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Subject: [PLANESCAPE] - Flower Powers (long)

Here's a little something for the weekend...and to celebrate our shiny new listserver :)

I was originally planning on sending this to Dragon, but seeing as they're becoming increasingly obsessed with stat-infested articles I figured you'd appreciate this more than them...

As usual, there's a prettier (and very slightly more up-to-date) version of this article on my web site...if you've been living in a cave for the last month that's at:

<http://www.mimir.net>

Anyway, please enjoy, and feel free to email me with questions or comments ;)

Jon

Flower Powers

Being an Exploration of the Dangerous and Deceptive Flora of the Outlands

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This article was inspired during a Dark Sun game, when my party was ambushed and nearly slaughtered by a psionic cactus, of all things. Half-motivated by a desire for revenge upon Steve, the DM responsible, and half by a curious longing to redress the ecological balance in Planescape, so the seed of the idea germinated.

The following text is quoted from a traveller's diary which was found in a small orchid-filled grove of trees, near the gate-town of Ecstasy. The backpack next to it'd been left untouched for months, judging by the state of the leather-wrapped cheese inside. The author's name is unrecorded; the entries bear only the pseudonym 'the Druid'...

I was travelling around Gratuity, an Indep burg a day or so away from Sylvania, when I happened across a most unusual garden. One of tenders, a half-elven cutter named 'Moss', called it the 'Pasture of Tranquil Slumbers'. I spoke with him a while:

"Welcome to the Pasture, blood. Have you come to Sleep or to Awaken? Neither? Then why are you here? Ah, another information- seeker. You don't have a Mimir with you, do you? Shame.

"We're looking to expand our business see. What business, you ask? We're many things to many people, cutter. If you're about to be scragged by some high-up you've bobbed, we're the bloods you want to see. We hide people, right? We've got 'em all here: a berk who gave a factol the laugh, a sod who learned too much about the Lords of the Nine, and a proxy who bobbed his Power! No I'm not telling you which one! That's not all, though. Feeling old? Want a rest and a chance to rejuvenate those aching bones? Come visit the Pasture.

"How do we do it? Why, that's a secret, I'm afraid. How much? Oh well, a little garnish never did hurt...

"The dark's under your feet. Literally, I mean. See, we bury folks who don't want to be found, and the plants do the rest. How? Well, we don't really know, but I'll tell you what I think. It's all to do with these vines, the Sandman's Curse.

"Chant is the vines're too lazy to do all the work needed to survive by themselves. That's why they don't grow much until some sod lies down on one and falls asleep. Oh, they're found in the wild too cutter, believe me. You've got to be careful where you rest in these parts! Once the vine's enticed a weary soul to sleep on its soft moss, it wraps the sod up in a pulpy cocoon. No, you don't feel a thing; they've got this scent which knocks you out cold. You don't wake up; the vine sees to that too. It don't harm you, much - see, the plant needs you alive just like you need it. I reckon it's the warmth of your body that the leafy thing craves; it can't reproduce unless it's nice and cosy. Best way to do this is to get itself a warm-blooded sod to snuggle up with.

"The vine keeps its guest healthy, too. Once its big leaves and roots are grown it draws nourishment from the light and the earth, feeding itself and the sleeper. It channels dew and nectar into the sleeper's mouth, and ensures the sod can breathe by leaving his nose poking out of the soil, protected from the rain by a leafy funnel.

"No, the worms and bugs won't get him either. See, the vine keeps them away from the sleeper by trapping them in little leafy jaws. Makes a nice meal for the sleeper, I expect. Oh, they can stay like that for years; our oldest sleeper's been here since long before I was born.

"Like I said, we hide wanted cutters. When they're sleeping, they're not actually alive, see. Their hearts beat and such, but really they're part of the cocoon vine - so spells and scrying just won't locate 'em. When the heat's off we just wake up the sleeper and they're free to pick up their lives where they left off, although nobody's been woken up since I started working here ten years ago.

