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## Assignment

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*The Short Official Account of Known Heroes*<sup>1</sup> was released bi-annually by the Accountants Ministry of Owl from WiM 447 to WiM 16, at which point the publication fell into a prolonged hiatus - the Arbiters Ministry having revived an old controversy over the correct methods of measuring the heroic nature of any individual of Owlic Citizenry, given verifiable records of their deeds and misdeeds.

This was a hard endeavour, to be plain; by what dependable means might one be expected to assess the heroic qualities of another - especially now, with acts of warfare no longer viewed as the main measure of a man's heroics (and men themselves, for that matter, no longer the sole sex deemed by the Arbiters as capable of those)? None could say for certain, any longer, what made a man a *man*, or a hero, *heroic*, and to what extent either of those qualities even counted. The times were changing, as all of the direst prophecies had foretold. So-said the pale and aged men who had been charged with the prophet-ing all that time.

The purposes of the Short Account (called the *Account*, for short, by those who kept it) were manifold; many functions - from taxations, to official commendations, to criminal investigations and exonerations - were well-served by having such a compact list in popular circulation. A Citizen who found their name upon it (and who also bore the accompanying seal) might expect preferential treatment and deference when out and about in the Isles - opening doors (both metaphorical and at times less-so) which would

remain otherwise barred to those rest of us who were not officially deemed sufficiently (or at all) heroic. <sup>2</sup>

The single, intact 230-volume set of the Account's series of bi-annual ledgers known to have survived the Great Rescribing is still archived in the vast lower levels of the Archive of Owl, in a fair-sized trunk made of Ironioak, which is banded in silvered steel, sealed tight with the wax of Elder Bees, and guarded with the Greatest of available Glypheries, for extra good measure. No part of this collection may be signed out of the Archive's inner research chambers - save by The Executors themselves (who hold, after all, every key to every secret, save of course for their own).

A great many incomplete and unofficial copies of the Account are nonetheless in general circulation, with many of these containing quite falsified contents, and making exaggerated claims - implying heroism in whom it is uncertain any such thing is to be found. Questionably certifiable heroes abound in the Isles therefore, these days, and one can find them in nearly every nook and cranny, partaking in the particular perks of their profession, provided by participating merchants, guildhalls, parlours, and inns throughout the Realms. This, in spite of the Ministries' current proclamation that even the official one is no longer to be taken too seriously, except for its value as a historical record.

Nonetheless, the task of keeping the original (though stagnating) ledgers accessible and verifiably accurate - along with the added business of removing from circulation the continuous flow of unsanctioned forgeries - falls to the sub-office of the Arbiters Ministry known as the Heroics Observatory of Owl.

The HOO - as it has come to be most commonly known throughout the Realms - is divided further into three *Arms*: the *Inner*, responsible for copyediting, revisions, and intra-ministerial communications; the *Outer*, responsible for (re)assessment of heroic deeds and qualities out in the field, as well as investigation of false claims and removal of forgeries of the Account from circulation; and the *Lower*, responsible for preservation, archival, and security measures pertaining to the remaining official documents, and all of their revisions. These arms are officially headquartered in two separate wings of the Heroics Observatory: one

connecting to the offices of Accounting Ministry (via an enclosed walking bridge), and the other hanging somewhat precariously out from the Central Spire, overlooking one of the city's Mid-Quarters' larger cisterns (which is also a frequent meeting place for those of the Council of Crow which make the rooftops and alleyways of Owl their home).

All told, there are nearly three-hundred Observers in the ranks of the HOO - most of who take their sworn duties quite seriously still, despite their office's present and protracted disenfranchisement, as a department dedicated almost entirely to the maintenance of historical revisionism.

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Bardlii Noonstar awakens again, as he has every morning of his life: he sits upright, opens his eyes, and remarks to the room he is in, 'What a curious dream.'

The room is chilly, mostly dark, silent, and nearly empty of furniture, save for the stone-firm cot he is sitting upright upon, a small desk and chair, and a row of pegs upon the wall opposite that, where some clothing is hung. This is how the room had been the previous night - there appear to be no surprises. Bardlii is wearing his knee-length, burlap sleeping shift, and is half-under a thin wool blanket, which he does not require, but has chosen to wake up beneath anyhow.

