Chapter 1
The Rose and the Revelation

My eyes shot open as I sucked in a much needed breath. The dream had been so vivid that I could faintly smell the pine trees lined in rows around me. I could feel the force of wind that swished through the clearing causing my hair to whip against my face. And there, in the midst of my dark bedroom, I could vividly see the giant creature rise on its hind legs and unfurl its great wings to the heavens. With a great roar, it spewed fire from its throat that caught on the wind and whirled about the trees. As I looked upon the massive beast, I glimpsed something in its serpentine eyes. It looked down on me, one so small and inconsequential compared to its glory, and in its gaze I saw need. Those yellow eyes, made almost red from the reflection of the fire within them, cried out for help. And with a force that knocked me to the ground, the Great Dragon thrust its wings and flew into the haze of the night.

The dream slowly began to fade as I stared into the darkness of my room, but the look in the dragon’s eye seemed to stay with me. I climbed out from under the coverings on my bed. I made my way to the small window that looked out to the forest behind my father’s little cottage. The sun was just beginning to rise, so the light had not yet reached the shadows of the forest. It was shrouded in mystery as thick as the fog that covered it. The town had given it the ominous name of Blacklick Forest, and no one, including me dared venture into it unless extra firewood was needed. I stared at the trees that lurked on the back of our property, looking as far into them as possible. My dream seemed so real that I was not sure what to think. Could there be a dragon somewhere in the midst of the darkness? It would not be the first time I was drawn to an animal that needed me.

I turned from the window and walked across my room to the bureau that held my clothing. As I dressed for my day, I tried to shut those piercing eyes from my thoughts. Even if there was a dragon that was in need, what could I do? A dragon was nothing like the rabbits and deer that I took cared for everyday. A dragon was a fierce creature that would kill as soon as look at me. I decided, it would be best not to go.
I finished dressing and synched my apron tightly around my waist. I walked from my room and saw my father sitting at the table in our little living room. Our house had only four rooms, and three of which were tiny bedrooms. We made a fairly decent living from the pottery my father made, but we decided the small cottage would be better for just the three of us. I watched my father sip his morning coffee and thought about how well he had cared for my sister and me our whole lives. He was a quiet, patient man, who never spoke a harsh word to either of us. Even when he learned of my gift he was more concerned with how it would affect my life, not his. He had been burdened by my mother’s death from the fever that swept the town. Two daughters to raise alone would seem daunting to any normal man, but my father looked upon us every day with joy because our lives were a gift to him.

My mother, sister, and I had all caught the fever at the same time. My mother, weak from taking care of her daughters, could not fight the fever, so it claimed her life. My sister was perfectly able to fight the disease but was left scarred forever by the memory of watching my mother die in her arms. I was hit quite hard by the disease and was sent in a deep sleep for days and days, so long that my father was quite sure I would die. When I again opened my eyes, I woke to find my scraggly cat lying on my chest. He had a very worried look on his face, and when I asked aloud “Why, whatever is the matter, Buttercup?” I heard inside my head, “I am ever so worried about you, my sweet mistress.” My eyes widened and I gasped quite loudly, which brought my very relieved father and sister to my side. I quickly told them of the exchange between Buttercup and me, but they both thought I was hallucinating from the fever. I thought perhaps I might be, too, but as the days moved on, and I became well, Buttercup and I continued to have daily conversations. My father and sister did not notice, for the house was too shrouded in grief for anyone to care about much of anything.

“What are you thinking about, Rose?” My father’s voice woke me from my memories and I realized I was standing in the middle of the living room staring into space.

“Oh nothing, father, just thinking about nonsense,” I said, smiling at his kind face. Hudson Fairchild was his name, and he was as unique as the name he was given. He had
started crafting pottery and blowing glass when he was quite young. That was how he met my mother. She was a young witch in training when she came into his shop looking for something to put her potions in. She was one of the many witches that graced the country with their presence. Perhaps that was the reason my father reacted so well when he finally believed me about my gift. Our town was full of witches and wizards, and his business thrived on them, so it seemed only right that a young witch would catch his eye and draw him deeply into love.

I walked to the chair where my father sat and kissed him on the forehead. “You off to the shop this early?” he asked.

“Yes, I wanted to arrange that new batch of pots you brought over yesterday. I think today is going to be a busy day. School is starting soon.”

“Good idea.” My father, a man of very few words, stood, kissed me on the cheek, smiled and walked outside to go to his workshop beside the cottage.

“He seems quieter today,” my sister London said as she walked in the room. I looked over at her and thought again how beautiful she was. Unlike me—a disheveled mess no matter how hard I tried to tame my long brown locks—she always looked wonderful with her glorious blonde hair falling perfectly into place.

“He’s always quiet on days I go to town. He’s worried,” I said, looking through the window at the strong man who always worried so much about his little girls. “He would hate for anyone to find out about me.”

“So, why do you go? You could stay here and make it easier on him.”

“So, I’m to stay cooped up here all my life? I need to get out, and it’s only once a week, not everyday. And I’d go more if I could. I’m going crazy staying here all the time. I need a life! I need something to do!”

“I know,” London said, coming over to smooth my wild mane. “But father would do anything for us. Don’t you think you could give him this one thing?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said as I looked down at London. “But today I am going to town, and now. There is a lot to do today. I’ll see you when I get home” I leaned down and
kissed my shorter big sister on the cheek. I then turned, grabbed the basket I had filled with food last night, and skipped out the door.

I always looked forward to the days I went to town. I loved hearing all the tales from the witches and wizards when they would come into the shop. Most of them were old and haggard now, and relished any chance that they got to tell a story to young and willing ears. I could listen to them for hours, and then, when they were gone, I would dream of all that they had told me and relive it in my head. All I wanted was just one adventure of my own, but I was a potter’s daughter with no talents. I could do was talk to animals, but that was so uncommon among the wizarding community that my father never wanted anyone to know. There were many rather unsavory witches and wizards who lived on the outskirts of town who would love to use me for their own ends. If anyone could ever call upon the forces of the animal kingdom, they could win an entire war or take over a kingdom. My father did not want my ability falling in to the wrong hands, so we kept it a secret. It was hard sometimes, because I would go into a trance in front of the customers. This would happen because, before I would hear an animal cry out for help, I would feel its pain so strong within my heart that it would send me into a momentary shock. Then, I would hear its cry, no matter how large or small the animal. This ability to actually feel the emotions of creatures strengthened as I had grown older. I had barely noticed it as a child, but now, as a young woman of nineteen, I could sense the need of an animal even before it knew to cry.

The town was quiet when I walked into it. Guelder was not usually a quiet town, though it was small. I had lived here my whole life and I adored it all. While I wished for grand adventures to whisk me away, part of me always wanted to remain in Guelder. The entire town was just one long street with shops on either side. On the outskirts were the houses where the people of the village resided. At the end of the row of shops was the school. It was a big school, one of the biggest in the land, and by far the biggest building in the town. Guelder was known for this school. Gifted children from a very young age were sent to train at The Guelder School of Wizardry. Guelder was full of witches and wizards who, if they did not teach at the school, set up yet another shop to sell their potions.
I walked down the street where only a few early risers were out preparing their own shops. I found myself in front of my father’s stand. London and I tried to talk him into building an actual shop, but since he hated change so much, he refused to build anything different. So, every morning, either London or I were forced to open the wide doors of the stand and pull down the counter. Then, we would pull every pot and bowl out from under it and place it up on the shelves for another day of business. This day was just like any other day. I set up the pots and our other wares and went about my business. Witches and wizards came into the shop. They would stop, have a nice chat, and be on their way. Nothing out of the ordinary happened until the two witches who were to change the course of my future walked in to the shop.
Chapter 2
The Rose and the Dragon

They were known as the town gossips because they always knew every person’s business, sometimes even before that person found out himself. They were in the midst of a serious conversation when they entered.

