**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Vignette: The Blood Bandit**

**Chapter 3: Folk Tales**

They had him trapped.

The Forenian Guards wore their characteristic armor, most notably the circular chest plates with the symbol of the city, and the feathered helmets. But Jrain hadn’t seen any of these men before. A raccoon led them forward. His fur came out in tufts where his armor ended, and his long stretches of fur over his cheeks were pushed downward because of the faceguards.

The raccoon’s ears flicked, and he flashed a grin.

“It’s the lizard man I’ve heard so much about!” He snickered and shook his head in disbelief before crossing his arms. “What’re you doing back here on someone else’s property?” he demanded in a surprisingly ominous shift of tone.

“I, um,” Jrain looked behind him for no particular reason, and found it served him no purpose; it was a dead end. “I was just eating lunch.”

Two more stepped into view. A hyena and cougar.

“Uh huh,” the raccoon intoned slowly, looking subtly past him and raising his brows. His shining black eyes almost blended into the same-colored fur that draped over his face like a blindfold. “You know, last I recall, you gave some of our friends quite the trouble.”

“… W-what do you mean? I don’t want anyone in troub—”

The raccoon snapped his fingers with an exaggerated epiphany dawning on his face.

“Joby!” the raccoon recalled. “Joby. You know what happened to him? He got demoted to grunt work for a *month*. Lots of cleaning with the barracks, flash ordinance, rifles and artillery, armor. Stella herself checked in on him at random a couple times. Slapped him around here and there for supposedly shit work!”

The raccoon paused and put his black fleshy hands on his hips.

“Always looked like shit, too. Fur covered in soot and oil. No one was allowed to help him, and *phew*, there were some days the lad looked like on the brink of death—right, boys?”

The raccoon twisted and lifted his arms out, to which the surrounding soldiers nodded and grunted with affirmation. There were six in view now with a black wolf, a shepherd dog, and … a male lion without a mane. He was in the back and the tallest of the bunch. He looked like the oldest as well with gray tinged throughout his faded coat. And his white eyes … Jrain had been startled by the ferocity even in the friendly eyes of the farmers, but these eyed him with cold calculation. However, his left eye looked foggy with a deep and old scar that went over his cheek and brow.

Jrain noticed most of them had their hands on their wooden batons.

He took a step back and instantly regretted how it looked.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jrain said earnestly. “I don’t know anyone in the military guild, but … can I do anything to help?”

The raccoon let out a short bark of laughter.

“It’s been a while since then. We tried to get Joby back on his game after his stint, but he quit. Too terrified of messing up and having to do all that all over again. Funny thing is that he swears he saw you and *Kin’dar”—*the raccoon paused to spit on the ground—“sneaking off after he got pulled away from escorting you both! Didn’t even bother waiting around for him!”

All the while, the soldiers had formed an impenetrable wall. You could cut the air from the tension that suffocated the dark alleyway.

“We … I couldn’t figure out where he went,” Jrain said. There was some truth in that, and he had to be honest in some way rather than outright lie. “We got separated.”

“Right,” the raccoon said flatly. He pulled out his baton and struck his palm with it, repeating the gesture as he continued.

“When it comes to Foren, you knew from the moment you walked in—especially your bastard of a sly friend—that the Forenian Guard isn’t fast and loose with the rules. Our governor—we—make sure of that.”

The other soldiers drew their batons. Darkness fell over all their faces as crooked grins, low growling, and hateful eyes fell on him.

“You somehow got *reeaal* lucky with the people you’ve surrounded yourself with!” the raccoon said, ending this with a contemptuous scoff. “We’ve never had a chance to get you alone—until now! Just for this little chat! And a word of advice.”

Jrain gasped as he hit the planked fence behind him. He hadn’t realized how far he’d moved back until now, too frazzled to pay attention to his own motions.

The raccoon stopped playing with his baton.

“You mess with one of us, and you stir up the whole hornet’s nest. And you don’t walk away without getting stung.”

