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## Crossroads

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*updated 2022-05-14*

*Official Field Account #474*

*Fenrii Netherlight,*

*Observer, 2nd rank, HOO*

*Third Thirdsdaii, Autumn, WoM 121*

*Master Noonstar and I have been traveling slowly Seaward from Owl with the 77th Owlic Muleborne, and we are soon to break camp on this, our fifth morning. There have been no great incidents, save for some spontaneous tax collection, which is never terribly pleasant to observe, though to Owl's credit, its methods are far more intensely bureaucratic and paperwork-laden, than crudely intimidating, as in the days of old, or as in some neighbouring Regencies still.*

*This company of men is mostly young, and the majority have yet to see any fighting in the field. There are a few old grognards, and one or two of varied experience who seem to take some satisfaction in the exacting of tolls from travellers and labourers, in exchange for the use of the Kings Roads and Fields, whenever the opportunity arises. The company's captain, an older man with a regal nose, named Nells, turns a blind eye to this toll-taking by those under his command at times, being inclined to do what is needed to*

*keep the men from any undue discontent. It is a myth that mutinies may only happen at sea.*

*And so, our traveling coffers are somewhat heftier already, and the men's spirits are high, since that will be where their Moondaii ciders and other recreations will come from, along the long journey around and back again. We've left no fomenting revolts in our wake, as best my mentor and I are able to discern. I've seen worse patrol captains than Nells, and a better one, as well.*

*I have endeavoured dearly to practice my wanting crafts of Observation along the route, and for this purpose, have asked Master Noonstar to inform me each time I become, even for a moment, too Storied in the perceptions of the men. We have agreed for now not to count those occasions when the cleverest burro, whom we've named Hound, chooses to make it known to us that it can still tell what we're up to, as often as not. It seems to be practicing too, though of course, that is surely only my imagination. Hound does not seem to care whether any of the soldiers see us, and none of its kin seem to notice us at all, even when it is clearly on our scent. Hound is for us, for now, a helpful anomaly, providing opportunities to hone our finer skills of un-presencing. I am uncertain from where its preternatural senses arise, as it is otherwise utterly nondescript among its kind.*

*I have managed to remain fully un-present to over three-quarters of the men now, for these past several days, and have begun, I feel, to learn how to sink back again into the obscurity more surely and suddenly, when occasions arise where I am perceived anew, and then even recalled as having been met before, somewhere. Only two of the older men seem to be growing in their suspicions, each time we re-meet. Noonstar has suggested I remain opposite them in the camp for now, until I have mastered disappearing from the minds of the younger ones, who seem more amenable to wholly ignoring us.*

*By Third Soondaii eve, we could see old Owl only by its now-faint ambience in the evening sky, and by yesterday, the hills stood entirely between us and home, and we skirted the edge of the Bollburii Bogs, which stretch clear to the Rightward Sea - though nothing but a fog fills one's*

vision there, in all directions and at all times of day, so none would ever know where the ocean was, until they had waded clear into it, and up to their neck. We moved carefully along that stretch, staying toward the driest land when possible, as the boardwalks and bridges are forever in a state of rot. Every Owlic patrol's duty includes repairs of the King's Road, along the way. The captain ordered a few logs and planks and posts replaced here and there at first, but for the most part, we soldiered quickly on. Others would do their part, presumably, to keep the path through that place passable enough. Few came this way anyhow, anymore. The Bogs, you see, are almost entirely new. They were once farmland, called the Bollberii Fields, not so very long ago.

Bugbears were spotted in the swampy ditches amid the fog, by several of the men, as we neared early eve. They were greater in numbers than we had been led to expect - and this was the point in our journey when the men no longer muled about quite so casually, trading shots of bravado and nonsense. Bugbears are not known to be all that brazen, unless they have a high advantage of numbers. At least, Noonstar assures me, by a factor of six-to-one, or more.