“But did you hear what happened to her?” the ginger witch asked the scraggily grey haired witch.

“Why, no! What happened?” the grey haired witch responded.

“Burnt to a crisp in her house by a dragon, that’s what.”

“A dragon? But there are no dragons in these parts.”

“I heard she caught one and was practicing her magic on it.”

“Serves her right for being so stubborn! We told her for years her kind of magic would get her into trouble. You cannot practice the dark arts and expect to remain unharmed.”

“She was rather abominable, too, but still, what a terrible way to have it all end. Two medium size pots, dear. And put it on my bill, will you? There’s a good lass.”

I was listening so intently on their conversation that had I to take a moment to collect my thoughts before I realized the grey-haired witch was talking to me.

“Dear?” the ginger witch said patting my hand. “Are you alright?”

“Dragon….” I squeaked.

“Yes, dear a dragon, but I would not worry too much about it. Richard, the warlock from the wand shop, saw it fly away, rather clumsily, into the woods. He believes it was injured, so we have nothing to worry about.”

“But a dragon….” All I could picture was the dragon from my dream, that terrible yet beautiful beast rising before me with such pain in its eyes. Was it injured? Was that what my dream was telling me? Had I felt its need so strongly that it punctured my dream while I slept soundly?
“Dear, could we have those pots?” the ginger witch asked, breaking me from my trance.

“Oh I am terribly sorry, of course. Two pots. That will be three shillings on your bill.”

The two witches thanked me and moved to walk away from the stand, changing their conversation to some other piece of gossip. “Wait!” I said suddenly, stopping them in their tracks. They turned, surprised, and looked at me expectantly. “Did Sir Richard say where in the forest the dragon fell?”

“No, dear,” the ginger witch responded, “but I wouldn’t worry. If it was injured, then we really have nothing to fear. No dragon is going to come save it. It is all alone and will probably die there.” And with that they nodded and turned their backs to the stand.

I finished out the day and closed up the shop just as the sun was setting behind the forest. I walked home and watched the sunlight reach through the trees while I thought about the dragon. I was halfway home when I was stopped and almost knocked to the ground with an overwhelming feeling of pain. It was a feeling like I had never known. The only feeling I had ever felt rival it was the pain I was in when I was told my mother had died while I slept. Pain like this could only be felt by a very large creature, and I knew what that creature was.

I began running, past my house, past my father’s work-shed, straight into the forest. I ran as fast as I could, unsure of where I was going, just following the force of the pain. Finally, in my head I heard a cry. A little voice was whimpering for help. It was not a childlike voice, like so many animal voices seem to be, but it was a man’s voice. He was in so much pain that he could barely even say the word help. But I heard it. Every thought in my head was distracted by the voice until I was screaming outwardly for him to keep crying. The cry for help grew louder and louder as I kept running. I tripped repeatedly and my knees were bruised and bloody, but I was not going to stop running until I found him. The cries suddenly became deafening and I stopped in my tracks, right in the middle of a clearing. All around me little yellow flowers glistened in the sun. One row of flowers, just one, rippled and danced as a solitary breeze blew them. I followed their movement, turning
to my right, and faced giant nostrils lying on the ground. They breathed in and out in a choppy nervous fashion. I moved my eyes from its snout to its own frightened, snake-like eyes. I stared into them for a moment and then my gaze continued over the body of the behemoth. The green and golden scales shone brightly in the shaft of light. Broad filmy wings graced his back. They were an orangey-red color that contrasted a little with the green and yellow scales, but it did not detract from its beauty. He looked exactly like the dragon from my dream. As hard as I looked up and down the great body, I could find no place where the beast was injured. I looked into the face of the dragon, and I gasped as I saw in his eyes the same look of need that was in my dream. There was something else more plainly showing in them, though, and that was fear. The poor creature looked terrified of me. I walked a little closer to it, but nowhere close to touching it. I crouched down onto one knee so I could look it straight in the eyes. “Hello,” I said quietly. “My name is Rose and I would like to help you. Are you injured?” The dragon lifted its head, and cocked it to the side in a confused manner, but he does not speak. “You can talk to me. I’ll understand.” He opened his mouth and made several grunting noises like he was actually trying to talk like a human. “No, no. I can read your thoughts. Think about what is wrong. Tell me.”

“I…I don’t know what to tell you,” the dragon thought in a baritone voice. “There is nothing physically wrong with me… I just….”

“What?” I asked him, kneeling on both knees and inching closer. The dragon just closed its eyes and shook its head. “Well, let’s start with your name. What is it? Dragons have names, right?”

“I suppose. I haven’t met many dragons. But my name is Alistair Hale,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “And you?”

“Rose Fairchild.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Rose Fairchild.”

“You talk so properly for a dragon. I always thought dragons would be more barbaric, and what a posh name you have. I had no idea dragons had last names.”
“Well … yes. You see I’m actually not ….” Alistair stopped and sniffed the air. “Someone’s coming,” he said, rising to a crouched position. “If they find me here, they will surely kill me. Dragons are not exactly popular among the human race.”

“No, you’re right. Why don’t you hide deep in the forest? Flying away will draw too much attention, and they might have arrows. I’ll see if I can lead them in a different direction.” Alistair backed his gigantic body into the shade of the trees as I turned and ran to ward off the intruders.

They came with blazing torches, and I realized that the sun had finally set in the sky. It would not look good that I was out here in the forest at night. They would surely think I was an evil witch up to something evil. The knights came bursting through the trees, their swords drawn ready to attack. They were moving so fast that I was not even sure they realized I was just a young girl standing in the middle of a forest. All they saw was a threat. They came bearing down on me, and all I could do was kneel down. I could not run back the way I came for fear they would find my dragon. “Witch!” they yelled, and one giant knight swung his sword at my head, but before it struck my neck, another sword was there to stop it. I looked up into the face of a man I had never seen before, and he began fighting the giant knight. I stood to see who he was, but I was instantly hit on the head from behind. I swayed for a moment, fell to the ground, and everything around me began to fade as I watched the mysterious man fight the knights.
Chapter 3
The Rose and the Promise

I woke to the feeling of wet breath on my face. I had never known breath could actually be wet, but when I opened my eyes to two big nostrils, I understood immediately. “Hello.” I said to Alistair. “Good to see you weren’t killed, or worse.”

“What is worse than being killed?” Alistair asked with a chuckle lining the sound of his voice. He plopped his gigantic head down in front of my face and gazed at me.

“I don’t know. Maybe being captured?” I smiled and sat up. I reached my hand out and touched him for the first time. I stroked the bridge of his nose. It was surprisingly soft, almost a velvety texture. He closed his eyes and made a sound in his throat, but then his eyes shot open and he lifted his head slightly out of my reach.

“You should not have gone after them. You got hurt. I do not want you to get hurt because of me.”

“Well, I almost got killed, but …”

“What?” the dragon asked, his eyes narrowing.

“A man saved me. At least I think there was a man. He came out of nowhere and now it all feels like a dream,” I said squinting my eyes and thinking hard. I focused back on Alistair. “Did you see a man come from somewhere? He would have run right past you.”

