

Assignment

updated 2022-06-17

A note from the Editor:

The Reader would not be faulted for wondering at this point about the protagonist whom we'd been promised - that is, Harlii the Hooded Harbinger, a common hooded rat. Remember them? Where are they? Three chapters is a curious amount of reading to do before meeting the protagonist of a story.

When I asked the Author at which point our hero might appear, they simply told me they were waiting for Maevis Morgan to get to that part. This is not really how books are written. This is what I told the Author - and we bickered for a while and finally I put my foot down and told them that the rat needed to appear before the end of chapter 4, and certainly no later. The Author was not happy about this, but eventually capitulated, and so now that's what happens, just near the end.

Who exactly is creating this story? Is it the Author, Maevis Morgan, or myself? And how long do we intend to proceed with drawing out its set up? I cannot say. We all want the hero to get on with the heroics, and the villain to show up, to get in their way, by threatening somebody or something. I'm only supposed to be here to observe and seek out typographic anomalies and continuity errors, not tell the Author that the book's hero is entirely missing. In any case, I believe we're back on track.

*Though I have no idea what any of these characters you are about to meet have to do with anything Ms. Morgan has been telling us so far...**

From the Archive of the Compendium Allegoriian, WoM99+

The Short Official Account of Known Heroes was released bi-annually by the Accountants Ministry of Owl from WiM 447 to WiM 16, before the publication fell into a prolonged hiatus - the Arbiters Ministry having revived an old and unsolvable controversy over the methodologies of measuring the heroic nature of individuals of Owlic Citizenry, given verifiable records of their deeds and misdeeds. ¹

This had always been 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 violence and counter-violence no longer viewed as the measure of a man's heroic capacity (and *men* themselves, for that matter, no longer the sole sex deemed, by the Arbiters, as capable of having that)?

The times were changing, as all of the dire Prophecies had in some way foretold. None could say for certain, any longer, what made a man a *man*, anymore, or a hero *heroic* - and to what extent either of those characteristics might even matter. The pale and bearded sages who had been charged with keeping the Prophecies for all those countless centuries had finally heard the heralding of their own redundancy - the future was both plain to see for all, and utterly uncertain at the same time: This uncertain future came in form of the rising of the waters; suddenly at first, and then with greater, slower urgency.

From where had the new tides come? What manner of hero or demigod could hold back the Great Deep itself? There was no sword sharp enough which could slay it, no voice loud enough to command its thundering weight homeward, no army vast enough which might divert it for even a single day.

The Deep took every low battlefield, and flanked every high defence. It ate the crops, it scattered the animals before it, it consumed the roads which had made countless cultures and fortunes, and formed of the once rolling hills of the Realms of Folk a thousand new island nations, some vast, and others the size of a single, lonely tower.

Dungeons of wealth descended indefinitely into the depths. Countless caverns spilled slowly forth their fleeing denizens, dizzy in the sunlight and seeking the shady, cool places which could no longer be found. Some fled further still into the vast labyrinthine underground, seeking out the fabled places where even the tides and changes in climate did not reach - at least, at first.

So many souls perished in those first seasons, when the Ocean stormed the Land, and broke the nations open, leaving them in utter disarray... and then continued to ruthlessly advance, with all the time in the World on its side.

With monsters and men intermingling to survive then upon the shrinking soils which remained, the profits of professional peace-breaking quickly began to disappear, and the old and once-trustworthy notions of heroics and villainy, so closely tied in the past to the pursuits of war, began to wholly unravel.

The best experts among Men conjectured at length on when the last tower's top might finally disappear - assuming the waters had endless reinforcement from the Elemental Realms from which they must surely be striking - and the the most dire prediction gave Mankind less then seventy-seven years. That was, of course, the most dire one. Some were less so.

In the face of such overwhelming change and uncertain priorities, Owlic funding went through a series of significant modifications, which the Executors processed with the same opacity used in all of their matters of executive decision-making. In WoM 13, on a Thirdsday morning, a proclamation was announced, requiring all Ministries to submit written justifications for their continued funding, by noon the following Moonday, through a designated slot in tower 4, level 17. Few knew this slot had existed prior to that, but many came to investigate it, hoping there would be a door to knock on, or perhaps a bell to ring. Some way to perhaps ask for an extension on behalf of this Ministry or that. None of the Executors themselves, of course, would answer any questions or hear any concerns about the matter, and few in the Ministries bothered to try, as the Executors had never said a word in response to any question or concern in all of their known history.