They did not appear to number more than triple our company, at their largest apparent count, though every hour we spent travelling the perimeter of the Bollburiis, more of them seemed to emerge out of the wetland, drawn by news of our presence, perhaps, and the scent too, no doubt, of our many mules. Always though, approaching only to the very fringes of where the fog would let us discern their bulbous and spindly forms. How many waited behind those we saw, further into the fog, was always unknown.

The captain wisely had us march straight through that night. Aside from one long, troubling, and laborious wade through a wide river, aside a bridge which had recently and fully collapsed, and with our surroundings and selves lit by torchlight alone in the otherwise-gloom, we had no more worrisome encounters in that place. Though afterward, in the morning's light, two of the mules were found to be gone. We had left the Bogs behind, along with a half-filled coffer of freshly collected coin, several tents, and the hapless mules that had carried them steadily for us that far. Simply earned, and simply lost, as the old adage goes.

*On the fourth day of our journey, yesterday, during a moderate and persistent rainfall, we were sheltering within a copse of low-slung Oddwoods, and that is when Master Bardlii overheard two soldiers talking, which then caught his attention, so that he called me over, and told me where to stand, in order to not be noticed. It was the older of the two, whom the younger called Riteweld, which had me intrigued.*

*Riteweld, otherwise called Sir Ba* <sup>1</sup>

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Junior Observer Netherlight is propped against a middle-sized Oddwood. He is making his Official Field Account for Third Thirdsdaii morning, Autumn, WoM 121. He is once again entirely unaware that his mentor is among the company, despite his having mentioned that very mentor several times in the same journal entry he is currently dictating. When he reviews it, he will recall for the seventh time since his mentor began testing his attention along the road, that I have been here all along.

His *intention* is not the issue, it is entirely his *attention* which is his current challenge, and therefore, mine as well.

Netherlight is an all-too-willing pupil, but is far too caught up in not being caught, and so he misses things, and gets caught anyway. I will have to explain this to him, once again, in some other way. This is fine, as this is part of my role as Observer, fifth rank. I do not mind passing on what I can, when I'm able, to apprentices. Nonetheless, we have real work ahead of us, and Netherlight is about to commit to print the name of our first encountered subject, which of course, can't be permitted to happen.

Naturally, *this* ad-hoc observation by me, which I am making as he is making his, will be stricken from all accounts, so as not to confuse the final, aggregate one. There is always some editing involved. I have in any event over-indulged in self-references. I would never wish this record to find its way into anything official, and so it most assuredly won't.

I like fluffy clouds. My favourite colour is summer-finch green. I should like to meet a real unicorn someday, as I have several questions to ask of them.

I sometimes wish that I did not know the precise day and time of my mortal demise.

The end of this account, to be purged.

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Middling Observator Bardlii Noonstar was sitting next to his Junior, Fenrii Netherlight, beneath a middle-sized Oddwood, observing the man's narrative Account of the previous days' adventures, filled as it was with speculation and superfluous description and wandering, bloated syntaxes.

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There was a value to being verbose in one's Accounts, at times, and there was more often a greater one to being succinct. Bardlii's own Field Accounts of that same stretch of time and space, placed side-by-side with the one he was trying to follow now, while reading over Fenrii's shoulder, were of roughly equal length, in terms of words, but the former contained nothing but subjectively perceived, objective fact: precise quantities; times; weather conditions; notes on observed flora and fauna, with locations and conditions; the ages, heights, weights, and objectifiable traits of all 41 soldiers, fifty-two (once fifty-four) mules, and one captain, which together comprised the (official) entirety of their company; and several dozen additional records of variable type and similar worth. Not a thing one would read for pleasure, to be sure, and that was precisely the point; if you were writing for anyone's pleasure, your own in particular, then you were being entirely subjective, and that was not what history was.

Fenrii's Account, meanwhile, read like some tale told by the tall-tale-telling Faerie Folk, the sorts of tales which are captured at times in Tale-Telling Tomes as they are being told, and then often sold as curiosities to the idling nobility, and also sometimes, to the gainfully under-employed, who often had occasion for such things as well.

