**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Epilogue**

**Grounding**

Two months later ...

“Thanks for coming over,” Jrain said happily, folding his hands out in front of him on the table.

“It’s been far too long since I had scallops,” Kin’dar said with a full mouth, sighing in relief as he folded his hands in imitation. “Not too many people coming out this way to forage the seas, but maybe that’s a service you could provide the city,” he added, winking. “But I don’t mind being an exclusive customer of your deep sea hunting.”

Jrain grinned at Kin’dar’s words and inclined his head.

“Something to give thought to, but I’ve got my work cut out for me,” he said, looking over at Jack and raising a brow. The horse had one hand resting on top of his belly and the other idly picking his teeth with a toothpick.

Jrain made a nervous, expectant face.

“Was the seaweed okay?”

A few seconds of silence passed, and Jack eventually looked up out of curiosity, then jolted up in his chair.

“O-oh, my boy, what was that?”

Jrain chuckled.

“Was the seaweed okay? I tried my best.”

“Oh, ah,” Jack said, clearing his throat. “Too slimy for my taste. Could’ve been cooked some more since it was on the tougher side. And the bread wa—*oof!”* he suddenly went, looking to his left at a glowering Kin’dar. His eyes shot over to Jrain quickly and returned to Jack, and then he made a subtle praying gesture.

“U-uh, yes, yes! I enjoyed it. That’s what I meant, of course!” Jack said, laughing. “I’d love to have it again sometime,” he said enthusiastically as he murmured to himself and leaned back in his chair once more. He resumed picking his teeth and rolled his head methodically to look around the room.

“A very cozy home to visit for supper, if I do say so myself,” he said proudly under his breath.

The four of them were sitting in a one-room cabin with just enough space for a folding wooden square table in the center. Starting from the door to the right, a cot was in the corner that stretched halfway down the wall, which had a rectangular window in the middle that looked out to a water well. In the distance, the forest was off to the right, and the ocean to the left. A piece of furniture with a few shelves stood at the foot of the bed with assorted items neatly organized on it.

All along the wall adjacent to the door was a counter, as well as cabinets in the left and right corners. In the middle, a circular window looked out to a vista of the sun setting into the ocean. A sink was just below the window with a pump similar to the one in the kitchen of Kin’dar’s cabin. The pump connected to that newly dug water well outside.

The last wall that Jrain was facing—and that Jack had his back to—was a stone hearth that crackled with fire, creating a smoky, piney aroma that was mostly funneled into the chimney. A spacious closet was to the left of it, where Jrain kept his clothing and various hiking items.

Several cooking tools were spread out to the sides of the fire within the hearth that could either be stood on stands or hung from hooks over the fire, which he had used to prepare a meal of freshly caught fish and scallops, flatbread with sea salt, handpicked berries, and seaweed. It had taken him half of yesterday and the first half of today to gather all of these ingredients, let alone prepare them.

He had asked Kin’dar in advance if he knew how to use all this cooking ware, and Kin’dar had gladly written down some notes for him to take home after giving a demonstration with his own hearth. Jrain had referenced the notes thoroughly, which rested on his counter, water stained and lightly crumpled from all the handling.

It was his home. Jrain’s quaint, seaside cabin.

He decided to live a couple miles north of the beach on Light’s Shadow Coast atop the white-faced cliffs. His cabin was perched just a few yards away from the ledge. It was a little harder to get to compared to the plateau to the south, but he wanted to be out of people’s way. Jrain had considered living further north where he got his staff, but this was a better and more convenient place to reside while still being decently far enough from any traffic, except for the people he welcomed or invited, such as these three men. Pinstripe was among them, too.

Jrain had come to an agreement with Jack that he would work for him in Foren for several months as payment for the time and labor he allocated toward building his cabin for the last several weeks after completing the renovation of the path to the coast, which had taken another two weeks of intense labor when Jrain returned from his journey. He had worked his tail off to help because he wanted to.

He needed to. As penance.

Jrain wasn’t sure if he’d like construction that much, what with being around people in Foren a lot and toiling under the sun, but Jack had seen the expression on his face describing the work, and so he had comforted Jrain that The Slumber would be a more agreeably cold season during the majority of his indentured service. Jack also told him that anyone who bullied Jrain would get a word from him, easing some of Jrain’s anxiety. Stella had been informed of Jrain’s decision by Jack, but seemed to not care since he was so far from town.

