



QUANTUM DEVIL SAGA

AVATAR TUNER

Vol. 1

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Quantum Devil Saga
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Yu Godai

Translated by Kevin Frane

Prerelease Preview

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Part I

The Junkyard

Time: ST 5:43:21
Solar Noise: LEVEL 8
Point: 02A7-7B77845
In Progress
Scanning.../

Height: 3567mm
Length: 2225mm
Width: 2225mm
Weight: Unknown
Material: Unknown
Object: Unknown
Retrying scan...
Category: Error/

Chapter 1

We are the children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos.

—P.W. Atkins



Serph froze. Someone was staring at him. He could feel it.

There. He peered through the falling rain at a small creature perched on a nearby pile of rubble. It gazed back with bright eyes.

Sheets of rain swept over them both—silver rain. Tiny puddles of it rippled at Serph's feet, so metallic that the water looked like dancing mercury. All around him twisted pieces of rusted metal jutted out of the ground. The rain washed across the battlefield. It had no weight to it, no warmth—it merely hung there, painting the air silver.

In the distance loomed the spire of the Temple. Right now it was ST—Shade Time—and the sky was leaden gray, with an occasional flicker of green light visible only from the corner of the eye. Serph's forces and their opponents lay in wait in impromptu strongholds made of pitted slabs of concrete and overturned vehicles, facing off across this shattered no man's land. The tribe suits they wore for combat were temperature-controlled, but they weren't meant for long-term engagements like this one. Serph had been stretching out his legs, trying to work out the stiffness in his muscles, but he'd

paused at the feeling that someone was staring at him.

Cat.

The word flashed in his mind, but he didn't know what it meant. The screen of his scope glowed green, displaying the words "Category: Error/" over and over. He wasn't sure whether that reading came from the object up ahead that he'd just scanned, or from the thing that was staring at him from atop the rubble. *Probably nothing to worry about.* A moment later whatever it was vanished, along with the message.

The rain grew ever so slightly heavier.

"Sir," his sniper said in a low voice. He looked over at her. "I've sighted Harley Q."

Serph nodded and adjusted his scope's field of view, increasing its magnification to zoom in on the enemy forces deployed on the rise across the way. Ruined cityscapes formed a grim backdrop in the shadowy distance further beyond. The enemy was lurking in the cover provided by a scattered assortment of decaying buildings, indistinguishable hunks of concrete, and armored vehicles turned on their sides. The silver rain continued to pour down without a sound.

Even with his eyes' low-light spectral enhancement, it was difficult for him to detect the enemy's positions during an open-air engagement like this. But then, the enemy was in the same boat. They too had reinforced nervous systems and bolstered senses, but the dreary battlefield provided effective camouflage on every side. He switched over to thermal imaging mode, and red and orange silhouettes popped out against the field of gray.

There they are. Serph contemplated the force that the Vanguard had deployed.

Data on their leader, Harley Q, was superimposed on one corner of his data display. He didn't see Harley himself yet, but if his sniper said he was there, then he was there. She had an unparalleled knack for spotting targets—she didn't even have to rely on scanning technology.

Harley Q tended to prefer cautious guerilla tactics; it was uncharacteristic of him to take such an openly aggressive course of action. Which was precisely what made Serph uneasy.

Uneasiness.

That simply meant that some key piece of data was missing.

The battlefield was a shallow basin. The uneven incline was littered with concrete debris and lumps of melted construction plastic that jutted out at odd angles across the field. In the middle were the remains of a highway overpass that had collapsed halfway along its length. Its darkened silhouette pierced the drab sky, marking the military border between Svadhisthana and Muladhara. On the near side of that line was a team of forty, and on the other, a team of about sixty, both parties waiting for the signal to commence hostilities.

The enemy had advanced down the slope to various points of cover provided by shipping containers, blocky remains of long-abandoned structures, and other ruins. They appeared as indistinct blobs on the thermal scanner; their voices were audible as a low murmur. From what Serph could see, each of the positions he'd spotted was manned by squads of three to six foot soldiers.

He switched back to normal vision and looked around. Behind the enemy lines he could see glimpses of green tribal markings in furtive motion. Each tribe wore uniforms marked with a unique color to differentiate itself from the rest. The Vanguard wore outfits accented with vivid green markings, and their opponents—Serph's tribe, the Embryon—were marked by bright orange. Both stood out against the drab, gray scenery.

The Vanguard controlled Svadhisthana, while the Embryon held Muladhara.