Bardlii of course had kept his opinions of Fenrii's style of Account-taking to himself, all this time. It was one thing to wax poetic in personal letters and private road journals, and quite another to do so while recording the official reports of a wandering historical Accountant.

It was, however, not his place to bend his Junior's practice into some shape, poorly resembling his own. The Administration back in Owl would decide for itself to what extent Fenrii would be required to edit his own material afterward, to fit within the permissible schemas defined by the Archive. The natural consequence of substituting hard fact with verbose fancy would be days and nights spent in the gruelling effort of dredging forth minute recollections of all those missed details, long after the fact, from his own mind. There were, of course, techniques and tools for this too, and none of them were particularly pleasant. Most were just simply, intolerably dull. Fenrii would learn at least some things the hard way, as Bardlii had done himself. There was no other way to learn anything, in fact, without learning some things wrong the first time.

He watched as Fenrii meticulously recounted with quill the *feeling* of watching taxation occur; the *regality* (not a subjective measurement, by any measure) of Captain Nells's nose; a variety of Observator exercises, practices, and conversations which, by Owlic Law, must be redacted anyhow; the embarrassing incident of armed Owlic patrols avoiding, rather than dealing with, Bugbear incursion into Owlic lands (the whole point of arming a patrol is to deal with these things, one would think); and then the impending mention of Sir Barnabas Riteweld, legendary Fellow of the Aged Knighthood - a man fabled to have once found the ever-illusive Isle of Elder Bees, and that was when Bardlii had to keep the young journalist from continuing to journal things.

So he put his finger on Fenrii's notebook, and when Junior's quill got to where the once-again forgotten mentor's finger was unexpectedly waiting, Fenrii near jumped from his own skin.

"The *Fate!!*" he practically screamed, and a full half of the company of soldiers, who were not so spread out or unaware as to not notice even a hiding wizard in their midst shout loudly in fright out of nowhere, turned at once to see what the issue was, and who was yelling what, and three of them had even made moves for their weapons.

Bardlii grabbed Fenrii by his tunic scruff and pulled him around the side of the tree, and they locked eyes, and Fenrii immediately recalled, once again, who Bardlii was, and they both slow-counted to three, and did some

Wizard Things in their minds, for a moment. Bardlii then stuck his head around the tree, and saw the men had gone back to what they were doing, though two of them continued their conversation with hands casually upon the pommels of their swords, not aware they had them there now. He scanned around for the older two men who had earlier become unconsciously suspicious of Fenrii's flawed, ongoing un-presence, and saw, thankfully, they were at the far end of the camp, only eyeing the other men, and wondering what had caused the stir.<sup>3</sup>

Bardlii retreated again behind the Oddoak, and the two rested against it for a moment, shielded safely from the company by common, living wood, and this allowed them to let their guards down for just a bit. Things had been fairly focused for days, and the Middling Observator felt a break was in order.

"Let's give ourselves some space from these fellows, for a an hour or two. Follow me, but watch out that Hound doesn't see you." And then Bardlii got up and began walking evenly away from the encampment, keeping the Oddwood generally between he and the others, and so Fenrii followed, glancing around for nosey burros, but Hound was eating carrots elsewhere, which were entirely more interesting in that moment, than poorly hiding wizards, to Hound.

The two found a shallow gully through which flowed a brook, and this gave them some earth to put between themselves and the rest, and as they sat down at the wayer's edge, with their backs to the sloping soil, Fenrii demanded, "Just how long *have* you been with the company? All this time?"

Bardlii sighed. "Give it a moment, Fenrii. Unwind those tangled thoughts of yours."

And in a moment, Fenrii slumped forward, and put his head in his hands, once again. "I am a failure. I've forgotten you have been here, what, seven times now."

"That's good, you've got the count correct this time, at least. You'll *get* there. I keep telling you that, but then you keep not believing it, which

causes you to forget that it's true, and therefore, that it's possible. Sit up straight and stop self-pitying. That's becoming rather old, very fast."

Fenrii nodded and shrugged, somewhat straightening, "What can I do?"

