**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Vignette: The Blood Bandit**

**Chapter 1: An Unexpected Guest**

A few months after Book 1 …

Jrain’s paws beat the mud with rapid footfalls. His breathing was frantic and ravaged from lungs that longed for his legs to stop, but they refused to cease in their tracks. Compulsion possessed them to climb the hill, and so the formerly dull, tolerable discomfort in his muscles had flared into wildfires of pain that blazed across his calves and thighs.

A flash of ghostly light washed over the hillside. Jrain sharply inhaled, slid to a halt, and ducked as low to the ground as he was able. A few seconds later, a low rumble echoed from the direction of the ocean.

The dragon man sagged in relief. His body begged him to remain crouched for just a minute more. Two. Maybe four.

*No. I cannot stay here*, Jrain thought firmly.

He grunted long when he stood up, resuming his labored jog. He felt lightheaded and imprecise in his motions by physically pushing himself to the limit. Nevertheless, he pressed on through the downpour.

To both sides of the path, long brown coastal grass was all around with large clusters of pampas grass. Their fluffy white tussocks bowed and bobbed from the storm’s raging winds, their motion mimicking the ocean’s tumult just over yonder. What one would find upon reaching the top was a short stretch of plateau that ended in a cliffed coast—unusually smooth and steep, stretching to the north and south for miles, as if a colossal deity had cleaved the hill in two, revealing an interior of white chalk. It was dulled in its brilliant color over the ages by the sun, and pockmarked with nests of seabirds that claimed it as their home for generations.

Jrain’s small cabin was atop that plateau. He had to get there *now*.

Suddenly, his paw met a slick stone, and the pressure of thrusting himself ever forward caused it to dislodge from its usually secure spot. His entire leg flew backward along with the rock, and Jrain careened forward, yelling as his hands scrambled outward to catch himself. But the world was conspiring against him today without relent, and so he faceplanted into the sludge; it squelched loudly with its mocking embrace.

He lay there for a few seconds in the rainy night, stunned out of his panicked sprint. He gulped for air, and an intense flush filled his cheeks, hot enough to boil the mud away. There may be no one around for miles, but *this?* On top of everything else today?

A bamboo shoot had been draped over his shoulders that rested against his nape. The shoot had been held with both hands to both sides of his spiked shoulders with two nets of fish hung from both ends—each packed with at least eight fish. Now? The shoot had slipped out of his hands in front of him, and the fish had been freed from their mesh prisons. Some he’d already slain with his talons and teeth, but others still clung to life and made that abundantly clear by floundering and flapping in the mud.

Jrain lifted his head at the sounds. Then, he looked back down and shut his eyes, balling his fists into the mud, which gathered in his palms and seeped out from between his taut fingers. A growl crept into his heavy breathing. He pounded the mud with one fist.

*“Dammit,”* he hissed. The leviathan bit his tongue and thinned his lips.

Then, he noticed his bioluminescence briefly appearing along his forearms, ever so subtly yet unmistakably there as it shimmered out from between and through his blue scales and hide. He gasped and gripped his forearm, trying to cover the light to no avail.

He would *not* allow the anger to get to him. He would *not* let his body bring the fire of the heavens down on him. Jrain still wasn’t sure if he could control how much he attracted electricity after what happened a few months ago, but he did *not* plan to find out. Ever.

Jrain exhaled and released his hold on his forearm, letting his hand relax as he tried to slow and temper his breathing. He could only do so much, but the calming exercise he’d been taught today should help. The breathing part, at least.

He huffed determinably and resolved to not cower in the mud, frozen by indecision and fear. He rose onto his knees.

His entire front was plastered brown. Jrain shook away and wiped at globs of mud and pebbles that clung to him, but he could do little about the slick layer of dirt. He was wearing a simple brown kilt with a dark brown leather belt, as well as a white tank top with a couple threads at the neck. He had multiple sets of this outfit—each slightly customized for him by the tiger tailor named Pinstripe—in a few different color combinations. This getup was much lighter and more practical for everyday wear than his adventuring clothes. Those would’ve been a nightmare to clean off.

His head darted about as his hands shot out to gather dead fish. With the first in hand, he pulled the tool toward him and studied it.

