

<Alex, Real - Venomous Invaders, Space Between the Innominate and the Space Station>

As he flew through space, Alex realized that he really needed answers to questions he should have asked in the 'planning' phase of things. *No time like the present... at least when the past isn't an option.*

As such, he reached out to Juba through his cuffs.

Alex: Juba, your drones have flamethrowers or some other anti-swarm functionality, right?

Juba: ...

Alex: Right?

Juba: Alex, my friend... Are you telling me that you have no ax to get your honey?

Alex: What now?

Juba: I'm saying, a weapon that you don't have in your hand will not kill a snake.

Alex: ...That has the ring of a proverb, both did, actually. I don't think I've heard you speak in proverbs before.

Juba: There is a reason for that.

Alex: Oh?

Juba: Those *were* proverbs, and I am using them when I usually wouldn't so as to not insult my friend for his... less than ideal choices.

Alex: ... Ah... That's fair... Do you have anything more useful to add?

Juba: Don't fight a dragon with a stick.

Alex: I don't think that applies?

Juba: Don't fight bees with a club.

Alex: See, that applies, but I don't feel like it's particularly helpful. Do your drones have anti-swarm measures?

Juba: Alex, my friend. You are a very dumb smart person.

Alex: ...Yes, Juba. I done messed up. We can agree on that. I'm clearly a bit more... not in my right thinking space than I really considered. I promise I will do something about it *when I get back*.

Juba: I am going to talk with the others.

Alex: No, Juba. I'll be fine. We're here because of me, and I can get it done.

Juba: ...Are you sure? Don't you wish for me to bring you back?

Alex hesitated at that question, looking up from his bracelets and seeing the station growing large before him. He would arrive within a minute at his current speed. *Did* he want to go back? Should what he want matter?

He closed his eyes and *thought*. Finally, he nodded.

Alex: No. There are people on the station in need, and even if all I can do is get covered in spiders and roll across the floor to squish them, that's more than anyone else has been able to do to help.

Juba: The drones have anti-swarm measures. Specifically, shields to let you pull back and reset your mind and gear.

Alex: Alright. Not ideal, but I can work with that.

Juba: I will hold them in reserve until you call for their use.

Alex: ...Thank you.

Juba: I do think that such will be an *optimistic* result, however.

Alex didn't know what he meant by that, but the station loomed before him, filling his field of view.

Juba: I still feel that I should talk with the others.

Alex: No, Juba. They have their own tasks and training. I'm not a child. This is my choice.

Juba: You are not a child, but I still feel uncertain... Fine. It is your choice.

Alex: Thank you.

The drones gave a quick jerk on his hands and feet—a bit harder on his hands—and he let go, reorienting and landing with surprising agility.

Gravity took hold, making the station 'down' for him.

His head spun briefly as his body tried to understand the sudden reassertion of such a fundamental force.

The sensation passed quickly enough, and he looked around.

The hull was quite different from that of the Innominate, and not just because the station was clearly larger than his ship.

There was an interesting blue hue to the metal that wasn't magical but which Alex remembered was anti-life in some mundane way, preventing the establishment of any void-flora or fauna in the green light of the star.

He frowned, then. *Wait. The star is green. That means the light is green. How am I seeing blue so easily?*

No easy answer presented itself, so he decided that the light likely wasn't *purely* green, and his mind was simply filtering and interpreting what portions of the spectrum it could.

Beside him, a section of the floor opened, showing a green light—different in hue—within the pit, within the airlock.

It only took him an instant to notice the indicator on one side of the square opening, informing him what side was the floor within.

Handy, that. The drones hovered over the hole, oriented to look into the opening as he went around to the proper side.

He *almost* poked at Juba for landing him on the wrong side of the airlock, but realized that he was in *no* place to throw stones. *Forget glass houses, I'm on a glass planet...*

Alex took a deep breath, then laughed, looking around at the vacuum of space. "I kind of love magic."

He then looked at the open pit before him.

"The current results of my own choices? Not so much."

Then, feeling *very* odd, he leaned over and allowed himself to fall face first into the airlock, his feet pivoting on the corner.

The next moment, he was stumbling forward, stabilizing his footing on the solid floor. Behind him, five drones floated just outside the door. Beyond them was the emptiness of space with the Innominate in the near-distance.

Alex nodded and sent the command to close the airlock.

Lights began to flash red, and the drones shifted inside as doors appeared, beginning to slide shut. Alex paled slightly.

Alex: Thank you, Juba.

Juba: My friend, it becomes more apparent that a part of you has something of a deathwish.

Alex: That might be uncomfortably close to the truth.

There was a long pause before the man sent another message. Juba: Help those you can, then get back and accept help yourself.

Alex: Agreed.

The airlock doors clicked shut.

A moment later, hissing filled the space, and Alex finally registered that it had been *entirely* silent save the sound of his own heart and breath for the last minutes. *Huh, it's amazing what we can filter out and ignore...*

There was likely a lesson in that, but it was hardly the time.

He did find it interesting that both the Innominate and the space station used airlocks, now that he considered it. He'd have thought there was some sort of shield magic or technology that would allow physical passage while keeping the atmosphere contained.

