

## **Dark Dice – 2 - Mindless**

### **Travis**

Having stamped out the last embers of the fire, and laid the corpses respectfully flat, faces covered, the seven adventurers continued along their track. They traveled for over a quarter of an hour, the stench of rotting flesh and pungent copper ever-present in the moist air of the Dead Pines.

Rain fell, lightening the stench only slightly, but obscuring their path. Soren, having followed the path previously, paused to consider their way, and the children's Survival.

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

As they paused, water pooling into the fiber of their cloaks, Soren continued, his path sure and clear. Sister Cavernsfall held her warhammer and shield at the ready. With every step she scanned the surrounding forest, searching for a moving figure in the towering, dripping pines.

### **Kaitlin (Sister)**

I'm staying on alert, and I urge you to do the same, Father. We saw that thing run off into the woods, no telling where it may be.

### **Eypór (Sindri)**

Oh definitely. Kore, stay near me.

### **KORE**

You don't have to tell me twice...

### **Kaitlin (Sister)**

I'm not getting surprised by some creepy throat monster.

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

I'm right behind you, Sindri. Just keep that hammer raised and try not to hit me.

### **Kessi (Flygia)**

I can't pick up any scents to track in this... rot.

### **Travis**

While the seven continued onward, Ilaus lurked in the darkness. His grey skin blended with the moist, dying bark of the trees, and his curling horns protruded as branches. His attention locked on the forest, and the unseen track ahead of Soren. He viewed his fellows only in passing, thinking of his safety, and that of his son.

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

[confused] What?

**Travis**

Rowena, fumbling over a tree branch, reached out to steady herself on her cousin's shoulder. The skin beneath her palm collapsed at her touch, and she did not feel the hump on Father Westpike's back caused by so many years in the dwarven mines.

She did not recognize him at all, but knew him in some way. An old, sunken face. Long, pale hands. His height began to unfurl, his spine rolling up with cracks. Then, just as she ripped her hand away, the pale hand flashed across her arm, a dark talon unlike any man, dwarf, or teifling, carving into her arm until the pearly white of bone shone through.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

No!

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*(scream of pain and terror)*

**Travis**

The elder's face phased, pulled tight until it lay shiny and expressionless. The eyes sunk further into their sockets, disappearing, and the mouth shifted, swallowing up the short boney nose until only three dark empty sockets remained.

*[shriek]*

With a cackling shriek it bounded into the pines, leaving the six adventures confused, frightened, and in doubt of their sanity.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Rowena, are you injured? Show me your arm!

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Ow... ow... oh what the fuck was that ow. It looked like a person. Ow.*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ok, so here's what we're gonna do, everybody stay together because if this thing can look like us, then... don't leave anybody's sight. Ever. Nope.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

Ow.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Well which one was it? Who, who did it look like?

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*I don't know. I just had a sudden realization there were seven of us and there are only six of us here. And then the thing attacked me, I thought, that's alright maybe it was just*

*someone I just didn't recognize. But I feel like I did recognise him. He was supposed to be there, until he wasn't. Oh ow. (30 seconds of sounds of pain as you stand there in pain)*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Where is Kore? Was it Kore that attacked you? Rowena was it Kore?

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*No, I don't think so.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He's...

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He is not in the party, he is not around. He.. er..

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*No*

**David (laus)**

I thought he was with you... No offense to you dwarves.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*No, I don't think it was anyone I recognize.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I'm gonna cast cure wounds on you, stop moving.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

laus, Did you see which way Kore went?

**David (laus)**

He fled further back into the woods. Err.. That way.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Pelor, please give me strength so I might spread the warmth of your light.

**Travis**

Father Westpike touched Rowena's bleeding arm as a faint glow emanated from his hands. Over the course of the next minute her flesh weaved together, the tiny strings of flesh bounding over and under in a loom of blood and light. The bone covered, the wound healed, Rowena flexed her fingers, her pain eased.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*You're my hero.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Thank Pelor... Umm, please be still for...

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*I told you you were the coolest family member I have. Oh that's better.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Oh gods. Kore must of gone that way...

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Father Westpike, you are confusing us all, who's Kore?

**David (laus)**

Yeah who is Kore?

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He's, he's the old man from the village, he was going to help us.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Yeah, no. No.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Yes, Kore.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Yeah, no. There's nobody here like that, Father. It is just us six.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Kore's been with us since, well, he's been with us since, well. Well, I was talking to him earlier. He.. He..

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

No.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He's an old man.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

This person has never existed. We were decived by wicked magics.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*This might be first time i've ever heard his name.*

**David (Ilaus)**

He's never been in my shop. Never some old man name Kore, not in Ilmater's Hope.

**Peter (Soren)**

Are you injured, were you scratched in any way?

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*He just stabbed me, screamed at me and then pissed off. Obviously he thought "oh, she's gonna kick the shit out of me", which he was right I would have done. But no, no I'm ok.*

**Peter (Soren)**

Let me see your arm.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Here.*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Seemed like he stabbed you with a talon, though. What did it look like to you all?

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Kore is just an old dwarf.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

He looked like an older Dwarf that I thought I might have recognized, but something was off about him, ya know?

**Peter (Soren)**

I also felt like he belonged in the party. Until he stretched back his face and attacked you.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright, so that guy did not belong in the party. And I don't know who he was or where he came from.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Has he not, has he not even travelling with us the whole time?

