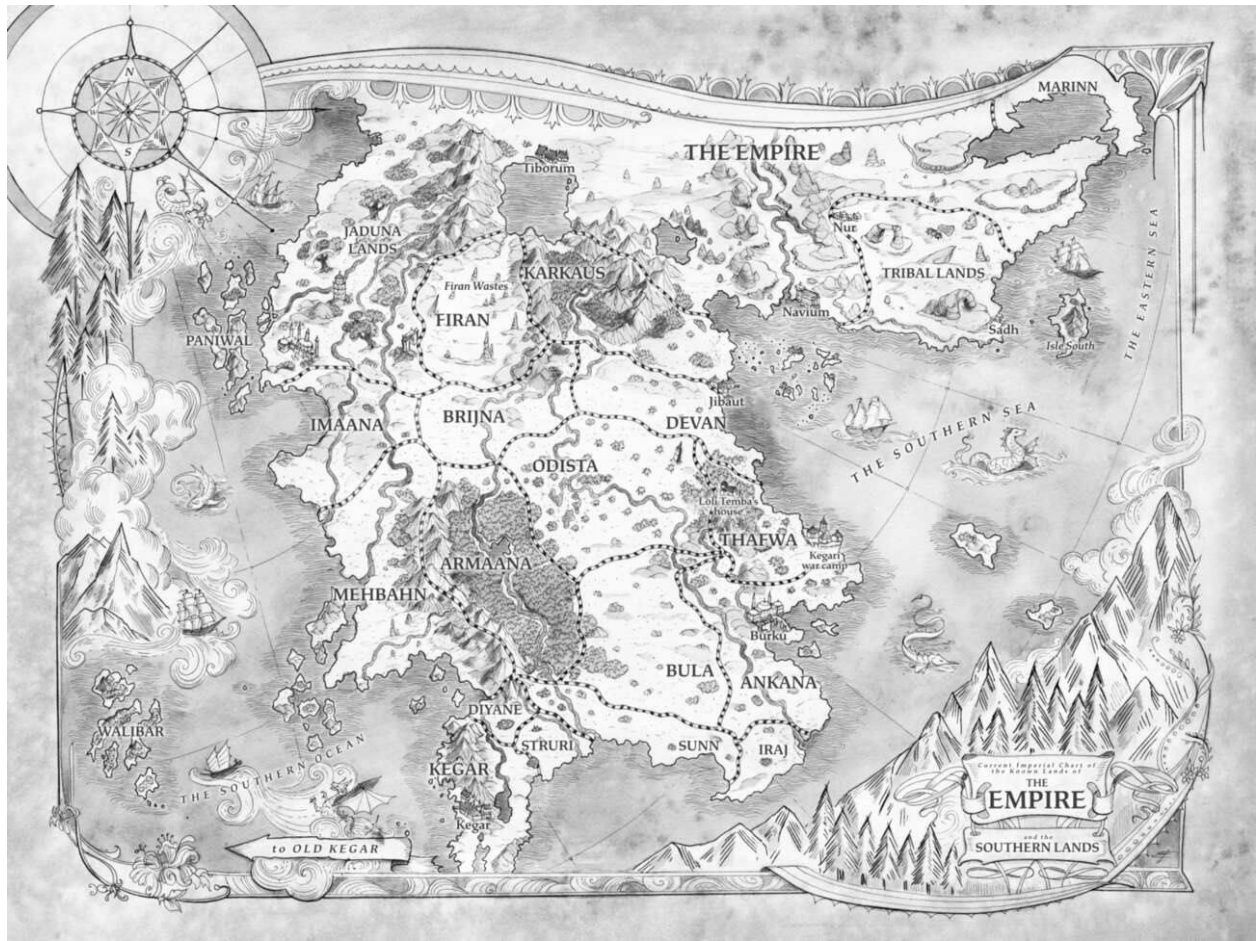


HEIR



SABAA TAHIR

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling
and National Book Award-winning author



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ALSO BY SABAA TAHIR

All My Rage

AN EMBER IN THE ASHES QUARTET

An Ember in the Ashes

A Torch Against the Night

A Reaper at the Gates

A Sky Beyond the Storm

HEIR

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148404609

For Cathy Yardley, who has waded with me through the muck of my ideas for a decade. Your forbearance and love are a gift. Thank you for reminding me that I have things worth saying.

And for Sami, my very own furry Light of Eärendil.