“No, I saw no one. Perhaps you were hit on the head harder than I thought. Are you sure you are okay?”

I rubbed the back of my head and felt a rather large bump, but for the most part I felt like my normal self.

“I’m fine,” I said, standing up. I looked around the clearing and saw no dead bodies or any mysterious men lurking about. “What happened to all of them?”

“After they struck you, they ran deeper into the woods. They never found me, and I imagine the wild of the wood took them. I would not worry about them anymore, my lady.”

“No, I suppose not.”
“Now, my sweet Rose, I am afraid you must leave me. There are things that surround me that are not safe. I would never forgive myself if someone as nice as you were to be harmed.”

“Wait, why are you not safe?”

“She asks as she stands there looking at a dragon,” he muttered sarcastically. “You are a strange girl to be sure. You know of the Dragon Wars? I am dangerous company to keep in times like these.”

“But the Dragon Wars are over.”

“Yet the hatred of dragons is not. Trust me, I know more than anyone. Why do you think those knights were in this forest? There is more to my story than you need ever know, sweet girl. Now, you must leave me.”

“But where will you go? Those men might still be out there. What will you do if they catch you? You will surely be killed, and I cannot let that happen. Please let me help you,” I moved toward him again and put my hand on his snout. I looked at the sharp contrast between his green scales and my pale skin, and thought for the first time how very strange this gift of mine was. If I had known, all those years ago when I had been sick, that one day I would be touching the nose of a dragon, I would have been the happiest of girls. This thought resolved me to help this poor creature that much stronger. How could I leave him when he looked so very frightened? He tried to put on a brave façade as a fierce creature, but I knew better. I could feel his terror, and though I did not understand exactly why he was afraid, I knew I had to help him. “I’m not leaving you. There is no amount of arguing that will cause me to do so. I feel drawn to you in a way I cannot explain, or even understand, but I know that if I leave you, something terrible will happen to one or both of us.”

Alistair sat for a moment, looking at me and thinking too quickly for me to know his thoughts. Then he said, “My lady Rose, you are a brave one, and, since I am so very alone, I will be pleased to call you my friend. There is no argument from me, but I will say this: go home to the family I am sure you have, and let them know you are safe. You have been gone all night, you know.”
“Oh! That’s right! My poor father must be sick with worry,” I turned around in a
circle quickly; suddenly unsure of the way I came. “But I do not know which way is home.”
“You came from the town, did you not?”
“Yes.”
“There is a path right there,” Alistair said, moving his large foot to the right.
“There’s a path? Oh and my poor knees could have been saved so much pain,” I
remarked as I looked down at my bruised and bloody appendages.
Alistair smiled. “Well, off you go then, Rose. Homeward with you.”
“Yes….” I started off toward the path, but turned around quickly. “Do you--”
“I promise I will be here upon your return. Bring me some food if you will. I am
quite hungry.”
“But I have nothing that could fill a belly as large as yours.”
“Do not fret about that. Anything will do. Now go. I will await your return.”
I smiled at the great beast affectionately and took off down the path. In my head I
heard “Thank you,” and I smiled brighter at the wonder of making a new friend in a
dragon.
I ran the whole way. My poor father was most likely frantic with worry. I reached
the cottage and burst through the back door. “I’m here! I’m all right!” I yelled as I ran into
the living room. My father, sitting at the table as usual, jumped, yelled, and dropped his
mug with a look of surprise and disapproval crossing his face.
“Rose, what are you talking about? Why did you scare me like that?”
“I’ve been out all night!” I squeaked out between the breaths.
“What?” My father looked up from cleaning the mess he had made.
“You didn’t know?” I said, slowly backing toward my bedroom. “Never mind …
must have been sleepwalking or … something.”
“Rose.” My father’s admonishing tone, one I was not used to, stopped me in my
tracks.
“Yes?” I faintly said.
“Where have you been?”
Knowing that I could not lie completely to him, I told him the basic truth … “I was in the wood, tending to an animal that really needed me.”

“Oh! The forest? That is a dangerous place, my dear. You should not be out all night. And not telling me? You could have been hurt and I would never have known.”

“How **did** you not know I was gone?”

“I worked through dinner. I assumed you and London were already asleep when I returned home. Next time,” he crooked an eyebrow and a smile, “I shall not assume.”

“I am sorry, father. I had no idea that my presence would be needed so long.”

“Next time, stop in to let me know.”

“Yes, father. Then I shall tell you that, I will probably be out rather late again tonight. The poor animal is still in need of my help.”

“Not today. I need you in the workshop. You may check on it after dinner.”

“But father --”

He held up a finger. “Consider that your punishment.”

“Yes, sir.” He stood, placed the broken decanter in the sink, and walked over to kiss me on top of the head. “Now, go change, my sweet girl. You’ve a long day of glass blowing ahead of you. We have a large order to fill.”

I turned and looked out the window at the forest, wondering how long Alistair would keep his promise and wait for me. There was nothing I could do for him now. After dinner I would run as fast as I could to get back to him. I prayed he would still be there.

I worked, through the day, which seemed to move slower with every passing hour. Every now and then, I would imagine I could hear Alistair calling my name, but I was sure my mind was deceiving me. The sun was setting in the sky when I finally raced across the backyard and into the forest. It was dark by the time I made it to the clearing. I searched everywhere but could not find my dragon. I stood there, the food still hot from dinner, in my hand, unsure what to do. Then I heard a branch snap behind me and someone say, “Hello, Rose.” I turned, but did not find my dragon. There before me, cloaked in moonlight, stood my savior from the night before.
“You!” I gasped, dropping the food on the ground.

“Oh, don’t do that! I had you bring me food so I wouldn’t have to find it on the ground,” he said, walking towards me.

“What? Bring you food? Who are you?” I said, backing away from him even farther as he came over to take the food from the ground. As he drew closer, I was able to see him better in the dim moonlight. He was tall and dark. He had an olive complexion, and his brown hair glinted with gold. He had a nice face, not harsh, but mischievous looking -- even as he did something as simple as bend down to pick up the food. He was dressed in the same tunic, black pants, and black leather boots I had seen him in from the night before. He stood up with the food in his hand and I focused on what he was saying.

“Do you not recognize my voice? I’m Alistair!”

“Alistair … but I do not understand. You’re a dragon! I know you are! I saw you! Where is my dragon? What have you done to him? Did you hurt him?” I ran over and knocked the food from his hand.

“Will you please stop doing that? Now it is really dirty.” I grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled his face close to mine. “Oh! Hello!” he said as we were eye to eye.

“Explain! Now!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, disentangling himself from my fingers. “When you were in town yesterday, did you hear anything about a dragon around the forest?”

I remembered the day before, which seemed so very far away, and said, “Yes, two old witches came in and said a dragon had killed another witch just beyond the town and had flown into the forest. That’s how I knew you … the dragon was here.”

“How do you think an old witch was able to catch a dragon? Did that not seem odd to you?”

“I suppose I did not really think much about it. I’m not aware of what kind of magic witches can do. Perhaps she could conjure a spell big enough to lure even a dragon.”
“She cannot, and she did not. She was given a kidnapped man, and she cursed him to take the form of a hideous dragon. I am that dragon.”

“Well, say this is true. You are a man now, so the spell must be broken.”

“No I am afraid it is not. When the sun set last night and I returned to the form of a man I thought that the death of the witch must have broken the curse. Yet, when the sun rose and I woke to find myself lying beside you again as a dragon, I realized that the witch was unable to cast the curse in its fullest form. It seems that I am forever to remain a dragon by day and a man by night.”

