

CHOSEN

THE IMMORTAL ONES – BOOK ONE

Shade Owens

www.shadeowens.com

Edited by Nikki Busch

www.nikkibuschediting.com



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A Note From The Author

Dearest awesome reader,

In case you're wondering what you're about to get yourself into, this book is BOOK ONE of THE IMMORTAL ONES series.

If you're familiar with my other works, this next part won't come as a surprise to you.

Are you ready?

I love cliffhangers.

If you hate them (enough to make you want to throw your ereader at the wall), well... you might not be very happy with me when you reach the end of this book, or any of my books, really.

As for content warnings, there isn't much to warn you about aside from the following:

- Violence
- Some swearing, although it's very mild in comparison to my other series, The Feral Sentence... Okay, any of my other series, really.

Thank you for picking up a copy, and I truly hope you enjoy the... ride! >=] (you'll understand that reference later)

Shade Owens

PROLOGUE

Crack.
My head rocked back and forth, and my surroundings blurred.
Was my jaw unhinged? And what was that rusty smell? Blood?
I opened my mouth wide until a loud popping sound echoed in
my ears.

Why was everything so fuzzy? How hard had he hit me?

I blinked hard, trying to clear the haze.

Suddenly, the man grabbed me from behind and my heart skipped a beat. My heels scraped the floor as he dragged me through a series of doors.

“No!” I wanted to shout, but I was too disoriented.

Instead, I reached everywhere I could, clawing the air as I tried to latch onto something solid enough to stop this man from dragging me. But I was too weak. Everything I touched slipped away.

“Since you want to be a hero,” he growled, “you can go next.”

Although I couldn’t see his face, the way he spoke made it sound like he was smiling.

He was enjoying this.

When the door next to me blasted open and a powerful gust of wind blew in, I knew exactly what was about to happen—I was going to die.

CHAPTER 1

They spoke about Selection Day as if it were like winning a large sum of money—whatever *money* was. I'd read about it but didn't quite understand it. Grandma told me that in the old days, people used something called *money* to spend however they liked. She explained that this *money* could be exchanged for food, toys, clothing, and even vehicles.

I hadn't understood what a vehicle was, so she explained it to me, too. Something about a metal frame on wheels, like a horse chariot, only it was run on oil and gas. It sounded like science fiction to me, like something that could only exist in the future, not the past.

And how was it even possible to buy belongings? To own property? *Freedom*, Grandma had called it. I always wondered what that kind of freedom felt like.

Some days, I fantasized about walking into something Grandma referred to as a grocery store. She'd described it as brightly lit and full of vibrant fruits and vegetables. The more she spoke about the past, the more I wanted to travel in time like the characters in an old book I kept hidden under my bed—*The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells.

"I need it more!" Grunwalt said, leaning back in his wooden chair and smoothing the wrinkles on his face. "Ya see these? Ain't no goin' back from this."

Poor Grunwalt. I felt sorry for him. Not because he was old and grumpy, but because every time he talked about his life, it sounded

empty. No partner, no children, no friends... His entire existence, or at least what he talked about, had revolved around him trying to get a dose of the Ambrosia Serum.

Kiatha sat next to him. She leaned forward until her dark elbows formed indents in her thighs. She smiled, the light of the fire making her brown skin look creamier than usual. "What I wouldn't do to feel thirty again."

Kiatha was in her midforties. But like everyone else in Division 9, all she ever spoke about was Selection Day. I didn't blame her or the others. Everyone wanted to be selected to join the Elites.

We couldn't go back in time, but we could join the Elites. That was everyone's dream. That was the reason people worked so hard all year long: to earn a chance at a life that was said to be eternal bliss.

To be ageless.

To be immortal.

To live like royalty and never want for anything.

"Thirty years I been waitin' for this," Grunwalt said. "It's finally our turn. It's gotta be."

By turn, he meant Division 9's turn at being selected to take part in the lottery. Every year, the Elites chose one division from all of Lutum, and from this division, they selected a single person. The odds of being selected were roughly 1:2000, which according to Grandma, were great odds.

