

Hard to find

"What's your problem, friend?"

Geralt pointedly stared at the orc in front of him, virtually goading him to go for the knife at his belt. It was a small scram, fine for cutting meat and preparing food, but a food knife was be no use at all when his opponent had two foot of heavy Dawnish steel hanging off his belt. If this orc made him draw that sword, the fight was only ending one way. The orc stared back with a look of pure hate in his eyes. Little fucker wasn't backing down though, no matter how outmatched he was.

At last the orc broke the silence and his gaze. "No problem... my lord." He dropped his head as he said it, but he spoke the last part like his mouth was full of badger's piss.

Geralt didn't bother to correct him. It had been "my lord" this and "my lord" that since they'd got here. He didn't know how the bloody Dawnish put up with it. He tried correcting them, but they just played dumb which only got on his nerves even more. So he just left it.

Still it had seemed sincere enough when they'd first got

here. These folk had been charming, fawning even. Like cheap League hawkers trying to cadge a ring. For weeks they'd be pleasant. It was only when it became clear that Geralt and his friends weren't leaving that their eyes had filled up with ice.

"I'm not daft, friend. You've got a problem. If you've got a problem with me, then I've got a problem with you. So what is it? Let's have it out."

The orc stared at Geralt liked he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him alive. By the paragons, but these fuckers hated them all of a sudden. Come on pal, he thought, if you're gonna start it, let's just have it out.

"This!" - the orc blurted suddenly, pointing at the half-completed building. "This is our problem. This is a bad idea. A very bad idea."

Geralt curled his lip in a look of scorn. This region was huge, the whole bloody territory was enormous. Surely they couldn't be this pissed off about losing 2 acres? It made no sense.

"This is a very bad idea," the orc said again. "This will make the Druj come back quicker."

Geralt only laughed. "You don't know what you're talking about", he scoffed.

"This will make the Druj come back quicker." The orc said it again, but with more certainty this time, like it was more of a threat than a warning.

Then, as if he'd said too much, the orc spun on his heel and walked hurriedly away.

It's a good job for you I left my bow in my tent, Geralt thought as he watched the orc storm off.

Overview

While all eyes are on the conflict in the north of the Barrens, there is a glorious expedition planned in the south of the territory, a quest deep into the heart of the Untrod Groves. There are rumours of a strange creature dwelling here, a terrible beast that is linked the legendary Earl of the Groves. A band of daring knights is preparing to venture deep into the Groves unaware that disaster is waiting for them.

The Groves are an infamous mess of tangled forest, rush-filled pools, and waterlogged woodlands that can quickly baffle even the most seasoned explorer. Fortunately, the Dawnish are guided by their new allies, the Karass. These skilled guides know these lands better than anyone, but even they discover they are no match for the Untrod Groves once the magic of the Barrens turns against them.

The Dawnish are no longer the only nation to take an interest in the Barrens. The Navarr have now completed their new wayhouse, the *Last Battle*, in the Bleaks. It provides a powerful connection to the Navarr nation, allowing their people to operate freely here, but it could also be useful to Dawnish groups looking to explore.

The Untrod Fastness

- **The expedition into the Untrod Groves has gone poorly.**
- **Forge the Wooden Fastness has aided the monstrous Earl of the Groves and impeded the questing knight's efforts.**

After the Autumn Equinox, a band of Dawnish questing knights journeyed into the Untrod Groves within the Barrens. The Groves are the furthest extent of the Great Forest of Peytaht. They are badly understood and barely mapped, as the name suggests. The knights were aided by the Karass, who had agreed to assist after negotiations with the Barrens senator **Aramis du Froste**. There was some suggestion that there might have been a dangerous presence in the woods, linked to the legendary *Earl of the Groves*, who is said to claim their demesne deep within the trackless forest here. There were even rumours that this "Earl" was some kind of terrible beast - perhaps even the mantichore of legend - although they are traditionally native to dry, arid regions quite unlike the Barrens, so that seemed fanciful. A host of questing knights assemble on the border of the Groves as the autumn

turns to winter. They are more than three thousand strong: surely enough to overcome any threat? The Karass at their side as guides, they set off into the forest, searching for wealth, glory, and adventure.

