**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 5**

**The Walls We Build**

Kin’dar was running toward danger.

Again.

He skirted around yet another giant impression of a paw, being a few yards wide and a foot or so deep. The forest floor’s grass was smeared and torn up, and the distance covered by a single stride took Kin’dar a few seconds to cover, but that didn’t stop him from letting up on his pace. He had nothing else to do but keep following the destruction.

Weirdly enough, the damage largely stuck to the path, now littered with countless leaves and broken branches exposing it to the morning sky. There were bent and splintered and leveled trees to both sides of him.

*Impossible,* he thought for the umpteenth time. *They’ve never come this far. There’s no way one could’ve wandered this way without attracting notice.*

*It’s impossible.*

Over dinner last night, Jrain had asked about his parents in the drawing on his shelf. The interest took him by surprise, so he mentioned they were explorers and how dearly he loved them, but not much else.

One such thing he hadn’t mentioned was that this path had been trailblazed by his parents over a dozen years ago. Once they completed it, they had attested for the area’s safety, and how it would be safer and equally abundant with resources for hunters, fisherfolk, and gardeners in contrast to the sanctioned regions that branched out toward the north and south from Foren.

Of course, they were right. The path had shown promise after being approved of by the acting governor at the time. But once Stella took over a year later after The Breach, she shut down activity outside the city for a couple years to the largest extent possible by pushing hard for gardening and farming within Foren’s walls. Legislation or initiatives that remotely involved ‘expansion’ or ‘exposure’ of the city and its people had been cast out.

Stella’s isolationist posture, however, had loosened its grip ever so slightly in recent years. Not only due to the population of the city growing, but also the soil becoming less fertile and harder to cultivate. One relaxation had come through by his arguing for the reopening of the path and wishes to move outside the city. With Jack’s support, Kin’dar and Stella came to a compromise that his cabin would act as an honorary post where people would check in between Foren and what lay beyond the cabin, which was a half hour jog from there.

Thankfully, his house wasn’t something he had to man at all times since there was a form hanging out front under the porch. At the end of each day, he’d see if everything checked out with people having returned. If not, he ironed out any issues with the guards at the western gate. Most of the time, problems were just from people forgetting to write down their check ins or outs—or doing so in the wrong boxes.

Sometimes, he’d get lucky with people hanging out on his porch to take a rest or just say hello. The bureaucratic task—despite not being paid for it like his main job—was a fair trade for chatting with elders, families, friends, and more.

It had gone on like this for a couple years with Stella’s surety that he’d be attacked having gone unfounded.

Until now.

It was like a massive hoe had gone through the forest. Like a battering ram had swung through half of his abode. Just like …

Kin’dar grunted angrily at the memory and pushed it down.

He had to focus; he had to make haste.

At least he knew what to expect. That monster—a damned Shade—must have Jrain.

Kin’dar had only seen its silhouette briefly against the rising sun before retreating behind his house in the hope he hadn’t been noticed. Once he had heard it stomp far enough away, he dared a glance and only saw the top of its horned head above the path’s trees before it disappeared to the east.

He wouldn’t let this Shade take Jrain if he could help it. Even if he had no idea what to do once ... *if* he found it any second now.

Kin’dar finally saw the ocean come into view, much sooner than usual since there were little to no trees obscuring the way. And because he had dashed the whole way here, so he slowed his pace to a jog and gulped in air.

He had passively watched the sky shift in its violet and orange hues with the sun rising from behind him, steadily making it easier to watch his footing with these pawprints and debris.

*The Shade couldn’t still be around,* Kin’dar thought. *They always disappear before the sun rises. Maybe it can stay behind the cliffs, but not for long. And after that ... where could it go? Unless it took Jr—*

His suspicions ceased churning when he made it to where the shoreline and forest’s edge met. A giant, long impression had formed on the beach, creating a shallow, uneven inlet that was filling with water.

He scanned in and around it, and soon enough, a blue figure’s upper body could be seen hanging on to the inlet’s ledge. Jrain’s lower body was in the tide.

There was no Shade in sight.

Kin’dar gasped and rushed over to Jrain with sprays of the black sand kicking up from behind him.

“Jrain!” he yelled, nearly tripping as he assumed a full sprint once more. He shouted his name several more times, but the dragon didn’t react.

He kneeled down in front of him and put his hands on his shoulders. To his surprise, Jrain’s eyes were open, but only barely.

Jrain looked so ... drained. He was disconcertingly despondent.

