

<Alex, Real - All Dead? Is It Permanent?, Burntout Art Gallery>

Alex's hand came up, even as he leapt forward, taking the lead head... well, head-on.

He slapped the incoming tip of the front skull, triggering Life's Active Defense, and to his mixed joy and horror, every head was stopped in its tracks.

It was joyful because it meant that the beast had been using some sort of unified skill, allowing him to foil it entirely.

On the horrible side, he'd just taken the entirety of an attack that would have mostly missed him.

His health and stamina each dropped by more than a hundred and twenty points.

In the momentary pause, Alex shot some health into the creature, hoping to kill it quickly.

One of the bones briefly glowed green before it was ejected from the creature, discarded, the act seemingly severing the connection to the rest of the body.

Well... that's not great.

Grant and Natasha hadn't been idle, thankfully, and even as Alex was reeling from the hit to his resources and the misstep of one of his primary defenses, Grant's hammer crunched one of the skulls. Natasha's spear was less effective, but she still used it to eject bones from the hostile mass, thus making their job easier.

Nine? I think there are nine heads since Grant took care of one. The thing was like a hydra, but rather than having a dragon body, the body was just a snake's tail.

It was *odd*.

Natasha's spear thrust in again hitting a seam in the roof of one of the other skull's mouth, splitting the thing in half.

John's guns cracked out, Alex's mana sense and danger sense both highlighting just how much power the man was putting into each one. The shots destroyed vertebrae outright, but they were just cast aside, the slither-bane shifting its configuration to take the damage into account.

Then, the beast finally seemed to recover from the shock of its opening strike stopping cold.

The other undead hadn't been idle either, and suddenly the four Initiates were *hard* pressed from every side.

"Burst!" Alex called, and the others pulled back slightly without argument, continuing to destroy the lesser undead to the best of their ability as they did so. They knew what he was going to use, and they didn't want to be hit by it any more than he wanted to hit them.

Alex, in contrast, surged forward again, beginning to build power in his Force Burst spell.

He *briefly* considered trying to run up one of the skeletal snakes to reach the junction of bodies, but after his flubbing of a simple vault through a window, he decided not to risk such a difficult maneuver.

Instead, he did his best to gather as much attention as possible, cutting and hacking as his companions left him to advance on his own. He couldn't *ash* while building mana within Force Burst. It seemed that he couldn't split his power that way, not yet.

Still, one of the skeletal snake heads—easily as big as his own—lowered down before him, wavering back and forth as if in an attempt to distract him. That was fine with him.

He jumped up and forward just as two more heads struck, one from each side.

He released the burst.

Power *slammed* outward, catching three heads and six lesser undead in the bubble.

It also caught the floor, causing it to groan ominously. That, blessedly, held, at least for the moment. Even so, there were obvious cracks all across the otherwise sturdy—if slightly charred—floor.

The amount of power that he put into the blast cracked the slither-bane skulls, but wasn't quite enough to shatter any.

Still, it seemed to anger the beast as a full five of the eight remaining heads oriented on him, their eyes filling with a purple light.

On instinct, he lifted his left hand in the way and used Life's Active Defense again, feeling almost desperate for the skill to be of use.

That, as it turned out, was a mistake.

Apology Tutorial Notice:

Life's Active Defense has brought a large portion of your Health and Stamina into direct contact with an incoming curse effect.

This is not a damaging attack to be so defended against.

Effect has instantly spread through most of your body, bypassing your Magical Fortitude.

Minimally reduced due to Basic Resistance - Magic level 1

Well, that is surprisingly unfortunate... It also reminded him of his attempt to block the Plague Witch's magic. It hadn't worked well then either.

Notice:

Curse of Immobile Death, partially resisted.

Reduced to Curse of Imposed Rigamortous

Curse of Imposed Rigamortous, partially opposed.

Conditions:

Curse of Imposed Rigamortous

All Power reduced by 10% (x5 due to physical suffusion) 50%

All Agility reduced by 25% (x3 due to physical suffusion) 75%

All Fortitude reduced by 50% in regard to sources of Undeath, Death, or Curse damage or effects (x1.5 due to physical suffusion) 75%

Alex would have stumbled if he wasn't already in mid-air. This was a *disaster* of epic proportions.

"Curse!" Even his voice sounded weak to his own ears. He felt like his very vitality was snuffed, the flame of his power reduced to a fragile ember in an instant.

Note to self, survive... then never do that again.

He landed, stumbling as his legs did not work as he expected, even with his attempts to compensate for his weakened state.

