

## ***RUNEHEART (SAMPLE)***

By Gino C. R. Marchetti, II

R

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

R

Gino C. R. Marchetti, II was born and raised in Minnesota, *dontcha know*. However, his studies have taken him across the country and around the world—Minnesota, Nevada, Indiana, Argentina, and Vatican City are all places he has called home at one time or another. Currently, however, Mr. Marchetti’s feet are firmly planted in Fort Wayne, Indiana. There he serves as an STM graduate assistant, studying historical theology, specifically the development of mystical theology in the early modern period. He has two cats, Freja and Astrid, who excel at stepping on keyboards and knocking pens on the floor.

RRR

### **CHAPTER I**

*Purify me, O Kinsmen Redeemers, O Holy Two! Purge me of my hidden fault, for ye alone have plumbed my depths and know how deeply my iniquities run. Heal the mortal wounds which ye have inflicted in righteousness, and bear ye away my disgraces. I pray ye, teach me wisdom in the secret heart, where once only darkness dwelt, that all may see and rejoice in you unto the ages of ages.*

— From *Carmina Diva, Pars LI*

R

I knelt at the teakwood prie-dieu, which stood before the east-facing altar in the corner of my sitting room, and clasped my tremulous hands in prayer. Two candles—one was brown and decorated with a golden, majuscule *A*, and the other white with a similar majuscule *L*—stood at the horns of the altar. Both burned in their candlesticks, wax rivulets dripping onto the altar’s wooden mensa.

Between the candles, two gilded icons scattered dancing candlelight upon my darkened face. I squinted, for my eyes had grown accustomed to darkness, but despite their blinding splendence, I forced my teary eyes to gaze upon the icons of the Two Holies. The first bore the radiant image of a wolf, Holy Luváli, whose fur gleamed silver and whose eyes were golden suns. Under his chin and leaning against his forepaws was an illuminated tome decorated with malachite vines and leaves. Though I made my eyes hold the divine wolf's gaze, his eyes burned into my soul and set my heart ablaze with fear—fear of his fiery wrath against what I was and what my flesh longed for.

As the wolf's wrath pierced me, I shifted my gaze to the second icon. This one was of a man, Blessed Andar, dressed in radiant silver, who held his own tome. Upon it, a white-gold dove held a malachite olive branch in its beak, yet I gazed upon Andar's face instead. I flitted between his brazen eyes—one narrowed to bear witness against sin, the other full of sorrow for what surely awaited me—but I found no rest there.

Unable to bear the gazes of the Two, I looked to the censer between these icons. From its vented top, wisps of fragrant smoke curled, dancing as they floated into my lofted study and the ceiling's shadowy vault. Those nebulous trails of smoke were my prayers vanishing into Oblivion.

I inhaled the spicy incense, closing my eyes to block out the reflected light of the Two. That scent, this entire ritual, had once been a balm for my troubled mind. Now it did nothing to soothe me, and I poured forth tears in sorrow.

I ceased mouthing the "Prayer of the Penitent" and turned the pages of the leather-bound penitential, which the vicar at Melbù had ordered me to recite, with trembling hands. An enormous scarlet *T* overshadowed every other handwritten word below. It spelled *Temptation*. A coal-black, impish figure, with no nose and embers for eyes, clung to the letter's stem and clawed his way toward the top. Another devilish figure, astride a flaming hellhound, prowled atop the letter, and the hound howled at a bloody moon and unholy black star, which shed its dark light upon the debaucheries below.

In the bottom margin of the page were lurid images of men, women, he-wolves, and she-wolves engaged in a demonic orgy. They poured goblets of wine into each other's mouths, the wolves lapping up what spilled onto the ground. All danced around a fire that threw off brownish-red flames, and dark, smoky phantoms flew into the darkness and hovered over the drunken revelers.

Everywhere, women had collapsed with their breasts and legs exposed. He-wolves and men drew nigh, eyes burning with unnatural lust. Between the fallen women, drunken she-wolves wobbled and presented themselves to the debauched he-wolves and naked men.

On the facing page, women and she-wolves, with distended bellies, tore their hair, clawed their faces, and howled. The men and he-wolves, eyes filled with unsatiated lust, gazed on the women whom they had impregnated. Elsewhere, women and she-wolves gave birth as blood poured and monsters emerged from between their legs. The men and he-wolves, seeing what they begot, slew themselves and their concubines with sword and claw. At the top of the page, the devilish rider and his demonic lupine steed spied the sight below and cackled.

I pried my eyes from the horrid scene and read, *“Temptation: All must avoid stirring up temptation within themselves, for to stir up such is to walk willfully into sin. To sin through willfulness and to entertain temptation is to put one’s soul at risk of eternal fire. Yea, one must hate sin entirely, but especially those sins which are most shameful: idolatry, sorcery, divination, fornication, and lusts for alien flesh.”*

My eyes flitted everywhere—the illuminated manuscript, the altar, the icons of the Dead Gods—but they found no place of rest. But, why should a wicked man expect to rest among the holy? No, but I rested my eyes upon my trembling hands, which lay palms up on my thighs as I knelt in unholy terror.

I clenched my eyes and fists shut. My heart raced. I dug my nails into the callused flesh of my palms. Blood flowed. A groan escaped my clenched lips. The blood was hot, but it could not expel the bone-deep chill from my limbs.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, nose, and bearded upper lip, and great drops fell onto my upturned palms. They stung my wounds.

I rocked forward on the prie-dieu, running my nails across the clawed-out furrows in the otherwise immaculate kneeler’s boards. I leaned over the altar, my bloody hands folded once more. The blood—my blood—dripped upon it. A profane offering, but an offering, nonetheless. Perhaps they would hear me now ...

The prie-dieu shook in time with my body. The candles, too, shook.

I bowed my head against my bloody hands. I prayed, but the fire in my soul grew hotter while I grew all the colder.

My blood dripped.

Still, the Two were silent.

R

“Ma,” the boy called, “we’re at the road’s end. Now’s the fork they said to look for.” The wind howled, and the boy pulled the fur-lined hood of his cloak tighter around his face. “Ma?”

A woman called from the rear wagon, “Do you see a signpost, Aros?”

“Maybe ... With this snow flyin’, I canna say for sure.” He pulled back on the reins, and the horses stopped. “Arve, go see if there’s a sign.”

