

RQG – 182 – The Garden of Yerlik

Content Warnings

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[Show Theme - Intro]

ALEX

Hello and welcome to episode 182 of the Rusty Quill Gaming podcast. I'm your host and GM Alex Newall and with me today, I have

BEN

Ben Meredith

BRYN

Bryn Monroe

LYDIA

Lydia Nicholas

HELEN

And Helen Gould

ALEX

And who are you playing?

BEN

Zolf Smith

BRYN

Hamid Saleh Haroun al-Tahan

LYDIA

Cel Sidebottom

HELEN

And Azu

ALEX

This is probably gonna need bleeping, I'm full of piss and vinegar now.

(laughing)

You guys had an entire episode last time with one dice roll. Ok. I've hit my limits. I can't...I can't do this anymore!

(laughing)

LYDIA

He's jonesing for a fight!

ALEX

I need to imperil you. I'm jonesing hard. So that's it. I'm coming in. I'm coming in hot and heavy. None of this we are functioning creatures with emotional needs. No! You do not. We have none of those things.

BEN

Emotionally imperilled constantly for the last 182 episodes.

ALEX

Pfft. If you can't see the flames it's not a real fire right.

LYDIA

I mean technically only Hamid has been emotionally imperilled for the last 182 episodes.

BEN

True, yes. I got a break.

ALEX

Oh yeah Zolf got a year off.

BRYN

Two or three episodes ago at some point, I forget exactly when, I cast endure elements on the whole party.

ALEX

It was 20 something and you cast endure elements.

(laughing)

BRYN

Which lasts in game 24 hours. Has it been 24 hours since I last cast endure elements oh master of the time.

ALEX

Yes...I am going to, for the sake of clearing house, say yes your endure elements has expired and your two druid friends explicitly stated that you won't need that in order to make it down to the garden which is what you're at the edge at now and the garden itself is kind of almost balmy compared to the surrounding area. So metagame what that means is I have not needed to tax you against shivering for spell slots. So you are arrayed at the edge of the garden with Sohra and Sumutnyerl. You will be heading in with Sumutnyerl. Sohra and Sumutnyerl still appear kind of a little bit tense. They don't appear to have necessarily put all their emotional baggage to bed. Sohra addresses you all and is just, I will be waiting at the bluff. I won't be able to come in to assist you but we wish you the best and I will wait as long as I can in case there are delays. She gives a small gesture and then backs away on foot, doesn't fly

off. Just backs away but does her back on all of you and almost unceremoniously just depart up the bluff.

HELEN

Oh.

ALEX

Very well. Do you all feel settled?

BRYN

I think we're ready.

ALEX

Excellent. It is a good day for the garden. The sun shines very brightly. It shines well. There is no clouds that might interfere. We should be able to make good progress if you are careful. Please do not wander off. You may be tempted to do so if you see something interesting etc. I encourage you not do so. You would do well to support one another through this.

HELEN

Alright, good.

BEN

Yep

ALEX

Sumutnyerl starts walking into the tree cover. Do people follow?

HELEN

Yeah

BEN

Yep

LYDIA

Yep.

ALEX

So heading beneath the shade of the nearest tree, the first things that are like gonna be obvious are the floor covering appears to be throughout fresh, blue petals.

HELEN

Aw

ALEX

Which can't technically be possible because you would get mulch. This is how biology works. No. It seems to be a bed of fresh blue petals throughout. There's no real undergrowth to speak of. There don't appear to be other plants and so on, it really does just appear to be these very, wide bowed trees.

At the start where you are at now you appear to be coming into an area that's a little bit younger and there appears to be younger saplings by which I mean normal tree sized trees. However can I please get a will save specifically from you, Zolf.

BEN

Sure

HELEN

Ooh!

BEN

26

ALEX

You're fine.

BEN

Oh is this a spell or a spell likeability.

ALEX

No it's not.

BEN

Cool

ALEX

You and Wilde are making an extra check because all of you notice, as you approach the nearest one, the root structures are almost identical to what you would expect from the blue vein appearances that are skin. For you and Wilde you have far more visceral experience of this and there's an immediate like – bad, no, bad. Like, you know almost like a tripophobic response where it's like bad, very bad, go away, bad. Sumutnyerl is actively fine and seems to be walking towards the nearest tree but everyone else I'm not going to get that roll because you just have less experience with it. To be clear it isn't doing anything but it is incredibly reminiscent and as you start walking beneath the bow you realise that the roots between the trees appear interconnected. It does not appear to be a tree, plonk. Another tree, plonk. You can literally trace a route from the nearest tree to another nearby tree in a way that normal trees don't work like.

HELEN

Like massive mushrooms

ALEX

Sumutnyerl goes up to the tree and just runs her hand over it and just turns to face all of you – I can understand that you would be afraid given the manner of these that sweep through your lands. This is not that. You need to understand before we proceed. The trees may respond but they do not wish you ill. They do not really wish you anything. As she runs her hand up the tree a new small branch seems to bud out from the tree beneath her hand. Nothing huge,

nothing elaborate. A very, very, little, small new branch buds out. She takes her hand away and then it just stays there where it is.

HELEN

That's very cool.

BRYN

Is it the same way she sort of stroked the seed the other way.

ALEX

Similar. Yeah very similar although, give me a knowledge arcana actually. For you specific...actually Cel I would allow as well because you have it from a cultural background. I'm afraid neither the cleric nor the paladin would have the background for that.

