

## Wolf's Paw

by Summer Hanford

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Leaning over in his saddle, Andorr swung his greatsword in a low arc, shattering the farmer's poorly forged blade. A horrified look flashed across the peasant's face before he was swept under the hooves of the galloping warhorse. Andorr didn't pause to see if the man was dead. He didn't need to. A burdened form fleeing toward the large communal barn caught his attention, and he yanked the reins. Freshly turned soil sprayed around him as he charged through a garden in pursuit of his new goal.

Inside, the barn was dark in contrast to the high afternoon sun. He slid off his horse, moving forward slowly as his eyes adjusted. A woman with long bright hair was kicking hay from the top of a trapdoor, a boy of about four in her arms. As Andorr's metal shod feet hit the hard packed earth, she turned, thrusting the boy into the pile of hay behind her. Andorr advanced in measured steps, bloodied sword held loosely before him. Her face flushed with anger, the woman grabbed a pitchfork from the straw beside her.

"You will not have this boy," she snarled, the improvised weapon gripped tightly in both hands.

His blade snaked out, the force of the blow combining with her too tight grip to rip the pitchfork from her hands. He'd seen mothers react like this before, throwing themselves against him desperately to save a child. He reached up and tore off the left sleeve of her dress, revealing a smooth arm unblemished by the Dragon brand. The lack of that marking spared her life.

Andorr drew back one hand, knowing it was wiser to render her unconscious before taking the child. He'd made that mistake once, turning from a dying woman to enforce the king's law on her Dragon-marked child, only to have her leap on him from behind. She'd died even as the rusty kitchen knife she wielded snuck through a narrow gap in the side of his armor and broke off there. Though the blade had been quickly removed, the wound festered and nearly cost him his life. It was the closest anyone had ever come to killing him.

This child's arm, bare in his short smock, already condemned him. The incorruptible Dragon God of Judgment glared at Andorr from just below the boy's shoulder. It was rare to see one so young so strongly called, but youth was no protection. By order of the king, the boy would die.

The woman braced herself, and he knew as surely as if she'd told him that she intended to try and dodge his blow. Her eyes darted to the fallen pitchfork and back, flashing green anger meeting his impassive gray. He paused for a moment, arm upraised, realizing this girl could not be the mother of the child. An older sister, then, protecting her young sibling.

Andorr's mind spiraled back to his eighth year. The sky had been bright and full with the summer sun, but his wide eyes were fixed on his dying father. As the last of his father's life drained into the dirt at the hooves of the king's mount, Andorr had become aware of his weeping mother, arms clutched round his little sister. Over his sister's golden head, his mother's scared eyes had begged him, pleading with Andorr not to let the king make a slave of her daughter. So he got down on his knees and sworn servitude

to the man who'd just beheaded his father, in order to save the weeping little girl his mother clung to.

“But I will keep her here, son of Andwer.” The king's voice had filled his heart with hatred even as it filled his ears with threats. “Until the price is paid.”

Andorr was jarred back to the present as girl leapt at him, trying to take advantage of his momentary hesitation. He brushed her aside, sending her sprawling to the floor. Sweeping the boy up in his sword arm, he wrenched open the heavy trap door. He shoved the crying child into the hidden refuge and dropped the cover back in place, kicking chaff over the door to conceal it.

He straightened to find the girl staring up at him, her eyes wide with shock. He shouldn't have allowed a witness to his act. If the king found he'd spared even one marked child the past ten years would be for naught. He strode toward her as hooves rang outside.

“This village has been cleansed, Sir.” The knight's voice echoed off the inside of his helmet. He raised his visor, leering at the girl. “I'll take that one off your hands if you like, Sir.”

Looking down, Andorr realized the girl was very pretty, with long auburn hair spilling around her on the floor. “I was going to search this one for hidden brands,” he suggested. He reached down and swung her easily over his shoulder. She let out a screech, her hands drumming like rain on his mettle-encased back.

“It's about time.” The older knight issued a grating laugh. “Too bad for the lot of us you had to take the prettiest one we've seen. But you're the captain.”

Andorr strode to his horse where it stood in the sunlight outside the barn. Tossing the woman over his steed's neck, he pulled himself up behind her with his bloody sword still in hand. He rode to the center of the village, a quick headcount telling him all his men were accounted for.

“To the camp,” he ordered, gesturing with his blade while his other hand held the reins and pinned the struggling girl.

Twenty of the king's knights galloped from the town, leaving bodies and fires behind in a cloud of dust.

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The girl struggled all the way to the camp, persisting long after the jeers of his subordinates died down. They quickly realized he couldn't be baited over his sudden acquisition of this girl after four years of raiding without touching one. They were accustomed to their leader's impassivity and soon talk turned to breaking camp and heading back to the capital in the morning. Generally, they stayed near the king, cleansing villages within a day's ride, but as the eve of the Dragon Year neared, their royal leader ordered them out further and further, cleansing the countryside more thoroughly than ever before.

Andorr harbored respect for those who followed the Dragon God. The Dragon was a harsh master, demanding his followers be branded several times during their lives as their devotion and standing grew. To bow to the Dragon God had once offered the power and responsibility of judgment over others, and the God's favor had been sought, his ranks swollen. At the start of the cleansing, many had died who may have deserved

death, but those who bore the mark now were only the most dedicated. Their hearts belonged to their God beyond fear, and they carried his brand in defiance.

The girl continued to struggle as he carried her to his tent. He dismissed his page with a nod. Outside the tent, men laughed, calling out suggestions to their leader. He ordered the ale barrels broached, as he always did at the end of a longer campaign. Soon the noise would escalate, swelling around them to form a bubble against the dark empty night. Several of the men were already singing, and he could hear the higher pitched murmurs of the camp hangers-on as they greeted the knights' return.

He set her down gently opposite the tent flap, his casual demeanor belying the fact that he was ready to grab her if she tried to run.

“What do you intend to do with me?” Her green eyes once again sparkled in anger.

“I thought you would help me remove my armor, since I've sent my page away to protect your dignity.” He pulled off his helmet, shaking out dark blond hair.

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise before narrowing suspiciously. He tossed the helmet onto the makeshift bed.

“If I help you out of your armor, you'll be free to have your way with me.” She clenched her teeth together tightly after speaking, and he realized she was much more afraid than she wanted to show.

