

Chapter 1

Good Deeds and a Pile of Leaves

A purposeful rain may muddy the waters, but it may also wash away a mountain of filth to reveal a precious stone. This is merely a metaphor. Rain does not fall in Everhome Realm--not since the River Queen died. But here, in the Outlands, the wind carries the vapors of an unfortunate precipitation of events. A breeze blows through the treetops of Ussion Forest and dips down, flicking the ground. It pauses against the brown skin of a woman standing silently in the middle of a pile of leaves. Her red hair moves in the wind like a fire threatening to consume the wilderness surrounding her and humidity rests itself on her head as if desperately attempting to put out the flames.

This particular woman had been born on a night when the clouds covered the moon. When she came out of her mother's womb, instead of crying, she gurgled and coughed up a peculiar sound.

"Aksha Nshee!" she squeaked loudly.

This sounded like "acousa neshe" to her mother. In their language, this phrase meant, "cursed sky." So her mother, in a spirit

of optimism, gave her a name that meant “blessed joy.” But tonight, in this forest, the apparent cursings of this woman’s birth are revived with each distressing breath she takes.

The woman scans her surroundings fearfully. Her eyes travel up toward the trees and the waxy leaves stare down on her as though ready to ambush at any moment. Though she cannot seem to remember anything before this moment, this beige-colored forest is surely new to her. As her eyes move toward the ground, she notices that in front of her is a short, pearl white creature who looks more like a little girl than not.

“H-hello?!” the small pale person stammers to the woman in the pile.

The woman does not answer.

The little creature fidgets nervously. “Could I have offended the land goddess by wandering so late at night and disturbing the leaves?” she thinks. “Oh, goddess!” the small creature cries. She promptly falls to her knees and bows her head, uttering a sincere apology and begging for mercy.

“I-I’m not a goddess,” says the woman.

The miniature humanoid looks up inquisitively. “You are not a goddess?”

The woman shakes her head. “I don’t think that I am.”

“Kind lady,” the child-sized person exclaims, “Excuse me for saying so, but I can’t very well stay on my knees until you decide one way or the other.” She shifts impatiently.

“Let’s say that I am not a goddess,” says the woman. “Please get up.”

The little one stands with a sigh and moves a bit closer to her. Then, the short stranger bows her head slightly, unsure of

whether her gesture is a sufficient greeting. Now she can see that this woman is not a goddess. Goddesses do not bleed, and there is a dried trail of blood on the side of this woman's head.

"I am Shio Takama of Ama-lanso," says the small creature. "Please tell me, if you are not a goddess, then who are you?"

The woman realizes, at this very moment, that she has no answer to give. She opens her mouth to speak as though the answer is on the tip of her tongue, but she says nothing. The woman holds her hand to her head, in an effort to stop her mind from throbbing. Her green dress ripples slightly at a gust of wind, and the silver embroidery, trailing down from her collar, briefly catches the glare of the moon.

Shio can see that the foreign woman is humbled by her confusion and though her clothing is very fine, she looks as tattered as an old rag doll. "If I help her now," Shio thinks, "Maybe she will take me with her later. Then, I'll finally be away from the forest." She politely asks to look at the woman's belongings.

The flustered woman removes the black purse that is hanging across her body and hands it to Shio who immediately begins to rummage through its contents. She sees nothing of any importance except a yam bread roll and a small empty box until, something beside the leaf pile catches her attention. It is a silver necklace. She holds the necklace up to the moonlight. The letters 'BEA' hang from the silver chain and glimmer radiantly.

"Bea," she reads aloud. "Could that be your name?"

The woman moves forward quickly. She grabs the necklace and the bread roll right from Shio's hands and stuffs the roll into her mouth. The woman secures the necklace around her neck while Shio stares--mildly disturbed by her abruptness.

“So, I suppose you *are* Bea,” she says, “And I have found you here in Ussion Forest. I will call you Bea Ussion! Is that ok?” She names her with the glee of a child who has found a new toy.

The woman looks up from picking leaves off her dress and nods decidedly. Her cheeks are puffed out, filled with bread. Her head bobs like a heavy fruit at the end of a tree branch.

Shio giggles. “I will find some more food for you, so follow me.” With that, the two head off through the forest, Shio leading the way.



Often, deeds are done beneath the veil of night--some bad, some good, and some walking the line between. It is when the line has been crossed that one will notice a change brewing on the inside. This metamorphosis can be subtle, but most often, incorruptible proof of its beginning is marked by either guilt or relief. Allus Estugu is beginning to understand the pangs of his own remorse. It seems that guilt can follow any kind of deed even if done for the right reasons. Though it is against the precepts of his religion, Allus has always believed that the end justifies the means. In his heart, nothing will stop him from doing Good, not even righteousness.

