

The book cover features a dynamic illustration of two anime-style characters. On the left, a male character with short, spiky light blue hair and a serious expression stands in a dark blue, form-fitting suit with orange and black accents. On the right, a female character with long, flowing pink hair and a confident smile stands in a similar dark blue suit with orange and black details. They are positioned against a background of a city at night, with a large, glowing orange and yellow light source on the right. The title 'AVATAR TUNER' is prominently displayed in the center in a large, white, stylized font. Above it, 'QUANTUM DEVIL SAGA' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right of the title, 'Vol. 1' is written in a white, stylized font. At the bottom, 'Translated by Kevin Frane' is written in a white, sans-serif font.

Yu Godai

QUANTUM DEVIL SAGA

AVATAR TUNER

Vol. 1

Translated by Kevin Frane



Bento Books, Inc.



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Quantum Devil Saga: Avatar Tuner, Vol. 1

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Quantum Devil Saga

AVATAR TUNER

Vol. 1

Yu Godai

Translated by Kevin Frane

The Territories of the Junkyard

Muladhara, held by the Embryon tribe and led by Serph.

Svadhithana, Held by the Vanguard's tribe and led by Harley Q.

Manipura, held by the Maribel tribe and led by Jinana.

Anahata, held by the Solids tribe and led by Mick the Slug.

Vishuddha, held by the Wolves tribe and led by Canis Volk.

Ajna, held by the Brutes tribe and led by Varin Omega.

Sahasrara, the inviolate territory that holds the Temple, the headquarters of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma.

Part I

The Junkyard

Time: 05:43:21 ST

Solar Noise: LEVEL 8

Coordinates: 02A7-7B77845

Scanning.../

Height: 3567 mm

Length: 2225 mm

Width: 2225 mm

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 Vanguarders 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 guerrilla 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's 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's 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 Vanguarders.” 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 led 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 waypoint. 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.

ओं मणपिद्मो हं

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 coif. 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 Vanguarders 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 young man 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 muscle 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.”

Chapter 2

*. . . up they rose
As from unrest, and each the other viewing,
Soon found their Eyes how open'd, and their minds
How darken'd.
—Milton, Paradise Lost*



“What are you looking at?”

Serph glanced up from the screen of his terminal. He was in his private quarters, but the door was open, and at some point Heat had come in; the big man stood leaning back with his arms folded, one of his feet braced against the door frame.

They were in one of the rooms of the run-down building to which Serph and the others had first staked a claim on the day they petitioned the Church to found their tribe. Rusty ducts and exposed pieces of rebar showed through the crumbling concrete; the worst sections had been patched with quick-drying cement.

Serph’s room reflected the general state of the tribe’s headquarters. This was a military installation, after all, so priority was given to shoring up exterior defenses over enhancing personal comfort. The Embryon had needed to expand rapidly due to the influx of new personnel, and now, rather than having everything centralized in one main building, the base was a haphazard affair, sprawling out in every direction, making it neither easy to navigate nor pleasing to the eye.

“Has something got you interested in your stats after all this time?” Heat asked. “I mean, you gotta be pretty used to your own face.”

I should be, shouldn't I? Serph thought.

The flickering screen showed the head shot of a slender young man with silver

hair and silver eyes. In the archived image, he looked pallid and expressionless, like a corpse. Alongside his picture, numeric values for all sorts of data fields scrolled by. Height. Weight. Registration number. Statistics on every part of his body. Elapsed time since rebirth. His status within the Embryon. The Combat Points he had earned so far.

This was Serph. The data, the code that defined him.

Somebody else might say his face looked rather feminine, he considered. Or perhaps it might be better to call it androgynous. His features were light and symmetrical, so perfect as to approach artificial and lifeless. His chest and shoulders were far more slender than Heat's, and he was shorter and lighter as well.

Heat. His red hair made him immediately recognizable, and he was tall enough to stand out in any crowd. He had broad shoulders and a burly chest that gave weight to his presence whether or not he spoke a word. His face, too, was decidedly more masculine than Serph's, with a strong jaw, chiseled features, and tanned skin. Beneath his unkempt crimson bangs shone piercing red eyes.

Heat was the silent type, and rarely spoke to anyone other than Serph. For him to come and strike up a conversation of his own volition felt somehow out of character.

Serph felt an awkward twinge in his chest.

Have I—has Heat—always been like this?

Serph brought his hand up and waved it in front of his face. His fingers were long, slender, and dexterous. The simple act of thinking that this was *his* hand made him feel weird all over again.

And my face, too.

"You worried about something there?" It was only when Heat asked, voice quiet, that Serph realized he'd begun to stroke his left cheek.

"Yeah. I am worried. Aren't you?"

"Yeah," Heat replied, lifting up his left forearm to reveal a dark, oddly shaped bruise.

The edges of the bruise were well defined, making it look as if it had been stenciled there; it was in the shape of a fireball leaving behind a trail of flame. The fireball itself bore a mouth with sharp fangs, opened wide like it was roaring.

Serph looked back at his screen. The face of the young man was the same as ever, but he knew the same could not be said for his own. Something had begun to change.

Serph, too, had a distinctive black bruise, in this case on his left cheek. It looked like a spray of water droplets, a different image than Heat's bruise, but clearly in the same general style, and also with an irregularity that could be interpreted as a mouth with fangs.

"Do the others all have them too?" he asked.

"Yeah. Argilla on her chest, Gale on his left shin, and Cielo on his right thigh." Heat shifted his stance, then lowered his voice. "The locations are all different, but they've all got a mark somewhere on them. We haven't checked the whole tribe yet, but it looks like we could be talking about everyone here in the base."

"So then it wasn't just people who were at the battle. This might have happened to everyone in the Junkyard."

Heat was quiet for a moment, and then merely shrugged. Serph set his terminal into sleep mode before turning around in his chair to look at his lieutenant again. "Do you think that these bruises have some connection to the black object and those lights we saw?"

"Beats me. Though to be honest, right now I can't think of anything else that could have caused it." Heat brushed his hair out of his face in irritation. "What has the Church said?"

"Nothing yet. Gale is getting his implants calibrated right now, but from what he tells me, all Church networks are currently down. I haven't had any luck accessing them either. It looks like our server is operating in standalone mode." Serph shook his head. It felt like it was packed tight in foam. "What about the girl?"

"Still sleeping, as far as I know. I think Argilla's looking after her, but I'm not sure."

“Maybe we should go and check up on her.” Serph stood. His body was sluggish and weary, demanding more rest, but he didn’t have time for that now.

He stopped as he walked past Heat. “You coming?”

“Nah, I’m good. I lost one of my best grenade launchers in the battle—I need to get in some practice with a new one.” He shoved off from the door frame and started to march down the hallway, but he stopped to look back over his shoulder when Serph called out after him.

“The girl—I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve seen her somewhere before.” Serph lowered his voice. “Do you get that feeling too?”

There was a brief pause before Heat responded. “Maybe. And that freaks me out.” He hurried on his way, leaving Serph standing in his quarters, alone with a gnawing sense of *déjà vu*.

“Hey, buddy!”

Serph staggered as a blur of bouncing blue braids came bounding into the room, slamming right into him.

Cielo’s pale blue hair was pulled into a series of tufts held in place by metal clips. His big, round eyes flickered across his surroundings, as if looking for anything that might draw their interest. The large pouch at his waist slapped against his thigh, allowing fleeting glimpses of the black bruise beneath it.