“W-wait, hold—no, what are you doing?” Jrain said, his breathing becoming panicked as he pressed himself against the fence. “I didn’t want that to happen to Joby! If I’d known, I’d’ve said something! Done something.” Jrain took a step forward and leaned down slightly to the raccoon’s level with his hands up. “I’ll prove it to you. I—”

The raccoon’s face contorted in confusion and outrage, and he struck Jrain across the side of his snout with his baton.

Jrain flinched and turned with the strike, holding his face where he’d been hit. It hadn’t hurt too much, but he didn’t want to want to find out what kind of damage his posse would do.

“You don’t get to grovel with your fake sympathy, snake!” the raccoon hissed. “Speaking of, you know, snakes are pretty tasty, when you descale and tenderize ‘em.” He snickered and licked his black lips. “Come help me out with this one, lads!”

Jrain shot his head back forward at the raccoon in fright, and the raccoon reacted speedily, swinging his baton upward into Jrain’s jaw. His head snapped back, and the motion sent him back against the wall. He instinctively kicked a leg out square into the raccoon’s chest plate, sending him back with an “Oof!” as he hit the ground.

*What … what is happening?* Jrain thought in horror.

The shaggy black wolf snarled and held his baton aloft, which was more appropriately sized for him, since he was a foot taller and more muscled than the raccoon. He telegraphed a horizontal swing that’d be coming in on Jrain’s left. As the wolf committed to it, Jrain dropped as the baton swung over his head and went *clunk! clunk!* against his horns. He leaned forward in his crouch and jabbed a fist into the wolf’s right side, causing him to gasp and stagger back into the wall to the right.

The hyena had come in faster from the left than Jrain could’ve prepared for, wielding two batons that he delivered a flurry of blows with, the first cracking across the top of his head, and the rest striking him against the back.

This one was fast but sloppy. Jrain was brought lower to the ground because of the downward strikes, but he reached out with his left hand and grabbed the hyena around his ankle, pulling him in and causing him to slip and fall on his back, too. Jrain could hear the wind knocked out from his assailant, intermingled with wheezing laughing sounds.

Jrain looked forward and yelped as the raccoon literally jumped into his face, having dropped his baton and opted for his natural weaponry. Jrain felt his claws glide harmlessly across his scales, but his bite had gone for Jrain’s gills, and somehow, the raccoon had lodged his mouth between one of the slits, pulling and gripping hard at it—and getting *much* closer to penetrating the soft inner flesh.

Now, the raccoon was leaning into his neck, leaving himself completely exposed to Jrain’s bite.

For the briefest moment, Jrain snarled more widely, considering tearing into the raccoon’s side with a bite that he would remember. Instead, he got to one knee, lifting the raccoon as he continued throwing his claws against his shoulder and the side of his face. Jrain growled angrily as he gripped the raccoon at his sides and felt his way between the layers of clothing and armor until talons met fur, and then skin.

Jrain warningly prodded the raccoon’s skin—not enough to draw blood, but enough to make his assailant unclamp his jaw to gasp.

And that’s when Jrain knew he could toss the infernal thing.

Jrain lifted the raccoon briefly over his shoulder as he turned his body slightly to the side. Then, he twisted the other way and used the angle to lean forward and fling him forward with a short roar. The hyena and wolf were still temporarily incapacitated off to the sides, so the raccoon went right past them, and the shepherd and cougar, who dodged out of the way just in time.

The raccoon’s metal armor screeched as he collided with and skid across the cobblestone. His helmet tumbled away right before he came to a halt in front of the lion.

“You … *ahhgh …* just gonna stand there, Kane?” the raccoon said in bitter exasperation, looking up at the maneless lion.

The fight had come to a standstill, with Jrain taking time to draw to his full height and bring his fists up. But he took this moment to uncurl them and place his palms out.

“I don’t want to fight, please,” Jrain pled, turning to all the soldiers. “There … there must be something I can do to help Joby.”

