

“Do you need me to boost your healing?” Silver asks as she helps me to the wall so I can sit and catch my breath.

My health is surprisingly high, even with the underdog spell over, near two third. I nod anyway.

“Just stay on guard. It’s possible the sound is going to draw more of them.” I can’t have her be too relaxed about the situation.

She looks into the darkness. “Maybe I shouldn’t then. I don’t know if I’ll hear the skittering over my violin.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for movement.” I smile. “Just try not to get so wrapped up in your playing you don’t hear me call out for you.”

Her first two attempts don’t sound good. Then she takes a breath, lets it out slowly and a calm melody plays.

My health bar pulses as I pull a healing bar from my inventory, then stops and Silver stares ahead of her.

“I just gained a level in the spell,” she says, stunned.

“You must have been close to gaining it,” I reply, then munch on the bar.

“You don’t get it. I haven’t practiced it as much as I should have. I still had a few hours to go before I’d reached level ten.” Her eyes flick to the right and she frowns. “You’re almost all healed.” I raise the half eaten bar. “You didn’t need me to play. Did you know this was going to happen?”

“I didn’t know you’d go up a level, but we’re in a dungeon, so I knew it would speed things up.”

“But we aren’t fighting.”

“I told you. It isn’t the fighting, it’s the danger.”

“That’s why you told me about the music attracting more spiders,” she says, as if that’s a revelation. “You wanted me to still be afraid.”

“I pointed that out because we are in a dungeon and there are spiders who react to sounds. Being on our guards for more is just common sense. But yes, the added benefit was that you remained alert to danger, so when you played, your gain was boosted.”

I look at the spider carcasses and the implications of what I said sink in. I really should be butchering them. If only for the level gain.

I stand, and, since my health is maxed out, wrap the bar and put back it in my inventory for next time. I can’t take them for granted since I only have eight left.

“What about your damaged armor?”

I glance down at my legs.

Leather leggings, Quality: Normal, Type: Armor, legs
A well-made piece of leather armor
Perception Check Failed

It dropped one quality rank. “I’m going to need to buy a new set or spend a lot getting this one repaired.” I crank the light and wince at how loud it is. It’s nothing compared to the music, but I can’t afford to be doing this as we walk, so I spend a few minutes cranking it

hard before we start moving.

Remaining alert for anything, I notice the color doesn't quite match on a stone ahead and—

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

I point it out to Silver, and together, we locate four more. We formulate the plan over the team chat, and Brandon doesn't butt-in.

We make quick work of them, moving in position silently, then each making sounds in turn to split them up and confuse them. Things almost turn bad when one of the spiders cuts Silver and she panics, but before the spider can do a lot more damage as she flays about wildly, I dispatch it, then finish off the last spider.

She apologizes a lot, and I do my best to reassure her she did fine, but somehow, when I give her the rest of my bar to take care of her injuries, the silence turns awkward. Then we're on the move again and reach a bifurcation. I shine the light from one path to the other as I crank it.

[Denis] Brandon, do you have a sense of how close to us you are? Can you see the light?

[Brandon] No, and no. We're following the right wall, which should have us getting back to you at some point

[Helen] If this even reconnects with them.

[Silver] Can we not jump to worse case scenario yet? I'm already freaked enough as it is.

[Helen] Sorry. It's just that the paths have been taking turns after turns even when there weren't intersections. Bran says he knows roughly where we are from when we split from you, but I am utterly lost.

[Dennis] Do you have some mapping ability, Brandon? Is that something we can unlock?

[Brandon] No, sorry. The best anyone can manage, as far as I know, are a few magic items that will compile maps. I haven't been able to afford one yet.

[Silver] Should we stick to the left wall from now on?

[Brandon] It can't hurt.

[Dennis] Have you encountered anything? Your bars haven't moved since we got separated.

[Brandon] Dennis, come on. I'm something like four times higher in level than what's in this part of the dungeon. They kill themselves trying to bite me.

[Helen] as usual, he's exaggerating. But it hasn't taken much to take care of the spiders and flies we've encountered.

[Dennis] okay. You be careful. Sometimes the level jumps unexpectedly.

I look at Silver when there isn't a response, then—

[Brandon] We will be. You be careful too. A jump like that is more dangerous to you than us.

I keep cranking for a while before we proceed, taking the left tunnel. We make it a triple treen before the sound of something breaking in the distance stops us. I can't identify what it is, and it's still going on when we proceed with even more caution.

The next indication we're headed for trouble is a broken spider-web across the tunnel. It would have blocked it otherwise, and now, the sounds coming from the darkness ahead make me think of cracking nuts between my teeth.

Silver's skin looks a little green, and I'm not exactly feeling good about what we're going to see, but her nod is resolute and her sword is steady.

Instead of a bifurcation, it opens into a cavern large enough I can't see the other side beyond the broken web, and only make out one passage to the left out of the corner of my eye as my attention is drawn to the carnage to the right.

four, way too big, centipedes are in the middle of what's left of a lot more dead spiders, munching on them.

