

## CHAPTER ONE

**THE DOOR OF** the council chambers in the wizard Citadel of Alaris crashed open, echoing forcefully off the far wall. Battlemaster Allison Stenos was the first out of her seat. Her dark hair bounced at the nape of her neck as she sprinted forward, sword in hand, her grey eyes scanning everything between the council table and the thick double doors.

“Careful, Alli.” Roland Tyre stood from the commanding end of the long table. At barely eighteen—two years older than Alli—he was a level four wizard and had been High Wizard of the Citadel for almost a year now. He held a reputation as the most powerful wizard in Alaris, and maybe all the kingdoms of the western continent, a point he was always quick to point out.

Sliding to a battle-ready position, Alli glared at the stranger who now pushed the guard into the room. It was not someone she had seen before. His face was dusty, brown, and white-bearded. He was at least ten inches taller than her five foot four inches, and his robes hung loosely on his thin body. His brown face had more wrinkles than she remembered ever seeing on someone before. Yet he carried himself with an air of power that instantly put Alli on high alert.

Holding up her sword with one hand and readying a spell with the other, she stood in front of the man, blocking him from the rest of the room and the other ten wizards.

“Who are you to barge into Rol—” she caught herself and tried not to blush at using Roland’s name so casually— “into the High Wizard’s council meeting?”

The man waved a bony hand out in front of him, and Alli found herself flung off to the side like a piece of parchment. She tried to hang on to her sword, but it clanged loudly on the marble floor when she hit. She lay there for a moment, stunned. Having been raised to a level-three wizard at fifteen years old and then named Battlemaster for the Citadel, Alli was one of the most powerful wizards in Alaris. Her skills already approached that of many level-four wizards—although there were few of them these days.

Embarrassment sank in, and with that, anger. Jumping up off the ground, she flung her arm out toward the man. A sizzle of fire raced toward him, but with another flick of his hand he brushed it away.

Not one to be bested, Alli ran at him full speed.

## The Golden Dragon excerpt

“Enough!” Roland’s voice filled the hall, and Alli skidded to a stop a few feet from the stranger.

Roland walked forward. Quite a bit taller than Alli, at eighteen his shoulders were still broadening. He pushed his chin-length blond hair out of his dark-rimmed eyes and moved his golden cape off one shoulder—allowing him full access to the bright golden sword at his side. As yet he had not pulled it from the scabbard, but Alli knew he could do so in the blink of an eye.

Having been raised as a counselor wizard, Roland had nevertheless proclaimed himself a man of all the magic disciplines—counselor, battle, and scholar. Those outside of Alaris might refer to them as disciplines of the heart, earth, and mind, but Alaris had been lost to the outside world behind a magical barrier for 150 years; that is until the previous year.

“And who might you be, my good wizard?” Roland asked with a small smile and then a wink at Alli. “My Battlemaster is not used to being bested.”

Alli ground her teeth, and Roland shook his head at her before she could open her mouth to retort. She would have words for him later on the subject. The man thought too much of himself and didn’t take enough things seriously.

The stranger stood still and gazed around the room, then returned his attention back to Roland. “I was searching for the Dragon King.” It was clear that he thought that Roland, at his age, couldn’t possibly be of any import.

Roland’s face darkened for a fraction of a second. Alli noticed the slight squint in his eyes before he resumed his normal, charming smile. Bakari, the Dragon King, was his best friend, but Roland never liked being second best in anything—and it was still a burr in his soul that he had made a hasty decision to swear fealty to the Dragon King upon becoming High Wizard. The title was an ancient one used to denote the head of the dragon riders—a group that came to establish peace during times of great need.

“The Dragon King is not here at present,” Roland said, as if the two intruders had politely asked for entry. “Battlemaster Alli is one of his dragon riders. Is there a message we can take to him?”

