

Ground Up 12 - Tussle in the Tavern

Sven looked up to see a greasy goateed man wearing garish attire standing over their table, their eyes focused on Dalia. Looking back behind him to the table, the man had staggered from there seemed to be three others, all looking like they took turns in sharing the same half-brain. Sven returned his gaze to the affronting fop. Despite the bright colours of his coat and trousers, he was reasonably well dressed. He had a slightly pudgy, pampered look on him. It was something he had seen a few times; typical city lad rejects, thinking he is top of the pile in the village because he has some coin and goons to goad him on. Potentially trouble if they have too much liquid courage and a chip on their shoulder. Which seemed to be always.

"Not often I see such an eloquent woman in these parts," the man continued. "My name is Fabious Rheese, the Third of the Rheese estate." He bowed clumsily, rotating his hand in an odd flourish. Sven figured by 'eloquent' he was drunkenly avoiding saying foreign. It was possible they didn't get too many travellers through the village that weren't local to the area. Indeed, in the time Sven had spent in the village, he had only seen a handful of non-humans, half of those being dwarves. On the other hand, the capital had people from all around the continent, so Sven hadn't thought anything of Dalia's heritage.

"Funny because loud-mouthed weak men are more common than pig shit around here," Dalia replied, still deep in her thoughts.

There weren't actually any pig farms in this area, but Sven thought that was a decent retort considering her focus was elsewhere. The jab had obviously hit the spot judging by the clenched grimace of Fabious; his face was slightly more flush than its' previously inebriated colouration. He took a second to recompose.

"And sharp with the tongue, too." he waved his finger at the table. "These guys ain't weak then either, right? The cripple and old guy here?"

Sven wasn't that old; oh, he probably meant his left arm in the sling. He had kept it there to rest for convenience. He decided to shelve away his internal defensiveness about his age to address it at a better time. Theon had been focusing quietly on his book this whole time but turned to beam a smile at the belligerent new guest at their table. Fabious seemed to take offence at the mere sight of the wizard.

"Oh, you think this is funny, ey? What are you reading anyway?" he snatched the book away from the wizard. "Obsh-Observations-sh of the Juv-enile Crayfish-sh and, and whatever," he managed to slur out whilst squinting at the words. "What kind of farmer are you, old man?" the struggle to get the title out was far less surprising to Sven than what the book's contents actually were.

"Fish is a funny word," Theon responded calmly as though stating a fact. "Fishhhh." Unfortunately, this seemed to be the final straw for the belligerent man, probably not used to not having his boots licked. He dropped the book on the floor slowly, deliberately, intending to get a rise from the wizard whilst Theon just continued to beam at him.

"Mocking me, huh?" he glanced over to his goons, who seemed to get the signal that things were about to get punchy. "Maybe you guys need to be taught a lesson?" The grinding sound of chairs moving could be heard in the background.

Sven didn't like how this was going; if they were about to start a fight, then with him injured and Theon unarmed, he didn't fare their odds too well, even against these thugs. He looked over in the direction of the backdoor to the outhouse. Hopefully, Rhain would return shortly. He felt cold glass press against his hand, and he looked down. Dalia was holding a potion bottle under the table, already uncorked. In the least suspicious way he could manage whilst Theon had the thug's attention, he took his empty ale mug and lowered it so that she could pour the contents inside. He had no idea what the potion was, but he was definitely about to need it.

"Is it a lesson about fish?" Theon asked, his mouth open in excitement.

The man slammed his hand on their table and snarled in the wizard's face. The footsteps of the goons making their way across the tavern put Sven on alert, and he quickly tagged them up. Two of them were large; one was slight. He didn't want to typecast them, but the smaller, wiry one looked like the backstabbing type, whereas the two larger guys were probably typical meatheads. The fatter one had a bowl cut and piggish nose, and the more muscular one had a shaved head and short beard.