The wolf and hyena were back up again. They and the other two soldiers eyed him warily. But after a couple seconds, the lion grunted and turned the raccoon over onto his back with a motion of his paw. He considered his comrade emotionlessly for a moment, and then stepped on and over the raccoon, causing him to gasp as the few-hundred-pound lion’s weight made the raccoon’s chest plate slightly crumple.

“KAAnnee?!” the raccoon managed between painful wheezes. “What are yo—*oww* …”

Jrain regarded the lion’s approach and dropped his hands, walking forward to meet him. The hyena and wolf were to his left and right, and the wolf and shepherd stepped up with batons raised between their comrades and the lion.

The lion was seven feet tall, a few inches taller than Jrain. Now that he was closer, he could see how *tired* the lion looked. He looked like he’d seen it all.

“Well?” Jrain asked.

The lion said nothing and soon broke eye contact, pulling out a piece of paper and uncorking an ink bottle encased in a protective leather pouch at his side. He began to write on it gently with his talon.

“… What are you doing?” the shepherd asked.

The lion froze in his writing to stare daggers at him, and the shepherd gulped and looked down. The lion resumed with his note.

*What … is happening?* Jrain thought again. *Is he … mute?*

Once he had finished scrawling on the sheet of paper, he handed it to Jrain and looked back up at him with his disciplined expression.

Jrain hesitantly grabbed the paper, turned it over, and read it:

*“Your presence portends disaster. Our ancestor’s stories speak of your kind. You cannot be trusted.”*

Jrain regarded the words with confusion, and in between that, intense curiosity. *Stories?*

“W-wait, I’m not lying. What do you mean about my kind?” Jrain kept staring at the paper, rereading the words. He thought of Jack’s experience with reptile people like him, supposedly. “I don’t kno—”

Jrain glanced up and was immediately clocked square in the nose. He heard and felt his snout crack with blood welling in his nostrils, and when he tilted his head forward after staggering back a few steps, purple streams flowed out over his snout, slowly painting the stones below.

*“Gugghh,”* Jrain mumbled as the lion moved in for another punch.

But Jrain caught the fist with an open palm and stopped it mid-strike. He had gathered his breath bracing for the impact, and when it had hit, he snorted, sending a short shower of purple blood onto the lion’s chest plate.

The lion grunted and brought his other hand up from below to grab Jrain’s neck, lifting him up off the ground. As strong as he was, it was a shaky few seconds, with the lion snarling from the effort.

He walked forward until Jrain was pressed up against that back wall, and the lion delivered several rock-hard blows with his right hand to Jrain’s stomach and left side. Each strike drew more wind out of him than the last, and when he was done, he let go and let Jrain drop to his knees all on his own, battered and wheezing.

His vision was blurred. He coughed, and blood spattered to the ground.

Then, the top of his hands glowed with those circles of bioluminescence.

*No*, Jrain thought desperately, his talons digging into the dirt between the cobblestone, which was less neatly and tightly laid out in the alley. The light pulsed again and remained. Jrain looked down at himself to see the light traveling from his hands to his arms, then his sides, and onward.

“What is he doing?” a new voice said in concern.

“Probably some survival instinct,” the raccoon scoffed from afar, who must have gotten up. “The pretty lights won’t do you any good here,” he taunted in a singsong tone. “We got you, little snake!”

Jrain groaned in protest, the bioluminescence glowing brighter. A subtle warmth seeped into his innards and muscles that he hadn’t felt since …

*“Nooo,”* Jrain begged woozily. He bent over closer to the ground and rested his forehead against the dirt. He took deep, careful breaths to suppress the sensation, which halted the increasing intensity of his glow.

Jrain lifted his right arm to tenderly wrap it around his left side, and then he looked up and saw the lion jabbing a finger in the direction of the raccoon. He then ran a talon along his neck and pointed at Jrain.

“Finish the job, you say?” the raccoon said. “We can say he got mugged or whatever. No one will know.”

Jrain’s heart beat faster. The sensation suddenly surged against his will, making him involuntarily rumble as heat and adrenaline filled his muscles, even his injuries and daze began to abate.