Altogether the Junkyard comprised seven areas. Foremost among them was Sahasrara, the inviolate territory, which held the headquarters of the Church. The gates to the paradise of Nirvana would open themselves to whoever controlled the other six. So said the Church, and therefore it must be true; the Church of Karma was the absolute authority.

Muladhara, Svadhisthana, Manipura, Vishuddha, Anahata, Ajna, and inviolate Sahasrara. Sahasrara was where the tower stood, the massive spire inhabited by the Church's white-clad warrior priests; at its top were the gates to paradise. The top of the great spire was far, far above the Junkyard's bleak expanse, beyond the rain and the dust. From Serph's perspective it looked blurry and ethereal, as if painted over with watery ink.

From that tower, it was said, one could see to the ends of the earth. And right now, on that rubble-strewn battlefield, was something no one had seen before.

Weight: Unknown
Material: Unknown
Object: Unknown

Category: Error/

No matter how many times he scanned it, he got the same result.

The object was about three and a half meters tall and two meters across. Its shape was that of a warped sphere, pointed at the top; its surface consisted of elliptical metal plates—also pointed, reminiscent of the object itself—that overlapped like scales. A pattern of green light occasionally shone between the dull black plates, making the object look as though it were enveloped in some sort of glowing net. Several thick tubes ran out from it along the ground, looking as if they were providing the thing with power of some kind.

Light coursed through the tubes, and each time it did, the object quivered in the misty silver rain. It was like some kind of bud, Serph thought, before that unknown bit of code was erased from his mind.

Cat. Bud.

The noise was really bad today.

“Warning to the Embryon.” A rough voice came echoing through a megaphone. “Remove the unidentified object at coordinates 02A7-7B77845 at once. Failure to do so will be considered an act of war, and we will respond with force.”

“Warning to the Vanguard.” A similar voice replied in the same flat, even tone. “Remove the unidentified object at coordinates 02A7-7B77845 at once. Failure to do so will be considered an act of war, and we will respond with force.”

A call sounded in Serph’s ear. The bishop, stationed further back behind the line, transmitted his data analysis. Information began to stream in front of Serph’s eyes, but the conclusion was the same. Not even the bishop could crack the mystery of this unknown object.

Serph gave a short reply, then ended the call. With his gaze still fixed on the enemy's position, he issued quick orders to his troops via hand signals. Footsteps scurried around behind cover. The female sniper, in shooting position, gave him a quick look. She had pink shoulder-length hair that made her stand out in the gray light.

"Soldiers can always be replaced, sir, but we can't replace our leader."

He didn't respond. At this point, it hardly warranted acknowledgment. In a conflict between tribes, if one side were to take out the enemy leader, that was the end of it. Even if one tribe were emerging as the clear victor, if their leader fell in battle, they would be declared the losing side on the spot.

For a large tribe with sufficient forces, like the Solids of Anahata, it was a matter of course that the leader didn't show himself on the front line. But for an up-and-coming tribe like the Embryon, which had far fewer members, the leader was an invaluable presence on the battlefield.

It was unprecedented that an upstart tribe like the Embryon had come to control all of Muladhara, a feat that would have been impossible if not for its leader's exceptional abilities, and the considerable talents of his four core members.

Argilla, the woman with the rifle, was one of these four. She had a remarkable knack for scanning the enemy without needing to use a scope, singling out her target, and dropping her man with a single shot. Two of Serph's other lieutenants were presently in charge of their own squads, which were stationed to either side of the main formation. The fourth member was the bishop, who would likely bring up the rear once he had finished his data analysis.

The fact that the Embryon required its leader and its other core members to engage in personal combat was a weakness, but also a strength. The tribe had only boasted about fifty members when it had taken control of their current area, with that central group of five handling the bulk of the fighting all on their own. There probably weren't many other tribes that concentrated that much potential into a mere five combatants.

Serph drew his handgun from its holster and racked the slide to chamber the first round.

The plan was for him to press the attack toward the enemy leader if he turned up on the battlefield. With deft, artful movements, Serph would draw enemy fire in his own direction, hopefully luring out Harley Q himself—in which case, Serph would have his forces attack en masse. If they took out Harley, the battle would be over then and there.

Ordinarily, going toe-to-toe with the enemy with only a handgun would be suicide. In this case, however, he wanted to avoid heavier firearms. A larger, longer weapon such as an assault rifle or machine gun would be too cumbersome, and would impede his ability to dodge incoming fire.