"You don't want to be a Producer your entire life, do you?" Grandma would often say to me.

It was like she'd given up on the idea of eternal youth and only wanted the best for me. And now that I was seventeen, winning the lottery was a real possibility.

Did I want to leave Division 9? Yes, but not by joining human beings capable of making countless others suffer so they could live comfortable lives. Every evening, Producers from within our section gathered around a fire and spoke of joining the Elites like it was the same thing as

receiving a gift from the gods.

I'd always wondered why the Elites couldn't share their serum with everyone. According to Grandma, more than 98 percent of the world's population was wiped out during the war—a war caused by the serum... chaos caused by human beings wanting to live forever, but not having the means to afford the serum. But now, with only 2 percent of the world's population remaining, why keep it from us? Why not let everyone live in abundance? It didn't make sense.

Closing my eyes, I pictured Grandma's face from the day before. She'd been hunched over with a rounded back, working hard in the gardens. When she sensed me approach, she pulled her face out from the bushes, a thin layer of dirt coating her veiny, bulbous nose. "It's all for control, Silverstasia."

Grandma was the only one who ever called me by my full name. Everyone else called me Silver.

"How would they survive without us?" she said. With a muddy finger, she tapped her translucent temple next to her salt-and-pepper hair. "Think about it. We're basically slaves. If we were all ageless and immortal, we wouldn't care about anything. We wouldn't feel the need to work our butts off to gain points every year."

Grandma was right. In every division, Producers were awarded points for good behavior and strong production. After every lottery, the score was wiped clean and we started over again. Both divisions and Producers were selected to take part in the draw based on their points. No one understood it, but some speculated that if you fell within a certain range of points, you were included in the draw.

So only the top-producing divisions in all of Lutum were placed in the lottery, and once a single division was selected, only the top producers from that division were placed in the lottery. This meant everyone was always on their best behavior.

Mother's footsteps echoed behind us, shaking me out of my daydream.

“You all know the serum doesn’t reverse aging,” she said, her tone bitter. Although I refused to look up at her, I sensed her eyes narrow on me. “Now quit your dreamin’ ’n get to bed before the Defenders get involved.”

Without a word, Grunwalt stood, picked up a bucket of dirty water, and spilled it over the fire.

CHAPTER 2

Don't mind your mother," Grandma said. She swept my hair over my shoulders and let it fall behind my back. With a twinkle in her eye, she pulled a bright red elastic from her pocket. "For luck."

"Where'd you find that?" I asked.

Bright colors were forbidden in Lutum... something about heightened emotions. Everyone was given the same clothes: beige hemp suits that turned brown after a few days of work.

The worst part? These clothes weren't even provided by the Elites. They were sewn internally by Samara, our seamstress.

"What makes you think I'm even in the lottery this year?" I asked.

I was only a farmer; I helped Grandma with her chores, and that was it. How could I have possibly earned enough points to be in the lottery? Without a word, she moved behind me and smiled, making a wet clicking sound.

"Whether it's today or another day, sweetheart, you *will* make it to Olympus."

I'd always thought the name *Olympus* sounded funny. It wasn't until Grandma explained Greek mythology to me that I understood why the Elites had picked such a unique name. They thought of themselves as gods.

"What if I don't want to be in Olympus?" I asked.

Her grip tightened around my ponytail. "I won't let you turn out like

your mother.”

Mother was cold and distant. The last thing I wanted was to end up like her. Ever since I was a child, Mother had been this way. It was like she hated me, and I’d never understood why. Swallowing hard, I stared at my bare feet.

We sat in silence for what felt like hours as Grandma prepared me for Selection Day. With a sponge soaked with cold water, she wiped mud off my cheeks and hands and from underneath my fingernails. Then, she reached for something underneath a tuft of grass and extracted a purple flower.

My eyes popped. “Where’d you find that?”

Flowers, due to their vibrant colors, were also forbidden in Lutum.