“If that's what I really wanted, I would have let my page stay.” His kept his tone impassive, caring little how the evening went.

“And if I take your word, the word of the Wolf's Paw.” Her tone showed what little she thought of his word. “And help you disrobe, then what do you plan for me?”

“I was going to eat.” He shrugged, pulling off his gauntlets as he spoke.

Reminded of how he'd disarmed her, his eyes sought her hands, but her fingers did not appear to be broken. “If you eat or not is your choice.”

“That is not what I meant, Sir,” she snapped.

He was almost inclined to smile.

“I intend.” The gauntlets landed beside the helmet and his voice muffled slightly as he looked down, pulling at a strap under his arm. “To wait until that lot's asleep and send you on your way. We are not so far from your village as you can't walk back by morning.”

He could feel her eyes on the top of his head and he raised his face, meeting her scrutiny emotionlessly. His men called him the Wolf's Paw because of his unnatural calm, even in battle. They said a calm that absolute could only come from the Wolf God. It served as his surname now, his own having been stripped from his family when his father was revealed as a traitor.

She shivered, perhaps seeing in those gray eyes the same impassivity they would show as he ran her through, should he find reason to. She stepped forward, batting his hands out of the way. Wordlessly, she began loosening the thick leather straps that held his armor in place. A calloused finger slid under her chin, gently tilting her face upward.

“And you will tell no one of the things I have done this day,” he informed her, his tone the cold of a deep winter's night.

“I will not compromise you to the king,” she promised. “He is no friend of mine.”

“The blood of the innocent will be on your hands if I am revealed.”

“I find it hard to believe that the King’s Paw cares about the blood of innocents,” she snapped, using an altered version of his name to show who she thought the real master of his soul was.

“But you do,” he reminded her, eyes revealing nothing as they stared down at her.

His hand dropped and she looked away, continuing her work.

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He ignored the jeers he received the following morning when he informed his men that the girl had slipped out sometime in the night after he’d fallen asleep. He never admonished his men for banter, so long as it did not wander into the realm of insubordination. Banter, he felt, gave vent to the perceived slight his youth was to them, no matter that he was the king’s most accomplished knight. Insubordination, they all knew, was met swiftly and quickly with death. No pleas, no forgiveness, just his unfeeling eyes as he killed.

There were no cheers or flowers as they rode into the capital after nearly a month of absence. He could recall when he’d been very young and the old king alive, that when his father and the other knights came from a campaign, people lined the streets to cheer them safely home. Now the king’s knights were met with furtive glances, the only calls of welcome coming from whores leaning out of upper story windows.

Outside the castle gates, he dismissed his men to the barracks and rode across the drawbridge alone. The guards barely glanced up from their dice as he passed. The king’s eldest son waited for him on the oversized steps that swept up to meet the castle doors.

Nearby, a group of court ladies strode the well-tended lawn, veiled and carrying parasols

to hide them from both the sun and the eyes of lesser-born men. They giggled and tossed pieces of stale bread at peacocks that fled off into the rose garden to escape them.

He rode his horse at a walk on the crushed gravel roadway to avoid kicking up dust, coming to a halt before the future king. He suppressed his annoyance before it began. Andorr preferred when the king sent his second son to deal with him, but these days, Mentus was often sequestered deep in the royal library. The crown prince stood halfway down the steps, making sure he towered over the mounted man before him.

“I have come to report, My Lord,” Andorr called loudly, raising his visor and bowing in the saddle.

It vaguely disgusted him that the prince felt it necessary to stand above him, so he didn't dismount and walk up the steps to speak more privately with the man. Let the whole court hear them converse. Perhaps witnesses would help the prince feel he had more authority over his father's knight.

Most of the court ladies had pursued the peacocks into the rose garden, but one drifted apart, her eyes idly scanning a book of verse. As she wandered near them, Andorr could almost feel her ears seeking their conversation.

“I will take your report, Wolf's Paw,” the crown prince commanded.

Andorr had long ago concluded that the slender man before him was incapable of speaking without a snide tone in his voice, and so gave it no consideration. “The northeast province has been cleansed, Sire,” he reported in flat tones. “All of the followers of the Dragon God have been slain.”

“This is excellent news.” The prince nodded importantly. “My father wishes for you to next cleanse the village of Vinton. The Portent senses resistance there.”

“Yes, Sire.” He bowed again. Andorr turned his horse away, making no issue of the fact that they’d cleansed that town not four months past. The men would be pleased. Vinton was one of the outlying towns which boasted an inn. They usually had to bivouac after raiding a town, but sleeping in beds was better than tents.

“You are not dismissed,” the prince barked.

Containing any reaction, Andorr turned back, catching a flutter of auburn hair as it escaped from beneath the flimsy pink veil of the poetry-reading lady. As if realizing she’d been exposed, her green eyes rose to meet his, flashing with anger even as she pretended to lower them demurely and wander away. He suddenly felt that a trip to Vinton would be wasted. They would find no Dragon brands there.

“You are to leave at first light,” the prince declared, raising his voice further as he felt the lack of attention Andorr was giving him.

“Yes, Sire,” Andorr agreed, annoyed that his perceived lack of obedience would be taken out on his men, for he was sure that the king had not ordered such a hasty departure. He sat rigidly on his horse, eyes impassively focused before him.

“You may go,” the prince decided finally, turning to stomp back up the steps.

Andorr turned his horse slowly, scanning for the pink-veiled lady. She was gone. It had been just a glance, and he saw only her eyes, but he was sure it was the same girl he’d made a silent meal with the evening before. He stared at the spot where she’d been. Was she truly a noblewoman of the court, or was she an imposter? Was it his duty to seek her out and denounce her? Yet if he did, surely she would denounce him.

“Sir Wolf’s Paw.” Another lady had drawn near. This one wore a nearly translucent veil, its shimmer enhancing rather than hiding the delicate features and

flowing blond hair that marked her as Lady Envoline, the most renowned beauty in the kingdom. "I wish a word with the king's knight."

Her ladies in waiting held back, murmuring to each other as they oversaw the conversation. As he had not for the prince, Andorr slid from his horse, bowing as he came to stand before her. "Envoline," he greeted quietly.

"The king has spoken with me, Andorr." She kept her voice low, for only him to hear. "He is worried. He says he feels your loyalty wavering."

