**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 7**

**A Bear**

Jrain thought it couldn’t get any worse.

The passing scrutiny from Foren’s populace had been one thing, but the kind he weathered now made him want to throw his cape over his head. Crawl under the desk. Dash out the door.

Kin’dar was his social liaison. Jrain wasn’t supposed to be put on the spot—pressured to answer a question he wasn’t even sure he should lie over or be truthful about.

The reason being that he needed no confirmation. The woman who had just walked in was Stella, the governor of Foren. She carried herself with regimental precision with a flair of pomp. She looked down at Jrain with a professionally curious air, but there was an underlying smugness to it—as well as to everything else she had said or done thus far.

How had she known Kin’dar and he would be here?

Had Pinstripe told on them? Willingly or by force? Had Joby overheard Jrain quietly asking Kin’dar about Jack while they were being escorted? Did Stella just know Kin’dar too well? Did she already know the truth about himself ... the Shade ... and was baiting him to see what he’d do?

Jrain didn’t have time to dwell on these things. Each passing second without his answering Stella felt like an explosion counting down, and the more he waited, he knew everything would blow up in his face.

All of these thoughts occurred within a span of a few seconds, during which he had looked at Jack, who seemed alarmed yet morbidly curious. He straightened his back and folded his hands together on the desk with that pipe cupped in his palms, ready to watch the show unfold.

Jrain looked over at Kin’dar briefly, who tried to look as casual as possible.

“He’s shy, Stella. A lot of this is new and scary for him, so you could let up a bit,” Kin’dar said, shooting a judgmental glare at her before patting Jrain’s shoulder and narrowing his eyes in caring concern.

“It’s okay, Jrain. You can tell her. Go on.”

He squeezed gently. And Jrain wasn’t so clueless as to not read what the gesture and Kin’dar’s eyes told him.

*Make it up.*

*Kin’dar trusts me,* Jrain thought to himself. *I can’t let him down ... even though that means lying again.*

He nodded subtly at Kin’dar and turned to meet Stella’s steely gaze.

“H-hi, nice to meet you,” Jrain said to Stella, letting a second pass before he thought to lift his hand up like Pinstripe had. Maybe that was the normal thing to do.

Stella lifted an eyebrow at his hovering hand without wavering for a couple seconds. She sniffed with her black textured nose and grinned, bringing up her furry, black-padded hand up to grab his own.

Her grip was tighter than Pinstripe’s had been. Almost painful.

“Charmed,” she said, letting go to gesture out with her arms. “Welcome to the fortress city of Foren. I am Stella Arcitras, the governing official of this land,” she theatrically added before lowering her arms back down to rest on the desk’s edge again. She frowned.

“I must say I’m disappointed that I couldn’t have greeted you sooner. Why did you flee from your escort, Joby Terlinger?”

Jrain opened his mouth, but Stella held a hand up and made a sharp noise to interrupt.

“Do stay on topic this time, *please.”*

Being nice didn’t help ease the tension. Jrain felt his spirit wilt a bit since he thought being nice always worked.

“Well ... I don’t wear any clothes, so I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Jrain said slowly. “We got separated from Joby because he got dragged into a big crowd, so we couldn’t find him. We decided to get me some clothes since it was on the way to the tower. After that, we bumped into mister Jack.”

“Calyde,” Jack suddenly said.

Jrain looked at him, but Stella didn’t.

“It’s ‘mister Calyde,’ if you wanna know, mister Jrain,” Jack elaborated, grinning amusedly. “But Jack’s fine. Everyone calls me that here, including miss Arcitras right here.”

Stella snorted at this, rolling her eyes.

“You know,” she began, pulling out one of the scrolls of paper tucked into the top sleeve at her right side. She showed it to Jrain and flicked it in the air before pointing at it with a black claw. “That does check out with Lars’ report; he noted your insistence to see Pinstripe first.” She rolled the paper and stuffed it back in its place. “Joby and Pinstripe relayed additional information that doesn’t conflict with your account either. Pinstripe, in particular, told my men you’d come by just a few minutes before they did.” She leaned toward Jack and looked at him from the side. “Though it is *mightily* convenient that Foren’s head of construction would be out for a stroll in the middle of the day, happening upon a *very* good friend of his, and our peculiar visitor. Wouldn’t you say so, Jack?”

Jack cleared his throat and scrunched up his face, drawing from his pipe before blowing out more smoke directly at Stella. She closed her eyes for a moment, but was completely unfazed.