“Jrain! Jrain? Talk to me,” Kin’dar said breathlessly, grabbing Jrain’s wrists and pulling the heavy man out of the tide slowly but surely. The fox huffed as Jrain’s waist cleared the edge, allowing him to more easily drag him onto level ground. Jrain was lying on his stomach, still uttering not a word with his head on its side.

“Stay away from me,” Jrain whimpered. “You shouldn’t be helping me.”

Kin’dar’s eyes went wide, and then he scowled.

“What? Nonsense. *You look at m*e*,”* Kin’dar demanded, reaching out to grab under Jrain’s shoulder and shove him onto his back with another impressive tug, no doubt aided by adrenaline.

The fox lifted his upper body off the sand by pulling on the back of his neck with one hand while putting the other paw on his snout to rotate Jrain’s face toward his own. Jrain refused to meet his eyes.

“Jrain, look at me. *Now.”*

After a moment, he hesitantly obeyed with a shame in his eyes that exceeded what he displayed during their first meeting.

Kin’dar’s mouth parted at the sight, searching his eyes desperately.

“Jrain, are you hurt? What did that Shade do to you?” Kin’dar asked pleadingly.

Jrain slowly scrunched his brows.

“... W-what?”

“That was … Jrain, almost no one ever survives being taken by a Shade. I ...”

Kin’dar briefly looked away as he bit his lip, blinking away tears with those old memories freshly surfacing, but also with the relief of knowing his friend had survived.

“I can’t believe you’re alive. I am *so* happy it didn’t take you,” Kin’dar said, letting go of Jrain’s snout and draping his other arm around his back for a hug. There was a long silence between the two. Jrain did not hug back.

“… What is a Shade?” Jrain asked wearily.

Kin’dar pulled away.

“You don’t …? Well, I supposed that makes sense, but come on. You have to sit up.”

The fox issued some encouraging words to Jrain, who soon brought himself up on his butt, lifting one leg up so his tail could move out from between his legs and rest behind him. Kin’dar then inspected various areas of his body, pressing into some like his stomach and limbs while asking him if anything hurt, to which Jrain responded in the negative.

Kin’dar never expected to be using so many of the Foreriders’ emergency medical procedures in such a short period of time. Everything about Jrain was fine, but he was as distant and frightened as he had been during their fateful meeting.

It was only then that Kin’dar relaxed and sat himself in front of Jrain.

“A Shade is a monster,” Kin’dar said. “They are like giant people made of … darkness. Shadows. They roam around carelessly and mindlessly, unpredictable in their actions. When provoked, or upon sight of people, they can go into terrible rages, growing even bigger when they rampage anything and everything in sight. They will usually just kill, but if given enough time, some have taken people, who have disappeared with the Shades. That can be stopped if you hurt them enough or, better yet, use powerful light against them, but if they disappear to ... wherever it is they go, whoever is in their clutches goes with them.”

Kin’dar paused, sighing.

“That is a Shade, Jrain. Though the one that took you … I didn’t see it well, but it was new. It looked a lot like your species with a tail and horns. It must have sensed your presence or something,” Kin’dar said, becoming more invested in his explanations as he leaned in closer to Jrain.

“Over time, we’ve noticed they take on the shape of species like my own, or bears, tigers, and the like. But none has ever gotten past Foren. It must have materialized somewhere in the Haze Maze, which has never happened before. They always lumber toward Foren from the west, or at most have been seen forming on the horizon in that direction at nightfall. But this …”

Kin’dar paused in consideration, soon straightening with sudden purpose.

“We have to go to Foren. Now.”

Kin’dar got to his paws quickly, but he noticed Jrain hadn’t moved. He was looking down gravely at the sand between his legs.

“Yes, a Shade took me,” Jrain affirmed hesitantly. “I didn’t know what to do when it had me. I guess I’m …”—he trailed off for a moment and gulped—“… I guess I’m lucky I survived.”

“This is all very new and strange, Jrain. The Shades have been appearing in unusually great and erratic numbers as of late, but this ... you’ve been through enough already,” he said sadly.

Jrain nodded in appreciation, but he still looked very uncomfortable.

“I, um … W-what about your house?” Jrain asked sheepishly, his fins drooping with a frown.

“We’ll need to—ah, right,” Kin’dar said with a curse under his breath. “I … I’ll have to talk with Jack about that, and I have to ask for his advice before I talk with Stella.”

He opened his palms toward Jrain in explanation.

