**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Vignette: The Blood Bandit**

**Chapter 4**

**Intuition**

“I was watching you the rest of the time, you know,” she said coyly.

Jrain was indiscriminate with the way he ate fish, currently on his fifth that he had just bitten into—bones and all. He had no reason to pick his way around the skeleton like some other species preferred to, such as his guest. She had had only two and was picking her teeth with a rib bone.

He stopped mid-chew and glared at her uncomfortably, the other half of the fish clutched in both hands. He suddenly felt self-conscious about how ravenous he must look, but today … had been a long day. And he wasn’t going to say no to food, no matter who had prepared it. He’d quietly thanked her for it a few minutes ago.

She’d barely said a word since their blow-up an hour ago, only letting him know when dinner was ready. He’d gotten all his clothes washed and hung along the hearth’s mantle. He swallowed after a few bites.

“… What do you mean?” Jrain said uneasily.

“I didn’t leave after you thought I left,” she clarified. She had her paws up on the table with her legs crossed, and her back to the fire. At this point, the worst of the rain had passed, and what was left was a pleasant pitter-patter that mingled with the crackling sounds in the fireplace, along with the gentle creaking of the cabin from the whooshing gusts of wind outside.

“I saw you bawl like a baby in Mira’s arms. You let her lead you by the hand into hiding. You left the city with a fresh set of clothes and a hood, which”—she paused to point a finger at him—“was smart, by the way. Hiding those bruises, even though they were subtle enough with those scales of yours. Kin’dar looked pretty confused when you left earlier after checking you out.” Her ears twitched. “Oh, and Mira covered your tail nicely, but I let Jack know what really happened, so he won’t be giving you an earful tomorrow.”

Jrain chewed on the rest of the fish while she spoke. He was both angry and unsettled by how much she spied on and insulted him, but the moment she mentioned Jack, he was in the middle of chugging some water and nearly spat it out.

“Y-you did what?!” Jrain exclaimed, slamming his cup down.

She didn’t react in surprise to his outburst, opting to snicker instead.

“Jrain, dear, is that a surprise to you? Look,” she said, clearing her throat and lifting her arms out in front of her, the hands flat and angled vertically in a lecturing gesture. “Why do you think Jack stumbled into you and Kin’dar when you arrived in Foren? Who do you think told him about you, hmm?”

Jrain’s eyes darted around the table aimlessly for a few seconds. Then, it clicked.

“Talara,” Jrain whispered, looking at her with fresh eyes. “Your name is Talara.”

“In the flesh,” Talara said dramatically, smiling broadly as she tossed the fish bone back into the fire without looking. She rested her hands behind her head. “The Blood Bandit. The Silent Shadow. The Scourge of the City!” She was looking up to the ceiling and bobbing her head to the left and right with each name she mentioned. Then, she lowered her eyes toward Jrain and smirked. “Stella’s Royal Pain in the Ass. That’s what I like to call myself.”

Jrain eyed her with consideration … and curiosity.

“What about those soldiers? Won’t they tell?”

“Oh, no. I imagine they’ll be too ashamed to admit their failure. Besides, it’s one thing if you were the only one there, but if they say mention me? Ha! Stella’s a bitch of the highest order, but she doesn’t play favorites; she spares her lackeys no bias. They’d be castigated for letting me go. Even if they just say it was you, you’ll get summoned for a chat. Just deny any and all allegations.

“… But I don’t like to lie,” Jrain said sheepishly.

“Oh, for the love of …” Talara held her tongue. “Look, then say you didn’t fight them. They *did* strike first, even though you were an idiot by opening yourself up more than once. Whatever. Even if they insisted on accusing you, Stella wouldn’t believe them. I think people would vouch that you don’t have it in you.”

“All right, I get it,” Jrain bit out tersely, now hunched over with his forearms on the table. wooden cup cradled in both hands. “I’ll manage if it happens.”

There was an awkward pause.

“You, um … seem to have a habit of watching me,” Jrain observed.

“It’s my job to watch *everything*,” she replied. “My hobby? I suppose you could say both. I have a bone to pick …”—she paused to raise her brow and leaned forward, plucking another rib from her plate and snickering in a nasally way as she resumed picking her teeth—“… with the way things are run in Foren, and … let’s say Jack and I have shared goals. But enough about me. Not my place.”

She finally removed her paws from the table, lowering her hands to grasp the edges of her seat. She lifted herself up briefly to tuck her legs underneath herself.

“You are the most confounding, intriguing thing,” she said, leaning forward and crossing her arms on the table. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “You’ve been called a lizard man. Reptile. There are rumors of people like that, but you’re a dragon.” She grinned. “Those don’t exist.”

Jrain felt the blood drain from his face as he straightened slightly.

He cursed internally, remembering she had probably seen his back *multiple* times tonight. He hadn’t been careful. He breathed in and was about to reply, but she beat him to the punch.