For this strategy to work, the person acting as decoy needed to have exceptional judgment, physical prowess, and the ability to defend himself on the battlefield with the smallest weapon possible. The only person who fit all those criteria was the leader of the Embryon himself. Of course, the rules were clear that a leader's death spelled immediate defeat for a tribe. This was why Argilla had cautioned him.

But there was another rule to consider, as well.

Upon a tribe leader's death, the remaining members were required to surrender on the spot and swear their allegiance to the conquering tribe. That was how the Embryon had expanded its own ranks. The same woman who had warned him moments ago would likely wind up serving this other tribe without hesitation if they were victorious.

He held up a hand to signal the start of the operation.

It had silver eyes, he thought all of a sudden.

The cat. It was black, and it had a long tail, big triangle-shaped ears, and needle-like whiskers.

That doesn't matter right now.

He brought his hand down. The first gunshots rang out.

Leaping from behind the concrete wall he'd been using for cover, he charged forward at a full sprint, dodging erratically as he ran. Gunfire riddled the ground at his feet. The scent and heat of gunpowder blew past his face. Since he'd outfitted himself to remain as agile as possible, Serph wasn't wearing anything to protect his head. He shielded his eyes with one hand and ducked into a combat roll.

The Vanguard's weapons of choice were auto-crossbows. Their projectiles didn't have much in the way of penetrative strength, but they were loaded with explosives that would trigger a wide-area blast upon impact. These explosions could kick up sand and gravel with enough force to maim or kill.

He came out of his roll behind some cover, but another attack followed before he could catch his breath. Crossbow bolts rained from above. Even if they didn't score a direct hit, the explosives would do their work. Quickly he fired off a series of precise shots with his handgun, detonating the bolts at a distance. Dazzling flames engulfed his field of view.

As he rolled back out of his hiding place to avoid the explosion, scorched fragments of metal came showering down, and a gust of terrific heat washed over his face, hot enough to raise blisters despite the anti-burn cream he'd applied to his exposed skin. If he had taken the brunt of that blast, he would be a charred, lifeless corpse right now. The scent of burnt hair filled his nostrils.

He destroyed another dozen or so arrows that were angling toward him, firing off the last round in his magazine as he somersaulted behind the large piece of rubble he'd set his sights on. A single heartbeat later, flames blossomed above him as an explosive arrow engulfed the whole area in its blast. There was a tremendous boom, followed by a searing rush of air that carried with it the stench of singed asphalt and burnt flesh. A good number of people were probably dead.

He slapped a fresh clip into his gun and scanned the area, choosing his next destination. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw enemy soldiers scrambling from behind cover, gunning for him. He responded instinctively with a single shot—not at the enemy, but at yet another explosive bolt coming his way. Deflected and spinning out of control, the projectile careened straight towards the cover the enemy had been using.

Direct hit.

Screams filled the air. A number of enemy troops stumbled out from behind the shattered concrete, smoke rising from their bodies as they ran.

A moment later, however, they staggered in a spray of blood and pitched forward onto the ground. The reports of gunfire followed.

Argilla, still crouched at her sniping point, switched to a new clip with practiced ease and resumed firing without delay. In the span of a single breath, every member of the enemy squad lay dead on the ground.

A fresh round of intermittent gunfire sounded from Serph's right. A small-statured Embryon soldier with locks of braided blue hair slid down the embankment at the battlefield's edge, firing his submachine gun from the hip in short bursts. The squad he was leading followed close behind.

At the same time, another team came rushing down from a position on the opposite side. They were lead by a shock trooper, a big man with bright red hair that stood out clearly against the drab landscape. Over one of his broad shoulders he bore a grenade launcher. He fired it as he ran, belching out a gout of flame; in the ensuing explosion a number of enemy troops were blasted to cinders, leaving a blackened, smoldering hole in the ground.

Across the basin, combatants marked with green and orange clashed in an unruly frenzy. The red-haired man came to a quick stop, keeping the enemy in check with another grenade, backed up by a curtain of submachine gun fire.

Serph activated the status tracker function of his augmented vision as he surveyed the battle. The enemy currently had thirty-two troops; his own side was at twenty-two. Things were going better than anticipated, but given the disparity between their forces, they were taking too long. Even as he checked, another of his men was lost.

Twenty-one.

But there was still no sign of Harley Q.