“Quiet, Cielo. We don’t want to startle her,” Argilla scolded, looking up from where she knelt by the side of the girl’s bed.

Argilla was fit and muscular, and tall for a woman, close to Serph’s height. The slit in her long skirt offered an appealing glimpse of her bare legs underneath. Her eyes were the same soft pink as her hair.

With gentle, careful movements, she was straightening the sleeping girl’s disheveled hair with her hands. As she moved, the opening at the front of her suit showed her own black bruise. Hers was shaped like a series of waves arranged in an inverted triangle, sporting the same unusual fanged mouth design as the others.

“And what’s with the ‘buddy’ this and ‘buddy’ that? You address our leader as

‘sir.’”

“But ‘sir’ sounds so stuffy,” Cielo pouted, his arm still thrown around Serph’s shoulders. “And saying ‘buddy’ just sounds so much more *me*. Makes it feel like we’ve got a real bond. Besides, you don’t mind being called ‘buddy,’ do you, buddy?” he said with mock pleading.

Serph forced out a strained laugh, then signaled his agreement with a fatherly pat on Cielo’s head. Cielo let go and hopped around in triumph.

“Sir, this is ill advised. You can’t allow one of your subordinates to address you like that.”

“I don’t mind. Cielo’s one of my top people. He can call me whatever he wants.” But even as he spoke, Serph struggled against an unnerving feeling of dislocation.

Argilla and Cielo. And Heat, too. The three of them have been at my side for so long. So why do I feel like this is the first time we’ve ever met? Like this is the first time I’ve associated whatever those names represent with actual people named Heat, Argilla, and Cielo . . .

He did his best to force the sense of dissociation from his mind. There was no time to dwell on that sort of thing right now.

“How’s she doing?”

“Not good. It’s like all she’s doing is breathing. And really quietly, at that.” Argilla appeared ill at ease, so Serph knelt reassuringly beside her. The mysterious girl was tucked under a white sheet, her chest rising and falling ever so slightly. It didn’t look like she was going to be waking up anytime soon. Even with Cielo making a fuss nearby, her eyelids didn’t so much as twitch.

“We did a full medical scan, and there isn’t anything physically wrong with her. Actually, I’d say there isn’t *enough* wrong with her.”

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t appear to have any combat experience whatsoever,” Argilla said. “In fact, she doesn’t look like she’s from the Junkyard at all.” She gestured to the nearby monitor, and Serph raised his eyebrows at the data that scrolled by on-

screen.

The girl had no scars or signs of any previous injuries, nor did she have any implants. Her muscle-to-body-fat ratio was exceedingly low. The skin on her feet was so soft it seemed as if she'd never taken a single step on hard ground. The logical assumption was that she'd never been in combat, but even "Newbies" didn't have bodies so frail.

"If she isn't from the Junkyard, then what is she doing here?" Serph's inquiry was met with silence. He hadn't expected anything else; Argilla certainly couldn't have an answer to such a question. Serph scratched his head and stared at the sleeping girl.

Newbies, more properly called "Newborns," were those who had recently been given life underneath the Temple. When denizens of the Junkyard died in combat, their bodies dissolved and rose up into the heavens, where they joined the ever-present clouds before falling back to earth again as rain.

Those raindrops accumulated at the heart of the Junkyard, in the central area known as Sahasrara. There, the rain flowed to the depths of the Temple, arriving at a place of purification where it was washed clean of its karma before being given new life and taking the form of a person, who would then be sent out to take part in the ongoing conflict. That was the doctrine of the Church, at any rate.

Newborns were all different, varying in terms of gender, physical appearance, and innate skill, but in general, everyone was built with a predisposition for combat, and all were relatively similar in terms of fitness and martial prowess. There were outliers, of course. In the case of a smaller individual like Cielo, he made up for his size by possessing powerful legs that made him unusually quick and agile. Argilla was another such example; as a woman she was physically weaker than the average male, but she had been graced with the rare talents that made for an expert sniper. People from the Junkyard tended to compensate for weakness in one area by naturally excelling in another.

The Church loosed the Newborns into the Junkyard; after that, they were on their own, with no one else to protect them. Once they left the Temple, they had two options: either they could join a preexisting tribe, or they could band

together with other Newborns and form a tribe of their own, taking territory from an existing tribe by force to make a place for themselves. Those that could do neither were quickly slain, left to be reborn once more.

Besting another tribe and taking their territory was the far more difficult option, and actually succeeding in doing so, as the Embryon had, required uncommon synergy among very talented individuals. That didn't mean the process had been a painless one. Serph had sustained his fair share of injuries, and many of his subordinates had endured worse. And yet this girl had no wounds, no physical strength to speak of, and no enhancements of any kind—not even the most basic of implants that the people of the Junkyard were all given in order to keep them linked to the Church.

“She doesn't have a tag ring, either?”

Argilla shook her head. The tribe had sent out several teams to investigate in the aftermath of the incident, primarily around the border of the Vanguard's territory where they'd found the girl. Thus far, none of them had reported finding anything, but then, the girl herself had had no possessions whatsoever when they discovered her.

Tag rings were a form of identification provided by the Church. Everybody had one. Without it, a person couldn't obtain ammunition, new weapons, or even food supplies. The rings were also necessary for making information queries to the Church for Combat Points and the like, and they served as the authentication needed to enter certain areas and bases. No matter how skilled an individual might be at combat, it would be practically impossible to live in the Junkyard without one.

But that was neither here nor there, at this point. Serph sighed and stood. “It looks like we'll have to wait for her to wake up. Argilla, I'd like you to look after her for a little while longer.”

“Roger that, sir,” Argilla said, keeping her head down. In a voice almost too soft to hear, she added, “Once she wakes up, I'm sure she'll tell us something.” Serph pretended not to hear.

He headed back toward his own quarters to get some rest. Before he made it to the elevator, though, he heard a high-pitched voice call out “Buddy!” from

behind him.

“Hey, ah . . . hey, buddy.” Cielo hurried to catch up, then hesitated, chewing his lip. “So, like, about what happened before. I—”

“It’s all right,” Serph said quietly. He knew what Cielo was worried about, but he didn’t want to discuss it. Not yet. “Things are really hectic right now. Once the Church’s systems are back online, we’ll check up on who the girl is. There’s no one in the world the Church doesn’t know about.”

“Yeah.” Cielo nodded, but he was visibly dispirited. He hovered close to his leader as if seeking cover.

Serph wanted to tell the youngster that he wasn’t alone in being afraid. The sense Serph had of being out of place, being out of sync with reality, had faded somewhat, but it all still lingered somewhere deep down inside him.

Uneasiness just meant that some key piece of data was missing. But Serph was sure that it wasn’t just lack of data about the black object that was causing the anxiety he felt. Cielo was trying his hardest to act calm because he could see how Argilla and Serph made a point to keep their composure. He was doing his best to make light of things too. The way that he’d suddenly decided to call Serph “buddy” was probably part of that.

“Listen,” Serph said, “if you don’t have anything to do, why don’t you go and dig up something for the girl to wear when she wakes up? We can’t just have her walking around naked, after all.”

“Yeah. Yeah, all right, buddy,” Cielo said, his expression brightening a little. “Sure. I’ll go do that. When she wakes up, she’s going to be part of the crew. Prepping some clothes for her is the least I can do. After all, it’s gonna be my responsibility to set a good example.”

Cielo did a little hop, turning around in midair before scampering down the hallway with a wave. Serph waved back, and felt the sinking feeling in his chest return, even stronger than before.

