

Chapter One

Riot

The sickening taste of metal that is coating my mouth becomes unbearable. I started to cough up the chemical tar that I have been inhaling for the past 17 hours. This happens every time I leave the factory, but it is still shocking. Walking down the streets I put my hands on one of the walls that is flanking the alleyway and leads to the border of Nyx, which meets the Quagmire. The smoke is so bad I have to keep my eyes closed, but this is just my daily routine now. The Nyx is known for Its factories which come with the smoke and chemicals, but the smog gets so much worse this time of year. You can feel it stick to your hot sweaty skin. This place got more rotten even in the one year that I have been working here. The Nyx has had a black cloud over it as far back as I can remember, but there are stories that say it once had clean air like the rest of our country, and that it was one of the most highly populated (and richest) sectors in Altis; however, it is now deserted except for the workers that only stay as long as their shifts. This is still the richest province outside of Novet, and that is where all the Golds live. Normally people don't step foot in here unless they need the money, and in truth, that is why I'm here. The thing with my family -- and most people who live in the Quagmire-- once you turn

thirteen, you go to work even if you are a girl like me and it is illegal. Thirteen is the first year that you are out of basic education and get to bring in money.

There is more money in the factories of the Nyx than in any jobs of the Quagmire because working here is like signing your death certificate. They take anyone that is willing; even the “boys” that they know are girls. They don’t think twice about hiring us -- the owners just need as many hands that they can get a hold of to make their goods that will be shipped away to soldiers fighting in the war. The owners are also the richest people in Altis--other than Golds--so they get a little bit of freedom awarded to them, and it can be taken away at any time if they don’t manufacture enough--by which I mean, whatever the Golds decide isn’t enough that day.

Girls aren’t technically allowed to work until they have gone to The Omaska Academy for Young Women and the Pundits decide if you will be one of the “lucky” ones and picked to become a Paramour for the Golds. The rest get to go back to where they came from in Altis and get one of the jobs that are for women; but women usually just stay home after they get married and have kids, which is customarily right after you leave the Academy. This was my last year to work in a boy’s job, so I picked the factories because of the money. Also, being the first child is a girl in my family and with my four--now three-- older brothers who could continue to work the high paying jobs and give as much as they can to my parents, I felt that I should give extra this year because of the little to no money I will be getting after the Academy.

As I drag my body down the street, I keep losing my footing. This shift really wore me down. My stomach won’t stop its hunger rumbling; I didn’t get any breaks, so I haven’t eaten since I left my house at 4 this morning. My head hurts from lack of sleep and I can barely get my legs and arms to

work. I don't have to worry about anyone being on the streets at this time of night, so I reach up and pull my brother's hat off my head. Taking out the pins that have been in it for too long, my long brown hair falls down--I can feel it frizzing already from the July heat. It also sticks to me like a second skin, but I'm too drained to even try and fix it. I am craving the fresh air; I can feel my lungs char with every breath from being here too long. I can slowly feel the black chemical filled-fog lighten as I get further from the Nyx and closer to the Quagmire. I move as fast as I possibly can without exerting too much energy. There is no running in the Nyx. You run, you start panting, the panting leads to gasping for breath because of the smog, which leads to not being able to breathe, and that then leads to a worker's untimely death. The King put out a decree--when the smoke got so bad and people kept on dying--that said it is illegal to do anything but walk.

Walking out of Nyx, I go as far away from that place as I can before I stop. There is one good thing the Golds have done with their powers and that is containing their death fog to just the Nyx--once you exit, there is clean and fresh air all around. I always stop here. I can hear the men inside the only pub here, and they should have stopped drinking about 3 hours ago. They are having a delightful time annoying the musicians by singing loudly, and overall, being rambunctious. It is always loud with the workers and locals, but it is extra aggravating tonight: I can't even think, let alone breathe. I take one last deep breath before I return to my aching body and disheveled mind. Slowly I open my eyes that have been closed since I left the factory. As required, I'd memorized my route home. Now I blink quickly a few times, giving my eyes time to remember what it means to be used. As my head turns towards the pub I notice that there is about a herd of horses and one royal carriage--it is dripping with the royal family's colors-- waiting outside. Looking at the pub I can see the wood

shaking. I stare at it for a while to make sure it isn't just my eyes being weird from lack of sleep, or them being closed for my whole walk through the Nyx, or from any chemicals that might have seeped through my eyelids. I turn my head up to the sky, trying to tune out the commotion of the pub. Looking up at the night sky I try to focus on the stars and just breathe. The feeling of calmness and comfort that I always get from them washes over me. I close my eyes again, thinking about how minuscule I am in this world.