"Side effects, you say? Well, I'd be bobbing you if I didn't admit there are a few minor side effects. Sleepers feel fresh and whole when they wake, though they do tend to be skinny and weak until they learn to walk again. A few get all melancholy that we woke 'em, but that usually passes. Some of 'em look kind of strange until we've scraped off the roots and tubers, too. Oh, and they get this greenish tint to their skin; that doesn't go away either.

"Interested? The rate's a hundred gold a year, advance. No? Tell you what; special price for you as you're such a blood: eighty! Hey, where are you going...?"

I met noted Planewalker Jh'ala McTorr in a queue outside a Bleaker soup kitchen in the Hive Ward. He told me of his last adventure, for the price of a mug of broth:

"It'd been a hard day's climb, up those perilous slopes. Torch's mountains aren't friendly places to visit on a good day, cutter, and this hadn't been a good day. I was tired, hungry and paranoid - being the sole survivor of a mezzoloth attack tends to make a blood edgy - and to top it all, I'd lost the key to get home.

"That's when I heard the chiming sound, as if a hundred tiny bells were being rung, and a hundred little voices were singing along. There was a scent too, sweet enough to mask the stench of sulphur and tar that hung so heavily in the air - the scent of ripe fruit and fine wines. 'Well', thought I, half-delirious with hunger, 'Seems my prayers have been answered. But by what?'

"Clambering over the next jagged crest, I saw the blossom. It was a pure white flower, about the size of your head, the petals edged with crimson specks; in this place of hellish flame and lava, it was a joy to behold. Around the stem were fruits - their scent pervaded the air, beckoning to me, but I'm a cagey basher. I'd walked the Planes before, and I knew something was only that beautiful for a reason. I'd come prepared.

"See, a real blood's always suspicious - it's saved me from the dead-book more than once. I unravelled this scroll I always carry, for emergencies like this, and spoke a prayer to reveal poisons. Nothing glowed sickly green, so I knew the thing was safe to eat. In fact, the more I examined the plant, the more I fell in love with it: the white metallic petals which jangled and chimed in the noxious breeze, the alluring perfume the blossom wore, finer than that of many of the ladies of Sigil. Maybe the plant worked some enchantment over my addled brain, but whatever it did, I wasn't thinking paranoid enough.

"I lent towards the bloom to better sample the scent. As my nose brushed against a petal, there was a sudden squeal of metal, and thorny fingers clamped themselves around my face! They squeezed with the force of a fiend, burrowing into my skin, seeking my brain! As I struggled, they only clenched tighter.

"Summoning all my strength, I grappled with the flower, grasping its thorny stem and trying to prise the bloody claws from my flesh. My hands were ripped to ribbons on the razor spines, but the survival instinct's strong in my veins. With a mighty heave, I pulled the bloodsucking thing from my face and cast it away.

"To this day, I still don't know how I found my way back to the Cage. That cursed flower took my eyes along with half my face. The reason my voice sounds so rough? My throat was cut in half.

"Are we done queuing yet? Could you direct me to the door, cutter? There's a blood."

There I was, tramping through the underbrush in the Hinterlands, searching for this damned orchid I'd heard tales about. I was weeks away from anywhere I wanted to be, and I was beginning to think the whole search was a waste of time. Then something truly remarkable occurred:

"Pike this damned flower," I shouted to the skies, "I just want to go home!"

"You only had to ask," said this voice, rustling like hands crunching dried leaves.

I looked around in shock, for I thought I was alone. Nobody was in sight, just this tumble-down ruined city, overgrown with weeds and ivy.

"I'm right in front of you, leatherhead!" said the voice.

"Don't you call me a leatherhead, berk," I growled. "Come out from behind that ivy so I can see who I'm about to nick."

"I am the ivy, addle-cove."

Well, I was so surprised I let the insult pass. There's not much you can say when a plant answers you back. "What...errr...who are you?" I stammered, looking and feeling a fool for talking with a bush.

"Like I said, I'm a clump of ivy. You couldn't say my name if you tried, berk, and I'm not going to waste my time trying to teach you. Listen, do we have a deal, or what?" asked the plant, petulantly.

"What deal?" I asked, worried my voice was rising into a whine.

"You want out of here, I want you out of here. Simple, really."

