**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Prologue**

**A Theophany**

He didn’t want to open his eyes.

He was lying in a shallow pool. The water gently lapped against his hide with its icy touch keeping his body cool. He wasn’t sure why he felt so feverish, and his joints ached. His muscles were sore. His back pulsated with a dull, deep pain that felt ... *wrong*. The more he tried to focus on that area, the more his mind seemed to discourage his curiosit­y with waves of drowsiness.

*What am I?* he groggily thought.

His eyes flickered open and saw scaly paws.

*I ... am a leviathan,* he thought, wrestling for focus. *My name is ... Jrain*.

Jrain didn’t have the physical or emotional strength to react accordingly, but in his bones, in his mind, he just knew something was *very wrong*. It took all that he had to lift his head from the pool with fatigue and disorientation weighing him down.

But this wasn’t a pool. Jrain slowly turned his head left and right, furiously blinking because of his watery, itchy eyes. His vision was blurry, yet he could tell the water stretched out into a misty and perfectly level horizon in all directions. He dipped his head to peer into the crystal clear water, and he saw a white stone floor that looked and felt perfectly smooth.

Upon the water’s unusually calm surface, Jrain could make out a faint impression of himself—a sea dragon wearing a hide the color of thunderstorm clouds, adorned with clusters of sapphire scales and spikes. Curved horns pointed forward like those of rams, looping around a pair of teal ear fins with drooping tendrils that ended in bulbous tips faintly flickering like distant stars. His angular, fearsome face glowed with that same faint light in small swirling patterns, erratically and weakly. These were partly obscured not only by soot and char coating his hide, but also purple liquid caked in splatters across the top of his head and along the sides of his stocky neck.

He stared back blankly into his crimson bloodshot eyes.

They had seen a lot. Too much.

Of what? He realized—in a baffled concern that began to bubble in his mind—that he couldn’t remember.

Suddenly, his upper back seized in pain, and he growled while his head splashed down into the water. His forelegs tensed with the paws thereof gripping at and clawing into the stone, leaving short gashes in their wake.

Once the episode subsided, Jrain dragged his neck to one side, raising his head to look back at himself. His breath caught in his throat, and if one could see the flesh beneath his scaled face, they would have seen it turn white.

Two ghastly, gaping holes exposed the bone and tissue in his upper back. They were mostly sealed with congealed purple globs, and it was then that Jrain realized the dried liquid on his body was blood. His blood.

He now saw that it was splattered all across his back, but two thick rivers of violet ran down his sides. The fresh blood was fanning out around him in the water like a pair of murky phantom wings.

Jrain’s eyes contracted and glazed over as he turned away, looking out into space helplessly. His breathing became labored, and the rise and fall of his chest against the stone prompted another spasm of pain. He coughed, and it sounded wet and wheezy. A spray of blood had gone out from before him across the water.

*I’m dying*, he thought numbly.

Out of nowhere, he pierced the silence with a disturbing roar. His body began convulsing, and he involuntarily rolled onto his side with his back arching inward. His limbs and paws locked up as a cascade of emotions rushed into his heart; a volley of opaque memories dug into his conscious like thrown shards of glass.

Jrain momentarily ceased his roar with an abrupt gasp of wonder as deep love and belonging filled his being—he saw a small figure leaning against his side with their hand placed atop his own, and they were sitting on a platform looking out to a sparkling cyan ocean.

The memory contorted into another that unveiled a new scene gripping his heart with fear—he was surrounded by shadowy figures wielding tridents who closed around him on a beach during a tempest.

Fear was then replaced with a ravenous excitement as his heart skipped a beat—his head was in the clouds, and he looked below upon an island filtered through a pulsing red lens. A series of tremors vibrated throughout his body as lightning flashed.

Then, everything went to black as he was taken by fury. What followed was a pain unlike anything he could’ve imagined. The line between this vision and reality blurred, for he unleashed a truly feral roar as his wings were being torn from his shoulder blades in this vision, making him writhe all the more in reality. No sight came with this memory, but he felt his muscle fibers being shred. His veins and nerves stretched and snapped.

Then, the agony dulled enough for him to grow quiet as his vision morphed a final time—he turned a corner to a balcony that opened to a breathtaking vista of the sun rising above a mountainous horizon. The celestial body pierced through a mist sitting over a vast forest. Ahead of him, three figures stood before a carved stone guardrail. He could hear echoes of muffled laughter and conversation amid a gentle breeze and the chirping of birds. They all turned upon hearing Jrain’s approach and beckoned him with grand gestures, but he couldn’t make out who they were—or what they were. They were indistinguishable silhouettes against the bright morning sky. Even still, he could sense that they emanated greatness. Regality. Power. Hope.

The paroxysmal vision faded peacefully, and soon, Jrain’s attention fully returned to the present.

He didn’t want to open his eyes.

He could hear the gentle lapping of water again, but the relative silence was broken by quiet, quivering sobs. Bloody tears ran down his face as he shook in shock.

Then, anger boiled up from within. He knew not exactly for whom or what, but all this pain, all this confusion ...

His eyes narrowed as he slammed a balled paw into the water, causing the stone to crack. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, giving him the strength to slowly raise himself up on all fours. His body glowed with that cool light, but this time, the patterns grew in presence and intensity, moment by moment. His horns crackled with sparks of electricity until tendrils danced around them.

Once he reared his head back and puffed out his chest, he lashed upward with a plaintive, long roar as lightning soared upward and spread outward as a flashing web in the misty gray skies.

