

Chapter 267

A Better Pants Solution

Jason regained consciousness surrounded by a fiery, transcendent energy, which immediately vanished and dropped him to the floor. The feel of cold tile on his body told him that he was naked, which he quickly confirmed by pushing himself into a sitting position and doing a quick visual inspection.

There were a bunch of system windows but he minimised them for the moment as he looked himself over. There was no light in the windowless room but his perception power let him see perfectly in the dark. He seemed intact, but feeling the cool air on his head, he patted it and realised that his hair had once again callously abandoned him. He thought it might be because hair was dead material, but so were fingernails, as far as he knew, and those were still present.

“Weird. Still, you’re alive, unexpectedly. Take the win.”

His body still carried the scars of his previous encounters. The long scar across his abdomen from the elemental tyrant; the many small scars where shards of star seed had been forced out of his flesh. They were familiar, but there were new one as well. His chest was marked by a series of roughly circular scars where the Builder’s spikes had impaled his body. All in all, his torso was a mess.

He got to his feet, memories swirling through his head. The last thing he remembered was charging through the window, the pain of the stone spikes spearing into his body. The mad whirl as he fell, then fading into darkness, only to wake up wherever he now was. His brain was telling him it had only been moments since he fell from the tower, but his soul was telling him otherwise.

Jason didn’t truly remember the original battle for his soul against the Builder. He had some mixed-up, hazy recollections as the star seed took over, then was forced out of his brain. The true battle had been in the spiritual realm, his soul a small ship rocked by the stormy seas of the Builder’s will. Only by outlasting the star seed and cutting off the Builder had been able to survive, but much of the experience were more like feelings than memories. They were feelings, imprinted upon his soul.

He had a similar sense now, of his soul having experienced an encounter for which his brain had not been present. It left him with an incredibly strong feeling that he shouldn’t be alone, yet no one else was present. He spread his aura out over the entire building, his aura strength more than up for the task. He sensed nothing but small animals, birds, rats and bugs.

Mentally shaking off the odd feeling, he examined his surroundings. He was in a dilapidated room that was tiled on the walls and floor, completely empty except for Jason himself. The air was stale and clammy, with a taste of unhealthy growth on the air, like fungus or mould. There was a set of swinging double doors with small windows set into them. There was a lingering magic that was definitely the force that had delivered him here. It was fading quickly but he sensed the transcendent strength of it. By contrast, the ambient magic around him was otherwise incredibly anaemic, even compared to Greenstone. That was the default, for as far as his magical senses extended.

He was trying to collect his thoughts when he felt something building within him that he had experienced enough to recognise as a skill evolution. Given what he had been through, it was hardly surprising, although one thing was new. Instead of the blue-grey light of iron rank, the radiance that shining from within his body was an amber colour.

➤ [Outworlder racial ability \[Inventory\] has evolved to \[Spirit Vault\]](#).

Jason only glanced at the notice before minimising it with the others. He had too much to deal with as it was, sending his mind reeling. His team, his death and revival, the strange discordance between his mind and his soul. He needed time to spread everything out into manageable chunks that he could process.

He had no idea of what fate had befallen his team. He was almost certain he had bought them enough time to complete their task, but how long they survived afterwards was up in the air. Had Clive been fast enough to open the portal before the Builder's wrath caught up with them? He had been confident enough in Clive's ability to knock out a speedy ritual that he threw away his life to give him the chance, but there were no certainties. Jason had no regrets, knowing the lives that failure would have cost if the world engineers were awakened.

"Okay," he told himself, rubbing his hands over his face to shake the lingering sopor. "Take stock, formulate a plan of action. What do I need and how do I get it? I need pants. Again. I need hair. Well, I want hair. I need to know what happened and where I am."

Jason has a better pants solution than the last time he'd unexpectedly arrived somewhere, naked and bald. With a thought, dark mist engulfed him before disappearing as quickly as it had come, leaving Jason garbed in one of his prepared outfits. He went with a smart casual suit in the Vitesse style that looked much like a casual suit from own world.

It was one of many outfits supplied for his winter wardrobe by Gilbert, although he looked forward to replacing everything with bronze-rank apparel once he got back to Greenstone. The iron-rank clothes has basic self-cleaning and repair enchantments, along with some very light protection. At bronze-rank, not only would those enchantments be stronger but it was more cost-effective to incorporate other utility magic.

With his clothes sorted out, he moved onto hair, carefully applying Jory's hair-growth cream. He had no doubt that the result was an unruly mop, but it would suffice until he found a hairdresser.

Meeting those simple needs left him feeling much more in control of his circumstances. He thought back to when he had first woken up in a new world, naked, bald and confused. Just the question of pants had been a tribulation, let alone the larger questions.

Now, Jason was confident that he would better handle those larger questions the way he better handled the issue of pants. To figure out what happened, he started pulling up the system messages.

