

FK Tale Part 2

Chapter 1: The King's Demise

"You're a monster."

The King's face was in shadow, but his voice rang out across the darkened throne room. Gruff as ever with just the faintest quiver. It was the quiver of a man who knew his life was about to end.

"You killed my mother," fire swam in Alana's eyes and in her stomach.

No torches were lit in the King's throne room, no mystical energy swam through wires into electric bulbs. The old King knew his rule was about to end. He had retreated from battle, not to regroup, but to hide and wait for an inevitable fate.

A battalion of Cyberian soldiers lay unconscious on the floor. The King's last attempt at a defense, strewn across the stone. Tossed aside by Alana's newly acquired power and her fury.

Alana stared at the King, his battle armor in a pile by his side, she looked at the man who tore her life apart, and she felt the fire within her. She'd felt it in the gorge, after her... transformation. After her and the dragon... fused. She had closed the path to the Forbidden Kingdom and driven back the King and his troops. When she went down into the gorge, she was still a girl. But what was she now? A hybrid? A fusion of both the old and the new? Thereon and Norm? Or was the King right, was she a monster?

"You killed my mother!" she spat once more at the squat King.

"Your mother? I don't even know who you are! The only thing I know is that you're one of them. A Thereon. Liars and thieves all of you. Hiding the mystic energy of our world in your hidden Kingdom. All we wanted was what was promised to the Norms by your Queen. If I killed your mother in the process, then she was just one more beast removed from my path!"

That was enough. Alana felt the fire rage in her, she let it flow up through her throat and out through her mouth. A scream of flames.

The King's body toppled onto its side. His crown rolled off and away into the shadows.

As the fire settled back to a dull ember in Alana's gut, she gasped at the sight in front of her. She almost couldn't believe she was responsible for the smoldering husk before her, but she was. Before she returned to the Floating Castle, Alana spoke with one of the Thereon warriors who had joined her in her charge to New Kingdom's capital. She asked them to round up any remaining officials or highly ranking members of the King's cabinet and lock them up.

She lifted into the air, hoisted aloft by the freshly born set of wings which now grew from her spine. She looked over the city and the fields before her and headed back to the Forbidden Kingdom.

Chapter 2: The Queen's Command

"You are a brave warrior, my child."

The Queen looked at Alana across her chamber in the topmost room of the tallest tower in the Floating Castle. "You have saved my people and became a true power in this war."

"But, Your Majesty, the King is dead. Surely that means the war is over."

The Queen gave Alana a thoughtful look before moving towards a window. Her long spindly spider's legs clacking as she went.

"Wars have a way of waging beyond their ends," she said, staring out across the clouds and mountain tops. "You will see, child."

Alana took a step forward.

"I wanted to ask... well... the thing is... I know what happened. I know that when the dragon died it gifted a part of itself, a part of its soul to me. But I don't know exactly what that means, for me, or why I was picked. I wanted to ask you... what am I?"

"You are chosen, my child." The Queen spun about quickly and came towards Alana. "You have been deemed worthy by the mightiest of creatures and through an act of transfiguration you have become one with the dragon. It is a great honor. One that has not been seen in many years. It is a great honor and a great responsibility."

The Queen spoke and it felt as if her words reverberated in Alana's chest.

"What do you mean responsibility?" Alana looked at her arms covered in bronzed red dragon leather; at the claws her fingers had become.

"The dragon chose you because it knew that when the time came you would do the right thing. That you would use its power to ensure those that would want to cause us harm are destroyed."

Alana's body temperature ran hot these days but even still, in this moment, she thought she felt a chill run down her spine.

"You have the power to destroy any who oppose us. The dragon knew you to be worthy of this power. I know you to be worthy of this power."

"Is that what I am then? A weapon?"

The Queen lifted an eyebrow.

"You, my child, are a great leader."

She might have been half dragon but the half which remained Norm blushed at this last statement. Something inside her buzzed with the knowledge that she had earned the Queen's respect. She let a lock of crimson hair fall across her face.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"Although, you are still young, still volatile. You need time to grow into your new power. There may come a day when you lead the Thereons. But for now, I want you to learn from me, I want you to sit by my side. Which is why I'm sending you back to the New Kingdom. There you shall act as my representative, my right hand with which I will grip the New Kingdom and bring order to the land. You will be my voice in that land and yes, if a threat to my power should arise, you will also be my greatest weapon."

Alana's breath caught in her throat and when she coughed a little puff of smoke escaped her mouth.

“Ahem... excuse me, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 3: The Cyberian’s Salute

The sounds of battle rose through smoke from the Capital. As Alana returned, she could see fighting in the streets. The Thereons and Cyberians were battling. Metal and machine against fur and feather.

