Burp

A loud sound, one of satisfaction, emerges from a dwarf's mouth before he turns to a young man and asks a question.

"Aye Lad, you sure you want to join us on our dive?"

Franky nods across the table, a table comprising all members of the Emerald Shields diver group.

"Well, it's settled then. If our dwarven [Bard] is ok with having him join us on the dive, then I have no problems with this," Brock answers with a smile.

"Idiots! You're just going to let him join us? Just like that? We know practically nothing about him," exclaims Jessa, quickly turning to the other female in the group.

"Siberia, talk some sense into these idiots. We can't just accept a greenhorn just like that, even if he is a you know what."

Franky adjusts his clothing, making sure that the hood and mask he wears keeps his identity a secret, especially now that the Divers Guild knows a [Hero] is in their midst.

Siberia gives Jessa a glance before shrugging, "Brock is the leader. I will follow his decisions."

"AHHHHHHHHHHH" Jessa screams, grabbing her hair.

"You all are idiots. We can't just le--- what the hell is that?"

Franky drops a pouch of coins on the table, smiling under his mask as Jessa's eyes focus on it.

"I can't expect you all to just take an unknown to danger, so I figured payment would be necessary."

Jessa's mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. Her head flicks to Brock.

"We're fucking taking him or I will nag you for the rest of your life."

"Bahahahahah," the dwarven [Bard] starts to laugh, holding his rather large stomach. "Coin be the only thing that can move Jes here to do anythin',"the dwarf says, grabbing another beer, pouring it down his throat, and then laying the empty glass next to the other seven.

"Shut it Turncock, a girl's got things she needs to buy," Jessa says, her hands on her hips as she glares at the [Bard].

“It’s Turnock you harlot, and I’m not the one spending all me coin on others. I only spend it on important things,” Turnock explains, grabbing his eighth beer on the table, a cheeky smile on his face.

The yelling and name calling between the two continue, but Franky ignores them. Instead, he turns his focus to Brock. ”Thanks for letting me join you guys. Matilda told me that the best way to level is to actually put myself in harm's way. I figured, diving into a dungeon with an experienced group would be a good idea.”

Brock nods, fully understanding how much faster you can level as a diver than just through training. His eyes moved to the coins on the table, “You don't need to pay us, we would be more than happy to have you join us.”

But Franky shakes his head, “It's fine. You guys are taking a risk by just having me be with you guys. Plus,” Franky shrugs, “I seem to find myself with a lot of coin to spend.”

Brock smiles and winks, “Well then, I’m not averse to accepting coin from someone who seems to have quite a bit of it, especially when it's so freely given by the church.”

His expression changes to something more serious.

“Anyhow, if you are going to join us, I’m going to need to know what you can do. Classes, levels, skills, anything noteworthy. It’s important for a team to know what other members can do. I hope that's fine.”

“Fine with me.”

Brock lifts an eyebrow, “Most people would be very much against giving such information out so freely. But, I guess with what you are, it won't matter in the future.”

He shakes his head, ”But still, don't make a habit of it. Keep your classes and especially skills secret. Your class and levels can be figured out, but your skills are your own. Understood?”

Franky nods in understanding.

“Good,” Brock leans back, “Now then, tell me how you fight. Your weapons, armor, enchanted or otherwise. Classes, levels, skills. Even your combat experience.”

Kind of weird to warn me about not divulging important information and then asking me to divulge all of that important information.

I sigh under my mask and call up my character sheet.

Franky Sasco

Level 28 [Warrior]
Level 26 [Hero]
Level 31 [Light Mage]
Level 12 [Scout]

Minor Mana Sense
Flickering Strike
Flash Fire
Defensive Instincts.
Analyze
A Hero’s Moment
Blinding Block
Glowing Armor
Aimed Throw

Strength	20
Dexterity	16
Stamina	25
Perception	33
Endurance	15
Vitality	107
Mana	302
M/regen	1.3
Affinity	7

Intelligence	50
Willpower	450+431
Soul	320
Charisma	431

Heart of a Hero: Willpower increased by Charisma amount.

The past week was actually quite underwhelming. I only gained three new skills, one of which when I hit thirty in my [Mage] class, which upgraded to [Light Mage], giving me another skill. And then, since I hit level twenty-five on my [Hero] class, I was able to get another class, which was [Scout]. When that class hit level ten, I gained my last skill.

I explain all of this to Brock, not hiding anything. Though he does give me a surprised look when I mention my stats.

“You don't make this easy for me Franky,” he says, scratching his beard only slightly longer than a stubble.

“Mage classes are supposed to be in the back, casting spells, but you don't have any spells. And the one you do have is of a very short range. But you also have a [Warrior] class specializing in shield and sword combat. Decent levels too. And then you have the [Scout] class, which is supposed to strike from blind spots, from range, or not fight at all. You’re very confusing, you know that?”