"And how do you intend to get rid of me?" It was probably a foolish thing to ask, I knew, but this plant'd started to intrigue me.

There was a rustle, and I raised my buckler, half-expecting to be attacked by a man-eating vine. Instead, a glowing portal opened with a sparkling, resonant sound. Through it, I could see a baking, parched red plain.

"Abyss? Baator?" the plant chirped merrily. "Or somewhere less friendly?" The scene changed to one of miserably drizzly streets, menacing spiny buildings, and mud-slick bashers: the Hive.

"You're a regular dryad now, aren't you!"

— Anywhere vine to astonished traveller

"You can open portals?" I exclaimed.

"Three cheers for the scholar!" rustled the ivy, irony in its leafy voice. "Will you get lost now? Please?"

"Tell me how you do it. Then I'll go."

"Pike it berk, that's my dark!" It rustled at me menacingly, and the vines near my feet made definite moves towards my legs.

The plant was clearly beginning to resent my presence, so I kept my peace and stepped through the portal. Sure as Sigil, I appeared from a doorway wreathed in razorvine in the Hive, safe and sound - well, safe as any trip to the Hive could be. The portal slammed shut behind me, leaving only the memory of the bizarre encounter.

I'd returned from a month in the field, as it were, to Phoenix, an Indep burg half-way between Glorium and soXa (or however you spell the name of the barmy place). I was surprised to find the place burned to the ground. The dense forests surrounding the burg'd gone, replaced by scorched, blasted terrain reminiscent more of Avernus than the Outlands. Worried for the safety of the inhabitants, I asked a local githzerai carpenter whether this was the work of the fiends or slaadi:

"No basher, it weren't neither. This happens every cycle, about this time. Take your concerns elsewhere, berk, 'cos they're not needed here. We're hardy people, and we were expecting it. The burg'll be up again before the week is out."

My ill-timed curiosity'd already taken hold, however, and I wasn't about to leave the questions which jostled in my brain unanswered. "Then what happened here?" I pondered aloud, hoping the grumpy cutter'd take pity on my ignorance.

"T'was the Fire Ferns," he answered gruffly, like I was Clueless. "They blossom, and the whole place goes up in flames. Happens all the time. No big deal."

"Please, tell me more of them. I've got jink." Could he tell I was desperate? "I'm a Guvner," I added, thinking it'd make a difference.

"If you insist, basher," he finally conceded, when he saw the coins. "But it'll have to be short, I've still got three kips to rebuild today.

"Fire ferns only grow in a few parts, and this be one of 'em," he began, apparently proud of the fact. "Chant is they came through a portal from Gehenna and liked it here. See, the ferns are harmless most of the time; it's just when they flower that the blazes start.

"They're green and red flowers on black stems, but the dangerous bit's the bladders that grow under the ground. They swell up with this explosive liquid, see, about the time the seeds ripen, and poke out of the ground. It only takes one careless sod to set 'em off; if he treads on the sac and bursts it he'll be showered with the sticky liquid. Thing is, it catches fire as soon as its in air, and the flames that spout out soon spread to the rest of the plant. The whole merry thing explodes like a barmy wizard spell, and tornadoes of flame shoot across the forest. 'Course, that sets off all the other ferns, until the whole place is burning away. Looks a fine sight, it does."

"Don't the ferns destroy themselves?" I asked, puzzled by the strange life-cycle of the plants.

"Nope. They likes the fire, see. It creates these uplifting drafts, and that carries the seeds away. They need to be hot to grow, and if they're still burning when they hit the ground, they'll burn away all the other plants too. No competition then, see. The parent gets a good deal out of it too, cutter, as it's got the corpse of the unlucky sod who set the whole fire off to feed on. Everyone's happy. Except the other plants, and us who've lost our cases, I suppose.

"Well, that's about all there is to tell. It's about time you were sodding off anyway, berk. Your type ask more questions than's healthy." The githzerai left, presumably to continue rebuilding the small burg.

