

FK Tale Part 4

Further and further Alana fell, struggling against the grip of the dragon's jaw.

The beast's teeth dug into her stomach and back, tight enough that she couldn't escape. If only she still had her powers she could fight fire with fire. But in her powerless state she was at the dragon's mercy.

The pit into which they plummeted seemed to go on forever.

Down they plunged until the light of the world above was nothing but a glowing pinprick. A single star growing more distant with every second. Alana grunted as she attempted to pry the jaws of the dragon open. But the monster was too strong. She beat her fists against its leathery snout and cried out.

"Let me go!"

And just then, as if the beast was responding, the pressure was released from Alana's waist, the dragon let her drop from its mouth.

She watched its slimy, snake-like tongue curling back in its mouth as she began to fall freely. She watched as the dragon let her tumble, wondering why it would have given her up so easily. Her stomach was in her throat, her arms flailed wildly. And then her eyes shot open as the dragon beat its expansive wings, hovering in the air above her. It pulled back its winding neck and she saw the glow of fire building in its gut.

It's going to burn me to ash!

The dragon opened its mouth and fire shot from the back of its throat. Piercing yellow and blue flames raced toward Alana. She covered her face as she was engulfed. The heat was immense and blinding. She screamed and thrashed about, she spun listlessly, she waited for the fire to extinguish her life and then...

She opened her eyes.

Alana was no longer falling, she was floating, held aloft by the pair of wings which grew from her back.

The flames hadn't burned her, they had revived her.

Above her the dragon slowly descended to her level. It's dark, emerald eyes fixed on Alana's. But she could see them properly now, even in the dim light of the tunnel. This dragon meant her no harm.

"Why did you pull me from the bridge?" Alana asked as the dragon came level. The two of them beat their wings in unison. The dragon stared into her as if it was looking into her soul and then it dove.

Into the dark depths of the pit the dragon flew and Alana, on instinct alone, followed.

Finally, a shimmer caught her eye and Alana slowed. As she descended, the tunnel opened up into an expansive underground cavern. A glimmering lake flowed between two openings and to the nearest edge a silver bank of sand rose out of the water. Alana landed gently before the dragon who was waiting for her.

"What is this place?" she asked, a strange sense of familiarity tickling at her brain. The dragon lifted its head and blew flames across the water, the fire licked at the cave wall, and—with her mouth gaping—Alana marveled as a series of images ignited, glowing pearlescent, and remained illuminated. It was as if the fire had seeped into the stone to show her its secrets.

She took a step closer to the water, squinting to get a better look at the images.

In the center of the wall was a human figure with flowing hair and a pair of dragon wings. She glanced back at the dragon.

"Is that...me?"

The dragon lowered its head.

On either side of the figure were two dragons. One looked exactly like her current companion, with a flame engraved beneath it.

"Fire... That's you?" Alana turned as she asked the dragon her question, but the beast wasn't paying attention. Instead it was lowering its large body into a sitting position, making itself comfortable in the sand.

Next to that was another dragon, unlike any she'd seen in pictures or in real life. Underneath it were the swirling lines of a whirlpool.

"Water," Alana said, instinctively.

To the figure's right was another unfamiliar dragon, with the wisps of a breeze engraved below it.

"Air."

And finally the fourth dragon was another she had seen before. The dragon she had saved as a child, the one who joined its soul with hers, and gifted her her powers. Underneath this dragon was a picture of a boulder.

"Earth."

Alana took another step forward.

"And what about those lines?" she asked. "What do they mean?"

The dragon grunted.

Squiggly lines led from the four dragons to the central figure, who channeled them into a beam of power sent skyward. Hanging above the figure was a globe, with a swirling pattern, not unlike the orb.

That sense of familiarity was still pricking at the back of Alana's mind. She stopped squinting and closed her eyes. It was then that the message of these shining images came to her. In that instant she knew what the drawings meant and she knew their message was meant for her.

"In order to destroy the orb and defeat the queen I will need to harness the power of all four of these dragons. I already possess the power of the earth dragon, but that was given to me as a dying gift, as a..."

Alana turned and was unable to prevent a small gasp from escaping her lips.

The fire dragon was lying in the sand. Only now could Alana see how old the dragon was, and how tired.

