

An Ember in the Ashes Study Guide

An Ember in the Ashes

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Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide specifically refers to the following version of this book: Tahir, Sabaa. *Ember In the Ashes*. Razorbill/Penguin Random House, 2015. Paperback Edition.

An *Ember in the Ashes* is a young adult fantasy novel by Sabaa Tahir, that recounts the struggles of 17-year-old Laia to save her older brother from the clutches of the Empire, while Aspirant to become Emperor, Elias Verturius, struggles to find a way to leave the Empire. When the novel begins, Laia and her sole surviving sibling, Darin, live with their grandparents, for their parents and their sister have long ago been killed. Laia knows her parents were members of the Resistance, and knows they were betrayed to the Empire. She wants to avoid Darin suffering a similar fate, because she knows he has been sneaking out at night for unknown reasons. The Empire stages a raid on the house, killing Laia's grandparents and capturing Darin. Darin tells Laia to run, which she does.

Laia seeks out the Resistance in the catacombs beneath the City of Serra, where she uses her family history to gain an audience with Mazen, leader of the Resistance, and some of his best fighters, including Keenan and Sana. Mazen agrees to help Laia free Darin if Laia will spy on the Commandant of Blackcliff Military Academy, and provide crucial information for the Resistance. Laia agrees, and goes undercover as the Commandant's personal slave. There, Laia learns the Commandant has a bastard son named Elias, who is preparing to graduate from Blackcliff and become a full-fledged Mask. Elias, as it turns out, wants nothing to do with the Empire, and plans to desert after graduation. However, it is announced by the holy men of the Empire, the Augurs, that a new Emperor must be named as the current Emperor has no heir. Four Aspirants are to be selected from Blackcliff to participate in the Trials to select a new Emperor. Elias, his best friend Helene, and their enemies, the cruel brothers Marcus and Zak, are selected for the competition.

As the Trials unfold, Laia does her best to spy, but no matter what she brings back for Mazen, it is not enough to prompt him to rescue Darin. The Cook at Blackcliff, formerly a member of the Resistance, tells Laia not to trust them, but Laia has no choice. She returns to spying, and has repeated encounters with Elias whom she begins to trust. Helene, who is in love with Elias, becomes jealous of this connection, but struggles on because she knows Marcus and Zak must both be defeated in the Trials. Meanwhile, the existing Emperor, having learned of the plans of the Augurs, heads south from the capital to attack with what forces remain loyal to him, and to keep his throne. When the final Trial arrives, the three surviving Aspirants – Elias, Helene, and Marcus – are tasked with killing Laia, whom the Commandant had discovered is working for the Resistance. Elias refuses to kill Laia, and is arrested and sentenced to be executed at dawn. Marcus attacks Laia, and believing he has killed her, is declared Emperor. Helena is named Blood Shrike, or second-in-command to the new Emperor.



The Augurs, however, have protected Laia, and now help her escape Blackcliff to join the Resistance. There, she learns the Resistance has killed the existing Emperor, meaning that there will now be no civil war and the Resistance will be easier to crush for Marcus. She also learns from Mazen that he never intended to help her. Keenan helps Laia escape from Mazen, and arranges to meet her in the city of Silas to help her save Darin. Laia, meanwhile, returns to Blackcliff to help Elias escape on the condition he helps her find Darin. In a bittersweet parting, Helene covers their escape, telling Elias that they will be enemies when next they meet.



Chapters I - XI

Summary

Part I: The Raid

I: Laia – Seventeen-year-old Laia's brother, Darin, sneaks into the house with a sketchbook and smelling of the Serra forges after being out all night. Laia worries for his safety because he is the only brother she has left, and because there are many patrols out in the street. She does not like how Darin sneaks out, and how Pop and Nan (their grandparents) must shoulder the healing business on their own. She worries Darin is secretly working for the Martials, and siding with the Empire even after the Empire killed their parents. Darin tells her it is not what she thinks that he will explain everything, but a raid begins instead. Laia hides her brother's sketchbook in the bush outside the window, while Pop and Nan urge both Laia and Darin to run to the East Quarter. Laia and Darin sneak out toward the back gate just as Martials arrive at the front door. It is then that a Mask appears through the gate.

II: Elias – Elias Veturius, a mask-in-training, down in Serra's catacombs, hides a pack full of food and water in a crypt. Elias looks forward to one more day before graduation, when he can be free. In the meantime, he pretends to be searching for a deserter. Helena confronts him and tells him the deserter did not come this way, and that Lieutenant Dex has taken a company of troops into the East Branch tunnel to catch him. Elias cannot help but notice how attractive Helene is, as she is beautiful, strong, and the only female student at Blackcliff. Elias knows Helene is rabidly loyal to the Empire, while he secretly hates it, and plans to desert.

III: Laia – Darin puts himself between the Mask and Laia. The Mask quickly subdues Darin, slamming him into the ground. The Mask then herds Darin and Laia back inside, where Martial soldiers (also known as legionnaires) report the house is secure. Nan and Pop are tied up. The Mask demands Darin's sketchbook, or there will be violence. Laia reveals the location of the sketchbook, afraid her family will be killed. The sketchbook is retrieved, and the Mask looks through it. He demands to know how Darin got into the Weapons Quarter to sketch secret Martial weapons. Laia then realizes Darin is not working for the Empire at all. Darin explains he snuck himself in and out, and was then followed by the Resistance, who took him, blindfolded, into the catacombs. The Mask is not happy with the lack of answers Darin gives, so he determines Darin should be jailed. When Pop speaks on Darin's behalf, Pop is killed. Nan moves toward the Mask, who slits her throat and kills her. Darin attacks the Mask, and orders Laia to run. Laia rushes out into the predawn darkness of the Scholar's Quarter. Laia is torn between sadness at the deaths of her grandparents, and fear for her brother and for herself. As Laia runs, she considers herself to be a coward for running. She decides to seek out the Resistance for help, and heads into the catacombs.



IV: Elias – Elias and Helene return to Blackcliff, where the school's 3,000 students have assembled. The Centurions, the subject masters at Blackcliff, are watching over everything. Students enter Blackcliff as Yearlings, then at age 11 are thrown into the wild to survive for four years. Those who survive are called Fivers and given masks. They then spend four years as Cadets, then two more as Skulls. Elias and Helene are Senior Skulls. Elias hates wearing the mask because it feels like it suffocates his skin. He is the only student whose mask has not yet melded to him, because he always takes it off.

Back in their squad, Elias is asked by their lieutenant, Demetrius, who the traitor is. Elias says he does not yet know. Among the others in the squad are the twins Marcus and Zak, both evil, who Helene refers to as the Snake and the Toad. The Commandant of Blackcliff then addresses the assembled students. The Commandant is the only living female Mask, apart from Helene. The Commandant is cold, callous, and strict. The deserter, Fourth-Yearling Falconius Barrius, is brought forward and found guilty of treason, where he is then taken to the post and whipped. The students cheer. It reminds Elias of why he wants to leave. The Commandant then orders the barely-living Falconius to be taken to the dunes to be finished off by the scavengers. Elias reveals the Commandant is his mother. Yet, he knows if he is not careful, he will end up just like Falconius.

V: Laia – Laia heads west, away from the majority of the garrisons of the Empire. She wanders around in the catacombs for hours desperately seeking the Resistance. Laia thinks about her life as a Scholar, the lowest order of people under the Empire, and who routinely and frequently suffer the wrath of the upper classes. Laia touches her armband, a keepsake from her mother long ago, for strength. Laia is suddenly confronted by half-a-dozen hooded figures, including a woman named Sana and a man named Keenan. Laia's fate appears uncertain until an auxiliary patrol approaches. It is then that Laia notices a tattoo on Laia's neck of a closed fist, a flame behind it, and the word "Izzat" beneath. Izzat is the old language spoken by the Scholars before the Martials invaded and forced everyone to learn and speak Serran. "Izzat" now means many things, including strength, honor, pride, and freedom. It denotes the Resistance.

VI: Elias – The death of Falconius Barrius continues to bother Elias. Faris and Dex notice something is bothering Elias, but Elias shrugs it off. Helene speaks to Faris and Dex, telling them that Elias's Grandfather, a Mask and a perfectionist, has been hounding Elias lately. Helene reveals that Marcus and Zak are telling everyone that Elias thought the punishment against Barrius was too harsh because he stayed behind to look at the body. Helene warns Elias not to draw so much attention to himself, as they are only a day away from graduation. Elias does not want to serve an Empire that relies on violence, rape, and constant war with the Wildmen and the Barbarians along the Empire's borders. Elias plans to flee to the south, where he will blend in among other Martial merchants, craftsmen, and mercenaries. Elias knows he will be the first student to desert after graduating. He also knows that Helene is a rarity, as she is the only female selected in a generation for Blackcliff. One female is only ever selected from each generation. Helene is ranked third in the entire Senior Skulls class. Elias cannot help but fantasize about Helene while Helene wonders if the Augurs, the Empire's holy men, will attend the graduation. It is the Augurs who select students for Blackcliff and



assign masks. Elias, along with his Grandfather, do not believe in the Augurs, knowing they are pretenders and frauds. However, they do not voice their beliefs as the Augurs are revered by nearly all in the Empire.

In the mess hall, rumors of the Augurs selecting a new Emperor run wild, as the Emperor is 70 and has no heir to continue on his dynasty. Tristas believes it is finally the year for such a decision, while Dex does not. Marcus confronts Elias, accusing him of being soft on Barrius, and accusing him of not truly being one of them and wanting to desert. Elias is forced to say that Barrius got what he deserved. Marcus and Helene face off, but a Centurion arrives to settle things down. Elias is panicked, wondering if Marcus knows about his plans to desert, or if Marcus is just guessing and baiting. Outside, Elias paces to calm himself. He is confronted by an unknown man who tells him that all things change, and that Elias is a boy who has become a man and now has a man's choice to make. Elias is stunned when he realizes he is talking to an Augur.

VII: Laia – Sana and Keenan blindfold Laia and take her along with them to avoid the patrols. She is taken to a cavern occupied by the Resistance. Laia tells Sana that she has been seeking the Resistance's help, but Keenan interrupts and says the Resistance is stretched thin. Keenan takes an interest in Sana's armband. Keenan heads to get Mazen, the leader of the Resistance while Sana explains that the operations of the Resistance have changed from defensive to offensive attacks.

When Mazen arrives, Sana explains her situation, but Mazen does not want to hear it. When Sana explains that two of Mazen's men followed Darin, Mazen's attention is taken. Mazen wonders why two of his men, new recruits named Raj and Navid, would give Darin's name to the Empire. Laia goes on to explain that if it had not been for Mazen's men, her brother would be free and her grandparents would be alive. Mazen apologizes for Laia's loss, but refuses to help.

VIII: Elias – The Augur tells Elias he has nothing to worry about, because he knows Elias thinks Augurs are only frauds. The Augur knows about Elias's plans to desert, but Elias does not know how this is possible. The Augur asks Elias if he knows the history of Blackcliff, to which Elias explains he does: 500 years before, a warrior named Taius united the Martial clans and conquered the Scholar Empire, then most of the rest of the continent. Taius, Elias recalls, was known as the Masked One for the terrifying silver mask he wore, and learned from the Augurs that his dynastic line would one day end, and a new emperor would have to be selected, so the Augurs established Blackcliff. Elias knows the new emperor will be chosen through the Trials, a series of physical and mental tests. The Augur explains that Elias reminds him of Taius the First. The Augur reveals that his name is Cain, and it was he who brought Elias to Blackcliff. Cain explains that Augurs dream of the future, all outcomes, and all possibilities, but that Elias is the only one who appears in all. The Augur tells Elias he cannot escape his destiny, that no matter what he does, he will pay the consequences. Cain tells Elias if he stays and does his duty, Elias will have a chance to break the bonds between him and the Empire forever. The Augur will not say more, and disappears.



