**The Leviathan of Alden**

**Book 1**

**Chapter 2**

 **Land Legs**

Jrain raised the bottle of golden liquid in his hand to admire its sparkling, shimmering quality as the sun’s light filtered through it.

*What is all this?* he thought.

He lowered the bottle into his lap and put its neck in his other hand, slowly twisting the bottle several times over in his grasp and watching tiny bubbles float to the liquid’s surface.

He raised one of his hands and studied it, deliberately releasing and clenching his fingers.

*How did this happen?*

He refocused his attention on the bottle, now determined to open it by grabbing at the cork keeping the golden ambrosia inside. Jrain took two fingers and tried tugging at it, but he couldn’t get a good grip. He snarled and his tail instinctively thumped behind him on the ground.

He thought for a moment, tapping the glass with a steady *clink, clink, clink* …

Then, he extended his index finger and carefully yet firmly jabbed his talon into the cork.

A brisk *pop* sounded when he pulled on the cork, and his hand flew out to the side. Jrain smiled as he brought the cork near to his eyes. Triumph.

A few seconds later, he gasped when he felt a cold rush down his inner thigh. He looked down and saw the liquid pouring out, so he swiftly tilted the bottle upward before any more could escape.

He sighed with his fins drooping.

*Why am I like this?*

Thankfully, he saw that only a third of the liquid had been lost, so he shrugged and brought the bottle’s lip to his mouth, tilting it up a little too fast with some liquid spilling down his chin. He hunched forward with his other hand instinctively snapping forward to hover under his chin, as if he could catch it somehow. He relaxed a bit when he found the right pace to slowly tip the bottle backward to keep drinking.

Kin’dar had called this mead. Jrain savored its unusual flavor as his thirst was quenched, which was much stronger than he had realized before downing the contents. Who knew how long he had been unconscious, and how many meals he’d missed? He chugged gulp after gulp, tilting the bottle farther and farther back. He loved how refreshing and sweet, yet dry and bitter, this mead was.

Jrain’s eyes flew open when it stopped flowing forth. He brought the bottle down, turned it over, and shook it gently until a tiny drop plopped onto the sand. Jrain frowned and scratched the back of his neck in sudden embarrassment, hoping that Kin’dar wouldn’t mind that he’d had it all … including the food.

Jrain leaned over to his left and placed the bottle atop the cloth coverings inside the basket, and then he leaned back on the sand with his left hand, letting out a steamy breath from a satisfied stomach. He brought his right hand out in front of him and rubbed at his slightly rounder belly.

After savoring the moment, Jrain placed his right hand behind him as well to lean back more fully and comfortably. He had been looking at the gray blue sky, but had noticed—toward the south, which was also his right—it was being overtaken by gray with dark clouds in tow, like a shadowy frontline leading an army of darkness sweeping over the heavens.

He looked down and thought to call out and get Kin’dar’s attention, but when he caught sight of him, he cocked his head and grinned in a mix of amusement and bewilderment.

*Who exactly is he?*

The fox was frantically climbing his board to stand on it with a wave forming behind him, and Jrain chuckled when he heard Kin’dar happily cry out as he rode inside the arch of this wave. The dragon kept his gaze trained on him as he neared the shore with the wave dissipating into the tide. Kin’dar awkwardly hopped off the board, picked it up to tuck it under an arm, and trudged through the shallow water onto wet sand with heavy breaths.

He stood there for a good minute with his hands propped on his knees. Before long, he brought himself back up and waved at Jrain, jogging over to him and kicking up dry sand as he neared, which speckled Jrain’s legs.

“*That’s* waveriding,” Kin’dar said, pointing behind himself with the thumb of his free hand before running a hand through the wet fur on his head.

Jrain grinned as he looked up at Kin’dar. He was a head shorter and not as big-boned or muscular, but he was sinewy and limber. He had kind eyes that sparkled like amethyst amid the circular patch of black fur on his face, which was surrounded by a perimeter of ash that quickly bled into a rich orange on his ears and cheeks. He had taken off his shirt before waveriding, so he could see that the front of his mid-section was black, which curved into orange streaks along his sides like lava running through volcanic rock.

When Jrain had held him close, he felt so delicate and thin. And with his downy, slightly unkempt fur, Jrain hadn’t wanted to let go. It reminded him of the comfort he had felt in that vision with the hand atop his paw.