Swiftly, Alana approached the fading creature. It opened its emerald eye and looked at her once more. Tenderly, Alana ran her hand down the impressive jaw of the creature.

"I will do my best with your gift," Alana said.

With the last of its strength the dragon lifted its tail, dripping sand as it curled the appendage toward Alana. She took the tail carefully in her hands. It was hot but didn't burn her. Gradually the end of the dragon's tail melted, glowing a brilliant shade of gold and orange. Like lava it flowed across Alana's forearms and seeped into her skin.

As she absorbed the dragon's gift, she watched as the dragon's body hardened, turning to ash, before crumbling and then drifting away as if on a breeze.

The veins in Alana's wrists were glowing with her newly gifted power. And she wiped a single tear from her cheek, closed her eyes, and felt the new heat burning inside of her.

The fire dragon's power was immense and volatile. She felt twice as strong as she had only moments before.

With a new determination, Alana gave thanks to the fire dragon, and set her mind on thoughts of home and the queen. The evil Thereon could already be back in the New Kingdom by now. She may not have the power of all four dragons just yet. But Alana knew she needed to stop the Queen now.

She clenched her fists, spread her wings, and in a blast of flames, she took off for home.

Aquila stood on the highest tower of the castle, looking out across the New Kingdom as the sun set peach and violet in the distance.

He often stood in this spot and watched the city below him. His eyesight was keen and from here he could make out the townspeople as they went about their business.

He'd been watching the kingdom closely since Alana left. There was still unrest between the Norms and the Cyberians. A day didn't go by without a scuffle or a conflict. It was a good day if things didn't turn violent.

The Cyberians continued to resent the Norms, it was below them to work side by side with such lowly creatures. Meanwhile the Norms didn't particularly like the jeers and glares they received from their Cyberian counterparts.

Something would need to be done soon or unrest would turn to war.

As he swept his gaze across the spires of the city Aquila noticed something strange on the horizon. A caravan of travelers was wandering in single file toward the western gate. They were so far out they resembled a trail of ants, but Aquila could see who was leading them.

"The Queen!" he said, spinning and heading for the stairs.

"Do try to hold still," Alana's mother said as Quill twisted sideways groaning in pain. "Alana will be back soon. I know. You just have to hold on."

Suddenly, the door to her chamber swung open and Aquila stepped inside.

"Quickly, you and the boy must hide," he said, already moving to help Quill from the bed.

"What's happened?" Alana's mother asked.

"The Queen has returned with an army at her back. Without Alana the city cannot hold her back for long. It isn't safe here for you."

Alana's mother's mouth hung open.

"Alana will be back soon," she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Not soon enough," Aquila said. He lifted Quill from the bed and Alana's mother wrapped one of his arms around her shoulder. "In the hallway outside my chambers a blue tapestry hangs in the wall, adorned with a scarlet phoenix. Behind the tapestry you'll find a passage. Follow it as far into the ground as you can. I will do everything in my power to hold them back."

"You will be safe won't you," she said, her eyes brimming with tears and emotions she couldn't quite put into words.

"Go."

Without another seconds hesitation Alana's mother helped an agonized Quill out of the room.

Aquila's chambers were on the floor above this one and, on a good day, Alana's mother would be puffed just getting up the stairs. Today she had the extra burden of carrying Quill. The injured boy did his best to hold his weight but he repeatedly lost his balance as waves of pain shot through him.

By the time Alana's mother had lugged Quill up onto the next level there were already shouts coming from outside the castle.

"Heavens, they're already outside," she huffed.

The Queen and her forces had wasted no time and if Alana's mother didn't hurry her and Quill would soon be found.

Sweat soaked through her garments as she finally approached the tapestry. She looked up at it as if expecting it to pull itself back by magic. Nothing happened.

"You better be a secret entrance," she said. With her free hand she pulled the tapestry away from the wall and found a wooden door. "Well that's something at least."

The Queen and her forces made quick work of Aquila's patrol and had overrun the castle within an hour of their arrival. Bellona, the towering centaur, galloped through the halls leaving a trail of soldiers in his wake.

Aquila remained standing, battling for his life in the throne room. He knocked back one of the Queen's soldiers with a wing and clawed another's face.

