**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Vignette: The Blood Bandit**

**Chapter 2**

**The Troubles Amid Our Toils**

*Thunk, thunk … thunk*

Jrain realized he had been biting his blue tongue in concentration. He slipped it back into his mouth and straightened, exhaling as he reached behind himself and used the backs of his hands to push against his spine. Several vertebrae popped as he scrunched his face and sighed in relief. Then, he let his hands fall to his sides, hammer and chisel still in each hand. His handiwork looked sharp and uniform enough to him. He grinned and grunted in self-affirmation.

He’d used the tools to fashion a log’s end into a pointed tip. It was going to be one of many posts erected for a fence. He’d already punched in a couple holes for the horizontal logs, which had small pegs on their ends that would slide into the holes, so this particular post was ready to go.

Jrain leaned a hand on the makeshift workbench supported by sawhorses. He looked to his right at the field the enclosure was being built around. Interestingly enough, this big backyard to a farm was on the inner fringe of Foren, occupying the space between two of its giant interior supports that held up the city’s grand wall, which the field’s two fences actually met with.

The front part of the farm was a storefront to sell dairy. Eggs as well, since—attached to the back of the farm—there was a chicken coop surrounded by its own smaller fence where the fowl would strut about and play in the dirt. Off to the side of the coop was a large swinging door where the field’s cows were corralled at day’s end to rest and be milked … or be inspected by one of the town’s butchers, along with the chickens.

Jrain didn’t care so much for killing fish, but he couldn’t think to harm those cute animals he’d gotten to pet early on with the job. The soft brown eyes of those cows, and the fluffy feathers of those chickens … Jrain smiled stupidly, remembering how he’d been given a chick to hold in his cupped palms. He’d never seen one before, and how he loved them! It reminded him dearly of the time he’d held that cardinal, but the chicks were even smaller—arguably cuter.

Jrain turned away from the workbench and put his other hand on it, now leaning back to relieve his aching legs.

The western fence was fine, but half of its opposing twin—which he was standing by—had been trampled by a stampede just four nights ago. The owners had decided the fence was old enough to be entirely replaced, so tearing down the rest and starting from scratch was the job.

Something had spooked the cows—no one knew what. A bull had gone straight through the fence with the hole widened by the following herd. They were eventually brought back to the barn, but the owners were hoping to let the bovines out soon, so this was a priority job because the farm’s goods were important to Foren. Jrain imagined the cows were jealous of the chickens’ freedom.

Jack shouted something behind him just then, but Jrain wasn’t really paying attention to his boss: a literal workhorse who helmed the construction guild of Foren. He handled all manner of commercial and private building, renovation, and remodeling projects. Jrain was surprised he was taking charge of such a small project, but that was Jack for you—unpredictable. Or he was always looking for opportunities to delegate authority so his employees could take on more leadership roles. Jrain wasn’t sure.

Jrain’s thoughts abruptly drifted to the farm’s owners and their magnificent blonde manes and golden fur. They were lions, which he hadn’t met until a few days ago! The husband had a boxy frame and a voice befitting that of a bass singer, who spoke slowly with a subtle twang. He often wore deep-colored sleeveless shirts underneath a pair of denim overalls, which stretched out from his notable gut that could contest with Jack’s. He also often wore a big straw hat with a brown leather band wrapped around the base of its crown.

His wife was excessively nice and hospitable, as well as a resilient, hard worker with the same unusual yet pleasant twang to her voice. She didn’t have a mane but had strong facial features and lean musculature. She typically wore bright-colored skirts and blouses, overlayed with darker vests with buttons that hung loose from the front. She had the same marble-like eyes as her husband, with round pupils that conveyed so much strength on their own, but hers were blue, and her husband’s gold.

Their names were … wait, what were they again?

Jrain twisted in place to look at Jack, who was wearing an unbuttoned burgundy long-sleeve shirt rolled up to the elbows with a simple undershirt, as well as a pair of thick brown pants. He was holding out a folding wooden measuring stick over a small stream that varied in width depending on where you were in Foren, alternating between two to four dozen feet wide. It went under the eastern fence, through the field, and under the city’s wall. The river actually went not around, but *through* the entire city from the south and up north, ending in a large lake a couple miles away that fisherfolk frequented. This was yet another river branching out from a massive one that spawned the other two Jrain had already encountered to the east.

