



THE FK TALE

Leading up to President's day weekend, embark on the Forbidden Kingdom journey with us as we unfold the clash of two worlds.

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The Bodies

It's hard to know what you're going to feel when you see a dead body. But if the rumors of the most recent attacks were true, they were going to find out this morning—hopefully before their parents noticed they'd gone.

“Hurry up,” Liam hissed.

“Shush! Or do you want your pa to know we've run off?”

Alana pushed on ahead quietly. They weren't far enough from the village yet. Not far enough that their parents couldn't hear them and call them back if they were found missing. The sun wasn't fully risen yet; dawn was just breaking through the clouds. The morning was pale and fresh, and the light was just beginning to pervade the underbrush.

The mud squelched under their boots as they trudged through the forest. It had rained last night, leaving the soil damp and swampy. The clouds gave them a little more time, but it wouldn't be long until the wolves woke up, inevitably rousing the rest of the households. Their parents would expect them to be home to help with the housework or breakfast. They had to be quick if they wanted to find the body without getting caught.

It wasn't unusual for Alana to be off exploring the countryside when she was meant to be helping her mother. For as long as she could remember, which was thirteen years, give or take, it had just been the two of them. She knew how much her mother depended on her. They were the poorest family in the village. Her mother was a healer of animals—she took care of strays injured in the forest, or helped out with the maw cattle on nearby farms. She was so gifted in this arena the locals had nicknamed her “the creature whisperer,” but her talent didn't bring in any

money. Their only sources of income were repairing clothes and selling the squalp root they grew out back.

Too often, Alana got caught up examining an interesting cluster of mushrooms or poking around in a cave she'd never noticed before when she was supposed to be sweeping or sewing up holes in a pair of old britches. She wasn't ungrateful; she tried to help her mother out as much as she could. But she was restless and longed to stick her nose into every nook and cranny nature could provide.

She had convinced Liam to come out this morning. He lived in the cottage down the track with his four older brothers, his parents, and his grandmother. He was small, even for his age and was often unwell. He liked Alana and the excitement that being her friend brought along with it. When the other kids in the village made fun of him for his meekness, he had a tendency to whimper. But Alana was different—when they made fun of her for her raggedy dresses, dirty knees, and messed-up hair, she would stick out her tongue and stomp away. Liam thought she was brave, and being her friend meant he could be brave, as well.

They'd met one day when he'd been sent to fetch water from the well and was struggling to pull the full bucket out. He had slipped on a wet stone and had nearly gone tumbling in, but Alana had caught him just before he'd toppled over and pulled him to safety. There were some kids nearby who had started laughing, but Alana had taken Liam's hand, grabbed the bucket, stuck out her tongue and marched him off. He'd been following her around ever since.

So last night, when she knocked on his window well after she should have been in bed and said, "Want to go see a dead body tomorrow?" he had agreed.

Scratching at a rash on his leg and shivering a little in the cold, Liam continued to splosh through the mud. He was nervous, but there in front of him was Alana, her red hair a frizzy mess, striding over rocks and roots that sprung out of the dirt.

“How did you even find out about the body?” he asked.

“Some traveler came to the house last night,” Alana answered without turning around. “He was pretty shook up, too. He kept talking about some forest dwellers nearby. Saying they’d been attacked. Murdered. All of ‘em!”

“Murdered!” Liam stopped. “You didn’t say they’d been murdered!”

Alana turned around, clenching her fists.

“Don’t be a guppy, Liam! How else do you think a body that was living becomes a body that’s dead?”

She tilted her head and stared him down. He didn’t say anything, but held her gaze.

“My ma didn’t think nothing of it. Said I shouldn’t be listening to tall tales from travelers looking for a free meal. But I know forest dwellers camp around here sometimes. I’ve seen their tracks. I reckon I know where to find the bodies.”

“Bodies?” interrupted Liam. “As in more than one?”

“Yeah!” Alana said, a spark of curious excitement in her eyes. “I told ya. It was them forest dwellers, they travel in packs. Like dogs.”

“Are they Norms?” Liam asked.

“Yeah, they’re Norms, just like us. Only these ones like to live in the forest in tents and stuff.”

“Oh, okay.”

Alana started to walk again and Liam followed, holding his breath.

It wasn't long before they came across a smoldering pile of ashes in a pit dug into the soil. It was still warm. Then they saw one of the tents—a leather hide hung across a couple of ropes tied between trees. And there was more than one. Alana was right. There were enough tents here for a large family.

Around the entire campsite were signs of the attack: broken branches hanging limp from their trees, tracks in the tall grass, bottom-dwellers trampled. The two friends looked around in silence. Alana noticed a scrap of cloth hanging on the branch of a pine tree and went to inspect it. She held it between her fingers, feeling the damp patch of brown canvas, and then looked up again. She let out a small gasp.

“What is it?” Liam whispered. But Alana didn't reply. He ran over to where she stood so he could see what she was looking at. Just beyond the pine tree was a small clearing. And in the clearing was a pile of bodies. All the hands were covered in blood, the faces were burnt, and the clothes were torn. Flies had started to hover over them, buzzing noisily.

“They're definitely Norms,” Alana said, “but the thing that killed them . . .” she turned to look back at Liam, who was scratching at his leg again, “. . . the thing that killed them definitely wasn't.”

The Royal Court

The old man trembled as he made his way to the center of the court. There was a draft sweeping through the hall, and he shivered in his mangy tunic. His tattered attire and dirty face identified him as someone out of place. All around, the faces of nobility looked on contemptuously. They were dressed in their finest robes of silk and cotton, purple and gold. They were adorned with mechanical spectacles that had interchanging lenses, motorized fans to keep their owners cool, and other small gadgets—popular symbols of wealth and stature.

Great columns of stone rose up to the domed roof. Stained glass windows let in just a little light, but huge braziers of fire made up for the lack, illuminating the entire room and casting long, dark shadows across the marble floor.

Behind the old man, the two thick, wooden doors slammed shut and there was silence in the court. In front of him was a raised platform upon which the throne sat; it was from here the king presided. It was the old man's first time laying eyes on the monarch, whose stern face was partially hidden behind a great ginger beard. The king was a squat man, his rotund waist compacted by a belt pulled too tight. He would have seemed imposing if he wasn't so short. He sat upon a mound of cushions, which were intended to give him height but had the adverse effect of keeping his feet dangling above the floor. One of the suspended feet was different than the other: Polished gold and rounded metal rose from his shoe into the leg of his pants. The artificial limb, forged from indestructible metal, clinked against the side of the throne. The old man was afraid; the king was known for his fiery temper and short fuse.

Next to the king stood a long, thin man in robes of black. He had a sleek, black goatee and a tall hat which denoted his position. He was the counselor of the king, and his gaze unnerved the peasant, who now lowered to his knees to the hard floor.

“Your Majesty,” the old man stammered. “I—”

“You will not address His Majesty King Carnivorus directly, peasant.” The counselor spoke quickly, his voice deep and smooth, his tone irrefutably judgmental. “Now, what business have you with the palace?”

“Sir,” coughed the old man, “Your Greatness, I come . . . I come to beg for the king’s assistance. I come to beg for the king to send his army—one regiment, at least—to help the people of his kingdom.”

“An entire regiment?” sneered the counselor. “You are aware that a regiment is made up of one hundred men, are you not?”

There was a long silence as the old man began to sob into his chest.

“Well? Speak, peasant!” the counselor commanded.

“Yes, sir. Yes, I am aware.”

“And do you not think one hundred men is quite a large request for a man so . . .” the counselor ran his fingers over his pointed chin and grinned. “. . . So small?”

The old man began to shake.

“Yes, sir, yes—is a big ask, I know. But I come . . . I do not come here lightly. There have been attacks.”

“Attacks? Do tell.” Eyebrows raised, the king’s counselor almost seemed as if he were enjoying himself, reveling in the old man’s pain.

“Attacks! In the countryside . . . I seen ‘em. I seen them bodies—lots of ‘em in different towns and out amongst the clans.”

“Ah, the clans, those nomadic barbarians who can barely call themselves Norms. I wouldn’t be surprised if they weren’t killing each other for sport. They’re so wild and primitive—basically dogs.”

Snickers could be heard all around the court as the nobility looked on with pleasure. The counselor was toying with the peasant. They laughed, looking down at him as he shook even more violently than before.

“No, sir!” he spluttered, barely able to talk. “No, they not killing ther’selves. They being hunted out. Picked off. Mutilated, burnt. I seen their faces all a mess—I seen fear in their dead eyes.”

At this, the court grew quieter, yet the counselor remained composed.

“And who do you suppose is responsible for these atrocities?” The counselor raised an eyebrow.

“It was . . .” The old man coughed. “It was Thereons!”

At this, the crowd of noble men and women burst into laughter again. The old man looked about him in shock and despair. Once more, he started to cry, holding his frail body with his arms and rocking back and forth. The nobility continued to laugh.

Finally, the counselor waved his arm in a single, graceful movement, and the room was silent again.