"Stop!" the Queen's voice cut through the sounds of battle. Her soldiers fell back and Aquila turned to face his opposition. "Leave him to me." On tall spindly legs she scuttled forward toward Aquila.

Anger rolled in his chest and he growled. He'd lost patience and had no interest in diplomatic solutions. He grabbed a sword which lay to his right and in one swift motion he spun, lunging at the Queen and piercing her straight through the heart.

Her eyes went wide and she gasped in pain.

Slowly he withdrew the blade.

"You are defeated," he said.

The Queen smiled.

"Am I?"

She pulled a glowing orb from a pouch at her side and held it aloft. The orb shone white in the center, fading to a murky purple around the edges. Its light filled the room and Aquila watched in shock as the wound in the Queen's chest healed before his eyes.

"That's the last of them," Bellona said, charging through the doors at the far end of the hall. He arrived at the Queen's side and dropped the lifeless body of a Norm soldier. Aquila winced as the body hit the floor. Bellona looked from the Queen to Aquila. "Shall I take care of this traitor?"

"No," the Queen said through a smug grin, "we may need him. Lock him in his chambers."

Aquila was in such a state of shock that he barely resisted as Bellona took him by the arm, sword at his neck, and led him from the throne room.

"When Aquila said to go as far under the ground as possible he didn't mention anything about sewers," Alana's mother said, huffing as she pulled Quill from a rather slimy passageway and into a dim chamber. "Well at least it seems a little dryer here."

Quill moaned and she noticed how pale he'd become.

"You don't look so good." She took in their surroundings. "Wait, I've been here before." She took another step into the chamber as dark memories of her time as the King's prisoner came flooding back. To her left were the remains of the door to her cell that Alana's fire had all but disintegrated. The walls were as moss-ridden and damp as she remembered. That time had been a haze for her, nothing but blurry and painful images scorched in her mind. Until Alana had arrived to save her.

"This dungeon is about as hidden as you can get," she said to the unresponsive Quill. "I suppose this is a good enough place to rest for a moment. I can't even hear the battle anymore."

Gently, she attempted to lower Quill to the ground, but his weight became too much and he sloped into a heap against the wall.

He didn't seem too bothered, his eyes were closed and his head hung against his chest. Quill was out cold.

"Great," Alana's mother said. "I can't carry you if you're unconscious, so I guess we're stuck here."

She was just about to sit down herself when a voice rose from the darkness before her.

"He doesn't look so well," the voice rasped.

Alana's mother froze but didn't back away.

"Who is that?"

The hidden figure lit a match. He hunched at the other end of the room inside a locked prison cell.

"I remember you," she said, a vague recollection of her former prison-mate rushing through her mind.

"I am the Hand of the King," the man sniveled.

"You don't look all that much to me." Alana's mother stepped forward. The King's former advisor was a skeletal remnant of his former self. His robes were tattered and thin, his face was pale and sunken. "But you've been busy I see."

Inside the Hand's cell was a contraption, constructed from stray strands of hay and splintered pieces of the bench which used to hang from chains at the back of the cell. The rudimentary machine was

collecting the water trickling from a crack in the ceiling, filtering it through layers of old cloth, before it dripped into an iron bowl.

"It keeps it clean," he said, gesturing to the bowl. They stopped coming by with food and water after you left." His thin lips pulled back over his teeth as he spat out his words. "It's amazing what you can come up with when deprived of basic human decency."

Alana's mother looked to the other side of the cell where a row of plants was thriving in a base of moss.

"A lesser man would have starved," the Hand said. "I could help your friend too, if you'd like."

Alana's mother glanced back at Quill.

"How could you help him?"

"Find the key to this cell and you'll find out."

Alana's mother lifted an eyebrow. She was low on options but something was telling her not to trust this withering old man. Behind her Quill coughed and slumped onto his side.

She'd run out of time for distrust.

Alana lifted her head from the sand. She looked around at a barren moonlit desert. The last thing she remembered was flying. The sun was setting and she was desperately speeding home when she'd begun to drift off.

When was the last time she'd slept?

She sat up and felt her muscles aching as she pulled her legs beneath herself. There was no time to rest. The Queen would already be back at the New Kingdom. For all Alana knew, she may already be too late.