PART I
THE FALL



1

Aiz

KEGAR, THE SOUTHERN CONTINENT

Aiz wished she didn't hate her enemies with such fervor, for it gave them power over her. But she was a gutter child, and the Kegari gutters bred tough, bitter creatures, ready to stab or scheme or slink into the shadows—depending on what the moment required.

What the gutters didn't offer was luck. Only a divine entity could bestow good fortune.

So, with dawn approaching, Aiz crept through the hushed, wood-beamed halls of the cloister and out to its stone courtyard. Her thin shoes and ragged skirt did little to protect her against the foot of snow that had fallen in the night. Still, she shoved forward, grimacing into the biting wind that whipped off the mountain spires and stole her breath. Perhaps it would steal her anger, too. Today, of all days, she needed a clear head.

For today, Aiz bet-Dafra would commit her first murder.

The orphans of the cloister and the clerics who cared for them still slept. Lessons began after sunrise. Kegar—a crowded city of a quarter million—was quiet beyond the cloister walls. Aiz was alone, accompanied only by her fury as she regarded the blackened timbers on one side of the courtyard. The orphans' wing, still in ruins ten years after it burned to the ground.

Her chest tightened. She could hear the screams of the children who'd died there. She dug her nails into her thigh, into the ridge of skin beneath her patched skirt. Mostly, she ignored her scars. But some days, they still burned.

Your anger will be the death of you, Cero, her oldest friend, told her years ago. He'd seen her lose her temper too often to think any different. *You must control it. Get what you need. Forget the rest.*

She needed vengeance. Justice. She needed her plan to work.

Aiz stopped before the statue at the center of the yard: a woman wearing bell-sleeved robes and looking toward the mountains. Her stone face had hollow cheeks, thin lips, and a heavy brow; her hair was swept back from a high forehead. She wore a headdress carved with a beaming half-sun. Aiz liked to imagine that she and the woman in the statue had the same brown hair and light eyes.

The woman had many names. Vessel of the Fount. First Queen of the Crossing. But here in Dafra slum, where so many were orphaned by military drafts, illness, and starvation, she was Mother Div.

The statue's plaque was pocked and weathered. But Aiz had learned the words as a child: *Blessed is Div, Savior of Kegar, who led our people to refuge in these mountain spires after a great cataclysm engulfed our motherland across the sea.*

"Mother Div, hear me." Aiz clasped her hands in supplication. "Don't let me fail. I've waited too long. If I'm imprisoned or tortured, so be it. If I'm killed, it is your will. But I must succeed first."

Strange, Aiz knew, to ask the patron of light and kindness to bless a murder. But Mother Div loved orphans, too. She'd have wanted revenge for those killed in the fire. Aiz was sure of it.

A Sail passed overhead, its shadow like that of a giant bird, before winging off to the north. Tiral bet-Hiwa, the highborn commander of the air squadrons, sent patrols over the slums. A reminder that the Snipes who lived here were being watched. And a promise that, if they were lucky, they could join the watchers. Aiz observed the aircraft for a long time, and jumped when she heard a step behind her.

Sister Noa crunched through the snow, her frayed woolen skirt dragging. "Light of the Spires, little one," the old woman greeted Aiz.

"Long may it guide us," Aiz responded.

Sister Noa lifted a brown, wrinkled hand to Mother Div's stone forehead before wrapping her own scarf around Aiz's neck, waving off her protests.

"You'll be working at the airfield," Noa said. "While I laze."

"Drinking tea with biscuits," Aiz said, though the cloister was too poor for both. "Bossing your servants about."

Noa smiled at the lie, dark eyes sparkling beneath the paling snow clouds. As a cleric in Dafra slum's biggest cloister, she'd be on her feet all day, no better than a servant herself—overseeing lessons, running the kitchens, ensuring the care of any who came to the cloister for aid. And shivering all the while, no doubt.

She smoothed Aiz's hair back with the same hands that had smacked her when she stole barberries and held her when she screamed at the death of her mother. Noa seemed old even then. Now she was gnarled and wrinkled as a thorn-pine.

The cleric peered at Aiz. "You're troubled, little love. Tell me a dream."

"I dream of a Kegari spring." Aiz smiled at the familiar question. "And a belly full of siltfish curry."

"May Mother Div make it so," Sister Noa said. "The sun rises. Get to the airfield. If you ride with Cero, you'll arrive before the flightmasters give you a hiding."

