

[An excerpt from a YA novel that I worked on as part of my Senior Writing Seminar. A fantasy novel set in the World of Thoth, which I created for an extended Dungeons and Dragons campaign. The story is original, but utilizes NPCs from the campaign.]

Castle Drear was the largest, sturdiest and by far the most breathtaking structure Wallace Whitewater II had seen in his entire life. Never mind that this was the third or fourth time his father had taken him to the capital, the sight of the great windows, looking down on the city below made the young man's chest swell and his heart race every time he saw it. It was like being in the presence of a God, an eternal entity that looked down upon men as though they were insects. His father had told him that nobility was the closest thing to divinity a man could attain, and Castle Drear had always reminded Wallace of this lesson.

Today breakfast was served in the great hall, rather than the solar. The great tables were covered with food and all of King Greysword's court was in attendance, along with many faces Wallace did not recognize. The young man entered the hall two-and-a-half steps behind his father and grandfather, taking measured steps, his back perfectly straight. When they arrived at the King's Table, he waited for his father to pull out a his grandfather's seat before doing the same for his father, a sign of respect and one of a great list of customs one must observe at a royal event.

When all in attendance were seated, Queen Mirabell rose, the great hall fell silent and all eyes turned to her. She wore flowing pink and maroon fabric, matching the

pinkish hue of the soft golden tiara atop her head. She glanced around the room and smiled warmly.

“Thank you all for joining us today as my husband, your noble king,” she took the hand of the older man beside her and gave it a squeeze, “speaks with you all. But before all your business, we hope that you will take this time to enjoy the hospitality of Drear.” And with that, servants stepped from the corners of the room and began removing the coverings on dishes all along the great tables. The one before Wallace II contained an entire cooked peacock, the plumage festively arranged fanning out from the back. He sliced a large portion of breast and offered it to his father who turned up his nose slightly and raised a hand, palm out. Wallace II nodded and slid the steaming meat onto his own plate. As everyone began serving themselves, Wallace II turned to his father.

“My lord, I am curious. Which of these men at the tables below are West Imperial Trading Company? The King will have summoned them too, no doubt.” Wallace II looked at his father’s hands as he spoke. With fork and knife, Captain Wallace Whitewater I served himself a stack of crispy bacon and a baked yam.

“Indeed he did, my son. Malcolm Hightower is seated at the near end of the table just to your left.” Captain Wallace did not look up from his plate as he spoke, almost whispering, so that Wallace II had to lean in slightly to hear him over the noise of the hall. “He is wearing that ridiculous hat, ostentatious as your breakfast.” The boy colored a little in the cheek, but maintained his line of questioning.

“What do you think the King desires, summoning all the merchants of the land to the castle at the same time? Do you think he will finally take your advice and grant you purview over one unified trade organization?”

“I would not presume so much as to postulate as to the purpose of anything our noble King does.” Captain Wallace set down his fork and knife and turned to his son. “His grace has explained to me quite reasonably, besides, that one organization would hold too great sway over prices throughout the land.” Wallace II stared into his father’s eyes without blinking and swallowed. “So it seems to me that a unified salesforce is far from likely. So we shall continue our rivalry with,” Captain Wallace turned his attention to Malcolm Hightower again, “The West Imperial Trading Company shall continue.”

Captain Wallace had told his son that such divisive rivalries, as were common among the various trade organizations of Thoth, served to keep gold from the pockets of honest merchants. Wallace II watched the man in the plumed hat tear a drumstick off of a large chicken in front of him before he wiped his palm on the sleeve of his fine red doublet. Wallace scowled for a moment, but then set his face back to a neutral expression. He tried not to see all the informality in the see of people below him, but he could not help himself.

There, a woman wiped her mouth with the center of her napkin rather than the corner, and over there a fat man kept changing which side he set his glass down on, crossing his elbow over his plate again and again. It disgusted him that people would act in such an uncivilized manner in the presence of the Royal Family.

Though unrelated, Wallace II's father had been named in honor of King Wallace Greysword, as Wallace II had been named to honor his father. The King was a close friend of Wallace II's grandfather, and so the family joked that the name was a royal gift and bond of the friendship between the Greyswords and the Whitewaters. Captain Wallace was heir to White Castle, the ancestral seat of house Whitewater far to the North on the cliffs above White Water Rush. House Whitewater was responsible for turning the small fishing community of White Water Rush into the largest and busiest port in Thoth. His grandfather, Lord Maro Whitewater governed the city while Captain Wallace carried goods from Stoneport Veil in the far northern Dwarven lands to the Frozen Shore on the very southern tip of Thoth.

