

Dark Dice

Chapter 1: The Silent One

TRAVIS

[whispered in elven] Shaelysti paes salaelaes?

[match striking, a lit candle hisses]

[normal] Do you seek him?

You have found yourself among those who roll the Dark Dice. What you are about to hear happened long ago; a story brought back from the edge of oblivion, dutifully transcribed, and enhanced aurally to better captivate your attention.

Our tale is a harrowing and collaborative one, set within a world of Dungeons [pause] and Dragons. However, dissimilar to most stories of its kind, our protagonists are not fantastic heroes of legend; they do not understand what lays on the path of their fate, and they do **not** overcome all odds.

No. I regret to inform you that this story follows a team of flawed individuals; selfish, foolish, naïve, and ill suited for the path of a hero. But not every story is about heroes. Some tales are fables of warning. Do not go into the woods at night. Fear the strangers in your midst.

Never play games with fate.

[Intro Music]

[fade to]

Some time ago, the small pious village of Illmater's Hope, suffered a terrible season of blight. Crops blackened and animals ill beyond care, the men and women of the village spent much of their time far from town, collecting together what they could to feed their slackened mouths.

Exhausted but fed, the men and women of Illmater's Hope slept well, and awoke to calming rays of the sun. Rested, they turned to face a new day, and one by one the households screamed to find their children missing.

So it was that six able-bodied men and women set out in search of them. Tracking the children through the woods to the east, they wound through an ill-stricken section of the Bright Vale, the Dead Pines. Glimpses in the Dead Pines' heavy mists tricked their eyes, and the obscured path slowed their progress, but they went on. The chill of the night bit at their noses and ears, and the sound of distant thunder bounding off the nearby mountains promised worse days ahead.

As the storm pushed down the mountain, five of the would-be rescuers huddled around a dying fire, clinging to wisps of warmth and consciousness. Through traveling together they knew little of the strangers with whom they shared food and fire. Over the last two days their conversations consisted of their mission to find the children and little else. One firey-headed Dwarf before the fire took it upon herself to break the weight of anonymity between them.

[Edit note: Move this from later to here. It's recorded, I just need to move the dialogue around.]

Hem

I am Rowena Granitespike.

Travis

As she spoke she stood, rustling a long, dark, cumbersome cloak behind her before seating herself nearer the fire, dragging her small pack close. The light flickered across the well-carved sigil of weighted scales pressed into her metal chest piece, and on the small well-cared for harp hanging at her hip.

Hem

I have family amongst the group, a cousin, Father Westpike. I don't know if you have a first name, I might just call you Father.

Eypór

Yes, I am Sindri, Sindri Westpike. I come from the Frost Iron Mountains.

Travis

While the aged Dwarf spoke he moved to place more sodden wood upon the fire. He stepped with a limp and an unevenness, his shoulders strong but carrying a hump from decades of toil in darkened mines. As he placed the wood upon the fire, embers bounded up past his greyed beard and hair, and his smiling face. The face of a proud, happy Dwarf, a life of hard work and dedication behind his eyes.

Eypór

I have travelled these realms for 80 years now. I have been in Ilmater's Hope now for maybe a year, trying to help build the current church. You would know me as a cleric of the god Pelor...

Travis

With a strong grip he grasped at the symbol of Pelor around his neck. Pelor, the kyr os jhol (Key +or Oh+s Tz + Ole'), the god of the Sun, Light, Strength, and Healing, the creator of much that is good. Father Westpike looked at the holy symbol, at the bearded face within the rays of the sun, and he thought for a moment on his most beloved of the old gods, an ancient symbol of power and righteousness in the realms of Men.

Eypór

May his light guide our actions.

Travis

An uncomfortable rustle issued from beside the Dwarf, and a short grey-skinned teifling peered up at the man under long horns. He seemed odd, anxious, and set beside three sets of shoes, a pair for any occasion.

David

My name is Ilaus. I'm an innkeeper. Of the children that have been taken from the village, mine is one of them. His name's Barrin, he's 12, he's a dwarf. I know he's not mine, but... but, it's how we roll. Alright? It's a long story, I don't even wanna go there and I don't wanna waste time talking about all this cause I wanna find him.

Travis

With that, the teifling shifted his eccentrically designed cloak about him and nodded to the next dwarf beside him. She was short and unremarkable in her features, but her broad shoulders and heavy hands were testament to the strength of Dwarven youth.

Kaitlin

I am Sister Tavorite Cavernsfall...I am a Paladin of Ilmater, and I come from the Dwarven village Faxifoss. Though, as stonemasons, we lived in a house next to a massive cavern that fell into the earth, hence Cavernsfall.

I came to Ilmater's Hope to help build the church, as I have assisted in the stonemasonry of two previous churches of my faith. Now, the suffering of Ilmater ordains I help alleviate the suffering of others, so I will help find the children that were lost to the town. And you, my wild-worn fellow?

Travis

Sister Cavernsfall was speaking to the last of their group, a tiefling woman of the wild, with blood-tinted skin and dark hair dotted with sprigs and leaves.