“But that cannot be possible,” I said, confused.

“If you do not believe me, then wait until morning when I transform before your eyes.”

“But you stand before me clothed in a shirt and pants, and even boots! How can you transform back and forth and keep your clothing?”

“I have no explanation for you, Rose. All I know is what I have told you.” He looked at me with such sincerity in his eyes that I could not bring myself to doubt him. His story was not so terribly farfetched. I had seen witches and wizards transform themselves into creatures, so why could they not do it to someone else? I leaned down and picked the food from the ground, brushing it off the best that I could, and handed it to him. “Here,” I said. “You must be hungry.”

He smiled at me and took the food from my hand. “Thank you, sweet Rose.” I smiled, feeling suddenly that this man could be a kindred spirit, but I backed away quickly, unable to accept it. “But … why?” I asked suddenly.

“Why what?” he asked, his mouth full of food.

*He eats like a dragon, to be sure,* I thought. “Why would someone want to turn you into a dragon?”

“Oh, that,” he said, continuing to chew. “I’m next in line to be king.”

“What!”?

Birds in the trees squawked and scattered at my exclamation, and Alistair choked on a piece of mutton. “Goodness. Was that necessary?”
“You’re … you’re a prince?” I asked slightly panting. I had no idea why I was out of breath, but seemed to become so thick that I thought I would faint. I thought for sure I was going to faint.

“Yes, I am Prince Alistair Hale. I thought you would recognize the name when I told it to you yesterday.”

The kindred spirit I felt with this man suddenly faded. He was a prince, and I … I a potter’s daughter. “We do not know much about the royal family all the way out here. We just know that you have never visited. Before now, anyway.” I forced a smile and curtseyed in a playful manner.

“No, Rose.” He said abruptly.

“Sir?”

“Please do not start treating me like a royal. I need a friend, not a subject. Please.” He placed the sandwich on a rock and grasped my hand. “Please I just want you to be Rose. I could not bare it if suddenly you became proper and distant.”

“Alright.” I smiled up at him, but then returned to my question. “But why do they want you to be a dragon if you are to be king? You seem kind, and you seem like you would be a good ruler. Why, I hardly even know you, and I feel like I could trust you with my life.”

“Ah yes, but do not kind rulers often have enemies?”

“I suppose they do, yes. But who are your enemies?”

“I am uncertain, but I believe that my enemy is Seneschal Brooker. He was the steward of the kingdom while my father, younger brother, and I were fighting in the Dragon Wars. He thought it was foolish of us to go and that we should leave the dragons in peace. What he did not understand was that the dragons and their sympathizers were planning to burn whole cities, including yours, I believe. While we were gone, he decided that he could rule better than we could and I believe he has been plotting to take over ever since. My brother’s untimely disappearance ought to be next. Those were his men in the woods last night. I am sure they were keeping an eye on me after they brought me to that witch two nights ago.”
“So what are you going to do? Find a way to break the curse?” I suddenly realized he was still holding my hand and standing quite close to me, so I withdrew my hand and stepped away, under the pretense that I wanted to see his face clearer.

“How am I going to do that?” Alistair said as he threw his hands in the air. “I killed the witch that cursed me, remember?”

“What?”

“I keep catching you by surprise today. I have to say your shocked face is quite amusing.”

“Well, as much as I enjoy amusing you…” I began with sarcasm lacing my voice.

“Yes, yes. I guess omitted that part. I suppose you heard of the cottage catching on fire?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I set it on fire. I was so surprised when I was turned into a dragon that I belched fire and accidentally burned the house. The rotten old woman burned to a crisp before my eyes. And now I have no one to break this curse! I am destined to be a dragon forever.”

“Not at night,” I muttered, but apparently not quietly enough, because he turned and cocked his eyebrow at me.

“Well, there are plenty of good witches in the city. What if I found one that would help us?”

“Us?” he said asked. “No,” he said, louder, looking into the distance. “I have had enough of witches and magic for the moment. I need to return to the castle and warn my brother, who may be able to help me.”

“Do you think that’s wise? What if there are people waiting for you there? You are a dragon during the day, remember? What are you going to do, fly up to his window and hold a conversation with him?”

“I will meet him at night. That would be best. He would probably kill me on sight if I appeared as a dragon.”
“There has to be an easier way. Maybe we can get him to come down here and find you. I could have my father send word to the castle that he thinks he saw you. I’m sure they are looking for you everywhere. Your brother will want to come find you.”

“I think it would just be easier if I went on my way alone. I do not want to get too many people involved in this. It will probably get dangerous.”

“What did I tell you?” I asked grabbing his hand. “I’m not leaving you. You need me.”

“Perhaps … as a dragon.”

“Yes, that was when you were the most dangerous creature on earth. And now I am standing before a man, and I am saying I will not let you do this alone. I’m only a simple potter’s daughter, but I am the only person who can speak for Alistair Hale the Dragon, and I will always be here to do so.” He smiled down at me, and for the first time fear was not the first thing I saw in his eyes. Appreciation had replaced it, and as he squeezed my hand, I assured myself that I would help this man regain all he had lost, no matter the cost.

As I looked up into his face, a shaft of light from the rising sun broke through the trees, and I saw for the first time with my own eyes the transformation of the man to the beast. I let go of him and moved back as light swirled and completely shielded him from my sight. With one burst of light, and one great roar from his throat, Prince Alistair became Alistair the Dragon again. He coughed out a little ball of fire and looked at me with a look that almost made me giggle. Again I only heard his voice in my head as he said, “That was interesting.” I smiled and nodded. “Are you okay?” He asked. I nodded again. “Well, then, get you to your father and see if he can help.” As I turned to leave he said “But do not tell him of my curse.” I nodded a third time and quickly made my way through the woods.
“Oh Rosie, I am so glad you are here! Where have you been this whole time? I have such exciting news!” My sister London fairly tackled me when I walked through the back door. It was probably only seven in the morning when I made it back to the house, but she was already up and dressed. “Father said you’ve been out all night taking care of some animal, well that has got to stop now.”

“What are you talking about, London?” I asked, uneasy about why she was so excited.

“I am getting married!”

“Married? To who?”

“To the prince, that’s who!”

“Prince?” I asked shocked. “What prince?”

“Prince Galorian Hale. He’s the younger brother of Alistair Hale, and the more handsome one in my opinion.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know…”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Anyway, Galorian or Galory, as I like to call him-- came into the shop yesterday and talked to me all day. And then this morning, he came by the house and said he was so taken by my beauty and kindness that he wanted to marry me! Of course father consented, and now they are outside discussing the details.”

“Wait, father said yes?”

“Well, of course! You do not decline a future king.”

“Future king? You said he was second in line. What happened to Prince Alistair?”

“Galorian said he had been kidnapped and was last seen here, murdered. That’s why he was in town.”

“So he came looking for his brother, but stayed in the shop with you all day?”

“Well, he sent his men to do the looking. Kings do not participate in search parties.”
“I see.”

“Would you like to meet him?”

“I’m not really prepared,” I said as I smoothed my tangled brown mane and wrinkled dress.

“That doesn’t matter. He’s not here to marry you,” my perfectly blunt sister pointed out. “Come on!” She grabbed my hand and pulled me out to the front of the cottage where I saw my second prince of the day standing next to my father. Prince Galorian looked nothing like Alistair. He was tall, which was his only resemblance to Alistair, and he had pale skin, so pale it almost hurt to look at him in the sunlight, and fiery red hair blazed in spikes on the top of his head. He had a nice face when he was smiling, as he was at the moment while he spoke with my father, but I did not like his eyes. Alistair had nice eyes, but Galorian had steely eyes. But I quickly remembered that he was probably worrying about his brother’s safety. That would cause any man to seem harsh. “Galory, here she is! Come meet my sister,” London said in a rather annoying melodic voice.

