

Chapter 760

Hit Points

The massive vertical shaft was thick with battle. The gold-rank adventurers were doing their best to keep the fight with the spider moles away from the crawlers and the lower-rank adventurers. The silver-rank adventurers had even more to deal with, as at least the spider mole numbers weren't increasing. Gas and fire elementals kept pouring in through holes in the wall. Even more prolific were the toothy worms, continually burrowing their way out of the rock to extend from the walls like tentacles.

Worm after worm dug through and extended their sickly grey bodies in search of something to devour. The metal of armour or the crawlers would do, although the way they grew agitated at the smell of blood revealed their true preference. As the battle continued, they just kept coming until the shaft was a vertical, fleshy forest. As the worms could reach more than halfway across the shaft, there was no escaping them. They could only be fought through, which is exactly what Jason and his team did. The team were in the process of making their way to the Magic Society research team, to secure them inside Onslow's shell.

Jason suggested he go ahead alone and portal the researchers to Onslow, but Humphrey nixed the idea. While Jason going off alone was barely acceptable, portals had become unreliable as the expedition drew closer to the natural array. Instantaneous teleportation, like Humphrey and Jason's, still worked, but sustained dimensional apertures — portals — quickly grew volatile and exploded. This included dimensional bags and certain storage spaces, like Clive's portal-based storage, which the expedition discovered at the cost of some supplies.

The expedition had back-tracked to a safer level and transferred the most important supplies to the crawlers in magically reinforced bags which made any threat to the crawlers more dangerous. Along with the gold-rank coins to sustain the most powerful members of the expedition, substantial ritual materials would be required to activate the messenger device.

Jason had argued that he could probably stabilise his own portals by tapping into his astral throne, but Humphrey said no. Along with the uncertainty of that working, he didn't want Jason debilitated from drawing on his astral king powers too much. Jason had argued that he would probably be fine, losing the debate at the word 'probably.'

Thus, the team continued to slog their way across the shaft, fighting through elementals and worms while dodging stray blasts of webbing and poorly aimed projectiles from the gold-rank battle.

Farrah focused on the fire elementals, her Child of Fire ability making a mockery of them. Even completely immolated, their flames didn't so much as singe her hair. Even more ridiculously, her own powers were burning creatures that were themselves made of fire.

"How does that make any sense?" Jason asked.

"You made a rock bleed to death," Farrah shot back.

"I will not apologise for being awesome."

"What was that?" Farrah asked. "You were trying to explain how I'm the one doing ridiculous things but I couldn't hear it over the sound of you coming back from the dead over and over."

"Oh, like you've never come back to life."

Neil opened a voice channel to Rick Geller.

"Rick, I know your team already has a healer, but would you be open to recruiting a second?"

"Are you seriously contacting me to CRACK A DAMN JOKE right now?" Rick roared back.

"Sorry," Neil said contritely and closed the channel.

"Can we please demonstrate at least a little discipline?" Humphrey growled.

"Sorry dad," Belinda said meekly.

"Belinda..." Humphrey admonished.

"Are we not meant to call you daddy?" she asked. "Because Sophie said—"

"LINDY!" Humphrey bellowed, not through voice chat but out loud, audible even amongst the pounding of explosions and the sizzling zap of spells going off.

Humphrey continued to grumble but let it go. Partly it was because he knew they weren't going to stop, but mostly because the banter hadn't slowed them down. Neil was throwing out his short-lived barriers with pinpoint timing. Jason flickered through the shadowy battlefield, loading afflictions on worms not yet engaged by adventurers. Belinda was blasting attacks from the wands she had in each hand, duplicating spells used by Neil and Clive, and also conjuring platforms for Rufus to use.

While Humphrey told himself he preferred stoic professionalism, he let the banter slide so long as the team was getting the job done. Even if the other team leaders made fun of him sometimes.

“Look,” he said in a voice of resigned annoyance. “At least avoid hitting team members in the head and dropping them down the shaft.”

“Yeah, that was my bad,” Jason said.

Humphrey himself was in charge of handling the gaseous elementals that were not only explosive but also inflicted some unpleasant afflictions on anyone they overran. Humphrey detonated them from out of range of his companions, either with his fire breath or flaming dragon sword. They reconstituted shortly after, but couldn't detonate again for a while. That was when he moved in with his Spirit Reaper attack.

Ability: [Spirit Reaper] (Magic)

- **Special Attack (melee, dimension, drain).**
- **Base cost: Low mana and stamina.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (71%).**

- **Effect (Iron):** Inflicts additional disruptive-force damage and drains mana. Has additional effect against incorporeal or semi-corporeal creatures.

- **Effect (bronze):** Inflict [Stunned] on incorporeal or semi-incorporeal entities.

- **Effect (silver):** Inflict [Radiant Echo] on incorporeal entities.