I can only conclude that the good people of Phoenix are either too leatherheaded or too stubborn to move their kips somewhere safer, or else they're sitting on something real dark that they're not willing to share. The fact that they're rebuilding their burg with wood rather than stone suggests the former, I reckon. Though I can't help wondering how much a vial of that flammable sap would fetch in the Great Bazaar.

Whenever something nasty happens to Plague-Mort, most decent-thinking cutters smile and say 'about time too.' However, when you happen to be a decent-thinking cutter who's found himself in Plague-Mort (through no fault of his own) at the time something nasty is happening, then you tend to say 'Help, where's the nearest portal out of here?' Of course, this happened to me...

There's always a plot going down in Plague-Mort, the saying goes, and it seems I've stepped right in the middle of this one. I arrived in the horrible burg this morning - though mornings and evenings don't have much difference between 'em when the sky's always murky. I've only been here once before, and that time the barmy place was busy slipping into the Abyss. This time, the whole town's covered in these royal purple roses. They'd almost look attractive if I didn't know what they were.

See, some years ago I was out travelling with an adventuring party on the Abyss, some few layers down. I came across a burg choked with roses just like these, and we stopped by for somewhere to kip. Their scent was voluptuous and buxom, comforting and inviting. We found the whole village'd been deserted by its inhabitants, as if they'd just upped and left.

It was some time before the ranger noticed each of the rosebushes was growing from the decaying corpse of an unfortunate villager. We didn't shed any tears, as they were probably all nasty sods anyway, but it did rather concern us. We decided to leave the burg that night, and found shelter instead in a cave system with stalactites which whispered to each other about our imminent grizzly deaths. We ignored them, and thanked our stars that the creatures that slaughtered the locals hadn't got us too.

Later that night, as we settled around the fire, the githzerai mage clutched his throat and began to froth at the mouth, coughing and sneezing. He played ill for a couple of hours, then quite without warning green tendrils sprayed out of his bone-box and all over his face, clawing and grasping! We watched aghast, as his body collapsed and green vines burrowed their way out of his skin, rooting themselves in the rocky ground. As we turned and fled, purple roses blossomed from his corpse, their festering scent wafting throughout the cave.

For the next few nights we moved on, not stopping for longer than an hour at any place. One by one my companions were killed from the inside out by these terrible roses. Mercifully, I alone was spared from their carnage, left to ponder the nature of the affliction that so effectively wiped out the others.

*"Ring a ring o' roses,
Yer body's full of posies,
Atishoo! Atishoo!
We all fall down.
And then the rest of the town..."*
— Tiedfling nursery rhyme

Thus I was filled with terror when I saw the roses had somehow escaped the Abyss into Plague-Mort. Folks of the burg would seem healthy enough, then they'd suddenly begin to sneeze, and razor sharp leaves would cut their way out of the sod's skin. The flowers spread like a disease through the locals, slicing a great swath through the population. Panic seized the hearts of the citizens, who tried to escape by the hundred. They were either cut down at the gates by mask-wearing Hounds, or at portals by tanar'ri who'd mysteriously arrived on the scene. I stayed shut away in my case, and didn't open the door to any berk.

My guess is that the fiends've peeled the burg's high-ups yet again, delivering the roses to the burg to incite enough chaos to push Plague-Mort off the edge of the Outlands and into the Abyss. I never thought I'd see the day, but the tanar'ri've really said it with flowers.

With the virus trapped in Plague-Mort by fiends to increase the chaos, I'd say it was a narrow escape for Sigil. If some infected sod found his way in the Cage, I'd dread to imagine the scale of the carnage that could ensue.

The vegetative infection spreads initially through the scent of the flowers, though I believe it's at its most contagious when a berk's coughing his last. By then the infection's incurable, as the poor sod's lungs are already full of thorny vines. I guess I'm either immune to the disease, or just plain lucky.

The Virus Rose'll spread rapidly through a small burg, though some strains seem to be virulent than others; fortunately for the people of Plague-Mort, this one isn't too serious. It's the black roses you've really got to be careful of. Only half the folk've died, and the town's still on the Outlands - that's probably because it's hard to be chaotic when you're dead. The tanar'ri always slip up somewhere, don't they? I'm sure they're not going to leave it long before they try again, though.