Some return. The first, a week later, and then more in bits and pieces throughout the season. Their number, however, was much reduced. The survivors have spoken of a horrible nightmare within the thicket of trees. At first, they had early success, gathering much dragonbone and iridescent gloaming with the help of their Karass guides, who knew the woods well. Then, the forest itself began to turn against the questing knights, the woods becoming a thorny barrier that turned back their attempts to move forward. The Karass seemed still to move with relative ease, calling the forest home as they do at present, but this only served to separate the questors from their guides all the quicker. The thorns grew sharp and cruel, and when camp was made in a clearing, overnight it would become thick forest once again, separating the questing bands from each other.

It soon becomes clear that a powerful Spring ritual is in place in the region. The ritual appears to be Forge the Wooden Fastness, which is a defensive ritual that protects an area by causing thickets of thorns and briars to form in the area, creating impenetrable walls of living vegetation. The Wooden Fastness makes an area extremely difficult for enemies to traverse, which is exactly what is happening here, but it

shouldn't be. The trees should part to allow the swift passage of 'allies'. For reasons that are unclear, the enchantment has gone awry when selecting who is friend and who is foe, but that ought to be impossible.

There is one way that could be happening... The ritual chooses who to aid and who to hinder *based on who has the greater claim to the area*. The Untrod Groves are under Imperial control, so there ought to be no problem here. And yet... there clearly is. The only possible magical explanation would be that something, someone, has the greater claim to these lands. That's definitely not true in a military sense - nobody is contesting control of this region with the Empire - but dominion is a complex hearth magic and it's not impossible that something here has an older, deeper claim to these lands than the Empire.

A Triumphant Failure

Players more than achieved the necessary military unit strength to successfully reconnoitre the Untrod Groves and discover the power that lurks within. As with our Winds of War, this wind of fortune has a strong narrative in which the expedition struggled and only just made it to the Earl's manse at the heart of the Groves. The description includes important thematic elements that contain information that is relevant to the situation, but as with a wind of war, they don't change the

mathematical outcome. The questing knights have successfully managed to discover all there was to find here.

The Earl of the Groves

- **Some who journeyed into the woods have become vassals of the Earl after falling in battle to its stinging tail.**
- **Some of the vassals have crossed into the Bleaks and are heading for the Golden Sun encampment.**
- **Other vassals have begun making friends and alliances with local Dawnish houses.**

It seems something else calls this place home; something more than the Karass who are thought to live on the outer reaches of the side of woods that edges into the Bleaks. The survivors of the expedition confirm the presence within the groves of something resembling the manticore of legend, some horrible carrion-beast with a venomous sting and an all-too-human face with a mouth smiling wide and cruel. They say that this being has named itself the Earl of the Groves, and with barbed condemnation, it accused them of being trespassers and malcontents on the rightful holdings of a Dawnish house.

Of course, a manticore cannot be a member of the nation of Dawn, any more than a hylje can be a member of the nation

of Wintermark, or a mora call itself a true Varushkan. Yet, those who journeyed into the woods confirm that the beast sometimes took human form, and when it did so it wore all the trappings of earldom, and by its side marched nobility and yeofolk both. They speak caution regarding the latter, however. Those who stood with the Earl of the Groves moved as one with the Earl, as if they were simply extensions of its malign will, and when it spoke of them it called them its vassals - or perhaps "vessels": reports are unclear. They generally tended to be armed with magical weapons and the tools of the war-witch, with the ability to shatter their opponent's weaponry or hold their legs or body in place.

This has disturbing implications when set alongside the reports of the effect of the manticore's sting. Those stung by the manticore began to experience a hollowing-out of their inner nature, and a rising within them of base and cruel desires. This was not simply a physical poison, but a spiritual malady that seemed to corrode the very essence of what it meant to be a human inside them. Liao was in short supply for those who had travelled within, so while many were exorcised of the spiritual corruption, many yeofolk who had been separated from the baggage-trains of the military units succumbed. At the last, they became unrecognisable to a priest's eye as human, and they left their friends and comrades and went to join the Earl as vassals in turn.

Those who went on the expedition managed to get deep

enough into the woods to confirm that there is a glade within, in which sits a manse, a manor in the traditional Dawnish style in a great clearing, with banners and a tournament-square as if it were a field in Astolat. From there, however, they fought a fighting retreat as the Earl and its vassals pushed them back into the outer woods from which they had come.

