**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 3**

**The Duel of Wills**

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Jrain stirred.

*Drip. Drip. Snort!*

The water droplets had been falling on his snout, forming a tiny pool of water that finally broke like a dam and overflowed into one of his nostrils. He jolted awake and was sent into a short fit of sputtering coughs. His eyes welled with tears from the mild, stinging pain.

Once he could breathe clearly, he bowed his head, cleared his throat, and exhaled in relief.

He realized something was off.

No, *everything* was off.

He was sitting on slick grass and wore a tan loincloth laid over a leather skirt of sorts held up by several belts. He looked up his body and noticed the fringes of a worn hemp shawl draped over his shoulders. He didn’t own any trappings like these, let alone putting them on. He didn’t know where he was either.

His head had been leaning back against a tree before he’d woken up, but now he got a proper look upward. He saw thin wispy branches that sagged under the weight of their plentiful, thin leaves of yellow. Most of the branches farthest from the trunk nearly touched the ground, obscuring much of what lay beyond them. He knew it was raining, but the canopy above made sure he was undisturbed by the inclement weather. Well, not perfectly.

Jrain realized he must be in a forest. He’d marveled at the one he had walked through not too long ago, having never seen one in his life up until he met …

*Kin’dar*.

The dragon’s eyes went wide as the name flashed through his mind.

“Kin’dar?” he quietly said as he looked around.

“Kin’dar!” he yelled, leaping to his paws and marching toward the layered walls of foliage. He parted them one after the other until he stood out from under the tree’s embrace.

Jrain felt a chill run down his spine as he took in his surroundings. It was an overcast day with a drizzle. He turned to his right and saw that half of the tree’s canopy that he’d slept under was over land, but the other half hovered over a dark river, since the tree grew on the bank. The waters churned powerfully from the rainfall to the point of them nearly flowing over the edges. At the other side of this river, taller trees stood guard with firm branches that held their multicolored leaves aloft. They were much like what made up the forest that Kin’dar had taken him through.

Could his cabin be nearby? Jrain cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Kin’daaar!” he shouted. His voice cracked since he was still breaking in his voice. He grew quiet in a flash of self-embarrassment. Besides, his voice wasn’t going to carry here.

He suddenly realized his tail felt a little heavier than he remembered. He twisted around to find some bags attached to the base with small belts and buckles. He reached back to open some of their pouches, but they were empty, just like the waterskin resting atop his tail between the bags, as he soon found out after untying and holding it.

He strolled over to the river, dropped to one knee, and removed the waterskin’s cork to fill it up. It burgeoned at the seams in a matter of seconds, so he quickly removed it and drank until it was empty. He filled it back up and replaced the cork before tying it back in place—trial and error notwithstanding.

He became pensive, pinching his chin with an index finger and thumb.

“Am I dreaming?” he wondered aloud. He looked down at his ashen palms and brought one of them to his face. He hesitated, but he huffed resolutely before giving himself a good slap across the cheek. He rubbed it with the same hand.

“Oww … guess not,” he grumbled.

Jrain sighed and leaned on his knee with the other arm. A brief flash of light came from behind him, and a second later, thunder boomed, nearly making the dragon tumble forward as his back, fins, and tail stiffened in surprise at how close and loud it had been. He caught himself with his hands on the bank, picked himself up, and whipped around.

*That was awfully close,* he thought as he looked in the direction from whence it came. There were more trees like the ones on the other side of the river, but none like the solitary yellow tree beside him in this small clearing.

The forest beyond the river was thick with darkness, but he noticed the thicket in the other direction had a subtle glow permeating on through.

Jrain paused for a moment to calm himself from the shock of that thunder. His heart rate and breathing soon returned to normal, and he knew where he was headed next.

He grasped at the back of his shawl and was unexpectedly rewarded with a hood. He carefully drew it over his horns and head and began walking away from the river toward the light.

*I know I was with Kin’dar earlier today,* he thought. *Or yesterday? And this outfit is tailored for me; there’s no way Kin’dar had this prepared.*

*Who put me in this anyway? I never left Kin’dar’s house.*

*I don’t remember stopping to sleep under that tree. I was in bed. I …*

He mentally trailed off as his confusion and frustration mounted. Another possibility slowed him to a halt.