“I’ve been growing a garden of flowers in secret,” she said, placing a finger over my lips.

“Grandma—” I tried, but she wouldn’t listen.

Why would she do something like that? If she got caught—

“Here,” she said, dabbing the flower against my neck. “To smell clean.”

I breathed in deep, salivating over the floral scent.

Then, she scrunched the flower with its leaves and tucked it inside my pocket. “Also for good luck.”

I smiled. “You’re very... What’s that word again?” I asked.

“Superstitious,” she said, tapping the tip of my nose as if I were a five-year-old child.

Her large, hazel eyes narrowed on me. “Are you still reading every night?”

I nodded. “I do, but Mother says Producers should spend more time resting than reading.”

The truth was, Mother had thrown many of my books into the fire, but I didn’t bring it up. Grandma already didn’t like Mother, and as cold as Mother was with me, I didn’t want to get her in trouble.

Grandma frowned, the folds on her face deepening. “I swear, that

batshit crazy woman—”

I chuckled. Grandma always talked funny. She spoke in slang and used words that most Producers would likely never hear in their lifetime. Where did she come up with these things? Were they words people had once used in the Old World?

“I have a secret stash under my bed,” she said. “Every evening before supper, while your mother’s busy preparing the meal, I want you to pick up a book and read, okay? Don’t let anyone see you. Sit quietly and read.”

I nodded.

Ever since I was a child, Grandma made it a point to read something to me until I learned how to read myself. Reading, as she described it, was power. She’d always tell me that knowledge was power, and reading was how a person obtained knowledge. Most Producers didn’t read, and Grandma often told me that the more time went on, the more people would forget the English language... that they would speak in broken English. When people spoke funny or broke sentences up, she’d often lean into me and say, “See what happens when you don’t read? You can’t talk worth shit.”

It always made me laugh. I liked the way Grandma spoke. It was so straightforward and funny. She described English from her time as laid back and creative. She said people would communicate about all sorts of things using unique words and that oftentimes, people would even make up words and they’d become official. Or at least, official *online*, whatever that meant.

It meant a lot when Grandma said that my vocabulary was good for a farmer. *Vast*, I think was the word she used.

Grandma grabbed me by the shoulders, kissed my forehead, and handed me a scrap piece of metal. “There, you’re ready.”

I grabbed the metal and stared at my distorted reflection. Although I wasn’t used to seeing my hair tied back, I liked it. It stayed out of my face and made me look proper. I reached for it, touching my dark brown roots, and smiled. “This is great. Thank you, Grandma. And I smell

wonderful.”

She reached for my cheek and pinched it hard—something I always tried to avoid. “Yes, you do! And you look pretty damn good too, kiddo.”

Kiddo.

I liked that.

No one else used this word, but Grandma always called me kiddo, so the word became special to me.

“What’s goin’ on here?” came Mother’s voice.

I always hated when she barged into people’s rooms. She did this often to me, and despite my room being only large enough for me to stick my arms out, it was still *my* bedroom.

With her hands on her hips, she gave me the stink eye. “Silver, stop playin’ around and get outside. The Elites are goin’ to be here any minute.”

Somedays, I hated how much I resembled my mother—green eyes, long dark brown hair, and skin neither pale nor dark. I had an athletic build like her, which she always criticized, and the same cheekbones, which weren’t that prominent, but they were noticeable.

The only reason Mother even bothered to look interested in the Lottery was because she hoped that one day, if I won, I’d find a way to bring her into Olympus. She never seemed to think she’d win herself, and every time I asked her about it, she told me that it was disrespectful to question others and that I should mind my own business.

In fact, no one questioned Mother. There was a hardness to her that made everyone afraid of her.

Some days, I wondered if my father was taken to Olympus, which would explain why my mother was so bitter. But there was no way of knowing—she refused to talk to me about him, or about anything, really.

Even Grandma seemed on edge when I questioned her about it. She’d say that it was up to Mother to talk to me about it. I hated secrets more than the idea of living with the Elites.

Mother’s tone hardened. “Get outside, now.”