There is a tall, narrow window on the wall facing Bardlii, a few arms away. The window is nought but a deep, dark blue shape at the moment - neither the Eye of the Pale Sun nor the Tear of the Burning Moon are yet quite out; It is seven hours and seven moments before noon.

Bardlii has always known what time it was, and has always chosen to awake at precisely seven hours and seven moments before noon. This affords him time to dress, and some seven hours to do some work, before the bells of the City begin to sound - when he will be compelled to curl himself into a ball until the clanging (and the waves of panic which accompany it) subside. After this, he will be afforded seven more hours (less whatever time he has taken cowering that noontime) to do some additional work, before then going to sleep for (somewhat) seven more

hours. This, he has repeated nearly every day of his life (once he had mastered moving his body about, which took about four or five days, all told, if he is being humble in that recollection).<sup>4</sup>

'Hello?' Bardlii adds, but of course, nobody is there. There is a gentle blue wimlight illuminating the room just enough that he can see the outlines of things. It has grown slightly brighter upon hearing his voice. There is nobody here.

Of course. He had fallen asleep alone - as he has always done, every night, for the past twenty-seven years. Today is his 27-Count Day.

On his 28-Count Day, Bardlii had walked around the Ministry halls all afternoon with a flower in his mouth. It was a buttercup. This was something he had never done prior to that day. Most Persons enjoy flowers, but he had not received many compliments from his colleagues about his Count Day one. This Count Day, he will do something different. He is at present unaware of what that will be.

Bardlii arises from the cot, steps bare boot to the wall where his clothes are hanging from pegs, and removes his sleeping burlap. He stands naked, hands on hips, regarding the clothing options hung upon the pegs before him. He is lean, healthy, and quite stronger than he appears - though he has never had occasion to exert himself unduly with exercise, other than of the kind involved in carrying small stacks of books about, and climbing lots of stairwells. This sort of exercise turns out to be quite sufficient for most people who are otherwise indoor sorts.

Being neither wonderfully wealthy nor particularly poor, Bardlii has a limited set of clothes to choose from: they are all plain, well-made, and mostly monochromatic, with some brown for colour. All told, there are one dozen combinations he can make with these options - more than enough for a lifetime, by his own estimation. He chooses a shirt, pants, and belt. His sole pair of indoor boots are by the room's door, so for now, he remains shoeless. He has no mirror in his room and so walks to the room's window and stands considering it instead, as he dresses himself. Pants first, then shirt, then belt - all efficiently completed in a matter of moments (about four moments, this particular morning).

He runs a hand over his hair, which is mostly in place, save for a few eternally curious tufts, which never remain entirely where they should be, despite his attempts to tame them.

Beyond the mirror of his open window, across the wide and darkened landscape of farmland, valley, river, forest, hedgewild, and hill - leagues upon leagues from where he is - the distant ridge of the Razorspine is beginning to emerge in crisp, dark silhouette before a horizon of deep blue. Tear, the Burning Moon, has begun its slow glide Realmward from behind the World's oldest mountains. It is always low to the edge of the World during the Summer, and it will barely crest the lowest peak before gently arcing again down in the late afternoon. By then, the Pale Eye will have been launched perpendicular to it in its high arc, and across the dome of the sky toward the City, and over it and onward, travelling to the distant Sea to plunge itself in - and the Realms into night, once again.

Below Bardlii's window, a myriad lamplights from the deep, maze-like alleys and avenues of the Middle Quarters illumine the many guild halls, gated gardens, minor palaces, wells and waterways, and the still-silent, sprawling High Market - all fanning out below the adjuncted piles of towers and turrets in which the varied Ministries of Owl are housed, and hanging precariously over. Farther below and well beyond the high walls of the Middle Quarters, into all directions, the hovels, commons, graveyards, and shops and lesser markets of the masses lie, still unseen, shrouded in darkness and curfews.<sup>3</sup>

Bardlii is nearly out of moments. He turns from the window and makes his way across the room, slips on his indoor boots, and exits the room.

Bardlii's room is on the ninth level of the West face of the Westernmost tower which comprises the compounded column of towers known collectively as the Trunk.<sup>5</sup> His door exits into a narrow, curved corridor, enclosed and dimly lit by the slow, faint flicker of blue-green wimlight. He follows the corridor counter-clockwise, passing doors which lead to the chambers of fellow Observers - some have risen already and others are late-risers. The work of the Observatory is done largely according to the schedule of its members. This has been its tradition for all its long years.