Although the battle spread out across the city, the main glut of Cyberian troops and Thereon warriors were facing off in the center square. It was a wide expanse, covered in sandstone paving, with only a fountain at its center to provide either army some form of cover. From the sky, it was hard to make out exactly who was winning. Both sides seemed evenly matched. But as the Cyberians rallied, the Thereons began to fall and Alana dove towards the ground.

“I am strong. I am the dragon,” she whispered to herself as clouds whipped her face.

In a stream of fire, she descended into the melee. Both sides were forced backwards.

“Stop!” Alana cried and the enemies froze. The Thereons bristled behind her, the animal hybrids ready to back up the dragon girl. The Cyberians didn’t move. Quiet settled across the square. Until... Clank!

The leader of the Cyberian troop stood to attention. His blaster clanking against the metal armor built around his leg. His left hand rose swiftly into a strong salute. Then one by one, each Cyberian stood to attention and saluted.

Alana looked around in confusion. Was this a trick? She widened her stance and prepared to fight. She could feel the confused whispers from the Thereons behind her.

“The King is dead. Long Live the Queen!”

The chant came from the Cyberian army. They spoke as one.

“The King is dead. Long live the Queen!”

“It sounds like you’re their Queen.”

Alana had been too confused to even notice the centaur appearing at her side. She looked at him, speechless. His hair was long, jet black, flowing in the breeze. His jaw was strong, his shoulders wide. His metal plated chest led down to a slender waist and beneath that the proud body of a horse. A coat of black with just the faintest speckling of silver along his back.

“I... I don’t know what I am.”

The leader of the Cyberian troops approached. The centaur gripped the handle of his sword in its sheath. Alana didn’t move.

“Your Majesty,” the Cyberian general spoke, “you have usurped our once great leader, King Cornivorus. The Cyberian army is yours to wield.”

Her mouth hung open a little. Alana tried to comprehend what this meant. That maybe she was chosen to wield great power, to command an army.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” the centaur interrupted her train of thought, “because it sounds an awful lot like you *are* their Queen.”

Chapter 4: The Centaur's Distraction

Cherry blossoms wafted through the air, signaling the start of Spring in the New Kingdom. The months that followed became known as the Battle of the Gorge, and Alana's ascension to the throne, a great many things began to bloom.

The Kingdom's capital sprang back to life, houses were rebuilt, furnaces in the factories were relit, and life as it was before the King's thwarted invasion resumed as normal. The sun rose and lit up dusty, golden streets. Bakers baked, students studied, and children played. And though all seemed to be at peace, new tensions were blooming between the Norms and Cyberians.

Under Alana's instructions the Cyberian Army had taken on the guise of a police force, charged with maintaining order within the capital. Although a well-meaning plan, the Norms who were used to life without such measures of control became unnerved. Pockets of rebellion sprung up like daffodils. And while Alana tried her best to assuage both parties, even with help from her Thereon counsel, the tension continued to grow.

Along with the spring plumage, affection was beginning to bloom between Alana and the centaur. Bellona was a high ranking Thereon warrior and, since their first meeting, had proven worthy as counsel and advisor to Alana. More spirited than a mindless soldier; he was sarcastic and self-aware; his smirk was teasing and careful. He neither disrespected Alana nor spoke to her like a distant monarch. She came to enjoy his gentle teasing and calming tone. As an experienced leader she relied heavily on Bellona's strategic knowledge. Often turning to him for advice on how to handle the political upheaval sprouting amongst her citizens. As their professional relationship grew so did their personal connection. It was under a full moon that they first kissed.

Around this time of year, the Norm's celebrated Spring with a weeklong festival. Balls were held in palaces; flower markets lined the streets and all over people rejoiced in the rebirth of their crops. It was at one of these balls that Alana found herself alone with the centaur.

Having found the food, the wine, the dancing a little much, Alana had attempted to take refuge on a quiet veranda. Vines draped around columns and in the distance a river shone in the moonlight. But she was not as alone as she first thought. Bellona was there, leaning ever casually against a pillar.

"Not much for parties either?" Alana startled the centaur. He huffed and clicked his hoofs. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you," she turned to go back inside.

"No, it's fine. I tend to be a little skittish. It's a family trait." Bellona smiled from the side of his mouth before looking back towards the horizon. Alana joined him, placing her hands on the balustrade. Neither of them spoke for a minute but Alana could feel the heat resonating off the Thereon's body.

"Did you come out here to be alone?" Alana asked.

"I'm used to being alone. I get a little sick of all the chit chat. I don't mind if you stay." Alana felt the flames licking her cheeks.

"Ha! Me too! I'd much rather be climbing a mountain, or I don't know... fighting a great beast."

Bellona laughed.

“Forgive my bluntness, Your Highness. But you don’t have many people in the world you are close with, do you?”

“Everyone I had was taken from me.”

“And that is why you fight?”

Tears blurred Alana’s vision and she hoped Bellona wouldn’t notice for fear of seeming weak.

