

**A SPRING FOR  
SPEARS**

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## CHAPTER 1

A spear whistled past Astrid's ear, glancing so close to the fragile skin that the breeze stirred her hair.

Before her opponent, Torva, could recover, Astrid ducked into a roll and sprang back to her feet, just inside Torva's spear defenses. Torva sneered. Her freckles scrunched together, red hair spiraled around her face in frizzy strands half-soaked with sweat.

Astrid tsked.

Torva shouted and attacked again.

Quick as a lynx, Astrid clamped a hand around the incoming spear, twisted it out of Torva's grip, and earned a blow to the chin in the process. Torva lumbered to the side in a poor attempt to get her feet under her again, while Astrid staggered back, jerking the spear from Torva's paw-like hands. She shook her head to clear the pain radiating through her jaw. Her fingers tightened around Torva's now-claimed spear.

*Take that, bully,* she thought.

They circled each other for several moments, chests heaving, eyes locked. Astrid wiped away strands of hair that had fallen out of her braid.

She smirked. “Sloppy, sloppy, Torva,” she sang. “You let me get your spear.”

Astrid twirled the stolen spear around her back, then snapped it back into a guard in front of her.

“I’ll step on you, runt,” Torva snarled. “Then you’ll break in half like the little thing you are. You’re not even a whole Skolvarg. You’re half-sized.”

Around the sparring ring, other warriors snickered or rolled their eyes. Torva’s rage-scrunched face looked like an ogre’s. She advanced with a stomp, cracked her thick knuckles, and rolled her shoulders. There had to be Stallogre blood somewhere in her lineage. Astrid had always been small, but not short enough to throw off her comprehension of an opponent’s size.

“Stop dancing around and fight me like a real Skolvarg,” Torva hissed.

“I *am* fighting like a Skolvarg,” Astrid snapped. She backed away, spear held low, a wary gaze on Torva’s advancing form. “You’re the one lumbering around like an ogre.”

Torva’s face turned red as she bellowed and charged. The speed of Torva’s assault startled Astrid—she didn’t know Torva could

move that fast. Astrid swung the shaft of the spear around at the last moment.

Being Torva's spear, the ogre-like girl wouldn't want to snap it in half. Torva would be forced to lessen the intensity of the attack at the last moment to protect her own gear. But Astrid miscalculated Torva's desire for blood—she charged with full strength anyway. Astrid managed to lift the spear. It struck Torva on the shoulder, but glanced off. Torva wrapped her arms around Astrid and drove her hard into the ground.

All the air fled Astrid's chest when she collided with the ground. Caught between Astrid and Torva's descending bulk, the spear shaft cracked. A rock jabbed into Astrid's ribs, slicing skin under her shirt. She gasped from pain and lack of air.

Torva shoved herself to her feet, looming over Astrid like one of the giant, grizzled gray bears that followed the streams in the spring.

This time, Torva smirked.

“Not so quick after all, *Astrid*.” Torva always drawled the vowels in an annoying, brutish way. “You'd think someone as little as you would at least be quick. Then again, you've always been a disappointment.”

Astrid gasped through frozen lungs, wheezing out an incomprehensible retort. Torva rolled her eyes, then nudged Astrid not-so-gently in the ribs with her foot.

“Try again, *omegr*.”

Shock rippled through Astrid. *Omegr* was the highest insult possible in their Skolvarg tribe. Rage fueled her recovery. She forced her lungs to take the air back in.

“I said,” Astrid gasped, “you fight like an ogre.”

Astrid’s foot slammed into Torva’s thigh. Torva dropped to one knee, but her sturdy bones only bought Astrid a few seconds. Just enough to snatch the top half of the spear off the ground and spring back to her feet before Torva had her balance again.

Astrid fought off a grimace. Her ribs ached. One of them might be broken. As a Skolvarg, she healed faster than other folk, but it would still hurt like shine for a few hours anyway. Her breath came in shallow gulps.