“Stella is the governor of Foren, and Jack is the head of the city’s building guild. I know him pretty well, and for all I know, he’ll probably fix up my cabin for free,” Kin’dar continued, shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck. “He’s … we understand each other well, and he’ll need to hear about this. Repairing my cabin to such an extent will not go unnoticed, so I need his input on what Stella should know.”

“I want to help,” Jrain firmly said, clearing his throat and straightening himself.  “Can I help you fix your house, please?”

The fox was a bit surprised by the forcefulness in Jrain’s offer, but he blinked and inclined his head.

“Your help would be greatly appreciated, Jrain. But first, we have to see how everything plays out,” he said, offering a hand to Jrain.

Jrain nodded, followed by his hand reaching up to grasp at Kin’dar’s wrist, which he could easily grasp all the way around. Heavy as he was, Jrain helped Kin’dar out by pushing himself up with his tail.

“Not exactly how I planned to start out today, but nothing’s changed with my plans to take you to visit town, eh?” Kin’dar said with an anxious laugh, looking up at Jrain with a sudden twinge of confusion. “Well come on, let’s … uh, let’s get going.”

Jrain had stood up straight but immediately hunched over. After Kin’dar had turned around with a slightly confused expression, Jrain saw him slightly shake his head yet make no remark.

Jrain sighed in relief.

In that moment, he hadn’t realized he was still a few inches taller than normal; he was on the cusp of returning to his normal size when Kin’dar had arrived. It probably wouldn’t be much longer until he fully shrunk, so he would have to keep a slight distance from him until then.

He looked to his left at the giant notch taken out of the shoreline, then to his left at the razed path Kin’dar was walking toward.

His mind went back to the bird he had held yesterday evening, as well as the countless others that had flown all around him, always just out of sight, hidden by the branches and leaves.

He remembered the sound of frogs along the river, and the occasional sight of fish swimming on by when he’d crossed the log.

And there was Kin’dar, who—just under an hour ago—was the size of an insect to him, cowering behind the remnants of his home.

*Did I kill any animals?*

*Could I have almost killed Kin’dar?*

Jrain moaned in discomfort. He felt nauseous and pressed a hand to his stomach.

*Who was I back there? What if I hadn’t ... hadn’t stopped ...*

Jrain scowled, refusing to think of the word. What had happened ... he could never forget how it had made him feel.

The stranger had been right—he loved his power. But if it was *that* hard to control, and *that* dangerous ...

Jrain gasped softly.

*Wait … this stranger … was it ‘The Stranger’ that that being in my dream warned me about?*

He gulped.

It had to be. Who else could it be? That power the being had mentioned, and The Stranger … it must be the whole electricity thing. Turning into a giant.

Suddenly, what Kin’dar had said about these so-called Shades came to him.

That’s what he was. A Shade.

*Am I? Really?*

He let the shame of it fill him because, even now, he was getting excited thinking about how that power had felt. The tingling warmth and energy still lingered in his body ever so slightly, now briefly stoked with a flare of anticipation that made his fins twitch.

He cringed in revulsion and facepalmed.

*What? How could I feel this way after all that?*

Jrain looked out to the ocean, which sparkled even more from his increasingly teary eyes.

*Maybe I am a monster.*

Jrain sniffled and moved his hands to his eyes and rubbed down, followed by a long, shaky sigh.

*I can’t let myself use that power again.*

He knew he was lucky. He hadn’t lost his friend.

*Do I deserve to lose my friend?*

Maybe it was best Kin’dar didn’t know the truth, but that didn’t make him feel any better over what had happened. He didn’t like lying.

There was no way he deserved Kin’dar’s kindness or help ever again. But Jrain couldn’t leave him now. He had no one else, and he *had* to make amends.

Or was it too dangerous for him to stick around? Was there any electricity left in him? What if The Stranger wanted him to go to Foren? Could he stop himself if he started growing again? Could The Stranger take over his mind if that happened?

The dragon shook his head and snarled. So many questions, and they made him so scared that he didn’t want to move. What was he to do? He just wanted to hide.

In the distance, Kin’dar turned and dramatically shrugged before beckoning to Jrain.

He owed his life to this fox.

Maybe, as long as he focused on him, he would be okay.

Jrain wrinkled his snout and nodded shortly, resolving to catch up with his friend.

“Well, is it working out for you?” Kin’dar asked eagerly, raising an eyebrow.

Jrain frowned as he examined the green cloth around his waist.

