

Asheraven Play Report #2

Another good Thursday morning brings the second installment of the Asheraven play report from my weekly Basic Fantasy game. These first few reports are tasked with bringing events to the present all the way from the start in February 2022. If this handwriting nonsense is off-putting, then find relief in knowing this is the second of a mere three letters that shall be sent like this. I will also repeat that these reports will be revisited after the 29th of January to be typed in proper fashion.

When we resume play, all but one of the original group have been replaced. The four characters are Laurana, Aileen, Vlad, and Figlar, and they've just agreed to spy on Aldo, a local restaurant proprietor, to learn his secret to his irresistible steaks. First, however, the party wants to check out the caravan that has recently arrived in town. There are many vendors, but it is the line of wagons which contain Gandolfo's circus (or rather, the tents and materials that will be so) that catches the party's attention. The immediate detail that stands out are the two flabby hill giants that sit leaning against the second eye-catcher — that being the cart containing the freakshow specimens. The giants are shackled at wrists and ankles, and one of them is sleeping while the other pushes dirt around with his fingers in a bored manner. The freaks, whose wagon is covered in thick canvas, chatter in a gibberish tongue. Figlar strikes up a conversation with the giant, learning his name is Rag and inquiring about the circus, and offers the giant a ration in so doing. Rag says that he and the other giant, Tag, are prisoners to Gandolfo the Ringmaster. They suffer under the smart, merciless whips of the clowns, who

are compulsive drunkards. Ray was kidnapped by the circus from far away, but he says Tag is a recent addition and was sold to the circus by other giants. Ray did not actually see that exchange, but he heard the voices. He gains the sympathies of the party over this conversation, and they vow to free the giants from Gandolfo. Ray also allows the party to take a peek at the freaks, although he warns that he's been told to scare people away from the freaks, "so be quick". The freaks just jabber, but the party feels as if they are actually speaking a coherent language - just one they're not familiar with. The freaks themselves are truly deserving of their title, appearing to be horrific combinations of man and beast of all variety.

Despite their interest in the circus, the party did learn in the time between sessions some information regarding Aldo. They learned that Aldo approached at least one Farmer Vinkle to partner with, but the farmer refused. Another angle, offered by Domino in fact, was that the "distributor in the wilderness" could be a ruse and that Aldo may be using the lands of Lord Tarban, the vassal of Narwell, illegally. These lands are lent to farmers as needed to ensure bountiful harvests. When they are not under lease, they are typically reclaimed by grasses and wild flowers or used for other civil purposes; the circus would use a portion of this meadow when the time comes to set up. Pursuant to these rumors, the party travels to Farmer Vinkle's homestead, although, being a cattleman, he's technically a rancher. Anyway, he receives the party cautiously but also graciously. He confirms that Aldo did approach him with the prospect of partnership. Vinkle says he declined, because, not only did Aldo want to build a large compound on the ranch, but he also would forbid Vinkle from entering it. The farmer says that Aldo claimed to have discovered a new method

of rearing cattle the makes the resulting beef unbelievably tender and perfectly marbled, but the effort would be completely for naught if the cattle were disturbed in any way. "I'm Farmer Vinkle damn it," Farmer Vinkle proclaimed, "The best way to care for beef cattle is already well-known, and it's the way I do it. Last I'd heard anyway, Aldo didn't know how to do nothin' but run a meaty-ochre café. What's he know about cattle?" Vinkle said he thought he'd heard from another farmer, letterman, that Aldo approached him but was similarly turned away. If Aldo built his compound out here, at least with the plans Vinkle saw, it'd be a highly visible stone structure tens of yards in length and width and twenty or thirty feet high.

Seeming to have reached the conclusion of that thread, the party inexplicably purchased two of Farmer Vinkle's beef cattle and set them to draw a cart so they didn't have to walk everywhere. They also resolved to sneak into Aldo's after closing to see if any secrets were being kept within. Since it would be still a few hours until then, the party prowled through the town hoping to find yet more information. Figlar did not join them and, instead, got in line at Aldo's for a steak for Rag. The only information gained by the party was found out while watching and waiting for Aldo's to close for the night after Figlar rejoined them. They saw the cart driver, who stops at Aldo's at open and closing, filling the crates and barrels of his cart and loading them onto it. He seemed to be taking everything - trash, leftovers, and everything else - except utensils and cookware and laundered items. The latter, he did handle those, were put into a large canvas bag, which then was cinched shut and left by the backdoor. I should have mentioned that they were observing the back side of Aldo's from their vantage

point, hidden in the tall grass of a small hill. The cartman was a stout, muscled human of just-past middle age. He never let the cart far out of sight, and, just before driving the pair of oxen off to pull it, he carefully and tediously checked the bed of the cart but not the underside nor in any of the containers. Once he was gone, four ordinary-looking, albeit sweaty and greasy, humans exited from the backdoor and were soon followed by a sweatier and greasier cheeseball of a man. He very obviously was the proprietor Aldo himself, and he looked around cautiously as he made the arduous journey from the inside of the door frame to the outside. Giving one final, slow look about, he locked the back door, stuffed the key in a fold of skin, and broke away in a brisk walk, apparently only having pretending to be slowed by his size moments earlier.