Grandma didn't seem too bothered by Mother's attitude, but I never liked annoying Mother, even if it felt like she hated me. Smiling at Grandma, I stood up and followed Mother outside toward the common area.

I wasn't one to visit the common area often—Mother rarely allowed it. It was where most Producers gathered to socialize after a long day of work. It was plain, with a dirt floor and many large stones to sit on. The space was large enough to fit several thousand bodies and sat right next to Division 9's main gates. Most people steered clear of the gate area, which was guarded by two heavily armed Defenders dressed in some scary red and black suits. Sometimes, little lights flashed on their suits. They must have been powered by something.

No one ever talked to the Defenders. They knew better. I'd heard of stories about their weapons being able to disintegrate people on the spot, and that was enough for me to keep my head down.

I preferred to disappear into my room and read after a long day in the garden beds.

Mother stormed through the crowd, elbowing everyone as she went. When people saw who she was, they didn't tell her to watch her step or to be careful. What were they so afraid of? Was Mother *that* cruel to everyone?

"At the front," she ordered, and I did as I was told.

The crowd continued to expand, filling the air around us with so much noise it was like being surrounded by huge swarms of flies. I stomped my way through the mud, my toes covered in a gooey brown—the result of heavy rainfall from the day before—until I found myself standing next to a boy my age with scraggly chestnut brown hair, light brown eyes, a flawless pale complexion, and hills for cheekbones that made it impossible for me to stop staring. He ran a hand through his hair, revealing a star-shaped scar on his wrist. It was odd. I'd never seen a mark like that before.

The moment he smiled at me, I bowed my head and looked away.

“First time?” he asked.

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t. I wasn’t used to talking to people I didn’t know.

At once, Mother nudged me in the back. “Silver, it’s rude not to respond when spoken to. For God’s sake, you’d think you would have learned that in those stupid books of yours.”

This time, I made eye contact, and it looked like the boy felt sorry for me. He glanced at Mother, but only briefly. Not long enough to upset her.

“Y-yes,” I said.

Again, he smiled. “You must have just had your seventeenth birthday.”

Behind me, Mother sighed heavily as if the idea of my birthday was overwhelming. I’d never understood why she hated my birthday so much. I’d heard of children being celebrated on their birthdays. Grandma tried her best every year to make me feel special, but for some reason, Mother was always cruel with me on that day—more cruel than usual.

I nodded.

He could probably tell how uncomfortable I was. He reached out a hand. “I’m Rolie. Got transferred from Division 6 ’bout a month ago.”

Why was he giving me his hand? I stared at it, not knowing what to do.

“I-I’m Silver.”

His lips pulled up on one side only. “Pleasure.”

Behind me, Mother sighed.

Why did she always do that? It was embarrassing and made me so uncomfortable.

Rolie stared at my face. “I’ve seen you around here... I’d never forget a face like yours.”

I sucked in a quick breath, my cheeks warming. I’d never seen *him* before. Were people too afraid to approach me because of Mother?

He parted his lips to say something, but all of a sudden, Division 9's massive gates opened up, and through it came a lineup of Elites riding on white horses.

CHAPTER 3

I stared in awe as the Elites strode in with their backs straight and their chins pointed toward the sky. Their uniforms, white and stainless, looked like snow. It made me feel ugly with my torn hemp clothing and my filthy, scarred skin.

But my focus was on the horses. I'd never seen white ones like that before. I'd seen pictures of knights on white horses, but the images didn't do them justice.

It was incredible.

Grinning, I turned to Grandma, but my smile vanished when Mother jabbed me in the ribs, ordering me to focus.

The leader, a woman dressed in a similar white uniform with red stripes on her sleeves, led her horse to the front of the crowd. She smiled down at us and little lines formed next to her eyes—something Grandma referred to as crow's feet. She raised a hand to silence the crowd and watched us with such warmth that for a moment, I wondered what it might be like to live with the Elites.

She seemed nice enough. Maybe it wasn't all that bad.