Noa nodded to the cloister gate. Beyond, a horse stamped its hooves in the cold. The figure beside it paced in circles, equally impatient. Cero.

The calm that had entered Aiz's heart at Noa's touch evaporated, replaced by a memory: A night six months ago, before a new crop of pilots was announced. Waiting with Cero in his quarters to find out if they'd been chosen for the elite Sail squadron. Aiz had paced from cot to window, unable to sit still until Cero took her hand. His touch elicited a spark, a kiss, confusion followed by delight and laughter and hope.

And then the morning after, Cero became a pilot and Aiz became nothing.

“I don’t see why he lives here,” Aiz said. “Taking up a bed. Eating our food. He can quarter with the other pilots.”

“The cloister is his home,” Sister Noa said. “*You* are his home. Don’t punish him because Mother Div saw fit to make him a pilot. Now, get moving, love.”

Aiz tucked the scarf back around Noa’s short white curls. She needed it more than Aiz did. “Go inside, Sister. Warm your bones for a bit longer.”

When Sister Noa had shuffled away, Aiz regarded Cero, waiting beyond the cloister gate. He hadn’t spotted her yet.

She turned away and snuck out the back.



By the time Aiz arrived, the airfield and its runways bustled with pilots, flightmasters, engineers, and signalers. Aiz’s fellow drudges scurried amid the chaos, lowborn Snipes like her hauling buckets and poles and ice-encrusted flight leathers.

Beyond the airfield, the Sail-building yard was equally busy, crowded with scaffolds and skeins of twine, reams of canvas, and stacks of cured reeds. The Aerie stood beside it, casting a long, blue shadow. Like many of Kegar’s buildings, it was slope-roofed, made of wood and stone and shaped like the slash of a quill. It housed hundreds of pilots and drudges.

“Snipe!” A flightmaster grabbed Aiz’s elbow and dragged her to the stables. He was a Hawk, a highborn, like most of the Aerie’s bosses. “Muck out the stalls. Then report to hangar one. A dozen Sails need waterproofing.”

Aiz sighed and grabbed a pitchfork. Stable work was stenchsome, but at least the building was well constructed, with stone walls that kept away the wind and wide doorways that offered a clear view of the airfield.

Out on the launching pads, dozens of Sails awaited pilots. From here, the craft looked like piles of sticks and canvas, rustling in the wind. But Aiz knew better.

Every Kegari child, regardless of birth, was tested for windsmithing skill at age fourteen. When Aiz had shown a talent for it, the flightmasters put her in a Sail, and she was sent to the Aerie for training.

She’d never forget how it felt in the single-seater cockpit: The cool bowl of Loha, the metal that flowed into liquid at her touch, fusing with her hands before shooting out through the Sail’s hollow frame; the sight of the curved, triangular wings lifting like the pinions of a coastal gull. The way her blood fizzed at the caress of the wind—before she inevitably spiraled to the earth, unable to control her magic.

She’d spent years trying to control it. She’d failed.

Now, face hot with envy, Aiz watched Sail after Sail spring to life, canvas stretching tight as the reed scaffolding filled with living metal. The Sail pilots would wing north across the mountains to drop bombs on distant foreign villages. The waiting Kegari army would pillage grain and goods to send home. And thus, Kegar would survive another season.

Aiz's people had long ago stopped producing enough food to feed their own. For the last century, the raids were ever present, ever essential. So were the pilots who led them.

Which meant that whether you were born a low Snipe, a middle-class Sparrow, or a highborn Hawk, becoming a pilot guaranteed food, shelter, clothing, training. It meant a life. A future.

Reins jangled and Aiz whirled to see Cero leading his mount, Tregan, into the stable. His dark hair was scraped back into a high bun. Purple smudges beneath his eyes made his green irises look black. In blue-scaled flight leathers, he managed beauty and gravity, even as he leveled a stare at Aiz.

"I waited for you."

Aiz shrugged and pitched a particularly large scoop of filthy hay over her shoulder—barely missing Cero. "Your problem, not mine."

"Spires, Aiz, but you're difficult." Cero, usually as emotionless as the mountains, sounded almost annoyed.

"And you're cranky." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Don't see why."

"Right, because I'm a pilot." Cero walked Tregan to her stall and she snapped at him. Aiz smirked. The mare had always liked Aiz better than Cero.