This kilt looked suited for the fox, but its width was restricting on Jrain’s dimensions and gait. There was a hole sewn in the back that Kin’dar could slide his bushy tail through, but it was *far* too small for his own. Jrain had to keep it on the inside of the kilt, which made it look his posterior was ... preposterously large.

“I feel silly,” Jrain said sheepishly, looking at his behind. He thought it would only add embarrassment to the anxiety of when everyone in Foren would stare at him.

“Bah, don’t worry,” Kin’dar said, waving his hand in dismissal. “You look great! But first thing we’re going to do is see Pinstripe. It pays to know the town’s finest tailor. I’m sure he’ll appreciate the challenge.”

Jrain didn’t say anything, so Kin’dar turned his head back around to look forward. After all, Jrain knew he’d be of no help with navigation.

They were twisting and turning through those large rocky hills to the west of the cabin where the sun had come up earlier. They were anywhere from 100 to 300 feet tall, and the dips in between them felt like traversing a geography somewhere between dells and gorges since the hills were so steep and close together.

With the sun now approaching its zenith, the gentle heat was welcome due to the chilly air that got caught in and flowed through this terrain. Kin’dar had said fog would get trapped in here as well, which is why it had been named The Haze Maze. He also had told him that the chances of making it out the other side easily were slim to none with no guidance, even with the sun since it was often obscured by fog amid the gorges, but not today.

Even with clear skies, the Hazy Maze had the baffling effect of turning people around who weren’t paying attention. The city kept the right path undetectable; it was simply taught to citizens by memory. This was done to keep strangers from entering or, as Kin’dar had explained, if Shades could assume normal sizes and somehow figure out the way inside. He had laughed it off and sighed in exasperation.

Jrain paused for a moment with Kin’dar not looking now. He furtively slid the kilt down and lifted his tail up and out. He pulled the kilt back up to his waistline in the front, but now it rested underneath his haunches at an angle. He exhaled in relief, swooshing his free tail around in satisfaction.

“I can make it work for now,” he answered belatedly, grinning as he jogged apace to meet up with Kin’dar. Jrain was also wearing the red blanket he had slept with last night, which he pulled up yet again over his shoulders since it kept trying to slide off.

He studied the small holes and tears in the blanket. A fresh wave of guilt washed over him.

They had passed by Kin’dar’s cabin before making the trek to Foren, and while he tried to make the best of the situation, there was a great sadness in Kin’dar’s eyes when he had walked among the wreckage. Everything from the western side of the house up to halfway through Kin’dar’s bedroom had been leveled.

Jrain had noticed Kin’dar approached the toppled bookcase and asked for help to stand it back up. After carefully rummaging through some items, he singled out the portrait of him and his parents. The glass had cracked in the frame, but the illustration had survived.

Kin’dar had held it out briefly and stuffed it in his backpack along with a few other things that lay among the detritus. Afterwards, they had found some clothing in the dresser that had been opposite to Jrain’s bed, but most of the clothing had been ruined in the crushed furniture.

However, the very article Kin’dar had referred to yesterday had survived in the bottom drawer, much to his rueful surprise. And the blanket itself had miraculously remained whole if scratched up.

Jrain had also found his silver horn ring under some planks. He was so glad it hadn’t been broken. In hindsight, taking it off had been fortuitously wise.

“You like that blanket, huh?” Kin’dar observed as they turned onto a path at a three-forked intersection. He wore the same outfit he’d had yesterday, but he now shivered for what must be the third time. “I should’ve worn my longer shirt over this.”

“Yes, I like it,” Jrain said quietly.

From behind, he frowned watching Kin’dar cross his arms and rub his biceps.

*I shouldn’t get too close to Kin’dar, but I want to help …*

He breathed out nervously.

*Focus on my friend.*

He quickened his step and came beside Kin’dar to open the blanket at the right side, wrapping it around him.

Kin’dar looked up at Jrain with pleasant surprise on his face.

“Oh, thank you,” Kin’dar said. “I wasn’t insinuating by commenting on the blanket, by the way,” he quietly added.

“I didn’t think you were,” Jrain said, hesitating before leaning his head to the side and brushing his cheek against Kin’dar’s own. “I hope this helps.”

Jrain lifted his head and struggled to put words together.

“I, um … I-I hope you’re okay. I’m here for you, Kin’dar.”

He considered Jrain for a moment before looking to the ground in contemplation.

“I … yeah, I’ll be okay,” he answered softly.

He seemed taken a little off guard, which made Jrain self-conscious. He wondered if he was being too insistent or clingy, but there was a strain of hope in Kin’dar’s tired voice, and so he pushed down his doubts.