“I suppose.”

Bellona turned to look at her now.

“Then we are the same.”

Alana looked into Bellona’s silver eyes and she recognized a feeling of pain which she recognized. Before she knew what was happening, she had risen to her toes and kissed the Thereon. He kissed her back.

As they stood on the balcony, their arms wrapped around each other, the first explosion erupted.

Chapter 5: The Counsellor's Warning

Fire in the capital! Insurgent Norm factions had begun to fight back, they were attacking Cyberian barracks and strongholds.

On the recommendation of her counsel, in order to keep the peace, Alana had deployed more Cyberian troops into the city. Unfortunately, the cost of having such a large police force fell upon the Norm citizens who were already fed up with the constant Cyberian presence. They had begun fighting back.

What Alana's counsel failed to inform her of was the distaste Cyberians, civilian or not, harbored for Norms. They found them inferior and as such had begun to abuse their authority. Suppressing the Norms and stripping them of civil liberties.

"Why are they fighting?" Alana looked out from her bedroom as fire raged through the capital.

She had awoken from a nightmare. In the dream she was flying above a landscape ripped apart by rivers of molten lava, flames surrounding her. She was in a battle. On land and in the sky faceless enemies, shadows, came at her and she struck them down. Each one, torn in two, burnt to dust, destroyed. Until finally the shadow had a face, a familiar face, and familiar platinum hair... Alana shot flames at the figure and awoke, drenched in sweat, gasping for breath.

As soon as she was awake, she noticed the fires outside.

"I have to stop this" she whispered to no one. She spread her wings and was about to take off when she remembered her dream. "Who am I kidding? These people don't need a dragon. I can't stop people fighting when that's all I'm good for."

Behind her she could hear Bellona's breaths. She turned to look. Veiled by a sheer silk curtain, Alana could see her bed in which the sleeping Bellona lay. His eyes closed and his breaths deep.

"You'll know what to do," Alana thought to herself.

As she turned to go and wake Bellona a light caught her eye. From a drawer in her desk a blue glow was seeping through the cracks. Alana hurried to the drawer and pulled out the light's source. The wooden medallion. Of course! The one her mother had gifted her, engraved with images of a wolf, a squirrel, a trout and a dragon. The one which had led her to the Forbidden Kingdom and was leading her somewhere now.

Feeling the familiar tug of the necklace Alana followed its path until she was standing outside a tall, black tower.

"Is this a prison?" She could barely make out where the building ended, and the night sky began. "Why have you led me here?"

The necklace continued to lead her into the tower, through dark, dank halls and down twisting, cobwebbed staircases. Until finally she was standing in the bottom most chamber. The walls were green with moss and damp, a pungent smell hung in the air, like three-day old meat. Alana was standing outside a prison cell, but it was too dark to see inside. Peering through the bars she made out the shape of a person. A small bundle of rags and hair. Then she heard her voice...

"Alana?"

“Mom!”

She grabbed the bars of the cell door and let the fire in her rumble. She looked at her mother behind bars, on a cold stone floor, and suddenly her hands were hot. They were so hot the metal beneath them began to glow. Finally, she wrenched at the bars, pulling the door clean away from its hinges and she fell at her mother’s feet crying. The two women embraced, their tears mixing with each other’s.

“We have to get you out of here!”

Alana picked up her mother gently, slipping her arm over her shoulders and began to carry her from the cell. As they made their way towards the stairs a deep, slippery laugh echoed out from behind another set of bars.

“Who is that?” Alana asked.

“Oh, never mind him,” said her mother. “He was brought in by a Thereon. Says he was the counselor of the King or some such.”

“I’ve heard about you, dragon girl. I’m so pleased to finally set my eyes on you.” Alana paused and looked at the figure. Cloaked in shadow, Alana could only make out a long white face, deep black eyes, and spindly fingers clasped beneath his chin. “I know what you are.”

“What are you talking about? You’re nothing but a prisoner of war.” Alana’s voice was calm and strong.

“I was the King’s chief counsel, his main adviser, the royal engineer, the father of the Cyberian race and a citizen of the Old World. I travelled here from Forbidden Kingdom and other lands before that. I have seen more of the world than any living man and I know what you are.”

“You’re just a crazy old man!” Alana went to move again but stopped in her tracks.

“The Thereon Queen is a liar. A monster. You are nothing but a pawn in her game. But play her game too long and you will become an even greater terror. I know what you are Dragon Woman, I know where you came from. The belly of the beast.”

“No!”

Alana let fire spill from her gut, sending flames streaming across the floor and licking at the bars of the prisoner. The Hand retreated into his cell. Her mother looked up at her with terror in her eyes.

“Come on, mom,” as she carried her mother away, Alana couldn’t help but hear the words of the counselor repeating in her mind, “I know what you are.”