LYDIA

22

ALEX

Hamid will have a higher DC because he's coming at it from a different angle

BRYN

21

ALEX

So Hamid you are less sure, Cel you are...you have seen druid craft before. You have. With what happened with the seed where it was literally running up the finger, that's real classic druid craft. You've seen people turn up to crops and be like, cool. You sweep your hand across them, now they've rooted because there was bad soil before or whatever. What you're seeing here seems a little more nuance than that. This isn't just, hey I'm using some magic to make it bloom. There's a bit more going on here. But again this is more like a vague flavour thing.

Do you all feel you can proceed without fear?

BEN

Yeah, yeah.

LYDIA

Yep

HELEN

Yes

ALEX

Very well. Sumutnyerl starts walking into the trees. The ambient sound shifts across to feeling almost a bit more like summer insofar as it before it was you're thinking more winds and you're thinking more, again, like exposed mountainside to a degree. Whereas now there has not been a seasonal shift

because these are not seasonal trees but it almost feels that way. The temperature is a bit more balmy but the sound of ambient trees. There's even a little bit of birdsong here and there. Nothing elaborate, you're not talking morning chorus or anything but there is life amongst the trees and as you start heading through, honestly, it starts to just be very pleasant. And I don't mean in a like, ooh, everyone give me a will save. You're walking amongst a slightly fragrant smelling forest with a completely fresh, not leaf litter, like petals beneath and it's just very contemplative. Sumutnyerl, without really turning around says – do feel free, there's no need for enforced quiet. We have a walk before we reach anyway that could be considered blighted but many prefer the quiet.

Could everyone please give me a perception check.

BEN

15

HELEN

16

BRYN

25

LYDIA

30

ALEX

Ok for the 25 and 30 as you're walking amongst the trees the two of you notice, slightly distant, a slightly younger, again, tree. If a normal size tree is a sapling, we're talking something freshly planted. You think very, sort of hidden beneath the petals you might see some kind of body or similar which is by the base of this new, very, very young sapling but to be clear you're talking, think someone with their arms crossed, laid at rest with the blanket of petals across. You can see that there is a form there, not who, not how they've been shrouded or anything. But you see that slightly off distant. Yeah as you proceed in, it would be very easy to forget the context and just enjoy your time here. It is very contemplative and I will say now, that unless anyone actively tries to speak with Sumutnyerl she will just press on. She'll just carry on but not at a forced march or anything like that. Just kind of striding through. Before we advance any further, does anyone want to chase anything up or ask any questions or anything like that.

HELEN

I think we're alright.

LYDIA

No.

ALEX

Ok fabulous. In that case then I am going to say that Sumutnyerl presses on and I would say you're walking for a few hours. It is easy. There is a slight gradient because like I said it has a natural caldron and you seem to be walking

towards the middle of that cauldron. However, although there is the odd bit of rockfall because like I said, it's a sort of ice age geography almost. It is a very easy walk and you come to realise that there are paths moving between the trees. They don't appear to be heavily worn or anything but the petals are just slightly more depressed and there are clear roots between them. They don't appear to have a clear direction though. They appear to be sort of wandering in, interlacing and Sumutnyerl's route does not appear to be confusing. It appears to follow a broad direction but there is no straight line here. It is sort of slightly windy, just picking whatever seems to be the most direct route but it does sort of curve around and so on. Can everyone please give me a perception check.

BEN

30. Oh well nat 20 but 30 total

HELEN

Natural 1 so...

LYDIA

I'm just a little bit worried that Cel's using up all their good rolls now because yeah, that's 26.

BRYN

28

ALEX

Congratulations Ben you get to be the first.

BEN

Yay.

ALEX

You hear...ha, I'm so tempted to go Lord of the Rings with this. You hear a fell voice on the wind. You don't. There's not a fell voice. You hear a very quiet gentle pleasant voice on the wind. You do not recognise it. It doesn't appear to be speaking a language that you recognise. It appears to be a middle aged woman's voice, something similar. You can't really discern words. It just...there appears to be a distant monologue happening amongst the trees. No one else has anything. Like to be clear you haven't even got a hint of it.

BEN

I will say – I'm hearing voices. Is that normal?

ALEX

Sumutnyerl stops and turns. The garden has recognised that you are here. It will recognise the others soon.

BEN

Great.

(laughing)

ALEX

This is not a bad thing. It is just a thing.

BEN

Yeah.

ALEX

You should take heart. It means you have a strong spirit. It has recognised you.

HELEN

Aw

BEN

Great, cool. Good.

(laughing)

LYDIA

Take the compliment Zolf!

ALEX

Sumutnyerl looks at you a moment and Alex does an NPC roll he doesn't get to do very often.

HELEN

Sense motive I hope.

ALEX

Sumutnyerl looks Zolf in the eye and non aggressively just says – practicality will not be the solution to all your problems in this garden – and starts walking on again. She doesn't wait for you to have a response.

BEN

I'll just give like a shrug.

(laughing)

LYDIA

Burn!

ALEX

So heading through I would say over the course of the next hour you all start to hear different voices. In fact Zolf the first voice that you hear is replaced by an older benevolent voice. Cel you start hearing a child's voice. Again these are all quite benevolent. They're not really saying anything. It's more like the musical quality of a voice as opposed to a message that is being imparted and it is non-intrusive. It is very much more like you are heading through a normal park and someone's just having a quiet conversation to themselves a bit

distantly from you. But yeah heading through Sumutnyerl effectively just warns you, the garden has now recognised that you're all here and so on.