Galorian faced me, beaming a snowy white smile in London’s direction and then shined it onto me. “Ah yes, Rose, is it not? I am so pleased to make your acquaintance. Your sister has told me much about you.”

“Only good things, I hope,” I said smiling as I bowed in a low curtsey. “The pleasure is all mine, my lord.”

“Rise, young one, and shake my hand. We are to be related after all. Very soon, in fact, if I can convince your father. I wish to take this ravishing young creature away and have her with me as soon as possible,” he said, dropping my hand and turning to grasp the hand of his beloved.

“I’m not saying no, I’m just asking if you are sure. You’ve only known him one day, my dear,” father said, turning to London. “Are you positive this is what you desire?”

London looked into the face of her apparent true love, and I could not help but notice what a striking couple they were. Her perfect, long, blonde hair and pale skin matched him completely, and standing together they looked like one great glowing light. “I am positive, father. You always said you wanted nothing less for me than a prince. Well,
here he is, standing before you.” London beamed over at our father, and I saw capitulation in his face. London jumped once and clapped her hands like a little girl rewarded for being good.

“Rose, oh Rose!” London squealed, coming over to grasp my hands. “You must come and live at the palace with Galory and me. He already said you can! Oh, Won’t it be such fun?”

“Well, …” I started, but father cut me off.

“I think we should let you get settled first, my dear, before we invade you. You can send for Rose when the time is right.”

“Yes, father.” London walked over to hug him. “I am going to be so happy. I promise, father!”

“I have no doubt,” my father said, shooting Galorian a warning look.

“She will never want for anything. And if the rumors are true and my brother truly has met an untimely demise, she will be queen. An adored queen, I am sure,” he said smoothing down my sisters golden hair.

“You don’t seem very upset about your brother’s death,” I said sharply. I couldn’t imagine why he was taking it all so lightly.

“You mistake my calm for apathy,” the prince said, looking me in the eye. “I cannot allow myself to be upset. I am a ruler. I, more than anyone, do not wish for my brother to be dead, but I must remain calm. I suspected this might happen. Our steward has not tried to hide the fact that he hated relinquishing the rule of our country, and now, with our father’s sudden death, we were prepared for anything to happen.”

“Obviously not anything, since the prince is most likely dead.”

“Rose!” My father and sister both said at once.

Galorian said, stopping them with his hand, “No, she speaks her mind. I admire that. You are right. We were not prepared for him to be kidnapped in the middle of the night. And if I could I would search for him until I died, but I must go rule my country, and I must have a beautiful woman by my side.” He took London under his arm and faced both
my father and me. “So we shall leave first thing in the morning to be married, and I will start my duties as king.”

London was beaming with pleasure, and I could not help feeling that she was getting what she deserved. Though often dimwitted, she had always been a pleasant big sister and had cared for father and me so well in the first few months after our mother’s death. I was glad that she was getting this chance at happiness, and Galorian seemed like the man who could make all her dreams come true.
That night, after helping London spend the entire day packing and preparing, I ventured into the forest to search for Alistair. I knew I had to tell him the news, but I was not sure how exactly to go about it. I knew that he would want to go to Galorian and show him he was alright, but I was afraid that he would be caught by some knight lurking in the bushes before he could reach his destination.

I ran down the path to the clearing as fast as I could. The moon was high when I reached the little flowery grove, and there I found him walking around in a circle beyond the yellow buds. I stood for a moment and watched him, wondering what would become of him. I had hardly known him for more than two days, yet I felt like he was the biggest part of my world now. I was willing to protect him with my life. Was this what any subject would feel for her king, or was I feeling something more? London knew she was in love in less than a day, but I felt that a feeling that strong would take more time. I and reminded myself that I was a potter’s daughter, and not a rather undesirable one at that, so I was surely not destined to find myself the wife of a king. I decided to put such ridiculous thoughts from my mind and focus on the task at hand. Yet, when I cleared my throat and Alistair looked up at me and smiled, I could not help hoping that maybe… 

No! I stopped myself and moved into the clearing to speak with my prince.

“Where have you been?” He asked running forward to grab my hands. “How did it go? Can your father help me? No, of course not. What was I thinking? I will be stuck in this forest forever.” He dropped my hands and threw his into the air in exasperation. “I will live out my days as a gigantic dragon, eating squirrels and playing in the flowers.”

I rolled my eyes and thrust a parcel out to him. “You’ll never have to eat squirrels as long as I’m around.” When his temper calmed, he reached for the bag.

“Ah, that smells so good,” he said, closing his eyes.

“We had a bit of a feast tonight, so I cooked only the best of our food.”

“A feast, eh? What is the occasion?”
“My sister marrying your brother.”

“Go on … what is the true reason?” he laughed.

“That is the true reason.” Alistair just looked at me in disbelief.

“What is going on? There is very little moonlight left.

“I will tell you, but you have to promise not to run off immediately afterwards.”

“I promise.”

I explained every detail from the time I entered into my house this morning to the time I left for the forest that night. I watched his face as I told him the story, and it ranged from slightly amused to excitement. That last emotion was the one I feared the most.

“I need to go quickly!”

“Wait!” I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “What did you promise?”

“Yes, but…”

“No! You have approximately two hours until sunrise. What are you going to do if you turn into a dragon in front of your brother? It won’t do any good to go to him now. You will be caught and killed as a rogue dragon.”

“But what if…”

“No,” I said, putting a finger over his mouth. He raised an eyebrow at me and made a face that was probably meant to scare me, but I just ignored it. “I have an idea if you will just stand still for a moment.” He puffed out a breath around my finger, and kicked his foot out to lean on one leg in a casual manner. “Thank you,” I removed my finger from his lip, but kept a warning look in my eye. “Now, here is what I propose. Let your brother leave tonight with my sister so that they can be married. Then, my sister can settle herself in the kingdom. In time she will send for me, and I will also become a fixture within the castle. At this point I can get you inside, when I am sure none of the Seneschal’s knights are lurking about, as they could very well be tonight. Then you can have all night to speak with your brother about what has happened to you.”

“Hmmm … And what do you propose I do while I wait for your sister to send for you?”
“During dinner your brother mentioned that the Seneschal left the kingdom when word of your supposed death spread through the kingdom. He said that he is lurking somewhere near this town to make sure that his deed was carried out, but not close enough that it could be traced back to him. I suggest that we travel to the surrounding towns in search of him. If we find him, then he might be able to tell us if there is a way to break the curse.”

“You have thought this through, have you not?” He looked at me with admiration. “I suppose the plan seems sound. It is a little more complicated than I would prefer, but it seems reasonable enough.”

“I know it seems like a long time to wait, and I know you do not wish to remain in this state much longer, but I really think that time is on your side here. Everyone thinks you are dead, and you are in the perfect position to make a plan, and the best part is I get to help you,” I said smiling brightly. “So you don’t have to do this all alone.”

“That is the best part, eh?” He raised his eyebrow again.

“Well, … to me. To you, I suppose ….”

“No.” He then stopped my words with his finger. “That is the best part: not being alone.”

“So, you’ll do it?”

He removed his finger and briefly tapped my chin.

