**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 1**

**Anchor**

“Ah, finally!”

The red fox smiled widely, sighing in relief—and from exhaustion. He put a hand above his eyes and scanned his surroundings. Kin’dar had just made it over a hilled section of a vast forest. He stood at the clearing, and a considerably steep dirt path lay before him that led down to a black sand beach. To his right, a ravine with a modest river moved parallel with the path, but unlike it, the river widened and cut through the shore to join with the endless expanse.

This forest extended to his left—the north—as far as anyone could guess. Countless more trees went on for miles to the south as well, but to his right, here, a white-faced cliffside was just beyond the other side of the ravine. It towered about 200 feet above sea level and went inland from the shore by twofold at a steady incline. Trees became sparser as the forest rose to the plateau, where nothing grew aside from thick green grass and dandelions, but both were starting to die from the onset of chilly, cloudy weather brought on by the season known as The Rest.

While the shore itself was over 100 feet in depth and butted against the steep cliffside, the latter eventually overtook the former a couple miles away to the south and north. So, those looking to dive could find excellent spots to do so from numerous spots where people could climb down natural paths and ledges 20 or even 60 feet above the waves. Kin’dar came to realize early on that diving from the cliffsides revealed how there were two kinds of people in the world. Well, three, since some people deferred to relaxing on the plateau where the sounds of sea birds and waves could be enjoyed at a distance.

Well, technically four types. He hadn’t come for diving or lazing about. No, he was here for the waves, which were only readily accessible from this beach. There were small coves and tiny shores to explore beyond the points where the shoreline ended, but all of them would take more than twice as long to get to, and most could only be reached by boat, which very little people had ventured to do.

Right here? Light’s Shadow Coast—so named for the contrast of white cliffsides and black sand—was easily the largest beach within range of the city of Foren. And after another long week of work with reading and writing all sorts of things, he would’ve usually brought his friends out here, but he had decided to keep this weekend getaway to himself; he wanted some time alone to kick back and relax. Well, once he was done with his waveriding.

It was a new hobby he’d picked up that few Forenians knew about or cared for. But he was ecstatic to be helping Faleene test out her latest models of sleek wooden boards to see what tweaks to their contours, dimensions, fins, grooves, and whatnot worked best. She was a craftswoman who enjoyed the challenge of improving the designs from the reports and feedback of the niche collective of “Foreriders” to which Kin’dar belonged.

He was never one to do the usual thing, but he supposed the unusual went along with being a Cross. His grandfather had chosen the last name in being the first among his siblings—and foxkind as a whole—to have an unusual pigment to his fur. His face, limbs, chest, and tail were black, and other areas of his body were the usual striking orange and snow white characteristic to foxes. His mother had inherited this physical trait, and now he was the latest in that line.

Kin’dar was careful to watch his step on the winding slope. After some carefully placed steps, he leapt down onto sand with a soft *thump*. He winced when his waverider pressed into his left shoulder from the impact, which he had been carrying since noon for almost an hour.

He momentarily closed his purple eyes and wiggled his toes to feel the dark grains between them. He deeply inhaled the salty air. A peaceful sigh followed, and he opened his eyes with a new spring in his step.

A gust of wind blew over him that made his clothes ripple. He wore black linen shorts that were not only barely loose, but could also easily qualify as boxers with inseams less than six inches. He also wore a gray linen undershirt, and two rings hung from a black leather strip around his neck. He loved being outside during this season and took every opportunity to wear little and light clothing, but he was concerned about the dark clouds that seemed to be moving in from the south over a spectacular range of mountains far, far away.

No matter. Even if the clouds came this way, he knew he’d be long gone by then. A few hours was all he needed.

Kin’dar came to a stop about 40 feet from the tide and nodded in satisfaction before putting down his food basket that he’d been holding in his right hand. He then relieved his shoulder of the waverider with both hands and drove it into the sand next to the basket, which took a couple more downward tugs to keep it rooted in place.