The younger boy on his right grunted, mumbling about the cold.

“C’mon, Arve; Da is countin’ on us to—”

Arve huffed and jumped down. His boots sank into the ever-rising snow with a crunch, the frozen crust breaking under his weight. The boy trudged on, patting the horses as he passed. His outline blurred in the whirling snow.

“Aros?” his mother called.

“Arve’s lookin’, Ma.”

An eternity passed while the biting wind stung him. He licked his lips and hissed as they cracked. Metallic-tasting blood filled his mouth, and though he sucked his lips, the pain did not die. He cleared his throat rhythmically and rubbed a gloved hand against his thigh.

“Oh, Andar, please let us be close to somewhere ... anywhere. Please ...” He lifted his gloved hand and made the Sign of the Two—an inverted *V* that touched from the inner corner of one brow to the other, from the vertex of which a vertical line ascended—upon his forehead to seal his prayers. He put his hand back to the reins as snow crunched nearby.

For not but a moment, he thought it was Arve, but the sound had come from his own side of the cart.

One of the horses nickered and stamped its hooves. The panic was infectious as a second horse stamped at the snow, pulling on the reins, followed by a third.

“Whoa. Easy now. ’Tis nothin’. Just a deer ...”

A flash of gray shot by on his left.

“Must be the snow and wind.” He heard a soft *crack* on his right. “Arve?” He peered forward to see if it was him.

Another crack sounded on his right, and then on his left again. He shot his hand to the belt knife laid across his lap. With his numb, gloved fingers, he fumbled with the handle, unable to draw the blade.

All the horses danced now. He pulled back harder on the reins.

“Brother? Hurry, brother. I—”

Wolves howled in the woods nearby. Aros froze.

The horses reared and jerked, Aros fighting to rein them in.

The sound of crushing snow returned. Boots? Paws? Whatever it was, it drew nearer.

“Arve?” He saw a form huddled low to the ground in front of the cart. A man? A wolf?

“Aros, there’s ... Out there, there’s ...” Arve leapt aboard and grew silent. Great puffs of steam poured from his mouth and nose. “Wolves.”

“Was there a sign? What did it say? C’mon, Arve; I want to get out of here.”

The younger brother looked at the elder, fear plain in his eyes. “Uh, ’tis—”

The wolves howled again.

“Arve!”

“’Tis, uh ... ’Tis a lodge in a mile, to the left. To the right, in ten miles, a-a town. Melbù or somethin’.”

Aros snapped the reins and steered left. “Ma, there’s a lodge only a mile away. We’ll ne’er make the trip if we head to the town, no with Da as he is. The horses’ll no be able to go much farther neither.”

His mother did not respond, but he made out the distinct crack of reins. *Oh, Andar, let there be room ...*

## R

A scratch at the door brought my prayers to an end. Dazed, I glanced over my shoulder, my brow smeared in blood. I raised my eyes to the heavens. Was this the way the Two would deliver me? Had they received my sacrifice? Or, would I fall away once more?

*For now, this shall be my escape.*

I unlatched the front door, and morning sunlight, diffused by the storm clouds, illumined my darkness. Along with the light, four great beasts rushed past. The snow and chill also rushed in but could not cool the burning within my breast.

Raynor perked his ears and stared at me with his single, glowing yellow eye—he had lost the other as a pup when he had stuck his snout in a badger’s den. He greeted me with a bark from near the stone hearth, which jutted out into the sitting area, and he stretched his lithe body while letting out a high-pitched yawn as he curled up in his usual place on the bearskin rug. Two of the other wolves, Ragnar and Ada, each had a hunk of meat from some unidentifiable animal in their maws as they sat by the larder door. Ever obedient, they entered with their prizes only after I acknowledged them. The final wolf, after she had made her obeisance at the altar, sat at my side.

“Freya.” I scented a wolf’s greeting as I spoke. Her tail beat the floor as she gazed up at me, her tongue hanging out as she panted. I caressed her head and scratched behind her ears, but I also coated her fur with my blood. The bloody gouges in my palms sullied everything I touched.

Freya nudged my left leg and looked at me with large, gold-brown eyes. She followed at my heels while I searched for a cloth with which to bind my hands, and only after did I scratch her ears again.

Her tail bounced, and she scented contentment with both the attention I showed her and with the pack’s hunt. She circled my legs and wedged her head between them so I would scratch her whole body. Her tail beat my legs as she stood under me, and I scented my contentment to have the pack with me. She barked and licked my hands and wrists, unbothered by the blood upon them. The warmth of her body, so natural in comparison to the hellish warmth of mine, comforted me.

When she settled down, I rekindled the fire and set a kettle of water, which hung from a peg on the wooden mantelpiece, to boil. I reached for one of the many pipes arrayed on the pipe rack upon the mantle, but my bandaged hand hovered over it. With my head hung low, I stared at the bandage and leaned my elbows against the mantle. I gripped the braid of hair at the nape of my neck with both hands.

A penitent ought not indulge in pleasures, but I could not give even this little thing up. I hated myself for this simple thing, these little pleasures, which I could not give up for my soul’s salvation.

*You’re weak ...*

Freya sidled up by my side. I placed my hand upon her head, letting my own continue to hang.

“I’m in a bad way, friend.”

She whined, her sympathetic eyes shining, but I refused to engage her. Rather, I snatched up my pipe, threw myself into one of the three chairs before the blazing fire, and smoked furiously, ignoring the pipe's bite.

Freya set her exceptionally gray head on my knee—her custom when I was troubled—but I still paid her no mind. Instead, I gazed upon the swirling, intertwined vines carved into the mantle. I traced them with my eyes, never coming to an end or a beginning, and though they were beautiful, they unsettled my mind, which would not gaze upon the vines as a whole, but only in part.

I slid forward in the chair and stretched out my long legs before the fire. I closed my eyes and sighed, but my mind's eye continued to wander ceaselessly over the images of tangled vines.

As I contemplated the maze of vines, Freya pushed her face toward mine. She breathed upon my face, and I looked down to find her staring at me. I rolled my eyes before scratching her chin with my free hand, while I held my pipe to my lips with the other. I puffed on the pipe, and a great cloud enveloped me as I stared into the inferno before me.

“I'm so tired, Freya.”