“Thereons, you say?”

“Aye! Please, please believe me, sir. Please, believe.”

“But the Thereons have been in hiding since the treaty was made with their people—at which point, I might add, they were all but extinct. I’d be surprised if there were any left at all. Any Thereons who’ve survived are not permitted to leave the Forbidden Kingdom.”

“But I *seen* them,” said the old man again.

The crowd gasped as, for the first time, the king himself became animated, moving forward in his chair.

As if questioning a child, the counselor asked, “You’ve seen them? Well, how can this be? What did they look like?”

“Great beasts, with claws and teeth. Death in their eyes, their glowing eyes!” The old man couldn’t contain himself any longer. He fell to the floor, shaking and convulsing.

The counselor turned to the king and spoke directly to him; still, his velvet voice rang out across the court. “Sire, if the Thereons have returned, then they have broken the treaty. What shall we do?”

The king grabbed at the arm of his chair and hoisted himself from his mountain of pillows. Next to the king’s counselor, he was about the size of a toddler, and yet his gait was that of a grandfather. He waddled to the front of his podium.

“People of New Kingdom,” the king’s voice was gravelly and loud. “Fear not the words of this peasant. He is but a crazed pauper—and yet there is truth in his face. We will search the countryside with all of our military resources to ensure the Thereons have not indeed returned and broken the treaty. We will ensure your safety.”

“And what if they have returned?” a plucky man called out from the back of the room. His face quickly turned pale as eyes around the court turned to stare. “I’m sorry, I . . . I should not have spoken out of turn, Your Majesty.”

“If the Thereons have returned,” the king said as he stared down the man, “then we will destroy them once again, the way my father did before me. And this time, we will use our great technological advancements to wipe them out!”

The Beast

It was a hot summer day when Alana headed into the woods on a mission. There had been a landslide the day before, and she wanted to explore. She ran through the forest with light footsteps until she came to the base of the rubble. A large pile of debris was lumped at the bottom of a hill.

For a second, she thought she was imagining it, but it seemed as if the rocks were growling. A low rumbling sound, like an angered dog, was coming from the rocks, from somewhere just beyond the mound. She climbed up, careful not to displace anything for fear of further sliding.

As she reached the top of the pile, she ducked quickly to hide, shock ricocheting through her body. What did she just see? Was it . . .? Was it possible?

She peaked over the boulder, and down below her was a creature. Her skin was thick and leathery in shades of burnt red and scalded crimson. She had claws and wings and a massive snout. It was a dragon.

Alana was frozen in shock. Dragons weren't supposed to exist. They belonged in stories. They were a thing of legend. They weren't *real*. And yet, here one was, more real and ferocious-looking than she could have ever imagined.

The creature looked old but strong; Alana could see the muscles moving under her roughened skin. There were tears in her wings and in the flesh between bones—battle wounds from long ago. There were cracks in her abdomen, through which Alana could see lava circulating, swirling within the belly of the beast.

And her eyes—they were big and golden, accusatory, angry, and scared. And they were looking in her direction. But were they looking *at* her? She moved a little, and the eyes moved with her. Yes, the dragon was staring her down.

Then, without warning, the dragon let out an ear-splitting roar. It was a high-pitched, painful sound. Guttural and bellowing, her cry echoed around the mountains. Every hair stood up on Alana's arm.

But she was confused. The dragon had seen her, so why wasn't it coming for her? Why wasn't it, in fact, moving around at all?

That's when she saw it—a boulder had rolled and landed on the dragon's right wing, pinning her down and holding her there. The dragon was thrashing about in pain, crying and wailing, trapped. Ever so gingerly, Alana made her way down. Her instinct to help the trapped creature had overridden her sense of danger. Slowly, slowly she clambered down the rock pile. The dragon hissed and huffed a little at Alana's approach, but mostly she just watched, her eyes flickering with caution, and with something else, as well.

Alana had seen the way her mother approached a wounded animal—how she soothed an aggravated wolf, for instance—and she tried to approach the dragon in a similar fashion. With one hand outstretched, Alana reached the dragon and gently placed her palm on its side. There was a little huff and a sigh, and then the dragon relaxed. Alana made her way around to the boulder to inspect the animal's wing. She tried to move the massive rock, but it was too heavy for her to lift. The dragon whined in pain.

Thinking quickly, Alana looked around to see if there was anything she could use. She spotted some thick vines, grabbed them, and tied them around the boulder. There was a sturdy branch overhead, and she threw the vines over it, grabbing hold of the loose ends. Using the

branch for leverage, Alana tugged at the vines with all her strength. Ever so slightly, the boulder shifted, and the dragon yelped.

It took all of Alana's energy, but she finally gathered the strength to pull hard enough. The boulder shifted again, and the old dragon was able to move her wing. She whipped it out from beneath the stone and gathered it into her for a moment. Unsure of what would happen next, Alana backed away. The dragon stretched out her wings and gave a couple of test flaps, which blew ginger strands of hair across Alana's face. One last time, she looked at Alana, who was doing her best to stand her ground, before pulsing her wings two, three times and lifting from the ground. Alana watched as the dragon flew off and disappeared into the clouds.

The New Cyberian Army

In a long hall somewhere in the subterranean channels of the castle, the counselor of the king was waiting. The hall was lit by a line of luminescent bricks that ran along the tops of the walls, energy pulsing through them, illuminating the counselor in a sick green glow. The sounds of coughing and metal hitting stone echoed towards the counselor. He cocked an eye in the direction of the sound. Eventually, the king lumbered into sight, his metal leg dragging the other onwards, coughing and spluttering as he went. When he reached the counselor, he stopped and leaned against the wall with one hand until his hacking fit had ended.

“To your health, sire.” The counselor of king peered down at his ruler like a panther from a tree.

“I’ll have your head before I let go of my hold on this wretched kingdom, you leering bastard.”

They stood there, staring each other down, until finally the king burst into laughter (that is, a mix of chortles and more coughing). Even the counselor relaxed and allowed himself a smile. They began to walk together through the dark hall.

“I’d say it’s all going rather well, wouldn’t you, sire?” the counselor said, his fingers clasped in front of him.

“Yeah, yeah,” the king grunted,” “as long as the people think we’re protecting them. And as long as they know we have the power. How are the plans coming along?”

They stopped mid-corridor and turned to the wall. The counselor pressed against the brick fifth down from the top. It slid to the side with the rattling sound of chains and gears, and then an entire section of the wall swung away.

“Everything is on schedule, Your Majesty.”

They entered a long room lined with beds and machinery. There were no windows—only pipes and air pumps and copper tanks. Next to each bed was a table that held drills and saws and other apparatus used in mechanical repairs. In each bed lay a man. All of the men were unconscious and hooked up to machines—machines that were breathing for them, sustaining them. Each of them was in the process of enhancement.

Where one was missing a leg, a new one had been attached, built out of metal and powered by an external source. Where one had lost his arms, new arms had been provided, glimmering and strong. One had eyes that could see for miles, one ears that could hear far across the kingdom. They were weaponized, too. Every enhancement was equipped with immense strength: razor-sharp blades emerged from wrists like swords, a crossbow was attached to one man’s shoulder. In life, they had been strong, the best of the best—until battle had ravaged them. Now, they were an agglomeration of man and metal, mechanical creature and soldier.

“This was your father’s legacy, his mission in life—and we will see it to completion. We will have the first Cyberian army known to man.” The counselor swept through the room as the king tried to keep up. “It will be the most powerful armed force in history.”

“And the men . . .” the king wrung his hands as he looked about. “Are they healthy?”

“Oh, yes, sire, very much so. Don’t you worry.”

They approached an enormous glass syphon at the end of the hall that reached from the floor to the ceiling. Inside the bulbous glass container, light and energy seemed to race around each other, sparking and spiraling. It was as if fire had become liquid and spirit. The sparks of color twirled and twisted: blue and purple and onyx, brilliant and illuminating.

“The only problem, sire . . .”

“Is there a problem?” The king’s face began to turn red. “Cornelius!”

“I’ve told you before, Your Majesty. The problem is that all of these experiments, as vital as they are, well, they take a lot of energy. And all the energy we have, all the energy we were able to capture and harness from . . . from before the treaty, is in this syphon.”

“And so? If we aren’t able to find the way into the Forbidden Kingdom, what then?”

“Then we run out in a matter of years.” The king’s counselor stroked his beard, pensively, then turned away and began back towards the door.

“We will search harder. We will find the way!” The king called after him, but the counselor didn’t turn back.

The king stared up at the energy swilling about in the syphon and grit his teeth together.

A Gift from the Old World

On her sixteenth birthday, Alana and her mother were sitting at the table in their kitchen. The room was small and dark. There were cobwebs in the rafters and dust on the windowsills. But the two of them were warmed by the fire and by the pot of stew that was bubbling away over it. They could rarely afford meat and so this was a treat—a big one. Her mother poured out two generous portions of the meaty broth while Alana sat with her spoon at the ready, breathing in the rich aromas.

