**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 6**

**Threads Crossed**

*Ding-a-ling*

A high-pitched metallic sound rung as Kin’dar pushed on the wooden door.

*“Psst!”*

Jrain jumped at the fox’s breath suddenly in his ear. He was so focused on the crowd that he hadn’t seen him lean in next to him.

“Come on in already!” Kin’dar implored.

They were a mere few tiers away from the tower, which, by now, was looming overhead, and much larger than Jrain had realized from afar. The streets were notably less crowded this high up, but Jrain was still attracting some attention—the nature of which was confusion, disgust, or discomfort, depending on whom he singled out. Some even looked positively frightful, looking about frantically in search of someone or something.

One such individual ran straight up the street in a panic a couple minutes ago after Jrain and Kin’dar had exited an alleyway onto the street a few blocks from what must be Pinstripe’s place.

Jrain had since draped the blanket over his head, but his horns were getting in the way, and his tail very much stuck out no matter what. He thought how all these dragon parts of his didn’t help with wearing much of anything, which is why he wished he could just wear nothing like he wanted to. How was this Pinstripe going to fit him in anything?

He went stiff when a patrol of guards rounded the corner of the street up ahead that led to the tower, so Jrain obediently and gladly obliged Kin’dar’s request, sliding past him into whatever awaited him inside.

Kin’dar stepped next to Jrain’s side and let the door close with the bell above its frame making the same noise. Both of them breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Ha, yeah, same,” Kin’dar said. “Well, here we are!” He held both arms out and gestured around the room.

Jrain saw carrying bags, belts, trousers, shirts—all sorts of clothing and accessories of various fabric and leather lining the walls and hanging from the ceiling. A few select fabrics were on display atop tables around him, including long, thin pieces of cloth with holes in the ends of them. After cocking his head and picking one up to inspect it, Kin’dar told him these were ‘socks,’ which were hard enough to wear for his furry kind with their sharp nails. The message was implicit for Jrain. He put the sock back down.

Just ahead, there was a long counter made of smooth gray stone supported by a wood-paneled bar that separated the viewing area from the back, where half-finished textiles were propped and hung, obscuring whatever else lay behind the multi-colored and multi-layered veil. Jrain noticed there were some pieces of guard armor, too.

Suddenly, a tiger of an above-average build stepped out from behind a sheet in the back and methodically strolled down the center of his array of projects. He was a few inches shorter than Jrain and had gray fur with varying stripes of darker grays. His eyes were icy blue, and he carried himself with dignity and purpose. He wore black trousers that bunched and gathered just under his knees, as well as a tucked sleeveless sky blue tunic with navy bordering along the collar and hem. A measuring tape was draped around his neck, and he had circular glasses on his nose with different lenses on one side that he could switch between. He held a curiously shaped leather boot in one hand and a piece of cloth in the other that he was wiping the former with.

“Whom do I have the honor of ...” he began, trailing off when he finally raised his head upon approaching the counter. Jrain had just lowered the blanket from his head so his face could be clearly seen. He tensed at the sudden silence.

The tiger glared at Jrain, but he didn’t look alarmed or worried.

“… serving,” he finished more slowly without changing the polite tone of his inquiry.

His eyes darted to Kin’dar, who was smiling widely and eagerly clasping his hands out in front of himself like a child who was both guilty and proud of having done something risky yet impressive.

The tiger’s face broke out in a bemused grin. He sighed as he laid the cloth and boot on the counter, and then lowered the glasses so that they hung down from his neck since the temple tips had a strand of twined cloth tying them together. He put his hands on his hips.

“You always find a way to top yourself, do you not?” the tiger asked, looking at Kin’dar in disapproval.

“What can I say?” Kin’dar said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m full of surprises. Or, in some cases, I attract them.”

The tiger smirked and grunted.

“Your reputation precedes you.”

A couple seconds passed with the tiger turning his gaze toward Jrain again. His eyes narrowed with an expression of neutral curiosity.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“My name is Jrain. Hi,” he said, raising a hand in a half-hearted wave. “Um … Kin’dar told me about you. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Jrain,” the tiger met. He murmured to himself in some kind of measured astonishment before walking toward a small section of the wood bar that had been notched out with the stone counter continuing over it. He lifted this section on its hinges to pass through and stroll toward Jrain, holding out his hand and never breaking eye contact. He waited with hand suspended, but not impatiently.

Jrain eyed it for a moment before hesitantly reaching up with his own to grab it. Pinstripe grabbed it tightly and firmly shook it once, then clasping the top of it with his other hand as well.

The strength and confidence in the gesture hadn’t been expected. Jrain surprised by how he was being greeted so ... normally. Enthusiastically, even.

“I am Pinstripe. It is my utmost pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said, bowing his head as he softened his grip and raised the back of Jrain’s hand to kiss it.

