

FK Tale Part 5

It's hard to know how you're going to feel when you see a dead body. Alana remembered thinking this when she went out searching that morning. A morning that felt so long ago now, but that set her on this course—her first time meeting a dragon. But as she charged toward the new Kingdom, with Quill at her side, and a small but passionate consort of fighters behind her, she knew exactly how she would feel, when finally the Thereon queen's body lay before her.

She grit her teeth and charged forward with steely determination. Quill's new metallic body was somehow able to keep pace with her, even though she held the power of two elemental dragons. She wondered just how strong he was now.

As the city wall grew closer they plowed on until suddenly, the stone wolf skidded to a stop in front of them. Alana, Quill, the defector Norms, came to a standstill.

"What are you doing?" Alana asked both the rocky animal and to its passengers, her mother, and the Hand of the former king.

"Think about what you're doing, Miss Alana," the Hand said. "You've barely a single regiment, the Queen has an army. An army she's growing as we speak."

Alana sneered up at the thin, dower man. She hated seeing him sitting so close to her mother, even if she trusted the wolf with her life.

"I can take her," Quill said, drawing her attention. Her old friend was probably strong enough to make a dent in the Queen's forces, but he couldn't match her, not while she had the orb.

Alana took another look behind her, at the rag tag crew in her wake. When she'd first come across them she thought they might be refugees. The Hand was right. If they tried to face the Queen in all-out battle, they'd lose. They needed to be smarter.

"Okay," Alana said back to the Hand. "What do you suggest?"

Half an hour later, Alana and her mother, Quill, the Hand, and the fighters who'd returned to the capital with her were sneaking through a drainpipe beneath the city.

"How do you know about these tunnels?" Alana asked the Hand, who's suggestion it was to sneak under the townsquare where right now the Queen was still transforming Norms into Thereons.

"I designed this entire subterranean system," he sneered.

"And you're sure this will lead us right to her?" she asked.

"Certain."

"This better work."

It was the Hand's idea, which is why Alana didn't trust it. But it made sense, at least, in theory. A sneak attack, from underneath, catches the Queen when she's least expecting it.

"Don't worry," Quill said, his voice deeper than she remembered, echoing down the curved, slimy tunnel. "If anything goes wrong, I'll take her out."

Alana studied Quill's face. He seemed certain. She hoped the arch in her brow didn't give away her concern.

"Shh, wait," Alana said when she heard something. From a little way down the tunnel she thought she could hear...yes! It was the Queen's voice. Alana wrinkled her shoulders. "Ugh, she talks too much."

"Are we close?" Quill asked.

She met his eye and nodded. They wandered until the voice had grown from a whisper to a roar, a grate in the ceiling of the tunnel let streams of light in.

"This is it," Quill said.

"Let's do this," Alana replied. She turned to her mother who was hard to see in the din, but who had her arms wrapped tightly around herself. "Mom, you stay here, a couple of these men will protect you. If anything goes wrong, turn and run."

"You take care out there," her mother said, pulling her tightly into her arms. Then whispering in her daughter's ear, "and kick her ass."

Alana took in her mother's features, pressing her lips together, then took a breath, bracing herself.

"Okay," she said, turning back to Quill who was already positioned underneath the grate. "You ready?"

"More than ever," he replied, and Alana didn't like the dangerous glint in his eye. But there was no more time, up on the surface more and more Norms were being transformed, they had to stop the Queen.

"On my count," Alana said, readying her wings and clenching her fists. "One..."

But Quill was already bursting through the grate, sending a shower of stone and rocks raining down on the people above. Alana huffed and flapped her wings, rising into the sun. In the half second before she emerged, chaos had already engulfed the square. Norms were running in all directions, hysterical and panicked. Thereon soldiers readied their claws while the Cyberians raised their blue-pulsing weapons.

Quill was already engaged in battle with a lion the size of a boat, a man-sized vulture, and three metallic-suited men. To her surprise, he was winning, knocking all his opponents back faster than they could come at him. Which was lucky because Alana's attention was quickly pulled to where the Queen was standing, a fizzing ball of blue energy pulsating as it levitated a few inches from the palm of her spindly hand.

"You do not have the power to destroy me!" the Queen roared and hurled the energy ball at Alana. She lifted into the sky and was missed by less than a hair's-width.

"Alana!" Quill shouted from the ground as he tossed yet another soldier aside like a sack of grain. Alana watched from the sky as Quill turned his attention to the Queen and before Alana could react, he charged.

"No!"

Alana's cry was too late. Quill pulled back his fist, rippling with electronic streams, and as he lunged to strike, the Queen grinned. She raised the orb into the sky and disappeared. Quill's punch hit empty air, the inertia sending him crashing into a sandstone wall.

Then before she knew what was happening the Queen's laughter echoed in Alana's ear. She whipped around to see her, reared back on her spider's legs, one arm wrapped around Alana's mother.

"Let her go!" Alana cried.

