

Prologue - Esha & The Ifirt

A warm wind caressed Esha's face, the loose strands of her braid flying around her in a dark halo. She stepped her bare feet into the cool sand and looked about the small village, all were asleep; the buildings dark and completely silent, even the rats rested. The only sound to be made out were the ocean waves and the loud crackling of a bonfire, the snapping of wood and the seething hiss of air combusting was too loud and hypnotic to be crafted by humans. This fire's song was different from others, and it stirred a deep fear inside Esha.

She would never have left her daughters alone if it weren't urgent, and she knew by its hypnotic call that there was more at stake. For what other sort of flames could lick at the sky and look like dragon tongue? What other fire could roar so seductively, its flames beckoning and wooing any mortal that dared see it for what it was?

She had summoned it in desperation, using the last of her strength to escape and hide from the soldiers that had captured her. She closed her eyes, dark lashes brushing away the single tear that dared escaped. The rocking of the small boat she had hidden in came back to her, the memories still vivid and alive in her mind. Her belly was swollen with the souls of her three daughters, the cold ocean water slowly seeped into the bottom of the boat, turning her toes cold. She had traded the last of her royal jewels for this boat ride, biting back tears when she handed over the gold ring that was encrusted with rubies, the markings on the inside identifying the true nature of her bloodline.

"Please, deliver me and my children to Yuennan safely. My children." Her hands had indicated her pregnant belly and the old man had nodded; his pockmarked face and milky eyes betraying nothing. Then they had pushed off in the small handmade vessel that was willing to brave open water, its wooden sides expanding in cold to welcome other sailors.

She was surprised she had survived the two days at sea: the depthless waves rocked wildly and the relentless sun burned her skin dark. Many times she had feared for her life; the sinister eyes of men hungry at sea or the feeling of her turbulent stomach and throat retching over the prow. But she had known she

would survive to find land and birth her three daughters. It was certain by the stars: she would birth three alike in look and age. And when Esha was afraid, a cloaked woman had approached underneath a full moon, and it was foretold that they would come and bring peace her nation had so long desired.

The journey had ended abruptly when the boat had hit the sand. It was late, the few hours of night before sunrise, she remembered the cloudless night and looking at the stars, witnessing her capture. The blood warriors had known refugees were coming, they had waited, hungry for blood. They had no idea who she was, just another refugee hoping to return home. Harsh hands gripped her wrists and shoved her up on land to be taken for harvest, lined up and ready to be delivered to whatever hell they used to produce their blood magic. Her heart raced and despite the heat of the night she felt a cold kissing her skin, death was seducing her.

It was a desperate act, using the little magic she had left to summon the demon. He had came in flames, blazing high above her, promising to help her in exchange for something precious. What choice had she had? To be taken to the Mad Queen and gutted, the last hope for her world gone with her children? Or to promise the demon what he wanted and wrestle him away later? So she nodded, and the Ifrit smiled wickedly, turning its back

to her and towards his prey.

Now, five years had passed and she had successfully hidden herself from the eyes of the queen and her army. She had ran away from the burning inferno that freed her from her captors, watching the pillars of smoke rise up behind her. Into the forest she ran, as quickly as she could with her swollen belly, she was sure she would give birth right there on the rainforest floor. Her bare feet jumping over roots and avoiding sharp rocks. Esha had walked for three days, following the stars North, winding her way through the unpredictable rainforest. Some nights she would lay in the darkness, huddled beneath the welcoming roots of an ancient tree wishing for her death, hoping for some easy salvation instead of facing the unknown.

Esha had known better, some force had kept her safe. It covered her tracks and found fresh water for her to drink from, her path inexplicably bringing her to banana trees where she would feast on their sweetness. Yes, some higher power had defended her against all odds, so that she would finally arrive at the Northeastern edge of her beloved nation and see the quaint fishing village that greeted the open seas on its peninsula, the one that would become her and her daughters' home.

For what better place to hide her daughters than in this

village, so remote and far away from strife, somewhere she could raise them by herself. The birth was difficult, for giving birth to twins was unheard of, let alone triplets. The midwife had said she was blessed for carrying three strong and healthy girls for so long. She watched over the years as her daughters grew into precocious five year olds that asked questions and showed true kindness, each with their affinity to an element. She could already foresee the difficult journey their lives would take them on. She could not - no, would not lose them now. It was too soon.

Esha shook her head, returning to her present task. There were too many memories the further she went back; she could go back to her days of royalty in Preynokor, she could slip into the role of an exiled princess and lose herself in the past... but she couldn't. There was too much at stake.

She slipped in between the shadows of the village, past the Elder's house and through the small stone pathway, mice skittering through her feet. The humidity this evening was unforgivable, her skin was matted with sweat. She went past the drinking well, dampening her slipper in the wet sand, and up to the back of the village near the edge of the forest. Here the fire's song was even clearer, she was thankful that no one in the village had risen and answered its call. Or perhaps it was

because the song was only for her.