It certainly wasn't a big party, but they joked and laughed, their cheeks rosy from the fire and their bellies full from the stew. Sometime after dinner, when they had pulled the two small, battered armchairs close to the fire and reclined into them, her mother pulled a palm-sized wooden box from beneath a cushion.

"It's not much," her mother said as she handed her the box. "Just a token."

Alana opened the box, and inside was a necklace with a circular wooden pendant. Four animals were carved around the outside, each running into the next. There was a wolf, then a squirrel, then a trout, and then a dragon. The craftsmanship was amazing. The wood felt light in her hand, but at the same time it was as if it held the weight of something, something old and important.

She put the necklace on and let it rest against her heart, sitting up straight to let her mother look. Her mother reached out and lightly pressed against the medallion.

"This was given to me on *my* sixteenth birthday," her mother said, and smiled, likely thinking of some mischievous memory from her childhood. "It's from the old world. It was passed on to me from my mother, and if I'm ever in doubt about what to do, all I have to do is

look at this carving and it shows me the way.” Her mother sat back in her chair. She retreated into herself now, watching the fire and humming gently.

Alana hadn’t paid attention to her mother’s last comment; she was too busy running her fingers over and over the carved creatures—lingering on the dragon.

A Promise of a New Life

A crowd had gathered in the square. Hundreds, maybe thousands of Norms from the bottom rungs of society were milling about, their faces gaunt, their limbs withered, their tunics distressed. A screen had been erected on the north side of the city center. There had been a summons. Everyone had been invited by messenger drone to a presentation in the square, and attendance was mandatory.

Quill stepped up onto the edge of a well by the side of the square to get a better view. A cool breeze swept the platinum hair across his face, which was tanned from working outside. He was a roofer, and spent his days on top of the world—that is, on the roofs of the homes of the capital’s elite, fixing holes and broken tiles, installing sun-capture panels, and watching the city below.

Military airships circled above the crowd, their sloping roofs shading the troops in the baskets below. It wasn’t often that the troops were this central; their practice maneuvers took place in the fields outside of town.

Up close, Quill could make out the faces of the men . . . and something was off. He caught a glimpse of gold and bronze, and the occasional spark of purple light. He tried to see them more clearly by shading his eyes with a freckled hand, but suddenly the screen lit up, drawing his attention elsewhere.

Phosphorescent energy rippled at the edges of the image as it came to life. Every head in the crowd turned to watch. Quill leaned out a bit to see the whole picture. There was a crash of thunder from the speakers, and the royal insignia—the fist of a man gripping a lightning bolt in

front of the silhouette of a castle—flashed on the screen. A voice boomed out from speakers across the square.

“People of New Kingdom! Prepare for a new age!”

Another crash, and the screen blazed forth footage of the town. Tired and forlorn townspeople walked the streets, dragging carts and struggling with heavy bags.

“Ever since the signing of the Great Treaty, when our prosperous kingdom was founded, when the demons of the Forbidden Kingdom were sent back to their mountains, our technological advancements have been striding steadily towards the future. And yet, too long have the amenities built and discovered by our leading scientists seemed out of reach. Too long have these privileges been affordable only to the wealthy and elite. Too long have you struggled to get by, performing the most basic of chores. Too long have the exquisite fashions of the rich and the techwear of the affluent been out of your grasp.”

Quill looked down at his tar-stained clothes, his pants ripped at the knee. “*Effluent*, you mean,” he said under his breath.

“The time is now!” the speakers continued to boom. “Transform your life and the life of your family!”

The frumpy video crowd transformed in a whirlwind of electric swirls and flashes. Suddenly, the people on the screen were impeccably dressed in the most up-to-date and outrageous fashions, their clothes silky and metallic. Their hands and faces were adorned with all the personal tech imaginable: golden jewelry, communication devices, timepieces, identification scanners, screens and gadgets, trinkets which played music, cogs and chains ornate and expensive.

Quill’s eyes went wide.

“The modern wonders of our society, once beyond your grasp, can now be yours! Step up now for your chance to become part of the upper crust. Stand up to claim the respect and notoriety you deserve!”

At this, the soldiers leapt from the air ships, falling from the height of the buildings and alighting gracefully amongst the crowd. It was a landing no Norm should have survived. Some of the onlookers backed away. Others remained in place.

Quill watched from his lookout as men began to flock towards the soldiers to sign up for a new social status and a new life. He could see the faces of the soldiers—all fusions of skin and metal. Gadgets, yes, but there was something else, something about the way they moved that was different, not normal.

Quill thought of his days working on the roofs that belonged to the capital’s richest families—the way he’d been spoken to, the way he had been treated, dismissed as trash, as merely something to be endured. His job had afforded him a glimpse into their world, and he hated them. But all the same, he resented their wealth and the respect it garnered them. And he wanted it.

He wanted a slice of the pie. He jumped off the well, landing hard on the cobbles, and went to speak to one of the soldiers.

In the Counselor's Chamber

The king was unwell. The coughing fits, which usually came just after a bout of physical exertion, had become more frequent. He often felt faint, often ran a temperature. Gripping the bannister, he finally reached the top stair of the tower. For a moment he stood, catching his breath.

A door swung open and the counselor poked his head out. A large magnifying glass was attached to his shoulder, making his eye appear large and bug-like.

“Ah, I thought I heard His Majesty's wheezing,” he said. He was in a good mood. “Come on in.”

They made their way into the counselor's chamber. Tapestries hung from the high ceiling of the tower, and sunlight streamed in from a tall window, casting a glow over table upon table covered with papers, sketches, designs, scientific equipment, protractors, and compasses.

“You were supposed to see me in my chambers this morning,” the king said gruffly.

“My apologies, sire. It completely slipped my mind.”

“Anyone else would be hung, drawn, and quartered for this insubordination, you know!”

A boxy, robotic contraption holding all manner of tools rolled across the floor and stopped at the foot of the counselor. He picked out a screwdriver and sat back down at the mechanism on which he had been working.

“The reason for my impertinence is this . . .” He turned a final screw and the engine in front of him roared to life.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked the king, peering closely.

“Indeed.” The counselor smiled and looked proudly at his achievement. “This engine has the ability to harness enough mystical energy to power both the weapon and your armor.”

“This is good news,” the king coughed into his hand. “And not too soon, either.” He looked down at the little spot of blood on his dry, cracked palm.

“Yes, this suit will have the power to keep you from the reaper’s unmerciful grasp, and in fact, give you the strength of a small army.”

“You’ve outdone yourself this time, Cornelius.” The king looked around the room, and at the flying devices buzzing around the high ceiling. “When will it be ready?”

“Very soon, my liege. The only problem . . .”

“What?! What is the problem?”

“Well, with these machines and the new soldiers, we’ve almost exhausted our power supply. The suit, which you need to stay alive, will use the last of it.”

The king growled and stroked his beard. “Have the scouting parties turned up nothing?”

“No, sire.”

“Damn that treaty!” The king stomped his metal leg. “Damn those Thereons for tricking us. We thought we were getting the world—a whole new kingdom, more vast and plentiful than before—but they knew, those clever bastards! They knew they had the power. And now they’ve blocked the path. Made it invisible. All we need is the location, and we will wage the greatest war ever fought and claim the source of the energy.”

“Yes, sire,” the king’s counselor wasn’t disturbed. “On the other hand, the smear campaign is going well. The commoners are riling against the Thereons and their dastardly attacks.” He laughed softly to himself. “The new recruits have fallen for the promise of wealth and are flocking to enlist.”

“Yes, yes, yes. All of this is good. Good progress. But all of it means nothing without that power source. If we can’t find our way back to the Forbidden Kingdom, then all of this, all your

work, will be for nothing! There must be another way, some lasting link hiding out there. Someone who can lead us back.”

“Surely, sire.” The counselor turned back to his tinkering.

“Have the special forces expand their search, raid the entire countryside if they must! We *will* return to the Forbidden Kingdom and have our war, mark my words!”

“Consider them marked, sire.” The counselor was fully immersed in his work and didn’t even turn around to see the king lumbering from the room.

More Thereon Attacks

Rumor had spread like wildfire about the Thereon attacks across the valley. More travelers had been discovered mutilated, burnt, and dead. Even a distant village had been targeted; there were no survivors. Across the countryside, speculation and panic had begun to take hold.

Alana's mother went on about her business, despite the impending danger. Warily, she kept up her visits to help sick farm animals, keeping an eye out for potential threats but dismissing talk of Thereons as nonsense.

"Thereons in this kingdom?" she huffed. "Pull the other one." She laughed and left for the day.

Alana remained vigilant against Thereon attacks, having witnessed the results firsthand. The image of that charred and bloody mound of bodies in the woods had stuck with her. And while her imagination began to create images of the savage beast responsible for those deaths, another matter had also come to occupy her mind.

The dragon. She had never seen anything like it, let alone gotten so close to one. The dark, smoky hide had shimmered in the light, glowing like embers. The battered but strong wings had been capable of lifting the creature's massive weight into the air. And the eyes—the eyes had been piercing and smart.