IX: Laia – Laia suddenly remembers she has seen Mazen before. She remembers her father putting the tattoo on Mazen's neck, and tells him this. She tells him that he called her father Jahan; that he called her dead sister, Lis, Little Lionnes; and that her mother, Mirra, was called Lioness, Leader, and Head of the Resistance. Everyone around Laia is stunned. Laia continues, telling Mazen he served with her parents both in Marinn and Serra, rising to third-in-command. She reveals her parents left the Resistance when they were expecting Darin, because they wanted a normal life. But after they had Darin and herself, Laia explains, they chose to go back into the fight for the sake of their children's future. Mazen does not believe Laia until he sees the armlet. Tana tells everyone they must aid Laia, because she is one of their own. The fighters in the room split into two groups over whether or not to help Laia. Mazen stops the argument that breaks out, and calls for Keenan, Haider, Sana, and Eran to discuss and decide with him privately. Some hours later, Mazen reveals he will help free Darin, if Laia will spy on the Commandant of Blackcliff Military Academy for them.

X: Elias – The next morning, Elias is still stunned by his encounter with the Augur. Elias does not know whether he should trust the Augur. The rest of the Senior Skulls are very happy to be graduating. Marcus and his goon friends, Thaddius and Julius, grab Elias to beat him up, but Helene puts a knife to Marcus's throat and forces them to stop. Marcus kisses Helene, which enrages Elias and causes him to pummel Marcus, punching him over and over. The Commandant suddenly arrives and breaks things up. She does not deal out any punishments, but orders everyone to report to the amphitheater for graduation.

Among those in attendance are Elias's Grandfather, General Quin Veturius, and 50 or so relatives. Through the entire ceremony, Elias wonders whether he should run or stay. After the ceremony, everyone cheers until they realize the Augurs have all suddenly decided to attend. All 14 of them appear. Cain announces to all those assembled that the line of Taius will end, but that a new Warrior Empire is to be chosen through the Trials. Four aspirants will be entered into the trial. Cain announces that they are Elias Veterius, Marcus Farrar, Helene Aquilla, and Zacharias Farrar. All four have the choice to accept or back away. Elias, like the others, submits to the Trials.

XI: Laia – Mazen reveals that Laia is to pose as the Commandant's personal slave, as the Commandant goes through slaves very quickly. Tariq worries that Laia is too young for such an undertaking, but Mazen does not believe so. He orders the others to ready Laia, for she will leave for Blackcliff that very night. Keenan warns Laia that the Commandant is savage, but Laia is determined to do whatever has to be done to save Darin. Laia is to spy through the course of the Trials, perhaps even a month. Keenan and Sana then bring Laia to the Foreign Quarter to an allied Tribesman who will handle Laia from there. Laia follows the Tribesman to Blackcliff's slaver, who purchases Laia for 180 copper marks. Laia is marked as a slave with silver bands on each wrist, then is taken to Blackcliff in a ghost wagon. She believes she sees a menacing shadow which taunts her about Darin. The slaver reveals that Laia will face serious challenges from the Commandant, and will probably even be raped by students. Laia realizes there will be no going back.



Analysis

When *An Ember in the Ashes* begins, Laia and Darin seem poised to inherit the legacy of their parents, dead at the hands of a traitor and the Empire. Laia must watch as their home is raided, their grandparents are killed, and Darin is arrested. She flees when Darin urges her to. Her decision to run from danger is not an escape, but allows for Laia to circle back and confront it by the end of the novel. Laia's destiny is to continue on in the work of her parents, both Resistance members, and something Laia initially wants no part of out of fear for her remaining family. Yet, even remaining away from the Resistance leads to tragedy, as Laia now directly seeks out the Resistance to help her free her brother. Laia's destiny could not be escaped: she must go to, and now work for, the every people she tried to avoid having anything to do with. Laia's own life will now be on the line in order to save the life of her brother.

At the same time, Laia's hatred for the Empire can be seen almost in contrast to Elias's hatred of the Empire. Elias should, of all people, have no qualms with the Empire, for he is poised to have a strong hand in its future – but instead, he wants to leave it. (His nonconformance is symbolized by his mask's inability to conform to his face.) As the Augur tells Elias, Elias cannot escape his destiny. He is meant to have a future in the Empire, and that no matter what he does, his destiny will not let him outrace it. Destiny becomes critical for the novel, as Laia's destiny (self-appointed) is to free her brother through helping the Resistance, while Elias's destiny (religiously foretold) is that he has an important part to play in events to come regarding the Empire.

Laia and Elias can also be seen as dutiful. Their destinies are fated by duty. In an ordinary situation, Elias would be bound for life by duty to the Empire: to serve it, to protect it, and to fight for it. In the present, Elias's determination to escape is met with a foretelling of doom if he deserts; and the Augur unveils a new duty-inspired destiny to Elias: that he must remain on the present course and refuse to desert so that he might actually sever the bonds between himself and the Empire forever. Elias's duty is now to his own destiny. Laia, on the other hand, gives herself her own destiny. She will do whatever she must in order to ensure that her brother survives and can be helped to escape. Indeed, her entire life comes to revolve around this duty of impersonating a slave to help free Darin. Between Laia and Elias, a thematic argument is to be made that duty is the greatest calling in life.

Although Laia and Elias appear to be alone at first, they are not truly alone at all. Loyalty is something that affects them both deeply. In Elias's case, the friends and fellow students in his squad – especially Helene – are loyal to him, especially against others like Marcus and Zak. Helene has known Elias for years, and the two have always been very close. It is clear to the reader – and only clear to Elias later on – that Helene has romantic feelings for him, which strengthens this loyalty to immense ends. Loyalty is indispensable, as Elias and Laia will both later come to learn. Laia, on the other hand, has only a suspicious loyalty with the Resistance, which seems more of an arrangement than genuine loyalty. It is clear the Laia will be able to rely little on the Resistance, and that it will be up to her to form allegiances with others.



There is no clear-cut good and evil, as the reader quickly learns. Elias, obviously an agent of the Empire, is by no means cruel or barbarous, while the Resistance, seemingly poised against the Empire, is less than willing to lend a hand where it is needed. The Resistance is seen here as practical and utilitarian, not unwaveringly loyal and devoted to good at all costs. Helene, whose kindness towards Elias exceeds typical military loyalty, presents another gray area between good and evil. Helene cannot be a cold-blooded, evil killer if she is as sensitive as she is with Elias. The Commandant, cruel and cold, is Elias's mother. It is clearly something that she struggles with, which means she cannot yet be classified as wholly good or wholly evil. It is through the Commandant that Elias knows family can be a curse as well as a blessing: the Commandant appears only to be a mother-in-name. Because the Commandant is especially hard on Elias, family can be considered a curse. However, family for Laia (until their deaths) was clearly a blessing, as she found happiness with her brother and grandparents. For Darin, family is a blessing because Laia is determined to free him. For Laia, family becomes something like a curse as her life now centers around freeing Darin – and this will involve many hardships and difficulties.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elias want to desert the Empire? What explains his lack of faith in the Empire, and in everything the Empire stands for?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Cain tell Elias he must not desert? What does Cain instead instruct Elias to do? How does Elias respond to this? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Laia want nothing to do with the Resistance at the beginning of the novel? What changes her mind and compels her to seek them out? What is the result of Laia's establishing contact with the Resistance?

Vocabulary

croons, desecration, brazen, chivalrous, furtive, exudes, indifferent, fixated, vengeful, wraith, sedition, charlatans, jostle, cacophony, deprivation, besotted, quash, supernatural, visceral



Chapters XII - XX

Summary

Part I: The Raid, continued

XII: Elias – Now an Aspirant, Elias stands beside his grandfather to welcome guests to the post-graduation party. Only members of the Illustrian families and very wealthy Mercators attend. Elias's mother is not invited. Elias is stunned by the amount of attention being paid to him now that he is an aspirant. Elias finds himself thinking about escape, and thinking about Helene. In two days, Elias will be compelled to return to the school along with all the other students, foregoing their leave in order to witness the Trials. Helene arrives at the party a short time later, but Elias is quickly whisked away by his grandfather to speak with Governor Leif Tanalius. Grandfather explains to Elias that he will need all of the powerful men around him to help him run the Empire, including the full support of the military. It is revealed that the Emperor has heard of the Trials, and is coming with the Blood Shrike, as well as those that remain loyal to him, to fight to keep the throne.

Grandfather reminds Elias not to be distracted by Helene, but that after he becomes Emperor, he could use Helene to produce heirs. Elias is made uncomfortable by the conversation. Grandfather then gifts Elias with two Teluman scims, swords so powerful they can cut through five men at once. Elias then goes to find Helene, who is on the roof of the shed at the back of the gardens. Elias asks Helene what she will do if she becomes Empress, but Helene tells him that he will win, become Emperor, and she will become his Blood Shrike. She explains that if she did win, she would change everything by expanding trade south, bringing women into the army, opening up relations with the Mariners, and help make the lives of the Scholars better. Helene makes Elias promise he will fight to win. She tells him that they must work together against Marcus and Zak so neither will win. Elias knows something is bothering Helene, but she will not say what. Helene knows something is bothering Elias, but he will not say what. Elias knows they are no longer children, and things like sharing confidences will never be done again.

XIII: Laia – Laia is brought to the Commandant's house at Blackcliff. The Commandant agrees to purchase Laia from the slaver, who congratulates her on her son's being named an Aspirant. The Commandant tells the slaver to get out. The Commandant's office is decorated with countless wanted posters of people she has hunted down. Among them are Laia's parents. The Commandant warns Laia that if she crosses her, she will add Laia to the wall. Laia stays focused by thinking of Darin. A young slave girl, known as Kitchen-Girl, then brings Laia to the cook, named Cook. Laia is given tea to bring to the Commandant. Laia is late, so the Commandant beats her with a riding crop. The Commandant tells Laia not to be late again. Laia is bleeding from her back, and does her best to think of Darin, but can only believe she will be killed and the mission will fail.



Part II: The Trials

XIV: Elias – Grandfather continues to remind Elias that the Trials will be a test of his mettle, and that Elias is to remember the mantra “Always victorious.” Grandfather reminds Elias as well that his mother, the Commandant, will do all she can to keep Elias from winning the Trials.

Elias and Helene return to Blackcliff to prepare for the Trials. A slave girl approaches Elias and Helene. Elias is struck by the girl’s beauty and un-slave-like demeanor. The girl tells Elias and Helene the Commandant has requested to see them at sixth bell. On the way, Elias asks the girl about herself, and she reveals she has only been around for a few days.

Elias and Helene arrive at the Commandant’s office. Marcus and Zak are already present. Because the Augurs are preoccupied, the Commandant has been ordered to give the four Aspirants details about the Trial, including the foretelling in which four traits are being sought from the winner: courage to face fears, cunning to outwit foes, strength of arms, heart, and mind, and ironclad loyalty.

The Aspirants’ training will be intensified because they are Aspirants. She reveals that if a Trial is won, a token will be received from the Augurs. If a trial is passed but not won, the reward will be life. If a Trial is failed, the Aspirant will be executed. The Trials can take any form and begin at any time. The Commandant confirms the Emperor and his loyal forces are headed south to stop the Trials, but that the Augurs have foretold waiting vines circling and strangling the oak, while the way is made clear just before the end. When Elias sees Marcus cruelly treating the slave girl, he is angered but can do nothing about it. Elias dreams he is in a wasted landscape that night, but when he awakens, he realizes he has not been dreaming. He realizes the Trials have already begun.

XV: Laia – Laia arrives in the Commandant’s private chambers as the Commandant regards herself in the mirror. Black tattoos are visible on her back. Laia worries when and how the Resistance will contact her, especially because she has not yet gained any useful information. While Laia does the Commandant’s hair, she reads a letter the commandant is reading, and learns the Emperor is fast losing allies. The Commandant orders Laia to take a red-sealed letter to the courier, and a black-sealed letter to Spiro Teluman, where she is to wait for a reply. Laia sees the letter with the red seal is addressed to the Emperor himself.

The Commandant tells Laia to get used to Blackcliff, for she will be there for life. The Commandant, disturbingly, urges Laia to make friends with the others. Laia, on her way to deliver the letters, begins striking up a friendship with Kitchen-Girl. Kitchen-Girl reveals her true name to be Izzi, but warns Laia about making friends because the Commandant uses friends as tools of manipulation. Laia gets on her way, and thinks about the Commandant’s son being so unlike anyone else at Blackcliff.



