

Prologue

The forest is quiet and dark. The two moons are lighting the sky, breaking the darkness with pillars of light peeking through. Some spider-like creatures with one large eye covering most of their head, group together in the moonlight lit branches.

A man with long white hair, round glasses and a sickly pale skin sitting in the darkness on a long-fallen tree, fiddling with a gold-colored orb, which every now and then pulsing with a faint light and shakes on its own. He looks up watching the trees, impatiently.

In the distance, moving branches and shaking leaves break the silence slowly, and get increasingly louder as something in the crown of the forest approaches. The man stands up, and puts away the orb, into one of his many pockets inside his long dark coat. His coat makes a clinking noise as he pulls it together and the vials with red liquid inside vanish between the layers of cloth.

From the trees the sound stops for a moment, then hits the ground with a thump. The face of the girl is revealed through a sliver of moonlight, though most of it covered in a scarf.

- “You got it?” – Says the man as he stands up and reaches his hand forward
- “Yes,” – The girl gives an old rugged diary to the man, then hands him a letter - “This letter was in front of Gareth’s home, it might be also useful.”

- “Good. We need to read through it if there is any more traces of her mentioned inside. She’s ruining our plans” – He says and clenches his jaw.
- The girl looks at the man’s coat, as the orbs light peeks out from the inside - “Am I free to go now?”
- He glances up on the blood red moon– “I still need a few more things to be done.”

They began walking through the forest, the girl opens the diary and begins reading.

Chapter 1

“1208, 3rd cycle, 70th

„Hey diary? I’m Sophia, Gareth said I should treat a diary like a person, so I’ll try. I was also told doing this was supposed to help me. It makes sense from starting from the beginning right, just to catch up.”

“I don’t remember much from when I was a kid. I loved helping dad in his work, though I bet I was more of a bother. We always played together with dad (I loved fighting with sticks), and mother always told me stories.

“She always talked about the great Adept, who despite being only 17, started changing the world for the better, and liberated our country. I always wanted to be like her, strong, powerful yet kind and caring. I wanted to be like Marquette”

“I wish I would remember more of my mom, but things happened when I was still really young. All I have left of her was this necklace she gave me, she told me as long as I wear it she will always be with me.”

“I wish that would feel true”

###

1202, 2nd cycle, 45th

It's a sunny day in the middle of the far away peaceful forest, massive trees reaching far into the sky and shrouding the ground in darkness, the sight of this wonderful forest is still visible from the distant capital city of Nolas, Mountain Pass.

The wide dirt road swirls in the dark forest branching off into a log house in the depths of it.

The Shadestell family lives there, with their daughter Sophia. The large muscular father using a saw to cut logs into smaller pieces. His build and wrinkles on his face tells of his hard work

but his clean pale white skin and shining blonde hair would tell otherwise. The mother is the opposite, her dark brown skin covered in tiny cuts and marks, telling of a rough life, however her speech and movements are delicate, and her hair is a soft blue like a clear sky.

She's showing the little girl who got the paleness of her dad and the hair of her mom, how to attach the saddle and carriage to the large mount the family carries goods to the city with.

The creature is called a Grompas, a tough bug reaching over three meters in length, its body resembles one of a roach but with six thick legs on each side. It is munching on large pieces of wood, and makes a seemingly satisfied rumbling noise.

Sophia starts running to her father, Matheus with excitement "Dad! Mom said I will be six in..." - She begins opening her fingers and count, then shows her hand - "...eight days! I can go to Adept school then, right? I will do magic!"

His smile starts fading and looks at Hanna, who's washing the scales of the creature. As he walks up to her with a firm stride, she smiles and turns to him.

"Look how stiff her scales are, I think she will start molting soon" - she explains, - "I can feel this time they will sell wonderfully."

Matheus grabs her by her arm firmly - "Did you tell Sophia she can go to Adept school?!" His expression is gentle but firm, with worry slipping through his gaze.