The she-wolf wedged her head under my free hand, but I pulled away. Disappointed, she sprung up, her front paws landing on my inner thigh. I grunted and instinctively shot out both my hands to protect that singular part of me my otherwise loving pack cared little to protect.

Burning tobacco fell from my pipe onto my hands. I leapt from the chair, and Freya jumped, also, shaking tobacco and dottle from her fur. I stamped the smoldering tobacco and cursed, “Damn dog.”

Freya hung her head, ears flat, and she backed away with a whine. She scented sadness and, more bothersome to my conscience, fear.

Sitting back in my chair, I covered my face with my bandaged hand. “I'm sorry, Freya. I shouldn't have called you that.” I set the pipe down and gestured for her to come.

Though reluctant, she approached with her tail tucked and her body low to the ground.

“I avoid one sin only to commit another, and that against the ones I love.” I knelt upon the hardwood floor and nuzzled her head. “Forgive me.”

She licked me and barked. As if a war-horn had sounded, the other wolves charged. They yanked on my heavy linen pants and linen tunic sleeves with their teeth, careful not to tear them, and pulled me to the ground. Though I stifled my laughter—I had allowed myself too much luxury

already—I let them pull me down. When a sloppy tongue found its way into my ear, however, my resolve broke.

The wolves nipped at my thick, well-oiled beard and pulled on my bound hair. The dark-brown braids, which were streaked with patches of the lightest gray, flowed across my temples to the loose knot behind my head. This came undone, and my hair spread wildly about me while I lay on the floor.

I rolled onto my back in submission, and one of my packmates claimed his victory by pouncing on my gut. I gasped and covered my eyes with my forearm, trying in vain to stop the flurry of slobbering tongues that lapped at me. Thus we played until the kettle whistled louder than our barking, growling, and laughter. Only then did they stop long enough for me to free myself.

Fending off Raynor's last attempts to pull me down, I took the pot, filled a cup with loose tea, and poured the boiling water. Tea in hand, I relit my pipe and puffed away between sips. From my chair, I smiled at my pack huddled before the fire. "Thank you, friends."

A noise somewhere between a growl and a bark rumbled in Raynor's throat. He blinked once at me, scenting contentedness—the earthy smell of a warm den filled with packmates. He then fell asleep.

I took another sip of tea, one more toke on my pipe, and set both down. I shut my eyes and fell asleep, scenting contentedness, too.

RRR



## CHAPTER II

*Look mercifully upon the sojourner and wanderer, for such are ye in this world.*

— *Evangelium Andaris, Caput XXIII*

R

I woke to the sound of Ragnar growling at the door, and he bared his teeth with his ears and tail straight back. Had anyone entered, he would have torn them apart.

Behind him, Ada and Raynor waited, ready to fight, though not growling like their leader. Only matronly Freya, who nudged my slouching frame with her nose, remained unperturbed.

“I’m up, Freya.” I stretched and yawned. “What has you so on edge?” I sniffed the air but smelled only smoke from the fire and the musky scent of fearsome anger held at bay.

Ragnar scented back a burst of garbled scent-images, “*Outside. Invaders. Strangers. Noises—horses, people. Danger.*” The last scent-image was neither fearful nor trusting, but a statement of fact.

Unsure what he meant, I took the wood axe that was ever by the door. It had been a long time since I had wielded any tool as a weapon, and though I hated to admit it, having the axe in hand comforted me.

I ran my thumb across the cold, smooth wood, and a sudden wave of nausea and—anxiety? adrenaline? ecstasy ... aye, timeless yet particular ecstasy—overtook me.

*The cries of men and clashing blades resounded. Horses screamed, struck by arrows, and grown men shouted and cried. I was on a battlefield once more. My vision ran red. My heart raced. My mind was on bloodshed.*

*I stared down a man in full plate armor. I bore no weapons, but he trembled before me. I was on top of him. Someone screamed, but I knew not who. And blood. A fountain of blood shot forth as I ripped his throat out with my teeth. I turned my face to the sky—*

A pounding on the door brought me back. The wolves backed away, knowing what kind of berserker I could become.

I inhaled the smoky, dry air of my home to ground myself further. At the threshold, I gripped the axe with white knuckles and instinctively traced the faded red tattoo on my right wrist with my other hand. *No, it has nothing to do with that. Those days are long behind me.*

The pounding continued. “M’lord, m’lord, have mercy. Let your servants in, or we shall die.” The woman’s voice was thick with the clipped, tonal ring of a westerner.

At the sound of the woman's voice, Raynor bounded forward. He bowed on his forepaws to invite a chase, and his tail quivered. "*People. Many. Small and large. Horses.*" He cocked his head, and his tail ceased to wag. He whined, "*Fearful ... dying.*"

*What are the Two placing before me?*

I narrowed my eyes and tilted my head as I listened to Raynor, but the one-eyed wolf added nothing else. Still unsure, I leaned toward the door.

"Dear woman, do you come as a friend?"

"Aye, m'lord, we mean you and yours well, but we come to you as less than friends. I, m'lord, am your servant, as are my own. Please, we are desperate to find shelter, e'en if only in your stable, so we can weather this storm, which grows worse by the minute. But if you do no receive us, m'lord, my children shall perish, as will my husband, who is ill."

I recalled what Raynor had scented—little ones and great ones, death and fear. I knew she told the truth, yet I pressed her, "What proof do you have of what you say? It's dangerous to take in strangers."

"Aye, m'lord, but do you no hear the cry of my wee daughter?"

A baby, who had been silent a moment before, wailed.

A pang of guilt overcame me—I had sinned to ask for such a proof—and duty prevailed. "Dear woman, I will let you and yours in."

Though the wolves relaxed when they heard the voices of the people, I scented for them to stay back in utter silence. "*Men. Hatred. Wolves.*" These three images coalesced into one of chaos, one which the wolves knew well.

When I looked at the wolves, I also spotted the penitential lying open upon the altar. Its gruesome illuminations shimmered in the firelight, and I immediately regretted my hospitality.

The woman called again, "M'lord, are you there?"

"Give me but a moment." I rushed to close the book and hid it among the other prayer books stacked under the altar. Nobody could know the truth about me. Even I could barely face it.