He knelt down and opened the basket’s lid, licking his lips as the aromas of raw trout, flatbread, and assorted berries wafted up from underneath cloth coverings to keep these delicacies fresh and cool. To top it all off, he had a bottle of mead to wash it all down. He couldn’t wait to chug and chow down later.

Kin’dar had also brought his leather backpack with some assorted items in it, which he now shed and placed on the sand along with his shirt. As he was kneeling down and placing his necklace inside, he gasped and ducked, feeling something *whoosh* right over his head.

Once he looked up, he shook his head and chuckled in realization—just a puffin. His eyes followed it, which soon landed on a rather large piece of driftwood to the north.

His warm smile slowly turned into a frown as he stood up warily. He squinted and craned his neck forward.

It wasn’t driftwood. It looked like a body.

Kin’dar’s fur briefly rippled in fear, but his concern overrode his reservations since he leapt to his paws and ran toward the supposed body.

As he neared it, he slowed and quieted his approach, but that didn’t stop the puffin from looking his way and squawking before flying back from whence it came. He paid it no mind because his attention was affixed on the definite body before him.

“Hello?” Kin’dar said. “Are you okay?”

No response.

The still figure was on his side with his back turned to Kin’dar. He looked about the same size as his friend Pinstripe, but that’s where the similarities ended. This person was clad in a rough, scaly light blue hide that had dark blue spikes and scales grouped in spots across his body.

Even though his head was facing away, he saw teal fins sprouting from both sides of his jaw, and two straight dark blue horns jutting out backward from his cranium. More fins were on the back of his forearms and calves, as well as on his spine from head to tail tip. The figure’s legs were bent in a fetal pose, and a comically large tail mostly blocked them from view that was not only as long as he was tall, but also nearly the same width as his waist. It curved inward and draped over his knees with the lower half snaking along the sand toward his front side.

Kin’dar thought he looked similar to skittery lizards he’d seen in the forest, but they were small, harmless, and soft. This figure was the complete opposite of all those descriptors.

Two long gashes were on his muscled, broad back. Kin’dar winced and stared too long at the tender and pink flesh that seemed as though it had only recently healed over.

They were too symmetrical to be random wounds, so did he use to have ... wings?

Kin’dar shuddered and pushed away the thought of wondering how they were removed.

*This guy looks like a dragon,* Kin’dar thought with incredulous awe.

He’d heard tales in his childhood that had dragons in them, but they were evil, big, and feral monsters that raided and destroyed villages. This stranger was hardly as enormous or feral as they were depicted in the fables.

The fox put a hand to his chin.

*If this is a dragon person, does that mean dragons exist, too?*

Kin’dar shook his head from the possibilities racing through his head. He brought his attention back to the dragon man and grimaced as he tiptoed closer, quietly kneeling down to place a hand on his shoulder.

...

Nothing happened.

He tried nudging him and shot his hand away in anticipation.

...

The body remained still.

After a few seconds, Kin’dar tried pulling at his shoulder and was shocked that he wouldn’t budge. The fox harrumphed, grabbed onto his shoulder with both hands, and pulled hard.

The dragon rolled over on his back with his left hand flopping onto his chest and his right falling palm up on the sand along with his tail.

Kin’dar stood up and backed away once more, but nothing occurred, save for his shock over the dragon being completely naked.

The fox’s face grew hot, and he instinctively turned away in shame from having seen another person unclothed. It was seen as unbecoming and embarrassing to his people, somehow being an instinctive desire of theirs to separate themselves from wild animals. But he hadn’t turned away fast enough and had seen all of the dragon, which is why he then blinked in confusion.

He hadn’t seen any genitals, even though the dragon was very likely male. He hesitantly turned his head back around and confirmed this was so.

He suddenly recalled how this was the case for lizards as well, and snakes to boot. Maybe dragon people were the same way? Lizard people? He wasn’t sure what to call this person.