However, at this very moment, his internal contradictions are muted by his growing fear. Tonight, the darkness covers many deeds and secrets. And as it turns out, he knows the one secret that could threaten the stability of Pickcend’s dependable structure. The daidon, ruler of Everhome Realm, is missing.

Allus's dark blue eyes undress the dim streets of Pikcend. He has been searching for quite some time now. The modest stone houses seem to tower high into the night sky above him. Shades of blue and gray blur together as he rides steadily on Wool's back. This dark-colored husky beast, a "loafe" as it is called, has been Allus's companion since childhood. Though most of Pikcend's citizens see loafen merely as large, expensive dogs, Allus has found that its four muscular legs prove reliable in all occasions. Allus named his loafe "Wool," despite its sleek appearance. The only things that may be considered ugly about Wool is that his head is a bit large, his tusks are stumpy, and the nostrils at the end of his snout are always flared. Conversely, there is nothing ugly about Allus. In fact, many thought that he was too pretty to become a minister. Yet he worked hard to ignore all feminine distraction and studied diligently under the encouragement of his father. There had been only two loves, besides God, in his twenty-one cycles of life. One would call him either very lucky to have had two loves or very unlucky considering the circumstances. Both relationships were complicated and ended unfortunately--the unfortunate situations being more accurately described as tragic. In any case, the speed with which Allus is able to move through the wide streets of Pikcend is of no help to his cause.

"My life is cursed," he mutters to himself.

He can hear Wool's paws pounding lightly against the stone-crusted streets. Usually, the rhythmic sounds of riding calm the excited drumming of his heart. However, tonight he receives no such comfort. If anyone recognizes him as the First Minister of Pikcend, there will be questions as to why he is out among the

citizens and inquiries into the lateness of his excursion. Allus pulls forward the hood of his dark cape and begins to slow Wool's gait. He tugs back on the reigns as he nears Pikcend's first gates. Beyond them lay the vast Outlands of Everhome. Against his instinct, he turns around and heads back to the palace. He is already late for a meeting with the First Counselor and the Council in Waiting. They will want to know why the daidon is absent, and Allus will be forced to commit another deed against God, for the greater good. He will have to lie.



Most inhabitants of Ussion Forest are quite content with the wind season in the Outlands. Leaves are fun to play in and nice to sleep on. But Shio Takama had not been content. She most certainly likes the ground more than the leaves that cover it. So tonight, she had walked, kicking and grumbling--cursing the leaves.

All her life she had wanted to travel. She would often read books dropped by foreign wanderers, and in her youth, she would even venture beyond the protection of the forest. However, she continues to find that the world is not made for small people. Because of her size, many dangers threaten her. Not even her spirit for adventure can convince her to travel alone again. While walking at night, though, she can imagine she is in another world--one full of excitement and mystery. Others of her kind keep to the sun-side of the day. This is what sets her apart. She walks on the moon-side. When she had come upon the leaf pile earlier, she had thought that the other settlers piled them to spite

her. She had stomped over to the pile, ready to tear apart the whole bunch of leaves. It is at this moment that the leaves began to move.

Now she walks happily with her new companion. Her light brown hair flaps in the breeze and sweeps across her pale shoulders as she trudges along. The two weave between the tall, thick trees of Ussion Forest--Shio skipping to keep the lead and Bea stopping, every now and then, to touch the tree bark. Some of the trees are smooth and cool, others are rough and prickly. Fallen leaves bend quietly beneath their feet. Now, not even the wind makes a sound as it travels through the treetops. The stillness of the forest is unsettling to Bea.

“It must be scary . . . to be born into such a quiet place?” she says.

“Gods be certain, this forest is not my homeland,” says Shio in a small whisper. “My people are from Ama-lanso. That is where I was born. We migrated here after the destruction of our homeland during the Great Persecution. I was only a child when it happened, but I can still remember the smell of fire raining down upon our city. It is a horrible memory. I suppose everyone has some kind of horrible memory, though. Life is like that.”

Shio stops at a small bush full of large dark berries. “Eat these and put some in your purse for later. Please wait for me here. I will return.”

Bea nods then quickly begins to stuff the berries into her mouth. She almost chokes--not expecting them to be so sweet and succulent. Juice begins to run down her chin, and she is so occupied with eating that she barely notices a dim light shining ahead.