"Having my basic needs met only costs subservience to the Triarchy," Cero went on, "and offering my life to a Spires-forsaken megalomaniac who shouldn't oversee a dog kennel, let alone an army."

"Shut your gob!" Aiz looked around frantically. The stables were empty, but that didn't mean no one had heard. Lord Tiral bet-Hiwa led the flight squadrons. He was also heir to one of the three Triarchs who ruled Kegar. His family had spies everywhere.

"What's he going to do if he hears me?" Cero said, leaning against the thick wall of the stables. "Throw me in the Tohr? The Sail squadron leaves tomorrow. Tiral needs me dropping bombs on innocent villagers, not moldering in prison."

Cero sounded bitter, not proud. His ability to windsmith—to bend the air currents to his will—was prodigious. That's why he'd been chosen to pilot a Sail.

He hadn't expected that Aiz would be left behind. But while Cero could tame the wind, Aiz enraged it. While Cero lifted a Sail into a precise spiral, Aiz tore the canvas wings to shreds. She could shift a scent and call a breeze, but any more than that and the wind defied her.

No point in grieving what could have been. Aiz had found another purpose.

"He deserves our respect." Aiz spat out the lie. What Tiral deserved was a knife to the jugular—which was exactly what Aiz planned on giving him in a few hours. But if Cero guessed Aiz's plot, he'd try to stop her. Tell her it was too dangerous.

"Tiral's our fleet commander." Aiz thought of the knife in her skirt, sharpened in the darkness of the cloister's forgotten tunnels. "Without him, we'd all starve."

"He doesn't care about us." Cero fixed his eyes on Aiz and she found it difficult to look away. "Be wary of him."

Aiz went still. Cero never spoke idly. He must have seen her entering Tiral's quarters. Or leaving. She thought of what Tiral had said months ago, when Aiz first allowed him to think he

was seducing her. *Keep our secrets to yourself, little Snipe. Wouldn't want anything to happen to you.*

Cero's expression was severe enough that Aiz wondered if there was something between her friend and Tiral. She'd often been clueless about Cero's entanglements. He'd kept an affair with a seamstress so quiet that Aiz didn't learn of it until the woman showed up at the cloister, demanding to see him.

"I don't care who you dally with, Aiz." Cero's detachment stung. "But don't make assumptions about Tiral. The only person he cares about is himself."

As he spoke, he spun a ring on his finger. Aiz used to have one like it. An aaj. One of Cero's many creations. It let them communicate without speaking. She'd returned it to Cero after he'd become a pilot.

"Done lecturing?" She let her voice ice over and scooped more hay. "I have work to do."

A shutter went down behind Cero's eyes. He left the stable. Aiz knew she'd hurt him, which both upset and satisfied her. But she couldn't dwell on Cero. She only had time for one man today.

Waiting was torturous, the hours crawling by in a blur of mucking hay, waterproofing Sails, and dodging the flightmasters' blows. Eventually, the rose-gilded snow clouds bumped along south and the wind's screams quieted to whispers. Night fell. Aiz was helping to light the airfield's lamps when one of the signalers called out.

"Incoming!"

He pointed to the snow-drenched spires that encircled the capital, jutting into the sky like triumphant fists. The moon highlighted the approaching Sails, and Aiz's pulse quickened.

"Get those lamps lit, you Spires-forsaken rats!" the closest flightmaster roared, whip flashing. Within moments, dozens of signalers flooded the field, blue fire held high.

The Sails landed with well-practiced precision. All but Lord Tiral's, which was the largest; it turned on a wingtip not once but twice as he surveyed the squadron. He didn't spiral down until the rest of the fleet had landed.

Aiz hurried from pad to pad, collecting goggles and caps and empty bowls of Loha. All the while, she watched Tiral for a weakness. Tiredness or an injury. Something that would make it easier to stick a knife in him.

The only oddity she saw was familiar: his hand strayed to the thin book always tucked into his belt. When she'd first spotted it months ago, Aiz thought it was the Nine Sacred Tales, the parables Mother Div told to guide her people. Or if not that, a journal or a record book. But as best she could tell, it was a volume of children's stories, useless to her unless she wanted to beat him to death with it.

Unfortunately, it was a bit small for that.

As Tiral strode around his Sail, pointing out the damage it had taken to the flightmasters, Aiz paced in the shadows, consumed with hate.

