Session Notes: Adventure 13A04 part 2: The Singing Bones

Highclan, after the phoenix fight



Shakeetha

The party enters the long hall that runs along the top ridge of Highclan's back. Shakeetha, who is clearly the village headwoman, clears out the people who were hiding there and summons the council, which consists of Quigo the druid, her husband ***Periro***, a herbalist, and the village shaman ***Lerumu***, an elderly woman with straggly hair and an unfocused look.

Shakeetha thanks the heroes for turning up when they did. In response to their questions, she explains that Highclan went off course just to the south of Dire Wood about 3 weeks ago. There was no warning – the first the villagers knew was when Highclan was crashing through trees and stomping on night phoenix nests. The villagers have tried all the rituals they can think of to make Highclan return to its usual path - sacrificing half their stored meats and even a freshly hunted dire boar, performing ritual dances to entertain it - but nothing has worked.

Soril asks if they can communicate with Highclan in any way. At this point Lerumu pipes up. "I have inhaled the sacred herbs and watched the sacred tentacles", she says, staring into the heroes' eyes. "They move in unusual patterns. The spirit of Leku-hashnah is troubled. It knows its true path, but it cannot take it."

Shakeetha translates this as "something is drawing Highclan off course". Because of the phoenix attacks, the villagers haven't had a chance to reconnoitre the environment. She'd like the party to do it for them.

One obvious question is what keeps the koru behemoths moving as they do. Shakeetha explains that no-one really knows, but since koru behemoths are never seen to eat, it's thought that they graze on springs of primal energy that are only visible to them. These deplete and regenerate with time, hence their constant need to move on.

Spirit Readings

As the heroes are bedding down for the night in the long hall, Lerumu comes up and offers to read their spirits in thanks for saving the village. Yrion is the first to accept. Lerumu guides him to her shaman's hut, a dark cabin smelling of woodsmoke and herbs, where she stares into his eyes and tells him that his spirit is sorrowful and that he should seek comfort in others, which Yrion interprets as "go and get laid". Yria is next, and learns that her spirit is troubled and that she should seek its source. Yria remembers that Lerumu said the same thing about Highclan and concludes that she and the koru behemoth must be linked. After all, they both have tentacles.

Gwindor takes his turn and is told that "a Great Power influences you - be sure that its path for you is what you want." Kavan's reading is rather more dramatic – Lerumu tells him that "the Great Spirits conspire to destroy you! Run!" She seems genuinely concerned for his wellbeing. Soril is told that his soul is split, and that he should ensure that the Great Spirits do not tear it apart.

After these less-than-helpful prognostications, the party settles down for the night, trying to ignore the regular distant boom of Highclan's footsteps as it forges onwards.

Seventhday of the Sixth Week of Autumn

At dawn the next day, Yria decides to follow up her insight of the night before. Taking a complaining Yrion with her, she heads towards Highclan's head. They bump into Ishe, the girl that they met last night, who takes them to a lookout at the front of Highclan's shell which has a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside over its turtle-shaped head. It's not quite what Yria wanted, but her sharp elven eyes spot a thin thread of smoke from a campfire next to a cave mouth in a crag slightly to the left of the behemoth's current trajectory.

Yria explains to Ishe that she wants to get closer to Highclan's tentacles and asks if it is safe to climb onto its head. Ishe says no, it would throw them off. The way Lerumu does it is to climb down and stand in Highclan's path. Yrion is not keen on the idea, but Ishe says it's safe if you don't stay there too long. She leads the way down a rope ladder to the ground and shows them to a spot in the behemoth's eyeline. Yria unfurls her tentacles and waves them, trying mimic the undulations of Highclan's. To her surprise, it works – she feels a sense of a huge ancient presence which is – dancing? That's not quite it, but something like. And it's fascinating. You could just lose yourself…

Ishe tugs nervously at Yrion's sleeve. Yrion needs no second asking and grabs his sister, pulling her to one side as one of Highclan's huge elephant legs comes crashing down unnervingly close. Yria comes to and shakes her head to clear it. "Okay, time to go," she says.

