

THE ALCHEMIST SAGA:
SUBVERSION

LAURA ANDER

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“YOU ARE AN ALCHEMIST; MAKE GOLD OF THAT.”

-WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE LIFE OF TIMON OF ATHENS* (TIMON
AT V, I)

ALCHEMY:

A medieval form of chemistry that focuses on the transformation of base metals into gold. This transformation is based both on specific astrological alignments and on inward transformation of man's soul. The metals are "perfected" into gold through the use of a Philosopher's Stone, a mysterious, ethereal creation that is formed from *prima materia* (first matter.) Upon further practice and transformations, the Elixir of Life may be achieved. This Elixir is a liquid that, upon being consumed, grants alchemists the gift of immortality.

PROLOGUE

THE PRISONER SPAT AT SERAPH.

"I hope you choke on your sour cream," he said.

The three guards in the room growled in outrage at the prisoner's open disrespect.

"Peace." Seraph raised one hand in dismissal. He kept the other hand on the giant plastic spoon he was using to finish off an oversized bowl of sour cream. He raised an eyebrow at the prisoner and deliberately smiled at him. "Thank you," Seraph said, politely nodding in his direction.

"For what?" Arrus grumbled in annoyance. The younger, middle-aged man stood next to Seraph, waves of fury radiating from him and a forever angry expression that could freeze even water. The block of stone that sufficed as his face matched well with the overly polished suit and tie, and his quick tongue never failed to find nasty words for anyone.

Seraph shot him a look. "For his kind wishes," he replied slowly. Seraph rubbed a napkin against his face and threw the empty bowl of sour cream into the trash. "At least those words were sincere . . . a striking contrast from your earlier actions, Tony. Tell me again why you conspired against me?"

Seraph stood from behind the colossal mahogany desk and crossed the room in three quick strides, choosing to lean against the side of one of the many bookcases in his magnificent library. This particular bookcase was situated neatly between the western entrance to the library and the largest fireplace in the entire kingdom.

He looked briefly at the extravagant oil painting that had been carefully hung above the fireplace centuries ago. The flames cast his face in shadows, but

it was impossible to miss the pain in his eyes when his gaze met that of the woman in the painting.

Silence followed Seraph's question. The fire sizzled softly, a few sparks sneaking past the grate and jumping onto the hearth where they hissed once more before meeting their imminent, inescapable deaths. It was the only fireplace in the entire castle that had never died out; it was eternally burning.

Without warning, Seraph turned sharply and roared, "Answer me!"

Tony didn't even flinch. He adjusted his posture and looked squarely into Seraph's immortal, all-knowing gray eyes. "You were never meant to live forever."

Another long moment of silence followed that assertion.

Arrus's frown deepened. Seraph readjusted his dark green vest, picking at nonexistent lint, seemingly deeply concerned with his appearance. Of course, it was all just an act. Seraph was not the type to be distracted.

Finally, it was Drogo, the only other person in the room aside from the voiceless guards, who broke the air of stillness. "We are alchemists, Tony," he murmured softly. "We are all meant to achieve immortality at one point or another. What are you, if not one of us?"

Tony narrowed his eyes and looked directly at Drogo, an air of unmistakable defiance resonating throughout the library.

Seraph sighed heavily. "I do not care why you tried to kill me, Tony. I just—"

"Who helped you?" Arrus rudely cut him off. "You clearly could not have orchestrated that assassination attempt on your own. You are far too daft." Bluntness was another of Arrus's many wonderful traits that had gained him so many friends over the years.

Once again, several moments of deadening quiet thudded through the room.

"Oh, for the love of . . ." Drogo had had enough. He gestured to the guards. "Please take him away. I am bored. Lock him up in a dungeon where he can have a real conversation with the cobblestone."

The three guards grabbed the prisoner with overt force, securing the heavy cast iron chains once again over his arms and legs. Gruffly, they pulled Tony upright and began the long, maze-like journey of dragging him through the entire castle.

One long corridor would lead to another, and another, and only after descending three flights of rocky, unstable stairs would they arrive on the castle's dungeon level. Tony would be trapped down there forever, a kind alternative to utilizing the guillotine that Seraph had stolen during the French Revolution.

"Someone close to you will betray you." The words were barely audible over the thunderous echoes of cast iron being dragged atop cobblestone flooring.

"I do not want to hear your prophecies. I have messengers for that!" Drogo shouted after them. The door thudded shut with a deafening sense of finality. Quiet oozed through the room, and no one spoke for a few minutes.

"I would honestly be in favor of bringing back beheadings," Arrus announced to no one in particular.

"Oh, shut up, Arrus," Drogo spoke with a snarl. His hatred of Arrus was no secret.

"We are not savages," Seraph replied gently a moment later.

Arrus stared at both of them in disbelief. "Well, you do not think he has a point, do you? About not living forever?"