Kessi

I am Flygia, a tiefling and a woman of the wilds. I consider wherever I travel to be my home and for the last few months I've lived in a small hut in the woods just north of Ilmater's Hope. I am known as the demon-witch of the Grey Swamp, the keeper of the wilds, and also, more recently... the lady of bunnies. [pause] It's not my fault for having so many!

Though I'm called a witch I'm actually a druid, one who communes with nature.

Travis

With this she rattled the tell-tale signs of her craft: opaque tinctures, natural charms, bundles of herbs, and bulbous potions hanging from her cloak. Even her walking stick looked alive and wriggling beneath her fingers.

Kessi

I'm not an evil person and while I don't mind being perceived as a scary witch I'm sick of being harassed by dumb people with pitchforks, so when the villagers came to ask for my aid I said... "(*Evil cackle*) Sure I'll help you. (*Evil cackles*)"

[long pause]

I talk endlessly about my bunnies if you get me started, and one of my brooms, I guess you'd call it a *broom-mate*, it taking care of them while I'm gone.

Hem

That's amazing. I'm sorry, I'm would -I'm just going to call you Lady of Bunnies, that's just too good.

[EDITOR NOTE: End of cut from later stuff]

Travis

While their spirits seemed lifted the night pushed heavily on their shoulders, and the days of travel behind them seemed insignificant to the task ahead. Each seemed lost to thought; of the bitter cold, the missing children, the will of their gods, and the path onward. Breaking the sorrowful silence, laus Innskeep shuffled his pack.

IAUS

So, taking stock of the provisions we've been given. Everyone has a bedroll, a bonus canteen which should last the entire journey unless you... use it in a way that would cause it to run out... like dousing a fire, these are actually pretty big, -multiple fires or something. We have one bottle of instant rope, compliments of myself, which creates 30 feet of rope out of a jar and it lasts about an hour before it peels apart. I also packed two very warm blankets, and my neighbors were nice enough to donate a basket of elderberries and cashews - basically one meal for the entire team whenever we decide to have it. Any preference on who's holding the warm blankets, and/or the elderberries? I'm already carrying a lot.

Eypór

Well, I have a very good cloak that I wear, so I do not need any of the blankets, but I can carry them for you if that's any problem.

Kaitlin

I'm still interested in the "bottle of rope", so you just open it and rope comes out?

David

Don't you worry.

Hem

Have you seen those, those, like those snake in a jars?

Kaitlin

Oh snake in a jar yeah, ok.

Hem

It's like that in a bottle for 30 foot of rope

David

That's alright i'll just hang onto that one... It is my rope after all.

Hem (Rowena)

I don't think I should take anything to be honest.

Travis

As lighting crashed closer and the pressure of thunder rocked the Dead Pines, a flash of metal and slick cloth gleamed from the long fingers of distant trees. A figure emerged from the shadows, near enough to feel the heat of the fire. The team recognized their final fellow, Soren Arkwright, the renowned monster hunter of the Bright Vale, returned from his scouting mission. Grey eyed and deceptively plain, his cloak's hood covered all but a cropped and haggard beard as he drew up tight around his neck.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Soren, what have you found?

Peter (Soren)

That was quite a journey. A lot of trees. Tripped a few times. You guys don't need to hear about that. Anyway, what I saw was a campfire, it's about an hour and half away from here. There was a, a, a child's doll on the ground. I'm assuming it did come from Ilmater's Hope because of the green delphinium that was weaved into its, -woven rather, into its hair. There appeared to be about three humanoid figures guarding the campfire. It looks like they're resting for the night.

I think that if we leave immediately we could probably catch up to them before they move on for the night, if you guys aren't too tired?

David (Ilaus)

Definitely, what are we waiting for?

Hem (Rowena)

I agree.

Eypór (Sindri)

Did you see no trace of the children?

Peter (Soren)

Only the doll, I did not see a child.

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Have we been following the footsteps of adults, or have we been following footsteps of children?

Kessi (Flygia)

Both.

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm.

David (laus)

Well we'll definitely go, what are we waiting for?

Kaitlin (Sister)

Well then yes. If we're well rested and can go then let's do this.

Eypór (Sindri)

We should definitely move quietly, whoever these people are, they are of the illicit sort, they will not hesitate to use violence I think.

Kaitlin (Sister)

We can certainly try, but my nature is not trustworthy when it comes to being sneaky.

David (laus)

That's alright, some of us are.

Travis

Another glimmer of lighting lit up their eager eyes. Now, before the rain began to fall, they had a path and some hope for finding the lost children. While others slept fitfully in the distant Town of Ilmater's Hope, the search party stired with purpose. Heavy mis

Kessi (Flygia)

I know that Soren and I have been tracking for the past two days, but what would we like our traveling order to be?

Eypór (Sindri)

I would not hesitate to take the first step if everybody is ok with that.

Kaitlin (Sister)

I don't mind being in the front either, I'm just... I'm wearing chainmail and I am not sneaky.

Eypór (Sindri)

Oh neither am I, neither am I. I am simply, simply thinking that we have the more beefy of us up front.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Who are you calling beefy, Sindri?

Eypór (Sindri)

(apologetic) I only meant!

Kaitlin (Sister)

I was joking. [quiet laugh] I am as strong and stout as a Dwarf could wish. A block of quality stone.

