

ORCHID WELLSHIRE, DISTRICT 9

Branning's been doing better lately. I can take more shifts in the fields since he needs me less and less.

It's almost been a year and a half since my brother lost both of his legs in a farming accident, and I've had to take care of him on a small portion of my peacekeeper father's salary—when he decides to send some home.

Branning insists that he's fine, and I know he's embarrassed that his little sister has to take care of him like he's elderly and incompetent. But he needs someone here with him at least for a few hours a day, since he can't even get out of bed by himself. He's at least excused from attending the reaping, and his name is finally out of that bowl now that he's nineteen.

I'm not so lucky, though. I only took out a few tesserae this year, though. It felt weird only asking for three or so when they took this year's tesserae orders a month ago. It used to be a...few more.

I used to take out hundreds back when I was with the raes. But after my brother's accident, I realized that the chances we were taking just weren't worth it.

The raes were my best friends, and had been since I was a small child. We were all poor and weak, with bad money situations and absent or abusive parents. When we turned twelve and were eligible for tesserae, we tried a new business model that no one's gone for before: selling tesserae. Our own tesserae.

We used to take out hundreds of it for each of us, then sell the subscriptions to our own supplies. I'm honestly shocked that none of us got reaped, even with our names in hundreds of times. We were pretty young when we left home to do this full time, traveling for most of the year selling what we'd sell for the coming year and delivering what we sold last year. We were a second family to each other and our relationship with the public was mixed.

They felt scammed by us but at the same time appreciated the miles we traveled and the work we did to save their children from more entries in the reaping. We were edgier and different than most of nine, with brightly colored clothes and makeup because we could afford it, and genders that they couldn't guess by looking at us. But they still shook our hands and dropped more and more of our envelopes into the bowls.

We did this for five years until my brother ran into an accident with a hay baler that crushed both of his legs. He needed a double amputation and I had to go home. They took this as a betrayal after hearing me talk badly about my strict, hardened, patriotic brother for years. The rest of them still run their business, and I'm sure I'll be seeing them at the reaping.

Which starts in three hours.

I tie up my fiery hair quickly, since it's blisteringly hot outside. The

only fancy thing I have is a black dress I bought with the raes last year. Great.

I try to leave quietly but Branning stops me.

"I don't expect your name to come out of that bowl. You don't either... right?"

"I've told you a thousand times, I don't work with them anymore. It's in there eight times."

"And how many times are Tiff and the rest of those bitches in?"

I sniff. "Teff. And hundreds, probably. Last year he was 400. And I'm not going to get picked."

"I know." He crosses his arms. "Love you, Orchid."

"I love you too."

It's a long walk from our tiny house to the capital of district 9, but at least we can walk. Some people have to travel for days. In a big district like ours, only eligible kids have to attend the reaping. There's just not room for a few hundred thousand people in the capital courtyard.

After a couple hours of walking, the courtyard comes into view.

And so do the raes, sitting in their usual spot behind the brick wall.

All five of them. Oatley and Teff are in the middle, cloying all over each other. It grosses me out way more now than it used to for some reason. I used to be kind of into Teff, back before we really got into the business world. I'm totally over him. He and Oatley are super into each other—they can't keep their hands to themselves. It's a shock she's not pregnant, honestly.

Amara and Miller and to the side holding hands. The two of them are super quiet and haven't ever kissed or anything. They just stay close to each other. I was super close with Amara and she never really turned on me like the rest of them did. Farro and Ash are on the opposite side with the price notebook, probably adding up today's initial sales.

I walk quietly towards the check-in line but my staring errors me— I lock eyes with Farro and he quietly suggests that they get in line. I keep shuffling forward and desperately hope that someone comes in between us.

But no, I hear Oatley's deep and Teff's ironically high voice behind me talking about what district they want to place bets on tonight. Oatley's bet on District 2 every year since we had enough money to bribe our way into bets. She's won once or twice, but the rest of them are all 11 and 12 buffs.

I can practically feel her eyes glaring into the back of my head before I hear Miller.

"Hey, is that..." they whisper.

Oakley puts a hand on my shoulder and turns me around.

"Um...hi." I say. I wish this line would hurry up. I'm begging to be stabbed in the finger by the checker waiting hundreds of people ahead of me.