Drogo rolled his eyes and stormed out of the room.

"Do you?" Arrus inquired again, more loudly this time.

The door slammed shut once more. Seraph walked back to his desk and hurriedly gathered the loose papers from it, then stuffed them quickly into a briefcase. He answered Arrus's unspoken question, but didn't speak a single word more than necessary. "I am going to Transylvania for a while, Arrus. I must speak with Sebastian. Take over while I am away."

"But . . . you cannot leave, Seraph. You were here earlier when Cyr stopped by. We have visitors coming. New alchemists."

Seraph barely acknowledged the concern. He finished his packing and dumped the briefcase into a larger carrier case, throwing the entire bag over his shoulder.

"Well. You are here, are you not? Why not go put that charming personality to good use for a change?" He glanced around the room one last time, seemingly nodding off an elfin checklist to himself. Apparently satisfied, he marched out of the room without further comment.

Arrus was left alone with his favorite scowl until a soft meow broke his defocused irritation. An overly lofty feline wandered over to the fireplace and took her usual spot in front of it, curling up on the shaggy rug and soaking in the fire's warmth. Her golden-tan fur was briefly spotted with black specks, and she had impossibly long whiskers.

She yawned and glanced at Arrus. The cat's name was Grizzly. Seraph had chosen the most ferocious name in existence for such an innocent, cute face. The cat probably had better manners than anyone in the castle, and she radiated an air of elegance that no human could ever hope to imitate.

"Well, do not just sit there, you idiot feline. Go greet them before something eats them."

Grizzly hissed at the word "idiot," but lazily dismissed the insult a moment later. She set her head down and settled in for a nap, choosing to ignore the rude company.

"Oh . . . fine." Arrus exhaled loudly. "I will go do it," he mumbled.

CHAPTER ONE

RAGNFRID-TARON WAS A MESS THAT YEAR.

Or, at least *that part* of Ragnfrid-Taron was a disaster.

The terrain looked as though it had been victim of multiple fires, and my God did the place reek of death. And, as I'd soon find out, the people were quite damaged too. Which, I supposed, would come as little surprise since I could practically taste the wrath in the air anyway.

There must have been some damn pissed off people who had roamed through here over the course of the centuries. It was like all the negative energy had seeped deep into the ground, and the ground had soaked it all up like a half-dead cactus or a bloodthirsty parasite. The air wanted to strangle me with its fury and eat me whole.

What the hell was I doing here?

Well, believe it or not, I was actually here on a quest to seek help.

You see, my name was Aspen Pacific, and my younger sister Ragan and I were alchemists. I liked to think of us as medieval chemists living in the modern world . . . because, well, that was basically the most accurate description of what we were all about.

The goal of alchemy was to transmute basic, non-gold elements into gold through a process of "perfecting" the elements.

Yes, that sounded like a bizarre and completely impossible objective, but believe me, it was totally attainable.

We looked at astrological alignments to help us with the transformation, and we also tried to evolve ourselves. As we grew and changed, everything around us changed also. We didn't see things the same way anymore, and those things didn't see us the same way either.

If we were able to change in the right kind of way, we could make gold out of anything. Alchemists spent their whole lives seeking to evolve themselves so they could evolve elements into gold.

But what did gold have to do with this unwelcoming land?

Well, after our Mom passed, we moved in with our distant, older cousins Liam and Vachel. Her name was really Rachel, but she insisted on that unique “v” sound, so everyone just called her Vachel. They didn’t practice alchemy, but they were family and knew that our mother would have wanted us to continue her rituals, so they graciously took us in.

But something changed a few years ago. They became paranoid, sickly paranoid. They were suspicious of everything, mistrusted everyone, and they became obsessed with safeguarding and shielding themselves from purportedly imaginary dangers that no one could see.

Suddenly it became absolutely vital that we move out.

I could still hear Vachel’s words echoing in my head. *Aspen, you are going places, she had said. But we can’t go with you. Those places are not for us. We’ll always be here for you, but Liam and I can’t help you anymore. You need to leave.*

She mentioned the existence of these unclear dangers that had scared her into extreme paranoia, but she left the entire thing shrouded in mystery.

I could only imagine that it was a danger linked directly to the practice of alchemy, and she didn’t want to be exposed to it in any way, even if it meant having to send her only family away. I couldn’t really blame her, but the whole thing was still frustrating and frightening.

She did help us though, and for that I would always be grateful. She had funded our move to California and set us up in our own apartment.

Meanwhile, Liam had dug up some old journal that once belonged to our Mom. The journal had created more questions than it helped answer, but still it gave us a direction to pursue. It made mentions of a faraway land known as Ragnfrid-Taron, and it repeatedly referred to an immortal and all-powerful alchemist known simply as Seraph.

While the journal didn’t explain much past that, it did give fairly explicit directions for how to get to Ragnfrid-Taron.

