

AN
EMBER
IN THE
ASHES

A NOVEL BY

SABAA
TAHIR

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Version_1

For Kashi,
who taught me that my spirit is stronger than my fear

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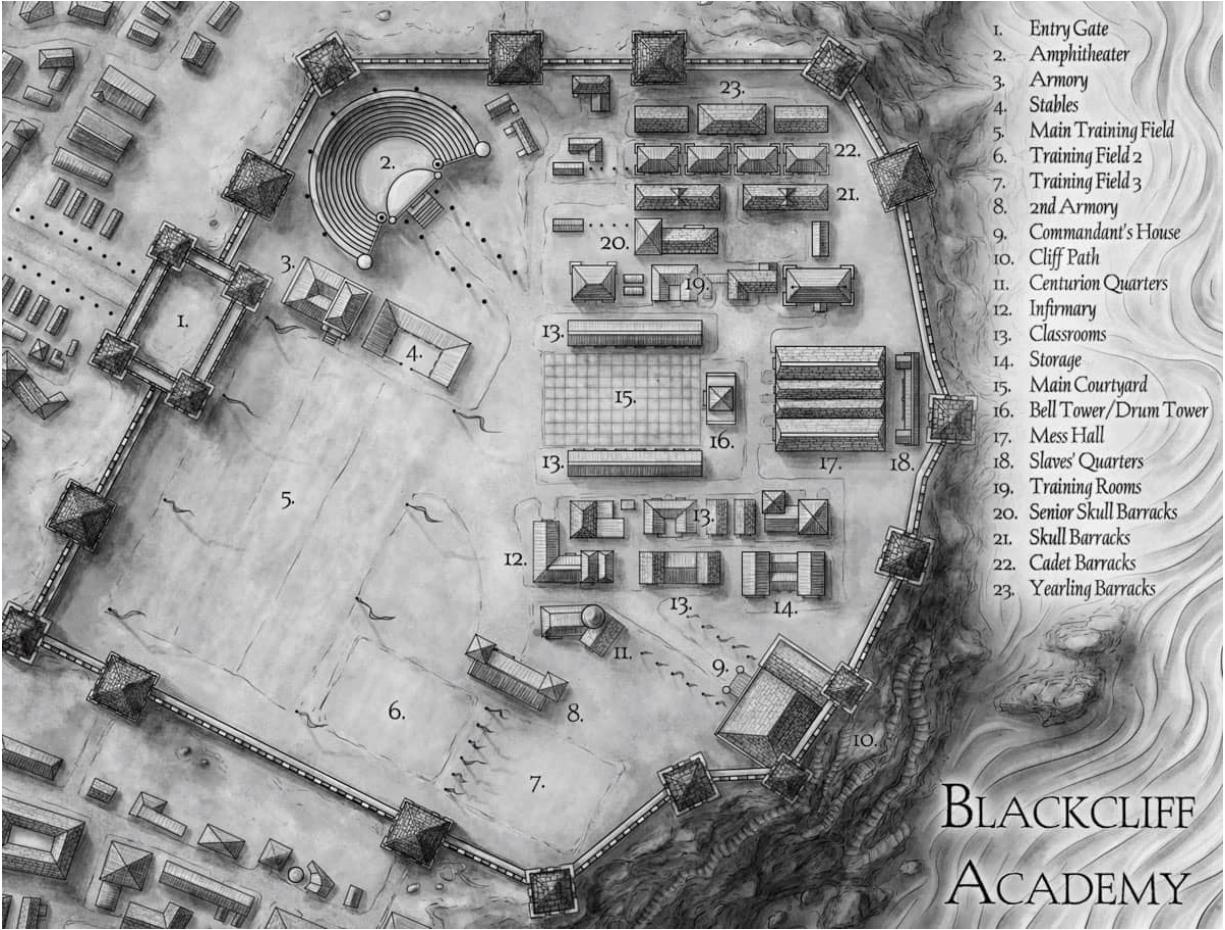
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BLACKCLIFF ACADEMY

PART I
THE RAID

I: Laia

My big brother reaches home in the dark hours before dawn, when even ghosts take their rest. He smells of steel and coal and forge. He smells of the enemy.

He folds his scarecrow body through the window, bare feet silent on the rushes. A hot desert wind blows in after him, rustling the limp curtains. His sketchbook falls to the floor, and he nudges it under his bunk with a quick foot, as if it's a snake.