If I won, would I have the same freedom Grandma has told me about all these years? Would I receive money to buy whatever I wanted? I chased these thoughts away. They were selfish. How could I possibly enjoy a life like that knowing that Grandma, along with countless other people, were being treated like slaves?

"Greetings, Division 9," the woman said.

Everyone bowed their heads and dropped to one knee. When I didn't budge, Mother dug her nails into the back of my neck. I winced and dropped down like everyone else. The air around me felt hot and thick. Everyone was quiet, holding their breaths.

Why?

Was this where they'd announce the lottery winner? I'd never attended Selection Day before—I'd never been allowed.

Rolie leaned into me. "That's Estrelle Marigold, chancellor for our division."

The woman was pretty but in an artificial way. Her skin looked like it was covered in something—a beige balm? I couldn't tell what it was, but it seemed that the intent was to mask her imperfections. Her hair, a golden blond, sat in a neat ball at the back of her head. It even shined under the sun as if coated with something.

She was thin, but seemed strong with square shoulders. Were those her real shoulders, or was that part of her uniform? I couldn't tell.

I stared at our chancellor, feeling small.

I'd read a few books on politics, including one about Lutum, to better understand how Olympus operated. Every division was assigned a chancellor who reported back to the president, meaning in total, ten chancellors oversaw all of Lutum.

I watched Estrelle as she spoke, her chest heaving and her fists wrapped firmly around the brown leather strap of her horse's bridle. She went on about how Division 9—also known as the division of agriculture—was formed, and how our obedience and hard work are what led to the rebirth of civilization. It felt recited, like she'd practiced this speech a hundred times before coming here.

Although I'd never attended Selection Day before, I remembered Grandma telling me about the beautiful horses, and how they were the only reason she would attend the celebration. She'd mentioned that despite Olympus having super-advanced technology, they made a point to attend Selection Day on horseback to remind the people of Lutum of

the life they'd brought upon themselves—a simple life without technology.

Estrelle went quiet and wiggled in her seat, a little smirk pulling at the corner of her lips.

Was this it? Was she about to announce whether or not Division 9 had been selected? For the last few days, rumors had circulated in Lutum, but no one knew for sure if we'd won.

Everyone stood silently, and a swift breeze whistled through the crowd.

"I, Estrelle Marigold, would like to officially congratulate"—at once, the crowd exploded with cheering, but Estrelle continued, raising her voice as loud as she could—"on being selected to take part in the *Freedom Lottery!*"

My heart raced as the crowd became restless, and behind me, Mother dug her fingers into my shoulders, but not out of anger; it felt like she was holding her breath, hoping to the gods that I might be selected.

Estrelle grinned and pressed a hand over her heart. A man next to her guided his horse closer and handed her a slip of paper. It didn't look long. How come? Were there not many names on the list?

"Alicia Bloomsdale," she announced, and an isolated section of the crowd blew up with cries of joy.

"Annabelle Tyson."

"Singura Wilsif."

"Mark Yourk."

The names went on, and to my surprise, it was mostly young women that were selected except for a few young men not much older than me. I stared in horror, my clammy palms sticking to each other, when Rolie leaned in again and whispered, "You think they draw fairly? Sometimes I wonder if this thing is rigged."

Rigged? What did that even mean? I arched a brow at him.

"You know... fixed," he added.

I worried Mother might tell him to shut up, but she didn't. She stood quietly behind me, hanging on to Estrelle's every word.

"I don't understand what you're telling me," I whispered back.

"The Elites I've seen, aside from the Founders, are all really young," Rolie said.

By Founders, he meant the original members of Olympus—the first ones to receive the antiaging serum. Some of these members were well into their fifties and sixties by the time the drug was created, or at least that was what I'd heard. I'd never met a single Founder in person.

"I can't imagine them choosing anyone over the age of forty to join their society," he said.

When I didn't respond, he shook his head and waved dismissively. "Never mind."

As Estrelle continued to call out names, I swallowed hard. Why was I even nervous? It wasn't like I'd made any effort to earn points this past year. No way would I be included."