Ever so slightly, he felt the waistband of his kilt stretch against his hips.

*“Don’t. I beg you,”* Jrain said shakily, looking up with teary eyes, followed by a spasm as he lurched forward and let something out between a growl and moan.

The lion regarded him with a raised eyebrow, and looked over his back. Suddenly, grave suspicion marked his face, and he swiftly approached and leaned over him, disappearing from Jrain’s sight. He felt the lion grab the back of his shirt by both hands and pull up, poking holes into the fabric as he began to pull it apart …

But before he could, Jrain heard a high-pitched whistle and a quiet *thunk.*

The leviathan felt him let go of his shirt and step back. Several seconds later, he heard a loud *thump*.

Jrain glanced up as far as he could and saw the lion had fallen backward in a heap.

Then, someone dropped in from above, landing gracefully and softly in front of him.

The figure was clad in black with the exception of a long red headband that flapped in the wind, which emerged from the front of their wide hood that rested on their shoulders. They had a black leather belt with exotic tools—most of which appeared to be weapons—laid over a red waistband. From behind, Jrain couldn’t even tell what their species was because they concealed their short tail inside a tight black cloth sleeve. Even the tops of their hands and paws were concealed by black cloth strapped in place by bands so they could remain dexterous. They wore black leather bracers and greaves as well.

Jrain watched as the wolf, hyena, cougar, and shepherd staggered back, gasps and growls sounding all around.

“The Blood Bandit!” the cougar exclaimed.

With that, this Blood Bandit reached in front of their chest and sharply withdrew two richly dark wooden weapons from loops on a wide chest strap that attached to a black leather pauldron on their left shoulder. These sticks looked similar to the soldiers’ batons, but each had a perpendicular handle two-thirds down their shafts, allowing the longer end to either extend over the length of the bandit’s forearm, or outward if they twisted the handle in their grip.

The bandit smoothly swept their foot in an arc along the ground to rise to a standing position. They brought their weapons together, angling themself and separating their arms in a fighting posture with a control and force Jrain thought impossible.

The bandit said nothing and waited.

The lion was in no state to fight, struggling to do so much as lift a limb despite sluggish attempts to get his muscles to cooperate. Even still, the other five rushed in to overwhelm the bandit with battle cries, some betraying their unease to Jrain’s rescuer.

Before they had a chance to hit their mark, the figure flipped backward and hit the ground with her hands, effortlessly bending her elbows and backflipping upward to land on Jrain’s back, which drew a sharp inhale from him as his back tensed in surprise.

The situation was distracting enough for him to barely hold back his power, which felt like taming a wildfire with buckets of water. Somehow, it was working despite taking every ounce of his mental concentration. He would have to leave it to this person to defend him if he was to be victorious.

The wolf and shepherd staggered into each other with their empty swings where the bandit had leapt from, and then Jrain noticed the bandit had thrown a wooden spherical device to the ground in front of him, which hit the ground and popped as it separated in the middle—white smoke and streams of red erupted from the openings!

Jrain couldn’t see what was happening—the very attempt be damned in this cloud that enveloped him and everyone in the alley, but he soon heard plenty of grunts and yelps of agony.

*Swing! Whack! Whoosh! Crack!*

The streams of red mingled with the white as the smoke rose and lingered in the air, creating a screen that resembled the color of coral reefs he’d had the pleasure of swimming among.

Whatever this bandit was doing, it *was* keeping the soldiers at bay, so he kept breathing slowly and calming his mind. He imagined not buckets of water, but a drizzle morphing into something more. He stood before the fire of his desire, willing it down and away, and with this, his internal vision of the rain morphed into a formidable deluge that kept back the raging inferno.

And behind it all, he thought he saw faint flickers of a silhouette. A hooded figure who looked like …

Jrain refused to acknowledge it.

Apparently, he *did* absorb errant electricity from his surroundings. He knew not how much, but he knew he should just come to expect the unexpected, if his existence was anything to go by.