Dungeon Centipede, Level 7
Drawn in by the abundance of food, these centipedes have been evolved by the dungeon to establish a balance
Perception Check Failed

Silver doesn't look as sure as before, and I don't feel overly confident. The level might be one below mine, but the smallest of them is as long as I'm tall, and the longest, twice that. I also have no idea how tough that carapace is.

I focus on each of them in turn, hope for the best, and get lucky on the first try.

Dungeon Centipede, Level 7
Drawn in by the abundance of food, these centipedes have been evolved by the dungeon to establish a balance
Perception Check Succeeds Dungeon Centipedes have carapace armor, but unprotected underbelly.

Except that it's only unprotected if it rears up, and I don't see why it would.

[Dennis] Silver, you don't have to fight them if you don't want to.

[Brandon] You can do this.

[Dennis] Butt out, Bran. Once we're out, you're telling me how I go about setting up private channels.

I look at Silver.

[Dennis] I mean it, you aren't a fighter, and I'm going to have to get to the underside to do any kind of damage.

I grin.

[Dennis] Finally got a perception check when it matters.

[Silver] If I scratch the shell, does it still count as me taking part in the fight?

[Dennis] Yes. You'll have scored a hit.

[Silver] Then I'll do that. Maybe we can both take on the smallest first? That way, I won't have to deal with all its attention.

[Dennis] Good idea.

I hesitate, then place the crank light down with the light shining into the cavern.

[Dennis] It's so you know where to retreat to. My ring is going to give me enough light to fight by.

We enter the cavern silently and freeze as the centipedes stop eating.

How do those things see?

The smallest moves away from the spider it was eating and...skitters?—what am I supposed to call what all those legs are doing?—in our general direction.

I move to one side and motion Silver to go to the other.

[Dennis] I'll attack first. Get a hit in and retreat.

She nods. I look at the others to make sure they are staying where they are, then attack.

The centipede's faster than I expected. It whirls in my direction and I realize the pincers on its face are huge. It snaps forward, but I step back, slashing. My blade skids off the carapace on the side of its face.

I lunge, aiming for under the head, but lowers it and I barely move my arm out of the way before its pincers snap shut. I try again before it can move, this time going for the head and hoping there are eyes there I'm not making out. Something soft right in front of me is going to be easier than trying to get it to rear up.

Its pincers snap shut and I lose a tenth of my health. Fortunately, it's only the edge that cut me. The way they snap close, it can probably slice me in two.

Silver runs off, so I move around. Force it to follow me. I Lunge, trying to get it to do something other than undulate out of the way. And when it does, I regret it.

The head butt is fast, hard, and causes a stun debuff as I land on my back. I don't have time for that so I will it away. It was more orange than yellow, so the drop, after my

willpower bar pulses, is noticeable. But I'm on my feet and out of the way of its dash, slashing at its legs and cutting off a bunch of them.

Okay, so those count as its underside. Now I have something to work with.

Silver plays, and my health bar elongates as I feel stronger.

You have been buffed: Strength of the Underdog

It comes at me and when I side step it; I test the buff against its carapace and the tip of my sword sinks in, but my mental rejoicing come to an abrupt end with the buff vanishing and, in the lack of music, I hear a lot of skittering.

The other centipedes are heading for her.

“Take the light and back up!” Then I bang my sword against my shield. “Come on! I'm the one you want!” It's not as loud as I'd like since there's still stuff stuck to it, but it does the job and they all turn to face me.

Right. Because dealing with one of them wasn't hard enough already. I dodge as they each lunge at me, slashing at the legs as best as I can and not making a good show of it. Except for one, where my sword bites deep. When it skitters away, it leaves a trail of wetness until it's out of the circle of my light.

That's another problem, with the crank light no longer illuminating the cavern, I have no way to know what they're doing in the dark.

I don't step out of the way in time to avoid the pincers and pain lances up my leg.

How about I stick with the problems I can see?

I run at the closest, screaming my anger, then freeze in surprise when it rears up, spreading its multiple legs in a rather comical version of an animal trying to make itself look bigger.

I mean, it's already way too big for a centipede, so that's not adding much to—

This time, I see the motion in my peripheral vision and throw myself out of the way. I'm still cursing as I get to my feet. It was right there, its underbelly exposed, and what did I do?

Okay, I can be pissed at myself later. Was it an accident, or was the reaction reflexive? I run at another one, screaming again, and it rears up.

I am not letting this pass me by this time. I plant my sword in and cut down. Its scream is so strident it hurts, and when it shakes, I'm sent off my feet and land close enough to another I can make out its pincers before my vision clears entirely.

I roll aside, and I swear I can hear them tear up the ground.

I'm on my feet, ready to—

I'm in the air again, my back hurting and down something like a full fifth of health. Fuck, this one hit hard.

I hurry to my feet, panting, and turn, ready to—

I'm alone in the circle of light.