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- You have died.
 - All equipment has been returned to your inventory.

 - [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.

"Bugger me. That explains how I survived, I guess; I didn't."

He only had a vague recollection of that system box appearing as everything faded out.

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- You have been reborn.

 - You have received the blessing of the World-Phoenix.
 - If you accept the blessing, your outworlder racial ability [Astral Affinity] will evolve to [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
 - If you reject the blessing, your ability will remain unchanged and can be evolved by normal means or other blessings in the future.

Jason paced back and forth. Coming back from the dead was a pleasant surprise. The World-Phoenix token had always been a mystery, but in hindsight he felt it should have been obvious. Knowledge had told him that he lacked the faith to use it. He finally understood, since killing yourself to trigger it would require a lot of faith in it working.

Jason stopped pacing as realisation passed through him like a bolt of lightning. He was focusing on the token bringing him back from death, the startling function momentarily

pushing the function he already knew about from his mind. The moment he remembered, his whole body tingled with anticipation and he couldn't open his map fast enough. His eyes immediately shot to the listing of his current location.

➤ **Zone: Casselton West Regional Hospital [abandoned] (maternity ward).**

He stared at the words like a deer in headlights. After a long, stunned moment he turned his eyes to the map itself and started zooming out. He expanded out from the hospital to the whole town, then the whole Casselton region. There was his home town, Casselton Beach. Large portions of the map were uncovered; most the of the region, as he had travelled through most of it at one time or another. He kept expanding out, through the mid north coast, all of New South Wales, then the whole of Australia. When he zoomed out to the whole world, the continents were all where they should be instead of the funhouse mirror of the magic world's geography.

Jason stared for a long time, not daring to believe. Then he closed the map, pushed through what he now recognised as heavy hospital doors and started rushing through the abandoned hospital. He had been born there but it had been closed down some fifteen years ago, now mostly a place for High School kids to come and smoke. It had been emptied out, leaving nothing to obstruct him as he rushed to find a window.

He found a patient ward, the windows opaque from years without cleaning. Without hesitating, he grabbed his sword from his inventory and smashed the scabbard into the window, sending glass raining down outside. He was on the fourth floor looking out on the semi-industrial part of West Casselton where the hospital had been located. It was deep into the night and the sky beat down with rain. Clouds obscured the moon and stars, but street lights reflected off the wet asphalt street. On the other side of the road was a takeaway store he remembered, closed for almost as long as the hospital. Next to it was the main depot for the Casselton regional bus service.

"I'm home."

The words came out in a tremulous whisper, as if he were scared that to say them would somehow make them untrue. His mind was once again sent staggering.

Jason's arrival in the magical world was a stark dividing line. What came before was so removed from what came after that the two seemed inimicable. Yet now he looked at his old world with his new eyes. The darkness did not obscure his sight, which was sharper than ever before. Colours had depth and nuance he had never realised, the air carried a complexity of scents he never realised. He could taste the ozone tang of water

on the power cables, smell the grass of the overgrown hospital grounds. The damp and mould of the disused hospital interior, and even a lingering trace of disinfectant, some fifteen years after it was last used.

His brother, Kaito, had once gotten reckless with his bicycle when Jason was nine years old. He was stuck spending a few days in the hospital, with Jason's sister driving him in every day to visit. Afterwards they would get chips at the takeaway store across the road. Now, under Jason's powerful new perception, the familiar store seemed almost alien.

He took a long, deep breath. The ramifications of coming back were like a sudden storm at sea. He had no idea how to navigate what would be disorienting at best and deadly dangerous at worst. The things he had learned and the things he could do represented a fundamental shift in the general understanding of reality. His very existence would be an opportunity to the ruthless and a threat to those who already claimed to have all the answers.

Those were just his concerns for the world he found himself back in. He had further concerns over his adoptive world. Most pressing was that he would have no idea how his team fared until he found his way back across the dimensional barriers of both worlds and the astral void between. He was determined to do so, but had little idea of how.

Did they all survive? Did they know he had revived in his own world? While he had discussed the World-Phoenix token in broad terms with some of them, he played that particular card close to his chest. In any case, even he hadn't known the specifics. Only Knowledge had the full truth and he would make no prediction about what the goddess would do.

Those concerns were only peripheral compared to what he had to deal with immediately. He had no idea what his situation would be coming home. Did people think he was dead? How was he going to explain everything? What did he even need to explain? For all he knew, time moved at different paces between worlds. He may have been gone a week of subjective time or ten years.

Then there were his arrangements going forward. Whatever his circumstances, he wasn't going to go back to the stationary store and ask for his job back. He had a pile of solid gold in his inventory but that wasn't the same as having money.