Regrets and reconsiderations would be had later. He eventually huffed and collected himself, rubbing his bloody snout and rising to his paws. His bioluminescence had faded across most of his body from quelling that impending power trip.

It was good that he did. The bandit came flying out of the smoke and careened into his chest. He took one step back from the impact and maintained his balance, catching them in his arms.

It only took one second of the bandit’s eyes darting upward to say it all.

*“Let me go. NOW.”*

He dropped them on their paws. Ahead, the smoke was beginning to fade, and Jrain could make out that three of the soldiers were knocked out, moaning or unconscious. The only ones still standing were the shepherd, raccoon, and … the lion!

The feline brute was apparently hard to keep down, even with whatever had incapacitated him before. He rubbed a bloody smear on his lip and growled. There was also a big bruise swelling under his gray-blonde fur on his right cheek. He did *not* look happy.

The bandit was surprisingly short, but he wondered how in the world they had dispatched the others in a couple minutes. However, this lion might be out of her league because of his sheer mass.

*How did this bandit even land blows to his face?*

He watched the lion stalk forward, his left knee subtly buckling. Jrain noted that *and* puffed out a plume of steam from his nostrils and gills, stepping in front of his poised rescuer with a hand out in front of them.

“You handle the dog. I’ve got the cat,” Jrain said with determination, but regret and disappointment lay beneath his words. He hated being forced into conflict. He hated people who could not, and would not, reason with words.

His rescuer narrowed their red-brown eyes as if they were about to protest, but they eyed the shepherd and conceded with a shrug.

Jrain scoffed at their reaction and nodded, now locking eyes with the lion. Jrain glowered and almost grinned, but instead took a deep breath and lifted his arms out in front of him for combat—palms open, but ready to fight this time.

“So, you want to tell me why I’m worth killing?” Jrain asked, slowly beginning to circle to the right. The lion played along and went counter-clockwise.

For the first time, his enemy frowned, shaking his head.

“If you think I’m such a threat, why don’t we talk about it?” Jrain said. Their backs were now facing each opposing wall of the alley; the bandit and shepherd were left to stare at each other in between the two of them, and at this, the lion grunted—a signal for his comrade to rush between them and deal with the bandit.

Jrain watched his rescuer toss one of their weapons straight into the shepherd’s temple before he could step forward. A solid *thunk* came from his skull, and the bandit dropped into a low dash and lunged straight for the shepherd with a drop kick.

Jrain, however, did not pay attention to what else happened between the two, because the lion lumbered forward after the bandit rushed between them. It took all Jrain had to not be intimidated by his opponent, but at least he matched his foe in bulk, and now had fresh energy and clarity to take him on.

The lion locked both of his hands together and swung them down together like a boulder, but Jrain leaned backward with a slight step back, bounding forward with a right hook that connected with the bruise on the lion’s face. His scale-covered fist took some fur with it, and fresh red blood stained his cheek.

The lion grunted in annoyance and wasted no time bringing his locked hands upward, attempting to hit Jrain’s chin, but Jrain dodged to the right and poised his left arm back in a feigned punch. The lion swiftly sidestepped to his right, but Jrain saw his moment and dove into the lion’s side, grabbing around his waist and pushing him.

The lion nearly toppled over, but found his footing before Jrain could retreat. He locked Jrain’s head in the crook of his left elbow and bludgeoned the top of his head with his baton, which he had quickly grabbed once more from his waist.

The lion was smart, unlike the raccoon had been. His claws were more likely to cause self-harm with swipes that could catch against the grain of Jrain’s scales, or glide harmlessly off them along with the grain. Blunt trauma was the trick against a naturally armored foe like Jrain, and he wished the lion didn’t know that because he began seeing stars.

Then, the lion splayed a hand across Jrain’s forehead for leverage as he attempted to grab Jrain’s horn with the other hand, and he pulled *hard*.

Jrain could feel just how powerful the leverage was, and while snapping the horns of a wild deer or goat was one thing, his were horns covered in something mystical that granted Jrain his power; the dark blue material that coated Jrain was—so far as he knew—impenetrable. Unbreakable.