He was the leader, the lifeline of the tribe. If he died, then so did the Embryon. It was like Argilla had said, “Soldiers can always be replaced.” But the leader . . .

In the Junkyard, all that mattered was the creation and destruction of the

tribes. There was a whole clan of people relying on him to make the right choices.

Still, he may have been a leader, but he was only one piece of the system. A leader was only important insofar as he or she was irreplaceable within a given tribe. The regular members of any tribe could simply join up with another if their leader was defeated. Which meant that it wasn't really the rank-and-file who needed to keep the leader safe—that was something that Serph had to do for himself.

But right now, Serph felt like he had a responsibility to quash Argilla and Cielo's sense of unease. That might be above and beyond a typical leader's duty, but Serph couldn't help it. He felt it was the right thing to do.

He was starting to get a headache. Trying to refocus, he headed back to his quarters.

"Sir." The call came in through his terminal just as he opened the door to his room.

"Gale? Are your calibrations finished?"

"The recalibrations have just been completed." The bishop's voice was an unfeeling monotone. "Our connection to the Church, however, has not yet come back online. In the meantime, I would like to go over the facts as we now understand them. Would you please come to the briefing room, sir?"

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The briefing room was located in the innermost section of the base. It was the largest room in the facility, but with the holo-monitor, the various pieces of analytical equipment, the terminal-equipped round table, and sufficient chairs all crammed within, there was barely any space left to breathe. Still, this was the only room in the base whose walls were reinforced with sturdy carbon crystal and self-repairing organic compression fibers, strong enough to fend off even a fairly large-scale assault. This was the central hub for the Embryon's tactical planning, information processing, and contact with the Church; if this room were

destroyed, the base wouldn't last much longer.

Serph had called for all four of his core members to take part in the meeting. Gale hadn't objected, but once they had gathered, he pointed out that he would be presenting tactical information which, for strategic planning purposes, should be known only to the leader and his chief advisor.

Argilla and Cielo immediately clamored in protest.

"I'm a member of the Embryon too," Argilla said. "I have a right to know what's going on."

"Yeah. You can't hog all the time with my buddy!"

"Gale," Serph said, holding a hand up to silence the others. "We're dealing with an unusual situation right now. We might come across some things that you and I can't sort through on our own, and if that happens, there may not be time for us to get the others up to speed. For right now, I think the five of us should have a grasp on everything we know about the situation."

For a brief moment, Gale was silent in thought, and then he dipped his head. "I cannot argue with that logic, sir."

Unlike roles such as sniper and shock trooper, which were assigned based on an individual's acquired skills and talents, the position of bishop was a different matter entirely. People became bishops because they were born to be bishops.

Certain Newborns were gifted from birth with raw intellect and tactical knowhow. These individuals were referred to as bishops, and could be identified by the special protective hoods that covered their heads, which were packed with delicate electronics. They emerged into the world with brain implants that gave them a direct link to the Dissemination Machine that was central to Church operations.

Other Newbies received implants as well, but nothing like the loadout of the bishops. In addition to their connection to the Dissemination Machine, each also had an organic display grown into their retina, allowing them to sort through data without need of a terminal, while internal memory storage enabled them to record everything they saw. All told there was a lot of precision equipment that required careful calibration. Bishops also underwent regimented thought

conditioning, making them more like humanoid computers than people.

That was probably why Gale didn't appear to be experiencing the same sense of discomfort as the others. Serph had sensed an undercurrent of unease while talking to Heat, Cielo, and Argilla, but Gale exhibited nothing of the sort.

Gale was a tall man, with green hair worn long in back, his matching eyes partially concealed by his hood. He had a long, expressionless face, with thin lips and a sharp, high-bridged nose, and he was visibly the oldest of those present. He wasn't as broad-shouldered as Heat, but his arms were muscular, which was rare for a bishop—a sign of the excellent physical prowess he also possessed.

If the leader was the heart of the tribe, then the bishop was its brain. Having a good bishop could determine whether a tribe thrived or perished. Gale had belonged to the small tribe the Embryon defeated in their takeover of Muladhara. It was he who had detected that his leader had fallen in the midst of that pitched battle, and had called out at once for a cease-fire. Then, in accordance with the law, he was brought into the Embryon, becoming Serph's first bishop, and the best he could have asked for.

Gale waited motionless for his leader's next directive.

"All right, Gale. Why don't we start by going over whatever information you have about what happened, beginning with the appearance of the object."

"Acknowledged." A pale green grid flickered to life above the table, displaying a three-dimensional image of the "object" in question.

"This object appeared two cycles ago at approximately 00:00 ST, at coordinates 02A7-7B77845. Its composition, purpose, and other details are unknown." Gale changed the angle of the display as he continued his explanation. "The object's time of appearance at 00:00 ST is a matter of conjecture; the exact time is unknown, though this estimate is derived from eyewitness accounts from our troops stationed along the border. Our sensor data corroborate this. One moment, the object was not present, and the next, it was."

"What the hell?" interrupted Cielo. "It couldn't have just appeared out of thin air."

“Quiet, Cielo,” said Serph. “Gale, please continue.”

“The following day, at 06:23 LT, we received a warning from the Vanguard. They stated that they regarded the presence of the object to be an act of aggression by the Embryon, and threatened to retaliate if it was not removed.” The timestamp scrolled across the screen as Gale went on. “In response, the Embryon concluded that the object had been placed there by the Vanguard. We warned the Vanguard to remove the object, threatening an attack of our own if they did not comply. That same day at 10:02 LT, Vanguard and Embryon forces engaged each other in combat. We were successful in driving the Vanguard contingent back to their own border. During the engagement, we confirmed the presence of the enemy leader, Harley Q, on the battlefield. Reasoning that this situation presented a potential opportunity to eliminate the Vanguard, Embryon leadership amassed the tribe’s forces along the border for a full-scale assault.”

At this point, Gale closed his eyes, and silence hung in the air.

“And then”—it was Heat who broke the silence, practically spitting out the words—“we headed in, and something happened. That’s the part we want to know about. Spare us the long-winded intro.”

Gale hesitated. “The data is insufficient.” It was rare for the bishop to lack an immediate factual response. No, it was unheard of. “We have almost no data pertaining to the situation beyond this point. Nearly all of our sensors went black. The Church’s Dissemination system may have some data, but we remain unable to access it. We have yet even to account for the whereabouts of all forty of the Embryon members who took part in the attack, or whether those unaccounted for are alive or dead.”

“Try not to dwell on that,” said Serph. “For now, just tell us what you can. You’re the bishop—give us your best educated guesses.”

“I will transfer some visual data from my personal memory banks,” Gale said after a few moments. “At this stage, this is the only verifiable information I have at hand. The contents are of little significance, but there is nevertheless merit in sharing it.”

He opened up a console at the head of the table and gently swiped his finger

across the board. He let down his hood, exposing the implant embedded behind his ear, pulled a cable out from the console, and plugged it into the metal jack in his head. The others watched as the 3D display above the table wavered and disappeared, replaced by the image of a battlefield hazy with falling rain. The perspective was from high above, looking down at the circular field below: a recreation of Gale's view from his rearguard position with the bishop unit. There was an occasional flicker of static, making the forms of the soldiers clashing below even harder to see.

"The resolution is poor. In addition to running the footage through video processing, I have attempted to use a direct wire connection to minimize data degradation, but these measures appear to have been insufficient."