"I can't just rock up to the royal mint with thirty million worth of gold bullion and no explanation of where it came from. They'll think I'm a drug dealer."

Jason didn't know much about the gold trade in Australia, or anywhere else, for that matter, but he did know there was an amount of regulation. A scrap gold buyer might be

largely overlooked, but if he dropped an unmarked ten kilo bar at a booth in shopping centre, they would probably call the police.

The larger gold exchanges were watched more carefully. A retail employee who went missing for a year and a half, then showed up with a bunch of gold bars he couldn't explain the origins of would quickly find himself in a room with federal officers. Maybe he could find a shady one willing to make a backroom deal, but Jason's ignorance would make any such attempt fraught with peril.

Jason could have used a sounding board but Shade was locked away within his soul. His familiars had retreated into his soul at the time he died, and he could still feel their spirits within his soul. Their vessels were no longer present in his body, however, which allowed him to draw certain conclusions.

Jason had come a long way in his understanding of magic, with Clive guiding his studies. His focus, like Clive's, had been on astral magic, but he still had a solid grounding in general magical theories. This gave him a better understanding of the processes involved with his summoned familiars.

His familiar's vessels hadn't been literally contained in his blood, shadow and aura. Jason's magical body, like that of anyone iron-rank or above, was composed of the biomass that made it up and the magical matrix that governed that biomass. The magical matrix was responsible for the ways in which the body interacted with both the world around it and the soul within it.

A familiar's vessel, on being summoned, was anchored to physical reality by attaching itself to aspects of the summoner's matrix, rather than the biomass. This was the reason that summoned familiar's gave enhanced abilities when their vessels were subsumed, as they enhanced the capabilities of the aspect to which they were attached.

In Jason's current situation, that knowledge allowed him to make a deduction. Since the spirits of his familiars were ensconced comfortably within his soul but their vessels were gone, his revival had been in a whole new body. He had no idea if that was a function of the World-Phoenix token or just of his returning to his world. Any soul entering a world would build a new body for itself, as Jason's had when he first became an outworlder.

If it was because of being an outworlder, it hadn't changed his racial abilities the way it had the first time. His soul had already been affected by passing through the astral, unconsciously drawing on the astral's power to grant itself the tools it would need to survive. His racial gifts remained as they were, aside from the one that had just ranked up.

Jason pulled a chair out of his inventory and sat down. It was time to formulate a plan that went beyond pants. He went back to his original questions.

“What do I need and how do I get it?”

He needed information. If nothing had gone wonky with interdimensional time-streams, it should be somewhere near the start of winter. The rain pounding down outside the broken window let in a damp cold that certainly fit, but he would need to be more accurate than that. He enjoyed the bleak cold coming in through the window, having spent much of the last year and a half in scorching desert, sweltering delta and the hot, wet jungle of the astral space. After the sweltering delta, the desert around it and the hot, wet jungle of the astral space.

He also needed to know what happened regarding his status. Did the world think he was missing or dead? Was his outworlder self some kind of magical clone, with his original still living his life, oblivious.

A lot of those answers could be had with an internet connection. Unfortunately, he had no phone, no money and no transport. He was hesitant to call in on family to get them, at least until he had a better understanding of his circumstances. Then he remembered a certain member of his family and reconsidered.

Jason had two uncles, one of which was estranged from the family. Hiro Asano was the family's black sheep due to his involvement in organised crime. Hiro might simultaneously be a useful source of information and a method to convert some of his gold into cash. He would get well-below market rates for an illegal gold sale, but he just needed enough money to get by for a while.

The only problem was that Hiro was in Sydney, hundreds of kilometres to the south. In theory, Jason could portal his way south, reaching Sydney in a few hops. He knew from Clive that all portal powers had the same range of around forty kilometres per rank at bronze, including rank zero. Fortunately, Jason's Path of Shadows ability was one of his highest rank powers, giving him a range of roughly two hundred kilometres. His only concern was if the power would work at all.

Normally, portal abilities would take someone to any place they had been. Jason had never thought to ask if that included places they had been before they gained the power, or even before they were an essence user. It was something he would need to test.

That, at least, gave Jason a tentative plan. Test his portal ability, cash up and get the lay of the land. It would do for his immediate, practical concerns. That left the more magical concerns and he resumed looking through the windows he had minimised.

➤ You have been reborn.

He wondered why had he appeared in the abandoned hospital. It had been closed for years, after the new big regional hospital opened in Castle Heads. Was it random? If so, that would be quite the coincidence, arriving in the same hospital he had been born in.

Something occurred to him and he backtracked to the room he had arrived in. On the outside the room was a faded sign. MATERNITY THEATRE.

Jason pushed the doors open and went through. He hadn't arrived on the floor, but in the air, then falling to the floor. He guessed the height was about right for a hospital bed.

"Was I reborn in the exact same place I was born the first time?"