While in the market, Laia is snuck away by the Resistance. Mazen reports that Darin is indeed still alive. Maze, Keenan, and Sana study the letter to the Emperor. It is brief and involves Commandant Keris Veturia agreeing to make unknown arrangements. Mazen is not satisfied with so little information, and he tells Laia she will have one more chance to gather real information.

XVI: Elias – Seven Days Earlier – This chapter steps back in time seven days. Elias realizes he has been put in the Great Wastes. A note is stuck to a nearby, dead tree with Elias's dagger. It reveals him to be in the Trial of Courage. He will have six days to reach the belltower of Blackcliff, or be killed. Elias realizes he will have to face a dark fear rather than merely traveling back to Blackcliff. Elias begins traveling, wondering what fear he will have to face. At last, Elias encounters a battlefield of the future dead, where a dead boy leads him down among the bodies. Elias is sickened. The dead speak to him of their unfinished lives and the suffering of their loved ones left to live without them. The boy tells Elias that, until he conquers fear, the dead will remain with him to haunt him. Among the dead, Elias finds Helene. He is terrified, wondering how he could ever harm her.

Elias vows he will never harm her, and as he does, the vision of the battlefield fades and Helene, alive and well, is before him. They embrace and Elias cries. They begin to travel together. Helene reveals the Augurs set her down in a spire vulture's nest in the mountains in the Northwest. As they travel, Marcus and Zak attack them, but Elias and Helene survive when Elias stabs Zak in the leg. They run into the woods, and Elias follows to hear Marcus tell Zak they had orders from the Commandant to finish off Elias and Helene before they reached the Gap. Elias returns to Helene to find her badly wounded in the arm. He does his best to bandage her up with his shirt. He then begins carrying her along, knowing she is fading fast. They come to the river, and Elias hails a Martial boat to bring them back to Serra. Upon their return to Blackcliff, they are cheered, but Elias realizes that Helene does not have a pulse.

XVII: Laia – The novel returns to the present. Keenan and Sana are worried about the injuries that Laia has sustained in being slave to the Commandant. Keenan tells Laia she must learn to act more a slave, broken and beaten, and must learn to do things such as gossip with the other slaves. He explains his own family is dead and gone, which is why he is helping Laia with Darin. Laia goes on to deliver the first letter to the courier, but on the way to Teluman's forge, notices a shadow move across the ground. When Laia arrives at the forge, she wonders if this forge is the one Darin had specifically been spying on. She hands the note to Spiro Teluman at the forge, after which Teluman tells Laia to tell the Commandant he is not interested.

Back outside, the shadow comes back at Laia, pretending to be Darin in distress. Speluman suddenly appears with a simulacrum, and drives away the shadows. He explains they are called ghuls, which feed off of sorrow and sadness. Speluman says he has changed his mind about the Commandant's note. He tells Laia to tell the Commandant to send him some specs, but that they must be sent with Laia. Back at Blackcliff, Laia is surprised to find the Commandant is not present. It is then she learns that Marcus and Zak have returned earlier, and that Elias and Helene have returned in



the nick of time. When the Commandant returns, Laia reveals Speluman's answer. The Commandant then reveals she knows one of her letters has been opened by Laia, and says it is lucky that Speluman must find Laia attractive, or he would not have accepted the commission she has proposed to him. She then heats a knife and uses it to burn Laia's chest, telling her that if Speluman was not interested in her, she would have taken out Laia's eye instead.

XVIII: Elias – Grandfather is the one who detects a pulse in Helene's throat and calls for physicians. The Augurs arrive. Elias reveals what happened to Elaine, and that Marcus and Zak were somehow waiting in ambush for them, meaning they had to have knowledge of their movements beforehand. Cain orders Augur Cyrena to stabilize Helena, while Marcus and Zacharias are to be isolated and questioned for the potential of cheating. If it cannot be proved they cheated, Helena will be left to live or die as fate would have it. If they did cheat, the Augurs will heal her. Grandfather believes the Commandant is somehow involved as well. At the infirmary, the Commandant confronts both Grandfather and Elias. Grandfather calls her a traitor to the family. The Commandant says that Grandfather has picked his favorite, while she has picked hers. Grandfather reminds Elias not to underestimate his mother.

XIX: Laia – Laia regains consciousness the morning after being singed by the Commandant. Izzi has been tending to her. Izzi says it could be worse, because her first punishment was a missing eye at the age of five. Laia is commanded to collect sand for the Commandant. Heading out, Laia is surrounded by shadows once more, and tries to run away. Instead, she runs into a person with pale gray eyes.

XX: Elias – Elias angrily learns that the Augurs have declared Marcus and Zak did not cheat. Marcus has been declared the winner of the First Trial, gifted with a dagger, and Helene will more than likely survive under normal physician hands. Zak suddenly arrives, begging Cain to heal Helene. Zak refuses to say they cheated, but does insist Helene be healed. Reading Zak's mind, Cain realizes that someone led the Farrar brothers to each other, but it was not the Commandant. However, Cain explains, it is enough to convince him that the Augurs should indeed heal Helene. Cain orders Zak and Elias out of Blackcliff for an hour because their minds are torrents and make Cain's task of healing Helene impossible. Zak tells Elias to protect Helene, that the old creatures are coming, and that he has only ever followed Marcus because without Marcus, Zak does not know who he is. Elias heads out on his own to the sand dunes, where he runs into Laia. Now in a position to help her, he does.

Analysis

As Elias enters into the Trial, it is clear that destiny cannot be escaped, especially when that destiny coincides with duty. Under other circumstances, Elias would have been headed south to free himself of the Empire. Instead, he finds himself in a struggle for the Empire's throne itself. Elias recognizes that his destiny must be found through the Trials – and that he now has a duty to ensure that Marcus does not win. If Marcus wins, things will become far worse for the subjects of the Empire. Elias does not want to win,



but realizes the Helene could do real good for the Empire if she is declared the winner. Her plans for making life better, in general, are appealing to Elias – especially for subjects traditionally particularly harassed by the Martials of the Empire. The reader should note the scene in which Elias confronts a battlefield of his future victims – something he wants no part of, and his greatest fear. Elias’s desire to escape the Empire has now entwined with a duty to ensure it does not become worse.

Meanwhile, Laia infiltrates Blackcliff as a slave girl, and her treatment is horrible at the hands of the Commandant. Laia meets other slaves who have run afoul of the Commandant, and Laia herself knows she will have a difficult time succeeding – but her duty is to free her brother.

Laia’s decision to deal with things at Blackcliff, no matter how tough they get, is indicative of the kind of loyalty that seems rare among many in the Empire. Laia’s duty and destiny, to free her brother and work with the Resistance, are loyalty in its highest form. Laia has no greater loyalty than to her brother. It is the sole thing driving her, and the sole thing allowing her to endure the cruelty both of the Commandant, and the students at the school. At the same time, it is clear the loyalty between Elias and Helene will be crucial in the coming Trials. Elias risks his own life to save Helene’s from the First Trial, even carrying her all the way to the river when she is wounded. It is a loyalty that will not be lost on Helene, and will come to prove monumental in coming chapters – especially by the end of the Trials.

As the reader comes to realize, good and evil are not always clear-cut. The Augurs appear to be entirely committed to the Empire, not to any one person or situation. They will commit good and evil acts as needed. Their investigation into alleged cheating by Marcus and Zak seems cursory at best, with their ultimate goal being a new Emperor. It is clear they are less concerned about things like good and evil than they are about sustaining the Empire. They are even willing to have a sitting Emperor overthrown by a new Emperor by way of the Trials to achieve their ends. (This can also be tied into the theme of loyalty, as the Augurs are loyal without a fault to the Empire, but cannot be pinned down for loyalty to another individual.) Helene can be seen to be a character that also exists somewhere between good and evil. She is a full-fledged and loyal defender of the Empire, but her feelings for Elias are the only compromise to that loyalty. At the same time, the reader recognizes a sense of loyalty in Teluman for Laia, though why he should have any concern for her at all is beyond knowledge at this point. As the reader will learn, it has something to do with her brother.

Family itself continues to be both a blessing and a curse for the characters of the novel. Marcus, with Zak in tow, feels more confident and believes he has a loyal ally in his plots against Elias and Helene. For Zak, however, Marcus is more a curse than anything else, for Zak is not cruel like his brother. While the Commandant may have been hard on Elias – the mother with high expectations of the son – it is surprising that she is actively rooting against Elias, and may even actually be physically working against him. For Elias, his mother is a curse. His Grandfather, however, is a blessing. Grandfather, though he has political ambitions for Elias, is genuinely emotionally invested in him as well. Grandfather’s family loyalty is clear when he squares off against the Commandant



not as a politically-powerful family head and the commander of the Empire's most elite military academy, but as father to daughter in defense of Elias.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Elias choose to save Helene during the Trials, risking his own life and the outcome of the Trials themselves to do so? What is the outcome of Elias's heroism? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Elias's Grandfather come to his assistance against the Commandant when no one else will? What does this mean for Elias?

Discussion Question 3

Why are the Resistance members unhappy with the information Laia has brought back to them? What ultimatum do they give her? Why?

Vocabulary

obsequious, vehemently, diminutive, dawdling, uncanny, mettle, preposterous, gimlet, notoriously, simulacrum



Chapters XXI - XXIX

Summary

Part II: The Trials, continued

XXI: Laia – Laia realizes she has run into Elias, the Commandant's son. Elias asks for Laia's real name, and she gives it to him. He seems concerned about the burn wound on her chest. She reveals she is too busy trying to gather sand. She is interested to learn about Elias's time in the First Trial, but worries that his friendliness toward her could be a trick.

Elias carries Laia back into the kitchens. Elias tells Cook to tend to Laia. When he leaves, Cook asks Laia who Darin is, for Laia was calling out his name in the night. Laia reveals Darin is her brother. The Cook quickly sizes up that Laia is working for the Resistance. The Cook cautions Laia not to do anything dangerous, because the Cook herself once worked for the Resistance and was caught. The Cook reveals her entire family was butchered and her own face carved up as a result. The Cook tells Laia to quit or find another assignment for the Resistance. The Cook realizes Laia is the Lioness's daughter, and tells Laia it was the Lioness who led the Cook to her current situation. She tells Laia not to trust the Resistance, that they will use her and only ever take.

XXII: Elias – Elias begins living day-to-day in full armor, not wanting to be caught off-guard again for the next Trial. He is angry about the scar that Laia now bears – a scar in the shape of a letter K. Elias worries he will end up just like his mother, recalling the vision of a battlefield of the future dead contained 539 bodies.

Back at the Blackcliff barracks, Elias realizes they are empty, and that the Second Trial, Cunning, has begun. As Elias begins to battle ghostlike attackers, he runs into Helene. She is fully healed and asks if Elias has missed her. Elias realizes the attackers are some of the old creatures Zak has warned him about. They are wraiths. Outside, Elias discovers Helen going after Marcus to attack him. Marcus taunts Helene, asking her if raping her will be similar to fighting her. Marcus tells Helene she should join him now, because the Augurs have foretold that she will belong to him. Helene refuses. Zak suddenly appears to ambush Helene, but seems to deliberately miss hitting her with an arrow. He and Marcus flee into the night.

Elias and Helene realize they must now be cleverer than their attackers and would-be assassins, and must survive until dawn. Helene thanks Elias for saving her life in the Great Wastes. Suddenly, they are confronted by an entire squad of soldiers, and must fight them off. Elias and Helene make their escape along a cliff, but are shot at by the soldiers. Using a rope, and with Helen wrapped around his body, Elias begins to repel down the cliffs to the desert sands below. The soldiers back off, making Elias wonder what is coming next. They are confronted by Rowan Goldgale, king of the sand efrits



and his efrin minions. They attack. Elias remembers that the efrins can be defeated with a song, but it is too late.