Kessi (Flygia)

I'll just trail behind you, silently. These forests are not kind to strangers.

Hem (Rowena)

Thing is if we want to try and get information out of them, we want to get on them quiet, we don't want to just, let them know were coming cause they might run away.

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm.

David (laus)

And also you want someone that can actually see in the dark.

Eypór (Sindri)

I...

Hem (Rowena)

I'm a dwarf...

Eypór (Sindri)

We are...

Kaitlin (Sister)

...dwarf.

Eypór (Sindri)

You have a dwarven child, you should know this.

Hem (Rowena)

I think...

David (laus)

I know. But i'm also sneaky as well.

Hem (Piss taking as Rowena)

This is a conversation we probably should of had already: who can actually see in the dark?

Kessi (Flygia)

(insulted) I won't dignify that with an answer.

Eypór (Sindri)

I...

Kaitlin (Sister)

I can. Stone does not mine itself from the mountain.

Hem (Rowena)

Ok, I'll rephrase it, who can't see in the dark?

Peter (Soren)

Did I mention I'm very tall? I...

Kaitlin (Sister)

[confused, joke] Perhaps for a Dwarf, but you are a human...

Hem (Rowena)

Oh good, then no one needs to worry. We're all good.

David (laus)

[*Cutting across banter*] Can we stop debating about all this and get a move on?

Eypór (Sindri)

Yes, yes.

[EDIT: from just ahead]

Travis

Their march further into the Dead Pines continued, and through side-eyed glances they faced an unsettling but common sight over the pervious days. Sister Cavernsfall stepped carefully over a torn limb, the great haunch of a stag, and her heavy boot squelched through the mud mixed from blood and soiled dirt. Further ahead the rest of the body lie splayed out upon the path, belly torn open, fly infested, wriggling with parasitic life, cracked antlers hanging limp, its tongue lolling out in a contortion of pain and fear.

Kaitlin (Sister)

[whispered] Poor, creature, to have suffered so...

[Normal] While we're walking, should we not discuss the mutilated animals we've been passing? I don't really know much about these things, for I am not hunter, but I wanted to get a second opinion. Were they torn open? Are there signs of consumption by some another animal?

Kessi (Flygia)

We've been seeing them pretty regularly. It was as if they were ripped open by something rabid but not hungry.

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm.

Peter (Soren)

They're also rotten, as if decay hit them very quickly. Before they could be consumed by carrion or scavengers.

Eypór (Sindri)

Lady Cavernsfall, let us not worry about the animals right now, we have the children to worry about.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Yes, I'm just worried these things may not be what we think they are.

David (Ilaus)

That's all very interesting but could you please keep it down? Some of us are trying to be sneaky.

[END OF EDIT]

Travis

Half an hour passed on that dark path, and with a gust of heavy wind, the air, laden with the gentle scent of damp rot, bloomed to a foul odor that grew stronger with each step. With the many discard carcasses and festering meats of animals they had passed, this seemed to surprise none. However, Father Westpike, leading the team, stopped his tread. Ahead by some sixty feet three dark silhouettes sat around a fireside, through the party's determined path.

Father Westpike motioned at the figures and silently indicated their number before drawing up his shield and hammer. Sister Cavernsfall, unhooking her warhammer from her belt, followed suit. Together, the symbols of their gods glimmered in the dying firelight, Pelor's face seemed to cackle, and the hands of Ilmater almost appeared to bleed.

Kaitlin (Sister)

[whispered] Ok, so there's three people up there.

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm.

David (laus)

I'm going to hide and get ready to sneak attack.

Travis

The dead debris underfoot, a constant reminder of the sick place, made it difficult for laus to easily act as he wished. And so, he put stock in his skill and cast the dice.

[sound of Dark Dice Roll]

Travis

Fate smiled down on the tiefling in that moment, and laus took his place behind a nearby growth of thorned brambles without the slightest rustle. He now waited, at a distance from the party, until the need arose for more dire action

Trailing behind his fellows, hunter Soren attempted to glean more about the distant figures, straining his eyes in the dark.

[sound of Dark Dice roll]

Peter (Soren)

[whispered] They appear to be unarmed... merchants... One female, two males. Humanoid, perhaps human or half-elf.

Travis

Between flashes of distant lightning, aided by Dwarven and Tiefling darksight, the others saw that the trio was facing away, motionless, unarmed, and dressed in the plain but colored garb of merchants. And then a white light washed over them, a great booming crack splitting the air, illuminating the surrounding towering forest. They blinked back the white spots in their vision, and the distant trio now had their eyes upon the team.

Unsettled by their stares, Father Westpike raised his shield, but Rowena placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Hem (*Rowena*)

[whispered] *Erm, Father make sure you don't die, because you're the coolest family member I have.* I'll instill you with bardic inspiration, [cough] (in dwarven, musically, quietly) ***"Be safe, be bold, and endure what life throws at you."***

Travis

The light notes of her song filled Father Westpike's mind with sharp warmth, the memories of fond Dwarven revelry made into song and strength. This was the magic Rowena had taken up, not the devout power of the gods, but the living enchantment of music.

