**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 8**

**Perilous Heights**

Why not just camp for the night? Right here?

Jrain sat on the slick grassy ledge of a cliff to the side of a waterfall. His legs hung still in the brisk air, and a cool mist rose from below that cooled his limbs. The sensation had been spreading up into the rest of his body for some time now, and after another unusually hot day for this season, filled with hours of walking, jumping, and even climbing, the flesh beneath his hide thanked him for the rejuvenating respite. He was cold-blooded, after all.

Perhaps parched wasn’t the right word. Neither shriveled nor wilted. But the feelings behind how his skin felt came to mind as he sat there contentedly. To put it another way, it felt like his flesh gradually dried out with prolonged exposure to heat, like a fish being cooked from the inside under its scales.

It had been especially difficult *not* to swim in the river for the last two days. He certainly preferred the water, but he thought he should start building a tolerance for being on land. After talking with Kin’dar about how much he loved showers or—better yet—being in a body of water, Kin’dar had said he only got wet to clean himself off or go waveriding. Otherwise, he didn’t want to stay that way for long because the water would weigh him down and make him freeze. Jrain figured the same could be said for everyone with fur, but Kin’dar had mentioned otters would agree with him by default. Jrain thought he should reach out to some to go for a swim. Maybe he’d find a new friend in one, perhaps more.

And with all the clothes he was wearing on his expedition, he couldn’t swim since he would have to shed them every time. Yes, they *could* get wet, but he was carrying supplies in all his leather compartments, so they’d be ruined if they got drenched.

Pinstripe had brilliantly designed his tailbags as a single unit that rested atop and strapped around the base of his tail. These were attached to a waist belt so they wouldn’t slide down or off to either side. More secure and steady that way, but they were an ordeal to remove.

He also had a kilt of sorts, but it was two separate pieces—one of dark tan cloth that draped over his crotch, and one of thick brown leather that covered his haunches and split at the tail. Pinstripe had enthusiastically described his thought process with this design as ‘form and function’ so he could avoid having to weigh down the fabric with leather underneath. By splitting the fabric, he had more mobility and less potential for his spikes to snag. Jrain liked it even more than the prior kilt.

His burlap hood also functioned as a shawl and cape. Pinstripe admitted he needed time to further develop this since Jrain’s fins and horns required purposeful slits and holes so it could be worn, which compromised the piece’s integrity and durability.

His mid-section was largely exposed, which was fine since it was plated unlike his back. When he didn’t wear his poncho one day while working on the cabin, he’d found out exposing his scars to the sun was a *bad* idea, which had required Kin’dar to head back to Foren to obtain some ointment from the town’s herbalist because his scars itched and stun so badly.

Jrain had almost cried from how soothing and relieving the ointment had felt once Kin’dar had applied it, which elicited the cheers of Jack and his crew just before they left that evening, since they had helped him by keeping Jrain in the shade, pouring water on his back, and the like while Kin’dar was gone during the afternoon.

Kin’dar had helped apply it again that night around their campfire before bed, and once he was done, Jrain had asked if Kin’dar would sit in his lap with them both facing the fire. He had obliged, and Jrain had felt so peaceful that he dozed off for an hour … with Kin’dar still nestled between his crossed legs and held against his bosom.

Jrain was so worried when he’d woken up and realized what had happened, but when Kin’dar didn’t respond to his apologies, he smiled noticing that Kin’dar had fallen asleep, too.

Jrain had gently and slowly carried the fox into his makeshift tent, tucking him under his sheet and watching him sleep for a minute before returning to the fire for a few minutes, watching as the last flickers of flame went out with a pile of smoldering ash and embers.

He thought about how he’d do anything for his friend.

And that’s why he resolved to go on this expedition before retiring to his own tent.

Kin’dar had insisted on going with him, but Jrain had countered that Jack and his people needed him to help with the second project—restoring the trail to the beach. The one he had ruined with his giant legs and tail.

A compunction seized him since he had left them behind to deal with the rest of that, but he had stayed to fix up the cabin’s exterior to completion. He had also gotten to clean up and grade the first couple hundred feet of the path, too, and that was the most important part for appearance’s sake. Jack was keeping construction equipment and debris out along the path in front of Kin’dar’s cabin, hoping that would dissuade citizens from coming any farther, but he was also stationing a person or two in rotations near the clearing to turn anyone back since the path was ‘closed’ for renovation. A few had come and gone, but a Foren soldier had come by to give a report to Stella. Nothing had come of it with their carefully constructed façade.

No one could see what had happened to the path besides those who were loyal to Jack; all involved knew only a Shade could have done this, so with this knowledge and their involvement in covering it up, they were risking their livelihoods with vigilant, tenuous discretion. If this got found out, Jack would very likely receive a harsh reprimand and be on city arrest, but Kin’dar ... neither knew what Stella’s wrath would entail if she found out about his hiding such a thing.

He shook his legs and water droplets that had collected along his hide flicked off in a small cascade. They fell into whatever lay below the thick cloud of mist created by the river. He gently rocked his legs back and forth.

Last night, he had come across a spot where the river had widened twofold with an islet splitting it in two for over half a mile. Much to his own luck, he had found a tree that had fallen across the gap, so he balanced across it and camped there for the night, but not without an extended dip in the water.

He hadn’t had any devoted time swimming like that since ... well, he didn’t know. He could see everything in the water with the assistance of the moonlight and his second pair of clear eyelids. The pebbled, sandy riverbed was pockmarked with slimy green plants that grew on larger stones like grass, while other plants had pliable, slender branches undulating with the current. Jrain had brushed against these plants at times as he dove and curved his way along and against the current, which had been weak enough at this juncture to do so without much effort. He even had caught sight of fish swimming by. Jrain couldn’t resist snatching a few in his jaws, having eaten a few whole. He got to save his dwindling rations that night.

When he swam freely and hunted by instinct, he felt more like whatever he had been in the past. Fleeting impressions of a grander underwater world surfaced when he was submerged—one filled with bizarre sea creatures and plants and geography. He looked forward to exploring whatever resided around Light’s Shadow Coast to see if anything matched with what little he remembered. Maybe more memories would be triggered.

