

Chapter 2 – A Wolf In Sheep’s Clothing

When the last of the crates were stored away, Val made his way back towards the church. As news of Skarn’s ultimatum spread, more and more people started to fill up the square, until near enough the whole village was gathered. The loud drone of conversation filled his ears. High pitched voices were raised in panic, others growled low in anger, but all seemed nervous. Making threats was one thing, but there was little the village could really do to protect itself if Skarn did turn to violence. His thugs were armed with all manner of deadly weapons, it would be a case of rifles going up against pitchforks. Nobody in the village knew how to handle a weapon, Val was pretty sure most had never even seen one. He hurriedly pushed his way through the crowds towards the front, yielding a few irritated grunts, and a few surprised greetings once they realised who it was. He pushed his way through two grown men, only to come barging into someone hurrying the other way. His vision was suddenly filled with fiery red hair as the two of them went sprawling to the dirt.

Hearing a painful grunt, he opened his mouth ready to apologise, when he found himself staring into the clear, green eyes of his best friend Sienna, sprawled out on the ground beneath him. “You better get off me right now Valon Tel’al or I’ll box you silly,” she said, glaring at him.

Beautiful, but fierce, he thought, his mouth quirking into another wry smile.

“I don’t know what you find so funny, I mean it,” she warned. They stared at each other for a moment, neither blinking, until they both suddenly burst out laughing. Val got to his feet and pulled her up.

“And where were you off to in such a hurry?” he asked.

“To look for you, you great big ox. I saw Thane outside the church so I knew you were here somewhere. If you’ve bruised my behind, I really *will* box you silly.” This time she added a smile instead of a glare.

“Have you heard about Skarn?” asked Val.

She rolled her eyes at that – “Have I heard about Skarn? Of course I’ve heard about Skarn! How could I not? The whole village hasn’t shut up about it, you’d swear Nezarec himself had appeared.” That earned a few disapproving looks from those close enough to hear. “Come on,” she said, grabbing him by the hand. “The council’s gathering.” Sure enough the crowds around them were slowly bustling into the church through its wide double doors, like a river being forced through a narrow pipe. The bell tower suddenly rang out above their heads, calling the few villagers not already in the square to the church.

“Hurry Val,” she said impatiently as she pulled him through the crowds. “We need to get a good spot.” Val quickened his step until he was right up beside her.

“From the stories I’ve heard,” he said softly, “Skarn isn’t much better than Nezarec, Sienna.”

“Old wives’ tales,” she said scornfully. “At least that’s what my Pa says,” a bit more uncertainly. “He reckons Skarn’s about as dangerous as my left boot, still told me to stay away from the square until it all blows over though. He thinks one good fright will send him running with his tail between his legs.”

“Funny, Abel said much the same,” he muttered.

“I’d like to meet him,” she said simply. Val looked at her sideways. “Well I would! Just to see if he’s as bad as the stories make out.”

Beautiful, fierce and crazy.

By the time they managed to squeeze their way into the church, the large interior chamber, with its high vaulted ceiling, was already half filled. The wooden walls inside were of the same white paint, but slightly less faded than those outside. Not much of the room had changed from its original layout, there was a raised dais at the opposite end of the room, with a large stone table and podium. On the wall above the dais, hung another symbol of that ancient religion. It was the same cross shape, this time made of grey wood, but on it hung the shape of a man, so worn and faded that no further detail could be made out, but that it was a man there was no doubt. *What a grim thing to worship,* thought Val. *I wonder what he did wrong to deserve that.* Row upon row of long wooden benches faced the dais, split into two

columns with an aisle running between them. The villagers made their way down the aisle, and sidled themselves onto any spare benches. Such as the crowds were, many would have to stand against the walls.

“Val, this way,” said Sienna, tugging his sleeve. They headed up a narrow stairs to their right, onto to a small gallery overlooking the room below. There would be nothing to obstruct their view of proceedings from up here.

“Perfect,” said Sienna, with a satisfied grin. Val leaned over the parapet to study the villagers as they poured into the church. Their nervous chatter was magnified within its walls, making it feel like a great big beehive. They streamed in the doors, filling up the benches, dressed in dark clothes of greys and browns, blacks and blues, with the odd splash of colour on those lucky enough to have scavenged such clothing. The women were dressed much the same as the men, with heavy coats and narrow breeches. There were no beautiful dresses - like the ones Val had seen in pictures - to be found here. Another example of practicality trumping aesthetics. Life in the Trollheimen demanded it.