- **[Stunned] (affliction, magic):** Briefly be unable to move, use abilities or control already active abilities. Fully reactive abilities and effects can still be triggered. The duration cannot be refreshed by applying [Stunned] again and being affected multiple times in succession has diminishing returns.

- **[Radiant Echo] (affliction, damage over time, magic, stacking):** Deal ongoing disruptive-force damage.

The special attack shredded the gaseous elementals, even stunning them briefly while he went to town. He wasn't the only one to do so with the team's familiars backing up him and Farrah.

Stash turned into a floating orb monster, effectively an inflatable skin ball. Known as a gusher, it used compressed air attacks that made a comical noise that Stash was a little too enamoured with. Fortunately, the attacks were as effective at dispersing the elementals as they were at replicating flatulence sounds.

Gordon's disruptive-force beams were highly efficient at tearing apart the insubstantial elementals. The attacks of Belinda's familiar, Shimmer were likewise

effective. The sentient ornate lamp bobbed through the air, shedding silver light and firing rapid streams of force bolts. Belinda's other familiar was the echo spirit, Gemini. She turned into a blurry replica of Humphrey and tore through the elementals with a force sword.

Jason was the member of the group that roamed the furthest from Onslow. Shadow-jumping came as naturally to Jason as walking by this point and trumped even Sophie's mobility in the current conditions. With darkness and shadows everywhere, it wasn't so much a shadow jump as an unrestricted teleport with no cooldown.

For the most part, Jason worked on loading the worms that kept popping out with afflictions. He focused on the ones not fighting adventurers, which weren't hard to find as their numbers grew.

"Are you sure I shouldn't be dropping butterflies?" he asked Miriam.

"Not yet," the tactical commander responded. "We need to finish the gold-rank monsters, extract the crawlers and make a tactical withdrawal. Then will be the time to unleash indiscriminate chaos."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Jason was able to move around the shaft almost with impunity, but he didn't make a great combat reinforcement. He was able to arrive swiftly, but anyone needing urgent help was looking for immediate impact. Someone to start their enemies on the path to a slow, miserable demise wouldn't pull their bacon out of the fire. What Jason could do was be a cleansing wand on a stick.

One of the stronger weapons available to the spider moles was a venom that impeded healing. While they didn't bite, it laced their bristly hair and the razor-sharp net variants of their webs. They also spat it out at close range.

The venom was something the gold-rank healers could handle, but when a stray net blindsided a silver-ranker, that was another issue. Rank disparity had a lot of effects, one being that afflictions were more resistant to under-ranked cleansing.

When Rick's fiancé Hannah was shredded by razor webbing, her twin, Claire, had trouble cleansing it. Jason appeared out of nowhere, drew the poison out with his Feast of Absolution power and vanished again within a few moments. Rick sent a quick thanks through voice chat before going back to fighting worms.

Jason's team was slowly but surely carving a path towards the researchers still hunkered down atop their vehicle. What should have been open space in the middle of the shaft felt like hacking through a jungle made of carnivorous worms. The silver-rank teams tried to avoid interfering with one another, but the larger hazard was the gold-rank battle.

The gold-rank adventurers worked hard to keep their conflict away from the silver-rankers and the crawlers. Their collateral damage could all too easily eliminate expedition members or critical supplies. They did fairly well at this, as while the spider moles had the numbers, they were weaker than the adventurers. The occasional monster still manage to escape the battle while the adventurers were too occupied to pursue, however, and go after one of the silver-rank teams.

Most of the silver-rank teams could put up a unified front against one gold-rank monster. They didn't have to win, just hold it off until the gold-rankers corralled the monster back into their fight. Winning was certainly an option, though, with Rick's team getting revenge for Hannah's poison razor net experience.

The most vulnerable group were the Magic Society researchers, the only team not made up of guild-level elites. They were silver-rankers, but not a combat team, and had been hunkered down on their vehicle since team Storm Shredder cut them loose. When Jason's team was only halfway across the shaft on their mission to retrieve them, Miriam's sent a warning through the command channel of the voice chat.

"Team Biscuit! Loose spider mole on the researchers! Can you handle it?"

Humphrey couldn't see the researchers to teleport to them and he looked to Sophie, the team's expert defensive interceptor. She was tied up helping a team that had suddenly been swarmed with a half-dozen extra worms, just as their defensive specialist was struck by a stray blast of gold-rank webbing. She couldn't abandon them until they freed their team member.

"Jason," Humphrey said.

"On it."

The battlefield was a mess of auras and magic. The spider moles were also able to interfere with aura perception, which was what made their ambush possible. Even Jason had to focus to punch through the noise and pinpoint the researchers, which he did and then immediately vanished.