What a dream he’d had. If it was a dream. He was still tossing that around in his head.

For a moment, his heart leapt at how good it had felt to be … protective and gentle with Kin’dar, especially after he had almost hurt him. Perhaps he had done it because the fox had been so forgiving and generous. Eagerly helpful and friendly. Expressing his thanks in that way had spoken to him in ways he couldn’t explain that had made him feel so calm and grounded.

“I feel like I have do … done waveriding before,” he said, wistfully gazing out to the sea and pointing at it. “But no board. It was just … me.”

“Well!” Kin’dar exclaimed. He took his waverider out from under his arm and drove it into the sand. “I think I’ll need to stick with this to get anywhere out there.” He then looked down at his slick fur, which had flattened out and made him look like a beanpole.

“*Oh.* One second,” he said, getting down on all fours before shaking himself violently.

Jrain gasped and brought his arms up to shield himself from the unexpected shower.

“H-hey! A little warning next time?”

“You look like a guy who can handle a little water!” Kin’dar replied as he stood back up and laughed.

“It does look like it’s going to rain soon,” Jrain said, looking up to his right. Kin’dar followed his gaze and his eyes widened.

“Oh, wow, that came *a lot* sooner than I thought it would. I was too in the zone with waveriding!” he exclaimed happily. “Ah, well, could you hand me the towel in my backpack? Please?”

Jrain nodded and twisted to his left to pick it up and put it in his lap, his head going this way and that as he looked over it. He furrowed his brows as he hesitantly poked at metal pieces attached to straps that kept the bag closed.

“Um … I don’t want to break your bag, can y—” Jrain said, but he abruptly paused and stifled a laugh after looking up. Kin’dar was way fluffier than normal after having shaken himself.

*“I know,”* Kin’dar said, making an exasperated expression as his shoulders slumped and tail sagged. “Here, let me show you how it’s done. I need to stop looking like this as soon as possible.”

He knelt down next to Jrain and walked him through the process. He showed him how to adjust the metal pins in the middle of the square metal pieces that held the leather straps in place by sticking them through holes. Once Jrain slid the pins out of the holes he was able to pull the straps loose and open the flap.

Kin’dar held out his palms grandly to his sides.

“Ta-da,” he said, standing back up and moving over to where he was standing before. “Now, let’s try this again.” Kin’dar exaggeratingly cleared his throat, assuming a voice with an accent Jrain could only assume was meant to sound snobby.

“Jrain, if you would be so kind, could you reach into my backpack to retrieve my towel? I’m quite unseemly in appearance.”

Jrain snorted.

“Now I can,” he said, sticking out and biting his blue tongue in concentration as he flipped back the flap. He saw a folded piece of rough green cloth and grabbed hold of it, lifting it up to Kin’dar.

“Ah, magnificent!” he exclaimed with a mock gasp. “Thank you, sire.”

Kin’dar dropped the voice and chucked as he let the towel unfurl in the air, then shaking it a couple times before grabbing both ends. He made the towel taut and rubbed it back and forth along his fur, which slowly regained its normal disposition. Meanwhile, Jrain’s gaze returned to the ocean. He felt himself get lost in the sound and sight of the waves.

*Why did he help me?*

...

*Should I tell him?*

...

“Jrain?”

The dragon shook his head and looked at Kin’dar, who was leaning down and slowly waving at him from the side.

“O-oh, sorry,” Jrain said, bringing his hands together in his lap.

“I lost you for a second,” Kin’dar said, letting his waving hand drop to his side. He brought his hand to his mouth and cleared his throat. “Ah, well … hm.”

Kin’dar threw out his towel, guiding it down to the ground so that it was laid out straight and flat. He walked onto the towel and grunted as he knelt down and twisted himself around to sit in the same direction as Jrain. He regarded him for a moment, also crossing his legs and clasping his hands as he did.

Jrain looked at him as he did all this, but Kin’dar paid him no mind as he grew silent and stared out at the sea as well. Jrain grinned and kept doing the same. Nothing passed between them for a couple minutes.

*Should I tell him?*

“And that’s all I remember until I … well …”

Jrain trailed off and finally brought his eyes up to look at Kin’dar. Jrain had stopped walking a couple minutes ago and been staring anywhere but at his friend, who conversely had been and still was staring at him with a nonplussed expression. A long silence ensued between them with nothing but the susurrations from above and chirping of songbirds around them.