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

No!

**Peter (Soren)**

I distinctly remember him being with us at parts over the last few days.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He told me about his missing grand-daughter. He said he just wanted to help us, like laus.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

When we all got up this morning...

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*No, my wounds disagree*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

... at 2 am. When we all got up this morning at 2 am, and Soren came back with the information about the doll and the trail, there were only six of us sitting around that fire. There was no old guy, I don't know if he was dwarven or whatever, but there was not, -that person did not exist.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

But I, I talked to him. He wanted to help us.

**David (laus)**

That kind of sums up my feelings on religion anyway.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*You wanna be careful...*

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Shut up a moment. (sniff) I'm trying to find his scent. It's impossible to focus with all of your whining...

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Travis**

Even with her enhanced senses and inhuman abilities, the witch could not find the trail. The smell of decay, sweet and putrid, overwhelmed her wolf-keen senses, though it reduced over time.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

I don't think there was ever an extra dwarf, it was just this, noxious smell of rot and copper.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Is, is the, the, the, iron smell you were talking about earlier, is it less now?

**Kessi (Flygia)**

It has lessened, slightly. It's not right up in front of us but it's still all around us... As if we were in the vicinity of one of those corpse carts.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Oh.

**David (Ilaus)**

We do have the clear breath. isn't it?

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Did we take that, I thought we left everything there?

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

No, we left the money but took the important goods. We aren't grave robbers, but some of these items are more useful to the living than the dead.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*If, I mean if, if we wanna give the, the best use of this, then probably, perhaps we can give it to our wolf companion, the Lady of Bunnies. Cause she's got the best sense of smell anyway and if we can help clear it up for her, maybe she'll get more out of it.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

We, we don't...

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Cause I certainly don't want it.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

We don't need to worry about Kore right now. We just, we need to hurry towards the, the campfire. We need to hurry, we need to get out of this forest as soon as we can this...

**David (Ilaus)**

We do... yeah.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

This is getting worse by the second, and I don't like it.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ok.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Who, who, let's just go, let's start with the basis. Who's real? We have a bunch of real people, I think there's seven real people... No.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Six. Six

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*What, what if we're looking, I mean the thing is about illusions is that they're they're not real, you can put your hand through them. Also if you look really carefully and you think you notice an illusion you can try and see through it. All these, you know, I've heard tales of that.*

**Kessi (Flygia)**

I should be able to smell them right?

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*...I'm pretty sure my cousin is real, cause you know...*

**Kessi (Flygia)**

I mean, i should be able to smell if something is not real right?

**Peter (Soren)**

In theory, if it's an illusion.

**Travis**

To ease his own confusion and fear, Father Westpike gave Rowena a hardy slap on the back.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Of course we're both real.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Oww... oww you dick.*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright so, let's do buddy system. You are the only person that you have to keep the eye on of the other person, ok? So choose your buddy and then let's go find these freaking kids, cause we've have too many delays and there's some creepy thing running around in these woods trying to slash us to death. Sound good?

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Psst. Hey. I see something up in the distance.

**Travis**

For a brief moment Flygia witnessed the glint of three orbs staring back at the team from the shadows at the edge of her range of vision. It appeared mismatched, the socket holes now filled with discolored eyes, having been crudely cast into the cavities of the face. As Flygia blinked, the creature retreated deeper into the heavy wooded darkness and the cover of increasing rain.



**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ok yeah, see that just, that makes it worse. That makes it worse.

**Travis**

Father Westpike placed his hand on Rowena's shoulder and nodded. He was resolved not to let her leave his sight.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Ok, we're moving forward.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*I agree. Everyone grab a buddy.*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Whoever is going to be sneaky, go be sneaky with a partner, and whoever isn't being sneaky let's get going.

**David (Ilaus)**

Ok, Lady of Bunnies, with me.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Ok.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Lady of Bunnies...

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

I don't mind being in front, so long as Soren doesn't mind being in front as well.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I think, I think we need to fix the people that are heading out together. I just realized...

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*No, no, no, you and I work fine at the front, we'll go ahead, I mean. Well, either you'll hit it with a hammer or I'll talk it to death, we've got this.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

You are proficient at that.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*I am very proficient at that yeah.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Alright, fine.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*We've got this.*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Well, lead on.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I'll keep an eye out for spooky three lights in the mist.

**Travis**

As the rain fell through creaking boughs, the troupe continued on the path for some time. Father Westpike, now ever-cautious, spotted a dim glow through the distant trees. There, just a stone's throw ahead along their chosen path, burned a campfire. It popped and hissed in the light rain, sending smoke up past the high branches. Even from their distance, several of the loud snapping and protesting pieces of wood could be heard.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Hmm. Hold up!

**Peter (Soren)**

This is it. This is where I saw the three figures and found the doll.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Hmm.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ok, do you see any child sized footprints, Soren?

**Peter (Soren)**

So far Flygia and I have only seen short groupings of footprints, not long sets or a larger group, because so far the ground hasn't been particularly conducive toward a continuous trail in a specific direction. It's been a single step here, a five or six paces there, a mix of adults and children in patches. But, the prints lead directly to this camp.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

The iron smell hasn't gone away and it shows no sign of relenting. I can also smell the campfire, and a hint of fear, very faintly in the distance up ahead. I guess, let's try to be sneaky, right?