Huddled together, they walked in silence for a few more minutes with the wind gently whistling among the hills. Jrain went with the motions of Kin’dar guiding him along.

Eventually, the fox’s long ears shot up.

“Ah, here we go with another around-the-corner reveal,” he said, flashing a coy smile. “Foren is just ahead.”

Jrain looked back at Kin’dar excitedly, and his tail thumped against the ground in time with the leap of his heart; however, he didn’t rush ahead, instead continuing at the same leisurely pace as his friend, never leaving his side.

Then, there it was. He first noticed the tall circular watchtower made of stone, embellished with wood and metal framing along its embrasures. It was enclosed within a fence made of logs that rose about four yards from the ground with their tops carved into sharp points. Then, as the hills at his sides receded into his periphery, Jrain felt his breath escape as he laid eyes on a huge town of wooden cottages, cabins, and small buildings of various heights and widths. All were built around and below the tower in circular tiers that rose at a steady incline toward the center upon an incredibly wide yet low hill, which was in stark contrast to those in the Haze Maze.

What surprised Jrain most of all was the grand wall of fortified timber surrounding the whole of Foren. The wall was slightly lower than the tower, but it was over 200 feet tall, braced with rows of thick steel brackets along the whole perimeter that created several sections where the tops and ends of other logs met and were fastened. The wall was also braced with equally impressive and steep diagonal supports that came to meet near the top of the wall from the inside. These supports looked like several logs wrapped together in a roughly cylindrical shape, kept in place with thick rope and more metal brackets along their lengths. Jrain could see some of these supports clearly to his left and right, and they not only looked deeply entrenched in the ground, but were also secured with giant metal brackets driven into place with metal stakes along the inner edges. These brackets also had forged sleeves that were a few feet long to adequately house the supports at their bases.

In addition, singular logs were in between the underside of the main supports and the wall. Because the main supports were at an angle to the wall that eventually met it near the top, these smaller horizontal beams were of varying lengths, becoming shorter as they moved upward. They were all vertically spaced apart in intervals of 30 or so feet, presumably offering stability to the main supports.

The walls weren’t just one layer of logs either, even if it seemed that way from the inside. He could tell the wall was a few logs thick—perhaps 20 feet. Because he was standing just outside the Haze Maze, he could look up to his left and right and see the interior of the wall since it extended over and rested atop the two hills that he and Kin’dar had just come through. The rest of the wall extended into them, technically making them part of it with no gaps left unfilled all around the city besides the opening he and Kin’dar were passed now. This was the only real way out of town, it seemed. To the east, at least.

And that wasn’t all. Six lookout platforms in total ran along the whole length of the wall, which came out several feet with diagonal logs underneath them that branched outward to the edges for support. The first two he saw were placed adjacent to each other atop the two hills to his left and right; however, there were five small buildings evenly spread out along the top as well that alternated with four other lookout platforms.

Long metal ladders with wooden framing could be seen leading up to these buildings. After asking in hushed awe what they were for, Kin’dar explained that these “glorified treehouses” were where guards stored supplies, changed posts, and sought refuge from inclement weather.

Indeed, Jrain noticed at least a dozen black specks walking or standing still. Most who were on the platforms stood still, and he noticed there were guardrails and large tools or weapons of various shapes pointed outward. As for other guards, some moved back and forth along the narrow walkways that connected the platforms and buildings. These walkways were only as wide as the wall itself, but there were guardrails for them, too.

Kin’dar had to bump Jrain’s shoulder to keep him walking since he was so mesmerized. Foren was less than 200 feet from the wall all around, and he could see a select few buildings occupied that gap, as well as some gardens and crops. But on this side of the town, a straight wall cut halfway through that distance from one side to the other. This smaller wall was about the same height as the one he’d barely been able to make out around the center tower.

“The wall has been torn down and expanded when Foren became too populated over the centuries,” Kin’dar explained without prompt. “This particular iteration has been in place for nearly half a century, having been notably enlarged, reinforced, and upgraded over the last decade more than any other. As you can see, we’re approaching the limits of our ... protection, but you can imagine that all this …”—Kin’dar swept his free right arm out, since he was still huddled next to Jrain’s right side—“… is not easy to get rid of with Shades that could arrive at any minute, especially as of late.”