The Accountants Ministry of Owl, through a series of improbable events, only submitted the first third of their self-justification report by the deadline - after which, the submissions slot was found to be missing - and so their funding was cut by two-thirds. ³

The single, intact, 230-volume set of the Account's series of bi-annual ledgers known to have survived the Great Rescribing remained secured in the vast lower levels of the Archive of Owl, in a fair-sized trunk made of Ironiioak, 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 could be removed from the Archive's inner research chambers - save by The Executors themselves (who still hold, after all, every key to every secret machinery - save, of course, for their own).

A great many incomplete and unofficial copies of the Account were nonetheless in general circulation, with many of these containing quite falsified contents, and making exaggerated claims - implying heroism in whom it was uncertain any such thing was to be found. Questionably certifiable heroes therefore abounded in the Isles, in those days, and one could 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' proclamation that even the official Account was no longer to be taken *too* seriously, except for its value as a historical record.

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 - fell to the sub-office of the Arbiters Ministry known as the Historical Heroics Observatory of Owl.

The HHOO - as it had come to be most commonly known throughout the Realms - was divided further into three *Arms*: the *Inner*, responsible for copyediting, revisions, and intra-ministerial communications; the *Outer*, responsible for assessment (and reassessment) 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 were 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 incautiously outward 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 old rooftops and ancient alleyways of Owl their home, even to this day).

All told, there were nearly three-hundred Observators in the ranks of the HHOO - most of whom took their sworn duties quite seriously still - despite their office's then-present and protracted disenfranchisement - as the Realm's most proficient practitioners of the age-old art forms of historical accounting and revisionism.

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 always choses 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, for at least the past four years.⁸

'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.

Today is his 27-Count Day.

On his 28-Count Day, Bardlii had walked around the Ministry halls all afternoon with a celebratory flower in his mouth. It was a buttercup. Most Persons enjoy flowers, but he had not received many compliments from his colleagues about his Count Day one. This Count Day, he might do something different. He has not yet announced to anyone what that might be.

Bardlii arises from the cot, steps barefoot 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 never has 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 though functional set of clothes to choose from: all pieces plain, well-made, and mostly monochromatic, with some splash of brown or tan, here and there, for colour. All told, there are one dozen combinations he can make with these options - more than enough for a lifetime. 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 seem to remain entirely where they should be, despite all attempts to tame them.

Beyond the mirror of his open window, over the low, overgrown mountain known as Old Mother, 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 morning horizon of deep maroon. Tear, the Burning Moon, has begun its slow glide Realmward from behind the World's oldest range. It is always low to the edge of the World during the Summer, and it will barely crest the lowest mountain peak before gently arcing down in the late afternoon, having just barely peeked at the world before receding away once more. By then, the Pale Eye will have been launched perpendicular to the Tear's trajectory, vaulting into its own lofty arc, and across the dome of the Sky toward the City, sailing over it and onward, and travelling to the distant Sea to plunge itself fully 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 of Owl 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. Further below and beyond the high walls of the Middle Quarters, down where the River Lionder cuts the low quarters between the old mountains in two, the hovels, commons, graveyards, and shops and lesser markets of the masses lie, still unseen, shrouded in darkness and curfew. ⁹

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 modest living quarters are on the ninth level of the Westernmost tower which comprises the compounded column of towers known

collectively as the Trunk. 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 Observators - some have risen already, others are late-risers, and some again are entirely nocturnal, now deeply dreaming. 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, upon a large balcony, within the Inner Trunk. Here, still dark in the near dawn, the great old central towers of Owl form a ring which ascends in haphazard fashion, each leaning gradually inward and against one another as they all jockey for position while rising into the low heavens, to form an immense and ramshackle silo of towers. There is a drizzle of early morning dew falling from the bridges and windows and banners above. Stories below him, the gardens within the Inner Trunk are obscured by the foliage of Elderwoods and Silverleaves.

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 - the Old Father Mound. In the end - high above - they chose at last to call it a truce, turning their attentions away from rivalling architectures and toward political maneuvers instead, in continuous contest for the key to controlling all of that spent toil and untapped power. At the very top, the immense Eyes and Ears of Owl are perched, soaring higher still, though in this pre-dawn light, they remain unseen from down below, except as vague, immense, and ominous silhouettes.

Torch light and wimlight intermingle from hundreds of inward-facing windows from the many levels of the seventeen main tower columns, forming a flickering firmament around Bardlii. The space betwixt the inward-leaning towers is criss-crossed with dozens of overlapping walking bridges connecting various ministries to various others, all the way up. Bardlii takes one of these from the wide balcony, which connects the middle levels of Ministry of the Observators - where he presently works, to that of the Arbiters across the Inner Trunk. He passes several Ministry folk along the way. He always nods to every one, sometimes adding a 'good morning' or occasionally a 'nice to see you again'.