The villagers themselves were as motley a bunch as could be. Tall and short, skinny and fat, dark skinned and fair, old and young. There was no unity to their appearance, no grain of similarity running through them. Their ancestors came from many lands, far and wide, rooted up by the Collapse and scattered to the four corners of the earth like dust on the wind. Until they, this small few at least, gathered together in search of sanctuary, in a world

barely recognisable from the one they had known. As he studied them, he realised he was wrong, there was a unity to them. Not immediately apparent, but when you looked closely, each of them had it. A stiffness to their shoulders, a hardness to their eyes. A callousness brought about by years and years of hardship and suffering. A trait that permeated generations, from the day they were born, right down through the lives of their ancestors, to the very first days of the Collapse. Under that hardened shell though, he knew each of them were as different as their skin or hair suggested.

That twinged Val a little. For all their differences, none were quite so different as him.

Idris Martellane, Sienna's father, strolled through the wide double doors. He had the same fiery hair, and a temperament just as fiery to match. He seated himself on one of the benches near the back. He saw his own father up against the wall to the left of the dais, him and Abel with their heads bent together talking quietly. Even from here Val could make out the heat in Abel's words, though he could not hear them, and his father seemed to be making soothing gestures with his hands.

"Skarn seems to have Abel in a right fit anyway," said Val, pointing to where he stood with his father.

"The Light help Skarn is all I can say. You remember that time we saw Abel get angry? I mean *really* angry?"

“How could I forget,” said Val dryly. “*Somebody* left his sheep pen open and he had to spend the best part of a week tracking down the flock.” He donned a falsely pensive frown. “And if I remember correctly, poor Cass got the blame. He was scared to leave his house for a month.”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” said Sienna, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “I’m only an innocent little girl.” She gave him her most deceiving smile. Val snorted loudly at that. He barely noticed the din of conversation had all but died until he heard a woman speak up loudly.

“Thank you,” said Gaia from behind the stone podium, addressing the hushed crowd. “Thank you. Let us begin.”

Gaia Salamon was a tall, lean woman, with a touch of grey in her dark hair. She was the closest thing the village had to a doctor of old, having learnt the skill from her mother, who had learnt from her mother before her. She was also the unofficial chairperson of the village council meetings. How she came into the position nobody knew, it had just happened and nobody disagreed, and that was the way of it ever since. Even Cass was respectful to Gaia, to her face at least.

“Now, let us not waste any more time than necessary, we all know why we’re here. There is the matter of a fusion cell scavenge to discuss.” Gaia had a sharp, snappish way of talking, as if she bit off the end of every sentence. Her voice carried across the large

chamber with ease. “If you would speak on the matter, now is the time to do so.”

“Never mind the fusion cells,” called someone from the back of the benches. “What are we going to do about Skarn!” A nervous murmur rose up from the people below.

“I say we give him what he wants!” called another. “He has guns! What can we do against guns?”

“And what then, Mikel you yellow-bellied slug!” roared Abel.

“Watch our people starve? To appease scum like him?”

There were a few scattered murmurs of agreement to that, but most just shifted uncomfortably in their seats, or else looked straight up horrified at the prospect of going up against Skarn’s thugs. Suddenly there were ten voices striving to be heard, all shouting and tinged with anger or fear.

“We will discuss Skarn later,” said Gaia, the sharpness of her tone cutting off all discussion. “But first we must decide upon this expedition.” Thane managed to soothe Abel, who had looked ready to come to blows with Mikel. Judging by the look on his face, Mikel was very grateful for Thane’s intervention. Val couldn’t blame him.

