

Chapter 1

The Path We Chose

What was it like, being able to walk in the Everpresent at will?

It was a tingle over Isaree's skin when a spirit wandered near. The echoes of magic left behind that whispered a story of what had been and what would be. The hiss of sunlight as it glanced across the river at dawn, building into an insufferable roar by noon. Struck numb, she stared in wonder as the world shifted and shimmered, burning bright with every color soaked in meaning.

Her first memory of the Everpresent was on the muddy banks of the Jinburi river, under the sweltering Suyoram sun of dry season. At six years old, she had no name for the vivid layer which thickened the air with a stream of crimson and rot, running forth like the lacerated offal from a gutted cow.

Little one... A voice came without sound, pitched high and low like a flute played in a deep well. It drifted from the shadows beyond the grass, under the bamboo platform where the fisherman would sit early in the morning after they waded out into the water to check their nets.

Please help me.

Long, narrow trenches carved into the dirt led under the pier, to a dark hole. Scrapes surrounded all sides of the pit, stretching out like the rays of the sun. A glint in the darkness – a slither like wet scales, metal rubbing against metal in the wash basin.

A small, gray hand inched from the hole, fingers flexing, dragging itself forward with clawed nails caked with dirt. A skinny arm followed, fish-belly pale, with deep violet veins spider-webbing across the flesh. *Help me up, little one. And we can be friends...*

The hand pulled itself forward little by little. But where Ree expected to see an elbow, its forearm extended like an unspooling ribbon. The skin flexed like a snake and rose in the air. The hand hovered before her, palm upward.

Hesitantly, Ree reached out, her small fingers grazing its cold claws.

A crash of thunder exploded into metal and fury. Her body flew back, stumbled to the edge of the water. Yelling and thrashing ensued, the twisted limb slapped at the form of her father. Pa's voice came through just like the creature's, without a body to it, and he yelled bad words.

Hunter, wait! The creature screamed desperately as Pa slashed down with his blade once, twice, three times. Before she realized it, Ree was on her feet and running toward the hole, but her Pa grabbed her into a fierce hug.

"Why did you do that?!" Ree cried. "She needed help!"

"No, no, sweet girl, she didn't." Pa easily picked her up, hugging her tightly. "That's a mae-nak. A phi, and they always lie." Ree couldn't wriggle away from his strong embrace, so she strained to peek over his shoulder.

It looked like a pile of rice noodles, with lumpy parts, covered in oyster sauce. A woman's face laid amidst the snake-like limbs, a normal face, except there was only smooth flesh where her eyes should have been. The edges of her mouth bubbled with black blood, and her lips still trembled, as if her screams were still echoing.

The air tasted putrid, and Ree gagged.

"It's too loud," she whined, burying her face in Pa's neck to drown everything out with his familiar scent. Safety, soothing greens and blue, a hint of her mother's jasmine lingering near his ear.

"What's too loud?"

"Everything," Ree said, then started to sob.

Eight years later, under the light of the high blood moon, Ree, along with six other novices, walked barefoot through the expansive bamboo grove that surrounded the Shrine of the First Hunters. The shrine was the oldest guild building that still existed. Each pillar, stone, and roof tile had been painstakingly deconstructed from their former home in the Capital and reconstructed in Jinburi.

They picked through the trees with ease, moving like silent shadows. Soon, her peers would appeal to the mysterious, nameless devas that arbitrated the gateway to the Everpresent. They would recite the voiceless chants they'd memorized, recount

the ways they'd paid tribute, the skills they'd mastered, their commitment to following the steps of the First Hunters.

And then they would die, and ask for passage back.

The shrine came into view, ebony-stained teakwood pillars flush with the shadows. Two stone statues of the Venara stood on either side of the open entrance, their monkey features hidden behind masks, their archaic uniforms carved onto bodies larger than human. The novices knelt at the entrance and waited. Finally, far inside, two candles ignited.

In perfect unison, they rose and walked the long passage, known as the Hall of Remembrance, where the names of dead hunters were engraved onto the stone plaques. Ree wondered how many names were missing – the novices who had died here, in this very shrine, in the attempt to someday be on this wall.

The closer they came to the inner chamber, the less Ree remained grounded in the Blinds – the mundane world. With the steady hum of the Everpresent rising, so did her awareness of the other novices' tempered anticipation and repressed fear. Falah and Bunni held the steadiest breaths. Goi and Raj were the most nervous, breath shallow and quick, a quiver in their step. Esha and Laopin were restless, Ree sensed their yearning to be in the Everpresent with her.

Phi hunters trained incessantly to access the heightened level of awareness where senses became intertwined, where magic flowed freely, where the scent of blood wove a living path toward their prey, where they communed with spirits and phi and demons alike. It was the source of their powers, every gray-magic spell a poetry of the voiceless chant invoking the devas for favor.