Chapter 6: The Mother's Advice

"Mum, I... I thought you were dead."

Alana and her mother were sitting on a sofa in her chamber. Pale and peach dawn light came in through the open patio doors.

"I'm so happy to see you." Alana wrapped her mother in yet another hug. "You even smell the same!"

Immediately upon reaching the castle Alana had summoned her most attentive handmaidens see to her mother. They let her bathe and cut her hair and finally, when she was settled on the sofa, they'd brought her tea.

"I've missed you so much."

"And I have missed you, my lovely. I never had any doubt that you were going to make it. That my necklace would lead you where you needed to be. I didn't think you would return quite so... well, changed."

Alana blushed and let her hair fall over her face.

"I must look pretty scary, huh?"

"Not at all," her mother reached out and took both of Alana's hands, running her thumbs over the dragonhide. "You look glorious. I mean, well... you've grown up."

"How did you manage to survive?"

"I was taken prisoner during the raids on our village." Alana's mother's eyes grew misty. "I saw them setting fire to the village and tried to help people escape. Some managed to hide in the forest but so many... so many of us perished. When they came for me, they were asking how to access the Forbidden Kingdom. I knew the horrible things they could do with that information, but I also knew they wouldn't stop... killing until they knew. So, I told them I could help them find it."

Her mother broke down into sobs and Alana cradled her, holding her as tight as she could.

"Those men, the King and his counselor, should be ashamed. I have half a mind to go back down and finish the job..."

"Oh Alana, it's true those men have done truly despicable deeds but your response to them will only reflect on you."

Alana gasped. Only now did she realize what she had done.

"Oh mother, if you're alive then... I killed him because... I killed the King for no reason. I murdered him."

This time it was the mother's turn to do the cradling while Alana cried. Finally, she looked at her mother with red, puffy eyes.

"I'm a monster, mother. That's what I've become."

"No, my darling. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"I don't even know how I came to be! I'm not Thereon, but I'm not Norm anymore either. There was a fusion and I just... came out like this... with claws and dragon skin and... fire."

"My daughter, I do not have all the answers for you, but there is some truth I can depart. I hid this from you because I thought it would keep you safe in case you were ever captured like I was. You are a child of both Kingdoms."

"A child of what? What do you mean?"

“Well, I was born in the Old Kingdom to Norm parents, back when there was peace. I had a happy childhood. Growing up in the Old Kingdom, before it was a forbidden place, I was always surrounded by nature. That’s how I became such a deft hand at animal husbandry and why I married your father.”

“My father? But you said he ran off.”

“And he did in a way. He ran off to war. To fight the Norm uprising.”

“To fight the... then he must have been... my father was Thereon?”

“Indeed. He was Thereon. As much wolf as he was man.”

“He was part wolf?” Alana’s eyebrows were so high up on her forehead she didn’t know if they’d ever come back down.

“A kind loving wolf man he was too. He was also wise, and he taught me about the special connection Thereon’s have with nature. But when the war broke out, he felt it was his duty to go fight with the others. I myself, never put too much stock in fighting. Your father never came home. When the Norm’s left what then became known as the Forbidden Kingdom, I had no choice but to leave with them. So, you see, you are a child of both races, which is why you have a strong connection to the earth. Which is probably part of why the dragon chose you.”

“I’m starting to wish it hadn’t. All I’ve caused since I changed is damage.”

“My child, you are special. You must see that. Your father knew it. That’s why he told me to give that necklace to you.”

“This was his?” Alana held it close to her chest. “So, you think that because I have both Norm and Thereon blood... that’s the reason I was able to merge with the dragon? But why? Why can’t everyone merge? Why me? And what am I now? If I’m part dragon, what does that mean, all the dragons are gone. How am I supposed to know what to do with these powers if I have no idea where it comes from?”

“Your father told me once about a place. A tree, by a river, in a cavern underground. Somewhere in the Forbidden Kingdom. A special place. A place of knowledge. A place where Thereons could go to meditate and learn. To gain a higher consciousness.”

“But how will I find it?”

Alana’s mother smiled and pressed her hand against the medallion.

“I think you have everything you need.”

Chapter 7: The Spirit's Vision

"Are you there? Are you with me now?"

Alana stood on a small patch of grass surrounded by stone walls. Smooth and perfectly curved, they rose to form the cavern. In the center of the cave a small island, surrounded by crystal clear cerulean water, rose dome shaped and in the center was a large willow tree. Starlight from a single gap in the roof bounced off the water and swam about the walls like mystical energy itself. She was reaching out to the tree with all her energy, attempting to make a connection to the spirits which inhabited this place.

"Can you feel me?"

She had followed the necklace once more. After sneaking past Bellona as he slept, an act of deception which made her feel only slightly guilty, she'd taken off and flown towards the Forbidden Kingdom with the necklace as her compass.