LYDIA

Cool. It'd be awkward if it didn't recognise one of us. I'm imagining some of the other characters are like yeah I'm totally hearing voices. Yeah, what. What lovely voices.

ALEX

You know what, I would say that Wilde actively asks what happens if you don't hear any voices. Sumutnyerl is momentarily concerned and then Wilde's like – I do. Just academically curious.

(laughing)

Sumutnyerl's like that's how you know the garden doesn't want you here. That it's not going to accept you in. That's how you know.

HELEN

Ooh.

ALEX

So yeah you press through. At some point Sumutnyerl calls for the first rest. I'd say it's pre lunchtime. You're sort of talking late morning and just calls for people to have a sit and so on.

Think of the garden like a high place. It does you well to rest frequently and grow used to the new air.

LYDIA

Oh yeah, that's...that's a thing. Cel babbles about depth and being a dolphin.

(laughing)

ALEX

Eventually as you're all just having a sit for a few minutes, the voices die down and then pass away. At which point Zolf you are the first to see, as you're sat you see a very, very distant amongst the trees, a movement between two trees. Think a vaguely humanoid shape that seems to be outlined in the petals walks from one trunk to another but then doesn't pass the other side of the trunk. Do you see what I mean?

HELEN

[Gasps]

LYDIA

We're in Annihilation.

BEN

Yes. Thinking that actually.

ALEX

Actually yeah, yeah if you've seen that as a reference, that kind of thing where you see them walk behind the tree and then nothing comes out the other end apart from petals, that kind of thing. It's more like a flurry of petals takes the shape of a form that walks and then falls apart back into petals again.

BEN

Basically Sumutnyerl since said this is normal, it's spooky. It's death woods right. I'll just keep paying attention, make sure nothing dangerous happens but it doesn't seem to remarkable.

ALEX

I would say eventually as you're all sort of setting up to leave, the rest of you start noticing the very occasional other figure, occasionally one will maybe be standing and observing. Sometimes they'll just be walking past. They all seem like a very decent distance from you so there's always a slight, is that one? Ok, no that one...no so that was wind, so that is one but, hmm. It's very ambient strangeness as opposed to something is approaching or something like that. With everyone's consent Sumutnyerl leads you on. I'm assuming you're all ok to do that.

HELEN

Mm huh.

ALEX

In terms of...can everyone please give me a sense motive.

HELEN

14

ALEX

14? On a sense motive? Azu, I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed.

HELEN

I rolled a 3.

ALEX

Oof.

BRYN

23

ALEX

Better

BEN

17

LYDIA

Cel got 9. That's kind of mid-range... that's what Cel would expect.

ALEX

So the dice know. Hamid, Wilde seems to be responding more to the garden than the rest of you. Things seem to be catching his eye longer. He seems more likely to be the one who stops and falls behind a little bit to see something, then catches up. Not in a like, oh no, he's being drawn away. Just he seems significantly more engaged in a more active way rather than passive. He seems to be actively listening to a voice. He seems to be actively like gesturing to things and stuff like that.

BRYN

I will start to pay slightly more attention to him just to make sure he doesn't fall behind or take a step in a different direction to the...not just a single step but start heading in a different direction to the rest of us but I'm not going to do anything apart from just pay slightly more attention.

ALEX

Yeah he might need a gentle scooch along as he's like one particularly just catches his eye and he just sort of gives it a calm consideration for a while but that's about it.

BRYN

Yeah.

ALEX

So at this stage, I would say after about another hour or so the figures start to be more prevalent and there start to be more of them and they appear to be standing and observing so it is still...these are shapes that are outlined by petals that are blowing through them and past them. But it has gone from them passing and occasionally noticing you to observing you actively standing and sort of seeing you and watching you etc. And they are increasing in number and also variety. Whereas

before it tended to be just mostly humanoid and so on, you're starting to see some large shapes, some small creature shapes and so on. To be clear it mostly still appears to be humanoid but you are seeing a greater variety and they all seem to be standing at various distances and just sort of watching. Sumutnyerl summons you all a bit closer – this means that the garden is now...you can expect if you are to start communicating with the garden and start having your experience, you should start expecting it from now. Be aware that we have a small, short distance prior to us reaching the blight proper but please be aware at this stage do not expect visions but be aware you may start to recognise elements or people. The garden means you no harm. This is a particularly clear day. This bodes very well for us. It has been long time since there has been such a clear day and a warm greeting but please be ready.

BRYN

Sure

HELEN

Alright

ALEX

I would suggest we take one last rest before we press on towards the blight. Sumutnyerl sort of sits and basically enters a sort of meditative thing. At which point Wilde just looks around and goes – this doesn't feel very blue veins currently does it?

BEN

No it's...but you know, they screwed it up so that makes sense.

ALEX

I just...I don't know. I feel like it's not going to be enough to know what's happened here. How do I put it?

BEN

I don't think it's going to be job done.

ALEX

No, no. What I mean is I sort was always walking under the assumption that this was something that Eddison or Tesla cooked up themselves but, I dunno...it's very odd

BEN

You saw those roots and everything that we've heard from now. This is absolutely 100% related.

ALEX

It's just I feel like I've been here before in a way that...

BEN

You died.

ALEX

No I understand that but what I'm trying to explain is...you know this Zolf. When it comes to the veins there's an alien quality to it. It...there's quite a visceral response that goes with it and I dunno...

HELEN

Well we haven't...we haven't entered the blight bit yet.

