

FK Tale Part 3

"Can you tell me where to find this man?" Alana asked, her hand outstretched.

Alana's mother handed the sword back to her daughter.

"Of course."

Glancing outside, Alana could see the dust still settling over the New Kingdom. She'd only just stopped the Queen's attack, and while her people, both Norm and Thereon, were safe for now, there would be rebuilding to do.

But she had a bigger problem right in front of her. Her best friend Quill was injured.

He was lying on her bed with an open gash in his side.

Stabbed with a cursed blade, he may not die but he would live forever in pain. Because his wounds would *never* heal. Not unless Alana could find the scholar her mother knew, the one who might be able to decipher the text on the blade.

"He resides in a place a few days journey from here, called Storm Valley," Alana's mother said. "It is very dangerous. The valley is surrounded by a never-ending cyclone, a storm which has ravaged travelers for centuries."

"Then how am I supposed to reach him?"

"My daughter," her mother said, giving her an affectionate, knowing look. "I've never seen a woman as strong as you. If anyone can fly through the storm, I know you can."

Alana gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. Quill moaned and she noticed how pale he had become, the layer of sweat coating his slick forehead.

"Please..." Quill stammered. "...hurry."

Alana nodded to her friend, then turned to her mother.

"Will you make him as comfortable as possible?"

"Of course, darling. But are you sure this is the best option?"

"I don't see any other. I'll be as fast as I can."

Alana embraced her mother, who responded by holding her as tightly as possible.

"Promise me you will be safe. We've just found each other again."

"I promise, I will be back soon."

With that Alana was off. Clutching the cursed sword, she ran through the castle halls to the armory.

She equipped herself with fresh armor, a dagger, a bow, and quiver full of arrows. She slung the quiver over her shoulder and headed for the exit.

The sun was hot on her face when Alana exited through the back door of the castle. She stood on the palace lawn and spread her wings. She beat them once preparing to take off when she spotted a dark shape flying circles above her.

"What is that?" she asked, thinking it could be a vulture or an eagle. The dark creature began to descend and as it grew closer she began to see how much bigger than a normal bird it was.

Finally, the creature landed in front of her with a thud and Alana gasped in shock. Standing before her was Aquila; the Thereon who had protected Alana during the King's attempted invasion of the Forbidden Kingdom.

He pulled his massive wingspan into his sides and stood tall, his beak glinting in the light.

Alana widened her stance and prepared for an attack. After all, Aquila was one of the Queen's closest allies. But she was shocked when he dropped to one knee and bowed his large, feathered head.

“Alana,” he said, in a deep baritone voice. “You have shown us the truth and freed us from the Queen’s oppression. I am indebted to you.”

Alana was taken aback. She had brought peace between Thereons and Norms by showing them a hidden truth. That the two species had the same origins. But she wasn’t ready for this level of deference.

But then a thought occurred to her. She needed to find the cure for Quill’s injuries, but with her gone the New Kingdom would be left without leadership when it needed it the most.

If it was any other Thereon, she might have questioned their loyalty. But she knew Aquila better than any member of his kind. He had protected her in the past and had always been loyal to her. She knew she could trust him.

“Aquila, you are one of the wisest, strongest warriors I have ever met. But I need to know if I can trust you,” she said. “I need to know your allegiance no longer lies with the Queen.”

“My allegiance is with you, Alana. Twenty years ago, the Queen had my parents imprisoned for crimes of treason. They were Norm sympathizers. So brainwashed by her lies was I, that I distanced myself from my family and devoted my life to serving my Queen. You have shown me the truth. I was wrong to abandon my parents. And now I have a great debt to pay. I would like to pledge myself to you, to rebuild both of our Kingdoms, in the hopes of repaying that debt.”

“Very well,” Alana said. She was trying to sound as official as she could, but Aquila’s story touched her. It was just another way in which the Queen had damaged so many lives.

“I have a task for you,” she said. “Please stand.”

Aquila rose to his full height.

“I have a journey I must take to save my friend. But I need someone here to make sure things get back on track. There may still be tension between the two peoples of this land. I need someone I can trust to take care of them while I’m gone. Can I rely on you for that?”

Aquila appraised Alana for a moment before nodding.

“It would be a great honor,” the bird-man said.

“Very well,” Alana replied. She began to walk away before turning back one last time. “My mother is in my chambers, will you make sure she is safe?”