“I have something to say for this *expedition*,” said Cass, standing to make his announcement. “It could very well spell the end of us all! We have escaped notice for this long, because we haven’t gone poking our noses where we shouldn’t! If we go traipsing around

like fools, you know very well what we could invite down upon us. A lot worse than Skarn I'll tell you! Fire and death!" Spittle flew from his mouth with the force of his words. "You know the Fallen like to hole themselves up when the cold starts to bite. Any one of those facilities could be crawling with them, and what then? They track us down, and butcher us! Every last one! Putting all of our lives at risk because some of us might feel a little *cold* when the snows come in!" Cass stared around the hall letting his words wash over the villagers. There was hardly a face in sight not frowned in worry. All of a sudden the threat of Skarn felt almost insignificant. A quick glance at Sienna said even she might be frightened, and nothing ever frightened Sienna. Abel looked ready to erupt again however, but putting a calming hand on the larger man's shoulder, it was Thane who spoke.

"You are right Cass," he said. Abel's eyes widened in anger and he looked ready to erupt all over again, but Thane continued on.

"You are right, we cannot go traipsing around like fools. There are things far worse than Skarn in the old places of the world. But we will not go like fools, will we? Idris, Abel and I, will go in with speed, and with stealth, and we will return unnoticed with the fusion cells. Because if we do not, people *will* die, Fallen or not. I want you to look around the room Cass, look at the faces you see. Look into Greta's eyes and tell her you condemn her to death. Tell her she has your permission to die. Look at her!" Cass swallowed a lump in his throat, but he refused to turn and face Greta. Seated on a bench by the aisle, her wrinkled face made Cass's appear smooth by comparison. She stared at Cass's back from where she sat, a mound wrapped in layer upon layer of blankets.

“And what of the rest of you?” continued Thane, sweeping his gaze across the room, his anger growing as he went on. “Will you also condemn Greta to die? And Harron? And Neila? For they surely will without those fusion cells!” People bowed their heads as his gaze swept over them, avoiding the accusation in his eyes.

“And for what? Fear of a few Fallen? The Fallen haven’t been seen this far north in over a hundred years! So I will ask you all again, will you let your own people die? For nothing more than Cass’s poisonous words and your own selfish fears? That is not the way of it up here, it never has been! We pull together, we do what needs to be done to survive, so we can *all* survive. If we do not, we’re no better than Skarn and his kind.” Thane had finished in a hush, before stepping back to take his place against the wall, but at that very moment you could have heard a pin drop outside. That grim silence weighed down upon them for what seemed like an eternity. Cass looked like he wanted to be anywhere but in that church, and as far from Greta’s piercing eyes as he could be. Val thought he saw a tear roll down her cheek as she looked at Thane.

“Yes,” Gaia finally said, pausing to clear her throat. “Yes, well said Thane. Very well said. Does anybody have anything they wish to add? No? I thought not. Very well, let us vote. All in favour of the expedition please raise your hand.”

Val’s hand immediately shot into the air, with Sienna’s only a fraction behind. Technically children weren’t allowed to vote, but it would be no harm if Gaia accidentally counted their hands.

Thane and Abel both had their hand's raised, so did Idris of course. Val tried counting but he gave up after twenty three, as more and more people were slowly adding theirs. *They don't have to look so reluctant about it though.* Cass stared at some invisible thing on the far wall, but he made no move to raise his arm. Even Mikel eventually raised his hand Val was surprised to see. Abel gave him a respectful nod. It was soon clear that there was no need for Gaia to count the votes, it was a sweeping victory for those in favour of the expedition.

"I knew we'd win," said Sienna, "how anyone could listen to anything that old wart says I just don't know." Val voiced his agreement, but inside he remembered the look of fear in Sienna's eyes. Even though he should know better, Cass' words had frightened him too.

"Well its settled then, the expedition will go ahead," said Gaia. "We will discuss preparations in a moment, but first we have another *issue* that must be dealt with. Any children present, this discussion is not for your ears. Make yourselves scarce. Come on, pip, pip," she said with a sharp clap of her hands. Val considered ducking behind the parapet - he really wanted to hear what they planned to do about Skarn - but just at that moment he met his father's eyes, and there was a grave warning in them. He sighed and shook his head at Sienna, who looked at him questioningly from where she lay on the floor.

"It's no use, my papa has seen me. Come on, I bet they'll spend hours arguing over the least important details anyway." As he

made his way down the stairs he saw Cass marching up the aisle, muttering incomprehensibly.