Wiping a drip of sweat from her brow she pushed herself off the ground, attempting to stand. But her legs were weak and wobbled beneath her like two columns of mud. She grit her teeth knowing she was letting her mother down, letting Quill down—everyone. She took a step...and fell.

Her legs were too weak, they would no longer carry her, and her wings were just as tired.

Her heart rate sped and she began to feel hopeless. Then a cool shadow drifted across the sand, blocking out the moonlight.

Alana turned to find what looked like a wolf behind her. Only this wolf was over 12 feet high and made completely from stone. Boulders piled on top of boulders.

She had no strength left to fight it, still she lifted her chin and prepared to do her best.

But the stone wolf lowered its rocky muzzle, huffing and barking in short, sharp yelps.

Alana squinted. Was the rock creature trying to communicate with her?

The wolf lifted its head toward its back.

"Do you want...you want me to climb on your back?" Alana asked.

The stone dog huffed and nodded.

Maybe it was the exhaustion but she felt as if she could trust this creature. "Okay."

As the wolf lowered itself to the ground, Alana winced, using what little strength she had to climb aboard.

The wolf lifted its head toward the moon and let out a gravelly howl.

"Yes, the North moon," Alana agreed. "Follow that and we'll be home in no time."

And with that the stone wolf leaped into action, speeding across the dunes with ease.

Alana let herself rest as much as she could without tumbling off. She'd need her strength for the battle ahead.

"People of the New Kingdom!" The Queen's voice bellowed across the square. "You are now under my reign."

A crowd of onlookers pressed tightly into the main square, the air was hot and thick with fear. An uncertain breeze whipped across the people's heads as they turned to glance at each other with furrowed brows.

"How many rulers are we going to have?" a stout man with a protruding belly shouted to the Queen.

She glanced sideways at Bellona, a knowing grin stretching into the corner of her mouth. The centaur huffed. These people had no idea what power they were dealing with.

"You think I'm just like the others," the Queen purred at the pot-bellied man. "You think I'm as useless as your former King, as spineless as Aquila, as ignorant as Alana. Well then, good sir, I offer you a challenge. Strike me down and you will no longer be a slave to this unending cavalcade of false rulers."

A couple of Cyberian soldiers jostled their way into the crowd, pushing people aside, until they reached the man. One of them handed him a blade, fizzing and vibrating with blue electric pulses.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he asked.

"Not at all," the Queen replied.

The soldiers each took an arm and led the man to the podium where the Queen stood. He gripped the blade with both hands, but he was shaking.

"Go ahead," she said.

Biting back his apprehension the man struck the Queen, lodging the blade into the side of her neck. The spider-woman's face tensed in concentration as she tried to push through the pain.

Bellona swiftly trotted to the Queen's side and pulled the blade free. The Queen once again reached into her satchel and pulled out the opalescent orb. In an instant the gash in her neck had closed, leaving nothing but a trail of blue blood oozing from a non-existent source.

The Queen replaced the orb in her satchel and reached a hand out in Bellona's direction. She took the blade and swung. The man's head rolled off the podium, bouncing on the stairs, toward the front of the crowd. A single Norm woman screamed, but everyone else was quiet—silenced by terror.

"So you see, people of the New Kingdom. I cannot die. There is no power in this land greater than mine. Now, bow before your true ruler!"

She held the orb aloft and the crowd fell to their knees.

"But I have not come to terrorize you," she continued, all eyes remained on the cobblestone floor. "I have come bearing a gift. I bring you the gift of transcendence, of self-betterment."

A few people lifted their heads just high enough to see the Queen, puzzled expressions wracked every visible face.

"Tomorrow at noon you are all to return to this square where I will begin the transformations. Soon there will be no divide between our races. You will be one people, my people. You will all be Thereons!"

Panicked voices began to rise. Questions were asked but not answered. A few of the Norms stood still, staring at the Queen intrigued by the prospect of this transformation.

"Tomorrow the Thereon race will rise anew!!!"

Swiftly, Alana's mother snuck upstairs, careful to stay out of sight. The castle seemed empty and she could hear noise coming from the town square. She knew she'd have to hurry before everyone returned.

She reached the guard station, a rotting desk in a cramped and dully lit corner, and was relieved to find it unmanned. Rifling through each drawer, she searched for the keys to the dungeons, and found nothing. A voice in the corridor around the corner startled her, and for a moment she thought she would need to escape, return to the dungeon and try again. But when would she have another shot as good as this?