The corridor becomes a stairwell, and he descends, reaches a landing, and exits into the fresh though windless air, within the Inner Trunk. Here, still dark in the near dawn, the great old central towers of Owl form a tight circle as they ascend haphazard fashion, leaning gradually inward and against one another as they collectively rise into the low heavens, to form an immense silo.

The construction of the Trunk from inside it tells the tale of ancient men in competition to be the first to build the highest tower upon the Realm's most enchanted mountain. In the end - high above - they chose at last to call it a truce of sorts, turning their attentions away from architecture and into political maneuvering, in search of the key to controlling all of that work and power. At the very top, the immense Eyes and Ears of Owl are perched, though in this pre-dawn, they remain unseen from down here.

Torch light and wimlight flicker from the many levels of the seventeen main tower columns, and the space is criss-crossed with dozens of walking bridges which connect various ministries to various others, across the expanse, and all the way up. Bardlii takes one of these which connects the middle levels of Ministry of the Observators - where he presently works, to that of the Arbiters, where he somebody might (if he plays his cards right) passing several Ministry folk along the way. He always nods to everybody, sometimes adding a "good morning" or occasionally a "nice to see you again". He arrives at the ninth level landing of the Ministry of Arbiters. Bridges from several directions and towers converge here.

Bardlii is recognized by the guards standing at the gate, and they swing open the doors, and he passes through, nodding a hello to both. The younger of the two guards nods back, the older gives the younger a stern look.

Bardlii passes down the wide, main corridor with its marble floor and walls adorned with cases, displaying the official units of measurement of the Isles - bronze plates bearing the precise official short distances which were the Arm, Nose, Knuckle and Whisker; diagrams visualizing the calculation of Centuries, Years, Seasons, Fortnights, Hours, Moments - and the most recently added Mere-Moment (mMoment), the smallest measurement of time invented to date; scales and counterweights of nearly every

imaginable size which is still practical to keep indoors; books upon books of Applied Philosophy, containing the methods for arriving at moral and ethical assessments with a reasonable degree of accuracy and expediency... Bardlii is well-acquainted with all these materials, and strides efficiently past them, though pausing for a moment to commit to memory the formulas for dividing moments into mere ones. He continues, and turns three corners, ascends four flights of stairs and descends two, and follows an ever-widening corridor toward an enormous, plain stone wall with two nondescript doors placed next to each other, about an Arm's space between them.

Today, the doors are black and bright yellow. The previous Twosday, when Bardlii last visited the Special Measurements Office of the Arbiters Ministry, the doors were sky blue and ochre. The week before that, two almost identical shades of off-white. It took a discerning eye to make an informed decision that week, about which door to use.

That both doors always lead to the same room on the other side hardly mattered. This is the Ministry of Arbiters; every decision, however seemingly trivial, is believed, with a near religious fervour by some, to have unknown significance. Potentially World-Saving or World-Destroying significance, if one is to ask any Arbiters of the Old School who happen to still be alive. Bardlii stands at a respectful distance from the wall, with its black and bright yellow doors, and considers them both carefully, hand on his chin.

Then with a cautious shrug, he chooses the [black door | bright yellow door], and walks through.

On the other side, the immense wall looks identical, and from this side, both doors are always left in their natural wood states. Bardlii enters through the leftmost one, and politely closes it.

The Special Measurements Office is exactly thirty-three Arms deep, thirty-three Arms tall, and thirty-three Arms wide - a box of sorts, save that the entire upper half of the ceiling is curved to nicely confirm to the great, circular window taking up most of the room's opposite wall. The Realms which led to the far Sea stretch wide and far in the window's lowest half -

most of the window is sky. Although the Office here is on the eleventh floor as seen from inside the silo of the Trunk, it is at a dizzying height above the Seaward face of the ancient mountain - this is the side where the city below drops away quite sharply, in terraced fashion.