Having found a path through a small enshrouded entrance, Alana arrived in the cavern and was instantly overcome with the feeling that she belonged in this space. She felt connected to the past and the present in a way she'd never experienced before. She shut her eyes and tried to make contact.

"I have come in the search of truth. My truth. I come to know the past and how I came to be. Spirits, can you show me?"

A breeze whipped past Alana throwing hair over her eyes. Mystic energy pulses began spasming between the tree and the rock faces surrounding it. The water began to vibrate and hum. Alana ran to the edge and watched as a vision appeared in the depths.

In the water she watched as a tribe of animals appeared: lions and eagles, beavers and horses, spiders, bears, wolves, rabbits, leopards and badgers. A pulse of blue light and another tribe came into sight. Prehistoric Norms in tattered loincloths, with messy matted hair, carrying rudimentary tools. Lightning bolts shot down as the Gods, hidden behind the clouds, selected members from both tribes. The selected Norms and animals floated into the center of the vision. They began to glow and were lost in a collision of smoke, fire, beams of light and star-shine. When the vision cleared again the selected members for the two tribes had become one. They had become the Thereons. The first tribe of Thereons; strong and at one with the earth. A wave washed the image away and Alana stepped back. But the vision was not yet finished.

A ripple across the water's surface as time sped by. Years passed before Alana's eyes, until a spider-woman entered the vision. Her power enormous, her connection to the earth and the mystic energy palpable. She is drunk with power. In her hubris she strips the Thereons of their direct connection to the land, washes their minds clean of their origins and limits their ability to harness the mystic energy. From a castle in the clouds she looks down upon the Norm people and she scowls, she judges them unworthy. She sends shackles flying towards the remaining Norm people. They become enslaved. Alana watches as they toil under the Thereon Queen's rule. She watches as even the Norm's leaders are forced to work, to mine inhospitable caves. She sees as the Old King grieves for his sister, made sick from years of inhaling poisonous dusts, he holds her hand as she whispers a plan in his ear. A plan which will give him cause to start a war with the Thereons. Alana watches as the Old King raises a dagger and

relives his sibling of her pain. Just then fire filled the water, tearing through the vision, sending Alana stumbling backwards.

“The Thereons are like me,” she whispered to herself. “All Thereons are descended from the Norms who merged with the animals. And the Queen... she’s lied to us all.”

“I never lied.”

Alana turned in shock to face the Queen, her tight pale face fierce and focused. “People have a way of seeing what they want. And some people have a way of seeing too much.”

Alana dove backwards as the Queen charged towards her.

Chapter 8: The Phantom's Surprise

Alana hit the wall and the Queen reared back to strike her again. But she was quick and leapt into the air, flipping over the Queen and landing behind her. She harnessed the fire which had already ignited within her and let out a howl of flames. The Queen clambered over the walls of the cave to avoid being burnt.

When she had reached a safe distance, the Queen drew threads of the mystic energy towards her, crackling blue bolts of power fizzed and whirred around her as she manipulated the energy into a single beam which she hurled towards Alana.

Alana felt the power sending her flying and beat her dragon wings as hard as she could to stay upright. Once the energy had abated, she found her footing again but noticed the Queen preparing another beam to strike with. Alana called on the fire and as the pulse came flying towards her, she unleashed a massive wave of heat. The two forces exploded as they collided in the center of the cavern, lighting up the stone and water.

The Queen was knocked back, staggering about and wiping at her face.

"My eyes! They burn!" she cried. Alana saw her advantage and charged towards the Queen, but it was all a trick. As she shot closer the Queen lunged at her. Alana and the Queen crashed onto the hard-stone floor.

Alana cried out in pain as the Queen pressed a sharp leg further into her shoulder. She was pinned down against the floor, the Queen's dark eyes peering at her.

"You foolish child! You didn't think I could sense your disturbance of the primal energy. I can feel every atom of this world, I can control every atom of this world!"

"You're a liar!"

The queen reared back, slamming down upon Alana, who cried out.

"You narrow minded, short sighted, Norm of a creature. Don't you see. The Thereons were disparate, directionless. They needed a leader someone who could build a true civilization for them. And they needed an enemy, someone to draw them together. The Norms are simple, destructive. They abuse this planet. They mine for the powers within, to which they have no rightful claim. They take a sacred power and they make weapons! They are petty and dishonest, and they deserve to be enslaved!"

"No one deserves to be enslaved," Alana winced.

"Oh really," the Queen released the pressure on Alana's shoulder, letting her sigh a breath of relief. "You don't think the people responsible for capturing and torturing your own mother deserve to be kept on the bottom of the food chain?"

Alana rubbed her shoulder and thought about the King, about all the harm he had done. To her mother. To Liam, her best friend, whom she had watched as he burned. Maybe the Queen was right. Maybe the Norms weren't good people.