“No, it wasn’t just tonight when I noticed. Left yourself exposed after you took a dip today!” she tsked several times and shook her head subtly. “You don’t try hard enough. Oh, and you *…* *ever so slightly* bulked up in muscle before I swept in to save the day,” she added slowly, cocking her head. “I’m not talking about getting pumped up like power-hungry soldiers in the barracks. I’m talking an *actual* size increase.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“So, you give people the razzle dazzle with a lightshow before getting gains in a matter of seconds—is that right?” she asked playfully, leaning a little closer and raising a hand in a pinching gesture. “It was a *little* more definition. Ah, and an inch or two in height! Makes me wonder just how much you were holding back, given how much you *didn’t* want that to happen.”

Jrain was tongue-tied.

“I … you’re crazy,” Jrain scoffed in disbelief, straightening while crossing his arms. “That’s not possible,”

“Oh, it’s impossible, Jrain. But it happened. I told you already: I see *everything,”* Talara repeated with absolute surety. “We’ve got giant beings of shadow who can appear from nowhere that go ‘poof!’ once they get exposed to enough light. Ha, what’s so hard to believe about a growing dragon?” she laughed out, but she quickly assumed a serious expression. “And since I see everything, I also know you’re a *terrible* liar. Even if you were a good one, you’re avoiding my gaze. Just now, your fins twitched and your tail pulled inward around your chair’s legs. Your pupils contracted. I know what to look for.”

She paused in self-satisfaction and leaned back in her chair, slapping her hands on her thighs. “So. How big can you get, hm? I think everyone should know. I’m *dying* to know,” she said in a sensual tone.

Jrain felt his face flush in rage and embarrassment. Without thinking, he shot his hands under the table and flipped it over with little effort, actually catching Talara off guard since she had been leaning on it. She fell on her side but acted quickly, reaching back for her belt that was draped along the headrest.

Just as Jrain stomped toward her and lunged downward to pull her up by the bandana around her neck, she had managed to put the blow dart at her mouth and aimed.

“*Shit*, this is one way to make your move on a lady,” she said, chuckling breathlessly. “I didn’t kno—”

*“Is all of this a game to you?”* Jrain bit out in a menacing voice. He narrowed his eyes. *“That straw isn’t going to do you any good,”* he growled out.

“You underestimate my aim,” she said in mock offense. “You want to be a fool and find out? Choke harder, then … not that I mind if you do it right.”

Jrain’s face screwed up with a sound of intense disgust escaping his throat. He slammed her back down and removed his hand before slamming it on the floorboard next to her head with a rattle that shook the nearby furniture.

*“… Damn you!”* he said in strained frustration, getting up and turning away. He clasped the sides of his head and moaned in tired irritation. “What … what is *wrong* with you?!”

She laughed, rising to a sitting position. “What’s wrong with *me?* You’re a *dragon* who comes out of *nowhere* who could *destroy* Foren in a matter of minutes, if you’re anything like the Shades! But the thing is … you don’t!” She shouted. “You seclude yourself out here and avoid your power, even refusing to save yourself with it. And now that I know your secret, you refuse to kill me!”

Jrain twisted in place and looked back at her. “I don’t … I won’t do that.”

She had just stood up and lifted her arms out to both sides.

“Why? I could expose you!” She jabbed a finger at him. “Get you kicked out for good! Yet you live among us as a simple man. You don’t do *anything* suspicious. Why are you here? What do you want?”

No one else seemed to care about Jrain or knew what he was capable of, but she’d figured him out.

His mind was stalled and on fire, wondering what he should say.

The truth came easiest to him.

He lowered his head while keeping his eyes on her. He balled his fists.

“I am a dragon haunted by a forgotten past,” he said, turning fully to face her. “I can harness lightning to ascend to heights and strengths untold. I could destroy Foren with a swipe of my tail or a swing of my leg.” He took a step forward. “I destroyed Kin’dar’s house and the forest. And I could have crushed those soldiers. But I …” Jrain blinked and paused, looking up past the ceiling as though he could see the stars. He steeled himself with a heavy sigh.

“I don’t want this,” he whispered. “I don’t recognize myself when I use this power. It turns me into a monster, and something inside me … I-I can’t do it, Talara.”

Jrain shook his head and lowered his voice. “I won’t let it have me. But I can’t stop you from having me banished. You’re right—I am a danger to Foren.”

He put both of his palms on his chest. “And why am I here? I …”—he paused again and barked out a short soft laugh—“… I’m only here to make friends, I guess. I want to know who I am, where I belong, and how I can help others. Maybe find some answers.”

“Like to whatever’s wrapped in that cloth beneath the floorboards?” Talara interjected, angling her head toward the spot where the staff was tucked in the crawlspace. “The extra nails tipped me off and I stole a peek.”

Jrain closed his eyes and gulped. At this point, it wasn’t a surprise she knew.

“Yes … I want to know what it is. That staff. It has some connection to me since it can absorb lightning, too.” Jrain rubbed his forearm, glaring at the spot on the floor. “But I can’t control it; I’m afraid to touch it.”

Talara was crossing her arms while listening to him. She wasn’t visibly shocked or scared of anything. Just … curious. Like she was trying to reach into his soul from across the room.

“You can leave now. You got what you wanted out of me,” Jrain said, moving to bend down and right the table and chairs. He grimaced at the wooden plates and bits of leftover food strewn across the floor. “I’m sorry about the mess, I just …” he trailed off and sat down on a chair, slumping forward into his arms on the table.

