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Departure

updated 2022-05-14

To Dagnett Bookniird,

Second Twosdaii, Autumn, WoM 121

Dagnett,

Hello, my friend. I hope the Archive is treating you well. I dropped by the upper level to see if I could catch you before you descended into the depths for however many days or weeks you tend to take down there, but I was an hour too late, I'm afraid, and so I am leaving you this letter to let you know where I've disappeared to, for a time.

I've been given a new assignment. I am not permitted to divulge where in the Realms I am being sent at this time, but they've said nothing in particular about staying tight-lipped as to the reason. In fact, the rumour I believe is being allowed to spread gradually within the halls of the Observatory and the Arbitorium both. We might be in luck; our careers might not be destined to be for nought, as once we had thought.

There has been a mysterious benefactor, recently come forth, offering a great sum of silver to the Executors, on the condition it be used solely in the production of a single update to the Short Account of Known Heroes. Perhaps you will have heard this news already, but I was too excited not to tell you myself, as well.

Although it is commonly understood that the Owlic Code is, under the right conditions, open to modification, no Minister I have ever discussed this with has been able to clarify what those conditions might be, and the occasions of it happening in the living memory of any of them can be counted on a single hand. It seems to me that, regarding this secret, only the Executors themselves hold the key.

Apparently, a good deal of coin in some cases is sufficient enough to warrant an update to our City's Code. I am, on the one hand, a bit disillusioned by this realization, and on the other, not terribly surprised. One can't, in any case, look a gift-mule in the mouth. We have been reactivated, if only for a single new issue. Perhaps, if our job is done well, others may be permitted to follow. Even if not, then this new issue of ours will forevermore be the last, most recent one, for future generations to regard as the latest example of the noblest work of interpretative history which the World has ever known: that of the definition of a True Hero, as regarded through the all-seeing eyes of Owl.

I cannot imagine a greater calling for us, than to help revive the Realmic zeal for the uncommon character, of whom so many are so sorely needed these days, as you know.

I am quite eager to get myself on the road. I have yet to be issued my traveling maps or mule, but once I have, I will have all that I need, to locate our first subject.

Curiously, they present to the scrying crystal in a most common and unassuming form - that of a common hooded rat. I believe we may be dealing with a Green Wizard of great craft, here, or perhaps one of the Fey-blood, rumoured still to lurk in some Hedgewilded places, far from their own shrouded Realms.

I was entirely underwhelmed, when first viewing the creature in the crystal, I must admit. This can only mean that I am in for a great surprise, when I finally meet them, face-to-face (even though they may well never see mine).

I have been asked to update existing records of Last-Known Heroes along the way, as well; whether they still live, if they are still quantifiably Heroic, and what additional deeds should need to be appended to their respective registries, if any. I have been issued two items from the Stores, to aid me in my travels abroad, which I might tell you more about in a future update.

I look forward to meeting with you upon my return, old friend, though I can't say when I might be back within the walls of Owl again. As you know, in years past, the Account was updated every second year, and so I will endeavour to complete the entire task well within that time frame, to increase our chances of being reinstated into active service, for good, once again. You have my oath that I will do my very best.

Take great care in the Archives. I have heard rumours of Gnomish unrest, and a surge in the populations of Grand Rats from the Depths. Watch your surroundings, and seek fresh air frequently, although I know the Bookniird clan is quite famous for needing surprisingly little of that. You are nonetheless still flesh and blood, my friend. Do see the sun now and then - the books will all be there when you return, I can almost assure you.

Until some other time, soon,

Your friend,

Bardlii

Unofficial Traveling Journal,

Bardlii Noonstar,

Observer, 5th rank, HOO

Second Moondaii, Autumn, WoM 121

I am a single day's mule ride out of the Capital, traveling with a contingent of soldiers tasked with patrolling the Kings Road, left-wise, through the

Norlund Wood, to the Cape of Gareth, along the Iced Coast, and eventually back again, the long way. They will be gone a good number of fortnights, but I will not be following them for long - I part ways with the company in the town of Somedruthers, some two day's ride from here.