Instead, she froze and waited. The soldier's clunking footsteps passed and finally disappeared. She continued her search.

When she still found nothing and was about to give up, her eye caught on a stone jutting out of the brickwork. She pulled at it and found that it moved. Behind was a large wrought iron keyring laden with chunky iron keys. Pocketing the keys, she pushed the stone back into place and ran for the stair.

The Hand's cell opened with a clunk.

"That's lucky," Alana's mother said. "I was afraid the thing would be rusted shut."

With an ear splitting creak the door swung open and the King's former right hand staggered from his cage.

Alana's mother looked on with caution. Was she doing the right thing?

"This way," the Hand said, approaching a wall.

"Ah, there's no way out that way," Alana's mother replied.

The Hand let out a sigh as he bent a long and creaky finger, tapping it against the wall in a circle. Pressing his ear against the stone, the Hand listened.

"Empty," he said, mostly to himself. "They didn't find it then."

And before Alana's mother knew what was happening the Hand kicked a stone at the base of the wall, triggering a door to open. The Hand pushed back the block of bricks and gestured for the others to follow him.

With Quill's arm around her shoulders, Alana's mother followed into the darkness.

After ascending a long and winding staircase they emerged into a large chamber with an arching ceiling, oversized machines littered the floor space, and shelves hung heavy with gadgets and scrolls.

"This place was a secret from all but the King and myself. It is my domain," the Hand said, limping toward a tall and thin, coffin-shaped contraption. He clasped a wheel on the front panel and spun it clockwise. The panel opened like a door revealing a metal suit. Twice the size of a regular man, it resembled a suit of armor, only it was black, with tubes running between the joints, and clear panels through which Alana's mother could see copper wiring.

"Put him inside," the Hand said.

Alana's mother looked at Quill. He was barely conscious, so pale he was nearly translucent. He would surely die if she did nothing. But still that nagging sense of doubt was scratching at her neck. What would this contraption turn Quill into?

She had promised Alana to keep Quill safe and now she was worried either way, she was going to break that promise.

"He's dying," the Hand said, prodding her to hurry up.

A small moan escaped Quill's lips.

"Whatever that is," she said to herself. "It has to be better than the alternative."

She set her jaw and carried Quill over to the contraption. The Hand got to work securing Quill inside the metal suit. When he was situated the Hand closed the door and spun the wheel.

He grinned a toothy sadistic grin at Alana's mother and then pulled a lever on the machine's side.

A bolt of lightning tore across the room and suddenly the machine sprang to life. Smoke plumed from exhaust pipes in the rear and blue electrical currents sparked and swam through the wires.

Inside, Quill's face was masked by a cloud of smoke and miniature lightning.

Alana's mother worried she had doomed the boy to his death sooner rather than later. And then finally the whirring stopped. The electricity ceased sparking. The Hand opened the door.

At first nothing happened, and then...*clank!*

One metallic foot hit the ground. And then another.

The machine was moving.

Alana's mother stared up at the now seven foot tall Quill.

"What..." Quill stammered, uttering words for the first time in weeks. "What is this?"

"If he stays in the suit he lives," The Hand said. "It will protect him."

"What have you done to me?!" Quill asked, anger rising in his voice. "What have you done?!"

The next day an even larger crowd was jam packed into the square. The Queen stood before them holding the orb in the air like a beacon, drawing them in. Trails of Norms flowed through the streets, people were lining up, some eager to shed their Norm identity and others afraid if they didn't they would be punished.

It was a fantastic turnout by all accounts, the Queen's threat of violence had made sure of that. But as she surveyed the crowd, squinting in the bright morning light, a scowl distorted her expression.

"Your majesty," Bellona said, sidling up to the Queen. "You were right. A group of deserters slipped away in the night."

"Send a battalion," the Queen said.

"An entire battalion, your majesty? What if there is unrest here in the city, our numbers would be severely depleted—"

"I don't care, hunt them down. No one escapes my grasp."

Bellona shuffled awkwardly, his four legs clopping on the stone, and lowered his head. "Yes, your majesty."

The centaur marched away to parlay the Queen's orders to his troops.