She sniffed. “You passed the test, so you’re good.”

Jrain raised his head halfway up and looked at her tiredly.

“… What?”

“We’re out here alone. You could have killed me with ease. Fried me. Smashed me. Whatever. I’m sure your fancy powers would just heal any stab wound I make and mitigate my sleep toxins. I was lying earlier with my confidence to hit you, by the way. Scales and all,” she said, gesturing to him and grinning.

Jrain straightened in his chair, sputtering for a second before being interrupted.

“Quiet. You put yourself at more risk out here because of the Shades. You visit Foren daily and have every opportunity to ruin us. You’re mistreated by our civilians and threatened by our soldiers yet don’t lash out. You don’t have the guts to be a rampaging monster because you have a damn loud conscience.”

Jrain wasn’t looking at her, opting to stare into the dancing flames of the hearth. He blinked with those last few words and looked at her with a raised brow.

“You have a moral resolve I’ve seen in rare few beings. You’re willing to undergo injustice to keep others safe from yourself. You’re aware of your limits and don’t test them. You fear the consequences of your actions because you think outwardly, not inwardly. You are a kind, gentle soul with a love of and care for life. I have watched you enough to know that’s true, even in the moments where you think you’re alone.”

A few seconds passed with Jrain staring wide-eyed at Talara.

“I-I don’t … um … thanks?” Jrain said awkwardly, slouching a bit and feeling his face redden slightly.

*“But I’m not saying that to be nice!”* Talara bit out sharply, pointing at him warningly with narrowed eyes. She crossed her arms. “I’m just telling it like it is. You’re figuring out”—she gesticulated to all of him—“whatever the hell you are. But there’s a catch.”

She turned to her chair and began placing her clothing back on.

“You’re a *wimp*. Part of why your fighting is sloppy. You have your moments, but you’re too reactionary and put too much force into your moves. Your weight and tail put you at a notable disadvantage because they slow you down. You make up for that in some ways with your armored self and sheer bulk, but if you didn’t have that power of yours, I could take you down in no time, just like any other Foren soldier pig,” she said, smiling.

Talara pulled down and tucked in her tight black shirt, now reaching for her red waist band.

“It also doesn’t help that your mentality is passive and noncombative. You pull your punches and leave yourself vulnerable, even when you think you don’t. So, if you’re too weak to control big time, and you want to live among our people”—she pulled the waist band tight with a knot behind her back and glared at him—“you must be able to properly defend yourself or you’re a liability. I can’t have liabilities in my city. No one can afford for you to lose your shit.” She paused and pointed at him. “So, I will train you.”

“… Hold on,” Jrain said, shaking his head and throwing his hands out. “You’re going to what?”

“You will train with me bright and early in the mornings outside your cabin for two hours every Wednesday and Saturday. We’ll start with the basics like your stance, footwork, and center of motion before we move on to any particular self-defense moves. And you’ll need to spar with someone your own size. I know a guy,” she said, clipping her utility belt over the red waistband. She raised the bandana over her nose and reached for her headband.

“N-no, that’s fine, I just have some ques—”

“Save them for later,” Talara said curtly, strapping the headband tight around her forehead. The fur compressed against her face with both articles, giving her a completely different facial profile. She reached back for the hood and gently placed it over her head. Only her red-brown eyes faintly shown through the inner shadow, the light from some candles on the other side of the room causing her own to flicker with flashes of white and red. She began to place her outer leather armor on. “I’ll see you on Saturday.”

“What about Kane?!” Jrain suddenly shouted, rising from his chair and coming around the table to stand across from her. “Do you know who he is? I need to know.”

She turned toward the fire with her back to Jrain. She glanced sidelong and grinned, aggressively placing both of her tonfas in the loops on her chest strap connecting to her pauldron. “I said *later*.”

Suddenly, she reached into one of her bracers and threw something at Jrain’s face! He yelped as darkness enveloped the world, and he reached for his snout to pull off whatever was on his face, but it stuck rather well. Before he could do anything else, he felt a tangle of ropes and hard balls wrap around his angles.

“TALARA, WHA—AH!”

Jrain took a frantic step forward but discovered his stride was completely hindered, like his paws had gotten caught in a tangle of seaweed. He careened forward onto the floor, which shook the entire cabin.

“AGH!”

“You have a lot to learn!” Talara shouted. He heard a *whoosh* in front of him as the heat from the fire washed over him in a wave.

Jrain lifted his upper body off the floor and finally ripped off what appeared to be a sticky net covered with a thick layer of black fabric. He cast it aside with a snarl and lifted his mid-section up to see that his legs were caught in a mess of rope with ends attached to round stones. He scoffed in disbelief and looked up to find that Talara was gone.

But he hadn’t heard the door open, so how …?

Jrain grimaced and thought to rip his way through the flimsy rope with his talons, but he thought better of it and took time to unravel them from his legs.

He stood up and looked at the blinding net and bolas in his hands. He adjusted his stance and turned toward the door, looking back and forth between it and the items.

*See you Saturday*, he grumbled to the walls.

The end.