According to Mom the world of Ragnfrid-Taron was exactly parallel to the old world that was so commonly known to us all. Many hidden portals connected the “real” world to this one, so it wasn’t particularly a challenge to get here.

Once in Ragnfrid-Taron, however, the journal remained enigmatically silent on how to find Seraph and his “enchanted” castle.

My sister and I had spent a few weeks every year for the past three years searching this world of alchemists in hope of finding answers. Every year we tried a different portal, and every year the entrance we chose proved wrong.

I honestly had no idea how to get to Seraph’s castle, but it was becoming increasingly important that we find it. Dangers that I didn’t even fully

understand were creeping up on us, and all I knew was that Seraph could help. If with nothing else, he could at least explain what the heck was truly happening.

I was starting to grow impatient and infuriated with this place, though. It looked like an ex-war zone, but the potential for beauty was still there. What a pity.

"At least there are no corpses," my sister whispered as we climbed the side of a muddy hill sprinkled with unstable boulders.

Yeah. None that we could see anyway. I didn't doubt that something was rotting beneath our feet, though.

A loud hiss sounded from our left, and I instinctively jerked up to see what it was. The movement, however, irritated the boulder upon which I was half-balancing, and I lost my footing.

"Aspen, watch out!" Ragan shouted. She reached over and grabbed my hand, more or less steadying me. The rock continued to shift beneath me, and my left shoulder was thrown into a muddy cavity between two other rocks.

"Urghhh," I groaned. That was painful. With Ragan's iron-grip clutching my right hand, I managed to pull my left arm out of the hole and clawed my way up the rest of the hill.

"How gauche." Ragan snickered quietly when we finally made it to the top of the hill.

"Thanks, Sis." I grinned at her and stuck out my tongue.

I glanced back to the left, still trying to find the source of that hissing sound. There was nothing and nobody to hold accountable for it. Perhaps a trick of the wind had caused it.

I straightened my back and took in our new elevation. I had hoped that higher ground would serve helpful, but I was quickly disappointed.

Crap.

There was absolutely nothing for miles.

I strained my eyes and slowly circled in place. The cold and fierce world of Ragnfrid-Taron stared back. Barren ground, sick and diseased vegetation, and a few invulnerable trees glared at me from all directions. The eerie silence was broken with an occasional whistle of wind and a sporadic angry hiss or growl from an unknown source. There were no people and no creatures in sight. There certainly was no sign of the legendary Seraph or his indestructible castle.

Ragan had crouched down on the earth near some sad-looking shrubbery and had begun picking the dirt from her nails, seemingly calm and immune to the Draconian milieu. She didn't comment, but I knew she was waiting for me to make a decision about which way to proceed.

It was times like these that I missed our other home, our San Francisco. Truthfully, the run-down apartment waiting for Ragan and me wasn't much to miss, but it still held good memories.

Unfortunately, it didn't matter.

Ragnfrid-Taron was where people like us belonged. Vachel and Liam had made that clear. That restless and sick feeling that had formed in my stomach years ago was starting to spark up again.

Every minute we spent here felt like wasted time. We needed to find Seraph and the castle, but it was impossible to locate anything in this realm without a better map. Mom's journal certainly didn't serve as an assist. Not to me, at least.

It didn't help that Vachel and Liam had contaminated me with their undying fear. Those dangers they had mentioned had to be serious. Ragan and I hadn't seen anything yet, but unseen perils were always the worst and most deadly kind of threat. We didn't know what to fear, and ignorance could kill.

The wind shifted in that moment, and I shuddered as an icy mist rolled across the lands. The weather had always been crazy here. One minute it would be sunny and welcoming, and the next a chilly fog would seep through, decreasing visibility immensely. The climate could be described as unpredictable at best.

Shit.

I might as well just toss a coin and make a decision that way. I was just about to open my mouth to admit defeat when something cawed angrily above us.

I snapped my head up and instinctively raised my arms, prepared to fight off whatever it was. A hiss sounded loudly from the creature, but it didn't seem so irate this time. I lowered my arms slightly and met its gaze.

It looked like . . . Wait, was that . . . a dragon? Its majestic wings cut through the sky, and its skin was a model of reptilian armor. The creature met my gaze with a defiant, but curious stare.

"Who are you?" I heard Ragan ask softly.

The question must have startled the dragon, for its eyes immediately darted away from me. In that moment I noticed a hint of vibrant blue color radiating from the slits in his eyes. It was a strange contrast to the ugly stone color that dominated his face.

The creature vanished as suddenly as it had come, rushing toward a distant mountainous region in the far right of the horizon.

"That was a gargoyle," I realized, squinting after it. If that was a gargoyle . . . Oh my God . . .

"Ragan! Ragan, get up. I know which way we need to go." I yanked at her shoulder and practically broke out in a sprint toward the mountains and after the mythical creature.