“You know Pinstripe makes clothes for me, Stella,” he said matter-of-factly. “Since my people were ahead of schedule today, I thought I’d pick up the new shirt he’d made me, as well as a few I’ve botched in the business. You understand,” he said, chuckling. Then he leaned forward and bustled. “And then, ha, my boy! And his blue friend! Out of nowhere!” He laughed. “Well, I had new priorities to see how Kin’dar came across this here lizard man.”

“Mmm,” Stella murmured in acknowledgement. “That’s fine and well, but all these twists and turns!” She made a scoffing sound and cleared her throat before proceeding to enunciate every following word. “But I want to hear what Jrain said about Kin’dar’s house being *destroyed.”* She emphasized the last word. “Decimated? Leveled! Now, how does that happen?”

“A tree,” Jrain blurted simply.

Stella blinked. She cocked her head slightly at him, confused by the immediacy of his reply.

“A tree,” she repeated back to him dryly.

“Yes, a tree. A tree fell on Kin’dar’s house through the guest room. It ... it almost hit me,” Jrain said quietly.

Stella frowned only slightly. Perhaps a hint of surprise and sympathy, or just disappointment over not getting the answers she expected. She shook her head.

“No, you cleared the area, Jack,” Stella said as a half question, half statement.

“Yes, yes, we did,” he confirmed. “But there are a few we left up behind the cabin. And along the path.”

“Why?” she said with disgust.

“… Scenic, I’d reckon,” Jack answered with a hint of playful sarcasm.

“Trees don’t just *fall,* Jack” Stella snapped.

“There was a huge storm last night,” Kin’dar piped in. “Didn’t it pass over Foren?”

“... No, it did not,” Stella said after a moment of pause, angling her head toward Kin’dar while studying his face.

After a few seconds, she looked down and raised her hands.

“Okay,” Stella said, bringing them down and clapping once. “Case solved.”

She chuckled and rubbed her hands together. She stopped doing that and eyed Jrain again, pointing her paws to herself.

“And here I thought it was a Shade,” she said.

“I initially thought it was, but no,” Kin’dar answered. Jrain looked over and saw him put a hand to his chest. “Jrain was so lucky, and he even helped me cut up and carry the blasted thing out of the house this morning because, well ...”—he glanced over at Jack briefly—“... now comes the next step.”

Stella crossed her arms.

Jrain’s heart was racing. He had to keep this up.

“... What’s a Shade?” Jrain asked fearfully, searching Kin’dar’s face.

“I’ll tell you later, Jrain,” Kin’dar said, giving him a firm nod.

“He doesn’t ...?” Stella looked between Kin’dar and Jrain incredulously.

*It’s working,* Jrain thought to himself in excitement.

“Yet you didn’t bother to tell Jack that you were assigned to see me first?”

Kin’dar shrugged.

“As you can tell by what Jrain said, it all happened so fast, and even then, the day was almost over.” Kin’dar jabbed an open hand toward Jack, slightly raising his voice in order to press his reasoning. “I had to talk with Jack before he got off work since I have a house in ruins with nowhere for me or Jrain to go, whereas you conduct business into the night.”

“You didn’t tell Lars that part,” Stella said smoothly.

Jrain felt his heart plummet. That was a good observation.

Kin’dar paused only momentarily.

“I didn’t think that was necessary to tell him then and there about *my* house,” Kin’dar said. “I was going to tell you and didn’t want to delay with Lars being as slow as he is. It’s got nothing to do with him. Or you, really.”

Stella suddenly shot up from the desk, her scrolls and cape ruffling with the sudden movement. She raised her chin and jabbed a claw at him.

“It has *everything* to do with me, Kin’dar Cross,” she bit out. Her arm was a foot from Jrain’s face as she reached across him to point, which caused him to lean back and stiffen.

“You think you can lie outside my jurisdiction just because you live outside our walls, but you work for *me. Here*. Your residence is also bound to Foren in its role to facilitate recordkeeping in our exploration of the east.”

“What ‘exploration?’” Kin’dar asked rhetorically.

She lowered her hand.

“Ahh, you think you get to do decide how things are done around here?” Stella asked.

Kin’dar didn’t respond yet he looked right at her.

Stella emitted a short, low growl before stalking around Jrain until she stood behind Kin’dar. She firmly rested her hands on the sides of his arms. Kin’dar was looking down at the floor now.

