

## Chapter 415

### Step Back

Standing in the middle of the street, Jason looked at the spheres Tran was holding, still bloody from where they had been ripped out of the anomalies. Looking around, it wasn't hard to spot more given the thoroughness with which many anomalies had been dealt with. The spheres were the size of the genesis cores Jason had been using, but instead of rainbow colours, the energy swirling within was black and red. Jason suspected that the process of looting them, rather than ripping them directly out of corpses, changed the cores. Since the cores he used were specifically stable genesis cores, it was likely these others were the unstable variety.

"These," Tran said, holding one in each hand. "I bet these are the secret of this place."

"This place has a lot of secrets," Jason said.

"As do you, Mr Asano," Chen said.

"I bet this is how he imprints himself on this place," Guo said, coming up behind Tran. He also had a bloody core in each hand.

"Guo," Chen said. "Perhaps you should see if you can't claim some of this place for yourself, the way Mr Asano had. You're so much stronger than him, after all, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Any essence user understood instinctively how to use actively use items, simply trickling a little mana into them. Even with all their essence abilities sealed that didn't change.

"I would very strongly recommend against attempting using those cores," Jason said.

"You just want me to play test subject," Guo said, tossing the spheres at Chen who neatly stepped aside.

"I'll do it," Tran said. "Anything this Japanese can do, I can do better."

"Oh, racism," Jason said. "I'm sure that's going to help. Look, mate, you'll probably blow up or something. There's a bunch of conditions you need to meet before you can start claiming territory here, none of which you meet."

"You're just trying to hide the benefits you're taking for yourself," Tran said.

"So much for believing me about saving the world," Jason muttered and gestured at Gerling. "If someone absolutely has to have a go, have this guy do it."

"No chance," Gerling said.

"You'll probably be fine," Jason told him.

“No one is going to do anything with these spheres,” Chen declared, only to be proven wrong as red light surged from the spheres in Tran’s hands. Guo, Gerling and Chan looked on while Jason ducked into an alley before peering around the corner.

“Tran, don’t be a fool,” Chen said. “Stop this now.”

“Aren’t you sick of being a slave to reality cores?” Tran asked as the red glow spread from the spheres to engulf him. “We should be taking a cue from the vampires. We have the power. We should be in charge.”

“We have a larger duty,” Chen said, even as he backed off. Guo and Gerling did the same. As they watched, the red light stopped spreading and was instead drawn into Tran’s body. His body started bulging oddly, as if balloons were inflating inside it.

“I think he’s going to explode or go full Cronenberg,” Jason yelled in warning. Guo, Chen and Gerling retreated to the alley with Jason.

“What does Cronenberg mean?” Guo asked.

“We have more important matters to pay attention to,” Chen said. Tran had fallen to the ground and was thrashing around, screaming.

“He’s talking about David Cronenberg,” Gerling said.

“The man from *Star Trek: Discovery*?” Guo asked.

“That’s where you know him from?” Jason asked incredulously. “Weren’t you in a fridge for years?”

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said defensively.

“He was in, what?” Jason asked. “Two episodes?”

“Episodes five, nine and thirteen of season three,” Guo said.

“Seriously?” Gerling asked.

“I like Star Trek,” Guo said again.

“Focus!” Chen snapped.

“Okay, I don’t think your guy’s going to blow up,” Jason said. “His aura’s changing into something.”

“Into what?” Gerling growled. Having his powerful aura senses barely functional felt like being blinded.

“Definitely some kind of anomaly,” Jason said. “This place is taking him over. He’s not the same as all these things we just killed though. It almost feels like... oh, that’s probably bad.”

“What?” Gerling snarled.

“Based on his aura, I think he’s somewhere between anomaly and vampire,” Jason said.

“How is that possible?” Guo asked.

“We’re in the land of make-believe and you idiots started poking random stuff,” Jason said. “He could have turned into Starscream.”

“What is a star scream?” Chen asked.