As I opened the door, violent winds pelted my face and arms with snow. My eyes watered, and I let my unexpected guests pass. First, two little boys tramped in, holding the hands of a young woman, whose blonde hair slipped from under her hooded cloak and over her shoulders in two long braids. The two boys stamped their feet with exaggerated force and shook off the snow

covering them. Their hoods bounced back to reveal they were identical towheaded twins, not more than four years old.

Two more boys—slightly older by the look of them—held the hands of yet another young woman. Her hair—auburn, unlike the other’s—also flowed from under her cloak’s hood and over one shoulder in a long braid. She struggled to hold the boys’ hands as they fought to break free and run to the fireside. These boys flung their hoods back as they broke away, revealing heads of gold and flame.

After these, another young child followed. Judging by size alone, this one was undoubtedly the oldest of the five little children, and in this child’s arms was a doll held close to her chest. What I first imagined was a doll began to wail, however, and the girl—it was clear she was a girl, for no boy would care so tenderly for a baby—cooed and rocked the babe in her arms. She, too, proceeded to the fire and settled in among her siblings.

After so many children, three men entered, though only two were on their feet. The younger two men dragged the limp body of the third between them, his arms draped over their shoulders, and they lay him near the fire on the bearskin rug where I had played with my pack. At his side, the young men sat huddled together with the others.

Seeing so many, I regretted my pity anew.

A woman, nearly as tall as I, lowered her head as she crossed the threshold and shut the door behind herself. She pulled her hood back, and curly, unbraided locks of gold fell freely about her shoulders. She fell to her knees at my feet. With both arms, she embraced my knees, and I nearly fell backward.

“M’lord, Andar and Luváli bless thee. We pray thee, receive us as thy servants.” She touched her forehead to my calfskin slippers. All the while, she kept her arms wrapped around my knees, her body contorted in supplication. “Send thy servants no away, but grant us those things needful, for we here place our lives, our own and those of our kin, before thee. Have mercy, O lord.”

I looked upon this suppliant stranger who had placed her family’s future into my hands with this invocation. How deep a desperation she must have known to have invoked this rite.

My gut twisted. There could be no rejecting them now. If I did, I truly would be damned—to reject a suppliant was to reject the Two. Aye, the Suppliant’s Plea ... the Writings warned it was no trifle. Wasn’t it just like the Two, though, to warn about trifling with this plea while they sent their beloved suppliants to the door of a monster like me?

But, for all my misgivings, I could not close my heart to this woman. Her persistence in hanging upon me, though my answer was too long in coming, shamed me. It convicted me of my faithlessness and repented me, too.

I sighed and raised my eyes toward the shadowy vault where the incense of my prayers had ascended. *Fine ...*

I placed my hands upon her head and spoke the sacred reply, “Arise, dear woman, I receive thee.” Yet, to the oath, I added, “But not as servants do I receive thee and thine, dear woman. Ye are guests and friends, if ye mean me and mine no harm. I am Rune Corinsson, who shall from this time on be a host and friend to thee and thine, and my posterity and thine alike shall share in this inviolable bond until Andar and Luváli, The Sacred Two, consummate the age.”

She looked up at me with pleading, bloodshot eyes and refused to release my legs. My heart ached and burned within me.

“Oh, Lord Corinsson, we owe you our lives.” She touched her forehead to my feet once more.

“You shall call me Rune—I am no lord.”

She inclined her head, rising at last.

“Now, as for your horses, send—”

“Lor—Master Rune”—the woman’s deep blue eyes widened—“how did you know we had horses?”

I cursed myself for my carelessness and said, “How else could you have come here? You could not have come on foot, not with children and your sick man.”

“Of course, Master Rune, I suppose to one such as yourself ’twould be obvious.”

I grunted and shrugged. “Whatever the case, have your young men stable the horses around the back. There are plenty of stalls.”

“Aye, Master—”

“And one more point. I am neither lord *nor* master; only Rune.”

The woman bowed at the waist, her hair nearly sweeping the floor. “Aye, sir. Howe’er, I must be beggin’ your pardon. Though you welcome us as guests, and e’en friends—which is beyond what we may have hoped—’twould be a sin for us to call you less.”

I frowned. “Is your conscience truly so bound?”

“’Tis, Master Rune.” She bowed again, even more deeply than before.

I waved my hand, and the woman rose, back straight but eyes lowered.

“Then let it be. Only have your sons fetch those poor horses from that icy hell.”

She nodded. “Aros, Arve.”

The two young men, who had dragged their father inside, stared into a nothingness far beyond their mother.

“Our host wants you to fetch the horses. He’s a stable for them.”

The boys drifted toward us like wraiths, devoid of life and hope.

“Ma,” one said, “how’ll we know where to brin’ ’em?” The young man, his eyes unfocused, scarcely noticed me. His face, though partly shadowed by his hood, was clearly frostbitten and raw.

Something was wrong with the lad ... It wasn’t his poor complexion, nor did he share my nature—none of them did—but he was full of something that made me ... uneasy. It was not fear, nor disgust, nor anything like what I felt toward him. It was something else ...

His mother’s voice brought me back to reality. “Master Rune’ll tell you, Aros.” She gestured at me with an open hand. “He is”—she bowed yet again—“our host and has graciously welcomed us.”

Aros torpidly imitated his mother’s bow. His darkened, sunken face, poor posture, and slight frame made him look almost like my former fellow slaves. But no, that wasn’t what drew my attention to him either. Besides, that was something I scarcely wished to think about, anyway. That had all been a long time ago ...

I stiffened when I realized I, too, stared into nothingness like him.

I blinked the confusion away and nodded curtly. “You can find the stable behind the house. Even in this blizzard, you’ll make it out.”

The other boy, Arve, who also appeared exhausted, though slightly less distant, spoke, “But what if we”—the boy’s voice cracked, betraying his youth—“still canna find it?”

“Well, lad—Arve—I’ll send Raynor with you.” Just behind Arve sat the four wolves.

Raynor’s ears perked and swiveled toward me. His tail beat the floor.

“He’ll lead you safely.”

Arve narrowed his green eyes. “Who’s Raynor? Your so—”

The boy had no chance to finish before Raynor jaunted over.

“This”—I pointed—“is Raynor.”

The one-eyed wolf, whose head came to the boy's hip, sauntered up behind Arve and stuck his head between the young man's legs in an unorthodox greeting.