“You know full well our motto, yes?”

Kin’dar said nothing.

“Say it for me,” she commanded.

“‘… By order, we lay the foundation of our strength. By unity, we build the tower of our prosperity. By diligence, we stand in the shade of our safety.’”

“Good!” Stella said, patting Kin’dar’s arms firmly. She inclined her head next to Kin’dar’s ear. “And how does all of that come together?

Kin’dar didn’t answer.

“All of it relies on *all of us,”* Stella said. “One crack in the foundation, one miscalculation in construction, a single lapse in one’s commitment ... why, what if these things are look over? Ah, even hidden?”

She rose and turned around forcibly with her cape following in a majestic sweep. She looked ahead of her out the windows to both sides of the main door, her hands likely behind her back, but Jrain couldn’t tell since her cape concealed her body. He noticed the same golden symbol was embroidered into the cape, centered on her upper back just below the layers of chainmail.

“These things could be the doom of us all,” she continued. “This order we’ve spent so long preserving and reinforcing. Our safety could come crashing down.”

She spun around in place, jabbing a thumb at her chest.

“I am the one who ensures order; I am the one who fosters our security.”

She came back to stand behind and between Kin’dar and Jrain, looking at the former, who was still as a statue.

“You remember how I warned you of what would befall you outside these walls, hm?”

“Yes,” Kin’dar said flatly. “We can all be grateful it hasn’t happened. Because it hasn’t, and it won’t.”

“We all have assumed similar things, including me,” she said darkly.

She paused, looking away and gently bobbing a pointed finger in the air as though she were trying to recall something.

“Including my family,” she finally said. Then, her finger fell on Kin’dar. “Especially your parents.”

Silence. Jrain only saw Kin’dar’s head lower inward more.

Stella huffed.

“My, my. Well, for your sake, I hope *your* naivete holds true unlike it did for them,” she said, adopting an affectated pleasantness, chuckling as she ruffled the fur on Kin’dar’s head.

She then unclipped the flap to the case resting at her crotch, pulling out the tome inside with its weathered cover and pages. Jrain could see that it was a makeshift book with pages bound in over the years. There were copious notes along and in between the margins of elegant, old penmanship.

“As you know, according to Mandate P under Section III’s addendum, which you uniquely brought about to our constitution, those who live outside our walls forfeit all insurance subsidies for natural disasters.” She shut the book and smoothly slid it back into place. “But since your cabin does serve a small purpose, and has served it well enough, I will not disallow Jack to do as he pleases should he wish to assist you. *On his own time*.”

Jack smiled wide, puffing out a few short clouds of smoke and raising his pipe to her.

“I would expect no less, Stella.”

“Then I need say no more,” she replied, grinning.

She turned and walked to the door with her chainmail and buckles clattering from the strength in her stride. Once she grabbed the door’s handle, she paused before departing.

“Lizard, you are harmless enough,” she said. “I don’t know where you come from or why you’re here, but know this—keep me abreast of your plans. I know where you are, and I will find out what you do either way.”

Jrain gulped.

“Of course. I mean no harm. I’m ... just a lowly traveler,” he said.

She murmured in simple acknowledgment.

“Yes, so you say.” She said, now leaning a bit forward for emphasis. “I count on it.”

She swung the door open and shut it behind her firmly. They heard her shout some order about falling in line and returning to the citadel.

Once she exited the building, Jrain looked down at his hands, folded together in a vice grip. It felt like he had been holding his breath, and so he let out a big breath as his shoulders and fins sagged.

He turned to Kin’dar, but before he opened his mouth, he saw him gripping his thighs aggressively. He was shaking.

“She had no right to bring that up,” Jack said in a low voice, peering over his pipe with sympathetic eyes at Kin’dar, even though he didn’t look up. “We will right things in time, my son.”

There was a mutual understanding in what Jack meant that Jrain didn’t understand.

“It was a Shade, Jack,” Kin’dar said through his teeth, his voice tight. He sniffed and brought a hand to his eyes to quickly wipe at and press on them. “It was a Shade.”

Jack leaned forward, his eyes widening and mouth parting.

“So, it’s true, then,” he said in disbelief. “They are appearing to the east.” He let his own words sink in, whistling down. “This ... changes things.”

“I know,” Kin’dar responded. “You have to move up whatever timetable you have in mind. We can’t risk secrecy and subtlety for too long.”

Jack grunted in agreement. His face contorted and eyes glazed over in deep reflection as he rocked his head slowly.