**David (Ilaus)**

I'll follow you.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

## EDITED ORDER

### Kessi (Flygia)

It has been a while since I've tried to be so sneaky...  
[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

### Travis

laus crept forward, hidden in the dark but for a trailing tail. He quickly distanced himself from Flygia, whose ill-placed steps cracked branches and leaves underfoot, her body weary from being in wolf-form.

### Kessi (Flygia)

Ok, well...

### Peter (Soren)

Let's see who's around the campfire...

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

Ok. I see four figures warming themselves by the glow of the fire, wait... No, I'm pretty sure that one of them isn't sleeping, but rather, is bound and hooded.

### Kessi (Flygia)

Bound like it's a prisoner?

### Peter (Soren)

With rope, yes. It's an adult, and I believe that's where the scent of fear is coming from.

### Peter (Soren)

Alright there were only three when I left, there's four now, and one of them doesn't want to be there.

### Hem (Rowena Speaking)

*Is it a large don't wanna be there or a little don't wanna be.. d'you know what? It doesn't matter, they don't want to be there.*

### Kessi (Flygia)

I'll take a closer look too... What are they doing... They appear to be sitting in proximity to the fire, but not warming themselves. Not really looking around the area but just, sitting around and doing nothing. That's weird and suspicious.

### Kaitlin (Sister)

So were the last ones before they turned to us and ripped open their throats.

### Hem (Rowena Speaking)

*I mean, do we want to try, you know, I hate to mention it, talking to them... first?*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Hmm.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Sounds right up your alley. If that is your plan, in you go bard.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Oh no no. No no, that's that's, -I'm not saying that's my job, but, maybe we oughta try talking to them first? Cause if we just kill them out of hand we're not going to learn anything.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

No I think it's correct Rowena, we should probably try to open a dialogue with them. And I trust that your tongue can actually make them more approachable.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Umm hmm. No, no pressure at all. No. I mean, I trust.. Well I don't really know most of you but, you got me back if everything goes wrong, right?*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Of course I do.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*And I've got you right by me cous? Right?*

**Travis**

Smiling at the question, Father Westpike claped a heavy chainmail gloved hand on Rowena's shoulder again, this time with enough gusto to jostle her footing.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Uuurgh... you've really got to stop doing that. Ah. what, by the way, what kind of armor are you wearing?*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Chainmail. It's loud as, loud as hell.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

Chainmail, ok.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Jingle jingle.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Alright, so I mean I can try talking to them, and if things go south, you guys got us right?*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

We're good. Right?

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Right behind you, if the need arises.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Alright.

**David (Ilaus)**

Yep.

**Peter (Soren)**

I'm assuming two of us should flank either side, just in case.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Don't forget go in your buddy, pair, in your buddy system. Don't... Make sure we don't lose anyone.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Definitely.

**David (Ilaus)**

Lady of Bunnies and I are gonna keep sneaking around.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Indeed.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Wherever, because we are doing the buddy system, wherever Soren wants to go to position himself, I'm just going to follow him. And Soren where do you want to go by the way?

**Peter (Soren)**

Yeah, I'll find position just off to the side where I could get a good shot in an emergency. Just in the trees maybe? I'll stay on the ground though so we don't have an embarrassing moment climbing down if they turn out to be friendly.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

Are we gonna go side by side, or should I be a bit ahead?

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I think...

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*It's, it's up to you, I mean you could look like muscle. Or we could look like we're travel... well we are travelling together, so, I... I'm gonna leave up to you, I mean...*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I think I should be in front until I've, we're in like earshot, like talking distance. That way I can protect you with my shield if something goes awry. But, the plan is for you to take the front when we started talking.

**Travis**

Rowena and Father Westpike started toward the clearing, the larger of the dwarves in the lead, shield held at the ready. Ilaus and Flygia, now hidden away in the woods, disappeared for the possible need for surprise. Soren and Sister Cavernsfall headed left, around the side of the central fire, to find a clear position for Soren's ranged attacks.

Rowena and Father Westpike continue onward, focusing all their attentions on the people huddled around the fire... Oh no.. I'm sorry no one checked for this...

[BEAR TRAP SOUND]

**Eypór (Sindri)**

[Scream of pain. Screamed] Oh, Pelor!

**Travis**

The crunch of sliding metal and the snap of shattering bone preceded an ear-splitting scream, breaking the melodic rhythm of the falling rain, and shaking free droplets from their resting place. It took Father Westpike a moment to recognize the scream as his own, before shooting pain blinded him temporarily.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Uggg.

**Travis**

Obscured by the rows of trees, Sister Cavernsfall looked on in a panic as her fellow dwarf screamed. She swung her warhammer back and forth over the ground around herself, and in the clearing ahead.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Great Saint Sollers! We didn't check for traps.

**Travis**

Across the clearing, unseen by all, Ilaus checked his surroundings and cursed.

**David (Ilaus)**

Who puts a trap out here?

**Travis**

The harrowed dwarf's leg ceased functioning as he realized the bloodied steel jaws biting deep into his leg. It did not seem like his body for a moment, the trickling blood washed away in the rain, the hole where skin and metal looked so similar in the dull light, and he thought for a moment of how he could just take off the leg, as it was not his, and continue on his way. Then his Sanity tried to regain control.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Ugg. By all the light... Arrgggh.

