

Kingdom of Embers Excerpt

“Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made.”

– Genesis 3:1

“Morning.”

The curtains swooshed open, and light poured into my room. I mashed the feather pillow into my face, wishing the woman moving around my room would disappear.

“Can’t I be homeschooled? Or at least try online high school. One year. I’ve only got one year left.” I extended my arm and pointed my index finger up.

“You know what your mother would say.” I heard Elizabeth cross to the dresser.

“Does she remember what it’s like to be a teenager? Can I get a replacement for her? Or at least a refund?”

“Now, Alena. You know you don’t mean that.”

“You’re wrong.” I sat up and let the pillow fall to my lap.

“I have fresh flowers for you, and the ribbons for your hair all laid out.”

“I could smell the flowers from the hall and heard you lay the ribbons on my dresser. You don’t need to tell me everything. Ugh! I can’t believe they’re making us wear matching hair decorations the first day of school.” I flung the white silk sheet from my legs and swung my feet to the floor.

“It’s a thin ribbon.” Elizabeth held up the red satin piece. “At least it’s a good color. That bright orange at your last school was hideous.”

“Don’t remind me of Cal High.” I zipped to her and snatched the ribbon.

“You better watch yourself. Your mother wants you to be in the habit of moving like a human.”

“What’s the point of this place if we can’t be ourselves?” Rolling my eyes, I ran to the bed, jumped over it, and grabbed my phone from the table. Back at my

closet, I checked for a message from Kaylie. My best friend had come up from San Ramon the previous weekend, and we'd bought matching outfits. We planned to text each other a selfie when we got dressed for school.

“Do you have your clothes picked out?” Elizabeth called from the door.

“Yes.” I lifted black pants and a flower print silk top off the bar.

“Your mother approved it?”

I popped my head out of the dressing room. “Last night.”

“I’ll make your breakfast. Orm will have the car ready to leave in”—Elizabeth lifted her wrist—“forty-five minutes.”

My hand went to my hip. “The car? I thought I could ride the bus.”

“Mother’s orders. LA is not like San Ramon.”

“LA is not like San Ramon,” I mouthed as I retreated to my bathroom.

“I can hear that, you know.” Elizabeth’s voice trailed behind her from the hall.

Tugging my hair back tight and securing it with an elastic band, I started the water and washed my face. Switching schools senior year felt like torture. I thought Mother would’ve learned from the debacle of my eighth grade year, but I hadn’t been so lucky. Patting my face dry, I applied makeup, making sure to swipe my eyelids with the cheerleader mandatory plum shadow.

Brushing my hair out, I parted it on the side and braided the front portion, weaving the red ribbon through the design. At least they weren’t dictating size or placement. If I had to wear a huge bow on top of my head, I would have staged a coup. Pulling on my pants and shirt, I stood in front of the mirror to check my look. Lifting my phone, I snapped an image and sent it to Kaylie. I gathered my shoes and backpack and headed to the kitchen.

“Alena,” Mother’s singsong voice called out as I entered the room. She sat perched at the end of the marble bar like every morning, reading the *New York Times* and sipping coffee. “Elizabeth has quail eggs and fresh bread from the market for you.”

“Thanks, Elizabeth.” I shot her a thumbs up and kissed Mother on the cheek as I slid into my seat. Mother looked me up and down as Elizabeth sat a plate in front of me.

“The outfit looks nice. Why the ribbon and plum eye shadow?”

“Mandatory cheer thing. I guess they want to show school spirit the first day. Either that or they’re marking us as a tribe right from the start.” I dipped my bread in the egg.

“And that’s the way you’re supposed to wear it?”

“We got to choose placement.”

“It suits you.”

The corners of my mouth turned up. “Thanks, Mother.” Mother was not one to hand out compliments, so when she did, I lapped them up.

“Okay.” She slapped her hand on the counter. “Orm has his instructions for driving. I will see you at dinner.” She leaned over and pecked me on the cheek. Standing, her heels clinked across the marble floor as she walked as fast as she could in her pencil skirt and four-inch heels. “Good day, Elizabeth,” she said as she exited the room.

“Good day, madam,” Elizabeth responded.

My phone dinged as I tore another piece of bread from the loaf. Opening the screen, I viewed Kaylie’s message. U LOOK AWESOME. She’d attached a picture of herself in the same outfit.

U DO 2, I texted back. SORRY ABOUT THE PANTS. BUT YOU KNOW MY MOTHER.

R U KIDDING? IT’S ONE DAY. I’LL BE BACK IN SHORTS TOMORROW. I MISS U. HOPE U HAVE A GOOD DAY AT YOUR NEW SCHOOL.

THANKS & MISS U 2. HOPE YOUR DAY IS GOOD 2. SAY HI TO EVERYONE FOR ME.

“You should finish your eggs.” Elizabeth pointed at my plate. “You need to leave in five minutes.”

As I set my phone down, Orm appeared in the doorway. “Good morning, madam.”

I spun my head, looking in one direction and then the opposite. “I don’t see my mother?”

“Oh, Miss Alena. You say that every morning.”

“I know.” I winked at him. “It’s our thing.”

“Did you have eggs?” I dipped another piece of bread in my scrambled mixture.

“You know my tastes are a bit different.”

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