Chapter 18: Baldur’s Gate



Afternoon, 12 Eleasis, 1370

They came into sight of Baldur’s Gate, sunlight reflecting off the roofs of a few of the temples in the city as they disembarked and traversed the docks following signs along the way to the Temple District.

Baldur’s Gate, along with Waterdeep, was about the most cosmopolitan city on Faerûn’s Sword Coast. They were on their way to Neverwinter, another contender for the title, and with so much to do while they were here, and so many ships coming and going along the coast, they exploited the sights and sounds of the midsummer day. Dry grass declared the land’s thirst, and the streets smelled of sage, hops, and hemp as people younger than the heroes pranced about them.

When they arrived in Baldur’s Gate, the ship docked along the northern docks, not far from the ‘Water Queen’s House’, a temple to Umberlee. Prior to disembarking, Nihm put the collar and leash on Lucky. This would be the wolf’s first time in a major city, so she did not want to take any chances for him getting spooked and taking off. Amara assured Nihm that she and Xena would be close by to help keep an eye on Lucky.

After departing and walking along the dock, they made a turn to the northeast and headed for the Temple District of the city. They were headed for the ‘Three Old Kegs’ inn located just outside the Temple District. They had been told that the ‘kegs’ was one of the best inns in town. When they arrived, Haal and Baldoor spoke to the person at the counter and they were able to get two rooms next door to each other. The men would share one room while the women took the other. Before leaving, though, they heard a bit of a tussle in the next room. A moment later, one of the serving wenches came through the lobby dragging a human male behind her. She dragged him out the front door and left him lying in the street. “Sorry about that,” she said as she returned, “still a bit drunk and upset over his losses at the dragons dice table last night.” Haal and Baldoor simply smiled and nodded back. Then Haal inquired, “We’ve been away for a while, is there any news of interest or excitement that you might have heard of? We’re trying to decide where to head next and would appreciate any news you might hear that could affect our choice of direction and destination.”

Though Baldur’s Gate was a well-fortified metropolis, it was often host to a wide variety of attempted incursions, mostly from disgruntled mages. A master conjurer named Edwin had been banished from the city proper at the end of the Time of Troubles, about a decade ago, and he recently returned, flying overhead with a menagerie of manticores and other beasts which he’d summoned with a Persistent property, giving him a platoon of monsters to unleash upon the Castle Ward, where his beef was to be quenched. He was thwarted by a coalition between the Supermuscled—a strength-oriented defense force—and the Balduran Guard, whose regular staff of mages was well equipped to deal with a single enemy spellcaster. Word was it, however, that Edwin had vowed to return and unleash a force mighty enough to overshadow all prior history of sieges of this city.

There was also talk of a cabal of necromancers operating in Little Calimshan—a poorly regulated district favoring those with Chaotic tendencies—that were either in league with the Monks of the Dark Moon or were members themselves. The most confident gossiper claimed that they were implanting people with “necrotic cysts” and creating living zombies that would do the bidding of the cabal.

There were also rumors of a form of lycanthropy whose initial symptoms mimicked leprosy.

The local government—it was alleged—was not quite prepared to deal with any escalation of tension with Amn, which was amassing gold and silver from Maztica with a growing fleet of galleons, and threatened to devalue these precious metals by flooding the Sword Coast’s market with them. The destabilization of the economy would surely precede a military expression of Amn’s expansion, and the city-state of Baldur’s Gate would be in a precarious state to defend its sovereignty. Another source claimed that this would eventually also bankrupt Amn, and drive the price of ale way down, but no one could follow her logic.

~\*~

With their room secured and the first two nights paid for, they decided to go and visit the market in ‘The Wide’ and see what there was to eat and perhaps purchase some small baubles or trinkets. As the group walked through the open market, they were careful to keep an eye on each other’s backs to deter any would be pick pockets or thieves. As they walked with Lucky still on his leash, they got a mixed reaction from some of the marketgoers. Some were happy to see him, though, when Nihm didn’t allow them to pet him, they walked off disappointed. Others didn’t like the idea of a wild animal walking through the streets of their wonderful, civilized city.