As I start walking again: I don't open my eyes. Just like in the Nyx, I know the route by heart. Walking away from the pub, the noises slowly start to fade and I can finally breathe correctly again. A gust of wind blows the few pieces of my hair that aren't captive of the sweat and dirt that my skin is submerged in. As I am pulling my hair from my face, my foot hits into something hard, and then I am falling. I try to put my arms out to catch myself but, before I can, I fall on something that isn't the ground, and I feel arms wrap around me. All my muscles tighten, making me wince from the pain. My eyes shoot open and I see the chest that I am laying on. As I scramble to get up I heard a low husky voice.

"Here, I'll help you. But you have to stop moving," the person says with a laugh in his voice. I freeze, but not because of what he said, but because I know he is a man. Slowly he rolls me off of him so that I'm laying on my back, looking up at the stars. "I know you know this, but it is not safe for girls to be out at night," he says calmly. My eyes widen, and panic takes over my body. Why did he say that, what is he going to do to me?

"No," I squeak out, "I'm not." I say deeper, this time in my imitation of my brother's voice.

“No! It is nothing like that!” he says quickly, knowing where my mind went, where it still is, “I just mean, umm, that it’s not safe and uh...” I turn my head to look at him as he continues to struggle to find the words that won’t make me terrified. He looks about my age, maybe older -- he has brown eyes that capture me in their muddy whirls and blond hair with loose curls falling down his face which adds a boyish feature to him. We are so close I can see the little dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He is smiling at me which makes a dimple appear on the left side of his face. “Just your hair was in my face and tangled up in between us, so I figured you were a girl,” he says and looks back up at the stars, “and you have nothing to worry about. I won’t say or do anything, I promise. It’s just not safe, which you know,” he finishes, and for some reason I believe him.

Relaxing a little bit I let my body sink into the ground. We lay there side by side for a while in silence, both looking at the stars. Out of nowhere my stomach starts rumbling.

“Hungry?”

“Umm yeah, I haven’t eaten since 4,” I say in my normal voice, not trying to mask that I am a girl anymore. *Why am I doing this? Riot you have to leave, you should leave. Now.*

“No dinner?” he says and I can hear the smile in his voice.

“No, 4am, yesterday morning.”

“Oh, umm I just—,”

“I didn’t get any breaks over my shift,” I say even though he should know this being in the military.

“So wait. That was, what? 17 hours?”

“Yup, just another day in the Nyx,” I say drily not knowing what else to say. My stomach rumbles again reminding me that I was on my way home. I start to sit up.

“Wait.”

“Umm, okay?” I say cautiously.

“Hi, my name is Sheldon,” he says confidently as he holds out his hand.

“I’m Finley, but everyone calls me Riot.’

“Well, Riot, it was nice to meet you,” he says with a smile that makes his dimples come out as I shake his hand.

“Yeah, you too.” Standing, I start walking away from Sheldon. I feel for some reason that I should turn around, and when I do I see him looking at me with a concerned look that I can see through the darkness of the forest .

“What!” I yell, somehow finding the courage.

“Are you going to put your hair up?”

“Umm, no, no one is out this time of night, and if they are they’re usually too drunk to register that i’m a girl or remember me.”

“I’ll remember you.”

“Oh well, okay. Yeah,” I mumbled as I felt a blush invade my face and move down my body.

“Why don’t I walk you home?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m already halfway home,” I say, but he is already standing. I didn’t realize how tall he is. I watch him as he takes three big strides towards me--I can’t seem to look away.

“It’s no problem,” Sheldon says as he stops in front of me. I have to crank my head up to look at him.

“Okay, it’s about a ten minute walk,” I say reluctantly because I don’t see him backing down anytime soon, and I really want food and my makeshift bed in the living room of the house. I’m not going to bring him to my actual house. I’ll let him walk me to my friend Shade’s house, which is about 5 minutes closer to the Nyx, so a shorter walk, and, I am not bringing a complete stranger to where my family and I live.

“Okay,” he says with a smile and a wave of his hand, “after you.”

“Sure,” I say as I start walking further into the Quagmire with Sheldon at my side. After a few awkward seconds of silence, I look over at him.

“You know, the myth behind people with blue eyes is that they are descendants of Sedna.”

“The goddess?” I ask, wondering what he is talking about. We never learn things like that in Basic. I only heard of the Goddesses and Gods from word of mouth in the Quagmire. *How does he know?*

“Yup, that’s her.”

“I didn’t know that about blue eyes. Well I don’t know anything really about the Gods and Goddesses.”

“Really?” he asks with a bewildered expression that is consuming his face.

“Umm, yeah, do people normally know about them?”

“I guess I wouldn’t know,” he says more to himself than me.

“So who is this Sedna?”

“Right, she was the Goddess of water and all the animals that live in water. It was known that she was the most powerful of all the Gods and Goddesses.”