“Yes, my sweet Rose. I will obey you. After all, how can I do any of this without you? You are the only one who will understand me when this happens.” He looked behind him. The sun was beginning to shine through the trees, and with a bright flash he was again my beautiful dragon. I stared at him, which led him to say, “You know, I think you prefer me this way.”

“Well, I know you cannot outrun me when you are like this, so that is an added enjoyment.” I teased him, patting him on the snout. He thrust his head forward as if he enjoyed the touch.
“Your sister is leaving this morning, and you must see her off. And then you must think of an excuse to tell your father why you will be gone for a few days while we look for my steward.”

“Oh, I’ve already got one of those,” I said, tilting my head up in pride.

“Yes?”

“I shall gather our latest products and set off to the nearby towns to sell our wares. I have not done this since last year, and it is quite time I take a trip.”

“He will let you just go alone?”

“You forget my lovely little gift,” I said to him as I tapped my forehead. “I have the entire animal kingdom at my disposal. My father need never worry that I will have protection. I travel with an abundance of creatures almost everywhere I go. In fact, right now there are three deer, two squirrels, and several wolves surrounding this clearing, but they are far too wary of you to come any closer. They are quite confused as to why I am conversing so casually with you.”

“You are a fascinating creature, Rose Fairchild. I look forward to spending the next few weeks in your company.”

I smiled and patted his snout again before making my way back home.
The next few weeks passed by in a blur. After seeing my sister off to her wedding and new life, and convincing my father that now was the perfect time for my trip, I set off with Alistair to find the steward. We did most of our traveling by night since it was too conspicuous to travel with during the day. If a dragon was even seen in the areas around Guelder, an entire army would be called out to bring it down. So we traveled by night and slept by day. It was easier this way for a myriad of reasons, the biggest of which was that it was far more proper for me to sleep under the wing of a gigantic dragon than it would have been for me to sleep beside a very handsome prince.

As the days wore on, we wondered aimlessly, hoping for some clue as to the whereabouts of the steward. I was beginning to doubt my wonderful plan when we finally found our first lead. When Alistair, dressed in a long cloak so that he could hide his identity, went into a tavern in a town not too far away from Guelder, he learned that the steward’s knights were camped out in the remotest corner of the woods. We immediately set out to find them, excited that we were finally getting somewhere, but when we came upon their campsite, we found the dead bodies around the cold remains of a fire.

“What are we going to do?” I asked Alistair. “Everything we’ve tried, every lead we’ve followed, every person we’ve talked to have led us to a dead end.”

“Fitting choice of words considering the scene before us,” Alistair chuckled darkly.

“This isn’t funny, Alistair. People are dead, and we are nowhere close to solving this.”

“Quiet!” Alistair whispered. “I think it is time for you to go home. We are not accomplishing anything by following wild chases, and your sister will be sending for you soon. I think the most we can hope for now is that you can get me into the castle to talk to my brother.”

“I’m sorry that I’ve failed you,” I sighed.
“No,” he said firmly. “Listen to me. You will never fail me. As long as you have breath to breathe and faith that good wins over evil, you will never fail me. No more of this defeatist’s attitude. You are the brightest, most beautiful creature I have ever had the pleasure of meeting, and I will not have you feeling like a failure.”

I looked at him unsure how to respond. No one had ever said such nice things to me, other than my loving father and dear mother. I was taken aback by his kindness. All I could muster was a polite “Okay” and “Thank you”.

“Good, now let us get you home. Your sister should be settled by this time, and your father no doubt would like you home for at least a day before you leave him again.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I am ready to be home.”

So we returned to my home, where I was welcomed with open arms by my extremely happy father.

Two days after I returned, I received a letter from my sister, who beckoned me to her beautiful life in her grand palace. I began packing and informed Alistair that he should begin to make his way back to the castle. Since part of the way he would be traveling was through dragon territory, he would be able to fly for most of the journey. We both set out on separate paths: I a respectable route in horse and carriage and he through the land of the dragons.

I arrived at the castle a few days later and was in awe of Alistair’s childhood home. The castle looked like it came from a storybook. It stood on the top of a hill in all its majesty. It was completely made of stone and had one main tower with three smaller towers jutting out on both sides and behind. Beautiful trees surrounded the castle. I had never felt such serenity in all my life, and I had grown up in the country.

The tranquility ended, however, the moment I walked into the castle. I was at first distracted by the great hall which displayed a painting of every royal that had ruled the castle. To the right was a painting of two young men: one sitting in a chair, and one standing behind the chair. It was the latter that caught my attention. Alistair stood there in the painting dressed in his princely attire, and I could not seem to focus on my sister who was squealing at me as she ran down the hall. All I could see was this version of a man I
had to grown to know so well, in a way I had never encountered before. He looked like a king. Everything about him appeared regal. He was less like my beloved friend and more like an esteemed king. For the first time I wondered what would happen if we succeeded in finding his steward and broke the curse. Would he take the crown and forget about me? I was sure he would. What would he want with a potter’s daughter once he was king and had the world at his disposal.

“Rose!” I jumped and looked away from the painting and into the face of my rather frantic sister.

“London, what’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly worried.

“Oh, Rose! I’m so glad you are finally here! I’ve been so terrified! I’m afraid I have done something terrible!” London pulled me to the side of the hall and began to talk quietly. “I think I have married a monster!”

“What are you talking about, London? Galorian seems like a nice man. You shouldn’t talk about him in such a way.”

“No, Rose, you have to listen,” London grabbed my arm and looked earnestly into my face.

“Okay! I am! I am!”

“I overheard Galorian speaking with the steward of the kingdom. Yes, the same steward who is supposed to be in hiding. Well, he was in hiding, but he was hiding here! Galorian was speaking to him about how foolish he was for leaving Alistair alone with some witch and that he should have stayed to make sure the job was finished. Apparently, they made a deal that if the steward could find a way to get rid of Alistair and Galorian took the throne, Galorian would find a woman that would never bear him a child and the steward’s heir would be next in line for the throne!”

“But I don’t understand. You can bear him a child.”

“I’m coming to that part, now shush! Galorian went on to accuse the steward of not following through with his end of the deal. The steward then said that Galorian had not either, because he had married a woman who could give him an heir. Galorian responded that he, of course, was going to have me tragically killed and that he would remain in
mourning the rest of his life over his beloved wife who had been snatched from him, and how dare the steward doubt his devotion! He bellowed that he only made the deal so that he could be king and he did not care who took over after he finished his reign. The steward tried to respond, but Galorian, in a fit of rage, grabbed him by the neck and did not let go until the steward went limp within Galorian’s grasp. He killed the steward Rose, and he is going to kill me!”

She said all of this in one frantic breath. Then, she suddenly became very serious.

“Rose, he knows about you!”

“What are you talking about?” I exclaimed, suddenly afraid.

“The Seneschal’s men told him that they saw you in the forest accompanied by Prince Alistair the night after he had been turned into the great beast, whatever that great beast is. He knows that you were helping Alistair, and God knows what he has planned, but I doubt that he will allow you to go free with all the information you have about him.”

“In that case, I need to find Alistair before Galorian starts his killing spree!”

“Alistair? He’s here? Oh, Rose, you both have to get away from here! We are all surely going to die!” London exclaimed, clearly starting to panic.

