

I roll as soon as I can think again, putting Silver under me. I can see the pain on her face, then I'm feeling it as talons rake through my armor and my health just glows as it slowly drops. I grit my teeth and focus on being able to think through the mounting pain and my willpower now glows, it too dropping slowly.

Fucking system, adding debuffs with each strike. I'm pretty sure that if not for my Taking it on the Nose ability, I'd be below half, instead of only approaching the three-quarter mark.

Then the silence is almost painful and the returning light blinding. I roll on my back, and a pain debuff appears deep red. I don't bother with it. The fire in my back is enough to tell me I'm not going to be worth anything in a fight unless I do something.

I scarf a healing bar down, and get to my feet before it's done healing me. Shadows dance around us. There's a treen of birds flying in the chimney. They look small and I have trouble believing they could do the damage they did.

It takes me a while to stay with one long enough to focus.

Cave Swallow, level 4
Small birds who feed primarily on insects and other small creatures.
Perception Check Failed

"You okay?" I ask Silver, handing her a healing bar without looking. I'm searching for something else, because there is no way those level four birds were able to kill all the dead centipedes we saw in that other cave.

"My back hurts, but you protected me before I lost much of my health. I'm probably good without healing."

"Take it anyway. Once the fighting starts, I don't think I'll be in a position to help you."

"You really think they're going to be a problem? They're just level three."

I look at her, trying not to glare. Why doesn't she seem to get we're in a dungeon. That there's nothing in here is so inoffensive as to 'not be a problem.' There's a cavern full of centipede carapace the way we came, proving that.

Her eyes go wide and I toss her the bar, looking up for what she heard before it registers she's looking at the entrance we came from. I turn to face it in time to see the fucking large form at the edge of the light flying toward us.

Then there's a beak the size of my forearm, orange feathers between two black eyes, black above that, brown under the beak, white below that.

And I throw myself to the side, the mesmerized debuff fading away to nothingness. Fuck, that was too close.

I stand as it flies up the chimney, slowing. It's going to fucking bomb dive at me.

"Dennis," Silver calls to me, and a glance shows she's still looking at the entrance, and pale.

Of course, there isn't just one of them.

I spare a second to focus, because I need to know what I'm dealing with here.

Dungeon Swallow, Level 10
Once a normal Cave Swallow who made a dungeon its home and was altered by it over time.
Perception Check Failed

“Stay against the wall,” I order here. Then I move.

Don't think about the fact the things wingspan is twice my height. Or that it's a level higher than me and that it had a friend coming to its help. Definitely don't think about what they're going to do to Silver if I die here.

*Never think you've lost the fight. If you do, you're making it true.* Grandmother recited that often as we trained. *Focus on what you can do. Find the thing that changes the battlefield to your advantage.*

She made it sound so easy.

I run because standing still definitely ends up with me dead. It misses where I was, and fuck, those talons are big.

Don't think about that. Think about—Shit! I duck under the other bird's talons, then weave out of the way of a third, remembering I have a sword and slash at it. I'm surprised my blade bites, and it lets out a pained scream that has a debuff forming.

Nope, can't afford that. I will it away and a tenth of my willpower's gone, bringing what's left close to half. I fucking hope I won't be dealing with that each time they scream, otherwise I'm going to run out way too fast. That's three of them. No, four, and I keep moving out of the way just in time.

What's going on here?

Not that I'm complaining.

I silence the suspicion before it forms into a query. That's one distraction I don't need right now. But I think I have it.

I dodge and stab, but miss.

Fuck.

Bob and Weave gives me bonuses when I run, which I am doing.

Okay, I have an edge. I need to capitalize on it, and think of what else I have to work with. I duck again and slash and it screams. That fucking debuff's back and I will it away. I'm under half now.

I run for the wall. It's not just them that can get a height advantage. I make it a treen meters up before the flashing of my stamina registers.

Come on!

I head back down, then I'm sent careening as a bird's head clips me. The sound of breaking bones as it collides with the wall is satisfying. The pain and added loss of health from my bad fall makes that go away, but I'm running again. It's my shield arm, so I'm not out of this fight yet.

Add to the list of things to buy something to recharge my stamina.

When I dodge again, and cut deeper, the bird almost yanks my sword out of my hand as it twists. It does throw me off balance, and another grabs me, its talons piercing through that's left of my armor and fuck, that hurts.

Will that debuff away and don't pay attention to how little willpower I have left. Instead, I plant my sword in its chest to the hilt. It's cry it cut off, but then were tumbling down and toward the wall.

Oh, I hope this works.

I pry myself off the talons and ignore the damage I cause, then send my sword to my inventory and I throw myself away from the bird and at an angle to the wall.