Jrain stopped rocking his legs. Water droplets ran down his hide and dripped from his spikes like stalactites.

He rolled and stretched his toes, grunting as he lifted one leg to prop an ankle on the opposing knee. He grasped at his paw with both hands and placed his thumbs on the underside, which had an ashen gray color that could only be seen on his palms, and subtly with his gills and the front of his slightly scarred snout.

When he pressed his thumbs into his foot’s muscles, he rumbled in relief. He kneaded as deep as he could and continued like this for a couple minutes before moving on to his other paw. He had been ignoring how achy his paws were with all of this living on the land. The residual water from the mist not only helped make the motions easier by making his hide slicker, but also helped wash away dirt and grass that had smeared on and got caught in the scales.

He wondered if there was anyone who did massages in Foren, and he sighed longingly at the idea of having his paws—no, his *whole body* being treated to one. He knew he had to ask Kin’dar when he returned. Or Pinstripe, who seemed like someone who would know about that sort of thing.

But that only served to remind him of how growing had felt. No massage could compare with that.

Jrain blushed with a sheepish frown and stopped rubbing his paws. He lifted his legs to prop both paws on the grass with his toes hanging just over the edge. He leaned forward and hugged around his shins, resting his snout on top of his knees.

*This is why I’m out here,* Jrain thought. *I’m putting a stop to this.*

He looked around. There were three smaller trees of a kind he’d never seen up until now with thin branches that reached and hovered out over the waterfall, as though poised to dive into the pool below. They had pale pink flowers with vibrant red centers. Their petals lazily floated down and disappeared into the mist, and a couple had landed on Jrain, such as right now on top of his snout.

His brows raised at the sight with his eyes nearly crossing, and he unsuccessfully attempted to blow it off with his nostrils until he decided to just shake his head and watch it float away on the wind.

He looked up at the night sky. There was nothing obscuring the black expanse beyond a few wispy clouds and these pink flower trees, but they were separate, small, and dainty in contrast to the usual sort that stood close together by the thousands with thick canopies. He closed his eyes and took in the rumbling and roiling of the waters, the curious songs of crickets and owls, and the rustling of leaves and flowers.

*Maybe I should turn back,* Jrain considered, turning to glance back the way he had come.

He shook his head slowly. He knew he couldn’t do that. Since the outfit was in his nightmare, it had been prophetic in nature. That meant The Stranger—as he had decided to call them—could be real. The place they’d fought could be real.

The staff could be real.

Jrain remembered the river in his nightmare and how it extended to the sea. He figured this: What if it was the very river that split with the one going to the beach?

Could that staff be on that precipice waiting to be claimed?

*Am I meant to claim it?* Jrain thought. *Would that person in the pillar of light want me to have it? Or is The Stranger leading me into a trap?*

The staff could store and unleash electricity—that much he knew. When he’d gone back into his nightmare while growing, he’d been able to keep electricity in the staff. So, if he ever got struck with lightning or somehow absorbed electricity in other ways, maybe he could keep it in the staff.

He’d never have to worry about becoming a giant again. Or maybe he could learn to control his power …

*No*, Jrain thought, shaking his head and stilling his beating heart. *It’s too dangerous.*

But can a staff *really* do that? He considered how his nightmare could’ve been metaphorical. In reality, the staff could be a regular old piece of wood.

Or was it?

That spurred Jrain’s quest, and he shuddered thinking over what awaited him.

He had to know the truth. And if The Stranger was there to intercept him ... he would confront him again.

He’d asked Kin’dar if anyone had ever ventured north along the river, but he had said only enough distance covered by a few hours. Stella had never permitted anyone to be out past nightfall. Much had been left uncharted since Foren’s established, secure routes had never proven inadequate for foraging and hunting. Going beyond what was adequate was superfluous and foolish in her eyes, Kindor had said.

Jrain thought that made sense in some way, but was that cowardly? Or was it a wise self-control? He wasn’t entirely sure where he stood yet, even if he disliked Stella personally and thought she went too far in some ways from what he knew.

He needed a better understanding of all these politics to see where everyone was coming from because, clearly, not everything was black and white.

He wasn’t even sure what he’d do if he found that staff. Maybe he should never engage his power again. Or maybe he should. Maybe there was another way …?

Jrain sniffed as he rose to his paws. Continuing to dawdle wasn’t getting him any closer, even though he was going to rest here for the night, but since the plateau extended from left to right with no end in sight, he resolved to rappel down its face before getting some shuteye.

He leaned over the side and peered into the misty abyss. He had been thrilled at the idea of diving into the pool below, but thought better since he had no idea how far down he had to go, let alone how deep or wide the pool was.

*This is when wings would come in handy,* he thought sadly.

He huffed and rolled his shoulders. That wouldn’t stop him. He had what he needed.

Besides the foodstuffs, seed, and water he had on his tailbag, he had a machete in a small leather band that held the blade at the hilt, which was an open sheathe designed with loops along the back so his belt could be thread through it. Additionally, two coils of rope hung from the other side with a similarly designed band that had a metal hook to hold them. Kin’dar had said he may need a few things to get around the land, and now, both of these had proven useful.

He also brought a two-handed axe that lay across his back with a sling crossing his chest. He wanted to bring something he felt somewhat familiar with that could help fell a tree or cut branches in his way if need be.

He unhooked one of the rope coils and unfurled it before striding over to the flower tree farthest from the waterfall, which was about two dozen feet. He knelt and wound the rope around the trunk, mumbling a recitation of the steps to make a secure knot. Kin’dar had taught him how to do that before leaving.

Jrain tugged at the knot he’d made a few times, and his tail thumped in satisfaction at his efforts.

“You stay right there, tree,” he said, pointing to it. “I need you to keep me safe ... and I want to keep you safe, too.”

He stepped toward it and looked up at the lovely contrast the canopy had with the night sky. Pale rays flitted through the branches and gave the petals an almost translucent appearance. The stars were sprinkled between and amid them all, twinkling.

