

Chapter 3 - Little spark

“I was bad at school, kids made judging glances at me, but despite that I still liked to be there more than home... Getting yelled at, being made fun of felt better than...

Nothing.”

1207, 3rd cycle, 84th

The sun peeks through the window, with curtains pulled lazily to the side, illuminating the specks of dust silently twirling in the kitchen. Sophia and her father eating at the table, the only sound can be heard is the occasional careful scraping of the ceramic plate by the fork and knife. The air has the fresh smell of a rain that just finished pouring down on a forest. The air is always humid in Nolas, but in the third and fourth cycle, rains often last for days if not for weeks. However, the past days rain has been sparse. The lack of rumbling of raindrops and thundering makes Sophia feel anxious.

The silence is deafening. The only sound is the broken ceiling from the damage of the axe, drips every now and then, and hits the floor on the very same spot where a small pot was placed, almost full with the rainwater.

Matheus releases an annoyed grunt after the long silence, another drop hitting the pot of water.

Sophia looks at him hunched over his food, and carefully starts speaking.

“We could try fixing it...” – her voice cracking after the long silence.

Matheus after a moment of pause, stands up, picks up his axe leaned against the wall and walks towards the entrance, leaving his plate of eggs and cooked berries behind.

“Forget it.” – He exclaims with a deep tired voice. “I got work to do.”

As he walks out, he slams the door behind himself. Or maybe it was just the wind pulling on the door, but that’s just her being hopeful.

She looks at the closed door for a while before taking her now frustrated expression away from it. She finishes her food in silence, thinking. She tries to distract her mind but her thoughts are filled with frustration bordering on hate.

Hate for her father? No. Hate for the government? Maybe, it feels such an abstract concept, it’s hard to grasp and hate on. It’s the indescribable hate towards herself. But why doe...

“Sophia!!” – The calling of a man shakes Sophia out of her distant gaze. She looks down as the man hands her a leather fingerless glove with little pouch on top of it, which holds a glass vial, and from that, tubes going to the end of the fingertips. She looks up to the man’s face trying to regain her composure.

“Sophia, were you listening? You were looking right through your gloves” - the teacher looking at her with worry in his eyes. He had a gentle, kind of childlike face, puffy and a youthful smile, but his slightly receding hairline, large crooked nose and tall stature was the telling of an adult.

His formal teacher outfit was modified with many pockets, holding various tools, a few belts that held tubes and vials, probably for repair and replacement of the gloves. Behind him his cape flown in the gentle breeze in purple color. Plia sensitivity...

He holds her hand and she regains composure again

“Excuse me Mr Torin. I was just...” – She mumbles through her words.

Torin stands up and gives her a gentle smile

“Just pay attention now. Okay students, everyone got their vial and a glove?” - He exclaims while looking around.

The students are sitting neatly in rows on the grass field in front the school, with some trees spread out around them to provide shade. Sophia takes glances around and notices the boy with fluffy hair from Monarda’s class taking glances at her but looking away every time she looks at him. But she is used to this, everyone does this.

Torin stretches a bit and steps back, to see all the students.

“Then let’s get started, shall we? What you have in your hand is a glass with an alloy inside similar to what you got handed at the ceremony. The metal inside that was palatine alloyed with iron. However, this one has a nickel alloy in it.”

One boy cuts in with a bored attitude

“Monarda told us the basics of Palatine..”

“I bet she did.. Then rushed to the next subject!” – Torin snaps back with the same attitude, waving his arms to his side.

Some of the kids snicker at his casual reaction, even makes Sophia smile a little.

Torin puts his hands in front of his smile, and lowers them with a quick motion as he breaths out switching to a serious expression, then continues.

“This alloy, when it comes nearby living organisms, it forms a thick gas, and said gas begins to attract energy inside you, which is what we are going to use to lure your first blessing out!” He waves his arms and raises his voice - ”ALRIGHT, boring part is over kids, put on your gloves!!”

The sound of kids shuffling fills the field, and as it quiets down, he continues.

“Next, see the holder on your glove? Pop your glass vial into it, and screw it on tightly until you hear the seal breaking.”

Sophia screws on the little container which has a thin leather-like material burned on top of it as sealing, as she screws it onto the glove’s holder, a popping sound and notices a little switch near the holder.

She turns the switch, and sudden hissing sound breaks the silence of kids fiddling with their gloves. She quickly closes the switch and looks around nervously.