Jrain’s eyes flew open as his cheeks began to burn. He showed the palm of his other hand and shook it side to side along with his head toward Pinstripe.

“Oh my, no, you don’t have to ... I’m just ... u-um ...”

He was utterly taken off guard by how courteous Pinstripe was being, almost in a way befitting a king, of which Jrain knew he most certainly was not.

Pinstripe lifted his countenance slightly, eying Jrain in mild puzzlement as though this were the most normal thing he could have done.

“I must stress it is my honor to welcome a newcomer to Foren,” Pinstripe said politely. “It has been long since the arrival of a new face, let alone one of your kind. I am blessed to have been graced with your presence on what I assume to be your first time here. So, thank you for turning your interest toward my services and wares. I greatly respect all who set foot inside my humble shop, even if just to browse.”

His voice was sure, deep, and soothing, holding no pretense whatsoever.

He said all this while still bowing his head, though he now let go of Jrain’s hand to cross his arm over his chest in some display of fealty. Then, he gracefully straightened once more and put his arms behind his back. He seemed to pay no mind to Jrain’s being flustered, which ironically made him calm down and feel less self-conscious than he had since entering Foren.

Jrain rubbed the back of his neck, still shocked by the sincere flattery.

“Well, I d-don’t know what’s around here, so you can thank Kin’dar for bringing me here, really,” Jrain deflected.

“Do I get a kiss on my hand as well? How come you haven’t done that to me before?” Kin’dar accused, crossing his arms indignantly.

Pinstripe grinned at Kin’dar and shook his head.

“This is a special occasion, Kin’dar. Only the best of Forenian hospitality will do,” he answered, inclining his head toward Jrain once more before his eyes traveled down his body.

“I see Kin’dar lent you his kilt.”

Jrain looked down at Kin’dar quickly before returning to Pinstripe’s gaze, nodding twice.

“Yes, he did. I—”

“Why is your butt sticking out, Jrain?” Kin’dar remarked, looking at it with a bemused expression.

“O-oh, b-because of my tail. It was uncomforta—”

“I haven’t seen that kilt in years, Kin’dar,” Pinstripe interjected, as though Jrain or Kin’dar hadn’t said anything. He cocked his head. “Why do you dislike it?”

Kin’dar gasped, followed with sputtering sounds as he fumbled for words.

*“T-That’s not fair,”* Kin’dar said, taking a step forward and jabbing a finger at Pinstripe. “Just because I don’t wear it often doesn’t mean I don’t like it!”

“Ah,” Pinstripe said. “Is that what he told you?” he asked Jrain, glancing over at him without turning his head. “Where was this kilt stored in his cabin?”

Jrain winced and partially deflated at the mention of the house. He had forgotten about that and what he’d done … but he recovered and cleared his throat.

“Kin’dar said …”—Jrain began, looking over at Kin’dar to see him starring daggers. Jrain gulped—“… I look great in it. And it was in the guest room.”

“Ahh,” Shorn mouthed more loudly than before. “A lie, followed by the truth of its relevance.”

Jrain furrowed his brows and huffed, swinging his head around to return the daggers to Kin’dar.

“I told you I looked silly in this! I knew I did!” Jrain bit out.

Kin’dar raised his arms in the air and made a sound of disbelief.

“Okay, all right. I, for one, am quite *shocked* that *you* would be so forthcoming to my new friend, Pinstripe, and—”

“And say the truth about how poorly this kilt and”—Pinstripe’s whiskers twitched looking at the blanket—“*bed dressing* look on his otherwise handsome complexion? How horrendously ill-fitting they are? How they clash so drearily with his exotic colors? And how this injustice demands a proper tailor who can design an outfit to accommodate and accentuate his striking, sharp appearance?”

Jrain blushed again at the sudden litany of compliments.

Pinstripe had a way of saying these things as though they were objective truths, which made Jrain feel really nice, since he thought he looked a little scary after looking at himself for the first time in the beach’s river. At least he didn’t look like his feral dragon self. There’s no way he’d fit in any clothing, let alone this building.

Kin’dar sucked in air to issue a rebuttal, but he let his finger hang in the air for a moment as Pinstripe stared him down. The fox narrowed his eyes and relented, lowering his hand.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Kin’dar said, crossing his arms again. “You wouldn’t happen to know an expert in that sort of thing, would you? Not here, surely?”

“Aye,” Pinstripe said, nodding and crossing his arms as well. “As a matter of fact, I do. Right here.”

Jrain didn’t know how to quite react to the fox and tiger’s exchange, since they proceeded to laugh.

He marveled at Pinstripe’s implacable disposition, who managed to be both serious and playful all at once. He was an astute, self-assured, and exceedingly respectful person who must take pride in his craft. Jrain wasn’t sure what to entirely make of him yet, but clearly, he and Kin’dar had history. Good history.