“It rose from my house, pieces falling off its dark form,” Kin’dar suddenly whispered.

Jrain turned and felt his heart skip a beat.

“It blotted out the sun, and I saw it turn toward me with glowing yellow eyes. I swear it saw me, but it just stood there before stomping off with Jrain. I followed as soon as I could and found him on the beach in a massive crater in the sand, as though the Shade fell down or ... or was trying to dig its way out of the light,” he said confusedly. “It was gone by the time I arrived.”

Kin’dar finally looked up at Jack, his eyes tired.

“It looked like him,” he said, turning to Jrain. “You know how Shades take on our forms?”

“That I do,” Jack said. “I’ve seen it myself—an equestrian Shade.”

Kin’dar looked a bit surprised, further evidenced by his ears perking up.

“It happened long before you were born,” he said, waving his hand. “Soon after my arrival here as a youngin. They said it looked like me. You can probably guess what would’ve happened to me had Stella been in charge at the time. Her father was a good man.” He cleared his throat, turning over the pipe and gently shaking out some burnt leaves into a trash bin somewhere to his left under the desk. He went for another match and relit his pipe.

“Anyways, I’ve only personally seen an equestrian Shade twice. No more over these long years.”

Kin’dar nodded with this new knowledge.

“Maybe this was a one-time thing with Jrain’s arrival. Maybe the presence of certain people triggers the appearance of certain Shades, and determines their proximity. Maybe they take different forms as they please. Maybe ... ah, we don’t know enough,” he said. “And we can’t if we stay this way,” he added under his breath.

“We will know more,” Jack said sincerely. “But first things first.”

Kin’dar exhaled to collect himself.

“Right.”

“I will send out a pair of my people to your cabin first thing in the morning to inspect the damages. Tonight, you ‘n’ Jrain will stay with me, *and yes,*” Jack said, raising his voice as he said the last two words, anticipating the protest that almost issued from Kin’dar. “I know you don’t wanna be here a single day more, but you gotta do this for me, my boy. It’s my place. Just one night. A couple at the most.”

Kin’dar bit his lip.

“Just one night,” he agreed. “But my room did survive ... barely.”

“Only the guest room was ruined?” Jack asked, turning to Jrain. “Was that bit true?”

“M-mostly,” Jrain affirmed solemnly. “That and the whole left side of the house is ... gone.”

“We will likely need to start from the ground up with the foundation, tearin’ down parts of the framing and rafters here and there to attach and brace it to what’s left standin’, dependin’ on structural integrity,” Jack mused, sighing and taking a puff. “But so long as your room is intact, you can certainly move back in while we work if ya insist.”

“I would be there working alongside you, Jack,” Kin’dar said.

“But you know I’m doing this for free, my boy,” Jack said as a given fact, winking.

“I will help,” Jrain piped in. “I have nowhere to go and ... he’s my friend. I’ll be there every step of the way,” Jrain said softly, eagerly looking at Kin’dar.

The fox gently grinned back in appreciation, and the end of Jrain’s tail wagged a bit.

Jack leaned a bit to the side, looking past them.

“The sun will be setting soon,” he said. “Gotta get out there and see who’s gonna head out with us tomorrow morning. But you go on ahead and do this for me, my boy. Let my people know. I’d like a word with your friend first.”

Kin’dar looked between the two of them.

“Oh, yes, of course. That’s okay. Right, Jrain?”

“Oh, um … yes,” Jrain said, even though he didn’t like the idea of being left alone.

Kin’dar got up from his stump and placed a hand on Jrain’s shoulder.

“Good job, by the way,” he said, squeezing his hold. “That was very clever of you to come up with that story on the fly and play the beats of it. It’s not exactly what I wanted to do before asking Jack, but it was for the best, I hope.”

“It was,” Jack said in exasperation, trilling with his lips. “I would’ve told you as much; she can’t know about that because ...”—Jack trailed off and paused, shaking his head and laughing in horror—“... oh, you saved my skin, boys. I can’t imagine what that would’ve been the start of. Thank you. Now ...” Jack let Kin’dar fill in the rest as he made a shooing gesture.

Kin’dar nodded and left. Jrain heard the door open and shut behind him.

This was the first time Jrain was alone with someone else other than Kin’dar.

Jack didn’t say anything, letting the quiet settle in. Jrain could hear the creaking of the rafters and walls, as well as the muffled susurrations of the tree through the roof. Combined with the lapping of the small pond to the right, it was a calming ambience that Jrain could get used to. If he were alone, that is.