"I could probably gut ya like one if ya like," the drunk fop's eyes were practically bulging out of his head as he inched closer to Theon's face. Alright, time to get involved, Sven decided.

"There's no need for trouble, gentlemen; why don't we just buy you a drink and forget about this?" A weak bout of diplomacy there, admittedly, but it gave him a plausible excuse to down his secret potion. It tasted earth and flat. "See, looks like I could do with another."

"That'll be your last," Fabious seethed. "Boys, I think we need to show these two outside."

"Oh, I've seen outside; it is nice," Theon shrugged with immediate boredom.

This was the final straw to set the man off. He grabbed the wizard by the shoulder and tried to wrench him from the seat. In one quick motion, Theon pulled out his wand, stabbing it straight through Fabious' hand, pinning it to the table.

The drunkard screamed and dropped to his knees, trying to support his impaled hand with his free one. The goons paused momentarily in shock before rushing over to defend their boss with a more aggressive purpose. Sven also leapt up from his seat and circled the table to get between the goons and his party. The potion had started taking effect as the initial combat adrenaline surged through his body. He felt his skin tighten, and the dull ache from his recovering muscles faded away. The three men approached unarmed, which was a brief relief for Sven. None of them had come to the tavern armed, except for Dalia with some potions and Theon with his wand. He felt unprepared in comparison, and he wasn't much for fist-fighting himself, whereas the thugs looked like they had encountered this scenario a fair share of times.

The stronger of the large men was first to arrive at their table, dressed in a simple sleeveless shirt, his arms bulged with muscle and a few choice scars. He immediately threw a wide left-handed swing at Sven's head. Sven blocked it with his right forearm. Strange, apart from the impact, he didn't feel any pain from the strike. A second follow-up quick jab he couldn't react to, and it hit him in his slung left arm. Bracing for the wave of pain to follow, Sven was again surprised for a split second to find he didn't feel that either. Ah, a Stoneskin potion. It wouldn't stop the damage, but he would be able to take some hits for a few minutes without feeling anything.

Trying to fight three men one-handed would be an issue, though. The ringleader was still squirming and whining with his hand pinned to the table, tears running down his puffy cheeks. He was out of the picture for now, at least. Theon sat cross-legged on the floor and was again reading his book. Dalia had a smug grin and looked way too confident in Sven's ability to handle this on his own as she sat with her arms folded. Hopefully, she had another potion or two up her sleeves - or knew something he didn't.

Too late to think further - the weightier man with a pig nose was upon him now, and Sven pivoted to avoid the ham-fisted lunge from the thug. He readied to strike back and retaliate but had again to block a further strike from the bullish thug. This could turn south quickly if it continued in this way, Sven thought, and managed to lash a kick out to the shin of the more muscular thugs, following with a quick elbow strike to the shaven head as the brute flinched from the pain. The muscled man staggered back and lost his balance, falling to the wooden floor with a heft thud. It gave Sven a little breathing room, cut short by the piggish thug launching a flurry of blows against him. He tried to block them all, but with one hand tied, he was losing just against the pure mass of the man wailing into him, pushing him back towards the tavern wall.

At the back, he heard the faint but unmistakable sound of Rat drawing a dagger from a sheath. Even a Stoneskin potion wouldn't help him against that. Sven felt cold sweat start to run down his back.

He continued to find himself on the defensive, managing to block or absorb the blows of the stocky goon, and now the stronger had recovered off the floor. He cursed his luck and again at the bravado that had left him with an injured arm. Without using it, he struggled to find the opportunity to do much else but survive in the fight. Then, clang! A brief metallic sound sharply rang out in the tavern. Both Sven and the piggish goon glanced in the direction of it to see the slight thug with the knife now dropped to the floor, with Rhain leaping atop him, wielding a mug like a knuckle duster. The dagger spun across the floor out of reach after the second clonk of the mug struck the man. Sven recovered from the surprise entrance sooner and took the opportune distraction to launch himself fully into the pig, upsetting his footing and knocking him backwards. The larger man failed to recover in time, tripping over his boss and crashing through a chair, splitting the various parts into a pile around him.