A spider mole lunged through the air, having launched itself from the wall of the shaft. The Magic Society researchers in its path didn't just wait helplessly, blasting projectiles and raising barriers. The damage was negligible to the gold-rank monster with its inherent damage reduction against lower-ranked attacks. The barriers did a better job of slowing it down but were still smashed through in short order.

Just as the spider mole was about to crash into the researchers, a swarm of shadow arms yanked them out of the way. They were left dangling from the wall like cuts of meat, but the monster had missed them, meaning they weren't actual cuts of dangling meat. The

monster's squat face roared but Jason appeared on its back before it could move on the researchers now being passed hand-to-hand along the wall by the forest of shadow arms. He distracted the monster further by plunging his sword into its back.

Jason's speed was buffed to the point that his reflexes weren't entirely eclipsed by a gold-rank monster. Eight legs were a lot, however, and only three were occupied holding the monster to the wall. The rest snatched at Jason on its back, reaching for him with flexibility beyond any real spider. Needing the spider mole's attention squarely on himself, Jason tried to dodge rather than shadow-jump away, buying time for the researchers until a gold-ranker came to the rescue.

Jason's attempts at evasion lasted roughly no seconds, his feet impeded by the monster's sharp, venomous hair that punched holes in his boots.

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- You have resisted [Spider Mole Venom].
 - You have gained [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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Each of the monster's legs ended in prehensile feet with three long talons. One foot wrapped around Jason's torso and another around his legs, the talons digging deep into his flesh. Jason tried to shadow-jump from the creature's grip but it didn't work. This was normal for when deeply impaled with monster parts, but he tried anyway.

Jason's body resisted the monster's tugging for a brief moment before he was torn in half. Flooded with life force from all the enemies he had drained, fed even more by his potent regenerative powers, Jason had stacked up several times his normal maximum. As a result, he was near-unkillable until that life force had been chewed through. Some of that was consumed to immediately regrow his legs, the new ones flicking from the bottom of his torso like shaking a rug.

Life force was an odd thing, especially when it came to magical bodies and going beyond normal maximums. It sometimes made the body seemingly impervious, other times triggering near-instantaneous bodily restoration. Jason related having excess life force to having hit points that needed to be shaved off before he could take any meaningful damage. It would take more than being ripped in half to finish Jason off, but the monster seemed keen to oblige.

He also reconjured his armour, not liking his bare unmentionables so close to all those bristles. His boxer shorts were not conjured and were still on his old legs. The spider mole had tossed them away and they'd stuck to the webbing-encased crawler below.

The monster moved Jason to dangle helplessly in front of its ugly face. It was like a mole's face but pushed right in as if it'd been hit by a train but was too damn ornery to die.

“I don’t suppose we could talk things through?”

It shrieked in Jason’s face, coating him with phlegm.

- You have resisted [Spider Mole Venom].
 - You have gained [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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The monster’s talons squeezed, talons digging into Jason like fingers digging into a peach. At the same time, bristles erupted from its body, shooting off in every direction. It left the spider mole’s wrinkly skin exposed for a moment before the hair grew back, almost as fast as Jason’s legs. The bristles pincushioned Jason and quite a few of them hit the researchers than were still not that far away. Jason immediately croaked out a spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Feast of Absolution drained the venom not just from the spiked researchers but every adventurer affected by afflictions in a wide area. Trails of red stained with ugly purples, whites and yellows flowed into Jason from all directions.

- You have absorbed [Spider Mole Venom] from multiple allies.
 - You have absorbed [Smoke Toxin] from multiple allies.
 - You have absorbed [Gaseous Bloat] from multiple allies.
 - You have gained stamina and mana.
 - Stamina and mana have exceeded normal values due to ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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With Jason held right in front of the monster’s face, the multicoloured light streaming into him obscured the monster’s vision. This prevented it from noticing the mass of leeches seeping out of Jason’s discarded legs below.

The spider mole continued to squeeze, blood oozing around its talons and soaking down its legs and onto its body. The monster had animalistic cunning, but not the intelligence to pay attention to that blood and how oddly lumpy it was. It likewise failed to notice that those lumps had teeth. Oblivious, the monster concentrated on crushing Jason in its grip, surprised at his resilience. Jason’s excess life force was being rapidly consumed to keep him alive.

As Jason’s spell ended and the monster no longer had the light of the spell in its face, it finally realised what was going on below. Jason’s boxer-clad severed legs were now completely buried under a mound of purplish red flesh that had melded together from a massive pile of leeches and was now adhered to the wall. The mound undulated and shifted, Colin still in the process of taking a new form.

The spider mole looked down and shrieked at it, only half-coating Jason in venomous phlegm this time. Seeing the flesh mass as the greater threat, it flung Jason aside with gold-rank strength. It was so hard that he moved horizontally along the wall, barely starting to arc down by the time he struck a rocky protrusion like a bug on a windshield.