"People of New Kingdom," the Queens exclaimed, casting silence across the crowd. "The time has come. Bring forth the witch!"

A Cyberian soldier emerged from a shadowy arch. In one hand he led a disgruntled horse by a rope and in the other he held the end of a chain, attached to a pair of shackles clamped around the wrists of a hunched old woman. Her hair was a wild birds nest and her eyes darted around in terror like a panicked squirrel.

"Through this beast," the Queen bellowed, gesturing to the oversized horse, "we will transform you all. In order to become Theron this creature must submit its soul to each of you one by one. This sorceress has the power to force this animal into submission." She turned to the witch. "Do it."

The witch hissed through gritted teeth but, reluctantly, she obeyed. She began muttering an incantation. As she did the horse stomped it's hooves and reared back but as the spell worked it's magic the creature settled and began emanating a golden glow. When the spell was cast the horse was subdued.

The witch stepped back and turned to the Queen, spitting at her feet.

The Queen arched an eyebrow and the Cyberian guard drew his sword. The witches head toppled to the floor, landing by the horses feet.

"One by one you will each sacrifice this horse," the Queen said, pulling a dagger and handing it to a woman at the front of the crowd. "The horse's soul will meld with yours and your transformation to Thereon will be complete."

"But how will the rest of us sacrifice the horse if it's dead?" a woman close to the first asked.

The Queen turned and grinned. "Life and death mean nothing to one with my power."

And with that the transformations began. The first townswoman stepped up to the horse and slashed its neck. The same golden glow spilled in wisps and tendrils from the horse's neck and flowed into the woman. Her body contorted, morphed, grew, until she no longer resembled herself. She had become a centaur and the first of the new Thereon race.

Within a moment the horse's wound healed, thanks to the Queen's magic orb. The beast was ready to submit again.

The Queen looked out at the crowd, soon they would all be part of her new army.

"Next!"

Alana rode astride the stone wolf, charging for the New Kingdom, to her right a rocky mountain ledge signified that she was close.

"I know those alps," she said to her comrade. "We're almost there."

It wasn't too much later that she came across a band of travelers. Only from the large packs on their backs and the single cart, burdened with too many possessions, they looked more like refugees.

The rocky beast slowed to a standstill, blocking out the sun and casting a long shadow across the people as they approached. They stared up at the mystical creature in awe.

"Where are you coming from?" Alana asked.

"From your homeland, Miss Alana. "A young man stepped forward, bowing gently. "We are your former subjects but we have been forced to flee the New Kingdom. The Queen has taken siege, she intends to transform the entire population into Thereons."

"What do you mean?"

Alana swung her leg over the back of the wolf and dismounted gracefully. She approached the caravan of frightened faces.

"Tell me everything."

The second the man was done explaining the Queen's plan, Alana returned to her wolf companion.

"Quickly," she said, running a hand down his hard snout. "My mother and Quill are still in the city. We must stop the Queen before she hurts them."

But the wolf shook his head.

"What do you mean, no?" Alana asked. "You've brought me this far, why desert me now?"

Quill was slowly getting used to his new body. After the initial shock had worn off, and he'd managed to calm down, he began to feel the new power he'd been given. He felt stronger than ever before, the electricity that powered his suit felt like it was flowing in his veins. The first thing he wanted was to find Alana and stop the Queen.

"We have to find her," he said to Alana's mother and the Hand of the former King. "Together she and I will be powerful enough to overthrow the Queen."

"Perhaps," the Hand said, running a slender finger along his chin.

"Is there a way out of the city?" Quill asked. "Perhaps we can intercept her?"

"Of course," the Hand trilled. "Follow me."

Using a series of secret tunnels, Quill, Alana's mother, and the Hand escaped the city unseen by the Queen's forces.

Once they were safely beyond the city walls, they headed in the direction Alana was last seen flying. The terrain became rocky and while Quill, with newly acquired strength and agility, found it easy going, Alana's mother and Hand struggled to keep up.

"Down!" Quill said suddenly in a hushed whisper. The three of them ducked behind a cragged boulder.

"What have you seen?" Alana's mother asked.

"Cyberians," Quill said, "carrying the Queen's flag."