"Silverstasia Blackwood."

My head spun.

Had she... Had she called out my name? No way. I must have imagined it.

"Silver!" my mother shouted. She twirled me around so fast that my hair swept through the air and hit Rolie's face. Her eyes, round and wide, made me feel something I'd never felt from my mother before—love.

For the first time in my life, Mother looked happy. She looked proud.

"You did it! You're in the draw!" Saliva sprinkled from her mouth and onto the tip of my nose. She turned me around again, and before I could say anything, shoved me forward.

I stumbled, my arms swimming through the air, and joined the crowd of potential winners. As Estrelle continued to call out names, the crowd became even more frantic. It was like they knew the list was about to end, and some worried they might not be called.

"Luis Lamontagne," Estrelle shouted.

She crumpled the piece of paper and slipped it into a tight pocket on her pant leg.

The crowd blew up in a rage, causing a few horses to neigh and jump back, their big hooves rising from the ground.

“Enough!” she shouted, and nodded at a Defender nearest to the crowd.

When no one listened, he extracted from his belt a gadget no larger than a pocketbook, and with his shoulders drawn back, aimed the weapon at the crowd.

No one dared make a sound after that.

Was this the same weapon I’d heard rumors about? The one that had disintegrated a Producer on the spot? I’d heard countless stories about how a man by the name of Peter Koris became so unruly that a Defender pressed a button, causing Peter to burst into a cloud of ash.

A story like that was frightening enough to make any person reconsider their behavior.

“My, my,” Estrelle announced over the still crowd. “Is this how my people behave when they’re awarded a gift? If so, I may simply have to reconsider placing your division into the draw next year, and perhaps even the year after that.”

Several mouths parted, but no one spoke back.

Her forehead tightened, and she scanned the crowd with a sour expression. “Twenty hardworking individuals stand before you, deserving your praise and your respect.”

As I watched Estrelle, I no longer saw the sweet, prideful woman from earlier. Instead, she reminded me of teachers I’d read about in some of my books—the ones who threatened and abused their students.

Her smile sprang back as quickly as it had vanished. “Now, shall we continue?”

The leather of her horse’s saddle creaked as she climbed down, her matching leather boots landing softly in the mud. When it splashed up onto her pant leg, she curled her lips over her teeth as if someone had

vomited on her.

She turned away from us and said, “Scramble, winners.”

Everyone eyed each other, not quite understanding what this meant, until at last, a man with long braided hair and an unkempt beard pointed at us. “It’s the same thing as last time,” he said. “Mix yourselves up. Walk somewhere. Choose a different spot.”

I did as instructed and navigated my way to the edge of my small group. Next to me, a young woman with a creamy brown face and bulging eyes trembled, her legs resembling twigs in the wind. I wanted to ask her if she was okay, but I was too scared to say anything.

When she caught me watching her, she forced a smile, then refocused her attention onto Estrelle. “Please pick me... please pick me... please pick me...” she mumbled, fidgeting with her fingers.

I searched the audience, where Mother stood with a scowl so hard you’d think some magical creature had turned her to stone. She didn’t look angry, though. It was like she was concentrating and praying to every god she’d ever heard of to send good fortune my way.

Estrelle stood quietly with her back facing us. What was she doing? Why wasn’t she moving?

A few moments passed and she raised an arm into the air. “One diamond, one beauty forever!”

Several gasps spread throughout the common area.

What was everyone so on edge about? Why was she holding her arm up like that?

In an instant, two clouds parted and a bright ray of sunlight came blasting down on all of us. It felt warm against my cheeks and neck, making me want to close my eyes and bathe in it. Instead, I watched Estrelle, wondering what her gestures signified, when I noticed something shiny between her thumb and index finger. It wasn’t big or small—maybe the size of a grape, and it glowed the colors of a rainbow.

Was that the diamond she’d spoken of? I’d read about diamonds in my books, but I’d never seen one in real life. It was magnificent.

“Eternal beauty, may you find the most deserving,” she said, and she tossed the diamond toward us.

