

Dear Summer,

Thank you for letting us review “Wolf’s Paw”! We had a great time coming up with these notes, and we hope you find them helpful. If you have any questions about any of them, please be sure to ask!

World Building

We were very excited to look at the world building in your story. You have the basis for a very engaging world, especially because of the potential dynamics between the different gods.

Please keep in mind that what we send to you are just suggestions. We found a few elements in the world that seemed incomplete to us, but there are multiple ways to address this problem.

The first thing we would recommend would be to establish firmer rules for the gods. One thing that confused us was that Andorr could gain the power of the dragon god by being branded in the king's dungeon. We would want to know at least a little more about how these brands show up on people: are they voluntary? Are they only for certain people, determined by birth? The story mentions that the four-year-old boy with a dragon brand had been “strongly called.” We certainly wanted to know more about that situation, and we actually think this boy has a lot of potential to solve any problems that occur with the plot.

However you resolve the story, it’s important that the means used by Andorr to summon the dragon god and defeat the king are established beforehand—include brief but meaningful story details that establish how this is possible.

But to continue with the religious world building, we really enjoyed the scene where Andorr goes through the old prayer rituals before his sister's wedding. It added a real authenticity to the religion that you had built, and we would love to see a few more scenes or quick mentions of devotional activities. Incorporating more expressions of religious devotion would make the world you built seem more organic, and we think you have a great start there.

On a minor note, it would be a good idea to get rid of the portent character. It might be interesting to have some sort of prophet ascend the throne, like the boy from the beginning of the story if you develop that character more. Otherwise, though, an underexplained portent character just seems to clutter up the story.

One question that kept coming up during our discussions was why Andorr's father was considered a traitor in the first place? What did he do to this current king that got him so incensed? We had a couple ideas for you to consider on this point, but keep in mind that you are welcome to resolve issues in any way you see fit.

We had the idea that maybe the king saw Andorr's father as traitorous because the father broke a tradition of succession.

It could be that Andorr's father was a knight in the court of the Wolf king who was, by means of some prophetic manifestation from the dragon people, appointed to rule the kingdom instead of the firstborn son, Faynton, the king we have in this story.

Or maybe Faynton was also a knight in the court who didn't get chosen as the successor. Maybe the prior king didn't have a son., and this king had appointed Andorr’s father to rule.

One of these approaches would explain why Faynton killed Andorr's father in the first place (he was jealous and wanted the throne), why he was paranoid (he knows that he didn't have the right to the throne), and why he would want his son to marry Envoline (maybe that marriage would assure that Faynton's line would have actual right to the throne. Envoline is after all the daughter of the man he killed for the throne).

All of our suggestions (both above and subsequent) are just that—suggestions and options for you to consider. This is your story, and the main function of the developmental edit is to point out issues that we find need to be fixed one way or another.

To summarize, these are the main gaps in the Wolf's Paw world that need to be addressed by

1) making the laws of god summoning more apparent, so Andorr's defeat of the current king makes sense.

2) including more information about Andorr's father's assassination and the rules of royal succession.

3) making Andorr's final situation feel more just. That is, we think that the end has a serious problem in that Andorr gets to return to his land as ruler without having to pay for the atrocities he committed in killing all these followers of the dragon god. There are multiple ways to deal with this issue, but we strongly feel that Andorr has to lose something. Maybe he would lose his heirship because of everyone he has killed. Maybe his sister Envoline could be killed. Any way you decide to address this problem, it would make the plot much smoother if Andorr met with some kind of punishment or consequence for his questionable choices: his sister wasn't really worth all the people Andorr killed to save her.

Character

Andorr:

The name Andor has a longish history as a fantasy name going back (at least) to Classic Star Trek's Andorians. You're ok legally to use it, because so many already have, but arguably readers might find the name a little too overused because it's a place in the popular Wheel of Time series, and for that matter because of Battlestar Galactica's Anders. You're headed in the right direction by adding another 'r,' but maybe one more tweak would help: Andarr is an Arabic name, but not too common, and it might serve you better. We'll keep referring to him in these notes as Andorr though.