The Karass only managed to find many of the adventurers again after the woods have forced them out. They are apologetic for the knight's misfortune, claiming that the magic was as confusing to them as it was to the Imperials. Some are suspicious of them, but they appear to be genuine.

The Earl Reaches Out (The Barrens)

- **A group of the earl's vassals have been talking with minor Dawnish houses in Hope's Rest and Bitter Strand**
- **A second group of vassals are approaching the Golden Sun's baggage train**
- **Bandits of the Bleaks are moving on the baggage train, and the vassals appear to be trying to intercept them**
- **This skirmish is a combat highly likely encounter**
- **The *General of the Golden Sun* is responsible for minimising the threat to the baggage train**
- **There are no innocents present on this conjunction; magistrates advise that lethal force is fully justified**

As the winter solstice draws closer, two groups of vassals of the Earl emerge from the woods. The first group of vassals moves out, unarmed, to Hope's Rest and the Bitter Strand,

where they appear to watch with interest from afar the dramatic events transpiring in the Fangs. They also visit the small settlements of the most adventurous Dawnishfolk out here in the wilds.

The vassals offer friendship and support to their fellow Dawnish houses. They talk of shared ideals - of glory and ambition and how the small houses of the Barrens might collaborate to become more powerful. Not everyone likes what they have to say, but a few houses are happy to make an alliance with the Earl. They do not appear bewitched or affected by the Earl's poison; it seems they have been convinced by its words that it is Dawnish in spirit if not in legal fact.

They speak movingly of the Earl of the Groves' support for Dawnish ambition and Dawnish pride in the Barrens. The Earl claims the Untrod Groves for themselves and will defend them against any interlopers, just as any Dawnish earl might, but their only desire is to help their neighbours become more glorious. Those that claim to have spoken with the Earl or its representatives say that the Earl has asked them to travel to Anvil to attend the Earl's Council on the Friday evening of the summit on their behalf.

Another group head towards the Bleaks where the Golden Sun, fresh from the rout of Therunin, are encamped. A week earlier, one of the army's baggage trains was attacked and

looted by a small group of bandits in the Bleaks. Such perils are common in the trackless wild areas of the Barrens, and would not normally be a problem, but this is a relatively large band of bandits who are surprisingly well equipped, which suggests they are either deserters or, more likely, looters. The vassals, some of the yeofolk who were separated from the exploratory force, seem to know where the bandits are and have moved to engage them.

It's not completely clear what is going on, but killing the bandits is the minimum needed to remove the ongoing threat to the army's supplies. The heroes should also find out what the Earl's vassals are doing and stop them if necessary.

An Outstretched Hand

- **A herald of Jaheris has approached the knights who quested in the Untrod Groves**
- **They invite some of those who attempted the quest and the knight-protectors of Dawn to an audience at 16:00 on Saturday accessed via the Hall of Worlds**
- **They wish to discuss the Earl of the Groves in the Untrod Groves and claim to offer help to defeat it**

All of this is somewhat demoralising for the questing knights still recovering from the events in the Groves. Is the monster they fought truly an ally of Dawn? Have they been tricked by the Karass into this attack on a being who could be a friend? Still, would an ally seek to interfere with the Golden Sun, as the Earl's vassals seem intent on doing?

It is a difficult situation, and the assembled multitude are arguing these matters in their camp at the edge of the woods when they are approached by a woman wearing a surcoat bearing the sigil of the Lord of the Forest of Arden. She has something of the imperious mien of the changeling about her, though her form seems to shift and change into different heraldic forms, though always retaining the same haughty nobility.

She calls herself the *Wit* - or perhaps Witch? - of the Silver Woods. She says that *Silverbrow* knows the Earl of the Groves as an old personal enemy. As such, he would like to invite the Knight-Protector of Summer to attend the Witch in her chambers just after 16:00 on the Saturday of the current summit, journeying from the Hall of the Worlds. They should select from amongst those who journeyed into the groves as many to accompany them as their banner will allow.

In addition, the invitation is *also* extended to the other three Knight-Protectors, who may travel under their own banners. They may not bring accompaniment, but, explains the Witch, their presence is no less vital to what she has to discuss. She will relay the will of the *Lord of Despite*, and offers alliance against the Earl if the Knight-Protectors wish it.