They had packed up Kin’dar’s things and been journeying back to his house for the past half hour. He had said it took nearly 40 minutes to get there, so Jrain had volunteered to carry his waverider and basket. They’d been walking alongside the same ravine that Kin’dar had trekked beside a couple hours ago. For the last ten minutes, the path had curved slightly to the right along with its river, and at this juncture, it forked with a second river, now splitting the land ahead of them as well.

Jrain still wasn’t over this strange, new world. Something he remembered seeing in his memories had been rough trees with long, thin, sharp leaves, but the trees here were thicker and taller. They closely grew together for miles on end to create a low-hanging sky of much tinier leaves that were shades of red and orange and brown and green. They slowly and lazily fell through the air onto the forest floor’s grass, which was losing much of its green due to the colder season of The Rest, as Kin’dar had informed him.

At the beginning of their hike, Jrain had walked off to the side of the dirt path to walk in the grass, kneeling to brush and run his paws and hands through it in fascination. The smooth, tickling sensation had brought back one of those fuzzy impressions of himself swimming through ... kelp? He thought that’s what it was called. His overall knowledge was spotty and inconsistent.

A bird had even landed on Jrain’s left horn at one point. Kin’dar had told him to reach out his hand so he could slowly put some seeds in it that he kept in a side pouch on his backpack. After he had backed away upon doing so, the bird landed on Jrain’s palm and pecked at the seeds. Jrain had looked at the bird with dazzled eyes and a smiling, agape mouth. This bird had been unlike the black and white ones he’d seen flying around the beach’s cliffs. No, this one was vividly red with a face shrouded in black like a mask of shadow, much like Kin’dar’s face. He couldn’t resist reaching out with a talon to pet the bird’s pointed, feathered head, but it had flown off.

The forest was magical. It was the first thing that made Jrain forget about his frustrations with his mind and new body. He wished he could tell someone about these things, if only to better understand them for himself by talking about them out loud.

And that’s exactly what he had been doing for the last five minutes or so.

Granted, Jrain was sure he hadn’t conveyed everything well since he was still figuring out how to talk with plenty a pause and stutter. There was so much that didn’t make sense, and he was sure Kin’dar would think he was even crazier if he disclosed everything.

*An otherworldly being? A liege? Good and evil powers?*

No, Jrain only brought up what he felt comfortable sharing.

“Let me see if I got this right,” Kin’dar said, shifting his paws in the dirt to fully turn to Jrain. He broke eye contact to look out into space. His face showed he was thinking hard.

“You were a feral dragon with wings. You also remember that you need to find some friends.” Kin’dar paused and cocked his head, looking up at Jrain now. “You also remember transforming into”—Kin’dar gestured toward Jrain—“this while you felt pressure keep you from moving. I think that sensation might just relate to when I was trying to bring you back. And then you woke up.”

“T-that is right, yes,” Jrain said.

“Maybe you were only a feral dragon in the dream?”

Jrain shook his head.

“No, I know I was.”

“But you weren’t transforming before you woke up,” Kin’dar said. “You make it sound like it was going on just before that. I was around you for a couple minutes before I tried, well, bringing you back.”

“Maybe it was just a dream, but *it felt real*,” Jrain said, straightening and making a fist with one hand in determination. “And my scars … they don’t hurt anymore, but I had wings.”

Kin’dar slapped himself.

“Right, right. I forgot for a second. It’s just … so cryptic.”

Jrain had simplified and glossed over *a lot* of details.

“Alden,” Kin’dar uttered. “Had you heard of the name before your dream?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure,” Jrain replied uncertainly. He did say his friends could be there. He wondered if it had to do with those people he saw on the balcony. Or the person who had held his hand.

Kin’dar didn’t say anything, seeming to reflect on the name.

“You keep saying feral …?” Jrain half asked.

Kin’dar broke out of his thought with a nod.

“Yes, feral is a word we use to separate animal people and animals,” he confirmed. “For example, that bird from earlier?” Kin’dar paused and grinned at Jrain. “That was a feral bird, but I’ve heard there are bird people as well. I’ve never seen one, but they walk on two legs and can speak like you and I can. They live far away to the north, but we know they’re out there. Actually, my parents were among the rare few to meet some in their travels.” He paused. “Anyways, um, I’ve never heard of an animal turning into a person, and no lizard people. Plenty of feral ones around here, especially during the hotter seasons. But you said you remember being a big, winged dragon. You’re the first I’ve heard of beyond the tales,” Kin’dar said with a tone Jrain couldn’t discern.