"Submit!" the Queen replied. Alana's mouth twitched, her wings fluttered, and she wished with every fiber of her being to dive at the Queen and tear her head from her body. But instead, she drifted slowly to the ground.

Swiftly, Alana and her crew were escorted to the dungeons.

"Aquila!" Alana's mother called as the prison door slammed behind them. Alana surveyed her old Thereon ally, lingering toward the back of the cell, as her mother raced to him and took him in her arms. His wings were limp and his shoulders slumped, but he was the same person he always was.

"What are you all doing here?" Aquila asked Alana. She ran her eyes around the dingy cell. Everyone was locked in the same cramped space. The heroic Norm fighters who had returned to the city with her, the Hand who hadn't scattered like a rat, and Quill who wouldn't look her in the eye.

"We heard what was happening and we knew we couldn't wait, even if we weren't strong enough to beat her. Not while she has that orb." She felt Quill bristle awkwardly to her right.

"I'm sorry," Aquila said. "But do not take your defeat to heart, the power of the orb is great and terrible."

"What is it?" Alana asked, remembering how the Queen lusted after it back in the gorge.

"It is a fragment of the energy left behind by those who created this realm. It gives whoever holds it the gift of immortality, the ability to travel through space and time in an instant, and for those who are able to delve into the dark depth of its core, the power to rearrange the molecules of this world."

"She has all that power and yet..." Alana surveyed the shadowy faces of her cohort, their black eyes, and dirt-smudged faces. "And yet we're all still alive. The Queen obviously doesn't want us dead right away, so maybe we have some time."

"She's been saving my execution for a special occasion," the bird-man said, nodding, "perhaps she wants to make a show out of us."

"Then we might have a chance." She squinted and studied his weathered face, perhaps this honorable creature had the answer she'd been tossing about in her mind. "Aquilla, what do you know of the stone wolves?"

"They are an ancient breed, almost extinct if I'm correct. Why do you ask?"

Everyone was getting comfortable in the cell, slouching against rotting walls, crouching in shadows, Quill especially, was keeping his distance. But Alana stood a little straighter and took a step forward.

"I was gifted the power of the fire dragon, and given a message. The orb can be destroyed by one who wields the power of all four elemental dragons. When I was first gifted my powers, I was given them by the earth dragon, although I didn't know it at the time. If I can obtain the power of the water and air dragons maybe I can defeat the Queen once and for all."

He nodded solemnly. "I have heard myths of such a creature, one who holds all four elements within their soul. But I had not thought it possible. Indeed, it is believed that the air dragon left this realm for the next over a millennia ago. What does this have to do with the stone wolves?"

"After I left the fire dragon I was visited by a stone wolf. He seemed to intuit what I needed and brought me here. But I'm still unsure why he showed up when he did. I've been thinking maybe there was a deeper meaning. Like perhaps he was supposed to lead me somewhere."

"The old stories do tell of a treaty between the ancient dragons and the stone wolves."

Alana's eyes widened and her heart beat like a drum.

"So you think perhaps this wolf was supposed to lead me to the other dragons?"

"If they knew the power of the orb had been unleashed on this world..." He wrapped a talon on his chin, deep in thought. "It is possible they would send a sentry."

"Then I have to get back to him, we left him outside the city gates, he was too big to fit in the sewer drains."

"A mathematical oversight, I'm sure," the Hand said, rolling his eyes sarcastically.

Alana watched the Hand for a second, still distrusting of her old foe.

"But I can't go," she said, taking her mother's hand. "Not when the Queen could come for us at any second."

A metallic thump rocked the floor, jangling the metal bars of their cage. Quill had stood.

"I will protect them," Quill said, his head bowed, his eyes in shadow.

Alana bit her lip.

"I promise."

With a squeeze of her hand, Alana's mother told her everything she needed to know, that she should trust her old friend, and do what is necessary.

"Okay," she said and began surveying the bars from a weak spot.

"Want to escape the King's dungeon?" the Hand said, emerging into a dust swirling beam of light, smiling eerily. "Then you'll need a guiding hand."

Outside the city walls, Alana shielded her eyes from the glaring sun. The Hand had come through, she had to give him that. If it weren't for his knowledge of the dungeons, she'd still be in prison.

As she crept to make her escape, she wished she could have brought the entire group with her, but she knew if the Queen discovered her entire hostage collective missing she would have stopped at nothing to get them back, or destroy them trying. Alana hoped her absence would go unnoticed until she could return.

An hour went by as she wandered, wondering if the stone wolf had left her for good, until finally, in the drifting haze of the horizon, she saw him. He appeared like a shadow pointing in the wrong direction and Alana sped up her approach.

"Hello friend," she said, lifting her hand to meet the wolf's hardened muzzle. "Can you take me to the ancient dragons, the ones left in this realm?"