The first real problem is that Andorr tends to be inconsistent. He claims to be completely devoid of feeling, and sometimes acts like he does indeed lack emotional responses. At other times he seems passionate, merciful, caring, and capable of becoming annoyed. His character needs to be consistent. We need him to be either impassive, or not impassive. He can undergo a character arch and change, but if so, the change must be gradual, not erratic.

Whatever your decision, we need more description of his internal reactions, even if his reaction is a feeling of numbness. We will give two examples of the kind of description we would like. The first is with an impassive Andorr.

The girl struggled all the way to the camp, persisting long after the jeers of his subordinates died down. Once those jeers might have lead Andorr to issue challenges, or at least give a contemptuous glance. Life had taught him those reactions were dangerous. His position in the kingdom was tenuous. Containing his

emotions had prolonged his life. Once contained, the emotions had begun to wither. They were long dead now. He didn't mourn their loss."

The second is of Andorr as an emotional character.

The girl struggled all the way to camp, persisting long after the jeers of his subordinates died down. Some of the suggestions he'd heard made his blood boil. He knew some of the men dallied with village women, but the violence they suggested against this girl reminded him how cruel some of his men were. He would need to keep a closer eye on his subordinates. He had been commissioned by the king to kill, and kill he would. Perhaps, though, he might buy salvation through what small mercies he was allowed to perform.

Please remember these are suggested rewrites, meant only to give an idea of how an edit can be implemented. We will include several more of these rewrites throughout this critique.

As noted in the world-build section, we felt that in many ways this story sets up Andorr as a possible heir to the throne. The end scene when the King's staff begins to flicker when he holds the staff. This occurrence seems to promise that Andorr will have some greater role in the ruling of the kingdom. Then he is banished.

In the world-build section, we discuss the possibility of having Andorr's father being named heir, but then killed. We felt this would explain the king's paranoia, and help define Andorr's role and define him as the heir apparent. That being said, we thought that it would best be to explain what Andorr has done to forfeit his heirship. We felt that Andorr's role in the purge of the followers of the dragon god would be enough to prove him unworthy to rule. However this would require explicit explanation.

Also, we need to know how Andorr feels about the loss of his heirship. We also wonder how Andorr feels about being forced into the king's service? Does he resent his Mother or father for this necessity? Does he resent his sister? Does he have mixed feelings about his current situation?

Finally, as noted earlier, we feel that Andorr needs to pay some weighty price for his crimes. Despite the fact that he was forced into the current king's service, he still did commit atrocities. It is true he is banished from court, but we felt this was insufficient punishment. After all, his primary goal was to preserve his family and withdraw to his family lands after his term of service. The banishment is also far from permanent, so, if he later decides he misses the court, he can possibly return. He committed atrocities to save his unworthy, bratty sister. His sister is completely saved. He also gains no great physical harm. No price of consequence seems to be exacted.

Here are some prices we thought could be paid:

His lands are forfeit.

His sister is killed or maimed.

He is killed or maimed.

Some ambitions of his toward the throne are thwarted. (We don't see any ambition as of yet, but it could be added).

Envoline:

The main problem we have with Envoline is that she is completely unlikeable. Despite the fact that Andorr has sacrificed his innocence, she has no loyalty or affection to her brother. She is spoiled and nasty. She hates the peasantry and considers them less than human. She has no redeeming quality that we can see. Yet she is Andorr's motivation for remaining bound to the king. Even taking into account the unconditional love between siblings, and the promise made to his mother to keep Envoline safe, it seems extreme that a man would consent to be bound to commit genocide in order to save a sister who will only perpetuate the slaughter. He isn't even resentful of her behavior, just sad at the loss of her innocence. It seems that he has only just noticed her change, but wouldn't he have seen it happen gradually over the last ten years?

We need some redeeming quality in order to at least pity, if not like her.