"That's right, think about what they did to you," the Queen's voice became quiet. "I wasn't lying when I said you were chosen. You have been given tremendous power and now you can use it to make up for all that they've taken. Join me." The Queen began to move towards Alana, slowly, making each step isolated and purposeful. "Stand by my side. Become my greatest weapon and you will understand what true power is."

Edging backwards Alana took in the Queen's words. She might not like what the Norms had become, but they weren't all like the King. They may not have been perfect, but they were born of this world too. There is the same energy running through them as the Thereons, the animals and the land. Alana stopped moving backwards. She stood her ground.

"I will never be your weapon."

Fire began to spiral in her eyes, she felt it growing in her belly.

"Then you will watch as I tear down the Norm Kingdom. Before I came here tonight, I ordered my Thereons to destroy the Norms. They are battling now."

Alana watched as the Queen drew energy to her like wisps of web, collecting them in a ball and opening a portal through which she could see the Capital. It was under attack. Thereons were charging on Norms.

"No!" Alana cried before remembering that she too had an army. "The Cyberians they follow me. I will have them defend the Norms."

"Actually, that's not entirely true either."

With a wave of her hand the Queen's ball of energy twisted and morphed, reaching into the past and plucking out a vision from years ago.

In a room full of mechanical wizardry, gizmos, tools and books the King stood behind his main adviser, behind the counselor.

"And they are mine to control?"

"Yes, your majesty," the counselor's tone was snide and irreverent. "I have programmed an obedience override into the Cyberians cerebral control unit. Even if they wanted to defect, they couldn't; they follow you. If you are usurped by any means the army will follow whomsoever secedes you."

The counselor cocked an eyebrow, as if there was more to the situation than he was letting on, then the vision dissipated.

"But I seceded the King, the Cyberian army fight for me," Alana tried to assure herself as much as the Queen.

"Perhaps you misheard, child. The Cyberians follow the person who seceded the King. You dethroned him on my orders. You were acting under my authority, so although you may have physically disposed of the cretin, the King's mechanical army is under my control."

Alana thought back to that day in the Queen's castle.

"There may come a day when you lead the Thereons. But for now, I want you to learn from me, I want you to sit by my side." the Queen's words rung out in Alana's mind.

"I let you have your fun ruling the capital. I watched while you foolishly attempted to upend my orders for Norm suppression."

"It was you? Suppressing the Norms..." Alana's gaped, trying to catch her breath. It was all so much to take in.

"Not that you noticed the complete subjugation of an entire race. You were so engulfed in your own little fling with a particularly convincing centaur."

Alana drew a quick breath as the truth dawned on her.

"You mean Bellona... he was working for you?"

"Of course," the Queen smiled before rising from the ground. Mystical particles were floating in spiral patterns around her, lifting her through the air. "Now before I leave you here

know this: my war will wage and there will be a great many deaths on each side, until you join me. Unleash your destructive potential and agree to fight with me. Together we will rule not only the Thereon, Cyberian and Norm peoples, but any race we come across, until the world is ours. Make your choice. Let the dragon be unleashed!”

The Queen rose through the gap in the roof of the cave and was gone. Alana leapt to follow but was knocked aside by a boulder rising to fill the hole and block the entrance.

“No!”

Heat ran through Alana’s veins. She was trapped in more ways than one. The Queen would destroy everything just for control. Alana felt the fire in her veins, the flames throbbing in her chest. How dare she?! The dragon inside her was stirring. She would not be controlled. Anger turned her hands into fists as Alana began to beat her wings and lift off from the ground. She would blast her way out. Let the monster rage, she would eviscerate the Queen, tear her apart in a sea of fire. Steam threw her hair about as the fire glow in her eyes lit up the cavern. She gathered all her strength, all of her anger and was about to unleash every ounce of hatred she had for the queen in an unyielding ball of fire when... she heard a familiar voice.

Chapter 9: The Beast's Battle

"Alana... wait."

She looked down as a cloaked figure stepped out from the shadows. But the fire inside her was too big, too out of control. Her eyes were wide, her jaws tight and her teeth bared. Alana's mouth began to open, the flames desperate to escape. She was about to erupt when the figure threw back his hood.

"Quill!"

The fire burst from her lips, rumbling up from her stomach, through her throat and out into the cave. She had just enough time to redirect the trajectory of the blast, aiming at the roof and barely missing her old friend. The explosion blasted through the roof of the cavern, sending rocks hurling into the sky. With the anger in her abated and Alana slowly came back to earth.

"Wow," Quill said, scratching his head, "that was quite the show."

"What are you... how did you... why... I thought you must have died or..."

"Nope, not dead yet."

"After the battle, you... well, it looked like you saw me change into this and then, well, run off." Alana blushed.

"What? No! After you closed the passage I couldn't get back into the Forbidden Kingdom. But there was no way I was going back to serve in Cornivorus' army so I ran off."