There was a small copse of persimmon trees, their gnarled barks winding high into the sky, creating a small clearing where flames dance mischievously. Esha approached, wrapping herself in silk despite the intense heat. He was there, a tall man with skin the colour of ash, his eyes wide and dark pools, thick eyebrows with a wicked curve. She had to recollect herself, for he was a beautiful man, and a powerful seducer. As he moved she could see where the fires licked at his skin, enveloping him in his beloved flames.

"Esha, I know you are there. Come out, no harm at all." His voice was all at once grating and soothing, from it she could hear the roar of a powerful forest fire or the meeting of flint and rock.

She stepped out, her toes curling from the heat in the sand. She bowed low to the creature in front of her, preparing her body for the effort it would take to capture him.

"Great One, father of fires, Huojin, how may I be of assistance?" His head lifted, dark eyes glowing a fierce yellow as he smiled, his sharp white teeth gleaming from the fire. He looked at her, a smile that seemed to take up the whole of his face as his human form shifted into a being made of pure fire.

"Do not play with me Esha, Daughter of the Earth. You

called me forth with your blood and I have come to take what is mine."

"Please, Great One, I am not ready. She is not ready." Esha stepped out of her bow, carefully and slowly she rearranged her stance into a battle ready one. This creature was volatile, his emotions on a precipice twavering in the slightest.

"You promised. Your blood sealed it." He lifted his hand and pointed his finger, tracing in the air a symbol that hung in the air, burning in flames. It was a crude three pointed flame that spun within a circle. Esha felt her panic taking over, she could not lose to him.

"I summoned you to help me escape, now go back to where you came!" She lifted her hands and felt for some strength within her, a gust of wind came from behind her whipping around the flaming demon, creating a swirling vortex of wind around him. Entrapped he laughed, his mouth wide and revealing pure wildfire, the brightness and heat of it throwing the world into harsh relief.

"I will receive my payment." Esha could feel the strength waning from her body but she had to hold on, for just one more moment. The wind whipped even wilder, it whirled loudly about her and became stronger, diminishing the demon's bright flames.

"Never!" She held her hands high and shouted above the

tornado, "I will never let you have my first born!"

"She is already mine. Betrayal on a blood oath means your tongue will be binded." His voice roared even as the fire slowly diminished, she could feel his words cursing her, binding her.

"Never will you be able to speak of their gifts." She fought to keep the tornado strong, her muscles tightening and sore, arms heavy, ears pounding with blood and aching from the wind.

"Never will you be able to teach them of their true natures." She held on, allowing his curse to bind her, if only she could banish him.

"Only in death will your tongue be freed." At long last, his voice ceased and she forced him down into a small flame, one that would dance on the wick of a candle, only then did she release the gale. The flame danced in the slight leftover breeze and with a sigh Esha waved her hand, a last small wind whipping the flame into oblivion. A deep throated laugh erupted around her, it travelled through the forest and into the clearing, his voice echoing above her and in her mind: "She is mine."

Silence, nothing but scorched earth lay in front of her and she was left standing in the dark. Her hand wiped the sweat from her face, and she doubled over, heaving in the night air. A deep feeling of sorrow washed over her.

Her tongue was tied, she could feel his fiery curse within her, never would she be able to speak to her daughter's about the prophecy, about their powers. She could only watch them learn with no knowledge.

With sadness she reached inside herself and found that her magic waned, she held no more power over any elements, there was only enough in her reserves for one last, truly desperate feat. She inhaled deeply, hoping that would not be for a long time.

She stood up and looked around the clearing, there was no evidence of a demon or tornado. He was gone, for now. She gingerly began the walk back to her home, her legs and body weakened from her encounter.

Esha was unaware of a pair of dark eyes watching from the edge of the clearing. The young girl's eyes were wide with fear and she shivered uncontrollably from what she had seen. Her name was Phuong, and she was the oldest of Esha's girls, born thirty minutes before her other sisters. She had been restless in her sleep that night, something more than the heat making her toss and turn on her small mattress.

She had sat up in the middle of a bad dream and looked at her sisters, they were fast asleep, tiny snores emitting from their peaceful faces. She crawled out of her mattress and felt

something calling her name, she knew it was someone who cared for her, almost like her mom. Maybe it was her father? She had never known her father and her mom had said he was long gone. Still, her tiny self could not help but hope for something like him in her life, and she felt the call of the man so strongly she had had to get out of bed.

It was almost like walking through a dream, she had never been up so late or seen the village so quiet. She followed her mom, all through the village, from their home, by the water well and to the edge where the buildings ceased. The trees were so tall and scary she hadn't wanted to follow her mom in. Still, she stepped into the dark forest, because she knew she would be safe, he would keep her safe. So she followed and saw her mom talking to him, the one that called her here.