Besides some food and snacks to nibble on, some members of the group did end up finding a couple of things for purchase. Nihm found a unique gold necklace with a unicorn made of platinum for 35 ₲, so she bought it to show her loyalty to her deity Meilikki. Amara found a collar for Xena with several tiny gemstones on it for 20 ₲ as well as a set of gold earrings and a platinum bracelet for 25 ₲ total. Haal purchased some ink to replenish his supply as well as a replacement quill. He planned on doing some writing and sending a letter to an old instructor back a Candlekeep. As they made their purchases and browsed, they listed to any tales of creatures or bandits causing problems in the area. They also asked the shop owners if they had heard anything interesting, exciting or dangerous in the last few days.

The streets were traversed by folks from many walks of life, though the fashion and accents most represented locals and other folks from the Sword Coast. They’d seen far less beggars than they’d anticipated, and assumed they were segregated to other districts. The children of rich and poor played amidst street vendors and performers, sometimes encroaching on one another’s space. All in all, it seemed like a well-regulated and thriving city.

When they were done in ‘The Wide’, they headed back to the ‘Three Old Kegs’ inn to get some rest as it was now getting late in the day. With a rather pleasant day behind them, they spent a few minutes deciding where to go the next day. The heroes then settled in for a restful sleep in the most comfortable beds they’d slept in in quite some time.

As the sun began to cast shadows as long as the height of the heroes while they meandered along a boulevard, they discussed some of the allegations of happenings that they’d heard since disembarking. The breathtaking views of the seaside city comingled seamlessly with the scent of seafood and hope, and the rattles and strums of nearby performers pointed them to the busier sections of this commercial sector.

They were reminded of past adventures—before they’d even met one another—reminiscent of some of the scandals and ado that this urban jungle boasted.

~\*~

13 Eleasis, 1370 DR

The next morning, they headed out for two separate destinations. Haal and Amara were headed to ‘The Knowledge Hold’ in the temple district. They both wanted to do a little research on the Moonwells as well as additional research on the northern part of the sword coast. While the pair headed to the library, Baldoor, Kassuq, Nihm, Lucky and Xena all headed across the city to the ‘Insight Park.’ Baldoor was more intrigued by the fact that the park was created by a dwarf while the others just wanted to spend some time in a ‘forest’ within a city for a little while. They had all agreed to meet at the ‘Low Lantern Festhall’ near the park for a late lunch/early dinner. Again, it was a rather uneventful day for the party, until they arrived at the ‘Low Lantern’.

When the group arrived, it was well past lunchtime. They hadn’t worried about time since Xena was with the group in the park. Amara had wanted to let Xena know mentally when to head to the ‘Low Lantern’ and Xena let them know by running in a couple circles and squeaking at Nihm, but the relationship between spellcaster and familiar didn’t work that way.



At first, when they walked in, things were quiet with the hall only about a third full. According to the server, things got busier and rowdier after sun set. So, the group placed their order and figured they would be gone before the late crowd arrived. However, just as their food arrived, a group of 8 drunken sailors entered the hall.



Two of them were women (one human and one half-orc) and the other six were men (two human, one dwarf, one half-elf and one orc).



At first everything was fine, then, when one of them broke a chair, Lucky gave a low growl. Looking at the wolf, the male half-orc grunted, “Shut yer mutt up or I’ll rip his throat out!”



At the same table, a half-elf male named Snakebane bore a posture in his chair such that he would likely get up and start casting a spell in a moment.



Nihm beat him to it, and stood, as did Lucky, growling deeper and showing off his teeth. “Try and you’ll be lucky to keep both your arms.” The others on both sides then stood and were facing off against one another.

Kassuq simulated the most dire scenarios that could unfold over the next few seconds, including that stubby, jerky hominid showing off for the orcishkin to earn their respect.



Things were quiet for a while as both sides sized each other up and the other patrons looked on, wondering who would throw the first punch or land the first blow. Haal held his arms up saying, “No need for violence, we all just want to enjoy the day and finish our meal. However,” he added glancing to his friends on both sides of him, “If you *do* want a fight, we are happy to give you one.”

Wearing an unidentified headdress that she’d picked up on sale from a street vendor, Amara anticipated having to cast some spells. *So* ***this*** *was where her mana might be spent today,* she thought.



The tension in the air could be felt by all. That was until the female human recognized the group, well, all but Amara. “Hey, didn’t you all sail to Llewellyn on the Locust Swarm? You look familiar but I only recall 4 of you and no mutt.” The term elicited another growl before the female corrected herself, “wolf.”



