

<Alex, Real - Endure, Assaulting the College>

Alex felt a bit like he was stuck on a repeating loop as the Initiates fought through the undead amassed against them.

He had even put his shield and dadao into storage to make his back and forth sprinting just a bit more efficient, given his chances of being able to actually fight were, seemingly, vanishingly small.

He *could* have simply done blood transfusions in order to remove the need for direct contact, but that would have increased the resource usage, and he was loath to be so wasteful.

He *did* decide to practice his newest use of Shaped Force Burst, however.

As it turned out, because he created the symbol sets in orientation to himself, it was rather easy to orient them in any desired direction. That, combined with his ability to drop items from his Inventory into precise locations within a few inches of his body, meant that he could perfectly position the projectiles for the burst of force to launch them forward.

His results were far from perfect, as the undead he was aiming for were invariably moving, unlike the Death Knight he'd knifed in the eye. More critically, the rocks he pulled into his inventory and spat back out to use for his tests were *not* aerodynamic, causing their flight paths to be a bit... erratic.

Thankfully, he never hit any of the Initiates between him and his various targets, but it was a near thing a couple of times, causing him to bias his shots toward the peripheries.

They also weren't killing blows, as the best results he could get at the moment were equivalent to a *very* hard throw. Given all his stat gains, that was better than most if not all professional pitchers back before the system, but it still wasn't anywhere close to a bullet.

The main benefit was the precision that *should* be attainable, and the fact that it didn't take a hand, or really any portion of his body at all.

This will need a lot of practice to be truly useful. Still, it did allow him to get a few assists as the other Initiates racked up kill after kill.

A small smile pulled at his lips at that thought. His companions were expanding their abilities, and that would make them all stronger. He'd *rather* be fighting alongside them, but he was the only one who could easily purge the turning plague, and so he would fulfill his role, content with their survival and gains.

The purging actually *did* get him a bit of experience, even if it was basically the theorized 'one experience point' for defeating something far below him in power.

He wouldn't level from it, but it was something.

They were half-way back to their original furthest point when the nonsensical chanting and painful sound returned. They'd cut through several waves of undead this time, likely killing more than even during the first assault, but Alex was still immediately irritated by the impediment.

Regardless, they'd planned for this, and the Initiates disengaged, slowly drawing back once more.

The undead similarly didn't follow, allowing the Initiates to retreat toward the main gate.

As the group passed close to one building, rounding the corner and passing through what Alex hoped was a blind spot for the watching undead, Alex, Natasha, Paresh, and Maria broke off, and slipped into an already broken window in a window well.

Basement access for the win! Alex kept himself from chuckling in excitement.

Even if they had slipped away unnoticed, he didn't delude himself into thinking they'd remain undiscovered, as much as they hoped for that outcome. The undead were too good at finding the living for the four of them to count on remaining hidden within their central base.

As such, they quickly began to hunt for a way to get further down into the bowels of the campus.

The sound attack *did* continue within the building, but it was muted, the basement seemingly not having warranted as many or as high quality of components for the PA system.

Still, it was annoying for the couple of minutes that it continued before suddenly cutting off, indicating that the other Initiates had retreated for the moment.

The plan was for them to come back in an hour after accepting their experience and taking a short breather. Hopefully, Alex and the others would remain undiscovered for that time and have finished by then.

Alex pulsed his Detect Unlife again, confirming that the mass of seemingly rigid undead were just one floor below where they'd entered the building, arranged in lines that indicated underground passages of some kind in the surrounding earth.

Thankfully, as a public institution, there were *lots* of signs directing people where they might want to go.

Unfortunately, as a public institution, the college's ideas of what was wanted were not all inclusive, nor comprehensive.

In this case, Alex had to admit that it would not have made sense for the college to point visitors to the under-complex.

He was still irritated, however.

Blessedly, Maria actually had a spell to reveal what she was seeking or something like that, and as such, they only took about five minutes to find the non-descript door to the stairs leading downward.

Five minutes was still a small eternity when every sound felt like the first herald of a cavalcade of undead falling upon them, but it was faster than they'd have been reasonable to expect.

Regardless, they'd found it.

Paresh carefully opened the door, some skill of his preventing the latch and hinges from making even a whisper of noise.

Yeah... bringing them along was the right call.

Natasha tried to go first, but Alex gave her a firm look that resulted in a seven-second stare down.

Finally, the Russian grimaced and motioned for him to lead.

He gave a nod and smiled, taking the front position for the descent.

Maria tapped his shoulder as he passed, and his vision shifted, the dark staircase becoming easy to see, even if it was in gray scale.

He hesitated only a moment, realizing how stupid it would have been to pull out a light, effectively announcing them to anyone with eyes to see.

He smiled his thanks to Maria and took the first step down the concrete stairs.

The walls were cinder-block construction, the mortar scraped clean, but with the surfaces otherwise unfinished.

At the base of the stairs was another, heavier door, requiring Paresh to use his skills to let Alex pull open the door silently yet again.

All their caution was *almost* for not, as Alex went to step out and came face to face with a clearly undead man.

Alex barely caught a scream of surprise, freezing in place to suppress it.

If the thing had been capable of attacking, it would have had Alex dead to rights.

Instead, the business suit wearing man was seemingly locked in place, as were the dozens of others even spaced through the passage before them.

There was just enough room to move around the statue-undead, and Alex felt himself shudder.

That was so foolish, Alex. Use your Detect spells. Come on, man.