I shrug.

“It is what I have.”

He sighs, shaking his head, “If I saw someone with this many classes that are so different from each other, I would have called him an idiot. But you have that [Hero] class, which means you can have multiple classes and still level them up as fast as someone with just a single class.”

Sigh

“Well, considering your weapon of choice is a shield and sword, similar to my shield and axe, I am going to have you fight alongside me. I’ll show you what you need to do when we get inside the dungeon.”

He stands up and my eyes widen.

“We’re going already? As in today?”

Brock gives me a confident smile, “A Diver has to always be ready for danger.”

He turns to his team.

“Emerald Shields, we’re heading out!”

Jessa immediately jumps, throwing back the full mug she had been playing keep away from the [Bard]. The [Bard], with a deftness Franky had never expected to see from a short fat guy, catches the mug, not letting any of the liquid spill, and then flood his throat with the brew. He puts the empty mug on the table, grabs his last two mugs and finishes them off as well. A good two liters of beer finished off in less than half a minute.

His alcohol tolerance must be off the scale.

I stand up, patting myself down under the robe, making sure I have everything I need.

Seeing that I do, I follow the group outside and towards the giant hole in the ground a couple of blocks down the street.

“Well lad, dungeons are natural phenomena. They're formed around areas with dense mana.”

“Yea Turnock, I already know that from my studies. But I want to know exactly what forms them,” Franky exclaims, waving his arm around him, pointing at the dense underground tunnel they are within.

The dwarf strokes his beard, thinking. ”Well, during my studies at the [Bards] College of Svartalfheim, I had read books on various subjects. One such subject that every dwarf ends up learning is about dungeon architecture. An important subject mind you, especially since our underground great dwarven city of Svartalfheim was actually built within the shell of a dungeon.”

Franky lifts an eyebrow, “I figured dwarfs loved being underground, but an entire city is rather… dangerous. I can only imagine the structural and mobility problems that would arise, especially the problems of running water.”

“Haha, dat be normally true!” exclaims Turnock with enthusiasm before clearing his throat.

“Right, um, that would normally be true. But Svartalfheim is different. It is not underground per say, but actually deep within a mountain which is above sea level, so there aren't any water problems. As for structural integrity, the stone of the mountain is strengthened by dungeon mana.”

The dwarf walks towards one of the walls and knocks on it before turning to Franky and giving him a smile. “Dungeon stone is denser than regular stone, making it extremely difficult to break through.”

Franky pauses, tapping the wall himself.

“I… see. But can you answer my original question?”

The dwarf’s eyes widen, “Shit, almost forgot. A dungeon forms something we call a dungeon core. It's a crystal that absorbs ambient mana while also keeping the dungeon alive if you will. As such, th-.”

“Keep up. We need that light.” Brock yells from the front, turning around to find both Turnock and Franky staring at the dungeon walls like it’s a long lost lover.

Realizing that they had been sidetracked, the dwarf and human pick up their pace and get behind Siberia, who has been silently following Brock the entire time.

———————

After a couple minutes of following silently, Turnock decides to finish his explanation before they get too deep into the dungeon, where a simple distraction could cost them their lives.

“As I was saying, the dungeon crystal is the heart and brain of a dungeon while the dungeon itself is its body. These walls are its veins, and we are a poison which must be eliminated.”

The dwarf flicks his beard, unstrapping his guitar, sliding his hand on the string, ”never forget, even if things may seem peaceful, even if we are safely walking for several hours, the dungeon always knows where we are. It will always hunt us and we will always be the enemy.”

“I...I see.” Franky replies uncertainly.

“Don't let him get to you, we're really only in danger if we're in a large group or several floors down, closer to the control. The dungeon isn't going to waste its time trying to kill us, especially when there are much stronger and further down diver groups to contend with, and that's not including the church's people who train farther down below.”

“That many? How big is this dungeon?” Franky asks, trying to make heads or tails about the size. They had traveled through several passages, constantly going into new ones with forks and splits. Overall, Franky was not confident at all at finding his way back out without help.

“As a dungeon gets older, it gets stronger and stronger while its crystal digs deeper and deeper. This specific dungeon is older than this city. Only the church and possibly the [Guild Mistress] knows exactly how far down it goes.” Turnock explains.

Franky frowns, “But what is the purpose of these dungeons? Why do they form?” Franky asks, but neither Brock nor Turnock answer. Instead, it’s the sole elf.

“Because the world designs them to.”

Sigh, ”Humans, elves, dwarves, they all have their own interpretation. But really, nobody knows.” Turnock explains, getting an annoyed glare from Siberia.

A moment passes and the lengthy tunnel starts to expand in size, the light illuminating the walls shrink exponentially as well. The group’s light is now solely coming from Franky and his glowing white steel armor.