He abandoned the unnecessary line of questioning and looked him over from head to paw once more. As physically intimidating and powerful as the dragon looked, he had an unusually peaceful and friendly look despite his angular features, sharp teeth, and a scar beneath his right eye. As the fox looked at his head, he leaned in closer and slowly reached up to his right horn after noticing a silver band at its base. He ran his fingers along it and stumbled upon something metallic that clinked. He gently folded the dragon’s pliable ear fin forward to discover a silver pendant hanging behind it from a short chain link attached to a silver metal ring. The pendant was shaped into two perpendicular lines laid over each other, but the vertical one was longer on the bottom.

A simple variation of a cross. He wasn’t sure what it meant beyond being the literal meaning of his last name.

In hovering closer to the dragon’s head, Kin’dar’s ears suddenly perked up not because of a noise, but the absence of one—breathing. He looked back at the dragon’s dark blue chest and saw it wasn’t moving, so he let go of the pendant and shifted his knees in the sand to kneel directly to the side of the dragon’s midsection so he could lean down and press one of his notably long ears against the dragon’s chest.

There was no heartbeat.

He shot back upward with his eyes darting between the chest and mouth. There was no telling how long he had been like this, but he had to try it.

“Okay,” Kin’dar nervously whispered, exhaling to collect himself and remember the Foreriders’ technique for helping someone who had drowned.

He swung his right leg over the dragon’s stomach so both knees were resting on the sand to both sides of his waist, and then he started rhythmically pressing on the dragon’s chest for a minute or so with stacked and flat palms. He paused before the next step, putting one hand on the top and the other on the bottom of the dragon’s snout to keep it tightly closed as he breathed in two large breaths. Afterwards, he repeated the process anew.

The fox continued like this for several minutes before slowing from exhaustion. He heard nothing every time he checked for a heartbeat. By the seventh attempt, he lifted his head with his ears turning downward.

“What am I going to do with you?” he said somberly and breathlessly, looking at the dragon’s placid face. He weakly flapped his arms at his sides and frowned. “I was too late. I ... I ca—”

The dragon breathed sharply inward and sat up quicker than Kin’dar could register with his snout colliding into his face, which made the fox yelp and stand upright in fright, but the impact and sudden backward momentum made him trip and fall onto his back. His heart rate soared, and he clasped his snout with both hands as he made muffled noises of pain, but that didn’t keep him down. He sat up as fast as the dragon had, only to see him pouncing into him with a devilish snarl and outstretched talons.

“Wait!” Kin’dar yelled in distress, holding out one hand. But he was forced down as the dragon’s hand wrapped around his neck and pinned him to the ground. The fox froze as the dragon lifted his other hand above with the fingers contorting into claws. He had Kin’dar’s lower body pinned. The fox’s breath caught in his throat as the dragon stared down at him with glowing amber eyes and a low ferocious growl.

Then, the dragon blinked, and his eyes glowed no more. The irises shrunk in diameter as well to reveal the whites surrounding them. His snarl was wiped away by a dazed expression as he became quiet.

The fox felt the dragon’s grip loosen around his neck. He slowly relaxed and lowered his right hand as well. Then, he lifted both hands in front of himself and stared at them. After a few seconds, he gasped after looking down at himself, pressing and rubbing his hands flat against his chest and stomach, and then he reached over and under both shoulders to feel at his back. His breaths grew faster and louder.

His attention eventually focused back on Kin’dar. He scrambled off of him, regarded him for a moment of tense silence, and ran off in the direction Kin’dar had come from.

The fox was frozen for a couple seconds, but he blinked and let his held breath go, then furrowing his features in anger, confusion, and concern.

“Hey, wai—”Kin’dar tried to say, but he abruptly coughed from how tight the dragon’s grip had been around his neck. He cleared his throat, sat up, and extended a hand in the direction of the retreating stranger.

“Wait! Come back!”

The dragon didn’t stop.

Kin’dar groaned in exasperation, slouching and letting his outstretched hand pound the sand. He got to his paws and began sprinting toward the dragon, even though he felt crazy for doing so.

After several strides, he realized the dragon had an incredibly wide and unstable gait, as though he didn’t know how to walk. In fact, he almost fell over when he looked back and saw he was being pursued.