Eypór (Sindri)

Such inspiration...

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Because I'm a valor bard...

Eypór (Sindri)

Nice.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

You only use it once. It can bolster your chances to hit, strengthen an attack, swing luck your way, or shore up your defense. Make it count.

Eypór (Sindri)

Ooh.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I don't want you to die, so I'm just gonna piss off into the bushes. This is too much.

Eypór (Sindri)

Keep close to me, we don't know what's in these woods. Alright. The creatures are staring at us now? Or the people..

Peter (Soren)

Again, I don't think they're armed, they look like human merchants.

Eypór (Sindri)

State your names. What are you doing in the forest on this eve?

Travis

Sitting so far off into the dark woods, the trio remained unmoving around their sputtering fire. Floating embers here and there drifted before their eyes, which stared at Father Westpike. Straining through the dark, at the edge of his vision, Father Westpike watched, confused, at their lack of action.

[sound of Dark Dice roll]

Eypór (Sindri)

Hmm. yeah I guess I'm, I'm trying to figure out...

Travis

Still sharp in his old age, Father Westpike could see their chests move with shallow breathes, shifting their merchant garb with every slight heave. As a log cracked open atop their fire it was easy for the cleric to discern their glittering jewel brooches, golden necklaces, simple trinkets, and well-carved bracelets... and yet they wore no shoes and their traveling clothes

were sodden with rainfall and smeared with mud. However, most unnerving were their decaying smiles, spread out beneath otherwise hateful unblinking glares.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Nice

Eypór (Sindri)

Are you in need of assistance? You... this is not ok.

Travis

Father Westpike began his slow approach, his hammer hefted up in caution.

Eypór (Sindri)

They are not ok. They are not well.

Peter (Soren)

I'll follow you cautiously with my bow. .. but not very threateningly..

Kaitlin (Sister)

I will approach with you, following you, as I am sure you will seem far less threatening alone if you are attempting to talk. Yet, if they attack, I will not hesitate to act.

David (Ilaus)

(whisper-yelled) I'll take 'em from the side.

Kessi (Flygia)

I'll turn myself into a wolf and go around.

Travis

It was a sight to behold. With a gesture lost to the dark of the forest and the age of her arts, the woman of the wilds bent and contorted. Her long dark hair wrapped around her limbs, her nails grew dark and thick, her horns pushed back along her skull, disappearing beneath the fur. Her pointed tiefling tail was the last to be consumed by the growing, wrapping noose of bristling hair. With a glint of long white teeth, the wolf Flygia shook out her haunches.

Eypór (Sindri)

I love druids.

Kessi (Flygia)

Growls

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I'm just going to hide behind this tree. I'm actually trained in stealth. Why did I study stealth?

Travis

As the Lady Rowena concealed herself from the prospect of battle, ahead of her, the merchant woman broke her silence. Opening her grin wider and wider, parting her clenched decaying teeth as if to speak. She opened her mouth, her tongue moving as though to whisper, but all that projected was a weighted heaving sound. Her tongue pushed forth from her mouth, past her teeth, past her chin, then further.

Wriggling, wrenching, the tongue tore itself apart, two halves reaching out, wrapping around her jaw. The wriggled as though jointed, long dark fingers pushing out from her throat, and as the long digits gave way to an elongated hand the flesh of her cheek tore open, a sickening crack signaled the dislocation of her jaw, and the snap of her spine.

The mouth tore open, another long black hand pushing free, the woman's neck bloating, and together to two hands gripped her shoulders, push down, pulling up an emaciated hairless figure of oily skin and protruding bone.

It was here, among the looming cage of the Dead Pines, beset upon by an unknown darkness, the air heavy with rot and turmoil, that the fellows first doubted their sanity. All but Lady Rowena, who, hidden behind a tree, saw nothing of the harrowing transformation.

[sound of Dark Dice Roll]

[heavily edited section – reorder lines]

Kaitlin (Sister)

What demon is this?!

David (Ilaus)

Has this thing... my son...

Travis

Sister Cavernsfall and Ilaus Innskeep recoiled from the sight, their minds suspended, their sanity raked over by the long black nails of the unfurling thing before them. There, in that darkening night, they stood parlayed.

Peter (Soren)

I see this kind of thing every day.

Kessi (Flygia)

Nothing is going to surprise the wolf.

Travis

Flygia, flinching back her jowls at the sight, prowled unscathed. The Keeper of the Wilds had seen a great many horrors in her days, as had Soren Arkwright, who drew back repulsed but not unnerved.

Eypór (Sindri)

Oh god. No.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Remember, Father, you are still inspired, you can strength your grip on your sanity.

Eypór (Sindri)

Oh I definitely want to, I don't want to be paralyzed.

Travis

Father Sindri Westpike searches his memory for her short song, the feeling of revelry it gave him, and with its sound firmly in his mind he pushed out the fear, the vision of the transformation, and overcame the madness of what he'd just witnessed.

Eypór (Sindri)

Ah ha!

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

You're welcome.

Eypór (Sindri)

Thanks cousin. Now, what is this foul thing that we face?