BRYN

And this place is a little bit alien though I agree there's no threat to it yet, as such.

ALEX

Wilde looks a little bit confused by your statement. Is it?

HELEN

Well it's blue.

BRYN

It's how it feels to me, yeah.

ALEX

Maybe it's a me thing.

LYDIA

Cel will lean in and sort of say – well like all of us are going to bring our experiences, right. And you actually died and three of have visited the death-y space, whatever the...purgatories? Is that...that's a...

ALEX

I think we might need a better name than death-y space but I'm not sure what right now.

LYDIA

It was...like so many cultures I've been brought up have different names and different shapes for it and I get the impression that everyone's different.

ALEX

A waiting room maybe.

LYDIA

Yeah like so we've all been there but Hamid has not so perhaps we're all getting that sense of familiarity but for very natural reasons, he isn't.

ALEX

Maybe.

LYDIA

Also you can have a very, very good health inducing potion and just add one wrong ingredient and it turns to poison. So it's very possible that this has the same thing but if you take it you will have an upset stomach for a significant length of time and you absolutely will not turn into a bird.

(laughing)

BEN

I guess the point is Wilde, what's your point?

ALEX

Wilde gives a sort of contemplation and then turns to you Zolf specifically and says – I think it's affecting me a little bit differently and I don't know. Let's put it this way, I feel like if someone's going to be compromised, it might be me.

BEN

Right – and I'll get a rope out my bag and tie myself to Wilde.

ALEX

Wilde literally offers a hand and is just like – that's probably a good idea.

BRYN

Yeah it does seem like you've been able to see and hear things a bit clearer than the rest of us Oscar as we've walked through so far.

ALEX

Why what have they been saying to you?

BRYN

Well basically nothing. It's more like background noise from when you're in a party...

ALEX

Wait, so none of you have been hearing any words?

BEN

Nope. Well I ain't.

HELEN

Voices but nothing I can understand.

ALEX

Hmm ok.

LYDIA

What have they told you?

ALEX

Greetings and compliments mostly.

HELEN

Oh that's nice.

ALEX

I realise that, pardon the pun, in a past life that might've been a bit of background noise to me. I dunno. It's odd.

BRYN

Oscar, you just said pardon the pun. I don't think you are ok.

(laughing)

ALEX

Fair. But yeah Wilde happily consents and basically says – yeah that's a very good idea.

BEN

Yes, also to be clear waist to waist not wrist and I am going a real devious knot on his one. Like, I'm trying really hard to do an incredibly difficult knot in a way where maybe we just have to cut it off because I'm not having him undoing it in a fit of, I must be over there because the sirens told me to.

ALEX

Yes. Yeah, yeah. That's fine.

BRYN

We'll all keep an eye on you Oscar don't worry.

HELEN

Maybe you should walk in the middle where we can all see you.

ALEX

That's probably a good idea. It's a shame you can't hear them. They're saying quite lovely things.

Sumutnyerl's just like – those who have already passed before the veil before tend to be recognised more as a friend than as a visitor. It's not cause for concern but your precaution might be wise. Certainly I have seen...people can get very wrapped up in the welcome. How are we feeling? Ready to progress?

HELEN

Yes. It's quite nice so far actually.

LYDIA

Yeah, I mean I'm not going to use the word anticlimactic because that feels like it's setting myself up for some kind of climatic thing but the concerns I had have not so far...it's been...it's nice. It's nice. It's nice. You know, I'd really love...I would actually really love to turn into a bird and fly through. I could do a squirrel. Squirrel. Cel looks mournfully at the trees.

ALEX

It is unwise to pass through the garden too quickly.

LYDIA

I mean I'm not going to do it. I'm just thinking about it. I'm just thinking about it.

ALEX

As you said as a dolphin you would not dive to the depths as quickly as you could. One should not fly through the garden as quickly as one might.

LYDIA

I just mean it seems nice to explore.

BRYN

Is that true going in both directions? I mean just sort of contingency planning as it were, you do imply that there might be dangers. If we did have to escape dangers very rapidly would, you know, rushing out of the garden again be a bad idea for that reason?

ALEX

Sumutnyerl gets another roll. Goodness me. All these NPC rolls. I don't need you guys to roll anymore. I'll just play a game at home and write a novel that's based on dice.

LYDIA

What are you talking about Alex? You've been playing the game with yourself five years ago.

BRYN

Oooohhh

ALEX

I tell you what, if that is the moment of realisation for me. How sad and anticlimactic like my dramatic irony has just failed me and it's just like oh. I don't even make it to the end of the campaign. God. So Sumutnyerl looks at you a little bit shrewdly and says – fleeing through the garden I almost guarantee you, you will have a visitation

BRYN

Ok so even in...

ALEX

We are resting and approaching slowly that we might minimise your visitations.

BRYN

Even if we're leaving in an emergency, best to do it calmly is what you're saying.

LYDIA

Cel pipes up – so wait, we could have more visitations if we went fast? We'd be more likely to see people that we lost.

ALEX

Oh yes. If you wished for a visitation I would suggest normally you enter on your own. That you take some time, perhaps sleep in the garden or if that's not possible...

LYDIA

Go on a little jog. Zoom through.

ALEX

The quicker one moves through the garden the more extreme the visitation is. Perhaps that is a better way of putting it. There is a difference between a quiet contemplative moment with someone you thought was long gone than a...

LYDIA

A crowd of people shouting at you about some misunderstandings.