I have never been out of the Capital, even one step. I have envisioned it in my mind, every day of my life, at least for a few moments, when I can spare them. From the town, my mule and I will head Seaward through the Norlund and bend right, until we cross the trail known as the Hillsnake. This begins a long and winding upward journey, and protocol does not permit me to document further where I will go from there, at this time, so as not to endanger - or forewarn - my quarry unduly.

I have brought two enhanced items from the Stores with me, to aid me on my journeys. I can only believe that I have chosen wisely. The rest is with the Fate.

This endeavour cannot be dismissed as a frivolous expense, as some have already seen fit to call it openly, within the halls of the Trunk. They are either afflicted by jealousy, or else a lack of vision. I am aware, like most of my colleagues in the twin Ministries of the Observatory and the Arbitorium, of the significance of the task, even if others are not, or will ever be.

There are none in the Realms, I will wager, who do not in some measure inwardly aspire to the ranks of True Heroship - though more than most of us consider the road too long, and the cost and risk of walking it, far too great. Known Heroes, since the Dawn of Records, have been drawn from those select few who both possess, in the first place, the rare mettle to aspire to that calling, and then proceed to do so, boldly.

Yet without the adoration of the masses, and the recognition of the State, even these are as likely to remain wallowing in obscurity, as they are to rise to their own potentials. This is the nature of Folk, as we know it - to be driven or coerced toward this way of action or that, by the balance of forces within and outside of themselves.

Owl itself was founded upon that wisest of insights: that the deepening of our knowledge of the inner workings of the hearts and minds of Folk would

lead, invariably, to the final, perfect, self-reflecting Law, which will best govern societies of mortal hearts and minds, at scale. The carrots and sticks which are the signals and sentences of Adoration and Contempt are of such fundamental function to this Law, that they bear oft-repeating, for being so obvious and uncontroversial as to be in danger of easy dismissal - and forgotten altogether, at our great and collective peril.

It is a good mantra, that a Person will act to be less a Villain than a Hero, if there is known to be, in essence, some things in it for them, one way or the other. This is a good thing - it gives Owl all levers, and the means to pull them as well, in order to produce a better citizenry, which will in turn create a better Owl, for All.

I consider this the perfect age and assignment to have been created for! I am fortunate to bear witness to the unlocking, perhaps in my own lifespan, of every remaining secret of the Spirited Beast, and the keys to its right management. Owl is the Alchemist that will concoct within itself a new age of peace upon this world - its citizenry is both the reagents, and also the afflicted subject, seeking to be made whole again, through its own self-mastery.

May the Fate guide me in the choices which must now follow all others already made,

B. Noonstar, In avid search of the next Known True Heroes of the Realms.

Bardlii Noonstar puts a flourish on the final point of his latest self-inspiring journal entry, and puts his travelling quill carefully back into its leathern case, snapping it closed. He has propped himself cross-legged upon a large, flat stone, well removed from the bustle of the soldiers, who go about the business of securing the mules and drawing lots for who gets to post the first watch that night, and who gets to start their drinking early. The Pale Eye is still over the horizon, though it is now just kissing the tree line, and will soon dip the world into twilight. Somewhere far beyond the Norlund Wood, the Seas await it - the World's sun will need a good bath by then. Travelling the Sky every day is hard and sweaty work, for a Star.

A young soldier has wandered close to the stone where Bardlii sits. The man does not acknowledge the Observer, but begins relieving himself in the grass close by. Bardlii watches the man silently, considering what town he has hailed from, and whether he chose his profession, or whether his profession chose him. The soldier has won the right to first ciders, and is getting his drinking and pissing in early, knowing he'll need to be sober by the time the Burning Moon winks at them over the distant mountains at midnight.

For most of the deepest nights in Allegoriia, at least in the Autumn season, the only light one can see by is that of the stars, and then, at times, that of the Burning Moon, always low to the horizon, if even above it at all. When the sky is clear of clouds, this can be quite enough.