I was passing through the burg of Esper in the Outlands, near Ilsensine's underground lair. It'd been a hard slog through the mountains, and I was looking for a comfortable place to kip. Esper wasn't it - there was something wholly unnatural about the place. Seems everyone there's got strange mental powers, probably curses from the Brain God. They should've called the burg 'Migraine' if you ask me. Hoping to get some respite from the buzzing in my head, I ventured out of town to the wilderness...

Once again I was hungry. Seems to be one of the great problems of adventuring, hunger. No sooner do you get a bite to eat than all the fresh air and tramping about gets your stomach thinking its time for another meal. So there I was, splitting headache, starving tummy, night drawing close, when what should I smell but freshly baked onion bread!

"Well," said I (for I'd even begun talking to myself - anything to escape the psychic drone), "Seems like some kind fellow's looking to share a meal with a ravenous traveller." 'Course, even if he wasn't willing to share, he was certainly about to.

I beat my way through a thick gorse bush, and stumbled into the clearing beyond. There wasn't a hermitage, like I'd expected, but just a hot loaf of onion bread for the taking, sitting on a tablecloth of leaves looking at me. I stood very still for a long time, expecting a trap, but no nets dropped on me, nor were any trip- wire triggered arrows fired at me.

"Hello?" I called. "Mind if I share your meal?"

Silence.

"No? Jolly good!"

I sat down next to my prize, found a knife and a block of cheese in my knapsack, and picked up the loaf. It was cold as a rock.

"Funny," said I. "It smells fresh. It even tastes fresh. Especially with Arborean gorgonzola." Paying this curiosity no mind, I continued to munch on the bread. The texture was just how I like it, and there was just enough onion too; almost as if someone had baked it from my own recipe.

Absentmindedly I picked up a handful of stones from the ground, and slipped them into my pocket for later. My hunger sated by some mysterious benefactor, I wandered away to find somewhere comfortable to sleep.

I'd have forgotten about the whole incident had I not woken up later in the night with a pain in my side. I soon realised there were several small rocks digging into my side through my pocket. "How did these get in here?" I pondered. I was about to throw them away when I noticed some of the stones were germinating; they were seeds.

My famous curiosity piqued, I examined the tiny seeds more closely by the firelight, trying to remember where I'd got them from. Slowly it returned: I'd picked them while I was eating, then completely forgotten about it.

I lit a torch from the fire's embers and wandered back to the clearing. The scent of honey scones was heavy in the air; mmm! As the light from my torch chased away the shadows, I spied a pile of delicious-looking scones lying in the clearing.

I'd almost finished the third one when a small voice inside me asked "What d'you think you're doing, leatherhead?" I told the voice to go pike itself and leave me alone, but it was persistent. When we'd stopped arguing I realised the voice had a point. I'd been hoodwinked into eating more goodies, and now both of my pockets were brimful with these stones. Things began to come clear.

"Listen plant!" I demanded, for I know the work of a crafty plant when I see one. "Stop playing me for a Clueless sod. It's plain insulting, when I'm a proper druid and all. It's an elaborate plot you've got here, for sure, tempting me with morsels and getting me to spread your seeds around for you, but I've got a few problems with your plan, see?"

"One, you're making me fat, and heavens know I'm plump enough already. Two, I resent doing your dirty work for you. Find some animal to carry your sodding pips around. And three, erm...d'you think you'd make me a brandy apple pie if I promised to plant a seed somewhere nice for you?"

The scones rotted away real fast and then, quick as Sensate downing a mug of wine, an apple pie grew from nothing. "Thanks, plant," I said, picking up my prize. "Say, what do you really look like anyway?"

The leafy creature shuddered and became a dull green toadstool, studded with white fungal pseudopods. "I get the point. Who'd be a mushroom when you can be anything I'd like you to be? Well, I've got an appointment with a pie. Goodbye."

I could've sworn the plant waved a leaf at me.