There was a slight time lag when he came out of search mode. As he did, he spotted an enemy soldier clambering over the rubble just half a meter above him. Was the enemy shrugging free of his markings as he made his way closer? Serph started to lift his gun into firing position, knowing as he did that he would be too late. He found himself staring back into a pair of wide-open eyes.

Serph saw himself reflected in them, a silver-haired young man whose own eyes were open just as wide.

An instant later, there was a gunshot from behind him, and the ambusher disappeared from view in a spray of blood and gray

matter. Serph reaffirmed the grip on his gun, shot two succeeding ambushers right between the eyes, and moved on to his next way-point. Static crackled through the comm link in his ear.

Atop a rise behind Embryon lines, a man lifted his face from behind the scope of his assault rifle. His eyes were a bright blue-green, the same color as the hair underneath his hood. The bishop.

“I can confirm that Harley Q is present. Use caution, sir.” He followed up his transmission with a packet of coordinates. Serph adjusted his scope, switching over to magnification mode to scan the enemy line. A man with reddish hair appeared briefly, moving behind one of the containers. The scope snapped a still image, enlarged it, and then further enhanced it. Blurry lines were cleared up, revealing the silhouette of a thin man with a striking profile. There were green markings at his shoulders and beneath his eyes. It was enough to confirm a match between the current image and the one on file. *Harley Q himself.*

Serph had acquired his target. Now it was simply a matter of finding the right way to lure him out into the open. He waited for a break in the enemy assault, trying to determine the best possible route to take.

Then suddenly the battlefield was bathed in a blinding white light.

औं मण्डित्स्वै हूं

At first, Serph figured the light had come from an explosion, but a moment later, he heard an awful screeching through his comm link, followed immediately by total silence. His scope flickered with static, and the data stream had cut out entirely.

He could see Harley. There was no sound of any gunfire, just an intermittent hiss of static. Harley staggered out from behind cover, then arched his back and spread out his arms. Noise. More noise.

Serph could hear Harley’s tortured exclamation. “What’s happening to me?”

Harley’s voice sounded like it, too, was mixed with static; his words devolved into a gurgling groan. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground, hunched over as if to vomit. A pulsing movement ran up and down the hump of his back, like something alive.

The wet sound of rending flesh filled the air.

And through it all, a background of static.

Harley let out a scream. The back of his jacket bulged upward, then split open from the inside. A black shape lashed out almost too quickly to be seen; the screams of one of the nearby Vanguard soldiers ceased abruptly as everything from his shoulders upward vanished without a trace. The dead man tumbled over backwards, and a moment later, blood began to gush from his corpse, forming a thick, crimson puddle.

Serph stared, baffled. Had the enemy devised some new form of attack? That didn't explain Harley's twisted body, though, or why he would attack his own men. Had a new opponent joined the fray?

A number of possibilities came to mind, but Serph dismissed them all. The Embryon leader remained hidden as he weighed his options. He tried to call his rear guard on his comm link, but there was no response. Sporadic gunfire had started up again, but on nowhere near the same level as during the battle before. With great caution, Serph stuck his head out from behind cover and looked around.

The "bud" had opened.

The strange object had sat there in silence during the battle, and since neither side had seen it as a tactical threat, it had gone largely ignored. Now, however, it looked like it might be some sort of bizarre laser weapon or cluster bomb, the light from within it pulsing in quick, random bursts.

The black scales now appeared more like petals, and they had unfolded into a circular calyx, above which danced a cluster of countless pale blue lights. The lights spun around a central vortex, leaving glowing trails in their mesmerizing wake. It was impossible to keep track of any of them individually. Every so often, one of the blue lights would break away from the rest, as if it simply couldn't keep spinning around with the others, and fly off in some random direction—or else it would go after one of the cowering individuals who'd been too slow to run away. Anyone unfortunate enough to be pierced by one of these lights wound up doubled over and wracked by violent spasms. The thick tubes on the ground throbbed grotesquely, flashing as they did so, green-tinged fluorescence painting the area like alien blood.

Spinning lights and static.

Serph tried to give the order for his forces to retreat, but the comm link in his ear only let out screeching protest. Realizing the danger, the Embryon forces began to fall back of their own accord, but this was a situation that no one could outrun. Some suffered the same fate as the first victim, having their heads or limbs blown off, whereas others, like Harley, were pierced through by the steaks of bluish light and pitched headlong onto the ground. The gunfire ceased, replaced by a barely audible whirring sound as the area was flooded with the light from the alien object. Serph felt an intense pain, as if some creeping tendril had slipped in past his eardrum and was trying to hack his brain out piece by piece with a tiny knife. The gun fell from his hand.