“Hey, stop!” Kin’dar shouted. “I’m trying to help y—*Hey, don’t touch my stuff!”*

The dragon was just about to run past his belongings, which he had only slowed down for a second to look at, but he glanced back at Kin’dar again upon hearing him and tensed in greater fear, continuing his confused southward sprint.

Kin’dar cursed under his breath. Of course he didn’t care about that.

The fox was about ten strides behind the dragon, who slowed again when he noticed the river that cut through the shore. The dragon nearly tripped over himself once more picking up his pace, running as fast as his legs would carry him, which wasn’t fast at all since his tail and overall body looked like a lot to lug around.

Kin’dar slowed to a jog because he would overtake him in no time by sprinting. He sensed he didn’t need to bolt after the dragon. Something was very wrong when a reptilian brute was running scared from a lanky mammal like himself.

“Please, let me help you!” he yelled as nicely as possible. The dragon continued to ignore him and halted at the edge of the river. He dropped to his knees and fell forward with his arms plunging halfway into the water so that his face and upper body was hovering just over the bubbling and partly foamy surface. He leaned closer and didn’t move while staring at his reflection, only heaving from exhaustion.

Kin’dar skidded to a stop several feet away. He didn’t know what to say, but decided it best to keep silent. To his surprise, a minute or two passed with the dragon seemingly forgetting about his presence.

During this while, he watched the dragon gently take off the ring that was on his horn. The dragon had sat up straight with both arms leaning on his thighs as he held the ring out in front of him.

Kin’dar cleared his throat.

The dragon gasped, twisting in place to acquire the fox with scared eyes. His fins had twitched and flared out at the noise, and now his tail curled around his legs as he half turned away. The dragon only looked into his eyes briefly before they darted away to look back at the water.

Kin’dar felt a wave of sympathy wash over him seeing the scars. He lifted his hands up and knelt down slowly to the dragon’s level.

“Don’t be scared,” he said quietly, searching for words. “I … you were lying over there in the sand,” he continued, pointing in the direction the dragon had been. “You weren’t breathing. I was trying to save you.”

The dragon looked upset, and he dipped his head downward and sheepishly crossed his arm across his chest to hold his opposing bicep.

“Are you okay?” Kin’dar asked.

After a few seconds, the dragon placed the ring back on his horn. His facial features twitched and contorted as his mouth moved silently for a few seconds.

“I … okay,” he eventually said, very slowly and intensely, looking at Kin’dar with a concentrated yet nervous expression. “Th—… Th-Thaank you … save … mee.”

He had an uncharacteristically soft-spoken yet deep voice that cracked a couple times.

“I … am … sorry,” the dragon added almost too quietly to be heard as he cast his gaze downward. “Me … I do … did not know you … help,” he stammered out. Then, his fins sagged. “I am sorry.”

Kin’dar frowned, but his expression quickly turned into a soft smile. He couldn’t believe how timid this person was, so he maneuvered himself closer and reached out with his hand to gently touch his spiky shoulder.

“That is okay,” Kin’dar said, assuming a slower and more enunciated manner of speaking. “I believe you.”

The dragon had tensed and abruptly leaned away from the touch, so he had lowered his arm to show he meant no harm. Kin’dar instead took that hand and put it to his own chest.

“My name is Kin’dar,” he said, then pointing a finger forward with the same hand. “What is your name?”

The dragon looked intensely at Kin’dar’s mouth as he spoke, and once he finished, he looked down and concentrated again, closing his eyes rather tightly.

“I ... am a leviathan,” he eventually said. “My name is ... Jrain.”

“Jrain. That is good, Jrain,” he said, nodding slowly and smiling. “Can you tell me how you got here? Where are you from?”

Jrain paused for a long time.

“I … do not know,” he mumbled. “I only have … had dream of myself with four legs, also I-I was hurt bad.” Since he was still at a half turn, he briefly twisted so Kin’dar could see his back more clearly. After this, he shifted his knees in the sand to face Kin’dar more directly.

“I talked to … I need to do something, and now …”—he trailed off, looking around before gesturing to himself—“I do not … understand why I am this.”