Where have you been, Darin? In my head, I have the courage to ask the question, and Darin trusts me enough to answer. *Why do you keep disappearing? Why, when Pop and Nan need you? When I need you?*

Every night for almost two years, I've wanted to ask. Every night, I've lacked the courage. I have one sibling left. I don't want him to shut me out like he has everyone else.

But tonight's different. I know what's in his sketchbook. I know what it means.

"You shouldn't be awake." Darin's whisper jolts me from my thoughts. He has a cat's sense for traps—he got it from our mother. I sit up on the bunk as he lights the lamp. No use pretending to be asleep.

"It's past curfew, and three patrols have gone by. I was worried."

"I can avoid the soldiers, Laia. Lots of practice." He rests his chin on my bunk and smiles Mother's sweet, crooked smile. A familiar look—the one he gives me if I wake from a nightmare or we run out of grain. *Everything will be fine*, the look says.

He picks up the book on my bed. "*Gather in the Night*," he reads the title. "Spooky. What's it about?"

"I just started it. It's about a jinn—" I stop. Clever. Very clever. He likes hearing stories as much as I like telling them. "Forget that. Where were you?"

Pop had a dozen patients this morning.”

And I filled in for you because he can't do so much alone. Which left Nan to bottle the trader's jams by herself. Except she didn't finish. Now the trader won't pay us, and we'll starve this winter, and why in the skies don't you care?

I say these things in my head. The smile's already dropped off Darin's face.

“I'm not cut out for healing,” he says. “Pop knows that.”

I want to back down, but I think of Pop's slumped shoulders this morning. I think of the sketchbook.

“Pop and Nan depend on you. At least talk to them. It's been months.”

I wait for him to tell me that I don't understand. That I should leave him be. But he just shakes his head, drops down into his bunk, and closes his eyes like he can't be bothered to reply.

“I saw your drawings.” The words tumble out in a rush, and Darin's up in an instant, his face stony. “I wasn't spying,” I say. “One of the pages was loose. I found it when I changed the rushes this morning.”

“Did you tell Nan and Pop? Did they see?”

“No, but—”

“Laia, listen.” Ten hells, I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear his excuses. “What you saw is dangerous,” he says. “You can't tell anyone about it. Not ever. It's not just my life at risk. There are others—”

“Are you working for the Empire, Darin? Are you working for the Martials?”

He is silent. I think I see the answer in his eyes, and I feel ill. My brother is a traitor to his own people? My brother is siding with the Empire?

If he hoarded grain, or sold books, or taught children to read, I'd understand. I'd be proud of him for doing the things I'm not brave enough to do. The Empire raids, jails, and kills for such “crimes,” but teaching a six-year-old her letters isn't evil—not in the minds of my people, the Scholar people.

But what Darin has done is sick. It's a betrayal.

“The Empire killed our parents,” I whisper. “Our sister.”

I want to shout at him, but I choke on the words. The Martials conquered Scholar lands five hundred years ago, and since then, they’ve done nothing but oppress and enslave us. Once, the Scholar Empire was home to the finest universities and libraries in the world. Now, most of our people can’t tell a school from an armory.

“How could you side with the Martials? How, Darin?”

“It’s not what you think, Laia. I’ll explain everything, but—”

He pauses suddenly, his hand jerking up to silence me when I ask for the promised explanation. He cocks his head toward the window.

Through the thin walls, I hear Pop’s snores, Nan shifting in her sleep, a mourning dove’s croon. Familiar sounds. Home sounds.

Darin hears something else. The blood drains from his face, and dread flashes in his eyes. “Laia,” he says. “Raid.”

“But if you work for the Empire—” *Then why are the soldiers raiding us?*

“I’m not working for them.” He sounds calm. Calmer than I feel. “Hide the sketchbook. That’s what they want. That’s what they’re here for.”

Then he’s out the door, and I’m alone. My bare legs move like cold molasses, my hands like wooden blocks. *Hurry, Laia!*

Usually, the Empire raids in the heat of the day. The soldiers want Scholar mothers and children to watch. They want fathers and brothers to see another man’s family enslaved. As bad as those raids are, the night raids are worse. The night raids are for when the Empire doesn’t want witnesses.

I wonder if this is real. If it’s a nightmare. *It’s real, Laia. Move.*

I drop the sketchbook out the window into a hedge. It’s a poor hiding place, but I have no time. Nan hobbles into my room. Her hands, so steady when she stirs vats of jam or braids my hair, flutter like frantic birds, desperate for me to move faster.