His companions instantly noticed something was wrong—likely aided in that observation by the snakes' previously glowing eyes and the magic of their attack, along with his shout—and they all moved to try to support him.

Grant rushed forward, but his fourth powerful step broke through the floor that Alex's Force Blast had weakened.

Right behind him, Natasha seemed to almost reflexively cast a Force Shield that caught the big man's falling foot, allowing him to only barely stagger in his continued charge. It also supported her as she moved around behind him.

John didn't advance, instead dumping a large portion of his mana into a rapid series of shots, irreparably shattering the three heads that Alex had weakened.

Even so, five more advanced on Alex who felt like he was moving through molasses, his mind as clumsy and unresponsive as his body.

How is this possible? I still have effective stats more than quadruple what I did before the system. He frowned... was that math right? *Focus!*

He looked up, blinking slowly just before two sets of massive snake jaws snapped closed, slamming to a stop with one around each shoulder.

The largest immediate thought that Alex had was that it *hurt*. His fantastic jacket had kept the fangs from penetrating, but it hadn't really reduced the force of the impacts, at least not by much.

His shoulders were suffused with the feeling of bones breaking and grinding against one another. It was a blessing that the attack wasn't a death or undead effect, so his full Physical Fortitude was able to partially resist the force.

That was likely what enabled him to have another thought. *Are these things stupid?*

He immediately dumped power into another Force Burst. As he did so, he could feel just how anemic the spell was. That made sense, his Magic Power had been reduced just as much as his Physical. In this case, he had some mana to spare, and so he simply doubled the amount of mana he had been going to use in the spell, increasing it until he felt like he was taxing the twists and whirls of power.

Less than a second after the two snakeheads bit down, another blast radiated outward.

It only extended five feet from him, rather than the standard ten, but that was a blessing in this case, as otherwise he would likely have caught both Natasha and Grant.

As it was, he only caught the blade of Natasha's spear as she closed to try and free him from the snake bites.

The entirety of both heads were blown apart, along with their neck-bodies, everything that had been within his spell's range.

It was more effective than Life Transfusion had been for this creature and not by a little.

As for Natasha's spear? It was bent, cracked, and twisted, utterly ruined.

The woman cursed, something that Alex heard as a vaguely racist commentary on hamsters? It made literally no sense.

Still, it seemed that the slither-bane was on its last legs... because it certainly was on its last necks and heads. It had no legs to begin with...

Alex shook his head, trying to focus.

While the Russian woman was still processing the loss of her spear, Grant *vaulted* up toward the hole through which the slither-bane was attacking them. “SHIELD!”

Natasha snapped back into focus, summoning a Force Shield for the big man to leap off of. And leap he did, in spectacular fashion.

His warhammer vanished, and suddenly a massive, twenty pound, demolition sledgehammer came into his hands.

He was *strong* now, and that strength came to bare as he swung the great tool with speed that would make a pre-System fencer proud, slamming the metal weight down on the main body with literally bone crushing force.

It wouldn't be accurate to say that the whole building shook, but bone shards definitely rocketed around, pinging off of various surfaces. Their group was only protected by Natasha's quick thinking and use of a well placed Force Shield, close to the source, cast after she'd dismissed the one that Grant had leapt from.

Grant was utterly untouched by the blowback from his strike, Leave No Trace coming in to make his life easier yet again.

A blessed notification confirmed they were successful, and Alex quickly checked through his bulk of kill rewards to make sure.

You killed

Zombie Ravager (Common), level 15 x 4

Zombie Ravager (Common), level 16 x 2

Zombie Ravager (Common), level 17 x 5

...

Flaming Skeleton (Uncommon), level 19

Kill Assists:

Zombie Ravager (Common), level 13 x 8

...

Slither-Bane (Rare), level 25

Reward:

Experience to be granted when in a safe location.

Alex skimmed most of the list as he'd gotten in the habit of doing, ensuring that everything that he thought should be dead was, in fact, killed in the System's eyes.

Good. He nodded once to himself, smiling in satisfaction.

Then, he collapsed to the floor, unable to stay up due to his pain and weakness.

Wounds:

**Crushed Shoulder, internal, unset x 2
[100,000 HP x 2 required to heal]**

Conditions:

Curse of Imposed Rigamortous

Apology Tutorial Addendum:

Curse Origin has been destroyed, it will fade over ten minutes (x5 due to physical suffusion) 50 min

Basic Resistance (Curse) lvl 2 detected.

Time Divided by 5 for each level, compounding.

Curse will fade over the next two minutes.