Nonetheless, this dirty move made something snap within Jrain, and he roared in feral hatred at this violent attempt to take something elsefrom his body.

Jrain gathered his legs up under him and reached out with one hand under the lion’s groin to wrap his arm around the thigh. He then grabbed the lion’s waist with the other hand and groaned in effort as he brought the lion up and slammed him onto his back with an impact that shook nearby crates and pallets.

A distressed, low gasp erupted from the lion’s mouth, but he took Jrain with him, maintaining the headlock all the while; however, it loosened along with slowed punching, with the lion likely dazed from his head rattling in his helmet from the fall.

Jrain broke the lock by pushing away on the lion’s chest armor. He sat himself on the lion’s waist and forced him down with a knee on his chest before he could lean up. Jrain reached for a small crate nearby and drove it into the lion’s head, which shattered into various pieces against his helmet. Jrain grabbed one of the broken pieces of wood and banged it across the lion’s helmet, which made him appear even more dazed with each strike. After several clanging blows, Jrain tore off the helmet and tossed it into the wall, which clattered against the log building and cobblestone ground.

Jrain leaned down and grabbed the lion’s mane before snarling in his face. The lion was wild-eyed yet maintained a neutral expression, though much tighter and forced than ever before. Jrain reeled back his right arm and held it there, ready to be launched forward with a jab.

“What did you mean?!” Jrain hissed between his heavy breaths. He spit out a glob of blood to the side. “Why would you go this far to hurt—to *kill* me?!”

Jrain searched the lion’s face, looking for any amount of regret or understanding, but the seconds revealed nothing; his expression belied nothing.

“I need answers! What do you know?!” Jrain said pleadingly, pulling the lion’s mane a little, which lifted his head slightly off the ground. Jrain grimaced in disappointment and desperation as he drew in breath and raised his fist a little farther back.

A small dart whizzed in the air and burrowed itself in the lion’s right bicep. He growled and tried to bring up his right hand with a knife poised, but it didn’t quite make it to Jrain’s head, being suspended in air for a moment as the lion’s eyes unfocused and rolled into the back of his head as his arm fell with the baton rolling out of hand. His head drooped to the side, and his mouth of thick, monstrous teeth unhinged slightly.

Jrain hadn’t seen the knife. A knife …

Jrain maintained his posture but shot his head off to the left. He beheld the bandit with one foot atop a fallen shepherd, and a blowgun held in front of their concealed face.

Jrain looked back at the lion. Then back at his rescuer. The sound of his own heaving overpowered the quiet moaning of the unconscious and pain-drugged soldiers. The bandit, however, seemed perfectly relaxed.

“Why did you do that? I needed him to talk!” Jrain struggled to say. His throat was dry.

The bandit reached into their hood to replace their bandana, and then put the blowgun back at their side. They cocked their head and reached behind her leg to pull out a thin knife from one of her greaves, gesturing to it with the other hand questioningly.

Then, Jrain heard a frantic skittering from behind the bandit—the raccoon was making a mad dash for them!

“Wait, look out!”

Jrain barely got the warning out of his mouth before the bandit spun and dropped in place, reaching for their pauldron where a small set of darts lay flat against the leather. In one smooth motion, they flung their right arm back in an arc and let a dart fly, which hit the rabid raccoon right in the neck. The sudden jolt caused him to stumble as he careened toward the bandit with a wail, but they twisted their torso while leaning farther to the right to support themself while lifting a leg out where they had been crouching.

Somehow, the bandit had moved the knife from their hand to their outstretched paw! As the raccoon passed her, the blade sliced through his right arm just before he stumbled forward and collapsed a couple feet away from Jrain with a groan and his tongue lolled out.

The bandit stood up on one paw and placed the knife back in the hidden spot underneath her greave with her other paw. They came up to the raccoon and tore off a section of cloth from his outfit to fashion a crude tourniquet, since his forearm had formed a small pool of blood around itself before the bandit finished.

