

[Dennis] Brandon, how are we doing this? Silver's pretty scared.

"Ow!" I look at Silver in surprise at the punch in my stomach.

"I can see the chat." She glares at me.

Right, it's a team chat, after all. I wonder what I need to initiate a private one.

[Brandon] Is Silver done hitting you for drawing everyone's attention to that?

"I don't know," she yells.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't want to scare you more."

"So you were going to talk behind my back? I'm scared, not an idiot."

"Sorry," I say again.

"I'm done hitting him!"

"Good," Brandon yells through the stone. "You don't want him too hurt, because the only real course of action is to proceed ahead. Me and Hel will do the same and we're bound to meet up at some point."

"Okay!" I yell. "Once we reach the next junction, we'll check in. Start ahead. Hopefully, you'll be waiting for us there."

"See you soon."

"Are you okay?" I ask Silver.

"No. But I don't think I'm going to freak out."

"Good. This isn't great, but we need to work with it. Here's what I want us to do. I'll take the lead. You follow with your sword in hand."

"I think I'd be more useful buffing you."

"Maybe, but right now, I think it's more important we use this to level you up. All you need to do is scratch one of them for the system to recognize you took part in the fight and get some experience. Once you've done that, you can retreat and play."

"What if I can't even do that?"

I don't mention that under the circumstances just trying to hit will get her skill experience. Her sense of how it goes was skewed by Brandon keeping us safe, and I don't think I can convince her that now it should be quick for her to gain skill levels.

"I'm going to do my best to keep you safe." I can't sound too confident or it's going to undermine her gain. "We went from level five creatures to 8 with the spider, so I'm hoping it was a fluke, and that they'll be level six or seven things next time." I give her my best smile. "I can handle those easy."

I'm reassured that, as I'd hoped, she doesn't look all that convinced.

"We'll stay against the wall, and move slowly. We should be able to hear anything approaching." I give the light a few cranks. "This will let us see any webs before the spiders can attack."

She nods, then she has the sword Brandon gave her in hand and I take slow steps forward, hugging the wall, and pausing every few to listen. It's how, after two treens of steps, I make out the faint buzzing. When I look at Silver, she nods.

I keep listening, and the sounds grows stronger.

“They’re coming this way,” I whisper. “I think that means there can’t be spiders, or they’d get caught in the webs. We’re going to step to the center of the tunnel and I’m going to shine the light in their direction to get their attention. Then just swing at them until you hit one.”

“What if there’s too many of them?”

I focus on the sound and trying to tell how many there might be.

Perception Check Failed

“I don’t think there’s that many of them.”

The incredulous look she gives me makes me wonder if the system showed it my failed check.

“Ready?”

She nods, but the sword in her hand trembles.

Makes sense.

I step away from the wall, shining the light ahead, and she follows. I take a step away from her to give us fighting space, but she follows again. Before I can tell her we’ll need space, the five flies are zooming toward us.

Dungeon fly, Level 5

A fly that has been changed by living within a dungeon
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Perception Check Failed

I put the light in my belt and ready myself. It’s going to be on me to stay out of her reach.

I swing, stepping forward and to the side, scratching one, and make out Silver giving a wild, two handed swing that completely missed. I cut one.

“I gained a level with the sword!” she exclaims, frozen in place, and bash the fly that was about to reach her.

“Keep fighting.” I step away so she has room to swing, then I’m blocking and slashing at them.

“I hit one!” she exclaims, as I skewer one of my own. They are fast bastards.

“Good.” I dodge one and slash another. “You can retreat and let me deal with them.”

Instead, she steps toward one, wildly slashing in its direction.

I take another one out after it got close enough to...barf on my arm?

Silver screams and her sword clatters to the floor.

I’m between her and the two flies attacking. I cut one in two and crush the other with my shield against the wall. The sound it makes as it dies sends a shiver down my spine.

“I’m sorry,” she says as I help her up. “It spit my arm and I panicked.” She shows it to me and there’s a thin line of wetness on the leather, like on my arm.

Remembering what Brandon said, I look through my inventory. “Do you have a rag? Their spit is probably mildly acidic, so we don’t want to leave that on us.”

“I have the cloth I use to clean my violin, but I’d rather not...”

I hand her my dirtiest shirt and add rags to the list of things to buy in Detroit. Along with more clothes.

“You could have stepped back after that hit.”

“Are you kidding?” she says, grinning as she wipes her arm. “I’m level five, just from flaying around like that. That’s four skill levels when I didn’t get anything from the fights before.”

I take the rag and wipe my arm with it before moving on to my sword. “That’s what danger does. Because Brandon was there to protect us, we never felt in danger, so we weren’t getting the boost. It slows, but you should be good for a while before you question if it’s worthwhile. I only got one level from the fight.”

“But you did a lot more.”

“But I was level twenty-two. Like I said, it slows. My understanding is that once I’ll hit twenty-six, it’s going to slow even more. So there’s a point where it’s not worth getting into fights just to rush through level gain.”

“And that works for every skill?” she picks up the sword and I look over my shield to make sure it’s wiped clean.

“That’s the way the dungeon runs are explained back in Court. None of the crafters returned with complaints, so it’s got to work for them, too.”

I take her hand and reposition it on the hilt. “You want to hold your sword correctly. I don’t want to think about the penalties you were dealing with swinging it like that.”