On either side of the great window, two-thirds of the way between the inner wall with its two unassuming doors, and the outer wall with its single enormous circular window, sits the desks of the Administrators of Special Measurements - the Leftmost (on Bardlii's right), and the Rightmost (on Bardlii's left)

The Leftmost, a tall, elder woman with a great nose and spectacles to rival it looks up from her paperwork as Bardlii closes the door. The Rightmost, a short, middling-aged man with commendable ears and a chin that always seems to be hiding from danger, remains writing in his book, as though neither person is there.

"That's enough, Fenrii", says the Rightmost, without looking up from his writing, "Noonstar is now in the room, your narration is no longer needed for the Record."

Bardlii did not recognize the young Observator which Ogilveii had just addressed. No doubt the man was new, and still in training; he was barely visible, situated directly beneath the great window, halfway between Master Observator Ogilveii and Master Observator Vist. Nonetheless, he could still be seen. He would have two or three years of training ahead of him, Bardlii surmised. He held a hand up to wave at Fenrii - it was a reflex - but then realized he was being professionally rude, and quickly put his hand behind his back. "I received a Mouse late last evening that I should report here first thing, Observators."

"Come in" Vist said, "make yourself comfortable - there is a chair by the door you entered." Bardlii turned around, and so there was. He had not noticed it. Next to the other door - the one he had not chosen - was a small table with a lemon cake upon it. Bardlii was very fond of lemon cakes, but took the chair gracefully, hiding his disappointment, he brought it to the centre of the floor, and sat.



There was some silence from the the four of them, as they all waited for Ogilveii to complete whatever it was he was writing. Vist sat, staring at him from her desk, a unreadable look on her face. Ogilveii seemed to be writing a list. One could tell by his hand motions; there was a dot with a flourish, some words, another dot with more flourish, more words. He reached the end of his page and started another. There was an almost imperceptible sigh from Vist. Although Bardlii wished to give Fenrii his privacy, he could not help noticing the young man was trying quite hard to not be noticed. *It takes many years, keep at it* Bardlii thought at the man, trying to use his kindest thinking. He doubted though that Fenrii could read those yet, given the trouble he was having with cloaking - and against a large wall, with backlighting at that. There was always the Archive for Observators who could not master all the tricks. Fenrii still might though.

Ogilveii continued to write his new page, glanced up briefly at the rest of the occupants in the room, to gauge whether he had held things up long enough. He wrote for another thirty moments, and then, with one last flourish of his quill, put it into its inkpot. "Good morning, Noonstar", he added. "How was the walk?"

"From across the Trunk?" Bardlii said, "Very well. No surprises, no complaints." He kept his hands folded in his lap, awaiting the assignment, or news.

"Interesting choice." Ogilveii remarked.

Bardlii thought for a moment, "Yes, well. The chair is comfortable, thank you. I might have chosen wrong. Hard to say."

Ogilveii seemed unconvinced of that. "I suppose for some, it is."

Fenrii actually gave a small cough - Vist shut her eyes and shook her head ever so slightly. Ogilveii glared directly at the young Observer, who attempted to shrink further into obscurity against the wall, but it was no use, his nerves had been shot, he was fully, sadly present. Bardlii pretended he had not heard the cough at all - though he wasn't fooling anyone. "I would like to have my assignment now, if that is why I am here."

Vist smiled, and tapped her palms on her desk in approval, "Right to the work, Noonstar, as always. Your reputation in that regard is unmatched." Ogilveii was about to make a comment, but Vist continued, "have you heard of the Short Account's current status update?"

Bardlii had not. "The Short Account? It's been on hiatus for years."

"Sixteen and one Season and one Fortnight" Ogilveii offered. "Collecting dust in the Archive, mostly. Sad." he was shaking his head. It was sad. This was their life's work, before attending to desks, as they now did.

Bardlii remembered following the Short Account during his younger years. He had memorized the list, which was last updated not long after his 43rd count Day. "I always enjoyed following the Account. Wondering what heroics all of the best Heroes of the Realms were up to."

Fenrii was almost too young to remember that time. He had been more a follower of the Long Account, truth be told.

"Fenrii, you can leave now." Ogilveii said.

Vist added with a smile, "Thank you Fenrii."