Otherwise, the night here is as dark as darkness itself. There will be fires lit along the perimeter of the camp, though the real dangers for this company will not likely appear until they are well away from the City's gaze, and further along the road to the Norlund Wood.

Bardlii shakes his head, attempting to dismiss an errant thought.

"Fenrii, please stop, I'm trying to think", he says at once, brow furrowed. The soldier does not even react to the Observer's voice - but finishes his business, and quickly stuffs his -"

"*Fenrii. Enough.*" Bardlii is looking at me now, and I suppose I had better stop. I put away my parchment, which politely ceases its self-scribery.

Fenrii, though hidden behind a suitably large ironioak, and also a good two-dozen strides away from Bardlii - far enough, he had assumed (though incorrectly) to be able to go unnoticed - had nonetheless become unfortunately Storied. So he slunk from behind the tree, and tucked his Scroll of Self-Scribery back into his belt - now unsure then where to stand, or what to do with his hands. He had not planned to be put on the spot, and so into the plot. But it had happened again, so.

Bardlii regarded the young Observer from his sitting stone. He had been trying to ignore the young man's presence for the entirety of the trip from Owl (which was still quite visible in the near distance, being such a towering sprawl upon such a mountain as it was), but could not bring himself any longer to pretend Fenrii was not there. It was too much mental work. He had tried to be polite, but the Junior Observer was doing everything wrong, and Bardlii was apt to say something less polite, the longer he let it go. He motioned for the young man to come over, but Fenrii stood by the ironioak, among the tall grass, hanging his head, and feeling a bit defeated, and hoping he might somehow slip himself back into obscurity.

"Well, what are you slouching there for? I'm not about to un-see you, not *now*," said Bardlii, "You've stepped squarely your own narrative, again, so you might as well come over, into the thick of it. You look silly standing there. Besides that, you are directly beneath an Elder Bees nest. Unwise." Bardlii motioned impatiently with his hand for the young man to come over. Bardlii disliked excessive inefficiency. A little was fine, but his Junior had wallowed in self-pity quite enough in a short time. Bardlii needed to be asleep in one hour and ten-to-fifteen moments. He had dreamed to do, and needed a clear head.

Fenrii looked up, and only then noticed the large, perfectly round, leathern sphere hanging in the lower branches of the great tree, precisely above his head, sagging with honey. It was not so much the Elder Bees one had to worry about, at least this time of year, as the great weight and velocity of their nest when it finally chose to fall, which they invariably did. Larger men than Fenrii had died from falling nests such as those. It was not very *common*, of course, but there were certainly one or two verified reports, from over the years.

Fenrii quickly shuffled away from the danger, through the tall grasses toward Bardlii. How long had the Middling Observer known he had been standing there, and under that?

"I knew you were in the company as we were leaving the main City gate." Bardlii responded to the unvoiced question, as he motioned for the man to sit on the flat stone next to his. It was considerably more squat, so Fenrii

was not much further off the ground than if he had been sitting on the ground itself, once he sat himself down. He looked up at Bardlii, a pained expression on his face.

"Please stop feeling sorry for yourself." Bardlii said, as another, older soldier strode past him, carrying a heavy saddlebag, nodding only to Fenrii on the way by. "Half of our company has noticed you at one point or another, though most forget a few moments later, to your good credit."

"I am a failure as an Observer." Fenrii had cut right to the heart of his matter, his head in his hands.

Bardlii sighed, and shook his. "No, you missed my compliment. I said that I knew you were in the company *as we were leaving* the main City gate. I had not known how long you had been with us prior to that point. Would you like to tell me that, or do you prefer to keep it to yourself? I understand either way. I am offering to give you feedback on your technique."

Fenrii had in fact slipped into the company's presence just *after* they had left the city gate, which meant either Master Noonstar had known Fenrii's intentions of joining them prior to his having acted on them himself, or else the Middling Observer wished for Fenrii to think that, for some reason.