“Wait, how many are there.”

“Of the Gods and Goddesses?” he asks rhetorically, “too many to get into,” he says laughing a little bit, reminding me of his boyish charm that is so bewitching.

“Okay. So Sedna?”

“Well she was the most powerful out of all of them and Kebili--the God of fire--was always trying to somehow prove that he was tougher than Sedna,” Sheldon says. His voice changed into a serious, storytelling voice that my father always had when he told me and my siblings a story at bedtime. “And one day he felt that she was humiliating him by showing off, he decided to get rid of her. Kebili didn’t know how to overpower Sedna, so when she was alone by the water using her powers he snuck up on her from behind and slit her throat. She fell into the ocean after Kebili killed her. See the thing about Sedna is her blood was blue, and when she fell into the ocean the water turned blue and all the animals that live in water were created,” Sheldon finishes, but he didn’t explain how my blue eyes contribute to Sedna’s myth.

“So that’s Sedna, but what does she have to do with why I have blue eyes?”

“Oh,” he says with a shake of his head and a small smile, “Well when she died Kebili thought that was it. He killed her and she never had kids, so no reason why he now wasn’t the most powerful God. But the myth says that she did have a child that no one knew about. It is said that the child hid her identity from everyone, so Kebili never found her. Sedna’s daughter went on to have children, and all of those children are said to be the people with blue eyes.”

“So I am a decendent?”

“Yes and no. The myth also says that all of Sedna’s descendants have her powers of controlling water and the ability to control all the water animals. Since no one has these powers, people assume that the myth isn’t true, and blue eyes are just some genetic mutation that happens.”

“Now I’m a mutation?” I say in a joking tone as I look up.

“No, no, no. I don’t mean--” Sheldon says quickly as he stops walking, but he gets cut off by my laughter.

“I’m just messing with you.”

“Oh,” he says and starts laughing with me. We start walking again, still laughing as we go. The sound of trees and bushes rustling make us both freeze. He grabs my arm and pulls me behind a tree deeper in the forest and away from the dirt road.

“Put your hair up,” he says quickly, I can hear the fear in his voice. My hands shake as I twist my hair and throw on my hat. I look up at Sheldon, he is watching the road intensely.

“Do you--”

“Wait,” he says as he puts his finger to my mouth to quiet me.

I hear the footsteps getting closer and closer. He takes his finger from my lips slowly and turns towards me, in a whisper he tells me.

“We need to be quiet.”

I turn my gaze to the road and off of Sheldon. Two men in royal armor come into view. I can see their mouths moving, but can’t make out what they are saying. I start to move again since they are

in the military, we aren't vulnerable anymore. I only take one step, and Sheldon grabs me and pins me up against the rigid tree, his hands on either side of me.

"What are you doing,"

"They are in the military."

"So?"

"Well, you are too, so we can go," I tell him, and push myself off of the tree. That was a mistake, now my face is an inch away from his. His eyes are locked with mine and he seems to be confused, but his watchful brown eyes are still dripping with panic and worry, so I don't ask him.

"That doesn't matter. You are still a girl," he tells me as he looks away.

Well that shut me up. I slump back into the tree. Sheldon is keeping an eye on the two men while I live in my mind. They finally get close enough that I can hear them, but what they are saying doesn't make sense.

"The Prince must have walked this way," the taller guy says to a smaller, younger guard.

"He wouldn't have walked this far away from the pub."

"Maybe he did."

"Why would anyone go into the Quagmire on purpose," the smaller one says as he laughs at his own joke. I wince when he says that. I know the stereotype of the Quagmire, but no one ever voices it usually. I guess it is different when you are in the military.

"I don't know. Let's keep going."

"We probably passed him already. And he can take care of himself, he isn't two year old. Let's head back."

“We should really--.”

“He does this all the time. Lets go,” the smaller one doesn’t wait for an answer and just walks away. The taller guard follows behind. Once we can’t hear them anymore, Sheldon moves from in front of me and walks back to the road. I follow behind him, just like the guard.

“What was... that was...”

“I should go,” he tells me before I can finish what I was saying, “I should go help them.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense”

“How far away from your home are we?”

“Just about five minutes. Not that much longer.”

“Good. Will you be okay getting back?” he asks, his worry coming back from earlier.

“Yeah, I do it every night.”

“It was nice meeting you Riot.”

“Yeah It was nice meeting you too,” I tell him as I drop my gaze to the ground. I see his feet turn and then they are out of view. *Was that it?*

“I’ll see you,” he yells to me. When I look up, he is a few yards away from me.

“Yeah!” I yell back to him, not wanting to ask how that would ever happen again. I turn away from him this time, and head towards my house.

What just happened.