The boy stared into Raynor's golden eye. The little of Arve's face I could see under his hood blanched. "Wo-wol—"

A flash of motion in the corner of my eye caught my attention as Aros shot a hand under his cloak and drew a knife from the sheath hanging horizontally across his waist. Before even I could react, Ragnar leapt between Raynor and Aros. He bared his fangs and flattened his ears. His tail was straight, and he growled low enough to rattle bones.

I, too, snapped into a fighting stance, arms uncrossing, feet spreading, toes curling to grip the floor. Time itself slowed, and I stood outside myself, caught up in the familiar ecstasy of battle. Unconsciously, my right hand shot forth and grabbed Aros' knife-wielding hand by the wrist. I scented calm to Ragnar, but he refused to back down.

"Put the knife away, lad. My pack won't harm you."

The lad gasped and pulled away, and I loosened my unduly tight grip. He glared at me. His wide yet fiery green-gray eyes were like those of a greenhorn soldier facing his first enemy. I had once had eyes like those, too ...

His eyes revealed no recognition of my words, and so I guided his tremulous hand from above his head where it was poised to strike. "It's all right, lad." When the boy's knife was at his side, I tentatively let go of his wrist. "Now, put that away." The blade rattled against the metal lip of its sheath.

Aros' eyes, and the terror they held, aroused a sense of pity within me. It compelled me to open his cloak and guide his hand to sheathe the knife. Only then did Ragnar cease to growl.

I glanced around the room for other signs of danger, but all I saw were looks of fear. The young women had gathered all the children behind themselves, and the children all clung to their protectors. Arve was pale and trembling, and Raynor had slipped back out from under him, tail between his legs. Aros trembled where he stood, rubbing his gloved hands together, and he made a rhythmic clicking noise in his throat. Their mother covered her gaping mouth with both hands.

Part of me hoped they would choose to leave of their own will, now that they'd seen how I lived, but I kept that desire of mine quiet.

"Is everyone all right now?"

I received no reply.

“You’ve nothing to fear from my pack.”

“But they’re wolves,” Arve managed to say. “Wolves ... They—”

“They’re monsters,” Aros finished. “Killers. Beasts.” He flexed his hand, as if to grab his knife again.

Raynor, who kept backing away, yelped as if wounded, and Ragnar growled.

I scented for both to be still.

“Lad, my wolves aren’t like that.”

The others all stared at me.

“Let me prove my pack, my wolves, are not like what stories say. They’re anything but brutes or monsters. They’re Luváli’s folk, or have you forgotten that one of the Two was a wolf?”

All were silent, and the scent of fear slowly died away in all but Aros. This was the power of faith—to banish the terror of a monstrous form with the assurance that a god had once borne it, too. It had been a long time since I had seen that kind of faith.

I beckoned Freya with my hand. “Look.”

Everyone darted their eyes between the wolf and me as Freya walked between the two young men, her head held high, and sat at my right.

“Arve, this is Freya, my dearest companion. Please, lad, come and say *hello*.”

He shook his head.

“No? Well, will anyone greet my family? I swear they’ll do you no harm. If I thought they might, I’d never have allowed them to remain when I welcomed you.”

The stomping of tiny, booted feet on the wood-planked floor broke the silence. The youngest pair of boys bolted from behind their sisters, who shouted in unison, “Troy, Eirik, no.” Heedless of their sisters’ cries, the boys threw themselves at Freya, arms outstretched to embrace her. “By the Two Holies, no!”

The boys hung upon Freya by fists full of her gray winter coat. “Doggy!”

Ragnar became indignant at hearing his mother called “dog” for the second time that day.

I looked askance at him. “*Only pups. You were one. I remember ...*”

The hot indignation faded and turned into the same annoyance he felt when Raynor stole the last bit of meat from a kill.

Freya, unlike her alpha son, exuded joy. “*Pups. New life. Energy. Hope.*” Her scented thoughts were a jumble, which I doubted even her kin could comprehend. She licked the boys, rolling over on her back, her tail bouncing. She let out a high-pitched whine and a short howl.

The boys climbed upon their new friend. They pulled, tugged, and giggled as they played. “Nice doggy,” one said, while the other pretended to bark and howl.

Freya licked the boys and rolled about, never complaining at their roughness.

I barked a laugh. “Do you believe me now, dear guests?” Oh, to be a child again with the confidence—or, was it foolishness?—to play with monsters because some stranger said they wouldn’t bite ...

Raynor sidled up to Arve again, tail still tucked between his legs. The wolf nudged Arve’s leg with his nose, and Arve started. Raynor stepped back, lowering his stance to avoid a blow that never came.

Each stared at the other, neither moving nor speaking. They refused even to breathe. Arve held out his hand, and Raynor sniffed, touching the tip of his muzzle to it. When the encounter did not end in disaster, Raynor licked the tips of the stranger’s fingers. Arve laughed, and Raynor licked the boy’s hand all over. Soon, the two were face to face. Raynor licked Arve’s ears, and Arve scratched Raynor’s. The earlier fear had vanished.

Ada, Ragnar’s mate, made her own timid approach toward those who remained by the fire. Though uncertainty tinged all their actions, curiosity overcame fear as the two sides united. The three younger children petted Ada, though the young women ensured they did so with great care, and the she-wolf licked their fingers and nudged their hands in return.

The children’s mother also drew near to Freya, who welcomed the new, gentler hands. With their mother near, the boys grew gentler, too, and Freya rose. She doled out sloppy kisses to the boys and nuzzled their mother’s hand.

Only Aros and Ragnar refused to meet. They glared at one another with the same animosity as before.

I turned to the lad. “Aros.”

The boy gave no reply.

“Ragnar.”

I received only the vaguest of scented replies.

“*Young. New alpha. Protecting pack. True alpha wounded.*”



*“Dangerous. Threatened pack.”*

*“Young. Impulsive. Confused.”* I waited for those scent-images to settle, but the alpha’s fiery anger remained.

*“Threatened pack,”* the wolf replied.

*“Make peace. Welcome him.”*

Silence.

*“Ragnar, Alpha of Four. Rune, Alpha of Five. Make peace. Offer protection. Enlarge pack.”*

Ragnar narrowed his eyes and scented the image of a wolf rolling before his alpha. The wolf broke his gaze with Aros, softened his stance, and approached his rival.