She could be ignorant of what is really happening. She could love her brother but be led astray by her connections in court. She could be brain washed. Whatever it is, we need to see it, and see it soon after her character has been introduced. Here is a suggested rewrite:

"The king says the prince and I may be married at the dawning of the seasons of the dragon," she said, "but only if you remain loyal through the night. Andorr, I beg you. You have kept our family safe these past ten years, but what happens after you are freed of your oath? Don't you see? My alliance will secure our continued safety. And it is not so much a sacrifice. I have affection for the prince, and I believe he has affection for me."

Andorr shook his head. She didn't know, couldn't know, the depth of the evil her marriage would bring. She was ignorant, but he had caused the ignorance. He withheld the true horror of what happened at the raids. She was ignorant, but that ignorance kept her safe. With her marriage, Andorr would be bound to the king forever, and the kingdom would burn for certain.

Linella:

The first minor detail we need to have resolved is that we need to hear her name much sooner. We understand that, thematically, you've placed considerable importance on characters regaining their true names, but withholding any name at all for Linella isn't working. Without her name, you have to reference her by often repeating description of her red hair and 'angry' green eyes, and this becomes distracting. Please give us her name (or some name) within the first page or two of our meeting her.

Secondly, what we know about Linella is that she is angry, but we do not know why she is angry. We need to see some motivation for her feelings.

Is she close to the commoners because she is a lower noble? Or does she believe that as a noble, it is her duty to protect the people? Was she born a peasant, then raised to nobility? Or does she have allegiance to the dragon god? If so, why?

We also felt that her character might be more well-rounded if we could change her anger into passion. Passion is a much more controlled emotion. It would lend her credibility and stability. Below, we offer a written example of how this could be explained.

"I swore to follow the orders of the king," said Andorr.

She crossed her arms and drew herself up, nostrils flaring, and spanned the little space between them. She was shorter than him by a nearly a foot, but she glared up at his face without a trace of fear or embarrassment.

“And what of the oath required by even the lowest born knight or noble? ‘I shall defend my lands and its peoples from harm. I will secure to them their goods, their happiness, and their lives. To my last breath, I shall defend them against all hazards.’ Unless I am much mistaken that oath predates your oath to the king. You had no right to swear your devotion to a king who himself forsakes his oaths. You are a pawn, but you were born to be more, much more. Doesn’t that make you angry?”

We wanted to know more clearly what her relationship is to Andorr. Is she a love interest? And what is her relationship with Mentus? Is the rumor true that he and she are going to be married? Why didn't we see more of the politics of the matchmaking process earlier? Her alleged engagement came as too much of a shock.

Another of her relationships needs to be better defined. What is Linella's relationship to the boy we see in the beginning of the story? He is strongly called, and Linella takes special pains to guard him. Does she know he is strongly called? Is she his protector? Did she simply decide to defend him because he is a little boy? If so, why THIS little boy, and not another in the village? As noted earlier, this boy could be developed more and made the rightful heir to the throne, in which case the character of Mentus might serve other purposes or be written out of the story altogether.

The Current King and his sons:

The king is a paranoid character. We need to see the cause of his paranoia. In the world building notes, we thought it might fix some plot and character issues if you made it clear why he killed Andorr's father. We suggested that Andorr's father had been named heir to the throne, rather than the current king.

In the original draft of the story, it sounds as though the king was afraid of the dragon god because the king had killed his own father. This idea provides some motivation, but the explanation comes too late in the story and was thought to be an unsatisfactory motivation for genocide.

We instead felt that having Andorr's father named to the throne would explain why the king would allow the marriage of his son to Envoline. It would help bring security to his reign by uniting the two families. Please see the world building notes for a more thorough explanation.

We are in unanimous agreement that the three sons should be whittled down to two, whatever their names may be. We only need two sons to achieve the contrast of good son vs. bad son. You do a fine job with the bad son, and he should be kept more or less as-is. However, the third son's only responsibility is to be married to Envoline, which can also be accomplished by her marrying either the good or bad son.