Risking another look, Quill poked his head over the rocks. An entire battalion of the Queen's cyberians were marching west. Quill scanned the horizon wondering where they were headed until his eyes landed on a large ash gray, wolf shaped creature. And standing before it a woman with fiery red hair and dragon wings at her back.

"Alana!" Quill ducked back down. "I've seen her. But the Cyberians will be upon her shortly."

"We must hurry and reach her first," Alana's mother suggested.

For a moment Quill was still, thinking.

"You know," the Hand chimed in. "That suit can do more than keep you alive." He grinned a knowing smirk and Quill met his eye.

"You're right," he said. "You two go on ahead. Catch up with Alana."

"What will you do?" Alana's mother asked.

"Take care of the Cyberians."

With that Quill launched himself over the cragged rock and charged across the open ground toward the Cyberian battalion.

His new metal legs propelled him across the land, launching him toward his foes with enough speed and grace that they barely saw him coming.

Nearing the battalion he leapt into the air and as the Cyberian's turned to spot him, he descended amongst their ranks sending at least ten of them flying backward. He stood in the center of a hundred Cyberian warriors but as each came at him he flung them away with ease.

Blue electricity danced from his joints, the wires connecting the suit to his brain transmitted his every move and desire. Blades expanded from his forearms, slicing Cyberians in two with a single blow. His kicks were as powerful as a stampede of elephants and took out two, three opponents at a time. Toward the rear of the ranks he noticed two Cyberians loading up an electric canon. Without knowing it was possible the front panels of his suit opened up revealing a canon of his own. Blue light shot from his chest disintegrating the Cyberian weapon and the men soldiers at its side.

Within three minutes the battalion was leveled. Quill spun about taking in the hundred or so bodies littering the ground. He glanced down at his new body. He was truly powerful and he wondered if he had even begun to explore his new potential.

Alana was angsty. She didn't know why her companion was so adamant that they remain at the edge of the city.

She wanted with every fiber of her dragon-being to charge into the city to rescue her mother and her friends. But she trusted the wolf, after all he'd brought her this far. She explained to the escaped Norms that she needed to wait in this place and they had agreed to wait with her. They were safest in her company.

So they'd begun to make camp and rest.

Alana was helping to raise a tent when she saw two figures approaching. She recognized them both, but for a moment seeing them together confused her into stillness. Her confused state only lasted a second, outgunned by her overwhelming love for her mother. She raced toward the figures and took her mother in her arms.

"You're safe," she gasped, choking back tears of relief.

"And so are you," Alana's mother replied, squeezing her daughter even tighter.

"But what are you doing with him?" Alana asked, stepping back to look at the Hand. Fury lit up behind her eyes, and fire swirled in her gut. She ought to dispose of the untrustworthy cretin right there and then.

Just as she was about to strike she heard another voice and another shiver of relief rippled through her.

"Alana!"

"Quill!"

But when she turned to greet him, she didn't recognize the young man she had known. He was obscured by machinery, more Cyberian robot than man.

"What happened?" Alana asked, frozen to the spot. Quill approached her and took her hand in his.

"I was going to die," he said to Alana, and then begrudgingly toward the Hand he added, "he saved me."

To Alana, this was the most shocking twist of all. She gaped at the hand with an open mouth.

"Him?!"

"Yes, without him I would have died."

"And he helped us escape," Alana's mother interjected.

Alana sideeyed the Hand, surveying him. She was more than grateful the people who mattered most to her were alive, but still she distrusted the sallow man.

Knowing this chance meeting was the reason her wolf friend had kept her here, Alana was ready to address the situation in the New Kingdom.

"The Queen is turning the people into Thereons," Alana informed Quill. "We have to stop her."

"Why is she doing that?" Alana's mother asked.

Quill stepped forward. "She's building an army."

"But how?"

"She has this magical orb," Alana replied to her mother. "It has powers I've never even imagined."

"The Orb of Dorifal," the Hand piped in.

"You've heard of it?" Alana asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "I've read about it. If the Queen has this orb then we are all in much greater danger than I thought. With the magic contained in that orb she will not only have the power to transform her people into the Thereon army, she will also be able to control their minds."

"An army of beasts at her beck and call," Quill said, turning to look in the direction of the new Kingdom.

"We have to stop her," Alana said, stepping up to Quill's side, her gaze cast toward her home. "We can't wait any longer."