"No, this is fine, Gale. Keep going," Serph replied, staring intently at the video feed. Here was an outside observer's perspective on what had happened while he'd been caught up in all that chaos.

Serph could see himself. As the tactician behind the operation, Gale was high up and far back, able to look down at the battlefield, with nearly all of both the enemy and their own forces within his field of view. The audio was garbled, but it was enough to make sense of what was going on. Serph saw himself leap out from behind a concrete wall. He came under attack, he returned fire, and then he rolled back into cover.

There was an explosion. Cielo and Heat came charging down from either side of the embankment. Grenades exploded across the battlefield while Cielo's squad pinned down enemy troops that were trying to advance. Argilla, meanwhile, used her sharpshooting talents to pick off enemy soldiers one by one. Amidst the unfolding carnage, one soldier with striking silver hair—Serph himself—darted from behind one barrier to another. So far, events were unfolding as Serph remembered them.

In one corner of the image was a timer displaying the time elapsed since the start of the battle. When the counter reached 00:52:43, the incident began.

"What *is* that?" someone said, voice raw. Serph knew how they felt. The black object on the battlefield, having gone largely ignored up to that point, shuddered and began to glow. The scales that formed its exterior opened up one

by one, revealing nothing but light within—a mad, whirling light.

The image from Gale’s point of view bobbed as he appeared to step forward. The battle below seemed to diminish in intensity. Lights spiraled and swirled above the object’s now-open bed of scales, and then one of them shot out at incredible speed.

The briefing room went dead silent. No sound came from the monitor above the table, but the scene continued to play on. The streak of light struck one of the nearby Vanguard soldiers, who immediately dropped his weapon and fell to the ground. He was still alive, though; the man writhed in agony, his twisted fingers digging furrows in the dirt. His fingers and nails began to turn black.

As the tribe members on both sides began to retreat, the lights rocketed after them as if giving chase. In rapid succession the lights struck each of the combatants, dropping them to the ground. Then there was a burst of static, so extreme as to briefly blot out the entire image. A figure came into view, thrashing about. The image shook violently, broke apart like shattered glass, fixed itself, and then broke apart again. The noise reached a deafening pitch, and Argilla and Cielo both scrunched up their faces as they covered their ears.

“Sir, get down!” A sudden, clear voice rang out—Gale’s voice. In the distance, Serph had risen up from behind cover and was staring at the glowing object, dumbstruck. A moment later, his body jerked, and then he staggered backwards before falling forward to his knees, clutching at his chest. Bright red blood trickled from the wound.

Gale let out an unintelligible shout. The kneeling form of Serph looked so far away. Gale ran, the image shaking back and forth.

Abruptly, he turned.

Something was coming right towards him, a mass of pure, white light.

Impact.

The image went white. Then it cut to black.

“That is all,” Gale said softly as he unplugged the cable.

The room was quiet. Nobody knew how to react to what they’d just watched.

Unnerved by the uncomfortable silence, Cielo fidgeted, then turned to Serph.

“It looked like you got shot, buddy. Are you all right? That was a direct hit.”

“I’m fine. I remember getting shot, but when I came to I didn’t have any injury. Just a hole right through the protective lining of my suit. Which is another thing to add to our list of unknowns.”

“Ah, all right.” Cielo’s smile was an awkward mix of nervousness and relief. “I mean, so long as you’re okay . . .”

Serph gave Cielo a little nod. “All right, Gale,” he said briskly, “what about these . . . bruises on our bodies? How do they relate to what happened back there? And did it only happen to us?”

“We have finished inspecting all Embryon members. Each of them has a mark somewhere on their bodies, including those who remained back at base during the battle. Here.” The image changed, showing rows of stylized icons.

There was the water mark on Serph’s cheek. The fireball on Heat’s arm. The waves and fangs on Argilla’s chest. The tornado on Gale’s shin. Cielo’s series of concentric rings. The marks from the five key members were in a row at the top, and beneath those were seven or eight less elaborate designs.

“There aren’t as many marks as there are people,” said Argilla.

“The same designs repeat themselves on multiple members of the tribe.” Gale input a series of commands, and underneath each bruise icon appeared the faces and identity codes of different tribe members. Each design had between five and ten people associated with it. “The five of us, however, have marks that appear to be of completely unique design, shared by no one else. Though as we have no means of checking the other tribes, we cannot be certain.”

“Well that doesn’t exactly make me feel any better,” Cielo grumbled. “What the heck is goin’ on? Our enemies up and disappear, we get these strange bruises, and the Church doesn’t tell us a thing! What are we supposed to do?”

Everyone in the room was thinking the same thing. A gloomy atmosphere hung over the meeting. No one, not even Gale, said a word. For a time the whole group merely sat in silence, staring at their own hands on the table.

Then the comm link on the table started to blink. Before Gale could answer it, Serph reached over and pressed the button. “This is the briefing room. What is it?”

“This is Recon Team Three,” said the voice coming through the speaker, mingled with a touch of static. “We’re currently scouting out Svadhisthana, but, ah . . . um, sir . . .”

“What’s going on? Give me your report.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” The scout’s voice betrayed a hint of panic. He swallowed before going on. “We’re here at the border between Svadhisthana and Muladhara, but there isn’t anyone here.” Serph exchanged glances with the others in the room. “We haven’t seen any Vanguard sentries. Ordinarily, we’d take this as a sign that they were preparing for some kind of incursion, but there hasn’t been any movement. We sent out a patrol to check things out, and the place looks deserted.”

“Can you give me a visual?”

The image above the table switched to the feed from the reconnaissance team over by the edge of Svadhisthana. Gale layered a coordinate grid over the map. They were at coordinates 3065-A-w3. And as the man had said, no one was there. The image showed what was likely a camouflaged patrol station, but there was no visible activity. The position of the camera suggested that whoever was filming was standing out in the open, an easy target, and yet they weren’t coming under fire. That was decidedly odd.

“Could this be a trap? Are you *certain* there is no one there?” Gale said into the comm.

In a more relaxed tone now, the scout answered, “I don’t know.”

Several of the members of the recon team had been out scouting for enemy movement, he said, when they came across a soldier in Vanguard markings. However, the enemy showed no hostile intent, and did not seem disposed to attack. When they found him, he was simply clutching his head and shaking, hiding in the corner of a ruined building. When the recon team went inside and asked him his identity, he screamed and ran from the room. They had then searched the area, but found no further sign of him. The tone in the scout’s

voice as he delivered his report didn't fully mask his own confusion.

"Good work," Serph replied. "Since we can't rule out the possibility that this is some kind of ruse, you're ordered to break off pursuit. For the time being, why don't you come on home. We'll update your orders as needed. Be careful on your way back, soldier."

"Roger that, sir." His tone was rather cheerful, and he hesitated a moment before adding, "And it's an honor, sir."

The call cut out, and Serph blinked in confusion. "What did he mean by that last bit?"

"He's happy that he got to speak to his leader directly, buddy. That's an honor, right? I mean, I get to talk to you all the time, but still." Cielo finished with a chuckle.

"The lower ranks don't even get to see you most of the time, Serph. It must've been a shock to suddenly wind up talking to you," Argilla said with a laugh of her own. Heat maintained his stony silence, and Gale, not comprehending the others' amusement, began his analysis of the footage from Svadhisthana.

Serph didn't understand either. Had the tribe always felt as though speaking to their leader was so unusual that it was cause for celebration?

A leader was only a part of something bigger. The same held true for the other members of the tribe. Together, they made up this thing called the Embryon. Sometimes, one part of the machine needed to speak to another; it was just a matter of course. There was nothing remarkable about it.