Jrain inclined his head until the top of it rested against the trunk. He then gently placed his palms on it and loosely wrapped his tail around the stump.

He didn’t know why. He just ... wanted to respect the life in this tree. Its beauty.

“I hope you don’t mind this,” he said quietly. “I need your help.”

He backed up several steps until he was standing on the precipice. No looking down.

Jrain breathed in deeply and grabbed the rope with both hands. Then, he eased himself backward with nothing but open air behind him, relinquishing his balance to test the rope’s and tree’s resolve.

No creaking. No fraying.

He pressed his lips together and took his first step on the cliff face, searching for a foothold. Another, and then another. Soon, he lost sight of the plateau as he committed to his descent.

The first few steps were muddy with his paws slightly sinking into the cliff face’s damp dirt, but it quickly transitioned to sterner stuff—perpetually glistening gray and black rock with patches of moss spotting the cliff face. He felt a steady yet light splashing of water along his left side from the waterfall, and he hoped his attire and tailbags wouldn’t become too drenched by the time he reached the bottom.

After a couple minutes of this trepidatious effort, his hands were already starting to cramp from gripping the rope too hard. He stopped for a moment and gently bounced on his toes to be sure he was secure before trading off his hands one by one from the rope, shaking them out with grunts of pain. He had been loosening his grip in pulses to slide his hands down along the rope, but he figured he should try placing one hand under the other in a repeating motion.

He let one hand go and looked down to grab under his other, but there was a problem—he’d come to the rope’s end.

At this point, he was a few feet into the mist and could faintly see the rope draped over the edge from on high. Several more feet and he would be totally immersed in mist.

Jrain groaned anxiously, looking around to see if there were any outcroppings he could stand on.

15 feet away, his eyes fell on a ledge under the waterfall that jut out at least two feet.

Jrain hoisted himself back up the rope a few feet to give himself slack as he pushed himself against the cliff face to the left with a big jump that took him halfway there. He walked to his left more carefully as he approached the outcropping. Soon after, his paws touched level ground.

The sight underneath the waterfall was spectacular since he could see the curvature of the river as it shot out from the cliff face. His eyes fell downward, observing how the solid stream broke and dissipated. Here, he also saw something that made his jaw drop, and he knew the name for it: a rainbow.

He wished he could sit here, but not on a ledge like this. Not at a time like this.

Jrain backed himself up to the rocky face as much as he could.

“Okay,” he said to himself, holding the tied rope in his left hand as he carefully unhooked the other with his right.

Tying two ropes together wasn’t something that he remembered as well, much to his own frustration. However, after fumbling a few attempts, he got a promising result. He had double knotted the second rope to the first, giving it several strong tugs before nodding in satisfaction. He believed this was called the “Double Fisherman’s Bend.”

Jrain grabbed hold of the rope again with restored confidence and craned his neck to eye the spot he had stopped at a few minutes ago that was directly in line with the tree.

He exhaled in preparation and bent his knees, propelling himself off the ledge as he hit the wall running. His eyes briefly shot upwards to see that he only had to take a few more steps until he was aligned, so he slowed his pace and did a final, small leap onto the spot, splaying out his toes and gripping the stone thereof as well as the hide and talons thereof could manage.

*FWIP!*

From above, the rope came loose!

After two seconds of freefall, the rope snapped rigid again. Jrain felt a jolt go through his arms, especially his right, which forced him into letting go. His body flipped over at an angle with his back to the cliff face.

For whatever reason, he hadn’t screamed. Instead, his breath had been caught, and he now let out a horrified gasp. Jrain stared wide eyed into the mist below. He still couldn’t see the bottom.

Jrain looked back up. The rope faded into more mist.

Jrain saw that he was glowing with his light once more.

He had come to assume it wasn’t tied to his power after his outburst at Jack. It apparently came forward instinctively when he felt intense emotions of anger or joy, among others.

Like fear.

*Maybe I need to grow to save myself,* he suddenly thought.

Or excitement.

He gulped at his gut instinct.

*I could try growing until I rise above the trees. Could make out my destination much sooner.*

*I could reach it faster.*

*I co—*

*NO,* he chastised himself.

*No excuses. I cannot risk it here. I must have the staff first.*

He had not tried to see if he had any electricity left in him since that night.

There was *something* about the air that felt electric, and he wondered if he was always absorbing the element from his surroundings without knowing it—and how much.

He couldn’t lose himself here and now, even when being a giant could help. Besides, he’d snap the rope if he got any heavier. He might not even do it fast enough to make a potential fall more tolerable at a larger size. Could he even hold onto the rope with his hands as they got larger? And how could he forget that his outfit would be ruined if he did this?

He snarled and threw his body and right arm back up to grasp the rope near where his left hand still held on.

The rope shifted and began a steady foot-long descent. Jrain felt his spine shiver along with the fins lining it. He didn’t move a muscle until the movement stopped.

*I have to get as far down as I can. Now.*

Jrain furrowed his features in concentration, and his body’s light faded as he stowed his fright by funneling his focus. He hastily put one hand under the other, scrambling down with less regard for sure footing.

After a minute of swift rappelling, his left paw slipped, which made his weight aggressively shift to the left. This sent his right paw sliding out from under him as well, and he bumped into the side of the cliff face with a grunt through gritted teeth.

Immediately thereafter, he heard a faint echo of groaning from above as the rope came loose yet again.

His body scrapped against the rocks in his fall, and his jaw clipped on a jutting piece of rock that made him yelp.

*THUMP!*

*“Aagghhh!”* Jrain roared with his impact on a cold slab.

He had landed on his side, groaning as pain radiated throughout his left hip and shoulder. He raised a hand to his throbbing chin and winced at how sore it was.

His ear fins twitched at the sound of crashing that became louder by the second, both solid and rustling in character.

Jrain snapped his head to peer at the rope at his side. It was rapidly pooling in a messy coil.

Without thinking, he scrambled to a sloppy crouch and frog leaped as powerfully as he could away from the rope. As soon as he hit the ground and slid across the slab, something huge collided with the ground with a resounding *thunk* and loud rustling.

He turned and despaired—it was the tree he had wrapped his rope around.