Torin points at her with a smile on his face - “Nice find Sophia, that’s the next step.”

He glances around for a moment, then adopts a more serious tone.

“But first, I want everyone to listen. This alone won’t do anything, just a little push into the right direction. You have to concentrate really hard for anything to happen, and it’s okay if nothing happens! Just stop if you feel pain and find your balance! You can seriously hurt yourself if you aren’t careful.”

The kids look at him silently, waiting, eventually Torin breaks the silence

“For me it took three weeks to get my first blessing out!” – He laughs awkwardly while scratching his head and looking away.

Hissing sound and the sharp stinging chemical smell of the gas fills the air as every student turns the switch on their gloves. A thick cloud begins to form nearby each kid, lingering near and only a thin mist is escaping the pockets of gas around them.

Torin walks slowly across them, carefully studying their expressions as they focus.

He eventually stops and grabs Sophia on the shoulder with a quick motion, who's clenching every muscle on her face trying to force it.

“WHOA WHOA, not like that! Relaxx! You have to feel things, if it helps, close your eyes and just try to catch some strange new sensation.”

He scratches his head and continues with a thoughtful expression – “It's hard to explain, but imagine I'm a shrubfox and I try to explain to you how to wiggle your tail!”

He articulates his words by shaking his hips as if there was a tail on the end, then pats her on the head and moves along.

Sophia smiles but it fades after he leaves as she focuses all her attention and closes her eyes.

From the distance Torin occasionally breaks the silence with teasing comments - “You will poop your pants if you struggle like that, concentrate but relax!”

Eventually he goes silent as well, and only the crowded noise of the gloves hissing can be heard.

The smell of the gas is harsh and stinging, but she gets used to it eventually. The mist flows between her arms and legs, and she begins to feel weightless for moments, similar to laying in bed with a high fever trying to fall asleep.

As her body relaxes and she's used to the sensations, her thoughts grow busy.

“Come on, there has to be something” – She thinks, irritated.

Eventually, tiny colorful sensations tingle her fingertips, which come and go without a pattern.

Surprised, she tries to catch those feelings.

But they fade.

“No no I have to keep it! Don’t go dammit!”

Her mind suddenly takes her to memories she ignored for long. She loses concentration, forces her eyes open to shake the thoughts out.

As her vision clears, she notices Torin in front of her crouching, watching her closely.

“Hey buddy are you okay?” – He whispers to her, with genuine worry on his face.

Sophia realizes her eyes been teary, quickly wipes it off and gives a fake smile.

“Yea, I just got it into my eyes”

Torin gives her a warm, honest smile – “Happens with the best of us. Don’t strain yourself.”

Sophia nods her head, and a sudden flicker of light catches her attention.

A boy cheers loudly, with a mix of surprise and pure joy on his face.

“Whoa! We got our first success!” – Torin announces proudly then continues, lowering his voice – “Now keep it quiet so the others can keep practicing”

Sophia looks back down on her gloves emitting gas, turns it off and looks at the kids who are joyful about bringing out their blessing in such a short time.

“Over 2 cycles passed. Half a year... and I still didn't have my first blessing, every other kid already had it.”

1208, 2nd cycle, 58th

School ended earlier than usual, so Sophia decided to explore the city. More so, she wanted to see the community housing she heard stories about. The massive structures built during the uprising, to hold massive number of soldiers and people after the Omdich burnt and destroyed most homes close to the wall on from the outside.

And there they were.

Trees reaching the width of several family homes, climbing all the way to the sky with the windows and branches breaking the flowing pattern of the connected, spiraling bark up to the top, where surprisingly small patches of leaves decorate the rim of the building. You would barely even notice them if you kept your eyes on the streets, as the bottom of these massive structures are filled with life carved into the base of it, many homes and shops hugging the housing in a circle, creating a fascinating sight. The streets are paved and follow a wave like patterns as the roots curve and shape the environment.

Sophia takes it all in, and takes glances towards groups of people just living their life.

A group of drunks singing a classic war song, holding each other by the shoulder. Several kids run by the street, hiding between the gaps of the shop walls, as another kid looks for them. A mother holding the hand of her child, who points at fruits hanging at one of the seller's stand.

She holds her eyes on them for a moment before turning into another street trying to dodge the heavy feeling taking her over.

As she strolls across the narrow passing of the darker corners, some noise catches her attention. She looks behind a pile of trash, and notices a small wooden box wiggling and making noises.

Looking around, she opens the latch, which was surprisingly cold to the touch.