Gnomes

The rest of party join Yria and Yrion the path in front of Highclan. Their original plan was to head straight to Innocence Falls, but they decide to investigate the campfire that Yria spotted since it is only a short detour. Guided by Soril's unerring sense of direction and Yria's memory of the distinctive shape of the crag above the cave, the heroes soon find themselves passing down a narrow defile that they think will bring them out at the campsite. Kavan is striding ahead when Soril sharply orders him to stop. He has spotted an unnatural rectangular shape in the sandy floor. It's a pressure plate, clearly part of an alarm or trap. The party carefully step round it and are thus able to sneak up on the camp site unobserved. Four small tents are arranged around a cooking fire in front of a narrow cleft in the rock. The design of the tents is familiar, and the heroes are not surprised to see a person of Gnomish appearance standing by the fire. Soril makes himself visible and asks to talk. The gnome looks up. "Oi! What are you doing here? Clear off!" Two more gnomes bustle out of the cave carrying hammers and another emerges from a tent. They eye the heroes suspiciously, hefting their makeshift weapons.



Suspicious gnomes

Yria exercises the paladin leadership skills that she was taught in Golden Citadel to calm the situation down. She leads the rest of the party forward, explains their quest, and asks if they have seen anything strange recently. The gnomes glance at her and the rest of the party and relax slightly; they introduce themselves as ***Orjin Blowbelly***, ***Wilcra Shadowpitch***, ***Lilna Deeppocket and Tressel Fineheap***. They've been digging here for the past week and haven't seen anything strange. Oh, except for a couple of wizards that Orjin spotted a couple of days ago. They had set up a large magical device with a big rotating lens on a crag to the east and were fiddling with it. "Gnomes are the best at devices," says Yria encouragingly. Tressel proudly agrees, only to be teased by Wilcra for making his perimeter alarms too sensitive. Both of them went off a couple of nights ago, one twenty minutes after the other, but when the gnomes ran over to see what the intruder was, there was no-one there.

Soril asks Wilcra to show him where the northernmost alarm is – he has some knowledge of tracking, so perhaps he could work out if there had in fact been an interloper. Wilcra obliges, leading him to a crossroads where three paths meet. Soril carefully checks the trails and spots tracks in dried out mud that had been created by the storm a couple of days before. He identifies several prints created by bipedal creatures that are goblin-sized or a bit bigger, and also a larger set of boot prints made by a human- or elf-sized humanoid. The tracks come up a path from the south-east, reach the pressure pad and then retreat the way they came.

With a bit more detective work and a few more discoveries near the other alarm, Soril figures out what must have happened. The creatures were trying to make their way north along the track to the campsite that the party came up. They tripped the first alarm, retreated, and worked their way east and then north, but then hit the second alarm. Seems Tressel's devices weren't too sensitive after all.

The party thanks the gnomes for their help and follows the muddy tracks on the south-east path. As Soril suspected, they soon turn up a path heading north-east, but the ground is too dry for him to follow them further.

Wizards

The party decides to find the wizards and their mysterious device. This does not prove to be difficult; Gwindor shimmies up a nearby crag and immediately spots a tall cylinder with a rotating top that flashes in the sun standing at the top of an escarpment about a mile to the east, slightly to the south of Highclan's path. As the party makes their way there, Soril continues scanning the ground for signs of the creatures he spotted before. He doesn't find them but instead discovers huge paw marks that look as if they were created by a bear. The prints are fresh, and somewhat concerningly, are headed in the

same direction as the party. Soril follows them to the base of the escarpment where there is a small camp with a long-handled handcart and a set of wizard's robes hanging on a washing line. From the top of the escarpment the heroes hear a deep growling and two elven voices: "Deary me, it's coming for us! ***Iganis***, blast it!" "I would, old thing, but I seem to have misplaced my wand…"



Two wizards and a bear

The heroes hasten up the shallow slope to see a huge dire bear with thick spiky fur that has trapped two elderly wizards against the escarpment's edge. Yria and Kavan charge in yelling; Kavan's morning star bounces off the creature's unnaturally strong and sharp bristles, but Yria lands a good solid hit with Strikefast, albeit taking some lacerations to her hands. Yrion manoeuvres behind the combatants and lines up a bow shot, taking care to avoid hitting the cowering wizards; Gwindor is less cautious, but fortunately manages to hit the bear. Soril sprints for the device. "Over here! Get down!" he hisses at the elves.

Kavan and Yria try their double act again, but their weapons bounce off the bear's spikes. The beast retaliates with fury; it rears up, snags Yria in its claws, and rips a chunk out of her shoulder with its powerful jaws. Yrion quickly dodges behind Yria and lunges with Shadowjumper, forcing the bear away as he pours healing energies into her. Gwindor misses with his arrow but distracts the bear. "I've softened it up for you!" he shouts with a magical drum roll. Soril takes advantage of Gwindor's encouragement to cast his spray of mesmerising lights. The dire bear roars in confusion and turns towards him, giving Kavan a chance to a land a powerful blow on one side of its muzzle and Yria on the other. The bear turns its battered and bloody head towards them and rears up on its hind legs – then the light goes out of its bloodshot eyes, and it topples backwards, lifeless.