“It’s a lot to take in, you know?” he added, sighing with weariness in his voice. “A dragon ... but hey, what’s important is that you’re okay even without your wings, right?”

“Right,” Jrain replied.

“Yes,” Kin’dar replied, nodding. “Well … we can see if anyone knows where this ‘Alden’ might be once we visit Foren in the morning, yeah?” A chilly breeze blew between them, and then a long, low rumble was heard from a couple miles away. “It’ll be getting dark soon, and we want to get inside in case that storm passes over us.”

Jrain nodded, and Kin’dar did likewise before resuming their walk until they stood at the river’s edge where a large tree trunk was laid.

“We’ve got to get across here,” he told Jrain, pointing to the trunk and tugging at his backpack straps. “Here, let me take those things,” he added, briskly walking toward Jrain, who reluctantly handed him his stuff.

“Are you sure?” Jrain asked.

“I’ve done this plenty of times,” Kin’dar said with spunk, leaning lightly to his side to look just behind Jrain. “I’m not sure, but I think you’ll want to consider picking up your tail so it doesn’t get caught on the trunk, or fall off and pull you with it,” he advised with a chuckle. “Besides you, Faleene may be the only kind of person I know who has to consider things like that!”

“You’re probably right,” Jrain said, grimacing as he looked back at his tail, which had left flattened grass and uprooted chunks in its wake. He stooped low and grabbed the middle of his tail with his left arm. Once he had hoisted it up, he pulled it closer to his chest so he could comfortably hold it under his left arm and the lower half in front of him in his right hand. He definitely wasn’t used to this sudden shifting of weight and balance.

Jrain looked up and Kin’dar was already halfway across the trunk with a grace and lightness Jrain couldn’t have imagined. He watched him in astonishment as he lightly jumped on the other side.

“All right, Jrain! You’ve got this!”

Jrain gulped at the distance he had to cover. The river was at least 30 feet across, and despite being a sea dragon, he wanted to challenge himself to see if he could avoid falling. He gingerly stepped on the edge of the trunk and put one paw in front of the other.

Two steps … four steps ... ten steps …

With only a few wobbles along the way, he’d made it halfway across the trunk.

“You’re doing great!” he said, lifting up one hand and tilting it with his fingers making a sideways U-shape. Jrain didn’t have time to figure out what that meant.

Jrain had looked up at Kin’dar and smiled from the motivation, but in looking down again, he straightened in anxiety at the churning rapids below, even squeezing his tail like a scared child would do to a parent’s leg. Jrain started tiptoeing again, but two steps in, he suddenly veered to his left, which was the side of his body that his tail was coming around.

He made a frightened noise as he let go of his tail with his right hand to extend that arm aggressively in that direction. The end of his tail flopped down in front of his calves onto the trunk as he kept leaning right. He managed to stabilize himself and awkwardly knelt down to pick up the end of his tail once more, timidly resuming his balancing act.

When there were but a few steps left, Jrain suddenly went into a hopping jog of sorts with long strides, and nervous grunts accompanied every footfall. He leapt down in front of Kin’dar with the successive thuds of his paws and tail. Then, he let out his pent-up breath and stood back up to his full height, looking at his friend in relief.

“I’m glad that’s over,” Jrain said breathlessly, unable to hold back a smirk. Maybe he could get used to only using two legs.

“You get extra points for doing that with your tail!” Kin’dar said humorously.

Jrain chuckled, but then cleared his throat as he gestured toward Kin’dar’s stuff.

“Oh, don’t worry. I got this for the rest of the way,” he said. “Let’s go!”

Jrain followed him as he led the way to where the dirt path resumed. However, Jrain was trying to muster up the courage to ask Kin’dar something. His heart was beating heavily, and he nervously rubbed his hands together.

“So, um…” Jrain began to say, pausing when he saw Kin’dar’s right ear straighten. His head followed through with the motion as he tilted it to the side.

“Hmm?” he hummed.

“… W-where do you come from?” Jrain asked.