XXIII: Laia – Laia is in tremendous pain, but she carries the specs for the Commandant to Teluman. Safely inside, Teluman asks Laia who she saw when the ghuls came. She explains it was her brother. Teluman then recognizes Laia as the sister of Darin, which stuns Laia. He explains he caught Darin spying on him and drawing in his sketchbook, but that he refused to hand Darin over because Darin was not only spying, but designing new weapons Taluman could never dream of. Taluman explains he parted ways with the Empire many years ago, and does just enough for them to keep them off his back. He is angry that the Empire has Darin's sketchbook. He reveals Darin was never working for the Resistance or the Empire, but for him as an apprentice. He also reveals the Empire knows his work was featured in Darin's sketchbook, and soldiers have been by to question him. He wants to help Darin, but cannot reveal Darin is his apprentice or they will both be killed. The only reason why Darin is still alive, Taluman explains, is because the Empire believes he is working with the Resistance, and so want to keep him alive for information. Taluman explains he has taught Darin how to survive interrogations and deal with the Empire in Serra, but being sent to Kauf would be a different story. Laia then hands over the spec papers from the Commandant and heads out.

Laia thinks about how Darin may be surviving in prison. Back at the house at Blackcliff, Laia spies on the Commandant through an open window. She hears the Commandant talking to a Lord Nightbringer about the coming arrival of Emperor Taius, who says Taius must arrive after the Third Trial or everything will be for nothing. The Lord Nightbringer appears to be a hooded creature of some kind, with shadows gathering at his feet. The Nightbringer tells the Commandant to stay focused, to shield their minds from the Augurs, and to keep guiding the Farrar brothers. The Nightbringer says Marcus must win, and he must be able to control Marcus. The Nightbringer refuses to kill Elias at the Commandant's request, saying he is not an assassin.

Later, Izzi tells Laia that what she is doing to help the Resistance is brave. Izzi wants to help, for she has nothing left to lose. Laia refuses to let her. In the market sometime later, Laia hears from Keenan that Darin is in a Death Cell, and is set to be executed after the new Emperor is named. Laia knows she will have to sneak out of Blackcliff in order to meet with Mazen to convince him to free her brother in exchange for the information she has gathered.

XIV: Elias – Elias wakes up in the infirmary. Helen is beside him, also injured, but not as badly. Helene reveals she defended Elias's unconscious body four more times through the course of the trial. She explains he hit his head when the efrins attacked, and should be dead. Helene has been declared the winner of the Second Trial. She reveals she has won an Augur-made armored shirt, which not even Serric steel can penetrate. Elias then realizes his head is in good shape, and that he should still be severely injured. Helene says no Augurs have been in to see him, which makes Elias wonder if something miraculous or supernatural has been awakened inside Helene by contact with the efrins.



Helene begs Elias not to mention this to anyone else so she can better understand the situation.

Elias suddenly remembers Laia, and Helene asks who this is. Elias says it is no one. Helene goes on to say that the Resistance has ambushed and killed a Mask, Daemon Cassius, in his own house; and that there is a rumor the Blood Shrike has been executed for opposing the Emperor's plans to attack Blackcliff and resigning his post. Elias suddenly realizes that he can be free if Helene wins the Trials and becomes Emperor, while he becomes Blood Shrike. Helene can then officially release him from his post as Blood Shrike, giving him the freedom he desires. Helene takes Elias's thinking as that he is thinking of Laia, causing her to walk away unhappily.

XXV: Laia – Late that night, Laia contemplates how to sneak out of Blackcliff to find Mazen. Just as she begins sneaking out, she runs into Izzi. Izzi says she could show Laia a secret way out down the cliffs, a scant path. Izzi says it is what a friend would do. Laia reluctantly agrees to let Izzi lead the way, knowing that Izzi is determined to help and that Laia has no alternative. She worries for Izzi's life.

XXVI: Elias – Despite his injuries, Elias is ordered by the Commandant to report for combat training. He decides to visit Laia, first, but overhears her and Izzi talking about the secret trail down the cliffs. Suddenly, Helene appears beside Elias, saying she never thought Elias would take a slave to bed. Elias denies this, but Helene is not convinced. Helene says she is going to report the two slave girls to the commandant, but Elias tells her not to. Helene says she is going to, but Elias blackmails her with knowledge of her new healing power. Helene is furious, knowing she must now stay quiet. She tells Elias to stay away from her, even in the Trials. Elias is shaken, but goes on to follow Laia and Izzi. Izzi has never been, and is amazed.

XXVII: Laia – Laia is disturbed by how small the ledge-like trail is, but is glad it exists at all. They descend to the docks, then move into the Scholar's Quarter. They use the Moon Festival that is ongoing as a cover to move about. They enjoy the festival, waiting for a member of the Resistance to reach out to Laia. Keenan eventually does. Laia is brought to Mazen, to whom she reveals all she has learned. Mazen tells Laia that the information is good, but not enough. He says they can break Darin out of prison in exchange for a secret way into Blackcliff that is more maneuverable for a large group of men.

Keenan and Laia then return to the festival, and dance. Laia is smitten, and realizes that Keenan is afraid of happiness, holding it back. Keenan explains he owes Laia's father for picking him off the street at the age of six after the Empire had killed his family. Keenan tells Laia they are alike, and tells her she is strong and that he has faith she will find the secret way into Blackcliff that is needed. He then disappears into the crowd.

XXVIII: Elias – Elias easily sneaks into the Moon Festival, and feels free because no one looks at him with fear or loathing. Elias follows Laia and Izzi, finding Laia beautiful. However, when Laia heads off with an unknown man (Keenan), a tribal girl named Afya Ara-Nur takes Elias to dance with her, asking his tribal name. Elias reveals it to be



Ilyaas An-Saif, which Grandfather changed immediately after he was adopted into the family. After three dances, she gives Elias a wooden coin, a token of a favor owed, for giving her such fine dances. The girl then urges Elias to dance with Laia, whom has returned.

XXIX: Laia – Laia is asked to dance by a tribal boy, and is intrigued because he does not sound tribal and barely looks tribal. They dance, asking one another about their lives. Laia pretends she is not a slave and that she lives nearby. Suddenly, a Martial raid occurs. The boy leads Laia and Izzi into an alley, and tells them they need to go back to Blackcliff. They both recognize him as Elias. Laia worries Elias is spying for the Commandant, but Elias says he would not do that for his life. He says there is no time to explain, but that the Commandant would flay him if she found out he was at the Festival. Laia and Izzi are terrified to put their lives in the hand of Elias, but have no choice. They follow him into the tunnels underground to the underground entrances of Blackcliff. There, Elias distracts the guards long enough for Laia and Izzi to sneak in. Safely inside, Izzi is thrilled to have been able to help Laia. Laia, in turn, thanks Elias for his help. When the Commandant approaches, Elias pretends to be coming onto her sexually while Laia pretends to fight him off. The Commandant tells him to get out, that Laia belongs to her.

Analysis

Destiny cannot be escaped. The brief encounters Elias and Laia continue to have are not accidental in that they are coincidental, but accidental in that they are leading to something more important that neither one of them yet recognize. Although neither are exactly trusting of one another yet, they have both given each other pause. The reader should note that, without the destiny of Elias, Laia and Izzi might not have escaped the raid in town. For Laia, these seemingly predestined meetings allow her to see Elias as a contrast to Marcus, to the Commander, and to most of the other Masks as a whole. For Elias, Laia is not only stirring romantic feelings within him, but reminds him that he is not like his mother, and values other human life because it is human life. Elias goes on to pursue his destiny in the Second Trial, knowing his duty to ensure Marcus's defeat and Helene's victory is paramount to everything else in his life – even his chances at being freed from the Empire itself.

Helene herself comes to repay Elias's kindness, and saving of her life in the First Trial, by saving his life in the second trial. When Elias is severely injured, it is Helene who defends him through the end of the Trial. She does this out love and loyalty, not merely as returning a favor. Her heroism and courage are unmistakable, as well as her feelings for Elias. The loyalty Helene and Elias have demonstrated for one another in the Trials has not only so far guaranteed their survival, but it has also guaranteed Helene has a shot at winning. The loyalty between Elias and Helene is indispensable, not only as a matter of Helene winning, but of Marcus and Zak losing. However, a rift appears between Helene and Elias over Laia. How this wavered loyalty will affect Elias and Helene in the future remains to be seen. The loyalty between Laia and the Resistance, however, remains tenuous at best. The Resistance continues to put off Laia, no matter



how good the information that she brings back might be. They tell her what they really need is a way into Blackcliff – and this is what Laia must now provide them with in order to save her brother.

The noncommittal avoidance of the Resistance to actually do what they say regarding Darin is troublesome, but Laia has a duty to fulfill. She will do whatever she must in order to secure the freeing of her brother. Her sense of duty to her destiny – freeing Darin – is unwavering, if blinding to the truth of things. The reader rightly suspects – as does Keenan – that something is going on with Mazen, and causes Keenan to doubt the man who has led the Resistance for over a decade. At least Laia knows she can count on Keenan's loyalty, for Keenan has never once proved himself to be anything other than trustworthy. (The reader should also note that Laia's befriending of Izzi has guaranteed Laia an unwavering friend and ally, a loyalty that will not ever be broken in the novel.) What is also emblematic of Mazen's seemingly reluctance is that the Resistance is supposed to be a force for good, whereas Mazen seems only to be calculating and continues to defy any clear-cut descriptions of good and evil. The Resistance wants to destroy the Empire, but what the Resistance will put up in its place is unknown.

Discussion Question 1

Despite the Resistance's seeming reluctance to commit at any stage to actually freeing Darin, Laia continues to try to work with them. Why?

Discussion Question 2

How does the loyalty between Elias and Helene, and how do Helene's apparent feelings for Elias, lead her to save Elias's life? Why is Helene so insistent on ensuring Elias's survival?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Izzi, at great cost to her own life, come to help Laia through this section of the novel? Why does this matter not only to Izzi, but to Laia as well?

Vocabulary

undertones, ululate, scrutinize, cascade, naught, poultice, niggling, scant, tantamount, poleaxed, salutations, brusqueness, sashays, saccharine, mirth



Chapters XXX - XLIII

Summary

Part II: The Trials, continued

XXX: Elias – Helene ignores Elias for days. Cain comes to speak with Elias, telling him the next trial will occur in seven days, and will involve fighting a formidable foe. Cain requests Elias pass the message along to Helene. Elias contemplates how strangely Helene has been acting lately, and comes to believe it must be because she wants him like he wants her.

Elias finds her on the practice field and delivers the message. While awaiting a duel with Helene, Marcus taunts and cuts Elias in the armory. He tells Elias that Helene belongs to him, and that Elias will not always be around to protect her. Elias, enraged, quickly loses his training duel with Helene. Elias tells Dex and Tristas to keep an eye on Helene for him. Both agree, and Tristas explains that whatever has happened between Elias and Helene, it is because Helene is in love with Elias. Elias says he cannot go down that road with her. Tristas says that is the problem.

XXXI: Laia – Laia has difficulty sleeping, wondering why Elias would want to help her. Laia knows she will have to ask Izzi for help in finding a secret way into Blackcliff. When Laia goes to Teluman's forge, she sees him working while the girl Elias danced with is murmuring as he works. When she leaves, Teluman explains she is the only female tribal chieftain, and supplies weapons to the Marinn branch of the Scholar's Resistance. Teluman explains to Laia that he is pretending to make weapons for the Commandant so that the Commandant will spare Laia any harsher punishments. Laia reveals Darin is to be executed within a week, but Telamun says this is not possible because Darin has been moved out of the Central Prison. On the way back to Blackcliff, Laia runs into Keenan and asks him about Darin. Keenan says their spies are reliable, and that Darin is to be executed.

Keenan reveals that Mazen has called a meeting in eight days, and Laia is to meet them for it. If she needs them before then, she is to wear a gray scarf. Keenan is enraged to see what the Commandant has done to Laia, but states that it means she is brave.

Later, Laia asks Izzi about Blackcliff. The Cook interrupts and says the Commandant has a map of Blackcliff memorized in her head, as it is always done from one commandant to the next. The Cook warns Laia once more about trusting the Resistance. Laia says all she wants is to get out of Blackcliff alive and save Darin. The Cook says everyone wants out of Blackcliff at some point, even the students. This makes Laia realize the students must know how to sneak out. She decides to follow Marcus and Zak, and listens to Zak's insecurities about the Trials. She loses them in the training building. Izzi helps Laia keep watch for the next few nights, until Izzi finds the secret tunnel.