Nonetheless, the scout had been happy just to get to speak to him. And now that he thought about it, Serph had unthinkingly added something to the end of his own message. "Be careful on your way back."

The scout had already made his report back to base; what did it matter to Serph what happened to him after that? The loss of any one soldier would have negligible impact on their military situation. They were at war; there was no place for adding little niceties to a transmission.

And yet the words had just come out of Serph's mouth.

“My analysis is complete.” Gale said, lifting his hands from the console. “Given the data we have just received, Svadhisthana does appear to be deserted. We are receiving similar reports from our other reconnaissance teams.”

The others looked at Gale as he continued. “The vast majority of the area is in a similar state of abandonment. We have had two other instances of our people coming across Vanguard members, and in both cases, the individuals panicked and fled upon discovery, making no attempt to fight.”

“What’s their deal?” Cielo asked. “If they’re not surrendering, then their leader can’t be dead.”

“One of them reportedly called out something quite peculiar as he fled,” Gale added. “He said, ‘*Don’t eat me.*’”

For a moment, it was like Serph’s mind had gone blank.

“What the hell?” Argilla murmured. She repeated herself, intonation rising. “*What the hell?* What does that even mean, ‘don’t eat me’? He says it like—like that actually happened. Like we actually . . . actually did eat some of them. That’s ridiculous! What do they think we did to them?”

“Argilla, calm down,” said Serph.

“I’ve had enough of this!” Argilla shouted as she slammed her fist down on the table. “Of all of this. I want to know what happened back there. I want to know what happened to *me*, what happened to all of us. And I want to know who the hell that girl is!”

Serph’s hand darted out to grab Argilla’s wrist before she could hit the table again. “Argilla,” he said. “Stop it. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I’m scared,” she said, going still. She lowered her head, concealing her expression, but she clenched her shaking fist so hard that the knuckles turned white. “I’m scared.”

“This isn’t going to solve anything.” Serph put a hand on Argilla’s back. “For now you need to try to relax.”

After two or three heaving breaths, the tension finally drained from Argilla’s body. “Sorry. A soldier shouldn’t lose her cool like that,” she said. “Maybe I

should go back to my quarters and rest. Ever since we got back I've had a headache and this weird feeling in my chest."

"Right. You've been looking after the girl this whole time. You're dismissed. Go and rest up."

Argilla smiled. "Yes, sir." She rose and walked out of the briefing room with shaky, uneven footsteps.

Cielo watched her leave. "Do you think she's all right? She's been pushing herself really hard. Her face has gone all pale since she's been spending all her time watching over that girl."

"Women tend to be less physically enduring than men," Gale said. "Such is to be expected."

"That's not what I mean," Cielo snapped. "Look, I know you're a bishop, but doesn't all this make you nervous? Or scared or weirded out?"

"I am 'nervous' in the sense that I am discomfited by my inability to predict a situation as unprecedented as this. It is unpleasant to lack a definitive course of action to follow. 'Afraid' and 'weirded out' are not precisely defined terms. Could you rephrase your query?"

As Cielo pulled his hair and swore under his breath, Serph stepped in. "Gale, how do you feel about the bruise that's on your leg?"

"It may not be a bruise; the data is insufficient. The cause remains unclear, though it does not seem to be caused by any external—"

"Never mind that stuff," Serph said, cutting him off. "Forget the data. I'm asking you how you feel about having that mark on your body."

For once, Gale was quiet. He lowered his eyes, and what looked like doubt crept across his face.

"That's what fear is. That's what Argilla and the others are all feeling right now. Remember that." *And I need to do the same*, Serph reminded himself. Gale did not respond. He simply reached down to rub at the black, cyclone-shaped bruise on his shin.

"So what do we do?" Heat said, finally chiming in. "Are we just going to sit

around on our hands while we wait for our link to the Church to come back online? Or are we going to go and take some initiative for ourselves?”

“I have provided all of the information I have at my disposal. I defer to our leader’s judgment. What is your decision, sir?”

“I . . .” Serph hesitated. He’d been about to order a quick incursion into Vanguard territory, but he found himself surprised by a new concern. If at all possible, he wanted to avoid casualties—he wanted to keep his people out of danger—and realizing that made him take back what he’d been about to say. He did his best to force away the fear and doubt that was coming to mind. “I think we should go to Svadhisthana,” he said at last, casting his hesitation aside. “I want to talk with Harley.”

“For real?” Cielo was taken aback.

Heat narrowed his eyes.

Only Gale remained impassive. “We do not know whether Harley Q is dead or alive,” the bishop said, “nor do we know his whereabouts.”

“But the members of his tribe aren’t surrendering to us,” replied Serph, “which means that he must still be alive somewhere. The area itself might be abandoned, but if we can make it to their base, I’m sure that we’ll find people there. Then, if we can confirm that he’s dead, we’ll cement our victory. And if he’s still alive, we can ask him about what happened with the black object. If the same thing that happened to us is happening to his people, he’ll want to know what’s going on, too.”

“You said yourself that this could be a trap, sir.”

“I did. Which is why we need to proceed with the utmost caution. This is too dangerous for a mere recon team, and if we send too many people, we run the risk of provoking them.”

“So you’re suggesting we go there ourselves. Sounds simple enough.” Heat slowly shoved off of the wall. “And whether he’s dead or alive, we’ll get Harley against the wall and rip what we want right out of him. Right, Serph?”

“Yeah. Right.” Serph felt like something was stuck in his throat as he replied. Heat had a very different line of thinking than Argilla or Cielo. Serph watched his

broad-shouldered lieutenant stalk out of the room, seeing him in a new light.

Serph realized he was afraid of Heat, his most trusted companion, his second-in-command.

But what was it he was scared of? It wasn't as if Heat had threatened him personally. That would have been a violation of the laws. Members of a tribe simply did not defy their leader.

Heat.

Saying aggressive things like that was just the sort of person Heat was, right? Serph felt a tightness in his chest when he thought about it. It wasn't Heat himself that Serph was afraid of, he realized; he was afraid of the comrade he knew and trusted becoming someone else.

But what did it mean to "know" him? Heat was still number two in the Embryon, a skilled combatant and Serph's direct subordinate—Heat wasn't the sort of person who would overstep his authority. But though Serph had witnessed no direct change in the burly shock trooper, he had a slowly growing conviction that something was different now. Yes, Heat *had* changed.

Serph couldn't have put his finger on it, but Argilla and Cielo had changed as well. On the surface, Gale appeared to be the same, but the bishop was impossible to read at even the best of times.

Cielo poked his head back into the room. "What're you still hanging around here for? We gotta go, buddy."

"Yeah. I'll be right behind you."

They had all changed. As for what that meant, Serph still didn't know, but the niggling notion that he was missing something refused to go away.

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They entered Svadhisthana certain that they would come under immediate attack, but their fears turned out to be unfounded.

"What's going on? Is this place really empty?" Cielo was following close behind

Serph, sounding almost bored as he looked around. When they'd first crossed the border, they'd kept communication down to hand signs and essential conversation only, but as they made their way further and further in, it became clear that there was little to get worked up about, and they'd allowed themselves to relax.

Svadhithana shared a large part of its border with the Embryon's territory of Muladhara, and there wasn't much difference in the terrain of the two areas. Serph and the others entered on foot through what had been a contested region along the border that had switched hands countless times, essentially making it the front line in the conflict between the two tribes. Abandoned buildings and bombed-out vehicles had been left there to rust in the silent rain. Their present journey would have taken no more than a half hour if they'd used a vehicle themselves, but to avoid drawing attention they'd opted to go by foot.