As soon as her mother had left for the day, Alana grabbed her bag, shoved in some bread and a canteen of water, and ran out the door. Within an hour she was back at the site of the rock slide, her back damp with sweat from running. She was looking for anything—a sign, some remnants of the creature. She looked about the rubble, using a stick to dislodge rocks nearby where the dragon had sat.

Pausing to wipe her forehead, something caught her eye over the tops of the trees. Smoke was rising in the distance. Her heart began to race. The plume was twisting and puffing into the sky. She was looking back towards home—the smoke was coming from her village.

She leapt from the rock pile and began to run again.

Pain shot through her legs as she ran. Her breath was quick and her heart was pulsing quickly, thumping in her chest.

She came upon Liam's house first—or, what was left of it. Fire had torn through the property and continued to rage in the fields beyond. The roof had caved in, and there were no signs of anyone having escaped.

“Liam!” she screamed again and again as she tried to make her way into the blaze. The smoke was thick and choking, and the heat was so immense she could barely step inside the house.

Changing tactics, Alana left the house and ran around back to the shed and the fields. She stopped in her tracks and doubled over at the site she was confronted with. There, chained against the blazing wall of the shed, was Liam, his face torn and mangled. His family—parents and brothers—were chained up next to him; each was mutilated and continued to burn. She fell to her knees and vomited into the grass.

Lying there in the grass in front of her was Liam's personal identity reader, a small metal box he had worn around his wrist. The box contained a chip with all his personal details—everyone had one. It's what they would use to identify his body. It was the last piece of him, the only piece saved from the fire. She clutched it to her chest.

Looking up through the tears now streaming down her face, Alana's eyes caught sight of another smoke plume down the track, coming from the direction of her house. In an instant, she had pocketed the identity chip and was up and running.

When she finally reached her house, she could barely believe what she saw. In place of her house was a pile of rubble, ash, and fire. Now her tears turned to sobs, violent and involuntary. She ran towards the rubble, grabbed her shovel from the ground, and beginning to shift the debris.

Her mother had been out of the house, hadn't she? She'd been visiting another farm? Maybe another farm that had been attacked . . . but she wasn't here. She couldn't be . . . could she?

Tossing a piece of what looked like ceiling rafters aside, she had to slap her hand across her mouth to keep from vomiting again. It was her mother's basket, the one she always took with her on her visits, the one with medicines and herbs used to soothe injured creatures. The one she had taken with her that morning. There it was, in what would have been the sitting room, burning. The medicines and balms were disappearing in the flames. They'd gotten her mother, as well.

"Damn you, Thereons!" she wailed. "You scum! You disgusting . . . vile . . . murdering . . . scum!"

Falling backwards off the smoldering rubble, Alana looked around desperately for some solace, some evidence that her entire world hadn't just gone up in flames, but there was none to be found.

Silently, with clenched fists, she vowed to get her revenge on the Thereons . . . one way or another.

A Mysterious Companion

A year had passed since Quill had joined the army, and he was yet to see any of the riches or respect he had been promised. There were strict rules about desertion, and so he remained. He performed drills and learned to shoot and handle a sword. His training had been intense and extensive. He was a good soldier in many ways—his attitude wasn't one of them.

The other soldiers seemed more willing to acquiesce to the commands of the generals, willing to submit to orders without question. Because he wasn't, Quill stood out amongst them. When told to climb a wall, he would ask why, which only resulted in him having to do more push-ups than the others. They would laugh while he stared at the dirt.

He had grown a little; his muscles were more defined. His silver hair had been chopped short, but he relished how it had grown back quickly. He had a keen eye and was good in hand-to-hand combat. But he was still an outcast, even here.

One night, the soldiers were sitting around their large fire pits, eating their rationed meals. Quill was sitting alone while the other soldiers sat in groups, laughing and telling off-color jokes. He didn't mind being alone, though. He disliked the other soldiers as much as they disliked him. And despite the lack of tech or financial rewards, he knew deep down that he was doing something worthwhile: helping his country, keeping people safe. He was able to feel a pride about his work that he'd never had before.

Through the smoky haze he looked across the field, where soldiers sat on logs around the fires, and spotted another soldier sitting alone. The lone soldier was small, with just a peek of red hair poking out of his hat. He was looking down at his food and not eating it. His gaze was stern and thoughtful.

Quill approached the lone soldier "Hey," he said, "can I sit here?"

“Sit wherever you want,” the soldier huffed. Quill was somewhat surprised at the voice of the soldier. He spoke like a child attempting to imitate a grown-up gruffness. Quill sat down.

“I don’t much like spending time with them, either.” He gestured over to a group of men. One was making a lude gesture and the others were falling backwards in laughter. “Idiots.”

“They’re here to fight. Just like you.” The gruff loner didn’t even look up.

“Ok, well, right now they’re fighting to act their age.”

“It’s just guy stuff,” he mumbled.

Quill laughed a little. There was something off about this guy, but he couldn’t quite figure it out. “Why does guy stuff mean acting brain-dead?”

The other loner finally looked up, and also laughed.

“No idea,” he said. He shook his head, smiling.

“My name is Quill. What’s yours?”

“Liam.”

Quill saw the distant look in the soldier’s eyes and knew he saw a person with secrets.

“Liam, where are you from?”

“Nowhere special.”

“Well, Liam, you seem like you’ve got a few more thoughts knocking about in that head than the rest of our military ‘elite.’ How come you’re here? Did you fall for that conscription video about tech and stuff, too?”

“I’m here to fight the Thereons,” Liam intoned, deadly serious.

“Oh yeah? Have you ever seen a Thereon?”

“No, but they . . . they destroyed my village.”

“Ha! You think the Thereons did that? There’s loads of bad guys out there who are way more likely to go around destroying villages than some mythical creatures.”

Quill watched as Liam quietly placed his hand on his chest and clutched at something underneath. The beginnings of tears were building in the soldier’s eyes. Quill took in the soldier’s soft features, his gentle hands. He smiled.

“Listen, sorry,” Quill said, his voice sincere. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Lots of people have lost loved ones here. You’re in the right place.”

Liam looked up and met Quill’s eyes. A moment passed between them, the fires casting a glow on their faces.

“Have you? Lost people, I mean?” Liam asked.

“Nah,” Quill ran a hand through his hair. “I never met my family. I’m an orphan.”

“Then you just fell for some lame conscription video?”

“Yep, I guess that about sums it up.”

“Sounds a little brain-dead to me.”

There was a brief pause, and then Quill burst out laughing. Liam looked up at Quill and smiled, as well.

The King's Transformation

Steam rose from the massive pipes and tubes that led from the syphon to a metal container in the middle of the hall. The room was hot and the king's counselor wiped a single drop of sweat from his brow. He was looking up at the chamber; condensation was building around the rivets.

“How are you feeling, Your Majesty?”

The king's head was poking through a hole at the top of the container. His face was red and his brow extremely moist.

“Is it working yet?”

“The power is on—just a few more minutes for the joints to fuse and the power current to intersect with your blood flow.”

“Well, it's damn hot in here!”

“Yes, sire, the machine is working at its full capacity. We've never attempted such a massive Norm to Cyberian conversion before. That much power will give off some heat.”

The cogs turned and a blue liquid was pumped through tanks. Sparks were flying and steam continued to pour across the floor.

A series of long, sharp needles controlled by robotic arms moved into position. The king screamed in agony as they penetrated his skin, reaching the major nerve groups and organs.

“I have some other good news for you, sire.” The king's counselor used a handkerchief to clean the lens of his magnifying spectacle.

“Well, what is it? Give me some distraction from this . . . ah!”

“The search parties found something.” The counselor remained calm as the king screamed and thrashed about.

“I’d keep still if I were you,” the counselor went on. “On one of the latest raids, we were able to discern the coordinates of the Forbidden Kingdom.”

“Ah!” the king bellowed. “Are you trying to tell me, Cornelius, that we know the way back?”

“Indeed I am, sire!”

“Then, ah . . . hurry this . . . ah . . . damn thing UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!”

The machine began to whizz and roar. It was working hard now, grinding and churning, cogs and screws turning, power fizzing. The king wailed torturous cries. The blood vessels burst in his eyes and he cracked a tooth from grinding his jaws. Finally, he let out a scream, and then fell quiet.

There was silence in the hall, disturbed only by a final *whiz* of a screw.

“Your Majesty?”

Nothing.

“How are you feeling, sire?”

After a long pause, a hiss of steam shot from the chamber, which clanged open with the grinding of metal on stone. Then . . . *clank!* Once. *Clank!* Twice.

The king stepped into a beam of sunlight as the final piece of the suit was lowered onto his head from above. The helmet rested on his forehead as the cerebral nodes made their connections to his brain. The king opened his eyes.