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

**Travis**

Beset by continued suffering and feeling... free of his ownship of the suffering limb, Father Westpike stood motionless, taking 20 points of stress damage. His leg had shattered, the blood was pooling, and he remained a sentinel in the dark, Stunned.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Cousin! Shit!*

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

He is stunned by his suffering. I've seen this before, people incapacitated by their pains, the shock of it. Can't move, barely speak... completely exposed to attack...

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

Oh, gods no. *Not while I'm here. I'll be your shield.*

**Travis**

As Rowena prided herself on her intent to protect her family, the rain-drenched figures around the fire bolted up. They appeared human in height, though each of them hunched over, and with swift motion drew out their weapons. [Cue Battle Theme]

The glint of the metal in the firelight spurred Rowena to action. She stopped down on the metal latch of the trap, trying to pry open the claws holding Father Westpike.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

It's gonna be okay, Cuz, just let me pull your leg out of this...

**Eypór (Sindri)**

(in shock) Leave it be... I don't... I don't...

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Shut up!

**Travis**

Though not a fighter, Rowena still had the Strength of a Dwarf.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

... Ugh!

**[creak of metal as the trap opens, rustle as she pulls Father Westpike free, slick noise of blood and flesh, metal trap crashing closed while empty, crumple into bushes]**

**Travis**

With pain and blood, Father Westpike's leg broke free of the trap and Rowena could see the bones of his leg shine through on either side where the teeth tore away flesh. Pushed back the distraction, she lowered him onto a nearby bush, then tried to hide herself from the armed strangers.

**Eypór (*Sindri*)**

Phew. Oh god.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Grr. Fuck this.*

**Travis**

It was obvious to Rowena now that the scream and clashing trap had given away their position. The men approached, but as they passed a large bundle of pines, Flygia, her haunches raised and teeth bared, swung out before them. She growled and snapped, her intentions clear if the strangers continued their approach.

**Kessi (*Flygia*)**

(attack grunt)

**Travis**

The leading stranger recoiled from the snap, while two others lunged forward to attack the witch. Scences alert, Flygia could see the slack drawn on their faces, and an empty, dull stare. Each of them attacked, glinted metal swinging, but only one made contact with the assulting wolf. The short sword, worn and spotted with rust, slashed her shoulder and trickled blood into her black fur.

**Kessi (*Flygia*)**



[Angered growl/yell]

(In Infernal – “May the darkness find your souls and burn your bodies!”  
*“Mih zmy virclyww, oulv wafdw, vorv kfrl kavuyw!”*)

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

### **Travis**

The blood still fresh, the flesh just torn opened, the first attacker stumbled as light erupted from the witch’s wound. The crimson light of the Hellish Rebuke burned bright, strings of flame washing over the man until his feature began to slosh and stretch, bubbling with steaming blood.

To the disgust of the onlookers, his head popped open and his body slumped to forest floor. A single, long pale claw pushed forth from a split in the man’s skull. It raked against the ground, grasping a root, and pulled. More slender clawed legs appeared, dragging a shrivled oozing pustule out into the firelight.

The thing increased in size as it crawled toward Flygia, rivulets of blood oozing down its countless folds. Though unafraid of violence, the unknown writhing mass before her cast doubt on her purpose, and if joining these people was the sane thing to do.

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

### **Travis**

And she doubted her choices. Doubted her abilities and her grasp on reality. Her hairs stood on end, watching the crawling thing. She thought of death, how close it seemed. And of life, and what could be considered living. Was the thing before her truly alive? Had the man been before she’d popped open his head? And in those moments of doubt she felt ill-intentioned magics clawing at her mind, testing her brain, her Intelligence.

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

### **Kessi (Flygia)**

I’m too smart for this

### **Travis**

She fought back, Woman of the Wilds, Lady of Bunnies, and pissed-off wolf, pulling her mind back from the brink. She snapped and snarled, and the pustule clawing at the ground before her lashed out in anger, a thin red line crossing her snout.

### **Kessi (Flygia)**

[Growl and sounds of pain]

I cannot take much more of this alone!

### **Hem (Rowena)**

Get out of there, wolfie!

**Travis**

But the evils of the forest had not yet sprung their surprises. Projectiles hailed down from the trees, brief flashing bolt-tips headed for Father Westpike.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

[mumbling to self, grumbling, something about the gods or perhaps cursing the AllShadow (hated deity of Pelor)]

**Travis**

The cleric, still Stunned, was struck. A bolt landed in Father Westpike's chest, peircing through the chainmail just enough to puncture skin and muscle. The dwarf staggered, confused, pained, and still resting on the bush.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Urg...

**Travis**

Near the campfire, a tall individual with a commanding presence surveyed the battle, preparing a plan of action. He placed a small dagger from his hand into a well-stocked bandoleer across his chest and proceeded to draw out two swords. Prepared and confident, he followed his fellow attackers toward the fray.

**David (Iaus)**

That must be their leader...

**Travis**

Stooped low, Iaus drew the cruved rapier from his belt. He eyed the taller man, contemplative. Should he aid the injured Witch, or use his unseen position to his advantage on their possible leader?