My sprinting rampage was short-lived.

We had managed to conquer about two miles of distance before I keeled over from exhaustion.

Cardio had never been my strong suit, and I desperately needed to take a break. Ragan, too, was struggling. She panted loudly beside me, plopping onto the ground to recover.

My feet were screaming in pain, and my shoulder was still aching from earlier.

Too bad it wasn't Thanksgiving right now because I finally had an answer for that age-old question of, "Well, Aspen, what are you thankful for?"

I would happily respond that I was grateful for the fact that I had insisted on traveling light this time around. So light, in fact, that Ragan and I hadn't brought any bags whatsoever. We used to carry mini suitcases around this realm, all in naïve hope that we would find Seraph's castle, and like a happy family from a poorly scripted TV show, move right on in.

No. Not this time.

I was exhausted enough just hiking without much pause through this ridiculously high elevation. Bags of clothes and accessories would just weigh us down. The only thing I had to worry about lugging around was a water bottle and some granola bars so we wouldn't perish during this weeklong survival-of-the-fittest style excursion.

Still, our food and water supply was about as minimalist as you could get. My stomach had been rumbling practically nonstop for the last hour, but I refused to give in to the hunger pangs. It was of paramount importance that we ration as much as we possibly could. There were no guarantees for how long this would take.

I tried not to complain, though. Despite having plenty of opportunity, Ragan hadn't grumbled or protested at all since we'd been here. If she could keep the negative thoughts bottled inside, so could I.

I was doing a terrible job playing the older, wiser sister who supposedly knew all. Yet, she didn't criticize me, and that was one of my favorite things about my little sister. I could do something completely stupid, and she would still look for the positive and find a way to be supportive.

The gargoyle had left no signs of its existence in its wake, so we were pretty much just running blind.

I had to trust that the creature had been real and not just a figment of my desiccating mind and body. How cruel to think that it might have all been just some sad creation intended to add imaginary sprinkles of hope into this land of death.

Fortunately, Ragan had seen it, too, so I doubted that it had just been a hallucination. The gargoyle had to be real.

"Ahmagawddd." I let out a small groan as we pressed onward, refusing to give up. This grueling journey to nowhere was quickly starting to resemble a trip to hell.

About three hours had passed since we had last seen the gargoyle, but I was so exhausted that it could have easily been three days. Honestly, I wouldn't have known the difference. Everything was slipping together into a giant haze in my mind.

We had to take a break.

Ragan helpfully handed me a water bottle and one of the granola bars. We wolfed down the protein in just a few bites, thankful for the little nourishment we could get. I drank more of the water than I should have, but my body was dangerously dehydrated.

The feeling of lightheadedness slowly disappeared as I regained some of my lost energy. I looked around us with new eyes, happily realizing that we had actually made some progress. We were in a totally new area.

Most of the terrain leading toward the mountains thus far had been relatively flat. There were a couple of hills that we had needed to surmount, but overall, it had been doable. We had finally made it to the "horizon."

The mountains we'd seen from afar were now within a few yards of our reach, but they looked different up close. I didn't think either of us had expected that.

The terrain changed abruptly and drastically. The mountains seemed to sprout out of the ground with unnatural suddenness. Seriously, it was like an impenetrable wall of dirt.

"This isn't weird at all," I had snidely remarked upon seeing the mountains up close. This type of "sudden mountain" would only exist in a place like Ragnfrid-Taron.

Ragan had logically tried to suggest that we find a way around it, but I knew that wasn't smart. Perhaps it was the rational and reasonable way of thinking, but it wasn't a smart idea.

The gargoyles were our way to Seraph's castle. I knew it had to be. Gargoyles didn't just randomly roam around. Well, I didn't really know. Maybe they did. I just assumed that they lived on the rooftop edges of castles.

Namely, I assumed they perched themselves on top of Seraph's castle.

Going around the mountains would not only take way too much time, but we wouldn't be able to find our way back to this particular route. We had to find a way through the mountain.

Ragan didn't comment on my ridiculous proposition of finding a way through the dirt wall. She simply helped me examine the strangeness of it and helped brainstorm bright ideas on what to do next. We spent a long while walking alongside of it, stupefied by the mountain.

"It actually looks just like a poorly constructed drywall." Ragan ran her right hand across a short length of the base of the mountain and frowned. She turned back to me with a puzzled look. "It's as if someone stood right here many years ago and proclaimed, 'Let's build a mountain!'"

Huh. She had a point.

The base unquestionably resembled drywall, but upon a crane of the neck, I could tell that higher up the mountain returned to the expected appearance of elevated foothills and peaks. It was a mountain, but not in its entirety. It was a hybrid mountain.

"If someone built it," I trailed off as I continued to stare at the wall in wonderment, still pondering a solution, "then . . . I bet it can be taken apart."

