I stood in the middle of the courtyard and stared at the sky. Windcrest Academy was a beautiful, gothic style castle. Walls surrounded me and towered high above. There were pillars on each corner with a different Windcrest dragon insignia carved into them, and the roofs came to high points that made the academy look massive. The building was a mixture of different shades of gray and black, and although it looked eerie from the outside, it was stunning.

My brown hair was in a braid and was loosened by the wind that whipped around me. My black riding leathers were tattered from the battles I had completed earlier today, and my body was exhausted.

I continued to look at the sky and completed my breathing exercises when someone cleared their throat behind me. I turned around and rolled my eyes at Mason Solace who was leaned against a pillar.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, Arya Adler,” Mason said.

Mason’s dark, curly hair had grown out too long and covered his green eyes. He wore his black riding leathers and above his collar bone he wore a blue dragon patch.

“You know I hate being interrupted when I’m meditating,” I said and turned back around.

Mason was the lead instructor of combat for my class but had also been my best friend since I was five. He was a couple of years older than me, but that didn’t matter when you grew up in an orphanage. I felt lucky when he was assigned as one of my instructors.

Every five years, 500 students were brought into the academy and separated into twenty classes for a competition. Each class would learn combat, war strategy, and medicine, and by the end of the year, the best student would get to be the queen’s captain of the guard.

Mason had helped me all year and was the main reason I made it this far. Out of the twenty-five students that started in my class, I was the only one left. We were at the final stage of the competition, and I knew the odds of me winning were slim to none.

“It’s almost time for the final battle,” Mason said.

I took a deep breath. “I can’t believe I’m in the final two.”

I had beat ten other students in one-on-one combat, and my final opponent was currently battling for the spot against me.

Mason walked up to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. “You deserve it, Arya.”

“Do you know who I’m up against?” I asked.

“Kage Whitlock is about to kill his final opponent,” he answered. “It will be him just like we thought.”

I dropped my head into my hands. Kage was the strongest person left in the competition, and he hated me. He had made it apparent throughout the year that he thought girls don’t belong in the guard. He had also killed forty-eight students this year during combat training.

I was much smaller than Kage. I was barely five feet tall and although I was muscular, it didn’t mean anything when the man I was up against was 250 pounds.

“He’s going to try and kill me,” I said.

Mason nodded. “He will try, but you will kill him first.”

I stepped back. “I’m not killing anybody to work for the queen. I don’t want to work for someone as corrupt as her.”

Mason’s eyes narrowed. “We have talked about this. You have no choice if you want to survive.”

I paced. “The queen is killing innocents in my homeland. I have no desire to win this battle and work for her. Kage is evil and the perfect person to be by her side.”

Mason shook his head. “You sound like a ridiculous child. Just take two seconds to think about what it would be like if Kage worked for the queen.”

Before I could say anything, a voice played over the intercom.

“Arya Adler, please report to the sparring room for the final battle.”

I walked toward the door and Mason followed. I didn’t have time to think about what Mason said about Kage. All I could think about was how I was probably about to die.

I walked through the double doors into the sparring room. There were over fifty sparring rings throughout the room, but the biggest was in the middle. Lights beamed down into the ring and a ward that restricted magic from entering. I walked to a corner and claimed it as mine.

Kage was on the other side of the ring with his combat instructor. He was sweaty, but there was no sign of injury from the other people he had battled.

“Remember, there’s no magic allowed in the final battle,” Mason said from beside me. “Which is why you see the ward surrounding the ring.”

I was born with the rarest magic in the world, and it allowed me to see other people’s power. If someone had magic in their bloodline, it showed in their eyes. Mason’s eyes glittered green, and Kage’s glittered silver. Wards sparkled blue and any object with a spell on it glittered yellow.

My mother and grandmother were the only other two people in the world who could see magic, which is why the queen forced me to join this competition in the first place.

“I don’t know if I can beat him without magic,” I whispered to Mason.

Mason grabbed my hand. “You can beat him without magic because he doesn’t have his powers either. He is strong, but you are faster and smarter than him.”

I shook my head. “I’m scared, Mason. I don’t want to kill him.”

“You will do what needs to be done in order to survive,” he said.