Suddenly, a wave of motion swept through the crowd. Every head turned, one after another, to face the doors at the entrance. Wallace craned his neck, despite his seat at the elevated King's Table, looking at the far end of the room. Three figures were milling about at the end of one of the great tables. The largest, a thick, curly haired man in a garish yellow and purple raiment bowed low to another who departed. "Tardy merchants," Captain Wallace almost growled. Wallace II clenched his jaw in turn and turned to look for the King's reaction.

King Wallace seemed unperturbed. He continued to pick at the food before him, taking small bites and chewing them thoroughly before each swallow.

"How disrespectful." Captain Wallace shook his head and returned to eating. "Who could be so careless as to arrive late when summoned by the King? That does not speak well to ones scrupulousness as a purveyor of goods," Wallace II added,

imitating his father and taking another small bite like the King, chewing it thoroughly with his mouth closed.

His father nodded in agreement. “No, it does not. Remember, my son, even when sailing the Sea of Storms, punctuality is the first thing a customer will notice.”

Captain Wallace returned to his meal in silence while Wallace II looked back up at the latecomers. They certainly were a strange pair, one as large as a draft horse, the other a twig of a person. And where, the big one was frantic and overly gesticulative, the smaller was rigid and jerky of movement, as though each step were a great mental struggle; the big one kept steering him around with a hand on his shoulder.

The little one, Wallace II saw now that their shuffling search for a set of open seats had brought them closer, also had curly brown hair. He wore a tight shirt of yellow fabric with lacy blue ruffling around the wrists and collar and black breeches with a single emerald elf rune imprinted on the upper thigh.

Wallace II snorted to himself derisively; clashing lace and elvish-detailing had been all the rage in King Wallace’s Court several seasons ago,. No wonder the two were still getting looks and cold shoulders as they reached the end of the bench and were forced to proceed back up the opposite side of the table in search of seating. As the big one steered his little companion around the front of the long table, directly in front of the King’s Table, the little one suddenly froze, so that the big one bumped him in the back, sending him sprawling across the floor.

Wallace II looked to his father. Captain Wallace only cocked one eyebrow and shook his head. Wallace II smirked. He knew that such a faux pas was tantamount to

social suicide for any member of the court, but, as outsiders, these buffoons neither knew nor cared. It was like they were a couple of jesters, arriving late in silly clothes. Wallace II couldn't take his eyes off of them, burning with curiosity, wondering what misconduct they'd commit next.

The big one tugged the little one to his feet and dusted him off with swats from his meaty hand. "Do not worry, Milosh, there will be seats on this side! I think I see some just there. Please sir! May we sit?"

The big one spoke casually, but his deep voice boomed out over the pitter-patter of polite dining conversation. The way he spoke was strange, guttural. He swallowed rolled his Rs and shortened all his vowels. Wallace II almost cringed when he heard the man pronounce the words this and sit as thees and seet. Proper diction, he knew, especially for a tradesman, was important for anyone who needed anyone to listen to him.

"Important people place peerless posture and perfect expression above all other orders of comportment and oration," Captain Wallace had taught his son. "If ever you find your tongue or your spine wiggling in ways that they should not," his father had said, "repeat that phrase with perfect diction. By the time you are done, you shall find yourself with the bearing of a gentleman before you reach the end." And he had been right. Now Wallace II hardly ever needed to remind himself at all.

Upon hearing the strange accent, Captain Wallace turned back to look at them. His lip curled up slightly, as though he smelt something foul, but did not want to let on that he had. Wallace II watched his father clench his fork and knife and run his thumbs

up and down the handle as he observed the pair proceed up the aisle, only to find the gap filled, and men now pressed shoulder to shoulder.

Captain Wallace sneered. "I wouldn't exactly want some nivi trinket peddler and his brat sitting beside me either," the Captain breathed.

"Is that the manner in which nivi speak?" Wallace II asked his plate, not wanting to seem interested. He had never seen one and only ever heard his father use the word under his breath, and once, a friend of his, Roderik Ellonso, had been scolded publicly by his mother for using the word in the presence of Princess Aerah. His father had explained to him that night in the privacy of his study, that it was the name of a wicked race of men, nomads and vagabonds who camped out by the western river and traveled it on boats, breezing into nearby towns and making off with livestock, crops and occasionally pets or children.

"Barbarous." Captain Wallace said. "At least the boy has the courtesy to know he doesn't belong. That oaf is practically carrying him." Wallace II clenched his jaw, imagining the big man snatching up a child and making off with him, as he'd heard nivi were wont to do.

Once more at the back of the room, the father and son still hadn't found their seats. Wallace II watched as they crossed over to the other table and began searching for a spot.