Fenrii looked morose. It is a pinnacle of achievement of an Observer to be forgotten entirely whilst still in the room, despite being no longer needed (or even wanted) there. Bardlii felt for the man. Fenrii nodded, and the three of them waited as he collected his small stool, and small sack of scribes essentials, and crossed the long floor with his head down, and past where Bardlii sat. He reached the doors and nearly went through the rightmost with no thought at all, before catching himself, and stopping abruptly. He looked at both doors - knowing he should consider the implications, but not yet knowing why, or how - and proceeded through the rightmost door anyway, bowing slightly on the way out, and closing it with a faint click.

Ogilveii wasted no time, and was on his feet. He had picked up a small crystal ball from his desk and brought it over to Bardlii. He handed it over. "We've been given an opportunity to revive the Short Account."

Bardlii took the crystal, and looked up at Ogilveii in surprise. The crystal had already begun to swirl into an image. Bardlii then looked at Vist, who remained at her desk, and then back at Ogilveii again, looming above him. "But how? The Executors code has decreed-"

"The Executors code" Ogilveii interrupted, "as we have sometimes witnessed over the years - though not often - can be overridden. It has happened in my own lifetime twice, verifiably."

"But, who?" Bardlii looked at the crystal ball in his hands. It was a Type B, one that carried no sound and could only reach back in time by no more than one moon's revolve. Something was happening in the Isles almost at that moment, which had just renewed Bardlii's hope in his own life's work: to catalogue the endeavours of the Realm's greatest Heroes, as they actually happened. Where had the Heroes gone? How many remained? They were sorely needed now (though he did not know yet how sorely).

"What is my mission?" Bardlii asked, but keeping his eyes on the crystal, knowing it would show him the answer soon enough.

Vist was standing over him now as well. "The Ears have told the Mind that a Great Hero - unlike any the Realms have ever known in seven-hundred-and-seventy-seven years - is about to be Storied. We want you to find this Hero -"

"- and document their journey of self-discovery -" interrupted Ogilveii.

"- for the Owl to bear witness." continued Bardlii, stating the old Oath of the Heroics Observatory of Owl.

*"For the Owl to bear witness, for the All",* responded Ogilveii and Vist, as one.

Within the crystal held in his hands, Bardlii saw a form emerge. It moved through wispy brush, it scurried through waving grass. Over and around resolving stones, diving within a bed of wild roses, it poked its frightened head out, and gazed about alert of dangers - a singularly common rat.

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1. Not to be mistaken for the (predictably) larger *Full Account of Known Heroes*, the (considerably) larger *Encyclopedia of Almost-Heroes*, or the lesser-known (though nonetheless interesting) *Gregorri's Gazetteer of Mostly Heroes*.
2. There were, of course, correspondingly official accounts of known villains, anti-heroes, and assorted Ne'er Do Wells - but these, for now, are not the purpose of the accounting with which we are presently concerned. Perhaps another time.
3. The entirety of Owl is a great circle, bisected Rangeward to Seaward by the River rising progressively upward at the centre- an inverted funnel of stone edifices, walls, archways, thatched and clayed roofs, alleys parapets, bridges, and awnings - higher and higher in stumbling, spiralling steps, the column of the ministerial towers (the Tower of Towers), and skyward to where the Three Great Eyes of Owl lord over all the Land - a presence rivalled in height only by the distant peaks, in majesty and vision only by the Very God Itself.
4. The astute Reader here might surmise that I am not telling a story which occurs on a their own World, which might have either a 24-hour day cycle, or else a 42-hour day cycle (there are no doubt others of which I am not presently aware). On Allegoriia, the day cycles are 21 hours, give or take a few moments. Mind you, I have said nothing about how long each hour is measured in moments, nor how long a moment might feel (empirically or otherwise) to this Person or that... and so, I am not sure I have told the Reader anything particularly useful here.
5. This column - sometimes called the "thick spire", or "very large tower", or "immense and somewhat teetering castle" - that one cannot help but notice rising from Old Mountain and high above the bundled and sprawling city, which surrounds it like a great and tumbling stone skirt, when viewing the capital City of Owl from afar, for the first time (and really, all times after that). The Trunk owes its great girth to its being comprised of seventeen separate tower columns, arranged in a fairly tight circle, creating an interior courtyard (which of course one cannot see unless one is in the Trunk itself). Quite impressive - my words are insufficient to do justice to its architecture, inspired by the feverish desires of now-ancient men to outrace each other to the sky (though don't ask me why).