The wolf sniffed and threw back his head, signaling for Alana to climb on board. She did so with ease and immediately the beast was off. The stone creature powered across the landscape throwing up sand and dirt as it went. They traveled so fast it was almost as if they'd stopped moving and instead the world was swishing past them, rocketing past until everything was a blur, and then suddenly they stopped. The world rocked back into place and Alana held onto the wolf for dear life. Dizzily she looked up to find they were standing in front of a desert oasis. A pool of glistening crystal clear water sat before them, surrounded by a crescent of lush and verdant greenery. Palms and bushes dense with emerald fronds, stood out amongst the dusty orange landscape surrounding them.

Alana hopped off the wolf and walked to the water's edge. She looked down into the pool of water and was shocked to see how deep it was, as if it went on forever, into the earth's core. Plantlife clung to the rocky walls of the pool drifting in an unseen current.

Looking back at the wolf, Alana raised her eyebrows questioningly, and was nudged forward.

"I have to go down there, don't I?" The wolf didn't respond. "Okay. Thank you." She took the biggest breath she could muster and dove head first into the sinkhole.

The water was warmer than she was expecting and she was able to swim straight down easily. Pressure grew in her ears but she kept kicking. The walls began to close in around her and she noticed shimmering reflective patches in the walls. Like air pockets or smaller tunnels leading off from the main hole. She saw herself reflected in them. At first she took little notice of her own reflection, but then, passing a particularly large reflective patch, the surface wobbling in an unseen current, Alana was shocked.

Since her encounter with the fire dragon, she hadn't had the chance to look at herself in a mirror and she was shocked to see the subtle changes in her appearance. Her cheekbones seemed sharper, her nails longer, her hair a more fiery shade of red. Her eyes seemed darker, set further back in her skull, her limbs longer. Her wings trailed behind her, marked in a patchwork of glowing ember-colored veins. She couldn't tell if it was a trick of the light, refracted through the water, or the haziness of the vision, but she thought she was beginning to look more like a dragon than a woman.

Stroking faster, she tried to move on from the vision, wanting to swim so low that it would be too dark to make out anything else, but as the tunnel continued to narrow and the shadows to grow, her reflection only seemed more exaggerated, more unlike how she believed herself to be, and more like a creature than a person, more monstrous.

Just as she was beginning to panic, her arms growing tired, she fell through the surface of the water, like diving only in reverse, and with a splash she found herself tumbling through dry air. Below was another body of water, which she sliced into. Gasping for breath, she bobbed back to the surface. Above her the water from the tunnel remained suspended in a rippling circle, the surface shining silver. She was in a small cave, lit by the bioluminescent shine of a million glow worms. And she was alone. In front of her was a small shore.

Wanting to get her bearings, she began paddling toward the stoney rise but as she did something moved in the water beneath her. She remained where she was, treading water and trying to make out if there was something in there with her. Then all of a sudden a massive creature broke through the surface, sending water flying everywhere. She shook the liquid from her eyes and stared in wonder as an aquamarine-colored dragon, sleek and smooth, with a flat tail, small black eyes, and gills on its neck, flapped its wings and hung in midair.

The water dragon.

The creature peered at Alana, with what she thought was a questioning expression. So Alana, wanting to show that she was connected to the dragons, kicked her legs and spread her wings, lifting herself from the water and rising to meet the dragon.

Up close, she could see details on the dragon's hide and in its face that she hadn't before. Wrinkles carved deep into its face around its eyes and nostrils, scars running along its otherwise smooth, aerodynamic body. The dragon was old and, from the way it was beginning to struggle to stay above the water, tired.

"It's okay," Alana said. "You've done your job protecting this realm. I have come to help you pass over to the next."

With a nod the dragon lowered itself back onto the water, floating like a ship above the surface.

"I promise I will use your power for the good of this realm and its people."

The dragon lifted its long neck and closed its eyes, and as droplets began to float up and down, lifting and falling from the mirrored surfaces of liquid, the water dragon let its turquoise energy float into Alana.

Meanwhile, in the New Kingdom the Hand was eyeing Quill and stroking his pointed chin.

"What if she never comes back?" a man with sweat-matted hair and blood smearing his face said. It had only been a matter of hours, but tensions remained high in the prison.

"She'll be back," Quill said, still a little shocked by the metallic reverberation of his voice. The man backed off, slumping against a wall. But others eyed Quill, their unassuredness plain on their faces.

"How can we trust her, isn't she one of them Thereons?" another angry voice piped up.

Quill clenched a metal fist and took a step forward, but the Hand rose and crossed his path.

"The men do have a point," the Hand said, slimy as ever.

"Alana will never stop until she's rescued us," Quill replied.

"Of course, but what if she didn't need to."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Queen's power is coming from that orb. Without it she'd be no match for you. Not with your new body."

The Hand was eyeing Quill up and down, surveying his creation proudly.

"If you were able to separate her from that orb, there'd be no need for Alana to rescue us. Wouldn't she be proud?"