And... there was. He could sense it and read the magics within both doors, but it was a redundancy.

That was honestly quite comforting to realize. This Imperium didn't seem to do important things halfway.

Alex chuckled. "Or, the tutorial doesn't want the Initiates to die from silly, single points of failure."

Either could be likely. The structures involved were supposedly privately owned by those who lived and worked in them, and that incentivized doing things right rather than cheap... at least where possible.

He shook himself. His mind really was grasping at straws to keep himself from having even a single moment of introspection...

As soon as the light turned green once more, he keyed the inner door, and it swept open revealing a hallway crisscrossed with strands of what looked like webbing. It also let through the radiating feeling of 'life', tainting all the magic of the station that was still functional around it.

Alex sighed. "So, spiders..."

He frowned, pulling up the quest and looking at the 'queen' line.

"Spiders don't have queens... at least not the ones I know of... Don't some ants use webbing? Is *that* what I'm dealing with?"

He shuddered. If he began hearing little proclamations of 'For the colony!' he was going to have Juba take him back, survivors or no.

Don't lie to yourself, Alex. You'll help if you can regardless.

As he continued to look, he began to see some movement among the webbing as well as on the floor, walls, and ceiling.

He felt an ick rise up within himself that hadn't even been present when he faced the undead.

He *really* hated spiders and things like them.

Interestingly, he didn't dislike most insects. Many were annoying, but he had a *visceral* dislike of spiders, scorpions, and snakes... none of which were insects, now that he considered it, but that wasn't the thought that suddenly jumped to mind.

...This was a constructed encounter by a System and beings that were seemingly capable of reading his mind.

"Oh, come on..."

He was finally able to see the closest little thing, which was still outside the range of his Spherical Sense.

Little was *not* a good descriptor, despite it being about six inches in length.

It was a space scorpion with a bulbous central body and a tail that was reminiscent of a snake, slowly shifting back and forth, ready to strike.

Six distinct little eyes watched him with apparent hunger as it skittered forward.

Alex pulled his dadao from the sheath on his back, and then he remembered: He'd grabbed a few safety masks from the high school workshops.

One came from his Inventory already shielding his face. It was just the equivalent of a clear, curved sheet of plexiglass, but it made him *feel* better.

"Oh, Alex... Let this be a lesson to you. Distraction is *not* the answer for internal issues."

He glanced down at his shoes and for the first time, wished they had thicker soles.

The first thing skittered into the airlock room, coming to investigate him for one reason or another. As it entered his Spherical Sense it lit up like a beacon.

It was a little packet of life-magic barely held together by... something.

The specifics radiating off of it were like static, and Alex could only barely 'hear' what he thought were words among the chaos.

The face protection reminded him of another skill he hadn't really had the occasion to use.

He focused and used Harden Life, to lock his Life into a more defensive mode at the outer edge of his skin.

By the tutorial addendum he'd been granted, it should also bring his resistances more into play as well, likely helping them train more readily. When speaking of increases to his Life's defense, it had said that 'any resistance type attributes that apply will be affected as well.'

And... I should have been using this at all times... He added it to the list of should have's and moved on.

The little scorpion thing was *fast*, zipping in toward his feet after pausing to examine him momentarily.

Alex, though, was *far* faster than he had been pre-System.

He stomped down onto the critter.

Three things happened at once.

First, there was a *crunch-splooosh* as the exoskeleton gave way and its innards—which seemed to have been under pressure—painted the floor around his foot.

Second, his shoe's magic activated, ensuring he didn't slip despite the ick.

Third, the stinger—which he had *not* stepped on—reflexively struck forward, piercing his coverall with relative ease and injecting him with venom just above the top of his low-rise shoes.

Notice:

Greater Dreadweaver Drone Venom, partially resisted.

Toxicity reduced from extreme to severe.

Wounds:

**Greater Dreadweaver Drone Venom, Severe x 1
[800 HP x 1 required to heal]**

**Pierced Flesh, x1
[50 HP x 1 required to heal]**

Condition:

Greater Dreadweaver Drone Venom, ongoing -15 HP/sec per instance while a given instance is not being actively healed.

Alex gaped at the notification before the pain hit him.

Notice:

Blood Basher Bones are immune to Greater Dreadweaver Drone Venom.

Toxin confined to soft tissue.

That seemed... good? But the burning *fire* that felt like it was consuming his entire foot made it hard to think.

Thankfully, his healing was *tremendous*. As such, the wounds were addressed and venom removed in less than fifteen seconds, allowing his healing to divert to the two-hundred-fifty damage that had directly applied to his HP. He hadn't even suffered the damage over time effect that was likely the mainstay of the toxin.

All told, that had set him back by more than a *thousand* HP, even if it was mostly indirect damage.

He looked up as his peripheral vision registered motion.

As it turned out, the six-inch one had been on the big side, and a literal *tide* of the little horrors were flowing into the airlock across the floor, ceiling, and walls.

He began to breathe more frantically, that deep-subconscious level aversion to these things putting his brain off kilter.