“I’m still hurt over the kilt, though,” Pinstripe said, feigning sadness.

“I can’t … prefer some clothes you’ve given me over others?” Kin’dar protested, chuckling and pointing to his outfit.

“All right, I suppose I am able to abide that,” Pinstripe said. He then clasped and rubbed his hands together before pulling the measuring tape off his neck.

“Now then, stand where you are, Jrain. And *please* shed the blanket.”

Jrain had grown a bit attached to it, so he swooped it off his shoulders and handed it to Kin’dar.

“Please don’t throw it away or anything,” Jrain whispered. “It’s … it’s important to me.”

“Oh, sure,” Kin’dar quietly said, who looked a little surprised. “If it is, you can keep it—holes and all,” he added, winking.

Jrain grinned and nodded in appreciation, then turning back to Pinstripe. Jrain proceeded to grab the kilt’s waistband and pulled it halfway down.

Pinstripe shot up and lifted his hands up.

*“My goodness!* You need not ... oh,” he said.

It was the first time something had truly thrown him off since Jrain had walked in.

“Well, that is not something you see every day,” Pinstripe remarked.

*“Don’t see*, you mean?” Kin’dar corrected playfully.

“Hah,” Pinstripe sounded dryly.

“There’s a reason why I found him with no clothes on,” Kin’dar added.

“Yes, I see.” He lifted an eyebrow at Jrain. “You *are* comfortable this way, Jrain?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked innocently. “Oh, that’s right. Kin’dar told me …”

He trailed off, observing that Pinstripe was chuckling and waving his hand dismissively.

“No worries, you have answered my question. And this makes my job easier,” he remarked before clearing his throat. “Well, right …”

The tiger proceeded to measure Jrain’s legs, waist, and other areas of his body in various dimensions. Once he was finished, he stood back up and walked around Jrain.

He gasped softly.

“I do not mean to pry, Jrain, but I must ask about these scars. Are they sensitive?”

“That’s okay,” Jrain said. “They don’t hurt if someone touches them gently.”

“My, my … I will most certainly keep them in mind,” Pinstripe said solemnly. He paused, drawing breath.

“Why, these are … Kin’dar?”

Jrain twisted his head to see Pinstripe look to Kin’dar in awe. The fox nodded.

“He’s not a regular lizard person, Pinstripe,” Kin’dar said.

Pinstripe turned to look at Jrain’s back again in awe. He was silent for a few seconds.

“You wish for them to be concealed, Jrain?”

Jrain was about to answer, but he deferred to Kin’dar with an asking expression.

“I think that would be best,” he answered in Jrain’s stead.

“Hm. For multiple reasons, yes,” Pinstripe said. “Ideas, ideas, yes …”

He resumed his study of Jrain and eventually walked over to the counter at one point to pick up a clipboard that he drew on with a small stick, rather than with ink and nail like Lars had.

After a few minutes of musing and sketching and circling Jrain a few more times, he put a hand to his chin and stroked it. He had a slightly longer strip of dark gray fur hanging from there, as well as a curled stretch of hair between his nose and upper lip.

“A moment, please,” Pinstripe distractedly requested, walking behind the counter and disappearing as he muttered to himself.

“He’s loving this,” Kin’dar said when Pinstripe disappeared. “It may not look it, but when he’s this focused, I can see the excitement in his eyes. The tail also gives it away, just like yours does,” he added, winking at Jrain.

“Ha, well ... that’s good,” Jrain said sheepishly, clasping his hands out in front of him, idly fondling the front of his kilt as he waited. Eventually, he just sat on the floor after observing Kin’dar doing the same. They had some idle conversation about his impressions of the city thus far, but nothing substantive.

Several minutes passed before Pinstripe came back out. He held a simple brown linen kilt. He gave it to Jrain and asked him to slide it on, which fit more comfortably than the other kilt and was a bit longer; however, instead of there being a simple hole in the back, Pinstripe had left a large strip of the waistband unattached with a button on the tip that snapped in place on the other side where the waistband resumed. Below this, the fabric was cut and tapered down in a concave curve to make room for the underside of his tail.

All he had to do was snap the strip in place over his tail and it was secure. It fit snugly.

“This is a temporary wardrobe change,” Pinstripe said. “I will need a couple days to figure you out.” He pulled out his clipboard to show Jrain a rough sketch of ... himself!

Jrain’s eyes scanned the illustration with awe, marveling at how nice it was for how quickly Pinstripe had drawn it, which showed Jrain in a roughly conceptualized outfit with a more robust kilt and shirt. Several more types of clothing were drawn off to the sides with measurements and quickly scribbled notes that considered other possibilities.

Pinstripe proceeded to point to numerous parts of Jrain’s body with the small drawing utensil—a pencil, as he was told after asking.