"Oh dear it's okay," - Hanna's nonchalant smile doesn't fade - "She is just a child, let her have dreams" - She takes his hands from her arm and slides it down in her palm - "Also, the school pays for new students."

"Just because Nolas earned its independence, most of the world is still in war with the empire," - He exclaims, his tone getting more intense with each word - "What if she gets enlisted in another war as an Adept soldier?"

“At least she could defend herself, Marq is here to protect us anyways.” - She says.

Anger starts to escape through his eyes – “You mean her tool of a brother in power who can’t do anything! Marq is not protecting us, she’s fighting on the other side of the world! Sophia won’t become an Adept!”

Hanna holds his hand harder, firmly grasping on it – “Please don’t yell.” – Her voice stays calm – “She will be okay, she will make friends and learn important things. Most people these days have a blessing, why shouldn’t she learn hers too?”

An unexplained feeling of calmness washes over Matheus - “I...I don’t know.” – He looks at teary eyed Sophia who watched the two of them argue – “I want her to be safe.”

He turns to the little girl and crouches down to her level – “Alright, daddy will let you go.”

Sophia wipes her eyes – “Okay, I wanna, but I don’t wanna make you sad.”

Matheus helps her wipe her eyes, then hugs her close
“You won’t Sophia, you will make us all proud”

###

1202, 3rd cycle, 60th

Sophia is sleeping in her parents bed. Her own bedroom is neat and untouched, a layer of dust forming on the furniture. Her mother opens the door and shakes her up

“Good morning Sophia, let’s eat and prepare, today is the day!”

Slowly opening her eyes and rubbing them she realizes what was said. She jumps off the bed, still in her night clothes, and rushes downstairs to eat.

Her mother made prepared bread with cooked mushrooms and scrambled grompa egg. These eggs are sweet, and the yolk is almost greenish, but it tastes amazing with the right spices. These meals were common as the warm and rainy land of Nolas is abundant of large edible mushrooms.

Sophia hurrying, eats them and almost chokes as she gulps down the tea prepared next to her plate in a mug larger than her hands.

Hanna, walks downstairs and looks at her excited daughter “Don’t rush, your father is still preparing Pickle” – which was the name of their bug mount, named after it’s big green cucumber like body.

Sophia opens the front door quickly and smiles as she sees her father almost ready with Pickle. She runs out but her feet touch the cold morning stones on the ground, and realizes she still needs to dress up, so she rushes back, all while wearing a smile on her face.

As Matheus done with attaching the leash to the hardened antenna of the giant bug, he goes and picks up a large piece of log, and gives it to her. Pickle starts crunching on it, pieces of wet wood chipping away.

Hannah walks up to him and gives him a kiss.

“Don’t stress about it, it will be alright.” – she says as she rubs his cheek – “I heard the theatre is a beautiful sight”

Sophia runs out again, jumps and climbs on top of the mount and looks eagerly at her dad. – “Let’s go! Let’s go dad!!”

Matheus smiles and shakes his head – “Alright alright..” – He climbs on top as well, and pulls on the leash, which in turn pulls the grompa’s head up, making her start walking forward.

“Fornin bless you!” - says Hanna as she waves to them as they journey out of the forest.

###

As they leave the forest, more and more beams of light break the darkness of the road. The muddy road begins to have blades of grass sticking out of it, gradually increasing in density as the trees become sparse and short. Matheus could name the trees and rocks along this road and remember all, this is a route he takes often, to trade his goods in the city.

Sophia's eyes are opening wider as the forest opens into an endless field of grass and crops, with some farm houses in the distance so small, you could squash them between your fingers.

"So pretty!!" – Sophia turns her head into all directions soaking in the flat land with two mountains in the distance

"It's definitely a sight to behold." – He pats her head - "But I wouldn't trade anything for the privacy of our home"

"I would! I would never run out of things to look at!"

The road is sunk next to the field of wheat with multiple branches, forming a oval shaped cocoon of seeds. The field is still green, so there is plenty of time before the harvest.