"About not being older and more seasoned than you are at this moment? I'm not sure, I haven't learned that particular arcane trick yet - to exceed one's own experiences without first having had them. Perhaps when I am even older and more seasoned than I am today, I will be able to finally tell you how to manage it, without any time and effort."

"You think that my career being in crisis is a joke."

"No, it's... no. I know you are doubting everything. That doesn't really go away, you know. But I can promise you that someday, you will have different, more interesting things to doubt about yourself."

Fenrii gave a bitter little chuckle, and shook his head. "Wonderful."

"It *is*. And you will be doing that doubting of yourself in the midst of a Prince's wedding celebration someday, surrounded by four hundred attendants, whirling about you in a capering dance... or in the very eye of a wide storm of battle, with mounted knights careening past you, but never toward you... or sitting atop a vast treasure hoard, next to the towering teeth of an ancient, Hoardly Drake, who has yet to fall asleep, after twenty years awake, for being so certain there are treasure robbers about, who might pinch one single coin. These are the places, among many others, where you will stand, or sit, or walk, *utterly unnoticed, if that is your will*, while you record history, and grapple with whatever new concern has most lately befallen you, regarding your own worth in the World. I can only tell you that this is true."

Fenrii listened, and knew he should believe it, but it was too hard, right then.

Bardlii shifted his weight forward, to rest his elbows on his knees. Both of them were covered in the dust and grime of less than a week's travel. They had far more ahead of them than behind. Bardlii wished to pace their



lessons, and so he said, "Let's go back to the Tenets again. Tell me what they are, and don't worry about all of these other things."

Fenrii took a breath, and began.

"The Aspects of Observation - known informally within our order as the Tenets - are thus: that of *Attachment*; that of *Subjectivity*; that of *Temporality*; that of *Certainty*. These are the accepted and known ones, and it is understood that we may not know of them all, being imperfect beings - so this leads to the Fifth and final Tenet, which is also the First, before all others: that of *Mystery*."

"Good, and what do they mean?"

"Attachment is the degree to which the Observer is unable to pry themselves from the story. This causes a risk of being Storied oneself."

"And why must this be mitigated?"

"To be observed observing a Story is to change it, and so defile its essential purity. We seek to capture pure accounts, for within these alone can be found the unfettered insights that may at last help perfect the Law."

"And why is the Law in need of perfection?"

"To gain mastery over the future."

"For what purpose?"

"Assured survival."

"... which is a mortal imperative. And *this* insight is what?"

"An irreducible truth, which is pure, and must therefore inform the Code, and our actions."

"Good, now which is next?"

"Subjectivity, or to some, Relativity. This is the Observer's relation to the subject being accounted for."

"And which are the subjects, or relatives, if you will?"

"Myself, You, and Another, or Others. Quite simple."

"And what else can we say about this?"

"That Truth is not to be found in any one subject's perspective, more than any other."

"Can they be combined?"

"Yes, but there is no way of knowing whether doing so increases or decreases the degree of Truth which might be gleaned."

"So what is the point of combining the perspectives of these subjects?"

"One subjective stance is meaningless without the other two. I am not a philosopher. This one eludes me more than most."

"So you say. But for now, fine. And what comes next?"

"The Aspect, or Tenet, of Temporality. Again, three orthogonal directions. What *occurred*? What *is occurring*? What *will occur*?"

"And what else do we know of this Aspect?"

"The Stately Drakes tell us these directions are all in fact the same, and therefore the Tenet is misleading. And I don't understand that very well, either."

"The Stately Drakes state that they see all things happening at the same time."

"What do you mean though, by the *same* time, if there is only one?"

"The Stately Drakes have Higher Time than we, so all of our time, according to their account, simply fits into a single moment of theirs. This is entirely different from accelerated or compressed time, though this is often misunderstood."

"Master Noonstar, I must admit, this seems a bit speculative. How can we *know*?"