“London, I need you to relax, please. You are not going to die; I will not allow it. Now, here is what I need you to do. Bad things are going to happen in this castle, I just know it, and I need you to run to your room now and lock yourself in. Thank you for telling me all of this, and I love you, but you must go now! I will not let you be a casualty in this jealous feud Alistair’s brother has started. Now go!” I pushed London away from me, even as she was giving me a confused look, but mercifully she ran towards what I hoped was her bedchamber. As she around the corner, I saw Galorian enter from the other side of the long hallway. He spied her flight and turned to look at what she was running from, which was me. I looked at him for only a moment and saw in his face everything my sister had just told me. When I first met him, I had been troubled by his gaze of steel, and now he was looking at me with fire in his eyes. He must have heard everything London told me, and I was truly grateful that she had heeded my warning. Yet, now he directed his anger at me, and if I did not move quickly, I was sure to become his next victim. I worked this through
my mind, and with the next breath I turned, burst through the great castle doors, and ran onto the drawbridge. I hurried down the hill before Galorian even had time to call for the guards.

I had to find Alistair, to tell him what I learned before it was too late. The sun was beginning to set, and a human Alistair would be making his way to the castle soon, as he was confident that all the steward’s men were dead and that his troubles were behind him. What he did not know was that the greatest evil lay in what he thought was his greatest ally.
Chapter 8
The Rose and the Battle

I kept running as fast as I could down the steep hill. I tripped and rolled a few times, but I barely even noticed, so great was my need to reach Alistair. I ran into the woods where we agreed he to meet, and I could only pray that he was still there. I entered the forest blindly, running right into the man I needed to stop, knocking him to the ground. Before he could speak I quickly but quietly explained everything that London had told me.

“My brother would never want something like this to happen to me, and he certainly would not kill a man in cold blood. Your sister must be mistaken.”

“She’s not. She knows what she saw, and you’re in terrible danger.”

He stood and tried to walk past me.

“No!” I pulled him back, grabbing the collar of his shirt. “I’ve always told you the truth, and I’ve always cared about your well being more than mine, so you cannot start doubting me now. My sister has never been a liar. She’s not smart enough to create such a tale, and she was truly terrified. I believe every word she said, and you must trust me. I have seen him—the fire and anger in his eyes! I know what he is planning to do! If you go in to that castle, he will try to kill you.”

His face was expressionless. Then he leaned in and kissed me. “I believe you,” he said. “And I trust you, but you are wrong about one thing. If I go into that castle tonight, he will not take my life. I will take back my kingdom.”

We walked quietly to the edge of the forest. “It ends now,” he said, with an unshakeable strength. Galorian knew Alistair was here, perhaps suspected he would be coming with me, and he was more than prepared to fight whatever came up that hill. Yet, what I knew that Galorian did not was that Alistair was just as prepared.

Together we watched the sun rise in the distance. Then he turned to me, touched my cheek with his finger just for a moment, smiled, and transformed into my beautiful dragon. As the dragon, Alistair had always left me breathless, but now he was different. Now it was as though Alistair—even as the dragon—was more a king than man. He stood in all his
glory, and I recognize that before me stood the majestic creature of my dream. He reared his green and gold body onto his hind legs and spread his bright red wings across the sky. And with a great roar and a rush of fire from his throat, Alistair commanded hundreds of drakes to fly through the air and land all around him at his feet. Never had I seen such a sight, and never was I so shocked as when I stood in the midst of hundreds of dragons. While Alistair was a Great Dragon, or what the magic world had come to call a High Dragon, the drakes that surrounded us were only slightly taller than I.

I heard every one of their thoughts. This was the first time that I realized that dragons could actually speak telepathically. This explained how they were able to fight so well in the Dragon Wars.

Alistair silenced their dissonant voices. As I tried to meet his eyes -- for he now stood at his full height, and his face was just beyond my field of vision -- I saw his leg extend toward me. ‘Climb onto my back, Rose, so that we might claim my kingdom together!

He wrapped his long wing around my tiny body and pushed me towards his leg. I grabbed hold and pulled myself up to the top of his front claw, climbing his leg until I reached the shoulder, pulled myself over the base of his wing, and, with one swift bounce, Alistair positioned me onto his back. Suddenly I had to grab hold of as much of his neck as possible as we began rising into the air.

With a great roar Alistair called all the drakes into the air. They soared high above the castle, but the guards who surrounded it were prepared. I ducked as a volley of arrows pierced the sky sending several dragons to the ground. I knew that such tiny arrows could never deter Alistair, but the pain I felt from the drakes was almost too much for me to bear. I heard every painful, terrified scream, and then, I felt the life force drain from each of them. I tried my best to block every thought but Alistair’s, who called out orders to the remaining drakes. Galorian would not win this fight, but the battle surging all around us was the least of Alistair’s worries. I felt within the conflict within him -- the mounting hatred for his brother’s betrayal and the longing to forgive him. Alistair’s personal conflict waged on even as he ordered the dragons flanking us.
The battle was turning swiftly in our favor when suddenly a great cloud formed in the sky, right above the castle. Deafening thunder boomed all around us as lightning split the sky. The heavens opened and great drops of water fell down to earth. The storm billowed and bustled all around us as the drakes and Alistair tried to dodge the erratic strikes of lightning. The dragons were unaccustomed to flying in such heavy rain and to falter and stall in the air. Frightened to lose more lives than he already had, Alistair commanded the drakes to land on the ground and begin attack on foot. They all descended to attack the remaining knights, while only Alistair remained in the air. The lightning focused its energy on Alistair, and I knew that Galorian had bribed some evil wizard to turn the heavens against us.

“I am not sure what to do now, Rose,” Alistair thought as he dodged yet another bolt of lightning. “I had not thought that a wizard could be tricked into helping such a lost cause.”

“There are some that will do anything for a little coin.” His head was quite far away from me, so I really had to shout, but he caught most of what I said over the wind. “He must be around here somewhere, though,” I said more to myself than to Alistair. As we circled the castle, I searched the surrounding area for any sign of the wizard. He had to be outside the castle to command such a powerful and precise storm. I had to really squint through the buckets of water that were pouring down on us, but I found him. He was hiding on a little hill just to the left of the castle. I did not see him at first, because I was sure he would have been in the forest to the right of the castle. Yet there he was, hiding between two rocks. I pulled on Alistair’s neck until he looked back at me, and then I motioned for him to land me near the rocks, behind the wizard so that he would not see me. I knew that Alistair did not want me to take on the wizard, but at that moment, Galorian stepped onto the balcony of the castle. I knew Alistair would want to confront Galorian more than the wizard. Calling upon three drakes to fly into the air and steal the focus of the wizard, Alistair circled his massive body around and brought me up to a little hill behind the wizard’s perch. He flew low enough for me to slide clumsily off his back, and then he soared into the sky again in Galorian’s direction.
I stood there and watched the wizard for a moment. His magic was captivating as he moved the clouds back and forth with his great staff and called upon the lightning to strike the ground with terrible force. I had to wait only a moment before I put my plan into action. The nice thing about a great battle is only the really ferocious animals stay to watch, so as I stood on my little hill, I motioned with my hands for those animals to come forth. Wolves and coyotes flanked my side and prepared for what I was about to ask them to do. I turned my back from what promised to be a gruesome scene and told the dogs at my feet “Go.” A terrible scream hit the air and then silence. The storm had passed.

I bowed my head for a moment and took a deep breath, and then, without turning around, I walked down the hill and toward the castle. The battle was over now. We had won, but there was a war still going on above me on the castle’s balcony. Galorian stood at the left end of the balcony, staring at Alistair, still the fearsome dragon, perched on the other end of the balcony. I stood still watching them stare each other down. The hundred or so drakes that were left after the battle all surrounded me and looked up at the two brothers. I looked over at the drake closest to me and asked. “How did Alistair talk all of you into helping him?”