Jack took a final puff on his pipe and tapped on the bottom of the pipe to completely empty the burnt leaves into the bin. Jrain heard a drawer open again as Jack put the pipe back. He rumbled as he splayed his hands on the desk to push himself up on his hooves. He stood like this for a few seconds.

“Valen,” he said lowly.

Jrain blinked.

“What?”

“What does Valen mean to you?” Jack asked.

That same unknowable depth returned to his eyes from when they had first met, but now, Jrain saw what bubbled just beneath the surface of that intensity—anger.

Jrain shifted uncomfortably on his stump, his tail naturally curling in and around the base of it.

“I ... I don’t know what a Valen is.” Jrain said, slumping underneath the weight of Jack’s scrutiny.

Jack balled his fists and slammed them on the desk.

*“Liar,”* he spit out in a low, venomous voice.

Jrain flinched, grimacing in horror. The various tools and parchments spread out along the desk shook at Jack’s display of barely contained rage, with some things rolling and falling off onto the floor.

“Have you seen people like me before?” Jack demanded. The muscles of his forearms and biceps were taut, veins slightly bulging from the force of his pressure on the desk.

“I don’t know! I had nothing to do with … no,” Jrain said desperately, putting both hands to the sides of his head.

“Did you savages forget so easily?” Jack said in contemptuous disbelief.

“I can’t ... NO, STOP!”

Jrain stood to his full height without thinking, casting his arms out in a frontal sweep as his tail thumped against the floor. He bared his teeth at Jack and growled viciously, noticing that his body briefly lit up with those light markings. Jack take a step back, but the horse braced himself resolutely.

Jrain looked down at his hands immediately in panic, but the flash of light had gone as quickly as it had come.

*No, please. Not here,* he pled internally. He closed his eyes and focused on slowing his breathing.

He felt no inkling of power. No sudden onset of excitement.

He slowly closed his fingers inward into fists at his chest, then loosened them as he let his arms hang loose at his sides.

“Please, don’t ... Jack, I don’t know so many things, and I don’t mean trouble, but I feel like everyone thinks I mean to when ... it feels like trouble has followed me everywhere,” Jrain said regretfully. He gestured to his left toward the door and took a step forward, placing his other hand on his chest. “I just want to help. I want to help you. And Kin’dar. That’s all.” Jrain’s head fell to his chest, crestfallen.

Jack let the silence play out for a moment.

“I come from another land far from here,” Jack said sadly.

Jrain looked up, wary but interested.

“I ...” He tightly shut his eyes and scrunched his features. “I haven’t seen you bastards in decades.” An unmistakable venom and grief were etched into his words, and whatever past he recalled.

Jrain took a step back and looked away. He didn’t know whether to be offended or sympathetic.

“What did they do?” Jrain whispered hesitantly yet sincerely as he looked back at Jack.

He looked at Jrain in surprise, as though he expected more resistance. He trilled shortly in a dismissive manner.

“It’s no matter. The past is the past. You ... you are different, yes,” Jack said, more to himself. He crossed his arms and hummed in great consideration.

“You seem like a good boy, Jrain. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

He walked around his desk to place his large hand in the crook of Jrain’s neck along his shoulder.

Jrain didn’t move, looking at Jack unsurely, who grinned kindly.

“If my boy vouches for you, I can trust you. I count on it,” Jack said, winking. “We good?”

Jrain felt like there was much left unsaid, but he was too rattled and upset to continue.

He merely nodded.

“Good, good. Now, come. Let’s see if he managed to wrangle everyone together. They’re probably itchin’ to leave, and so am I. Potato soup tonight, which you’re welcome to, of course.” He patted his firm belly once with both hands. “You look like you can put away a lot, too, so I might not be left with leftovers for once, but that’s more than all right.”

There was a new understanding on his pleasant face, but Jrain couldn’t tell if it was genuine or not. He was a bit taken off guard by the abrupt shift in mood.

“Come when you’re ready, son. And one more thing—not a word of this to my boy. Water under the bridge now, yes?”

Jrain nodded again.

“Right,” Jack said, chuckling nervously. He clopped toward the door and left, leaving Jrain alone.

His mind was racing, but he couldn’t think.

He didn’t linger and followed Jack outside, eager to return to Kin’dar’s side.

Shade. It’s time for shade.