"It's so good to see you Quill." Alana wrapped Quill up in a tight hug. "Where have you been?"

"Well, after the battle I didn't know where to go. I didn't belong back in the army, I didn't belong wherever you'd gone, so I just started travelling. Alana, you'll never believe how much world there is out there. I met so many new people. Mystics and poets. Different races and oh yeah... dragons!"

"Dragons?"

"Yeah, they're alive, they've just been hiding."

Alana squinted at Quill.

"You're lying. The dragons are gone. That's what we've always been told."

"Do you think dragons are dumb enough to let themselves die out?"

"I don't..."

"Listen, I'd love to tell you all about it but isn't there a war we have to stop?"

"Oh yeah, right."

Alana grabbed Quill and took off, ducking through the newly made hole in the cavern and heading for the Capital.

As they came towards the city, they found it ablaze. Winged Thereons were attacking from the skies and even from this distance Alana could hear the screams of terrified Norms. They landed at the castle and were immediately accosted by a troop of Thereon warriors. "Stand down!" Alana commanded the Thereons, but they didn't listen. They continued to battle as she watched on, helpless.

"Why aren't they following my commands?"

"Because you aren't their commander."

Alana spun on her heel at the sound of his voice.

“Bellona! You liar!”

“I am the Queen’s counselor and commander of the Thereon army. You are standing between me and that Norm scum.” He lifted his glowing blade and pointed it squarely at Quill. “Pretending to love you was easy, but I’ll just as happily kill you to get to him.”

Bellona ran at Alana with his blade outstretched, she ducked and knocked him aside.

“I should destroy you for what you’ve done!”

Again, the rumbling fire ignited in her belly, heat and flames filled her soul. Bellona saw the green in her eyes disappear behind an orange glow. She prepared to unleash the fire when an explosion distracted her. From across the battlefield she could see the Queen lashing blue energy at a battalion of Norms.

“Go!” Quill shouted. “You need to stop her. I can handle this!”

Alana grit her teeth and gave Quill a nod, she took off at speed.

Quill pulled a long silver blade from his belt, the metal glinted reflecting a nearby fire, an inscription ran the length of the weapon. Bellona, who was recovered, stomped his rear hoof and charged at Quill.

Their blades crashed against each other and sparks flew as they battled.

“Stop this!” Alana hung in midair; her blazing eyes locked on the spider woman.

The Queen turned, strands of energy flowing between her fingers, and met Alana’s gaze.

“This can all stop when you agree to become my warrior. My weapon!”

“I won’t!”

“You are a beast, Alana. A fierce dragon. Your power is immense and destructive by nature. Look around you! Even if you refuse people will die. Just look!”

Alana looked around and took in the battle being fought below her. She saw the faces of Norm soldiers bloody and bruised. She saw Quill struggling to hold his own against Bellona. She saw bodies strewn about the place.

“Their blood will be on your hands!” the queen exclaimed.

“No, I won’t be like you. I won’t fight.” Alana was steady, ready for the Queen’s next attack.

“Then you will perish,” the Queen lifted an arm and pointed at Alana. “Cyberians attack!”

The Cyberian forces came running in waves. Their blasters and energy cannons held aloft. The entire Cyberian force was coming for Alana. She let the fire in her belly grow and explode. Until she was burning hot. She unleashed the fire on the Cyberians. Diving and sweeping along their front lines she drove them back. Her flames whipped up the dirt and knocked over even the strongest of soldiers. She hurled heat and rage in their direction. They were no match for her.

The Queen saw this and called out.

“Thereons! The Dragon has turned on us. She must be destroyed! Attack!”

And with that the Thereon troops came running from across the battlefield as well. A herd of wild beasts, rhinos and leopards, bears and eagles, came hurtling towards her. At the same time battalions of Cyberian troops were regrouping and they joined the Thereon’s charge.

She fought them back as best as she could. Alana sent torrents of fire pouring down upon the two armies attacking her. She grabbed up a discarded spear and tried to deflect the arrows coming her way. But the fire was losing its strength.

Finally, she was hit with the blast of a Cyberian cannon and fell.

Chapter 10: Alana's Choice

Groaning in pain, Alana sat up and watched in horror as the Thereons and Cyberians came at her like a wall of death. She felt the first blow make contact with her skull as she tried to stand. The second collided with her ribs and knocked the wind from her. She felt the scrape of blades and the pulse of Cyberian weaponry. She took blow after blow.

She did her best to fight back, to defend herself, but it was no use. A Thereon soldier, a mix of man and wolf, swung his club and sent Alana flying. Landing in the dirt, Alana fell back, wincing from the pain. She lay there with her eyes scrunched shut knowing that at any moment now her life would end.

The Queen's voice floated into her mind. Telling her to fight, telling her to kill. Telling her to let the monster inside take control. But she wouldn't.