The shoot was still intact but one of the nets had burst from the bottom. The other had only come loose from where it had been tied, so he grabbed it and inserted the fish into it along with several more. After gathering as many as he could and holding the top of the net firmly in one hand, he hastily picked up his tool in the other, got to his paws, and resumed running with an agonized sigh.

Jrain hated leaving the live fish behind, but he had no choice. If the storm subsided soon enough, he’d come back and retrieve them; they’d still be fresh and wouldn’t go to waste.

A lightning bolt struck a tree a short distance behind him near the edge of the forest. Instantly, a cascade of sonorous cracks bounced into and off the hill, resounding throughout the land.

Jrain’s pupils narrowed to the width of a knife’s edge. He moaned in terror and coughed grossly as he stumbled briefly. The mental and physical stress were wearing his resolve and vocal cords thin.

And there, finally, the stone-plated roof of his cabin just crested into view. All he had to do was ascend the last, and steepest, part of the path, which had been landscaped as a straight shot up the hill rather than the switchback trail behind him. Longer but less tiring. Not so here.

Just by looking at the tiny streams carving through the dirt path, he knew he’d slip at this incline. He compressed his lips and growled in annoyance before stepping into the grass. He trudged upward at alternating angles and assured each one of his steps was true. Excluding some close calls, he soon exhaled in weary victory when he found level ground. His cabin was *so* close.

Jrain gathered his breath one last time and huffed, making a dash for the entrance. He didn’t break his momentum as he leaned to the side and shoved the door open with his shoulder, staggering over the threshold and flinching as a flash filled his peripheral vision that shown through the windows. He leaned back on the door as soon as he was clear of it, which loudly shut the moment a crack of thunder shook the cabin, even making some items rattle along his shelves and kitchen counter.

But he only heard these things, for he shut his eyes the second he slammed the door.

A series of relieved and exhausted gasps erupted from his being, since he had tried to compose himself up until now with long, deep breaths in through his mouth and out through his nostrils. He slowly slid down the back of the door and—once his haunches hit the floor—pulled his legs in, slumped forward, wrapped his tail around his shins, and let the fish-filled net and bamboo shoot roll onto the wood planked floorboards. Rain droplets and splats of mud pooled around him as his rumbly panting filled the relative silence.

Once he was satisfied enough with his intake of air, he truly began the calming exercise, now adding the important step that hadn’t been possible until now.

*Focus on soothing sounds. Rhythmic. Continuous.*

The words echoed in his head as his ear fins twitched to listen intently.

His heartrate came first, which had notably calmed down, but he instead picked out the slow drip of his kitchen faucet, and then the gentle crackling within the fireplace. Then, a rhythmic creaking, like someone was balancing on the two back legs of a chair, rocking back and forth.

Jrain’s face scrunched up.

*… Wait a second*, he thought.

“You look like hell.”

Jrain jumped in fright at the foreign voice. His eyes flew open, and he looked across the room.

Someone was leaning back with her elbow on the table. She was staring at Jrain in unsympathetic bafflement and looked like a raccoon … mostly. Tan, brown, and black fur was all over her, but her defining feature was long dark cones under her eyes that fanned out to blacken the lower half of her face, whereas everything above her round red-brown eyes was topped with a bushy unibrow of tan fur. Another chair was turned around in front of her, even closer to the fire. Draped across the back support were damp black clothes, a strange tool belt, red bands …

Jrain’s expression of bewilderment shifted to a frown and furrowed brow.

“What are *you* doing here?!” Jrain sputtered, leaning forward as he pressed his palms against the floor. He huffed indignantly. “How did you get inside? Why ar—”

*“Skies above*, does your mouth always run this much?” she interjected wryly.

She sighed and rolled her eyes before turning back toward the fire. She reached for a wobbly metal knob near the top right corner of the hearth with stubby gray fingers. The device controlled the chimney’s flue, which Jack had installed. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the small fire while carefully turning the knob. The raccoon tsked and shrugged her shoulders, reclining in her chair but opting to prop her feet on the other one’s seat, rather than lean back on the back legs of her own chair again. She must have been adjusting the knob to avoid as much rainfall from dripping down the chimney as possible without fumigating the place with smoke.