She'd never understand why Mother Div gave Tiral windsmithing skill when he spat on everything she stood for. When he orphaned children by conscripting their parents and sneered at the clerics who carried out good works in Mother Div's name.

Tiral looked up, as if sensing Aiz's ire. He was twenty, broad-shouldered, of medium height, with pale hair and a crooked nose that made him memorable instead of ugly. His saurian gaze fixed on her. It took all Aiz's effort to keep her face placid. He nodded once.

She knew what he wanted. For once, she was happy to give it to him.

Aiz made her way to the Aerie, past the forges where metallurgists alloyed the Loha used for the Sails, wrinkling her nose at the stench. Rumor was that their supply of Loha—husbanded for a thousand years—was running out.

Without Loha there would be no Sails. Without Sails, the raids would fail. Then they'd all starve, Hawk and Snipe alike.

Aiz entered the Aerie from a side door and made for the bathing chambers. In the past six months, she'd learned to navigate the labyrinth of servants' passages with ease. On her way to Tiral's room, she saw others like her. Dead-eyed Snipes in revealing robes, doing what they needed to survive. They didn't acknowledge each other.

She wound through the innards of the keep to the secret door that led into Tiral's room. The stones of the tunnels were ancient, and she shifted one aside and hid her knife behind it. Then she knocked on the door thrice.

He made her wait. Unsurprising. He enjoyed the idea of Aiz shivering in the tunnel, not knowing if he'd allow her in or not. Aiz had worked hard to cultivate the image of a besotted Snipe. On the nights he left her outside, she sniveled and pleaded.

Pig. He thought he had so much power. Tonight, he'd learn different.

Soon, she heard movement. The door opened, and dim blue light spilled into the passage. Tiral's pale skin gleamed, like he was part specter.

"Aiz," he purred, and took her by the arm.

"My lord," she whispered. *Say it. Say it one last time.* "Thank you for allowing me in."

"I'm nothing if not generous, Snipe."

Lord Tiral drew her through his living quarters, the fur settees strewn with boots and fresh flight leathers. She caught a glimpse of herself in his mirror—small-boned and light-skinned, her dark hair spilling to her lower back, her blue irises seeming to glow. He nudged her onto his bed. Aiz's head sank into the goose-feather pillow that could fetch a week's worth of grain.

At least he was quick. Like many of Aiz's bed partners, he fell into an untroubled sleep after their coupling. Aiz observed him, her lip curling.

To their people, Tiral was a brave fleet commander. But to Aiz, he was the murderous child who, years ago, snuck into the cloister in the dead of night to set fire to the orphans' quarters. He'd listened to them scream as they burned, all because they'd made him look a fool in front of his father during an official visit.

The clerics, Sister Noa included, had gone before the Triarchy. Begged those three crooked monsters for justice. Even Dovan, the High Cleric of Kegar and leader of its many cloisters, made an impassioned plea.

The Triarchy did nothing. In time everyone forgot about the dead orphans—even Cero, who'd nearly died himself that night.

Aiz hadn't forgotten.

She rose from the bed, donned her shirt and skirt, and moved to the passageway for the knife. She was nearly there when Tiral stirred. Aiz swung toward his desk, feigning interest in his things. If he awoke, he'd only see her snooping. Amid the scrolls and quills and military orders, her gaze snagged on a book. *The book.*

She ran her fingers across the cover. The leather was slick, like the skin of a long-submerged sea creature. The imprint on the cover was triangular and reminded her of the tangled forests of the Spires. The hair on Aiz's neck rose, though she didn't know why. She opened the book.

THE FALCON AND THE THIEF

*In the abiding evenfall of the northern climes, a lone falcon winged his way home
after a long and—*

Bah. Just a story. Aiz closed the book, listening for Tiral's snores before opening the passageway and retrieving her blade.

The bed dipped as she returned to it, and Tiral muttered in his sleep.

Aiz wrapped her fist tight around the knife. *Get what you need. Forget the rest.* The faster the better. Right in the throat. Cero had long ago taught her where to strike to kill a man. *No one can keep us safe all the time, he'd said. Not even the clerics.*

"In the name of Mother Div," she whispered, "I take my vengeance."

Aiz brought the blade down.

And gasped when Tiral's hand shot out, catching her wrist with breathtaking swiftness. His eyes opened, and he smiled.

"Oh, Aiz," he said. "You poor, stupid fool."