

Unspoken words

Canta stared at the ground suspiciously. Idly she poked it with the butt of her spear, almost as if she expected it to move but of course it didn't budge. The lack of response did nothing to allay her fears. Something was amiss here. Something different. Something wrong. She could feel it.

She looked again at the path and that was when it hit her. There was a path here now, somewhere a path had no right to be. Canta had trained for years to become one of the Grove Walkers. She knew the lines of every path that had ever cut through the Groves. This was not one of those - it was new - perhaps a year old at most.

A creeping sense of fear grew inside her, threatening her composure like ice in her bowels. This was dangerous - the elders would need to know of this. First she had to find out everything she could about this path. Where had it come from? Where did it go to? Who had made it? Why? What did they want? And what did they know?

She ran her hand lightly over the path. Something was different, she could sense it. Cautiously she drew on her training, gathered her senses, marked the twin stars and reached out to discover if there was any trace of the realms here...

She leapt back as if the path had burned her. Druj magic! Here in the Groves. Someone, something, had used the realm claimed by the Druj, to create this path, to enchant it, and everything that walked on it.

She turned on the balls of her feet and began to run. It was two days walk back to the settlement, but she could make it in one if she ran the whole way. She pushed her fears down, forcing herself to slow down. She was desperate to return to the sept

and let the elders, but a sprint would only exhaust her.

Overview

Despite the apparent peace, the situation in the Barrens remains febrile beneath the surface. Like the calm before the storm, there is a nervous energy in the air, a sense of unfinished business that is yet to be resolved. Torn between the rival directions of the Dawnish Assembly and the Dawnish senators, the fate of the Barrens twists in the wind.

There are questions to ask, and it looks as if there are now three Imperial nations intimately involved in the Barrens. The people of Dawn themselves, of course, for this is Dawnish territory. The Navarr, who have sworn a mighty binding oath to treat the Great Forest Orcs of the Heart of Peytaht as their family. And the Imperial Orcs, who have cultivated close ties with the Rahvin sept who currently control the mithril mine known as the Fangs.

Spoken Words

Mithril can not fill empty stomachs, armour will not warm cold bones, and swords do not light up dark mines. With winter fast approaching, the Rahvin sept stands to face it once again without heart and home - as they did nearly a year ago. Three seasons ago, the Imperial Orcs saved the Rahvin from the unyielding brutality of winter. This season we invite the Rahvin back once more so that we can find a solution to your survival.

Bloodcrow Knott, Imperial Orc Assembly, Summer Solstice 386YE, Vote: Greater Majority 44-0

Dawnish senators knelt and begged for the Emperor to veto the

treaty with the Rahvin, after Senate had approved the treaty and Military Council had voted wholeheartedly in its support. The Emperor vetoed the treaty because it would have given the Rahvin land where the Dawnish make their homes - in the Carmine Fields, in Bitter Strand. There are no Dawnish homes in the Fangs mithril mine. The Rahvin were kept there as Druj slaves. They worked the mine - they slept, ate, and lived their lives there. Then they seized the mine from their slavers, and now they hold it. Where we toil, where we sleep, where we eat, where we live, where we hold - that is our hearth and homestead. Our Empress and Dawn's Senators tell us to value our homestead. So any decision about the future of the Fangs must take into account the claim of the Rahvin. We must reach out to them, negotiate, and demonstrate our Virtue. We must not force them out of their home. We must not force them out of their home.

*Claude Deeds, Dawnish Assembly, Summer Solstice
386YE, Vote: 424-74 Greater Majority*

- The Imperial Orcs have invited the Rahvin to return to Anvil to find a way to help them survive winter
- The Dawnish Assembly have called on their nation to negotiate with the Rahvin
- Jannik, one of the leaders of the Rahvin will come to Anvil at 19:00 on Saturday

A year ago, the Imperial Orcs reached to provide the desperate Rahvin with food, blankets, and winter clothing to get them through the winter. It was a gracious act that saved the lives of the sept - without it there would have been few survivors - and it fundamentally changed the Rahvin's perception of their benefactors. A representative of the tribe, Jannik, came to Anvil in secret to talk with the Imperial Orcs.

After the Rahvin were declared foreigners, Jannik returned to Anvil to try to find a way to negotiate a peace treaty with the Empire that would split the Back Wind from the Druj and give them leave to stay in the Barrens. That treaty failed in dramatic fashion, when Dawnish senators pleaded with the throne to veto it. Without a treaty, the Black Wind gathered their people and fled the Barrens, taking what refuge there was to be had in the lands of the Druj.