Jrain had walked past the two areas where the river had carved a tunnel through the wide-spanning hill Foren was built upon, and some townsfolk would take the river to transport supplies downstream to the north for fishing, or ride the river back into the city after hunting and foraging expeditions down south far outside the city. There were simple wooden drawbridges for people to cross—some being mere sets of planks nailed together that had to be picked up and moved, and others being mechanical marvels that could be extended or withdrawn with cranks. Some bridges were larger and permanent, though, made of sterner stuff and arched higher above the river so dinghies and canoes could drift under them. These were how horse-drawn wagons and carts got around town, too.

Some people would take boats to travel to the large lake as well, but they had to do so just outside the city because of the wall and fences. There was a river gate at the southern part of the wall, but not here. Maybe this job would be an excuse to make an uninterrupted boat ride through Foren a reality? Either way, Jrain hoped he’d be able to ride through the tunnel at some point, but apparently many avoided it for fear of the dark and how narrow it was. And the bats.

After a couple months of traveling into and around town, Jrain had learned so much about the city’s makeup. Its twists and turns. Its architectural wonders. He made it a priority to take different paths to work when he could, time permitting, and often met up with Kin’dar a couple times a week to check out stores, restaurants, and more.

“Hey, Jack, what were the farmers’ names again?” Jrain finally asked, raising his voice a bit so he could hear him.

The horse’s wide frame was still bent over the edge of the stream, stretching his arm out as far as he was able with the stick in hand. His tail was stiff along with his precariously balanced self. He didn’t seem to acknowledge Jrain.

Jack knew how to deal with terrain difficulties like this river, and after having worked with him for a couple months since he moved into his cabin, he didn’t doubt the workhorse. Jrain did as he was told and watched the master at work, eager to learn what he could from this experience. He’d be at it for almost a year. Maybe more.

On the other side of the river, Mira was leaning against a long, thin metal pole in her grasp with her chin resting in the crook of her elbow. She was the brown lab Jrain had met at Jack’s lumberyard—a soft-spoken and polite character whom Jrain still hadn’t gotten to chat with much.

He cocked his head slightly, one brow raised with a twitch of his ear fins. She whipped her head toward the street the moment she realized she’d caught his attention.

“MIRA! Abouts how much you reckon the distance is?”

The sudden shout from Jack—belted out at the same time Jrain had locked eyes with her—caused Mira to visibly jump.

“Oh! Y-yes, sir, sorry!” fumbling with her words and the pole in her hands as she proceeded to quickly bend down and extend the pole out toward the end of the tape measurer. I’ve go—*AH!”*

Jrain watched as the dirt beneath one of Mira’s knees gave way at the edge of the bank. She lost her balance and toppled forward with a distressed bark, plummeting into the stream.

The leviathan rounded the corner of the worktable and bolted toward the river.

Jack straightened in his knelt position. *“What in the abyss is—AH!”*

Jack, in turn, let out something between a neigh and shout as Jrain shot past him and dove headfirst into the stream. He quickly came back up right alongside Mira’s floundering body, holding her in both arms as he pushed her to the river’s edge. He braced himself along the submerged wall with his head barely sticking out of the water, grunting as he lifted her onto the brown grass with one hand as he held onto the land with the other. Afterwards, Jrain hoisted himself out with his forearms and scooted next to her.

“Are you okay?” Jrain asked, leaning down directly over her as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

Mira was panting and did just that for another few seconds in silence as she squinted. When she regained focus, realization dawned on her face, and her features contorted into an awkward frown. She sputtered nervously before slapping her face with both hands.

“Oh, goodness …” Mira said quietly.

“Mira! Y’all right?” Jack shouted from across the way.

“I … *I’m fine, Jack*,” she answered, but her voice was quiet and half-hearted.