"I have no reason to lie to you, Fenrii, especially about my own powers and limitations. It would serve no purpose." As he said this, Bardlii was considering if this meant that he had seen a sliver of the future, back at the gates - had he detected Fenrii's joining their company a moment before it had actually happened? This would be a new development in his own development, but he pushed this from his thoughts, for the time being.

"Are you always in my mind, like that?" Fenrii asked. *Is that how our world is*, he added, in thought.

Bardlii felt sorry in that moment, and withdrew from the surface of Fenrii's mind. "I apologize, it is an occupational hazard, to invade another's thoughts, without meaning to. I will keep out of your thoughts from now on, as a professional courtesy - unless it's a matter of security, of course. You may, if you wish, continue to attempt to glean *mine*. It's good practice for

you. I am a bit harder to read than most, you'll find, but I am not bothered at all with being a practice subject. It helps me hone my detections and defenses."

Fenrii had noted a subtle change in how the air touched the skin around his neck as the Middling Observator spoke, and wondered if that was a clue as to who was now no longer in his head. He tried to read Bardlii's expression, to determine if Bardlii had heard him think this too, but Bardlii simply looked back at him, as if challenging him to answer that for himself.

Bardlii's face broke into a grin. He had a good smile - it was genuine, and never condescending, unlike his words might sometimes sound. "It's hard, isn't it? I remember. You'll get there."

Fenrii picked idly at the dirt, flicking tiny stones into the air. "How many of the soldiers have seen me then?"

"Nine, maybe ten. About a quarter of the company. What does it matter? Your aim is for *not one* to see you. Until then, even one is too many. It might as well be a thousand, then." He leaned forward and restated, "You'll get there."*

"I am not so sure. I believe this calling is for those who are made with the gift." Fenrii caught himself, and added, "That is, I don't possess the same gift that you have. I might have been meant for something else."

Bardlii shrugged. "Maybe so. Maybe you were made for something more. Had you thought of that?"

"Something more than being an Observator?" Fenrii gave Bardlii a curious look. "That's a curious thing to say, from you. Isn't the journaling of Heroics the greatest calling there is?"

"I won't dignify that question with a response. I am frankly surprised you asked it."

Fenrii thought about it for a moment. Of course. "Of course, I meant after *being* a Known, True Hero, I meant it is the second greatest calling, surely."

"Is that what you meant?" Bardlii scratched his chin. One of the company's more inquisitive burros had been slowly sauntering over to where the Observators were sitting, and it began to sniff around Bardlii's sitting stone. Bardlii gave Fenrii a look, and did not move or turn to regard the beast. He merely held a finger slowly to his lips, signalling his Junior to be still. The burro began to nuzzle the stone next to Bardlii's leg.

Fenrii's eyes grew wide, but he made no sound or movement. The two waited as the burro continued to examine the rock, and then dug a bit at the dirt around it, its tail swishing as it attempted to solve some mystery in its burro's mind. Fenrii held his breath, and almost imagined then that Bardlii was trying not to laugh. Soon, he was stifling one of his own. He gave Bardlii a silent, questioning look. Bardlii just shook his head, ever so slowly, and waited.

At last, the burro heard one of its kin whinny, and it turned lazily, its tail hitting Bardlii full in the face, and it sauntered away.

At last both Observators let out a slow breath. Bardlii spoke first, "*None* in this company has yet to notice I have been with them all this time - even for a moment, as far as I'm aware - except for that damned burro, right there. It has been able to sense me *twice* now - and it is continuously curious as to where I've gone, even when it has lost track of whether I even am."

Fenrii felt incredulous. How could that be?

"Don't be so surprised. And no, I am not in your mind now, you just wear all of your thoughts everywhere, all over your face. Why does it surprise you so much that the baser beasts are more in tune with their surroundings than we, the thought-afflicted? That is their sole occupation, after all - to know their own environment. They are not much concerned with when they will be able to next get drunk, or how many silver coins their neighbour may have hidden in their boots, or who they hope the next Regent might be, or not be... or whether they've chosen their career well, or else have made a grave mistake."