Jrain gulped. The speed and grace of this fighter astounded him; they packed a lot of power in that small body of theirs.

“Wow,” Jrain said softly, letting his shoulders loosen, closing his eyes for a moment with a hand to his heart. “You saved me.”

“Jrain?!” a call came from around the corner of the alley’s bend.

*Mira*.

He looked down at the lion, his hand still loosely gripping his mane. He let go and brought his hands to the sides of his head.

“Skies above, what … what are we supposed to—”

Jrain looked back at where The Blood Bandit had been standing. They were gone.

He blinked and inhaled sharply.

“She can’t see … no, no,” Jrain said in quiet horror.

Before he could do anything, the brown lab rushed into sight and skid to a halt.

Mira was greeted to a dark alleyway strewn with the crumpled bodies of Foren guardians—one of their presumed leaders pinned underneath a scaly monster with blood on his face and hands.

That’s what they’d say. Jrain would be kicked out forever. His friends couldn’t help him. Would they think he had *wanted* to do this?

*“Jrain,”* Mira’s soft voice spoke in a hushed yet icy tone. “What’s going on here?”

Uncertainty and fear washed over her face as she stared at Jrain, who raised his hands and slowly stood up from the lion, who was snoring gently from whatever the bandit had shot him with twice.

“Mira, I … I can explain,” he said nervously, swallowing hard. His voice sounded small to himself. “T-this isn’t what it looks like.”

Mira held a hand close to her chest. She was at a half turn, and could either bolt forward or away. She was wearing an oversized long-sleeve shirt rolled up a couple times at the wrists and loosely buttoned up. Beneath this, she wore a white breastband wrapped around her chest. She also had on a cozy-looking pair of loose white pants. Sunlight from above produced a subtle halo around her, and the lingering smoke created the effect of visible rays of light piercing through it.

Mira was beautiful, and she slowly came forward, stepping around the fallen bodies with hesitation and approaching Jrain to gently rest a hand on the side of his arm.

His ear fins briefly shuddered at the touch. He regarded her with a mouth slightly agape in a mix of wonder and shame.

“They tried to hurt you, didn’t they?” Mira said gently. She looked up at him with sincerity in the question, not releasing her touch.

Jrain’s eyes instantly welled with tears, and streams poured forth like a dam had broken. Her visage blurred but he continued to look at her all the same as he began to shake.

*“Yes,”* Jrain whispered, his voice layered in hurt that all came to bear with the delayed shock. He felt like he was suffocating. His heart began to pound heavier and faster. He fell to his knees in front of her and wheezed between choked sobs. Jrain turned his head away from Mira, raising a shaking hand to cover his eyes.

“Oh, Jrain,” Mira said emotionally, getting on her knees as well and reaching out to cradle the left side of his snout with her left hand. She gently turned his face toward hers. He couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“Jrain, I need you to look at me,” she said firmly yet calmly.

Jrain slowly looked into her eyes as well as he could. It was as though her blue irises were like stormy seas shrouded in fog.

“I want you to sit up and close your eyes. Can you do that for me?”

Jrain struggled to follow her instructions. Once he straightened and was facing her. She placed her hands on the sides of his shoulders. Not gripping them, but holding him tenderly.

“Jrain, I want you to tell me what you hear. Not loud or uncomfortable sounds, but something quiet. Focus on soothing sounds. Rhythmic. Continuous.”

Jrain scrunched his eyes in concentration, his ear fins twitching as he tried to focus amid his panic.

“I hear thembreathing and groaning,” Jrain whispered.

“Don’t let your focus stay here,” Mira answered. “What is beyond this place?”

“… The crowd,” Jrain said. “O-on the other side of these buildings. I can hear their voices and walking, but it all blends together.”

“Yes,” Mira said, squeezing her hands reassuringly. “How does it make you feel?”

Jrain’s heart was still beating fast, but he tried to take deep, long breaths.