Captain Wallace returned to eating the last bits of his meal and Wallace II made an effort at forking his around, but found himself more and more distracted by the nivi merchant representatives. Now that he thought about it it made perfect sense; the two

clearly didn't fit in. Their clothing, the way they walked together, even their manner of speaking, everything these two did was completely against everything Wallace II had been taught was right. It was no wonder these people weren't mentioned in casual company.

"Does the food not please you, young lordling?"

Wallace II spun around in his seat, surprised he had not heard anyone approaching. Queen Mirabell stood behind him, a ring-encrusted hand draped over the back of his seat. Wallace II merely gaped at her for a moment.

"There are other delicacies down at my end of the table. If you'd like, I could bring you something different," The Queen chirped sweetly.

"No, thank you, your grace. My son is fine. I am sure he will finish in due course." Captain Wallace's voice was calm and cool, but Wallace II from the way his father rolled his thumb and forefinger together, Wallace II knew that he was upset.

"The meal was most delicious, your grace, but I cannot eat another bite."

"I am sure he is just excited to find out what news your good husband has for all of." Captain Wallace's fingers curled into a fist by his side and he looked at his son. "I am sure that the curiosity and excitement has filled him heel to crown," he finished.

"But the boy took so much! Surely you simply took a bite and found that peacock was not your favorite. My sister did just the same when first she came to Castle Drear," the Queen protested.

"Yes," Wallace II said, turning to look up at the Queen, "but no. I mean, er, my father, Captain Wallace, speaks true. I hardly ate any supper last night for the



excitement after he told me he was to speak with the King. Everything looked so good. I suppose my eyes were simply larger than my stomach!" Wallace II rushed through his words in his hurry to explain to the Queen, then glanced back at his father. The boy quickly took up his knife and fork, slicing a segment of tender white-meat and popping it smiling into his mouth. He gave it a few chews as he grinned first at the Queen, then at his father before swallowing.

Captain Wallace nodded curtly at his son. "So you see, your highness, no trouble at all with your food." The Captain cut another small portion of his own peacock and chewed it languidly, making a show out of how much he was enjoying the seasoned meat.

The Queen simply smiled at the Wallaces for a moment, first the captain, then his son. She clapped her hands together happily, squeezing them and giving them a little shake at each of them. "This is excellent, most excellent. The Whitewaters are our most esteemed guests. Please, enjoy the food. My husband will deliver his news shortly." With that the queen made her way back down the table.

Wallace II looked turned to his father, his cheeks coloring with shame, but Captain Wallace would not look at his son.

"Finish your food, my son," the Captain said curtly. Wallace II obeyed, taking large consistent bites until his plate was clear and his stomach ached.

Suddenly a crystalline tinkling pierced the dull roar of the hundreds of conversations filling the room. Beside the King, Queen Mirabell was tapping at her glass

insistently with her fork. Up and down the high table, nobles took up the call, each tapping a utensil against their goblets. Wallace II took up his knife in tandem with his father, delicately tapping the side of his own drink. The hall quickly fell silent, and King Wallace Greysword rose.

“Friends,” The King said into the silence, “guests,” all eyes were on the center of the high table, “countrymen, thank you for being with me today.”

Wallace II clapped in unison with the rest of the hall.

“Our nation may be the youngest of the Empires, but the accomplishments of Men have ever been the example against which all achievements are judged!”

Maro Whitewater was the first to clap, and the loudest and his applause carried on long after the rest of the court. Wallace II watched the Queen place a delicate hand on his grandfather’s forearm, and the old man’s vigorous clapping died down.

“The agency of Men shames the industrious Dwarves, in their Hollow Mountain, and our spirit eclipses that of the Elves in their crystal halls!”

Again, applause broke out across the grand hall; this time men were rising from their seats, giving the King a standing ovation. Wallace II felt his chest swell with national pride. From the back of the hall, a whistle split the courteous patter of acclamation. It was the large nivi merchant, making a scene again. The King silenced the room with a wave of his hand and all who had risen returned to their seats.

“You merchants and vendors, you buyers, sellers and traders. You caravaneers and shopkeepers. You are the agents of our realm. In this age of peace, brokered by our benevolent Grand Wizard, you are our soldiers! You are the boots on foreign soil!

Your quills are your swords and you ledgers are your shields!" The King raised his hands slowly as he spoke until he was holding them aloft, high above his head.

Wallace II could feel the energy in the room building, ready to boil over.

"You are an army and I am your King!"

A cheer echoed from the front of the room. Malcolm Hightower leapt to his feet and doffed his large hat to salute the King. The men beside him followed suit, then the men beside them until every man at all three of the great tables was standing and saluting King Wallace Greysword.

Wallace II had never been more proud, but he remained seated, as did everyone else at the high table. Only the King stood, smiling down at his army.