He looked down at her, seeing fear in her shining blue eyes. "You know I would never let you come to harm, Envoline." In his mind, he saw her as she was before their father had died, a little girl of four running barefoot through the fields, blond hair and laughter streaming out behind her as butterflies swirled through the blue sky. He remembered his promise to their mother as her eyes slid shut that final time. He would keep Envoline safe.

"He says Prince Geofin and I may be married at the dawning of the seasons of the Dragon," she continued, ignoring his reassurance. "But this will only come to pass if you remain loyal through the Night."

The Dragon Night. Every thirty-third year was a Dragon Year, the Dragon God of Judgment usurping the Wolf God to take power for four seasons, but every ninety-nine years, the Dragon God turned red on the eve of his seasons. The Red Dragon God was not one of Judgment, but of Retribution. It was then that the followers of the Dragon God were infused with his power, and through them, the God brought a reckoning to all men. It was a time when great sins were paid for. Their king, his soul filled with guilt

and that guilt fanned by his Portent's prophesies, feared the Night of the Red Dragon more than death itself.

"I swore nearly ten years ago to serve him until the dawn of the Dragon Year," he reminded her, his flat tones hiding his frustration at her doubt.

"This is important to me." Her blue eyes pleaded with him. "To us. Once I am married to the king's youngest son, we will never need to fear being cast out of court again."

"You will be free with the Dragon Dawn." He resisted the urge to shake her. As a lowly knight, he was never permitted to lay his hands on a noblewoman, even his own sister. "You don't have to marry him. We could go home, to Father's lands."

"Back to that hovel?" She sniffed. "I will be a princess once I am married to Geoftin. Don't be ridiculous, Andorr."

"Our people need us, Envoline. With the Dragon Dawn, the price of Father's treason will be paid." She did not know how much he'd paid. "We have to rebuild what I have spent years tearing down in the name of our king's paranoia."

"Andorr!" she gasped. "Do not say such things of the king. To speak so is treason in itself."

"We could go home," he began again. In his heart, he saw her once again the carefree, laughing little girl she'd been before they'd been brought here.

"This is my home," she interrupted him coldly. "Why you care so much for those peasants who once looked to our father, I'll never know. It isn't as if they're real people, Andorr. They're just peasants."

He made no reply. The image of his little sister as she used to be warred with the painted and pampered young woman before him.

“Don’t ruin this, Andorr,” she hissed. “All of my future plans hinge on this marriage.”

His mind shuddered back from her calculating tone. He deliberately turned her words aside, focusing on his own world. He was the king’s knight. Tomorrow, he must go to a village to the south and kill anyone who followed the Dragon God, and then he would sit in their inn and drink their ale while his men harassed the serving women.

“There is a girl at court,” he asked suddenly, before Envoline could dismiss him. “She has auburn hair and green eyes. She was reading poetry while I talked with the prince.”

“We call her the librarian.” His sister’s laugh was disdainful. “She is no one. The daughter of some lesser noble. They say she is here to tend to her father, but we all know her family hopes she might find a husband. They were summoned by the king for my wedding. Don’t set your sights so low, my brother. Once I’m married to Geofin, you’ll have your pick of women. Maybe you can even find one to drag back to Father’s lands with you and lock away in that dismal castle.”

Still laughing, she turned away, leaving him. He closed his visor and remounted, wondering if he would feel green eyes on him as he rode back across the drawbridge.

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As he’d expected, the men were not happy to leave so early, but he obeyed orders and started them out at dawn. If they rode hard, they would reach the village by early

evening. With any luck, they could finish the killing today. He slept better, knowing the killing was already done.

The villagers huddled in their low houses as the knights galloped into the center of their farming town. Most of the villages in the kingdom were arranged the same way, with a collection of central houses around an open square where much of the work was done. Communal barns were erected in a ring around the homes, some for livestock and others as needed for the products of their fields. The neat little houses all had vegetable gardens, and outside the ring of barns were the fields where the men worked to grow enough to feed themselves and make their tithe to the king.

“Split up, get them out,” he ordered. “I want to see the arm of every man, woman and child here.” He raised his voice so the whole village could hear him. “If they come quietly, don’t kill them. If they refuse, do what you must.”

With a gesture to his men to begin the search, he rode onto the porch of the nearest farmhouse, kicking the door in with one metal clad foot.

“Assemble in the name of the king,” he roared into the house.

Slowly, an old man and woman crept forward.

“Into the square,” he ordered, compassionless. “Bare your left arms. Is this your whole household?”

“Yes,” the man stuttered, looking away.

“I asked if this was your whole household,” Andorr barked, his sword out and at the man’s throat. The old woman whimpered.

“Our son and his family are gone,” she hurried to reveal. “They went to the capital for the summer fair.”

“Half the town is empty.” The old man spoke as bravely as he could with a sword at his throat. “They say the king’s son will marry. The seeds are in. The weather’s good. Everyone has gone to the celebration.”

“Square, now,” Andorr barked, backing his horse away so they could comply. They hurried out to join the others assembling in the center of the town.

“There’s hardly no one here, Sir,” his second reported as Andorr rode over to inspect the small group of terrified citizens. “Say they’ve all gone to the capital.”

“Check their arms,” Andorr ordered and his men began sorting the farmers, tearing the sleeves off of anyone who wasn’t quick enough for them. He noticed there were very few women present, and not one of them was of an age or complexion to tempt the knights.

Across the square, he saw one of his men come out of a house with a makeshift torch. Andorr spurred his horse forward, ignoring the squeal of fear from the villagers as he stormed past them. The torch arched upward, silhouetted against the darkening sky as it hurtled toward one of the large barns. Rising up in his saddle, Andorr plucked it from the air as he galloped by. Wheeling his horse around, he turned to face his men.

“Don’t burn anything.” His voice was emotionless. He handed the torch back to the slack-jawed knight who’d thrown it. “We’re staying in the inn this night. Did you want to spend half the evening putting it out first?”

“No, Sir.” The man looked abashed.

“We are done with burning.” He raised his voice so all the men could hear. “If we burn every village in the kingdom, there’ll be a rough winter in store for us all. After the midsummer festival, the king will not need so many of us for the cleansing. If he has

no villages left, he may decide we'd make better builders. If he has no food, he may decide we'd make better farmers, and that's if we even have enough unburned tithe to make it through the winter season. Think on that before you destroy anything else."