“Screw this,” Gerling said and rushed out. Tran’s body had returned to a normal-looking state and he stopped thrashing and screaming, laying still on the ground. Gerling ran up and stomped his foot down hard on Tran’s chest, only for Tran to transform into mist. All Gerling’s foot smashed down on were now-empty clothes. The mist cloud moved away and reformed into Tran’s physical body, with red eyes, no clothes and a manic, predator grin.

“Go,” Chen ordered and also rushed out, Guo close behind. Jason remained in the alley.

Gerling met vampire Tran’s eyes and then collapsed to his knees, gripping in his head in both hands as he let out a roar of rage and pain. Tran’s hands grew into claws as Guo and Chen attacked, Guo getting raked across the face before Chen sent Tran flying through the air with a kick to the chest.

Chen's gold-rank strength sent Tran flying, but Tran's gold-rank agility allowed him to flip in the air and land in a crouch, facing Chen, who was already charging. Tran spat out a swiftly-spreading blood mist but Chen used his momentum to leap over it. Tran raked his own arm with a claw, sending an unnatural amount of blood spraying into the air. The blood droplets transmuted into a swarm of knuckle-sized mosquitos, latching onto Chen as he dropped from the air. Then Tran was hit by a flying car.

Gerling had shaken off the mental attack, looked at the blood mist and grabbed the first thing that came to hand, which was an automobile. It slammed Tran into a building and through the wall.

As Chen scraped off the mosquitos that had latched into his flesh, blood sprayed out with each one he tore away, Guo, with his slashed face and Gerling approached the hole in what was now a half-collapsed wall with a car sticking out of it.

“Watch out,” Jason called as he sensed a cluster of anomalies spawn inside the building and a large pack of hyenas poured out of the hole to attack the three gold-rankers. They were much faster and stronger than ordinary hyenas, jumping on Chen, who was still distracted by the mosquitos and Guo, who was just slower to react. The obliviousness of not having their usual senses was hurting them.

Gerling dodged one charging hyena, pivoting his body to punt it away with a kick. The next hyena leapt at him and he grabbed it by the upper and lower jaw before ripping it clean in half.

Tran followed the hyenas out of the hole, holding up a hand that had a fanged mouth set into the palm. A nine-foot tongue shot out like a whip, flicking towards Gerling. Gerling snatched it out of the air, only for fangs to stab out of the tongue and piercing his hand. Blood flowed from the small wounds abnormally fast and was soaked into the tongue. Gerling ignored it and yanked on the tongue, pulling Tran towards him.

He lunged forward to meet the stumbling Tran with his fist, only for Tran to turn to mist and wash right over Gerling, reforming behind him. The mist left a caustic residue on Gerling's skin, which Gerling also ignored like his other wounds. Spinning to attack again, Gerling was caught out when Tran threw back his head and let out a horrifying shriek, high and glass-shatteringly piercing.

Gerling was staggered as blood ran from his ears and he stumbled, off-balance. Jason, still watching from a distance, was only silver-rank and was far more affected by the shriek, clutching his head briefly before blacking out.

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Jason came to as he rapidly healed the damage, although he still couldn't hear and it felt like a spike had been driven through his head. Still disoriented, he wondered how he was even affected like that since he was long past hearing via a vulnerable eardrum.

Pushing himself to his feet, his head cleared enough to remember the situation at hand. Chen and Guo were both tethered to the ground by red chains as they fended off the attacks of the hyena pack.

Gerling was still fighting Tran but was the worse for wear. They had similar gold-rank attributes and were similar in combat skill. The difference was that Tran had vampire powers, while Gerling's powers remained sealed away.

Gerling fought well but Tran had tricks to escape whenever Gerling threatened heavy damage, while Gerling could not boast the same. The gold-ranker looked like Jason felt, bloody and beaten, yet he struggled defiantly on.

Jason wasn't fool enough to try and help without pulling out the trump card he really, really didn't want to but it was clear that the gold-rankers were going to lose. Gerling was suffering some kind of affliction, most likely the vampiric transformation curse. If enough of it affected him he would turn into a vampiric minion and Jason didn't have his cleansing power to stop it. Unhappily, Jason drew his sword and took a fist-sized lump of golden crystal from his inventory.