*Was all of that just a dream?*

Jrain winced and brought a hand to his temple. He wasn’t sure what was real.

A few moments passed, and when he looked up, he saw how close he had gotten to the other side amidst his distracted musings. The light had grown far brighter, and his ear fins twitched at a new sound: waves.

His face became set with resolve. There was a spring in his step now.

As Jrain skirted past the remaining trees, he stepped out to observe a wide grassy plane that stretched to his left and right endlessly. But ahead, the plane sloped downward into a shallow gorge with the same river cutting through it. Beyond that, it gradually ascended and narrowed to a thin escarpment nearly a thousand feet away. The river continued on to the left and—a couple hundred feet in that direction—curved toward the plateau’s edge and met its end as a waterfall.

He looked at the long, thin escarpment and caught sight of a line piercing upward from the ledge. He felt an inexorable pull toward it, and before he knew it, he was walking toward it.

The grass gradually faded as dirt gave way to mud, and grass gave way to pebbles. Once he had descended the hill far enough and reached the river, he realized he had to swim across it to get to the other side. Since his pockets were empty and outfit already plenty wet, he trudged into the freezing water and dove. There wasn’t much to see below the surface beyond more sand and pebbles, and considering the strong downriver current, he made a beeline and got to the other side in half a minute.

As he drew closer the escarpment, it narrowed to the point where he could look down both sides by walking a few steps to his left or right. The ocean was far below, but even from this height, the dark icy waves were no less foreboding. He felt a bit uneasy being out here with the wind picking up, but he was getting closer to approaching the strange object.

The sky roiled with dark gray clouds, which seemed to have darkened even more since he’d wandered from the clearing. The rain was falling harder now as well. However, he only noticed these things in passing. His attention was fixed on what was now only a few paces away.

It was a staff—wooden and gnarled and chipped in various places. Small sticks protruded from its top, evenly spaced apart with a set of smaller perpendicular sticks pointing inward. Jrain circled the staff once with his tail surrounding it, and he instinctively slapped it to the ground to remove excess mud and pebbles that had accumulated along the underside. He leaned closer and noticed two of the stick sets had been broken off. He wondered if it once held something.

The staff looked charred, especially near the top. He reached out and touched it.

Jrain’s world exploded in a sea of white. His hand instinctively tightened around the staff as his body briefly coursed with a paralyzing jolt of power, and then he felt all of it flow out of his hand back into the staff. A bolt of lightning soared upward and spread out in the sky, followed by a concussive blast of wind and a deafening roar of thunder.

The force of the wind ripped him from the ground, and he hurtled through the air for a couple seconds before crashing back down and tumbling down the hill.

Once he came to a stop, he fumbled about dirt and patches of grass on all fours, hyperventilating from the world of white noise he saw and heard. As he gasped for air, he stopped crawling around, realizing that he was still on a precarious plateau high above the ocean that may or may not have sharp, craggy rocks just below the surface.

He was shaking, but he tried to keep calm until his sight and hearing returned after a couple minutes, though he did have trouble focusing and could still hear a subtle ringing.

Jrain grunted as he rose and looked in the direction of the staff. This time, he could see a thick column of smoke rising from it. The other lightning strike from earlier must’ve struck the staff when he was on the other side of the forest. He cursed at himself for not making that assumption before he was zapped. But, to be fair, he knew that wouldn’t have been the forgone conclusion.

*Struck by lightning,* he thought to himself, snorting in disbelief.

*This stick. Now me? And ... and I survived?*

He knew that staff had something to do with it. He knew it must be important. That brief surge of power had been … quite the feeling.

Jrain trundled up the hill again and grabbed the staff. His grip loosened for a moment as he felt a mysterious shift in his mind and soul, but no flow of energy into his body occurred.

He shook his head and pulled at the staff. Nothing happened.

He held on to it with both hands, bent his knees, and gathered his breath. He sharply inhaled as his thighs and biceps flexed from the effort.

After two minutes of pull after pull, his muscles ached more and more with each one. He leaned against the staff in exhaustion with his mouth ajar as he tried cooling off, but the cold rain and wind accomplished most of that for him.

He had one more go left in him.

Jrain gripped the staff and pulled with all his might, and the staff budged after a few seconds. Feeling this, his irises narrowed with adrenaline. His legs and forearms burned and shook in protest. His grunting turned into a feral roar.

