

Chapter 761

Surplus to Requirements

Jason lay spread across a rock like deeply unpleasant jam. Colin, in an incomplete apocalypse beast form, continued battling the gold-rank spider mole. Leeches had crawled onto the monster's body, moving between the stiff, venomous bristles and biting into flesh, draining health and delivering afflictions.

The monster flailed with surprise and rage, distracted from Colin's flesh mass continuing to take shape below it. A slit formed in the mound and opened like an eyelid, but instead of an eye, it was filled with rows of jagged shark teeth.

Ropey tendrils shot out of the maw, themselves having smaller mouths on the end. They looked like smaller, dark red versions of the wall worms and their teeth buried themselves in the flesh of the spider mole. They ignored the bristles they impaled themselves on, draining blood to replenish what leaked from the wounds.

The spider mole immediately started fighting back. Still anchored to the wall by three of its legs, the remaining five slashed at the tendrils and the flesh mound from which they had emerged. Gold-rank claws carved troughs into the silver-rank flesh of Colin's still-coagulating form.

Colin healed swiftly by draining health from the spider mole, shooting more tendrils to replace those severed by the monster's claws. Even so, Colin was being torn up faster than he could heal. His apocalypse beast form hadn't finished taking shape, and with all the health it drained going to regeneration, the transformation halted, incomplete. Even with Colin inheriting Jason's ability to ignore the suppressive effects of rank disparity, the power difference between gold and silver-rank was just too great.

Jason had been painted across a rock jutting out of the stone wall. He snapped back to consciousness as his body snapped back into shape, consuming most of his remaining life force surplus.

The rest had already been squeezed out of him by the spider mole before tossing him aside.

Groggy from the rapid succession of bodily destruction and reconstruction, he peeled himself out of the gore staining the rock and floated into the shaft using his aura. Still overloaded on mana the way he no longer was with life force, he reconjured his Cloak of Night. His robes technically weren't his to conjure but a fresh set draped over his body and immediately absorbed the blood coating him. It was Colin who created the robes, the swarm entity still partly existing inside Jason.

Jason never let Colin fully emerge, always keeping a portion of his biomass in reserve. This way Colin's vessel could never entirely be destroyed. That small amount of extra biomass was separate from the strategic reserve Jason maintained in his soul realm as well. That was excess that Colin couldn't keep or use after overfeeding.

Jason had started claiming that excess for himself, storing it up to return to Colin at need. They had even taken the time to build up a stock before the expedition, knowing they would probably have a use for it. Seeing how much damage Colin was going through, that would clearly be the case.

Jason shook his head to clear it and expanded his senses to take stock of the situation. Colin was fighting a losing battle against the spider mole, but it seemed like the monster had forgotten the researchers and Jason, focused fully on Colin. Then Jason noticed something that left his face twisted with anger.

"What are you doing?" he snarled at the gold-ranker floating in the air nearby. The thick cloud of silver lights shimmering around the bottom half of her body reminded Jason of a cartoon genie.

"So you are still alive," the gold-ranker said, hands clasped casually behind her back as she floated in the air. "I thought as much, despite your condition, given that your familiar's vessel remained intact. Although not for long, it would seem."

Her name was Valetta, one of the members of team Moon's Edge. Her aura was restrained to avoid the spider mole's attention.

"Why are you just floating there?" Jason asked.

"I wanted to see if you could win. All this talk about the mighty astral king; I wanted to see what the fuss was."

"At least save the research team!"

She glanced over at the researchers, dangling from shadow arms sticking out of the wall. They were out of range of the spider mole's fight with Colin, but not so far that the monster couldn't be on them in moments.

"It stopped bothering with them," she said. "Besides, saving them was what you were ordered to do, not me."

"I'm guessing you were ordered to help me, though?"

"Yes. And if I'm sure you'll need it, I will. Your familiar is holding on much better than I expected, even if it isn't going to win."

Jason held back a snarling retort, turning his attention back to the researchers. They didn't have any flying devices on them but they weren't helpless, either. Jason reconfigured the shadow arms to give them what amounted to a ladder to give themselves

more distance. The next priority was to keep the spider from finishing Colin and going after them or him.

The spider mole was definitely worse for wear, looking emaciated from the life-draining that had kept Colin in the fight. Colin looked far worse, his incomplete apocalypse beast utterly savaged by the monster's claws. The original mass of flesh had been torn to ribbons and he was no longer capable of sending more tendrils to drain life. Without them, he was not going to last much longer.

For a long time, Jason had instinctively gesticulated when using various powers, but it wasn't truly necessary. He didn't need to point his hand at a thing to move it with his aura or target it with a spell. Jason didn't move as he drew on his power, floating motionless in the air. Only his eyes moved, blazing rage from within the darkness of his hooded cloak.