Jrain was down on one knee and huffed picking himself up. He lumbered over to one of the trees behind Kin’dar’s cabin. It was an unusually hot day for this time of year, as a few people had already complained about in between labored breaths as they lifted, debarked, and chopped logs.

Jrain passed a freshly filled hole of dirt in the ground before slumping against a nearby trunk. Today, he was wearing the same cape and kilt, which were fitting for this kind of weather since they were loose, unlike some of the long trousers and shirts others wore that became damp with sweat.

Nevertheless, he hated this weather and drank the most water out of everyone, much to Jack’s boisterous amusement when he just downed an entire jug of water in a matter of seconds. Well, a few. In a row.

Jack had suggested a few days ago that they use the uprooted tree and the remaining ones standing behind Kin’dar’s house as lumber. It was the first thing they had done bright and early in the morning following Jrain’s first day in Foren.

While it had the practical component of needing to lug less lumber from Foren, this was primarily done should Stella or any officials show up to confirm the veracity of the information she had gathered from her interrogations. She herself might show up, but three days had passed since then without that happening.

Before leaving Foren in the morning after he arrived, Jrain had told a representative of hers that he planned to stay with Kin’dar, so she must not care of his whereabouts so long as he wasn’t in Foren. He didn’t feel very welcome there anyways. He and Kin’dar had been camping outside in his yard over the last couple days.

Jrain propped his forearms on his knees and smiled looking ahead.

Kin’dar’s cabin was well on its way to its former state. Removing debris and refining weakened material had taken two days. Relaying the stone foundation had been completed yesterday and, today, the outer walls were coming up. It would likely take a couple more days to wrap this up with the crowning task of rebuilding the roof.

Jack had only asked his core team if they could help with this project, while leaving some in Foren to continue ongoing projects with a brief reliance on secondary employees (government-provided or merely part-time workers) to keep the pace. This couldn’t last too long, as Stella would eventually take notice, but a couple weeks of Jack rotating in and out—while keeping his core crew out here—would keep up official appearances long enough for him and his crew to restore the cabin.

Some of the crew vocally insisted they didn’t need overtime pay because Kin’dar was one of them. Jrain could tell they had been working with Jack for years, who exemplified an unusually casual yet sincere camaraderie that Jrain had glimpsed into of an extreme sort with Yivir, but others like Mira toned it down to give a typical picture of the relationship between most of them and their boss—reasonable humor, a constructively critical environment, and generosity with onsite necessities like ample breaks and sustenance.

To put it another way, Jack treated his workers like family. He cracked jokes and shot the breeze with them all throughout the workday, even checking in with each person to hand out jugs of water and food. Most telling of all was that he wasn’t just supervising. He was as involved in the labor as they were, perhaps even the hardest working.

Maybe the same could be said for Stella, but Jack seemed more concerned about these things for them as individuals, whereas Stella would only do so to the bare minimum for the sake of efficiency.

Jrain was intrigued thinking about the differences subtle and large between the people he’d met, but most especially those two for how larger than life they came across to everyone around them with their commanding charisma.

Jrain kept thinking about how there seemed to be more to Jack than just being a construction manager, given their conversation in his headquarters. The way he spoke with Kin’dar and his crew. He’d hesitated to ask his fox friend about it.

A furry hand nudged his shoulder from the side, making Jrain jump.

“Come on, it’s not *that* bad!”

Kin’dar’s fur was a slightly darker shade in spots around his body, like his armpits and head. He was only wearing a longer pair of loose brown leather shorts that came down to his knees. He had a simple leather waistbelt with a holster for a hammer and some various tools like a drawknife and chisels that clinked around in a fairly large and wide pouch that hung over his butt.

Everyone had their own tasks in a few small groups, but e*veryone* contributed when debarking had to be done, as it made the work go much faster. Jrain had learned about a lot of tools, even some that had been on Jack’s desk. His favorite was the axe, which he was learning how to use so he could participate in shortening logs for placement on the wall, or hone corners for the eventual placement of vertical logs.

Kin’dar was decently experienced in construction work, having been raised by Jack when his parents passed away. Jrain had found that out talking with him on a bench in Jack’s backyard the night they stayed in Foren.

He admitted Shades had something to do with it, but he didn’t go into detail, and Jrain didn’t press.