*“No, no!”* Jrain said while attempting to stand, but he spasmed briefly and fell to one knee with a hand supporting him on the dark gray stone. That fall hadn’t been kind to his hip.

He decided to crawl over to the tree and tentatively touch the branches and trunk. Then, a gentle shower of petals began falling over him. He looked up and saw hundreds drifting in the air. Their descent formed a vague shape of the tree’s trajectory when it fell, now uprooted and barer than before.

“I’m sorry,” he said, mournfully bowing his head to the tree.

There wasn’t much of anything he could see above him with all the mist, but he could observe much of the lower surrounding area. Layers of smooth rock encircled the pool, both littered with colored leaves and pink petals. He was only a few feet from the pool, and he gazed to his left to see the water spilling over the black slab for two dozen feet before it ended with a series of tiny waterfalls that came together to form a continuing river that cut through the forest ahead.

He rose awkwardly and limped away from the waterfall. He found a boulder just where the dirt and grass met with the slab a few dozen feet away, and he leaned against it for a moment.

After resting a bit, he forcibly pulled his hood back and undid his belt buckles on his tail, followed by the ones at his waist. He sloppily placed it all on the boulder, moving on to remove the other articles of clothing.

One of the larger pouches became his target of interest, and he undid its buckle to lift up the flap and take out half a loaf of fluffy bread, which was only a bit moist on the crust. He took a ravenous bite and then grabbed a tube that sat in between the bags, which contained blueberries and blackberries. He popped open the cap to shake a lot into his maw. As he munched at them, he undid the string on his water skin, popping it open as well to drink refreshing gulps of cold water to wash down the bread and berries.

He found it a lot easier to eat fish. And less messy.

He put his head back down and sighed, wiping at his snout with his forearm. He slung the water skin’s string over his shoulder so that it hung beneath his right arm and stuffed the rest of the bread in his mouth.

Jrain neatly spread and smoothed out his tailbags and clothing. They were damp, but not soaked. He was glad there was a big clearing here so they could dry out by morning.

He trudged back to the slab and noticed a path where it continued behind the waterfall. On the way there, he emptied the tube of its fruity contents and knelt down to clean it in the pool. He drained the water skin and filled it again while he was down on the ground.

There was one loaf of bread left, so he’d have to go back to Foren soon or rely on foraging for plants and hunting for fish, which he was not certain he’d get lucky enough to find, let alone other animals on land, which he hoped to avoid eating if he could. He didn’t think he had the stomach to be a land hunter.

He slid down against the end of the cliff face and unceremoniously plopped down with an exhausted moan. Straightening his legs, he crossed them and leaned the side of his head against the wall where a patch of moss grew. He moved his tail around and picked it up to drape over his thighs, folding his hands together and resting them atop his tail.

Planning ahead or thinking wasn’t an option. He was upset over hurting the tree … and himself.

His tired muscles and aching side and shoulder lulled him to sleep, aided by the waterfall shrouding and silencing the outside world.

A chill went down Jrain’s spine.

He saw a huge tree with drooping branches and yellow leaves. They came down to the ground and hid the trunk from view.

The very one he had been reclining against when he woke to his nightmare.

He sidled along the bank and stopped when he was lined up with it, though he remained separated from it on the other side of the river, which steadily curved to the left a few hundred feet ahead of him. Farther to the right past the tree, light flitted through the forest section he’d walked through in his nightmare, too. The cliffs, the end of the river, the sea—they must all be around the bend.

Jrain gripped at his belts and pulled at them, deciding to fasten one of them a loop tighter. Everything had dried out by the time he’d woken up around noon. He must’ve slept for over 10 hours, and his body rewarded him for it with a side and shoulder that only produced a dull pain now. His chin, however, was still tender to the touch; he imagined the flesh underneath was purple as could be, and he had to be careful not to idly touch it.

The pool had also proven to be a boon for fish when he entered it for a morning dip. Since they had to awkwardly flop across the slab to continue down the river, several remained trapped for a while until they figured it out or got lucky. Or got eaten by a starving leviathan.

Even after the meal he’d gulped down the night before, he had eaten six fish within a half hour. He was out of food, so that was an excuse to stuff himself almost to the point of discomfort, which had given him a paunch that lasted for a couple hours until the fish had settled well enough for digestion. He figured he wouldn’t be hungry until nightfall.

Thankfully, the pool was only an hour’s hike away from here with little to no difficult terrain. That cliff had been his greatest challenge over the last three days, so he planned to stop there once more on the way back. He refused to think about what he’d do after that since the rope no longer hung from the top. He’d have to scale the cliff or find some other way around.

The two ropes were hanging at his side once more. As for the flower tree, he had dragged it near the forest edge so it could at least decompose into the earth. The thought of having uprooted such a beautiful thing pained him, but there was nothing else he could have done.

He grabbed the fringes of his hood and gently tugged it forward, resuming his stride. He would be coming at the plateau from the south rather than the west this time, and so he entered that last stretch of forest, continuing to straddle the edge of the river. A couple minutes later, he emerged out the other side to what had been a field of battle.

Jrain gradually descended into the valley that the river cut through; however, the river was three times smaller in width than he remembered. He could walk across and likely only have the water come up to his knees.

Now that he thought about it, it had been raining in his nightmare, and the river behind him had almost been spilling over the edges. But here, today, it was much calmer because of the neutral weather, which was gray and cloudy—much easier on Jrain than all the sun he’d endured lately. Given how he was walking along sandy, pebbled ground that extended a few yards out from each side of the river, downpours must make the river like the one he had swum across.

His eyes found it hard to look away from the escarpment far to his right. Up the hill far above the sea, a single line rose from the ground that penetrated the gray horizon.

The staff was here.

Jrain gulped. He was surprised to find that his right hand had automatically reached over to the machete’s hilt, but he didn’t reject the instinct. He grabbed it tight and pulled it out firmly with a *whoosh*, holding it firmly at his side as he began to scale the hill. His eyes never stopped scanning in all directions as he ascended the hill.