"It's like they just left everything behind and ran," Cielo said. "Here, look at this." He picked up something from behind a piece of rubble. "It's a shotgun. It's out of ammo, but it's not broken or anything."

"It doesn't look like it jammed or malfunctioned, either," Serph said, taking the gun from Cielo and giving it a quick inspection. "You know, it definitely seems like there was a battle here. There are shell casings all over the place."

"A battle with the Embryon?"

"I don't think so. Our recon team didn't make it this far in—and they would have reported it." Serph gazed up at the sky. Shade Time wasn't as bright as Light Time, but it never got pitch black. There was always a faint glow from somewhere in the dull gray sky, illuminating the tiny drops of silver rain.

He looked over at Argilla, in the center of the small group's formation. She really didn't look good. Her face was beyond pale—it was downright ashen.

Perhaps he should have made a more earnest effort to stop her from coming along, but it was too late for that now.

A short time earlier, as the team was about to set out, Argilla had insisted on joining the expedition.

"I'm a member of the Embryon, too. You can't just leave me here. Don't worry,

I can still pull my own weight.”

Serph shook his head. “But if you come, there won’t be anyone to watch over the girl—well, to stand guard over her, really. We still don’t know who she is, so we can’t rule out the possibility that she’s some kind of enemy agent from another tribe.”

“So lock her in her room or something. Post guards outside the door. Gale should be able to think of something. Please, sir—I need to see what’s out there. I need to know what happened.”

Argilla had refused to back down, and so Serph had conceded in the end. He asked Gale to assign a guard detail to stand watch over the sleeping girl in Argilla’s place, and the bishop quickly selected a group.

“Our destination is the Vanguard’s base in Svadhisthana,” Serph had told his four core members once they’d assembled. “Our objective is to locate and question their leader, Harley Q. Things are going to be a bit different this time around. Our primary goal is to establish a dialogue with him. If we encounter any of the enemy en route, you are not to fire unless they show hostile intent.”

“You’re being naïve,” Heat said under his breath. “It’s kill or be killed.”

“Heat!” Argilla snapped.

Gale turned to Serph, expressionless. “Are you going to allow such insubordination, sir?”

“That’s enough, all of you,” Serph said. He turned to Heat with a stern look. “Heat, if you feel like you’re in danger out there, defend yourself. But I don’t want you to kill anyone who doesn’t pose a threat. Our main objective here is to gather information, and it won’t do us any good if we kill the source of that information. Am I understood?”

Heat pressed his lips together as he met Serph’s silver-eyed gaze, then he shrugged and looked away. “Understood, sir,” he muttered. “If that’s a direct order, I’ll follow it. I won’t take any action unless provoked. Is that what you want?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want,” Serph said quietly, then raised his voice again. “Remember, we’re not out to rack up a kill count. It’s information we’re after.”

Serph stared at Heat's broad back as the shock trooper strode ahead of him. He could clearly recall the look of resentment on Heat's face at the reprimand he'd given.

As far as combat ability was concerned, there was no one in whom Serph had more faith. The Embryon leader was extraordinarily quick and nimble, but he didn't have anywhere near Heat's strength; no one was Heat's equal in terms of sheer physical might. He was the tribe's lead combatant, and his talents had gotten them out of a number of dangerous predicaments. But now he was making Serph uneasy.

By the time they'd finished their preparations, it was almost Shade Time. They had made their way cautiously across the Junkyard in the dying light, past the recent battlefield that they'd dubbed "Ground Zero," and into Vanguard territory. Now a sullen gray began to creep in at the edges of the dark magenta sky.

Serph hadn't noticed them before, but as he looked up through the falling rain, he could see faint, glimmering green lights far off above. He quickly lost sight of them if he didn't keep his full attention on them, but here and there, he would catch a green flicker amongst the heavy gray clouds.

It was a color that was almost eye-piercing, Serph thought. It occurred to him that it was very much like the green light he'd seen emanating from the strange object at Ground Zero, and he looked away.

"I have been conducting a continual search for hostiles," Gale said quietly. "At present, there are no enemy heat signatures in a fifty-meter radius. I have detected several surveillance devices and traps, but they are inoperative. They all appear to have been taken offline."

"That's weird," Serph said. If this were all a ruse, it would make more sense to leave the traps and surveillance instruments operational. Just as that thought crossed his mind, he lifted his foot up with a start, seeing a black, tar-like substance pooled around his feet. Was this one of the traps? He quickly tried to back away from it, but the sticky muck clung to the underside of his boots in gooey strands. It didn't appear to be either explosive or corrosive.

"Doesn't look like a trap," Heat said. "If it were, it wouldn't be so obvious."

Gale, any idea what this stuff is?”

“I shall investigate.” Gale knelt down, sticking a finger into the tarry puddle. As a bishop, he had a much more finely attuned array of sensory devices than the others.

Argilla looked down at the dark puddle and raised her eyebrows. “Gross.”

The mysterious substance was thick and black, filling a small depression in the ground. Scattered around nearby were various pieces of equipment, from guns to boots and helmets, and countless bullet holes riddled the walls and the ground. A fierce battle had evidently taken place here, as well.

But if that were the case, where were the bodies? Argilla examined the bullet holes in the area and concluded that the fight hadn’t taken place all that long ago—certainly not long enough for any bodies to have dissolved.

Bodies in the Junkyard didn’t stick around forever. After three days’ time, they dissolved on their own, rising into the heavens to become part of the silver rain that was falling even now, continuing the Church’s cycle of rebirth.

It was strange, then, that there were no corpses here so soon after the battle. There were no records of a large-scale engagement having taken place earlier, and it made even less sense that the Vanguard’s would have had some kind of internal struggle.

“My field analysis is complete,” Gale said, removing his finger from the pool. “My sensors are unable to conclusively identify the substance or its makeup, though I have been able to determine that it is not poisonous, corrosive, or volatile. It should be safe to touch. I will collect a sample and conduct a proper analysis once we have returned to base. Cielo, my kit, if you would.”

“Sure thing,” Cielo said, retrieving the sampling kit from the pouch at his hip.

“If there are no bodies, couldn’t that just mean the survivors took them when they ran?” Argilla asked.

“No, that doesn’t add up. If everyone fled, why would they leave their guns behind? Why would they have taken off their combat suits and their boots?” Serph indicated a single, discarded boot, stuck in the tarry puddle. Its top was tilted towards them, revealing the empty interior; the opening looked a

bottomless chasm. Argilla shivered and wrapped her arms around herself.

“I have finished collecting the sample,” Gale said. “I have also determined the location of the Vanguard base. It is not far from here.”

As an up-and-coming tribe, the Embryon had a small base. The Vanguard base, by contrast, was a full-blown military installation. Although it too had been built on a foundation of ruined buildings, the damaged areas had been patched up, and the various defensive fortifications that had been built, including observation platforms and gun batteries, made it look far more impressive. All told, it appeared to be around twice as large as the Embryon base, and the large-bore cannons and battlements that lined the walls put it in a different league entirely in terms of exterior defenses.

And yet the place was silent. As Serph’s five-person team made its approach, there were no warning shots. The entrance to the base was sealed tightly shut, but not a single lookout was posted along the walls. Storage containers, long ago stained red with rust, had been stacked up in massive piles, and silvery water pooled in the covers of combat vehicles that had been left with their doors open.