XXXII: Elias – Thinking that Helene is in love with him, Elias begins to do horribly in training, unable to focus. Helene still will not speak to him, and rumors fly that the Emperor is only a few days out. When Helene realizes that Dex and Tristas are acting as bodyguards for her, she furiously confronts Elias. Elias will not call them off. Helene challenges Elias to a three-round duel in the training building to determine whether or not Dex and Tristas must be called off. Elias and Helene battle, and Helene gains the upper hand, straddling Elias. They are about to kiss but hear a scream.

XXXIII: Laia – Laia and Izzi pass through the training building toward the secret passageway, passing by Helene and Elias as they duel. As Laia and Izzi sneak into the hidden tunnel, Marcus and Zak appear. Laia tells Izzi to run while Marcus grabs Laia by the throat and begins to savagely beat her. Laia screams.

XXXIV: Elias – As Elias heads into the hall, Izzi comes rushing on, begging for help for Laia. Elias rushes on, and tackles Marcus. Helene is right beside Elias, asking Marcus why he is not on watch. Helene orders Marcus away, and Marcus leaves. Helene says that the wounded Laia must be taken directly to the Commandant because slaves cannot be treated in the infirmary. Elias, Helene, and Izzi bring the unconscious Laia to the Commandant. They tell the Commandant what has happened, but the Commandant orders Laia brought to the Cook to be treated. The Commandant then orders them out, and tells Elias not to be late for watch on the East Wall.

Elias knows Laia needs more help than the Cook can provide, and he asks Helene to heal Laia. Helene says Laia is just a slave, and that slaves die all the time. This disturbs Elias greatly, who says that everything around them is wrong. Helene tells Elias he is tired and needs rest, but Elias repeats that everything is wrong. He damns the Trials, damns Blackcliff, and damns Helene as he storms off to his watch.

XXXV: Laia – When Laia comes to, she realizes Helene is over top of her, telling her not to speak. Helene begins to sing, and Laia believes Helene is singing her to death. She then hears the words of the song over and over again: live. Laia realizes Helene is bringing her back to life.

XXXVI: Elias – In the morning, at breakfast, Helene reveals that Laia is doing better. Elias goes to check on her, but the Cook will not let him in. Helene catches up to Elias. She tells him to focus on the Trials, not on a slave girl. Elias confronts Helene about her love for him, saying he could not love her back because she does not value life like he does. Helene admits she sang to save Laia's life. Helene begins crying, saying that falling in love with Elias is the worst thing that has ever happened to her because he approves of everyone else but him. She says he has no idea what she has given up for him, or the deal she has made. Elias questions her about the deal, but she runs away.

XXXVII: Laia – When Laia awakens at noon, Izzi explains the Commandant has had the secret tunnel sealed up. Izzi reveals that Marcus claimed she and Laia were spying on the Commandant, but Izzi reveals she told the Commandant that the Cook had sent them to get crowleaf until they were waylaid by Marcus. Izzi reveals the Cook backed up the story. Izzi also explains that Zak admitted to the Commandant he may have left the



tunnel open in the first place, which in turn meant that the Commandant did not punish Izzi or Laia.

The Cook sends Laia to town with a stack of letters and urges her to hurry back before a bad storm hits. Keenan meets up with Laia in town, then brings her to the Resistance. She explains she is working on a way in for them. She then asks how freeing her brother and breaking into Blackcliff are related. Mazen says Darin has been moved to Bekkar Prison, which is near Blackcliff. Bekkar provides backup troops to Blackcliff in emergencies. An attack on Blackcliff by the Resistance through the passage will leave Bekkar ripe for the taking. As Mazen heads out at Sana's request, Keenan tells Laia something is up with Mazen because Mazen seems to be changing his mind frequently. Laia worries that Mazen will not hold up his end of the bargain.

XXXVIII: Elias – The Trial of Strength arrives. Cain appears at Elias's door to bring him to the Trial. Elias is to lead his platoon in battle against the enemy and win. Elias and his unit move into the amphitheater, where they are confronted by Helene and her unit. Elias orders his unit not to kill, only to wound. The soldiers in both units are horrified, and some even cry as they battle one another. Dex begs Elias to be given the order to fight to kill. Elias reluctantly consents. Elias and Helene confront one another. Helene stabs Elias in the chest, but Elias gains the upper hand and brings his blade down.

XXXIX: Laia – As Laia goes about her duties, she cannot stop thinking about Elias. She is called to quickly do the Commandant's hair, who then grabs her weapons and rushes out of the house. In the kitchens, the Cook comes to accept that Laia will not give up her mission to free Darin for anything. The Cook retells the story of the history of the Empire, including how the Scholar Empire grew in power and prestige alongside the jinn, but that the jinn did not associate with the Scholars, declaring themselves apart. The Cook reveals that the Scholars grew angry with the jinn because the jinn would not give up their knowledge, even in hard times. The Cook explains the jinn sided with dark creatures in a Coven against the jinn to learn the secret of the power of the jinn, but the jinn still would not yield their secrets, and only one jinn went on to survive the secret weapon used against the jinn, called the star. The jinn who survived, the Cook reveals, was the jinn king, King-of-No-Name, who went mad and turned dark, and now goes by the name Lord Nightbringer. It was the Nightbringer, the Cook explains, who gave the Martials power to conquer the Scholars in revenge. The Cook now says the Nightbringer awaits his full revenge. The Cook reveals it was the Nightbringer who took human form and betrayed Laia's parents. Later that night, Laia wonders aloud with Izzi if Cook was the traitor herself, and merely made up the story.

The Commandant later calls for Laia, where she asks an Augur if Laia is the one. The Augur says that Laia is, and soldiers seize Laia and put her into an unknown room.

XL: Elias – Elias's blade shatters against Helene's shirt armor. The Augurs suddenly arrive, discussing whether or not Helene must forfeit victory for wearing armor, even if it has melded to her. Elias is declared the winner, for without the armor on Helene, Helene would have been killed. Elias whispers Helene's name over and over in apology, until



Cain has Elias stand up and celebrate. Twelve of 30 troops in Elias's platoon survive, but 18 die.

Elias waits outside Helene's room, wanting to speak with her, when he is confronted by Marcus. Marcus says Elias could not possibly have won since he did not kill Helene, and the Trial was to defeat the enemy. Marcus then reveals he had to kill his own brother, Zak, in the Trial. Marcus says Zak begged him to do it. Elias actually feels pity for Marcus, who is not himself now.

Grandfather later does his best to comfort Elias, but Elias is sick to his stomach. Cain comes to speak with Elias. Cain explains that the Trials are often about intent, not action. Cain explains the Augurs did not intend for Helene to be killed, but intended to see if Elias would follow through with orders. Elias is still angry that so many others, including friends, has to die. Elias says it is all necessary, and that worse things will happen in the war to come. Cain tells Elias that war is coming which will right all wrongs, and that Elias must be prepared for it. Cain tells Elias he will have his prize in his room, and no one will disturb him until dawn.

XLI: Laia – Laia is stunned to see Elias enter the room she has been locked in. Elias explains she is his prize for winning the Third Trial, but that he is not going to hurt her. Elias gives her his cloak while he takes a bath so that she can cover herself up. When he has dressed, Laia decides to be honest and tell Elias what became of her family. Elias tells Laia that there are no death cells in Bekkar Prison, and that Bekkar does not provide backup to Blackcliff because Blackcliff is full of 3,000 students trained for war. Laia is stunned, wondering if Mazen has lied to her, or if Darin is even still alive. She thinks about the Cook's warnings and Keenan's suspicions, and begins to wonder if Mazen can be trusted at all.

Elias confesses to Laia that he was going to desert had it not been for the Trials. He explains he had his entire plan worked out, including using the only secret entrance to Blackcliff, a secret tunnel he dug from the hearth of his fireplace to the West Branch tunnel. Laia realizes she now has a ticket to her brother's freedom. Elias continues, saying Blackcliff has not been an honor for him, that he does not like killing, and that he himself is bastard-born. He reveals when his mother had him in the desert, she left him to die, but that he was adopted by Tribe Saif until taken by the Augurs to Blackcliff and his Grandfather, who changed his tribal name to Elias. Elias believes, especially after the Third Trial, that he is evil and no better than Marcus, but Laia assures him this is not so. Laia herself feels badly about having run from Darin, but Elias reminds her that she did not have a choice. They kiss, but pull apart, realizing their situation. Instead, they sit and talk further about the past. Dawn arrives. Elias gives Laia a thigh sheath and blade to keep on her. They then go their separate ways.

XLII: Elias – Elias is torn by the attraction he feels for Laia, and the blood he has spilled the day before. Elias goes to seek out Helene, to make things right with her. On the way, Elias passes his friends, including Faris and Dex, who are also struggling with the events of the day before. When Elias meets with Helene, he is stunned to learn that she does not seem to be bothered by the events of the day before. She says their friends



who died were soldiers who died in combat for the Empire, and that she has no shame about it. Elias is horrified by this, and says he never wanted the Trials, that he would have deserted without them, that he wants Helene to win and become Emperor so he can become Blood Shrike, and then Helen can set him free. Helene tells Elias that they are masks, and freedom is accepting who they are. Suddenly, eight men arrive to bring Elias and Helen to the Fourth Trial, Loyalty.

XLIII: Laia – When Laia returns to the kitchens, Izzi and the Cook are thrilled to see that Laia is okay. She explains she was given as a prize to Elias, but that Elias did not touch her or harm her. The Commander suddenly appears, overhearing this, and tells Laia to come with her to her study. There, the Commandant tells Laia she knows Laia is working for the Resistance, and that she, too, has her spies everywhere. Just as the Commandant is set to punish Laia, an Augur arrives to bring Laia to the amphitheater. Laia believes she will now face her death.

Analysis

Destiny cannot be escaped no matter the circumstances. In this section of the novel, it is indeed fully revealed that Helene actually is in love with Elias. Elias, because he knows what his destiny must be, knows he cannot go down a road of romance with Helene. It is apparent that Helene also knows this, and believes that Elias would prefer Laia over her. This demonstrates, quite clearly, that Helene is not some immovable monster, but rather very much human. She has been raised to serve the Empire unflinchingly, but Elias is her reason for compromising that which she has been taught for most of her life to do. It is clear that Helene may be willing to compromise, then, her destiny for Elias – but Elias is unbending in his refusal to compromise his destiny for her. This hurts him greatly, but he knows he has no choice. Helene may not be evil, but she is not good, either – and her decision to uphold, protect, and expand the Empire, which seems only so far to be described as evil, is demonstrative proof that Helene exists somewhere between good and evil. The loyalty between Elias and Helene is almost broken when Elias seeks to stab Helene in the Third Trial, but fails to do so thanks to her armor.

The entire Third Trial itself is a reminder to Elias of his duty. Killing friends and fellow students in a game-like Trial is bad enough, but when Elias will have to commit himself to killing men, women, and children in the name of the Empire for the rest of his life, it is something Elias will be unable to bear. Elias has his destiny and his duty, intertwined, clearly before him: Helene must still win the trials. Marcus must be stopped. And Elias must find a way to break away from the Empire forever. Just as Elias remains unwavering in pursuit of his destiny and his duty, so too does Laia remain unwavering in her determination to free Darin. The reader should note that the Cook warns Laia about trusting the Resistance. Suspicion has already been mounting in the minds of the reader as well as Laia and Keenan, but now that someone like the Cook issuing warnings, Laia can only reconsider the loyalty of the Resistance. And yet, she has no choice but to trust them.



The Cook proves to be an important character in this section of the novel as well. It is through the Cook that not only are doubts about the goodness of the Resistance raised, but in which the goodness of even those persecuted – the Scholars – is called into question. As the reader learns, the Empire is not without blame or motive for their conquering of the Scholastic Empire. The conquering of the Scholastic Empire was spurred on by revenge by the Lord Nightbringer to destroy the people who had destroyed his own people. The Scholastics are not innocent people; and the Nightbringer is not purely evil. Events that are unfolding seem to be a cause for balance against the sins committed in the past. The Empire, though having conquered the Scholastics, is not without its own sins or problems, but given the history of the Scholastics, are no longer to be seen wholly as monsters. Likewise, the night that Laia spends with Elias allows her to see, fully and clearly, that Elias is not a monster himself, and that there can indeed be good Martials. This will come to be a decisive consideration in the final section of the novel ahead.