"What are you doing, you imbeciles!" Fabious screeched through his sobs.

Sven turned to face the now standing muscled thug once more, who grunted with a renewed understanding that he was not to upset his boss. Sven had a few minutes at most of the potion left, but with Rhain now back, he allowed himself to start thinking that things were in his favour. He risked a glance around the room to survey the situation. After taking a few

mugs to the face, the smaller goon was out cold. The heavier set one was recovering from the broken stool. Fabious himself looked to have fainted now. The stronger goon leapt towards him in an attempt to grapple during his situation review, but Sven was quicker and sidestepped; keeping distance might be better right now.

"Oi, catch!" Rhain yelled and lobbed something towards Sven from the side.

He caught it deftly in his right hand. It was a chair leg from the one broken. He gave it a test swing; it was lighter than what he was used to, but it was solid. He felt that the situation was entirely in their favour, and the unease could be seen on the stronger thug's face now that their boss was out of the picture. Nevertheless, the strong man knew he had a job to do and went for a desperate swing, trying to catch Sven flat-footed. Sven was ready, though and quickly struck the fighter dead in the side of the head as the swing was a little too wide; the stun against the goon was followed up with a strike to his stomach from the end of the chair leg. With the air knocked out of his opponent Sven landed a swift kick between the goon's legs, leaving the man to collapse to the floor, gasping for air.

Sven turned to see the piggish man had recovered and had struck out at Rhain, hitting the ranger in the face with a heavy hook, grabbing him, and throwing the elf to the floor. Anger flooded Sven at seeing his friend manhandled and gripping the chair leg tightly; he strode towards the thug. The heavy-set man turned to face Sven as he approached and gave him a wide, menacing grin as he spat towards the elf lying on the floor. The anger in Sven raged to a boiling point and was immediately extinguished as blue light flooded from inside his core, reaching throughout his limbs. As he got within striking distance, the light inside him flared brightly.

As the thug pulled back his meaty fist readying to strike at him approaching, in an instant, Sven ducked and spun a full arcing circle with the chair leg, pivoting on one foot as a flash of blue blur followed the tip of his makeshift weapon. There was a crack of splintering wood as the chair leg shattered on impact. The thug fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes with a heavy thud, a bloodied lump already forming on his forehead where the attack had landed. Sven dropped the remnants of the chair leg to the floor, the hand that had wielded it buzzing and twitching with static energy. Silence filled the room, save for his heavy breathing and the groans of the beaten thugs. Then, for the first time since the melee had begun, Sven turned to take in all the other tavern patrons. Almost everyone sat wide-eyed, staring focused on Sven.

As they slowly returned to their own business, a few raised their mugs or nodded in respect. Dalia behind him started slow clapping, which Theon energetically joined in with after dropping his book. Rhain got up off the floor, his nose bleeding, shaking the sawdust and floor debris accumulated on his tunic. He looked a little rattled and unsteady but not too severely injured.

"Looks like yer could do with a strong drink," he said humourlessly, wiping his nose and leaving a bloody streak across his white sleeve.

Sven shrugged, his arms aching uncomfortably, and was about to respond before he was immediately interrupted by the tavern door swinging widely open.

A small group of town guards entered, which was surprising given how short the scuffle lasted. Indeed they seemed shocked to find there had been a brawl at the tavern. A tall rakish man wearing a steel helmet pushed through the group of guards and scanned the room, pointing at the adventurers.

"You four with me; warden wants to see you," he sneered, observing the thugs strewn about the corner of the tavern. "Philen, Graeg, take these reprobates to the cells to sober up for the night." Two of the guards unclasped some manacles and began to restrain the thugs.

There was a thud as Theon removed his wand from the table, and the prone body of Fabious slopped to the floor.

"Sorry about the chair, Hank." Sven sighed and threw a couple of coins on the table as they were led outside.