His men were staring at him in shock. He realized it was not the content of his speech that startled them, but the passion behind it. He was startled too. He hadn't broken his monotone in ten years.

"Send them back to their houses," he ordered, his voice again even. "Check the inn. Once it is cleansed, we are done for the night. If anyone is staying in it, send them to stay with the villagers. Their houses are half empty."

He rode back to the center of town, eyes once again impassive as he watched his men haul several patrons from the inn and kill them. Others, they simply turned out into the town. He noticed that the old man and woman whose door he'd ruined took in a merchant and his son, the younger man fixing the door while they waited on supper. Their eyes met briefly, the boy looking away quickly in fear. Andorr sighed.

When all was settled, he gave his horse to his page and had the boy strip off his armor right there in the inn's stable. Leaving it to be cleaned, he walked out into the night beyond the ring of light created by the village. The somewhat subdued singing of his men drifted through the air behind him.

He recalled when he'd been knighted five years ago, the youngest to receive the honor. Mentus, whom he'd trained with, had stolen wine for them from the servants' quarters. They hadn't known the servants had access to only the roughest wine, and it was awful, but they drank it anyway. That was the last night he'd ever sang, the last night before he became part of the cleansing, and Mentus was relegated to the castle, the

end of his training making it no longer proper for the king's middle son to associate with a knight.

He felt her draw near even through his memories. "I knew you'd warn them."

"It isn't as if you and the prince tried to keep your destination a secret."

He could imagine her eyes flashing as she spoke, annoyed she hadn't been able to sneak up on him. "You are not one of them." He knew this to be true. He'd seen her arm. Not all of the four Gods required such a show of dedication, but the Dragon God did. All of its followers bore the brand.

"No," she agreed, coming to stand beside him. "If you knew, why did you come?"

"I was ordered to come." He shrugged, staring out into the night.

"But you knew the order was pointless." He was surprised at the anger in her tone. "So why follow it?"

"I swore to follow the orders of the king."

"To protect her, Lady Envoline?" Her voice went harsh with scorn as she said his sister's name. "Is that the innocent you were so worried about? I don't know what sweet lies she's whispered in your ear, but lies they were. She fully intends to marry Geofin on the solstice. You're just another one of her pawns."

"Yes," he agreed, resigned to the fact. "I surely am."

"Doesn't that make you angry?"

She was, he could tell. He wondered if she was always angry. He shrugged.

"I heard your speech in the square," she pressed. "It was a strange speech for a man whose reputation hinges on not caring."

“I don't feel like burning things anymore.” He looked at her now, his gray eyes searching her angry ones. “There comes a point when you've burned enough things.”

“You're younger than I thought,” she blurted. She blushed, looking down in momentary confusion before pinning him with an intense gaze again. “Will the killing really stop after the Dragon Night?”

“No.” His voice showed no emotion. “The king is not sane. The killing will never stop, but I will.”

“I will not.” She was angry again. “I will keep seeking ways to thwart him.”

“There is little you can do.”

“Anything I can do is better than nothing,” she snapped. “And certainly better than what you do.”

“You may go,” he told her, turning back toward the inn.

“What do you mean, I may go?” she sputtered incredulously.

“I have decided you are not a direct threat to the king.” He didn't bother to stop walking. “I will not be killing you tonight.”

“You what?” She'd caught up to him now. She pulled on his arm, but he ignored her. “Stop this instant. I have something to say to you.”

Against his better judgment, he stopped, turning to face her. The slap she gave him rang out in the night. Surprisingly, she hit hard enough that it almost hurt.

“That's what I think of you and your permitting me to live,” she snarled. At his lack of reaction, she slapped him again, her whole body shaking with rage. “I hope never to lay eyes on your again, Sir Andorr Wolf's Paw, or to hear your ridiculous name spoken.”

She whirled away, rich auburn hair flying past his face. The scent of mysterious flowers followed in its wake as she stomped off into the night.

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He assembled the men late, taking the journey back more slowly than they'd come as there was no element of surprise involved in returning to the capital. He told himself he wanted the men and horses rested for the vigil they would be keeping the following night and stopped early at an inn that was still several hours ride out. The men made no comment, subdued by his speech the night before. He could feel their looks as they wondered that his passionless veneer had cracked, and what they would do once the cleansing was past.

He arrived back at the castle alone at midmorning of the last day of the Serpent Seasons, having dismissed his men to ready for their all-night watch outside the castle gates. A guard saw him and slipped inside the giant double doors. The king's heir must have been near for he arrived as Andorr halted his horse at the bottom step.

"Where have you been?" the king's eldest son raged. "Father is most angry with you, Wolf's Paw."

"I was resting the men." He didn't bother to raise his visor. "They have a long night ahead."

"My father wants to see you immediately," the prince barked, fully exploiting this chance to dress down the finest warrior in the kingdom.

Andorr slid from his horse, tossing the reigns to a guard who hurried down the steps.

“Then I should not be standing here talking to you.” He snapped his visor up, eyeing the prince coldly as he strode past him.

Andorr's long legs easily took the steps in twos. The king's heir sputtered for a moment before following in the knight's wake. As Andorr crested the steps, he looked about casually, but the girl was nowhere to be seen. In fact, there were no ladies about. He assumed they were making ready for the royal wedding.

The castle was cool and dark, emphasizing the warmth of the midsummer's day he'd been standing in. Windows high up in the broad hallway stood open to let out the heat and illuminate murals of long-past battles. As he approached the throne room, the murals changed, the old ones having been arbitrarily painted over by hastily done images of the current ruler. The doors to the throne room stood open, the guards snapping to attention as he neared.

Inside, the king dominated, his broad shoulders a frame for the massive purple and gold robes that filled the throne, spilling over the dais to almost touch the floor. In his left hand, he held an intricately wrought staff, encrusted with jewels and topped with a single flame-shaped black agate. The stone was said to hold the magic of mighty kings past, and legend told that when its power was brought to bear by those of true blood, the agate would waken to a fiery red.

“I was beginning to question your loyalties, my knight,” the king boomed. His fifty-odd years had as little effect on his voice as on his warrior's frame. “To me and to certain others.”

“My King.” In one smooth motion, Andorr removed his helm and swept into a low bow, coming down to one knee.

“You may approach.” The king held out a bejeweled hand. Andorr rose easily and strode forward, dropping to one knee again to kiss the king’s seal. “You see, my heir,” the king called to the back of the room where his eldest son lurked. “The man is as loyal as ever. He would pay any price to the Black Serpent himself to protect the innocence of his sister.”