No one was around for miles. He didn’t even hear or see any animals. It was just the salty wind, the distant crashing of waves, and the soft *thumps* of his paws with each cautious step along the precipice.

Soon, he stood over the staff with the same intricate yet damaged crown. It looked charred, but only naturally. Not recently.

It was so driven into the dirt that it only came up to his waist in height when it was probably as tall as Kin’dar.

His heart was racing. He couldn’t speak as he reached out to it. He looked down and saw his left hand was shaking.

*“About time.”*

Jrain snatched his hand back and whipped around.

No one was there.

He clenched the machete in hand and exhaled before sheathing it.

*Now I’m imagining things,* he thought to himself. It was just the memory of something The Stranger had said.

Jrain grew pensive as he turned back around to consider the staff again.

*I don’t know if you can hear me*, he spoke from his soul. *But I hope this is what I’m supposed to do.*

He got in a crouch, his eyes opening as he gripped the staff without hesitation in both hands. He pulled up to no avail, but that only made the memory of his past struggle more motivating. He put his back and legs into it, using them to help pull upward with his arms.

Jrain grunted in intense bursts to relieve the pressure building in his head. He tried rotating the staff in gradually larger circles to loosen it, and before a minute passed, he felt the staff budge. He gave in to a low growl that drove him on a few more seconds until the staff came loose. He was ready for the jarring release and went up with the momentum, standing tall as he held it pointed straight to the sky in both hands.

His face was scrunched up in anticipation. But nothing happened.

He relaxed his muscles and brought the staff down, holding it out in front of him in both hands.

*Is it ... just a normal staff?*

As if it heard his thoughts, the staff faintly flickered with jagged lines of light along the cracks and splinters on its smooth surface. Jrain gently gasped as they did so until they assumed an intensity and consistency like that of his own light.

Then, that sensation swept over his spirit and mind that he’d felt in his nightmare—a moment where his physical senses dulled, yet his inner being was heightened and exposed by an ethereal touch.

He wasn’t really aware of what he did while this occurred over a few seconds, but he was now holding the staff a little tighter and closer to his chest. His shoulders had loosened, and he felt his anxieties about the staff and The Stranger grow distant. The light soon went out.

Jrain tried reaching into himself to tap into his power. He closed his eyes and focused on the staff in his mind’s eye, willing that it take whatever electricity he had.

But after a couple minutes passed of him grunting softly and standing in place, trying to hold the staff in different ways and think about different things, he sighed in annoyance as he planted the staff at his right side. Nothing happened.

*Maybe I don’t have any electricity in me*, he considered. *Maybe it only happens when I interact with lightning. And if I stay indoors, well ... what’s there to worry about? I can just keep this for emergencies. I have nothing to worry about now.*

Jrain sighed in relief. He rotated the staff in his hand by tapping it into his other palm a couple times before tossing it into his left hand, having it ready as a support should his hip have any other ideas, even though he hadn’t had much trouble with it today.

He now simply went back the way he came, relieved that his journey had come to an uneventful close.

Once he had made it halfway through the forest in between the coastal cliffs and the open area where the yellow tree resided, the staff suddenly came to life again with light.

He halted and lifted it up to inspect it. Nothing seemed to have triggered it.

*... I guess it’s going to do this randomly*, he thought, frowning in confusion. *It’s definitely some kind of magic.*

Jrain thought how crazy it was that a piece of wood could *glow*. Maybe it was a specific thing that happened with his touch. Perhaps a harmless visual effect from a spell of sorts.

*Are there sorcerers in this world?*

It wasn’t out of the question if he could change size and absorb electricity, so …

His thoughts slowed when he felt that spiritual sensation come over him again, but this time, the effect stacked until his vision became blurry, along with his mind being smothered by disorientation and disassociation.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he wavered for a few seconds, moaning before toppling over onto his back. The impact knocked the wind out of him, but he didn’t yelp or panic. His wheezing breaths felt distant and impersonal, almost as though the present were a memory he was reflecting on.

He didn’t know how much time had passed, but he hadn’t closed his eyes or moved much at all. He was sedated in every way.

His senses and emotions were returning slowly, but beneath the dampening effect on his conscious, he could make out how he felt exceedingly warm, like sitting next to a mystical campfire that warmed his body and soothed his mind from the inside out. It came into focus with greater clarity and intensity as the seconds ticked by, and it made his faculties’ recovery ramp up exponentially.

He didn’t think much of it in his tipsy state, and hissed happily from it as he languidly stretched out his legs and arms, becoming more aware of the brushing of grass against his scales. The branches overhead swayed and seemed to sparkle with his eyes being extra sensitive to the light.

Just then, his hiss became a gasp of pleasant shock as the heat soaked into his flesh from the stretching. He grunted long as he continued the stretch as far as he could. His muscles tightened. His limbs slightly shook. He curled his toes and fingers as much as he was able.

Jrain wished he could answer his body’s demand to stretch beyond what he was able. He longed to fill the empty space.

And then, his gasp moved on to a determined growl as his longing was answered.

All of his limbs began to creak as they stretched out, much to his ecstatic joy. He felt and heard his spine *crack* several times in succession, as though he were pressing into it slowly with the backs of his hands after a long day of kneeling over and lifting things. But his spine wasn’t just realigning. It was as though his vertebrae were multiplying.

Then, at last, his escalating growl was crowned with a triumphant roar in response to this steady growth being topped with a surge so impressive that he heard the grass crumple and tear beneath him as his back and limbs slid in place along the ground. Individual scales and plating all over him separated to their max extent, barely able to contain his burgeoning flesh. He even felt the flesh exposed on his back dig into the sides of his scales as his back muscles attempted to push out of his scar openings. Though he felt the skin come out a hair past his hide, it went no further.

During this, he paid little attention to stretching and tearing sounds below him. His nerves were blazing with a fire that he dared not stop stoking, but he was taken out of this immersion when the top of his head slammed against a hard object.

His feral roar stuttered into a grunt of pain and disappointment with his growth spurt halting. The pleasure abruptly subsided in turn.

Jrain’s wide smile twisted into a scowl. He growled viciously while scrambling to his paws, soon discovering the culprit: a tree.