As a child, Elder Nokai taught Ree how to withstand the unexpected noise without needing to cover her eyes, and ears, and scream to shut it out. But nothing could change her appearance – the red eyes and silver hair of a hunter in that state.

A tenor of melancholy washed over her. She was the only novice that wouldn't take the trial. During training, Raj questioned her worthiness if she didn't pass the trial like the rest. By then, she was used to feeling left out by her peers. This wasn't near as bad as it had been at the academy, before the bullying grew so intense that her mother finally let her quit and follow in her father's footsteps.

Still, it nagged at her, and she wondered if Raj was right.

One-meter pillar candles marked the end of the Hall of Remembrance. Beyond stood a roofless, circular chamber where the light of the moon cast silky reflections across a shallow pool.

There, the three masters sat waiting, cross-legged, and behind them stood the five hunters that had been near enough Jinburi to attend the ceremony. They all wore their ritual robes and masks – each one custom carved and painted according to what the master artisan saw in the Trance when he created them.

Ree's spirits lifted when she spotted her father's mask among them, the visage of a snarling white-wolf. Along with the other novices, she prostrated on her knees at the edge of the pool. Pressing their palms together in a respectful wai, they gave their full attention to Master Arei as she stepped forth and spoke.

"We gather under the light of the Phracan̄thī lēūxd in honor of the First Hunters, and for those who will follow in their steps. Centuries ago, the devas opened the veil between worlds, and asked the Venara warriors to hunt and kill a demon army that escaped the realms of Hell. In exchange for agreeing to such a dangerous task, the devas granted the warriors a gift that would aid them in the battle to come." Master Arei's red panther mask did not muffle her words. While Elder Nokai sounded like a kindly teacher when he recounted the legends, Arei reminded Ree of the Grisland preachers who stood outside of their foreign missionaries and accosted anyone who passed by.

"Under the light of the Phracan̄thī lēūxd, the devas opened the eyes of the First Hunters to the Everpresent, and changed them forever. As they walked in the gray, in step with the spirits, power flowed from the realm of the gods to bend the world in the shape of their will." Her words shimmered strong as steel. "Tonight, you will make the ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate your commitment to this path. Should the devas deem you worthy, by the will of the First Hunters, you will become one of us. Now," she stood, along with Master Seua. "Rise."

Goi's breath hitched, and the girl was a step behind as the rest rose to their feet.

The two master hunters stepped into the pool, the water rising to their waists. Their black robes floated around them like the fins of a koi. Together, the novices stepped into the unnaturally cold water. Falah was first in line, and remained still as Master Arei approached.

Ree heard Falah's father utter a subvocal prayer to the First Hunter. Of course he would be nervous, watching his son tempt death to follow in his footsteps. She wondered what her own father would have felt if she needed to do this. She wondered, for the first time, if her mother felt that way when her brother walked into the ring.

“Remember yourself as you walk the First Hunters’ path. Listen to the song of the devas.” Master Arei held Falah’s shoulder with one hand. With the other, she drew her ritual knife. A voiceless chant echoed in the Everpresent, and Master Arei stabbed Falah through the heart quick and clean, removing the blade as easily as it slid in. He made no sound, surrendering fully to death. Master Seua helped Falah lay down under the water. Eyes wide open, the novice sunk below, body limp, dark blood billowing around him.

Perfect, Ree thought, in admiration.

Goi was next, her breath shallow, the water rippling where she trembled. She flinched when Master Arei placed a hand on her shoulder. Arei stared at her critically, then firmly pushed her a step backward.

“You aren’t ready.”

With half a sob, Goi collapsed, shuddering and clutching her sides. The observing hunters shifted, but didn’t comment. Ree cringed inwardly with second-hand embarrassment.

Next was Bunni, the eldest novice at the ripe old age of nineteen. Like Falah, he took the knife without flinching, and didn’t thrash when he went under. The entire pool ran red with blood now. Raj sounded like he was hyperventilating, but took a long breath when Master Arei looked deep into his eyes and spoke the words. He nodded quickly, fists and jaws clenched. He gasped when the blade entered, and only let out a soft whimper as Master Seua lowered him under.

After Laopin went, the water stirred, as if it were bubbling with heat. It remained just as still, but there was a rhythm to the invisible movement. She realized it was the vibration of the voiceless chant – whether it came from the hunters, the masters, the novices, or the devas beyond – all of their auras braided together in a song so inviting her eyes stung with tears.

Next to her, Esha caught Ree’s gaze as the blood pooled around her face. And she smiled ever so slightly, as if to say, *See you soon*.

“It is done,” Master Arei said and wiped the blood on a wet segment of her robe.