Quill studied the Hand's sallow face. He knew not to trust this man. But he'd messed up back in the square. He was the reason they were in this cell and the reason Alana was out there facing who knows what. If there was a chance he could make things right, perhaps he should take it.

"But you saw how strong the Queen is, there's no way we could take her on and win."

"Last time, she saw you coming. What if this time she was actually surprised?"

"How would we do that?"

"I know the walls of this castle better than anyone, trust me."

Quill glanced at the eager faces of his cellmates, then to Aquila and Alana's mother, hunched over in the corner.

"Okay, let's do it."

Bursting through the surface of the water Alana rose into the sunlight. Her stoney companion was waiting by the shore of the oasis. Hovering in midair, Alana stared open eyed at her hands, they had taken on a shimmering new quality that danced and glittered in the light. The energy of the water dragon flowed in her veins like the tide, relentless and without mercy. There was a pull to the water below her, as if she longed to be submerged once again. And she knew that she had changed once again.

Into what, she wasn't sure.

With each dragon she gained power, strength, new abilities, but how much was giving up in return?

Slowly, she lowered herself onto the back of the stone wolf.

“Just one to go,” she said a little hesitantly, scratching him behind his rocky ear. “Do you know how to get to the air dragon?”

The stone wolf lowered its muzzle in acquiescence and took off toward the east. He gained speed faster than ever before until once again, the landscape was whooshing past in a blur of colors. Eventually, the stone wolf leaped into the air and didn't come back down. They flew through the sky, at a speed so great it was as if they were moving faster than the rotation of the planet. Tearing over the horizon the sun moved at an accelerated pace until the night sky came into view. It appeared as a line ahead of them, a delineation from crystal blue daylight, to deep onyx night. The stars were curved lines whizzing in Alana's periphery.

When finally they landed, Alana hopped down off the wolf and surveyed her surroundings. She was standing atop a mountain taller than any she'd seen before. Banks of clouds lolled past below, the ground obscured beneath them. Above there was nothing but a twinkling night sky. The air was thinner up here and her breaths were short and sharp.

A pulsing sound began to rise, which she assumed was just a natural echoing of wind against the mountainside, but as the pulse rose in volume, seemingly coming closer with each second, Alana knew something was approaching.

She spun just in time to see the air dragon, rising over the crest of the mountain, its wings spread wide, with a span as wide as the New Kingdom. Its body was sleek, midnight blue and almost indecipherable from the star potted sky behind it, but its wings faded out to yellow in a stunning ombre effect. With a grace and ease not possessed by any other dragon Alana had encountered, this beast landed on the granite plateaux before her, wrapping one long wing across the front of its body and letting the other drape down the side of the hill.

“My name is Alana,” she said, approaching. Her stone wolf plonked to the ground and curled in on itself. “I have traveled because I need your help.”

The dragon eyed her curiously.

“You brethren have all crossed over to the other realm, and gifted me their power, it is my wish to inherit your great strength and use it to save this realm from domination.”

The dragon huffed and did it...? Alana could have sworn it rolled its eyes.

“Please, the people of this land are in danger, and only with your help can I save them.”

Seemingly unimpressed and unwilling to give up its power, the dragon wrapped its other long wing over its head, cocooning itself within its own wingspan, and presently began to snore.

“Wait, are you...are you sleeping?” Alana called out. “I need your help!”

But the dragon didn't move, its body rose and fell with steady breath, the breath of slumber.

Alana turned to her stoney companion who glanced up at her, before dropping his head back onto his paws.

“What?” Alana said, turning in circles. She was on the top of the world with two very large mythical creatures, and she'd never felt more alone.

Hours had passed while Alana sat, her back resting against the rib cage of the stone wolf, waiting for the air dragon to wake.

Why when all of its counterparts had left this realm did it refuse to help her? What was different? She knew asking for it to relinquish its power was a big ask. But if all the other dragons had done so willingly, as if they knew it was their time to pass over, why was this dragon reluctant to do so?

The opalescent sheen she'd recently acquired glimmered like a precious stone in the moonlight. She began to wonder if that's what she was becoming. Perhaps that's how the stone wolves came about. Gradually hardening over the eons. And now Alana too was becoming something unlike herself.

Something new, unknown, and monstrous. Maybe that, she thought, is why this dragon won't give up its power. Maybe it took one look at her, saw the strange monstrous entity she was becoming and deemed her unworthy.

With a groan and a grunt she let her head fall against her stoney companion's body. Maybe she should turn around and go home. Save what's left of that girl from the forest who used to sneak out to explore, but she knew she couldn't, not if the Queen was to be stopped. With a long, slow exhale, she drifted off to sleep.

Quill did his best to muffle the clink of his feet as he crept through a secret passageway behind the throne room. The Hand stayed at his back, followed by a handful of the other prisoners. Aquila had remained behind to protect Alana's mother, his grave uncertain eyes burned into Quill's memory. Was he making a mistake? Was he repeating the folly from the square?