“You have my word.”

And with his reassurance Alana began to run, she spread her dragon wings wide and took off into the sky.

Wind battered Alana on all sides, rain lashed her face and lightning struck as she beat her wings through the storm.

She had flown for two days before she reached an ocean of red. Dark crimson waves swelled beneath her, stained by the blood of those who had attempted to penetrate the storm in the past. Others who did not survive the same journey she was about to undertake. Before her a storm cloud rose from the water to the stratosphere.

She plowed on, gliding over the muddy red sea toward the wall of grey.

“That must be the eternal cyclone!” she thought, glad to have reached it but apprehensive to dive headfirst into it.

But she didn’t have a choice. Quill needed her. There was no turning back and no stopping. With all the strength she had she dove into the clouds.

She flew as straight as she could while the storm raged all around. For hours it felt like she was flying through constant thunder and lightning.

She could barely see where she was heading and had no idea how long the storm would last, but she was determined to make it through.

Finally, after hours of battling the weather she burst through the other side. Brilliant sunlight met her face and she grinned.

She was able to slow her pace and look around.

The storm cloud behind her wrapped around, forming a complete vertical tunnel, above her was blue sky and beneath her was the lushest island she had ever seen. The red waves of the crimson ocean lapped at white sand beaches which rose to meet lush greenery.

"I'm in the eye of the storm," she said. "I made it."

Not wanting to wait any longer, she began her descent.

The island rose on both sides to form two towering mountain peaks and between them laid a valley. In the middle of the valley was a township, which Alana set her sights on.

She landed in the central square. The ground beneath her was solid dirt and around her sat squat huts made of bamboo and palm fronts. She noticed a few of the townspeople peering out of their doors.

"They mustn't have a lot of visitors," Alana huffed to herself. She began walking through the village, looking for someone who could be her scholar.

But all she found were weathered old ladies shutting their blinds or children being pulled back into their houses by grunting fathers.

The density of huts began to thin as she moved further from the center of town until she reached the edge of the village. Only one hut sat between her and the edge of a thick rainforest.

"You a Thereon?" she heard an old man ask.

Alana looked up to see a tanned and wrinkled old man sitting shirtless by the side of his hut. She had mistaken him for a discarded pile of rags. He appeared to be whittling some kind of pan flute out of a length of bamboo.

"Haven't seen a Thereon in nearly ninety years," the man continued, shaking his head in disbelief. "Thought you'd all disappeared!"

"You know of our kind?" she asked, approaching the man.

"Sure do!" he said.

"I'm looking for a scholar," she said, wondering if she was barking up the wrong tree.

"They used to call me that before I started losing my marbles," the man said, groaning as he stood. "I still have some books lying about. Come on in."

Alana raised an eyebrow but having no other option, she went inside.

The hut walls were covered in dusty books, a table sat centrally covered in papers. Alana looked around with amazement and gratitude. She was in the right place.

"Your blade," the man said, fussing about with an old teapot. "It's Flaronian steel is it not? Forged by the Mystics of the West?"

"Yes," Alana said, stepping forward and placing the sword on the table so the man could appraise it.

He looked it over as he poured two cups of steaming tea.

"This blade is cursed and my friend was stabbed. His wound refuses to heal and I thought you might help me translate this inscription so I can reverse the spell."

"Your friend," the man said, with a grave expression coloring his features, "is he Thereon like you or Norm?"

"He's Norm."

"Oh dear."

The man turned and moved swiftly to one of his bookshelves, pulling out a large tome and beginning to flip through the pages.

"Why do you look so concerned? I was told the wound would not kill my friend but would remain unhealed until the curse was lifted."

"A rule that only applies to Thereons I'm afraid."

"What?"

"Yes, those mystics are tricky people. They'll tell any old lie to sell their wares, especially to unsuspecting travelers."

"So you're saying my friend could die?!" Alana's heart began beating like an angry woodpecker in her chest. Her stomach dropped to the floor.

"Ah, here it is!" the scholar said pointing to a page in his book. "Yes, this inscription says that the injured party will die by the light of the first full moon after the infliction."

"So Quill is going to die at the next full moon? When is that?!"

Tears had sprung to Alana's eyes.

"Two weeks, if my calculations are correct," the scholar said, lowering his head in respect. "And they always are, I'm afraid."

"Then I need to lift the curse before then. How do I stop it?"