Participation : The Untrod Groves

Any character whose military unit was assigned to support the expedition to *Explore the Untrod Groves* is welcome to have

been injured during the adventure, although by now your wounds will have treated and healed. If you want your character to have been affected by the manticore's sting and subsequently exorcised of this mysterious malady, you will have felt the following roleplaying effect while under it: *You feel uneasy and disconnected from your body. It feels natural to indulge your basest and most wicked instincts.* Once exorcised, the sting-wound will have healed, and the effects will have almost completely faded, but you may still experience some lingering influence from the venom during the summit.

We also cheerfully encourage characters who assigned their military unit to the expedition to also roleplay that they were personally acquainted with one or two of the yeofolk who were separated from the baggage-trains and succumbed to the manticore's venom.

Across the Lines

- **The Last Battle is a wayhouse built in the Bleaks to provide a reconnaissance base for the fight against the Vallorn**
- **The Keeper of the Last Battle will be appointed by Navarri generals this summit**
- **The Keeper will immediately face a dilemma regarding other occupants of the Bleaks**
- **The Turan Flats and the Nesustak Forest in the Sarangrave and Eastring in Therunin are now under**

threat

- **Any Navarr can get a new personal resource in the Barrens for free this season**
- **Navarr resources in the Barrens count as being in Therunin for voting in senatorial and similar elections**

The Last Battle are a striding founded in the wake of the Navarr's commitment to taking the fight to the Vallorn, who have come together in the belief that the final battle against the vallorn will happen in their lifetime if they make it happen. They are almost exclusively thorns, sworn warriors who are eager to engage the enemy and defeat them once and for all.

However, to connect all the vallornhearts requires the Empire to fulfil its destiny and conquer the lands between. At a minimum, the Empire will realistically need to be in control of the Sarangrave before final decisions can be made on the approach to the heart that lies in Visokuma.

To that end, last Summer the striding proposed the building of a wayhouse on the border with a territory that contained a vallorn heart. The idea was to use the wayhouse as a base to conduct reconnaissance and patrols on the other side of the border. The wayhouse was commissioned in the Bleaks in the Barrens, which borders both Sarangrave and Therunin. This masterful choice of location has allowed the Last Battle to quickly establish supply routes from the Bleaks into the Turan Flats and the Nesustak Forest in the Sarangrave... as well as Eastring in Therunin.

The wayhouse provides valuable benefits to the Navarr while it endures. The Keeper will receive a personal bounty of herbs and this season there is an opportunity for Navarr to take up new resources in the territory without paying the usual 2 crown charge for a new resource. In addition, after close consultation with the Navarr egregores and consideration of Imperial law, the civil service have determined that Navarr who are resident in the territory will be able to vote as if their resource was in a nearby territory controlled by the Navarr or recently controlled by them. In this case, that would be Therunin - that won't matter much now, but it will when (if) the Navarr take the territory back. The court has confirmed that they will apply similar rules for any other wayhouse built, working with the egregore to determine which territory it is closest to based on traffic on the trod network.

The Last Battle now awaits the appointment of their Keeper, the one who will take on the duty of protecting the wayhouse and leading their expansionist efforts. The position is a national appointment by the Military Council. The generals of the Navarr armies are eligible to pick the new Keeper. By a particularly peculiar quirk of fate, this is currently **Rhisiart Dancewalker** for the Black Thorns and the Empress herself for the Quiet Step. While unorthodox, this is the technically correct legal interpretation.

The Keeper will have their work cut out for them. There is a vexing issue that the new occupant of the position will

immediately be faced with.

Who Would Dare To Go

- **The Karass are furious about the failure to consult them before building the wayhouse**
- **They do not seem to want to provoke a conflict but trouble is being stored up**
- **A diplomatic intervention from the Keeper of the Last Battle could be crucial**

The first problem the Last Battle face is from the neighbours of the wayhouse. The Bleaks was an excellent location from a strategic point of view, but it is not unoccupied. The sept of the Karass currently dwell here, making camp amongst the branches of the ancient trees. The Karass are deeply protective of their home and they are *not* pleased by this new arrival.