No, he'd learned his lesson and this time he wouldn't go rushing out until he knew it was the perfect moment. He was doing this for Alana.

Quiet voices drifted from the room beyond. The dulcet murmurings of the Queen and Bellona. Probably planning how best to deal with their newly crowded prison, or a way to fast track the building of their new army.

Finally, Quill came upon a gap in the wall, a cool waft of air breezed through the crack.

"Here," the Hand said, gesturing toward a bronze sconce with an unlit glass sphere sitting atop it. "On my word."

The Hand pressed his ear to the wall and they waited. It was a long while before anything happened. And then all of a sudden the Hand pulled back.

"What's happening?" Quill whispered. "Do we go?"

"You were right," the Hand said. "There is no way you can overpower her."

"What?!" Quill mouthed, trying his best to stay quiet.

"Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"There is a way. But you must trust me." The Hand leaned forward. "I can make you invincible."

Quill glanced at the expectant faces behind him. Everyone was depending on him. He'd disappointed Alana once, he had to do whatever it took to make it up to her.

"Do it."

The Hand took a step toward Quill and opened a hatch on his chest. Quill couldn't see what was inside it, but he heard the click as the Hand twisted something, and it locked into place. Suddenly, adrenaline pulsed through his body. His muscles bulged and his face grew warm.

"Now, take down the Queen," the Hand said, and before Quill knew what he was doing he'd stepped up to the wall, and pulled the sconce. He didn't know how he knew what to do, it was instinctive, or like he was being instructed somehow. But the wall slid back revealing the throne room and in charged Quill.

"Get the orb!" the Hand cried as Quill tore into the throne room. The Queen looked up but before she could react, Quill was already raising his arm, and shooting a beam of fizzling electric energy. The Queen was thrown clear across the floor and Quill leaped to the raised podium upon which the elaborate chair stood. He picked up the orb and could tell how powerful it was.

"No!" the Queen cried, readying to attack.

"Quick." The Hand had appeared at Quill's side. "Give it to me."

Quill looked from the orb to the Hand and knew he shouldn't, the Hand was devious, power hungry, evil, if there was anyone who shouldn't give the orb, it was him. But Quill wasn't in control of his body anymore. Instead, he freely handed over the sphere, screaming in his mind to stop, but unable to.

As soon as the Hand had hold of the orb he conjured an electric prison, which clamped down around the Queen and Bellona trapping them in the corner of the throne room.

"How did you do that?" the Queen cried, confusion etched across her brow. The Hand simply grinned a knowing grin in her direction, before turning to the throne. "Finally, the kingdom is in my grip," he said, taking his seat. "N-n-no," Quill stammered, barely able to form words for himself. "Kneel," the Hand commanded. And despite resisting with all his mental power, Quill fell to his knee.

Alana wandered through a dense, dark forest. Above, the canopy was blocking out all light, except for the occasional beam of violet luminescence, swimming with dust particles and pollen. The light was wrong but she didn't know why. A shadow moved to her right, a large silhouette, racing through the trees. Without thinking she took off after it. She was fast and gained on the shadowy creature, eventually drawing close enough that she could hear its monstrous breaths and thundering footsteps. She kept chasing until she broke through a wall of trees into a shimmering glade. The grass here rose about knee high, dotted with tall white flowers she thought looked a little like the ones that grew near her mother's house.

Across from her, behind the row of trees on the opposite side of the clearing, the shadow monster rose in the darkness. Its eyes glowed a sickly yellow, its breaths came out as visible puffs of smoke. With one thumping footsteps it began to move into the light. Half lit by the strangely hued sun, Alana could already tell the thing was hideous, a heinous mess of scales, veins, bulging muscles, and something organic, like a fungus growing in rings around its limbs.

She stood her ground.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

"Why not?" the beast replied, only its voice wasn't gruff of course, it was the rich, silky tone of the Queen, her words hypnotically acidic.

"Because monsters don't frighten me."

The beast took another step into the clearing and as the sun hit its face, it no longer resembled the gnarly creature from before. Instead, she stood staring at a perfect reflection of herself.

Her jaw quivered, her shoulders tensed.

Her mirror-self grinned. "Are you sure about that?"

Alana spun on her heel and took off back into the woods, shaking her head as tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Nonononono!" she muttered as she ran. Her vision blurred as tears flooded her eyes and without being able to see, she caught her foot on a vine—or did it rise from the soil to trip her?—and she tumbled down a ravine. She hit the ground hard, smashing her head into the stone ground, and reared back, grimacing.

"Why is the floor so hard?" she asked, then finally opened her eyes. She was no longer in the forest, she was back in her mother's house. The hut in the woods where she'd grown up. A fire was raging in the hearth, there was fresh bread and a bowl of fruit overflowing on the table. Her mother's rocking chair swayed gently to her right.

"Need a hand up?" a familiar voice said, and a hand appeared before her. She took it and was lifted to her feet.