"You're not seriously suggesting that we remove the mountain, are you?" Ragan sounded absolutely outraged, and I didn't miss the slight eye roll.

"No, not at all." I laughed nervously. "That would be stupid, right?"

Ragan just stared at me in silence for a long moment. Again, she didn't comment, but I could tell she was thinking exactly what I had just asked.

"No, Ragan," I tried again. "I'm just saying . . . look at it." I gestured at the mountain unnecessarily. That was all we were focused on anyway. "This is man-made. It's a game, a trick of some sort. There's a way to take it apart without actually becoming an old philosopher and," I deepened my voice and made air quotes, "becoming a person who literally moves a mountain."

My sister sighed and glanced back at the wall. "So . . . you're saying that it's like a trap door? If we can find the entrance, we'll actually be on the mountain?"

I nodded. Exactly.

"We need to prove to it that we're alchemists," I muttered to myself.

"How about the necklaces?" Ragan asked.

All alchemists wore a thin chain, locket-style necklace that twisted open and had just enough room for a few drops of liquid gold.

We had never before been able to use the liquid gold for anything in particular, though I had heard rumors that well-practiced alchemists could even turn themselves into liquid gold and use it as a means of transport. That was something that would have been incredibly helpful right now.

I took off my necklace and twisted it around my hand a couple of times until it was firmly secured in my palm. I then started the ludicrous process of scraping the chain alongside the drywall.

Nothing happened.

"Keep trying," Ragan whispered.

I did, and still nothing happened.

"Pop the necklace open," Ragan advised.

That was a good idea, I realized. I should have just started with that. I twisted the necklace open and flicked the three drops of liquid gold at the wall.

Now, *that* got a response.

Directly in front of us the wall parted in three. I secretly wondered if that had anything to do with the three specks of liquid gold or if it was just the design.

Part of the mountain lifted a few feet, another part cascaded to the left, and the final part jumped out to the right. An intimidating dark hole stared back at us.

"Alright, let's go!" Ragan seemed uncharacteristically eager to jump into the unknown, but I didn't dare hesitate either.

It was like a really bad Narnia moment. The walls closed behind us and momentarily left us in utter darkness. Fortunately, that awkward *oh shit* moment when we couldn't see anything did not last very long.

Wow.

We had magically and mysteriously found our way to a strange clearing high in the side of the mountains. Sadly, the clearing didn't feature rolling meadow hills and grasses. Instead, it was a repulsive and abhorrent swamp. Lovely.

"Light of Alessandra forever reigns." Ragan had noticed a boulder-sized stone in the middle of the swamp and read the inscription aloud.

I crinkled my nose. Who was Alessandra? And who the hell thought it would be a good idea to put a hunk of etched stone in the middle of freaking nowhere? And why was I so unobservant that I had failed to notice the huge words on a rock that was pretty much directly in front of us?

I rolled my eyes in frustration, feeling myself approach a breaking point. We were getting nowhere!

"I swear," I started my rant. "This place is so deserted. We've never seen any people in Ragnfrid-Taron. It's just a bunch of trees . . . and weeds . . . and rocks . . ." I picked up a jagged rock for emphasis.

As if feeling left out, Ragnfrid-Taron's notoriously cruel weather chose to change. The wind shifted, and a blast of almost arctic airstream breezed through the forested side of the mountain.

"And, of course, the cruel weather . . ." I added as an after-thought.

"Aspen!" Ragan tried to get my attention, but I didn't even hear her speak. Her voice melted away into the wind as if it were just one of the land's many strange sounds. I was too focused on my own exasperated feelings of disappointment and irritation to acknowledge anything else.

"You would think that by now we would have met someone here, right? We've been here for weeks. Well, not consecutive weeks, obviously," I clarified my ramblings. "But that gargoyle was the first living thing we've seen here in years."

I took a deep breath of the cold, fresh air and let out a crushed sigh.

"Aspen." Ragan tried again to break my miniature rant. I was so self-absorbed with my dissatisfactions that I didn't even notice that her voice now sounded stressed.

"Seriously," I continued obliviously, "I guess that's a good thing, though. We could meet evil here. Then what? How would we fight it off? We have no tools! That stupid castle better be near or—"

Ragan had had enough of my inattentiveness. She grabbed my wrist and whirled me a little sideways until we were facing each other.

"What?" I growled more loudly than I had intended. My anger wasn't directed at Ragan, but my overwhelming annoyance with the world could no longer be contained. I was in a snappy mood.

She didn't answer me immediately, so I had a moment to calm down and take in the atmosphere. I quickly recognized the shift in her temperament and in her voice. My little sister both looked nervous and scared.

I passed the jagged rock to my other hand and met her panicked eyes.

"What is it?" I asked urgently.

The wind breezed around us somewhat mellifluously. I didn't take that as a good thing. I would have almost preferred blatant howling to this creepy exorcist-style melodic humming in the wind currents. It made me feel like we were about to get chopped into pieces.