*“What?!”*

“She’s all right,” Jrain relayed, pausing before giving that hand sign of approval that he’d learned from his friends, which was getting close to being second nature now. Jrain saw Jack nod roughly and do the same, then he began to fold the measuring stick back together.

Mira hacked a couple times, so Jrain slid his hands under her back and the base of her neck to raise her to a sitting position. She was wearing tan overalls with a white long-sleeved corduroy shirt that complemented her fur very well, which had a uniquely firm and short yet soft texture.

“Just take a moment to relax.” Jrain remembered what Kin’dar had told him to do on the beach. “Breath in and breath out, slowly,” Jrain instructed, demonstrating with one hand cupped underneath his chest as it expanded and collapsed.

His outfit was all wet, too. The water made his dark blue chest plating easy to see through his now semi-transparent white shirt that clung tighter to his form.

Mira breathed in and out a couple times at his words, holding her face all the while, but when she lowered her hands and looked down from his face to see his demonstration, she drew in a sharp breath, twitching and covering her face again.

“Oh my, I’m … I’m s-so, so sorry, Jrain,” she said, her voice shaking. “I just … I need to go d-dry off.”

She lowered one hand to hoist herself off the ground with one hand to her mouth.

“You can borrow my … oh yeah,” Jrain ended in defeat, realizing his clothes wouldn’t help. Not to mention he didn’t want others to see his back scars.

“No, no, it’s fine, Jrain. Really, thank you. I’m sorry,” she said, turning and chuckling weirdly. “I … I’ll ask Abyll and Ti’shala if they have any towels or”—she gestured to herself—“any spare clothes. I’ll be back in a few. I’m …”

She turned quickly and walked at an unusually brisk pace until she approached the cobblestone road and crossed the river’s stone bridge, hugging herself and shivering from the chilly weather all the while.

Jrain rose from the ground, sighing as his fins drooped.

Was she scared of him? Had he done something wrong?

At least he remembered the lion’s names now.

“Well, I know the river’s too deep,” Jack said pensively from across the river.

Jrain turned about to look at Jack.

“Sorry?” he called back.

“Posts would be unsound with the loose sediment. I’d have to put ‘em in because the fence would be, well, longer across than I can measure,” he explained, gesturing to the river. “Besides, debris’ bound to get caught. Them cows ain’t gonna go for a dip, so might as well install a double gate. That way people can go to the lake more easily.” He paused and hummed, looking toward the barn. “Them lions would need to open the gates for people travelin’ by river, or just trust ‘em to do it themselves. I’ll need to see if that’s somethin’ they wanna do. Not to mention gettin’ Stella to approve making *another* river gate, which didn’t go well a couple years ago …”

Jack trailed off mumbling to himself, scratching his cropped mane.

Jrain was a bit proud he had been right—a much more exciting prospect for this project, even if it meant a lot more work.

“So you and Mira were trying to get the exact length with ...” Jrain trailed off and dove into the river again, paddling downward until he came across the steel pole lying at the bottom. He swam up to Jack, gripping the edge with one hand while holding up the pole in his other. “… this?” he finished with a grin.

“Yes, my boy,” Jack said, nickering as he finished folding the measuring stick and grabbed the pole. “Don’t know what’s gotten into that girl today,” he added, putting the measuring stick aside and taking the rod from Jrain with both hands, standing up as he did so. “We’re here to work, not daydream.”

“… I don’t think she meant to fall,” Jrain added, resting his forearms along the edge as he wadded in the river. “Looked like an accident.”

“She could’ve helped it,” Jack grumbled, tossing the pole down and brushing off his hands. “Should’ve gotten you to do this. Useless,” he said, taking the piece of wheat from his mouth, making a guttural sound in his throat, and spitting a loogie in the dead grass.

Jrain’s face fell.

“Mira isn’t useless,” Jrain replied slowly. “She’s done half the work helping you put the fence up, not to mention helping me learn how to do the chiseling over there.”

“Ha, she’s been workin’ with me for the last couple years. You suggestin’ I don’t know what I’m talkin’ about, boy?” Jack said in an unnervingly pleasant tone, turning to face him with a bemused expression.