Construction wasn’t something Kin’dar wound up particularly liking, as he felt more skilled and useful in the recordkeeping and writing he did. With that experience behind him, he told Jack he could handle the inside of his cabin as a slow-burn project as long as Jack could help him finish the exterior. So far, they were on track, and even though Jack had insisted on helping with the interior as well, Kin’dar had politely refused several times. Jrain insisted he would be helping with that, so Kin’dar used that to his advantage.

“You’re not doing much of the heavy lifting from what I’m seeing,” Jrain said teasingly, the corners of his mouth curling playfully as he watched his friend sit down and lean against the trunk beside him.

“Oh, I beg to differ!” Kin’dar exclaimed. “It’s not my fault I’m not as jacked as Jack,” he added, laughing. “Or you, for that matter.”

Kin’dar reached over to squeeze and clumsily pat at Jrain’s right bicep like a child trying to annoy a sibling. Jrain gently swatted at Kin’dar’s paw.

“Stop,” Jrain said with an embarrassed smile.

Kin’dar soon did as he asked, and so Jrain closed his eyes and put his head to the side of the trunk.

He relished the sound of distant, indistinct conversation and the rhythmic sound of wood being hammered and sawed. Even the birds were mimicking their work with woodpeckers picking away at bark for insects or to build hollows with nests for their eggs. Jrain had heard them for the first time yesterday evening, and he hoped he would get to see one someday soon, let alone hold one in his hand like that cardinal.

“You look happy,” Kin’dar said.

Jrain opened his eyes. His mouth slightly parted in surprise at the unexpected remark.

“I do?” he asked innocently.

Kin’dar giggled, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, you do.”

Jrain’s mouth scrunched in a bashful grin. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

“Aw, well ... you’re right. I am,” he said quietly.

“That makes me happy, too,” Kin’dar said, his tail swooshing along the grass at his side.

He carefully rested his head in the space between the forearm and shoulder spikes on his right arm.

Jrain’s eyes flew open at the sight, and his heart soared from within. Jrain’s tail began wagging sluggishly along the grass.

He hesitantly and gently rested his chin atop Kin’dar’s head, feeling his long ears flatten against it. He may be sweaty, but Jrain didn’t mind, reaching around his back and lowering his hand to hook it around Kin’dar’s right arm. Jrain pulled him a bit closer, and they stayed like this for a minute or more. He wasn’t keeping count.

“You’re just like a cat,” Kin’dar lazily observed in amusement.

Jrain’s throat abruptly cleared as he lifted his head and looked down at Kin’dar.

“W-what?”

“You purr when you’re happy,” he said, chuckling, lifting his head up to look back at Jrain. “I heard you do it a couple times hugging me from before. And holding that cardinal.”

Jrain didn’t say anything, moaning regretfully as he slouched forward and hid his face with both hands.

“Oh, I’m not making fun of you! It’s really cute,” Kin’dar said, reaching under Jrain’s cape to tenderly stroke his right scar.

The leviathan was instantly pacified, letting his hands fall from his face as he slouched forward. He closed his eyes for a few seconds at how good it felt, but soon trained his eyes on Kin’dar considerately.

“I ... I don’t know many people who are like that. And, no offense, I didn’t expect it from you. Some kids are like that—all innocent and gentle. Touchy feely. I feel like I’ve forgotten to be this way. Or am just afraid to? I don’t know why ...”

Kin’dar paused, looking down at a piece of grass he was twirling between the fingers in his right hand. He looked back at Jrain with wistful eyes and gently patted his scar.

“Don’t be ashamed of that. You are a great dragon, and a better friend.”

Jrain didn’t know what to say, keeping silent as he twiddled his thumbs.

He didn’t deserve to be called either, but even still, he really appreciated what Kin’dar was saying. Maybe he was making some things right.

Then, he cocked his head with a lopsided grin.

“Wait, you think I could be a better dragon?”

Kin’dar guiltily smiled and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Ah hah, well, it’s just that *normal* dragons I’ve heard of in tales are more about ...”—Kin’dar grimaced—“... lording over people, stealing their possessions, leaving towns in shambles. Stuff like that. So, *actually*, you’re a terrible dragon.”

Jrain felt a twinge of guilt over that last thing Kin’dar mentioned, but he nervously laughed it off.

“T-that’s okay. I *want* to be a terrible dragon, then,” he admitted.

Kin’dar genuinely got a good laugh out of that, and Jrain smiled.

“I would not classify him among the mythological accounts of dragons either, if my opinion is of merit.”