"The only person who can lift the curse is a mystic from the tribe who forged the weapon. You need to speak to a Western Mystic."

Alana slammed a fist down on the table. The fire in her eyes ignited and smoke steamed from her nostrils.

"Then tell me where I can find them!"

"Hold on, dear," Alana's mother said, holding a cool cloth to Quill's forehead. "Alana is out there and if I know my daughter, she won't stop until she's found the cure for whatever this curse is."

Quill moaned and clenched his jaw. Since Alana's departure, there had barely been a moment when Quill wasn't being attended by Alana's mother. She had doted on him as if he were her own. But his wound continued to aggrieve him and, what was more, the pain felt like it was getting worse. It was as if poison was spreading from the wound and infecting his entire body. Pain seized his limbs, ricocheting along his veins and into his muscles.

"How is the patient?" Aquila asked, appearing in the doorway. Alana's mother looked up to find the bird-man watching her.

"I fear his condition is growing worse with every passing hour. I worry he will not make it."

"I have met your daughter on more than one occasion, and if there is a soul in the world who can put this right, it is her."

"Yes." Alana's mother nodded and squeezed Quill's hand. "How are you getting on out there? The streets seem quieter at night. But I've barely left this room to know the true state of things."

"May I speak plainly?" Aquila asked, coming further into the room.

"Please," she said, gesturing for him to sit by the window.

"Tension remains between the two races. It seems centuries of unrest are not so easy to put to bed. The Norms do not wish to share their land and the Thereons expect me to be more sympathetic to their demands. They believe I owe them preferential treatment as I am of their kind."

"I don't envy you."

"No, but I don't envy him."

They both turned to Quill who had begun to shiver.

"I'm sure you'll get through to all of them in time. Alana trusted you and so do I."

"I hope you are right."

Aquila left shortly and Alana's mother went back to tending her ward. In due time she heard hushed voices in the hall and went to see who was out there. In the dim evening light it was hard to make out their faces, but standing a little way down from Alana's chamber was a group of four Thereons, all speaking in urgent whispers.

"He is a disgrace to his kind," a manly voice said.

"We are forced to live with these Norms as equals when we are a superior breed!" another voice whispered.

"Well, what do you suggest we do about him?" a woman responded.

"We do what we have to," said a fourth voice, a low, slimy-sounding creature.

Alana's mother strained to hear what would come next.

"Three nights from now we take back our power. We take him out."

A gasp escaped Alana's mother's mouth before she knew what was happening. She ducked back inside the chamber just as the shadowy figures turned to see who was listening in on their covert discussion. When she didn't hear footsteps, she braved another peek and was relieved to see the shadowy figures heading in the other direction. She wondered if she had scared them off. She was safe for now. But the same couldn't be said for Aquila.

She went back to Quill's side and took his hand.

"Aquila is in trouble," she thought just as Quill let out another agony-induced moan. "And so is this lad. I can't wait for Alana to return. I must think of a way to put a stop to their plan."

...

"The Western Desert" the scholar had said.

As soon as she knew where she was heading Alana snatched back the blade and was off again.

This time the storm didn't seem so impenetrable. Fueled by the fire inside her, she plowed through it, letting the pounding rain bounce off her forehead like it was nothing. Nothing but another obstacle she needed to overcome to save her friend.

Because now Quill wasn't just in pain, he was going to die if she didn't put an end to the curse.

Once out of the storm she continued west. She flew through the night and as the sun was rising she found herself soaring high above a seemingly endless carpet of sand. By the time she reached the desert she was exhausted.

But she couldn't stop.

She flew until she saw the Mystic's settlement beneath her. Swinging back around, Alana prepared to make her descent when suddenly her wings gave way. She tried to beat them but they hung lifeless at her sides. Panicked and falling she did her best to stretch them as wide as they would go to slow her plummet. With a heavy thud she landed, the sand cushioning the impact.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she wondered what had happened to her wings. It was like she had lost control of them completely.

Afraid that she would be unable to make the return journey she surveyed her surroundings. Yellow dunes rolled toward the horizon, there was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see.

She tried to lift her wings once more and nothing.

"I must be exhausted," she said, thinking back on her recent days of flying.

The Mystic's camp was made up of canvas tents, around ten or fifteen, pitched in a random configuration.

The central tent was the largest and Alana assumed this would belong to the Mystic Elder.