Something—some kind of transformation—had begun. Harley was wailing. A pair of bumpy limbs sprouted from his hunched back, flailing around wildly as if controlled by some other mind. Across the battlefield, bodies shook and writhed as wings unfurled, horns jutted forth; fearsome claws extended, skin was replaced by scales or fur. Flesh convulsed as the fallen combatants began to turn into something other than human. There was a sort of terrifying artistry to the grotesque display of twisted bodies.

All of a sudden, the static in the comm link cleared up, and a shout came through it.

“Sir, get down!”

Only then did Serph realize he had ever stood. He felt a powerful impact in his chest.

He'd been shot. He could feel it, plain and simple. Right in the heart. A fatal wound for sure. He didn't know if it had been friend or foe, but a stray bullet had caught him in the chest, right through his combat suit. The strength slowly ebbed from his legs, and he dropped to his knees. He looked down, watching as his blood pumped out of him and spread over the ground.

A long time passed, or so it seemed to his slowed perception. But according to the time display that still remained on the mostly blacked-out scope, it had been only a second. In another second, he knew, he would be dead. He saw the red numbers as a counter indicating how much longer he had left to live.

Static.

A sphere of white light came hurtling towards him. He needed to avoid it, he thought, but he didn't have the strength. His time had run out. The instant before he lost consciousness, the white light enveloped his body.

The cluster of whirling lights emitted a high-pitched sound, and then they burst apart, scattering in every direction.

A phantasmal form floated in front of him. Its shape was humanoid; looking at it felt somehow like looking into a mirror, except the face gazing back at him wasn't human. Rather, it looked to be something carved of crystal, with millions of glittering, translucent facets. Its hair stood on end, semi-liquid, waving steadily back and forth, creating a rainbow as it moved. Energy flowed from within it in surging waves, originating from its translucent elbows and ankles, coiling up over its robust, hairless body.

Serph's scope was hit with another burst of static as it tried to register the mysterious form, and then it displayed a single line of text.

Om Mani Padme Hum

Om, jewel in the lotus, hum.

The text then seemed to melt and crumble away, coalescing back into a single word.

Varuna

God of water and sky.

The apparition approached and silently slipped into Serph's body and vanished.

He could feel it flowing into him. *Such overwhelming power.* His breath was wrenched out of him in a single, unending scream. It seemed as if his cells were exploding, one by one, but infinitely quickly, as his body was rearranged into something other than itself. Just under his skin, the power inside him rippled like mercury.

And now, of all times, he was laughing. It was a roaring laugh, thunderous, as if it issued forth from the depths of a stormy sea.

There was a roar as a jet-black tendril came creeping around him from behind. Just as it was about to wrap around his throat, he

reached out and grabbed it. It was easier than stopping a punch from a young child. Bone and tendon were crushed in his fist like they were made of paper. He felt pain and hunger, along with a delightful fear that washed over him like a wave of utter pleasure.

The enemy looked back at him, eyes flooded with terror. Good. Now his foe knew just how mismatched the two of them were. Still in his hand were remnants of crushed flesh and bone. He kept a strong grip on that squirming victim and reeled it in as he plodded steadily closer.

The mantra tingled on his lips. His power crystallized. He was the master of water.

Serph reached out with one hand. There was silver . . . and then bright red.

It was . . . raining.

Rain.

A rain that never stopped. The rain of the Junkyard.

The bodies of the dead were broken down and taken up into the heavens, becoming the rain that fell, ultimately to collect beneath the Temple. There, the spirit-flow was cleansed of its karma—the sins committed during the fighting—and was reborn into the world anew, to fight once more. Thus spake the Church.

He saw a hand slowly reach out before him. Beyond it stretched the gray sky, dull and drab as ever.

The Junkyard. The fighting. Rain, light. A hand.

My hand.

Me.

I am Serph.

He felt as if someone had squeezed their bare hands around his heart.

Serph let out a low groan as he came back to consciousness. As he did, his surroundings came into view with almost frightening clarity.

The enemy was gone. He didn't see any of his allies, either. It was quiet. His comm link had fallen to the ground, where it emitted an atonal hum. The twisted remains of what appeared to be a rifle lay at his feet.

Someone put a hand on his hip, turning him over and trying to prop him up.