“I like the sound of distant crowds because I’m apart from them. It’s … it’s not like a small gathering where words are distinct and distracting … it’s all so much to take in. Crowds make talking sound like rain. A flock of birds in a forest.

“You like quiet, uniform sounds,” Mira observed kindly. “Can you hear that here?”

Jrain listened intently.

“… The wind overhead, whistling over the rooftops.”

“Yes,” Mira said.

“I can hear the river, just barely,” Jrain said. “The rush of the current and bubbling.”

“You mentioned rain. I imagine you like water a lot, don’t you?” Mira said.

“Yes,” Jrain said, grinning slightly. “It’s … it feels like home, whether I’m swimming in the sea, next to a stream, or hearing the rain outside.”

Jrain sighed shakily yet pleasantly, and in that moment, he realized he had stopped panicking. He opened his eyes and regarded Mira in surprise, who stared back at him with a pleasant grin, still holding onto his arms and searching his eyes.

“Well?” Mira asked.

“I … I feel better,” he said, steeling himself as he looked around, now able to more passively observe what before had caused him such distress. He was still worried, but he was able to control his fear.

“M-Mira, I … I’m sorry.”

“Jrain, don’t feel sorry. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, look outside yourself for the peace in the world to calm the one within.”

Jrain looked at Mira with undivided interest, pausing to consider this. After a moment, he blinked and nodded, a fresh understanding and calm dawning on his face.

He reached up and gently grabbed her forearms, pulling them down and sliding his fingers along their length until her hands rested in his, down in his lap. He closed his eyes and slightly bowed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “I’m …” Jrain trailed off, looking around. “They came and attacked me, Mira.”

He thought about how he almost gave in to his power. What might have happened had he become a giant *in the middle* of a city that *hated* them. Those mysterious Shades. His face twitched at the thought.

“B-but someone saved me. The Blood Bandit. They were about a foot shorter than you. Dressed in black and used smoke and these baton things. W-Who was that?” he asked, tripping over some of his words as he recalled the scene.

Mira’s eyes widened. *“The Blood Bandit? In the middle of the day?* My, my …” she said, trailing off in wonderment. “I’ll explain who that is later, but”—she leaned in and lowered her voice—“we need to figure out what to do before these men wake up. We can’t have any others seeing you here,” she said furtively, rising and twisting in place to look back, her oversized shirt and floppy ears whipping about with the motion. She turned back around and held out her hand.

“We can ask Abyl and Tri’shala,” she said. “They’ll help clean you up. I know you’re not allowed to stay in the city overnight, but they may be able to help escort you out.”

She grunted trying to pull him up off the ground, not nearly strong enough to do much of anything, but Jrain could do plenty with his other arm and tail. He leaned into her pull, making sure she felt like she was helping. He winced at the pain in his side and head, wondering whether to cradle his side or head.

“I do know Kin’dar works as one of the customs officials,” Jrain whispered. “He’s actually working at the eastern gate today, which is where I checked in.”

She nodded. “Perfect. Come along, then!”

The brown lab took Jrain’s hand and led him to the entrance of the alley. The farm was only two blocks away along the street on the left. Just a little farther down the road was the river bridge and field.

She glanced left and right. “It’s clear! Hurry!”

The two of them dashed out of the alley toward the right. Some passersby were in the near distance behind and ahead, but they would not see Jrain’s bloodstained clothes and face. Mira led him to the front of the farm and into a small alleyway where two trash bins were located next to a side door.

They entered into an excessively cozy, welcoming space with red cedar walls, and the place smelled of hay. A *lot* of family portraits lined the walls, with Jrain making out how the couple had had several children. There was a small table to the right of the side door with a vase of snowdrops below a coat hanger with blacksmith-forged hooks.

Miss Tri’shala came around the corner, a hand to her chest and a worried expression on her face.

“Mira, dear, I saw you two from the front,” she said in that similarly twanged accent of her husband. When she approached, she let out a short, strong gasp at the sight of Jrain.

“… I can explain,” he said nervously.

To be continued.