Baldoor stepped forward, looking up at the woman, “Aye, that we did and fought off an attack on tha ship as well. Were you aboard tha Swarm? All you humans look alike ta me.”

The woman smiled and gave a slight chuckle at Baldoor’s comment. “Yes, I was one of the crew. Changed ships when we docked in Waterdeep a week ago.” She then turned to the others, “I’d trust what the ranger,” she said pointing to Nihm, “said about losing your arms. The four of them fought off about a dozen kuo-toa after helping fight off a ram-fish as well. They are good luck at sea in my book.”

The four heroes that had been there recalled the predicament. Hearing the woman speak, the others relaxed a bit, the orc male adding, “Sorry fir callin’ your friend a mutt.”

“Apology accepted,” replied Nihm as everyone returned to their meals and Lucky stretched out on the floor next to Nihm.

With the situation defused, the groups went back to their eating and drinking. The heroes asked the servers if they’d heard anything exciting about what was going on outside of the city, especially along the roads headed north along the coast.

There was laughter, which subsided when the male orc answered, “There’s not a day that goes by when nothing exciting happens along the Sword Coast. Why, we were just talking to a band of overlanders who told of a well-trained group of bandits compromising the inland trade routes.” The conversation went on to reveal that these were likely Zhentarim agents.

Haal considered a conflict between the expanding Amnish Empire and the geographically boundless network known as the Zhentarim, and feared for buffer states like Baldur’s Gate, should such a calamity sweep over its domain.

After finishing their meal, the group returned to their rooms at the ‘Three Old Kegs’. Once there, they changed into some more comfortable clothing before heading down to the gambling rooms. Xena and Lucky remained up in the room that Nihm and Amara were sharing. Plenty of food and water was left for the pair that mostly just slept while their companions were just a couple floors below them.

The Low Lantern got rowdy at night, and the crew currently shuffling into the scene looked spikier and less friendly than their previous company. They had overheard a conversation between a realtor and a forensic diviner at an adjacent table that there had been an unusually high rate of disappearances, and a peculiarly similar spike in abandoned homes with imminent foreclosures.

In the morning, after breaking even at the gambling tables, the group paid for one more night at the inn. They then headed to the ‘Smilin’ Boar’ cafe for breakfast. They had been told it was one of the best spots on the sword coast for breakfast. They figured that was an exaggeration, but was worth checking out. As they approached, the sign above gave them all a smile and a flight chuckle. It was a boar mounting a sow and smiling. They all wonder what the more upper-class citizenry of the area thought of the rather crude but amusing sign. They took a table outside and ordered a hearty breakfast plus some extra eggs and meat for Lucky who had been behaving himself while in town. Nihm still had the collar on him and tethered to her by his leash, just to be safe. After they finished breakfast they had a few stops to make that day prior to heading north the following morning.

Their first stop was at ‘Eastway Expeditions’, an establishment known for having all the gear that explorers and adventurers need. While there, Amara was able to exchange her mace for a shortspear and also get a masterwork light crossbow as well as an Anklet of Translocation.

Nihm was able to find a wyrmfang amulet for Lucky plus a quiver of Ehlonna for herself. She also purchased several arrows (giving her a total of 60), 18 javelins and 6 spears to go into the quiver.

Haal had been looking for a new weapon for a while and found a heavy mace +1 that caught his fancy. So he traded in his masterwork quarterstaff, masterwork sling and bullets towards the mace. He also purchased a buckler shield, a pair of Gloves of the Starry Sky and Vanishers cloak. Kassuq did not find anything that caught his eye, but Baldoor did find a couple of items. The dwarf purchased a backpack (Howard’s Handy Haversack) and a Magic Bedroll. With their purchases finalized, they headed down the street to another well-known store in town.

As they browsed and made their purchases, they casually asked the clerks and fellow patrons if they had heard any news of strange happenings or dangers along the coast, and heard confirming news of the bandits rendering the eastward trade routes unsafe. They were reputed to be a small, racially heterogeneous band of outcasts who preyed particularly on merchants ferrying luxury goods. If and when they ambushed a wagon carrying more fundamental goods, they were likely to only take what they could eat at the moment, and buy themselves goodwill amongst their fellow peasants and street urchins.