“I said children, but I suppose he qualifies too,” said Gaia to a wave of laughter. Val couldn’t suppress a grin himself and he heard Sienna openly guffaw behind him. Cass’s face turned beet red, and his whole body trembled visibly. He caught his eye as he passed, quickly wiping the grin off Val’s face. He looked like he desperately wanted to say something, something nasty no doubt, but a quick glance back towards Abel and Thane and he thought better of it. With a furious toss of his head he turned and stormed out through the wide double doors.

Val waited a few moments before following. He didn’t want to know what Cass had been about to say, and he would likely find out if stayed too close. The morning outside had given way to afternoon, and grey clouds covered the sky. Val saw Cass stalk up one of the streets towards his house.

“It’s so unfair, we’re not bloody children anymore,” said Sienna kicking a loose stone across the square. “There’s no reason we shouldn’t hear whatever is they’re discussing.”

“I said the same to my father this morning,” he sighed. “Much good it did me then.”

“I wonder is there any way to get up to one of those big windows,” continued Sienna as if she hadn’t heard him. “I bet we could hear through one of them.”

Val sighed again, once Sienna set herself on wanting something, she didn't rest until she exhausted every avenue in trying to get it. As she busied herself looking for something to prop against the side of the church, Val walked over to a large wooden crate lying open in the middle of the square. It was empty, and otherwise plain, but for a small paper note pinned onto the inside by a rusted knife. Crouching towards it, he strained his eyes to read what was written on it in a long, flowing hand.

“People of my hometown, my old friends, I regret to say it is with grave tidings that I return to you at last. You see, me and mine are running desperately low on supplies, and I fear we will not live through the winter months without a little bit of, sustenance. Let it not be said that Skarn is a glutton however! All I ask is for one eighth – just one! – of your winter store, to see us through the hard times ahead. You should know Skarn can be a benevolent ally, so it would fill me with deep regret if you were to refuse my most reasonable of requests. The outcome for you would be most, distasteful. I leave you this warning only because of that special bond we once shared. Consider yourselves fortunate, others have not been so lucky.”

The note was signed with a large S that merged seamlessly with a smaller K.

“He sounds half mad,” muttered Val.

“He does doesn’t he, although his handwriting is rather pretty wouldn’t you say?” Val gave a little jump, he hadn’t realised Sienna had been peering over his shoulder. “Here, help me with this,” she said, bending to lift one end of the crate. “We might be able to reach one of the windows if we put it on its side.”

“Well, well, what have we here,” spoke a voice laced with intrigue. Val spun around to face the unfamiliar sound, hearing a loud gasp from Sienna, and a crash as she dropped the crate. What he saw was a tall, young man. He had a fringe of sleek black hair brushed to the side of his narrow, pale face, and he wore dark, tattered clothes underneath a battered chest plate of dark plasteel armour, with a collar of fur around his neck. Swaggering across the square with the deadly grace Val could only associate with a wolf, he stopped merely inches from where Val stood. Taking Val’s chin into his hand, he pulled his head up to face him, his dark eyes boring into his.

“Ah, so it’s true. I’d heard rumours of this, ‘*star child*’ they said lived in these parts. I dismissed it as just that, rumour, but here you stand.” The young man had a rich, mellifluous way of speaking, he made Val feel distinctly uneasy. “Some of my men wanted to kidnap you – oh don’t frown at me so, I am not in the business of kidnapping children– they believed you might be of some value. Hmm, looking at you now, I’m not sure they were wrong.” Val pulled his face free of his grip, it was a firm one.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Why, do you really not know?” he asked with feigned shock. He bent to pull the knife free of the crate, twirling it around his fingers like he knew how to use it. “My name is Skarn,” he announced, Val heard another strangled gasp from Sienna, “and I’ve come to collect my eighth. Although it looks like you have denied me even this most trifling request, in spite of all my professions of amity. I will not deny I am a little hurt. What a pity.”

Val could nearly believe the pain in his voice was genuine, but it never touched those cold, dark eyes. *Light, is he insane?*

Suddenly, Skarn was moving faster than he would have believed, and before he knew what was happening, he had Val pulled up against him with a leanly muscled arm that belied its own strength. He felt the cold touch of metal pressed against his neck, and he looked down to see the rusted blade of Skarn’s knife. Struggle as he might, he couldn’t budge from that iron grip of his.