He was over seven feet tall and encased in a suit of robotic armor. Tubes ran from his skull into the engine, which was perched on his back. Massive black shoulder guards nearly scraped the walls, and his chest was metal-plated, with clear pipes through which the cerulean energy

pulsated. His legs were massive and capable of crushing boulders underfoot. His right arm was equipped with an energy blaster, his shoulder a crossbow, his left arm fire shooters.

The king took a breath and inspected the massive robot body he now occupied. Then he laughed, loud and raucous, spit flying from his mouth. He went quiet. He lifted a hand out in front of him, clenching and unclenching his fist a couple of times. New life glimmered in his eyes.

“I’m feeling . . .” Even his voice seemed more imposing now. “Deadly.”

A Secret Revealed

They were running through the tall grass that grew on the outskirts of the capital. It was part of the daily routine, the ten mile, cross-country run they did every morning before breakfast. Training had been intense over the last few weeks, and they were all exhausted, sweaty, and filthy. But their spirits weren't broken. Every day, they were fed more and more stories about the Thereons' attacks on innocent villagers.

Quill was running a little behind Liam, who kept turning around to check if he was still there. They'd become fast friends, spending most of their free time chatting and getting to know each other. Quill was amazed at how fast Liam was. In fact, despite being smaller than the rest of the men, Liam was often the best at drills. He could lift more weight, run further, jump higher, and shoot straighter. The other soldiers resented Liam when they were forced to do more push-ups for losing to the runt. There was a determination in Liam that Quill hadn't expected, a devotion to the cause. Quill struggled to keep up, but he at least wanted to try.

There were monitoring drones that flew alongside them on their runs and would administer a small electric shock if they slowed down. The drones were there through all of their training—if they weren't shooting straight or weren't working hard enough, they'd get shocked. Quill spent most nights rubbing his arms with a cool towel to try to soothe the stinging spots from all the zaps he'd accrued.

The track they took led from the tall grass through some trees and out into a marsh on the other side. Due to the denseness of the trees, the drones had to fly above the foliage. This was the only time they were left alone on their runs. But if they showed any marked decrease in speed, they were in for a nasty shock when they emerged.

There were some guys running ahead. Liam was at the head of their squadron, so Quill figured they must have hung about from the last group. He recognized them as one of the more boisterous groups. They were looking at each other; one was grinning, one laughing a little. And yet, as far as Quill could tell, there was nothing that funny about the marsh they were about to wade through.

Then he saw it. One of the boys was carrying a barrier line canister—a metal ball that, when thrown, would break in half, attaching to the first surface it came into contact with and creating a pulsating barrier. It was one of the weapons with which they'd been training. He kept running, but didn't stop watching the boys.

As they reached the edge of the trees, Quill saw the boy toss the canister. It hit and connected two tree trunks on opposite sides of the path.

“Hey! Stop!”

But it was too late. Liam came in contact with the barrier. The shock grabbed him, and for a moment he was suspended in the air between the trees, convulsing and writhing in pain. His eyes bulged, his hands clenched, and all of his muscles went tense. The boys turned to look, howling with laughter. Behind Quill, the rest of the squadron stopped to watch, too.

Quickly, Quill grabbed the knife from his belt and went to lever one half of the canister from its tree. The canister had sharp, claw-like arms, which were dug deep into the wood, and he struggled to dislodge them. All the while, Liam was thrashing about in the barrier.

Finally, with one last stab of his knife, the canister came loose and the barrier evaporated.

Liam fell to the ground, holding his body and moaning in pain. He breathed deep, ragged breaths and sobbed.

“That was a nasty trick,” Quill said, coming to check on his friend. “Are you okay?”

He took a step back.

The hat Liam always wore had been thrown off, revealing long, auburn hair that fell over his face. His clothes had come loose, and Quill stared for a moment in confusion at the thing strapped around Liam's chest.

His eyes became full moons. "You're a girl . . ." Quill said.

Alana's body was in agony.

But the feeling she got when she finally caught her breath and looked up at the faces of the other soldiers staring at her was worse. They were shocked—some even looked betrayed—but mostly, they looked ready to get even. They'd surely turn her in, or worse. To them, beating her and leaving her in the marsh would be sweet revenge for all the times she'd shown them up in training. There was no way they'd let this slide. She grabbed at the hat that had kept her hair hidden and her sex disguised.

After vowing revenge against the Thereons, she had made her way to the capital. She'd thought there would be someone there, some initiative or group doing something about the terrors of the countryside. When she'd gotten there, she had spent a long time wandering the streets, stealing bread to eat and sleeping in alleys. She'd come across a conscription tent set up in one of the big squares; the people there had been talking about the oncoming war, about the scourge of the Thereons. She had heard them say things about the new military, the special militia that was being developed specifically to defeat the evil creatures, and she'd wanted in.

The soldiers had laughed for a while when she'd told them she wanted to enlist. They had looked her up and down. "Even if you weren't a girl, there's no way someone as scrawny as you could ever defeat a Thereon!" they'd told her.

That night, Alana had sat on some crumbling steps, shivering in the cold. The army had turned her away, but she was determined to make this happen. As she clutched her possessions close to her for warmth, she noticed something hard in her bag. She reached in and pulled out Liam's identity chip, turning it over in her fingers. This was the thing she needed. She slipped it on, stood up, and left her stoop.

As she'd walked, Alana passed a laundry lady's shop and poked her head inside. There had been no one there, so she'd stolen some boy's clothes, a sheet she could shred to bind her chest, and a hat to cover her hair.

The next morning, she had signed up under Liam's name, and that was that. She had joined the army. She'd kept to herself for fear that she would be discovered, and only when Quill had approached her that night had she thought there might be someone she could befriend. She'd liked his roguish smile and the mischief in his eyes. She'd liked how he spoke to her and how her face went red when she caught him staring at her.

"I . . ." Quill stammered, "I knew it!"

Alana tried to compose herself, pulling her tunic shut over chest and reaching for her hat, but one of the boys stomped his foot down on it.

"You'll be locked up for this," he sneered.

The group of boys began to move in on Alana, their fists ready.

Alana got to her feet as one of the boys brought his arm up to hit her. She dodged his attack and elbowed him in the spine, sending him flying to the mud. The other boys leapt on her and she fought them back bitterly. Her punches were quick and hard; she was nimble, and managed to duck and dive to avoid getting hit. But she was also outnumbered, and eventually the boys started to land their punches.

“Leave her alone!” Quill jumped in front of her, but two boys grabbed his arms and one sucker punched him in the face. He fell to the ground.

“No!” Alana cried. She wanted to run to Quill, but before she could, another boy grabbed her by the collar.

“Run!” Quill shouted, spitting blood. “You have to run!”

A boy rose his fist at Alana again, but she kicked his shin—hard—and ran. All she knew was that she had to leave the army; if they discovered her, she’d surely be killed. She ran and ran. She left the forest—narrowly avoiding the drones, which were waiting at the marsh—back into the tall grass and away from the camp . . . leaving Quill behind.

The Castle in the Sky

Alana ran into the night, not knowing where she was heading. The stars blinked as she ran through grassland and then thick trees, finally arriving at the base of a towering waterfall. She stopped and dropped to her knees, breathing hard. She had no idea where she was now. She had lost everything—her family, everyone she held dear. And now, she couldn't even help the army defeat the Thereons, the people responsible for the death of her mother.

Pushing back the tears, she looked down at her chest to the place where the wooden medallion hung from her neck. She took hold of it, the only thing she had left of her mother. Grasping it tightly, she held it to her mouth.

Light trickled in through her closed eyes. She held the medallion away from her face and stared at it—it had started to glow a celestial blue. She could feel it hum, as well—a slight vibration just noticeable against the palms of her hands.

Alana held it up to see clearer, and noticed the same cerulean glow coming from the middle of the cascading water before her. She felt a gentle pull. The medallion seemed to be leading her to the waterfall, and she went with it. The closer she got, the brighter the glow became, and the more vibrant the hum of life resonating through the wood. The light in the water continued to expand as she came towards it, as well, until it reached from the top of the fall to the pool at the bottom.

From the edge of the pool, she stood and watched the lights flickering in a vertical motion. At first, she thought it was a trick of the light, some kind of optical illusion, for it seemed as if the water had begun to fall upwards. The tumbling liquid appeared to be falling and rising at the same time. Alana watched with awe as the base of the falling water lifted out of the pool and rose

all the way up the rock face and finally disappeared over the top. As she stared at the mysterious movement of water, she noticed a cave in the cliff face, with a narrow rock path leading inside.

The medallion continued to pull her forward, toward the cave's entrance, and Alana, with nothing to lose, followed willingly. She lost track of time once inside the cave, which was long and dark. Tracing her fingers along the wall, she pressed on in the darkness.

It was a long time before Alana emerged at the other side. She found herself standing at the foot of a large, circular staircase in a great stone hall. Her mind was racing and her impulse to turn back was strong, but her curiosity was stronger. Cautiously, she ascended the stairs.

For a while, it felt to Alana that the stairs would go on forever, the walls curving around her as she rose. Eventually, she came upon a small window cut into the stone, and looked out. At first, she thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. She was in the sky, with clouds drifting below. How had she gotten so high up, and why did it seem as if she were in a floating castle? She kept climbing.