As they approached the shorter wall, it obscured most of the town from view, except for the tops of the upper tier buildings and most of the tower. The trail led to a wicket gate with square metal plating subtly recessed into the wood in several rows and a couple columns on each door. Blocking their way was a single guard: a broad-shouldered St. Bernard who was somewhere between Kin’dar’s and Jrain’s statures.

The guard wore a mix of steel and leather armor. In particular, he had an open-faced helmet that curiously rose in a curve toward the back where a short green flag hung and gently flapped. He was wearing simple light-colored garments composed of a tunic and trousers, but what overlaid them was more interesting. A dark brown leather kilt came up a few inches above his hips, but unlike the smooth cotton one Jrain was wearing, it was rugged and fitted with pouches and loops for assorted tools and things. His shoulders were covered by metal oval-shaped spaulders that were simple enough, but it was his chest that drew the most attention.

A giant circular plate of metal lay on the guard’s chest with the diameter extending vertically from hips to clavicle, and it stuck out beyond his sides slightly so that his inner arms were partly obscured. It might as well be a shield, and perhaps it was intended as such if it could be detached. From what Jrain could tell, it was securely strapped in place with thick leather straps that buckled in place along the perimeter of the circle in an X-shaped orientation. Two of the straps draped over the shoulders, and the other two wrapped around the waist. A large ornate symbol was engraved into the chest piece, which looked like an ‘F’ with the horizontal branches continuing to the left, mirroring the right side.

Jrain was puzzled that the guard wore no armor on his limbs. His fluffy white fur was slightly matted and pressed down along his calves and forearms, and that was when Jrain noticed he *did* have bracers and greaves with similarly long, narrow oval-shaped metal plates. They were leaning against the wall to the side of the gate, but he didn’t seem to have anything for his hands or paws.

Jrain saw his ear twitch, and then he lazily lifted his head and half opened his eyes.

He snorted and his head jolted upward at the same time. His now very open eyes briefly darted to the side for a moment, toward where the rest of his armor was, but he didn’t turn his body or head.

All of this happened within two seconds, and now he assumed a staunch demeaner with a face marked by indifferent familiarity for Kin’dar, and mild puzzlement for Jrain, though not of a fearful nature, as Jrain thought would happen with everyone.

The guard straightened and casually lowered his spear into a subtly defensive pose.

Jrain tensed and froze at the gesture, but Kin’dar didn’t miss a beat in his stride, smoothly exiting the blanket’s embrace by coolly shrugging it off so he could stride forward. He crossed his arms and stood a mere two feet from the St. Bernard, actually reaching out to rest one hand on the middle of the spear.

“Good morning, Lars! Bit jumpy today, are we?” Kin’dar asked pleasantly, lowering the spear gently.

“K-Kin’dar,” the guard said in a low growly voice.

He flinched after Kin’dar stopped speaking, knowing he’d been found out for dozing off. He followed the address by inclining his head with a pensive, intonated growl.

“Mind telling me who …”—the St. Bernard glared at Jrain—“… *what* your friend is?”

“If I have to vouch for his credibility, I think you just saw us under that blanket together, so ...” Kin’dar said, leaving the conclusion hanging. He then exaggeratingly leaned to the right to look past Lars. “Seems you find it a bit stuffy out here. Last time I checked, no one’s supposed to remove any armor on duty.”

Even though Jrain couldn’t see Kin’dar’s face, he knew he was smiling as he said that.

Lars turned his gaze to the side and mumbled incoherently. He was visibly uncomfortable, but he still hid it well.

“Hrm ... you didn’t answer my question,” he said, turning back to face Kin’dar sternly.

“I met him yesterday. He’s …”—Kin’dar turned around to look at Jrain, pausing for a moment with a sympathetic grin—“... a traveler from far away. Very tired. *And undersupplied*,*”* he added, bobbing a finger in the air. “Almost all of his clothes were ruined from rigorous travel, you see.”

Lars raised one of his bushy dark eyebrows and planted the end of his spear on the dirt, letting it fall into the crook of his inner elbow. He looked past Kin’dar and eyed Jrain up and down more thoroughly, seemingly unfazed.

“You got any other business here?” he asked Kin’dar. Jrain’s posture slightly crumpled under the greater scrutiny, and he pulled the blanket over more of himself.

“I—my friend needs to see Pinstripe,” Kin’dar responded.

“For what?” Lars asked indifferently, perfunctorily unclipping a small clipboard that hung from a loop along his kilt. He reached into one of its pouches and popped open an ink bottle with one nail and dipped another into it.

Kin’dar sighed.

“I already told you what my friend needs. *Clothing*.”