Pinstripe was patting his mouth with a cloth he’d brought. Jack silently offered him a toothpick and he took it, opting to pick at his large incisors and around the rings at their bases.

“You are a gracious and honorable host,” Pinstripe said, inclining his head. “I am privileged to have been invited among these gentlemen to share a meal with a friend I look forward to seeing for ... what seems a long time,” he said, raising his glass of apple cider mixed with blueberry juice.

“Hear, hear,” Jack acknowledged, raising his glass.

“I can drink to that,” Kin’dar said, lifting his glass along with the others.

Jrain leaned forward in his chair.

“Me, too.”

They reached across the table toward the center, clinking their glasses together. Jack downed the rest of his cider in a couple huge gulps, whereas the rest took more moderate sips.

Jack firmly slammed his glass to the table and sighed before putting both hands flat on it.

“Gentlemen,” he looked to each of them with twinkling eyes. “I would love to stay, but I must be up at the crack of dawn for work. On to a new row of our city that is ... slowly getting too big for itself! But that’s a problem for later,” he said, lifting himself up off the table, which slightly groaned under his weight. He clopped over to the door and grabbed a green and gray-checkered long-sleeve shirt to wear over his white undershirt.

“Farewell, and I will see *you* in three days,” he particularly said to Jrain, smiling as he opened the wooden door and walked out.

Jrain hadn’t told Kin’dar what happened between him and Jack, but since that day, the horse had been nothing but amicable. Jrain could tell there was still some kind of wariness to Jack when he was around, but when he had privately asked him if everything was still good between them, Jack had firmly dismissed the subject.

Obviously, he wanted to forget about it, but that puzzled Jrain. How did he know others like him? Is Valen where he’s from?

Maybe these were questions he could ask in roundabout ways to Kin’dar.

The embers popped softly. The cabin naturally creaked from the sea winds rushing over the cliffside. The remaining three sat in silence for a moment.

“You are sure it was an animal?” Pinstripe said.

“... Pardon?” Jrain said.

“An animal mauled your outfit, yes?”

Jrain rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled nervously.

“Does something make you think otherwise?” he said.

“It is curious that the belt buckles were twisted and bent,” Pinstripe recalled. “It must have been a bear trying to access the food in your pouches. Or it may have merely been playing with it …”

He trailed off in thought, soon shrugging lightly.

“Either way, most misfortunate. While I wish I could have begun anew with the hood and shawl, I will respect your wishes,” Pinstripe said, pausing again, but looking like he couldn’t contain himself. “However, should you change your mind ...”

“I’ll let you know,” Jrain answered. “Everything fits and looks perfect to me.”

The belts had been unsalvageable, so while they had to be replaced, Jrain had asked if Pinstripe could sew back together his lower and upper garments. He said it was possible, if visually unseemly, but Jrain had insisted.

When he woke from his sleep that evening next to the river, he held on to every piece of his outfit.

He would remember.

“I might add that I am ... concerned that you would choose to live outside of Foren,” Pinstripe delicately laid out, shifting in his seat. “You could have lived under our protection from the potentiality of another Shade attack. If what you said about it resembling your species is true, I just ...”

“I think being up here close to the sea will be better,” Jrain said. “And I don’t think I’m ready to live among you all. Truthfully, I like being by myself. I think everyone isn’t used to a dragon person yet.”

Pinstripe humorously murmured, the hint of a grin appearing on his face.

“These are valid reasons, but I merely hope they are not superseding your priorities with safety.”

“Safety isn’t everything, Pinstripe,” Kin’dar interjected.

Pinstripe turned to Kin’dar and raised an eyebrow.

“Sometimes others value some things over some freedoms, some principles, some privileges,” he added.

“All I mean to say is this,” Pinstripe said, sighing with a hint of exasperation. “Always reconsider your priorities, Jrain. What we value can change according to our circumstances and development. You will do that for me, yes?”

“I will,” Jrain replied.

Pinstripe nodded and relaxed his posture for once, slumping back into his chair and leaning back against the headrest.