ALEX

Yes. This is a better way of describing it yes. If you should wish for a visitation...

LYDIA

No I'm fine.

ALEX

Sumutnyerl looks around and closes her eyes for a moment – today would be a good day.

LYDIA

Ok, let's deal with the clue finding and save the world and then maybe we'll have a little lunchbreak to...to jog through the trees and say goodbye again to our lost loves. All that stuff.

ALEX

Sumutnyerl isn't even going to have to roll for this one. Your need for a visitation means that the likelihood of one is very high.

LYDIA

Oh it's not a need. It's not a need. I'm just...I'm genuinely interested in learning as much as one can in these things. You know, it's...you know how it is. You live a long life, you end up with a lot of stories.

ALEX

As you say. Sumutnyerl turns and starts walking deeper in again. You are still in the first half of the day and you still have at least a couple of hours before midday. You set off at crack of dawn so there's no worries that you're going to get halfway or anything like that. Just to lay out that groundwork because I realise if I'm being vague with time you could feel like I'm going to force you sleep here. But yeah, you've got plenty of time yet.

HELEN

Sure

LYDIA

You've very much made it clear that we do not want to be there at night.

HELEN

Azu's going to pat Cel reassuringly on the shoulder.

LYDIA

I'm just interested in learning. You gotta test the, what's it, the tolerances. I'm interested so if you go slowly and then you accelerate would that...would that mean more...or if you managed to...

ALEX

Cel, can you give me a will save

LYDIA

Cool. Oh dear. That's 8.

ALEX

Ok can you also give me a perception check

LYDIA

Oh natural 20. So 34. The two things that Cel is bad and good at. Like ah I see lots of things but I'm absolutely unable to make a firm decision about which one to grab.

ALEX

I may have accidentally generated something that's really quite bespoke to your weaknesses here. And your strengths in a bad way. That's fine. So as you're moving through and sort of discussing these things suddenly from nowhere you, Cel specifically, have an overwhelming sense and then the scent of your once husband.

LYDIA

Cel just pivots on...

ALEX

And I mean suddenly from nowhere. It's quite like whoomph. It's as if they were suddenly right next to you and it just hits you like a ton of bricks. It's almost disturbing because it has such an emotional impact from zero to a hundred. It's very potent.

LYDIA

Cel pivots on their foot and is just like looking into the trees and – Yuuko? Yuuko? Yuuko?

ALEX

None of you discern anything. Wilde however immediately turned to look in the same direction.

LYDIA

Yeah like...

ALEX

And has clearly picked up on it as well.

LYDIA

Yeah, Cel doesn't...they don't see anyone. They just take a second to breathe and then smile – I got stuff to do but if you've got a moment it'd be...be good to say hi. Boys are doing ok. I think.

ALEX

Both Sumutnyerl and Wilde smile.

LYDIA

Cel is looking up into the forest canopy and all around but not with that...not expecting to see something. You know when someone's looking around.

ALEX

Yeah, yeah.

LYDIA

And it's not like "where is the thing". It's just, I don't want to miss something but I'm pretty sure that's not what this is about and just turns and continues walking. I might say...wait, as we're walking along, Cel will be talking quietly as though Yuuko were there. As if we were having a nice conversation. As if that person is there but weirdly although they're not expecting a response, they're not doing their usual, talk about an interesting thing until they almost cycle themselves into a...it's not "oh my gosh have you seen this, have you seen this". It's more like you're having a

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conversation and you're just not really having breaks and just talking about what's been going on.

HELEN

Yeah the kind of talk to a grave.

LYDIA

Yeah pretty much that. Yeah.

ALEX

In which case then could everyone please give me a will save and perception check as a pair.

HELEN

Ok will save.

BEN

33 on the will save. 29 on the perception check.

BRYN

18 on the will save. 28 on the perception check.

HELEN

Will 29. Perception 26

BRYN

Do you want me to roll for Skraak?

ALEX

Ooh yes please.

BRYN

Skraak gets also 18 on will and 29 on perception.

ALEX

Ok yeah. So all of you then as you are pressing along you basically all have a far more reigned in version of Cel's experience. If Cel's experience was what we were talking about where it's like whoomph, all in one go, yours is a far more gradual and measured and it isn't overwhelming. For Cel it was, you know, very overwhelming. It was a little bit like an emotional splat to the face. Yours is very much as you're walking you can't help but suddenly feel like someone's stepped in to walk beside you. I don't mean that you hear anything, it's just that feeling of someone near you. For all of you they are familiar presences that carry comfort with them. For each of you as you're walking, you have no reason, it's not like you're hit by a scent or a sound or anything like that but you get a strong feeling that it is a specific person. Zolf, your brother.

HELEN

Aw

BEN

Ha. Comforting present.

ALEX

To be clear it feels benevolent. Like it actively feels benevolent. It's not like you're just going, oh that's nice. It feels like someone is in your corner, that's the best way I can describe it.

HELEN

Aw

BEN

Sure

ALEX

Hamid, Aziza.

HELEN

Aw!

ALEX

And Azu, you get Grizzop

(gasps)

HELEN

Azu automatically looks down and to the side.

ALEX

There's no one there. There's no petals. There's nothing. To be clear it's a very gentle gradual thing where you're like, who is that?

HELEN

Gentle and gradual doesn't sound like Grizzop!

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, yeah

(laughing)

Thonk, he's on your shoulders. Thonk.

ALEX

Maybe that's why it caught you by surprise.