Phuong was most scared when her mother had lifted her arms and the gust of wind had blown in, lifting her skirts and whirling her hair around. She held onto the tree root for safety and watched as the man disappeared into a flame. She didn't know why but she wanted to cry because he was gone. She stood there, shaking, watching as her mom walked slowly back to the village. She knew she should follow but she felt too sad.

Go with her, don't worry. I am here with you, always.

Phuong smiled, the man was still here, with her. Her

sadness dissipated with his soothing voice, the voice that came from within her own mind. She quietly followed her mom back to their house. She slid back into bed, between her sisters and fell asleep, comforted by the heat of a hand caressing her head.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Phuong's Life

Phuong

Ocean waves crashed against the red Eastern cliffs, insects buzzed loud through the hot air and its thick humidity wrapped around their limbs. Phuong's sweat beaded down her face, her calves tight from the steep incline she hiked as blades of grass tickled her bare ankles, her sisters climbed alongside her. A slight sea breeze teased them here and there. Even with the intensity of the heat, Phuong was happy to be able to spend a day just with her sisters, out in the hills and lands she loved.

The summer months had just begun, the heavy rain and typhoons had passed with little excitement. They had spent too much time inside, sewing, cooking and planning their celebration. And Phuong had spent too much time thinking of her betrothal. Outside, away from the village, she could escape any

expectations and venture into the meadow of her childhood.

That was their destination, a lush plateau of green grass with a small rainwater pond. On their way they would pass the village gravesite, tucked away high in the rocky hills above their village. Stones and crafted markers stood erect in the ground, the name of the deceased etched into stone. It was custom to place offerings to buried ancestors, many villagers made weekly trips up to lay out small meals and light heavy incense, the smoke and scent curling into the sky as their voices rang out in chants.

Their slippered feet kicked up rocks of burnt sienna and their breathing slowed, each step more careful and quiet. The entrance to the gravesite was marked with erected marble pillars, an arch carved from a red lacquered wood depicting the heavens hung over their heads. Bodhisattvas and elegant warriors stood, palms up announcing the domain of the dead. The graves had slowly been increasing over the past year, it was a fearful reminder that war still raged on in the South. Still, it was not a soldier's body they brought their offerings to but a quiet fisherman. Reverence fell over them as they bowed at the nearest grave, recent fruit offerings lay on the stone and the smell of freshly turned earth entered their senses.

Phuong and her sisters placed their carefully packed

mangoes and rice cakes at the stone marker. The grey marble was etched with a small boat sitting atop a wave, the symbol for 'peace' painstakingly etched in with gold trim. It had been a tragic death: the fisherman had unexpectedly drowned, pulled by an undercurrent, leaving behind a teenaged daughter with his body buried next to his wife's.

They unravelled their patterned silk pouches, carefully untying the red string to reveal long sticks of red incense. Phuong looked to her sisters and then checked her surroundings, silence and trees looked back. They were alone. Each took a turn putting the incense into the dirt and Phuong reached forward, pinching the tips between her thumb and forefinger, a small flame ignited, the stick glowing orange. She repeated this for each one and they watched the grey smoke rise and contrast against the bright azure sky, their lips whispering small prayers.

They briskly walked out of the graveyard, Phuong's body was coursing with energy, a hot and wild current moving beneath her skin. She could only feel heat radiating from within, lightning rushed through her veins, a familiar voice hummed an old melody, one that coaxed the flames from within her. The outside world did not touch her: there was no grass blades against her ankles, no wind caressing her cheek, only a burning that threatened to

overtake her. She turned to her sisters, eyes wide and black, fearful and dangerous. Kieu grabbed her hand in concern and immediately recoiled with a shout.

"You burned me!" Her sister cradled her hand to her chest.

"I'm sorry Kieu. It's getting harder to control." Phuong's dark eyes searched her sister's, they were identical, all three of them. Each a reflection of the other and all with the same worry and fear in their eyes.

"Breathe, Phuong." Jaya came to her side, steadying her with her eyes. Kieu nodded, ignoring her burned hand and steadying Phuong with the chant they often heard coming from the temples, one that invoked the lotus and jewel within. Her soft voice carried into Phuong's veins and with a deep breath she felt her skin cool. The world slowly came back to her, sounds louder and colours more vivid.

"That was close." She smiled at Jaya and Kieu, it didn't help. She could see the concern written plain on their faces.

A sleek snakebird with shining black feathers rested atop a tree, its dark eyes twitching in its socket as it watched the three sisters. Its yellow beak opened once to snap at the air. When they began walking again its long neck stretched high, its wings spread wide as it pushed itself into the sky. It had seen what it needed.