They pass a farm house near the road, with a chubby middle-aged man walking out with a crying toddler near the entrance, as the mother is scolding the older child.

Sophia watches them carefully, and asks his father politely – "Dad? Why they are all squinting?"

"Sophia, don't be rude. They are from Cumberklot, on those lands everyone looks like that." – Matheus explained as he waved to the family

"Oh, sorry dad."

"It's okay, they probably looking at us thinking we look funny with our bright colorful hairs" – He said with a smile in a lighthearted tone - "That's what makes us humans interesting"

###

The large bug moves steadily with its many legs, and with time they reach the city walls, that tower fifteen meters into the air, woven together by green vines as thick as several humans. The structure of the vine walls are seemingly natural, however near the top where guards patrol it gets thinner and more defined. Down at the base of the walls, there are men leashing up Grompas similar to Pickle, however they vary in color and their horn is all unique in shape and size. The buzz of a crowd, coins in purses, and yelling fills up the space as the surrounding space of the wall is filled with quickly made tents where people sell their wares.

Sophia is stomping her foot she can barely hold her excitement soaking in all the new information - “So many people! Wow, how did they make that wall?”

Her Father’s attention is on the crowd as he tries to navigate through the dense crowd and lead their mount at a stable. “Oh sorry sweetie, I was focusing,” - He rubs the back of sophia – “Hundreds of Adepts made these walls before we gained independence, to protect the people”

“We don’t need protection in the forest?” – Sophia asks still staring at the walls with open mouth.

“No because your mom scares everyone, even the old empire” – Matheus winks at Sophia with a smirk on his face

“I can see that...” - She nods seriously.

He leads Pickle in a stable and takes a Shimmer and gives it to the boy at the stable. The boy inspects it, as he holds the coin the core starts flickering with a dim light. He seems satisfied, pockets the coin then gives Matheus a paper with a number and stamp mark on it, then paints the same number on the back of Pickle.

Sophia watches the exchange with intrigue, she will definitely ask a lot of questions later. However, there is no time, because they are walking inside the city now, and the only thing holding her back from running through the gates is holding her father's hand.

As they walk through, a long road with densely packed buildings hugging it from both sides open up to their eyes. the buildings are packed on top of each other like a disorganized pile of toy bricks, yet there is a feeling of order and beauty in the structures. The streets are packed with people bumping into each other and rubbing into one another so she grasps her father's hand tighter. Matheus notices, looks down on the nervous Sophia, picks her up and puts her on his shoulders.

"See, everyone is here for the Adept ceremony, just like us" – He says while holding onto Sophia.

"So many people! Too many people..." – She's still tense as she looks around.

"Hah it's not this chaotic normally..." – He searches through the crowd absently, then rubs Sophia's hand with his thumb as he holds her – "Hey! This is your big day remember?"

Sophia somewhat relaxes on his shoulder.

"Alright, I think this is the way" – He says and turns into another street.

From street to street, he follows where the crowd flows and eventually they turn to reach the sight of the Arena – A massive circular theatre made out of stone bricks supported by large trees reaching up and over hugging the sides. The crowd flows inside through multiple entrances like ants into their nest. Another entrance has a shorter, but static line, this is where Matheus stands.

“I never seen the arena before, it looks amazing, I can’t wait to tell your mother about it”

“Daad! Why are we standing here? Everyone else is getting inside!” – She says, frustrated.

“Those people are only here to watch, we have to register you for the ceremony.”

So they stand in line and wait. Almost an hour passes when they reach the entrance, and Sophia wakes up as Matheus takes her off his shoulders. Her vision is blurry and the noise of the crowd keeps her dozed for a while but begins to focus on the conversation

“Documents please.”

“Please write address, birth date below the name there.”

“Okay thank you, go up on the left stairs.”

Sophia’s eyes open wide as her dad walks to the stairs and the officer pushes her to a different entrance – “Dad!!”

Matheus smiles and waves to her – “Don’t worry sweetie, I will be watching you from the crowd! It’s all okay.”