Fenrii wondered if his flushing face was visible in this light, which was now approaching dusk. He imagined that it was. He was overwhelmed at times

with the questioning of himself. "Still, you have been at this profession for -
"

"Twenty-six years. Yes. I fail *too*, Fenrii. More than you might think. It may not be in my professional interest to make that well known, but it happens, I'm telling you now. You are in for a lifespan of learning. Don't fool yourself that you will ever have mastered anything. You never will. Mastery is not for mortals to bear."

"But you are -"

"- *also* mortal, as *you* are." Bardlii's tone and eyes made it known that subject was closed.

"I understand."

"I'm sure you feel that you understand some things, at times. Let me know what it feels like, if you ever know for certain that you understand everything, all the time. I should like to know what that's like."

The two sat for a moment, the younger uncertain what question was most needed next, and the somewhat-older, waiting to see what that might be.

Then the fireflies alit, all at once. ¹

Bardlii startled, having never seen fireflies up close before. He had only seen them vaguely as glowing clouds upon the ground, and only with the strongest of spyglasses, and always from a great distance... and only twice in his whole life, at that. He looked about him everywhere now, as the thousand flitting lights rose as one from the tall grass, and the soldiers nearby shouted a great greeting, many considering it a sign of good Fate to have the fireflies visit them so early in their journey. One of the younger men began trying to catch a firefly in their helmet, but that never works. The company had not really entered the dangerous part of their journey, and were still relaxed, and easily amused.

Fenrii watched Bardlii for a while, as his Senior observed the fireflies wandering lazily about, winking in and out, at times alone, and other times

in patterns, as though they were telling stories, or sharing news. "You have never seen fireflies before." Fenrii observed.

Bardlii continued to watch the patterns - they were more intricate and meaningful than he had imagined. There seemed to be several independent groups, and a hierarchy, he felt... though it had nuance. "No. I have only heard of things outside of the capital City. I have never left the gates. Sometimes I use a spyglass to catch glimpses."

Fenrii had suspected that Master Noonstar was an eccentric of sorts - many Observators were - but he hadn't considered him to have been a proper City-bound shut-in. "Never in twenty-seven years? I... I am..."

"Shocked? Disillusioned?" Bardlii smiled again. He was taking out his field notebook, and wondering where he had put his drawing coals. It would be difficult to sketch things so bright with things so dark. He would have to sketch the night and the trees and the mules and the soldiers instead - the fireflies themselves would just be the absence of any darkness, among all of that. "I understand. I have been training all of this time for this opportunity." Bardlii opened his sketchbook, and gave Fenrii a stern look. "I am *not* ever fully ready, Fenrii - but I am **ready enough*, anyway. We have our assignment, and it's a very worthy one. We're ready." Bardlii unwrapped his sketching coal and began to capture fireflies - a moving absence of darkness, among all other things.

Fenrii had seen fireflies fourteen times in his life by then. Maybe fifteen. His memory was not perfect, which was a shame to him, as it would need it to be. Wouldn't it? He was an Observer - his purpose was to observe - *for the Owl to bear witness, for the All*. He would need to recall things accurately. Wouldn't he? Things like, *exactly* how many times he had seen fireflies before, and which one of the mules he should be the most careful to conceal himself from, and where not to stand in case of falling nests... and what qualities to watch for, to know that you're watching a True Hero, for sure.

Fenrii chose to put aside his too-many concerns for that evening, and simply observe his Middling mentor for a while, as Bardlii tried to capture the essence of fireflies in flight, seen by mortal eyes for the very first time,

at night. The Burning Moon, called Tear, was at its low zenith, and the clouds had all departed, and every single star came out to attend to the firefly ball, and the lights of Owl were there too, observing it All.

And it was the brightest, clearest night that Fenrii would ever know.

1. In Allegoriia, this is how fireflies work - when they come on, they all come on at once. Some say it is Tear, the Burning Moon, that tells them to. It's quite lovely, really, though often startling as well, at times, as one might imagine. ↩