

Empire of Ashes Session Summary 01/25/2009

Attendance

Bruce (Kalauben) is deeply confused, because he's been absent for the last two gaming sessions. Something about being exiled to the far reaches of the Frozen North, where Garrison Keillor is a native.

Brandie asks, "Who's Garrison Keillor?"

Chris (Garret Heftungen) quickly leaps in, "Nobody important! You don't need to know! Don't get him started on Garrison Keillor!"

Chuck offers, "Absolutely! The last time, we were trapped in Lake Wobegon Purgatory for hours!"

Paul (Ardreth) mourns, "Oh, the suffering! The suffering!"

Tim (Erf) points out, "I don't see what's wrong about mentioning *Prairie Home Companion*. It's not that bad; sometimes even I like to listen to it on Saturdays."

Ernest (Versane) quickly cuffs Tim to silence him.

Ed (Maurs) and *Patrick* (Umbutu) show up a bit later, as usual too late to be thoroughly mocked in print. They are not disappointed. Not a bit of it.

<i>Character</i>	<i>Player</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Ardreth the Arrogant	Paul	Thul-eth	Warlock	Vengeful, bald, green freak
Erf	Tim	Drolar	Monster	With bonus stitches and sewn-on muscles
Garret Heftungen	Chris	Drolar	Investigator	"Extra-dirty"
Kalauben	Bruce	Vashaen	Wandering Swordsman	He carries two blades and wants to right wrongs.
Maurs the Enforcer	Ed	Aemoni	Enforcer	Underworld guy, complete with leather trenchcoat
Umbutu the Unlucky	Patrick	Gorg	Witch Doctor	Not only is he unlucky, he's also plump. And a savage from the hills.
Versane the Arrogant	Ernest	Aemoni	Noble	Part of the rulers of the Empire

Wounded in Valix's Compound

The characters are halfway into the urban compound of the villainous *Valix*. *Erf* is badly, badly wounded and *Umbutu the Unlucky* is out of healing mojo. On the plus

side, *Kalauben the Wanderer* was discovered locked up in the aged thul-eth warlock *Zeblatha's* hut, providing some additional firepower.

Ardreth the Arrogant walks in, happy beyond reason. “Hey, guys! I just learned the Bodyguard spell! I can summon up a tentacled monster! It’s so great!” The others do their best to suppress their shudder responses.

Erf realizes that he’s gained an extra Bennie because he just regained consciousness. “Erf got lucky!” The others presume that Erf is speaking of something else entirely...

Apropos of nothing, *Garret* comments, “Anybody want to weigh my meat?” Everyone except Erf shudders. Erf moves to raise his hand, until he realizes that *Maurs* is frantically shaking his head “No!”

The characters also have quite a bit of loot to distribute, including a pile of shortswords, three bows (with quivers and arrows) and some leather armor. The others decide to show mercy upon Kalauben and give him one of the bows. They split up the actual cash amongst themselves.

Special items include a charged *Power Crystal* (which contains 5 Power Points for a magician to use) and an *Argentium Dagger* (which provides an additional 1d8 damage on a raise, rather than 1d6 damage). Umbutu takes the crystal to help in his efforts to heal Erf, but notes that he will hand the item over to *Ardreth* because the warlock should be able to recharge it better. *Garret* takes the argentium dagger.

Erf stirs feebly and makes a noise that *Garret* confuses for a weed-eater. While Umbutu dabs at Erf’s wounds, *Versane* comments, “I wonder if Erf is for sale.” He ponders possible interested buyers. As he thinks, Umbutu rams his thumb right into Erf’s intestines. Erf makes a sound almost exactly like a transmission seizing up. *Versane* reflects, “Perhaps my thoughts of selling him to the knackers aren’t entirely theoretical.” Umbutu continues working, but only barely manages to avoid actually killing Erf.

Regrouping for the Attack

Versane comments, “You know, we’re really only here to get a brooch back from Valix. I don’t think that means we need to kill everyone in the zip code, so perhaps we should avoid encountering Arturo the Fence in his warehouse.”

Garret points out, “I think your sudden sense of compassion has more to do with the fact that we’re all horribly wounded rather than any deep-seated morality. After all, an hour ago you were calling for genocide.”

Versane answers, “Well, obviously!”