Last Laughter; now there's a burg with a poor sense of humour if I ever saw one. It's located between Carceri and the Grey Waste on the Outlands, and it's so named because of the hideous cackling shrieks that roll in from the dreary grey wilderness. They also say it's the last place folks feel like laughing before they reach the 'Waste. Fortunately, I've never been anywhere near the vile place; I've got apprentices who do that sort of thing for me. The blood who got this mission was Kloie Horfveldt, an outspoken tiefling associate of mine:

I'd assumed the locals were joking when they told me the horrible guffaws which echo through the streets at night were from the trees by the rank River Sorrow out of town. They told me those trees were the only wood for days around, and that's why all the cases in the burg were built from mud or stone. It seemed the sort of sick joke they'd try to bob a newcomer to this awful place with, and while I wasn't keen on going to check out the chant, the Druid's instructions were clear.

It was with heavy feet that I trudged across the grey plain to the river. I could smell the rancid thing from miles away. For all their lies and double-talking, the locals had told me that while it wasn't part of the Styx, it wasn't a good idea to go near it anyway. Then they laughed like barmies when they told me the trees I sought leaned over the banks of the river.

Sure enough the trees were bent over the grey flow like old bubbers at a bar, fronds dangling into the putrid water. They seemed quiet enough, but I still approached quietly, so as not to disturb any monsters which might be lurking in the shallows. I wasn't more than a hundred paces away when I heard talking - it was a smug, self-satisfied sort of a voice:

"I don't care what you think, I still say you're a loathsome little weed."

There was a chorus of approval from the copse near me. I dived into a bush (which thankfully remained silent), hoping I hadn't been seen by the speakers.

Near the centre of the copse, a sapling willow trembled violently, like an angry tree might. "How dare you!" it squealed, in a voice like a child's. "Why, I ought to cut you down!"

"Like to see you try," came the smug voice again. "Mine could beat yours in a fight, even if it were blind. Which it isn't." Then it laughed, a scary, loathsome laugh, which resonated across the flat land.

Again the sapling bristled, and I was aware of a sulphur stench in the stagnant autumn air. Noxious fumes billowed from the roots of the tree, and out of the mist stepped a small black gargoyle - a spinagon if I wasn't mistaken. The fiendish thing looked around in shock for a moment, until the tree commanded it to chop down the smug willow. It hesitated, then ran towards the tree with its gleaming back axe held high above its head.

It hadn't even landed a blow when green fog issued from the earth around the willow being threatened. From the cloud waddled a gruesome bald monster; an amnizu baatezu. It too looked stunned for an instant, until the willow commanded it to "Do away with the pathetic creature, and the weed over there, while you're at it. There's a good fellow." Then that laugh again, this time both mocking and intensely self-satisfied.

The fiend's muscles tensed, as if resisting some spell, then it raised its slimy green hands. A tiny ball of fire shot towards the sapling and blossomed into a globe of flame - the sapling was blasted out of the ground. Then the amnizu crushed the spinagon with a single squeeze of its claws.

The smug willow's mirth became even more unbearable, and the amnizu began to cast another fireball, this time at the willow itself. "Tsk tsk tsk," warned the willow. "That's not allowed, as you know." The amnizu stopped and bowed its head, growling an unintelligible insult.

"Oh, and as you're here, do something about that little snoop hiding in the bush over there, baatezu." The willow guffawed, and was joined by the rest of the copse in laughing at my discovery.

I turned and ran away, as fast as I could back towards that horrible town, with plenty cackling ringing in my ears.

...And that's where her journal entry ended. The innkeeper of the tavern which Kloie returned to that night said no trace of her was ever found. Luckily the contingency spell I'd placed on her journal functioned, or we'd not even know about the willows. It's such a shame about Kloie.

Though the report's clearly incomplete, I conjecture that these trees have evolved a mechanism for summoning baatezu to defend themselves. Maybe the baatezu owed some plant Power a favour, or perhaps the baatezu have been blackmailed into service because the willows know some terrible dark about them. Although I'll be damned if I can think of anything a tree could hold against a baatezu! Whatever it is, there's clearly some resentment involved on the fiend's behalf.