Squeals of excitement and fear filled our entire division as the diamond soared through the air, its fascinating rainbow colors making it impossible for me to look away. At first, it almost looked as though it might not reach us and instead land in the dirt, never to be found again.

But as it moved closer, I realized... it was coming straight toward me.

Was I dreaming? I couldn't possibly be the one selected to join the Elites in Olympus. I... I didn't want to be. My heart nearly stopped when the stone landed in the dirt next to my bare feet, and the entire audience sucked in what sounded like a single, giant breath.

Estelle spun on her feet and raised a flat palm that I was certain signified, *Nobody move*.

So I stood still, staring wide-eyed at the diamond in the mud.

The closer she came, the faster my heart raced. She looked even taller off her horse, with long slender legs and an elongated torso. Unsmiling, she pursed her lips the way Mother did when she was concentrating and came close to me.

When she reached us, a spicy floral scent filled my nostrils and my knees almost buckled. I'd never smelled anything like that before. Was that what perfume smelled like? I breathed in hard again, wanting to hold onto this smell forever.

Estelle's piercing blue eyes landed on me, the diamond, and then the girl next to me.

My stomach sank.

Was I... Was I the winner? Or was the other girl the winner?

“Did I win?” asked the dark-skinned girl who'd been trembling earlier.

Then, someone else in the crowd said, “It's between them both! Who won?”

Estelle's jaw muscles popped out on either side. She seemed upset, but I didn't understand why.

“No, it’s in front of this girl,” she said, pointing at me.

“I don’t think so—” someone else said.

“It’s a tie!” someone cried out.

“No, it isn’t—” Estrelle tried.

“It’s a tie!” someone else shouted.

Without smiling, Estrelle stiffened her posture and clicked her fingers at someone behind her. I wasn’t sure who she was calling until the man on the horse next to her climbed down. He moved toward us with one hand behind his back.

“Yes?” he asked.

Turning away from us, she leaned into his ear and whispered something.

The man tilted his head sideways to look at the diamond.

“What’s going on?” came a whisper from the audience.

“Who won?”

“It can’t be a tie!”

“Silence!” Estrelle shouted. Veins bulged from her temples and several strands spilled forward from her perfectly coiffed hair.

Anger didn’t suit her, and when she realized we were staring at her, she ran a hand over her hair to flatten the loose strands back into whatever product held everything in place. Then she smiled so big that her molars appeared.

“Agrul, please provide me with the measurements,” she said. “Surely, this isn’t a tie. It appears to be more on the right.”

The Elite standing next to her, Agrul, reached into his pocket and extracted a long band with writing on it. A measuring tape? It was much nicer than the ones we made here in Division 9.

Crouching, he placed the measuring tape next to the diamond and measured several places: the space between the diamond and my foot and the space between the diamond and the other girl. He did this another three times because Estrelle kept telling him to remeasure when he’d look back at her. Every time he measured, his gloved hand

tickled my bare foot.

Eventually, he sighed, got up, and shook his head.

Estrelle looked like she was about to blow up. But with everyone watching her, she forced yet another smile, repositioned her white overcoat, cleared her throat, and said, "For the first time in history... it would appear we have a tie."

"I knew it!" someone shouted.

Before the crowd could blow up again, she stuck out a flat palm. She seemed confident in what she was doing, but she did that thing with her lips again, and I knew she was working hard to figure it all out in her head.

The dark-skinned girl next to me trembled so severely her teeth clattered. "I-I-I" she stammered, unable to get a full word out.

Without thinking, I opened my mouth. "She can have it."

Estrelle's eyes bulged. "I beg your pardon?"

I swallowed hard and avoided eye contact with Mother. "I-I'll give my win to her. She can have it."

Estrelle's mouth clamped shut, her teeth smacking together.

Agrul stared at her, looking just as confused. Had I made a mistake? Should I have waited to see if I might be selected to be an Elite? It didn't matter. The truth was, I didn't want to be an Elite. I didn't want to leave Grandma behind.