The prince scowled and turned away, no doubt to slink into one of the nearby rooms that offered more private ways to listen to the voice of the king.

Would? Andorr found himself thinking as he knelt before his king, not yet released to rise. I have.

“And what a lovely lady we have made of her for you,” his master added, gesturing for the knight to rise. Andorr stepped back as he did so, for it was forbidden to stand so near to the king. “The blood of the old nobility in her has been polished by our court, making her fit to be one of us. Even today, she has proven her loyalty to me.” The king paused, eyeing his knight speculatively. “You will go now, Wolf’s Paw,” he ordered, “and prepare yourself and your men for the vigil tonight. They will hold the castle gates, letting none pass, but you shall stand at my side through the night.” The king’s eyes narrowed, glinting darkly under heavy brows. “In the morning, you will give your sister forever to my son.”

“Yes, My King,” Andorr agreed, bowing again.

The king made a gesture of dismissal. Andorr straightened and walked back between the rows of banners, his eyes on the clear sunlight sliding slowly along the walls of the outer corridor.

“My knight.” The king’s voice slid smoothly across the room, turning him back, bringing him to his knee again, one foot resting on the threshold of the doorway. “You are to adopt courtly dress. I want to see no harsh metal or other accouterments of war about you. You will be part of a wedding, after all.”

“Yes, My King,” he agreed.

Andorr waited until he was sure the king would speak no more before coming to his feet and turning in one motion, long strides taking him quickly away from the throne room and into the bright light of a summer’s day. He did not pause as he burst from the massive doorway. He was down the steps and onto his horse before the crown prince could reach the top step. He gave the future king an expressionless glance, wheeling his mount and galloping from the castle.

In the barracks, he sequestered himself in his small captain’s chamber, performing the ritual his father should have, in preparation to give his sister away. He knelt at the small, lone window. On a trunk, for he had no table, he filled a basin with cool, clear water, bathing first his hands and then face. After patting them dry, he placed a heavy white candle in the center of the shallow bowl. Lighting it, he lowered his head in prayer, beseeching the White Goddess to bless the woman he would relinquish in her marriage, her children and her home. He carried out the ritual numbly, his mind blank as he refused to think of the people who should have been there, or whether or not his sister even cared for the blessing. It was his duty, and so he preformed the ceremony.

The womenfolk had the greater task, purifying and readying the wedding chamber. A new bed should have been brought by the groom’s family, and adorned with freshly sewn linens. A canopy would be sewn to hang overhead, the Goddess’s blessings

whispered into every stitch, the symbol of the white phoenix spread across it to bear witness to the wedding night. Candles would be made, set about, and lit. They would permeate the air with the scent of the small white flowers that grew in the shadow of the Goddess's temples.

As the family could afford, the chamber would be filled with bridal gifts, the girl's dowry. Everything from fresh bread, to yards of cloth, furniture, or jewelry might be brought to the room and set out to greet the couple on their wedding night. Andorr could only hope Envoline's ladies performed some of these duties for her.

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He returned to the castle just before sunset. He could feel the nervousness of his men as they followed him. Their warriors' world was further pushed askew by his fabric-clad back and unarmored horse. He had no weapon about him, not owning or caring to borrow the flimsy, decorative sword a noble would wear under the circumstances.

"You will stand here tonight," he ordered them as they reached the drawbridge set in the outer wall of the castle. Around them, townspeople peered through windows, unsure if the knights were part of the Midsummer's Eve celebration or something to be feared. "You are to let no one approach the castle. You will circle in twos, always in sight of the group before you. The rest of you will keep station before the drawbridge. You may retire at dawn."

"Yes, Sir," they chorused.

Under them, their horses fidgeted nervously.

"And tomorrow, Sir?" his second asked.

“And tomorrow, you will have new orders from the king,” he informed them. “Until dawn.” With a nod, he turned and rode across the drawbridge toward the still-open castle doors. Andorr could hear the ropes creak as the heavy wood was raised behind him. The voice of his second dividing the men into groups of two was drowned out as the drawbridge boomed shut.

He gave his horse to a page, the boy blinking in surprise at Andorr's lack of armor or weapons. Not betraying any sign of his reluctance, Andorr took the castle steps two at a time. The guards pulled back slightly as he passed between them, apparently finding the expressionless mask of his face even more disconcerting out of uniform.

The hallway in the castle was dark but for small squares of red light hitting the east wall as the sun set outside. Before him, the giant chandeliers in the throne room blazed with candles above a full assembly of nobles. The king, he knew, believed in keeping his enemies close. He had invited every noble in his kingdom to celebrate the Night of the Red Dragon God and the wedding of his son with the dawn.

“Wolf's Paw.” The king's voice rang across the room as Andorr's foot touched the threshold between the massive double doors.

Andorr strode forward. The colorful throng of nobles silenced as he passed among them, men and women alike swaying away from the hard visage of the king's knight. He dropped to one knee before his master and once again bowed his head over the royal seal.

“I have a special task for you. Fayten,” the king barked, gesturing to his eldest son.

“Come with me,” the prince ordered Andorr.

Andorr looked to the king, who nodded dismissively, not looking away from his guests. The knight rose, following the heir from the room and through one of the many nearly invisible panels set into the murals of the main hall. As they wound through the corridors in a direction that could only lead to the dungeons, Andorr began to worry, recalling the king's earlier mention of his sister.

Had it all been for nothing, these ten years of service to absolve their family name? Had the king thrown his sister, and now him, into the dungeon when their freedom was so nearly secured?

"My father has special entertainment planned for his guests." The prince broke the silence.

Andorr did not.

Clamping his own mouth closed, Fayten led Andorr onward into the area of the dungeon used to extract information. Andorr had rarely been there, preferring to leave supporters of the Dragon God dead rather than let them pass under these doorways. His eyes drifted casually around the dark passage, noting there were no guards outside the rooms and that the prince wore only a dress sword. The showy hilt and scabbard probably hid nothing more than a cutting knife for dinner.

The prince pushed open the first door in the corridor to reveal an old man and the auburn-haired girl chained to the walls. They appeared disheveled, but unharmed. A heavyset torturer was tearing the left sleeve from the old man's shirt. The girl's was already missing.