The stairs came to a doorway that arched over her head and led into a shadowy room. The floor was stone, and there was no light other than what could slip in through the little windows dotted around the walls. She ran to the nearest one and looked out. There was no doubt—she was floating, and this was a castle. It was floating in the sky, and yet Alana hadn't left the ground. Her memory of the journey to this room was hazy. As she tried harder and harder to remember the way from which she'd come, the more and more misty those memories became.

There was a sort of landing running along the walls of the room, about halfway between the floor and the ceiling—hard stone jutting out, with no banister. From an opening in a wall, a shadow emerged onto the ledge, its many legs clacking on the stone beneath. Tall and imposing, the creature was shrouded in darkness.

“Child of the Norm world,” came her voice, deep and commanding. “On whose authority have you breached the gateway to the Forbidden Kingdom?”

Alana gulped.

Rallying the Troops

“Our gallant forces!” The king’s voice projected across the gathering of the troops.

They were standing at attention in their ranks, in the largest of the training fields. They were uniformed, fed, and armed. Cylindrical towers of light surrounded them, swimming with gold and neon blue in the dark of the night. Above them, on a wooden platform, the king stood, the light reflecting off the gilded surfaces of his metal body. A long, leather cape flowed the nearly eight-foot distance from his shoulders to the ground. He was wearing battle armor, as well—an expansive breast plate embossed with the royal insignia, embellished cuffs of steel, knee plates, and spikes on his heels. The troops stood in awe of the machine-man before them.

“Tonight is the night. Thereon vermin have infiltrated our country, committed acts too horrifying to speak of. They have broken the treaty—the treaty signed by our forefathers promising peace.

“Our only option is to hit them back! Reclaim the kingdom that was once ours!”

The soldiers began to huff with anger. Some of them lifted their blaster guns into the air in time with the guttural chant which had begun. Some ran shock blades over their energy shields, sending sparks flying and crackling.

“Until now, the Thereons’ whereabouts have remained a mystery, shrouded in secret. But we have discovered the path back to the Forbidden Kingdom, to the hideout of the depraved Thereon cockroaches!”

A great cry went up from the men.

“We call on you now, our troops, our front line. We call on you to ride tonight and fulfill your destiny! And once the Thereon are exterminated, you will have everything you have ever desired!”

Quill scoffed silently. He was a long way back in the lines, but the king was so monstrous in size, he could still make him out. The word had come in that afternoon that the king was on his way, and with him he brought the call to arms. There was a quiet energy pulsating through the troops. It was adrenaline and it was fear, but it was also the sense that glory was in reach. Most of the soldiers believed in the king; they believed they would be rewarded for going to war. They all hated the Thereons, but they longed for the life of splendor and excess they’d been promised. Tonight signified a change in the wind.

Quill lit up his shield and held his glowing blade aloft, although he did so half-heartedly. His heart wasn’t in this war, and his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking about the girl—the girl who had been his only friend in this army, the girl who had gotten away. The girl who could be anyone and anywhere now.

“Tonight,” the king boomed, “for your king and country, we take back the Forbidden Kingdom!”

There was fire in the eyes of the men as they cheered their king. As one, they began to move out on foot, heading into war. Quill went with them.

Friend or Foe?

Fire shot up around the room, exploding from a pit which ran along the base of the walls, and licking against the stone. She felt small. The ceiling was so high it might as well have been the sky and the room was expansive. But more than anything else, Alana was surrounded by creatures of great stature.

They'd appeared out of nowhere—or had they been there all along, watching her from the shadows? Behind her on one side was a man the size of a bear, with fur on his legs and belly, and with massive claws and teeth. He was wearing armor, rough and thick, with elaborate decoration: swirling vines, leaves, and tree roots. From one of his paws dangled a mace, heavy and ominous.

On Alana's other side was a woman . . . or was she a wolf? Her face had the jaws and snout of a beast, with ears and fur to match. Her hind legs were that of a wolf's, too. But her torso and arms were a woman's. She, too, was wearing similar armor, and was carrying a formidable spear.

In front of Alana, to the left, was a half-man, half-horse creature. His long hair was silver and reached down to his hind legs. The muscles bulged in his arms and torso as they moved beneath the caramel fur that covered his lower half. He was also wearing armor; an intricate plate had been shaped specifically for his waist and reached back over his horse's spine. He carried a crossbow, and his face was weathered and stern, intelligent.

Finally, facing Alana straight-on was their leader: a woman and spider forged into one. Her face was calm and commanding, her body strong and armored. From her midsection down was the hard exoskeletal body of an arachnid. Her eight long, pointy legs clacked disturbingly as she moved across the stone, and held her a full head above everyone else in the room. Between her

hands were silken strands of webbing that moved and contorted as she spoke, shimmering in the light, reflecting different colors.

“I am the head of the Thereons, child,” she said, her voice deep and penetrating. “This is my council. You are the first Norm to wander the path to the Forbidden Kingdom in over fifty years. Tell us how you have come to be here.”

The Forbidden Kingdom. Alana was *in the Forbidden Kingdom*, a place she had thought was at best inaccessible, but was most likely imaginary. It was a place she had dreamt about while her mother had told her bedtime stories, a place she knew in her mind but never thought she’d visit. It was a place she didn’t know if she could trust.

“I won’t tell you anything you, you . . .” Alana was frightened, but she gained confidence by looking into the emerald eyes of the creature responsible for her mother’s death.

“Careful the words you choose, child. Words can have consequences.”

“My mother . . .” she struggled to say as she fought back tears, “. . . you killed her!”

“There is blood on my hands, child, as there is on any great leader’s. But the blood of your mother is not on mine.”

“Liar!”

“There are a good many things you do not yet know, my child. But you will.”

Alana said nothing. She was confused. The queen seemed nice—compassionate, even—not at all like a savage murderer.

“Now, tell me how you came to be here.”

Alana touched the amulet around her neck, pressed the wood against her heart. She took a deep breath, removed it from her tunic, and offered it up to the Thereon.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“My mother gave it to me. It was hers.”

The queen exchanged a look with the horse-man and then turned back to Alana.

“My dear, what do you know of the Thereon people?”

Alana fiddled with a loose thread in her tunic. “I know . . . I know that there was a war, because one of you killed the king’s sister, and you were defeated and banished to the Forbidden Kingdom. And there was a treaty that said you weren’t allowed to come back, ever.”

The queen laughed. Her cohorts did, too—the gruff chortles of animals.

“They do teach such silly lies in the New Kingdom,” she grinned and looked sideways towards Alana.

“Lies?”

“Yes, my dear. You see, there are some aspects of your history on which I’m afraid you’ve been misled.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“See for yourself.”

The queen lifted her hands into the air, the threads between them expanding into a beautiful web. Then, a great wind blew. Between Alana and the queen, a surge of cerulean light began to take shape, swirling into a sphere.

In the center of the sphere, an image came into focus. It was the old king—Alana recognized him from paintings in books. He was standing over a bed, holding a knife; a woman was looking up at him with terror in her eyes. The vision blurred and the energy fizzed and contorted. When it came back, the vision showed the old king holding his sword, pointing it in the direction of the Thereon queen. Again it blurred. Then everything went red and dark. She could almost hear the clang of swords, the roar of the Thereons. Hundreds and hundreds of Thereons, and even more

Norms, all fighting. There was fire and smoke, death and blood. There were explosions as the king and something—something clouded in darkness—tore through the battlefield.

Smoke blocked Alana’s view momentarily, and when it dissipated, she almost couldn’t believe what she saw—an entire battlefield laid to waste, and on it the mutilated corpses of the entire Thereon army. The sphere swirled again and she saw the queen, with tears in her eyes, signing a long scroll. The image clouded one more time, and the last thing she saw was the Norm army leaving the mountains and marching into the kingdom she knew. A heavy mist descended on the valley, and when the old king turned back, he no longer knew where they had come from. The sphere wrapped about itself and crackled back into the stones.

Alana stood dumbfounded.

“So you see, child. Your kingdom is the new version of our old one, an offering given to save my people . . . what was left of them, that is. My kingdom, the Forbidden Kingdom, was where we all once lived in harmony—Norm and Thereon. But it is also a great source of power, a mystical energy that lives in every stone and tree. This power can be extracted through a connection with nature. Thereons have this connection. We can use this power to conjure images, like the one you’ve just seen. We can use it to heal wounds, to change the weather, to live long, healthy lives, much longer than that of Norms. And the old king, the one who ruled before your current monarch, was jealous of our long lives. He wanted to harness the power for himself. And he did, to some extent. His scientists, led by a prodigy child—a particularly insidious boy named Cornelius—managed to extract the power in another way: using metal and science. They drilled holes into the stones, and they demolished forests. They mined and harvested all the power they could until they’d exhausted their supply. When I surrendered, I offered them the power they had collected, allowed them to take it with them as long as they left

and never came back. As soon as they were gone, we concealed the entrance to the Forbidden Kingdom and went into hiding.