Now, almost a year later, the cold touch of Winter is creeping back into the Barrens. The nights spread their black arms to encircle the day and a grim chill seeps into the bones from the hard earth. The Rahvin have made no plea for help, but they are a Proud people, it was the assessment of the civil service that identified the urgent need last winter, not any entreaty from the orcs. They are not helpless, they have traded mithril for weirwood and food with the Great Forest Orcs, but their needs have only grown since then. Not all the Black Wind fled into the East, many preferred to rejoin the Rahvin than submit to the Druj, swelling their numbers further. How will so many survive the cold months without help?

The Imperial Orcs have extended an invitation to the Rahvin to return to Anvil so that they can discuss their plight and what can be done to ensure their survival. At the same time, the Dawnish Assembly have reiterated their firm determination to treat with the Rahvin - "to reach to them, negotiate, and demonstrate our Virtue". The outreach appears to have been successful, the Rahvin have sent word that their negotiator, Jannik, will return to Anvil and aims to arrive at 19:00 on Saturday (although the Civil Service caution that the orc has a notoriously poor sense of time-keeping).

Jannik has passed on a message that he is eager to talk with his friends in the Imperial Orcs, but he is open to negotiation

with this "Claude Deeds" and their allies in a suitably neutral location if one can be agreed (he is clear that he will not meet with the Dawnish in their camp). This is a notable change of tone for the Rahvin who have thus far publicly refused to meet with the Dawnish.

Presumably the Rahvin will be looking for a way to raise money to buy supplies to feed his people for the coming winter. Last year they needed 75 thrones to survive and their numbers have more than tripled since then. A few cynics point out that the Rahvin might not have any food, but they are sat on significant stockpiles of very valuable mithril. Rumour has it that Imperial negotiators extracted a promise to trade their mithril with the Dawnish as part of negotiations for a peace treaty last season. Perhaps then, it is time to show the Rahvin the virtue of Prosperity decries the coin that goes unspent and those who take without giving...

Unspoken Words

Pride exalts and uplifts those who have been laid low by the wicked. The Great Forest Orcs have reclaimed their home. The Karass seek to trade and grow together. The Rahvin wish to find a path away from the yoke of the Druj. Earls' council has raised its voice, it calls for the wait asked by Ser Dindrane's Mandate to be over! It calls for Dawn to venture forward and settle the lands of the Barrens! Should we answer this call, and let The Barrens bask in the light of our glorious nation?

*Aramis du Froste, Dawnish Assembly, Summer Solstive
386YE, Vote: 126-220 Not Upheld*

Dawn has never lost an allocated territory to the barbarians. We reaffirm this commitment to the people of Dawn and the Empire. The Barrens is now Dawnish, and we will no more countenance its loss than we would Astolat, Weirwater,

or Semmerholm. We call on the generals, weavers and combatants of Dawn to ensure the Barrens remains resolutely Dawnish forever more. We expect that defence to be extended to those people of the Barrens we regard as foreigners, and for their lands to be defended with equal fervour - to do less would still be an insult to our pride.

*Viviane Knotes, Dawnish Assembly, Summer Solstice
386YE, Vote: 320-48*

- The Dawnish Assembly convincingly rejected a judgement calling on the Dawnish people to settle the Barrens
- The Assembly passed a judgement calling on Dawn to extend the defence of the Barrens to the foreigners who live there

Despite completing the conquest of the Barrens more than a year ago, the Dawnish have been cautious and made little efforts to settle the lands. This is a matter of frustration to many Dawnish earls - the Barrens is rich in natural resources, with great wealth to be found in the forests, marshes and mountains of this wild and untamed land. A convincing effort to settle the Barrens would provide Dawn with a suite of opportunities to benefit from these riches. But mindful of the sensitivities of the people they aimed to liberate the Dawnish Assembly have successfully urged their people to hold back.

Ironically, the Barrens have continued to open up since then. The Karass wiped out the Vendarri leaving the region of Salt Marsh largely empty. The Varushkans slaughtered the last of the Montanians, now the ruins of Dourfell Keep are the only sign that those people ever dwelled in Hope's Rest. The Black Wind have abandoned the Carmine Fields, those that have not fled the territory are now confined to the Bitter Strand. The Menrothat are desperate to claim Farweald, but thus far they have not dared to risk settling the lands without permission from the Empire. All these regions could be settled without risk of

displacing anyone - and doing so would bring new Prosperity to Dawn.