Jason's soul realm portal opened in the air above Colin and the monster, hovering in the air as a horizontal ring. The sheet of energy inside the ring flickered and stuttered, the elemental forces in the ambient magic attempting to make it explode. Jason grimaced as he tapped into his astral gate to reinforce the portal's dimensional integrity. The flickering stopped and the portal snapped solidly into place.

Jason called on the strategic reserve of biomass he kept in storage and dumped it out through the portal. It geysered down in a deluge of thick and viscous fluid; red, purple and sickly white, all mixed together. Somewhere between blood and molten flesh, it gushed over Colin and the spider mole, painting them in gore.

The meat soup looked like it should be splashing off them and continuing down the shaft like a waterfall, but not so much as a single drop was wasted. Instead, it curved through the air or crawled off the spider mole to inundate Colin, completely obscuring him in the liquefied flesh.

Despite Colin's obfuscation, the spider mole didn't let up its attacks, legs delving into the deluge to slash blindly with shovel-sized talons. It started shrieking as it did, whether in fear, pain, rage or all three, Jason couldn't tell. As the gore rained down on them both, the monster kept flailing in a frenzy.

As the downpour finally started to slow, a tree-trunk arm emerged from the meat waterfall. It had no skin, just ropey muscle shining wet from the thick fluids painting it. At the end of the arm was a hand with eight fingers, each terminating in a dark heavy claw. The hand reached out and grabbed the rock wall, fingers easily digging into the stone.

The spider mole immediately lashed out at the arm, only for another to emerge and intercept the attack. A third limb and fourth came into view as the downpour from above

slowed and finally came to a stop. Colin's full form was revealed as he absorbed the last of the liquid.

Colin's body was an uneven sphere, ugly and lumpen like a tumour. No longer adhered to the wall of the shaft, he was held in place by three of his eight arms, the same as the spider. His arms jutted from his round body at seemingly random positions, with no sense of up and down or left and right. Between the limbs, eye-shaped mouths covered much of the remaining body, ringed with hooked, jagged teeth.

The mouths let out an alien shriek that scraped against the soul in a horrifying aura assault. The soul attack combined the immense power and domineering cosmic authority of Jason's aura with the sanguine horror's infinite alien hunger.

The screech gouged at the senses, leaving only Jason unaffected. The spider mole flailed and shrieked back at Colin in panic. The researchers screamed and tumbled from where they'd been climbing the walls, shadow limbs once again grabbing them before they fell. Even the gold-ranker, Valetta, was visibly shaken.

Despite being taken aback, the gold-rank monster didn't flee but lashed out with renewed freneticism, its legs a blur as they thrashed at Colin. Despite Colin's now-complete form, there was still no getting around the difference in rank and the spider mole took large chunks out of him. Even so, Colin was better able to fight back, reconstituted and reformed while the monster was still drained and afflicted from earlier.

Fresh tendrils shot out of Colin's mouths to clamp onto the monster's flesh and resume draining it, sustaining Colin for the fight. The spider mole slashed at them with its claws but had less success than previously. Not only were they thicker and tougher, but Colin's arms ran interference. It wasn't enough to keep them from being severed, but it slowed the process down.

Jason closed the portal to his soul realm, only a little worn down from tapping into the astral gate to maintain it. He floated past Valetta as he opened a voice channel to Miriam just long enough for a simple message.

"You can call your team member back," he said. "She's surplus to requirements."

Jason vanished and reappeared on the spider mole's back, shadow arms reaching down to anchor him to the bucking monster. He reached down to draw his sword, still buried in the monster's back from when the spider mole had grabbed him. The monster didn't seem to notice, caught up in the battle with Colin. To a massive gold-rank body, already brutalised, withered from life drain and covered in rotting, bleeding ulcers from Colin's afflictions, a sword wasn't especially impactful.

Jason immediately made use of those afflictions, casting a spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The Punition spell created an immediate surge of necrotic damage for each of the dark afflictions on the target. The Monster’s flesh rapidly rotted, turning a dark and hideous yellow. Its spiky hair, weapons in themselves, turned brittle and crumbled or fell out entirely. Even so, the fortitude of a gold-rank monster was so outrageous that the damage was still far from enough, not even slowing it down.

Jason's powers were extremely mana efficient and his mana pool, like his life force, could be extended well past his default maximum. This meant that he had a large supply to use on his one mana dump spell. Punition normally had a thirty-second cooldown, but ramping up the mana cost could reduce that or even remove it entirely. He left the first casting with a ten-second cooldown, giving him time to cast a few other quick spells and make some special attacks.

None of this fazed the monster who continued to view Colin as the threat. The spider mole still had the power advantage, but the tide was slowly turning as the monster weakened under the blood draining and afflictions. The pace was glacial, however, another reminder of the absurd resilience of gold-rankers.

With additional afflictions in place, Jason’s spell came off cooldown and he started using it over and over, dumping massive amounts of mana into removing the cooldown entirely. Doing so also gave a much shorter incantation.