Ardreth locates a jar containing a severed thul-eth head suspended in a glowing blue liquid. While everyone else is gazing at it, Kalauben tries a sip of the blue liquid. He reports some nausea and a horrible, horrible taste. Ardreth rolls his eyes and proclaims, “This is not an object of great mystical import! It is merely a ghoulish portable lantern. The blue liquid does have preservative properties, but the head is simply meat. Ask it any questions you like, but it won’t answer back!”

Eth observes the gagging Kalauben and comments, “Pretty person technically smarter than Eth, but even Eth know to not drink glowing blue liquid.”

Assault on the Warehouse

The characters move out into the courtyard, where the rain has washed away most of the blood but hasn’t done anything for the putrid water in the festering fountain. Ardreth examines the fountain and proclaims, “This is surely not the fountain that has been dedicated to the Forgotten Ones! It is merely in terrible condition! And the water will surely poison any who should drink of it!” He gazes harshly towards Kalauben.

Kalauben is too busy sneaking up on the big double door. The others simply walk up to it. Garret just opens it and looks inside. The warehouse interior is lit by sparse lanterns. A work gang of gorg and aemoni is scurrying around clearing up boxes and generally acting as if things are going way out of control.

Garret and Kalauben sneak in and get into position. Versane simply strides in after them and yells out, “Hey! We’re here to talk to Arturo!”

One of the workers yells, “I know those guys! They killed everyone in the courtyard!”

Garret yells back, “Technically we didn’t kill *all* of them! Some of them are still drowning in fetid rainwater out there!”

Umbutu sends his pet wolf in to savage one of the workers. Kalauben follows up with his two blades, cutting the man down. Versane shoots another minion, wounding him.

Aldreth takes the encounter to a whole new level when he intones, “Horrible terrors from the forbidden depths of Hell come to serve me!” His terrible minion manifests and flings itself at a worker who screams straight from the lungs. The others turn away as the creature envelops the worker in its tentacles. They hear the awful sounds of marrow being torn straight from living bone.

Garret lumbers towards a worker with his flail. The worker fails to evade and takes the flail head right to his ribs. While the worker struggles, Garret moves back and cracks his companion in the spine. He laughs with glee as the three workers around him all stagger, a laugh that ends when the third worker stabs at him and forces him back against a stack of crates.

Arturo the Fence moves in, slashing at Kalauben. Versane takes the opportunity to shoot an arrow through Arturo’s sleeve, pinning his arm to a large crate. Versane intones, “Surrender or die!”

Maurs draws a bead upon an injured worker. His arrow pierces the fellow’s ribcage and drops him.

Umbutu’s wolf tears his way through the worker on Arturo’s flank. Versane clubs Arturo on the head, knocking him out. Meanwhile, Umbutu and Garret finish the last of the workers.

Versane looks at the bodies. He asks, “Are there enough to make a muppophone? Let’s count... one, two, three, seven! Yes! Okay Erf, start severing heads so I can arrange them by tone.” Garret groans. Kalauben volunteers to help tune. Erf ignores the decadent party members and starts harvesting spare parts.

This Is a Terrible Warehouse

Umbutu starts to explore the warehouse. The others have already determined that this is a terrible warehouse: rain is already leaking down from the second floor and most of the crates and bales on the first floor are clearly ruined. However, he does manage to find a *Basalt Idol*. Aldreth examines it and proclaims, “This is magical, but I do not know its purpose. It was carved long ago in the lands of Hanara! Surely it is an object of great mystery!”

Erf holds up a silver filigreed lantern and grunts, “Erf find light!” The others decide that it is worth about 30 denarii.

Maurs finds an old but still serviceable pair of shoes. Then in the right shoe he finds a set of hidden lockpicks, and in the left shoe he finds a very old coin made of platinum.

Garret doesn’t say much: he has found an ashwolf pelt that he really, really likes.

Ardreth finds a mud-encrusted idol that he feels has arcane potential. He concentrates upon it, attempting to invoke its powers. He succeeds! The idol’s power floods through him, healing a wound. In the distance, he hears Umbutu yell out as he suffers a wound in exchange. And thus the balance of the universe is maintained.

With the rest of the warehouse picked clean, the characters turn to looting Arturo and his men. They find:

- 5 auri;
- 38 denarii;
- 18 sestertii;
- 8 shortwords; and
- 7 sets of leather armor;

Interrogating Arturo

Versane leads out in the interrogation of Arturo. The man doesn’t hold out long, swiftly admitting that he doesn’t know anything about *Lady Shenyra*, but he does know that Valix has a brooch resembling the brooch stolen from her. He is also more than eager to give over a very nice cane with a brass head and an iron-shod foot, an item that both looks nice and can be used as a melee weapon doing STR+d6 damage. He explains that his job was just to sell off the goods that Valix and his inner circle didn’t personally want. He hasn’t seen any of them for about a week and a half, but he’s certain that Valix has a collection of allies in the house.