Standing before her was Liam, her friend from back in the old days, before she'd come to the New Kingdom, before the Queen and the Thereons, before the dragons. The friend who'd been killed when the old King torched their village. He looked exactly the same as she remembered him, the same friendly eyes, the same gentle smile. Immediately, she wrapped him tightly in her arms.

"I've missed you!" she said. "I'm so sorry. So sorry I couldn't help you."

"Hey, what happened, none of it, was your fault." He held her in front of him and took her in. "I've missed you too."

Alana held his hands and brought him over to the table where they sat opposite each other, unable to stop their lips from grinning.

"I can't believe this, how are you here?" she asked.

Liam eyed their surroundings and shrugged casually. "I'm not sure. Maybe you needed me."

Alana nodded. "I do. I really do." She wiped a tear from her eye, and caught a glimpse of herself in a nearby glass. She was amazed Liam could even recognize her. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Neither have you," Liam said.

"Yeah, sure, I'm not exactly the girl for the village anymore." Suddenly, Alana couldn't look him in the eye. "I don't even know what I am anymore."

"Hey." Liam took both of her hands in his. "I know exactly what you are."

"But look at me. I'm barely even human."

"Alana, do you remember when we were kids? I used to follow you around everywhere you went, even into the forest when we weren't supposed to. Because I knew you were special and I just wanted a chance to get a little bit closer to that. You've always been this amazingly strong, caring person, a natural leader, fierce and powerful. And you still are. I haven't changed because I wasn't given that chance, but I don't think you've changed as much as you think you have. It's just, you've become the amazing person you always were."

Alana couldn't speak, a single tear rolled down her cheek, freckling the table below.

"We can't stay here much longer," Liam said, clutching her hands a little tighter. "Just know I'm always with you, and you are amazing. Okay?"

Alana sniffed and nodded.

"Remember that." With these words, Liam paled and faded until Alana was alone in the room. With his words echoing in her mind, she lay her head down on the table and closed her eyes.

With a start she woke back on the mountain top. Pushing off the ground, she approached the still sleeping air dragon. The stone wolf shifted and rose to a sitting position.

As Alana approached, the dragon unfurled its wings, eyeing her sideways and rearing back its neck.

"I'm sorry," Alana began. "When I came here I wasn't sure if I wanted your power. I was scared of what it would do to me, what I might become if I possessed the spirit of all four elemental dragons. But I was wrong to be afraid. Nothing can change the person I am, except for me. And I can only become stronger, better, able to do more good, with your help."

The dragon's eyes drifted over her figure, still unsure.

"I would be honored if you would bestow your power upon me," Alana said, bowing her head.

For a moment there was quiet and she wondered if it still wasn't enough, if this majestic creature still distrusted her, or thought her unworthy. But she knew she was, even if she left without the power of the air dragon, she was enough. And just when she was about to say as much, she felt a tingle touch the fingertips on her right hand.

She looked up to see the air dragon, a smile in its eyes, letting its pure white energy float in spiraling rivulets, toward her. Alana lifted her head, pulled back her shoulders, and embraced the gift.

The air dragon nodded gently one last time as the last of its essence flowed from it and gradually it vanished, gone from this realm to the next. The power flowed into Alana. She closed her eyes and took a breath, letting the power flow through her. She felt light, agile, powerful, and when she opened her eyes again all she saw was brightness.

The castle was veiled in shadow when Alana arrived home. She'd flown across the desert, faster than the stone wolf could carry her, although he tried his best to keep pace on the ground below. When she stepped up the stairs of the palace, unafraid of running into Thereon guards, she could instantly tell something was wrong.

Where were the guards? Why did the palace feel quiet and still in a way that sent shivers running up and down her spine?

For some instinctual reason she didn't head straight to the prison and instead made her way to the throne room. She knew the way well. Without fear she pushed through the doors and stood gaping at the sight before her.

The Hand was sitting on the throne, glowing orb in hand, while Quill was kneeling at his side. To the right, the Queen and Bellona were trapped in a zapping cage of energy.

"What's happening here?" Alana demanded.

"Un-uh," the Hand warned, "not another step, dragon-girl."

"Quill!" Alana called but her friend didn't so much as lift his chin.

Immediately, Alana connected the dots. Somehow the Hand was able to talk his way onto the throne, using Quill, who's armored body must have been built with an override system, giving the Hand full control of whomever was wearing it. Alana wondered if the Hand had originally planned this armor for the King, and was quietly smug that she'd at least put off his plan for this long.

"Let him go and give up the orb," Alana demanded, crossing the empty hall.

"That's far enough," the Hand said, and Quill in response rose to his feet, stepping in front of the throne.

"Quill, I won't fight you."

"That's too bad," the Hand said, just visible behind his mechanical bodyguard. "I had thought of letting you leave unharmed, if you swore never to return."

"Won't happen."