“…No, Jack,” Jrain said, looking away briefly, unable to meet his gaze. “Just … just saying.”

“First, that’s sir,” Jack said, winking. “Second, that’s your opinion!” he added, pointing a finger at him and smiling before placing both hands on his hips. “You’re just sayin’ your opinion! A lot of my people have opinions. Some *had* opinions,” he added with a chuckle. “Sometimes y’all gotta know when to give or hold ‘em. I know what I’m doin’. Ha, I’ll be havin’ a talk with her about what work is all about when she gets back.”

Jrain nodded reluctantly and got lost in himself.

“You gonna daydream too, boy?” Jack said. “Get up on oughta there.”

Jrain snapped out of it. “Y-yes, sir,” before scrambling back on land.

“You can call me Jack, boy! I already told you that, remember?” Jack said, laughing.

“… Right,” Jrain said, softly laughing in turn.

He cleared his throat and walked past Jack to his workbench. He looked around and saw no one on the street, and Jack was doing something else, so he quickly removed his shirt, ringed it, and shook himself from head to toe before putting it back over him carefully.

He knew Mira wasn’t useless. She was one of Jack’s most efficient employees. So why would he say something like that about her? If anything, Jrain thought how he was more useless since he was learning everything from scratch.

He frowned and placed both hands flat on the workbench as he blankly stared at the post he’d finished.

Suddenly, a burly hand slapped the top of it, making Jrain jump as he looked up to find Jack grinning at him.

“Why don’t you come help me get this in the ground?” Jack asked, slapping the pole. “Last one we need to place next to the bank! We’ll worry about laying out the other side of the river after lunch.”

Jrain nodded. Jack snorted in affirmation and strode back to the edge of the river.

It was like nothing had happened, but Jrain couldn’t let go of what Jack had said about Mira. Jack thought he was right.

Jrain kept running that word over in his head.

*Useless.*

Jrain gripped the post a little too tight, the tips of his talons digging a bit into the pulp. But he calmed down and adjusted his grip so that it was balanced in both hands under his arm before walking over to Jack.

“Place ‘er right there,” he said, pointing with one of his hooves to a spot that had a wooden stake next to it.

Jrain nodded, bent his knees, and put the post out in front of him vertically. Then, he lifted it briefly before letting gravity and his strength do the rest.

*Shunk!*

The post sunk a good few inches into the soil, and all that would have to be done is a few hammer strikes bef—

“Jrain.”

He turned in response. “Hm?”

“The post is too short.”

Jrain blinked at Jack in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he said dismissively, turning back to the post.

It was over a foot shorter than the next post over. It would be over two feet if it were driven into the ground to satisfaction.

“… But … I-I thought …”

Jrain had spent nearly an hour working on this. He must’ve measured from the ground to the top of the post. Mira had done all the measurements for him before Jack asked for her help.

Jrain felt his face get hot, and he looked down in shame, but could tell Jack was crossing his burly arms from his shadow.

Jack sighed.

“Well, perhaps I spoke too soon about you.”

Jrain’s mouth went dry, and he visibly sagged.

Then, Jack playfully punched his back.

“Lighten up, my boy!” he said, chuckling. “I’m just playin’. Perhaps we can use this post elsewhere, or for some other purpose.” He kept his leathery palm on Jrain’s shoulder blade, patting it twice before letting his hand fall away.

Jack didn’t know about Jrain’s scars. He had resisted with all his might to not scream from that punch.

“Just remember you gotta account for how much the posts are gonna sink into the ground. Rookie mistake,” Jack said knowingly, sniffing. “Anyways, let’s stop here. I’m gonna meet up with Jeros at the Underhill Pub—you wanna join us?”

“I brought my own lunch,” Jrain said flatly.

“Suit yourself,” Jack said, shrugging. “We’ll resume in an hour!”

He chuckled and slapped his hands against his belly, then slid them down to stick his thumbs into his pants’ belt loops. He walked away, turning onto the street and crossing the small bridge over the river until he disappeared in the jungle of stone and wood homes past the farm.