“You will need to see Stella,” he said plainly, seeming to ignore Kin’dar’s snark. “I’d like to see how that goes over with you involved. She’ll consider your appointment a priority because of this friend of yours,” he added, briefly lifting his eyes from the sheet to glance over at Jrain yet again.

“Oh, we’ll do that, sure! We’ll get right to her after w—”

“First thing,” Lars interrupted, now turning his gaze toward Kin’dar and pausing in his writing.

“... First thing, yes, of course,” Kin’dar repeated, nodding and flashing that same gesture he’d given Jrain yesterday while he was crossing over the river.

“Of course,” Lars mumbled along with a few other incoherent words as he jotted down notes. “Proceed.”

Lars twisted his head around and let out a loud bark.

“I got two comin’ in! Kin’dar and—wait, hold!” Lars said, turning back to Kin’dar. “What’s his name; what is he?”

“His name is Jrain. He’s … a lizard.”

Lars snorted.

“I’m gonna get questions from a lot of people later. Thanks,” he said.

After a few seconds of more scribbling, he tapped the sheet and wiped his talon against a small piece of jumbled, splotchy cloth hanging from the top of the clipboard. “And I got a new one! Looks like a blue lizard. Name’s Jrain. ‘Mandate O2A’ from western gate to citadel,” he yelled to whomever was on the other side.

“Wait, ‘Mandate O?’” Kin’dar asked. “He needs to at *least* look presentable bef—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lars interrupted. “Them’s the rules. Joby will be escorting you there.” Lars voice remained flat, but Jrain noticed that he smirked.

“Thanks, Lars,” Kin’dar said with affectated pleasantness. “I’ll have to let Stella know the western gate was less than diligently watched today.”

“Oh, now you’re making up stories?” Lars said, clearing his throat and holding his head a little higher. “After all, who do you think she’s gonna believe more?”

Kin’dar tsked and motioned at Jrain to step forward by tilting his head toward the gate. He gently bumped into Lars as he passed him by. Lars let out an amused grunt.

Jrain grimaced and tensed his shoulders again as he followed, keeping his head low. But before he could fully do so, the St. Bernard put a hand on his shoulder, making him jump.

“I’ve never seen your kind around here. Wouldn’t have imagined lizard people were a real thing,” Lars whispered. “No funny business, right?” Lars warned, squeezing Jrain’s shoulder a little tighter.

“Y-yes, sir,” Jrain said.

“Hrm,” Lars mumbled, letting go and giving his shoulder a shove. “Off you go.”

Jrain awkwardly fumbled forward but caught his stride. He met up with Kin’dar, who had just now turned around to look at Jrain. He hadn’t seen Lars talking to him, but Jrain didn’t think it was worth mentioning. They waited until the doors of the gate slowly swung inward one by one.

The dirt trail transitioned to a stone cobbled street 40 or so feet away. The street rose slowly and split to the left and right between the first two rows of buildings. Some were made of logs like Kin’dar’s cabin, but others had lower halves made of stacked stone or were mostly made of it.

Racks of equipment lined the inside of the smaller wall like bows, axes, and pieces of armor. Wooden boxes were stacked in a few piles a few yards out from it. It was quiet here with Jrain only making out a couple people passing by the entrance to the main street.

“Not a lot of people leave town,” Kin’dar said. “And when they do, it’s in large groups only for a short time, like with gatherers. The southern and northern gates can be fairly busy as well, but this exit is in the safest direction, and the least fortified and guarded.” Kin’dar lowered his voice. “But that’s my opinion. And that might be officially changing.”

One other guard—who looked like Kin’dar but with more orange fur and white fur—was standing to their right, holding onto the right door and waiting for them to pass through so he could close it once more. They waited until he did this and went over to close the left one, too. Both looked incredibly heavy in how slow they moved, and in how this new fox had to pull and push them with both hands.

Once he was finished, he strode in front of them and sized Jrain up. Given how he was slightly shorter than Kin’dar, it was no surprise to Jrain that he audibly gulped with his eyes widening at how much he had to look up to meet his gaze. He did, however, have a stockier build than Kin’dar, which made sense given how he wore the same armor as Lars. It looked like it would be slide off Kin’dar’s slim frame.

“Hello,” he said to Jrain.

“Hi. Um ... nice to meet you,” Jrain replied softly.

Joby nodded back with an uncomfortable smile before turning to Kin’dar.

“How’s life out there going for you?” Joby asked. His voice was at a higher pitch than Kin’dar’s, but it was steady and confident.