His roar soon trailed off, and with that, the last of the electricity. The dragon collapsed on his side with a loud splash the moment thunder boomed around him.

His horns and body gave off steam. The light from his body faded. His death throes were complete, and so darkness choked his vision with his soul growing still. He closed his eyes and accepted release from this weary vessel.

...

**“Fear not, leviathan.”**

The words came from every direction at once from a strange yet hauntingly beautiful voice. Soon after, a beam of light shot downward from the heavens and widened into a pillar of light. The world not only shuddered once the pillar had reached several feet in width, but it also sent out an explosive gale. The force of it slammed into Jrain like a battering ram and made him briefly sail through the air before careening back down into a tumble with a pitiful cry followed by a growl. His instinct took over as he reached out with his forepaws and dug into the stone once more to prevent himself from sliding back any farther. He was plenty alive now.

**“Sea serpent.”**

The wind only let up slightly, forcing Jrain to maintain his hold in the stone. He grunted in a mix of pain, effort, and frustration. The wind and light made it hard to look upon the blazing column, but he noticed it was pulling down the mist from on high. Like a waterfall, it streamed over the front and edges of the pillar, pooling over the water like an ethereal carpet.

**“Jrain.”**

This otherworldly scene, along with the layered quality to the authoritative voice, now began to really sink in with a primordial fear that gripped Jrain’s heart beyond any worldly terror he knew, but it was not so much characterized by abject horror as it was a chilling awe.

**“Oh, Liege of Alden, how you have fled and twisted. Heed my words!**

A sudden and stronger blast of wind slammed into Jrain from the light source, forcing him to dig his talons into the stone floor more tightly. The mist had now expanded outward enough to reach where he was, which started to contour around him.

**I have seen your works this day. You have resisted The Stranger: they who besiege the body and mind; they who slaughter worlds untold; they who spare no expense to claim others for themself; they who bend all that is straight. Even still, you have found your way to reclaim your prior station. Though I watch from afar, as I am lost to your world, as this be your realm—I intervene. Yes, I intervene once more to restore a fraction of your power as it was received in times past. Heed my words!”**

At this point, the wind had calmed down, but Jrain was caught off guard by a bolt of white lightning that lashed out from the pillar. His body absorbed it and he went rigid. Not from pain, but from intense yet harmless sensations like fire and ice flowing through his veins.

Then, he felt a thumping on his chest—a rhythmic pressure applied by an unknown force. His right forepaw clutched his chest. He gasped as the weight applied to his entire body, like gravity was singling him out. The leviathan rolled onto his back with his limbs sprawled out, which were also being weighed down to prevent him from moving.

The dragon gasped in relief as those sensations banished all his bodily suffering. Their effect was like a pure healing energy that soothed and invigorated him, and just when he thought this was all it was, he began to feel his limbs contract as they slowly slid inward along the slab. Jrain couldn’t grasp what was happening to him since he couldn’t lift his head; however, he was able to dart his eyes side to side, and in so doing, he saw his horns uncurling and shortening. They soon disappeared from his peripheral vision.

He seemed to be shrinking—no, *transforming*.

**“The Stranger’s corruption has altered the form of my blessing, but you must understand it as it is to redeem all of Alden for what it must be. To both embrace and refuse this power in light of The Stranger’s designs will be to know yourself and claim victory by my way.”**

The transformation stopped soon after these words were spoken, but the pressure on his body had become so great that the stone beneath him cracked, making him grunt in panic and discomfort. The tendrils from the epicenter gradually lengthened, spreading out across the slab into more cracks. They grew wider as well, and Jrain could sense the water around him rushing through the fissures into whatever lay beneath this empty plane. He wasn’t sure if his chest would cave in or if he’d black out first.

In the midst of this, he began to catch shadowy glimpses of someone kneeling over him, as well as the sound of heavy breathing. Waves and birds. Was he having another vision? Or were these memories?

**“Jrain, you are to reunite with the Aldenian lieges and venture unto the heart of this land in the fullness of your time.”**

Jrain couldn’t do or say anything, so with all his might, he craned his head backward, now squinting at the pillar of light upside down, still lying on his back. All he could think to do was weakly nod, and fresh tears fell for reasons he couldn’t explain. This time, they were free of blood, being as pure as the water draining underneath him. In their release, he felt a sudden, strange peace.

The slab buckled, and Jrain’s breath caught. Time froze. An eerie silence filled this moment.

Then, the outline of a person appeared within the light. Jrain could swear he saw their head nod in turn.

**“You have been slain. You are mended. You will be reborn.”**

The figure raised their arms forward and upward, and after holding them aloft for a pause, they swept them back down at an angle to their sides in graceful arcs. The slab completely gave way.

Jrain plummeted into darkness with water falling around him in a circle from the edges of the newly made hole. Nothing but the rushing sound of water and wind filled his ears until he plunged into water. As quickly as he was submerged, he somehow emerged out the other side with no less momentum that saw him sitting up with choking gasps. He had fresh strength, and gravity relinquished its bias.

His eyes flew open to an intense light. He blinked several times before his vision adjusted. His head frantically swiveled around as he sought to gather his bearings.

He was sitting on a black sand beach facing an ocean swirling with dark blue waters, but he quickly focused on a person with orange and black fur who was lying several feet away in front of him. Without hesitation, Jrain snarled and pounced as the person held his arm out and shouted something.

To be continued.