"You know, it's funny seeing you here after all this time." Oatley runs her tongue over her teeth and leans away from Teff.

"It hasn't been that long," I mumble.

"Sure. Your hair's still curly. Thought that was too alternative for your farm girl life."

I grit my teeth. "Funny, I thought you'd be too busy counting your scammed coins than to bother with us farm folk."

Teff chuckles, placing a giant hand on Oatley's tiny shoulder. "Oh, come on, Orchie. We all know you miss the good old days as much as we do."

Oatley looks like she wants to slit his throat for calling when I was with them the good old days.

"You mean the days before my brother got mauled and I realized what a bunch of hypocrites you all are?"

"Lay off, both of you." Miller interrupts us, though they're still glaring at me. "There's more important things to focus on today."

"Right, like which innocent kids to place your bets on this year? Or maybe how many starving people you'll con into buying your tesserae scheme?"

Oatley pulls down her shirt, which covers less skin than a swimsuit. She's the least alternative of all of them, and in different clothes she could pass for a farmer.

"You all look... different," I say, trying to distract myself from the conflict that just occurred.

And they do. Amara's long, straight black hair and brightly colored makeup is swapped for shoulder length and layered with dark eyeliner. Ash has more boyish hair and more eyelashes and lip color than before.

"Trying to skirt away from our little debate?" Farro juts, interrupting my quiet fantasy of this altercation being finished.

"I'm just trying to have a civilized conversation, but I guess that's too much to ask from you."

Teff runs a hand through his hair and smirks. "Don't act like you're better than us, Orchid. We all know where you came from."

I'm so done with this. "And I know where you're still stuck. Living off the

desperation of people who think you're a miracle."

Oatley raises an eyebrow. "The bitch can talk."

"She can," Ash says, "But we don't have to. C'mere, we need to finish these numbers before the reaping starts."

"Name, please?" A woman says, with a book of names in front of her.

"Orchid Wellshire. I'm sixteen."

"Yup. Sixteen is close to the back. Happy Hunger Games." I step aside and Oatley comes up behind me.

"Oatley Tillman. Sixteen. 796 tesserae," she says, and the raes burst into cheers while the woman rolls her eyes and motions to where the sixteen year olds wait.

Oatley, Amara, and Miller stay as far away from me as possible on our side.

It's not long until the anthem begins playing and the escort, who seems to change every year now, begins their happy hunger games spiel.

""Ladies and gentlemen of District 9, today we stand on the precipice of destiny. As we gather for the reaping, let us remember the strength and resilience that define us. Together, we face the challenges ahead with unwavering courage and unity. May the odds be ever in our favor!"

He walks to the girls bowl first. The envelopes are smaller than pennies and the bowl is almost as tall as the escort is. He reaches deeply in and shuffles his hand through. He selects an envelope and pulls it out, stepping back over to a small, dusty microphone.

"Oatley Tillman!"

I hear a loud, "F*ck!" from Teff.

It happened. Their stupid game of saying f*ck the odds and trust that they simply won't get picked has come crashing down.

The crowd parts and Oatley walks to the stage, running a hand through her hair; a habit she's picked up from Teff over the years.

She stands on the stage and the citizens of District 9 stare at her. She's prettier than most people here, and she doesn't look scared. The rest of the raes look terrified while she looks calm. It's true she's better fed and has more of a will to live and fight than the rest of us, but she doesn't stand a chance against the careers.

The escort moves on to the male bowl. I see him creepily grin at Oatley as he grabs another envelope, and she rolls her eyes and steps further away.

He looks at her for a moment more, then reads the contents of the envelope.

"Ash Oliver."

No. This is impossible. And statistically, it nearly is. This must be a mistake. Ash gets half the sales that Oatley does on a good year. And, yet...

Ash walks up to stage. The crowd whispers and complains about "unworthy tributes", and I have to credit that to the fact that Ash is wearing a lacy white dress and heeled boots.

If these games happen, six original raes turn to three. That... I can't let that happen. They're still my family, all of them.

So when the escort nasally asks, "Any volunteers?", I can't stop my hand from sprouting up.

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I introduce myself to the crowd. Oatley steps toward the stairs, a hand on her stomach. There's emotion behind her eyes, but I truly can't tell if it's hatred or love.

But then I understand.

There are still six raes.

And there always will be.