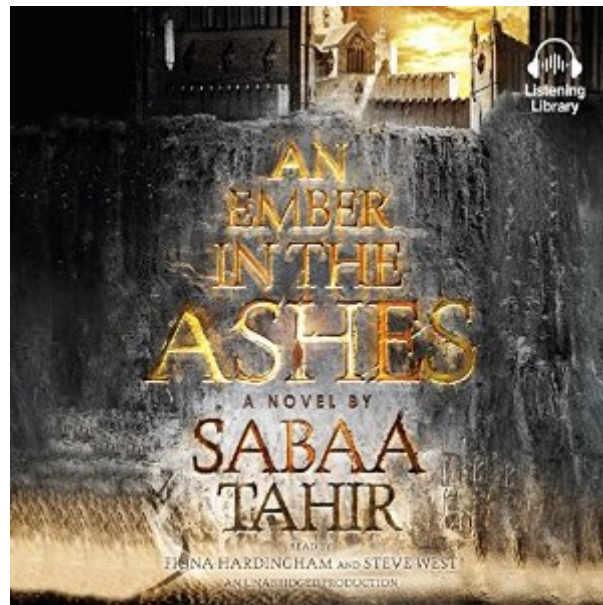


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# An Ember In The Ashes



## Synopsis

Set in a terrifyingly brutal Rome-like world, *An Ember in the Ashes* is an epic fantasy debut about an orphan fighting for her family and a soldier fighting for his freedom. It's a story that's literally burning to be told. Laia is a Scholar living under the iron-fisted rule of the Martial Empire. When her brother is arrested for treason, Laia goes undercover as a slave at the empire's greatest military academy in exchange for assistance from rebel Scholars who claim they will help to save her brother from execution. Elias is the academy's finest soldier - and secretly its most unwilling. Elias is considering deserting the military, but before he can, he's ordered to participate in a ruthless contest to choose the next Martial emperor. When Laia and Elias' paths cross at the academy, they find that their destinies are more intertwined than either could have imagined and that their choices will change the future of the empire itself.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 15 hours and 22 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Listening Library

Audible.com Release Date: April 28, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00UKE0HZO

Best Sellers Rank: #26 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Action & Adventure > Survival Stories #43 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Children's Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy #49 in Books > Teens > Romance > Fantasy

## Customer Reviews

First of all, and I shall repeat myself, this had better not be a standalone novel as the author claims. Second, I devoured this book, unashamedly, stopping only for extraneous things like sleeping, eating, paying attention to my family. It's that captivating. While I am old enough to be a mother or, god forbid, grandmother to members of the book's target audience, there is just something so thrilling and delightful in YA fiction that cannot be found in adult fiction. And a YA fantasy novel is the *crème de la crème* when it comes to disengaging from the real world and escaping into another. A young boy can turn into the greatest wizard ever or a young girl can become champion

of the world's deadliest game. We accept it and embrace it and absolutely love it. *An Ember In The Ashes* by debut author Sabaa Tahir is a fantastic new addition to the world of YA fantasy fiction. In a world ruled by brutal, war-like Martials, the lowly Scholars are forced into slavery and poverty; their libraries destroyed, they are forbidden to learn how to read. It has been this way since the Martials took over the Scholar Empire five hundred years ago. It is a badge of honor when Martial children are accepted to the warrior school Blackcliff. They train to become a Mask, an elite assassin. The Scholars, deprived of their names, are forced to endure cruelty and depravity while serving those at Blackcliff. However, in the city outside the gated fortress, a resistance army has formed and been a thorn in the Martials' side for many years. In the beginning of the book, Elias, a student at Blackcliff only days from graduating as a Mask, is planning his desertion. He faces a horrific death sentence if caught but Elias is sickened by the actions of the murderous Masks and does not want to become one of their cruel elite. Then it is announced that the Emperor's reign is at an end and the new Emperor must be chosen from one the top four graduates at Blackcliff who participate in the grueling tests of skill and loyalty called the Trials. An ancient seer convinces Elias that to desert would not bring him the freedom he craves, to stay and fight would. Laia, a young Scholar who lives in the city watches in horror as Masks arrest her brother Darin, murder her grandparents and burn her home to the ground. Her only hope of finding and freeing the last member of her family is to join forces with the resistance and work as a spy for them at Blackcliff. The resistance warns her that as a slave at Blackcliff she will have to endure unbelievable cruelty by the ruling Commandante. Determined to free Darin, Laia agrees. While most YA readers can guess the basics of what might happen between Elias and Laia, their story is much more complex than that. If Elias wins the Trials he will be Emperor. If he loses, he will die. His best friend, Helene, is competing against him in the Trials and his feelings for her are complicated by their friendship, his attraction to her, and the fact she is a formidable opponent who is fiercely loyal to the empire. Laia continues to spy for the resistance despite her conflicted feelings concerning their actions. Her family was destroyed because of a traitor within the group. But, as she repeats to herself in times of doubt, she is there to save Darin, she is his only hope. I love the world building of *An Ember In The Ashes*; it is rich and full without being overcomplicated. The Trials remind me of *Hunger Games* or *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. And the relationship between Elias and Laia is not "oh my God, where have you been all my life, I love you forever." It is more risky and nuanced. Elias' relationship with Helene is my favorite part of the book. He is so loyal to her and fighting against her is painful knowing that one of them will die. When the book ends, and it better not be THE END because there are so many unanswered questions, it is not an annoying cliffhanger. By the last page, everything is perfectly set