Okay, this isn't good. I have maybe three meters of light around me, and another three, I think where I'd be able to make something out. I was a little busy fighting them to pay that close attention.

I slowly step forward, listening for them moving. Instead, I pick up a trail of wetness on the ground. Before I reach its end, one of them runs into the light and I'm not fast enough.

The pincers cut me and my health pulses. My swing misses, and before I fully regain my footing, I'm struck and rolling on the ground.

My health is under half now.

Fuck, this is hard. They're just centipedes and two levels under me. I should be winning this a whole lot easier.

I'm on my feet as one of them enters the light and I don't wait. I lock eyes with its head and run at it, screaming like a maniac.

Dungeon Centipede, Level 9
Drawn in by the abundance of food, these centipedes have been evolved by the dungeon to establish a balance
Perception Check Failed

It rears up, and I barrel into it, sword first. And when it hits the back of the centipede, I pull up hard, then down. Its guts wash over me, but all I do is close my mouth, my eyes and hold my breath until I'm on the ground, then roll away so I won't be under it if it falls forward.

There was a fucking level nine among them. No wonder some of the hits nearly took me down. I wipe at my eyes with the slimy back of my glove and actively don't think about what that is. When I open them, one is rushing at me. I roll out and put my sword in its way. It's nearly yanked out of my hand as the edge bites into it after cutting a few passing legs. Its momentum carries it further, making the cut longer, and when it stops, it isn't moving.

My arm aches, but I don't have a debuff or lost health doing that, so I get to my feet and another one is before me; only its head in the light. I focus on it.

Dungeon Centipede, Level 9
Drawn in by the abundance of food, these centipedes have been evolved by the dungeon to establish a balance
Perception Check Failed

And of course, it's the two I didn't check before the fight that were higher levels. At least, I know how to deal with them.

I scream as I run, but instead of rearing, it skitters back and I have to follow so it won't vanish outside the light. I think it's the last one, but I won't know for sure until I check the combat log, and now isn't the time.

"Stop running, you coward!" Oh, real clever. Like it understands you.

Then it zags when I expect it to zig and it's no longer in the light.

I stop and listen, turning slowly. Come on, give me a success. I deserve one.

Perception Check Failed

Thanks a lot.

Do I have time to check the log and confirm—nope, not the time to be an idiot.

I turn in the direction of the skittering in time to make out the centipede's head enter the outer light, but it's on me before I expect it, as if it had been coiled and then exploded. The only saving grace is that its pincers don't close in time, because I'm down to a quarter health when I crash.

I pull a healing bar to my shield hand and bite the wrapper off as I back against the wall. That's one side it can't come at me from.

Of course, the next image that pops in my head is that of the earlier worms that crawled out of the walls, and I can't stop the shudder.

I only get a few bites in before I see motion at the edge of the darkness and send it to my inventory. Once I've survived this, I can finish it. I know it healed me, but not enough I can make out a difference on my bar.

It appears at the edge twice, darting back, like it's trying to get me to chase it, and now, I have to know. I open the combat log to the side and glance back and forth between it and the darkness, looking for how many of the centipedes I killed.

Two level seven ones, and one level nine.

So it's just it an me. Unless it got reinforcement.

I do hope it didn't. I'm really getting tired of those things.

"I am not chasing you," I call to it the next time it darts into the light and back. The problem is that I can't just stand here waiting it out. Silver should have come back at least close enough I'd see the light. She's still fine, as far as her info on the team screen tells me, but she could still be lost and that isn't good.

The next time it appears, I do what I told it I wouldn't, and follow. It freezes, then moves away again. Almost like it was surprised I acted. It turns and I rush to follow the undulating body so I can get an opening, and utterly miss the end that snaps in the air and hits me.

I roll and slide, landing in a thicker patch of goo, and I'm down to an eight of my health. I hurry to my feet, scuffing the ground to try to gain traction as it rushes at me again.

"I'm sure you think that was real clever, don't you?" Its pincers are wide and I bring my shield forward just before it's about to impact. I slide back from the force, but slip my arm out of the laniards and throw myself aside, then roll to my feet.

"Okay. How about we see how this goes if you can use those on me?"

It spins around to face me, then shakes its head, trying to dislodge my shield, but it's jammed there, its extended pincers keeping it in place.

I walk around as it fights with it. This time, as it snaps the end of its body at me, I duck under it, raising my sword to slice that open. The entire body trashes, and in the process exposes its underside to me, and each time that happens, I cut it. It isn't always deep, but I'm always adding cuts, making it bleed.

And eventually, it's still.

I keep my distance. That one's too clever for my liking.

I bring up the combat log and look at the last entry.

<p>You have killed a Dungeon Centipede, Level 9 You gain 1,521 experience</p>

Now, I breathe easier.

I retrieve my shield by hacking at one of the pincers until it breaks off the body, then call the healing bar from my inventory and—

Silver's distant scream is filled with fear.

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