I nodded and walked toward the weapon rack that sat against the ring. No magic was allowed, but we were allowed our weapon of choice. Kage already had his sword in hand. It was huge and heavy and would hopefully slow him down. I grabbed four small daggers and sheathed two on my thighs and two on my ribs.

“Be quick and be smart,” Mason reminded me. “He gets sloppy after a while.”

I nodded and before I could step into the ring, Mason pulled me in for a hug. I wrapped my arms around his neck and for the first time all day relief filled me.

“You have to win,” he said. “I can’t do this without you.”

I smiled and let go of his neck. I stepped into the ring to stretch before the final battle started. The magic in my blood fizzled out and left my body, and the blue ward was gone. Kage stood outside the ring with his instructor and watched as I stretched. As they watched me, they laughed, and I rolled my eyes in response.

When I was done stretching, Kage stepped into the ring. With our magic gone I couldn’t see the glitter in his eyes. Without his magic his eyes looked pitch black and terrifying.

“So, it’s just me and you left?” Kage asked and walked toward me.

I checked to make sure my daggers were in place. “That’s why we’re both standing here.”

Kage stood so close that I could smell his breath. “I wish I could say I feel bad I have to kill you, but you never really belonged here in the first place.”

“Get into position,” the intercom said.

Kage backed into his corner, and I backed into mine. The ring was elevated, but there were no ropes keeping us inside. If we fell off the edge we got a thirty second break, but a ten-point deduction.

We weren’t supposed to kill each other. That wasn’t the goal of the academy, but Kage had been killing people from the moment he stepped inside. If I wanted to win, I was going to have to kill him. Without magic our healing abilities were gone, which meant we would only heal as fast as the average human.

As Kage stood across from me his smile grew. He was actually excited to kill me.

“Begin!” The intercom said.

Kage took the first step and walked in a circle in the ring. I followed and studied his body language for signs. He wore black shorts and a white tank top that allowed me to see the shift in his muscles before he attacked. He also wore a black ring on his right finger that I know would hurt if it made contact with my face.

“Cute ring,” I said and looked him over one last time.

Kage smirked. “Thanks, it was a gift from the queen.”

I circled until Kage flexed his arm and I prepared for the punch. He stepped and swung, but instead of hitting my throat he hit air and stumbled forward. I somersaulted to the other end of the ring where Kage had just been standing.

“No sword?” I asked and circled the ring again.

Kage took a step toward me. “I don’t need a sword to beat a girl.”

Before I could reply, Kage took another swing that landed and hit me in the ribs. Bone cracked and my body hit the floor with a bang that caused all the air from my lungs to escape. The strength I was hit with was unreal. No person could be strong enough to break my ribs with one punch, there’s no way I was that weak.

I looked up at Kage and watched as he gloated at the other end of the rink. He was so cocky that he didn’t even watch me in case I made a move. I caught my breath and unsheathed one of the daggers by my ribs. I stood quietly and winced from the pain in my side. As Kage turned to face me, I flicked my dagger at his arm, but he moved before it could land in the muscle. The dagger brushed his arm enough to leave a deep cut, but it didn’t harm him enough to keep him from lunging at me. He tried to throw a punch, but he was off-balance, which allowed me to land a blow on his injured arm. I staggered back and waited for him to grab his wound, but he didn’t, there was no blood.

Mason spoke behind me. “You need to use the daggers, Arya.”

I shook my head in protest because I knew that Mason wanted me to kill him. From across the ring, Kage smiled at me, and with no urgency, he walked toward me. I stepped forward to meet Kage in the middle, but a sharp pain in my ribs caused me to fall. I tried to get up, but gravity forced me down. I looked up and Kage stood over me, but before I could move, he kicked me in the ribs. I held myself in a ball until Kage stopped kicking. As I stood, Kage’s foot came right at my face, and all I could do was close my eyes in anticipation.

There was a crack from my nose, and I flew backward off the edge of the ring. I landed on the cold floor and couldn’t move. The magic started to fizzle under my skin and rushed back into my body since I was outside of the ward, which meant I had thirty seconds to heal as much as I could.

Mason sat me up on a chair and put a washcloth to my face.

“This isn’t going how I expected,” Mason said.

“Something is wrong,” I said. “He’s much stronger than I thought.”