Both of them turned to the new voice. It was a white tiger wearing a black linen kilt with a white sleeveless shirt. The laces of his placket were loose with tufts of fur sticking out.

“Pinstripe? Whoa, what are you doing here?” Kin’dar asked, jumping to his paws.

Jrain slowly got to his feet and waved from behind Kin’dar.

“Hi, Pinstripe,” Jrain said pleasantly. He brought out his hand first this time, which Pinstripe accepted in a handshake that Jrain returned with equal enthusiasm.

“You would not believe how many people make no effort to reciprocate the same energy and strength in that formality, Jrain,” Pinstripe said, murmuring approvingly. “Well met.”

“I’m trying to get used to some things, yes,” Jrain said. He blinked in sudden remembrance. “Oh! By the way, you and Kin’dar can explain this to me.” He awkwardly made the hand sign he had seen them both do. “What does this mean?”

“It mimics the first letter in our city’s name, intended to wish the virtues our people extol on a personal level,” Pinstripe explained coolly. He made the gesture himself. “May you find strength in that which you put your hand to do. I long that you embark on and return from a safe, smooth journey. Sentiments such as these.”

“That makes sense,” Jrain said, making the gesture more confidently this time. “Um ... I am glad you had a safe journey here,” he added, smiling.

“Ah, thank you, Jrain,” Pinstripe said, bowing slightly in thanks. “That I did, but it was not exactly easy with a hand wagon in tow along the road, but I have been through more arduous circumstances hunting.”

Jrain and Kin’dar looked at each other.

“Oh, is it ...?” Kin’dar asked, an expectant look spreading across his face.

Pinstripe grinned, chuckling softly.

“Yes. I must say that I am most proud of how it turned out—your new attire, I mean, master Jrain.”

Jrain laughed nervously, holding out his open palms toward Pinstripe and shaking his hands side to side. “No, no, I am no master.”

“You are when I am in your debt, or in a contracted or offered service,” he said plainly.

“Ha, okay,” Jrain said. “If you insist.”

“He does,” Kin’dar commented playfully. “Why am I never ‘master Kindor?’” he added as though he’d been insulted.

Pinstripe rolled his eyes.

“Come see, gentlemen,” he said, ignoring Kin’dar and turning in place. He strode along the edge of all the construction activity and materials.

Jack had just finished shoving a log into place with two other people along the left wall of the guest room, which was now a few logs high, being around five or six feet tall. He brushed his hands firmly and looked up, hailing Pinstripe with a hand raised over his head.

“Pinstripe!” he bellowed.

“Jack,” Pinstripe said loudly but shortly, turning to incline his head toward Jack as he continued walking.

“Have you come to help?” Jack asked breathlessly, chuckling.

“... In my own way, if I were to say, ‘yes,’ to your question,” he replied. “I am unable to assist you directly, if that is what you mean to ask.”

“Well, yes,” Jack said, laughing again.

“If you will excuse us for a moment. I will return these men to your services soon,” Pinstripe said.

“Sure,” Jack shouted back, making a peculiar yet friendly face at Pinstripe before turning back to whatever conversation the two black bears were having who had been helping him.

“They don’t seem friendly,” Jrain whispered to Kin’dar, stepping over a log.

“They’re strictly professional with each other. Pinstripe is respectful toward everyone, but you can tell when it’s earned, if you catch my drift,” Kin’dar whispered back.

Jrain wondered if it had to do with Pinstripe’s indifference toward, or even promotion of, Stella’s politics. He wasn’t sure exactly where he stood. Could Jack be some kind of political opponent who thought similarly to Kin’dar? Jrain was hesitant to poke them about it, but he thought he should ask sometime.

Pinstripe took them along the path and then off to the left where the hills met with the forest, which was farther than Jrain had expected, being almost a mile away. Under the last tree on the path’s left side just before the small forest in between them and the Haze Maze. Jrain could see a wooden wagon draped in a white sheet that looked heavy and fine, much like the material of Stella’s cape.

Jrain’s tail swayed as a wave of excitement washed over him. He looked at Kin’dar with an eager smile, which made him chuckle. Pinstripe turned and waited by the wagon until they were standing right before him.

“May I present to you the very first set of draconic garbs,” Pinstripe said, leaning over and dramatically pulling the sheet off toward them, which made Jrain and Kin’dar flinch, but Jrain held his eyes closed a little longer, savoring the anticipation.

It was the very outfit he’d worn in his nightmare.

To be continued.