“I am also glad to have heard more of your history and aspirations,” he added, slowly leaning back up. “I am sorry you do not remember much of the former, but I hope that you will gain clarity in time. As I am sure my friend has said, we are here to assist you in any endeavors you make or questions you have in search of your people in ... Alden, was it?”

“That’s right,” Jrain said simply. “I appreciate you—both of you. Thank you for all that you’ve done.”

Both spoke at the same time with assuring affirmations.

“I believe Jack is probably far enough away for me to avoid discussion with him for an hour. No offense, Kin’dar,” Pinstripe said, lifting his hand out toward him.

“None taken,” Kin’dar said, raising a finger. “Believe me, I understand.”

“Right. Ah, but Jrain, would you like assistance tidying everything up?”

Jrain waved a hand dismissively.

“No, you all did more than enough coming out all this way. I’ll take care of it,” he said.

Pinstripe nodded.

“Will you come along with me, Kin’dar?” Pinstripe asked, rising from his chair. He walked over to the coat hanger on the wall next to the closet and began putting on a black trench coat with popped lapels. He wore a long-sleeve white shirt with a slightly fluffed jabot under the collar. His shirt was tucked into black trousers that were loose up until they laced around his lower legs. He had even combed back and styled the fur on his head and moustache.

Kin’dar had almost spit out his cider when Pinstripe had arrived an hour after Jack and him, who had come to chat in advance. Well, mostly Kin’dar. Jack had seen to inspecting the cabin for assurance.

When Jack had opened the door and greeted Pinstripe in his dirty undershirt and denim trousers held up by suspenders. The look on Pinstripe’s face at the contrast was admittedly something that made Jrain involuntarily grin.

“I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes!” Kin’dar said, doing the Forenian gesture.

“Copacetic,” Pinstripe said, pulling at the lapels and then returning the gesture. He kept it up as he rotated toward Jrain. “May your days here be long and well.”

He grabbed the doorknob with his free hand from behind, exiting gracefully as he stepped backward and turned when he was outside, grabbing the other handle and gently shutting the door.

“Well, *I’m* going to help you whether you like it or not,” Kin’dar said, smiling mischievously.

“But you already helped me with the recipes. And the pots and pans, *and* preparing the food!” Jrain protested.

“One cannot help one’s friends too much,” Kin’dar said warmly, taking a final swig of his cider.

“Aw,” Jrain said quietly, rubbing his arm. “Well, okay.”

The fox proceeded to collect the wooden plates while the dragon took them one by one, first scrapping off the excess food into a trash bin, and then washing them off with small tugs on the water pump to not waste too much, since Jack had told him it would take a few weeks to have an adequate amount in the well. As Jrain was finishing this up, Kin’dar folded the wooden chairs and leaned them against the door for now. Try as the he might, he couldn’t quite lift the solid wood table.

Jrain hastily scrubbed his hands on a towel and came aside Kin’dar, placing a hand across his furry back. He, too, had opted for an unusually casual attire, mimicking Jrain by going topless yet covering his lower body with denim trousers. Jrain was only wearing his stitched loincloths with one belt; his tailbag and upper garments were in the closet.

“Let me help, buddy,” Jrain said, moving along to the other side and lifting the table up in unison with Kin’dar. They waddled over to the right of the hearth and leaned it against the wall, which fit perfectly between the hearth and counter. Both split the load of chairs and leaned them against the table.

Kin’dar whistled down.

“Well, that’s that,” he said, dusting off his hands, but then he abruptly yelped and shook his right hand.

“Is that a splinter?!” he exclaimed, looking closer at his hand. Jrain was looking at it as well, and a few seconds later, could tell that blood was welling on his hand and soaking his fur.

“Oh, that’s a big splinter,” Kin’dar laughed, but it masked his worry at the sudden profusion of blood.

“Sit down on my cot,” Jrain demanded, going over to the sink and swiping the cloth up, quickly holding it under a rush of water from the pump. Jrain turned and sped over to his bed just as Kin’dar was sitting down. He sat right next to him.

“The light, please,” Jrain said, and Kin’dar reached over with his left hand to turn the knob on the oil lamp to its highest setting.