And then Versane cuts off one of Arturo’s hands as punishment for thievery and sends him on his way. Kalauben protests, “That was monstrous! Isn’t there a sense of justice in this world at all?”

Garret takes a different tack, congratulating Versane, “Nicely handled. I do not believe that King Solomon could have handled the situation any better.”

The characters spend at least an hour in the warehouse looting, bandaging, and interrogating. Versane makes a point of watching the main house as much as he can, but he doesn’t see any activity.

Valix’s Stronghold

The characters very carefully approach Valix’s Stronghold at the far end of the compound. The house is tall, with one large door and two shuttered windows. Umbutu listens at the door and reports that he hears the sounds of a comforting, warming fire.

Versane peers through the windows and reports, “I think I see a couple of braziers. That’s the fire that Umbutu hears.”

Kalauben comes up behind him and reports, “Yes, there are two braziers. Plus an array of divans arranged around two large tables, plus a long bar and a single large bed in the corner. There’s a portly form sleeping there under mosquito netting, and two figures standing guard. The roof here is leaking too, and the whole place is spotted with ripe mildew. There are meathooks hanging from the ceiling, and chains, so this is probably where the drolar flesh-collectors plotted and planned.”

Maurs volunteers, “I have lockpicks and the skill to use them!” The others give him his moment in the sun. He opens the door up. Kalauben leads the way as everyone troops inside.

As the characters enter, they realize that there are two snipers clinging to the rafters far above. The archers open fire. Ardreth takes a poisoned arrow in the throat, but reports to the others, “It didn’t hurt me! I’m okay!” A second archer blows his shot and drops his crossbow.

The first archer speaks a vicious curse against his comrade and shoots Maurs, leaving him shaken. Umbutu crows out, “Fly, my monkeys! Fly!” Versane obliges by taking to wing and sending an arrow at the archer.

Kalauben moves across the room and cuts down one of the guards next to the bed, realizing a bit late that the guard was actually just a straw-stuffed dummy. He explains to the others, “It was a well-equipped dummy with special training! It had nerves of steel and blood like ice!” Umbutu sends his wolf to tear apart the other dummy.

Aldreth intones forbidden words. His tentacle monster manifests up on the rafters and launches itself into the archer.

Garret runs to the bed and swings his axe at the sleeping figure. He is rewarded with a suitably horrible spray of blood and entrails.

One archer leaps down to the ground and stabs Kalauben, apparently clean through the lungs. Kalauben coughs and explains, "You'll never believe this, but he didn't hit anything important with that strike. It was just a flesh wound." Kalauben turns to dueling with the bodyguard. The two exchange cuts and stabs.

Garret takes a look at the body on the bed, quickly determining that it was a street urchin who had been tied up as a sacrificial lamb.

Aldreth, unsatisfied to let his tentacle monster inflict all the damage, unleashes a barrage of mystic bolts. The bodyguard shudders as the bolts strike home, but he does not fall.

Erf howls because he is unable to reach the sniper on the rafters. He roars in anger, then chops clean through it. The severed rafter strikes him on the forehead and sends the tentacle monster and the bodyguard flailing all around. Erf tells the others, "No need to fear for Erf! Beam only strike on head! Nothing important damaged!" Nobody doubts the drolar monster's words.

Umbutu tries to move out of the way, barely dodging the fallen bodyguard's rapier stab. The bodyguard scowls, then dies in a cloud of ice crystals as Aldreth strikes him with a mystic bolt.

The second bodyguard faces down both Garret and Kalauben. Garret steps in and hammers the man with his flail, leaving him shaken and vulnerable to Kalauben's shortsword. The two of them leave the man barely standing.

Aldreth helps the scene by launching one last, feeble mystic blast. He tells the others, "Okay, that's it for me! I'm all out of magic now!" Garret muses on what a wonderful world it would be if only the warlock wouldn't shout out his weaknesses to anyone who might be listening. Kalauben makes the problem academic by cutting the bodyguard down.