I have to be running and maintain two points of contact.

Luck, be a stat right now and be fucking high.

I have a hand on the wall, then my feet under me and touching it. It bounces off just as the other makes contact, and that's enough to keep me from flying off it. Then it's back in place and I'm running against the wall.

I swallow the elation. I might not be dead yet, but I haven't won this either. Four birds are on the floor, unmoving as I run, three are still flying. My health is below a quarter.

One opens its beak as it dives at me, and I glance at my willpower. Do I have enough left?

Instead of its cry, the sound of a violin explodes through the cavern. It's strident, I think, off-key, but what it certainly is; is impossible to ignore. I reach the ground and it's still going.

I want to ask Silver what she's doing, since I'm not getting a buff from that, but then I realize all I hear is the violin.

The bird closes its beak.

I equip my sword. Okay. One thing I no longer have to worry about.

I keep running, and my stamina flashes orange.

Not good. I can't stop running, but I don't have long until I won't be able to run anymore. I duck as I consider getting a healing bar and reflexively slash. I dodge out of the way of the other one and this time purposefully cut it, and the third is already heading for me.

My leg buckles as my stamina flashes red. I barely raise my sword as the bird grabs me, and now my health bar flashed orange, then we hit the wall. It flashes red and my vision fades along with it.

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You have gained a level. You are now level 10
You have 16 skill points available. You have 0 spell points available. You have 8 attribute points available. You have 3 ability points available
Experience required to reach your next level: 23,491

The words mean little as I try to figure out why something's tapping my cheek and what the noise is. My health bar glows gold as it slowly fills. Debuffs fade away before I can focus on them and I understand what I'll seeing, that someone is, none too gently, slapping my face and talking.

"Come on, Dennis, wake up," Brandon says, worry thick in his voice. "I can see your heath bar filling up. Just tell me I got here in time."

"You saved me again," I say, or I think I say it. I'm not sure my mouth works.

“Oh, thank the system you’re okay.”

“How come I’m not dead?” Now I know I formed the words.

“You should have seen them burst in,” Silver says, excited. “Brandon went right for the bird that was trying to get to you. Helen was throwing fireballs.” She chuckles. “We’re going to have roasted chicken for days.”

It takes me a bit to piece what has to have happened.

“You heard Silver’s...music? You followed that?”

“Yeah, we did,” he says. Before I can figure out what his expression is, he glares at Helen. After a silent exchange, she throws up her hands and storms away. “I was scared I wouldn’t get to you in time.”

“I’m glad you did. I reach level ten.”

I pull up the last entries from the combat log.

Your party has killed a Dungeon Sparrow, level 10
You receive 186 experience

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I chuckle. “Those birds you and Helen killed pushed me over the level.”

“I’m glad,” she replies, kind of harshly. I look at Brandon for an explanation, but he shakes his head.

“How about we get out of here?” Brandon asks.

I look up, then at my stamina. “I don’t think I can make it up there yet. I’m healing, but it’s not doing anything for my stamina.”

“I was thinking we’d go out the way we came in.”

“Isn’t that closed off?”

He shrugs. “Hopefully, the dungeon removed that wall by now. If not, I’m sure my sister will be happy to work off her anger on it.” He smirks as she glares at the back of his

head.

I push myself to my feet, then Brandon catches me before I tip over. “Yeah. This was fun and all, but I think I’m done with the dungeon.”

“You had fun?” Brandon asks as we leave the cavern, with him supporting most of my weight. For a moment I think it’s hope I heard in the question, but it’s probably surprise. I did almost die after all. That has to take the fun out of anything.

So why isn’t it for me?

“Well, yeah,” I say, speaking as I piece it together. “Don’t get me wrong, nearly dying sucks. I don’t want to ever do that again. But the fights...they were fun. I didn’t have time to doubt myself, just act, that one especially. I literally turned falling into running down along the wall because what else was I going to do? Just let myself fall? I didn’t know if it was going to work, but I was going to do something. And Bob and Weave let me dodge most of them, which was a good thing, because fuck it hurt when their talons got me.” I’m grinning.

Brandon pats my shoulder and looks at Helen with what I’m pretty sure is pride. She glowers in return. Okay, I can see why. She doesn’t really approve of Brandon pushing me to adventure.

And to be fair, I really shouldn’t be this okay with all of it. But it was my idea to go into the dungeon. And for all the pain and danger, I’m alive, and I feel good.

I’m not sure I’ve felt this good before.

When Brandon smiles at me, I grin back. Then I’m kissing him, hard.

“Woa, Buddy,” he says with a laugh, pushing me away gently. “How about we let the adrenaline work its way out of your system before you do something even I’m pretty sure is a mistake.”