"We're not alone," she whispered shakily. The words sounded comically ominous, and for a second I really thought she was just messing with me. But, I knew Ragan. This wasn't funny, and she certainly wasn't joking.

She swallowed visibly as she raised her right index finger slowly and pointed toward the far left side of the swamp.

An expressionless middle-aged man stared at us from across the quagmire. He was dressed sharply, like he was on his way to an important interview. Not in any way did he look as though he belonged on the side of this mountain. He honestly couldn't have appeared more out of place if he had tried.

Two gargoyles sat like guard dogs on either side of him, their stony eyes boring into ours in a state of cathexis. One of them must have been our guide from earlier. I couldn't be sure which one. They looked like twins.

"I am Arrus." The old man spoke to us like he already knew who we were, though obviously he didn't. He couldn't. He didn't raise his voice, but the words carried easily across the swamp, and we had no trouble hearing him. "I am here to help you get to Seraph."

Thank God.

"How do you know who we are?" Ragan called out in confusion.

The man who referred to himself as Arrus didn't even bother to acknowledge that he'd been spoken to; he simply turned on his heel and motioned for us to follow him and the gargoyles.

"Tell me your names and ages," he demanded when we finally caught up to him.

I couldn't believe this guy. He had the rudest demeanor I'd seen in a long time. Still, he was here to help us, so I supposed he couldn't be heart-deep awful.

"Aspen Pacific." I pointed to myself. "I'm sixteen."

"I'm Ragan, and I'm ten."

"Ragan what?"

My sister looked at him with hesitation. She didn't want to be disrespectful to someone who clearly held an authority-figure status, but I could tell she found the question pretty dim-witted. That was a striking difference between us. I didn't try to hold back my opinions; Ragan, on the other hand, liked to maintain a polite front in conversations. I could tell that I was starting to rub off on her, though.

"Same last name." She cleared her throat. "We're sisters."

Arrus didn't look impressed. In fact, he didn't look like he'd ever experienced any emotion other than displeasure. The rock-solid frown stayed permanently fixed on his face, alienating others.

"I must warn you . . ." he spoke icily. "I am not much of a people-person."

“How come?” I conversationally asked in a purposefully overly chipper tone. I wanted to see how quickly I could annoy the angriest person in the world.

“I dislike socializing.” His voice was like acid.

Huh. Pretty fast, evidently. Although, to be completely fair, he gave off the impression of being annoyed from the very start.

We continued along a narrow path in the side of the mountain for a few more miles until abruptly Arrus came to a halt. “We must ride now.”

“Ride? Ride what?” I asked stupidly.

I could easily be crowned the queen of asking dumb questions. I used to be more self-conscious about being the one in the room to ask the dumb question, but over time that insecurity faded away to nothingness.

After all, was I really the dumb one for not understanding? The person explaining should be designated as dumb for leaving ambiguity in his explanation. *There’s no such thing as a stupid question; there are only stupid teachers.*

He pointed at the gargoyles. “These gargoyles belong to me, and they will take us to the castle.”

At this point I knew more about the gargoyles than I did about our guide, and I could honestly say I liked the gargoyles’ company better than Arrus’s.

“Oh, the gargoyles are yours? I can see the resemblance,” I blurted out without thinking. The words just escaped. Oops.

Ragan gave me a shocked look, like she couldn’t believe that I had had the nerve to say something so crass, but come on. Like anyone could really argue. The stony looks of the dragons were just about identical to the stony expression of Arrus. I didn’t think that man had ever smiled in his life anyway.

Much to my surprise, Arrus didn’t comment.

“I have a question,” Ragan bravely spoke up as we climbed atop one of the gargoyles. Its skin wasn’t as rough as I had expected.

“What is it?” Arrus had mounted his gargoyle and was impatiently waiting for us to figure out what the hell we were doing with the second gargoyle.

The creature obediently lowered its body closer to the ground so we could mount with greater ease, but the task was still harder than it appeared.

“I like to ask this question whenever I meet someone new. It helps me understand their character.” Ragan decided to preface the absurd question that was about to ensue instead of just jumping right into it. As someone who knew what that question would be, I deemed that appropriate.

Ragan asked, “Imagine that you’re falling off a cliff and plummeting to your certain death. Would you rather be plunging down headfirst so that you know when exactly you’ll die, or would you rather be facing the sky, blissfully unaware?”

I snorted in a meager attempt to choke off my laughter and maintain a neutral expression.

Yeah, I was definitely rubbing off on her. I wanted to think of it as a good thing, but I wasn't so sure I should. It made for hilarity, though, so I wasn't about to stop her. Besides, let's face it. Arrus was an easy target.

He, predictably, declined to answer. Instead, he simply said, "Lovely. You must have been the Angel of Death in another life."