HELEN

Yeah!

ALEX

Oh you know what, in fact I'd be happy to say that it's upon the shoulders rather than walking beside, whatever's more comforting.

HELEN

Yeah.

ALEX

But a very strong feeling of, basically, just benevolent companionship.

HELEN

Awww! Aw! And he was in a wood as well. Aw!

ALEX

Sumutnyerl stops, turns and looks at all of you – this bodes very well. It is unusual for this kind of collective experience.

BEN

I am deeply ashen faced.

HELEN

Oh no!

LYDIA

Super benevolent.

ALEX

Roll this dice by the way. Ok. As far as Sumutnyerl is concerned you should all be really happy and assumes you are.

(laughing)

Sumutnyerl gestures. From here the blight. This may be the last of our pleasant experiences, do you understand?

LYDIA

Zolf's like oh, this was the pleasant bit!

BEN

Yeah. I'd actually mentally be telling Feryn to go away.

(laughing)

LYDIA

Dang! Burn!

BEN

Well because if he's going to turn nasty...

HELEN

Ok fair, fair, fair.

ALEX

You know what I think I'm going to take a break there. Just before we head into this. Lot to unpack there but yeah we'll be back in a couple of minutes.

And welcome back. So you all continue to step forward. The presences remain for a little while longer. Then for the first time since you've entered the woods a particularly cold breeze pushes through from ahead from where you're walking to. It seems to sweep away some of the petals underneath your feet revealing what appears to be just the bare roots as they were but they're dimmer and the presences

that are either beside or upon you or whatever, you suddenly realise that as the gust passes they feel like they've been blown away as well.

LYDIA

Cel was in the middle of saying – I met a very cute huma...oh. Oh.

BRYN

Hamid was humming the aria from one of the operas he saw Aziza perform in and he just stops mid song.

LYDIA

Oh.

BEN

Zolf lets out a relieved sigh.

(laughing)

ALEX

Oh god! It's a brisk wind and it passes again and then as it does so the animal birdsong die away and the trees give the rustle and then it sort of seems to reassert itself and return but the presences don't come with it. And as you all continue on it starts to get quieter. You start to hear less the sound of the gentle susurrations of leaves and slightly more the creaking of bare branches. It's a very gradual transition. I would say at this point you're hitting maybe...maybe half an hour off midday, let's say. Something like that and the branches themselves, you start to hear that wood movement and so on and the lurid blues give way to paler pastel blues and get paler and paler until soon you start seeing bare branches as opposed to the petals and

there is a sudden flurry off to one side and for a brief moment the petals take a form that's neither humanoid nor comforting. But then it's passed. It's gone. There's nothing there. It isn't like a perception check thing. It was just what is...oh it's nothing. Ok. Sumutnyerl takes a moment and stops and says – we are entering the blight now. If before any truths and visitations you have may have had will have been benevolent, from here, be careful. There is a last thing I need to explain to you. I believe that certain creatures are likely to have taken residence at the centre of the blight. I don't know if these are creatures that need slaying if they can be slayed. What their purpose is, the reason that we have approached in the day is that they will not be able to act directly upon you as they would in the night. But I caution you all, tread lightly, tread carefully. You are here to observe. Only react if you are attacked or harmed. Please do not proactively act. You are more likely to create a problem than solve one.

BRYN

Good advice. What about preparatory spells...should we, or is that more likely to cause adverse reactions?

ALEX

It is an oversimplification to see this as a magical affect. Do as you will.

BRYN

Ok

ALEX

I see no reason it might cause harm but if you have any protections you are able to make you are wise to suggest doing them now.

LYDIA

Cel will probably ask something like – so how long do you think it'll be until we get to the blight area, the danger stuff. I mean more danger than...

ALEX

At our current pace, perhaps 20 minutes.

HELEN

Alright.

BRYN

Hamid casts mage armour upon himself and casts heroism upon Skraak.

ALEX

Ooh. Good call. Any other prep that people want? Everyone ready to press on?

HELEN

Yeah the only thing that Azu does is, maybe have her hands around her axe or...

ALEX

No that's fine. You can be like battle ready if you know what I mean so it's not like you're going [singing] do, do, boop, boop, do, do, do everything's fine. Like yeah, battle ready is fine to say as a thing. Sumutnyerl, after you've done all your preparations turns to all of you and says one last thing – the blight seems to have worsened since last I was here. I will tell you now, if something that looks like a plant moves against you, please feel free to defend yourself. That is not the garden, that is

something else. Sumutnyerl seems more concerned than she was on the approach looking around.

BEN

Got it.

ALEX

Very well. Sumutnyerl starts moving and is now moving cautiously, slower, wary and so on. Meanwhile, for free, you can all tell Wilde seems to have had quite the change of heart on the situation. Whereas before this was all hunky-dory isn't this brilliant. Wilde seems especially concerned. Has gone quite pale. Appears to be trembling slightly and is looking around clearly heavily affected in a way the rest of you aren't yet or maybe not be able to but is quite disturbed by what's around him apparently.

LYDIA

Ok I think seeing how scared people are and given the timing, Cel's going to actually take their mutagen so I'm going to choose a thing where it's -2 to charisma and +2 constitution. I'm doing it that way around and then I get to pick a couple of animal traits. So they're gonna get wings and flying because flying's cool and also going to take scent so that means that Cel smells. Cel can smell. So Cel is now going around with their big fangs in their mouth and big teeth.

ALEX

Do you warn Sumutnyerl?