As noted above, we weren't feeling settled with the sudden final revelation that Linella was engaged to one of the king's sons. Arguably it would be more interesting if we knew that she was engaged to Mentus early in the story and also knew that Andorr had feelings for her in spite of that.

Or Linella could be free to be romantically involved with Andorr. If you feel that is too common an outcome, then she and Andorr might not be together in the end for many other reasons: for example, if Andorr has been punished for his atrocities with the loss of his lands, then he cannot support a wife, and he and Linella might have to part, heartbroken. That's harsh, but it has the feel of justice to it. If Envoline is to marry Mentus, another romantic interest would need to be provided for Linella, or she could be romantically involved with Andorr.

We also feel that Mentus needs to have more time allotted to him in the story, or he should be written out. We see him in a flashback where he steals wine to celebrate with Andorr; then we see him at the end of the story claiming his kingdom, and we have just a brief moment where Andorr briefly compares Mentus favorably to the oldest son.

We need to know more about Mentus if he is kept. Is he a good man? What is his relationship with Andorr? Is he a mentor? A peer? A friend, but what kind of friend?

We need to understand who this man is. We know that one of the sons is a jerk, and we have some idea what would become of the kingdom if he were to rule. We have no idea what the kingdom would be like under Mentus.

There are two scenes we thought of where Mentus could be made more visible. The first we discussed is the scene on the steps just before the raid on the second village. Andorr could meet Mentus instead of the other son. We could see more about how he feels about Andorr, the genocide, and the king's rule.

The second scene we considered was the flashback scene. You could spend more time on the flashback where Andorr and Mentus celebrate together. Some suggested he could declare his interest for Envoline in this scene or for Linella, whether or not Andorr knows who Linella is at that point.

The Boy:

This boy you introduce in the beginning of the story caught our interest. We knew that he was young. We knew that he was strongly called. He was also the only person with a dragon brand that Andorr has ever spared. Knowing all these details about the boy made us suspect he would have some role in the story. Some thought about how he seemed an almost King David type character-- anointed for kingship without the current king's knowledge, or a Samuel the prophet type character-- dedicated to the gods at a very young age.

We need to see more of this boy. We want to see him either as the chosen heir, or as a prophet to the dragon god. We thought we could see more of him by making him Andorr's traveling companion. Either by magic or makeup, they contrive some way to hide the boy's death-mark dragon brand.

Plot and Style

We'd like to talk about a few elements of the plot of "Wolf's Paw" that we haven't mentioned yet. While we're confident that the most important plot elements will be taken care of by the character development and world-building features we've suggested, there are a few other things we've thought of to improve the plot of "Wolf's Paw."

We like the idea of having a well-paced action scene in the beginning of the story. It's a great way to draw the reader in and get them involved. However, action without context inspires no emotional investment from the audience. There are a few options we thought of for including emotional context in an action-oriented beginning. There are also plenty of other strategies that you could come up with that might fit your reworked story even better. Please note that some of these options are dependent on other choices you will make in world building and character development.

1. You might start with a training bout between Andorr and Mentus. This would give you an opportunity

to establish Andorr's character before he becomes a killer, allowing the audience to see him change. Even more importantly, this will give you the opportunity to truly define the friendship between Andorr and Mentus. Maybe they could even be talking about Andorr's sister.

2. You could start in Andorr's boyhood with the attack on his father's castle. This would be a great opportunity to establish the world elements of kingly succession and the backstory of Andorr's father. The details you choose to include in this section will greatly influence the direction your story will take, as well as how it will end.

3. You could start the story a little before the attack on the town (basically, an hour or so before where it starts right now). Determining which details and relationships to highlight in this option may make it the hardest of the three to execute, but if it builds tension that can be released in the saving of the boy, it could also be the most effective.

Again, there are other options besides these three, and while these options could fit into various other aspects of the story that we've suggested, there may still be others that follow these same principles. However you choose to open the story, though, avoid flashbacks that break the action. As currently written, the audience is concerned about the impending doom of the little boy, and then is jolted out of the moment by Andorr's trip down memory lane. Reduce his feelings to two sentences, and then establish the full context of his memory later on--either through flashback once the action has died down, or through dialogue with another character. If you take option 2 listed above, though, you can avoid this whole problem.