“Oh!” Kin’dar exclaimed. “Well, everyone is from Foren. Several hundred people live there, and that’s where I’m going to take you tomorrow morning,” he said with an excited swoosh of his bushy tail. “I was born there.”

“Oh …” Jrain said under his breath. “Will they be okay with me?”

Kin’dar hesitated. “I think you’ll get some strange looks at first, to be honest, but that’s normal when it comes to new and different people. Pretty much everyone in town has fur and teeth like me. There are other foxes, of course, but there are bears, tigers, racoons, wolves—animals like those. You will want to put some clothes on before we go, like me,” Kin’dar added, spinning around to gesture at his undershirt and shorts, now walking backward.

“Why?” Jrain asked plainly.

“Well, uh,” Kin’dar said, pausing to nervously laugh. “You’re like a reptile, so you don’t have to worry about exposing yourself. Mammals like me don’t have that privilege.”

“I see,” Jrain said. He didn’t get why that was a big deal.

“I don’t think your clothes will fit me,” he added quietly.

“Oh, no worries, I thought about that,” he said, chuckling. “I got just the thing for you. You’ll see.”

He turned back around to walk forwards, and a minute of silence passed between them with nothing but the sound of their paws softly thumping on the path. Leaves shuffled and crackled here and there from being stepped on.

Jrain leaned over during this time to pick a flower with vibrant blue petals, of which he had seen patches of here and there along the sides of the path. He idly rolled the stem between his fingers and studied the bulbous base and mesmerizing assortment of petals that surrounded purple fuzzy tubes sprouting from the center.

“Why do you live outside Foren?” Jrain asked.

Kin’dar let out something between a sigh and a laugh.

“For multiple reasons. Let’s say I don’t agree with how some things are done there, and … well, personal history.”

“Why?” Jrain asked, now cradling the flower’s stem in both hands out in front of him.

“It’s because … because I’m a writer!” Kin’dar explained. “Yeah, the town is pretty noisy and crowded, so being alone and closer to nature is perfect. By day, I record, manage, and correlate logs of citizens’ comings and goings in and out of Foren from the southern gate. Paperwork stuff. Governor Stella has instated a strict curfew and meticulous planning and resources toward … keeping the town safer.” He then signaled Jrain to duck underneath some branches partly obscuring the path. “I also run something called a newsletter, which I publish once a month. I have some friends who contribute to and help publish it with this machine you’ll have to see,” Kin’dar said excitedly. “I thought it was important to spread important stories across town. You know, fun events, what people are working on, people’s opinions on stuff that’s going on. People should be informed and have a say in things, to put it another way.”

“Okay,” Jrain said pleasantly, amazed by what Kin’dar was saying but not sure what half of it meant or was like. “I really want to see all these things. I … I am not sure if I ...”—Jrain paused as he ducked under the branches—“… have been to a town before. I am … ah, I’m sorry. I sound so silly saying things like that,” Jrain confessed, putting his face in the palm of his hand. “What I mean is that I can picture some things that you mention. I know what they mean but don’t always know if I have experienced them. I don’t know why.”

“Jrain, you don’t need to apologize,” Kin’dar said, stopping in his tracks and turning around to reach up and place a hand on his shoulder. “It’s kind of like if I stop waveriding for a while. I will forget how to do it properly, but once I get back to it, a lot of it will come back to me. Sometimes, I have to ask my friends when I forget things I’ve already learned. Maybe the same applies for you. Just give yourself time,” he said, patting Jrain’s shoulder reassuringly. Kin’dar stepped back and smoothly waved the same hand out behind himself in a showy wave. “Now, there’s something I’d like to show you!”

Kin’dar turned away and jogged out of sight around a bend in the path just ahead. Jrain’s fins flared out as he followed and walked out of the forest.

A house made of tree trunks lay in the near distance. Several windows were fastened into its walls. There was a tall red chimney attached to one side and a couple log columns held up an extension of the roof, which had four wooden chairs and a matching table underneath it. While most of the area surrounding the house was clear, a few trees were left standing behind it and in intervals to the sides of the path, which continued straight onward to large hills that could be seen over a final, short stretch of forest. Miles and miles to his left, that incredible mountain range could still be seen, which must easily pierce the heights of the clouds. This drew Jrain’s gaze upward to see the dark overcast looming overhead, and just then, he felt the pitter patter of rain on his snout.