The scholar had told her about the leader of the Mystics. An aged woman with a close connection to the spirit world.

But as Alana approached the tent she stopped. Something was wrong. She could feel it in the ground beneath her and in the air. The life force which gave her her powers was vibrating at an unusual frequency. Which is when she realized she hadn't seen a single soul. The Mystic village was empty.

She took another step, intending to search the Elder's tent when the whole camp erupted into flames.

The fires burnt blue and quickly reduced the camp to the ground, revealing the source of the blaze.

Standing among the ashes of the Elder's tent was the Queen.

Her spider legs dug into the sand, and blue energy flickered between her fingers. She glowered at Alana with a smug expression.

To her right was Bellona, the half horse-half man who had seduced Alana and stabbed Quill. He must have found the Queen after he managed to escape from the battle.

Behind them were the remaining Cyberian soldiers who escaped the war with her majesty. The hot desert sun reflected off their metal bodies.

"You!" Alana sneered.

She stepped forward, wings outstretched and fire blazing in her chest. She was ready to fight, to attack her enemy, when the Queen raised her spindly hand.

"Not one more step, my dear," she said, her voice ice cold. "Bellona?"

She gestured to Alana's former lover who reached behind him and pulled forward a whimpering, old lady. Her long grey hair hung limply on her shoulders, covered by a colorful robe. 'The Mystic Elder!' Alana thought. But the old woman was bound. Tied up in ropes and gagged with a rag.

"Bellona here has told me of your search to heal your dying friend," the Queen said, her words burning like acid in Alana's ears. "I believe this pathetic woman is your last hope."

Alana's eyes met those of the Mystic Elder. She was shocked to see the woman's gaze was steely, calm and locked on her own. She didn't look scared or frightened. In fact, Alana thought she noticed a knowing grin creeping into the edges of the mystic's lips.

The Queen gave a subtle nod to Bellona, who pulled a dagger from his belt and without hesitation, drew it across the throat of the mystic.

"NO!" Alana cried out, as blood stained the sand.

She felt the fire burning in her gut and gathered her strength. She prepared herself to unleash fire upon the Queen and her forces.

But when she opened her mouth. Nothing...

A small wisp of smoke trailed into the air. She tried again and still nothing. Her powers weren't working.

She dug her heels into the sand and tried to draw on the energy of the earth as she had before. But none came.

Tears began to cloud her vision as panic rose in her throat. She shook her head in disbelief. For some reason she was unable to summon any of her dragon strength. Her powers had deserted her.

"You monster!" she bellowed.

"You stole my Kingdom," the Queen said, unmoved by Alana's cries. "Now I will steal all that matters from you."

"I will never let that happen."

"We'll just have to see about that."

With her last words the Queen gathered a ball of flickering, blue energy into her palm and flung it. at Alana.

Before Alana could move she was struck by the ball of energy. The impact threw her off her feet, flinging her backward.

She hit the ground hard and then everything went black...

When Alana woke she was draped over the back of Bellona. Her wrists tied behind her. Her head throbbing.

Weakly, she managed to lift her head and look around.

Ahead of her the Queen walked down a wide road toward a sheer cliff face. Behind her the Cyberian army marched in formation. On either side of the road, mountains rose into the clouds. They were taller than any mountains she'd ever seen. In fact, everything in this strange land seemed bigger than normal.

The boulders lining the road were the size of castles. The trees were taller than the mountains Alana used to climb as a child.

And that's when Alana noticed the enormous shadows moving about in the distance.

"Are they giants?" she wondered.

"Halt!" the Queen called with a hand raised. Bellona and the company came to a standstill.

Craning her neck, Alana saw that they had reached the end of the road. Two large wooden doors were built into the rock face, and rose higher than she could see.

Roughly, Bellona grabbed Alana and pulled her off his back. He took her by the shoulders as she attempted to stand but found her legs wobbly and weak beneath her.

With a sharp jab in the back, Bellona elbowed Alana forward. She stumbled toward the Queen, who grabbed her arm in a vice-like grip.

"What are you doing?" Alana asked.

"Fulfilling your potential," the Queen replied.

With the razor-sharp nail of her right index finger the Queen slashed through Alana's bonds. Alana sighed with relief and rubbed her bruised wrists. But before she knew what was happening the Queen had grabbed her again and, with the same nail, sliced through the skin on Alana's forearm.

She cried out in pain, clutching at the gash.