Aros tensed, flexing his hand. He made that same rhythmic huffing sound deep in his throat.

“Aros”—I stepped beside him—“Ragnar will make peace if you allow him. He’s the alpha of his pack and, for the time, you are the alpha of yours, at least as he perceives you. He only wanted to protect his pack, and that’s something you can appreciate, I think. Make peace, and he will consider you as his own, protect you as his own.”

Aros glared at me from under his hood. “He’d have killed me. He—”

“Lad, you drew a knife on his brother. What was he to do? What would you have done if someone pulled a knife on yours?”

“The other one snuck up on Arve; what was I to think?”

“You can see no harm was meant.” I pointed to Raynor and Arve, who wrestled with one another a few paces away.

Ragnar stopped just outside Aros’ reach.

“See? Ragnar will make peace if you will. Do what’s best for your family and meet him.”

The young man’s steely eyes softened. “Are you sure he will no—”

“Ragnar will consider you as his own. He would give his life for you. That’s what he means by coming to meet you.”

Aros sighed and nodded but did not move.

I gave him a push—a leap of faith is often a precipitous, forced freefall at first—and he knelt before Ragnar, holding out his upturned hand. Ragnar lowered his nose and sniffed. Aros flinched but put his hand back out, and Ragnar placed a paw upon it.

When all had made their greetings and amends, I clapped my hands. “All right. Now, let’s get your poor horses out of this blizzard. Raynor, Arve.”

Raynor and Arve both leapt up.

“Aros.”

He rose and turned his back to his former enemy.

“Go fetch your horses, lads. Raynor will guide you.”

Arve looked at Raynor then at me. “He’ll scare the horses, no?”

Raynor cocked his head at the young man and whined.

“He’ll stay far enough away and downwind. The horses will never know he’s there.”

Arve nodded, and he and his brother wrapped their cloaks around themselves. Raynor leapt out the door and into the storm, barking at his charges to follow.

“Give them as much food and water as they need. If they need blankets, you can find those in the stable, too.”

Both boys nodded and departed.

I turned to their mother, who had taken the twins to her side. “Now, let me take a look at your husband.”

RRR

### CHAPTER III

*To care for the bodies of the ill and dying, to bear their shame, is the highest art after the cura animarum, for care of bodies is analogous to the work of the Two. Yea, he who practices this art with diligence earns for himself a place of honor in the age to come.*

— From *Enchiridion Artium Hypocrathekeris*

R

The unconscious man, Harvald, lay on the bearskin rug before the fire, his body covered with the cloaks of his family. With every rasping breath he took, he shuddered. The eldest daughters knelt at his side and wiped his sweaty brow with the cloths and handkerchiefs they had scrounged together.

The children all watched me with sorrowful eyes as I knelt at their father's side. I stripped the cloaks away and slipped an arm behind his shoulders and under his knees, the damp fur of the bearskin brushing against my bare forearms.

With him in my arms, I strode across the once-polished hardwood floor, which was now scuffed and claw-marked, to the bedroom. Every step elicited an agonized moan from Harvald, and I tried shifting his weight about in my arms to reduce his pain, but no matter how I tried, he was in constant pain. Every muscle in his body was in rigor—his fingers had curled into tight fists, and the tendons of his wrists and neck jumped out. His sweat bled through his clothes and coated my arms, fever-heat radiating from his skin.

The bedroom, which many lords and ladies had once occupied back when I rented my home as a summer getaway, was cool and dim. The room was full of opulent furnishings—a heavy wardrobe, vanity, and silvered glass, bedside tables, and a carpet of the softest dyed Sviari dromedary wool—but the darkness obscured much. Indeed, apart from a layer of dust that covered everything, there was no better place to lay the man.

Calling for the top, dust-covered linens to be stripped, I laid Harvald in the oversized, four-poster bed, its curtains wide open. His wife, who had freely revealed her name—the laws of hospitality forbade a host to make such inquiries before a meal was served—was Gale, had acted before I finished speaking.

I wiped my sweat-coated hands upon my pant legs and spoke, “Forgive me, ma’am, but for your husband’s sake, I must ask you some pointed questions. I will make them as few as necessary.” Before she could reply, I continued, “Did someone send you to seek help from me?”

Gale blinked uncomprehendingly. “No, Master Rune. We come from the far west, ’cross the mountains—you can tell we’ve traveled far, no doubt. We were—are goin’ to Ebria, but this storm came up, and we could go no farther. When we came to the crossroads and saw this lodge was closer than the town ...”

I wanted to ask why they had chosen a location as far as Ebria—it was nearly a thousand miles from my home to Ebria, and another nine-hundred or so from here to the nearest mountain pass in the west—but I focused on the matter at hand.

“I understand. Now, I can treat your husband, if you’ll suffer it.”

“Master Rune, are you—”

“I’ve been many things, Gale. But, aye, I’m a hypocratheker.”

Her mouth hung open ever so slightly, and she squinted.

“You’d call me a barber-surgeon.”

She put a hand to her mouth. “Then, Master Rune, ’tis Holy Andar who brought us to you. Praise him.”

I wished I could have denied her words. Instead, I affirmed them, “Amen. So it seems. Still, I must have your answer. May I—”

“Aye, do whate’er you believe necessary. I place his life in your hands.” She bowed, and I inclined my head.

I stripped Harvald of his outwear. He, like all his family, wore heavy woolen clothes—a kaftan and belt, a woolen, outer tunic and under tunic of linen that both tied at the breast, sturdy pants, winingas, and calf-high, turn-down leather boots—all colored with the soft pastoral colors favored in the west—the greens and yellows of the pasture lands in the foothills, and the pale blue of the open sky—and hemmed with colorful geometric embroidery.

I discarded Harvald’s kaftan, and Gale snatched and folded it at once, setting it and every other piece of clothing I cast aside upon the dresser opposite the bed.

“When did he fall ill?” I asked as I unlaced his tunics. “What were his symptoms?”

“He fell ill—well, ill as he is now—four days back. He had a fever, sweats, shakes, and his whole body was stiff as ’tis now. He’d groan through the lon’ hours of the night, shakin’ like he was caught up in a ground-shaker.”

I squinted as I tried to understand her accent, which I had not heard in decades.