[end of heavy edits]

Travis

The crimson limbs righted themselves, standing hunched, a pile of skin and cracked bones at its feet. Roughly humanoid, its long limbs bent and bowed, its anatomy a thing of dark magic. Its hairless head was vacant of a nose or mouth, just a canvas of skin marked by three large but hollow cavities... Its body heaved, as if breathing, and with a crack it faced the group.

Eypór (Sindri)

What?

Travis

The other two merchants wailed in chorus with a high-pitched inconceivable shriek partnered with a flash of lightning, chaos. The long-limbed creature struck out at the two men's throats, tearing them open. Then it fled into the shadows with the passing of the lightning strike. The two merchants' bodies lay on the ground, their fringe cuffs near the smallest embers. The storm continued, but an unsteady calm beset them. The creature was missing, and everyone's senses slowly returned. The metallic decaying stench of the place remained unrelenting.

Kessi (Flygia)

(sneeze). *Sniffing*

Eypór (Sindri)

By all the light in the world, what the hell was that?

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

[rustle of leaves]

Ummm everything seems fine?

Eypór (Sindri)

No. You stay behind that tree!

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Ahhh

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

What? What do.. What do? What? Whatso? What. What no. I'm coming out from this tree. Everything seems to be fine now.

Eypór (Sindri)

Witch make yourself appear.

Kaitlin (Sister)

The carcass of the woman that the thing pulled itself out of... I've never seen such...

Peter (Soren)

And the two whose throats have been cut open...

Eypór (Sindri)

Witch please, make yourself appear again. Come back from the woods.

Kessi (Flygia)

Oh, ok.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

That's fucked up.

Eypór (Sindri)

Don't go close to them. Urg. (moving her)

Travis

Rowena, free of her hiding place, approached the horrific stage surrounding the dulling fire to satisfy her curiosity in the corpses. Worried, fearful, Father Westpike rushed behind her, his eyes on the darkness of the surrounding woods.

Flygia, her haunches still bristled, moved forward to the pile of pieces that once formed a woman.

Kessi (Flygia)

Maybe I find a scent or something.

Eypór (Sindri)

Oooh. That's cool

Kessi (Flygia)

They smell like they've been rotting for some time. Certainly not fresh. Not from just moments ago.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Where did you see that doll?

Peter (Soren)

I found the doll a few miles up the way still.

Kaitlin (Sister)

So this wasn't here when you scouted the path earlier?

Peter (Soren)

I must have come a different way.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Were these the three that you saw round the campfire?

Peter (Soren)

No they weren't.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Oh...

Peter (Soren)

I think I'd remember something like this. Ah heh.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Shit.

Eypór (Sindri)

I'm going to try to figure out if, there is any, recognizable icons on the people. Oh god.

Eypór (Sindri)

How do I say this? I'm trying to identify the corpses.

Eypór (Sindri)

I'm going to go carefully and respectfully through their belongings looking for anything that would identify them. Whether it be a trading clan or something like that.

Kaitlin (Sister)

A good idea, Father Westpike. I am sure there are families missing them somewhere. Though, it may be a difficult task...

Travis

Glancing at the corpses again from a distance, Father Westpike saw that what Sister Cavernsfall said was true. It would be a difficult and mentally taxing task to examine the foul-smelling blighted corpses in greater detail: a test of his hold on his sanity.

[positive sound of Dark Dice Roll]

Strengthened by the tenants of his faith, holding his mind at ease, Father Westpike moved to investigate further, his gloved hand turning out pockets, searching for identification, and examining the full extent of their injuries, while the other hand pressed a rag over his mouth and nose, a weak protection from the stench.

Eypór (Sindri)

(to himself) 36 gold pieces, a silver necklace, a broken gold necklace, 4 charm bracelets with a strange symbol. Hm... A worn copper coin on a string, around... what was previously the woman's neck. A thick blue candle. A glass vial... containing a grey smoky substance, and a crumpled silver amulet of Torm. All three of the deceased are bleeding from the throats and... stains through their clothes, across their backs, indicate bleeding beneath... All of them have blisters on their bare hands and feet. [Disgusted] Oh, dear Pelor, their eyes have... collapsed.

Eypór (Sindri)

Dugh.. this is very, very unsettling.

Kessi (Flygia)

I, I know many of the inhabitants within these woods. Let me see if I might recognize these ones.

Travis

As Flygia approached the resting corpses, the weak fire reflecting of pallid skin, the wrenching smell and violent nature of their deaths became oppressive to her senses. Flygia, attempting to sure-up her strength, strained her mental capacity for the macabre.

[negative Dark Dice Roll]

Unprepared for the distressing mutilation before her, Flygia was beset by dry-heaving, repulsed by the sight. Through her fits, at a glance, she noted that the dead were strangers to her and the woods of Bright Vale.

Kessi (Flygia)

(dry heaving for 10 seconds)

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Is the manner of their deaths reminiscent of anything you may have heard, perhaps in religious texts or tales from across the continent?

Kaitlin (Sister)

That would require a Knowledge of such... grotesque History, that I would not be able to recall. As a collector of stories though, Rowena, you would certainly have a better chance.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Yeah that's what I hoping you weren't gonna say.

[Negative Dark Dice Roll]

That's just as terrible, because I can't seem to come up with anything, either.

