

## Ground Up 13 - Part of the Solution

The party sat patiently in the warden's office, it had not been a long walk from the inn, and the dour man had not been present on their arrival. Sven had an ache in his right arm and kept getting pins and needles in his legs. The Stoneskin potion had worn off during the walk over, and he had started feeling some of the hits taken. His pain and discomfort must have been readily apparent as Dalia passed him a minor healing potion to help him recover. He popped the cork and downed it, the warmth soon relaxing some of his aches. Rhain looked a little bruised, but his pouting about not also receiving a healing potion was replaced by another anxious mood once they had entered the jailhouse.

After what seemed like an eternity for Sven's tired body, eventually, the warden came in through one of the side doors into his office. He stood by his desk, and even in the low light of the same single candle, he looked stressed and anxious. It was not surprising, given the arrival of that poor monk and news about the monastery, Sven thought to himself as he idly played with the small empty potion bottle. He could feel Dalia staring daggers at him, waiting for him to return it.

"Well, you guys sure look like shit." The warden wasn't wrong; all of them, aside from Dalia, had at least had some form of blood, dirt, or spilt ale all over their previously pristine white jerkins. Sven felt like he had just risen from the grave, and Rhain had an impressive black eye, and his nose was swollen. The warden sighed and rubbed his face. "I guess I should have known the group that knocked off a bunch of Redfang members would cause trouble in the local establishment." Once his hand left his face, the stress faded, and he was back to his imposing self, magnified by the underlighting the candle was giving him. He glared at them. "I know you didn't start it, so let's just shelve that for now. More importantly, there is this." From out of one of his folders, he slid a piece of paper across the wooden table and took a seat behind his desk.

Rhain picked up the paper. Sven attempted to crane his neck to read it too, but the lighting wasn't even good enough to pick any words out. The ranger finished scanning through it for information and let out a groan. "What does it say?" Sven asked, not particularly keen on finding out the answer giving that reaction, but hopefully if this meeting got concluded quicker, he could sleep for a day or two.

"Eh, so they found out what happened at the old camp, and reasoning that the ones who did it might have come up from Crann, the 'fangs are setting up a barricade across the route from here to Hamstell in the north. It's the route that would be closest to the monastery, I guess."

Sven tried to process the details, his brain resisting the function. "A barricade? To stop any travellers going through, or to find us, should we travel that way?"

"No," the warden clarified, "they intend to kill anyone attempting to travel along that road until the ones responsible for the raid are brought to Eric for 'justice'." The way the last word came out of the warden's mouth cemented that he felt the same as Sven in that matter.

The room fell into silence as the weight of this sank in on everyone. Due to their actions, there may be potential further innocent casualties if the bandits weren't stopped, and how

long did they intend to hold the road, just until they got their hands on the party? What would stop them from doing the same even if they did turn themselves over? Dalia was the first to break the silence.

"You've stopped all outgoing travel that way already, I assume?" The warden nodded as she continued. "I guess we know what we need to do then, right guys?"

Sven winced and avoided her gaze. He knew what she was thinking as it was the obvious solution. But right now, he would rather dive into a nice fiery pit of spikes than consider the plan ahead of them. Theon was absent-mindedly staring off into the corner of the room, seemingly not paying any attention to anything that had been said so far. Rhain was the only one to give the alchemist a reasoned response.

"Sooo, yer thinking of bustin' down this barricade, of course?" He seemed to have considered this, as he rubbed his chin, but the look in his light blue eyes gave away that his decision had already been made.

Sven didn't like that; it was the look that sent many adventurers into danger for the slightest glimmer of glory or gold. He slumped further back in his chair, defeated. There would be no talking them out of it. Plus, it was kind of their responsibility to do something about the barricade.

"Can we at least do it in the morning," he pleaded with eyes closed, much to their amusement.

"I think you've earned a rest after saving us at the tavern," Dalia smiled, nudging him in the shoulder. *Which hurt*, but Sven managed a pained smile in return. The warden cleared his throat, partly in an attempt to remind them he was in charge here and to get their attention.

"Now, before you go running off getting yourselves killed or us in more trouble," he paused to give another signature glare from below his thick brows. "The monks were from the Order of Her Guidance. We haven't been able to get a message to their main temple as of yet, but as luck would have it, one of their paladins happened to be nearby."

Theon visibly jolted at this information, drawing eyes from everyone in the room. For the first time since Sven had met the odd wizard, he looked on edge and uncomfortable. An awkward pause followed before the warden continued.

"I've tried to avail her of the danger of the situation, but she is headstrong in joining alongside any efforts to avenge the monks or retake the monastery" he shrugged, clearly having tried his best but with no luck in convincing the paladin otherwise.