LYDIA

No, I don't think so. Because they've already said that they can do this.

ALEX

It's fine. Sumutnyerl is completely unconcerned. She's just like – ah.

LYDIA

But they...when we were discussing flying they already said I can transform and I can fly but only for so long so they have discussed transformations.

ALEX

You get a look that can be summarised as – hmm, nice fang work.

LYDIA

Oh. Thank you very much. Thank you. They are my favourite teeth. I grew them myself.

ALEX

All of you press on. Battle ready and with this increasing brisk wind. The wind does grow actively brisk at this point. What's left of the petals are browning around you. There's more bare roots beneath. Yeah there's no mistaking that you're amongst the blight now. There's a moment where the petals...well the remains of petals are blown in a flurry, taking just a horrendous shape. It's really hard to make out what it is and it lingers too long before disappearing. It does disappear but it hangs around and it has more limbs than it should and more than one torso and then it's gone again.

HELEN

Urgh!

ALEX

And as you're walking Sumutnyerl gets slower and slower. Wilde starts actively quivering.

HELEN

Oh no!

ALEX

And then just starts whispering under his breath – it's fine. Everyone. I don't know by what but we're being hunted. We're definitely being hunted.

Sumutnyerl turns to all of you and just gives a slight nod but keeps going.

BEN

I will drop back to walking next to Wilde and I'll reach up and just squeeze his shoulder.

ALEX

Everyone please give me a will save.

HELEN

I mean aren't you connected to Wilde by the waist anyway?

BEN

Yeah so that's if he runs off but I can still give him support.

ALEX

Yeah but I think he's got more than say half a foot of rope and then sort of do, boo, boo together.

(laughing)

HELEN

This is our get along rope!

LYDIA

Cel rolled an 18! Which is...yay! Because there's no...they got no will bonus. So that's just...that's just what they've got. That's ok. That's good. We're doing good. Not gonna just immediately die. Probably. Maybe. Who knows. Oh wait. I get +3 sorry. So 18, 21.

BEN

24

HELEN

21

BRYN

20 from Hamid and 23 from Skraak.

LYDIA

Cel we're playing with the big boys now! We got a respectable will save.

ALEX

All of you simultaneously feel a voice, basically, right in the centre of your head. For any of you who've experienced telepathic communication before, very much this kind of thing. It feels actively different to what was happening in the forest earlier. That was very much more like the outside is there and you can choose to engage. This is inserted. This appears in your head. And for all of you, you're not suddenly able to hear each other's thoughts but all of you hear the same thing very powerfully stated in the centre of your head.

It's your fault.

HELEN

Oeerrrrr.

BEN

I say something very rude back in my head.

LYDIA

Did everyone...I see you all...

ALEX

It's all your fault.

LYDIA

I see...

ALEX

All your fault. All your fault. All your fault.

LYDIA

Are you hearing a voice saying that it's...

BEN

Yes

HELEN

Yeah

LYDIA

All your fault. It's all...is it saying it's all my fault or all your fault?

BRYN

My fault too.

HELEN

My fault.

LYDIA

Oh ok, ok. Great, ok cool.

HELEN

It's not our fault.

BEN

Of course not.

LYDIA

I mean we don't know. We don't know what it is.

BEN

Cel...

LYDIA

Yep

BEN

This is an obviously malevolent presence who is just trying to ruin our spirits so let's not give it the time of day.

LYDIA

Oh I mean we did hear the forest doesn't lie so...ooh. I mean but what it is...

BEN

Exactly.

LYDIA

Hearing the voice is our fault because we've walked into the garden so it's fine.

BEN

No Sumutnyerl said that the forest doesn't lie but this is not the forest, this is the blight. It is a completely individual thing.

LYDIA

Ok yes

HELEN

And hey maybe it's telling you a good thing is your fault.

LYDIA

Yeah, right, everyone's having a lovely time and it's down to me.

ALEX

All your fault.

LYDIA

I'll be honest it doesn't sound like it's a good thing.

(laughing)

ALEX

Sumutnyerl turns to all of you and just dead eye stares all of you – there is nothing of value to be learnt from this. Do not seek lessons where there are none.

BEN

Yep

HELEN

Ok.

ALEX

Wilde has stopped shivering.

BEN

In a bad or a good way?

ALEX

Everyone give me a sense motive.

BEN

Cool

HELEN

Oh no. I am rolling like balls today. 14.

BRYN

22 from Hamid. 16 from Skraak.

BEN

21

LYDIA

Incredibly stuff from Cel, 4.

(laughing)

Cel isn't even really sure who is who at this point.

ALEX

Hamid and Zolf which actually scans, you have rarely seen Wilde actually angry because he tends to keep a lid on it.

BEN

Ah

HELEN

Ooh.

ALEX

Something seems to have happened and Wilde seems to have transmogrified from fear to incandescent rage.

HELEN

Excellent.

ALEX

He isn't yelling. He has gone very, very still and he is beyond furious.

BEN

I will give him a calming but also supportive pat on the shoulder being like, yeah, good job. Solid response. Same. Same hat. Big mood.

ALEX

Wilde's fingers start twitching a little bit and then he starts...he sort of closes his eyes and he starts humming a little bit. It's not a jaunty tune or anything like that. It's more like a harmony. More like a sustained note and so on. And he suddenly starts to outline in gold.

HELEN

Ooh.