*A damned tree. A worthless, stupid twig.*

*“HOW DARE YOU!”* Jrain bellowed in a deeper, monstrous voice. It didn’t even sound like his own.

He roared at the tree and lumbered forward to grip halfway around the entire trunk, digging his talons through the bark by a couple inches and pushing at it with all his might. The tree groaned in protest before losing against his great strength. Jrain chuckled in pride as he continued to push, huffing with a final shove that sent it careening into the ground, causing leaves in nearby trees to fall around him.

“You will not stop him,” Jrain bit out in a low tone. *“He is mine.”*

Jrain lifted a paw and stomped in the middle of the tree. It was large enough to reach across its width, so he grinned smugly, puffed out his chest, and snorted defiantly as he twisted his paw into the bark, pulverizing it to pieces that fell off the sides and from the underside of his paw when he lifted it up.

“We need no axe to cut you down,” he said maliciously.

He yelled as he brought his paw down on the tree hard. He grunted violently doing this motion again, and again, and again. His vision became redder with each stomp, and eventually, the tree cracked and split from this assault. He continued to stomp until the pieces flattened into the dirt under a deep impression of his paw.

His breathing had become labored yet powerful as he brought his paw out from between the split tree*.*

He scowled at all the others around him.

*“Bow before us,”* Jrain commanded icily, balling his fists.

He proceeded to rampage with reckless abandon, swinging and punching trees like his fists were a pair of giant maces. The trees vibrated from the impacts, and when some leaned precariously enough, he began kicking and shoving them over when he could, clearing the vicinity little by little.

“FALL!” Jrain yelled with a wicked laugh. “We will *not* be deterred!”

He emphasized the last word as he elbow struck a tree, which was so powerful of a blow that the trunk practically burst at the point of impact. Jrain went through with the motion and swung around to catch the falling upper half of the tree, hoisting it over his head and throwing it aside with a roar. *“We will—”*

As he threw an arm out, he heard a distressed tweet and a soft *whack* against his forearm.

He growled in annoyance at where the sound had come from, looking to the ground a short distance away to see a woodpecker next to the tree he’d stomped on.

*“No distractions,”* Jrain sneered, a grin spreading across his face as he stomped toward the bird and lifted his paw up to smash it.

The woodpecker’s head bobbed all about in confusion for a few seconds as he approached, watching it hop over a few feet to the ruined bark and grass embedded in the paw impression.

The bird fell to its side again and flapped pitifully, but this time, it didn’t rise. Its beady eyes were fixed on that spot in the middle of the split tree, but Jrain eyed the spot with contempt, inhaling as he lifted his paw to punish the insignificant creature.

But just as he was about to follow through, he hesitated, suddenly realizing there was a misshapen jumble of twigs and sticks smooshed into the ground.

Jrain felt his crimson vision quickly fade. The blood rushed out of his face. He gasped in shock as he brought his paw back down.

“What d-did—… W-WHAT DID I DO?!” he screamed in terror.

He got to his hands and knees over the tree and turned his finger over to gently stroke the dazed woodpecker. It was still breathing yet didn’t flinch at his touch. He looked over to the crushed nest and … and …

He turned away and hastily got to his paws, milling about before leaning on a nearby tree with one arm as he began to hyperventilate. He felt like he was going to throw up, and then he looked down at himself and panicked further.

His outfit was in shambles. All but two of his waist belts had broken at their buckles, and their leather had endured great stress, now having a lighter tone and cracks along their surfaces. He tried looking behind himself, but the movement caused the tailbags to slide off onto the ground. Their belts had long since been destroyed by his tail’s doubled girth. He must be over 20 feet tall.

He staggered back and angled his hips forward. The waist garbs still hung in place, but they looked comically small, like he was wearing children’s clothing. What was just as ridiculous was his hood and shawl, which were tight against his head and neck. The cape no longer hung down near the base of his tail either, now resting just under his shoulder blades. He felt at his horns as well, realizing they had slightly torn the holes they fit through.

Another gasp came from him as he frantically felt over his right horn several times. He spun around in place trying to focus through his tears and blubbering until, after some difficulty, a glint shone amid the grass.

Jrain knelt and cupped his hand around the spot, turned his hand over, and opened his fingers.

His horn ring had cracked in two. The thing would barely fit around a finger.

Jrain turned to look at his tailbag, sniffing as he crawled over to it and awkwardly fingered at one of the pouches with a talon until it flipped open. He carefully angled his palm until the parts of the ring slid out of sight into a pouch. He gently grabbed the flap between two fingers to put it back since he couldn’t buckle it back in place; his fingers were too big to get an adequate grip.

His chest swelled and face flushed with burning shame as he put his face in his hands.

He took a deep, shaky breath and noticed the staff was before him on the ground. He must have let go of it at some point when he was lying on the grass, perhaps when he began stretching. He must have absorbed electricity while he was disoriented.

“No, no,” Jrain said mournfully as he picked it up. His hand covered a third of its length, which made it look like a stick.

*“You were supposed to work!”* he shouted angrily, gripping the staff tightly. “Take this power from me! *Now!”*

His hand was shaking too much, so he shut his eyes and tried focusing.

A nudge of that spiritual sensation came over him, but it was almost imperceptible in its fleeting return. His eyes went wide as the staff glowed with light again.

“Yes! T-take it!” Jrain implored, lightly shaking it. “Take it! Pl—*a-ah ...”*

His voice faltered as a rush of energy shot through his arm with the staff glowing brightly. Electricity danced in short, sporadic currents along his hand, all attracted to and being absorbed into his dark blue scales and spikes along his hand and forearm. Waves of arresting power washed over him like a tide, and his flesh became saturated like sand becoming heavy with water.

Conflict danced across his features as he looked at the staff, willing it to take the electricity from him, but it just kept giving him more.

*Maybe … maybe I should take from it instead,* he began to reason, biting his lip.

His legs began to tremble. His fingers locked around the staff. He made a sound that was in between a choke and a moan, for he so desperately wished to hold on so the staff would reverse the flow of energy, but this fought with his increasing need to feed his impending and inevitable growth spurt.