"So they want to join our party, at least in the short term." Sven sat upright, seeking clarification.

"That is my assumption, yes."

"When are they joining us?" Theon spoke out, the question forced through a fake grin.

"Oh, she is here right now." The warden extended a hand to the side door as it opened up, as if for dramatic effect.

Theon snapped his head wide-eyed towards the doorway, gripping the sides of his chair until his knuckles turned white. The sound of heavy metal footsteps entered into the room.

They all turned to face the paladin as she entered the room. Clad in ornate full metal armour which gleamed golden in the soft candlelight, she had short cropped golden hair and a rugged but beautiful face. She stopped a few feet into the room and gave a slight bow, as much as her armour allowed anyway.

"Greetings, great farmers," she began, her voice powerful and melodic. "It is an honour to meet you and offer Her Guidance to those who are in need. I am Brenna Ultworthy".

Sven looked over at Theon, the wizard seemed more relaxed now, but his head tilted in curiosity. The reaction had been intriguing and even more out of the ordinary than the rangers, but he would have to shelve those thoughts for now.

"Not farmers," Dalia corrected bluntly.

"Not sure we need your help either," Rhain added.

"It's not optional," the warden stood back up, stretching his legs. "Brenna has been tasked by her order to investigate, and you'll fare much better with her assistance than if you go separately."

Probably true, Sven thought. If nothing else, having someone else up front in the melee with him that had better armour would also increase his survivability. Depending on how powerful the paladin was, she would also have some beneficial magical powers granted by their benefactor, healing and protection most likely. He understood the trepidation of the rest of the party. An outside influence could be a big stick in the mud for how the party chose to proceed with their adventuring. Especially a paladin, who may have strict moral objections to standard adventuring fare like, say, murder or looting. Plus, he was just settling in as the new member; it might be too much too soon.

"Alright, but you are assisting us, not the other way around. We will call the shots," he spoke for the rest of the group, who still looked reluctant, but their glances agreed with his phrasing of the acceptance.

The paladin flashed a brilliant smile in return. "Of course, I only wish to bring some peace and justice for my fallen brothers."

Sven glanced at Rhain and Dalia, who both shrugged in resignation. Theon just had a blank look of his amusement on his face at the sight of the paladin. It looked like it had been agreed, if not for lack of option.

"We will need to group up to plan then. Come meet us at the edge of the village where the northern forest starts - there's a pond with some tables; we will go over the plans then."

Brenna nodded, and the rest of the party murmured their agreements. Having completed his role in this matter, the warden waved them off, seemingly content enough for now. And so, without much ceremony, they set out into the early evening. Sven could not wait for sleep; if his legs weren't so odd feeling, he might've run back to the tavern to get the rest. The air was cooler now, and the town had started to light up with lanterns and candles as dusk settled in. It was certainly a welcome peace.

Sven waved off the other three party members as they headed back off to their camp, but the paladin was still walking the same way as him towards the tavern.

"Er, hmm, apologies, I did not catch your name, sir," she asked, matching his pacing.

"It's Sven."

"Ah Sven, pleasure; I assume you are staying at the tavern, same as me?"

"It would appear so." Sven was shorter than he would usually be, in part due to his fatigue, but he also did not trust the newcomer that much.

"Fantastic! And, ah, not to be too forward, but your arm looks to be in bad shape - please allow me." The paladin held one of her hands out towards Sven and muttered a few words under her breath.

Sven felt warmth fill his left arm as a green glow moved between the hand and himself, and gingerly he found he was able to move his fingers and gradually the rest of his arm as well. It still ached and felt like it was made of wood, but as he lifted it out of the sling, he found he could at least move it to some degree now.

"Oh, thank you. I might not be half useless tomorrow. I appreciate that." Sven was genuinely grateful; healing magic was nothing to be shirking off. It could easily become the difference between seeing another day or being dead in a ditch. He had definitely missed the use of his left arm as well. He met her eyes with his and felt a bit foolish for giving her the cold shoulder.

"You are most welcome, Sven," the paladin once again flashed a brilliant smile, "I hope that with rest, you feel much better to come our time in the sun to test our faith and our mettle on whatever challenges lay before us."

It was a long and awkward statement, and before Sven could formulate a response, Brenna had already strode off ahead towards the tavern at a quicker pace. Sven paused and stood there for a second as the darkness of the coming night started to draw in. The warm glow of the healing spell he had felt diminished, and he shivered.

He set out again with renewed determination; his bed was calling, and he would not leave it wanting.