It was then that the growing pustle undulated, its claws poised to spring, and Iaus saw the bloodied Flygia standing, wavering, alone.

**David (Iaus)**

[whispered] Well, that's that then.

**Travis**

Decision made, Iaus dashed in, bringing the rapier down toward the pustualted brain.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

laus' slash cut through the pale creature, severing long clawed limbs. The only sound was that of snapping ligaments and spurting fluid, but in his mind laus could hear a hideous shriek.

**David (laus)**

Well that's life isn't it?

**Travis**

laus backed away from the creature, slipping behind the cover of a nearby tree. His devilish grin beaming white in the firelight from ear to ear.

Across the clearing, still hidden from view, Sister Cavernsfall and Soren prepared to act.

**Peter (Soren)**

I'll target the leader, try and get an arrow into his ear canal, if at all possible. You should get in there, Sister.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Right. I can't stay back here if I want to attack, so we're going to have to break the buddy system, Soren

**Peter (Soren)**

Goodbye.

**Travis**

Within an hour of creating her system, Sister Cavernsfall broke her own rule, leaving Soren behind in the trees and rushing to aid in the protection of her fellows. As she dashed forward, Soren took aim at the tall attacker's ear canal.

[Neutral Dark Dice Roll]

With keen aim but poor lighting Soren's shot veered from its intended target. The arrow flew and fell sharp upon the leader's chest. He stopped momentarily, swaying, but his face remained a steady unblinking scowl, as tears began to fall.

As the arrow had flown, so had Sister Cavernsfall rushed into battle. Warhammer drawn, shield raised, she leapt before Flygia. In a single swoop her warhammer crashing down upon the yellow brained pustle of a thing, flattening it to the appearance of unleavened bread.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Disgusting... Ilmater forgive the pain---

**Travis**

Satisfied that the creature was dead, Sister Cavernsfall prepared her defense against the nearest enemy while uttering a prayer to Ilamter. She was cut off from her mantra as the hairs on her arms rose and a booming voice from the treetops heralded the presence of magic.

### **CULT MAGE**

(Casting in Draconic: *Weakness, fear, helplessness!*) Plythu, l'gra, brengulch!

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Lady of Bunnies not looking so good?

### **Kessi (*Flygia*)**

*Whimpers.*

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Awww, Awww. That's too cute to leave, sorry cous.*

### **Travis**

Rowena, with a soft spot for the witch's wolf form, pulled out her handharp and shuffled over to place a hand on the wolf's bloodied fur. With fast twitching fingers she strummed a melody and sent for her notes of magic...

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Be still a moment, I'm gonna cast Cure Wounds.*

*"Don't you feel sad, your wounds are not bad."*

### **Travis**

Flygia looked up in excitement, wagging her tail as a pale light moved into her skin from Rowena's hand. The light glowed beneath the matted fur, binding itself to the witch's wounds. Though it's work went unseen, Flygia could feel the flesh seal, and her vigor return.

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Aww that's too sweet.*

### **Eypór (*Sindri*)**

*Damn.*

### **Kessi (*Flygia*)**

*Yay!*

### **Travis**

Invigorated by her successful aid, Rowena turned back to her cousin, raising a fist in the air in momentary celebration, hoisting an unseen celebratory flagon. Father Westpike, recovering from his stunned state, smiled, Inspired by her courage and talent.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

We can do this, cous!

**Eypór (Sindri)**

By Pelor, Rowena. *"You got this"*, Yeah.

**Travis**

Her wounds healed, Flygia wasted no time jumping back into battle. She snarled, watching as one man took a poorly aimed swing at her front paws. She dodged back, and could see the tall leader approaching, an arrow in his chest and tears in his eyes.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

[growled] You should not have attacked us.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Travis**

The wolf lunged for the nearer man. She snapped her jaw shut over his leg, breaking through hardened leather to taste blood beneath. She thrashed, casuing the man to stumble and for flesh to rip.

Behind her, Father Westpike drew out his weapon, and, using it as a cane to support his mangled leg, limped forth toward Flygia.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

"I'll take them from here, you, the rest of you please, just keep safe. By all that is just and good, may the lord of light guide our actions!"

**Travis**

Calling upon the power of his faith, Father Westpike emanated a soft glow. He cast a Blessing of Pelor upon them, surging Flygia, laus, and Sister Cavernsfall forward with renewed vigor.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Sister Cavernsfall, you're a fricking badass.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

I am happy to help you, my friends.

**Travis**

Trying to Perceive the attackers in the trees, Father Westpike focused on the path of the arrows.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

Had he not been a dwarf, accustomed to a life of darkness beneath stone and soil, he would have missed the three figures hiding in the trees just above the glow of the campfire. Two he saw loading crossbows, the other gestured, weaving evil magics in the dark of the Dead Pines.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

“Up there! The trees above the campfire! One is a mage, please, somebody, take care of it”.

**Travis**

The wizard stared out blankly, mumbling a final word. He cast his spell down into the party, past the fire, and a pricking sensation crept its way up Sister Cavernsfall's spine. For a moment, all was lost, she could see blades and bolts flying through the air, all meant for her, impossible to stop...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

But, filled with Ilmater's endurance, she shook the feeling of dread and filled her mind with drive; to save her fellows, to find the children, to build her church. She growled...