We finally found a way to settle on the back of the gargoyle, and Arrus didn't hesitate a moment longer. He rose high into the sky and gestured for us to follow. Fortunately for us, this required neither special knowledge nor skill.

Our gargoyle unquestioningly followed Arrus. They had a special bond, I supposed.

I waited until he and his gargoyle had completely turned away from us, and then I high-fived Ragan.

She grinned at me, and I couldn't help but laugh. Asking a total stranger how he wanted to die? What a priceless way to make and kill conversation in less than two minutes.

Arrus didn't say another word to us for the next year that we knew him. It was as though we were invisible to him, just pests wandering about, totally unworthy of mention or acknowledgment.

Not much of a people-person, huh? Well, we didn't exactly shine as role models for socializing either, but still. That may well deserve an award for biggest understatement.

Thoughts of Arrus temporarily moved to the back of my mind as our gargoyle picked up speed and gained elevation.

The flight experience was beyond cool. We rose to stunning heights, overlooking the lands of Ragnfrid-Taron from an entirely different perspective. From such great heights, the world seemed to have grown exponentially in magnitude. Stunning didn't even begin to cover it.

As we flew at this new altitude, I felt the wintry wind rip against my face. The icy breeze brought tears of irritation to my glazed-over eyes. If I had been cold in the swamp, I was utterly frozen in the sky.

The flight came to a close as suddenly as it had begun.

I caught sight of the medieval fortress just as we began our descent. We zoomed downward at what felt like a freefall on a rollercoaster. It was exhilaratingly epic.

The gargoyles dropped us off on the north side of the castle. There were neither marks nor compasses to denote the direction, but innately I always knew my bearings. *Like a compass, she will always find her way*, my mother used to say when I was younger.

The identical dragons left us alone with Arrus at the end of a lowered drawbridge and silently flew away toward the highest towers of the castle, probably resettling to their favorite perches atop the tower roofs.

I took the opportunity to take in what I could from where we stood. The first thing I noticed was the castle flag. It was a giant golden "A" against a solid, charcoal backdrop.

Light of Alessandra forever reigns.

The words that had held no meaning in the swamp water suddenly took on entirely new significance. Although no one immediately confirmed the connection for me, I already knew that the castle itself was frequently referred to simply by the name "Alessandra." I didn't find out why until much later, but at least the engraving had started to make sense.

Seraph's castle was extraordinary, to put mildly. However cheesy as it may sound, just one glimpse of the impressive fortress would take anyone's breath away.

Even the location was incredible.

I had previously been frustrated with my inability to find the castle, but now that I had seen its surroundings, I understood why it couldn't have been anywhere else. Any other place would have completely undermined its beauty.

Arrus whipped out a cell phone and crazily began poking at it.

Intense texting, I thought with a slight smirk.

I still couldn't get over how ridiculous Mr. Arrus looked. Well, it wasn't that he looked silly, really. It was just that his pressed suit and tie looked distinctly out of place at Alessandra.

The wind picked up again, and his tie slipped out of the pin that was strictly securing it to his dress shirt. It flew over his left shoulder. He pretended not to notice and continued to project an air of preoccupation with his phone.

How the hell did he even have service here? I sighed and took the opportunity to take in more of our surroundings.

The majestic kingdom found refuge deep within the towering, snow-tipped mountains of western Ragnfrid-Taron. A slight plateau broke the natural rocky and steep mountainous terrain. It was atop this general flattening of the land that the castle had been constructed.

Eternal waterfalls cascaded down the sides of several peaks and collectively fed into an epic moat that surrounded the castle in vigilant guard. The moat itself was deeper and wider than anything I could have imagined. I doubted anyone had ever fallen in and lived to tell about it. I felt like I myself might drown just by looking at it too long.

Two standardized, overly well-built drawbridges connected to the two main gatehouses, each of which was directly opposite the other. A few scattered rope bridges suspended from unidentifiable caverns in the mountains seemingly provided access to the castle as well.

However, the rope bridges paled terribly in comparison to the main drawbridges with regard to stability. Even the slightest shift in wind would likely upset the entire rope alignment and mechanism, inevitably throwing whatever or whoever into the treacherous moat below.

The sun was just starting to set, and its descent marked the beginnings of pretty purple and pink tones in the cloudless sky above. Snow on the highest peaks converted from pure white to soft crimson.

These gorgeous colors bounced off the rest of the mountainsides and lit up the walls of the castle, seemingly changing the gray-colored ashlar to a light, dusty amethyst color. The entire scene would last just a few moments, for within the hour the sun would set, and the kingdom would plunge into darkness.

Alessandra was indeed beautiful, and like a gem in a harsh world, its light would forever preside over all else.

Light of Alessandra forever reigns indeed, I thought, smiling to myself. I was so absorbed with my own thoughts that I had completely forgotten about my sister and the unfriendly company that had escorted us here.