With the top opening, a hissing little creature looks back at her, with an aggressive but terrified expression. It has a fluffy white fur, and flat face, its short and pointy ears are pulled back from fear, and its long body and tail are curled up into a ball.

Sophia looks at the creature with curiosity. As the little guy calms down, getting used to Sophia silently observing him, he starts curiously sniffing out of the box. She slowly reaches out. The critter barely larger than her two hands silently watches as she extends her hand towards him. When her finger reaches his soft fur, a sudden squeak and a wave of cold releases, shocking Sophia and pulling away.

“Whoa” – She whispers.

During that wave, she also felt a weird sensation. Something familiar yet distant.

An idea pops in her head, and pulls on her worn down training glove. She clearly been using it a lot, even if unsuccessfully.

A tiny cloud of gas form as she barely opens the valve, just enough to cover her hand. Then tries again.

She closes her eyes and concentrates as her hand get closer to the scared little creature.

Another wave of cold hits her pushing away the mist near her hand.

“I felt it! For a moment!” - Sophia announces to the animal full of excitement

“This means...My first blessing has to be cold!”

She turns and takes a bit of red fruit from her backpack; the plant has wavy green patterns on it.

She offers it to the spooked fluffy creature.

He stares at it for a while, sniffing and looking from multiple angles, before mustering up enough courage to take it. After the little guy decided that it is in fact a tasty treat, he calms down and lets Sophia pet him. Finishing his meal, he even starts climbing onto her arm sniffing for more treats.

“Aww you are not so spooked anymore, aren't you?”

She starts to giggle as the little paws tickle her skin.

“I'll call you Spook.”

As the bell of the castle tower echoes across the city, Sophia stands up quickly.

“Damned Nicron! I'm late!”

While running through the city, she takes her backpack and puts Spook into it, which he doesn't seem to mind, as there are even more fruits inside.

“Stay there, my dad wouldn't like me to bring home animals.”

When she arrives to her father leaning into Pickle, waiting, still panting from running all the way, she nonchalantly asks:

“Hey dad, I'm here. How was your day?”

The excitement in her voice catches him off guard and he pauses for a moment before replying.

“It was fine. Get on, we are already late.” – He only looking at her for a moment before walking towards Pickle.

The way home is silent, as usual. However, this time, Sophia has a smile sneaking through her otherwise blank expression. It even catches the attention of Matheus, who only takes quick glances at

her, his expression is empty as usual, but doesn't say anything besides some sighs or grunts.

When they arrive home, though the sun is just setting, inside the forest its already dark. Sophia quickly jumps off the moving mount and rushes into their house, closing her room's door behind her.

She opens her bag and Spook walks out of it disoriented from the travel, and eating everything.

“You have to be quiet for a while until I find you a good place...Or until I talk with dad about you.”

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A few days later in school, she is looking around curiously, with a piece of paper in her hand. She's annoyed to attend extra classes, but it's needed. She is the only one with no first blessing yet. Through the long corridors she finally finds the spiraling staircase she's been searching for.

While walking down, she looks at her piece of paper again to make sure.

“Anhi aid class. Down at 0A3...”

While thinking about the numbering of the building, she is reminded to that boy who helped her on her first day. Everyone else already got used to her presence, however she still catches his quick glances at her sometimes. Maybe she is lucky for not having a blessing, the other Anhi kid got his quickly, and everyone stares at him as if he was aiming a knife in their faces at all times.

The darkness quickly consumes the underground walls, with candle lighting the way down. When the stairs end, the single long corridor with wet stone brick walls extends into the darkness, patches of candle and some gold-palatine alloy orbs in-between giving a faint glow. Between each light is a thick wooden door, slightly rotten in places from the warm moist air.

As she carefully walks forward, one door opens, and the masked teacher with a wooden stump replacing his right leg makes a distinct sound as it hits the rock floor.

“You’ve grown a lot since the ceremony, Sophia, right?” – The teacher exclaims in a low raspy voice, his voice echoing through the underground walls.

“Y-yes. And you...?”

“Ah of course my manners, I’m Werniel” – He speaks animatedly with his body, placing it on his chest with an open hand.

He waves his hand towards the open door, turning his head as well, the warm orb light reflecting beautifully from the copper patterns of the mask.

She looks in carefully, confused to find only dim lights and a pool of water in the middle of the small room.

“Is this the class?” – She asks, raising an eyebrow.