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Whoever just tried to curse me is going to get smashed.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Mind control, mind control. That's what I'm thinking.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Yeah.

**Travis**

The men in the trees took aim at Father Westpike, easy to discern as he glowed, and launched their bolts. Shield raised, Father Westpike heard them clash against metal and fall to the forest floor, but he was unable to see the man on the ground charge and swipe at Flygia. The wolf, locked in battle and having tasted blood, dodged the attack, the missing swipe audible to her astute ears. The leader sliced at Sister Cavernsfall in a series of quick but ineffective blows, and in a final attempt he threw a dagger, which flew just shy of Flygia's head.

Still hiding out of site, Ilaus, unaccustomed to such direct conflict, contemplated his next move.

**David (Ilaus)**

(whispering to self, urgent) I'm also thinking Mind control here, and part of me is waiting to keep these people alive so we can interrogate them. So I'm, I'm thinking, well I've got a whole load of rope. I mean I've got a crossbow I could try and hit the mage with. Maybe the mage is controlling them all?

(to team, loudly) What should I do...

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Believe in the power of iron. Specifically iron crossbow bolts.

**David (laus)**

Right. Eat bolts, wizard.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Nice

**Travis**

laus lined up a perfect shot with his crossbow, but the ever-increasing rain sent it off course striking the mage in the shoulder.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Man, you have a lot of weapons.

**David (laus)**

Yeah.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

He's like a walking quartermaster.

**David (laus)**

I am a merchant.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

He's a tiefling, they've got weapons store stashed everywhere.

**David (laus)**

I'd thank you not to be so racist.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Remind me not to piss them off...*

**Peter (Soren)**

The leader has a second shot coming his way.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Peter (Soren)**

(hitting his target with an arrow) Ha!

**Travis**

With a swift shot, Soren sunk an arrow in the underside of the leader's arm as he took another swing toward Sister Cavernsfall.

**Peter (Soren)**

I will hit that ear one of these days... That beautiful ear.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

The mage is in the tree but I don't really have anything that reaches into a tree, and I'm only 4ft tall.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Kill the tree.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Well, now I feel like I have to finish off their leader

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Go for it.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright...

**David (Ilaus)**

I still think we need to be able to interrogate them.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Well let's not....

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

We can do non lethal.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

... interrogate the mage? Because it seems like a bad idea to keep him alive.

**David (Ilaus)**

Yeah I was going to go with that.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

So, lets. I mean I could at least take out a few ...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]



### **Travis**

With a sickening crack Sister Cavernsfall crashed her hammer to the knee of the human in front of her, the shattering of bones audible over the rain and clamor. Though momentarily doubled-over, the man remained standing, eyes locked on Sister Cavernsfall.

It seemed like the tide of battle was turning... However, There was just... one... problem... Soren, far behind the party, heard a phrase whispered gently into his ear and his blood immediately ran cold.

“Da haff wick ma?”

“Do you seek him?”.

Soren knew who it was even before he turned to face the three hollow cavities, now stuffed with bloody, drooping eyeballs. The Silent One slashed at Soren with disfigured talons, cutting open his forearms and digging into his chest.

### **Peter (Soren)**

(defensive scream)

### **Kaitlin (Sister)**

(a curse) St. Sollers! ... Soren!

### **Travis**

At the scream, Rowena sprung to her feet, abandoning her safe space behind the Woman of the Wilds and rushing forward toward the clearing. With intent and power she strummed the strings of the harp and sung

### **Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

(sung) *“you’ll soon hate and fear, the sound that you hear”*

### **Travis**

[crash of thunder]

A wave of thunder swept up along the treeline. As branches shook, one man fell from his perch, his ankle popping as he hit the floor. Her plan successful, Rowena doubled back to hide amongst the trees.

Aided by the bard’s magic, Flygia lashed out again at the man nearest her...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

The man moved his blade up defensively, but at the last moment his footing slipped and her fangs sunk in. Flygia, leg in her grip, tackled him to the ground, shifting her bite. She tore at his face and neck, tearing away pieces of flesh, but as another of the foul pustules crawled out from his ear, she backed away in disgust.

### **Eypór (Sindri)**

Where is Soren?

**Travis**

Father Westpike spun around. He could hear a commotion behind him, hidden in the darkness of the trees.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Frick.

**Travis**

He set off limping for the woods, shield in one hand, hammer as a crutch in the other. As Soren came into view, so did the lanky outline of the Silent One, its claws in Soren's chest. Mumbling low, Father Westpike cast a sacred flame upon the beast.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

(combat spell) Father of light burn away the darkness with your sacred radiance! Begone foul creature!

**Travis**

As he prayed for divine aid, a beam of light shot down through the sky, a spark from the heavens, illuminating the foul creature for a split second, burning it with splendid radiance. One of the eyes in its face continued to burn after the light dissipated, and surprised by this unexpected turn of events, the Silent One screeched and fled into the darkness of the woods.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Oh that worked? Ok.

**Hem (Rowena Speaking)**

*Good job!*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Yeah, Pelor!

**Travis**

The human leader initiated another series of strikes and counter-strikes with Sister Cavernsfall, but the whole of their exchange lasted mere moments. As they each stepped back before re-engaging, Sister Cavernsfall was beset by a sharp stinging pain on her left bicep and shoulder. She saw blood.