While Yria engages in bear butchery, extracting its gall bladder and other parts that may be of value to alchemists, Soril and Kavan interview the pathetically grateful wizards. They introduce themselves as ***Doress and Iganis Springflame***. They are members of the School of Imperial Wizardry and eagerly explain that they are on a mission from the Archmage himself to test a new device that he has had constructed. They're not quite sure what it does (Soril frowns at that) but they are assured that it's perfectly harmless. It's just a magical detection device. Could it be affecting behemoths? asks Kavan. Doress and Iganis look at each other. "Well, I suppose it's possible," says Doress. "After all, they are magical creatures…" Yria gets up, her hands still covered in bear gore, and advances on the wizards. "You will turn it off. Now." Doress nervously complies, creating a magical sigil with her wand on one of the device's surfaces that causes the circling lens to slow down and stop.

Subsequent interrogation suggests that the device probably isn't the cause of Highclan's wanderings. Doress and Iganis have only been in the wilderness for a couple of weeks and have mostly been further south, closer to the behemoths' normal migration path. They arrived at their current location a couple of days ago.

Soril asks how the device works and receives a torrent of magical technobabble about etheric currents and planar boundary conditions that he barely understands. He does learn that the device detects magical anomalies – indeed, it spotted one just two nights ago, moving from northwest to northeast until it went out of range. Iganis gets out his notes and calculates the precise direction in which it was last seen. He points towards the fields west of Innocence Falls – the same direction as the creatures' tracks were headed.

It is now twenty minutes or so since the device was switched off and Highclan, who is clearly visible to the north-west, has not deviated from its path. Nonetheless, Doress and Iganis promise to put a hold on their experiments for a few days. The heroes estimate that they have about a day before Highclan hits Innocence Falls, so although it is drawing towards dusk, they shoulder their bags, bid farewell to the wizards, and head off. It's going to be an all-nighter.

The Camp

The party arrives at the western edge of the fields a couple of hours after sunset. Soril conjures a mage light and Kavan gets out his lantern as they plod over ploughed land, looking for signs of the creatures. Thanks to Soril's tracking skills, after an hour or two they find them – the blackened remains of a campfire near an overhanging rock.

The party splits up to look for clues. Yrion finds a midden behind a nearby bush. Holding his nose, he examines the excrement he finds there – it's fresh and full of red kola nut shells, a delicacy prized by kobolds. Yria and Kavan discover more of the tracks, which Soril now definitively identifies as kobolds, and Gwindor spots more of the human/elf boot prints and some strange, rounded indentations on the ground near the campfire, as if several heavy objects had been set down. The tracks head out across the farmland, and the heroes follow them.

The Body

The party spends a couple of hours navigating fences and dodging sleeping cattle in the thin moonlight, relying on Soril's dark-adapted eyes to keep them on the trail. They are stumbling over the furrows in a ploughed field when he calls a halt. There is an ominous shape lying on the ground ahead. Closer inspection reveals it to be the corpse of an elderly farmer lying in a pool of blood. He has been stabbed with small knives several times and clearly died within the last few hours. There are small prints in the ploughed earth nearby, heading towards Innocence Falls.

The heroes look for a farm building and soon discover one about 100 yards away. There are no lights and it is eerily quiet. Suspecting that the murderers might have holed up there, Soril and Kavan sneak around the other side, intending to ambush them if they try to escape out the back. En route they notice a dropped bag of seed and some abandoned rakes and hoes. Meanwhile Yrion and Gwindor hide around the side of the house while Yria goes up and knocks on the front door. There is no response, but her sharp elven ears pick up some panicky whispering ("don't answer – it could be *them*!"). Yria puts on her most reassuring tones, explaining that she is an accredited member of the Adventurers' Guild who is investigating strange occurrences. There is more whispering ("I'm going to do it!") and the door unlocks, revealing a frightened-looking middle-aged woman holding a pitchfork. "Where's Heribert?" she asks.

