

“See what you got us into?” Helen yells at Brandon as she pushes against the now closed off tunnel.

“Can you blast it open?” he replies at lot calmer than I think the situation calls for. We’re basically trapped now, unless we can beat the whole dungeon, I think.

She glares at him. “And bring all this down on us? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Bran, but it’s basically just packed earth around us. And with those worm things that are crawling through, there’s no way it’s stable enough not to come crashing down if I just explode part of it.”

“Okay,” he replies.

“Okay?” she demands. “Are you fucking out of your mind with ‘okay’? You said we’d be turning around if things got too tough for them. How the fuck do you plan on doing that with this in the way?”

I do my best not to show my worry when he looks in my direction. The fear is clear on Silver’s face.

[need to add branching to the previous chapters]

“Look, this is a branching dungeon,” he says in a calm tone. “That means there are other ways to return to the entrance. All we need to do is start taking branches that double back and we will be outside in no time.”

“And how are you going to know we’re going in the right direction, oh mighty explorer?”

“We’ll know,” he replies, surprisingly unaffected by her derisive tone, “when the creatures we’re fighting go down in level. And before you bitch about that too, yes, I’m aware it means we’ll probably have to go up against higher-level ones before we find the right path, but Dennis is high enough to deal with them, and Silver can gain from the experience.”

“Do I have to?” she asks, and I give her the most reassuring smile I can. Brandon’s plan makes sense.

“Do you have to fight?” he replies. “No, of course not. Silver, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, even if the situation has cut down the options a bit. I’m just saying that with Denis fighting at your side, and me and Hel as backup, it’s a safe situation to gain experience. You don’t even have to kill any of the creatures. Since we formed a party, you get a trickle from any of Dennis’s kills.”

“Can’t we get yours instead?” she asks, voice still trembling.

He shakes his head. “Me and Hel are too high level. The experience gain needs to register to us for it to trickle to you and Dennis.” He smiles. “And you’ll go up in level a lot faster if you take part in the fighting. It’ll be fine,” he adds, and even Helen seems mollified.

I feel confident enough I check for a buff from his speech, but there isn’t one.

“O...okay.”

With another reassuring smile, I start walking.

I get now why Brandon isn’t a fan of the crank light, although he shouldn’t have the problem I’m having, since he fights with his fists. Cranking the handle while holding my sword isn’t comfortable.

Four of the flies come at us two treens of steps later and I drop the light in my rush to prepare. My ring still gives us enough light and Brandon’s back enough the beam of his

light crystal adds to that.

“You scored a hit!” Brandon exclaims. “How does it feel?”

She looks at him in disbelief. “Scary.”

“You’ll get used to that.”

I pick up the light and wedge it between me and my belt. It’s not comfortable, but the beam is ahead of us, even if it travels left to right as I walk, and I don’t have to worry about dropping it.

The next volley of flies is five of them, level five, and again, Silver manages to nick one of them as she flays about.

Then we reach a bifurcation and I look at Brandon.

“Okay, you and Silver stay here while me and Hel recon that branch to see if it doubles back.”

“Is that safe?” I ask before he moves. “What if the dungeon closes it off and we’re separated?”

He opens his mouth, closes it, then looks at Helen.

“What are you looking at me for?” she asks. “You’re the ‘expert’ on dungeons.”

“Okay,” he says through clenched teeth, “one of you stands here.” He points to the entrance to that branch of the tunnel. “That way, it won’t be able to close it off.” He glares at Helen, as if daring her to comment.

“What if it closes it, anyway?” Silver asks as I stand where Brandon pointed. “And Dennis is killed in the process?”

The question leaves him perplexed, and me questioning the wisdom of standing here.

“It probably can’t,” Helen finally says with a sigh of exasperation. “Dungeons aren’t made to kill anyone with structures like doors, even hidden ones.”

“I thought *I* was the expert,” Brandon says.

“Then maybe you should have read books on dungeons,” she replies. “I’m no expert, but I hang out with researchers, so I hear stuff.”

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

“As sure as I can be.”

I nod. “Go check it. I’ll keep the passage from closing.”

He and Helen vanish in the darkness and soon, even his light isn’t visible anymore.

“Aren’t you scared it’s going to close, anyway?” Silver asks. She’s closer, but still far enough she can’t be caught if the passage does close.

“A little,” I admit, cranking the light as a distraction.

“Then why are you staying there?”

“Because I’d rather we don’t get separated if I can help it.” I smile at her. “And I tell myself that if the dungeon is going to close this, it won’t just make a wall appear with me in the middle. I’ll have time to get out of the way.”

The light returns, and Brandon shakes his head. “As far as we can tell, that passage heads in the same direction as this one. So we might as well continue.

We make it past another intersection, which they go check, before we come to a warning we’ll be fighting in the form of a spider’s web blocking the way. There’s even a dead fly cocooned in it. The spider isn’t visible for the moment, but there are many holes in along where the web’s attached to the stone wall.

I get as close as I dare and shine the light through. "I don't see more webs."

"Which means only one spider," Brandon replies. "Probably."

"Maybe we should go back to the other branch," Helen says with a shudder.

"I doubt it's going to do any good," he says. "The passage heads in this direction so it'll have a similar monster progression." He looks at me. "If you don't feel like taking it on, I will."

"I'll do it," I reply. "If it's just one, I'll be fine."

"Okay, typically, spiders can spit a goo that can foul you up. It's sticky like the web and pretty tough to cut or break. In a dungeon, it might be able to do a few extra things, but it should be low enough level they won't be fight-ending."

"I can burn the web," Helen says, the snapping her fingers making a flame appear over them.