He realized he had to let go, but his fingers wouldn’t obey him, seized by the energy flowing from the staff.

*“Mmmph ... A-aagh ...”*

He managed to open his hand and let the staff fall, but as soon as he did, a heat wave exploded from his bones, so much so that it felt like his hide would start leaking steam. This crippling blow of sensuality made him double over with his entire being overtaken by literally and figuratively electric tingling.

*“GAAAHH!”*

In a staggered sequence, he felt his legs suddenly soar in height in two pulses during a couple seconds, gaining one foot with each pulse. His stomach stacked on top of this size as he felt his abs flex against his stomach plating. The last two belts on his waist *popped,* and they fell 15 feet to the ground, soon followed by the waist garbs tearing and drifting down in a pile.

His pecs widened next, making him instinctively arch forward again as his back cracked some more with low, resonating pops. When he looked down, his chest swelled forward, gently bumping against his sore chin, but he didn’t notice any pain as his heart rate increased at the sight of his ripped mid-section.

He brought his arms up out in front of him and placed one hand on his abs and the other on a pec, sighing hotly as he gently grasped both and felt his arms grow next, soon allowing him to get an even wider, firmer grip on the heated plating. His fingers greedily stretched out to feel more of his uncontainable self.

Then, his snout protruded by a few inches with his chin sliding against the plating of his pecs, and he could feel his teeth lengthen in his mouth, so he felt at them with his thick, blue tongue, which bulged in size as he did so. His mouth automatically unhinged at that with the mass of slick, shiny blue flesh lolling out. At the same time, he heaved out a long, literally steamy breath.

But his bliss was interrupted for a moment when his hood constricted around his face and blinded him as the rest of his skull expanded.

Jrain growled at how stupid this made him feel, and so his neck solved the problem by thickening all around and ripping the shawl and hood further, leaving the rest to him as he grabbed both sides of the hood and ripped it in two as though it were parchment. He rolled his neck and heard it pop, making him sigh happily.

*Useless, irritating garbage,* he thought.

“More,” he said between excitable breaths as he admired himself.

Jrain looked behind him and frowned, but then grinned mischievously.

*“More.”*

His tail had lagged behind with the rest of his growing body, but this would not stand.

Jrain widened his stance with two earthshaking steps and braced himself against two trees that bent outwards against his brace. He could now grip around the entirety of trunks with his thumbs and fingers barely overlapping.

He grunted by flexing the muscles in his tail as hard as he could. He bent his knees slightly and stuck out his posterior, and after some effort, he rumbled deeply as his tailbones shifted and snapped from within, followed by the thick muscles and sinews at the base engorging in a ripple effect down his biggest appendage.

With the several feet he had gained in height, his tail had looked pathetic in contrast, only being as wide around as his forearms and hanging down to his ankles. But now, it spurted outward a couple times until it became as thick around as his thighs and pooled on the ground with several more feet.

However, he was hardly satisfied with this size.

“No. *Bigger,”* he mumbled, his resonate voice shaking from anticipation.

The growth spurt of his tail tapered off into a gradual growth with the base widening out over several seconds. In fact, it became so wide and heavy that it began to sag vertically to the ground, and Jrain relished the feeling of the tail pressing more and more into the back of his thighs, forcing him to widen his stance further. His tail gained a few more feet in length as well, now proportionally larger than it had ever been before, now notably longer than he was tall, and now as thick around as he was, being equal in width to his waist.

He panted with rapturous delight as his growth came to a crawl, but it didn’t stop. He could feel that he was gaining an inch every few seconds with the way his toes gradually bunched up every half minute, which made him lift his paws up to make more room for their expansion. He turned his head to the side and eyed his tail out of the corner of his eye, rumbling as he reached back with one hand and stroked back and forth along one side of it. He could not lift it off the ground, and that made him feel like an immovable tower. A force of nature.

He took his hand off his tail and leaned against the other tree again. He felt his fingers gradually overlapping each other as the hide of his hands stretched and gently scraped against the bark.

He knew not how long he stood there, hunched over and moaning to himself periodically as intermittent, small spurts came in between the continual, gradual growth, but there was a voice in the back of his head.

“Can’t ... be ... any … bigger,” he said deliberately. “No, where ...?”

He stood up and immediately regretted it. A few minutes must have passed because he had gained a few dozen feet in height, and he hadn’t been paying attention to how his grip on the trees had been sliding upward this whole while.

His head bumped into and rose past a few branches in the canopy. Some broke and fell to the forest floor, which made it hard to look down between the branches. He saw that his tailbag was in between his two paws, small enough to sit atop either one.

And then he saw the staff a few feet away, a hair’s breadth away from his left paw.

He felt himself surge gently, grunting as his shoulders touched the canopy for the first time. His toes stretched out a couple inches or so, with one of the left ones brushing against the staff.

It immediately blazed with light, and a massive surge of electricity poured into him from bottom to top. He couldn’t move from how it felt, but after a few seconds, he managed to pull himself away by staggering back two steps, which destroyed a section of the canopy with branches snapping and bending against his head and shoulders.

Then, he grew in several successive spurts, his bones groaning under his weight but remaining resolute. The fibers of his muscles tore and grew back thicker and bigger. He groaned as he looked out straight and watched his perspective bob upward in pulses until, finally, his head burst out with his largest spurt yet that gave him several feet in height in a matter of seconds. His hide and plating could hardly contain the godlike power that drove him upwards and outwards, once more spreading apart to their max before catching up and settling over his larger frame.

He shrugged and brought his arms up and out with an inconvenienced growl. What followed was an explosion of branches that soared upward with a cacophonous shattering, and then they came back down in a shower. However, Jrain didn’t flinch when some branches harmlessly bumped off his hide and scales. He snorted in pride thinking about how he would have been hurt and trapped under one of them at his regular size, but now ...

His muscles pumped with blood, which had grown considerably, relative to their normal sizes. His forearms, biceps, thighs, calves, back, and pecs throbbed with excitable energy, and any slight move he made, anything that pressed into him—wherever he was touched sent out localized bursts of pleasure against his sensitive body. He felt as though if he walked forward, he would collapse in ecstasy and start growing again.