ALEX

He starts to hum louder and then opens his mouth and it's more like a sustained tone. It's more like a haaaa rather than a lilting song or anything like that. And you see that fold sweep out to the rest of you centrally from Wilde and start outlining you all. I am going to just mechanically tell you what's happening because I can't be bothered tracking all of the maths. However you are all now gaining a +3 bonus when I ask you for will saves from now on.

BEN

Nice

ALEX

And a +3 bonus on attack and weapon damage rolls.

LYDIA

Good lord.

BEN

Alright.

LYDIA

That's doubled Cel's will bonus so that's a genuinely a big deal.

BEN

Thanks bud.

ALEX

Wilde is sort of sustaining this and it is just again a series of harmonised humming or lightly sung notes. It's not echoing out over the forest or anything but it is being actively sustained as opposed to cast once and then it's done and he's doing it from a place of potent anger but it does seem to stretch to all of you. The voice comes in again – all your fault. So much death. So much pain. All. Your. Fault.

Could everyone please give me a fresh will save with the...

LYDIA

Can I roll a will save as a human person against your incredibly creepy voice?

(laughing)

I would like to not be intimidated.

BEN

Alex I only rolled a 2. 20.

(laughing)

BRYN

Oh Jesus!

LYDIA

You absolute...

HELEN

I finally rolled half decently. So that's 31.

LYDIA

I rolled an 18 so Cel has 24.

BRYN

18 total from Skraak. Hamid rolled a natural 1 so has a total of 13.

LYDIA

Oh!

ALEX

Ok. So who's familiar with their fear affect?

BRYN

Oh this is a fear affect isn't it? I get +2 versus fear. So I have a total of 15.

BEN

Oh I'm grief filled. 22.

ALEX

You're already in the clear but yes, you are grief filled Ben. Don't think I've forgot that. So what did you get Hamid?

BRYN

15 total but it was a natural 1.

ALEX

I'm going to punish you for it being a natural 1.

BRYN

Fair.

ALEX

Skraak will also be affected as is, interestingly, Sumutnyerl.

HELEN

Oh no!

BRYN

Wait, Skraak got 20 total. Too many different floating bonuses.

ALEX

Interestingly enough I have two people who failed which is Sumutnyerl, of all people, and you, Hamid. You are now shaken. Specifically you are taking a -2 penalty...so I am stacking all of these bonuses and penalties up and down. You'll want a piece of paper. You are now taking a -2 penalty on attack rolls, saving throws, skill checks and ability checks. You are also, if you're going to be subject, like I'll just tell you this mechanically because it's easier. If you get hit by this again you will enter the frightened state which is worse again.

LYDIA

Enter the fright zone!

ALEX

At which point, strap yourselves in. Are you ready? Could you roll me, I'm so happy I can't believe I got it back here. It's been so long. Oh I've got the shakes! Can I get a initiative roll. Can I get an initiative roll from people.

LYDIA

Yay!

ALEX

For an actual fight, in an RPG please, please can I get your initiative rolls.

BEN

Ooh, ooh, ooh. Natural 20. 25.

ALEX

Ooh big start.

BRYN

Hamid also rolled a natural 20

ALEX

For a total of?

BRYN

Well assuming the shaken applies to it, 26.

ALEX

It does I'm afraid.

BRYN

Yeah I believe it does.

ALEX

Okey doke.

HELEN

My streak continues. I rolled a 3 giving me initiative 6.

ALEX

Oof.

LYDIA

Cel's got 23.

BRYN

15 from Skraak.

HELEN

And also I'm real sorry to bring this up but can I just check that my auras are passive and not active. Like do I have them always?

BEN

No they are passive. You've always got them on.

HELEN

Ok then you should all know that you do have +4 morale bonus on saving throws against fear affects.

BEN

Ooh. Well there we go.

HELEN

Since I have aura of courage.

BEN

Because paladins are super cool.

ALEX

What would that have boosted you to Hamid?

BRYN

A natural 1 but a 19.

ALEX

Yeah a) that wouldn't have been enough and b) Sumutnyerl rolled that poorly that she would've fallen foul of it anyway. So we're fine. Everything's fine. Initiative is rolled. We have Sumutnyerl is shaken as is Hamid. The first indicator you have that combat is going to be starting is the sound of almost sleigh bells all around.

HELEN

Oh god it's evil Father Christmas.

ALEX

It starts very, very small and then increases in the ringing and there is the sound of distant but approaching sleigh bells in all directions.

HELEN

It's Krampus!

ALEX

There is then an absolutely deafening telepathic message effectively which just says
– All. Your. Fault.

At which point the roots all around you spring into the air in all directions as far as
you can see throwing up a flurry of desiccated petals and snow which has been
slowly working its way back in.

LYDIA

Goodness

ALEX

And at that point I think I'll end the episode and I'm sure it'll all work itself out next
time.

LYDIA

Yay!

HELEN

Oh boy. Oh boy.

ALEX

Guys, guys, combat! Actual combat! Actual combat!

BEN

Well not quite yet.

ALEX

And stuff...don't take this away from me Ben!

BRYN

We rolled for initiative...

LYDIA

I've still got the shaken affect from Alex's voice.

(laughing)

ALEX

Oh I'm so happy. I'm so happy. Right, I'm going to have to wrap it up there. But yes, good, combat, yes. Pain, misery, death. Good. All is back as it should be. I'm so happy.

HELEN

Well thanks for that.

LYDIA

Yay!

ALEX

Bye everyone.

EVERYONE

Bye!

[Show Theme - Outro]

ALEX

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