Her first instinct is to hide, stay where she is, and wait for Shio to return, but within her burns a great curiosity for this world that she doesn't seem to know. One who is more akin to forest areas would know that strange lights at night are not a good sign, but Bea feels drawn by the mildness of it. It almost seems as though she knows its red glow.

She packs away some berries for later and walks softly toward the light. As she approaches, she can make out two figures--a woman on her knees and a man in light armor standing beside her--in front of a small group of men. The red light seems to be radiating from a lantern held by one of the men. Bea hides behind a large bush and watches as the man in armor addresses the woman.

"I have given you the opportunity to depart, and yet you still come after me," the man says. "Are you one of the Intermaji?"

The woman does not answer.

"Have you unlocked majik?!"

The woman, still, is silent.

She looks more like a statue than a living person. Her features show no sign of surrender. Instead, she smiles defiantly. The man now draws his sword from the sheath at his side. Bea clutches a bush limb in fear and anticipation.

"I ask you again," says the man. "Have you unlocked it?!"

To this the woman scoffs. "Do you not know that the time is coming when all the people will possess power? Their powers will be even greater than mine, and you will not be able to stop them."

Just as she finishes her sentence the man draws back his sword. Time slows for a moment and the wind laps at the

sword's blade, but makes no effort to stop its progress. It seems almost unreal how easily the blade makes its way through the woman's neck. Her head goes one way--forward--and her body another--down. It is as though her head was just waiting to take flight. Blood follows in a desperate effort to connect the two body parts, but it is thwarted by the force behind the blade and the cold air of the night. The woman's head drops to the ground and rolls, matting hair, leaves, and blood together.

Bea is struck with fright. She grips the bush eventighter as her eyes shift away from the gruesome scene. She should *not* have come here. Suddenly, the man looks up from wiping his sword. He looks in Bea's direction, and it is at that moment that she realizes the branch has broken in her fist. She doesn't have time to think before her feet carry her away--away from the bush and away from the man with the sword. The darkness turns and quakes around her. The ground pounds beneath her feet, and it is not long before she trips. She stands quickly and realizes that she has tripped over Shio.

Bea can barely breathe or speak the words: "We must run He's chasing me I saw a light"

"Oh, goodness!" Shio squeals. "What did it look like? I'd always wondered—"

"Don't ask me questions! We have to run!"

She grabs Shio's hand and pulls her along. Though Bea's green slippers slide atop the waxy leaves, somehow she propels herself forward. Shio, unable to keep up, breaks free of Bea's hand, but they both continue running as fast as their feet will take them. They weave through the forest, dodging trees, but Bea can only see the woman's head dropping to the ground and

rolling. Dropping and rolling. Would her head drop like that? Would she die not even knowing if “Bea” was really her name? Shio’s scream pierces her thoughts.

Bea stops and turns to see the man holding Shio under his arm. Though she squirms, she can not break free of the man’s grasp. Her legs kick futilely in the air. Two other men emerge from the forest and grab Bea by her arms. The remaining men confiscate their belongings and lay them out. From Bea’s purse they pull a small decorated box, an empty pouch, and berries. In Shio’s bag they find a small black ball and a pear. Both Shio and Bea are bound at the wrists and ankles with rope and pushed to their knees. Shio keeps screaming until she is gagged.

The man with the sword looks them over, his weapon dangling heavily at his side. To him, Shio looks like the epitome of forestfolk. She is covered in moss rags and crusted dirt, but Bea seems to be of some status. Her silver necklace and fancy clothes are not common. The man turns to Bea, assuming that she is the more educated of the two, and thus more fit to answer him appropriately.

“What are your names?” he asks her.

Bea has seen how he treated the woman who did not answer him, so she thinks it best to answer quickly. “I am Bea Ussion. This is Shio Takama. We mean you no harm.”

“You were spying on us in the bushes. Is that why you are here?”

“No. We are lost. We are only lost.”

“Lost? That is an unusual excuse.”

He steps back and examines the content of their bags more closely. None of their belongings define them as spies. He would

believe that Shio is Bea's servant except that most servants dress better than forestfolk, and Bea speaks without the proper greetings. He supposes Bea could have stolen her clothing and come here to hide from whatever other crime she probably committed. However, criminals are far from useless creatures. He rubs at his chin mangling the hair of his small blonde beard as he walks back toward Bea and Shio.

"You will be our prisoners until we have figured out what to do with you," he says, and with a simple hand gesture he commands the men to lift Bea and Shio from their knees.