I looked in the ring and watched Kage gloat to anyone who cared to listen. He talked to a girl on my side of the ring, and when he looked up at me, his eyes glittered silver. His eyes weren’t supposed to look like that when he was inside the ward. I tried not to show any emotion as I looked him over. The ring on his finger glittered the same way his eyes did.

“You only have fifteen more seconds,” Mason said.

“He has magic,” I whispered.

Mason raised his eyebrows. “You can’t have magic within the wards.”

“I’m telling you that his eyes are glittering and so is the ring that the queen gave him.”

Mason leaned closer to me and whispered. “You’re telling me the queen gave Kage a ring that allows him to access his magic in the wards?”

I nodded. “The queen knows I hate her. She doesn’t want me to work for her, she wants me dead.”

“Take your positions,” the intercom said.

I stood up and noticed that my magic had healed my nose and broken rib. I was still incredibly sore but could at least move faster. I stepped into the ring and prepared myself by taking deep breaths.

“Begin!” The intercom said.

I marched toward Kage and made a motion with my hand for him to come closer.

“I know what you’re doing, Kage,” I said.

Kage raised his eyebrows. “And what is it that you think I’m doing?”

I circled the ring once more. “I know the queen wants me dead, and I know you happily volunteered to kill me.”

Kage shrugged. “Maybe that’s true, or maybe I just want to be captain and help the queen destroy Laryndor.”

“I will not allow you to destroy my home,” I said sternly.

Kage laughed. “What are you going to do? You’d have to kill me, and we both know that you’re not capable.”

He was right. I would have to kill him and commit to working for the queen if I wanted to save Laryndor from the destruction. My people had been tortured enough and the only way I could help them would be from inside the castle. I had to kill Kage and be captain so I could destroy the queen’s plans. It would be the biggest risk of my life, but Laryndor was too important to me. It was worth killing Kage if it meant saving the thousands of lives in Laryndor.

I smiled and took a step to the left. “I’m capable of more than you think.”

Kage sprung toward me and threw his fist toward my face. I ducked and grabbed his arm. I pulled his arm behind his back, but he turned and used his other hand to push off of me. I backed up into a corner and grabbed the second dagger from my ribs and one from my thigh.

Kage winked and wiggled his fingers on his right hand. “You know those daggers won’t hurt me, Arya.”

I held the dagger loosely in my hand.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “But I can at least try.”

Kage shifted his weight to his left leg in preparation to pounce on me, but before he could take a step, I flung the dagger at his right hand. The throw was so quick that he didn’t have time to move before the dagger shattered the ring on his finger.

Kage looked down at the pieces of the ring that scattered the floor. He glanced up at me with wide eyes and his mouth agape.

I winked. “I have incredible aim.”

As he looked back down at his hand, I used the second dagger I held and flung it at the fatty part of his torso right above his hip. Kage screamed and ripped the dagger from his side, and blood oozed through his shirt. Kage stumbled and the magic he’d had vanished. His healing powers were gone, and I finally had a chance.

I grabbed my last dagger, and Kage unsheathed his sword and stalked toward me.

“I don’t need magic to kill you, bitch,” Kage whispered.

I darted to the left, so I was no longer trapped in the corner. “Clearly the queen thinks you do.”

Kage seethed and raised his sword so high that I easily dropped to the ground and rolled to the other side of the ring. I jumped to my feet and used the dagger in my hand to stab Kage in his already bleeding side. As he turned to face me, I kicked the back of his knee and he folded into himself. He dropped his sword and I rushed to grab it.

It was heavy in my hands and made of pure steel. The pommel was engraved with the dragons of Windcrest and the initials of the queen. I put my foot on Kage’s groin and raised the sword as high as I could.

Kage looked at me wide eyed. “She will find a way to kill you.”

I shrugged. “At least I won’t die at the hands of a misogynist asshole.”

I drove the sword into his chest and blood rushed from his wound onto the floor. A hand grabbed my shoulder and I turned to see Mason.

“You did what you had to do,” he said. “I’m proud of you.”

Ceremonial music blasted through the speaker and the queen walked through the double doors. She wore a white, floor length ball gown and her curly, blonde hair was tied up in a knot on the top of her head. She walked to the edge of the ring and waited.

I lowered my body to bow like everyone else in the room. I kept my head up and locked eyes with her.

“Congratulations, Arya,” she said. “You are now *my* captain.”

I smirked. “It is an honor to have such a commanding position.”