"No, no, no, no..." she kept repeating and shaking her head. She clutched at the dirt beside her looking for something to hold onto and then she felt it. The earth. The soil she was lying on. She let her mind sink into the ground. She felt the energy of the world, the mystical power filling every atom of soil and every living creature.

Alana took a breath and she called out to earth. She drew the power to her. Beams of blue light dashed up through the sedimentary layers, flashes of green from the roots of trees and grass, the burnt orange heat in the world's center rose to her. She let the energy flood into her body. It filled her veins and her lungs and her mind. Her eyes snapped open and she rose into the air without flapping her wings.

The armies stopped in their tracks and looked up at Alana, her hair was blown about by the wind, her arms were outstretched, and her entire body was glowing. The light of the world's energy was beaming out of her.

She opened her mouth, and instead of flames, a beam of light shot upwards into the sky.

The battlefield went quiet. Every soldier stood still. The Queen watched on as Alana waited. Finally, the silence was pierced by the battle cry of a dragon. The armies turned to see a flock of dragons, more than twenty in number, flying in from the West. They varied in color and size, each with unique configurations of spines, horns and markings. An emerald green dragon, the largest by far was leading the flock and cried out again.

Both armies turned, and with the Queen out in front, readied themselves to fight.

But Alana reached out with one hand. She had felt her connection to the world and all the creatures living on it. She'd felt her connection to the Norm people and the Thereons, and she reached out to the entire race of animal hybrids. She lifted the veil of lies placed upon them by their Queen, allowing them to see the truth about their heritage, their connection to the Norms, and their true power.

As the Cyberians continued to charge towards the dragons, the Thereons fell back. They shook their heads in confusion, glancing between their ranks, and finally comprehending the truth about their monarch. The Queen felt this shift.

She looked back towards Alana and fear crept through her body and all eight of her legs.
“No!”

She watched as her Thereons turned their gaze on her and their expressions turned from confusion to anger. Finally, she looked towards the dragons who were nearly upon her. Before the Queen could react, Alana spoke to her. Although they stood at either end of two great armies the Queen could hear Alana’s voice as if she were speaking straight into her mind.

“You have abused the energies of this world. You have manipulated the forces of nature for your own destructive purposes. But not anymore. These are powers of creation and that is how they shall be used from now on.”

A single tear ran down the pale cheek of the Queen.

“Now take your Cyberian army and run!”

The Queen ran. Clambering away from the battlefield, she ran with her army following closely behind. Some of the Thereons wanted to give chase but Alana raised an arm and they knew to stop.

“Too many lives have been lost here today.”

Alana slowly descended to the ground as the energy beaming out of her withdrew back into the soil. She walked across the battlefield, touching hands with both Thereons and Norms, and indicating they should do the same. Both sides approached the other with caution at first but ended sharing tears and embraces.

Reaching the spot where she’d left Quill to fight Bellona, she let out a small gasp.

“Oh no.... Can you heal him?”

Alana was back in her room at the castle. She had found Quill injured and bleeding on the battlefield. Bellona was nowhere to be seen. With as much speed and care as she could manage, she’d carried Quill back to her room where her mother was waiting.

“Will he be alright?”

“He is badly injured,” Alana’s mother said, pressing a warm cloth onto Quill’s clammy forehead. “There’s something about this wound that’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. No matter the treatment this injury refuses to heal.”

“What do you mean?”

Suddenly Quill’s hand shot up and clasped around Alana’s wrist.

“Alana, my blade...” Alana looked at the engraved sword which a Thereon had collected and delivered. “Bellona, he stole my blade and... uunnhh... he stabbed me with it.”

“He stabbed you with your own blade?”

Before Quill could answer his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out, exhausted.

“The blade must be cursed.” Alana turned at her mother’s remark. “I once gave shelter to a travelling mystic returning to his homeland beyond the Western desert. He spoke of such a curse used by his people. Those wounded by a weapon with such a hex placed upon it will not die but live in eternal pain. This wound will not heal until the curse is broken.”

“But how do I do that? What do I do?!” Alana was panicked.

“You must go, my dear. Find the mystic and the cure for this terrible blight.”

“Ok,” Alana stood up. “But how do I even know where to start looking?”

“Bring me the blade.” Alana did as she was told and gave her mother Quill’s sword. Her mother leant over the metal trying to make out the inscription. “It’s in a language I don’t recognize.”

Alana felt all hope draining from her.

“But I know someone who might.” Alana sighed in relief and then glared at her mother.

“Well? Who is it?”

“An old scholar I knew once but he lives very far from here. Very far indeed. It’s a big world out there.”

“I’ve never been outside of our two Kingdoms.” Alana’s hand was firmly pressed against her forehead. “Can you tell me where to find this man?”

Alana’s mother handed the sword back to Alana.

“Of course.”