Sophia wants to say something more, but her eyes get teary and her throat starts to feel strange, she knows if she says something she will cry. And she is a big girl, she doesn’t want to cry, kids her age probably don’t even cry anymore.

As she enters the long curving hallway there are a bunch of kids standing in line, the one in front of her crying. Strangely, this makes her feel a bit better about herself.

###

Matheus spotted a free seat between the sea of sitting crowd, and begins to squeeze himself through people each step of progress is followed by four steps of apologies, but eventually he reaches the seat.

“Is this seat free?” – He asks the man sitting next to it.

The man shrugs then replies with a smug smile - “I didn’t pay for mine”

Matheus grudgingly sighs and sits down.

From his seat he is close to the stone podium sticking out of the side of the arena’s inside. This is where the current leader, Arlon Nean is sitting on a large padded chair. Next to him are guards firmly standing in their leather armors, with a hint of metal on the forearms and shins.

There is also a strange man wearing casual outfit and flip-flops, a cape covering only his left side, and messy short dark blue hair. If he wouldn’t stand like the guards he would look like an everyday citizen.

As Arlon stands up and picks up a large cone shaped tool the crowd goes silent gradually.

“Welcome everyone to the 45th Adept ceremony on the 2nd year of Nola Independence!”

The crowd cheers, then as it calms down, he continues

“It’s a wonderful day to celebrate our graduating students, and of course, the new ones to serve our country and become wonderful and powerful adepts! BUT! I’m not really the man of words, so let’s just begin the ceremony!”

The crowd claps and cheers again, and down in the arena the sound of drums, flutes, and various instruments fill the space.

Along with it, large carriages on wheels getting pulled in filled with strange glass orbs with liquid inside them, teachers

with flags on long poles walk in and lay them in a half circle on the ground, behind the wooden platform bearing a large symbol of the country flag.

###

The crowd of kids shuffle through the dark seemingly infinite hallway curving into nothingness, the candlelights on the walls flicker and makes the shadow of the stiff nervous kids dance. The long hallways emptiness is broken by Adept soldiers standing and guiding the kids. They are wearing leather armor and a colored cape with a symbol on it representing their rank. This symbol is also on their chest, etched into the plated armor made out of shed grompa scales.

Sophia shuffles with the line, she cannot relax any part of her body and sweats profusely, even though the hallway is cold. The loud music is muffled and the drums vibrate in her chest. She fiddles with her fingers looking at the guards, who just distantly look past the kids. Every few moments they take a step forward.

As she progresses along the hallway, the noises are clearing out, the flutes and instruments begin to fill in the deep hits of the drums and the melody starts forming. The music periodically stops for a moment, followed by cheering, and then it continues.

Light finally fills the hallway as she reaches the exit which open into a large empty field of grass, with a large crowd sitting on the elevated part of the arena. The line of kids trails onto the wooden platform.

On the platform, one by one kids arrive to the center, where an older man standing in a robe with long stripes hanging from his large hat, reaching all the way to his knees. Sophia's stress

calms for a moment as she sees the man in his funny colorful clothing. Almost like the fancy version of those jesters in the book her mom shown her about sewing and fashion of some weird masked people on another land.

Each time the old man puts his hands up in the air, the music stops with some drums gently keeping a steady rhythm, and the man speaks different words, based on the color of the orb

Then the announcer yells depending on color

Yellow - Nola!

Green - Scor!

Red - Muli!

Purple - Plia!

The crowd is clapping and cheering at each announcement

Sophia peeks from the line, looking beyond the platform, where every kid with their orb walked to a teacher holding the flag representing their color. Most kids are around the yellow flag, and spread out there is a smaller crowd near the green and purple flags. The red flag has a dozen kids so far and there is one she couldn't tell the color of, as the man without any children around him simply haven't raised it yet.

##

Matheus looking at the long line as he leans forward seeing Sophia from the distance.