Torva staggered as she gained her feet and picked up a discarded shield from earlier in the fight. The rounded edges looked more like a buckler, except for points on the bottom and both sides. She advanced slowly, wiping the back of her mouth with a meaty hand. Astrid took a step back for each step forward.

“At least I hear the wolf song, Astrid. Do you?” Torva laughed a grating sound, like wood pieces groaning together. “Of course you don’t. I’m not a tiny, pathetic freak like you. The wolves want me, not you. You’ll never be an Ulfsark. A sheep doesn’t run with the wolves.”

Astrid's control slipped away. Just like that— quick as the snap of two fingers—and Torva gained control over the fight. Because the *one* thing Astrid couldn't defend herself on was the truth. The ragged, undeniable truth.

She didn't hear the wolf song.

Instead of ignoring the taunt the way she usually did, Astrid let her rage come forward. She didn't send it back, didn't deal with it later. She felt it *now*. It flowed to the front of her mind like a rush of fire.

Blood boiling, Astrid charged.

Torva absorbed Astrid's ramming shoulder with her shield, the way Astrid knew she would. The pain sent hot spikes all the way down Astrid's spine and through her already sensitive ribs. Astrid pushed through it, because Torva would have expected her to abandon the charge. She didn't. She pressed on.

Torva grunted as she stepped back, gained footing again. Astrid shoved again, using all her fury to propel her. Torva stumbled once, twice, then dug her toes into the ground and planted herself. Astrid's advance halted. Torva caught Astrid low with the shield, and heaved, sending Astrid flying overhead.

Astrid landed hard on the cold, spring earth. The half-spear clattered to the ground next to her. She panted as she tried to pull her thoughts together. The pain left her too scattered. Her shoulder ached with every breath. Her ribs blossomed with

agony at every breath. Her body settled into something that tasted like misery.

Meanwhile, the chants and jeers of the other Skolvarg had settled into a low hum. Torva flashed a gaping, toothy grin and beckoned with a curl of her fingers for more. Astrid tensed in anticipation of leaping back to her feet. Her body refused to respond. Somehow. Somehow she'd find the fight in her again.

A commanding voice rang across the circle.

*"Enough!"*

Two younger Skolvarg grabbed Astrid and heaved her off the ground. Despite the pain rocketing through her ribs, she struggled against them until a woman appeared in front of her.

Huntress Vanna.

Dressed in fighting leathers, and with her hands resting on her hips, Huntress Vanna left no room for question. The fight was over. She wouldn't scold either of them—sometimes things got heated in the sparring ring—but her blatant disapproval didn't make Astrid feel any better. Nor did the sidelong glances from the rest of the Skolvarg, all aimed at her. Whether this fight began because Astrid defended two younger girls or not didn't matter. Torva had played the trump card of Astrid's failure to hear the wolf song and none of them would forget it. Maybe Torva was right.

Maybe she didn't belong here.



The hands gripping her arms relaxed. Astrid shook the two young girls off. “Let me go.”

The girls faded back. Astrid turned around to face Huntress Vanna. Heat flooded Astrid’s shoulder from the failed charge. Her nostrils flared as she tried to breathe through the spasms of pain that followed. Her right side felt like a single massive bruise from the rock, and her elbow hurt from being thrown.

“Grasp hands and leave the ill feelings here,” Vanna commanded, then eyed both of them. Her gaze lingered a breath longer on Astrid.

Astrid hesitated, then stuck out her hand first. With a scowl, Torva accepted, and they broke touch the second they could. Astrid shuffled back, gaze dropped. Embarrassment burned hot in her throat.

“Are we settled?” Vanna murmured. The creak of her leather as she folded her arms across her chest was the only sound in the field.

Torva nodded. “Yes, Huntress.”

“Yes, Huntress,” Astrid said.

“Go clean yourselves up.”

Astrid curled her hands into fists as Torva stomped away, her half-grown wolf, Syndr, trotting at her side. The two of them together sent a deep stab of jealousy through Astrid. She kept her gaze even, her face flat. Still, she couldn’t stop watching.

Torva's words echoed through her mind like an empty cavern.