An Executor rumbles by him at the midway point of the bridge - six arms tall, a wide golem of intricately assembled iron and stone - and Bardlii, following strict protocol, says nothing to it, and makes no eye contact with it myriad, unblinking lenses.

He arrives at the tenth level landing of the Ministry of Arbiters, having ascended one level during the footbridge crossing. Bridges from several other directions and elevations converge here.

Walking briskly across the balcony, Bardlii is recognized by the guards standing at the tower's 10th-level gate, and they swing open the doors, allowing him to pass through without delay, nodding a hello to both as he does. The younger of the two guards nods back reflexively, the older gives the younger a stern look. There are a great many protocols in the Ministries of Owl.

Bardlii passes down the wide, breezy, vaulted main corridor with its marble floor and walls adorned with a hundred 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 (the mMoment), which is the smallest measurement of time invented to date; scales and counterweights of nearly every imaginable size which are still practical to keep indoors; books upon books of Applied Field 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 - the latest preoccupation of a good number of his colleagues now.

He then continues on, and turns three corners, ascends four flights of stairs and descends three, 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 matters. This is the Ministry of Arbiters, after all; every decision, however seemingly trivial, is believed (with a near religious fervour by some), to have unknown and profound significance. Potentially World-Saving or World-Dooming 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 appears at 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 swaths of land which lead to the distant Sea stretch wide and far in the window's lowest half - most of the window is just broad sky, still dark but gradually coming alit with rosy orange and yellow morning hues, among lazily wandering clouds. 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 steep, Seaward face of the ancient Father Mound - this is the side where the city below drops away quite sharply, in hastily 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 Rightmost, a tall, elder woman with a great nose and spectacles to rival it looks up from her paperwork as Bardlii closes the door. The Leftmost, 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 Leftmost - Master Observer Ogilveii - without looking up from his writing, 'Noonstar is now in the room, your narrative is no longer needed for the Record.'

Young Fenrii, seated somewhat unseen against the wall directly beneath the immense window, faltered in his narration of that present moment, his quill hanging over his ledger, and the elder woman to his right (Bardlii's left) added, "...and I am unsure as to precisely what the nature of my nose has anything at all to do with the matters at hand.... Not that it matters. But still." Master Observer Vist fussed with her sleeves, a thing she did when she found herself flustered.

Bardlii did not recognize the young Observer which Masters Ogilveii and Vist had just addressed. No doubt the man was new, and still in training; he was indeed a bit hard to spot at first, situated directly beneath the great window, and so somewhat backlit, and exactly halfway between Master Observer Ogilveii and Master Observer Vist, thereby avoiding any conspicuous asymmetry in his own placement in the chamber. Nonetheless, he could still be seen without much effort. He would have two or three years of training ahead of him, Bardlii guessed. He held a hand up to wave at Fenrii - it was a reflex from his morning greetings - but then realized that might be professionally rude, and quickly put his hand behind his back. Fenrii, however, now seen by all, was already quite dejected.

Bardlii nodded to both the elders. "I received a Mouse late last evening that I should report here first thing, Master Observers."

"Come in" Vist said, "make yourself comfortable - there is a chair by the door you entered." Bardlii turned around, and saw the chair next to the door he had entered by. 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 carried it to the centre of the room, and sat, making the best of it.

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 upon 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 still trying quite hard to become re-unnoticed. *It takes many years, keep at it* Bardlii thought at the boy, trying to use his kindest thinking. He doubted though that Fenrii could read those yet, given the trouble he was having with cloaking. 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 or more 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. Ogilveii had meant his choice of doors, of course. "Yes, well. The chair is comfortable, thank you. I do like lemon cake, so 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 boy, who attempted to shrink

further into obscurity against the wall, but it was no use, his nerves had been shot, he was fully, sadly, finally 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 papers 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 is almost too young to remember that time. He has 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 was a prized goal of every Observator in training to be finally forgotten entirely whilst still in a room with others, despite being no longer needed (or even wanted) there. Bardlii felt for the young man. Fenrii nodded in resignation, and rest waited as he collected a small sack of scribes essentials, picked up his folding stool, and crossed the long floor with his head down, and past where Bardlii sat. He reached the doors and nearly went through the [rightmost | leftmost] 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 his first choice of door anyhow, turning awkwardly to give a slight bow on the way out, and then 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 a cloudy shape. 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." Vist nodded, concurring.