"Know, then," the King declared, his voice booming all throughout the great hall, "that your work is my work, your success mine! But know too that your failures are a reflection on all Men."

The room grew quiet.

"To achieve our success together, we must organize and direct your efforts. As of now we have many hands, but few heads. Therefore, it is my judgment that from this day forward, the City of Drear shall be home to The Golden Brotherhood, a grand guild for all of our merchants!"

The hall broke out in a torrent of noise. Cheers and applause shook the large windows of colored glass and many men banged their forks and knives and goblets uproariously against the great tables.

Wallace II glanced at his father. The Captain's face was an inscrutable mask as he casually drained his goblet. The noise in the hall began to die down after several minutes as many took their seats once more.

The King continued. "I think you, Men of Drear, for your staunch support. I have faith in each and every one of you, as you have faith in me. But—"

The silence in the hall became complete.

"Every army has need of generals, majors, a chain of command."

Wallace II looked excitedly to his father. "Leaders, father," he whispered, "the King has heeded your counsel!"

"Silence," his father hissed out the corner of his mouth, never taking his eyes of the King.

"It is with this thought," the King declared, "that I ask my oldest and truest friend, a man whose counsel I have always cherished above all others, to take up leadership of our new Golden Brotherhood."

The hall waited with bated breath, but the King allowed the tension to build. Then, slowly, the King turned to his left, gazing down the high table. Wallace II's eyes met the Kings for a brief moment and a shiver of excitement tumbled down his spine. But King Wallace's gaze slid down the table, over Captain Wallace, coming to rest on Wallace II's grandfather.

"Lord Maro Whitewater," the King breathed, though his voice still carried along the hall.

The old man locked eyes with the King.

“Will you answer your King’s call?”

Maro remained silent for a long moment, then slowly, he began to nod, picking up speed until his thin old neck looked ready to snap with each rapid bob.

“Your grace,” Maro almost shouted, rising from his seat, “it would be the greatest of honors.” He made to salute the King, as the assembled merchants had done so readily, but King Greysword waved him off, stepping back from the table. The King strode seriously over to the Lord of White Water then opened his arms. The two men embraced, and the great hall broke out in fresh applause.

Wallace II and his father quickly joined in, and when the King released him, Maro turned to his son and grandson, embracing each in turn. As he hugged his grandfather, Wallace II felt the eyes of everyone in the room upon him. The three Whitewater men turned to face their audience. Lord Whitewater waved and Wallace II followed his father in a deep bow, his nose dipping within inches of his empty plate.

“Now,” King Greysword said, fingering his chin in faux contemplation, “I believe the time has come for celebration. My Queen, you have something most excellent planned for us?”

“Indeed, your grace, I do. Without, in the courtyard, you will find such musicians, fools and prestidigitators as would please even your most high eminence. But first, our new general,” she giggled, playing with the word as she gestured towards the Lord of White Water, “surely he will desire an audience with his new recruits?” Again, the Queen tittered.

“It is as your grace figures,” Maro chortled, inclining his head.

“Excellent,” Queen Mirabell took up a scroll and unfurled it. “Then let us have the following merchant leaders follow us into the council chamber before proceeding to our lovely fair.” The Queen began to read off a list of names, and as she did, men throughout the great hall rose and began filing towards the back of the hall.

“Captain Wallace Whitewater, captain of the trading galley, The Pale Maiden.” Captain Wallace rose stiffly, bowed to his father and the two made their way towards the council chamber.

“Macni Fairfield, of the Eastern Fields and Pastures. Malcolm Hightower of the West Imperial Trading Company. Tomwise Umwulf of the Steel-Shaper Guild.” The Queen called out merchant after merchant, in a high, clear voice.

Wallace II watched as each man rose in turn and strode proudly off after his father and grandfather. His stomach twisted painfully, a byproduct of his hasty breakfast.

“Mah Jamora of the Nivasi Caravans.”

The large nivi rose at the back of the room. His son clutched at his sleeve, but the big bull of a man grasped the boy’s hand and freed himself before leaning in to say something to him and treading the long way down to the end of the hall.

“To our other honored guests,” the Queen beams, rolling up her scroll, “I bid you welcome to King Wallace Greysword’s first annual Merchant’s Day Fair! Please, enjoy yourselves to the utmost!”

A cheer went up from the remaining merchants as they rose and began picking their ways out into the sunny courtyard. The first sounds of merriment began to filter in over the dull roar of conversation, but Wallace II remained in his seat. He watched Mah

Jamora as he passed the high table. The nivi's clothes jangled as he walked, so replete were they with studs and bangles.

Wallace II rose, thanked Queen Mirabell for her hospitality and gave the King a deep bow before descending the small flight of carpeted stairs on his side of the dais.