Yria relays the sad news that her group has found a body as the other heroes show themselves. Kavan comforts the bereaved woman, ***Orlena Fernbrook,*** who introduces her young daughters ***Willow*** and ***Ama***, and the adolescent farmhand ***Jovan***. They are hiding from whispering spirits that Jovan and Orlena heard while sowing the fields at sunset. They say that the air was suddenly full of harsh whispers and a strange high-pitched humming sound, and they thought they could see faint shapes moving about. Terrified, they dropped their implements and ran for the farmhouse, where they barred the door. Heribert insisted on going out in the dark to collect them and didn't come back.

Orlena asks where the body is – she doesn't want it left out all night where vermin and scavengers could get at it. Kavan and Soril help her and Jovan retrieve it and Kavan leaves two gold pieces for the funeral. He also buys 2 bags of flour as he has concluded that the creatures must have an invisibility spell. Orlena wants them to stay until morning, but Yria insists that they must leave now if they are to catch up with Heribert's murderers. She tells Orlena to send Jovan to Innocence Falls when it's light – the paladins are sure to help.

The Band of the Singing Bones

The party continues to follow the tracks for another couple of hours, crossing the road from Horizon. They eventually end at a road which Soril reckons is the one that follows the northern edge of the Abyss to Bonedeep and Bastion of the Wyrm. In the first faint glow of the approaching dawn, Soril can just make out the walls of Innocence Falls about 100 yards to the south-east, and a path leading off the road heading east. The party can tell by the constant roar that the falls themselves are close, but they can hear something else - an uncanny hum of different notes that rise and fall, creating a disconcerting form of music that Kavan, Yrion and Soril find distracting. Yria's tentacles unfurl by themselves and point down the path, waving gently. Strikefast stirs restively and whispers "Boss – this isn't right!", but it's clearly the way to go.

The party take the path, which turns to the north and approaches the edge of the falls. They make use of the boulders and bushes that litter its western side to sneak up on whatever is ahead. When they are about 100 yards from the falls edge, Soril holds up a hand. He can hear voices speaking in Draconic, coming seemingly from the empty air. One – a human - is exhorting the others to "join the Great Gold Demon in the Abyss". Higher-pitched voices are expressing some doubt about the wisdom of this course of action – "I thought we were just going to toss the bones in and watch the chaos?" – but the human tells them that it is their destiny.

Soril sees no point in subterfuge, so he stands up and calls out in Draconic "Don't listen to the false prophet!" "We are discovered! Defend yourselves!" roars the voice. The heroes hear the snick of steel and the patter of many feet.



Falls Edge

Invisible cultists

Yria moves forward. Her tentacles point at a rapidly approaching enemy, and she swings Strikefast in a wide arc at waist height, connecting with a satisfying crunch that causes a yelp of pain. A small, black-robed figure wearing a golden mask suddenly appears and flies backwards several feet to lie still on the ground. Two other similarly-clad figures – clearly kobolds from their scaly hands and feet - are also revealed, brandishing knives. At their feet is a misshapen bone about 4 feet long, glowing with a faint purple light that brightens and fades in time with the eerie rising and falling hum that it is emitting. "Muffins, fetch!" orders Yria. Muffins leaps on the bone and both he and it disappear. The two kobolds attempt to stab Yria, but perhaps disheartened by the loss of their companion, fail to get through.

Yrion charges forward into the open space in front of the falls but is stopped when three more knife-wielding kobold cultists appear in front of him. They have also dropped a singing bone and Yrion grabs it, hoping that it will make him disappear. "Nice try, unbeliever!" cackles one of the kobolds, and stabs him. It seems that you need to be a cultist – or a cat – for the protection of the bones to work.

Soril has been preparing a spell and casts it on the two remaining kobolds in front of Yria, who collapse to the ground unconscious. He catches sight of two more kobolds in more elaborate masks who have appeared close to the river's edge, having dropped the bones that they were carrying. One of them throws a large parchment covered in runes on the ground, while the other cuts their hand with a sacrificial knife and drips blood on it. Crimson mist boils up from the paper, and a large draconic form begins to form above it.

The power of flour

Gwindor performs a drum roll and launches a thunderwave at the kobolds attacking Yrion. It misses two of them but the third is sent flying by the boom. Kavan calls upon the Moon and lobs his bag of flour towards the edge of the cliff, hoping to catch more invisible assailants. He succeeds – the bag bursts into a white cloud and the outline of a human figure is revealed, coughing. They are dressed in leather armour and have a chunk of rock and a fragment of bone on chains round their neck. This must be Leoven Alderheart, the renegade Golden Order cleric that the heroes heard about in Innocence Falls. "What are you doing, fools?" he shouts. "Stand down! This is the will of the Map Maker!"