The party waited another thirty minutes or so before sending Laurana down from the hill to unlock the door. Finding success, she waved the others down, Vlad taking the lead. He opened the door quietly but quickly and nearly ran right into one of Aldo's guard dogs, which stood fiercely growling. Another was making its way over to join the first, also hostile. The party, fortunately, won initiative, and Figlar cast his only prepared spell Sleep, which succeeded in putting the two beasts, the only sentries for the restaurant, soundly to sleep. The party entered into the kitchen, and, careful not to leave any trace, rifled through every drawer, cabinet, and bin looking for anything that might reveal Aldo's secret. Nothing of merit was uncovered, although a chest with robes inside was found. The robes were made of purple-dyed cotton with yellow star-shaped patches sewn all over. Figlar took a robe as a souvenir, and the party's attention

moved to the high shelves near the ceiling, which followed the entire perimeter of the room. What was really interesting, however, was the fact that the shelves held a variety of glass vessels of many colors, shapes, and sizes, each of which contained equally diverse contents among them. The party picked one at random, and Figler inspected it, finding that it was little more than colored water. Nothing suspicious seemed to be found in the kitchen, and they did not search the dining area. The party departed, being sure to lock the back door again, and made plans to follow Aldo's delivery man when he came by the next day.

It was also some time around here that I created Greasy Bruli to handle shopping between sessions as well as in-session over periods of a week or more. His mechanics are available in my letter which displays all my house rules. Anyway, as planned, the party stalked out near the restaurant, waited for the cart (and debated hiding in or on it, deciding against both), and followed it at a distance of about a hundred feet. They were not alone, in fact, and they found that about a half dozen others in total were also following, although they pretended, badly, that they weren't. The cart handler made frequent backward glances, surely spotting all in his wake, but otherwise ignored the affair. The route followed by the cart was twisted and undeveloped, leading just onto the foothills of a mountain range. The trail was soon tightly choked on both sides by a wild forest. At this point, only the party was still following the cart. It rounded a corner, and, when the PCs did as well, they found the trail ahead, where the cart should have been, totally empty. They figured the cart must have picked up speed and walked straight through the illusion, where they saw the cart

just ahead as normal as it was before. The party moved more stealthily now, avoiding the eye of the driver. The trail concluded at a structure very similar to that described by Farmer Vinkle. They saw a wall constructed of rough-hewn stone blocks that went up about twenty feet and across a much farther distance. Passing through a heavy wooden door—the only visible portal in the wall—just large enough to squeeze through was the cart. Two guards stood on either side of it, shut it, and assumed a vigilant stance into the forest. The guards here bore the tabard of those in Narwell and appeared to be official in all respects. The party had Laurana climb a tree to try and see what was over the wall; they could see a roof over a large area but not much else. While she did that, the others were plotting a way into the compound.

From her tree, Laurana saw a large stone building with a simple thatched roof. It measured at least fifty feet long and about half as wide, and the thinner sides were parallel to the door entering the compound. The visible side had a plain wooden door in its center. There was a much smaller building next to the larger, being about ten-by-twenty, this one having the longer sides parallel the main door and with another plain wooden door set against the right edge of its face. Laurana also spotted four more guards within the structure's walls, and, though they also wore Narwellian tabards, they were clearly not true guardsmen. Their mannerisms just weren't right. At ground level, the party pooled their intellects and inventories to come up with a sound entry plan. Figlar had previously experimented and invented a way to make a timed firebomb with a bottle of oil and a candle. The idea is to break off part of a candle into the mouth of the vial (conveniently, a candle fit perfectly there), light the wick, and either wait or throw it, shattering the vial and igniting the oil. He would set one of

these "charges" nearby the entrance while the other three would navigate to the side of the compound closer to the large building. Aileen would set her grapple hook into the wall with a rope to climb over, move around the wall back to where Figlar could see her, and give a signal. At that, the charge would be lit, Figlar would scamper to the party, they'd scale the wall, and split to search the two buildings. Vlad and Figlar would search the smaller and Aileen and Laurana would search the larger. As for the activities of these inside the compound observed by Laurana, who was still in the tree as of that moment, the cart went to the back of the large building, and its driver came back on foot and entered the smaller building. The four guards inside seemed bored, talking about nonsense. The two guards outside were vigilant as ever. Laurana descended, told the party what she saw as they shared the plan with her, and they got into position to really pull it off.

I hate to leave the report off on a cliffhanger, I really do, but real demands on my time prevent me from writing much more for today. With the amount I have written, though it spans fifteen pages now, at least in the notebook, I fear it may be three, four, or even five more letters before the play reports are caught up to the present. Perhaps the number will be reduced after the next one (which will be the final one written by hand), since I'll be at a keyboard again. We shall see. In the meantime, thank you again for reading, especially if you are powering through the original, handwritten manuscripts, in which case may God bless you with such unwavering perseverance in all other things as well. So good bye, until next week.

- miqued