“But I still gained levels.”

“The system doesn’t care how bad your form is, just that you’re fighting with the weapon. But you need to care. You have to be able to defend yourself, and score hits if you want to do damage.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to be good enough to do serious damage.”

“That’s okay. You aren’t planning on throwing yourself into fights. This is just so you can look after yourself when fights throw themselves at you.”

I look up from her hand, and she’s looking at me.

“Anyone tell you that you have nice eyes?” she asks, and my face heats up as I try to find something to say.

“You too,” I stammer, and she steps away, her cheeks reddening.

“Sorry,” she said, “I have no idea why I said that.”

“It’s okay,” I reply, trying to get my heart to slow down. “I mean, it’s true. Your eyes are nice.” I close my mouth. It’s not a lie, they’re a nice brown with golden flecks, but is now really the time to notice that?

“Maybe we should keep going?” she says. “We don’t want to keep Brandon and Helen waiting.”

“Right.”

We inch our way ahead against the wall, and I listen for buzzing, looking forward to the next fight, but it’s Silver who stops us, tapping my shoulder, then her ear.

I’m in the process of shaking my head when I make out the skittering. Not flies this time.

I shine the light ahead and no webs as far as I can make out. There are still a lot of

things that could be. The skittering stops as we move forward again, and I really don't like that.

I search the walls and floors to see what could be hiding around the stones, then notice one of the stone shift. I focus on it.

Hides Spider, Level 6
Hides Spiders are a class of spiders which have developed the ability to camouflage themselves by using material from their surrounding
Perception Check Failed

It's maybe a quarter the size of the level eight one, but I can't tell if the stone's actual rock or just its carapace made to look that way. I motion to it, and after a moment of incomprehension, Silver's eyes go wide.

Focusing on all the stones, I get the number of our enemies.

[Dennis] I count seven, you?

[Brandon] Is everyone okay?

[Helen] Can't you let them be? This is clearly not about you.

[Silver] Can't you two just talk? I counted six, so I must have missed one.

"Same as before?" I whisper. This time, when she nods, her hand is steady. We step away from the wall, and Silver leaves two full paces between us. Three of the rocks shift, but don't advance.

I take the light out of my belt and scan the space between us and them for some trap.

Perception Check Failed

So here's the question we always find ourself asking in a situation like this. Did it fail because there's something there and I didn't notice it? Or does the system tell us that even if there's nothing?

"Why aren't they moving?" Silver asks, and the stones skitter forward, only to stop as we stare...in silence.

[Silver] Do you think we can get through them without making noise?

[Dennis] That only puts them at our back when we deal with whatever's after.

[Silver] So, it's skill gain for me, then.

[Brandon] Atta girl.

I swear I hear Helen slap him, and I grin. I put the light back in my belt and look at Silver.

She lets out a melodic whistle, and the rocks rush in our direction, abandoning any pretense of being anything other than spiders.

Spiders who can jump, it turns out, as the closest one launches itself into the air. I block with my shield, and when it hits it I can feel the weight, which then pulls it down. I'm still struggling to keep it up to use against the other spiders when two legs appear over the top and what happened sinks in.

I cut them with a quick swipe and the weight shifts, but doesn't fall off. Two sets of legs appear on each side, then pain lances up my leg and I plant my sword in that spider's back. I don't know if they coordinated, or it's just bad luck they split my attention.

No debuffs, so this one isn't poisoned.

I cut two more legs, and the weight falls off, but before I can stab it, it skitters away.

"Dennis!" Silver cries out, and I rush to help her, heedless of the four spiders trailing after me.

I kick one, and miss stabbing my sword into the other, but it moves away.

"Did you score a hit?"

"I think so."

"Okay, then give me the underdog buff." I sweep my sword left and right and after scratching three of them, they learn to keep their distance.

They also learn the point can only be in one place at a time, and one rushes as it's on the opposite side.

I miss the kick, and it cuts my leg with a swipe of its own. Then the others use the distraction for their own rush and I'm stepping around them as they try to plan their legs into my feet and legs.

And I'm doing that badly.

My boots have holes in them, my leg armor's sliced to the knee, but they did their job because I only lose a fifth of my health from all that, and I kill two of them. Nothing close to a fair trade, but it's what I—

The music starts, an upbeat tempo that swells and with it my health bar stretches. It's nice, but not what I was after. The sense of strength follows and the violin shifts to a more aggressive beat, and when my slash connects with the spider's back, it cuts deep and sends it away.

I'm not any faster, so my dodges aren't as effective as I'd like, and I end up with a cut arm when I stupidly try to parry the spider's jump, but then I slam it down, cracking its carapace, and plant my sword into its underbelly.

I go a little wild after that, kicks and thrusts, bashing and slashing. Grandmother wouldn't be pleased with my lack of finesse, but it feels good to watch pieces of spiders fly away and goo streak the walls.

By the time they're dead, I'm out of breath, and Silver's still playing, so I can't imagine—she stops playing and my legs give out.

Okay. I don't have to imagine how exhausted I am.

"Are you okay?" she asks, at my side and keeping me from face planting, and I smile as the message pops up before me.

You have gained a level. You are now level 8
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You have 10 skill points available. You have 6 attribute points available. You have 1

ability points available

Experience required to reach your next level: 8,678

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