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

Miriam Vance was caught up in the latter stages of the larger spider mole fight, the monsters finally starting to drop in number. Gold-rank monsters, even the less threatening ones, just took so much killing before they’d go down. Even so, she couldn’t help but notice the bizarre magic and auras she was sensing from the direction of the magic researchers. She’d gotten an odd message from Asano suggesting the gold-rank monster was handled, and now that she had a spare moment she focused her senses in that direction.

Miriam's eyes went wide as she sensed what was possibly the most horrifying thing she'd encountered in her career. The aura alone coming out of it made her senses flinch, but there was something familiar within it as well. Her face paled as she realised that *thing* was Asano’s familiar. As for Asano himself, he was riding the back of the monster, tied down to it with shadow arms as he chanted a spell over and over.

Finally, she sensed Valetta, safely backing away, restraining her aura to not get caught up in the fight. Miriam could also sense the researchers nearby, hanging from more shadow arms that had to be Asano's doing. Valetta only watched the fight instead of going to rescue them or help Asano and Miriam's expression tightened with rage.

Many essence users had power sets that resulted in combat having stages if it went on long enough. Their battles could be almost narrative in structure and, for Jason, that narrative was oddly religious. At the beginning came sin. Pestilence, poison and unholy power. Then came absolution.

"Feed me your sins."

The spider mole's life force shone from within its body, the natural red almost entirely obscured in the ugly colours of affliction. All that taint flowed out of the monster filling the air with sickly yellow, purple and blue light, so thick that Jason was completely obscured for a moment. As the poisons, curses, diseases and unholy afflictions departed the monster's life force, they left something behind in their place.

After absolution came penance. The monster's body lit up with bright light, the transcendent damage of the Penance affliction. Unstoppable, unavoidable. All but inescapable. It went to work on annihilating the monster from the inside out.

Even through all of that, the gold-rank monster continued to endure. But Jason wasn't done. His Doom Blade power involved conjuring weapons, but his soul-bound blade, Hegemon's Will, could absorb the abilities of those conjured swords instead of having them manifest. Jason held out his sword, red runes pulsing down the length of the black blade. Jason used his power and the runes turned from red to a clean, radiant blue.

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- You have invoked the effects of [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Disruptive-force damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.
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The second form of Jason's Doom Blade was double-edged in more ways than one as the Price in Blood affliction increased the damage Jason and the monster dealt to each other. It was always a risk to employ, but the monster was occupied fending off Colin. For all that Jason was ravaging the spider mole with his powers, Colin was the one eating it.

Every blow from Jason's blade made the damage grow. Every strike not only escalated the Price in Blood but also delivered the special attack, Punish. In the beginning, Punish had been a tool of necrosis and sin, but the story of Jason's battle had changed.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 5 (42%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].

 - Effect (silver): If the target has any instances of [Sin] they suffer an instance of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. If the enemy struck has no instances of [Sin] but does have instances of [Penance], they do not suffer [Sin] or [Wages of Sin]. They instead suffer transcendent damage from this ability in place of necrotic damage and suffer an additional instance of [Penance]. Instances of [Penance] do not drop off for a short period.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.

 - [Wages of Sin] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Suffer necrotic damage over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
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Jason used a holy weapon to smite the monster with a holy attack. Over and over, blow after blow, the damage grew with every strike. Jason entered an almost zen-like state, a combat trance. He rode the wild thrashing of the monster, his body going with the flow. His senses expanded, taking in his surroundings. He absently noted that some wall worms had emerged nearby, prompting Valetta to finally rescue the researchers.

Time blended into itself and Jason didn't know how long it had been when the monster showed signs of finally flagging. The seemingly unkillable monster began to crumble, proving that even gold-rankers had their limits. The spider mole grew weaker, taking an extra limb from the fight with Colin to clamp itself to the wall.

The monster became sluggish and unstable, no longer trying to take down the ravaged Colin but fight him off, desperate to escape. Colin didn't allow it, tendrils still buried in its flesh. The familiar was still not as strong but the gap had closed and Colin's arms were dug into the wall. This kept the monster held fast for Jason to finish the job.

For many essence users, their powers were a reflection of who they were. Humphrey's were strong and straightforward while Sophie's were swift, elusive and unassailable. Belinda's required clever invention while Clive's had a complexity requiring someone steeped in the underlying rules of magic.

Jason's powers were the ideals of faith from the culture in which he had been raised, turned into horrifying weapons. His enemies were sinners because he declared them so, then forced them into atonement by the sword. They were delivered into misery and suffering on the path to a slow, terrible demise.

Then came the end.

"Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death."

Jason's execute power was called Verdict and looked like the wrath of a righteous, unforgiving god. A great column of transcendent light poured down, leaving Jason and Colin unharmed as it excised the monster from reality, vanishing in a plume of rainbow smoke.

The light faded, leaving Jason floating in the air. His sword was held at his side, runes blazing with light through dripping ichor. His eyes shone in the darkness of his hood, an implacable, imposing figure. Then he noticed the two elementals about to touch and explode.

"Oh shi—"