Discussion Question 1

What important information does the Cook reveal about the history of the Martials and the Scholastics? What does this mean regarding labels of good and evil?

Discussion Question 2

What causes the loyalty between Elias and Helene to nearly disintegrate? What does this lead to? Is the loyalty between them repaired? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How does the night between Elias and Laia affect Laia's perception of Elias? Why?

Vocabulary

formidable, impenetrable, intricate, summon, eunuch, pragmatic, impassive, sentinels, hackles, befuddling, waylaid, incredulous, bedlam, greaves, despondent



Chapters XLV - L

Summary

Part II: The Trials, continued

XLIV: Elias – As Elias and Helene are led along by the Augurs to the amphitheater, Helene pleads with Elias to be strong and win the Trials, or else everything will be lost. Marcus is already in the amphitheater, blazing with hatred once more. Elias is stunned to see the Commandant, an Augur, and a tied-up Laia arrive. Cain addresses the Aspirants and the audience, saying that all three Aspirants must now proceed to execute Laia, and the first to carry out the order will be declared victor of the Trial. Helene attacks Marcus, urging Elias to kill Laia before Marcus can recover. Elias tells her it is a line he will not cross. Helene says she will then kill the girl, because the girl will be killed anyway. Marcus takes advantage of the argument and stabs at Laia, being held up by a female Augur.

An explosion happens elsewhere that shakes the amphitheater, and then news comes that the Resistance has attacked and assassinated the Emperor and all who were with him, including children. Cain addresses all those assembled, saying that a new Emperor is now needed. Because Elias has refused the order to kill Laia, he will be executed at dawn. Marcus is named Emperor. Helene regretfully becomes Blood Shrike to Marcus.

Part III: Body and Soul

XLV: Laia – As Laia lays on the ground, a female Augur tells her not to move if she wishes to live. Laia is beyond confused, not only by what she has learned about Bekkar, but by the events of the morning. The female Augur and two others carry Laia away, with Laia realizing the female Augur took Marcus's blade for her. Though Augurs cannot die, they can bleed. Cain slips away from the crowds to lead the small group. Laia is furious with him for what is happening to Elias, but she is stunned when the Augurs bring her to the Resistance. Cain explains that, for the moment, their interests align, but he cannot explain more. Keenan is stunned to see Laia arrive. Mazen is also present, and asks if a new Emperor has been crowned yet. Mazen reveals that he himself killed Emperor Taius. Laia reveals she has the way into Blackcliff Mazen has been looking for, but Mazen finally comes clean. He has no intention of rescuing Darin, and only ever sent Laia to Blackcliff with the hopes she would be killed. Mazen says he did not have the time or men to rescue Darin, and that he had to keep Sana's faction of the Resistance in check by promising to rescue Darin.

Laia realizes the Resistance has walked right into the Commandant's trap: by assassinating the Emperor, a civil war in the Empire has been averted and a new Emperor has been crowned, one that will stop at nothing to destroy the Resistance. Laia then holds Mazen at knifepoint, demanding to know where Darin is. Mazen reveals he is in Kauf. Laia is then knocked out by Keenan, whom Mazen orders to dispose of Laia.



Keenan, however, saves her by refusing to kill her and bringing her away. Keenan reveals that Mazen, who has led the Resistance for a decade, has deceived everyone. Laia reveals what Mazen has done by killing the Emperor for the Commandant, which now means the Emperor's army will be strong and ready to take on the Resistance when Mazen leads it in revolt. Keenan explains that when he began helping Laia, it was to pay a debt to her father, but now, he is in love with her. Keenan kisses Laia, then returns her dagger. He tells Laia to travel upriver to the city of Silas, and from there, a plan can be worked out for Darin. After Keenan leaves, Laia decides to go see Teluman.

XLVI: Elias – Elias believes he has failed at everything, including saving Laia. He feels very alone in the dungeon. The Commandant suddenly appears before Elias. She tells him that from the moment she knew he existed, she hated him. She reveals she tried to abort him numerous times in numerous ways, and that she planned to kill him upon birth. However, she explains that a mothering instinct took over at birth, so she gave him to Mamie Rila, a tribal woman, rather than killing him. However, the Commandant reveals she later returned to kill Elias, because he was a symbol of failure for her, but that the tribe had already left. The Commandant reveals that her father took an instant liking to Elias when Elias was brought to Blackcliff by the Augurs, and that Elias, rather than his mother, was named heir. The Commandant reveals it filled her with hatred, and that Elias's death will give her a sense of peace and set her free. Elias tells the Commandant that his death will not free her, that he would rather die than become like her without a soul, mercy, or honor. Death, Elias, will set him free instead.

XLVII: Laia – Laia explains Darin's situation to Teluman. Teluman gifts Laia with the first true Teluman blade he made with Darin. Teluman urges Laia to have courage, and to refuse to back down to fear. Fear, he explains, is good because it can keep someone on their toes, but too much fear becomes paralyzing. Laia sneaks back into Blackcliff. There, she finds Izzi and the Cook. They are stunned Laia has come back. Laia explains everything to them, and both agree to help her with her plan. Izzi agrees to come with Laia to complete her quest, but the Cook will remain behind.

XLVIII: Elias- Elias is awakened at dawn by Marcus and his men. He learns he is to be personally executed by the Blood Shrike Helene. Elias knows this will probably be difficult for Helene, but he keeps himself focused on his coming death, knowing he will soon be killed and then be free. Elias is forced to his knees, makes eye contact with Helene, but Helene appears unmoved. She raises up the axe and brings it down against Elias.

XLVIX: Lia – Laia watches as Elias is brought before Helene, and notices that one of the Masks is the same Mask who led the raid on her home. Laia considers that, if her plan does not work out, at least she managed to get Izzi out of Blackcliff safely. Laia then puts her plan into action as Elias is poised for execution. The Cook has mixed up a batch of explosives, which have been planted under the stage. Laia lights them off, causing the stage to explode, and sending off a series of explosions that destroy the belltower. The audience scrambles in all directions. Laia uses the confusion to rush on stage to help Elias.



L: Elias – Elias believes he has died, but Laia tells him he is still alive. Laia tells Elias she is going to help him escape if he promises to help her free Darin. Elias swears to help. As they run, Laia nearly stops to stab the now-unconscious Mask that raided her home, but Elias reminds her that the Mask will face far worse punishment because of his escape. Faris and Dex watch as Elias and Laia flee, with Faris pushing Dex back into the crowd to prevent Laia and Elias from being stopped. They flee into Elias's room to use his secret tunnel, but are followed by Helene. Helene reveals she smuggled Elias's grandfather out of the city the night before, and that he is safe. Elias reveals his escape plans, and urges Helene to come with him and Laia. Helene refuses, saying she will cover the escape as she knows her own destiny has been foretold by the Augurs, but from here on are enemies. Elias and Laia then head into the catacombs, hold hands, and begin their journey to save Darin.

Analysis

Loyalty remains indispensable at the end of the novel. Had it not been for the Cook, or for Izzi, their friendship, and their loyalty, Laia would never have been able to help Elias escape. Likewise, had it not been for the scant loyalty remaining in Helene for Elias – probably primarily as a result of her love for him – Elias and Laia could never have escaped Blackcliff at all. The reader should also note that Helene's loyalty to Elias extends to Elias's Grandfather as well: as she explains, she helped Grandfather escape the night before. Here, through Helene's character, once again there is no clear cut case of good and evil. Helene now serves an evil Emperor – Marcus – but her own actions betray the loyalty she has sworn to the Emperor. This demonstrates that Helene is not all evil, but is very much torn by events around her. Of especial note is the scene when Helene makes it possible for Elias to win the Trials, but Elias refuses, choosing not to kill Laia. This devastates Helene, not because she wants Elias to win, but because Elias's stand means he has chosen someone else over her.

Loyalty means nothing to others. As the reader comes to learn, the Commandant, despite her insistence that she is not torn by her motherly instincts, clearly is. The Commandant reveals much of Elias's young life to Elias, in which she chooses to kill, then save, then kill Elias –while Elias's Grandfather names Elias to be heir to the family. To Elias and to his Grandfather, family is a blessing. To Elias's mother, family is a curse. It prevents her own ambitions and to her, represents weakness rather than strength. The Commandant allows hatred to supersede her conflicted feelings over Elias because any kind of feeling for Elias other than that of one soldier to another is incomprehensible to the Commandant.

Laia, the reader comes to learn, has mistrusted the Resistance. Mazen has no sense of loyalty at all, and never intended to help Laia. Further, Mazen's actions in assassinating the Emperor has allowed a new Emperor to be chosen without the need for a civil war – and so the Empire will be even stronger when seeking to crush the Resistance, now. Cain's own loyalty is nothing more than a question as he brings Laia to the Resistance, personally.



Destiny cannot be escaped, as it becomes clear by the end of the novel. The foretellings of the Augurs come to pass. Helene does indeed become Marcus's, but not romantically. Instead, she is to serve as his Blood Shrike. Helene does indeed also come to help Elias. Elias, sticking through the Trials, finally has the chance to break away from the Empire. He does this by agreeing to join Laia on her quest to save Darin. Helene covers their retreat and helps make good their escape. All of these destinies have been fulfilled – and yet, as one destiny is fulfilled, another rises to take its place. It now becomes Elias's destiny – and duty – to help Laia help Darin escape from prison. Elias's destiny with the Empire itself, however, remains unknown: whether or not he will actively engage the Empire or simply disappear from it following Darin's release remains undisclosed at the end of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Helene help Elias to escape, even though Elias is escaping with Laia? Why do you believe that Helene not only helps them to escape, but helped Elias's Grandfather to escape the night before?

Discussion Question 2

How does Elias initially believe he will finally be free of the Empire? What comes to change his mind? What does he determine to do instead of dying? Why?

Discussion Question 3

When Laia sets Elias free, why does she demand he choose to help her in exchange for his freedom? Why does Elias accept?

Vocabulary

bellowed, bear witness, decipher, inopportune, base appetites, unseemly, flummoxed, tenaciously



Characters

Laia

Laia is a 17-year-old Scholastic girl who loses her parents, grandparents, and older sister to the Empire, while her brother, Darin, is taken prisoner. Laia vows to free Darin, her one remaining family member, from prison. To do so, she seeks out the Resistance, and goes to spy for them at Blackcliff in exchange for Mazen agreeing to help free Darin. At Blackcliff, Laia impersonates a slave, and is brutally treated and tortured by the Commandant and the other students, except Elias with whom she begins to develop romantic feelings. Laia is later stunned when Mazen reveals he never intended to help her at all. Instead, Laia helps Elias escape from Blackcliff when he promises to help her find Darin.

Elias

Elias of Gens Veturia is a Senior Skull at Blackcliff Military Academy. The illegitimate son of the Commandant, Elias hates the Empire and plans to escape after graduation. However, Cain urges Elias not to do so, as his destiny mandates otherwise. Elias, at his best friend Helene's urging, agrees to participate in the Trials when he is named an Aspirant for the throne because he does not want to see Marcus crowned, and wants to see Helene made Emperor. Elias hopes to be made, and set free from, his duties as Blood Shrike by Helene. While undergoing the Trials, Elias befriends Laia, and it is Laia who later helps Elias escape from Blackcliff when Elias promises to help her free her brother, recognizing it as a way to break away from, and oppose the Empire.

Darin

Darin is the older brother of Laia, and is her sole surviving family member. Secretly working with Teluman to forge weapons for the Resistance, Darin is arrested and imprisoned. His arrest becomes the motivation for Laia to seek out the Resistance and find a way to save Darin.

Helene

Helene Aquilla is a Senior Skull at Blackcliff, and is the best friend of Elias with whom she is secretly in love. Helene presents a character truly torn by conflicting emotions and senses. She longs to see Elias made Emperor in the Trials, and her love for Elias fuels her loyalty to him and jealousy of Laia. Helene's loyalty to the Empire is only ever compromised by her love for Elias, whom she helps to escape at the end of the novel after she is made Blood Shrike to Marcus.