"...that the Stately Drakes are not lying to us about Time? Of course, we cannot know that. They are known to be quite reliable and trustworthy in other matters. Though, they are still Drakes. We're diverging. Mortals in any event can only take talking about Time so far, and no further. To us, Time is a matter."

"Another irreducible truth."

"Yes. What's next?"

"The next is Certainty, sometimes called Accuracy, or even Veracity, or Reliability. It goes by a few names."

"A bit odd, considering, but itself a helpful pneumonic, nonetheless." Bardlii produced a small pear from his vest, and one for Fenrii as well, and he passed it to the Junior, and they both paused to eat a pear apiece, for a moment or two. Both were thinking of other synonyms which almost described Accuracy, accurately enough. There were several candidates.

Fenrii continued, anticipating Bardlii's next question, "Certainty manifests differently, depending on the temporality. If I speak of an event in my past, the Tenet of Certainty says that I might be wholly right, wholly wrong, or more likely, somewhere in between, in regards to what I claim has objectively occurred. If I speak of an event in my future, the Tenet of Certainty suggests that I am merely constructing possibilities - there is no right or wrong, not yet. Certainty is not the same, in other words, in all the temporal directions you look."

Bardlii nodded, "and what of *now*?"

"That keen knife's edge? I am not so sure it exists at all, being that it is so impossibly small."

Bardlii didn't know about that. "Imagine that you are a Stately Drake, then, if it helps - what does it mean to be some sort of certain, when you are one of *those*, seeing all things at once? To them, there is only Now."

"I think that certainty must then just be a question of opinion. As in, *what is this*, which I am witnessing, in its entirety, right now? What does it *mean*? How do I take and interpret it well? Rather than, *this was*, or *that might be*. Again, I am unsure I am at all up to the task of Accounting for anything, the longer we discuss what seems to be required, to do it well. I do not understand what any of these Tenets we talk about truly mean, my Middling Mentor."

Bardlii took a final bite of his pear, and tossed its core into the nearby brook, and watched as it bobbed about, and slowly floated away from them. The portion of pear was already in the ocean, somewhere ahead of them. It might well still be in a seed too, someplace in the Archive - the Archive, which was rumoured to house all Records, since the Dawn of Records, owing to anomalies within the Old Mountain entirely too tangled to unfurl. Even the Stately Drakes are altogether unsure just how to Account for the entirety of records, which is the Archive.

"Fenrii, all you are worrying about is accounted for already, within the Fifth and final Tenet, which is also the First."

Fenrii shrugged in resignation to the conclusion they always came back to - their logical loop. "That of the Mystery, I know. The acknowledgement that we are never likely to see the whole extent of the Story, whether we are in it, or otherwise."

Bardlii watched the remains of his pear find its way through rocks and sticks, and for a moment fetch up, and then become released again, and at last around a bend, and out of sight. "One can't know the whole book, while also reading it."

And they both surely knew that neither could ever know what it *truly* was they were striving to show. They had both long before begun to wonder whether they had always been Storied themselves, since and until the Dawn of Records - and if so, then who was the author of that Dawn?

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1. And here Fenrii's journal entry trailed away, quite all at once. ↩
2. Noonstar made his own ad-hoc record here as well, purely as a point of process, ↩ and proceeded to assume it would never become part of any official aggregate. It bears mentioning that Observators' ranks go quite past that of the 5th, and there is no end to the learning, or the being observed - at least, that I will ever likely be aware of.
3. Range and line of sight are both quite helpful, though not strictly necessary, when ↩ seeking to successfully sustain spells of personal obfuscation. You won't get that far though, getting an Observator of any rank to talk to you frankly about the precise mechanics of Hermetic wizardry, here - they do not align philosophically with most other schools, which still consider the projection of fire and plague and wind and such to be all that magic was ever conceived to accomplish, and rarely talk in such terms; Duration, range, area of effect... these are not directly spoken of. Call them Observators, or, if you will, Historians-At-Large, or something similar. This will get you further in their good graces, than ever accusing them of crass Wizardry. But that is, frankly, what they do, under other names, and in any event, I am digressing.