She pulls me into the hallway. Darin stands with Pop at the back door. My grandfather’s white hair is scattered as a haystack and his clothes are wrinkled, but there’s no sleep in the deep grooves of his face. He murmurs something to my brother, then hands him Nan’s largest kitchen knife. I don’t

know why he bothers. Against the Serric steel of a Martial blade, the knife will only shatter.

“You and Darin leave through the backyard,” Nan says, her eyes darting from window to window. “They haven’t surrounded the house yet.”

No. No. No. “Nan,” I breathe her name, stumbling when she pushes me toward Pop.

“Hide in the east end of the Quarter—” Her sentence ends in a choke, her eyes on the front window. Through the ragged curtains, I catch a flash of a liquid silver face. My stomach clenches.

“A Mask,” Nan says. “They’ve brought a Mask. Go, Laia. Before he gets inside.”

“What about you? What about Pop?”

“We’ll hold them off.” Pop shoves me gently out the door. “Keep your secrets close, love. Listen to Darin. He’ll take care of you. Go.”

Darin’s lean shadow falls over me, and he grabs my hand as the door closes behind us. He slouches to blend into the warm night, moving silently across the loose sand of the backyard with a confidence I wish I felt. Although I am seventeen and old enough to control my fear, I grip his hand like it’s the only solid thing in this world.

I’m not working for them, Darin said. Then whom is he working for? Somehow, he got close enough to the forges of Serra to draw, in detail, the creation process of the Empire’s most precious asset: the unbreakable, curved scims that can cut through three men at once.

Half a millennium ago, the Scholars crumbled beneath the Martial invasion because our blades broke against their superior steel. Since then, we have learned nothing of steelcraft. The Martials hoard their secrets the way a miser hoards gold. Anyone caught near our city’s forges without good reason—Scholar or Martial—risks execution.

If Darin isn’t with the Empire, how did he get near Serra’s forges? How did the Martials find out about his sketchbook?

On the other side of the house, a fist pounds on the front door. Boots shuffle, steel clinks. I look around wildly, expecting to see the silver armor

and red capes of Empire legionnaires, but the backyard is still. The fresh night air does nothing to stop the sweat rolling down my neck. Distantly, I hear the thud of drums from Blackcliff, the Mask training school. The sound sharpens my fear into a hard point stabbing at my center. The Empire doesn't send those silver-faced monsters on just any raid.

The pounding on the door sounds again.

"In the name of the Empire," an irritated voice says, "I demand you open this door."

As one, Darin and I freeze.

"Doesn't sound like a Mask," Darin whispers. Masks speak softly with words that cut through you like a scim. In the time it would take a legionnaire to knock and issue an order, a Mask would already be in the house, weapons slicing through anyone in his way.

Darin meets my eyes, and I know we're both thinking the same thing. If the Mask isn't with the rest of the soldiers at the front door, then where is he?

"Don't be afraid, Laia," Darin says. "I won't let anything happen to you."

I want to believe him, but my fear is a tide tugging at my ankles, pulling me under. I think of the couple that lived next door: raided, imprisoned, and sold into slavery three weeks ago. *Book smugglers*, the Martials said. Five days after that, one of Pop's oldest patients, a ninety-three-year-old man who could barely walk, was executed in his own home, his throat slit from ear to ear. *Resistance collaborator*.

What will the soldiers do to Nan and Pop? Jail them? Enslave them?

Kill them?

We reach the back gate. Darin stands on his toes to unhook the latch when a scrape in the alley beyond stops him short. A breeze sighs past, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

Darin pushes me behind him. His knuckles are white around the knife handle as the gate swings open with a moan. A finger of terror draws a trail up my spine. I peer over my brother's shoulder into the alley.

There is nothing out there but the quiet shifting of sand. Nothing but the occasional gust of wind and the shuttered windows of our sleeping neighbors.

I sigh in relief and step around Darin.

That's when the Mask emerges from the darkness and walks through the gate.

II: Elias

he deserter will be dead before dawn.

His tracks zigzag like a struck deer's in the dust of Serra's catacombs. The tunnels have done him in. The hot air is too heavy down here, the smells of death and rot too close.

The tracks are more than an hour old by the time I see them. The guards have his scent now, poor bastard. If he's lucky, he'll die in the chase. If not . . .

Don't think about it. Hide the backpack. Get out of here.

Skulls crunch as I shove a pack loaded with food and water into a wall crypt. Helene would give me hell if she could see how I'm treating the dead. But then, if Helene finds out why I'm down here in the first place, desecration will be the least of her complaints.