As for the willows, I imagine the fiends'd be an effective deterrent to woodcutters, or inquisitive people. I expect the willows've grown complacent and arrogant in their safety. Well, if I had a fiend at my beck and call, I suppose I'd be smug too.

Despite all my travels, I've still not managed to track down this elusive plant. I've summed together all the darks I've heard on it, and that'll have to do for now. If you ever hear of a cutter who's found the sodding thing then don't tell me; I'd probably die with jealousy. As it is, I wonder if the whole thing wasn't just a bunch of addled nonsense in the first place...

The half-elf sage Axulaxos said the Eternity Palm was a perituros plant, that being one that'd never die. While I respect his wisdom, such pompous language isn't my style, I'm afraid. Well, he was a Prime, after all. Basically, the chant is that this plant's one of the oldest things on the Planes. It's thought to predate many of the Powers, and saw the start of the vendetta that became the Blood War. The dark of it is that nobody really knows how old these barmy trees are, or if they do, they're not telling me.

Legends mention only one Eternity Palm, but I reckon there's a lot more of them around than a cutter'd think. See, I've read tales from travellers who've seen the tree all over the place. First I thought that'd mean there'd be thousands of these trees scattered across the Planes, but then I thought of something rather more plausible: What if there maybe a score or two palms, but they could move round where they wanted and put down their roots when they found a spot to call a kip? Sort of like treants, 'cept the palms are able to walk the Planes as well.

'Immortal planeshifting plants', you scoff. 'What's so special about that?' Berk, it's what they know that's important. The Eternity Palms observe everything that happens around them, and since they've likely been anywhere you can think of in their infinite lifetimes, they've probably seen what you're interested in.

Bariaur folk tales speak of the 'Augury Tree'; a tree which produces white, daisy-like flowers. A lucky cutter who finds the tree can ask it a question, pick a flower from its branches, and pull off its petals one by one. The first petal is the answer 'yes', the second a 'no', the third a 'yes', and so on. The last petal on the flower'll tell you the answer to the question you've posed. The bariaur say the tree's never wrong. Careful research leads me to believe this tree's the Eternity Palm I'm seeking.

There's another myth, in Tir Na Og, which tells of a tree which casts shadows at the dead of night. If a cutter watching thinks of an event of the future or past, the tree'll reveal in a shadowplay what it has seen concerning that event. The Celtics call it the 'Oracle Oak'; I'd say this was the Eternity Palm again.

*"Question: Are you an Eternity Palm? Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no.
No? Whaddya mean, no?"*

— A cutter who tried to be too smart

'Palms, Oaks, flowering trees?' I hear you ask. 'How could a blood who knows as much as you do about plants possibly mistake 'em?' I reckon the tree's also able to change its shape to that of other plants, so it blends in better with its surroundings. It wouldn't do to be noticed too often, especially if you knew the answer to any riddle a basher'd care to ask. Before you knew it you'd have no leaves left as everyone pulled bits off you to ask their addled questions; hence the need for a disguise. It also makes my job of tracking the blasted thing down all the harder.

How do I explain their insatiable thirst for knowledge? Perhaps they feed on facts just like other plants draw nourishment from soil. Maybe they're just incurably nosy when it comes to the affairs of mortal creatures. Or do they report to some high-up man somewhere? As always, I'm still searching for the answer to that one. Hells, if I could get a cutting and grow my own Eternity Palm I'd never have to consult another book again!

As happens with all the most meaningful discoveries, this one occurred completely by accident. It seems that the moment you stop looking for something, it happens along and finds you. I wonder what the Signers'd say to that?

I was walking along this morning, hacking away the undergrowth, when I tripped and fell over a root, right onto my face. As I stood up, mud dripping off my nose, I was sure I heard a stifled chuckle.

"Who's there?" I demanded. "Show yourself!"

There was no answer. I suspected an invisible assailant, so I muttered the words of a spell to detect magic in the area. Scanning around, I saw a fading magical residue on the root which had tripped me, and an enchanted swirl growing around a lilly-white orchid besides the path I'd created.