"But, who?" Bardlii looked at the crystal ball in his hands. It was a B-Type, one that, although conveying no sound, and being capable of reaching back in time by no more than a moon's revolve, was nonetheless capable of scrying at exceptional ranges in good weather. Something significant was happening somewhere in the Isles almost at that moment, which had just then 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 all of the Heroes gone? How many remained? They were sorely needed now.

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

Vist had crossed the floor quietly, and 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, and soon. 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 Historical Heroics Observatory of Owl.

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

Within the crystal held in his hands, Bardlii saw the form fully emerge. It moved terse and quick through wispy thicket, it hurriedly scurried through wavering grass. Over and around resolving stones, diving within a bed of wild, forming roses, it poked its frightened furtive nose out, and gazed about, alert of danger: a singularly common farmlands rat - of no unusual size at all.

1. *The Short Official Account of Known Heroes* should not 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 Gazeteer of Mostly Heroes*. These are all quite separate things, though interesting and sometimes useful in their own right. The purposes of the Short Account (called the *Account*, for short, by those who kept it) were manifold; many functions - from taxations, to commendations, to annual celebrations, to criminal investigations, and occasional exonerations - were well-served by having such a compact list in popular circulation, and therefore always close at hand. A Citizen who got their name within the Account (and who also bore the accompanying seal, which proved them to be themselves) 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. ²
2. As for the accounting of the less heroic, there were, of course, correspondingly official accounts of known villains, anti-heroes, and assorted other Ne'er Do Wells - but these, for now, are not the purpose of the Account with which we are presently concerned. Perhaps another time.
3. The full story of how the Ministry of Accountants lost the bulk of their funding is another entire set of books which the author is not prepared to write at this present moment, and perhaps never will be. This is how stories sometimes go: they become far too large for a single book or even set, and one must pick their battles, because in the end, everything is interconnected, and so is all one book, really. Hence, the Archive. ⁴

4. The Archive cannot be properly described using words, and so in the account of ↩ Bardlii's adventures to follow, we will simply refer to the Archive as a series of tunnels containing all records since the Dawn of Histories, to the Dusk of Histories ⁵ - much like a dungeon filled with knowledge and opinion, rather than other sorts of treasure and peril. There is no avoiding the disservice which is attempting to capture the summation of all written thought in an infinitely small portion of itself, and I have been warned not to attempt it past a certain point, else I might open a hole in the fabric of reality. So, for now, let's call the Archive a Series of Tunnels, and leave it at that. ⁶
5. The Dawn of Histories is when things were said to begin to be Storied. Every story starts somewhere - the Dawn of Histories is where they all started. Strictly speaking, the Dusk of Histories is a hypothesis only, since only the Stately Drakes can possibly know for certain what lies at all ends of the Histories (and for that matter, how many ends they even have - whether it be one, none, two, or many).
6. I believe it is an Old Witches' tale, that one can tear a hole in the Fabric of Reality merely by writing about writing (and using sufficient fervour), but few wizards have the stomach to test such things. Save, of course, for the Chaos Warlocks. ⁷
7. Chaos Warlocks write a great many things about the Archive beneath Owl, precisely hoping to tear the Fabric a new hole. There is no reasoning with a Chaos Warlock about such uses of time, most of the time.
8. Given I have just described Bardlii's daily routine, consisting of 21 hours and some moments, 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 seem (empirically or otherwise) to this Person or that... and so, I am not sure I have told the Reader anything particularly useful here anyhow.
9. The entirety of Owl is a great circle, arranged between two unnaturally ancient ↩ mountains of varying height ¹⁰ and oddly bisected betwixt those Rangeward to Seaward, by the snaking, lazy, wide river known as the lionder. ¹¹
10. Both of the mountains which form the flanks of the city of Owl are squat, as ↩ mountains in Allegoriia go - more like large-ish mounds, really. The taller of the two is known as the Old Father Mount, and and shorter, the Old Mother. The Father rises progressively upward, artificially heightened by the furtive architectural pursuits of Men over the past centuries - an inverted funnel of stone edifice, snaking walls

and staircases, archways, thatched and clayed roofs, jutting parapets, tunnelling alleys, lofty bridges, smoking stacks, and wandering awnings - higher and higher in stumbling, spiralling steps, eventually forming the columns of the ministerial towers known as the Trunk ¹², and skyward to where the Three Great Eyes of Owl perch atop all of that business, to lord over the Land with a tireless gaze - a presence exceeded in height only by the distant peaks of the Dragonspine, and in majesty and vision only by the Very God Itself. The Old Mother is sacred, and nothing is permitted to be built upon it that the Mother Herself does not permit. This is where the gardens are, which feed the people in times of war.

11. As in, *the river that comes from way over Yonder*.



12. 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).