"These are the traitors your sister revealed to the king." As the prince spoke, Andorr met the girl's eyes, noting that they widened briefly in shock before returning to

seething pools of green fire. “We are going to brand them.” Fayten gestured to where the torturer heated a dragon-shaped brand on the corner fire. “And then you will behead them in the throne room as a lesson to all the nobles. Father was hoping to have it done before sunset, but your tardiness has ruined that.”

“It is ready, Sire,” the torturer’s voice rasped from where he turned the red hot brand over the flames.

Andorr did not look away from the girl. He wondered why she hadn’t spoken. A look of disdain crossed her face and he realized she would not bargain for her life. She probably felt they wouldn’t believe her if she tried to discredit him now, thinking it the desperate act of a frightened girl. How little she knew the prince.

“Start with the woman,” the prince ordered, his gaze intent.

Andorr’s eyes left hers, focusing instead on the look of glee covering the future king’s face. Fayten’s mouth was slightly open, his breath quickening with anticipation as the torturer removed the brand from the fire. This was the man who would sit on the throne once the current tyrant had gone to the beyond.

“I think not,” Andorr disagreed conversationally.

The prince turned to him in haughty annoyance, the expression falling from his face even as Andorr pulled Fayten’s gaudy fake sword from its sheath and ran him through. It was a messy kill. The dull blade required more force than usual to penetrate the prince’s body, and it reached his heart slowly.

“You should take better care of your weapons, Sire,” Andorr informed the prince as he twisted the blade. “And you should let me lock you in here,” he said over his shoulder to the stunned torturer.

“Traitor!” the man roared, aiming the hot iron at Andorr’s face.

Andorr whirled, pulling the prince’s weapon with him as he moved, only to find the hilt easily separated from the short blade to leave him holding a flimsy crossbar of gem-encrusted gold. Andorr hated decorative weapons. He deflected the oncoming blow, but the soft metal melted along the brand. The momentum of the heavy torturer carried him forward, the still glowing piece of metal now careening toward the girl’s face.

She twisted against the chains, trying to find enough slack to avoid the brand. Andorr lunged forward, gold and gems falling from his hand as it snaked out to catch the brand inches from her face. He gritted his teeth as pain seared up his arm. Wordlessly he began to press the brand backwards until he was between it and the girl. The torturer tried to pull it away as Andorr pressed toward him, but the knight’s grip on the dragon brand was unbreakable. Too late the torturer realized the wall was coming up behind him, and with a final lunge, Andorr forced the unadorned end of the poker through the other man’s hand and into his chest.

“The King’s Paw,” the old man murmured, looking up in confusion.

Andorr dropped the brand, not reacting as it pulled burnt flesh off his palm with it. He was aware of the girl’s wide eyes on him as he retrieved the keys from the hook beside the door and moved to unlock them.

“I did not see this eventuality,” the old man croaked, sagging against the wall as his chains fell. “Thank you.”

“Your father is unwell.” Andorr spoke to the girl, leaning over her to release the lock that held her right arm above her head. He had already freed the left from where it

was bolted to the wall at her side. He was not blind to the fact that such a configuration must be specially designed for the purpose of giving fake brands. Another sin of the king's. "You must hide him from the chaos to come."

"What chaos?" Her eyes no longer held anger, but he found the emotion that now resided in them unfathomable.

"The chaos I am about to create."

"Sir Andorr." She caught his arm as he turned to the door. Her hand slid down to pull his to her. She stared intently at the burn. "Your hand should be dressed."

He looked at the pulsing red dragon etched onto his palm, gilded by the melted gold of the prince's sword. It writhed with pain, seeming almost to shimmer. As he watched, a spasm rippled through the muscles, the beast leaping about as if seeking its freedom. He could feel its strange heat sliding up his arm.

"If I am alive with the dawn, you may bandage it then."

He left her with her aged father, striding purposefully through the dank hallways. The heat in his palm seemed to reach up his arm with a tongue of fire and into his brain, burning a clear purpose there. The guards at the top of the dungeon steps took one look at his face and drew their swords. He eyed them pityingly.

"You may choose to step aside."

They did not choose to do so, shifting nervously as he drew nearer. In one fluid leap, he was up the four remaining steps and in between them, hands locked around their sword arms. Inescapable, he slammed them together, forcing them to run each other through. He knelt briefly over the two bodies, closing their eyes and taking a short guard sword in each hand.

The king had stationed most of the guards outside, leaving the castle nearly deserted except for the throne room. Andorr did not return the way he came, choosing instead to reenter the main hall through a panel close to the vast double doors at the entrance of the castle.

“The king wishes these doors barred for the night,” he told the two men stationed in the archway.

Their eyes darted to the bloodied, naked swords in his hands and they edged toward the outer steps.

“Did I say the king?” He was almost upon them. “I meant I want them shut. Now!”

At his barked order, they jumped, both stumbling backward out the doorway. Bounding to the entrance, he had one door shut before they'd drawn their weapons. They yelled to the men in the courtyard, one bravely throwing himself into the still open half to confront Andorr. Twisting away from the man's blade, Andorr slammed the door shut, then opened it again to kick the man in the gut and get his shattered arm out of the way. He kicked the other startled guard too, sending both flying down the steps into the oncoming soldiers to buy enough time to bar the door.

He turned to find the guards from the throne room charging down the hallway, the massive doors behind them booming shut. The first two went down before they realized they'd reached him as he lunged forward low under their blades, his length bringing him easily within killing range. He burst upward, thrusting their bodies back onto their companions, tangling the swords of the next two long enough to dispatch them. Ducking

to one side, he disappeared into one of the many panels, wedging the internal latch with a stolen sword.

Andorr ran down the hallway, intent on his goal. He no longer had thoughts of whether he or his sister would survive the night. The symbol of the Dragon God writhed against his palm, tendrils of power twisting through him until dispatching the king became an inexorable obsession.

There was an upper balcony in the throne room, no more than a walkway, that the servants used to clean and hang the many coats of arms and chandeliers. Taking several turns, he wound his way to it, employing more stealth now so as not to alert his pursuers to his location. He knew the castle would quickly be filled with guards, and even he could not kill them all.

He slipped onto the walkway, looking around and finding a long-handled duster to secure the door. Below him, the worried babble of the nobles filled the throneroom, and Andorr could hear the king's voice as he raised his head just high enough to see over the low rail.