“A class just for you, young lady. Well, in general to Anhi students who struggle. Which is not rare...” He notes, as he walks to the pool and leans to put his finger in it.

“Anhi is a special type, unlike with most where your focus is on special sensations and feelings. With ours, it’s more about...The lack of...so to speak. A troubled mind can hold back your blessing, and strong emotions can take it *out of control*.” – He ends his speech with a lean of his head towards her his serious eyes showing through the eyeholes of the mask.

“But Torin said-”

Werniel quickly cuts her off - “That prick knows the general concepts but he is more of an engineer than an Adept. You should listen to a fellow Iriosz migrant like myself.”

“Iriosz?” – She asks confused by that word.

“Madsand, as the Nolani people would call us. It’s a mock name that fits their propaganda.” – He explains pointing at his mask.

“I was born here. I’m not like you.” – She stares at him with resolve in her eyes.

He lets out a short chuckle then replies.

“Ah, but does it matter when we are treated the same?”

He then points at the room again, trying to cut the topic short.

Sophia takes another look, and after a bit of thought she asks –

“So what do you want me to do? Are we going to spend the whole time here?”

Werniel pulling his long graying hair to the side and scratches the back of his head

“Well, first off, you will have to undress-”

“No way.” – She snaps back

“Let. me. finish. I won’t be here. After I leave, I lock the door. You undress, extinguish all the lights, and lay down in the warm water, let yourself float. No sound. no feeling, no sight, let yourself be consumed by your thoughts alone. Relax your mind. Process your thoughts.”

“Is this necessary?” – She rubs her arm visible discomfort forming on her face.

“Of course not! But at the same time, you need it. Well, see you in two hours! Then we talk.”

Werniel walks out and without hesitation locks the door behind her. The steps of his wooden leg on the stone floor slowly fade then disappear.

In the dimly lit room the silence is deafening. Sophia looks around and checks the door if it's locked well. Yep. It won't even budge. She observes humid room. This looks like an old bath house, she learned in history classes the city was built around a source of hot water coming out of the ground.

She hesitates a bit more, but sighs and begins to undress. She takes the metal casings hanging next to the lights to cover all the orbs, and takes one orb to the edge of the pool before covering it as well. She slides her legs in the warm water, then submerges herself in it. After a bit of sitting, she lays back and the salty water pushes her up.

Staring into the empty darkness she slowly relaxes her whole body and takes slower breaths.

“Thoughts. Nothing else. Just me and my thoughts.”

Werniel with a stack of papers around him, fiddling with his paintbrush back in the teacher's office, Torin is sitting on the other side of his desk, thinking.

“What a peculiar kid. Never seen Anhi student who couldn't bring out their first blessing in less than a cycle.” – Werniel thoughtfully exclaims tapping the chin on his mask.

Torin hunches over his chair, his eyes express a sliver of worry - “Poor kid. Probably a lot of emotional baggage.”

“Well, she either deals with them, or she will fail on the exam in a year. The school can't pay failures to stay.”

Torin looks at him frowning.

“That’s really insensitive...”

“That’s life Torin. Oh, by the way, I referred to you as a prick this time.” – Even if not visible, Werniel’s smile can be heard through the mask.

Torin rolls his eyes and lets out a big sigh, though a smile sneaks onto his mouth eventually as well.

As silence fills the room, Torin goes thoughtful again.

“Excuse my ignorance, but what does this exercise achieves exactly?”

“It is fine Torin, this is only your second year.” He says reassuringly – “School... work, chores; well, life, keeps us busy. People never really have time to feel their pains. If you could avoid feeling the pain of a broken arm, the choice would be obvious. Right?”

“Right.” – Torin nods, listening to the older teacher.

“Well, healing of the mind is a curious thing. You can ignore the pain. But it doesn’t fix what’s broken. You have to live and experience pain to its fullest to heal it.”

Torin leans on his palm in the chair replying doubtfully

“Don’t you just forget it with enough time?”

“Sure. But you believe the broken arm will heal properly if you ignored it? Most likely you will have to break it once again, on purpose, to make it right. And nothing is more terrifying than countdown to an impending pain.”

Werniel stands up with a big groan, turns around, and slaps away the peekbug trying to climb inside from the open window.

“If she refuses to get through it now, she will pay the price tenfold later.”

He looks at the distant watchtower holding his arms behind his back.

“An hour passed already. She must be at the good part by now.”

Down at the basement, the silence is broken by sounds of sobbing creeping through the thick wooden door.