Sienna was suddenly screaming in terror. “What are you doing, let him go!” He thought he saw her try to wrestle Skarn’s arm away from his neck, from the corner of his eye, but one kick sent her sprawling to the dirt.

“Be quiet girl.” There was no pain to be heard in that voice anymore, only ice cold anger. “Run along to the church and inform your *council* that Skarn requests their presence. Immediately.”

The sound Sienna made in response could only be described as a growl of some sort, but she obliged, sprinting towards the church.

“This would have been oh so simple, had they just given me what I wanted,” muttered Skarn, whether to himself or Val he wasn’t sure.

“Let me go,” rasped Val, the knife against his throat made it difficult to speak. “Please.”

“You wouldn’t make a very good bargaining chip if I let you go, now would you?” Val thought about redoubling his efforts to break free, but he must have tensed in anticipation, because a slight increase in pressure on the blade against his neck, was all it took to convince him otherwise.

“That’s a good sport, keep very still. We wouldn’t want any unfortunate mishaps. Well, *you* wouldn’t, that I assure you.”

Only moments had passed when Sienna came sprinting back out of the church, ahead of a throng of villagers caught between hurrying, and creeping forward warily. He heard some of them gasp at the sight of Skarn holding a knife to Val’s throat. They stopped about ten feet from where the two of them stood, eager to keep their distance.

“Don’t be shy, come closer, come closer.”

The villagers shuffled their feet reluctantly, but they moved forward, forming a nervous wall just out of arms reach.

“Good.”

Skarn stood silent for a moment, scanning the faces before him with those raven black eyes. Searching for something. For what, Val did not know. Fear perhaps, weakness. If that’s what he looked for, it wouldn’t be hard to find, half the villagers’ knees seemed to shake with it. Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it, for his dark eyes settled on Mikel with a smile that never quite reached them.

“Ah, Mikel,” he said lightly, much too lightly. “I have always believed you were an intelligent man. Did you know that?”

If Mikel’s knees had been shaking before, they were positively quaking now. “Eh. . . No. . . I mean. . . Thank you. . . Eh. . . What ma”—

“Tell me Mikel, what is inside this crate?” Skarn tapped the side of the crate with his boot.

“Eh. . .The crate?”

“Yes the crate, what’s inside it?” he snapped. Mikel flinched, and when he spoke, the words came out in a barely audible croak.

“Eh. . .Nothing.”

“Nothing.” Sweat beaded on Mikel’s brow at the sound of that softly spoken word. Val wished Skarn would scream at them instead, or lash out in a fit of rage, anything but that menacing whisper. He let that word hang in the air for what could have been an eternity.

“I asked you for one thing, one puny and insignificant thing! In return for the most valuable gift I could give you, a gift I do not offer lightly. The gift of my mercy! But alas, you have squandered that gift, and insulted me in the process. Those do not sound like the actions of an intelligent man, do they Mikel?”

Mikel tried to respond, but whatever he meant to say stuck in his throat. He wiped his brow with a trembling hand, and his legs looked ready to give way completely.

“However, it is in my nature to be merciful, so I will offer to you, my people, what I have offered to no others before; a second chance. Refuse me again though, and the consequences will be dire. Starting with this boy. If the crate is not filled as soon as humanly possible, we will find out if his blood runs red like the rest of ours. Can you look him in the eyes, and tell him his life is not worth a crateful of grain?”

Val’s stomach lurched, and not from the thought of that rusted blade tearing through his flesh. Skarn’s words sounded sickeningly close to his father’s in the church earlier. His ears rang hollow and his eyes swam, until he could neither hear, nor see,

what was happening around him. The only sound that existed was that of the blood pumping through his ears, like the beat of a furious drum, building towards a crescendo. A crescendo Val was sure meant his own death. He felt something grow warm in one of his pockets.

Oh Light, I don't want to die. Not yet. Not yet, father. Sienna. Mother. The warmth in his pocket grew hotter, it infused him. It felt as if his blood boiled with the heat, as if his skin burned. He wondered why Skarn did not feel it. He wondered why the blade did not melt. *Mother, I'm so sorry. Not yet. Not yet.*

“Let go of my son!”