The Aftermath of the Fight

Quick review determines that both of the bodyguards are alive, but desperately wounded. The urchin, sadly, is dead. And Umbutu is far too injured to be able to reliably heal anyone else.

Erf very helpfully comments, “Erf’s people’s big trick is the ability to heal our own wounds without taking wound penalties! Erf doesn’t actually know this trick, however.” The others ignore him and loot the two bodyguards, finding:

- 500 denarii;
- 2 suits of leather armor;
- 2 *Argentium Rapiers*;
- 2 short bows;
- 7 arrows poisoned with rat-spider venom;
- 20 regular arrows.

Versane and Kalauben each claim one of the *Argentium Rapiers*.

What Is Downstairs?

Umbutu searches the chamber and finds a trapdoor to the basement in one corner. Versane looks down into the darkness and contributes, “It’s like a swiveling emplacement that spits out epithets!” Nobody else has any idea what he’s talking about.

The characters briefly debate who should go first. Kalauben volunteers first, on the grounds that he is curious, stealthy and unwounded.

Aldreth points out, “Why are we proceeding? I’m as useless as a doorstep right now, we really need to rest up for a while.”

Versane explains, “We wanted to find out if this was an escape passage or a dungeon complex of some sort. Now that we know it’s a dungeon complex we’re going to withdraw quietly as long as those four guys don’t notice us.” He attempts to explain this using gestures only, leading Umbutu to think, “He says there are four guys, plus two panzer tanks and one tiger tank.”

An Interlude to Recover

The characters move back into the main building. Garret orders Erf, “Put something heavy on the trapdoor!” Erf puts Umbutu on the trapdoor. Then he flips over a table and goes to sleep underneath it.

Kalauben watches this performance and muses, “He’s almost exactly like one of those trolls that live underneath bridges.”

Garret corrects him, “He’s like Jason Voorhees. And none of us have ever seen Jason Voorhees sleep, so let’s assume he knows what he’s doing.”

After determining that Umbutu is useless to heal anyone if they were wounded more than an hour ago, the characters turn to the potential of Ardreth’s *Mud-Encrusted Idol of Life Stealing* to heal them up. Erf proposes, “Erf find many human urchins, and we use their life essences to heal ourselves.”

Kalauben objects, “May I point out that I have a code of ethics, and I feel that this plan is utterly monstrous!”

Erf answers, “Erf have code of honor! Erf loyal to friends, and do not lie! This not lying, and does not hurt friends! So is okay!”

Kalauben shudders. But then Ardreth points out that it is possible to hire people to perform healing, or to purchase *Healer Juice* from the marketplace at 50 denarii a bottle. A bottle of *Healer Juice* gives a character the ability to roll a free soak attempt, perhaps eliminating some wounds.

After a short trip to the market, one potion, and a good night of sleep, Ardreth very happily announces, “I was very fortunate! I have completely healed myself with only a single potion! My compliments to the alchemist!”

Umbutu rather glumly answers him, “I just poisoned myself...”

The characters spend several days drinking *Healer Juice* and recovering. Ardreth punctuates the experience, “I’m all healed and full of magic!”

Return to the Catacomb

The characters sneak back into the catacombs, but they don’t do it very cleverly. The four cultists on station around the brazier in the corridor realize that the characters are approaching very quickly.

Garret leads the way, running right up to one cultist and slamming him down with his flail.

Erf screams out, “Gonads in the lightning!” Nobody understands why, but several folks suspect that he might be quoting Metallica lyrics, because who really knows what those guys are doing these days.

The remaining cultists go down like ninepins. Maurs observed, “These guys were clearly not equipped to deal with violence on the level we are accustomed to providing.”

Erf sticks his head through the hole Ardreth’s eldritch bolt left in a cultist’s torso. He rumbles, “Erf is an amusement park! Erf sticks head through torsos! All the children laugh and dance!”

Umbutu warns the others, “I think Erf is craaaazy.” The others note that they did not much need the warning. They do loot the cultists, coming up with:

- 15 denarii;
- 4 daggers

The Prison Hall

The characters sneak up into the next portion of the complex, a large room full of cultists standing guard around four large cages full of captives. Kalauben is able to see two humans in one cage.

The characters swiftly arrange a plan: Versane moves up and will shoot one cultists, then pull back so the characters will take them in the corridor where they can control the environment.

Versane’s shot wounds a cultist. Three cultists move to the charge, and Kalauben cuts down the first of them. Maurs’ arrow ends a second, pinning the man to the stone wall. Versane shoots down the third. Ardreth calls out, “Send more goons!”