**CULT MAGE**

(Casting in Draconic: *Weakness, fear, helplessness!*) Plythu, I'gra, brengulch!

Travis

Across the clearing, the booming voice from within the trees repeated its incantation. In that instant, Flygia felt the fur on her neck stand on end, doubt and dread weaving its way to her mind. Facing down her enemies, wounded and angered, she steeled herself from the wills of the mage.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Travis**

Flygia shook off the feeling and focused on the emerging creature before her. She dodged, its small sharp limbs lashing out. Two bolts from near the campfire missed their intended targets as the brain-like abomination before the team undulated and quivered, shaking their central bulbous masses toward Sister Cavernsfall.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

I fear no evil.

**Travis**

Sister Cavernsfall could feel the creature forcing a path into her mind, her psyche, but she focused, thinking only of the pain of her wounds and the suffering of her fellows until the intruder on the thoughts retreated.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ilmater, forgive the suffering I will cause...

**David (Ilaus)**

I'm gonna, go mage hunting.

**Travis**

Ilaus, seeing his shot, moved forward with his crossbow drawn.

[Natural 20 Dark Dice Roll]

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Hell yeah

**Travis**

As the first bolt caught the mage in the chest, he dropped something small from his perch. It shattered upon impact with the ground below, and the mage scowled. Reloading with lightning speed, Ilaus took aim again.

[Natural 20 Dark Dice Roll]

The second bolt found its mark in the man's ear canal, impacting with a *squish*. As the mage collapsed from the tree and his head hit the ground, a pustule creature bursts forth from his nostrils, ripping itself free from his face and increasing in size with each passing second.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Hell yeah. Hell yeah.

**David (Ilaus)**

Where's my son!

**Travis**

As Ilaus raged, Soren took aim at the tall man. Soren now expected a pustule creature to come from the leader's head if he killed him, but he knew they'd be prepared. He lined up a shot...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

And as the man slashed at Sister Cavernsfall, Soren's arrow caught him off-guard. It pierced through his ear at an angle, exiting through the nostril. Another pustule, covered in a splattering of hardened coagulated blood, used the opening to escape the remains of the man's head.

**Peter (Soren)**

Perfect

**Travis**

Thankful for the aid, Sister Cavernsfall stepped over the body, hammer raised,

[Positive dark Dice Roll]

And with force and steel the pustule was flattened. A strange dark liquid splashed from its wounds as she pulled her weapon back, yet the creature still moved.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Ugh.

**Travis**

Drawing her crossbow, Rowena rushed back to Father Westpike. There, protected by his shield, she let loose a bolt for the fallen archer.

[Positive dark Dice Roll]

The archer, righting himself from his fall, his crossbow's sights aimed for Rowena, felt a catch in his throat. A warmth spread through him, and he gasped in weakening breaths, his grip fell loose. Rowena's bolt had loosed first, flying through the camp, and embedding in his throat. Rowena paused, happy for her lucky shot, until the man pulled forth a dagger and cut open his own neck, releasing a crawling, skittering pustule from within.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*That's gross. You, you already squished one a' these bugs! You've got this.*

**Travis**

Rowena glanced at Sister Cavernsfall, who, upon seeing the new creature, felt both determined and Inspired to continue her assault.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright, bring me to those abominations. They won't last long!

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Squish bugging time.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

[Growling] These things probably taste disgusting.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

I wouldn't try to bite them, Witch!

**Travis**

The wolf silently nodded, and moved to attack with its sharp black claws, leaping toward the nearest pustule.

[Natural 20 Dark Dice roll]

**Kessi (Flygia)**

[Growling] Perfect!

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Nice.

**Travis**

Flygia pinned the pustule, scratching at the creature repeatedly, smearing its putrid brain-matter into the dirt...

A few feet away, Father Westpike glanced back to Soren.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

"Soren, Please, move closer to the group. This thing is still out there".

**Travis**

The old cleric limped back into the fight, hammer raised to strike...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

With combined fury and bardic Inspiration, Father Westpike bludgeoned the newest pustule, part of the brain-like mass crushing under the impact. The brain undulated and writhed, as it's fellow creature had, and attempted to infiltrate the minds of the two devout attackers. Sister Cavernsfall could feel the familiar itch along her thoughts, and Father Westpike faced a new experience to test his strength of mind.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Stay out of my... head!

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Ah nice,. Nice

**Eypór (Sindri)**

We've been very lucky!

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Cause we're so damn smart in our family, we're all good.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

St. Soller gives me strength!

**Travis**

The heroes overcame the battle of wills, but, distracted, Father Westpike could not stop a slashing claw from further opening up the flesh of his leg.

Still in the tree, the final crossbowman loosed a shot which streaked past Father Westpike unnoticed as the final pustule undulated at Rowena, clawing at her mind.

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

I curse myself, I said our family was smart, not the smartest thing to say, clearly.

**Travis**

Rowena's head ached, then burned, then throbbed with stinging pain. The pressure grew, and her mind sank into thick mud. Her thoughts went incomplete, her aptitude for music lost, and the creature burrowed into her mind. She could not think to move, standing, paralyzed. It's battle of the minds won, the pustule jumped onto her arm and climbed its way toward her head.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Ahhhhhhh!