Just when Val thought he might be burned into a pile of ash, the scorching heat vanished with no sign that it had been there at all. His eyes focused on his father, standing in a gap the villagers made to let him through. Val had never seen that look in Thane's eyes before. If he didn't know any better, he could nearly believe those eyes had been the source of that great heat.

“This whelp. . . Is yours, Thane?” Something crept into Skarn's voice at the sight of him. He was suddenly uncertain, perhaps even afraid. Surely not.

Why would Skarn be afraid of my father?

“Let. Him. Go, Skarn,” he growled. Val felt Skarn loosen his grip slightly at the command in Thane’s voice, but when he spoke, he had resumed that beguiling lilt that bordered on contempt.

“Light, isn’t this a surprise. Thane Tel’al a father. I never thought I’d see the day. People really *do* change. Who’s the freak’s mother, a Fallen dreg?” he sneered.

Val was surprised to hear himself snarl, but his father may as well have not heard for all the change in that unquenchable stare.

“Oh, so he has a bit of bite after all. Is that the Fallen in him, or is that from you Thane?”

“Give me back my son Skarn, or I swear you will regret the day you ever came kicking and screaming into this world.”

Skarn barked an amused laugh. “There he is, *The Grey Wolf*. It would seem people don’t change very much after all.” A gulp only audible Val’s ears, betrayed his self-assurance. “You stand there as if you’re one of them, but you’re not one of them, are you Thane? You’re one of me. A wolf, not a sheep. Never a sheep.”

What in the Light is he talking about? The Grey Wolf? My father?

“I’m not playing your games, Skarn. Give him to me!” If it were not for the circumstances, Val would have been impressed by Skarn’s composure in the face of that glare. He thought it could melt even the eternal snows on the Trollheimen.

“Oh very well, you can have the child, he matters not. See it as a pact between wolves.” He dropped the knife from Val’s neck and released him. Val gulped in air though his raw throat, but just as he moved towards his father, Skarn grabbed his wrist.

“But first. . .” Val flinched as he drew the knife across the palm of his hand, dark, red blood oozing from the gash. As Skarn released his wrist, he almost looked disappointed. “Red after all,” he whispered.

Val dashed over to his father, throwing his arms around him. Buried in that tight embrace, all he could hear was Thane whispering into his neck; “I can’t lose you. I swore to her. I swore to her I would protect you. I can’t lose you.”

“It’s okay father, I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered back.

Standing there wrapped in Thane’s arms, he nearly forgot where he was. That was until Skarn’s voice jerked him back to the present.

“You see, good people? Skarn can be merciful. Do *not* test the limits of that mercy. Need I remind you, you still have the matter of my eighth to attend to.”

“You won’t be getting a single morsel of grain off us, you liver-bellied weasel!” boomed Abel, appearing behind Thane’s shoulder.

“Abel. Charming as always,” he replied, the corner of his mouth worked up in distaste. “I have given you all fair warning,” he announced. “Far more than others less fortunate than you have received. It would be most wise to heed this final warning. There will be no other. Does Abel speak for all of you on this matter?”

There was dead silence then, some of the villagers avoided Skarn’s eyes as if he might forget they were there.

“Aye, he speaks for us all,” said Thane finally.

“Aye,” echoed Gaia.

It was as if the floodgates had been opened, and calls of defiance rose up from the crowd, as if they suddenly realised there was fifty of them and only one of him. Even Mikel managed to croak out something that sounded like “Aye.”

“You see Skarn, even sheep can grow horns, and these sheep will not be led like lambs to the slaughterhouse!” growled Abel.

Skarn smiled, one of those that barely twitched his lips and never touched those dark eyes. “We shall see about that. Here, take this,” he said, burying his knife point in the dirt. “It will not do you much good when I return, but I suppose a poor weapon is better than none. You see Abel, wolves don’t enjoy hunting lambs, they relish a challenge.”

With that, he turned and stalked off towards the outskirts of the village. Two hulking shapes filed in either side of him from where they were lounging against a wall. Val hadn't noticed them before. Both carried what looked like automatic rifles. Not a sound stirred amongst the villagers as they watched them leave.

The Light help us.