Kaitlin (Sister)

I wonder if there is any religious symbolism behind the thick blue candle? I know the crumpled silver amulet of Torm belongs to a follower of the Loyal Fury himself, god of duty, loyalty, and righteousness, but I don't know if any of these other things have any religious meaning...the copper coin, the charm bracelets... sometimes History eludes me...

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

Oh wait, I've actually seen one of these blue candles before. It is a Restful Candle! It burns slowly and is said to greatly aid those in need of healing when it is present and burning. The last church on my previous pilgrimage used Restful Candles during all-night healing masses. They are quite effective... Wonderful, we have ourselves a magic candle.

And let's see, there's the little token with a symbol of... Well that can't be right, no one worships that... *god*.

Eypór (Sindri)

Which god is that?

Kaitlin (Sister)

The Nameless God.

David (laus)

The what?

Kaitlin (Sister)

An old fable, a legend, really. The stories are in some of the oldest religious texts, but they are... something of a children's tale now. Demented children. An occult, horrid thing. Father SilverMaul, a local priest from a town south of here, has collected theories propagated by the local religious groups. They believe that a herald from the Darklands will one day rise to reawaken the Nameless God. It's all rather distasteful when you sit down to read it.

David (laus)

To my knowledge the forces of Zarketh have primarily focused on gaining power through infighting since the dawn of the dark miracle.

Eypór (Sindri)

Forgive me for asking this but what is Zarketh?

Kessi (Flygia)

Zarketh is a city, one of the main forces within the Darklands. It's a bit lawless compared to the capital down there.

Eypór (Sindri)

And the Darklands are...?

Kessi (Flygia)

Were you born under a rock or something?

Eypór (Sindri)

Sort of, yes.

Kessi (Flygia)

The darklands are called the darklands because the sun has not shown its face there in centuries, since the dawn of the dark miracle.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Alright, we got some positive and some negative out of this.

Eypór (Sindri)

Let us converse away from the corpses. I'll bring over the things I found away from the corpses, and I leave the little gold pile behind in whoever's pocket I found it in.

David (laus)

So just one quick question, given that I'm a merchant and all: mind if I take a look at the glass vial with the grey smoke?

Eypór (Sindri)

Here.

David (laus)

[negative sound of thought] That doesn't bode very well.

Eypór (Sindri)

Can I assist you? "Are you sure this, the glass, is from this area? I've never seen anything like it."

Travis

Attempting to assist, Father Westpike indicated an odd tapering to the neck of the vial, which spun as though twisted in the flames that formed it.

David (laus)

Aha!

Eypór (Sindri)

See. see.

David (laus)

This is clear breath. It dulls olfactory senses, helping to maintain your composure and constitution when facing unpleasant odours. It can prevent some nasty side effects.

Travis

Shifting his cloak further up his shoulders, Soren, having faced monstrous horrors as a matter of life, surveyed the bodies of the two men and scrutinized the deep, pooling gashes partially severing the heads.

Peter (Soren)

I'm going to ask a very strange question: in order to converse with a dead body, do they need to have a throat?

Kessi (Flygia)

That is, a peculiar question indeed. And, though I frown upon the return of the suffering, the circumstances of the speech do apply. Bodies reanimated not healed would possibly find speech difficult with their throats slit as so, but a more *spiritual* calling would not require a throat, as the voice disembodied, or sometimes astral.

Peter (Soren)

Oh yay.

Kaitlin (Sisiter)

Odd reaction, but, to each their own.

Peter (Soren)

I'll inspect the bodies first, maybe turn them over?

Travis

Soren, unphased by the fetid brutality, further jostled the corpses, turning them over to investigate the bleeding backs discovered by Father Westpike. He paused a moment, drawing together a mental bulwark, before cutting free the impeding cloth.

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

Waiting, patient, Sister Cavernsfall took up her holy symbol of Ilmater. She watched the jostled dead with pity and decided upon the proper prayer for the dead.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Where's my incense... Ah...
(match sound, burning of incense)...
(deep breath)

Ilmater, bloodied, burned, and broken
Crying God, waiting with open arms.
Forgiveness is the mark of light,
A burden lifted from suffering lives,

Now free of bonds and mortal toil
Take up their suffering, shield their souls,
The bodies left are poxed with truth
That the lives of men are ill endured

Though not all see the trail of blood
And know the pain you take up
May the world beyond be unchained, unbeaten
An unyielding domain of compassion

David (Ilaus)

That's really rude of you.

Kaitlin (Sister)

...Excuse me?

David (Ilaus)

That's really rude of you to assume that everyone wants you to pray for them after death and try to steer their souls toward your god, the lord of suffering or some bullshit, if I'm not mistaken?

Kaitlin (Sister)

Lord Ilmater bears the suffering of those he can and is an enemy of pain and cruelty. And I believe it would be more rude to assume one would wish to be left in the mud, unattended. Their spirits need not follow the path I light for them, but I strive to make the afterlife open to such suffering souls, if they choose, Sir Ilaus.

David (Ilaus)

Not sir, just Ilaus. I'm an Innkeeper, not a knight.

Kaitlin (Sister)

It is still brave of you to accompany us into the woods in the search for your son.

