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Sample extract from Riders of the North: The Horse Lord by Tomos A. Roberts ©2014

This could be the last time he walked and laughed in the halls of his ancestors and along the streets of his people. "It is now or never" he muttered to himself, forcing his feet forward as he walked the long gauntlet past his people, in the tradition of ancient times.

The lining of the road was a usual occurrence for when the banner of the hold and its warriors rolled out but, today, the calling of a new horde was something which hadn't happened for thousands of years so all were out to witness it. Teo could feel the anticipation of the people around him as he reached the gate, where his father, brother and mother stood proud but yet sombre. His father stepped forward **"Teo Lionsmayne, first Lord of the Horse, you are here today and claim no banner, no allegiance to any horde and so you must walk as a nobody with no allegiance in the North. You are hereby stripped from my horde, stripped from my keep and no person here or anywhere in the north will admit you entrance until you find a banner to ride under once more"** Teo felt his mouth drying as the final words boomed out, in a crescendo down the long street, Teo looked at his father. "I understand by the ancient laws of our creed and by my honour I vow not to sully my own name nor the name of my people" Teo replied. "Teo, don't go" A small, light voice pricked the stillness and seriousness of the occasion. Teo turned to his right, connecting his sharp blue eyes with the brilliant light blue eyes and beautiful features of his younger sister. "Scarlet" Teo smiled, striding over to her with as much levity as possible "My sister, look at you" Teo felt his heart warm. He hadn't been sure he would be able to see his sister before he left. "How does your training go?" he asked, trying to lighten the dark mood of the event around them. Scarlet smiled a broad beaming smile and roughly hugged Teo around his chest, her thick black hair smelling of Jasmine underneath his nose. "Don't go" she pleaded, her muffled voice reached out and pierced, like a dagger, through the thick folds of his coat. "I have to Scarlet, trust me, there are things and creatures and horrors that you can't even imagine and I have to do this" Scarlet's bright eyes shone up from the folds of his coat, making Teo's heart clench. The knowledge that he may never see either of his siblings again was a painful thought. "Trust me, like you always have." Teo smiled down at the young girl as he slowly untangled his sister from him, pushing her back gently to her tutor behind. He turned back to his father and mother, acutely aware of the muffled sobs of his sister behind him, to see his brother, Jai smiling a wicked smile only a brother could understand. "Brother" Teo reached out, gripping his brother's outreached arm in a tight warrior's grip, like they always had. "Don't get yourself killed out there. I don't want to hear that the first Horse Lord we've had for millennia died of thirst" Jai's laugh helped to alleviate the dark mood, a few of the warriors around chuckled at his young brother's remark too. "I shall try not to, for your sake brother" Teo smiled back, closing his younger brother into a tight hug. "I would ride to your banner as soon as you unfurl it, you know that" Jai whispered "I know Jai, I know. I wish you were older, I would gladly accept you as the first sword to my call but brother" Teo paused as he extricated himself from his brother's grasp "You will ride under your own banner, you may even command this horde one day. I would rather have you at my side as an equal number" The spring of tears emerged in the corners of his young brother's eyes and as Teo looked around he could see them replicated in Lady Sophia's. His mother reached out and hugged Teo tight. "Look after yourself my child, you do us proud" she whispered. Teo forced himself to hold a neutral face, despite his heart feeling as if it were to be pulled from him "Will I ever see my family again?" thought Teo as he questioned his judgment to do this. "My son, my eldest, you've already displayed so much honour to make a father truly proud" added his father.

Teo stepped back, a little ashen in the face, as his father turned back to face the crowd assembled **“It is a great day today that one of our sons, one of our people, has risen to such height and brings so much honour and respect to our shields. The golden lion that stands proud on our banner rejoices”** Teo looked up behind his father to the huge banner hanging down with the golden lion emblazoned on it, up on his hind legs, roaring up at the gods above, his front legs outreached with claws of gold. “Whatever you do, wherever you go, whatever happens in your journey, we will always be here and wish your speedy return under your own banner” concluded his father. Teo took the warriors grip that his father extended out to him as the people of the North, the warriors, black smiths, farmers, everyone in the hold shouted out their support and congratulations. Teo waved at them all before taking a deep breath and plunging out through the small chink in the door left open between the two huge wooden gates to the hold. Almost instantaneously the sound from the crowds behind died away to nothingness. It took Teo a few seconds to refocus his mind and disentangle his thoughts from the emotions that descended upon him. He knew that the message will have gone out; riders would be conveying what happened at the hold to the four corners of the North, to every village hold and to every man, woman and child in the north. By the end of the week all would know that a new banner had been called, and the people would flock to see the spectacle for themselves and, maybe, even join with him. He suddenly felt all the expectations on him weigh heavily, like one of the many anvils he had watched craftsmen and women use to turn metal into blades when he was a boy. One week to tame a horse, find a banner and reach the ancient circle, where the people of his birth would descend upon him. “One week!” he reminded himself through gritted his teeth, rearranging the pack on his back. “Best get on with it then” he said out loud and without a backward look he set off down the rutted roadway leading away from the hold and towards the open plains.

"Damn this weather" Teo yelled out to the incessant rain as it hit the ground like hornets attacking his skin. Four days had passed, four days where the rain had not stopped falling, four days where Teo had doubted, on numerous occasions, whether he was going to be able to complete the required task in the allotted time. The people of the North would already be travelling up with their many mounts, even the rough weather would not stop them, covering great distances and most would converge on the most northern town of the territories within the next day. Then people would start setting off for the meeting place. Yet, here was Teo, underneath a gooseberry bush, wrapped up tightly in his cloak, sitting in the remains of what was a badger set that he had found, quite by chance, when being pursued by two wolves. Luckily for him, the rain and the shallow stream he had waded through had disguised his scent to deter the large wolves that stalked the North. "Damn, damn" Teo muttered into his cold hands that he held in front of his face. The gods of his people had not sent a sign of what the new banner would be and Teo reminded himself that his own imagination could not devise something elegant to place on a banner, it had to inspire troops and strike fear into others, "I can't stay here" Teo finally managed to persuade himself. Taking a chunk of dried beef from his knapsack and pressing it into the inside of his cheek to soften, he scrambled up from underneath the thick, spiny bush....

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