"I am afraid, my dear child," the king leaned back in his throne, addressing Envoline, who was held between two guards, "that I have to keep you here until dawn. If I am alive then, you may go dress for your wedding. If I should die, they are ordered to make sure you die with me."

"Father." The king's youngest son burst into the room from the direction of the royal suites, flanked by guards. "What is the meaning of this? Envoline has proven her loyalty."

“I never doubted it, Geoftin.” Andorr’s sister looked desperately from the king to her fiancé, hope blooming on her tear-covered face. “But she has long been my insurance and I will not see her free unless her brother pays in full. His sword is mine until dawn.”

“But I love her father,” the prince cried passionately, coming to kneel before his sire. Andorr could see the truth of this in Geoftin’s eyes, the young prince’s heart overwhelmed by Envoline’s beauty as so many others had been.

“That is not my fault.” The king’s voice was cold. He pulled his hand away when his son would have kissed the royal seal.

“My King.” A guard was let into the hall. The two at the entrance quickly replaced the heavy beam that held the double doors shut. “I have found Prince Fayten.” The guard shifted his feet, dreading the news. “He is dead, My Lord.”

“Dead?” the king roared, leaping to his feet. Around the room, the murmuring wave of the nobles rose in shock. “Fayten is dead?”

“Yes, My King.” The guard took a step back in fear.

“I want this castle searched!” The king’s voice rang from the vaulted ceiling. “I want every guard searching for that monster!” Blood suffused his face in rage.

“Yes, Sire,” the guards answered, scurrying down passageways.

“You!” The king leveled a royal finger at the bearer of the news. “Find Mentus. Find him and bring him here. I want my sons here where they are safe.”

“Yes, My King.” The man bowed and hurried into the royal wing, leaving only the two guards at the double doors, the two holding Envoline, and the seething mass of nobles.

“This is your fault.” Even as Andorr saw a way to reach the floor, the king strode down the steps of his dais and struck Envoline across the face. “You could not manage to hold his love for one more day.”

“My King,” she pleaded, tears making shimmering lines through the mark left by his hand.

Andorr crept around behind the low rail until he reached the heavy rope which held up the central chandelier.

“Her head, now!” the king barked.

“Father, no!” Geoftin cried, but the king gestured the guards to commence.

They jumped to comply, fumbling in their confusion over who was to draw his blade and who would hold her. Finally one dropped his sword and yanked her hair back, forcing her to kneel with her throat exposed. The other lifted his blade and Envoline screamed. Prince Geoftin rushed forward.

The guard jumped back, trying to divert his already descending blade from the prince. There was a wet tearing sound as Andorr swung from the balcony. He looked down to see Geoftin clutching at an arm that gushed blood.

“Fool!” The king lunged forward. He cast aside his staff, a sword appearing from beneath his robe. In one fluid motion, he ran the guard through. “Get my physicians!”

The second man released Envoline, running both to escape the king's wrath and do his bidding. She crawled forward to catch Geoftin as he sank to his knees, her delicate hands trying to quench the blood that welled from him.

“Geoftin,” her voice pleaded. “Don't leave me.”

“And where is my traitor?” the king roared at the remaining two guards.

In answer, Andorr dropped to the ground behind him. The guards charged forward to intercept the knight.

“You are the betrayer, My King,” Andorr growled in a low voice.

The king spun, his sword striking out as Andorr released the rope, letting the great chandelier come crashing down on the last two guards, showering the unfortunate nobles with shards of crystal and spraying blood.

Andorr jumped back, his stolen sword ready before him. He eyed the king warily. The older man had a better weapon. No fancy decorative sword had ever hung at the king's side. His advantage in reach was mitigated by the heavy robes he wore, but the king was a strong man. They circled each other carefully. Andorr knew he'd have to end the battle quickly or be overwhelmed by returning guards.

“I should have known you would betray me, Son of Andwer.” The king spat the words out, an accompaniment to a sudden series of ringing blows.

Andorr did not answer, allowing himself to give ground as he parried. He waited for the king's advance to slow, looking for an opening around the longer blade.

“How could you?” Envoline shrieked behind him and suddenly, he was falling as she struck the back of his knees with the king's discarded staff. Andorr's borrowed sword skidded from his grasp, the blade ringing out on the stone floor. “How could you do this to me?”

The king rushed past her, his sword raised in a deadly blow. Andorr tensed himself to roll to the right and retrieve his weapon, but Envoline was on him again, dropping the staff to grab his arm. With maniacal strength, she held him, clawing at him

while tears steamed down her face. Andorr stared at her, emotion jolting through him as he saw the ruin he'd made of her life. The laughing little girl he'd loved was gone, the lady she'd worked so hard to become destroyed.

Envoline screamed again as the king's blade descended on them. In what he knew was a futile last gesture, Andorr raised his sword arm, hoping to at least deflect the blade away from his sister where she lay, half-covering his heart.

The king froze, a harsh gurgling sound rising up from his throat as a dusky form rose from Andorr's palm. Red and black smoke poured from the knight's upraised hand, taking away the pain that throbbed there. The king rallied, tightening his grip on his sword to swing at the swirling form, but the blade passed through it. As the last bit of smoke left him, Andorr fell back with a jerk, gasping. Wrapping his left arm around the now limp form of his sister, he pulled her backwards, not noticing as he lacerated his palm anew on the crystal shards that littered the floor.

Around him, he vaguely noticed that the physicians had arrived, and now crouched unmoving over Prince Geoftin, wide eyes fixed on the apparition that filled the throne room. A score of guards and Prince Mentus skidded to a halt just inside the entrance from the royal wing, jaws slackening and eyes going wide.

"Mine instrument hath brought me to this place to pass judgment on thee, Faynton King-Slayer." The voice of the churning form was not loud, but the crystals on the smaller chandeliers rang together as it filled the room, causing the nobles assembled to flinch. "Have you aught to plea?"

The king's sword clattered from his hand, chipping the marble at his feet. "I," he breathed, falling to his knees. "I did what I had to do."

“Thy own self was served and none other, King-Slayer.” The hollow voice grew louder. “Have you aught to plea?”

“I replaced an aged and failing king.” The kneeling man’s voice cracked with desperation. “He would have died soon. His sons were young and not fit to rule. The kingdom would have fallen to chaos.”