“This is way too quiet. Are you sure this is the place, Gale?”

“I am detecting ten individual heat signatures inside. They are likely members of the Vanguards. Based on the data I have at my disposal, this is the most likely location for their base.”

Cielo pointed. “Look, it’s more of that stuff.” In several places on the walls of the base and on the ground nearby were pools of the black, tar-like substance they had seen before.

Serph studied the rusted containers carefully, but nothing moved or made a sound. “I guess they’re really not going to open fire. Come on, let’s head inside. Watch out for traps.”

Gale took point, making use of his enhanced sensors, and he performed a careful inspection of the area around the entrance. It was hard to believe his declaration that there were no booby traps to be found.

“Are you sure? They just locked the door and left it at that?” Serph asked.

“Maybe they abandoned this base and set up shop somewhere else,” said

Argilla, sounding doubtful of her own suggestion.

“Regardless, all we can do now is go in and check it out,” Serph said. “Gale, open the lock. But be very, very careful.”

Gale leaned in, preparing his jack, along with the code that should release the electronic lock. After a few moments, there was a heavy thunk, and the sturdy, metal doors swung outward.

Cielo was the first to step inside. “Whoa. What happened here?”

“It looks like there was a fight here inside the base, too,” said Serph.

“A fight?” laughed Cielo. “This place is a downright disaster area. And look, there’s more of that black gunk splattered everywhere, too.”

Cielo was right. The solid exterior of the base belied the state of total ruin within. There were gaping holes in the walls, and nearly all of the lights were broken. Bullet holes and traces of explosions riddled the floor, and discarded weapons and ammunition were scattered all about.

A number of walls had been torn down, opening a clear path into the center of the base. As Serph and his team advanced, whirls of dust puffed up around their feet. There were piles of rubble everywhere, resembling the war-torn battlefields outside. Monitoring stations and weapon storage lockers, already well-worn from use, were now completely destroyed, and shattered glass and bits of twisted metal littered the ground.

As they made their way further into the base, they came across more and more of the black tar. There were pools of it all over the floor and patches splattered onto the walls. It dripped and dribbled, mingled with blood, looking like it had been flung about haphazardly.

“If there was a fight here, who were they fighting? None of our people could have made it this far in,” Argilla said.

“Maybe some of our forces were taken prisoner back during the battle at Ground Zero and tried to fight their way out,” Serph offered.

“Unlikely,” replied Gale. “I cannot imagine that any captives were taken given the circumstances. Even assuming that they were, however, the firepower they

possessed is not consistent with the large-scale battle evident here. The structural damage to the base is too great to have been caused by any conflict they could have been involved in.”

Cielo rubbed his jaw. “Gale, what other explanation is there? The Vanguard’s didn’t do this to themselves.”

“However unorthodox that may appear, I believe that is the most likely hypothesis at present.”

“Yeah, that makes sense—wait, what?” Cielo clutched onto one of Gale’s arms. “Whoa, what’re you talking about? Members of the same tribe can’t fight each other. I mean, they all have to follow the same leader. How could a fight like that even happen? The leader has absolute control—that’s the law. You know that, Gale!”

The leader of the tribe was its master, and the other members were extensions of his will. That, along with the inviolate nature of the Church, was one of the fundamental rules of the Junkyard. The members of a given tribe all acted on the orders of their leader. For members of the same tribe to attack one another would be akin to the right hand trying to chop off the left. It was unthinkable.

“I am indeed aware. That is why I said that it is unorthodox.” Gale’s voice revealed only the faintest hint of distress. “However, after discarding the other improbable possibilities, it is the only explanation remaining. We lack the data for a more conclusive analysis. This is an unprecedented and highly irregular situation.”

“‘Irregular?’” Cielo seemed on the verge of saying more, but instead he just let out a deep, exhausted sigh.

Without warning, they heard a loud crash from behind.

Gale and Argilla whirled around and opened fire. Cielo followed suit.

A section of wall already perforated with several holes collapsed, unable to resist the brunt of their combined firepower. Large chunks of masonry fell loudly to the floor, and then lay still. From behind the remains of the wall crawled a man, whimpering as he came into view. On his shoulders and cheeks he bore the green markings that identified him as a member of the Vanguard’s.

Serph began to approach him, but Gale stepped in front of him, gun at the ready. “You should stay back, sir. I will question him. There may be some risk involved.”

“No. I need you to keep sweeping the area for traps.” Serph strode past Gale and helped the man to a sitting position. “Are you one of the Vanguard?” Serph looked the man over, assessing his injuries.

He was gravely wounded. There were massive gashes in his chest and abdomen, and he was covered in streaks of half-congealed blood. It was clear that he didn’t have much longer to live. “Can you talk?” Serph asked. “How did all of this happen? What in the world happened here?”

The man’s lips moved as he tried to speak, but no sound came out. His mouth, red with blood, twitched and quivered. “Our . . . leader,” he finally managed, the words little more than a groan. Before he could continue, the man’s head slumped forward.

“Hey, stay with me! What happened?”

Suddenly the man’s body started to jerk and spasm in Serph’s arms. On reflex, Serph tried to push away from him. The man’s eyes rolled up into the back of his head, and he bolted upright. Then he let out a scream.

“Look out!” cried Cielo.

“Sir, get back!” Gale brought his rifle to bear and tried to interpose himself. The man’s eyes were rolled back so far that only the whites showed. His mouth opened wider and wider, and he let out a tremendous bellow. As Serph tried to pull away, the man twisted around and bit his forearm.

His mouth, now grotesquely enlarged, bore rows of gleaming teeth. They were inordinately sharp, and they made a distinct, nauseating sound as they grated on the surface of Serph’s armor. Serph reached for the holster at his hip as he struggled to wrest himself free.

A gunshot rang out. Serph felt a splatter of lukewarm blood across his cheek. The man collapsed to the floor in a pool of gore and brains, his huge mouth hanging wide. Serph staggered, instinctively cradling his aching arm as he looked up to see Heat standing there, smoke wafting up from the barrel of his handgun.

“I think that qualifies as ‘provoked,’” Heat said, his tone cold, a cruel glimmer in his red eyes.

“Yeah,” Serph replied, taking a few breaths to recollect himself before wiping the blood away. “Good job, Heat.”

Argilla stepped closer as Heat silently holstered his gun. “That was freaky. Did he just go delusional as he was dying or something?”

“He bit you, buddy! Are you hurt?” Cielo asked.

“No, it’s fine. His teeth didn’t make it through, but—” The word “why” got stuck in Serph’s throat as the man’s body began to turn black at the extremities.

The five of them stared as the corpse appeared to writhe in anguish. A shadowy black shape slithered out from his toes and fingers as if it were a living thing, spreading across his entire body as they watched.

The dead man screamed. One of his hands shot out and clutched Serph around the ankle. The corpse’s fingers turned black, bit by bit, then began to crumble away, starting with the fingernails. Its digits then broke off at the knuckles, crumbling into dust before they even hit the floor. A sob began to emanate from the throat of what had up until a few moments before been a man, but it was cut off as a thick mass of the black substance spewed from his throat. There was a sound like that of rustling paper, and its arms came off at the shoulders before they too turned black and crumbled apart.

Just before the body turned completely black, Serph pulled free of the fragments that still gripped him. The fine black powder that fell to the floor began to melt away. The others stood by and watched transfixed, and within a few seconds, nothing human remained.