"I thought as much. And I'm afraid there's no way to me, except through him."

"Quill!" Alana pleaded, but her friend's face was vacant, he was nowhere to be found.

"This is beginning to bore me," the Hand said. "Quill, kill her."

Quill pulled back his fists and stomped toward Alana. She held her ground but couldn't believe this was about to happen. She'd fought so hard to save him, she couldn't take him out now.

His first blow was faster than she was expecting, and Alana only just managed to duck, air being slashing across her face. And once Quill had started attacking he didn't stop. Alana darted about the room, lifting off the ground and trying to outpace Quill, ducking and weaving to avoid his attacks. But he was incomprehensibly fast. She was beginning to understand the true strength of his armor.

Finally, Quill landed a hit and sent Alana crashing into the floor. She groaned and lifted herself but was immediately pinned back down. Quill was on top of her and the blows came in a flurry, and wouldn't stop. Alana tried her best to deflect, lifting her forearms and wrapping her wings around herself, but it was too much.

"Quill, Quill!" she called. "I know you're in there!"

Over the sound of punches she could make out the shrill laughter of the Hand. "It won't work," he teased. "You'll never reach him. The dimwit."

Something about this last sentence really ground Alana's gears and just as Quill reared back to land another punch she threw open her wings, shoving him backward in the process, and rose into the air. She charged forward, diving into Quill and colliding in a cloud of stone and dust, against the far wall. Quill struggled fiercely to free himself but Alana held him fast. Yes, he was strong. But she was stronger.

"Quill," she said, trying to drill into his mind with her words. "I know you're in there. You're better than this. I know you might not think it. I know you think you messed up. I know you think you're still that kid who can't get out of the gutter. But you're so much more than that. You're my best friend. I would give anything to save you."

His arms slowed down, his struggle growing quiet.

"I know who you are," Alana went on. "I just need you to know it too because you've got to save yourself this time. Just be the Quill I know you are."

Quill threw his head back against the wall, sending a waterfall of rocks and rubble tumbling down on them. But Alana held fast because she knew he was fighting the voices in his head. The ones telling him he was worthless. She held him down as he writhed about, thrashing back and forth, until finally his mouth opened and he cried out. There was a pop and an explosion and Alana was thrown clear. She landed on her feet across the room and waited for the smoke to clear. When it did, Quill stepped forward and she readied herself to fight once more. But there was a hole in the chest plate of his armor, surrounded by black soot marks. And when she took in his face, it wasn't blank anymore.

Alana met Quill's grin with one of her own. He nodded at her.

"Shall we do this?"

"Absolutely!"

"No!" the Hand cried out. "It's not possible. This can't be!"

"Time to wave goodbye," Alana said.

Alana and Quill turned in unison, and ran at the Hand. He held up the orb, screaming, trying to conjure some sort of weapon or defense. But he was so flustered, too shocked that somehow he'd been outsmarted, that he couldn't think straight. For once in his life he didn't have the answer.

With one coordinated blow, Alana stole the orb from the Hand and Quill punched him into oblivion. He whacked against the wall and fell to a heap.

"Nice to have you back," Alana said.

"Glad to be back," Quill replied. "I'm sorry—"

Alana waved his words off. "Nothing to be sorry for."

There was a sharp, high pitched crackle and Alana turned to find the electric prison dissipating from around the Queen and Bellona.

"It's over," Alana declared. . The Queen's lips curled back in a horrifying snarl.

"The Thereons will not be defeated!" she howled. "They cannot! We will defeat you a thousand times over."

"You sure about that?" Alana asked, holding the orb before her, endlessly cool. "When the source of your power is in my hand?"

"You don't even know what that orb can do," she said. "The terrible power it holds! You'd never have the guts to use it."

"You're right," Alana said, and closing her eyes, she summoned the spirits of the elemental dragons. Each of their essences flowed into the orb. They wrapped around each particle, separating them, and pulling apart so the magic would no longer work. The orb exploded in Alana's hand. She opened her eyes. "And I don't need it."

The Queen hissed through her teeth. "Idiot! Stupid girl! Even without the orb I'm still more powerful than you can imagine!"

"Give up, Queen. It's over," Alana said.

"It won't be over until I'm lying in a pool of my own blood."

Quill stepped forward. "That can be arranged."

"No," Alana said. "She can live, if she promises to leave and never return."

Laughter burst from the Queen's mouth. "Fool! If I can't rule. Then I'll burn this city to the ground!"

The Queen lifted off the stone tiles, rising at great speed, and crashing through the ceiling. Alana and Quill ducked so as not to be smooched by falling bicks. In the mess Bellona ran for the door, slipping outside before Alana could do anything to stop him.

"THEREONS!" The Queen's voice bellowed across the kingdom, as if projected somehow. "DESTROY THE CITY AND EVERYONE IN IT!"