“Heat,” Serph murmured, lightheaded, recognizing the big shock trooper by the firm grip of his hand. He tried to stand. As he did, he felt something lukewarm inching its way up his throat, and he vomited it up. A reddish-brown liquid splattered onto the ground, looking like old, used oil. Heat said nothing, merely holding Serph while the Embryon leader hunched over and emptied his stomach.

The sky was beginning to glow a pale magenta. It was getting close to LT—Light Time. Just how much time had passed? Serph gazed around. The mysterious object was gone without a trace. There was no sign of anyone else amongst the heaping piles of rubble and debris. It was as if everything had been nothing but a bad dream.

He wiped a hand across his mouth. “How are the others?”

“They’re fine. Well, ran off or got killed, at any rate. Either way, I don’t see anybody else here.” Heat stood and gestured at the bleak expanse of the basin. “Don’t fret on it. Everyone’s in the same boat.”

“You mean this happened to all of us?”

Heat nodded, then scrunched up his face and spat on the ground. Serph managed to get to his feet, then coughed and sputtered as he fought back another bout of nausea. “Where did everyone go? Did they retreat?”

“I’m not sure.” Heat shook his head in frustration. “When I came to, they were gone. Everyone was gone. We were the only ones left.”

Serph brushed his fingers across his chest, finding the singed bullet hole in his suit. *So it was no dream.* It felt like the inside of his mouth had been slathered with tar. There was the faint scent of iron, and a taste that made his tongue tingle.

Something didn’t feel right.

“Heat. You *are* Heat, right?”

“Of course I am.” Heat scowled. “You sure you’re you, Serph? Come on, Argilla and Gale are over there.”

Argilla. Gale.

Serph’s vision went blurry for a moment, and he staggered.

“Argilla” was the call sign of Embryon’s sniper, just as “Gale” was the name of the bishop, the taciturn analyst who devised their strategies.

And Heat was their best combatant, the Embryon's number two, on par with Serph himself. He had fought alongside Serph since the beginning, earning his spot as one of the key members of the tribe.

"Serph?" There was doubt in Heat's eyes as he peered at his leader up close. "You don't look so good. Maybe I should have the others come here instead."

"No, it's all right. I'm fine." Serph shook his head, forcing away the strange dizziness that was creeping over him. It was an odd sensation, as if the magnification on his scope had been turned up too high—or rather, as if the sharpness had been cranked up to the maximum. It was as though he'd been covered in a protective film that he'd never noticed until it was suddenly torn away.

He felt the warmth of Heat's fingers as they gripped his arm. He felt the patter of raindrops on his body, and a tightness in his chest as he remembered that the rain had been made from those who had died on this very battlefield.

The scent of rust hit his nose.

"Where am I? Why am I—whoa!" A high-pitched voice called out from somewhere nearby.

"Who's that?" Serph asked.

"There's Cielo," Heat said. "I wonder what he's going on about."

The youngest of the core members, Cielo—wasn't that his name? A foot soldier. Yes, that was right. Serph knew that. Of course he did. "Is he all right? Come on, let's go check."

"Sir, are you okay?" Argilla and Gale appeared from behind some rubble, apparently having heard Cielo's voice as well. Gale looked much as he ever did, face peering out from within his hood as he carefully scanned the area, blue-green eyes keen and alert. Argilla seemed like she'd been shaken up pretty badly, the disheveled curls of her pink hair straying from their usual precise coil. To see her without a rifle in her hands made her look more vulnerable than if she'd been naked.

"Sir, what in the world happened? Where did the Vanguard go? Where did *everyone* go? And what about that . . . thing on the battlefield?"

"I cannot presently detect anything corresponding to the object within three kilometers of our position," Gale said, his voice flat.

“There are no other life signs within five kilometers. Nor do I detect any automated defenses. We are the only ones here. I conclude that we are at no risk of further attack.”

“Oh, shut up,” Argilla snapped. “How many times do I have to tell you that being attacked isn’t the issue? I want to know what happened. Do you remember anything, sir?”

“No, I don’t. Neither does Heat. And from the sound of things, none of you do, either.”

Argilla drooped, looking completely spent. Serph looked expectantly at Gale.

“I cannot access Church records,” Gale responded, as if sensing what Serph was about to ask. “The static is too strong. It seems to be having some kind of effect on my implants. I suggest that we head back to base in order to regroup. Everyone is exhausted, and moreover, we need more information before we can make any proper decisions.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Serph looked at Argilla. Her face was pale, and she had a hand to her mouth as she fought off her nausea. Everyone was in bad shape, but Argilla seemed to be feeling the effects worse than the rest.