Jrain hadn’t lifted his head yet. He just kept his head pointed at the dead grass, not staring at anything in particular.

His vision was unfocused. The hunger and fatigue he’d faintly sensed an hour ago had been replaced by … nothing.

He felt his eyes well with angry tears, but he blinked them away.

Jrain couldn’t tell if he wanted to maul the post he’d made. Toss it in the river. Set it aside carefully. Leave it on the ground.

He opted for the last option, letting it topple over with a soft *thump*.He forced himself up and looked back at his workbench, where his lunch was packed in a leather bag leaning against one of its legs.

Jrain may not be hungry, but he knew he should try to eat. He wanted to keep himself occupied. Be anywhere but here. Somewhere to himself.

He glanced over the nearby buildings and spied their alleys. Some were blocked off. Some pathways led to other streets. Some were somewhat private alleys for storage and whatnot. He gathered his bag and trudged himself on over in that direction.

A few blocks past the farm, he found a long open alley that slightly curved with a bend, ending with a fence blocking off the next ring of houses. There were some side doors in the first half of the alley, but a couple small storage sheds, crates, pallets, and detritus were past the bend. Jrain made sure he was farther into the alley away from sight, and he sat on a crate beside a storage shed, which was more like an outdoor closet that likely contained shovels, buckets, and tools.

He leaned his head back against the building and let out a disappointed sigh.

How was he going to get back to work in 50 minutes?

He slumped forward and opened his bag, sinking his teeth into two pieces of bread he’d sliced and joined together with some nut paste. It was salted and mixed with oil—something Jack had recommended as an easy snack to prepare. It was okay. Too soft and bland for his tastes, not to mention how he had to smack his mouth and have his tongue lick around it since the paste easily clung to his gums and teeth. Still, it filled him up nicely.

He reached for an apple with a mesmerizing skin the color of amaranth: a grain that was harvested near the end of The Flourishing season. They’d be growing in fields across Foren in a few months’ time, and Kin’dar had shown him beautiful nature paintings on exhibit depicting just that during The Fair Rest—a centuries-old celebration that lasted for a week every year, which had commenced mere weeks after his cabin was built. The entire town participated in contests, feasts, music, and games before The Hibernation quieted things down.

Jrain had been so nervous about attending, and while he’d been the center of unwelcome stares and comments here and there, he’d met a few new friends and participated in some really fun things.

Jrain shook his head, realizing he’d drifted into his memories staring at an apple, and he was grinning.

He’d proved himself Foren’s fastest fisher catcher in one contest. Those otters and bears couldn’t quite match his reflexes. The upset of the evening! Though when it came to fishing with those rods … he had work to do. One of the otters had congratulated him and even offered to take him fishing sometime when it warmed up more. He really looked forward to that.

He idly turned the apple over in his hand before consuming half of it in a single bite. But none of this helped him figure out what to do with the remaining 40 minutes.

He groaned as he gulped down the eviscerated fruit, washing it down with a water pouch.

“Should I even tell Mira what he said?” Jrain wondered aloud, running his palms along the back of his head. His rubbery fins flattened and slowly poked back up to their natural posture.

“Why would Jack … anyone say stuff like that?” he added quietly, taking a meager bite of his sandwich.

“If he says anything like that about her … anyone … or me again, I-I’ll say something,” Jrain said, nodding to himself. “But … I should at least check on Mira to see if she’s back. Or if she needs anything.”

Jrain sighed in thought. Then, he cleared his throat and closed his eyes. He was much calmer now, and seeking refuge in this quiet, unassuming alley had helped. He scarfed down the rest of his sandwich and drained the rest of his pouch. Then, he leaned to his right to pick up his lunch bag and pushed himself up from his knees.

“Ay! Who’s back there?” a nasally yet commanding voice sounded from the left.

Jrain froze mid-turn.

Several silhouettes were cast against the left alley wall, and the sound of clattering metal heralded their arrival. Seconds later, a group of men came round the bend.

Forenian guards.

To be continued.