Alli smiled inside at the thought of being an actual dragon rider as she was now. Until a year ago, she hadn’t thought it possible. Bakari, the Dragon King, had touched the dragon orb last

## The Golden Dragon excerpt

year, and the first dragon in 150 years had come forward—along with the disappearing barrier that had kept them separated from the rest of the world during that same time.

The stranger examined Alli. Through all the whiskers on his face it was hard to tell what he was thinking. Finally he peered back over his shoulder to a woman. “This is one of their dragon riders?” He smirked. “You lost your dragon to the likes of this young girl?”

“I’m not a young girl.” Alli tightened her fists. “And I didn’t take anyone’s dragon. Miriel was given to me by the Dragon King.”

Roland held his arm out between Alli and the stranger. She pushed his hand out of the way and heard a gasp from the council chambers behind her. Chairs scooted out, and a few of the other wizards walked up behind Roland. The stranger hardly seemed to notice.

Alli turned to Roland. “I don’t know how this man got past our guard—” She gave a look to the door, and the guards turned their attention elsewhere and tried to slink away. “But he insults a dragon rider and the High Wizard of the Citadel with his condescending tones and rude entrance.”

Roland stood silent as she let out her tirade. He let go a long sigh, then gave Alli a small wink. Alli stopped herself from growling at the insufferable boy. *I don’t know why I was feeling sorry for him being so tired.* He thought this was all a game—that everything was just fun and games.

Roland turned his head slowly back to the stranger and stood in silence for a moment.

The person behind the stranger had come to his side. She was in her mid-twenties, with flowing brown hair, tanned skin, and height—well, everyone was tall to Alli. The woman had a blaring scowl on her reasonably attractive face. A thick, white fur cloak—a little warm for the late autumn weather—hung around her shoulders.

Alli glanced from Roland, to the wizard, and back again. What was Roland waiting for?

Alli only had a moment’s warning—she knew Roland’s face when he drew upon his magic, but the newcomer did not. With only a slight tilt of his head, Roland’s magic threw the wizard back up against the doorframe. The other wizards in the room gasped.

“High Wizard,” one of the older council members, Eryck, said as he left his chair. “Is this necessary?”

## The Golden Dragon excerpt

Roland paid him little attention, his focus on the stranger. Alli bit her lip to keep from smiling. The stranger struggled for a moment, but Roland waved his hand in a circle and the man ended up tied in cords of air, only his mouth able to move.

His companion flung out her own hands to throw a fireball toward Roland and Alli, but Roland brought up a shield of his own—made out of thin air—and Alli jumped high up into the air and kicked the woman in the shoulders, taking her to the ground. In the next instant Alli stood over her, just daring the woman to move. The woman growled and put up her hands in surrender.

The wizard continued to struggle for a moment with wide eyes, then finally relented.

The rest of the council now stood behind Roland. Roland stood directly in front of the stranger, his eyes only an inch or so lower than the stranger's own, and spread his hands out to the side.

“Now, everyone knows I'm always up for a little fun and all,” Roland said, “but, sir, your actions are downright rude. Suppose you tell me who you are and why you busted into *my* council meeting.”

Alli moved back to Roland's side, and the woman slowly stood up and moved over next to the stranger. “Can you at least free him first?” she spat.

Roland put his finger on his chin as if thinking, then offered a smile. “No. I don't trust him.” He turned back to the stranger. “Talk.”

The stranger glanced at the woman out of the corner of his eye, then let out a long sigh. “High Wizard, you are more powerful than we were led to believe, given your age and experience.”

“I get that a lot.” Roland chuckled.

Alli rolled her eyes at him and nudged him with her elbow. Would he ever grow up and take things seriously?

He turned to her and held up his hands. “What?”

She glared at him again. The man infuriated her to no end sometimes. It was a good thing she had asked to stay at the Citadel when she was named a dragon rider. Someone had to watch after him.

Still holding his hands out to his side, his golden cloak draping across one arm, Roland smiled and said with a perfect mix of arrogance and fact. “I *am* magic.”