The drake spoke to me telepathically. “He promised us peace. He said that with a man on the throne who understood the ways of the dragon, we could finally unite the kingdoms. This is all we want now: peace and a chance to become the powerful force we once were. Our numbers are few,” he continued, looking around. “What you see before you is all that is left of the male dragons. The females are even smaller in number. Prince Alistair promised that our actions today would wipe away the evil caused by ancestors in the Great Dragon Wars.”

I nodded and smiled at the drake. Alistair was now flying around the balcony. I looked down at the ground and wondered if he had figured out what I had and that was why he wanted to unite the kingdom. I was pulled from my thoughts, however, when a great roar split the air. Galorian had hurled his sword at Alistair, striking him in the chest, just to the left of his heart. And with that one blow Alistair faltered and fell to the ground like a massive cliff breaking away from a mountain.
I watched as my hero, my friend, and my prince fell to the ground and landed with a sound that rivaled the thunder from the great storm. I ran to where he lay on his back and tried to soothe the pain that radiated from his body. “I’m here,” I said over and over to him as I rubbed his snout. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, and I began to weep as I waited to feel his life force slip away from me, just like the other dragons.

But he was not like the other dragons. He was so much more, and I decided that one little sword could not steal him away from me like this. I would not let it. I climbed onto his stomach and grasped the sword that had pierced his chest. I noticed that the sword had not dug itself too deeply into the scales of my beloved dragon, so I pulled with all my might and out came the sword. Prepared for the inevitable bleeding, I ripped off my apron and balled it up, and it fit perfectly into the hole to stop the blood flow. Then I picked up the sword from off Alistair’s belly where I had tossed it, and slid down to the ground. I used the hilt of the sword and swatted Alistair lightly against the face. His eyes jerked open and I heard him say, “Hey!” and he looked at me rather upset. “That hurt!”

“Oh that hurt?” I snapped. “You’ll know what real pain is if you don’t get off your back and deal with your brother.” I heard him chuckle and I planted my hands on my hips in defiance. I looked at the entrance of the castle and saw the doors open. “Here he comes now.”

I stepped back so Alistair could roll and then onto his feet again. I watched the scene unfold with great pride. He stood as still and as tall as a statue in his dragon form and waited for Galorian to approach him. I still held Galorian’s sword, for which Galorian glared at me as he, but, soon focused all his attention on his brother.

“What a sweet girl you have there, brother. Does she know that you are always going to be a dragon?” He turned and said, “There’s no breaking the curse now, deary. He killed the only witch who could break it.” Since I was not surprised by this I simply shrugged my shoulders and smiled sweetly at the horrible man.
“Rose,” I heard Alistair say. “Be so kind as to translate for me will you?” I nodded and began speaking to Galorian for Alistair. “All of this has been known to myself and Rose from the beginning, brother. You have succeeded in your deed to turn me in a dragon, but not into a monster. I am still the same man, and I will still rule my kingdom. They question is, what shall I do with you? You have committed treason against the crown and are now a traitor. The punishment for this is death, or banishment. So I shall give you a choice. Which would you prefer a short drop and a sudden stop or a small island somewhere to call your own?”

“Neither. And what make you think you can just take back the kingdom? Why would the people of this land want a dragon as their ruler? Dragons are hated here.”

“Not as much as you think. And there is something you do not know about me, brother. That little witch you sent me to did not do her job very well.” Alistair looked over at me and winked with one massive eye. The sky was getting darker, and now Alistair would be able to speak for himself. As the last ray of light descended beyond the horizon, Alistair transformed into the man. He stood with his arms spread out, proof of the witch’s folly, and Galorian gasped at the sight of his brother.

“This cannot be!”

“Oh, but it is, brother. I told you that the witch was daft. I think she was a few ingredients short of a potion.” Alistair chuckled at his wit.

“Alistair, really.” I said, shaking my head.

“Anyway,” Alistair said getting back to the task at hand. “You have yet to decide your future.”

“Oh, but I have decided,” Galorian said.

“Ah! Good,” Alistair replied. “And?”

“And I do not want either. Just like I said.”

“This is not an option,” Alistair chided.

“I think it is.” Galorian reached inside his boot.

“Alistair!” I cried, and threw him the sword.
He deftly caught and grasped it in both hands, wielding it with a powerful force. Galorian drew a dagger from his boot and it sliced through the air at Alistair, who batted it away with his sword as easily as one would shoo a fly. Galorian rolled to the ground, straight toward the sword of a fallen knight. Alistair brought down his sword onto Galorian’s so forcefully that it disarmed him. Alistair then held his sword to Galorian’s neck to keep him in his place. “I have made *my* decision then,” Alistair stated loudly. The realization that his imminent death dawned on him, and I smiled in satisfaction, but Alistair said something that shocked both of us.

“What?” Galorian and I both exclaimed.

“Yes,” Alistair spoke firmly. “I will not become like my brother and kill to get what I want. You will not die today, Galorian, but I never want to see you in this kingdom ever again.”

Galorian had the gall to look relieved, but not after Alistair added, “But if I ever see your face again, I *will* kill you.”
Chapter 10

The Rose and Her King

After the banishment of King Galorian, the people of the Land of Alstoania cried out for Alistair to be allowed to rule, even in his dragon state. Never had they known a kinder prince, and they wished for nothing more than for him to become king. So Alistair assumed the crown in an evening ceremony that drew the largest crowd in the history of the kingdom. Alistair was adored and the people thought his tale was fanciful and romantic, especially where I was concerned.

Alistair did not wait long after his coronation to ask me to marry him. I did not hesitate to give him my affirmation, as I was as much in love with him as the people of the kingdom.

Well, perhaps a little bit more. We long ruled as king and queen, dragon and translator, and husband and wife.

Alistair was true to his word and forged a bond between the kingdoms of man and dragon after the great battle that fateful day. The dragons prospered and grew to an enormous number, but they were no longer feared by the people of the land. Instead of the Age of the Dragon Wars, the Age of Friendship with Dragons came about. Every witch and wizard who attended school was issued a baby dragon at the beginning of the term to nurture and bond. As time passed, the humans and the dragons became inseparable, and both lands thrived on the energy brought by the peace between them.

Alistair and I lived as happily as we could under the circumstances, and I have never looked back on any part of my life with regret. Sometimes I think upon those days in my father’s little shop and remember how badly I wanted an adventure. Never could I have imagined the amazing adventure my life has been. And now, as I am in my eighty-eighth year of life sitting at my desk to write this story for my grandchildren, remember those days with nothing but fondness.

When he was a child my son, Hudson, now King of Alstoania, once asked me when he was if I minded that father was a dragon. I told him that I thought it was the best thing
in the world. He looked at me strangely after I said this, so I explained further. “You see,” I said to him as he climbed onto my knee. “I was just a potter’s daughter that day that I ran into those woods and found your father. I felt like I was nothing of significance, and that all the great adventures in the world had already happened. But then, I found this glorious dragon, and though he was the biggest creature that ever graced this land, he made me feel like I was the most cherished person in the world. He made me feel like I could do, and be anything I wanted, even queen of this kingdom.” I, looked up as Alistair stood in the door of the nursery, bathed in the light of the moon. I said these last words without taking my eyes from him: “So yes, it is the best thing in the whole world that your father, King Alistair Hale, is a dragon because, if this one change never occurred, the whole world would have remained the same.”