A scratching sound jolted me from my distracted contemplations.

I turned around to find Arrus rubbing one of his formal and expensive-looking shoes against a rock in a useless attempt to scrape dirt from it.

Ragan caught my eye and mouthed a shocked *'what the hell is he doing?'* to me.

I pressed my lips together to suppress laughter and just shook my head at her. He was doing more damage than good to those poor shoes, but I was starting to get the feeling that Arrus was the type of person who carried mini Windex bottles and hand sanitizers in his pocket, always armed and ready to clean.

Arrus abruptly stopped his cleaning spree, put away the phone, and began a stomping stride across the drawbridge to the main gate.

"I think he's a little upset about his shoes," Ragan murmured to me as we rushed to keep up.

"I promise to buy him new ones the second he smiles," I responded amusedly.

Each echoing footstep on the drawbridge brought us closer, but it also made me realize that I hadn't even begun to grasp the true size of it all. Colossal didn't even begin to describe it.

The castle's walls were insanely thick and stretched far above our heads. The towers soared high up in the sky to insane extremes. When standing beside them on the ground level, I couldn't even see the tips of the towers, no matter how hard I craned my neck. It was intimidating, yet breathtaking.

There was something eerie about being surrounded by all of the ashlar and cobblestones that held the fortress together, but at the same time, it was a welcome relief to be in a medieval castle. There was something familiar about it all. Like maybe I was home. Crazy thought, but it was true.

We had reached the gatehouse of the northern side of Alessandra. As if by invisible hands that needed no instructions, the portcullis dropped down vertically behind us, sealing off the exit.

No way could it be automatic, but for a metal grate that was centuries old, it was surprisingly well oiled. I didn't know why, but the grate fascinated me, and I wanted to stay and examine it more closely.

Arrus, however, hadn't slowed his ridiculous stomp, and he proceeded to storm onward without pause.

The inner engineer in me would have to wait, and I made a mental note to revisit the grate mechanism later. It might come in handy one day.

The sun had finally decided to set for the day, and its departure cast the kingdom into shadows. I could see a few orange lights on the far side of one of the back towers, but other than that it seemed that no one saw the need to burn candles or light torches here.

I could barely see anything, and it was getting increasingly difficult to follow Arrus's swift pace.

I would remember nothing of the route he had taken to show us to our rooms, but I found solace in knowing that the burning lights meant that several other people resided here. Surely, not everyone would be as unsociable and unfriendly.

We climbed a flight of stairs, and Arrus suddenly came to a halt. He gestured haphazardly at two adjacent rooms and, seemingly pleased that he had fulfilled his duties as tour guide, stepped away into the darkness.

I squinted in the gloomy light, straining to make out figures and shapes in the dark. The only thing I noticed was that the doors didn't have doorknobs on them.

Great.

How were we supposed to get the rooms open? I reached out to see how the door closed with no knob, and I could feel a thick groove in the wood. The slight pressure from my hand was enough. The door swung open with a homey creak. No key required, apparently.

"Alright," I mumbled more to myself than anything; I was still examining the door. It didn't make any sense to me. Arrus would have known, but I guess he didn't feel like sharing. We would just figure it out ourselves eventually.

"Your call, Sis. Which room do you want?" I turned back to Ragan and waited for her decision.

She dropped her jaw in mock astonishment and covered her ears with the long sleeves of her oversized sweatshirt. "Oh, wow. So *that's* what noise sounds like! I'd practically forgotten with all that silent treatment." Ragan grinned jokingly at me.

I rolled my eyes and playfully jabbed at her shoulder. "That's so mean."

Ragan giggled. "I don't know where I could possibly be getting it from." Her voice was loaded with mischief.

"I don't know, dude. I think it might be your older sister. She's an awful influence on you." I stuck out my tongue at her.

She still hadn't given me an answer about the rooms, but I had a better suggestion. "Why don't we both just sleep in this room tonight? We can figure out which room has a better view tomorrow. You know, when we can actually see something."

Ragan walked boldly into the room and exclaimed in excitement, "Fireplace!"

I took that as my cue to give up on the door for the time being. It was impossible to determine anything in this darkness anyway.

Ragan had always been much more conscious of her surroundings than I ever was. I hadn't even noticed the fireplace in the room, even though I could clearly hear the soft crackling of the flames now that it had been brought to my attention. In my defense, the fireplace was oddly situated behind a wall, so it wasn't noticeable upon first glance into the room.

Nonetheless, the fire lit the left side of the room well enough to illuminate a large and rather comfortable looking bed.

Ragan sat in front of the fire, transfixed by it, but I opted for the bed instead. I crawled under the covers and tried to relax.

We were here, we were okay, and we'd figure everything else out tomorrow. The day's exhaustion washed over me, and I quickly drifted off.