

The sky was a clear, perfect azure, beautiful and bright and cloudless. The air was warm but not too hot, not humid but also not too dry. The ground was springy, not muddy in the slightest.

In short, it was a perfect summer day.

Rosalind had been hoping for rain.

She squinted toward the arena, which was little more than a silhouette with the midmorning sun peeking out from behind it. Her two best friends, Harley and Aisling, were squabbling next to her, but she wasn't really listening.

"I'll be *fine*. Why don't you just go worry about your catapult, huh?" Aisling snapped. She waved her arms as she spoke, and her chainmail made little clinky-jingly sounds when she moved.

"It's a trebuchet!" Harley corrected automatically.

"Well then it's definitely got problems, if I couldn't tell the difference," Aisling said triumphantly. Roz rolled her eyes.

"I – stop trying to change the subject, Ash!" said Harley. He poked her. "This is for real dangerous! You could get hurt!"

"It's fine, Hal," replied Aisling, waving him off. Her mail clinked loudly. "I know what I'm doing. And I'm only up against other kids my age, so –"

"Yeah, at *first*," interrupted Harley. "But what if you win?"

"You're the only friend in the world who say 'what if you win' like it's a bad thing," Aisling said.

Roz turned toward her friends, eyebrows furrowed. "It's a tourney, UV. He's got a fair point. If you win, you *will* be up against the big kids."

Aisling groaned. “Awww, not you, too!” She put her hands on their shoulders, her right on Roz’s and her left on Harley’s. “Look, if I win, I win, and I keep going until I lose. I know that. But I know what I’m doing, guys. I need you to believe that.”

Harley went pink, not meeting Aisling’s eye. “I know you do, but –“

“Last year Rhys Street broke an arm,” Roz supplied. “And when we were eight, Lucy Callaghan almost lost an eye. And they were both older than you, more training, y’know? We just don’t want to watch you get hurt.”

Aisling opened her mouth to respond, but there was a cannon blast somewhere by the lake signalling the start of the first match. Aisling pressed her mouth into a straight line for a moment. “I’ve got to go, it’s time to start.”

She pulled away from them, but Harley caught her forearm. “Wait, I’ve got something for you. A favour, you know?” He pulled a worn, dirty scrap of orange fabric out of his pocket and tied it around her upper arm. “Try not to die.”

“I’m not gonna *die*,” said Aisling, grinning. “They dulled the swords this year! No blood, even!”

With that, she scampered away to the competitor’s tent, and Roz was left to drag Harley up to the stands. They camped out in the middle row on the east side of the arena. Harley gripped Roz’s wrist, taking deep breaths and clearly trying to brace himself for the matches.

Aisling’s no-blood promise was not one easily kept. She managed it through her first two duels, but as soon as she stepped up against her third opponent, Roz knew it was a lost cause. Carys Nolan and Ash had been rivals – friendly rivals, but rivals – since they

were eight years old and first learning to fence. Aisling got that dangerous, mischievous glint in her eye, and showed no mercy.

The shining moment – and the one that drew blood – came at the end of the fight, when Aisling pivoted on her heel and whacked Carys across the face with her elbow.

After a moment she cursed so loudly that Roz could hear it from her place in the stands. “Shit, Cary, I’m sorry!”

As the girls separated, it became clear that if Aisling hadn’t *actually* broken Carys’s nose, she’d come close. Carys held up a hand toward the camp director and activities director (*I’m okay*), and then dropped her sword (*I surrender*).

Aisling looped her arm around Carys and helped her off of the field.

Roz elbowed Harley, who had buried his face in her shoulder. “It’s over, Haz. She won.”

Harley made an indistinct noise and didn’t look up. He’d never really been a fan of tournament day.

Aisling blew through the competitors her own age easily, and before long Harley’s worst fears were confirmed: Ash was up against the big kids. Of course, at 12 years old and barely scraping 4’6”, it really wasn’t that hard to be bigger than Aisling Day. But Aisling was smart and quick, and she used her size and speed to her advantage, which had Roz cheering for every win and Harley retreating further and further around Roz. By the time Aisling made the semi-finals, he was sitting entirely backwards, back-to-back with Roz, with his eyes squeezed shut tight and his hands gripping his knees so tight his fingernails were cutting into the skin.