But Jrain moaned in discomfort, awkwardly standing in place with his eyes darting about. He was a couple hundred feet from the other side of the forest, and he could just make out the yellow tree over the tops of the trees grating against his chest. He must be over 100 feet tall now. Maybe even 150 feet.

He had no choice. He knelt down slowly to avoid too much of that pleasure distracting him, knowing it heralded greater size at any moment. Poking at his clothing and tailbag with a talon, he managed to hook them around it without stabbing them. After dropping them into his palm and closing that hand, he could only use two fingers with his other hand to pick up the staff, but he paused before touching it again.

*I’m almost bigger than I was at the cabin*, he managed to ponder. *Just several more feet and my waist will rise to the tops of the trees.*

*I could be taller than the walls around Foren. The cliffs on the beach.*

*We could grow bigger than any Shade and tear down those walls,* Jrain heard in his head—a new voice had melded with his own. *We could take care of Stella and stomp on any of these Shades. Those people need a new ruler—one far more powerful and worthy of being followed … worshiped. We co—*

Jrain shook his head and screamed in fury.

*“NOOO!”* Jrain shrieked, his deep voice echoing all around him, causing flocks of birds within a mile of him to fly off. *“GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”*

He picked up the staff between his two fingers and rumbled deeply as he instantly absorbed more electricity.

No matter what he did, the staff refused to listen to his command.

Just as he thought he could bear no more electricity, the output sputtered, and the electricity stopped dancing around his fingers. The staff went dark.

Jrain stood up and threw caution to the wind, his face contorting and growing hot as his lips thinned. He was holding back the energy as much as he could with each destructive stride as he forced his mountain of a body forward, carving a path through the canopy like a plow put to dirt.

With the staff still in between his fingers, he repeated, *Take this away*, in his head like a mantra, but the electricity did not return.

A few dozen feet from the clearing, he could contain himself no further, and so fresh growth spread out from his fingers where he held the staff.

His right arm flexed and expanded, making him lean to the side for a moment with the uneven distribution of weight. Then, his mid-section widened with his stomach bulging out; his abs and fat were so compressed against his stomach plating that he now formed a power belly. His chest burgeoned over the top of it, but then the height came with his pecs rising off his stomach by a couple feet as his spine elongated.

His head and other arm followed suit in swelling, raising his upper body so that the top of the forest rested at the middle of his stomach, but his legs soon buckled and almost hurt from his bones growing alone, stretching his thighs and calves taut. This gave him at least a dozen feet in height in a couple seconds, which put his waist at the top of the canopy. He must be 200 feet tall now.

While his leg muscles soon bulked up to relieve the tightness, it was not soon enough to prevent his legs from locking mid-stride. Jrain staggered two steps before losing all balance, falling even slower than the trees he had helped fell a few days ago.

The last bit of trees before him immediately give way to the walls that were his legs, which he fell on top of with the upper half of his body landing in the open area with a momentary earthquake.

His arms were stretched out over and in front of him, and he looked up dazed, realizing his reach almost extended to the river. His right hand was only several feet away from the yellow tree, and at this point, he could hold it in his hand if he wanted to.

Jrain saw the staff between his fingers, which was practically the size of the match Jack had used to light his pipe. His spurt had stopped, but he was still slowly stretching across the ground, feeling his mid-section slide closer to the river, and his paws bump and push into trees.

He tried to make the staff take back the electricity, but nothing happened. The staff was depleted.

In one way, Jrain was relieved. But in most ways, livid.

He growled and pinched his fingers, determined to break the staff in two, but it would not do this either. He placed his middle finger on one side and his index on the other. Both pressed down with his thumb in the middle under the staff, but with all this powerful force that would snap any regular twig, the staff did not budge.

*I can’t do anything right.*

Jrain flicked it at the yellow tree and buried his snout into the ground for a minute, putting his hands around his head as he tried to not lose his mind.

Soon, his growth completely stopped, and only then did he raise his head and roll over onto his back with unbelievable heft as the ground shook. He looked down at himself, and the destroyed forest in his wake. Those trees near the clearing were still flattened under his legs and tail, with the latter being so huge that he was forced to spread his legs to make room for it in this reclined position. He was taller than the beach cliffs now.

Again, his heart raced. He wanted *more*.

Again, his heart sank. He wanted *nothing*.

He sat up with a sonorous grunt and scooted himself back from the forest. He moved enough until he could bend his legs and prop his paws on the ground in front of the clearing out of the forest.

He took his other hand, still clenched, and opened it to look at the intricate labor of love from Pinstripe. He poked and turned the pieces over with a talon. Ripped and torn. All was taters.

He winced recalling what he’d called it—*garbage*.

His special ring was broken.

The life of nature had been razed without purpose.

He hurt a bird and destroyed its home, and … and …

He leaned back and slammed into the ground with his horns stabbing into the river until they lodged into its bed; the water was deep enough that he could keep his head straight back.

He inhaled sharply and made fists at his sides.

“I thought it ...” Jrain whispered to himself, trailing off as his voice trembled.

“... W-why didn’t it work?” he barely finished, his breath catching with a sobbing sound. Tears streamed down the sides of his face into the freshwater.

He angrily and shakily growled as he pounded the ground at his sides.

“The Stranger wanted this,” he said to himself in despair. “They were … no … never, ever again. Never …”

Jrain’s despair made him forget his size, and all that pleasure still coursing through his veins. He continued to shed tears for a couple minutes more, growing numb as grief and disappointment filled his heart.

He thought he was worse than a Shade for what this power made him do and think—how it made him throw away his very self at every turn. For a feeling.

The rush from the energy and warmth staved off exhaustion from how physically taxing turning into a giant was, but now, the fatigue consumed him as he came down from his power trip. His emotions brought him even lower, and his soul begged for sleep so he could cease hating himself even further. He shut his eyes and longed to forget his existence for but a while. Soon, he lost consciousness with the bubbling river helping him drift off into a deep, sad slumber.

To be continued.