“The old king and his scientists thought they had drained the land of all the mystical energy. And they had, to the extent that they knew how to harness it. For they had exhausted the forests and rivers and stones. They left my kingdom barren and destroyed. But that is not how the power works, for it exists in the very breath of life. It exists in the earth, and it can never truly be gone.”

Alana’s head was spinning out of control. Everything she knew, all she had been taught, was a lie.

“But what about all the attacks?”

“You mean the attacks on the villagers of your kingdom, the traveling folk?”

“Yes, people saw you and your kind, creatures, murdering people.”

“Now,” she answered, “I have to confess that as much as we have abided by the rules of the treaty, it is true that we haven’t been completely innocent.”

“Then you admit it? You did kill my mother!”

“If you would let me finish, child,” the queen said, not without compassion, “what I meant to say was we still have eyes on the comings and goings of your people.”

There was a squawk like that of an eagle from overhead, and Alana looked up. Perched on a rafter high above the rest of the council was a man with the beak of a bird, savage-looking claws, and, most impressively of all, a giant pair of wings. He spread them wide as he cawed again.

“Your king has been perpetrating atrocities against his own people, transforming them with the power of the land’s mystical energy. He has turned them into metal beasts and has used them to attack innocent people. He is trying to frame us for this destruction, just as his father framed us for the murder of his sister.”

“But *why* is he killing people?” Alana asked. “What does he want?”

“The same thing his father wanted: to live forever.”

“He killed my mother.” Alana straightened her shoulders. She knew who the real enemy was now.

The blaring sound of a trumpeting horn erupted into the chamber.

“Your Majesty.” The horse-man spoke for the first time. “That’s the Horn of Monitum.” He reared back and let out a mighty bray, and then charged towards Alana. He came to a stop just inches from her face, making her coil back in alarm.

“Did you bring them here?” He demanded.

“No, I . . . I didn’t . . .” she stammered, shaking with fright.

“Lies!” he snorted.

“Stop.” The queen held up one hand. “I believe the child. She has the medallion. She is the one we have been waiting for, a bridge between the kingdoms. Gather your fighters, commander. Aquila?”

The bird-man swooped down from his perch with a piercing squawk.

“Take this child to the ridge and guard her.” And with that, the queen was gone. Alana was grasped in Aquila’s great talons and flown from the cavern.

The Horn of Monitum continued to sound.

The Clash of Two Worlds

From the ridge where Alana stood, she could see for miles. Down in the valley, towards the mountains, black and shrouded in mist, the castle floated among the alps. She looked back towards her home kingdom across vast fields of grass. It had taken her no time at all to reach the valley, and yet somehow all the Thereons were there, as well. From what she could tell, there was no way to leave the castle except by air—but there they were, transported as if by magic. She could see the Thereons, the queen and her council at the mouth of the valley. Behind them were more, all of them strange hybrid creatures. Some had scales and claws, some fur and teeth, and there were more species of birds circling above. Aquila stood on the ledge with Alana, poised and ready to protect.

Coming towards them at high speed was the king and his army. Their way was lit by carts with powerful lights attached. The king rode in the front, metallic and imposing, and behind him were hundreds of men in armor carrying swords and shields. Further back, there were men armed with arrows and bows. A number of metal vehicles also drove amongst the ranks. There were large, copper plated tanks—the closest with cannons on their roofs. Those further back carried catapults that glowed blue in the darkness.

The Thereons were vastly outnumbered, but then, what match is a Norm against a lion or a bear? Still, Alana couldn't believe how many soldiers the king had brought. She had known the army was vast, but she'd had no idea just how much so. There were other training camps from the one where she had enlisted, and still the awe of seeing them march towards her now was stunning. She wondered if Quill was down there with them.

She looked for him as they approached the waterfall. Wait . . . the waterfall! Where was it? She knew she'd climbed through a long tunnel at the foot of a cliff, but this was gone now, as if evaporated into thin air. It must have been part of the Thereons' disguise, she guessed. Alana continued to be amazed by the powers they held. She was beginning to understand how they'd remained hidden behind a veil of magic for so long. However, that veil was gone now, and the Thereons were going to face this head-on.

Just a few hours ago, she would have wished for the king's army to march in and destroy the Thereons and their queen. A few hours ago, she would have relished delivering the final blow herself. But now, after all she'd seen, she wanted the queen and her Thereons to triumph.

Crouching down in order to see better, Alana watched as the two armies faced off against each other—one extensive in numbers and tech, the other naturally powerful and capable of magic she could never have imagined possible. There was a moment when she could hear the king's gravelly voice giving orders to his troops—or was it a rallying speech? It was hard to tell. The Thereons didn't speak, didn't even look at each other, but Alana had the feeling they were still communicating.

All at once, a cry went up from the king, and his army charged towards the valley.

Quill was tired from marching. He couldn't understand how they were supposed to fight now that they'd walked so far. Yet here he was, about to go to war with some mythical foe. He looked around at the stolid faces and thought how, once again, he was alone in this world. His thoughts returned to the girl.

The king was shouting something about power and betrayal, and before Liam knew it, the cry went up. The men around him began to run, hollering and waving their blasters over their heads. He started to jog with them for fear of being trampled.

Fire was in the king's eyes as he rallied the troops. Everything had fallen into place. His plans were coming to fruition. Now, the time had come. He set his jaw, threw his mighty fist into the air, and yelled: "CHAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGE!"

The Thereons leapt from their ledges and bounded down the valley; those that were airborne raced ahead. The queen was manipulating her webbing, conjuring bursts of energy and powerful shields.

It all seemed like a blur to Alana as she watched. The blaster squads shot first, before the birdlike Thereons began to swoop down and grab up soldiers, dropping them back to land like rag dolls. Rockets began to shoot beams of light from the tanks, which shot down a good number of Thereons. Catapults were launched. The ground fleet ran into the fray. The bear-man took them down five at a time with his great paws. The head of the Thereon regiment galloped into battle, firing his crossbow with speed and devastating accuracy. Still the men swung their blades and tried to land their blows. The king remained in his chariot, right at the entrance, shouting orders and killing anything that came too close.

At first, it seemed as if the Thereons had the higher ground; they were stronger. Arrows bounced off their hides. They were able to take down entire waves of men in one movement. The king saw this and he gave out a call. The door of the tanks opened, and out marched another line of soldiers.

Alana tried to count, but lost her way around sixty—there must have been at least one hundred of them. They were bigger than the other men, and their bodies were a mess of robotic

parts and skin—flesh melded with steel. The same blue energy she had seen in the caves seemed to exude from their joints in spurts as they ran. These soldiers ran slowly at first, but quickly got up speed and charged at a full sprint towards the valley.

“Witness the power of my Cyberian army!” the king shouted, and thrust both of his hands into the air. “This, men, is the future! This is what will become of you all!”

Cyberian was the word Alana caught; she had heard this word before. She had heard of the army of metal men, the soldiers who had been implanted with tech and infused with power. This was her first time seeing them, and she was amazed at just how many there were. So were the Thereons—it was obvious by the way their whiskers bristled and their hooves stomped that this army of robotic men had them spooked. Alana longed to be down in the battle helping her new allies. She wanted to help defeat the king.

The Cyberian fleet was immensely powerful, each one a fair match for the Thereons. The clank of claw against metal rang in Alana’s ears. She heard the scrape of blades against skins and the cries of pain and struggle. She tried to clamber down the wall and fight, but Aquila held out his wing.

“The queen told me to protect you. You will stay here.” His voice was calm but stern.

With the Thereons now fully engaged in the fight against the Cyberians, the men flooded into the valley like ants. There were simply too many for the Thereons to keep back and fight off the Cyberian soldiers, as well. They were losing ground with every second, no matter how the web of the queen danced or how many men were pierced by the wolves’ spears.

Sweeping the battle with her eyes, Alana finally caught sight of Quill. He was battling a Thereon. She longed to tell him what she had just learned. She knew his heart wasn’t in it, that if he knew the truth, he would fight with her. Then she realized what was happening: Quill was

only making defensive moves. He wasn't trying to attack—just attempting to stay alive. She shrieked when the Thereon, a tigress, swiped at his head and sent him flying. His body crashed against the side of a boulder and fell limp. Still Aquila remained firmly planted in Alana's way.

Something else caught her attention then. For a moment, she thought the Thereon queen was retreating. Her sharp, spindly legs were hurrying away, sticking to the walls of the valley as she climbed out of the melee. But Alana quickly realized that the queen was finding higher ground. She reached a ledge, where she stopped and settled, looking out across the battle. Then she closed her eyes and began whispering something to herself. Finally, she raised her arms as she had done before. The web grew and spun, and new connections latched to old threads. The web was glowing with power as the queen drove it into the rock at her feet, sending a wave of built-up energy pulsing through the ground.