David (Ilaus)

I wouldn't have it any other way. -But I maintain what I said: you shouldn't pray for dead people you don't know. What if they were evil, or wanted their souls to go to oblivion? I know I wouldn't want to find myself in the domain of some god after I die.

Kaitlin (Sister)

(polite) I just open a door to the realm of many gods and goddesses, a choice for afterlife. It is the decision of the spirit to pass through, or to remain.

David (Ilaus)

Look, you're an idealistic young dwarf who's helped a few communities that have supposedly seen hardship, but if you live long enough to see as much as I have, you will come to understand that there is great evil in the world, and that *that* evil often extends into the next one as well.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Evil exists everywhere, but do not discount the strength of the light. Suffering can be great, or small, just like happiness, and one does not eliminate the other.

[positive Dark Dice Roll]

Travis

As Sister Cavernsfall's incense fought back against the oppressive stench of decay, Soren examined the bodies further. He made a disturbing discovery; across the backs of the men were letters, carved, flayed, burned, and scratched deep into the skin.

The roughly carved symbols rose from the bruised skin, characters of the bedeviled Infernal script still bloodied and legible.

"*Da haff wick ma?*" Again and again, down spines, across ribs, embedded into skin so deep it could never heal.

Scouring his previous encounters with infernal stock, the phrase sent an itch crawling up his limbs. It was recognizable, a call in the dark for something still darker.

"Do you seek him?"

"Do you seek him?"

The Silent One.

An ancient thing. A tricky thing.

A Saint to some, if Saints were feared and never loved.

The Sorrow of Children. The Gatekeeper.

Guardian of the Nameless God.

Peter (Soren)

Hmm. We might be in some trouble here.

Eypór (Sindri)

Soren?

Peter (Soren)

Absolutely.

Travis

Peeling his eyes from dark forests, its long trembling trees hiding the depths beyond, Father Westpike noticed Soren examining the bodies, the torn cloth discarded near the fire. Distressed, the dwarf approached, failing to detect the tremor in the ranger's hands.

Eypór (Sindri)

What are you doing? Please, let's not desecrate the dead more.

Peter (Soren)

I understand, but they're dead and gone, so I don't really care. I've seen this before, I'm afraid. The symbols, they are of the Silent One, the Sorrow of Children. I think I know why all these bodies, they're not being eaten - I think they're just having their faces stolen.

Eypór (Sindri)

The.. What the..

David (Ilaus)

More religious bullshit! All the more reason we should get moving and find the children.

Kaitlin (Sister)

I don't delight in the idea of the *Sorrow of Children*, as we are searching for kids, so we should probably hurry.

Eypór (Sindri)

I just saw a symbol of the Nameless God... I believe it was on one of the charms...
(searching) Where are you?

Eypór (Sindri)

Ah yes yes. I will pocket you for now. I'm assuming we're going to distribute the blue candle, the glass vial, and the silver amulet.

David (laus)

I don't mind.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I'm taking absolutely nothing.

Kaitlin (Sister)

I could take the candle.

Eypór (Sindri)

Yeah please do.

David (laus)

I'll take everything else if you want.

Eypór (Sindri)

Yes, please.

Kessi (Flygia)

I'm a wolf I don't have pockets.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Will, will, will, will you attack me if like, like pat your head and stroke your foot?

Kessi (Flygia)

I will growl at you.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I'm gonna do it anyway.

Kessi (Flygia)

Damn! Stop that... Stop it -my leg won't stop kicking!

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

(laughter) This is the cutest thing ever.

David (laus)

Can we get on a move on? We got children to rescue.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Oh right yeah, children, right yeah sure.

Eypór (Sindri)

Yeah yeah that.

Peter (Soren)

I'm going to light the black candle. You'll want to stand back.

Eypór (Sindri)

Black candle?

Hem (*Rowena Speaking - BG*)

Well I'm only here because of him, I mean...

Kaitlin (Sister)

Alright, so the Skin-Ripper ran off in that direction if we want to pursue it, but I think we should continue to where Soren found the doll. The children are our goal.

Eypór (Sindri)

I'm sorry Soren is doing something strange over there, again, with the corpses.

Kessi (Flygia)

What?

Peter (Soren)

I'm not entirely sure you guys are gonna wanna see this. It's unsettling, even for me. Maybe find somewhere comfortable to rest for a few minutes.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

How unsettling is unsettling?

Peter (Soren) (lighting the match)

It's totally up to you.

Eypór (Sindri)

Just turn your back.

Peter (Soren) (grim, holding the match)

Just don't say I didn't warn you.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I can, I can watch, what are you doing?

Eypór (Sindri)

No, turn your...

Kessi (Flygia)

Now you've got me curious, Soren. (*Pants in dog form*)

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*) – Firm to Sindri

Cousin, I have the option to leave so I'll stay.

Eypór (Sindri)

Then I will stay too.

Kaitlin (Sister) (scared)

I'm, I'm not looking directly at the corpses, Soren, but I need to know the information because we need to... I need to know what we're going up against if we're going up against is something horrible. I'll just turn around and make sure we're not ambushed, do what you must for the sake of the children.