"You might kill it," Brandon says. "Let Dennis have a go at it."

I almost slash through it to get the spider's attention, then think better of it. The last thing I want is to get my sword stuck on it.

I take three steps back and lob an arrow at it. It sticks to it and the whole web shudders, and keeps shuddering, which is when I realize it's no longer the arrow doing it.

The spider squeezes out of a hole that seems much too small for it. It is black, and the carapace reflects the light as if it's wet.

Dungeon Spider, Level 8
Dungeon Spiders feed on the errant fly that wanders within its web. As well as the careless adventurer who underestimate them
Perception Check Failed

"You've got this," Brandon says, as I'm about to ask for his help. "Just stay calm. You know how to fight. Make your first hit count. That's the most important one since it isn't paying attention to you yet."

I take a breath and take a treen-minus to study it while it pokes at the arrow with a leg. The carapace will be armored, but its eyes won't be. I start there, and at the very least, it'll get penalties on its attacks for poor vision.

I close the distance, and as I hope, the sound makes it look in my direction. My thrust goes right into its eye and it lets out a sound that, other than hurting my ears, I can't identify. It jerks its head and I nearly lose the grip on my sword, then my health bar flashes in time with the pain in my side as its leg pierces through the armor. I don't lose as much as I expected, a tenth at most, but an orange debuff appears

Debuff: Poison. Type: Weak
You have been poisoned and will lose 1 hit point every second until a counter agent has been used, or it has run its course

A second one, red this time, appears as I pull away and the legs leaves a small hole in

my side.

Debuff: Bleeding

You are bleeding. You lose 1 hit point every second until the injury has been seen to or heals naturally.

“Silver, I could use that healing song right now.”

I block the leg it tries to stab me with, then push it aside for another thrust, which skids over its carapace and leave me off balance. I lose a lot more health this time as the legs hits with more strength, two tenth this time? No other debuff, so they don't stack, that's good. I try to stab it, being so close already, but the point of my sword skids off again.

I push myself off at the cost of a second bleed debuff, but Silver plays her violin and they both quickly go from red to orange and toward green as I watch the spider skitter around. Something comes at me from its maw and I have my shield in the way, but the thing that hits spread over it and my arm. Cursing, I send it to my inventory to deal with later, but it doesn't go anywhere.

I'm out of the way of the next strike, but then I'm on my back from the glancing blow. I slash to stop its advance, and a leg falls off, causing it to retreat and giving me time to deal with why my shield doesn't want to move from the ground.

It's fucking stuck there.

Brandon's next to me. “You okay?”

“Don't,” I say as he grabs the strand covered edge of my shield and pulls up, ripping it off the ground. When he steps away, the gloves he wore stay stuck against my shield. I get to my feet.

“I'm okay,” I tell him, then glare at the fucking spider.

He grabs my shoulder and turns me so I have to look at him. “Don't get angry, Dennis. You can't win if you can't think. Whatever you feel right now, swallow it. I'm sure that grandmother of yours taught you to keep your emotions out of the fight. So you do that right now, got it?”

I swallow and nod. He's right. Anything that clouds my judgment only leads to me losing the fight. Brandon will be there to save my ass again, but I'd really rather finish this on my own.

When it opens its maw again, I jump out of the way and the glop of gooey filaments splash against the wall. Silver is still playing, but I can't tell if it has an effect on my health.

When it comes at me again, I bash its head with my shield, hoping it'll stick and I'll stay with it as I stab, but while I stagger it aside, my shield is clearly not sticking.

I wait for it again, hoping to get a shot at its other eye, but it's too fast this time, and all I get is more loss of health and a bleeding debuff that quickly cycles to green and vanishes.

When it jumps at me, I roll under it, only for my shield to get stuck on the ground again, but this time I manage to pull it off without help, although it's heavier from all the stuff stuck to it.

It dances around me, and when I feint left, it moves there, letting me cut off another

leg, but the bitch is fast and there goes more of my health. The slash goes wide as I push off and the bleed debuff it there.

“Don’t attack,” Silver calls as I’m about to lunge. “I need ten seconds.”

I go on the defensive, stepping out of its way as the music changes.

You have been buffed: Strength of the Underdog
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I smile as I suddenly feel better and have a longer health bar. It’s still slightly under half full, but that’s more than I had before comparatively.

I dodge a few of its strikes, while mine keeps skidding off its carapace. I almost get it in the eye, but it jerks out of the way at the last moment and I end up stabbed again. I land a punch before pushing away, but all that does is hurt my hand.

“Focus Dennis,” Brandon calls.

I bite my angry reply and do what he says. I have the training, I’m better than that. Grandmother saw to it. She would be so pissed if she saw how close I am to losing it right now.

When it comes at me, I wait too long to get out of the way, but along with the stab that hurts more than take away from my boosted health, I manage to lodge my sword at the joint between the front and back part of its body. Then I yank and it sends me flying.

Instead of the expected pain of hitting a wall, I’m caught in something that wavers back and forth, and I can’t pull myself out of it. I’m caught in its web.

Brandon puts a hand on Helen’s arm, stopping her motions as the spider takes a step in my direction, and I wonder what he’s doing when I notice the goo it’s leaving behind. It staggers to the side and seems to attempt to right itself, only or over correct. Then it trips and falls. It shuddered, and goes still.

For confirmation, I open the combat log and look at the last entry.

You have killed a Dungeon spider, Level 8

You gain 1352 experience

I sigh in relief, then looked at the others standing there, watching the dead spider.

“Is anyone interested in cutting me down from this thing?”

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