The Commandant

The Commandant, Keris Veteruia, also known as the Bitch of Blackcliff, is the headmistress of Blackcliff Military Academy, and the mother of Elias, something for which she despises herself because she considers it a sign of weakness that she had an affair and could not bring herself to kill Elias. The Commandant looks at Elias as a mistake, and looks at him as what blocks her from rising to become head of her family's house. She moves against him in the Trials and does all she can to support Marcus.

Keenan

Keenan is a member of the Resistance saved by Laia's parents as a child. Keenan comes to be Laia's closest friend in the Resistance, and supports her efforts to free Darin. Keenan grows suspicious of Mazen early on for his apparent lack of action, and becomes Laia's primary contact between the Resistance and Blackcliff. Keenan arranges to meet with Laia in the city of Silas at the end of the novel in order to help free Darin.

Marcus

Marcus Antonius Farrar is a cruel and vindictive Senior Skull at Blackcliff, and an Aspirant for the Emperor's throne. Marcus enjoys bullying, hurting, and tormenting others, including Laia, all the while lusting after Helene. Marcus is apparently in league with the Lord Nightbringer and the Commandant to win the Trials, which he ultimately does.

The Cook

The Cook is longtime slave at Blackcliff. Formerly a member of the Resistance, the Cook no longer trusts the Resistance, and urges Laia not to, either. The Cook also reminds Laia that good and evil are not so clear-cut, drawing on the history of the Scholastic Empire to do so.

Grandfather

Grandfather, General Quin Veturius, is the grandfather of Elias. Disappointed in how his daughter, the Commandant turned out, Grandfather is quick to warm to Elias, name him heir to the family, and support him both personally and politically through Elias's time at Blackcliff. Grandfather defends Elias against the Commandant when accusations of cheating are made against the Commandant, and Grandfather must flee the city when Marcus becomes Emperor.



Izzi

Izzi is a young slave girl who is identified as “Kitchen-Girl” based on the work she does primarily in the kitchens. Izzi’s entire family has been killed by the Empire, and her eye has been gouged out as punishment by the Commandant. Izzi becomes Laia’s dearest friend, and helps her to plan, plot, and prepare for escape from Blackcliff.

Mazen

Mazen is the leader of the Resistance, and has been for ten years. His motives and loyalties are not clear, but he is very much a pragmatist, willing to do whatever is needed to get a job done. He lies to Laia about being willing to help her free Darin so that she will not ruin his plans. Mazen leads an attack on the Emperor, killing him and destroying his loyal forces. He, knowingly or unknowingly, plays right into the hands of the Commandant and Marcus.

Cain

Cain, an Augur, is the leader of the Augurs. He declares the need for the Trials, and names Elias, Helene, Marcus, and Zak as Aspirants. Cain works behind the scenes to help events move along, though to what exact end is unknown. He appears to have no real loyalties to anyone or anything apart from the Empire itself, and works against people like Elias as much as he works for them.



Symbols and Symbolism

Martial blades

Martial blades are made of Serric steel, and symbolize the great power held by the Martial rulers of the Empire. The steel is a secret formula that no one besides the Martials know. The steel shatters all other metals that come against it, and make the Empire practically invincible.

Sketchbook

A sketchbook is carried by Darin, and is taken by the Martials. The sketchbook contains original drawings of new weapons by Darin, which he and Teluman are seeking to craft to combat the Empire. The notebook is taken by the Empire as proof Darin is part of the Resistance, and so Darin is jailed.

Masks

Masks signify both elite military warriors turned out by Blackcliff who wear masks that adhere to their faces, and they symbolize loyalty to the Empire. The Mask itself represents the ideology of the Empire, while the wearer must conform to the ideology. Fused together, a wearer and a mask become a Mask, in which the wearer has become a loyal adherent of the Empire. The only character in the novel whose mask does not fuse to his face is Elias, which in turn represents Elias's lack of belief in the Empire's ideology.

Armlet

A silver armlet is worn by Laia, and symbolizes both her love of family, and her family's past with the Resistance. The armlet is gifted to Laia by her mother before her mother is killed. Laia wears the armlet each day for comfort and strength. When she encounters the Resistance, the armlet helps to identify who she is to them, and that her parents were once a part of the Resistance.

K-shaped scar

A scar in the shape of the letter K symbolizes the cruelty of the Commandant. For reading one of the Commandant's letters, Laia has a scar in the shape of a letter K – for Keris, the name of the Commandant – carved into her chest by the Commandant. The K is meant to remind Laia of the cost of disobedience, and that the Commandant has the power.



Blood Shrike

A Blood Shrike is the Emperor's second-in-command. The Emperor relies on the Blood Shrike for loyalty, and to carry out orders. Emperor Taius's Blood Shrike is executed for resigning rather than committing to the Emperor's bloody plans for Blackcliff. Elias aspires to become Blood Shrike to Helene, so that Helene will set him free and he will be able to, in turn, be free of the Empire.

Augur armor shirt

An Augur armor shirt is gifted to Helene when she wins the Second Trial, and symbolizes the accuracy of Augur foretellings. The armor shirt melds perfectly to Helene's body, and shatters any weapon that comes against it, even Serric steel. The shirt saves Helene's life when Elias battles her in the Third Trial, in which the Augurs wanted to study intent as well as action.

Foretellings

Foretellings are prophecies made by the Augurs, and symbolize destiny through predicting future events. The foretellings vary, but the clearest one is made to Elias in which Elias's future freedom is foretold provided he participates in the Trials rather than runs away. Elias heeds this foretelling, which comes true in the end when Laia helps him to escape.

Healing ability

A healing ability is awakened in Helene by contact with dark creatures, and symbolizes the unknown within Helene. Helene is a character tormented by conflicted emotions, loving both the Empire and Elias. Helene's ability to heal is something she does not fully understand, just as she does not fully understand herself. However, Helene uses her healing ability to save both Elias and Laia at different points.

Explosives

Explosives are symbolic of loyalty and courage. Explosives are cooked up by the Cook and used by Laia to explode the execution stage and belltower at Blackcliff. The explosives go off and create terrible confusion, during which time Laia courageously rescues Elias. The explosives were themselves loyally made for Laia's use by the Cook, and are loyally used by Laia to save Elias.



Settings

Blackcliff Military Academy

Blackcliff Military Academy is the Empire's foremost elite military academy located in the City of Serra and responsible for the turning out of Masks. Blackcliff is perched on a cliff overlooking a desert and the city, and is under the command of the Commandant. Three-thousand students are in attendance at any one time, and are selected for admission by the Augurs. The students learn everything from imperial ideology to the art of war to actual combat, and upon graduation, are placed into service for the Empire.

Blackcliff is a place loved by loyal subjects of the Empire, hated by the Resistance, and hated by Elias. Elias, Helene, Marcus, Zak, and others, are all students at Blackcliff, and are poised to graduate at the beginning of the novel. Blackcliff is considered impregnable, and a symbol of the Empire's evil and power. It is to Blackcliff that Laia is sent to spy as a slave for the Resistance in exchange for the Resistance agreeing to help free her brother. At the end of the novel, Laia bombs parts of Blackcliff to cause chaos to help her and Elias escape from the grounds.

Serra

Serra is a large city located in the southern central territory of the Empire along the River Rei, and is known for the weapons its forges and blacksmiths produce, as well as being the home of Blackcliff Military Academy. Serra has a diverse population of Scholastics, Martials, and other peoples who live, work, and trade there. Serra is where Laia is brought up by her grandparents, and it is in the catacombs beneath Serra that Laia contacts the Resistance to help free her brother.

Antium

Antium is the capital city of the Empire, located in the north. It is the seat of power for the Empire, and is where Emperor Taius holds sway. Little is said in the novel about Antium, but it can be gathered the city is feared by enemies of the Empire and celebrated by loyal subjects. It is from Antium that the Emperor Taius sets out with forces still loyal to him to bring the Augurs, Serra, and Blackcliff Academy to heel.

Navium

Navium is a major port city to the south of Serra in the Empire. Navium is a major trading hub, from where ships and merchants come and go. Navium is among the places that Elias considers heading once he deserts from the Empire. Though not much is said about Navium, it and the South are clearly held in high regards by Elias because this is where he seeks to go upon desertion.

The battlefield of the dead

The battlefield of the dead, located in the Great Wastes, is a vision of Elias's future in the First Trial. The battlefield of the dead contains 539 bodies of those Elias could come to kill over the course of his lifetime. It is a terrifying sight because Elias does not want to engage in killing. Most traumatic in the battlefield is when he comes across the bloodied corpse of Helene, leading Elias to really wonder what will happen in his future. However, Elias manages to save Helene in the First Trial, meaning her corpse is not necessarily meant to be among the dead. This implies that the battlefield is not necessarily Elias's future.



Themes and Motifs

Destiny cannot be escaped

Destiny cannot be escaped, argues Sabaa Tahir in *An Ember in the Ashes*. Destiny, also referred to as fate and the future in the novel, is essentially what will happen in the future no matter what someone does to try to change it. Destinies are foretold by the Augurs to each of the Aspirants, but it is Elias above all who is horrified at the prospect of his destiny.

Elias intends to desert the Empire as soon as graduation is over and he can get away. He does not want to fight for the Empire, and does not want innocent blood on his hands. The night before graduation, however, Cain tells Elias not to run because he cannot escape his destiny without consequences. Cain tells Elias by participating in the Trials, he will be able to sever his bonds with the Empire forever.

Elias ultimately decides to participate in the Trials because he believes his destiny rests with Helene. He believes that by helping Helene win, not only will the vicious Marcus be denied the throne, but that Helene will bring about good changes as Empress, and Elias can serve Helene as Blood Shrike. As Blood Shrike, Elias can ask to be discharged from his duties, at which time he can leave the Empire.

However, Elias comes to learn his destiny does not rest with Helene completely. Helene does help Elias to escape, but it is Laia who makes the escape possible in the first place. Laia saves Elias from being executed, and helps him to escape after he promises her he will help her free Darin from prison. In escaping with Laia, Elias comes to free himself from the Empire, and to come in opposition to it. His destiny has thus been fulfilled.

Duty is the greatest calling in life

Duty is the greatest calling in life, argues Sabaa Tahir in *An Ember in the Ashes*. Duty – one's obligations and expectations based on one's identity – is the core element of each of the characters in the novel. Duty is often seen hand-in-hand with destiny, as the two are sometimes one in the same. Duty differs according to each character, and duty becomes what it is for different reasons.

For Elias, duty becomes ensuring that Marcus does not win the Trials. At first, Elias wants only to desert, and then realizes he must pursue his destiny instead. He comes to realize his destiny rests through his self-appointed duty to ensure Helene, and not Marcus, wins the Trials. Elias commits himself to working for Helene in the Trials, so that he might become Blood Shrike, and might be discharged from service by Helene.

For Helene and the Commandant, duty is wholly to the Empire. Everything they do in their lives – from their military service to their orders to their plots – is done for the glory



of the Empire. Helene considers it her duty to ensure Marcus does not win the Trials, wanting instead for Elias to win because she knows Elias would be a far better ruler than Marcus. Helene's duty to the Empire is only ever compromised by her loyalty to Elias, whom she supports against the Empire when she helps him to escape. The Commandant, however, has no qualms about actively working against her son in the Trials to fulfill her duty to the Empire.

Apart from Helene, perhaps the individual most driven by a sense of conflicted duty is Elias's Grandfather. Elias's Grandfather serves as guardian and mentor for Elias, helping Elias to navigate political and military circles. Elias's Grandfather, a general himself, is devoted to the Empire and considers his duty to be one of preserving the Empire, and advancing his family. Elias's Grandfather can be seen in the novel helping to advance Elias's career not only politically, but protecting Elias personally against his mother.

Loyalty is indispensable

Loyalty is indispensable, argues Sabaa Tahir in *An Ember in the Ashes*. Loyalty in the novel is the unwavering commitment of one person to another person, cause, place, or thing. That commitment compels the individual to protect, defend, encourage, support, and ally with whatever or whoever they are loyal towards. In the novel, loyalty – and a lack of loyalty – abound.