David (laus)

Smart idea, Cavernsfall. That thing may come back.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

I just wanna see what he's doing. I can't write heroic tale if I don't know what he's doing.

Eypór (Sindri)

Well, I've made it known that I disapprove.

Peter (Soren)

I'd like to genuinely apologize, to the entire team, if this is a little difficult.

Peter (Soren) (to himself, different voice)

Soren, is this the time?

Peter (Soren)

I think so. There are things we need to know.

(In Infernal and common –

Soul of the fallen I command you to return.

Soul of the lost return to this vessel!

Grant me your wisdom, grant me your thoughts, and I might free you from this torment!

Saf'd ao zmy oiddyl xe tappilv haff za ryzfrl.

Saf'd ao zmy dawz ryzfrl za zmuw jywwyd!

*grilz py hafr suwvap, qrilz py hafr zmafqmzw, vorv xe puqmqz oryy haf orap zmuw
zarpylz!)*

Travis

From beneath his heavy traveling cloak, Soren produced an old bronze lantern, worn with age and tarnish, and containing a small black candle. Without action, the candle flashed to life, burning with an emerald flame. Speaking low and incomprehensibly, the flame's light grew and grew, casting hideous green light in a wide radius around him. The flickering light threw writhing shadows behind nearby narrow trees, and the dark, moist pine bark seemed to undulate like flesh. Moments later, ethereal swirling figures descended over the corpses, pushing themselves down past bone and blood, into the now convulsing bodies. Torturous screams emanated from slashed, gurgling throats, and the sanity of the onlookers came into question.

[a mix of negative and positive Dark Dice Rolls]

Eypór (Sindri)

Pelor, help me persevere.

Kessi (Flygia)

(dog whimper sound)

Travis

Overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of such dark magics, Flygia, though a powerful witch, feels the tearing, grasping call of the Allshadow as the spirits suffered so. She shook upon her canine legs, her eyes wide, her mind damaged.

Father Westpike, his resolve steady, turned worried to Rowena. She had stepped back, but not diverted her gaze.

Eypór (Sindri)

Oh this is not starting out well. How are you holding up?

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Shh... I'm alright.

Travis

The heads of the dead bodies twitched and cracked, spilling blood and frayed ligaments out from torn throats. Their screams turned to high hissing as their rotted eyes blinked. Contorted, they faced Soren.

DEAD MAN, screaming

Why! Why bring us back to suffer so?

Peter (Soren)

I need answers, (clearly not sorry) I'm sorry for the pain.

DEAD MAN, screaming

We shall give them to you. Please, be quick!

Peter (Soren)

Do you know anything about the creature that did this to you?

DEAD MAN, screaming

No. We were wandering, through the woods, and then... we were not. We camped at night and awoke in the embrace of Torm.

Peter (Soren)

You have no other memories, you were perhaps attacked, or you were sleeping and turned into these... well I don't know how not to be rude.

DEAD MAN (2)

(Crying) Let us go, let us *RETURN*! The pain it's... It's... unbearable. We know nothing more.

Travis

Focused on their pain, nightmares of the children suffering the dark depths of the woods pushed Father Westpike to speak. Hands still grasped around his holy symbol as he stepped forward.

Eypór (Sindri)

Why were you carrying a symbol of the old god, the Nameless One?

DEAD MAN

(pained) A charm, a superstitious charm... to sell in Ilmater's Hope!

Eypór (Sindri)

Please Soren, please, let them rest.

DEAD MAN

(pained) We're... merchants, let us rest! We've done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve this pain!

Peter (Soren)

Were you in Ilmater's Hope, or have you not yet arrived?

DEAD MAN 2

We will never arrive! Let us go! [scream] Why?

Travis

The corpses shook violently, wracked with pain, as if experiencing their wounds for the first time. They arched as they felt the carving upon their flesh, gasped as they felt their throats open. Crushed back into the mortal world, their vessels damaged and tainted, they suffered unlike the living.

DEAD MAN

Release us! Please!

Peter (Soren)

Hope there's nothing else we need from them, the process is... difficult to repeat a second time.

Hem (*Rowena Speaking*)

Soren, let them go.

Peter (Soren)

Alright, I'll put the Lantern away. (whispered intensely like a magic spell) Xe rydyiwy haff!
(In Infernal: I release you. BLOW OUT THE CANDLE SOUND)

Travis

As Soren expunged the light from the candle the forest returned to the physical realm of horror, free from the tormented spirits. The souls of the deceased, white as smoke, clawed free of their tortured bodies and ascended to the looming clouds.

Peter (Soren)

I'm sorry about that. Not to anyone in particular.

Eypór (Sindri)

Are you really sorry?

Peter (Soren)

Some days.

Kaitlin (Sister)

Alright, we need to get back on the trail before that happens to people who are tiny.
Kids, that is.

Eypór (Sindri)

Yes, of course, of course. Sorry. Soren, thank you for helping us find more information.

Peter (Soren)

Of course.

Eypór (Sindri)

And yeah I think we should move on. I'll take the lead. This way, yes, Soren?
(mumbles something in Icelandic)

KORE

Agreed, Sindri...

Peter (Soren)

Yes, this way.

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.