She now lifted a short pipe to her mouth that had been in her right hand at her leg’s side. The pipe had a curiously harsh, V-shaped stem with a bowl shaped like a four-sided diamond. Once she withdrew the stem from her mouth, she puffed out smoke into the hearth that mingled with the fire’s. The cabin already smelled of tobacco with a touch of cinnamon and spice, which left a pleasant yet strong sensation in Jrain’s nostrils.

She was also down to her undergarments. She had black wrappings around her breasts and short black briefs on, as if she owned the place and wasn’t expecting guests.

“You know, I got the place all warm for you,” she said, flashing her teeth and holding her arms out. “How’s about some gratitude?”

Jrain fumbled for words. “How about you explain why you’re in *my* house?” he challenged wearily, pinching between his eyes.

She raised one side of her tan unibrow, which wrinkled the red bandana wrapped around her forehead. The black bandana that covered the lower half of her face was resting from her neck on her chest. This was the first time he saw her full face.

“How about you explain why you look like a dog who played in the mud?” she countered. Abruptly, she paused and pointed the stem of her pipe at him. “No. *Cat.*” She smiled and leaned back, proud of her correction. “Only a cat would look as miserable and scared out of its wits as you do. Don’t like getting wet, pussy cat?”

Jrain blinked and scoffed, glaring out the window as he felt his face redden.

“No,” he mumbled, crossing his arms over his knees. “Not that …”

She regarded him for a moment, going for another puff aimed at the ceiling.

“You’re a hell of an enigma,” she said plainly, clearing her throat and leaning forward to place her pipe on the other chair. “I don’t get it.”

“And I don't get you. What are you, a raccoon?”

The last word had barely escaped his mouth before she reached for her belt and threw a knife straight at him!

Jrain tensed and gasped when he felt the rush of the blade fly past his face before it stuck to the door and wobbled in place for several seconds. It was only several inches to the side of him.

“Wh-... What was that for?!” Jrain exclaimed.

She grinned and got up to casually walk over to Jrain until she stood right over him. He didn’t have to look too far up despite sitting. She was a little under five feet tall—about two feet shorter than he was.

She leaned forward and placed her hand over Jrain's shoulder on the door next to the knife.

“I'm a tanuki, idiot,” she said, placing her hand around the thin handle to pull the knife out. She inserted it between the waistband of her briefs. “And don't forget it.”

She inclined her head to the net and made a grabby gesture. “Fish. Now. And go clean yourself off. Again.”

She sighed, got to her paws, and casually walked over to Jrain until she stood right over him. He didn’t have to look too far up despite sitting. She was a little under five feet tall—about two feet shorter than he was.

“Fish. Now,” she said, inclining her head to the net and making a grabby gesture. “Go clean yourself off. Again.”

Jrain winced at the remark before grumbling and handing her the catch. Not like she had helped with that earlier.

She took the net and smoothly hoisted it over her shoulder, twisting in place to extend her left hand toward Jrain, who took as gentle of a hold as he could on her thin forearm. But underneath the fur were leaner muscles than he expected, and so she contributed a greater deal than he expected in helping him get to his paws.

The surprise must have been evident on his face as he stupidly hunched over and stared down at her. She was craning her neck to look up at him, her head level with the bottom of his chest.

She suddenly reached up and flicked his snout, which made him blink and snort.

“Are you deaf or something? Stop your gawking,” she said, turning around and walking toward the kitchen counter. “I’m starving. You have nothing good to eat.”

“Wait, you … you looked through my stuff?!” Jrain exclaimed in a muffled voice while rubbing his snout for a moment. “But why wo—”

“Oh, hush,” she said dismissively, waving her hand in the air without turning to look at him.

Jrain growled and looked back at the door. He frowned.

“… I can’t go outside right now anyway,” he said in a tone laced with irritation. “I—”

“Then don’t,” she interrupted, fumbling for cooking utensils from drawers and wall hooks. “Undress and clean off in here, like I did.” She briefly gestured at herself.

Jrain was surprised at the suggestion. Not that he really minded himself—or thought anyone else should, for that matter. But considering what he’d been told about Foren folk’s insistence on being clothed around each other, her indifference didn’t make sense.