That other store was ‘Well-adjusted Al’s General Store’ to see what other items they could find. Amara went looking at the selection of scrolls and potions with Haal and Baldoor. They each selected a few items to round out their normal allotment of scrolls and potions. Kassuq also grabbed a couple potions of *cure light wounds*. Besides those items, Kassuq found a pair of Gloves of Ogre Strength that fit him comfortably. Baldoor found a pair of Steadfast Boots that he tried on and liked, so he decided to purchase them. Finally, as Nihm was looking through the shelves, she found a pouch of Everlasting Rations and purchased that as everyone was ready to leave. They then went to drop off their new gear inn and grab a bite to eat at the market.

Well-adjusted Al was once known as Wacky Al, even Weird Al, but having gotten the mental health help he needed, he now levied a shrewder bargain than in his younger days. His counter boasted triptychs of his endorsed program—Lathand’randa—which he mentioned more than once had saved his relationship with his bride and kiddos.

First the group dropped off their purchases in their rooms at the ‘Three Old Kegs’ before heading out to get a late lunch. Stopping in ‘The Wide’ once again, they found a couple of venders selling food. The group purchased their food from a few different carts and sat down to eat. The food was good and the day was nice and cool with the breeze coming in off the sea. When they finished their lunch, they had one last place to visit. Fortunately, it was very far from where they were.

As fate would have it, Nihm—the hero with the least constitution among them—fell ill, having eaten a few oysters that did not agree with her.

After Nihm got treated with a *panacea* spell, the final stop of the day was just outside the Black Dragon Gate at ‘Garynmore Stables’ to secure horses and a wagon for their trip north. They had decided to travel by land this time, but didn’t feel like walking the entire way to the sword coast’s northern reaches. After talking to the employee about what they wanted, the woman took them out to the stables to look at the horses. They would be purchasing a total of five horses and one wagon. Three horses for riding and two for pulling the wagon. They would only need two saddles though, as only two of them would be riding at a time. They would rotate the riding horses so that one of them was always rested, tied to the back of the wagon. The riders would be Kassuq and Nihm, with Lucky trotting along with them. The other three would ride in the wagon, with Haal handling the wagon driver duties. Baldoor and Amara would take turns watching out the back or riding ‘shotgun’ up front with Haal.

While Nihm and Haal checked out the horses, the others talked to the farriers at the stables to find out any rumors or information about the roads to the north.

“The northern path—far as I’ve heard tell—has been fairly dull lately, with only winds and other natural hazards to watch out for,” was the most notable warning they got.

They spent several minutes examining each horse and the wagons that met their requirements. The wagon they selected was basically a box on wheels. It had wooden sides and roof, not canvas. There were two small windows on either side. They were meant to let in light, but could also be opened to fire projectiles out of. The rear of the wagon had a door that was a little wider than a normal door and was split into a top half and bottom half that could each be opened separately. In the front of the wagon was the seat for the driver and one passenger. There was also a small hatch like door behind the driver’s bench so that you could talk to whomever was inside. If one were small enough, one could climb through the opening.

The rear of the wagon had four cots, two on either side stacked like bunk beds with storage space below the bottom bunks. There was also a barrel attached to either side of the cart on the exterior for water or other items. After a few minutes of discussion, they came to an agreement for the cost of the items. The final total was 745 ₲.

Haal mentally tallied what they’d just purchased.

* 3 Light Horses
* 2 Heavy Horses
* 2 Saddles
* 3 Bits & Bridles
* Wagon & Carriage
* 10 days’ feed in 2 barrels

With the arrangements made for them to pick up the horses and wagon the next day, the heroes headed back to the Temple District. Haal headed over to the ‘Rose Portal’, a temple to Lathander, followed by Amara and Nihm. While Haal prayed and left a small offering, the ladies and their animal companions/familiars waited outside. Meanwhile, Kassuq decided to stop at ‘The Watchful Shield’ and pay tribute to Helm, an ally to his deity, Torm. Baldoor accompanied Kassuq to the temple, though the dwarf simply stood silently as the young hound archon paid his respects. Once they had all finished, they returned to their rooms at the ‘Three Old Kegs’ to get a good night’s rest. They had a long road ahead of them, and looked forward to the new adventure.