“Your tail provides me the opportunity for something I have only entertained with … otters, to name one of a handful of species with bigger tails, but I will keep this aspect of the project secret for the time being.” Pinstripe glanced at Jrain with a smirk. “For your own tail is exceptionally different due to the plating and spikes. I plan to accommodate for this with an underlayer of protective leather to prevent the fabric from snagging and tearing on your sharper elements from sudden movement or outward pressure rubbing the cloth against you. I have done this roughly with the improvised kilt you now wear along the front for your spiked thighs.”

Pinstripe glanced at the kilt’s fringe that rested just above Jrain’s knees. Jrain exclaimed in sudden realization and turned the kilt inside out to find a layer of leather underneath. Pinstripe nodded and continued.

“Your upper body presents similar challenges, particularly your shoulders, horns, and fins, should you wish to wear a shirt or hood.” Pinstripe paused in thought, twirling one side of his moustache. “For now, I have taken one of my shoulder capes and sewn in leather pads along the shoulder area.”

He then handed this cape to Jrain, who threw it around himself and clipped it from the front with two silver buttons. The cape—which could be considered a shorter kind of poncho—rested on his shoulders and went all around him with the fringes stopping midway along his abs, leaving several inches of his stomach exposed up to the kilt resting at his hips.

Jrain twisted left, right, and in full circles a few times, enjoying the sensation and appearance of the fabric twirling and rustling.

“I have had yet to serve a client with so many special physical characteristics to account for, so you make for a great study. While that may be all I have to say for now about my plans for your outfit, may I ask if your species prefers water and staying cool, as your anatomy suggests? I do not wish to presume.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Jrain said. “Thank you so much, but …”—he paused, frowning as he briefly looked sideways at Kin’dar—“… I don’t have anything to give you for this.”

Pinstripe murmured in acknowledgement, but was busy jotting down notes for several seconds before he answered.

“I will not charge you for this,” he said. “I assume you carry little with you, which is no business of mine as to why that may be, though I wish to get to know you better as time permits. For now, I thank you for providing me with this brilliant project. After all, I owe my friend for sending some customers my way before.” Pinstripe gestured toward Kin’dar. “That ‘waveriding’ is really catching on.”

“That’s all on Faleene. I’m just an enthusiast spreading the good word,” Kin’dar deflected, his tail swooshing in satisfaction at that news. “And thank you, Pinstripe,” he added sincerely.

“No, thank you. And thank you, Jrain,” Pinstripe said, taking a step away from Jrain. “I would ask where you hail from, and how you two came to meet, but I will save these questions for another time, for I must return to—”

*Clack. Knock, knock, knock.*

“Pinstripe Savangere! This is the Forenian Guard. We request entry into your establishment to enquire as to the whereabouts of Kin’dar Cross and his ...”—the voice faltered pronouncing Jrain’s name, but gave up—“... l-lizard companion, according to Joby Terlinger, who was meant to escort them to the tower and lost sight of them approximately an hour ago. Are you there?”

A second row of knocks ensued with the handle rattling from being twisted, but the door didn’t swing inward.

Pinstripe glared at Kin’dar.

The fox made a slightly guilty face and shrugged.

“I may have locked the door on the way in, just in case,” Kin’dar whispered. “… And turned around your sign on the door.”

“You were meant to see Stella first, were you not?” Pinstripe whispered accusingly.

Kin’dar nodded hesitantly.

“Tsk,” Pinstripe went, grimacing with more of his teeth showing. He had a set of four long incisors that looked like they could sink through the entirety of Jrain’s arm if he were to bite it. When he opened his mouth like this, Jrain actually saw small silver rings at the bases of all four incisors with swirly engravings.

“They wouldn’t let me come see you first for Jrain’s sake!” Kin’dar hissed. “Then I would’ve seen—”

“Jack,” Pinstripe finished. “You would’ve seen Jack next, not Stella.”

“Pinstripe, there’s ... more going on than just Jrain arriving,” Kin’dar whispered gravely. “I need to know what Jack thinks I should do before I tell Stella these other things.”

There was another knock at the door. They all tensed at the interruption, and had assumed half crouched poses.

“Kin’dar, you doubt Stella too much. You must consider—”

“Pinstripe,” Kin’dar hissed, holding out his palm toward him and using the other to press his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Now is not the time for you and me to discuss our differences. You must let Jrain and I leave out the back, please.”

Pinstripe closed his eyes and looked like was considering handing them over to the guards.

“I dislike lying on behalf of your antics and deception with our leader,” Pinstripe bemoaned. “I ... I do this for you as a friend, and only because you say these are special circumstances. But if ... if this pertains to what I believe it does ...” Pinstripe paused and gave Kin’dar an intense stare. *“Do not hide that from our people.”*

Kin’dar’s gaze became downcast, and he compressed his lips.