"Don't believe you," says Yria, and throws a javelin at him that lodges in his shoulder. "I challenge you!" Leoven locks eyes with her. "Very well," he says. He raises the rock and the bone fragment. "Map

Maker, make this apostate tremble with your wrath!" The symbols glow for a moment, but nothing happens. "I'm a paladin. I fear nothing!" says Yria smugly.

A familiar ring

Yrion dodges past the kobolds who are still recovering from Gwindor's sonic blast, leaps over a rock and strikes at Leoven, who raises a hand to defend himself. A gleam of gold catches Yrion's eye. It's a ring, a close cousin of the one he won in his rigged frog race and presented to Yria on her sixteenth birthday, which resulted in the growth of her tentacles. Yrion briefly considers stealing it but decides not to.

Soril casts a spray of colours at the two remaining cultists near Yria. One slumps to the ground; the other runs forward to stab Soril, but trips over a tree root. Gwindor fires at the priests, whose ritual is almost complete, but misses. The shape above the summoning circle coalesces into a fearsome-looking demon drake with golden scales, leathery wings and red glowing eyes which flies towards Yria. Kavan quickly invokes the moon's blessing and a healing aura on Yria, who dives to one side as the drake breathes a roaring flame at her. She is unharmed, but the two sleeping kobolds are not so lucky.

A bob cat hat

Despite her challenge to Leoven, Yria chooses to swing at the drake, scoring a solid hit. Muffins has reappeared, having given up on trying to drag the bone, and uses Yria's shoulder as a launching pad to leap onto the drake's head, scratching at its eyes. Distracted, the drake misses when it tries to bite Yria.

Yrion takes another swipe at the flour-covered Leoven, knocking him out, and turns to face one of the priests who is running towards him. Soril stands over the prone cultist and clubs him with the pommel of his dagger. He notices that the other priest is pointing its glowing staff at Yria and quickly casts a counterspell that snuffs out the fireball that it was going to cast. Kavan and Gwindor run up and take the priest out between them.

Only one priest and the drake are still standing. Yrion takes out the former, while the others gang up on the demon, which goes down under a hail of blows and pops out of existence. Soril revives the cultist that he knocked out and charms him, while the others catch their breath.

Aftermath – a Bad Enemy to Make

As the heroes are to about interrogate Soril's captive, Alderheart suddenly lurches to his feet and staggers toward the summoning circle, which has burned into the rock. Before he can get there, Kavan runs over and knocks him off his feet, but he falls by a singing bone and grabs it, rolling over and vanishing from sight. Yrion and Gwindor rush over to block the way, but Leoven suddenly reappears, having dodged past them, and places his hands on the summoning circle. A red line appears down the middle of his face, and he splits in two with a wet squelch. A woman with horns, large bat wings and a pointy tail rises out of the corpse, her hands cracking with power. "Aw, you spoiled my fun," she says. "Let me introduce myself. I am Haska Blumentongue. But you may know me better as The Diabolist."



The Diabolist

“Honestly, you do-gooders have no sense of fun,” she continues. “Didn’t you *want* to see a koru behemoth rampage through a town of stuck-up paladins and then throw itself down a deep hole? Think of the screams! Think of the splat! Anyway, what’s done is done. I’ll be taking those back.” She makes a swirling gesture and the singing bones rise up and rotate around her.

“Farewell for now. I’m sure we’ll meet again. And just remember - I’ve got my eyes on you. Especially you.” She points at Yria, whose tentacles wrap themselves around her body, pinning her arms and legs. A dark vortex opens and the Diabolist and the bones sink into it. Yria’s tentacles gradually relax, as do the party.

Searching the bodies reveals some trinkets worth 100 imps or so. Yrion pockets Leoven’s ring, while Soril talks to his tame cultist but gets little of use out of them. As the sun rises, the party hears shouts of fear from Innocence Falls as Highclan appears on the horizon. It soon becomes evident, however, that the behemoth is turning south. The town is safe.

The heroes head after Highclan, stopping at the gates of Innocence Falls to leave a message with the bemused guards that there is now a Diabolist summoning circle to the north of the town. After half a day of travel they catch up with the behemoth, and are welcomed by the villagers, who are busy repairing the night phoenix damage and stocking up on water from the river for the long trek over the Red Wastes. Shakeetha hands over the promised reward and arranges a feast in their honour. The next day, the party begins the trek back to Horizon to report on their success.