



CHAPTER ONE

LANA RUBBED HER ARMS, still shivering under layers of clothing.

You should have worn your cloak, her father's voice warned, mixing within her thoughts. After years of his lectures and training, he had become a part of her—one that she assumed would eventually go away, or at least quiet down a bit.

Under the short skirt layered over her leather pants, Lana retrieved her dagger from its custom pocket. Leaves rustled behind her and she spun around, ready for her opponent.

"One day, I *will* catch you off guard," Bowen said, twisting his lips.

"You're late," she teased.

"What's the wager, Lana?" he asked, holding up his sparring sword, ready to fight.

"You'll mend my sword without payment."

"And if I win, you'll run double errands," he answered.

She swung her sword and lunged at him. "*Deal.*"

Their swords sliced back and forth, making for an almost equal bout. Bowen stood taller than her by a few inches and weighed double. She glided around him with ease. He turned, whipping his blade around expertly. Sweat already beaded on his face. Lana's heart pumped and her blood warmed. She jabbed her blade. Bowen swerved unsteadily, almost escaping her weapon, but her final swing landed perfectly along his ribcage. Bowen stumbled sideways and fell to the ground, his playful expression turning bitter.

Lana bowed her head. A smile began to creep along her face as she raised her eyes back up to meet his.

"Next time, I will finish you more quickly," she tried to joke, attempting to ease her conscience.

Bowen held his side and cringed. "You'll do anything to win," he said.

Lana offered her hand, but he refused. "I'm done," Bowen said as he stood up and walked away from her.

"*Done?* What?" Lana balked. "Bowen, wait." Lana dashed around in front of him and pushed her hand out against his chest. He stopped, seeming unsettled by her touch. His eyes turned sour and far from amused. "We've always been a team," she pressed him.

"I don't have time to play knight with you anymore," he argued, but didn't try to push past her.

"Oh, too good are you?" she teased again. Seeing no change, she got serious. "I suppose it's your mother?"

"Who else is going to mend your sword and everyone else's? Father's ill. You know that."

She stared into his eyes, begging. "You're the only one left who can still keep up. Who will train with me?"

"There's more to life than fighting, Lana. You need a skill," he said.

"I have a skill." Defending herself was an invaluable skill that few women possessed.

"One that matters, like... I don't know." Bowen seemed to blush a bit.

She cut him off. "Cooking? Sewing? A skill more fit for a woman, so that your mother would approve of me?" His eyes agreed with her words and the realization sliced at Lana's heart. She thought Bowen would stand by her, but he had stopped dreaming. She stepped out of his way.

What do you say now, Father? she thought. *You won, but not over your anger.* She kicked the ground and gritted her teeth. Walking away, she struggled to listen over her footsteps, wishing that Bowen would chase after her and beg her to forgive him for his lapse in judgment. Instead, stillness affirmed her fear. He had deserted her.