“Any problems breathing? Or vomiting, seizures, di—”

Her eyes were uncomprehending. I would need to use simpler terms.

“Fits, the flux, or the like?”

She blushed and stammered.

“I’m sorry. I know this—”

She straightened her back, brushed out her skirt, and cleared her throat as the blush faded.

“No, Master Rune, you must know—you’re no our host alone now.”

As she spoke, I tried unsuccessfully to remove my patient’s tunic painlessly, but as I lifted his back off the bed, he groaned pitifully.

Gale gasped as if she herself had been hurt—how could anyone doubt a husband and wife were one?—but she recomposed herself.

“Aye, all these, but no the fits. His arms and legs shake lightly and become stiff, like ropes pulled fast, though.”

“I see.” I removed Harvald’s outer tunic. “I’ll need towels from the kitchen and washroom. It’s the door left of the fireplace. Have one of your children fetch—”

Gale bowed and rushed out mid-sentence.

Harvald moaned again as I crooked his undertunic over his head. The foul scent of his long-unwashed, filthy body poured off him, and I tossed his tunic into the growing pile of clothes with a grimace. Even in the dim firelight that entered from the living room, Harvald’s skin was pale—no, ashen—and not just in comparison with my darker olive-brown complexion. Even compared to a westerner’s fair skin, he was pallid.

I poked and prodded as I was trained to do. I spotted a few bed sores—undoubtedly from lying in the bed of a wagon for so long—on his shoulders and hips. When I palpated his abdomen, the muscles of which were drawn tight to reveal Harvald’s well-muscled frame, I still found no cause of his illness. Thus, I slid my hands up toward his neck and noted the few great purple and black welts from bruised ribs—I would have to ask Gale about those—and some minor scrapes, which were healing nicely.

Then, though it disgusted me, I set my ear to his hairy, clammy chest. His breathing was shallow and labored, and his heart beat too speedily for a man at rest, but this also revealed nothing new. I pressed his swollen neck—the taut muscles pulled his face into a stark grimace—and a tremor of pain shot through Harvald’s body as he coughed. When the coughing ceased, I felt along

his square jaw and ran my fingers through his coarse, unkempt red beard, which contained flecks of spittle and what could only have been dried vomit.

As I worked, Gale returned with a pile of heavy towels made of the finest southern cotton. “Master Rune, my daughters found these ...” She held out the fine towels. “But”—she pulled them back before I could grab one and offered me a stack of tattered rags she had found under the finer towels—“surely you mean to use these.”

“No, I do not. Those”—I nodded at the rags—“are for cleaning boots and floors. They’re certainly not for my guests.” Before she could protest, I snatched a towel and wiped away the layer of grime and filth from Harvald’s torso.

“Before he came down with this sickness, did he get injured at all? An animal bite, a cut, a gash? It needn’t have been great, only something deep enough to break the skin.”

As I waited for her answer, I examined his eyes, which were also unremarkable apart from their brilliant emerald color. I pried his mouth open, too, and braced myself for the stench. Still, I found nothing remarkable apart from a few missing teeth. There was still no explanation for his suffering, but that was all too often the case with the sick.

“Aye, Master Rune. Nigh two weeks back, we walked alongside the wagons to lighten the horses’ load, and my Harvald stepped upon a nail, which pierced his sole. He sat upon the cart and pulled the nail out without e’en a groan of pain. He was no e’en goin’ to bandage his foot since it did no bleed, but I did make him wrap it. ’Twas deep, but when I had fixed him up, he kept on goin’ as though ’twere nothin’.

“No more than six days passed, and his foot did pain him somethin’ fierce. He grew feverish and took to sittin’ on the driver’s seat for the pain and weariness. He grew weaker and once did faint and fall headlon’ to the road. By the grace of Andar, he missed the wheels and did no break his neck. You can imagine from there ...”

“Aye.” His fall from the wagon explained the scrapes, cracked ribs, and bruises, but the nail wound concerned me most.

I unlaced his first boot, undid the winingas around his foot and calf, and looked for signs of a wound. Finding none, I moved to the other foot. This boot was already unlaced, and when I did little more than touch it, Harvald writhed. As I removed the boot from his swollen foot, the smell of necrosis filled my nostrils. Though I had smelled a faint odor of decay on him from the moment

his sons had brought him in, I had paid it little mind—many sicknesses caused such smells without apparent cause—but now it demanded my attention.

I unwrapped the cloth that bound the wound but stopped when Harvald cried out. Upon the fabric were bits of skin that had torn away. I excused myself to fetch my hypocratheker's bag from a high shelf of the storeroom and larder. With surgical sheers in hand, I cut away the fabric.

Underneath, Harvald's foot was a swollen mass of red, purple, and black. The stench of sweat, decay, and pain were nearly unbearable, but I stilled myself, as I had been trained to do.

When Gale saw Harvald's foot, and when the smell filled her nostrils, the candleholder in her hand trembled. With her free hand, she made the Sign of the Two on her forehead and uttered a swift prayer. "Oh, the Two have mercy."

"Amen."

I ran my fingertips over the gangrenous foot, turning it toward the light. My night vision, though better than most men's because of what I was, still did not pick out finer details.

His skin burned, and the lightest touch elicited what surely would have been screams if Harvald could have opened his jaw. Despite the pain, I forged ahead and tried to focus while Gale muttered her prayers.

On the sole of his foot, a great abscess had formed, and angry, venous, red tendrils shot outward from the wound. The marks wound up to his ankle, like ivy climbing a wall, but stopped abruptly. Indeed, not only the tendrils but all the necrosis had stopped.

"That you bandaged his wound and left his foot wraps on so tightly may be the only reason your husband is still alive."

Gale made no sound or motion.

"I must work quickly now." I spoke more to myself than to Gale.

Unhesitatingly, I took the fabric sheers and finished prepping my patient. I cut along the outer seams of Harvald's linen trousers and soiled smallclothes so they would be easy to repair. Pulling the clothes from underneath him, I tossed them into a heap.

The light from the candle shifted, no longer shining upon me as Gale knelt at my side. She wrapped her arms around my knees again as a suppliant. "Oh, m'lord, do no shame yourself so." Tears poured down her cheeks. "What shame I brin' upon you, m'lord, that I let you tend like a servant upon my family. We soil your hands, your bed, and the air with our shameful and poverty." Her words became incoherent sobs and gasps.