Alex groaned at those messages. On one side, his quickly recovering Mental Power allowed him to do some quick math, and his shoulders would heal in just over 10 hours, which was *insanely* fast in pre-System terms. Moreover, they were currently 'unset' so if his companions could help, that could be drastically reduced.

On the other side, he was in a *bad* way, and he wouldn't be getting better until his shoulders healed.

Alex Johnson

HP: 931/5940

The curse fading so quickly was a boon, and he dearly hoped that his resistance would level up when it was fully gone.

It was good that the curse hadn't hurt his health regeneration, otherwise the math would have become *complicated*.

Natasha was beside him in a moment, inquiring about his state.

He conveyed it, and with a nod of determination, she set about trying to get his broken bones back closer to how they should be. John and Grant moved in to help.

It was a... grueling process that took about thirty minutes and ended up costing two hundred of his HP due to additional damage done, but with Grant and John watching over them and

assisting where they could, their group was able to get the bones 'set' enough to greatly reduce the healing cost.

Alex would only need to be mostly unmoving for another hour for the wounds to be fully dealt with. It would be less if the Ring of Regeneration (Health) had attuned to him, but sadly, that would take another day. So he was left with only his natural regeneration rate, prodigious though it was.

If this had been the real world, the other enemies above would have already come swarming down on them, but yet again the System's videogame-like set up of this scenario gave them a chance where otherwise they wouldn't have had one.

John was exhausted. He had been leaning heavily on a newly acquired skill to empower his shots, and he'd nearly bottomed out his mana, leading to a splitting headache.

Even so, he offered Alex a regeneration potion for Alex's health, knowing it would get Alex back up and in fighting shape *really* quickly, and knowing that they needed that.

Still, Alex refused, stating that John needed to recover too, and there was no need to use two potions when a bit of time would do the trick.

John protested but not too vehemently, finally agreeing to rest. Once that was decided, the man also took the time to call his wife and check in on her.

The initiate still hadn't woken up, but he was breathing easier. Some undead were starting to pay the building more attention, but she hadn't seen or heard any either entering or already within so far, so they still had time.

Natasha was less than pleased that Alex had broken her spear, but she was sanguine enough about it, understanding that it had been an accident, and his spell-use had been a good choice in the moment. That said, she did need a weapon...

Alex groaned, shifting despite the pain it caused in his shoulders. "Put it as straight as you can, then lay it across my legs."

She did so. She and Grant worked with his hammers to flatten out the bent, twisted, and cracked spearblade until it was near enough right, though still wholly unusable. Alex doubted it would survive a single cut or thrust.

Still, it was as close to in the right place as possible, and in that state, it was laid across Alex's legs. That done, he began *slowly* putting health into it, despite his already few points.

He groaned, sensing just how much it would take.

I don't have health to spare... But... He *did* have *Life*... He wouldn't be full of health for a long time, so taking a little Life off the top wouldn't affect *this* mission...

He grunted and took ten minutes to sink 100 Life into his friend's spear. He got a few notifications during that time, but postponed them until later, keeping his focus on the spear.

The metal slowly pulled the last fractions of an inch together along the cracks, making soft *click*-ing sounds, bracketed by the soft scrape of metal on metal. The imperfections smoothed over and the spear became usable once more.

When he was done, Natasha stepped forward and examined it. "Thank you."

He nodded, trying to Analyze it, out of curiosity.

System Granted Spear+:

This is a sharp bit of metal at the end of a short staff, usable with one or two hands.

Base damage dealt, calculated based on Physical Power and Agility.

Base damage multiplied by 2.5x when wielded by two hands.

Damage type: Slashing or Piercing

Now, it is more.

Repaired with the Life of a budding Life Initiate, this is almost worthy of a rarity... Simple, of course, and only *almost*.

+25% damage against Undead and Death-aligned creatures.

He grinned, ignoring the System's snark. "A bit better than it was before, eh?"

She nodded. "Yes. Thank you, again."

From there, he only had to rest. And, of course, *that* was when they heard more creatures coming down the stairs.

John groaned, rubbing at his temples. "I'm not anywhere near full, yet."

Alex checked his own status. The curse was gone—he was pretty sure he had a notification waiting for him about that—but his shoulders were still very much broken. "I'm out of commission for this one."

Grant and Natasha moved closer to the stairs. The man took out his warhammer, twirling the light, vicious weapon once as he took his place.

Natasha tested the weight of her newly repaired spear and smiled. "This is as good a time as any to test this out."

And that's all the time they had before the next wave arrived.