She won't find out. Not until it's too late. Guilt pricks at me, but I shove it away. Helene's the strongest person I know. She'll be fine without me.

For what feels like the hundredth time, I look over my shoulder. The tunnel is quiet. The deserter led the soldiers in the opposite direction. But safety's an illusion I know never to trust. I work quickly, piling bones back in front of the crypt to cover my trail, my senses primed for anything out of the ordinary.

One more day of this. One more day of paranoia and hiding and lying. One day until graduation. Then I'll be free.

As I rearrange the crypt's skulls, the hot air shifts like a bear waking from hibernation. The smells of grass and snow cut through the fetid breath of the tunnel. Two seconds is all I have to step away from the crypt and kneel, examining the ground as if there might be tracks here. Then she is at my back.

"Elias? What are you doing down here?"

“Didn’t you hear? There’s a deserter loose.” I keep my attention fixed on the dusty floor. Beneath the silver mask that covers me from forehead to jaw, my face should be unreadable. But Helene Aquilla and I have been together nearly every day of the fourteen years we’ve been training at Blackcliff Military Academy; she can probably hear me thinking.

She comes around me silently, and I look up into her eyes, as blue and pale as the warm waters of the southern islands. My mask sits atop my face, separate and foreign, hiding my features as well as my emotions. But Hel’s mask clings to her like a silvery second skin, and I can see the slight furrow in her brow as she looks down at me. *Relax, Elias*, I tell myself. *You’re just looking for a deserter.*

“He didn’t come this way,” Hel says. She runs a hand over her hair, braided, as always, into a tight, silver-blond crown. “Dex took an auxiliary company off the north watchtower and into the East Branch tunnel. You think they’ll catch him?”

Aux soldiers, though not as highly trained as legionnaires and nothing compared to Masks, are still merciless hunters. “Of course they’ll catch him.” I fail to keep the bitterness out of my voice, and Helene gives me a hard look. “The cowardly scum,” I add. “Anyway, why are you awake? You weren’t on watch this morning.” *I made sure of it.*

“Those bleeding drums.” Helene looks around the tunnel. “Woke everyone up.”

The drums. Of course. *Deserter*, they’d thundered in the middle of the graveyard watch. *All active units to the walls.* Helene must have decided to join the hunt. Dex, my lieutenant, would have told her which direction I’d gone. He’d have thought nothing of it.

“I thought the deserter might have come this way.” I turn from my hidden pack to look down another tunnel. “Guess I was wrong. I should catch up to Dex.”

“Much as I hate to admit it, you’re not usually wrong.” Helene cocks her head and smiles at me. I feel that guilt again, wrenching as a fist to the gut.

She'll be furious when she learns what I've done. She'll never forgive me. *Doesn't matter. You've decided. Can't turn back now.*

Hel traces the dust on the ground with a fair, practiced hand. "I've never even seen this tunnel before."

A drop of sweat crawls down my neck. I ignore it.

"It's hot, and it reeks," I say. "Like everything else down here." *Come on*, I want to add. But doing so would be like tattooing "I am up to no good" on my forehead. I keep quiet and lean against the catacomb wall, arms crossed.

The field of battle is my temple. I mentally chant a saying my grandfather taught me the day he met me, when I was six. He insists it sharpens the mind the way a whetstone sharpens a blade. *The swordpoint is my priest. The dance of death is my prayer. The killing blow is my release.*

Helene peers at my blurred tracks, following them, somehow, to the crypt where I stowed my pack, to the skulls piled there. She's suspicious, and the air between us is suddenly tense.

Damn it.

I need to distract her. As she looks between me and the crypt, I run my gaze lazily down her body. She stands two inches shy of six feet—a half-foot shorter than me. She's the only female student at Blackcliff; in the black, close-fitting fatigues all students wear, her strong, slender form has always drawn admiring glances. Just not mine. We've been friends too long for that.

Come on, notice. Notice me leering and get mad about it.

When I meet her eyes, brazen as a sailor fresh into port, she opens her mouth, as if to rip into me. Then she looks back at the crypt.

If she sees the pack and guesses what I'm up to, I'm done for. She might hate doing it, but Empire law would demand she report me, and Helene's never broken a law in her life.

"Elias—"

I prepare my lie. *Just wanted to get away for a couple of days, Hel. Needed some time to think. Didn't want to worry you.*

BOOM-BOOM-boom-BOOM.

The drums.