It knocked over every soldier, Norm or Cyberian, it came into contact with, stunning them and giving the Thereons a chance to come back. The Thereons took a moment to regroup, and then, with their new advantage they dove forward, the queen also joining her fighters. They seemed stronger than before, galvanized by the powers of the queen, and they began to drive the Norms from the valley. Alana cheered as they regained their ground.

A young corporal approached the king. "Sire, one of the beasts . . . she's able to conjure the energy, weaponize it . . . the troops are losing ground quickly, my lord!"

"Even my Cyberians?" spat the angered king.

"Yes, my lord!"

The king was angry, bitter with disappointment. He stepped off his chariot and pushed the corporal out of his way. He looked to the mouth of the valley, where his men were fleeing, screaming and flailing. Then, he grinned.

“It is time!” He swung around to face the two guards standing next to the largest of the tanks. “Let it out.”

Together, the soldiers pulled a massive lever, and the rattle of chains accompanied the lowering of the door. Smoke poured from the container, and three sets of eyes lit up from within. They were golden orbs glowing in the shadows. There was a final clunking sound of metal on metal, and then the creature began to emerge from its containment. The king turned and laughed with joy as he looked up at the creation.

It was a beast made entirely of metal. It had three heads, each snapping a fearsome set of jaws; they were bear-like, but with longer snouts and teeth, skeletal and terrifying. The heads were attached to a great, hulking body with sturdy legs that were covered in spikes. The cogs and mechanisms were visible as they turned and cranked within, and a deep rumble emitted from the creature’s belly. Its eyes were glass orbs swirling with golden light. Smoke tumbled from its colossal jaws.

The thing began to make its way across the battlefield, leaving deep indents in the soil. Water rose from the earth, creating puddles where the creature stepped. It reached the front line and let out an enormous roar that caused all heads to rise into the air. The battlefield went quiet.

“What is that?” Alana whispered to herself, watching as the Norm soldiers made a path for the beast. The Thereons looked on in fear as it came forward, its eyes alight, its jaws crashing down. “That thing will kill them all.”

The beast charged into the battle, one head grabbing the first Thereon, a man-ox, and tearing his head clean off his body. The Thereons edged backwards—except for the queen, who stood her ground. She opened her mouth and shrieked. The sound was ear-splitting and cut through the

dense night air like a freshly sharpened blade. It echoed through the valley as far as Alana could hear.

Silence settled in the valley before the dragon rose up from the mountains. She appeared black against the navy-blue sky, her eyes glowing, and a bright red, like that of burning embers, was radiating from the gills in her neck and her mouth. The Thereons let out a cheer, raising their weapons overhead, as the dragon flew into the valley.

She swooped down upon the beast and the fight began. The dragon spewed forth fire; flames rained down upon the beast. She whipped the beast with her spiny tail and tore at the metal skin with her claws. The beast fought back, each head attempting to take a chunk out of the dragon's neck. They both reared back and then dove at each other again.

Everyone else on the battlefield scrambled to get away. The Norm army sprinted over the rocky ground as fire and debris crashed down around them. The Thereons edged backwards, but watched with awe and faith in the dragon. The king looked on with bitter anger boiling in his stomach.

Quill was just regaining consciousness and couldn't believe the sight to which he awoke. Almost instantly, though, he saw an opportunity. While everyone else was stampeding to safety, he snuck into the shadows.

The Norms who had reached a safe distance turned back to look. A cheer went up from the men as the beast, ducking low to miss the dragon's tail, swiped up with its claws and pierced the dragon in her soft underside. The dragon thrashed backwards, twisting in agony, screeching and huffing. The beast leapt on top of her and began to rip into her scaled flesh. Jaws gnashed and claws dug, ripping at the dragon's skin and muscle. For a moment, it seemed all would be lost.

But the dragon, seemingly from nowhere, opened her wings to their full extent and swiped at the beast, sending him flying. She lifted herself into the air, and the light of fire began to grow in her belly. A rumble shook the earth. Then, with one great cry, she let out the biggest stream of fire Alana had ever seen. The onslaught of heat and light went on for a full minute. When she was done, the dragon dropped onto the beast and began to tear it apart. Chunks of metal, gears, and cogs went flying. It was savage. When she was finished, the beast was nothing more than a pile of scrap metal.

Stumbling backwards, the dragon was spent. She twisted her body and fell to the earth, dust rising from where she landed. Nobody moved. The dragon's breaths were heavy and labored. She wheezed as the life began to leave her.

"No!" Alana screamed, and everybody turned to look at her. The king, the Norm army, and the Thereons all stared up at where she stood. Quill heard her cry and turned back, as well. He couldn't believe it. There she was—the girl, standing on a rocky ledge halfway up the side of the valley, her long, red hair flowing in the wind. He was frozen, watching her.

"Aquila, take me down!"

The feathered Thereon lifted her up and brought her gently to the ground a few feet from where the dragon lay struggling for life.

The queen herself had already reached the dragon by the time Alana got there. Her head was lowered in respect, and she appeared to be thanking the dragon. Cautiously, Alana made her way over. The dragon looked up with pain in her eyes. Alana reached out her hand and placed it gently onto the dragon's side. The creature let out a small sigh and she looked into Alana's eyes, from which tears were now falling. The dragon's eyelids slowly began to close, and then she breathed her last breath.

“How does it feel, child, to look upon the body of such a creature?” the queen asked.

Alana looked at the body and she didn’t feel anger. She didn’t feel sadness. She felt *life*. Not life that was ending, but life that was being reborn, going back into the earth for a new purpose. She looked at the body and she felt peace.

“As I thought,” said the queen, who reached out her hands, taking Alana’s. She held onto her right hand and placed the left on the dragon’s side. The webs flickered out between them, floating weightless, shimmering.

A spiral of golden light began to rise from the body of the dragon. Like a million tiny stars, it rose and spiraled. The rest of the battlefield watched as the light rose above the valley, shining on the muddy, weary faces. The light gathered into a ball in the sky and hovered for a moment. Then, tiny trails began to flood away. They felt their way through the sky like tentacles, and some of them reached towards Alana.

With her eyes closed, she was gathered up in the tendrils of light and lifted from the ground. The light encompassed her as she spun slowly in midair. It seeped into her pores, her mouth, and eyes, and began to disappear into her.

Mist rolled into the valley, covering everything in a thick fog that gathered around Alana.

The Thereons looked on in shock. They hadn’t thought it was possible. The thing they were watching hadn’t happened in living memory—for everyone, that is, except the queen. An experience like this was considered by most to be a silly children’s story, a myth.

In the middle of the valley a cloud hung, morphing, and flashing with lightning. Thunder crashed, and energy crackled. Every stone in the valley began to rise into the air. The wind swept about and the ground shook. Energy swam through the valley and all the Thereons lifted their heads to the sky. They could feel it swimming through them, touching their souls.

Suddenly, fires erupted along the edges of the path. There was light building from inside the cloud; it grew and grew until finally it exploded into a brilliant flash of fire and light. The stones crashed to the ground, a fierce wind swept about, and Alana was there, fire blazing in her eyes.

She was transformed. Alana and the dragon had become one.

Her hair lifted up in the wind. Her eyes were green and glowing. Her muscles had grown, and her skin toughened. There were gills in her neck and spikes down her back. Her hands ended in claws, and she was stronger, more alive. Her weathered tunic fell away to reveal a new suit of armor. It was made of dragon skin, the same smoky crimson. Quill watched and thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Then, Alana spread her wings. A gust of wind blew over the Norms and Thereons.

The new Alana surveyed the valley below. She looked at the creatures behind her defending their territory and the natural ways of the world. She looked ahead at the king in his metal monstrosity. She looked at his army of men who weren't men at all—they were kids, poor and tired kids who had been duped into fighting a war they didn't understand.

Her eyes met Quill's, who was off to the side in the shadows. She smiled at him, then set her eyes on the king.

The king was raging, foaming at the mouth. His jaw was quivering and his fists were clenched. He ran towards the valley, his footsteps like thunder. He was screaming and there was hatred in his eyes. His troops began to rally behind him, and suddenly they were charging as one—a great line of soldiers all coming towards Alana and the Thereons.

To Alana, it felt as if her whole life had been leading to this moment. She felt the emotions rising in her stomach. She thought of her mother, and she thought of Liam; she thought about everything she had lost. She thought of everyone the king had slaughtered and the lies he'd told.

She thought of the boys that were running at her now with death in their eyes, all in the name of greed. She thought about Quill, about how she might never see him again, even though she wanted to. She thought about the kingdom she was leaving behind, and the one she was about to discover and knew so little about. She thought about the dragon's lifeless body down below. She felt everything, all of it boiling through her body, rumbling. Feelings tumbled on top of one another as the fire built and rose within her. It was all too much.

The fire rose until she couldn't contain it any longer. She opened her mouth to scream and fire exploded out of her. Blue flames leapt forward, burning hotter and brighter than anything anyone on the battlefield had ever witnessed. It streamed out at the Norms and Cyberians, driving them back. A torrent of fire flowed from Alana, and she let it rage.

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