But thus far the Dawnish Assembly has remained true to the mandate of Ser Dindrane, the Dean of Laroc Cathedral, who urged the Dawnish to focus on protecting the people of the Barrens instead of settling the land. Notably last season, the Assembly firmly rejected a judgement calling for the Assembly to recognise the wishes of the Earl's Council and agree that the need for Ser Dindrane's long vigil was now ended. What this means for the future of the Barrens is unclear - but it seems that the Dawnish generals, the Earl's Council and the Dawnish Assembly do not yet agree on how the matter should be settled once and for all.

Instead, the Dawnish Assembly backed a judgement by Viviane Knotes calling on the "generals, weavers and combatants of Dawn" to defend all the people of the Barrens, whether they be Dawnish or foreigner. It is not clear what steps should follow this call to action, but a handful of Dawnish troubadours have pointed out that oaths have been very much in vogue in recent years. The Navarr have sworn a powerful oath to defend the Great Forest Orcs and the Marcher generals swore oaths that their armies would always be there to defend their home territory against an attack.

The Dawnish generals could swear a solemn oath committing their army to defend the Rahvin, the Great Forest Orcs, and the Karass, against any attack by the Druj or others. Such an oath would be much more than just a gesture - oaths are a powerful hearth magic and the consequences of breaking one can be dire indeed. The Navarr nation swore that they would defend the Great Forest Orcs while their was breath in their body and woe betide them if they break that oath. Any magician, any troubadour, any historian will tell you that no

oath should ever be sworn lightly.

An oath would impress the Rahvin, provided they have a copy of the wording of the oath and some proof of its swearing. Their mistrust of the Dawnish is so great at present, that they are unlikely to be convinced by uncertain news of vague promises. Of course if you really want to convince the Rahvin of your good intentions - you would invoke the Lictors to seal the deal (one of the Marchers had a magic boon that allowed them to do exactly this but they chose not to use it). But that would be a very dangerous thing to do - the iron law of the Green Iron Prison is not to be trifled with. But if you desperately need to convince the sceptical that what you are saying is absolutely genuine then the very existence of the Lictors means that no other path is open to you. After-all why would you hesitate to invoke the Iron Law if you didn't plan to break your word?

A solemn oath leaves little room for evasion. A general would have to bind their army with their oath. Attempting to swear an oath in a personal capacity would be self-evidently an empty promise given how easy it is for Dawn to replace a general if needed. It would need to swear to protect the Rahvin and the Great Forest Orcs by name. It will do no good to offer promises of protection for foreigners in the Barrens, because the Barrens Orcs have seen how easily that designation can be stripped away. It is not that it is impossible for a troubadour to devise clever wording for an oath - but weasel words won't impress anyone unless they are clever enough to deceive the ears of those who hear them.

Whatever the decision, only the generals of the Dawnish armies can swear such an oath. The Dawnish Assembly have had much to say on the future of the Barrens in recent years - now is the moment for Dawn's generals to commit themselves to this course of action or answer with unspoken words.

Untrod Paths

- The Untrod Groves are one of many regions in the Barrens that is a site of mystery and great danger

The Untrod Groves, in the southern centre of the Barrens, are just one of many regions in the territory that remain steeped in mystery. A deep and tangled portion of the Great Forest that stretches from the hills of Hope's Rest to the very edge of the Plain of Teeth they are part of the Great Forest of Peytaht that stretches from Broken Ride in Reikos across much of the southern Barrens.

The Karass are one of the few people known to walk the Untrod Groves. Other than them, the woods appear largely uninhabited: the only known trails are game trails. The groves are deep indeed, and it is easy to become lost beneath the shadowed trees. There have always been reports of untapped reserves of iridescent gloaming, beggarwood and dragonbone in the forest, and many a knight-errant and questing knight has journeyed into the Barrens to seek glory and prove their mettle by stealing these treasures of the Untrod Groves out from under the noses of the Druj. Few ever return.

There is one persistent tale regarding the groves, a curious story that was once the subject of many a guiser's performance or troubadour's ballad, before it fell out of fashion some years ago. The tale speaks of a mysterious earl who makes their residence deep within the Groves. There, occluded from prying eyes, is said to lie a great glade in which the Earl of the Groves keeps their manor and rules their house. The stories all agree that the Earl is certainly served by many yeofolk, but they are equally clear that the Earl is the only noble of their house - and the name of the house itself varies from story to story, with no common thread. In the stories, a knight-errant comes a-wandering to the Groves, and encounters a stranger on the path

who directs them to the Earl's glade. There, they meet with the Earl, and in time they are offered a test to join the Earl's house.