“But won’t that make you un—”

*“I don’t give a damn,”* she interrupted more loudly, half turning her head to glare daggers at Jrain, and punctuating that last word with the *shunk* of a kitchen knife slicing a fish’s head off on a cutting board. “Just shut up already.”

Jrain twitched and scowled.

He was being bent. Close to snapping. A shadow fell over his face.

“First of all, this is *my* house that you broke into,” he said, taking loud steps toward her. “Secondly, you looked through who knows how many of *my* things. You insult me and act like you own *my* place.” He was standing behind her now, thumping his tail against the floor to enhance his presence. “Maybe I should ask you to leave right now if you’re not so afraid of a little water.”

She lazily turned to look up at Jrain. Unflinchingly, she flicked the severed fish head from the cutting board into the sink without breaking eye contact.

“Hey, that’s nice, honey. But if you’ll recall, I saved your sorry fat tail. As far as I see it, I can do *whatever* I like here tonight,” she said matter-of-factly. Then, she smiled and laughed. “Besides, I know you’re too much of a pathetic, melodramatic pushover to say or do *anything* like that—and to a *guest* of all people!” she added in mock shock.

Jrain watched her take the point of the knife and gently but firmly stick it into the space between his pecs.

“So …”—she paused, gently running the knife downward, scale by scale, and cutting his shirt several inches. She angled the knife after reaching the bottom of his chest and angled the loose fabric away, cocking her head as she studied him. She soon shook her head, scoffed in amusement, and returned her smug gaze upward—“… I run the place tonight. Consider it your favor called in. Capeesh?”

She lowered the knife.

Jrain looked at her aghast. Dumbfounded.

His eyes blazed as he leaned down and snorted a puff of steam in her face. Her headband and fur briefly stirred.

She hadn’t even blinked.

He turned and crossed his arms, anger sealing his lips shut.

“Aww, *tsk*, big ol’ baby,” she said.

Then, of all things, he felt her slap the side of his tail right near his rump.

He took an instinctual half step forward and threw his hands around himself to cover his butt. He whipped around, his mouth parting in confused anger. His face even hotter with embarrassment piled on top of shame. What was she …?

“Now get,” she said. “Clean up like a good boy and leave me, your benevolent guest, to be so kind as to make *us* dinner.”

With that, she turned around and didn’t wait for Jrain to reply. That was the end of the discussion as she began descaling the fish.

Jrain stared at the front door, unsure if he should strangle this insane woman or run off into the rain. Which option was best that meant them not sharing the same space?

However, as much he didn’t want to admit it … she was right. He *knew* he wasa pushover. She saw right through him, and Jrain hated that, loudly thumping his tail without thinking before stomping over to the fire.

After staring into the flames of his fuming kin for a minute or so, he stripped down to nothing and piled his filthy, wet garments on the floor, having carefully removed the drenched shirt since it clung to and easily caught on his scales. He got irrationally upset seeing the gash on it.

He sighed angrily and got out his washboard, bucket, and a towel from the corner closet. As he did so, he eyed his guest a couple times to see if she was faking her apathy, but even when she was at a half turn to him—walking this way and that along the counter—she glanced not once at him, as though he were invisible. It made him madder, if anything.

While hesitating at first, he slowly lumbered over to the counter with the floorboards creaking from the few hundred pounds that was he. Before long, the bucket was filled with icy water from the faucet, and he grabbed a bar of soap, too. She was focused on chopping the fish now, paying no mind to the huge, sopping, muddy leviathan.

Once he lugged the bucket back over to his laundry pile, he set the metal pail down next to one of the chairs, twisting it around away from the hearth so his back would be to it. He sat down, swished the soap around in the pail until the water was decently sudsy, and soaked his shirt. He’d soon move on to his kilt, but once he was done, he’d drape them over the backs of what chairs he could and get to cleaning himself after emptying and refilling the bucket with fresh, clean water.

But this would take a good half hour or more, about as long as it would take for his guest to prepare dinner.

He sighed, trying to calm his nerves by zoning out to the repetitive chore at hand, drifting into his memories of the day …

To be continued.