She reached down into her soul and tried to summon the powers of her inner dragon once more but the fire was completely gone. The only thing there was a cold empty nothingness.

The Queen swiped the blood dripping from the cut in Alana's arm with her fingers and smeared it on the wooden surface of the giant doors.

A bright light began emanating from the patch of her blood, spreading out and up, lighting up the doors. Then with a creak they swung open.

Alana stared in disbelief wondering how the Queen was able to do that. And why her blood was the key that unlocked the doors.

She stared at the darkness that lay beyond her.

Three nights after she heard the birth of their mutinous plan, Alana's mother had put a plan of her own into action. She had told Aquila of the threat and went about identifying the four shadowy figures.

She didn't enjoy leaving Quill for long, so Aquila agreed he would take over some of her nursing duties, while she took on the task of reconnaissance. It was on the second day when she heard that slimy voice again. She peered into the room where the Thereon was speaking and found he was a soldier, a mix of lizard and man. The murderous Thereon was joking with one of his comrades.

The next evening as darkness descended on the castle, she put her plan into action.

The quartet of would-be-murderers waited until the candles were lit in Aquila's chambers and then quietly crept through the empty palace halls. They stopped briefly as the old woman they knew only as the dragon woman's mother crossed their path—probably heading back to care of the dying Norm in her chambers—and then continued on. Silently, they slipped a stolen key into the lock of Aquila's chamber door and hurried inside.

They found the bird-man asleep under a pile of quilts and blankets, grinning at each other at how easy this was going to be.

As they stood at the foot of the bed, they readied their weapons to strike.

"Stop right there," Aquila said from behind the assailants. They all spun around in disbelief to find him standing in the doorway, sword drawn, with a mixed battalion of Norm and Thereon warriors backing him up. Mouths agape and eyes wide they spun back around wondering who was in the bed.

The lizard-man grabbed the covers and threw them off the bed, revealing a pile of cushions in the shape of a body, and a pumpkin where Aquila's head would have been.

The mutinous crew was arrested on the spot and taken to the dungeons.

Later that evening, Aquila and Alana's mother sat in her chamber while Quill slept uneasily. They clinked their goblets of wine and toasted the success of their deception.

"It was brave of you to volunteer to keep watch for me," Aquila said. "But we completely took those fools by surprise," Aquila said. "Well done."

"I knew people like that would never suspect an older woman of being any trouble. People have a way of overlooking us."

"Well, they shouldn't," Aquila said, raising his glass once more. "Cheers to surviving an attempted coup and thank you for your trust."

"That's all right," Alana's mother said, growing wistful. "My husband was a Thereon but I never put much stock in the division between our people, even before I met him."

"I did not know that about your husband. That means Alana's father was..."

“Exactly,” she nodded, pulling a leather purse from her pocket. “He was a big bear of a fellow. Here, that’s him.”

She opened the purse and produced a faded portrait of her late husband. Taking a breath she handed it to Aquila. He stared at the picture for a moment before beginning to chuckle.

“I should have known,” he said.

“What?”

“This man is Samson the Hairy. He and I served together during the great war. He was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield and in the pub.”

“Well, how about that!”

“He was a good man.” Aquila handed the picture back, nodding respectfully. “He would be very proud of you and your daughter.”

From across the room Quill rolled over moaning in his sleep. Alana’s mother sighed.

“If she isn’t back soon, I’m worried this lad isn’t going to make it. I wonder where she is...”

Aquila placed a hand on Alana’s mother’s shoulder.

“She is a strong warrior. Wherever she is I have no doubt that she will triumph.”

“You first,” the Queen said, shoving Alana forward.

She took her first steps down a long dark tunnel.

“Where are we going?” Alana demanded.

“Just walk,” the Queen responded.

Slowly she led the Queen, Bellona, and the Cyberians through the tunnel. Eventually arriving at the other end. Alana stepped out of the tunnel and found she was standing on a ledge at the top of a ravine, so deep she couldn’t see the ground below. Instead, all she could see beneath her was darkness, shadow and fog. In front of her stretched a thin wooden bridge that seemed to stretch into eternity. It was so long, in fact, that Alana could only just make out the faintest light glowing at the other end.

“Keep going,” the Queen commanded, appearing at Alana’s side.

Alana still couldn’t access her dragon-like powers and she hadn’t had a chance to find out if that meant her wings would even work. If she fell from this height, it would mean her death.