**David (laus)**

I can help with that. (focusing the shot) I'm good with ear canals.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

It's just a brain, it has no ears.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*No don't hit me. What are you doing? Put that crossbow away!*

**David (laus)**

And aiming the crossbow... And... Well... Oh no, that's no good.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*(background yelling) Stop pointing that thing at me. NO!*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Don't forget the blessings of Pelor!

**David (laus)**

(bored) Yeah, might as well. The gods might as well be useful for something. -Make this shot hit -yadda yadda yadda.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Burn...

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

**David (laus)**

The gods don't seem to be much help anyway.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Sacrilege won't get you far, friend.

**Travis**

laus' shot fired and though the gods did not wish to aid laus, his misplaced shot managed to avoid Rowena's face.

Still watching from afar, Soren jumped from his perch to approach the battle from the flank.

**Peter (Soren)**

Time for me to move closer to take a better shot at one of those pustules...

**Travis**

Soren jogged swiftly into place, notching an arrow, lining up the perfect shot... However, he failed to notice the metal jaws lying in his path... As he took his next step, he was able to feel the different texture and his mind raced...

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

His limbs reacted faster than his thoughts, pulling back just before the clash of metal snapped shut. Father Westpike shivered unconsciously at the sound, the pain in his leg all the more real to him. Soren, still intent upon attack, lined up the shot a second time, his position compromised...

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

but, his mind still distracted by his close encounters with the steel jaws of the trap, his bolt merely grazed one of the freakish creatures.

**Peter (Soren)**

Perfect.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

'oh no, not again'.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Time to crush a bug!

**Travis**

A smile unlike that of a godly woman flickered over Sister Cavernsfall's lips and her grip tightened on the warhammer. Her hand guided by the blessings of the gods, she swung from below, the impact sending the pustle catapaulting off into the distant dead trees. As Father Westpike watched the dark shape fly off beyond his sight, he found himself mirroring the triumphant smile that Sister Cavernsfall wore.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

[whispered] The cloak...

**Travis**

Rowena, her mind fighting back, tried to whisper for help, but nothing came out. As the pustle inched higher and higher, peached her shoulder, her body took actions all its own.

[Positive Dark Dice Roll]

Yet, it wasn't her body at all, but her heavy cloak, the dark shroud draped around her shoulders. The single metal clasp dug into Rowena's flesh, anchoring itself, and allowing the long flowing cloth or wrap around the pustle. It clenched and tightened, the cloak's noose



squeezing until the pustule hissed and screeched, then split in two. The halves squelched onto the forest floor.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

Oh excellent.

**Travis**

Rowena felt the fog lift from her mind, she saw Father Westpike dashing toward her, hammer raised.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Don't hit me, it's dead! Don't hit me it's dead! Stop trying to hit me, it's dead!*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

(dazed) Wait... what?

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

*Please don't hit me.*

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I'm Sorry. The sound of the bear trap must have triggered something.

**Travis**

As Rowena's mind recovered, she still felt slightly weakened. Her face was pale, her eyes sunken ever so slightly, and yet the shroud around her shoulders seemed more vibrant, its gold thread glistening, its fibers flat and oiled. Rowena, making to straighten herself after such an attack, verified with side-eyed glances that no one noticed her cloak's previous actions.

Flygia, focusing on the final pustule, jumped forward to its position, only to react by reflex as an arrow flew by, pinning the pustule to a tree. It twitched, then.. nothing..

**Peter (Soren)**

(Quietly, as if appearing at a surprise birthday party) Surprise!

**Eypór (Sindri)**

I don't know what came over me... Again I'm sorry.

**Travis**

Quiet overtook the site, and heavy breaths could be heard from the wounded and the weary.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright, is that mage still alive? Can we question him?

**David (Ilaus)**

No. He's very dead.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Ahh. Darn, oh well.

**David (laus)**

I made sure of that.

**Kessi (Flygia)**

Not just a little, he's very dead.

**Kaitlin (Sister)**

Alright, very dead.

**Eypór (Sindri)**

Oh yeah.

**Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)**

He's super dead.

**David (laus)**

Both ear canals gone and everything. Yup.

**Travis**

So they stood, bleeding, bloodied, and beaten, corpses at their feet, trees splattered with ichor and clinging stench. The campfire flickered and the rain fell; caring not for their struggle or for the lost children somewhere in the Dead Pines.

The moment to breath let realization set in; some had seen more death tonight than many see in a lifetime. Rowena worried, her mind still reeling from the invasion on her will from unknown creatures which now laid dead and broken in the clearing.

There was a squelch of flesh as Soren retrived an arrow, and the group gathered together outside the ring of the fire's warmth. The fire still hissed, alive but weak. There, still near the flickering flames, the hooded captive weazed and shook. Father Westpike moved to approach, seeing the one good thing left to do on such a terrible night.

But Sister Cavernsfall flashed back to the suffering woman, the creature that crawled out from within. She touched at her cheek, thinking of the tearing flesh that freed the Silent One. There, splattered across her face she felt the dark, viscous innards of the flattened creature before her. She wiped it away, but stopped at the sound of a weazing chuckle, so faint in the depth of the Pines.

She glanced back to her fellows and met the worried gaze of Soren. It was clear he had also heard it; somewhere, out there, the children were in danger, but so were they.