For the semi, Aisling was up against Peter Johansson, a broad, strong seventeen-year-old, who was at nearly two feet taller than her and probably twice as wide. They were quite a sight, squaring up to start their match. Aisling really was *tiny*. It was easy for Roz to forget, not being all that much bigger herself, but set up against Peter it was really striking. Aisling had won her matches so far by being quick and using her size to her advantage, but Peter was a senior camper and he'd won the last three tourneys in a row.

The crowd, mostly campers with a few instructors and counsellors mixed in, went wild when Peter had stepped out onto the field. He wasn't much of a showman, really, but he was popular enough that a few sheepish waves sent the crowd into a frenzy. He said something to Aisling as they stepped up to face each other and she grinned and put her free hand on her hip in a fist. Peter laughed.

All in all, it was a pretty good start to the match. Roz had watched Aisling face off with Peter before – he was junior instructor for their fencing class – but this time she knew that he wasn't holding back. They moved quickly, swords flashing. Aisling had clearly taken their *other* junior instructor's advice to heart, and was using her knowledge of Peter's style to make up for his advantage in skill and size.

It happened so fast that Roz didn't really see it happen. One moment, Aisling was parrying a sudden attack of Peter's, the next she was sprawled on the ground. Roz jumped to her feet.

Aisling rubbed her jaw and spat something onto the dirt. She picked it up, then twisted around to say something to Peter. He laughed so hard he almost dropped his sword before turning to the directors and signalling for time-out. "Shadow lost a tooth, sirs!"

Roz chuckled. She dragged Harley to his feet. “C’mon, Hal, let’s go meet’er in the medtent.”

They squeezed through the stands and down to ground level. The medical tent was next to the competitors’ tent just outside the stands. When Roz and Harley reached it, Aisling was already perched on the table while Peter looked on from near the wall. Her brother, a med student named Billy, was pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Just – just tell me it wasn’t a permanent tooth, UV,” he said long-sufferingly.

Aisling held her hand out, revealing a bloody, muddy tooth. First molar, maybe?  
“I don’t think so.”

“Nah, Asha, you’re good,” Roz said, leaning forward to inspect it.

Harley made a little sound at the back of his throat, probably indicating disgust. He’d stopped speaking in actual words about an hour ago. Aisling laughed.

“Well you don’t seem to be otherwise injured,” Billy told Aisling, shaking his head. “Just try not to get a concussion.”

“No worries there, Bill, you know I’d never really hurt ‘er,” Peter assured him.

Billy gave him a sharp look. Peter grinned.

“M’I free to go back to finish the match, Billy?” asked Aisling innocently.

Billy squeezed his eyes shut. “Yes, fine. Go.”

Aisling turned to Roz, still holding out the tooth. “Take care’a this for me?”

“Of course,” said Roz. She accepted the tooth and solemnly tucked it into her shirt pocket. Harley made a disgusted sound.

Aisling giggled and jumped down. “Let’s do this.”

She didn't win, but she put up a good fight. When they were done, and Aisling was officially out of the running, Peter scooped her up and put her on his shoulders. "One last cheer for Ash Day! Youngest camper *ever* to make it to the semi-final!"

The crowd cheered. Aisling waved, blushing faintly. Roz jumped up and down, punching the air. Harley just let his face fall onto his knees, sighing in relief.

They caught Aisling outside the competitors' tent six minutes later. Roz grabbed her by her upper arms and spun her around a few times. "UV, that was amazing!"

Aisling grinned so widely that Roz could see the gap in her teeth on the left side. "Tol'ja I could do it!"

"Yeah," said Roz. "Yeah, you did, Ash. That was awesome."

"You *bet* it was!"

Harley let out a choked laugh. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

Aisling elbowed him, still grinning. "Honestly. And you thought I was gonna die."