Elias has no loyalty to the Empire. He wants to desert the Empire because he finds it evil and wants no part in its operations. Helene, on the other hand, is unfailingly loyal to the Empire because it is how she has been raised and instructed, and because it is what she believes. Helene's loyalty to the Empire is only ever compromised by her love and loyalty to Elias. Indeed, the loyalty between Elias and Helene sees both saving each other at some point in the Trials, and later sees Helene helping Elias and Laia to flee Blackcliff.

Laia is loyal to her family, and undergoes everything she does – including the barbarous treatment she receives at the hands of the Commandant – for the sake of freeing her brother. Laia has made herself loyal to the Resistance for their help, but most in the Resistance – especially Mazen – are not loyal to Laia at all. Mazen has his own goals and end-game, and he admits late in the novel he never had any intention of helping Laia free Darin. Fortunately, Keenan reveals he has been loyal to Laia all along, and now will help her in any way that he can.

While Elias's own mother has no loyalty toward him whatsoever because of his illegitimacy and his very existence, Elias's Grandfather is steadfastly loyal to Elias. This is for reasons of both politics (Elias is poised to become Emperor, and Elias is heir to become head of the family) as well as of a personal nature (Elias's Grandfather actually does love his grandson, and this can be seen when he squares off against the Commandant over allegations of the Commandant working against Elias in the Trials).



There is very little clear-cut good and evil

There is very little clear-cut good and evil, argues Sabaa Tahir in *An Ember in the Ashes*. This is as true of people as it is of places, groups, and institutions. In some cases, what initially appears to be clear-cut cases of good and evil are much less so when the evidence is known. This creates a difficult moral landscape for people like Elias and Laia to manage.

When it comes to the Resistance and the Empire, it is believed by the Scholars and Laia that the Resistance is good, while the Empire is evil. Supporters of the Empire view the Resistance as evil. The Resistance, it turns out, is neither good nor evil, as it is pursuing the ends of Mazen. Mazen, rather than doing the good thing by helping free Darin, instead lies to Laia about helping her so his own plans are not derailed. As Laia learns, the Scholastics – persecuted after being crushed into submission by the Martials – themselves crushed the jinn because the jinn would not share their knowledge. The Scholastics are not the good people Laia initially thought.

Laia also initially believes no Martial can be trusted, and that no Martial has any goodness in them. However, her encounters with Elias and Helene prove this to be untrue. Helene not only heals Laia, but helps her and Elias escape. However, Helene's support of the Empire means she is not wholly good. Likewise, Laia realizes Elias does not love the Empire, but hates it. She realizes Elias is a good person who is caught up in a bad situation. Elias is one of the few cases of someone being truly good. The same is true of Laia.

In terms of evil, there is the case of Marcus. Marcus, from all appearances, is simply callous and brutal, wanting absolute power and not caring who is harmed in his achieving his goals. His horrible treatment of Laia, his killing of his brother, and his plotting to become Emperor all bespeak of his evil intents. On a slightly less note of evil is the Commandant, who is conflicted by her feelings of motherhood but allows her hatred and cruelty to stamp out what little tenderness there may be in her. She serves evil, and is very close to being entirely evil, but cannot be considered wholly evil because she did allow Elias to live rather than to die after birth.

Family is both a blessing and a curse

Family is both a blessing and a curse, argues Sabaa Tahir in *An Ember in the Ashes*. Family is considered crucial in the world of the Empire, for Martials and Scholars alike. Family assures a powerhouse of support, loyalty, prestige, and influence, but may be a curse as well based on circumstances.

Elias is both blessed and cursed by his family. His mother is the feared and respected Commandant of Blackcliff, but the Commandant has no real love for her son. Indeed, she even works against him in the Trials, using all of her abilities to do so because she believes him to be the product of her weakness when she had an affair many years before. She believes killing Elias will set her free. However, Elias has been protected,



raised, and defended unhesitatingly by his Grandfather, who not only worries about his grandson politically, but personally as well.

For Elias's grandfather, family is both a blessing and a curse. He is deeply disappointed in the woman his daughter, the Commandant, has become, and so he considers her as his daughter to be a curse – especially when she commits to cheating and working against her own son. Elias's Grandfather finds family a blessing, however, in Elias, for in Elias is seen a strong, brave, and moral young man capable of taking over the family one day, and even becoming Emperor. Elias's Grandfather could not be more proud of Elias.

For Laia, family is both a blessing and a curse. Family is a blessing because her grandparents and brother are a wellspring of love and acceptance. Family becomes a curse for her, however, when her grandparents – like her parents and sister – are killed at the hands of the Empire, and Darin is arrested. Laia determines she will find a way to free Darin, but this is a curse because she must suffer so much before then in order to do free him.



Styles

Point of View

Sabaa Tahir tells her novel *An Ember in the Ashes* in the first-person, limited-omniscient perspective from the points of view of both Elias and Laia. Each chapter alternates in being told either by Elias or Laia, presenting two sides to the same story until the halves of the story intertwine at the end of the novel. The first-person perspective allows readers to fully understand both Elias's story and Laia's story. When taken together, the reader has an overview of the story that neither Elias nor Laia has. Laia can only tell events from her perspective, and to the degree that she knows what is going on. The same is true of Elias. Together, the reader is given two unique and intimate glimpses into the unfolding plot, though full knowledge of everything going on is still withheld, creating a sense of drama and suspense.

Language and Meaning

Sabaa Tahir tells her novel, *An Ember in the Ashes*, in language that is gently formal but very straightforward. This is done for several reasons. First, the gentle formality of the language in the novel speaks to the education of both main characters, Elias and Laia, who are an elite Martial and a Scholar subject, respectively are both highly educated. Elias has been given a world-class education because of his position, while Laia is heir to a tradition of knowledge through the Scholars. This is also in keeping with the Roman/medieval-style setting of the novel, in which hierarchy, subservience, duty, and other critical aspects of life are highly formalized and solidified in rules of observance (though soldiers sleep with whores, sleeping with slaves is frowned upon; new emperors must be crowned through Trials when heirs cannot be produced, and so on).

Second, as both characters are young, their language is not stilted or uncompromisingly formal as is the language of older characters. Consider Helene's impassioned plea to Elias in Chapter XII: "And I don't want to compete with you, Elias. The moment we start working against each other is the moment we let Marcus and Zak win" (109) versus the Lord Nightbringer's admonitions to the Commandant in Chapter XXIII: "Taius must arrive after the Third Trial, or our plan is for naught" (223). In *Nightbringer*, there is a high degree of formality and rigidity, while in *An Ember in the Ashes* there is a more casual tone of conversation consistent with her youth.

Structure

Sabaa Tahir divides her novel *An Ember in the Ashes* into 50 consecutive, numbered chapters. Each chapter, reflecting the Roman/medieval style setting, is given a Roman numeral for the chapter denoting its number (I for 1, V for 5, X for 10, XX for 20, and so on). Chapters alternate from the viewpoints of Elias and Laia, beginning with Laia, then shifting to Elias, then back and forth again through the rest of the novel. Most chapters



occur chronologically, though some, like Chapter XVI, must necessarily go back in time to catch up to events in the present; and others, like Chapter XLVIX, step back in time a few moments so that the reader can understand how the exact same events are witnessed, understood, or participated in by both characters at the same time. Both halves of the story – Laia and Elias – give the reader a fuller view and understanding of the overall plot. They demonstrate that two separate lives ultimately entwine around a series of similar events, and ultimately, the same cause – freeing Darin.



Quotes

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

-- Laia (I)

Importance: Laia is unhappy that her brother has been sneaking out regularly at night, and she worries some harm may come to him. Worse, she worries that Darin is working for the Empire. The Empire killed their parents, so Laia is especially horrified to consider that Darin could be working for them now. A raid interrupts Laia's questioning of her brother, however.

Save Darin. Find the Resistance. Save Darin. Find the Resistance.

-- Laia (V)

Importance: After fleeing from the raid on her house, Laia heads into the catacombs of Serra. She repeats a mantra in her mind about finding the Resistance and saving Darin in order to urge her along. It is a long and dark journey through the catacombs, so Laia's consistent reminders to herself of what she must do helps spur her on.

The Foretelling is truth. A truth you will soon face. You seek to run. You seek to abandon your duty. But you cannot escape your destiny.

-- Cain (VIII)

Importance: The night before graduation, Elias is stunned to be approached by an Augur. The Augur says that Elias reminds him of Taius the First, the first emperor of the Empire. The Augur says he has had many dreams and visions about the future and possibilities, and that Elias is in them all. This means that Elias has a destiny he must pursue. Even if Elias tries to run away, destiny will come for him.

And I don't want to compete with you, Elias. The moment we start working against each other is the moment we let Marcus and Zak win.

-- Helene (XII)

Importance: Elias and Helene are both named Aspirants to the Trials by the Augurs and they have a long conversation the night of graduation. Helene believes Elias will become Emperor, but she also reminds him their lives are on the line because of Marcus and Zak. She tells Elias they must work together against Marcus and Zak, otherwise, the second they turn against each other, Marcus and Zak will win. Then, everyone will suffer.

Your Imperial Majesty, I will make the arrangements. Ever your servant, Commandant Keris Veturia.

-- The Commandant (XV)

Importance: In a letter to the Emperor that Laia is tasked to deliver to the proper channels, she is intercepted by the Resistance. Mazen and the others look over the



letter, which provides some very important clues. First, it appears as if the Commandant remains loyal to the Emperor. Second, the Emperor is planning something big, and the Commandant will be seeing to the details.

Taius must arrive after the Third Trial, or our plan is for naught.
-- Lord Nightbringer (XXIII)

Importance: When Laia spies on the Commandant, she sees the Commandant speaking with a dark figure she refers to as the Nightbringer. The Nightbringer is plotting with the Commandant, but the plan itself is unknown. What is known is that the Nightbringer and the Commandant are interfering in the Trial to ensure Marcus wins. The Nightbringer wants Marcus to win, so that Marcus can be controlled. To what end is not yet known, but the implications are clear: the other three Aspirants will be killed.

I know how to do it. I know how I'll find my freedom.
-- Elias (XXIV)

Importance: Elias realizes, after Helene wins the Second Trial, how he will be free from the Empire forever. He will ensure that Helene wins the Trials and become Empress. Then, he will be able to become Blood Shrike and resign. Helene will grant his resignation, and Elias can then be free.

You'll be trailing ghosts now. Like the rest of us.
-- Grandfather (XL)

Importance: After the Third Trial, in which Elias nearly kills Helene, and in which many friends die, Elias is sickened. His grandfather does his best to comfort Elias while not avoiding the truth. Death is a terrible thing, and the dead will follow Elias like a ghost. Elias knows his ghosts will not only be his dead but also his regrets, such as nearly killing Helene.

I told you there's a line I'm not crossing.
-- Elias (XLIV)

Importance: When Elias, Helene, and Marcus head to the final Trial, they realize it is simple but deadly. The first to kill Laia will be the victor. Helene quickly knocks out Marcus, telling Elias that he must kill Laia and win. Elias refuses, saying that it is a line he will not cross. Helene is furious, because it could mean Marcus will win, and then things will be really bad.

How do you make it look like you're helping her when in fact you don't have the time or the men to do so?
-- Mazen (XLV)

Importance: When Laia is taken to the Resistance by the Augurs, she tells the Resistance about the secret passageway and urges them to help Darin. Mazen comes clean, saying he never intended to help Laia because he did not have the resources or



the men needed for the job. Rather, his goal – to assassinate the Emperor – had to proceed. But now, he has made it possible for a new Emperor to be crowned without a civil war.

You fool! I want to scream. 'You walked right into her trap!
-- Laia (XLV)

Importance: When Mazen reveals he has had his Resistance group assassinate the Emperor, Laia realizes the Commandant has set a trap. By killing the Emperor, the Resistance has saved the Empire a civil war, and made crowning a new, brutal Emperor even easier. Mazen has no idea what he has done, Laia believes, and she now realizes she should never have trusted Mazen or the Resistance.

I'm with you, Laia.
-- Elias (L)

Importance: Elias, prepared to be set free by death, is instead rescued and saved by Laia. Laia promises to help Elias escape if he will promise to help her free her brother. Elias agrees to the conditions. As they flee into the catacombs beneath the city, Elias tells Laia he is with her, not only to reassure her, but to remind her he will keep true to his promise.