At last, the staff flew from its place just as Jrain was about to cease his war cry. The upward force made his hood fall back, and he almost fell back with it but managed to steady himself with a swift backward step.

After exhaling and smirking in triumph at the staff held in both hands against the gloomy clouds, he slumped to his knees and placed the staff back on the ground, holding on to it for support. His back heaved up and down.

“I did it,” he said breathlessly. “I did it.”

“Yes, you did,” a voice called out smoothly from behind him.

For a second, Jrain paid no mind to what he heard, assuming it must have been his imagination what with all the wind and rain. But he knew that wasn’t in his head. He instinctively felt a new presence from behind, so he straightened and pivoted his head to look behind him.

A figure clad in a tattered mess of loose black cloth stood several yards away down the hill. None of their features could be discerned amid their flapping, swirling robes; their face was consumed by the black void of their hood.

Jrain shivered. While he was exerting himself, he hadn’t noticed the temperature had slightly dropped. He could swear a chill was seeping through his hide.

“About time,” the stranger added slyly.

Jrain slowly got up and turned to fully face the unexpected guest, not once breaking his stare upon where their eyes must be under that hood.

“Who are yo—”

“You have already asked me that more than once. I have grown tired of repeating myself,” the stranger interrupted.

Jrain’s heart rate climbed from suddenly connecting dots. The voice had a layered quality to it, much like the being that had spoken to him in his dream. However, while that voice had been like a resonant, harmonious, and pleasing choir of sorts, the voice of this stranger was rough and gravely. The other layers added a body of range, but what disturbed Jrain most was a subtle lack of harmony between them—one layer was off-key here and there with some words.

“I-I have never met you before,” the dragon stammered in sudden confusion.

“… Hm, interesting,” the stranger muttered, pausing as his hood seemed to slightly cock to the side. “It happens every time,” he added in grim bemusement.

“Speak plainly,” Jrain said firmly. “What are you trying to say?” he clarified, looking down at the staff and adjusting his fingers to grip it more tightly as he held it out. “Is this yours?”

The stranger sighed, followed by a morose chuckle.

“No, it is not mine,” the stranger said.

They lifted their arms out before themself to expose scarred, pale hands that were neither furry nor scaly. They reached into the fold of their left sleeve, where a ghostly blue and white light began to emanate as they pulled out a sword with a twisted handguard of thorns. As more of it emerged from the cloak, Jrain saw that it was like a long needle of shadow with the blade oscillating between a silver and black finish depending on how it was held in the light. Once the tip of the blade had cleared the hem of the sleeve, the unnatural light faded, and the stranger made a graceful yet violent flourish before adopting a wider stance, partly exposing their pale feet and tattered black leggings with frayed hemming.

“But I will have it to make you mine,” the stranger said darkly as they dropped their rapier to their side. There was a slight tremor to their voice that was not one of fear, but of bottled rage.

Jrain was silent as he stared at the stranger in bewildered horror.

He looked down at the staff, raising it in front of himself with a regretful posture of defense.

“As I thought,” the stranger said flatly.

They soared forward like a specter after pointing their rapier toward Jrain, which pulled them forward like a magnet. An intense ghostly flash of the same eerie light momentarily stunned Jrain, but he reflexively stepped to the side and barely avoided the blade as he shoved it away.

The stranger flew past Jrain, came to an abrupt halt, and bent for a moment before flipping backward on top of where Jrain stood. He brought his staff up over his head to meet their downward slash, but the stranger quickly slid the blade inward toward themselves, dropping in a crouch right behind Jrain as they swung their sword at Jrain’s right ankle.

The dragon gasped in pain as the blade sunk through his hide and an inch of flesh. The stranger swiftly retracted the blade into themself as purple blood splattered across the ground. They swept and swirled backward, their robes making them appear as a tornado.

The stranger stood upright once more with the sword to their side. Their robes smoothly weighed back down upon their form, more slowly than what was natural, as if gravity was slower around them.

“You resist me again. Why must you be increasingly …”—the stranger paused mid-sentence and brought their sword up to look at the hand wielding it. They clenched the thorn-ridden handle, and blood seeped out from the taut gaps between their fingers—“… *difficult*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Jrain yelled, betraying weakness as he faltered stepping backward. He hissed and steadied himself, doubly frustrated since the stranger’s garbs prevented him from getting a clear read on their body language to predict where or how they’d move next.