When they got up in the morning, they had breakfast at the inn. Then swung by the market once more, picking up some food for the start of their trip and headed out through the Black Dragon Gate. Once outside the gate they headed for ‘Garynmore Stables’ where their wagon and horses were waiting. Once there, they inspected the wagon and horses as well as all the equipment to make sure everything was in order. They stowed their backpacks in the wagon, just keeping their weapons and armor on them for the trip.

When they started north along the road, Nihm and Kassuq road in front of the wagon while Lucky trotted along beside Nihm’s horse, seemingly glad to be free of the leash. Haal was sitting on the bench of the wagon handling the reigns while Amara and Xena sat next to him. Baldoor was sitting on a stool in the back of the wagon, so Baldoor had the top half open and tied back inside the wagon so he had an unobstructed view out the rear. It also allowed him to keep an eye on the extra horse as they moved along.

~\*~



Within two days, they’d made it almost half-way to the Winding Waters, a river that skirted the Troll Hills, which would prove to be a more difficult journey for the horses and wagon across winding and poorly kept roads.

The weather was pleasant as they moved along the coast. The bluff to their west offered them a stunning view out over the open seas. To their east was mostly flat lands with tall grasses and trees scattered here and there. As they made their way, Lucky enjoyed the outdoors, darting about and sniffing the air and the ground. He didn’t wander too far though, keeping Nihm in sight as he frequently looked back over his shoulder. Xena, on the other hand, spent much of her time nibbling on snacks or sleeping on Amara’s lap or in a pile of blankets in the back of the wagon.

The group made sure to stop a couple times each day to give the horses a break and to allow themselves to stretch their legs as well. During those stops, they all took some time to work on various skills. The primary focus of much of the breaks was sparing. Haal had purchased the new mace and was getting familiar with it. It was a lot different than using his quarterstaff, but he recalled some of the lessons he’d learned in his youth. Amara was also happy to give some tips as his father had taught her to use a mace when she was a young girl. Though Amara carried a mace, she had shown an interest in the lightweight rapier that Nihm carried, so during a few of the stops, Nihm gave Amara some pointers on how to wield the rapier properly. It was a new experience and much different technique used with the sword as a finesse and piercing weapon instead of the bludgeoning power of the mace. At first Amara really struggled, but eventually she started to get some of the basics. Nihm gave her some footwork to work on so that she could practice with or without the sword.

The group also used the breaks to discuss their plans as they approached the Troll Hills and the Trollbark Forest on the other side. This included adjustments to the daily spell allotment for Baldoor, Haal and Nihm. They would need some spells to help with the roads in the mountains, so Baldoor would pray for some stone shaping spells while Haal would add *make whole* to his list of spells. If the parts from any washed away items were there, he could repair it.

The big concern, though, were the beasts the hills and forest were named for: trolls. Amara had some spells that could do fire damage, so she was all set. The other three would add some fire spells to their list or possibly spells to restrain the trolls or slow them down like Nihm’s favorite, *entangle*.

~\*~

As they traveled they fell into a routine. Their pace was steady, not too fast so they could keep an eye open for any ambushes. The pace allowed Nihm, Kassuq, Haal and whomever was with him to look around every now and then for anything suspicious. Fortunately, all they saw was the beautiful scenery.

In the wagon, Baldoor spent a good portion of his time in the rear, allowing Amara and Xena to sit up front with Haal. The group made a stop around midday each day to allow the horses an hour or so to rest and for them to bet a bite to eat. When they stopped for the night, they each had their own tasks to tend to, which helped with the set up and take down of the camp. It also helped that they could sleep in the wagon instead of setting up tents every night. At night and in the morning the horses were given some of their grain to supplement their grazing and to keep up their energy.

Also, after setting up camp, they all did a little bit of sparing and telling stories about their past. The first part was to keep in shape and keep their skills up, the second was done in order to help break any magical compulsion that one of them might fall under (Teamwork Benefit: Snap out of it) During the sparing, Amara had mentioned an interest in Nihm’s rapier. So Nihm stated giving Amara some pointers on the sword. Amara wasn’t the best with a thrusting or slashing weapon, having been brought up using a mace. However, her natural agility seemed to counter that as she learned the basics of swordplay.

As they got closer to the river, they all discussed what spells they should have prepared before crossing it and approaching the Troll Hills.