Jrain took Kin’dar’s hand into his own, letting him rest it in his left palm. The dragon gently pressed into and wiped at the fox’s paw. He lifted the cloth and lowered his head, poring over the pad and gently separating fur with his fingers until his eyes fell upon a tan spot sticking out ever so slightly. Jrain took the talons of his thumb and index finger to slowly and precisely pinch the dot.

His first couple attempts to grip the splinter failed, with Kin’dar wincing each time.

Jrain felt his face flush from embarrassment, hoping he wasn’t hurting more than helping. But before long, his efforts tugged the splinter out just enough for his talons to grip it, and he looked to Kin’dar as he gently squeezed his palm with his left hand.

Kin’dar nodded, and Jrain pulled slowly. Kin’dar hissed as an inch-long splinter rose out of his hand.

Jrain laid the damp cloth in Kin’dar’s palm once more, letting go and closing the fingers of his left hand over Kin’dar’s fingers so that he gripped the towel for himself. Then, Jrain put his right hand on top, cupping Kin’dar’s hand and giving it a gentle shake.

“You can’t help your friends too much,” Jrain repeated, his eyes shining as he continued to stare at Kin’dar’s hand.

“You’re right,” the fox replied, smiling and chuckling. “Thank you, Jrain.”

Jrain didn’t let go of Kin’dar’s hand.

“Hey, um ...” Kin’dar said, his face expressing some hesitation. “I stayed because I also wanted to ask you, well ... you seem like you’ve had something bothering you for a while. Are you okay?”

Kin’dar placed his other hand on top of Jrain’s.

The sight and touch was too much, and Jrain sighed shakily with a sudden river of tears flowing down his cheeks, dripping on top of Kin’dar’s left hand.

“I—” Jrain tried to say, looking at Kin’dar, but he choked and turned away in embarrassment, keeping his gaze to the ground for a minute as he tried taking deep breaths. All the while, he held Kin’dar’s hand a little tighter.

Kin’dar didn’t say anything. When Jrain looked up, the fox looked worried and startled, but there was patience and care in his face.

“Pinstripe was t-talking about being safe, and ... I want to be in this cabin because ... I want to keep *you* safe,” Jrain said, shaking his head. “I want to keep everyone safe. I was terrified living with you every day, worried that …”—his voice grew quiet and fearful—“… that the Shade would come out and ruin everything. Hurt you. I can’t explain, but ... I think that Shade could come out again. It wants me, and I-I can’t let it cause any more trouble. I can’t bring that on you or anyone else. There’s …”

Jrain couldn’t bring himself to admit the full truth.

Kin’dar suddenly blinked several times over, his own eyes looking damp.

“Jrain,” Kin’dar said gently, his friendly voice a balm to the fear gripping Jrain’s soul. “I know you would never hurt me, or willingly put me in danger,” he breathed out, leaning closer with his features crinkling. “You can tell me anything.”

*Should I tell him?* Jrain thought. *What that power makes me think? What it makes me do?*

“I don’t know if I have the words for it yet,” Jrain said, sniffing and exhaling. “Maybe when ... if I can know myself more. My past more.”

“We’re outside Foren by ourselves, so we’re all we got,” Kin’dar said sincerely, squeezing the top of Jrain’s hand. “I will weather the storm with you, Jrain. You can tell me anything when you feel ready.”

“T-thank you,” Jrain said, sniffling again and trying to breathe evenly.

He gently pulled away from Kin’dar’s hands, and both of them placed their hands in their respective laps, sitting in silence for a minute.

“Would you like me to stay for the night?” Kin’dar asked.

“Oh, no,” Jrain said dismissively. “I want you to go with Pinstripe. I’ll be okay; I promise,” he insisted, standing up and approaching the door to open it for Kin’dar.

He stood there and watched as his friend rose from the cot and looked at his hand briefly. For some reason, he looked transfixed by it, but quickly shook his head and approached Jrain.

Kin’dar looked out the door, and then through the window to his back at the setting sun, halfway there from sinking below the horizon.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about our world,” Kin’dar said contemplatively. “Including ourselves. You’re not alone in that, Jrain,” he said, placing his left paw on the side of Jrain’s arm.