“I will do what is best for our people,” Kin’dar answered.

“I can only hope we see eye to eye with what that means when you—”

“Hand me the picklock,” a disgruntled voice said, muffled yet audible from outside. “One can never be too sure.”

“... when you have time to tell me more. Follow me,” Pinstripe finished.

They maintained their stealthy poses to lessen the noise of creaking boards. Pinstripe quietly and slowly opened the lift in the counter, waiting until Kin’dar and Jrain passed through before setting it down. They weaved and brushed past the hanging fabrics and armors until a door came in sight tucked away in a corner at the store’s back. A long wooden table lay across the back wall, and scattered atop it were cutting and measuring tools. A narrow rectangular skylight was installed above it to fill the area with light, but Jrain noticed there were some wax candles sitting in their own brass basins on the table, too. Pieces of cut fabric and thread decorated the floor, but besides this minimal clutter, there was an order and purpose to Pinstripe’s workspace from the small aisles of fabrics just behind them to what lay on the table.

Pinstripe looked at them both and put a finger to his lips before slowly opening the door and casually yet methodically scanning the alley.

“It is clear,” Pinstripe said, turning in place and putting a hand behind his back. He gracefully gestured out with his right with a little bow. “Until we meet again,” he added, flourishing with the same gesture Kin’dar had given Jrain twice before. He did so with respect, but Jrain detected worry in his face.

Jrain kept forgetting to ask Kin’dar what that gesture meant.

Kin’dar nodded and grabbed Jrain’s hand, which caught him off guard, but Kin’dar didn’t wait for his approval. He pulled Jrain right along as they slipped into the shadows. Jrain looked back and saw Pinstripe close the door, just barely making out, “Ah, gentlemen, my apologies! I was immersed in a project and did not hear you ‘til now. A moment as I ...” but his voice was overcome by distance.

Jrain and Kin’dar rounded a corner to an empty alley with the next lower street in sight, but they gasped when they came face-to-face with a figure who nearly bumped into them.

He was unlike anyone Jrain had witnessed in Foren. The stranger had an unusually long and narrow face, and when his mouth briefly parted in surprise, Jrain saw no sharp teeth, but blocky, smooth ones. He had no fur, but a close-cut, course coat of brown that almost looked like he had tough fabric for skin. This coat was pierced by a white vertical line along his face, and darker shades of brown on his forearms. He had a mohawk of cropped dark brown hair that went from the top of his head to his nape, and Jrain could make out a similarly colored hairy tail that swooshed from behind his bulky frame.

Jrain couldn’t see the rest of his coat since he wore a pair of dark blue trousers made of a material Jrain had seen in Pinstripe’s shop that looked rough and starchy. The trousers were unbuttoned at the waistline, making room for his firm belly topped by a barrel chest. Both of these were tight against his white undershirt, which was partially exposed since his red and black checkered long-sleeve shirt was not buttoned anywhere. He folded the sleeves thereof in messy folds at his elbows, and they could easily stay put since his arms were huge; his biceps were tight against the sleeves, and the forearms bulged with veins. His hands were also abnormally large—even bigger than Jrain’s despite the man being Pinstripe’s height. They looked incredibly rough with the coat on his palms seeming to have been worn down to the skin, which was a lighter brown with a cracked, leathery texture.

This stranger was frozen in place, too. He blinked his big round maroon eyes at Jrain in surprise. His overall expression swirled with the unknowable, but it was decidedly intense, and possibly wary.

Kin’dar let loose a guffaw and burst forward into the stranger’s arms, wrapping his arms around him.

The stranger let out a short “Oof!,” blinking a couple times as he broke his stare on Jrain and looked down at Kin’dar, murmuring heartily before nuzzling the top of Kin’dar’s head and chuckling.

“Kin’dar, my boy,” he said endearingly, caressing his hands at the sides of Kin’dar’s face, which could almost grab around his whole head. His appearance belied an unexpectedly higher voice than Jrain’s. It was nasally but naturally loud, characterized by a forceful confidence that carried more than one would initially guess—more than Jrain could muster even if he tried.

“You have explainin’ to do,” he said, glancing at Jrain again, but it was not angry or threatening in nature. It was simply … mystified.

Then, he flashed a wide smile and cleared his throat.

“Yes, yes, but this ain’t the place. We must hurry. Y’all come along!”

“Watch your step, my boys,” Jack said. “I ain’t worried much with these.” He paused and lifted one of his paws, which was nothing like a paw, but instead a cylindrical foot covered with a smooth, worn black surface that resembled the material of Jrain’s scales. Jrain noticed there was silver plating driven into the bottoms of his paws in the shape of crescents, which must offer protection. Hooves and horseshoes, he would later find out they were called.