Kin’dar’s ears subtly twitched at the mention of ‘four legs.’

*So, there are feral dragons,* he pondered.

His mind went blank for a moment, and he briefly shut his eyes.

*Who in Foren have I come across today?*

“Well,” Kin’dar began, opening his eyes and clearing his throat. “That is okay. I have never seen anyone like you before, so … maybe we can find out together?”

Jrain did nothing for a moment, but eventually nodded, still keeping his head low.

“Hey, um,” Kin’dar began to say, pausing to look around until he caught sight of his belongings. He pointed behind him. “I have food that I brought with me. Are you hungry?”

Jrain’s back slightly straightened, and he directly looked at Kin’dar. His fins also briefly twitched at the mention of food.

“I … am hungry, yes,” he quietly answered, putting a hand to his stomach. A gurgle from within him shortly followed, making his eyes widen in embarrassment.

Kin’dar’s eyebrows raised in surprise and amusement.

“I think what you meant is that you *need* to eat,” he said playfully. “Come on,” he invited, rising from the sand and reaching out his hand.

Jrain’s arms raised halfway at the gesture, but they gently lowered in hesitation as he looked from Kin’dar’s hand to his face.

“I promise it’s okay,” he affirmed, relaxing his more enunciated tone. “I won’t hurt you, Jrain. I want to be your friend.”

“... O-oh,” Jrain said. “You don’t have to ... I don’t … not after …” he trailed off again, looking to his left and right. “No, I need to go somewhere, but I d-don’t know why. I am so tired. I don’t …” his voice was shaking, and he shifted his knees to have his back to Kin’dar once more as he slouched and stared at his reflection.

Instinctively, Kin’dar walked toward Jrain and knelt by his right side. He got close and gently put his arm around his shoulders.

Jrain slightly recoiled at the gesture, but he stopped himself from pulling away this time. He looked emotionally overwhelmed.

Then, he lifted his right arm and placed it around Kin’dar’s back. Jrain paused, his mouth now starting to quiver. He turned again so his body was facing Kin’dar, and he gently pulled him in across the sand and spread out his legs just enough so the fox would slide in between them. Jrain drew him in as close as possible to his chest and placed his other arm around Kin’dar’s back for a full embrace, squeezing his waist gently with his thighs.

Kin’dar didn’t make any sudden moves, only maneuvering his face so that it rested on Jrain’s left shoulder. He wondered if his life was flashing before his eyes with Jrain about to make a meal out of him.

Goosebumps raised all over his skin when Jrain craned his head to rest over Kin’dar’s left shoulder blade. He wasn’t taking a bite out of him, it seemed.

And now that his head was on Jrain’s shoulder, he could look down behind him and see his giant tail slowly swaying side to side across the sand. And not only that, Jrain’s scales were now glowing with winding lines of cool blue light.

All this while, Kin’dar’s arms were stiffly hovering at his own sides. Unsure of what else to do, he slowly brought his shaking arms around Jrain’s sides to hug him back, which were just the right length for the pads of his hands to rest on the scars.

Kin’dar’s heart skipped a beat touching them, but Jrain surprised him further by rumbling softly when he had brushed them. The fox gingerly placed his hands back on the scars, tenderly and slowly rubbing them. Jrain’s version of a cat’s purr not only resumed, but his embrace also became a little tighter.

As Kin’dar let the moment play out, he tried to relax as he felt the dragon’s frame rise and fall with a calmer disposition amid the low vibrations of his sonorous rumbling. The fox felt Jrain’s back and arm muscles loosen as well.

Kin’dar was still uneasy, but he closed his eyes and embraced the moment for what it was with the bubbling river to the side. The waves crashing. The sun warming his fur. A ferocious dragon man lovingly holding him like no one else had since ...

*What is going on?* Kin’dar thought in disbelief.

He knew this must be hard for Jrain. Or maybe not? Kin’dar assumed it was something Jrain needed, or maybe it was his people’s way of seeking out comfort. Or apologizing. Maybe there was truth to both. Either way, he had *not* expected this.