“Franky, we have torches and Siberia knows the [Light ball] spell. You sure you can keep that spell up?” asks Brock without turning his head which continues to stare forward, always expecting something to jump from the far shadows.

“Yes,” I answer, “keeping [Glowing Armor] up isn't draining my mana at all. All it seems to do is lower my mana regeneration to a crawl.”

The dwarf laughs, “Leave it to a [Hero] to have more mana regeneration than our elf,” he says before jumping back, avoiding a swinging staff that was about to strike him in the face.

“Bahahaha,” he laughs, before getting back in line, giving the elf a wink.

Tap...

A sound reverberates through the walls, seemingly bouncing off the stone. At once, Siberia’s hands start to glow while Brock raises his shield, Turnock’s pick ready upon the strings of his guitar. I put up my own shield, sword ready and unsheathed at my side

Tap Tap Tap...

The sound comes again, seemingly in rhythm, echoing off the walls with both increasing and decreasing speed. And then the sound stops, pauses, before tapping once more.

Tap

Hearing that last tap, the others let down their guard, Brock lowering his shield while Siberia's hands stop glowing, a sign that her mana had been withdrawn and not at the ready.

Confused, I look towards the darkness, finding a figure completely in black walking out.

"We've got a bit of a fucking problem. There's a shitty rat swarm and I can't sneak past them," Jessa answers with a hint of annoyance.

Interesting, that tapping noise was just a code to notify us that she was coming into the light and to not attack her by accident. Smart, very smart.

She makes it to the group and gives me a confused look, "How the hell is he able to keep that light glowing for so long. I had to scout a significant distance ahead to give you guys a warning. This light is way too strong."

"Apparently, he can keep it up indefinitely. But enough about him, how big of a swarm are we talking about?" Brock asks.

She shrugs, "I would say about sixty, maybe even seventy. It's rather weird that so many are together, especially next to our shortcut."

Brock frowns and looks into the darkness, "What would you say their levels are?"

Jessica walks around the group, her hands on the back side of her head. I look at her and make eye contact, finding that her eyes have slits like a cat, "I would have to say that most are in their twenties, but some of the larger ones might actually be in the forties."

Brock goes silent to that, frowning, his eyes move to mine, and then his frown slowly turns into an optimistic smile.

"Normally, I wouldn't take the risk, mostly because we will need to use supplies for this kind of fight. Mana potions, health potions, bombs, all of that will be costly to replace. But since you're paying us to train you, this might actually be a good opportunity for a fight."

What? No!

"Don't put your lives on the line for me. Can't we find another way? Or better yet, do this another day?"

Turnock Chuckles, “Lad, we always find ourselves having to take out these rats. It's annoying and they seem to spawn quickly.” he shakes his head, “but if we let them fester, their numbers will rise even higher. Eventually, they will start to roam. A roaming pack of rats that size can overpower a decent sized team. It’s how greenhorns die. They can handle rats, but they usually don't have the levels to handle them in swarms. We're probably saving a team by taking them out now.”

“Also, we have you to bolster our defense,” Brock adds, unhitching his axe while making sure the straps on his shield are well attached to his arm.

I shake my head, still unsure if this is a good idea, but Brock seems confident, so who am I to get in their way. I do need the practice and experience anyways.

“Fine, just tell me what I need to do,” I say, suppressing my feelings of unease.

“No problem Franky,” Brock says before turning to Jessa, “Find a place and attack if there are openings. Don't hold back on your bombs, this is a large group and I don't want them crawling over me.”

Jessa nods, turning to me, giving me one last look with her inhuman eyes before turning and running into the darkness.

“Is she really Jessa?” I ask, watching her quickly disappear into the darkness.

“Aye lad, she’s different when we are diving. It not my right to say why. You should ask her yourself later.”

I nod, turning to Brock and barely catching a vial of liquid that he throws at me. He winks and then chugs it down. A seemingly thickened liquid with the color of poop. He frowns, seemingly struggling against himself to prevent throwing up.

But then his skin starts to slightly darken all over. He reaches to his side and puts on a steel helmet with eye slits.

“[Barkskin Potion]. Tastes extremely bad, but its effects are useful. It hardens your skin while keeping you from bleeding out. Good for right before a big fight.”

I look down at the vial, my glowing armor allowing me to see the mud like substance.

I take a deep breath and uncork the vial, gagging at the smell. A smell similar to spoiled milk.

“Bahaha, come now lad, you’re a [Hero]. Can't lose your cool over a bit of nasty drink.” Tornack jests.

Death by poop potion. Dear god, I hope that doesn't happen.

I close my eyes and pour the liquid down my throat, a rather thick substance which is taking its time.

Only a moment after it touches my mouth and flows down my throat does my brain finally receive the message of what it tastes like. But it was too late because Brock’s hand was already covering my mouth.