Jack’s hooves had clopped and clattered loudly against the cobblestone streets for the last several minutes of walking across town. The motley crew had made it to the mid-tier section of Foren toward the southern side.

“Well, you may be all right, Jrain,” Jack said, chuckling as he eyed his paws. “Those scales and all might be enough to keep any stray nails and splinters from gettin’ ya, but still, watch your step. Especially you, my boy,” he said, turning his attention to Kin’dar and raising his bushy eyebrows.

“I remember well enough from all the other times I’ve come here, Jack,” Kin’dar said in an exasperated yet fond manner.

After Kin’dar had apprised Jack that they had guards on their tails, Jack had guided them through the streets and alleyways as discreetly as possible, avoiding any patrols and citizens if possible. Jrain’s muted, brown articles helped him fit in slightly more, but more importantly, he felt much comfier in this outfit. He was already satisfied with what Pinstripe had given him and couldn’t imagine that these were only temporary. He kept wanting to grab the front of the cape to keep it in place like his blanket, but realized he didn’t have to. That blanket was currently tucked underneath his arm beneath the cape.

They had kept silent for a few minutes since Kin’dar chose not to disclose what happened to his house yet. He said it had to be discussed in secret, and it seemed they were almost in range of a place to do so.

They had come to an area of town where the buildings stopped several yards away from a picket fence no more than 5 feet tall. Here, the cobblestone street transitioned to a dirt path that led to an unlocked gate similar to the one he and Kin’dar had gone through in the alley behind the fish shop. Clearly obvious from outside the fence were several tall buildings that would otherwise be hollow were it not for the stacks of building supplies that filled their open expanses. Some housed tree trunks while others contained varying lengths and widths of lumber that had been cut down and sanded. Other buildings had piles of dirt, sand, and pebbles under their roofs, but some stacks of larger rocks, granite, and lumber were strewn around this huge yard.

Jrain followed Kin’dar and Jack as they passed these buildings by until a cabin three times as large as Kin’dar’s came into view. A third of the building had a garage on the left side that contained numerous tables, tools, and equipment lining the walls, but Jrain couldn’t make out most of them, let alone identify them. A singular yet massive tree actually shot up from inside the cabin with its thick, green canopy hovering over the majority of it. A long porch was out front with at least a dozen chairs and several tables, which—unlike Kin’dar’s cabin—had railing and even chairs that hung from the ceiling. Jrain noticed a dry riverbed came out from under the building and went off in the distance under the fence to what Jrain assumed was one of the water channels flowing down and between the streets.

Several people stood out around the cabin, either by themselves or in groups of two or three, working on removing excess branches from logs with hand saws or cutting entire ones with two-handed variants. Some were hulling around dirt or sand in wheelbarrows, while others were chipping away at large rocks.

Two in particular were leading two horses along with reins away from a large cart. They noticed the three men and were approaching them.

Jrain blinked in surprise, looking between Jack and these horses. They were the same species, but this was what Kin’dar must have meant when he said there are people and animals of the same species. It felt strange to see for the first time.

The horses were being led by—what Kin’dar whispered to him after his asking—a brown lab and spotted hyena. The former was rolling her eyes at something the latter had said, who had a shockingly loud, shrill laugh with a wicked smile to complement it.

Jack approached them, and the hyena abruptly stopped laughing and gasped. The lab heaved a sigh of relief and put a hand to her chest when the hyena turned away.

“Boss! Jack! Oh, Jack,” the hyena implored, leading the horse over to him with a skip in her step. She had a fast-paced, nonchalant tone to her voice.

“So, like you asked earlier, we went and delivered those supplies to the eastern quadrant and Mira and I did that in due time so we’re all ready to start constructing those storage rooms along the wall where all those boxes and equipment are and get this—when we were done, I said ...”—she snickered—“... I said, ‘It *behooves* us to get these horses back to the stables.’ Get it?!” she said, howling in Jack’s face.

Jrain visibly flinched at how intense the hyena was, and he took one step back. But Jack laughed right along with her with a volume to match her own. His was steady and measured, whereas hers was cackling and chaotic.

Feeling awkward about the scene and wanting to look elsewhere, Jrain caught Mira staring at him then, who had seemed to forget what annoyance she displayed toward the hyena. Her floppy ears drooped over the sides of her face. Her fur was silky smooth, and she had foggy blue eyes. She wore a pair of thin dark brown overalls that looked like the same material Jack had on, and beneath them, a long-sleeved white shirt.

“My goodness, what am I going to do with you, Yivir?” he shouted, sighing loudly to recover from his laughing fit.

“I’ve always got more where that came from,” Yivir said, smiling wide and winking. She then turned to look at Jrain and hummed. “So, who’s the blue dude?” she asked, pointing at him loosely with her thumb.