The little flower's petals were pulsating, and I could see beads of nectar forming in the head of the blossom. Then suddenly the environment around me began to mutate! The tiny copse of trees grew tall, gnarled and menacing. Haggard limbs reached towards me like zombies in the Mortuary, blades of grass licked at my legs like tongues of hungry beasts, and the branches I'd chopped down lay bleeding on the stained earth.

I was scared.

"You! You create carnage in this sacred grove!" The voice was whispered by the grasses, scratched into my flesh by the brambles, and boomed by the oak trees. It was all around me!

"Calm down, cutter, whoever you are," I began, in a trembling, not-very-reassuring voice. "I'm sure we can work this out. My name's the Druid. Who... errr...what are you?"

"Speak not with that name, liar and knight of cross trades," the floral voice said. It now issued from the orchid before me. Though it was tiny, its curvaceous petals resonated with the words. "We know who you are; we've been watching you and your curiosity for a long time with many eyes."

"Who is we?" I stammered. "How dare you claim I'm not the Druid?"

"Your name is Short Paddy McFarthey. You are a Prime, a halfling, and not a druid of any order we recognise. We are the Plants. All the Plants in the Multiverse."

I was stunned, to say the least. In fact, it was a while before I could answer at all.

"How can you be all the plants? You're an orchid, and a mouthy one at that, if you don't mind me saying so."

The ground trembled beneath me, and I got the distinct idea that it did mind me saying so. An oak tree beside me dropped all its acorns on my head, at once.

"Okay, okay. I get the message, cutter," I agreed, in my best plant-soothing voice. As I rubbed the bruises, my magic-sight showed racing streaks of mystic power all about me. Priest magic, if ever I've seen it, of the Plant sphere. And all of it emanating from the tiny orchid. It was almost as if it were...

"A priest, in your words, yes..." the orchid finished my thoughts for me.

I grew excited. Perhaps we could strike a deal. "You're a priest of Sheela Peryroyl too?"

I knew I'd said something horribly wrong when the oak uprooted itself from the wet earth with a creaking squeal, and crashed down inches from me. I'd narrowly avoided becoming pulp.

"Calm down!" I squealed. "Please! I don't mean harm, really I don't!"

"You slew my brothers and sisters," it seethed. I knew it meant the plants I'd been trampling.

"I didn't realise they were related to you. I'm sorry." The flower seemed pacified somewhat, so I risked another question. "So which Power do you serve, then?"

The orchid's stem turned so the flower could look at me. "I follow the One True Power, the King of Plants."

"Silvanus?" I questioned. "Demeter?"

Again the ground trembled. I watched the trees carefully; it wouldn't do to get squashed now. "Yggdrasil?" I offered.

The orchid shook with laughter. "A mere sapling! No, none of those. The Herb Lord is only known by plants. You fleshy creatures realise nothing of our culture, nor would you understand it."

"Try me," I quipped. "I'm a good listener."

"We, the Empire of Plants, have penetrated to the heart of your blood-based world. We know your darks, your cant, your petty power squabbles. We know of the Cage, of the Lady, and her secrets too; we have seen them.

"We plants watch everything you do, and we remain silent. What do you know of our nation? Nothing."

I was about to protest that wasn't the case, but thought better of it, because it wouldn't really be true. A whole empire of plants? I just thought they were green and looked nice. They sometimes even tasted nice. But an plane-spanning empire? Was I being peeled?

"It is the truth," answered the flower. I must've been thinking aloud. "You want to learn more, don't you?"

The orchid was playing with me; tempting me with darks it knew I craved. "What do I have to do?" I asked.

"Join us."

The presence retreated, and I was left alone in the copse.

The orchid's silent now, as if it never even spoke. And so I remain, writing down what I've seen, not really understanding. Who did the orchid mean by the Herb Lord? A power nobody's ever heard of, worshipped only by plants? It seems too far-fetched to be real. Think of how mighty it'd be, with those countless infinities of plant worshippers. Still, I've seen less plausible things happen.

Where would this Flower Power's realm be? A dark forest? An orchard? That realm no high-up claims in Elysium? It'll all be hopeless unless I can find out more.

"Join us"? It's going to be a great adventure finding out...