The second wave doesn’t last any longer than the first. Versane calls out, “No mercy, boys!” Erf is overtaken with enthusiasm: he rushes around the corner, charges a cultist, and manages to avoid the fellow’s prepared strike only through blind luck. He tears right through the cultist, shredding the man like tissue paper. Blood-soaked tissue paper. A second cultist runs up to Erf and chops at him, but doesn’t last long: Versane kills him with an arrow.

The last cultist attempts to flee. Ardreth launches a volley of freezing bolts at him, but misspeaks a particularly damaging syllable and renders himself shaken. Other characters run the man down.

The cages prove to contain two humans, two thul-eth and three female vashaen. Kalauben is incensed, “What happened to you? How did you end up in this ghastly, poorly-decorated pit?” While Kalauben tries to interrogate the vashaen, Versane evaluates the prisoners to decide which would make the best domestic servant.

While two of the vashaen are cowering in the back of the cage, the third is standing proud at the cage door. She demands to be let free. After a moment, Versane recognizes her as the *Baroness Shonta of Salaaur*. He orders the other characters, “Find keys, my minions! The Baroness and her servants must be freed!”

The thul-eth include the elderly scholar *Laurelle* and his apprentice *Nevarelle*. The scholar is visibly quite aged and infirm, but he promises Ardreth that if he is given his freedom he will more than make it worth his while.

Garret whispers to Versane, “We’re rescuing the Baroness? I’m not sure that Cobra Commander will pay a reward for her return...”

Aldreth offers, “But Destro will!”

Versane suggests, “Nice pants! I will call you Trouser Snake!”

Garret replies, “Bang! Bang! Oh dear God, why won’t it stop!”

Versane answers, “It was always Fumbles.”

Nobody else has any idea what Ardreth, Versane and Garret are talking about. They strongly suspect that there were some bad mushrooms in yesterday’s soup.

The characters escort Baroness Shonta and her two servants back to a safe place. Once she is safe, the characters let Ardreth take the two thul-eth wherever they want to go (“To the happiest place in the world: Tijuana, Mexico!”)

After the Rescue

The characters march back into the catacombs. They follow the signs: one corridor is decorated with skulls and strange symbols. The characters walk into a large room. The far side of the room is decorated with a statue of a large clawed creature, flanked by

two fiery braziers. A king's ransom in gold and jewelry lies between the creature's claws.

Erf and Umbutu run for the hoard as fast as their little legs can carry them.

The others hold back, convinced that this will not end well. Several of them notice that the side walls of the chamber are dotted with hundreds of little holes. The cry rings out, "Don't touch it! Watch out for the darts! Hundreds and hundreds of darts!"

Erf ignores the warning and starts digging through the coins, looking for the missing brooch. He doesn't find it. Umbutu goes for the statue's eyes. Suddenly, the ruby eyes swivel down to look at Umbutu. He flings himself to the side, but isn't swift enough to evade the creature's claw. It tears a long wound down his flank.

Versane steps up (into range of the darts) and lands a rat-poison-laden arrow into the creature, which by now has transformed from solid metal into apparently living chitin and tissue. The arrow bounces harmlessly off the creature's hide.

Erf grips his greatsword firmly in his rough-skinned hands and swings in roundhouse style. His strike slams into the creature, leaving it shaken. Erf calls out, "Erf need help!"

Garret decides that Erf is actually in pretty good shape. He explores one of the side doors, finding a Y-corridor. Versane cautions him, "Don't get us any adds!"

Kalauben and Maurs open fire on the creature, peppering it with arrows.

Ardreth steps up and announces, "Here comes the artillery!" He launches three freezing eldritch bolts at the creature, blasting it into pieces. Everyone cheers as Ardreth explains, "That cost me an immense amount of magical energy."

Erf tells the others, "I took the loot! It all still real!" The others check Erf's back and verify that he's collected:

- 25 auri;
- 120 denarii;
- 850 sestertii;
- 5 gems each worth 15 denarii;
- A pearl necklace worth 20 denarii;
- A ring worth 10 denarii;
- A *Firesteel Dagger*.

Garret very quickly determines that the two corridor branches he is looking at are dead ends.

The End of the Session

The characters finish in the altar chamber, ready to continue exploring the catacombs. Each character gains five experience points and gains an additional improvement.