“This is Jrain, Yivir,” Jack said, clearing his throat as he turned around and nodded at him. “He’s a friend of Kin’dar’s.”

Jrain waved, but no one said anything.

“Huh,” Yivir said. “Well, all right. Nice to meet ya, Mister Jrain. Anyways, I’m gonna go put Stalwart and Bastion in the stables. Now, come along,” she gestured to Jack, but quickly raised her hand in innocence. “Oh! Wrong horse! Yes, yes, I’ll stop *stallion* and get back to it,” she added, cackling once more before swerving back on her original path toward the stables, which must be behind or to the right side of the cabin.

Jrain noticed that Mira had waved back at him, then brushed aside an ear that moved over her eye when she inclined her head in a silent salutation. She took a step forward after visibly hesitating and opened her mouth.

“Mira?” Jack asked.

She blinked and looked over at Jack, shaking her head before doing a short whistle to her horse, gently tugging at the reins to follow Yivir.

“Sorry, sir,” she said. She was soft-spoken and gracious in her speech. She whipped around and nodded again at Jrain. “Very nice to meet you.”

Jack chuckled. “Quite all right. Off you go now!” All of them watched the pair walk away.

“Ah, you know, I have half a mind to fire Yivir,” Jack said casually.

Jrain and Kin’dar looked at each other.

“But those *are* some great jokes! Ha ha!” Jack said, not missing a beat. He sniffed. “Well, let’s head on inside now.”

Jrain and Kin’dar awkwardly chuckled from behind.

“He kinda ... just says whatever’s on his mind sometimes,” Kin’dar whispered to Jrain. “Pay no mind to it.”

Jrain nodded.

A few of the workers had most certainly heard Jack’s presence with his laughter, so as the trio covered the rest of the stretch to the cabin, most of them kept their heads down in their respective tasks, but some were eager and slowed to gaze at Jrain for as long as they could.

As soon as his paws hit the board of the first step leading to the patio, he breathed a sigh of relief and felt the tension begin to loosen. He felt the rest fall away the moment they went inside with Jack closing the door behind them.

The foyer held a large circular desk that rose a yard off the floorboards. A sheet of glass was around the tree a couple inches away from the trunk, held in place by a perimeter of boarding screwed into the ceiling. Just below it, a metal sheet in the shape of a funnel was attached to the trunk, which morphed into a spiral gutter that went downward until it stretched out over an artificial square pool a few yards in length and width on the right side of the building. There was a few feet of floorboards between the pool and the edges of the building where dozens of drawers were stacked and lined the walls. A few had been left open, exposing paper and parchment.

To the left side of the building, there appeared to be several rooms walled off with stacked logs separated by a hallway that Jrain presumed led to the garage.

To his surprise, Jack didn’t veer to the left, but kept walking forward to the tree and its circular desk. The main room was his office.

“Come, have a seat,” Jack said earnestly, branching off from them slightly to walk through an opening between the edge of the desk and where the pool began. He sat on a simple stump.

The desk was littered with parchments and papers that consisted of handwritten letters and complicated schematics, and a couple of pencils that Jrain had seen Pinstripe use. Jrain didn’t recognize some tools, but assumed they were used for measurements of some sort with the schematics. There was also a glass basin of ink with a sleeve that rose up in the middle to hold a feather by its quill.

Jrain and Kin’dar took their own seats on stumps along the desk’s periphery, of which there were six. There was only one other stump next to Jack’s behind the desk, but he knew not to whom it belonged.

“Yes, yes,” Jack said, hastily brushing aside the documents and utensils that littered the table. He cleared his throat and crossed his forearms, leaning toward them, eyeing both Kin’dar and Jrain with a studious expression. Jrain and Kin’dar didn’t move or say anything until the fox coughed.

“Yes, what?” he asked amusedly.

“Oh, yes, ha!” Jack exclaimed, this time with new purpose. He smiled broadly and slapped his hands onto his desk. Jrain jumped at the sudden motion, whereas Kin’dar kept smiling and looking at Jack expectantly with an impatient yet understanding expression.

Jack muttered to himself as he leaned to the side and reached under his desk. He pulled out a straight pipe and stuffed it with some kind of leaves, then leaned to the other side as he grabbed a stick with a slightly rotund, darkened tip. He swiped it against the desk, and the stick caught fire, which made Jrain’s mouth slightly open in wonderment.

Jack took the flaming stick to his pipe and murmured happily as it began to smoke. He drew in breath and opened his mouth at the side several times in a row as he puffed out small clouds. A few sparks flew out from the pipe as well. He grunted once more as he inhaled deeply before removing the stout pipe from his big lips, blowing a large cloud of the smoke right at Jrain and Kin’dar. He trilled softly as he did so.