This test is challenging, but never impossibly so. It is always cruel, however, and the tales all agree that it is in their test that the Earl reveals malice at their heart. Sometimes the knight accepts the test, and sometimes they refuse, but either way they meet their doom. Sometimes this is at the hand of the Earl themselves, sometimes it is at the hands of their loyal yeofolk, and sometimes it is at the hand of a great and terrible beast. In the stories, the knights rarely return, and when they do they are a shadow of their former selves, the light extinguished from their eyes.

Some scholars, such as the ever-practical Leontes the Scribe, point out that if the knights die or are reduced to a shell, then that does raise the question of where the stories come from. For this, and the simple reason that when the Barrens was in the hands of the Druj this was hardly a matter one could go and investigate, the stories of the Earl of the Groves had little relevance before now. However, as the Autumn Equinox draws near, there is an occurrence which puts things in rather another light.

The Lone Path

- Members of the Lone Path Striding and a Karass orc named Canta are coming to Anvil and expect to arrive 18:00 Saturday
- They are keen to talk with the Barrens senator or their proxy as well as members of the Navarr

The Lone Path Striding are a striding of Navarr who focus on walking the trods in the furthest reaches of the Empire - the far corners of Ossium, the deep reaches of the Barrens, the far

north of Sermersuaq, and so forth. In light of the Navarr's recent decision to commit to the final fight against the Vallorn, the striding collectively decided to return where their journey began, long ago, in Miaren, anticipating that the long walk is finally coming to an end. Before that, however, they took the trods through the Barrens, as is their charge, and the route they took took them through the groves. The trods do not form in accordance with the paths made by mortal hands, but track their own winding way through the world. Here they go straight through the heart of the Untrod Groves.

What happened next is unclear, but it seems that Emyri Lonpath disappeared during their journey, and was only found a day later wandering the woods in a daze, in a fairly bad state. The Long Path Striding say that they were assisted in their search for Emyri by one Canta of the Karass, a Karassi scout who had seen them in the woods clearly in some distress and offered to help.

Members of the Lone Path Striding - including Emyri - as well as Canta herself are now making their way to Anvil, and have sent word ahead that they expect to arrive on the Saturday of the summit. They would like to speak to the Senator for the Barrens, currently Aramis du Froste or their proxy, as well as suitable voices from their own nation - perhaps anyone interested in the new trods that now go through the Untrod Groves and other parts of the Barrens. Canta has asked to accompany them: the grim-faced orc has indicated that she has warnings from her own people to share with the Senator on the matter of the Groves. Both Canta and the Lone Path Striding will arrive at around six of the clock on the Saturday evening.

Does any of this have anything to do with the legendary Earl of the Groves of story and song? Well, many who play the entertainment trade in Dawn think so, and as news of the Long

Path's misadventure spreads, so too are the old tales seeing new popularity in their wake: so even if the Earl doesn't really exist like the legends say, that absolutely isn't stopping anyone from telling stories about them.

Untrod Riches

- The civil service could provide support for an expedition to explore the Untrod Groves if the senator permits it
- The rewards will be dependent on how much help the senator accepts from the Karass

The Untrod Groves are rich in natural resources, largely unoccupied apart from the Karass scouts who guard them, and apparently filled with dangers of some kind. The Dawnish Assembly have asked the nation to hold back from settling the Groves and other places, but surely that doesn't apply to exploring them? The Karass are very protective of the Groves, but what if the notoriously secretive orcs have something to hide? Perhaps it might be good for a few knight-errants to poke around the forest.

The Imperial civil service have indicated that they could easily provide the simple logistical support needed to enable those knight-errants and questing-knights who have military units to explore the Groves if the senator authorises it. Normally they would just get on with something like this, but given the sensitives involved, they have asked the senator to let them know if they wish to permit exploration of the Groves.

If the senator decides to permit it, then Explore the Untrod Groves will be a military unit option available to knight-errants and questing knights in the coming season. The financial rewards are uncertain at this time, they will depend on how much help and guidance the senator chooses to accept from the

Karass. The more help the knights receive, the more iridescent gloaming, beggarwood and dragonbone they will receive. This will be determined by the agreements made between the Karass and the senator or their representatives at the summit.

It is impossible to say what the outcome might be - who knows what adventure lurks in the Untrod Groves? But if the Empire manages to send a force with a military strength of at least a thousand then that would be enough to get a short report of something there, and if it was double that then it would have a more meaningful impact.