*You'll never be an Ulfark. I hear the wolf song, do you?*

*No, Astrid thought helplessly, and I don't know why.*

When the field fell empty, and the dying light of day a kiss on the horizon, Vanna turned to Astrid. For some reason, the Huntress had stayed behind. She hadn't told Astrid to wait, either, but the implication was heavy enough to keep Astrid rooted to the spot.

"I had thought name-calling above you," Vanna drawled. "Ogre? Even if it's true, it's not all that original."

Astrid motioned to what had once been a ring of Skolvarg, now little more than an emptying field.

"It was in the ring."

"That doesn't make it advisable."

"So Torva can call me a runt? An omegr."

Vanna frowned. "I didn't say I approved of that either."

"But you didn't stay behind to scold Torva."

"Because she didn't stay behind. You did. Now, what does that mean?"

A building protest died on Astrid's lips. Vanna had always been harder on her. Called on her more. Pushed her harder. Was it her skill in the ring? No, other Skolvarg were more talented than her, even if Astrid had proven herself in the fights as best she could. Short stature and lean frame notwithstanding.

Other Skolvarg were mightier than her, yet Vanna didn't pull *them* aside for name-calling.

"Nothing yet?" Vanna asked, head canted slightly to the side. Her dark hair fell to a braid on her right shoulder. She lifted an eyebrow, which softened her piercing eyes. Vanna didn't need to say the words *wolf song* for Astrid to know exactly what she meant.

Shame burned deep when Astrid licked her lips.

"No."

Vanna arched a second delicate, curved eyebrow. As usual, she gave no response. Just a light bob of her head—not even a full nod—and turned to leave. Vanna had always been graceful. Her fine-boned face and gentle hands were deceiving. She didn't look like she'd be hard to win against, yet Vanna always surprised Astrid.

Vanna stopped and said over her shoulder, "What would your parents say about that taunting?"

Astrid's reply stuttered to a stop. She clamped her mouth shut, at a loss. Her parents had been dead for years. She'd like to pretend she didn't know what her fierce mother and quiet father would say, but she did.

"They'd say to fight with weapons, not words," Astrid muttered.

Vanna's brow rose in question, then dropped again. "Exactly.

Torva may have started it, but I expected better from you, that's all."

"I always show up," Astrid cried. "I train harder than anyone. Torva and I fought because she was tormenting the younger girls with her spear. How is that right?"

"She will be dealt with."

Astrid's nostril flared. "You expect more from me than the rest. Is it because I'm small? Because I haven't heard the wolf song from one of our wolf pups so we can bond and I can be an Ulfsark too?"

"Yes," Vanna said simply.

The daughter of Hildr the Pack Leader, unable to even find an Amarak wolf willing to bond with her. Astrid shook her head at the utter disparity. It didn't make sense, not in any case.

The absence of the Wolf Song was never supposed to happen for someone like her, the daughter of a famous Ulfsark. As far as Astrid knew, it had never happened to anyone in her family who desired it, until her.

Vanna focused her gaze on the camp not far away. Fires winked at the edge of the Wolfwood and the bough of the pines darkened with the lowering sun. The Huntress gave no further explanation before she walked away. Astrid hissed in pain again.

Several moments of long thought later, Astrid grabbed the remnants of Torva's spear. She jammed it into the ground over

and over until her injuries forced her to stop. Once her frustration settled, she dropped to her knees with a grunt. Her shoulder and ribs still burned in the aftermath but not as bad. She'd be fine in a few days.

Losing to Torva wasn't the worst thing to happen. It had happened before. It would probably happen again. Astrid was no match for Torva's brawny size. Still, losing left a metallic taste in her mouth. Almost as bad as the taste of Vanna admitting that she was harder on Astrid because she couldn't hear the wolf song. What rankled Astrid the most was that Torva walked away from this fight *with a wolf*.

That hulking bully had a bond with an Amarak wolf and Astrid didn't.

It wasn't right.

Astrid gazed into the settling darkness, the same taunting question circling in her mind:

*What is wrong with me?*