After the Dawnish were granted the Barrens, the Karass made diplomatic overtures to them to request that the regions of the Bleaks, the Plains of Teeth, and the Towers of Dusk were all ceded to them. It was pretty clear that this was just an opening negotiating position and what they really wanted was the Bleaks, but their requests were summarily denied. To hear them tell it the response was effectively *"You'll get nothing... and like it"*

...and thus far giving them absolutely nothing that they wanted has worked pretty much perfectly. The Karass are used to the

uncompromising rule of the Druj who brook no insubordination and they have responded positively to a similar approach by the Empire. They've been obsequious in their negotiations with the Dawnish, almost as if they were trying to mimic the yeofolk. They've gone to some lengths to ingratiate themselves with their new overlords, with offers of help and support. They've corresponded with the Imperial Consul providing valuable intelligence on the other factions in the Barrens. They give all the impression of being the only loyal faction in the Barrens bar the Dawnish themselves. In fact, you could argue they've caused *less* trouble than the Dawnish houses have.

At least that was true until the Last Battle was built. The construction of the wayhouse has not directly led to any confrontation with them *yet*, but it is impossible for the Karass to conceal how unhappy they are. Those who speak to them say they are clearly *seething* about having to share this forgotten corner of the sprawling Barrens with the Navarr. Nothing has been directly said, they appear to be quite intimidated by the Imperial presence, which is perhaps not entirely surprising given the punishment meted out to the Black Wind, but the look on their faces says everything. Navarr passing through Karass lands to reach the wayhouse, claim they get a friendlier reception from the Jotun. It is painfully clear that the Karass want every single living being present at the wayhouse to drop dead and the ground to open up and swallow them and their building - they're just too terrified of the Empire to do anything about it... *yet*.

Provided they stay terrified it shouldn't be a problem. But there are a *lot* of Karass - enough of them to wipe out the Vendarri. If they had the nerve to attack the Empire, they could destroy the Last Battle in the blink of an eye. There's no evidence that that is going to happen, they appear genuinely scared of the Empire, but it is causing problems. Even just simple things like the fact that nobody is buying any food from the Karass to stock the wayhouse. The Karass might be terrified of the Empire, but the Navarr are nobody's fool.

When questioned about this, the Karass are evasive and unconvincing. The best explanation they can give is that they believe that the existence of the Last Battle will hasten the return of the Druj. They can't explain how that is going to happen, but they seem quite genuine about the threat. The Keeper would be well-advised to reach out to *Anka Karass* as soon as possible to ensure that this problem does not get any worse.

Run For Your Lives (The Barrens)

Accessibility & Content Warning

There is no combat intended in this encounter but it will include strong themes of post-traumatic stress disorder and discussion of the violent events of war.

- **The survivors of Therunin are wounded in body and mind**
- **A small group are currently recuperating at the Last Battle wayhouse in the Bleaks**

- **There is a conjunction to the Last Battle for 4 people at 18:50 on Friday**
- **This conjunction won't include any combat unless players attack the helpless NPCs**
- **The civil service has asked the Hand of the Healers to take responsibility for the conjunction**

Some of the last remnants of what was once Isaella's Dance and the Iron Helms have emerged from the blood bath in Therunin. They are accompanied by the still-coherent but badly wounded forces of the Golden Sun and the Black Thorns and survivors from the Spears of the Pines, the Great Forest Orc warband. It is at the Last Battle that they come to rest, the first friendly light on the road after escaping the terrible bloodbath that was Therunin.

The wounded are being tended to as best they can, but this is not a medical facility. The wayhouse is prepared as a reconnaissance station, not a field hospital. Many here are carrying not just wounds to the body but a terror in their soul. Dawnish, Great Forest Orc and Navarri alike: all are grateful for the assistance that is offered... but it is not much.

The striding are clear that they can use all the help they can get; they will have to offer physical, spiritual and moral support to soldiers who have seen things that every soldier hopes to never see. Given that it is very possible that a Keeper will not be appointed at this time, the civil servant has requested the Hand of the Healers take responsibility for the conjunction -

they can liaise with the Keeper if they have been elected.

Whoever it is, they should choose the four individuals who are best placed to offer this kind of help and send them along.

Guides from Navarr and Troubadours from Dawn would be particularly apposite choices, for who better to lift the hearts of the war-weary and show them the way to a better tomorrow?