up for so much more story. So, this better not be a standalone or I will just have to curl into a ball and eat all the Ben and Jerry's in my fridge because I do not want to come back to the real world. Highly highly highly recommended.

When all hope seems to be lost will you be able to keep the faith, trust your gut and survive? That is just one of the questions that author Sabaa Tahir poses in the powerful novel *AN EMBER IN THE ASHES*. We meet Laia, a girl who we are able to see transform as the book progresses from someone who doubts the power within into someone who learns to embrace it. This is a book about survival, family and what it takes to keep going with all odds seemingly against you. It's hard not to read this book and be inspired, especially because it is written in first person, allowing the reader to take the treacherous journey along with our unlikely heroine and her unlikely hero Elias. If you are looking for a book that not only reminds you of the importance of never giving up and the reward for staying the course, then this is one you definitely want to add to your reading list.

*AN EMBER IN THE ASHES* has been getting a massive push from Penguin Random House. The book was a pretty easy sell, for me. I was sold on the Roman Empire-esque setting and the heroine being a spy for the resistance, hiding out as a slave at the school where Martial Empire soldiers are taught. *AN EMBER IN THE ASHES* is told between dual points of view. Laia alternates with Elias, a student soldier who plans on deserting right after graduation. I actually found myself more drawn to Elias' point of view. He has a lot going on, because he's been chosen as one of four candidates to be the next emperor. He also has a complicated relationship with his mother, the Commandant, and his best friend Helene, who is also in the running to become emperor. Beside his action-packed storyline, Laia's seems somewhat wan. Her goal is to earn the support she needs to break her brother out of prison. But she happens to be not much as a spy and mostly alternates between getting in trouble and making friends with a fellow slave. Love triangle haters should avoid *AN EMBER IN THE ASHES*. There are two intersecting triangles: Elias must choose between Helene and Laia, and Laia must choose between Elias and a resistance fighter who barely has enough characterization to be even a faux love interest. I can see why Laia likes Elias: he's not only handsome, but also surprisingly principled and tries to make her life easier when he can. Elias' attraction to Laia actually made me like him less, because it doesn't seem to have much of a reason beyond she looks good in a dress. Given how much of *AN EMBER IN THE ASHES* hinges on their feelings for each other, I wish Elias had been shown being attracted to Laia for things other than her looks. I do wish more history of the world had been seeded throughout the book. For instance, Laia

is a Scholar, an underclass made up of a people the Martials conquered. The name of the people instantly becomes interesting when you learn they're forbidden from learning to read. Do they have tales of knowledge lost? Secret oral traditions? What sort of learning made them famed as Scholars the way Martials are known for fighting with scims? AN EMBER IN ASHES focuses almost entirely on Martial life, which does make some sense given that it is set in a Martial school. Sensitive readers will want to note that in addition to violence there are a large number of rape threats in the story. They make sense in context, but it is very prevalent and a bit wearying how much it gets mentioned. I did enjoy AN EMBER IN THE ASHES despite its flaws. It's a very cinematic novel with a compelling hero. I also really liked Helene, who kind of baffles her friend Elias even though he knows not to underestimate her. I'm excited to read the sequel and find out what happens next.

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