“Ha, we made perfect time,” Kin’dar said, holding out his palm as a couple drops hit it. “Let’s get inside!”

He casually jogged along the path with Jrain following him. looking all around in wonder. His tail swayed along the ground, even more so than normal since he was doubly excited to see the inside of this house.

They soon walked onto the porch after ascending a three-step stair to stand before a door to the right that Jrain hadn’t seen from the angle they had approached the house from. Kin’dar flung his backpack around and set it on the floor, and after ruffling through it to produce a set of metal keys, he stood back up to place one of them inside a metal surface beneath a vertical handle. Jrain shivered with his fins twitching when he heard a clicking sound after Kin’dar turned the key, grabbed the handle, and swung the door open.

“So, this is the living room where I write and eat,” Kin’dar said, gesturing to the table in front of them, which had a window next to it on the right. “Past that hearth behind the table is the kitchen, where I store and make food. Follow me!” He walked to the left of the door and turned another 90 degrees past a short wall, which revealed two hallways. “If you keep walking down that hallway straight ahead, the washroom is to your immediate left. You can ignore that small room at the end; I just store stuff in there.” He took a few steps forward and turned to his right before the other hallway. “My room is on the right if you walk down to the end, and here …”—Kin’dar paused as he opened a door closer to them on the other side of the hallway—“… This is where you’ll be staying.”

Jrain walked over to the entrance and leaned against the outside wall with his hand on the jamb. He peeked his head inside and gasped in delight as his eyes scanned the room.

“There’s a bed with sheets ready for you. You can put stuff on the nightstand beside your bed, and once morning arrives, you’ll want to rummage around in that dresser over there,” Kin’dar said, pointing to the one adjacent to the bed. “The outfit that I mentioned earlier is somewhere in there. I’m sure you’ll figure out which one it is.”

“I-I get to stay here?” Jrain said, turning to look at Kin’dar in disbelief.

“Uh, yes? That’s what it’s for!” Kin’dar said, laughing. “It’s a guest room. I always have it prepared since I have friends over a lot. But it’s all yours for as long as you need it.”

Jrain looked over the room and back at Kin’dar a couple times over. He didn’t know what to say, so he swept the fox up in his arms and lifted him a bit off the floor, subtly rocking him back and forth while burying his snout into his shoulder.

“Thank you!” Jrain said excitedly, his voice muffled against Kin’dar’s fur.

“Y-you’re—*ack!*—welcome!” he said in a strained voice, patting Jrain’s back. “Ha, y-you can put me down, though!”

Jrain said, “Oh,” and gently put Kin’dar back on his paws, also being mindful now that his tail had been swaying wildly behind him while he rocked his friend around. He had to be careful not to knock anything over in here.

“I don’t know what t—”

“You don’t have to do or say anything, Jrain,” Kin’dar interjected in a stern yet polite way. “You’re my guest, and now, I’m going to take a shower, and then you can have one while I’m preparing dinner because I’m *very* hungry.” He raised an eyebrow at Jrain, who smiled guiltily.

“Sorry about that,” he said, rubbing his arm.

“I’m just messing with you,” he said, chuckling as he lightly punched the side of Jrain’s arm.

Just then, thunder rolled outside, but it was louder than from earlier. A few seconds later, the rain was falling more heavily.

“Well, I might not need the shower itself now, but ... yeah, whatever! And just so you know, it’s right outside to the left of the door leading out of the kitchen,” Kin’dar said, beginning to walk out of the hallway back into the living room. Jrain followed closely. “You’re going to love it. It sprays water at you, which comes from something we call a well. Little feat of Forenian engineering and architecture, that.” He turned left into the galley style kitchen, and Jrain leaned around the corner. “Anyways, you settle in wherever you like for the next few minutes. Use the washroom if you need to. Bye!”

“O-okay!” Jrain said. Kin’dar walked out and closed the door behind him just as he said that.

Jrain had reached toward Kin’dar and stepped forward instinctively just as he saw him leave his sight, but he lowered his arm and brought his legs and arms in, realizing this was the first time he was alone. So, he decided to distract himself.