One of Tran's claw hands savagely slashed Gerling's arm, leaving it hanging limp. Tran grabbed the other arm, yanked it and slammed a fist into the elbow, bending it the wrong way. After pair of brutal knee strikes to the chest, Gerling doubled over and Tran bit into his neck.

Jason stepped out, striding towards the group fight, holding the crystal above his head and sending a trickle of mana into it.

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Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

*True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).*

➤ Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.

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Vampires were largely unaffected by the sunlight of Earth because it lacked magical strength. The diamond-rank light shining from the crystal was an entirely different matter and Jason felt the vampiric Tran's aura melt away like an ice cube under the hot sun as the crystal started emitting light.

The animals dissolved and scattered like mist in the wind, the chains binding Guo and Chan broke apart and melted into gobbets of thick, hot blood. Tran staggered, the diamond-rank sunlight making a mockery of his gold-rank strength. He struggled even to stand as Jason marched up, channelling aura into his sword.

The sword cut Tran's head clean off and Jason sent the body sprawling onto its back with a kick to the chest. After kicking the head away from the body, he moved over the fallen Tran's torso as he tossed his sword into the air and caught it in a backhand grip. After plunging it into the vampire's chest, he yanked the sword back and forth to make a hole. He shoved the light crystal into the vampire's chest cavity, right up against the heart.

As Jason stepped back, sunlight shone from within Tran's body, right through the skin. It started burning white-hot, from the inside out. The light of the crystal died after only a few moments but the damage was done and the vampire continued to burn.

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➤ You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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Jason watched the body blacken as Gerling, Chen and Guo recovered. The flames died out and Jason crouched to examine the body.

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➤ Would you like to loot [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly]?

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“It seems we owe you debt, Mr Asano,” Chen said. “I’m glad you have secrets enough still to resolve our situation.”

Jason slowly stood, his body stiff, turning to reveal a face twisted with anger and coated in blood spatter.

“Do you have any idea what I just gave up?” he demanded furiously. “Do you know what we could have done with that? The day will come when all those ancient vampires outside decide that they want to run the show and the thing I just used to save your worthless hides would have been our best weapon. We could have baited them into a massive conflict and used it to cripple enough of them that we could maybe even end it all in one stroke! You came because you wanted a head start on plundering this place and you’ve condemned the world to a war worse than it had any need to be.”

Chen looked contemplative, Guo looked angry and Gerling actually looked a little ashamed.

“You think I wanted to save you?” Jason asked. “I halfway contemplated letting him kill you all first and if I wasn’t worried about you pricks all turning into vampire minions I probably would have. The only reason I used that crystal was that without taking him down, I couldn’t finish the job I came in here to do.”

He turned to look at the pagoda’s upper floors, closed his eyes and then opened them again.

“The portal is open. Go, and don’t come back.”

Guo took a step toward Jason but Chen stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“You might need us again,” Gerling said.

“Not worth the risk,” Jason said. “I don’t have a magic crystal for every time you cause more problems than you solve.”

“Mr Asano,” Chen said. “If we do not return with something to show for our efforts – and our loss – then it will be hard to convince our people not to come after you the moment you leave this place.”

“You’re going to do that whatever you bring back,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Chen said. “But there is a difference between seeking an opportunity and needing to salvage at least something from a costly debacle. Take a step back and give our people some face; allow us to take back some of these cores from the anomalies. Then we can step back in turn and not pursue you as furiously as we otherwise might.”

Jason looked from Chen to the dead Tran and back.

“Are you serious?” Jason asked. “You want cores after what they did to him?”

“They are dangerous, yes, but powerful,” Chen said. “Unless you have some reality cores to offer instead,” Chen said.

“Do you see any reality cores lying around?” Jason asked.

“No, but my senses are sealed. Yours are not.”

“Just take some of the bloody things and go,” Jason said.

“We will be taking the body of our fallen companion as well,” Chen said. As soon as he did, Tran started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

“I’ve stepped back far enough, Mr Chen.”