“It’s been good. Unpredictable, but I like the adventures involved,” Kin’dar replied.

Joby nodded slowly. An awkward silence followed.

“Well, follow me,” he said.

They were led along to the main cobblestone street and steered left. There were sets of stone stairs seemingly placed at random between establishments, but some of these spaces were occupied by small gardens, sheds, and concave water channels. These channels cut through the street in straight or curving lines covered with metal grates, leading to whichever ones were closest in between each tiered row.

Jrain presumed most of the residences were in the lower sections of the city. There was little traffic here, so he drew little attention. But after a few more minutes of walking along the street and weaving their way through buildings to climb stairs farther up and into the city, he became far from inconspicuous.

Try as he might to conceal himself with his blanket, Jrain was catching much attention in what he presumed was the market section of Foren. The street was packed with people, and while their errands and activity kept most of them from noticing him, those who happened to look up and passed near him stared in shock. Some froze in their tracks. Some who were loudly chattering with friends or family spoke in hushed tones upon sight of him, which in itself attracted others who were otherwise oblivious.

They were all similar to Kin’dar insomuch as having fur and sharp teeth, as he had said. But they all varied in color, size, and shape. Admittedly, Jrain had a hard time not staring back at all the new people.

“Make way for the Forenian Guard,” Joby demanded boorishly.

People were lined up outside a particular building that had a wooden sign hanging above the door with two fish curling in the shape of a circle. A group of people were on the other side of the street performing a lively song with instruments to which people near the end of the line were clapping or dancing in place to, while others not in line surrounded the band, hooting and hollering and dancing.

Jrain grinned at the energetic scene, and he noticed Kin’dar was bobbing his head to the beat of the music.

Joby tried to navigate the space between the line and the band’s audience, but other people were trying to do the same. Combined with the fact that there were vendors set up all around to the sides of the street in between buildings and around the band, this was a highly congested area. Joby, Kin’dar, and Jrain had come to a halt.

“*Make way for the Forenian Guard!”* Joby yelled, but he didn’t have the voice or presence to command the boisterous scene. *“Make way for th—AH!”*

Jrain gasped when a female fox in a lavender and white gown pulled Joby into the throng of dancing people to their left. He saw her wink at Kin’dar as well before turning to face the protesting Joby. She laughed at him, saying, “Come on, Joby!” He was then sucked into the crowd with her unexpected strength.

*“... Jrain!”* Kin’dar whispered loudly, assuming a wider stance and swiveling his head around. He pointed to an alleyway to the side of the fish shop that had a wood panel fence around it. “Come on; follow me!”

Jrain nodded, hunching and bending his knees so he didn’t stick out more than he had to since he was a foot taller than most of the crowd. The two of them slid past some garbage cans and empty pallets leaning against the store. They turned the corner to see a gray wolf dumping fish skin and bones into a garbage can.

They stealthily moved toward a gate in the fence that was locked with a latch. Kin’dar unclasped and opened it quietly. Jrain looked at the wolf just before passing through after Kin’dar, and he noticed he had just escaped attention since the wolf had turned to his left to presumably head back inside the shop.

“Hello?”

Jrain froze with his back to the door. Kin’dar turned around and put a finger to his lips while glaring at Jrain.

“Huh,” the wolf said, and Jrain could hear him scratching his fur before the door creaked open. “Ca’tal, *for the love of all things*, stop sitting on your brother and come help me!” he commanded before shutting the door behind him.

Both of them released their held breath. They were now in between two rows of buildings in a dark alleyway thick with various smells both good and bad. Jrain put a hand to his chest, thankful to be out of the crowd.

“Kin’dar?” Jrain whispered in concern. “Won’t we get in trouble?”

“Don’t worry, Jrain,” Kin’dar said, flashing him a confident grin. “That’s the exit I was looking for—better than I could’ve imagined,” he added in disbelief, chuckling. “We can just say we got separated if we get found out. No harm, no foul. Now, let’s go see Pinstripe! He’s so close.”

Kin’dar jogged down the alleyway. Jrain dared a peek over the fence by standing up on his toes, but he saw no one around or behind the fish shop. The wolf was definitely gone. Joby was likely trapped in a dance. All he heard was the muffled sounds of laughter, chatter, and music.

He turned back around to see Kin’dar about to turn a corner, but he shrugged in a questioning way toward Jrain before beckoning him on. Jrain took a deep breath, clasped his blanket tighter over his shoulders, and followed.

To be continued.