“The old king knew fewer years than thee kneeling before me, King-Slayer, yet ye took life from him and all others within these walls with foul poison.” The voice of the Dragon God rose, roaring through the chamber as it asked for the final time. “Have you aught to plea?”

“I have been a good king,” Faynton cried. “The lands prosper and there is peace.”

“Thou hath been a tyrant and murderer of my people.” The voice of the God filled the room as the writhing smoke before the king coalesced into the burning black head of a dragon. Red eyes whirled with flame. “I find thee in need of retribution,” the dragon hissed, fire following the words and engulfing the king.

The form loosened, becoming translucent once more as the body of the king floated to the chipped marble in a shower of ash.

“Judgment has been made.” The voice slid through the room as the vaporous dragon head faded to nothing.

Slowly, people began looking around. Andorr raised his bloodied palm, looking at it with little comprehension. His sister let out a gasp and crawled away from him to where the physicians were once again working on Prince Geoftin. The murmur of the nobles rose, and they shifted like a hayfield in the wind, unsure what to do. Andorr raised his eyes to meet those of Mentus.

“Bring him to me.” Mentus issued the order firmly, as one who expects to be obeyed.

“Yes, My King.” The captain made a quick half-bow before gesturing for his men to follow him.

Guards surrounded Andorr warily, weapons drawn. Behind them, Mentus ascended the throne, ignoring the ornate blackened crown that lay in the ash at his feet. He watched Andorr struggle to rise.

“Bring me my staff, Wolf's Paw,” the new king ordered.

The guard captain gave his king a startled look, but Mentus nodded, emphasizing his order and his trust in his childhood companion. Andorr reached out and picked up the golden staff, leaning on it as he walked within the circle of guards to his king. Now that he was vertical, he realized he felt a vast weakness, a tiredness that seeped down into his soul. He handed the staff up to Mentus, noticing without comprehension the flicker of red inside it that died as he released it. Mentus pursed his lips, his eyes on the jewel. Andorr knelt, coming to rest on both knees at the feet of his king.

“Sir Andorr.” Mentus looked down at him, a fair imitation of Andorr's former inscrutable mask covering the new king's face. “Was it your intent to bring the Dragon God in judgment on my father?”

“Never, My King.” Andorr raised his eyes, showing Mentus the truth inside them.

“What was it your intent to do upon the completion of your payment to the crown for the treason of your father?”

“To return to my family lands and govern my people, My King,” he answered honestly, looking down as he fought to control the hope that threatened to crack his voice.

“Then this you will do, Sir Andorr.” Mentus raised his voice. “On the condition that you never again set foot in this castle, let alone the city outside.”

“Yes, My King.” Andorr raised his eyes, hope a sharp pain in his chest. “Thank you, My King.”

“And Envoline?” A weak voice came across the room.

The knight turned his head to see Prince Geoftin struggling to sit up. Envoline supported him against her, one hand stroking his forehead gently. Andorr looked the younger man over clinically, deducing that he should live, but would most likely lose his arm within a seven-day. The knight's eyes moved to his sister, whose own were locked in worry on Geoftin's face. He realized she would never be happy on their family lands, away from this life she had grown up with. She would never again be the carefree little girl he remembered from before his service to the king, but with Geoftin, she would be safe. Shutting his eyes against the burn of unshed tears, he let her go, this last trace of the loving family he'd already lost so many years ago.

“If you survive your wounds, she may stay,” Mentus proclaimed. “But before you wed her, know that any male children the Lady Envoline may bear will be raised by their uncle. He has brought about the death of our brother and sire, and the male issue of his line will be forbidden the capital until proclaimed otherwise by word of the king.”

Geofin nodded, acceptance and gratitude filling his face, but Andorr could see the line of worry on his sister's brow even as her arms tightened about her betrothed in happy relief.

"Go now, Lord Andorr, son of Andwer." Mentus's face was inscrutable. "You must quit the city by dawn. The Crown once again recognizes the name of the Lords of Luentine among the nobles of this land and vests to you your family holdings and titles."

"The Gods' Blessings on the King," Andorr intoned, rising.

"The Gods' Blessings on the King," the court of nobles responded in unison.

"Thank you, Mentus," he whispered under his breath as he turned away. He would never know if his friend heard.

The captain and his men escorted Lord Andorr Ap'Luentine from the throne room, unbarring the great double doors once more. The auburn-haired girl stood in the hallway beyond, as if she'd expected him. He stopped, the king's men shifting nervously around him.

"Wolf's Paw," she greeted him with a nod.

"My Lady." He paused, realizing he'd never known her name.

"Linnella," she supplied helpfully. "Thank you for the care you took of my father and me."

"It was correct." He shrugged, feeling suddenly exposed as the weariness and changes of the day stripped away the mask he'd worn for more years than his knight's visor. "I am the Wolf's Paw no longer. My family name has been restored."

"Then I thank the Lord Luentine." She awarded him the only smile he'd ever seen on her face, green eyes sparkling with something other than anger.

“It was my honor, Lady Linnella.” He bowed to her. “I am afraid I must leave now, before dawn.”

“And your hand?”

“I will have to bandage it myself, when the dawn arrives.” He smiled slightly.

She nodded and he bowed again before moving past her down the hallway.

“Lord Luentine,” she called softly. “I did not realize the Lady Envoline was your sister. No one ever spoke of it to me.”

He turned back to ask her why it mattered, only to encounter her soft, startling lips. As quickly as she'd kissed him, she was gone, her retreating form surprisingly far away by the time he managed to focus on it as it entered the throne room and the throng of people lined up to address the new king. He moved to follow, but the guards dropped their swords to bar his way.

“Your horse is the other way, My Lord,” the captain said, his face stern. “And for the sake of peace in this kingdom, none will tell the king of this.”

“The king?” Andorr asked as he resumed his walk from the castle.

“It is said that he and the Lady Linnella have an understanding, My Lord,” the captain informed him.

Andorr sighed, thinking it was a good thing he hadn't killed her. He wondered if she would tell Mentus that his brother and father had tried to brand and behead her. He wondered if the new king really knew Lady Linnella at all. Andorr reminded himself that he hadn't even known her name. He wished them both happiness and a long rule.

Leaving the kingdom safe in their hands, he turned his mind to the home he hadn't been

allowed to see in ten years. Lord Andorr Ap'Luentine stepped onto the evening and called for his horse. He had a long ride ahead of him.

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