The largest of the oncoming surge were some more of the six-inches ones from what he could see, but most were barely bigger than a finger.

He gave a little whimper as he backed up... bumping into the drones.

His eyes widened as he remembered them. "Shield now, please!"

The drones whipped around him, a barrier forming and blocking off the passage of the oncoming swarm.

The insects sparked off the magical protection, but they seemed unable to climb on it, and it held them back quite effectively.

Juba spoke into the momentary silence. "This'll hold for at least ten minutes if you need."

“Thank you.” His voice was surprisingly level as he spoke, even while his mind was still reeling. *Come, Alex. You are better than this. Think! Look! Juba’s shield will hold while you find a path forward.*

It seemed he wouldn’t get an easy out, but he’d known that. If Juba could have easily cleared this place out, he would have volunteered to do so.

Okay, Alex. Think. What resources do you have?

His dadao would likely disrupt the little buggers rather easily, but that wouldn’t help him with a tide. Just waving his sword around close to the floor was *not* a tenable solution.

He could use his Shaped Force Burst, and that would *definitely* be effective in a pinch, but he wasn’t practiced in using it against a lot of little enemies, and even if he were, the amount of mana that would be needed would be... considerable.

He groaned and rubbed at his temples. “What am I fighting, Alex? Start with that.”

This was life-magic made manifest. It was magical chaos that had come close enough to a spellform to create a horror show.

“Well... this is the result of that. These aren’t *all* that direct...”

But the statement still stood. These weren’t real creatures, not really. They were magical constructs, figments of power gone rogue.

That struck a cord within him, a mostly dormant aspect of his System-gained abilities sparking to prominence. “Can... Can it be that simple?”

He’d only really used his new class tangentially, but the description *did* say ‘When you seek to modify any runic structure or magical symbol set, the affected script is...more stable...resulting in a greater chance of success and lower chance of catastrophic failure.’

He moved closer to the barrier and focused on one of the creatures more closely, *wishing* to modify it.

He’d examined his shoes for hours, prepping to modify them, but he’d explicitly never actually tried to *do* the modification.

As he looked closer, it was almost like his class came *gleefully* to life, seeming to pull the magical language from the little critter to his perception, for his examination.

What he saw was a jumbled mess of mostly inactive gibberish, but the core was clear... in that it was a mass of information that Alex had no hope of fully processing.

If the creatures had been stable, regular manifestations, Alex was rather sure that his idea wouldn't have worked in the slightest. The fact that they were from life-magic just tilted things even further in Alex's favor.

It was hard for him to put what he was seeing into words, even though what he was seeing was *literally* words in the language of power.

No... it's like alphabet soup with the characters of that language, and there just happen to be words in the three-dimensional mess. It was a bit more ordered than that, likely due to the life aspect in the magic *wanting* to be ordered, to be alive.

Ideally, he'd just pull out all the letters and leave nothing behind, but that was *well* beyond him. Another good option would be to precisely rearrange the characters in the order he wanted, but again, that was well beyond his current capacities.

He frowned. This thing was alive because of the magic... Could it really be as simple as scrambling it? The characters resisted behind jumbled up, the coherent parts unwilling to be moved into nonsense forms.

He grunted in irritation.

After a minute more of concentration, he saw the flaw he needed in this one. There was a place where a small nudge would change one set of words into another, and from what he could sense, the result would no longer be capable of sustaining the creature... He was pretty sure.

Alex didn't have time to be absolutely sure, so he reached out, Life-Fueled Runewrighting flaring to help him with this adjacent skill along with his Life and mana manipulation skills. Linguistics - Magical Symbology was a guide, along with his Magical Cognition [Interception], which gave its boost because the creature's magic was 'in a permanent vessel'.

Even so, all that came together to allow very little.

He effectively *bumped* one section into another, not adding anything but causing a shift in the language that *should* render the little horror non-viable.

He let go, and the magical script seemed to settle back in place... before the thing jerked and fell over, limbs curling inward in death.

He laughed. "Victory!"

Quest Status:
Survivors Recovered 0/??
Venomous Stings 1/??
Dreadweaver Variants Slain 2/??

Queens Slain 0/??
Egg Sacs 0/??

Alex glared at the pop-up, then grimaced. He supposed this might take a while. It was interesting that 'bite' had turned to 'sting' in the quest status, but nothing else seemed to have shifted.

He began altering the magics in more creatures like *mad*, getting faster and faster with each as he progressed. There were variants, of course, but not many, and he was becoming faster at picking out which flaw a given dreadweaver had in order to apply his deadly alteration practically at a glance.

Juba's voice cut through. "Alex. This shield is not meant to run continuously, especially not against such pressure. We are nearing its limits, especially if you intend for it to be available later. Are you ready for it to come down?"

Alex most certainly was *not* ready. There were still hundreds of terrible little things in the room with him already... but he didn't really have a choice.

He grimaced, but pulled his mind into focus, making a plan. *Stomp, slash, modify the big ones first. When in doubt, roll to crush any that have gotten on you.* He swallowed. "Alright, Juba. Be ready to call it back up if I ask."

"Understood. Dropping in three. Two. One. Go."