Their belongings are gathered. With another gesture he commands the men to follow him and they obey. Bea and Shio are pushed forward and kept toward the center of the group as they move through the forest.

That night, when they stop to rest, Bea and Shio are forced to sleep standing up, tied to separate tree trunks as the soldiers lay on a bed of leaves. Shio begins to think that sleeping on leaves cannot be as bad as having no bed at all. Maybe if she had not cursed them so much earlier, she would be enjoying a nice sleep now. Her head drops slowly. Bea and Shio drift into a restless sleep.



In Pikcend, the night is quiet and somber amidst the cityfolk. However, deep within the city, the palace grounds hide the unrest boiling among the members of the Council in Waiting. In the Council Chambers of Castle Riverdeep, the members grumble to themselves. The small room holds the fourteen men

meeting here. They are congregated around a large table. Allus Estugu, sits near the door, due to his late entrance, and right now, he is contemplating an early exit.

The Council in Waiting consists of those aspiring to become the next spiritual advisor and tactical advisor to the daidon--six First Minister candidates and six First Counselor candidates. Within the Council, there is a level of respect for the current advisors since they are the two most powerful people in Pikcend beside the daidon, but there is also a good amount of envy. Allus can sense the competitive nature of the members in the air, and he sympathizes with his associate, First Counselor Nodnarb. Feiht Eht Nodnarb had blazed his way through the Royal Academy at Amard as an honor student and had risen out of the Council to fill his position only a cycle ago. He is very shrewd, though he may not seem so, at times. He is also still new to the position, and Allus does not forget this fact, even though Feiht operates with the smoothness of one born to hold such an office.

Feiht stands in front of the group with his hands pushing downward in the air. The purple cuffs of his long suit bounce as he makes the gesture.

“Calm. Calm. Let us exercise calm,” he says.

He can understand the Council’s confusion and outrage over the daidon’s unannounced departure, considering the fact that it was secretly disclosed only to First Minister Estugu and not openly discussed with the Council. If the daidon wanted a vacation, no one would raise any objection, in light of the events that have recently transpired. This is also another sore spot with the Council. They had been assured that last cycle’s *situation* was

permanently fixed, but were given only minimal proof to that conclusion. Now, with the daidon on hiatus, doubts are rising, though no one is bold enough to say so. There is nothing that the Council hates more than unchecked, limitless power. Their whole purpose is to provide some level of accountability to the daidon through Feiht and Allus.

Feiht adjourns the meeting and the Council members file out of the room. The only sound to be heard is the shifting of robes and the only sight to be seen is the twisting of sour faces. One councilman, Hervus, pauses to whisper in Feiht's ear.

"This current state of secrecy is unacceptable," says Councilman Hervus. "Do not forget, First Minister, how you acquired your lofty title. Out of all of us, the situation last cycle benefited you the most." He pauses to allow his comment to sink in. "Keep me informed," he orders.

Hervus leaves the room in an ill-tempered shuffle. The irritated First Counselor closes the door behind the last councilman and turns toward Allus. Feiht is not unsightly in appearance by any means. His skin is a rich dark color and his figure is stocky but stately. His eyes are calm yet commanding. He runs his hand over the black braids atop his head, and walks around the table. Feiht sits in front of Allus, knowing that there is more to be told.

"What is the real issue here? Where is Daidon Ex Wakiyo?" he asks.

Allus scoots forward in his chair, his brow furrowing considerably, knowing that the answers to both questions are distinctly unfavorable.

"The real issue . . . is that the daidon is missing" he says.

"Missing?!"

“I discovered this by *happenstance*, not by disclosure. Where the daidon is . . . I do not know exactly, except that I searched Pikcend before the meeting and found no trace of him.”

Feiht processes this information with an unruffled demeanor though panic has already led him to a distressing deduction. If the daidon is not in Pikcend then that leaves only the Outlands.

“The daidon is reckless,” Feiht whispers.

“Some of the royal guards are missing as well. I am sure that they were commissioned for his protection. The good news is that I found a letter in the Royal Chapel upon my return tonight. It suggests that the daidon left for personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons. What does *that* mean?”

“It means I have an idea of the daidon’s destination: the former First Counselor Andallis’s grave. I’ll send an Elite search team tonight. We must stay here and keep up a solid appearance.”

Feiht stands and walks away from his seat. He sighs and turns back toward Allus.

“We cannot tell the Council,” he says.

Allus rises from his chair and shakes his head. “We cannot tell anyone.”