“This will take a while..” – He sighs and starts trailing off, looking at the leader and his guards.

The leader, Arlon is laughing and pointing at the platform, while he makes gestures mimicking the features of the kids. Occasionally he hands a coin to the blue haired guard as he smiles too, though more reserved.

Arlon then starts shaking and slapping the shoulder one of the guards to get his attention, as the blue haired man gives the leader a coin instead.

Matheus frowns looking at them.

“From the tyrant of an empire to a childish man ruling our land..”

Sophia only has a few kids in front of her now, she can almost step on the stairs of the platform. Her heart is beating faster and faster, she is holding her own hand to contain her nervousness.

She scans through the crowd and as she sees her dad watching her, it calms her for a moment.

The girl in front of her steps on the platform and the man hands her the orb. She holds it, some of her tears fall onto the orb as its shifting between many colors.

Eventually, the whole liquid turns yellow. The old man raises his hand, the music quiets, and the announcer yells.

“NOLA!”

The girl seems relieved and walks to the group around the yellow flag.

Matheus leans forward smiling. Sophia’s nervousness gradually turns into excitement, though it doesn’t entirely disappear.

She steps on top of the platform. Her mind is racing wondering about the possibilities.

“Will it be yellow too? Or green?” Excitement takes over her as she focuses all her attention on the old man slowly taking the

orb from the assistant, both of them wearing gloves, then gently placing it into her hands. It's a glass orb with a leather strap around it, and a small cork keeping the liquid inside.

She is mesmerized by the tiny specs of colorful light inside the orb forming. As they dance and glow, Sophia's smile widens even if her hands are shaking.

"Maybe red or purple!" – she thinks to herself with wide eyes. The colors and glow start shifting faster and begins to turn into a single color.

The old man seems surprised all of sudden.

"Light blue?"- She says out loud, confused.

The man raises his arm, the music stops.

"Anh," – The announcer coughs and clears his throat. –
"ANHI!"

The crowd is almost silent, with a spare clap here and there, that quiet down after just a few moments.

Matheus looks around with annoyance and confusion on his face.

"What's wrong?!"

He looks at Arlon, even he looks serious as he whispers something to the blue haired guy who then walks away.

Matheus leans to the side and pokes the person next to him.

"What's wrong with Anhi?"

The man nonchalantly answers – "Pf, 'cause it's evil. Where are the most Anhi sensing people? In Madsand! No wonder it's called MADsand haha!"

Matheus leans back into his chair, seeming distressed. He doesn't know much about Adepts and sense types, but he heard in Madsand all form of blessing use is illegal.

Sophia confused, as she walks down the platform, and sees the teacher raising the flag of light blue.

She walks to the man with one wooden leg, and a long dark hair, his face completely covered in a golden mask with sharp lines of copper around the cheeks.

“And I thought I’ll get no students for a while...” He says as he scans the stadium – “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to the looks.”

She gets handed papers, with the general school starting date and the adept school’s starting date 3 years later on it, the later having an official stamp on her sensing type on it.

She is thinking about all the people’s reactions, through the rest of the event. As it ends, the kids are escorted through the same hallway they came from. She doesn’t feel nervous anymore, or excited. She feels guilty, as if she did something wrong, but doesn’t know what.

As she approaches the exit, she can see her father waiting for her. It’s hard to miss him with his large build.

Drums start to play inside the stadium again, after Arlon yells “And now, the graduation play!”

Matheus offers Sophia his hand, and they walk out.

“Why were people so quiet at Anhi?”

Her father looks serious, thinks for a moment, then looks at her and smiles

“Hm... Maybe it was a surprise! It’s like a rare gem!”

Sophia’s frown disappears as she listens to her father.

The drums get louder and as Sophia looks back, she sees the guards opening the main gate slightly to peek inside.

“Dad can we watch them too? Pleasee”

Matheus picks her up – “Sorry Sophia, we will be late from home, it’s a long ride”

She puffs her face in annoyance, but doesn’t argue.