While it surprised Jrain, he didn’t mind the aromatic smoke, which was fruity and earthy smelling. His snout curled at the strange yet calming scent with his fins briefly doing the same. Kin’dar went into a short fit of coughs.

“Oh, must you?” Kin’dar said in a strained voice.

Jack shrugged, grinning.

“When I heard Talara tell me you came into town accompanied by a blue lizard man, well ...”—Jack paused and drew from his pipe again, pretending as though he was about to blow forward again, but he raised an eyebrow and turned away, chuckling as he blew the smoke to his left instead—“... I knew I had to find you as soon as I could. She overheard y’all were headin’ to Pinstripe’s place, but I knew you must’ve planned to come see me next. Those guards weren’t gonna let ya do that with Stella and all.

“Ah, I should’ve known Talara would’ve had a hand in your finding us,” Kin’dar said.

“She’s resourceful,” Jack said proudly. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Jrain.

“Hmm ... the blue lizard man,” he said, pausing. “*Jrain.*” He recited the name slowly, drawing it out.

“Y-yes?” Jrain said.

That same intense ambiguity marked Jack’s face once more.

“How did you meet Kin’dar?” Jack asked, propping both elbows on the desk to lean his chin into his hands.

“Kin’dar saved me on the beach. On Light’s Shadow Coast,” Jrain added quickly, looking at Kin’dar in approval to confirm he got the name right, who nodded in confirmation.

“I don’t know how I got there. To be honest, I ... I don’t know where I came from. I have to find my friends in a place called Alden. And Kin’dar ... well, he said you might know something,” Jrain said.

Jack’s pensive expression showed no signs of recognition. Jrain felt as though he should keep talking.

“And there’s ... well ... Kin’dar’s cabin is half destroyed,” Jrain said sadly.

Jack had been inhaling from the pipe at that moment, but at this, his eyes widened, and he sputtered with the pipe, lurching forward as he went into an even worse tirade of coughs than Kin’dar had.

“Well, it’s you!” Jack eventually exclaimed, coughing a few more times after that.

Jrain felt the blood in his face drain away.

*How … does he know?*

One thing that was nice about having a hide is that some of his emotions couldn’t be detected, but his fins made up for that unreadability sometimes, which had become as stiff as boards.

However, Jrain noticed Jack wasn’t looking at him. His eyes were fixed on the door between Kin’dar and him.

“Forgive me, Jack, for arriving unannounced, but I *must* pay a visit. I am owed one by your esteemed guests!”

This new voice came from a female. It was deep, commanding, and almost rehearsed or theatrical in tone.

Jrain turned to his right to see Kin’dar had tensed from the voice, and he grimaced briefly with his expression not visible to the guest. They both turned around at the same time.

Before the door shut, Jrain caught a glimpse outside of a line of guards with their backs turned to the doors, seeming to block anyone from entering while this person was here.

The guest was a tall lean bear with fur as white as snow, possibly as tall and stocky as Jrain, but with slightly more curvature in the midsection due to the brown leather corset she wore, which had sections of chainmail sewn in between the leather at her sides. Under this, she wore a white linen long-sleeve shirt. She also had on tight brown trousers with open-toed dark brown boots that laced up to her knees. She wore long leather gloves that came up to her elbows; they only exposed her claws.

The same symbolic circular chest plate that Jrain had seen on other guards was on her chest, but it was smaller with the symbol inlaid in gold rather than only being merely etched. Curiously, a leather case hung from her upper abdominal area underneath the chest plate with metal clips. The weathered case held a tome that hung in front of her crotch area, which was prevented from swaying about by a waist belt that held the lower part of the case in place.

She had tubular leather pouches straddling most of her sides along the corset with pieces of parchment inside them that partly stuck out. Her distinguishing feature was a luxurious, majestic green cape that draped over her shoulders, held in place by miniature versions of her chest plate that were acting as large silver clasps. The cape’s fringes were marked by white fur that might very well be her own, but the upper back portion of the cape had chainmail sewn into it that weighed down on her shoulders. The length of the cape was only a couple inches off the floor.

“Hello, Jack,” she said, coyly grinning. “And if it isn’t Kin’dar Cross,” she added in a similarly savory way that Jack had said Jrain’s name, but more sarcastically. “I figured I would find you here since Joby Terlinger was unfortunately ‘separated’ from you.”

She let go of the glove she was adjusting and rolled the fingers thereof smoothly. She had been casually observing it but now turned her attention toward the leviathan.

“And lastly, Jrain!” she said in mock surprise. “Your arrival is of great interest to me. But now even more comes forward this day. Do tell—what is this about Kin’dar’s house?” she asked, marching forward until she stood to Jrain’s left right before the desk. She turned and leaned back against it, resting her hands to both sides of her along the edge.

“Well? I’m waiting,” she said, tapping her claws against the desk’s edge.

To be continued.