Jrain’s tail stopped moving, and then a sharp sniffle came from over Kin’dar’s left shoulder. Jrain pulled away and rubbed his forearm across his snout, and then his hands over his eyes. He then shuffled himself two feet away to give Kin’dar a couple feet of space. Jrain clasped his hands in his lap and hunched forward.

“I’m sorry, I … I d-don’t know why I did that,” Jrain said quietly. “It’s just that … you’re very nice, and I don’t know what to say, and … thank you.”

This time, Jrain kept his eyes softly trained on Kin’dar. The fear in them was gone, replaced by a curious, innocent optimism.

The fox realized he was blankly staring at Jrain for too long. He blinked.

“I, uh … no. I just … well, thank you, too,” Kin’dar said. “Do you feel better, I mean? That was a nice hug,” Kin’dar said, ending his sentence with a breathless chuckle.

The first sign of a grin crept at the edges of Jrain’s mouth, which he seemed to be trying to hide, but he wasn’t able to.

“I wi— … I did f—ah, *I do feel better*,” he said with frustration toward the end, yet there was a happiness to his voice that hadn’t been there before. “I am … I’m sorry for the talking,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck and sighing. “I don’t remember talking before.”

“I understand,” said Kin’dar.

There was still a lot he didn’t understand, but he saw Jrain heave a sigh of relief at those words. Much of the anxiety etched in his face and lined in his voice seemed to leave his body.

They knelt on the sand in silence. Kin’dar looked around, but he noticed Jrain hadn’t taken his eyes off him, so the fox slapped his hands against his thighs and cleared his throat.

“Well, how about that food, then?”

Jrain nodded gently and grinned.

“All right, let’s go,” Kin’dar said pleasantly, whipping his head in the direction of his things. He swiftly rose to his feet, and Jrain quickly did the same but almost fell backward.

“Whoa, whoa,” he said, trying to lean his body and wave his arms forward. He sighed in relief when he stabilized himself, then twisting around to look at his tail.

“No wonder you ran so strangely,” Kin’dar said, which made Jrain turn around with a confused expression. “I guess you’re not used to only using two legs to support that overgrown tail.” He narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms.

Jrain stared at Kin’dar for a moment and huffed with tiny puffs of steam leaving his nostrils.

“I-I can’t help it!” he stammered out. “Don’t make fun of my tail, or I’ll … I will pounce on you again,” Jrain responded facetiously, taking a step toward Kin’dar and puffing his chest out as he raised his hands into claws with a mock growl.

A couple seconds passed until Jrain’s arms loosened with an expectant look emerging on his face as he peered down at the fox.

Kin’dar realized it was Jrain’s attempt at humor, which he didn’t catch as well since Jrain’s mere presence up close was so daunting. He hadn’t realized until now he was over a foot taller. And nearly twice as wide.

“Oh, really now?” Kin’dar eventually said, overcoming his surprise with a dramatically raised eyebrow as he put his hands on his hips and glared up at Jrain. “I think you’ll find I can outrun you no problem,” he added with an exaggerated pride, turning his backside around to swish his white-tipped tail.

Jrain laughed for the first time, and Kin’dar joined him.

They turned with their backs to the river and walked side by side. Kin’dar adopted a slower stride to accommodate Jrain’s reluctant pace, and he subtly looked up at him. There was an innocent eagerness to his eyes as he looked forward. His warm grin was reassuring.

Kin’dar internally scoffed imagining this pairing. They went from being panicked strangers to embracing friends. This dragon—*a dragon*—looked like a deadly beast, but he turned out to be a childlike, nice person, though exceedingly awkward and enigmatic.

The fox grinned at the contrasts and various turns of events. Nothing could have prepared him for this day. Yet he was glad he had been here. His anxiety from the week had already been lifted, but he’d be lying if he said it hadn’t been replaced with a new yet welcome stress. He had to figure out what to do with an amnesic dragon person after he ate his food.

It was no ordinary day in Foren.

To be continued.