“What did I ever do to you?” he asked.

The stranger seemed to glide toward him rather than walk.

“They ruined everything for us,” they answered. “You are being manipulated by their deceit.”

After several steps, they rushed at Jrain and swung at his left side with a simple strike. They spun to the left to build momentum for another blow at his other side, but he blocked both strikes and suddenly took a step forward to clock the center of the stranger’s hood with his right hand.

The stranger stumbled backward, leaving just enough time for Jrain to grab his staff with both hands again and plunge it into the stranger’s gut. They doubled over onto their knees with a guttural gasp, and Jrain stepped closer to loom over them, poised to bring his staff down.

The stranger rolled to the side onto their back just as the staff came down where their chest had been. Their legs then flung back and came forward so fast that the momentum instantly got them to their feet.

Then, they violently sprung into Jrain with their sword piercing Jrain’s side. The stranger held on to the dragon as they fell to the ground together, and Jrain let out a cry of anguish as his blood spattered across his stomach.

“This need not be difficult,” the stranger whispered in a disappointed and almost pitying way after leaning in close to Jrain’s ear. They pulled the blade from the dragon’s side, and a small shower of purple blood followed as they stood back up. The hand wielding the rapier was still dripping with their own red blood right on top of Jrain, but he had no time to dwell on such things as the stranger leaned over to Jrain’s right and reached for his staff.

Jrain breathed unevenly and sharply from his second injury. Both wounds felt like ice spreading from within, and they prickled with pain. Conversely, his brain was on fire wondering what he should do.

Just as the stranger spread their fingers out to take his staff, Jrain gripped it and swung his arm up to hit them, but the stranger rapidly adjusted their hand to seize Jrain’s wrist. The stranger took their rapier and jabbed it straight through his forearm, nailing it to the ground with the sound of parting scales and rending flesh.

Jrain roared and reached up to grab at the stranger’s robes with his other hand, pulling them down onto his chest to bite into their shoulder.

The stranger howled, screeched, and hissed all at once as the layers of their voice devolved into chaos. Light erupted from their being, forcing Jrain to close his eyes as he bit down as hard as he could.

*“NOOO!”* the stranger yelled, wrangling their voice back into a semblance of harmony.

With Jrain blinded by the light, the stranger took the butt of their sword and reached overhead to drive it into Jrain’s head. After several blows, Jrain let go because of the blunt trauma, and the stranger jumped away with a preternatural backflip.

Jrain clambered to his paws with his staff still in hand, clutching the top of his head with the other hand from the fresh concussion. He drove his staff into the ground and leaned against it, hunching over and shaking from his injuries. He wiped at his snout with his free arm; red blood dripped from and covered his teeth and lips.

The blood tasted cold and metallic. He looked down at his shaking right arm, now awash in a glistening coat of purple and red.

“No, no …” Jrain whispered, feeling wrong for doing something so violent and hurtful. This was what he could’ve done to Kin’dar, had he not come to his senses.

The rain had not stopped during this skirmish, but only then did more lightning appear, dancing across the clouds above and showering the plateau with momentary flashes of lavender. A loud crash of thunder boomed.

“Why are you hurting me?” Jrain asked, a mix of sadness and anger in the question.

The stranger looked at their right shoulder and touched it with their left hand. It was marked with much blood after they lifted it, and Jrain could see ripped, pale flesh showing through the fresh holes and tears in the robes.

“This is why,” the stranger said in strange delight, turning their head to look toward Jrain. “The *true* leviathan. Your power is great, as is your capacity to rightfully rule.”

The stranger paused, pointing a bony finger at him.

“But you have lost your way. I know I cannot convince you of the truth. You *must* be forced to experience it again. All they want is for you to forget who you are.” The stranger shook their head. “No, you must not forget.”

They glided toward Jrain and slashed forward, which Jrain met with a horizontal block that turned into a lock; their weapons grinded against each other.