The rest.

“I almost forgot,” Serph said. “Where’s Cielo?” Cielo had been the one closest to the object when it activated.

Looking around, he saw the silhouette of a small-statured youth set against the magenta sky, kneeling atop a raised section of earth that had been pushed up by the explosion. Cielo was peering down at something with keen interest.

Serph and the others jogged up the embankment to join him. “What is it, Cielo? What’s going on?”

“Oh, hey there, boss.” Cielo whipped around to look at Serph, his braided blue hair swinging. He pointed at the spot he’d been staring at. “Have a look.”

Where the strange object had been there was now a circular crater, close to ten meters in diameter and deep enough for a person to stand fully inside. Its stone and soil walls had been transmuted into glass, as if melted by tremendous heat; the surrounding topsoil had been fused into what looked like obsidian. It glistened in the rain.

At the bottom of that bowl of glass was a girl, curled up and lying on her side.

She was a willowy young thing, without a scrap of clothing on her body. The slight swell of her breasts could be glimpsed through the space between her folded arms, and her skin was pure white, like unblemished porcelain.

“Who . . . Who *is* that?” Argilla asked, her voice trembling.

Serph got down on one knee and leaned over to peer into the crater. There didn’t appear to be any traps. He activated the magnification and scanning functions of his scope and began a careful search. As far as he could tell, the girl was unarmed, and she had no prosthetics that could conceal any weapons. There didn’t seem to be anything unusual about her at all—aside from the fact that she was curled up naked in the middle of a battlefield. Well, what had been a battlefield.

Her hair was black. *That* was odd, Serph reflected. He’d never seen anyone with black hair in the Junkyard. The people of the Junkyard were born with a myriad of hair and eye colors: Serph had silver, Heat had red, Cielo blue, and so forth. Eyes and hair always matched. As far as Serph knew, though, there wasn’t anyone on record who’d been born with black hair.

No one said a word. Not even Gale could offer any suggestion for what to do next. Still, standing around staring wasn’t going to accomplish anything, so Serph clambered down into the pit.

He carefully made his way to the bottom of the crater, sparing only a brief glance back at his companions as they called out after him in alarm. The glassy surface crunched and crackled under his boots. Whatever the object had been, it had brought the temperature here up to an absurd level. The residual heat rose up through the falling rain, a gentle warmth that enveloped him. The glass itself was still so hot that Serph could feel it through the soles of his boots.

But she hasn’t been burned . . .

He reached down to pick the girl up, finding her shockingly light. Up close, she seemed even thinner and smaller, with barely any muscle—which was unthinkable for a denizen of the Junkyard. The people born into this world were built for combat, and even someone as young as Cielo still had decent stamina and mus-

cle strength.

And despite the fact that she lay in the intense heat of the crater, the girl's skin was cold, and just the slightest bit damp. Serph brushed her hair aside, exposing her tiny face. Her long eyelashes were the same black color as her hair, and her scarlet lips looked like they'd been painted on. They were gently pursed together in mild discomfort. The silver rain made her hair cling wetly to her face.

"Argilla, toss me down something she can wear. We're bringing her back to base."

"Are you sure that's safe?" Argilla asked. Serph looked back down at the girl in his arms.

Would he be asking for trouble by taking her away? Maybe. But there was something inside his head that insisted that he couldn't just leave this girl here. She seemed somehow . . . familiar.

He shook his head to rid himself of the notion. That wasn't possible.

As a matter of course, there were noncombatants in the Junkyard. Most of the personnel who manned supply stations and workshops served a tribe only as secondary combatants. The Church's monks, for their part, adhered to a strict policy of non-violence, and would never show themselves on a battlefield in the first place; as the closest thing the Junkyard had to rulers, the monks served as the ultimate arbitrators for the tribes, and kept themselves above any sort of fighting. But Serph had never heard of the Church having any female monks, so he doubted the girl belonged with them.

She lay motionless in his arms, breathing slowly and deeply, still asleep.

"Dangerous or not, she might have some kind of connection to the object that was here," he said. "And possibly even to what happened afterwards. Once she wakes up, maybe we can get her to tell us something. Give me your cape, Argilla. And lower down a line; I don't think I'll be able to carry her out on my own."