And with that the Queen began to rain fire down upon the kingdom. She conjured balls of blue energy and threw them in every direction. Explosions broke out beyond the walls of the palace. The stern composure she'd always had was gone and in its place a more terrifying desperation. She had nothing left to lose, it was over for her, and she'd eagerly take all of them down with her.

“Quickly, we have to save the people,” Alana said. “I’ll take care of her!”

“On it!” Quill said, and charged for the door.

Alana almost couldn’t believe what she was seeing as she took off through the hole in the palace ceiling. Thousands of Thereons, freshly made, were in the streets and skies. There were Norms battling them on the ground, and Cyberians fighting on both sides. Quill was down there taking out as many Thereons as he could find, and even the stone wolf, who’d waited outside the city walls, had joined the fight. Fires were raging in every direction, smoke rose into the sky, murky the horizon.

Above, the Queen continued to summon her power and send electro-bombs crashing into buildings. But that was the least of Alana’s concerns, the winged Thereons were carrying armed Cyberian’s, who were firing on their own city. The Queen’s attacks were bad enough, but the sheer volume of her followers bent on destruction was more than Alana could tackle on her own.

But she knew what to do.

She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind. She let her thoughts roam free across the country. She spoke to her kind.

The first cry tore through the symphony of explosions. Alana opened her eyes and found the horizon dotted by thousands of dragons all coming to help, conjured by Alana’s call for help. They roared as they glided into battle, twisting and dancing a deadly dance as they began to take out the airborne Cyberians and their Thereon aircraft.

Finally, Alana was free to focus on her target, the Queen. She knew this was it. The end of the line for her and her longstanding foe. She flew in a straight line, whizzing through smoke and fog, fire rolling and churning in her chest, ready to pour forth and destroy her enemy.

The Queen spotting Alana, began to target attacks in her direction, and Alana had to swerve not to be hit. But with the essence of the air dragon she was swift and nimble, and with the power of the water dragon she was able to move in smooth fluid motions, twisting around the oncoming attacks easily.

When finally she drew level with the Queen, the once composed leader, was sweating, desperation tearing at the corners of her face.

“You don’t have the guts to do it,” she sneered when she should have been pleading.

“I gave you a chance to do the right thing,” Alana said, her tone level. “But time and time again you’ve tried to destroy the people I love.”

“You can’t kill me!” she spat. “What would that make you?!”

Alana huffed a laugh.

“I’m Alana,” she said. “Heir to the elemental dragons. Protector of this realm. Oh and I hate following rules.”

“What? No—!”

The Queen’s words vanished in the roar of the fire, her body consumed by the flames Alana sent forth. The heat roiled and swirled burning up the evil magic of the the Thereon Queen.

And when she was done, Alana pulled the fire back inside her, and all that was left of the Queen was a puff of smoke.

She raced to help the others.

A week later Alana and Quill stood on the steps of the palace, a bag on each of their backs. The sun was shining brightly on the New Kingdom, which was already under repairs. The fires had gone out and the citizens, a mix of Norm, Thereon, and Cyberian had gotten to work rebuilding.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay,” Alana’s mother asked as she hugged her daughter one more time. “The people would follow you. You should lead.”

“I’ve seen what power can do to a person,” Alana said. “And I had a taste of politics and it just isn’t for me. Besides, I know I’m leaving the New Kingdom in the best hands possible.”

Aquila stepped up to join the group, wrapping his arm around Alana’s mother and nodding at his soon-to-be daughter-in-law.

Alana couldn't help smiling. After the fighting, people just sort of assumed she would take up the throne. But she had little interest in ruling. Ever since she inherited the powers of the remaining dragons, she'd been itching to spread her wings, desperate to find open water and stretch her sea legs, itching to explore and experience new, exciting things.

So with a council of representatives from suburbs across the city, she'd formed a government, that would be led, but not ruled, by Aquila and her mother. Thereon and Norm.

And today she was leaving with Quill to head out into the world. Their plan was to head west to the home of the stone wolves, and then on until they reached the edge of the world.

"We should get moving soon if we want to cross the desert before nightfall," Quill said gently.

"Yes, we should," Alana said and took a long steadying breath. "I've asked the dragons to keep an eye on the place but if you ever need me just let them know."

They all glanced at the ceiling of the palace where a few dragons were perched, silhouetted against the light of the sun.

"They will be my eyes while I'm away."

With tears brimming over, Alana's mother took her child in her arms and gave her one last hug. "I'm so proud of you," she said.

"I love you," Alana said.

And then they were off. As they headed out into the rolling hills beyond the city, Alana glanced back one last time. She didn't know when or even if they'd be back, but she knew things in the New Kingdom were going to be brighter from now on.

"I heard there was a kingdom across the sea," Quill said, drawing Alana's attention back to the road ahead. "With an underwater castle, and dragons with fire!"

"Oh yeah?"

"But we'd have to scope it out first. Don't want to wander into a kingdom that's forbidden or anything."

Alana grinned and eyed the horizon.

"Or do we?"