“Wait!” Before she could think twice, Ree brought her hands together in a wai. “Let me take the trial. I must speak to the devas and ask for their blessing.”

Master Arei’s face was unreadable behind her mask, but she shook her head and moved away. “You already possess their blessing, child.”

"No," Ree reached out and caught her arm. "Please, master. It's not right that I don't go through this. I can't call myself a hunter unless I do." How could she explain this sudden, overwhelming desperation? This might be her only chance to experience the devas presence, and she felt not a smidgen of doubt or fear.

Master Arei tilted her head and subvocally spoke to Elder Nokai, who had not moved in his chair of blankets. "*She wants to go through KunNam.*"

"Wait," Ree's father broke from the line, stepping forward, then said out loud, "Isaree, you don't have to do this!"

"Do you not believe in me?" Ree said, indignant. "You said I was born blessed. Why would the devas turn their back on me now?"

The hunters murmured to one another, and Master Seua crossed his arms, a smile in his voice when he spoke. "I say let her."

"Isaree!" Her father started forward, until Elder Nokai held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"She's earned it," Elder Nokai said. Her father, torn between respect for tradition and fear for his daughter's life, clutched the side of his head and groaned. But to her relief, he stepped back in line.

"Her mother's gonna kill me," he muttered to the hunter next to him, who only shook his head and shrugged.

With that, Master Arei placed her hand on Ree's shoulder.

"Remember yourself as you walk the First Hunters' path. Listen to the song of the devas."

She hardly felt the blade, the master was so deft. The song, rushing in the water expanded around her, stinging her eyes. And then as if she were floating on the ceiling, she saw herself, saw the bodies of six other children, all dead. Terror crept around the edges, like a scream from miles away, threatening to shatter her resolve. Ree pushed it away, and clung to the voiceless chant that they'd all practiced for countless hours. And then what little she could feel of herself became numb, and the last thing she saw were her father's eyes, distorted by the water as she sank into the depths beyond the Everpresent.

Ree's first breath ripped in her throat as a ragged gasp. Red water cascaded down her face, her vision blurry with stars. She reached out, then collapsed into the arms of her father. He wrapped her in a blanket and held her against him at the edge of the pool.

"You did it, sweetheart, you did it."

Perhaps the other hunters were giving him disapproving looks from behind their masks, but her father didn't seem to care. Ree was too relieved to be embarrassed. Master Seua had taken off his mask, and smiled down at them. He laid a hand on her father's back, but his smile faded when he looked toward the pool.

Ree pushed away from her father to stand, searching quickly for her friends. Her gut unclenched when she spotted Esha, huddled under a blanket. Esha met her gaze with a shaken expression, then gave a weak smile. Raj sat next to her, clutching his knees to his chest, staring at something far beyond the walls of the shrine. Falah held a wai to his forehead, murmuring prayers. All their hearts were whole again, and all their eyes burned red in the dark, embraced in the Everpresent.

The other two remained still, floating in the pool, eyes dark and lifeless. Master Arei stood next to them, waiting. From what they'd learned during training, it could take up to five minutes to return. Ree was too afraid to ask how long it had been. By the tense set of the master's shoulders, it must have already been too long. Regardless, by tradition, the masters would wait until sunrise.

"Are they...?" Ree paused.

"They're fucking dead!" Goi cried from the other side of the pool. "They aren't coming back."

"This is the path we chose," Esha snapped, with no small amount of scorn in her voice.

"The First Hunters decided to take them," Falah said, much gentler. "It is an honor."

"An honor?!" Goi wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Seems like a bullshit deal to me!"

"Hush, Goi," Master Arei said sternly. "You shall stand vigil with me and Elder Nokai. The rest of you, go. Rest."

Ree's father walked with her out of the shrine in silence. Ree wasn't sure what she felt – she'd expected a real conversation with the devas when she went under, but when she thought back to that moment beyond death, she felt...

Nothing.

"Uh, sorry if I embarrassed you," her father said, sheepishly. "If you have a daughter someday, you'll understand. When you asked Master Rei for the trial all I could see was the little baby girl I held in my arms—"

"Pa, please stop," Ree grunted.

"All right." But a few seconds later, he said, "Maybe we don't need to tell your ma about this?"

Ree rolled her eyes but laughed. Sometimes her father still acted like a child, and it endeared him to her. She figured it was because he had to grow up fast, having been orphaned very young. Regardless, it took her mind off the confusing feelings that troubled her.

Two of her friends were dead. She couldn't understand why, for they'd both been steadfast under the trial. Bunni had been the best of them all. Ree had been so sure she'd see something definitive, something that would further bolster her faith in everything they were taught. Why were the four of them chosen, and the other two discarded?

The uncertainty haunted her, but she kept her faithless thoughts to herself.