I glanced at her husband's naked, filth-covered body. If she had known what I had seen in my life, what I had done and dreamed of doing, she would not speak thus, for I bore deep within a shame greater than that of having my hands dirtied with piss and shit.

"Dear woman, th—"

Freya's bright-eyed face poked through the doorway. She looked first to Gale then to me. "*Such grief. Shame ...*" The images Freya scented were of wolves mourning the loss of a pack member, of a lone-wolf wandering with his head down as a storm buffeted him. "*Death?*"

I scented the image of stormy skies on the horizon. "*Must work. Comfort her.*" This image was of the pack surrounding a wounded companion, of one wolf setting her head upon the wounded's chest.

Freya nudged Gale's cheek, and Gale hung upon the wolf instead of me. Freya licked her, and Gale burrowed her fingers into the wolf's thick winter coat. Freya leaned into the embrace and let the woman pour tears into her fur.

One of the young ladies also poked her head into the dim room. Hearing her steps, I rushed to cover her father's nakedness. It was a hypocratheker's responsibility to bear a patient's shame so that others would be unburdened of it. Therefore, our art was called *noble*.

"Ma, is—" The young lady wrinkled her nose.

"E'erythin' is all right, Erika. Please, go—"

"Ma, 'tis no all right. If you leave the little ones in the dark, fine, but do no hide the truth from me. Aros, Haldis, and Arve, too, know somethin' is wron'. You canna hide this from us, Mama."

Gale wiped her eyes on a handkerchief she pulled from her sleeve. "Your father is no well, Erika."

Erika embraced her mother. "'Tis obvious, Ma, but what has you so in tears?"

"He ... his ..." She choked. "M-Ma-Master Rune, p-please."

I folded my hands behind my back and sighed. I loathed this part of the job more than working with the ill and the dying.

"Your husband, your father, is suffering from a disease called tetanus. You might call it lock-jaw, or—"

"Lock-jaw?" Erika gasped. "The wild man's disease? How's that possible? Ne'er've we gone north of the village, least no so far as to where the wilds begin."

"Peace. You may also call it bone-break fever. It's not only a disease of the wilds."



Gale embraced her daughter, her sobbing renewed. "'T-tis a d-death sentence ..."

I worked to keep my voice level. "Only if it goes untreated. Now, your father's case has progressed quickly, but I'll do my best for him."

Gale released her daughter. "Master Rune, you must do whate'er you can."

"I will, dear woman." I paused to collect myself. "However, your husband also has a serious gangrene infection. Because of this and the terrible cold he's been exposed to, most of his foot is diseased. When I stabilize his fever and muscle spasms, I'm afraid I'll have to amputate."

Gale threw herself back upon her daughter. "Oh, I pray 'twill no be so."

"If I don't get the infection under control soon, it will spread. I'll be able to do little after that. Of course, if I can control the gangrene and tetanus both without taking his foot, I'll take the least drastic action. Still, you need to prepare yourself."

Erika looked over her weeping mother's shoulder. Her blue eyes were full of something I did not know. "What do you need from us?"

"A pitcher of cool water—there's a pump in the kitchen—and a cup from the mantel. I also need clean cloths—you can find them where you found the towels. I know night is some hours off, but you'll need to set a watch for your father. Likewise, make up a hearty stew or soup, something your father can drink. He desperately needs his strength. The kitchen is just apart from the washroom."

Erika nodded and pulled back from her mother. "Ma, Da needs us now."

"And give your mother some tea. In the storeroom—and I'm sorry about the mess in there; the wolves brought their quarry in before you arrived—there's a tea marked *solvens* on one of the shelves. It'll serve her well."

When the women left, I took a towel and cleaned Harvald as well as I could. I covered him again, wiped my hands clean, procured my scalpel, and set to work. I laid several towels at Harvald's feet and gently fit a few more under his injured foot. I ran the scalpel through a candle flame and made the first incision. It took little effort to pierce the taut skin, and though I had done similar operations, I had to hold back an involuntary gag. Few were able to numb themselves to the putrid smell of gangrenous flesh.

As I drained the wound, Harvald moaned more loudly than before but did not kick or pull away.

I prepared to bandage the wound when the door opened. Gale and her eldest sons brought in everything I had requested and set everything upon the bedside table or the high-backed dining chair they had also brought in. Their job done, Aros and Arve left while Freya and Gale remained.

Gale folded her hands as if in prayer, and though I believed she was about to drop to her knees again, she only bowed her head. “Master Rune, how is he?”

“Well, I’ve drained the abscess.” I grabbed a scrap of linen and wiped blood and pus from my fingertips, throwing the soiled linen onto the growing pile at my feet. “That should help prevent the infection from spreading quite as fast and ease the pain.”

“Thank the Two.”

“Amen.” I took a smaller towel, folded it, and dipped it into the bucket of frigid water they had brought. I placed the dripping cloth onto Harvald’s forehead, brushing a few strands of straight auburn hair away. “Now we can tackle these other symptoms. If he goes on much longer in this state, even with the wound taken care of, he’s going to have fits.”

As I spoke, Gale soaked more of the small cotton cloths and handed them to me.

“Refresh these every half-hour, at minimum.” I placed them across his neck, wrists, ankles, chest and, folding back the cloth laid across his lap, two on his groin. “Likewise, give him at least two—better three or four—glasses of cold water over the course of every hour. When the food is ready, you’ll need to feed him. Don’t fret if he soils the bed.” I took a cup of water and lifted Harvald’s head with my left hand. I touched the cup to his lips and poured the cold water down his throat. He drank greedily.

“When you give him water, be careful he doesn’t aspir—choke. He must have his head kept up.” I tipped the cup toward him once more and wiped away what dribbled down into his beard.

“Anythin’ you say, Master Rune.” Gale held out her hand. “If I may?” She took the cup and whispered into her husband’s ear as she gave him another sip.

“You’ll need to change the linens and bathe him often—he must stay clean, dry, and cool.” I took the chair and motioned for her to sit. She did but continued to lean over Harvald. She stroked his long, undercut hair, and ran her gentle hand down his bearded cheek.

“I’ll be back with some physic soon. Holler if you need anything at all.”

Freya remained by Gale’s side, and I scented, “*Care for her.*”

“*As I do for you.*”

RRR