Concerning the ending, remember most of all that Andorr *must* pay some kind of price for all the lives he's taken. Whether that's his own death, or his sister's, or some other loss, Andorr must atone for his murders for the plot to be satisfying. Most of the details of this kind of sacrifice have been treated above; there are multiple options for its execution (pun intended).

Now a few words on style. There are two things you want to avoid in your story: cliches and physical improbabilities (or impossibilities). Interestingly enough, the two often come together. They arrive in such forms as chandeliers crushing people and greatswords being swung from horses (wielding a two-handed sword on a horse is *very* unstable), not to mention the seemingly endless supply of inept and mortally doomed guards. These things show up all the time in fantasy submissions, and a way editors tell the good from the bad is to see which authors can be more creative than the cliches. If you must have a falling chandelier, make sure you do it in an original way. (For a good example, see Brandon Sanderson's *Allow of Law*, chapter 6. For a funny one, watch Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove*.)

Speaking of movies, one technique that could help your action sequences is that of thinking of them more like movie storyboards. Literally draw out and diagram the scene, if it helps you. If you do this, you can keep a situational awareness of every element in your action sequence--and if you do this, then there's a much greater probability that you'll be able to keep all those elements straight in your reader's mind. Remember that even though things are clear in your mind, they may not be so to your readers. This is where a good alpha reader can be invaluable to you. He or she will let you know when things don't make sense.

One example of this: the scene where Andorr gets branded in the dungeon. It took all of our readers a second read to figure out what was happening with the brand. Not only is this a pivotal moment in the plot, it's also a cool idea. We want to see the reader relish the scene. If you establish very clearly where

every person in the room is at the beginning of the scene inform the reader, and then let them know when someone changes position, the scene will be much more effective.

Here's one of many possible ways to rewrite parts of that scene:

“The prince pushed open the first door in the corridor to reveal an old man and the auburn-haired girl chained to the wall next to the door. They appeared disheveled, but unharmed. A busy torturer was tearing the left sleeve from the old man’s shirt. The girl’s was already missing. When he finished, the torturer stalked to the back of the room, where a fire had been built in a recess in the wall that resembled a blacksmith’s shop. A metal rod had been thrust into the coals.

Fayten stopped in the middle of the room, in front of the prisoners, and turned to face Andorr. “These are the traitors your sister revealed to the king,” he said. . . .

“You should take better care of your weapons, highness,” Andorr informed the prince, giving the blade a twist. “And you should let me lock you in here,” he said over Fayten’s shoulder to the stunned torturer.

“Traitor!” the man roared, ripping the hot iron from the flame and aiming it at Andorr’s face.

At this point the scene is all set up with the torturer at the far end of the room, Fayten (dead) in the middle, and Andorr standing between them and the prisoners. With this set up, the rest of the scene makes more sense, although we invite you to expand these principles into the rest of the action.

One quick note about dialog: remember what Orson Scott Card once said, " 'Said' is invisible." (Notice that I've inserted it into the scene above.) Using it as your default dialog tag allows the other words that you're fond of using to have their true impact. Unless another word is specifically necessary, use "said" to introduce dialog.

Finally, you have a gift for descriptions. Just make sure that you don't use too many adjectives at once, and that you focus on more than just one aspect of a character (for example, Linella's eyes).

And that is it! We're confident that if you apply these suggestions on world building, character development, and plot and style, "Wolf's Paw" can become the story it has the potential to be. If you would like to, feel free to submit the revised version to us to be considered for publication. While we can't promise that it will receive any special consideration, we would love to see more from you. The principles we've described here will help stories in all genres, not just fantasy. In the meantime, we wish you the best of luck with "Wolf's Paw," and hope to work with you again in the future. If you find our comments as helpful as we hope you will, please tell your friends about us!

Sincerely,

Daniel Friend
Senior Editor,
Leading Edge Magazine