“You are made for this,” the stranger hissed. They took a sudden leap backward with Jrain fumbling forward from the sudden loss of force he had been pushing against. The stranger doubled back and initiated a sequence of jabs, some missing or being stopped by Jrain’s scaled chest, while others found their shallow marks in his shoulders and sides. The stranger moved forward all the while, overwhelming Jrain and forcing him to hastily retreat as he tried to bat away the rapier.

“We are made for this,” they said amid their last few jabs. Jrain ceased moving backward when the stranger initiated a few more swings that he swiftly blocked. Then, the stranger lowered their rapier, and when the dragon quickly looked back, he realized he would’ve fallen to his death had they not stopped his advance.

“Let me show you,” the stranger calmly said, reaching out with their hand.

Jrain looked down at his staff, considering the request for a moment before looking back up and shaking his head in turn.

“I ... I don’t think I should,” Jrain replied in a haggard voice.

He rushed forward this time and swung the staff in a horizontal sweep that the stranger deftly avoided by bending back with surprising flexibility. They twisted into a knelt posture and cast their free hand out to the side as their robes momentarily flashed with light. An invisible force grabbed Jrain and spun him around, also forcing him to his knees. He blinked wildly from the power he’d just witnessed, glancing back just in time to see the stranger raising their sword above their head.

Jrain put the staff above and behind his head with both hands, catching the blade before it came down on him. He then spun along the ground toward his right and his staff came with it in an identical sweep, which caught the stranger in their side.

With this opportunity, Jrain got up and plunged the staff forward with both hands but slid his lower hand near the end of the staff, using it to immediately jab it forward a second time. The stranger backed farther away with the first attack but sidestepped the second, taking the hilt of their rapier and using it as a bludgeon against Jrain’s outstretched inner elbow.

He dropped the staff from the blow but tried swinging his left side forward for a sucker punch, but they unexpectedly spun and leaned inward with an unnatural speed, grabbing Jrain’s swinging fist to stop it in midair. The stranger’s robes briefly flashed with light again as they absorbed the momentum and used it in their left arm to punch back.

The dragon’s furious bewilderment only lasted for a split second before the blow connected to his snout with a grotesque *crack*.

Jrain crumpled to his knees with a stifled, muffled gasp as blood began pouring down the front of his snout. The stranger gasped long in tired anger before following up with a vicious knee strike that made his head snap back. He fell to the ground with a thud, making choking, garbled sounds as blood pooled in the back of his throat.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, and Jrain was almost numb to the pain that radiated all throughout his adrenaline-filled body. He watched the stranger calmly put their rapier back into their sleeve with the light glowing from within their robes. Once that was done, they walked out of view as Jrain helplessly looked up at the sky.

His still, broken body was pelted with heavy rain, which did little good in washing the blood away. He shakily reached for his wounded side and held his left hand to it. Then, he attempted to sit up.

The stranger came back into view with the staff in hand, pausing to watch Jrain sit halfway up. They positioned the staff’s pronged top toward Jrain and firmly pressed it into his neck until he was pinned against the sleek grass. Jrain grabbed at it weakly as he made straining noises.

The stranger inhaled in surprise.

“They *did* let you keep it?” they said.

Jrain didn’t answer, paralyzed like a cornered animal.

“Ahh, you do not even realize it yet.”

The stranger laughed wickedly, turning his gaze toward the heavens.

“Are you handing him over to me?” they wondered aloud.

There was no answer.

“No matter,” they said in delight. “All the easier, especially after all these setbacks you’re causing me.”

They paused, pressing and twisting the staff a bit tighter into Jrain’s neck. He winced and moaned in fear.

“You will understand,” they said, nodding.

They stepped on Jrain with one foot as they lifted the staff with one hand. They raised their other hand to the sky as well and clenched it as they pulled down at the air with their robes briefly lighting up.

With that motion, a lightning bolt descended into the staff, which absorbed all the electricity. The stranger then shoved it back into Jrain’s neck, and a volley of electricity exploded into him.

He seized up for a couple seconds from the sudden surge of energy, but he wasn’t paralyzed or in pain while getting fried. In fact, the agony of his wounds faded. His strength was building.

It felt … good. *Really* good*.* He felt more powerful by the second.

He stopped struggling and instinctively embraced the intake of electricity. It was an energy that filled him with a profound mix of fear and satisfaction, so he forgot about the stranger, closed his eyes, and gasped as his vision went white.

To be continued.