As Bellona and the others stood behind her, their weapons at the ready, it was obvious she had no choice. She had to do what the Queen was asking of her.

Carefully, she took her first step onto the bridge. It felt solid enough beneath her feet. She took another step and could feel the bridge beginning to sway, the ropes securing it to the rocks creaking. But it was sturdy enough, so she kept walking.

Once she was a little way out the Queen began to follow. With both of them out there the bridge began to sway more drastically. Alana tried not to look down.

“Where is this leading us?! What is your plan?” she asked of her captor.

“The plan?” the Queen asked with an evil twinkle in her eye. “The plan, my dear, is to destroy everyone and everything you love. At the far end of this bridge is an orb, which will not only grant the holder immortality, but will allow me to travel anywhere in the land I so desire. And I desire to return to my Kingdom, bringing death and despair to those you love.”

Alana stopped in her tracks. She felt anger in the pit of her stomach where there was usually fire. And she felt hatred for the Queen burning in her soul. There was no way, she decided, that she would let the Queen reach that orb, not if it meant the death of her mother, Quill, and her people.

"I would rather die than let you hurt them," she spat, turning to face the Queen.

"Oh, well allow me to give you the opportunity to do just that."

Alana shook her head in confusion. And just as she was about to speak she felt a powerful gust of wind blowing from beneath her. The bridge began to shake and swing violently.

"What is going on?!" Alana shouted, but the Queen just laughed.

Then a piercing screech tore through the cavern, echoing off the stone walls, and Alana watched with a gaping mouth, as the biggest monster she had ever seen flew out of the fog below.

"What is that?" she wondered, staring at the beast. It looked like a dragon but bigger, older, covered in more spikes and scales. It was so large that the Queen and her entire army looked like insects by comparison. With each beat of its impressive wings Alana thought she might be thrown from the bridge. Its eyes were clouded over and its skin resembled stone.

"That is what dragons used to be, the oldest living creature on this earth!" the Queen cackled. "And you've disturbed its eternal slumber."

Alana spun around just in time to see the dragon swoop toward her. She ducked and hung onto the bridge for dear life, as the ginormous creature swung about and came in for a second approach.

'Why is it attacking me?' she thought. 'Can't it see I am like it!?'

Once again Alana ducked and managed to evade impact. She clutched onto the rail of the bridge for dear life.

Glancing below she suddenly became aware of the massive drop beneath her. It was so deep and masked by fog, there was no way to tell how far down it went. She tried beating her wings, but they were still useless. Her dragon abilities were still nowhere to be found.

'If that creature knocks me off, I'm done for,' she thought, as the dragon swung around again. Alana glanced back to where the Queen was standing, only to find her gone.

While the dragon was charging, the Queen had somehow climbed past Alana, using her spider legs to scuttle on the underside of the bridge. She was in front of Alana now and heading straight for the orb. Alana began to run after her but skidded to a stop as the dragon lowered itself in front of her, blocking her path.

Shielding her face from the wind, blown toward her with every beat of the monster's wings, she tried to hold her ground.

The dragon reached down with its sharp, bird-like mouth and tore a section of the bridge away, tossing fragments of wood and wire into the ravine, before rising once again.

Alana stared at the gap between her and the rest of the bridge and then looked up to find the Queen had reached the orb. She wanted to run forward but knew there was no way she would make the jump.

"I look forward to meeting your mother, Alana!"

The Queen laughed mockingly as she grabbed the orb and, in a flurry of sparks and smoke, she vanished.

"NOOOO!"

Alana watched at the vacant space where the Queen had been standing. Was this the end? The Queen would reach her mother way before she ever could and then there was the dragon-monster, which was coming in for its next attack.

A steely determination grew in her heart. She wasn't about to give up. Not when everything she cared about was on the line. She may not have a chance at survival, her powers may have deserted her, but Alana was not about to quit.

She planted her feet as solidly on the wooden bridge as she could and braced herself. As the dragon came at her she lunged into the air.

She summoned all the strength she had, gathered every ounce of spirit and fire left in her and aimed it at the beast.

But it was no use. The dragon snatched Alana in its massive jaw, clamping around her side.

She flailed about wildly, trying to escape the tight grasp of the dragon, but she wasn't strong enough. The monster began to dive, taking Alana with it.

Down she was pulled, into the fog and shadow, until there was nothing but darkness...