He almost used his Analyze on it, but of late, he felt hesitant, now that he knew it could be detected. What if Analyzing one woke it up?

After the initial scare and relief, he found himself grimacing. Honestly, he'd have preferred it if these things attacked. The eerie stillness was... well, eerie.

Still, as he pulled his eyes from the undead, he saw thin black cables connecting to each, leading down the passage toward the center of campus. They glowed to his mana sense, clearly filled with undead magic.

What is this? They were already undead, so...

Alex closed his eyes, stifling a groan. This had to be some means of making the undead more powerful. It's the only thing that made sense.

The others were obviously just as hesitant about the unmoving undead as Alex, but they still followed as he began to weave down the tunnel, following the cords on the floor.

Nothing moved but them.

There was no light, no sound, nothing.

Alex almost wished the two stealth Initiates would allow some of their group's sound to propagate just so his ears would have something to hear.

Still, it was better that they went undetected.

As they progressed, they began to see rarer, more powerful variations interspersed with the clearly simple undead they'd encountered first.

They even happened to be right beside one in the wrong place as the mana within it undead reached a crescendo.

The woman in question imploded down on the cable before cracking, crunching, squelching, and expanding once more into the form of a bone lurker.

That confirmed it for Alex. Whatever was happening, these undead were being 'power leveled' in some form or other.

As odd as it was, the undead they passed didn't have any sort of rotting smell to them, despite them most likely having been dead for more than three weeks.

As such, when the scent of blood and death finally *did* reach their nostrils as they approached the center of campus, it stood out starkly.

These tunnels had all sorts of piping and cabling filled with various forms of mana, or seemingly mundane materials or forms of power, even if Alex couldn't really figure out what most were used or useful for. After all, who would need *darkness* mana?

Regardless, this and the branching paths they navigated past all clearly converged on a hub of sorts, and as Alex, Natasha, Maria, and Paresh drew close, they began to see the radiant light of day seeping down the tunnel to reach them.

The group tightened up at that, finally coming to the end of the line at a steel gate, which barred their easy path forward.

Maria or Paresh could likely have gotten them through with ease—as could Alex, actually—but none of them wanted that due to what they saw within.

Massive vats, which they couldn't see inside of, stood along one side of the large space. The vats were clearly newly put there as they not only didn't seem to fit well, but there were clear burn and blast marks on the walls and floor which were not evident on the vats.

This was on the other side of the gate when we blew up the science room? That seemed most likely.

Regardless, it seems that the undead had done some work to repair whatever this place was.

As the Initiates watched, bodies were dropped from above into the vats in an irregular, but steady, rhythm.

Cables flowing with mana led from each vat toward the center.

In the very center of the chamber, a creature sat crosslegged as if in meditation. In one hand he held the cables coming from the dozens of vats, and in the other he held the cables that then spread out and went into each of the tunnels leading radially out from this central point.

The flow of mana was constant, and as Alex analyzed it, he could see that the power flowing in was *not* the same as the mana flowing out.

What came out was somehow... purer? It was like it had been homogenized and strained, ready to be absorbed by the undead being nurtured.

More importantly, the easy comparison let Alex notice something that he hadn't before. The undead he'd fought all had a similar *flavor* to his mana sense. He only realized it now because the power flowing into the creature had that flavor reduced to almost nothing, and the power flowing out had it in abundance.

It almost felt like a signature of some sort.

This creature was claiming all the undead as his own.

The Plague Lord... Alex was *not* foolish enough to use Analyze, and thankfully his companions weren't either.

As he looked on, he regretted not bringing John, as the man likely could have put a powerful shot between the thing's eyes from here, potentially ending the threat once and for all.

This was *clearly* the source of their problems in one way or another, and he deeply wished that he could have simply set a mine or bomb or something and left, triggering it from a safe distance.

He even considered trying to perform a Blood Transfusion across the distance. Only the certainty that such a creature—as advanced and leveled as it was—would have the Magical Fortitude to make such a method of attack prohibitively expensive stayed his attempt. That was even assuming it didn't have any other method of protecting against such an attack.

With no other viable option, Alex was working himself up to have the door opened so he could go kill that thing. That's when he noticed shifting in the shadows around the room.

As soon as he focused on it, the still activated, magical night vision highlighted what waited within.

Six Flesh Golems of the Plague Guard stood sentry, spaced against the wall, and those were just the ones he could see.

He would *not* be able to deal with even two of them on his own with any sort of speed, and those with him were even worse equipped for such a fight.

They needed to withdraw and reassess.

Still, it galled him to be so *close* without being able to do anything...

He looked down at the cabling through which undeath mana was flowing outward to the growing undead.

He dropped to a knee, carefully separating the various lines until he had just one in his hand.

He leaned in close, pushing his senses to the limit, trying to tell what the cable actually was.

In the end, the material and makeup eluded him—as might be expected given what he had to work with—but he *did* detect the runes within.

There were two simple symbols, that for transfer and that for mana, arranged in such a manner that the symbol set could be chained in a spiraling stack.

That was the core of the cable.

Alex grinned. The symbol set didn't have directionality, and that meant that what the runes carried out could be sent back.

More to the point, the fact that it was carrying undead mana *outward* didn't prohibit him from sending mana back.

That, though, caused his smile to falter.

He didn't want to send *mana*, he wanted to send HP or Life.

His grin became a grimace. He *could* still use the cabling to send Life or HP, but it would be more like his practice with Stephen than a more direct connection...

He grunted, then squared his shoulders.

It might be fruitless, but he still had to try.