He really liked this kitchen, which had two long counters to both sides. To his left, several cabinets lined the ceiling with others below them both. To his right, a sink with a metal contraption was in the center of the counter. While there were cabinets beneath the counter, there were none against the wall, which was home to various cooking utensils that hung from it; however, none obscured the rectangular window above the sink. Jrain approached it and pressed his palms against the pane, smiling as he watched the rain fall and droplets slide down the glass.

It was then that he realized he was still holding the flower in one hand, having forgotten from all the excitement. A carved wooden sill jutted out from under the window, slotted in place thanks to a long, narrow notch in the log immediately below. Much to Jrain’s surprise, one item on the sill was an empty glass vase with specks of dirt and water inside, so he delicately inserted the stem into it.

Now, the metal contraption was too weird for him to not fiddle with out of curiosity, and he gasped in delight when he pushed down on a latch that produced a short fountain of water. He did it again and eagerly bowed his head until his gullet was directly beneath the spout, and he pushed down on it several more times before leaning back up and sighing in relief from how fresh and crisp the water was. He resisted the impulse to keep doing that, but did it once more to fill up the vase. Once he placed it back on the sill, he clasped his hands together and smiled, happy that the flower could now be as refreshed as he was.

He walked out of the kitchen and saw several cooking wares spread out along the hearth. To his right, a shelf lined the wall from the kitchen to the hallway. He poked at some book spines and scrolls, but what caught his attention was an illustration of three foxes. He picked it up, and Jrain’s face lit up in recognition of a much younger Kin’dar wearing an oversized brimmed hat that covered one of his eyes. He was being enthusiastically held by a lanky male fox with way more orange and white fur, but the female had black fur like Kin’dar. Both wore the same kinds of hat and long-sleeved shirts and trousers, along with belts across their waists and chests with strange contraptions and gear, but he recognized some like ropes and knives.

Kin’dar’s dad had a grand smile, whereas the female had a more composed yet warm expression. She was turned toward her husband with one hand coming up from behind on his shoulder, and the other gently resting across her son’s chest.

Jrain grinned at how cute the illustration was, and thought how exciting it’d be to meet them, even if it made him a little nervous. He placed the frame back exactly as it had been.

He turned and went into his room toward the bed. After pressing into the top of it, he drew his hands back in surprise at how soft it was. He turned himself around and angled his tail upward so it would drape across the mattress as he sank down into it, which creaked a bit under his weight. He looked around the room absentmindedly and folded his hands together, looking down at them.

He closed his eyes, listening to the muffled rain that fell on the house as he squeezed his hands. How had he gotten so lucky?

“Here you are,” Kin’dar said. The house was dark, but everything immediately around the two was cast in a warm yellow glow. Kin’dar held what he had called an oil lamp, and he extended another one just like it to Jrain.

“If you need to get up during the night or just want some light, this comes in handy,” Kin’dar said. “If you need it to be more intense, you can twist this knob on the front, but not too much. Or if you want to turn it off, you turn it the other way, open the little door on the side, and blow at the flame until it snuffs out. Make sense?”

“Yes,” Jrain said, accepting the lamp and holding it up. “And thank you for dinner. And for talking some more. And for … well, everything,” Jrain said quietly.

“You’re welcome, Jrain,” he said, opening his mouth wide to yawn. “I’m excited for what tomorrow holds. Sleep well, friend.”

Jrain yawned in turn while Kin’dar turned to go down the hallway toward his room.

“Goodnight!” Jrain shouted back. Kin’dar waved silently as he looked at him kindly before entering his room and shutting the door.

Jrain happily strode over to the side of his bed and pulled up the covers. He slid one leg in and set the oil lamp on the nightstand, turning down the light by twisting it as Kin’dar had suggested. He lifted his tail and other leg under the sheets, and before lying down completely, he pulled the ring off his horn and set it next to the lamp. Only then did he pull the sheets up to his chest, letting out a content sigh followed by a soft rumble as he folded his hands on his chest.

*Maybe things aren’t so bad*, Jrain thought. *Maybe I don’t have to worry about that dream.*

*Yes, tomorrow’s a new day. I’ll go with Kin’dar to see his people. Maybe even his parents. And then we’ll come back and have dinner and spend more time together. And then we can go back to the beach soon. And then … and then …*

He lost track of his thoughts. With a refreshing, cleansing shower in the rain, food in his belly, a soft place to lay his head, and a full heart, he dosed off peacefully with the hope of a new day with a friend.

To be continued.