“Please take care of yourself, and never hesitate to come visit. Or have me over, if you wish,” Kin’dar said, chuckling as he patted Jrain’s arm and handed him the slightly bloodied towel. “Sorry about the mess. I hope you like red-spotted towels. Don’t show this to Pinstripe or he’ll get new ideas for fabric patterns,” he said.

Jrain guffawed and took the towel, wrapping his arms around Kin’dar and leaning his chin into his furry head, right in between the pointed ears that brushed against the sides of his face.

“Thank you so much,” Jrain said tenderly, meaning it in more ways than one in a voice strained with emotion. “I love you, Kin’dar.”

“I love you, too, Jrain,” Kin’dar returned with equal heart.

He returned the hug, wrapping his arms just under Jrain’s own and rubbing at Jrain’s scars, which made him start to rumble. His tail thumped and began gliding back and forth across the floor. He leaned into Kin’dar a little more.

But after several seconds, Jrain snorted and brought his hands down on Kin’dar’s shoulders to gently push him away.

“H-hey!” Jrain said, clearing his throat and laughing. “I’m gonna catch on to you trying to make me ... *purr,”* Jrain said, quietly saying the last word as he blushed.

“Good luck with that,” Kin’dar said, looking up at Jrain slyly. He pointed at Jrain and pressed the finger on his sternum. “I know this dragon’s weakness.”

“All right, out the door with you,” Jrain said playfully. “I won’t be reduced to having the resolve of a cat.”

“Too late. You’re already a terrible dragon. Might as well be a cat,” Kin’dar sing-sung.

“I know,” Jrain tiredly said, sighing. “The worst dragon.”

Kin’dar chuckled, then telling Jrain to move aside for a moment before he forgot his long-sleeve dark green shirt. He moved back around Jrain and took a few steps out the door before turning around one last time.

“Sleep well, Jrain,” Kin’dar said. “I hope to see you soon.”

“I hope to. And you will,” Jrain said, inclining his head.

Kin’dar turned around, assuming a jog as he descended the hill.

Jrain watched him go with happy tears forming in his eyes.

Whatever life he had lived wasn’t what he needed to know now. He had been given a friend who was of his very soul … and other friends who helped him more than he’d expected. More than he deserved.

The dragon went back inside but didn’t shut the door. He knelt down to the floorboards and eyed a section of it sternly. The wind howled ominously from outside as the door gently swung on its hinges.

He pulled up three boards a couple paces from the door.

There was only a foot or so of crawlspace. Several stone piers rose from the compacted foundation, but right here in the fresh soil and sand—wrapped in the red blanket he’d slept with the first night he’d stayed with Kin’dar—was his staff.

He regarded it with contempt, in spite of his heart beating faster.

*To think what I could become if I …*

He scowled at the intrusive thought and did not so much as reach out to the sheet to uncover the staff.

Jrain put the floorboards back in place and traipsed over to his shelf to grab a bottle of nails and a hammer that Jack had gifted him alongside some other basic tools. He had known not what to do with the staff until now.

He would keep it out of sight—and maybe, over time, out of mind.

Once he was done nailing the boards, he walked back over to the shelf and replaced the items before exiting the door, curving to the left around the house just past the well until he stood a few feet from the precipice.

Jrain sat and folded his legs, leaning forward with his forearms draped over his knees.

“I will keep you all safe from me,” Jrain said out loud.

He held his left hand out patiently until a pink petal floated down onto it. He gripped it softly.

“I will keep you all safe from me,” he repeated more softly.

Jrain placed his right hand on a tree just to his right, and he looked up at it, amazed at the impossibly warm tones the sun gave the pink flowers.

*The Shade they know will never be seen again,* he thought.

Jrain’s hand slowly slid over the fresh layers of bark until he let his hand fall to his side. He then looked over to his left beside the house at an empty birdcage. He smiled, knowing he’d been able to nurse the woodpecker back to health. And now, the flower tree showed signs of recovery with its new home. Jrain had managed to carry it far enough back with him as a giant before shrinking back to his normal size.

He scooted closer to the trunk and leaned against it, closing his eyes and relishing the sight of the petals falling around him. The gentle rays of the sun soon faded as it disappeared into the sea.

*Never again.*

The end.