Estrelle's overcoat folded as she leaned toward me. Instinctively, I leaned back, not wanting her face so close to mine.

"That is a bold thing to say..." she breathed, her minty breath entering my nostrils. "What is your name?" She reached for my face, but I pulled away.

"Silver," I said.

She narrowed her eyes on me, deep lines spreading across her face. "And why on Earth would you refuse immortality, Silver?"

My eyes darted toward the crowd, and that's when I saw her. Mother. Only, she didn't look like Mother. She looked like a monster... like a

demon from hell. Her dark hair, wiry and muddy, made her look deathly pale. Her eyes, usually jade green like mine and Grandma's, looked black under her protruding brows. She curled her lip over her front teeth and scowled at me like she was trying to murder me with her mind.

Maybe this had been a mistake, after all. Mother would never forgive me for this. But when I caught Grandma's soft eyes, I felt confident in my decision.

"I want to stay here," I said. "With my family."

Estrelle smirked, but it felt fake. It was the kind of smile someone gets when they're enraged and doing everything in their power to hold back an outburst.

She must have thought I was delusional for giving up a life in Olympus. Maybe she didn't understand anything about family.

Sighing, she pushed on her knees and stood straight. "Suit yourself, Silver."

She turned to the girl next to me, who I thought might die of a heart attack, and said, "What might your name be?"

"A-A-Annabelle T-T-T-yson."

Estrelle quickly composed herself, though it was apparent by the way she cringed that she hated stuttering. Either that, or she hated any form of extreme emotion.

"Come," she ordered, and Annabelle followed her toward the horses, her legs wobbly.

When they'd reached the front of the crowd, Estrelle grabbed Annabelle's tiny wrist and raised it so high that Annabelle stood on her tippy toes.

"Annabelle Tyson, Elite of Olympus!" she shouted, and the crowd went wild.

As clapping and cheering erupted throughout Division 9, Estrelle led Annabelle toward a carriage near the gates. I stood still as countless eyes turned on me. What were they thinking? That I'd lost my mind? I didn't care. I felt like I'd made the right decision, and I was prepared to

defend it.

The crowd became so loud and distracting that I didn't notice her at first. It was only when she drew in nearer that I saw her—Mother. She ran toward me with her fingers curled and her mouth agape, shouting things I couldn't hear. Her face, ghost white only moments ago, was now so red that it might as well have been dripping with beet juice.

As she ran toward me, I couldn't move. I wanted to run, but I couldn't.

“Fool... ish... g... l!”

Her words became more audible the closer she got, and her mouth seemed to open wider and wider with every venomous word.

“You foolish girl! What have you done? You're dead! Do you hear me?”

Right before she lunged at me, several men managed to grab her and pin her to the ground. She shook violently under them, mud splashing all over her face, and shouted things that didn't make any sense. Had I broken her? Had she snapped?

Estelle, seemingly disgusted by Mother's behavior, walked toward us, rubbing her thumb and index finger together as if the sight of my mother were enough to make her feel dirty.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked Mother.

“She's an abomination!” Mother shouted, her voice a throaty growl.

Still calm, Estelle pressed the heel of her leather boot on top of Mother's hand. Something crunched, and Mother shouted out in pain.

“You will do well to mind your behavior,” Estelle said, eyes aimed at Mother's monstrous face. “Should I receive word that you laid a hand on this girl, you will lose your head.”

Mother breathed out hard, her teeth clenched.

Why was Estelle defending me? She didn't even know me. I wanted to thank her, but I knew it was best to keep my mouth shut.

“Do you understand?” Estelle said, adding more weight against Mother's hand.

“Yes!” Mother cried out.

Smiling, Estrelle pulled away, returned to her horse, and mounted it. “Keep up the wonderful work, everyone. You have made the Elites very happy this year.”

Everyone beamed as if blessed by the gods.

It made me sick to my stomach.

Guiding her horse toward the gates, Estrelle waved a hand above her head. “I shall see you all again soon.”

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