All that was left was a black, tarry puddle like the one Serph had found in the ruined city outside—the one Gale had been unable to identify.

A cry caught in Argilla’s throat; she staggered backward, covering her mouth with her hand. Cielo looked like he was on the verge of throwing up, and Serph felt some of the strength leave his legs. Gale’s face was calm, though even he couldn’t hide the slight twitching in his cheeks.

“Why did that just happen?” Argilla demanded, her voice hoarse. “When

people die, they're returned to the heavens. Nothing is supposed to be left behind afterwards."

"There is no record of such a phenomenon having occurred before. Evidently, the abnormality of this situation is becoming more egregious."

"Let's get going," Heat said. "This way." He started off without waiting for his dumbstruck companions to follow.

"Hey, wait up!" Cielo called out. "Doesn't this bother you just a bit? A guy just died in a seriously freaked out way."

"So what?" Heat replied without even looking back. "Dead is dead. If he were still alive and coming to attack us, that would be a different story. Which might be fun, but hey."

"Heat!" shouted Serph.

"What?" Heat stopped and turned to face his leader. His response was so calm and collected that Serph was shocked into silence. The gleam of hunger in Heat's eyes was clearly visible now. Cielo gave Serph an anxious look.

"Just hold on," Serph said before heading toward Argilla, who was huddling behind a section of broken wall. He was concerned for her—but he also couldn't bear to look at Heat's face a moment longer. "Argilla, get it together." He reached out to touch her on the cheek, certain now that allowing her to come along on the mission had been a mistake. Her face had lost practically all its color.

"Sir . . ." Argilla looked back at him, and as she did, Serph felt a chill run up his spine. He pulled his hand away. For just a moment, her eyes seemed to shine bright as gold. An instant later it was gone—a trick of the light, perhaps. But he could have sworn there was a momentary gleam in her eye at the sight of the smear of blood on his cheek.

I must be seeing things, he told himself. Argilla's eyes were the same pale pink that they always were. He regained his composure and reached out to set a hand on her shoulder. Her skin was cold and clammy. "Argilla, you stay here. There's still the chance of an enemy attack. Hold this position and wait for us to get back. That's an order, you hear?"

“No,” Argilla said, then touched her mouth, as if surprised by her own words. She slowly brought her hand back down, then repeated her refusal with more confidence. “I want to know what happened, sir. I know I’m not doing well—my head feels like it’s about to split in half, I’m sluggish, and I barely have the strength to move. But I’m going with you. If I wind up in trouble, don’t worry about me. But I *need* to know.” A long moment of silence hung in the air.

It was Gale who spoke next. “I have located Harley Q.” Serph and Argilla both turned to look at him. “He is in a hallway on the second floor. I believe he spotted us a short time ago and is currently heading deeper into the base. In all likelihood, he is attempting to flee from us.”

“Well he’s not going to,” Heat said, heading off at a quick gait.

“Let’s go, sir,” Argilla said, forcing herself more upright and tightening her grip on her gun. She bit her lip, and the look on her face showed that she wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You don’t need to worry about me. We need to catch Harley. He has to know something.”

The scale of destruction grew worse as they approached the heart of the base.

“I smell blood, and . . . and something else,” Argilla said.

The ceiling of the narrow concrete corridor they were following had collapsed in places, and both the walls and floor were smeared all over with black tar and blood. The carnage was catastrophic. In addition to the signs of a gunfight, it looked like some giant blade had carved deep furrows into the concrete. It appeared as though there had been fire, as well, leaving behind burned-out rooms littered with corpses, their limbs shriveled, flesh turned to ash. Yet the combat suits that held the bodies showed no signs of having been touched by flame.

“What happened here?” Cielo asked. “How could people wind up dying like this?”

“There is insufficient data to determine their precise manner of death,” Gale said. “There is insufficient data for any of the things we have witnessed within this facility.”

“Yeah, I know, Gale,” Cielo replied. “I was just thinking out loud. You know, like

normal people do sometimes when—" He cut himself off and pointed down the hallway. "Whoa, you see that?"

Up ahead another corridor intersected with their own. Someone had appeared briefly there, staring at them and then jumping back out of sight almost as if struck. As the figure disappeared from view, the team's heat sensors clearly showed it tripping over itself in an attempt to flee.

"We have located Harley Q," Gale said. "He is heading for a room further in."

"Stay on your guard, everyone. He's desperate, so be prepared for anything he might throw at us." As Serph issued that warning, his own apprehension began to make his insides churn. There were so many unknowns: the strange tarry substance; the golden light in Argilla's eyes and her poor physical condition; not to mention his own ever-growing sense of fatigue, which he had yet to mention to the others.

Along with a bizarre sense of exhilaration . . .

They pressed on, making their way up a twisting stairwell. Before long, they had their target in their sights, dead ahead. He crawled and stumbled forward, stopping to steal glances back at them before ducking around another corner. His gaunt face looked like it had taken a beating, and it was frozen in a look of such stark terror that he almost looked ridiculous. Harley's labored breaths came amidst choking and sputtering as he scrambled ahead, propelling himself with both hands and feet, his panicked footsteps echoing down the hallway. The footfalls of his pursuers became mingled more and more with his panting and huffing as they drew closer.

Harley was sobbing now. He shouted something unintelligible, and he made no attempt to defend himself as he fled.

"This doesn't make any sense," Serph said. "None of the other members of the tribe have come after us. Do you think this some kind of trap after all?"

"Unlikely," responded Gale. "A tribe the size of the Vanguard's would not use their leader as bait. And our previous combat reports do not show them having ever made use of such a strategy."

"Can the chatter," Heat said, raising his gun. A short distance ahead the

hallway ended at a door that looked like it led to either Harley Q's private quarters or the war room. Harley scrambled inside and slammed the door behind him. The malfunctioning lighting flickered weakly.

A moment later the team reached the doorway. They found the door locked firmly shut, but Heat kicked it right off of its hinges, sending up a cloud of dust. A meek scream came from within.

"You got nowhere to run, Harley," said Heat. "Put your hands up and do exactly as we say. Trust me, you don't want to provoke me."

"S-Stay back! Don't come any closer!"

Harley Q was a completely different man than the adversary they had once known. His eyes were sunken, and his cheeks had gone ghost white. He huddled against one wall of the room, quivering with uncontrollable fear. His once unremarkable face, framed by his red hair, was now so gaunt that he looked like he was already a corpse.

The room itself—once the Vanguard's war room—was an even bigger mess. The tactical planning table had been torn free of the floor and thrown against the wall, its monitors shattered, cords and other components dangling from its insides like entrails. Here, too, was more of the black tar. And there was blood—so much that it nearly covered the entire floor. The stench of it hung in the air, thick enough to choke on, and it made Serph's throat twitch.

"Hands up, Harley!" As Serph drew closer to him, Harley let forth a high-pitched screech that sounded like the wail of a siren, an inhuman sound.

"Please! Don't eat me! Don't eat me, don't eat me . . ." He broke eye contact as he stammered, covering his head with both arms. He sank into the fetal position, hiding his face behind his hands.

"What's he rambling on about? He's gone totally nuts," Cielo said with a snort.

Serph held him back. "What do you mean, 'don't eat me'?" *Stop now*, a voice inside him said. He knew, somehow, that there would be no going back if he asked what he wanted to ask, and yet his mouth, as if acting on its own, formed the words. "Just what did we do back there?"

Harley lifted up his tear-streaked face. “You . . . you devoured us,” he choked out. His hollow eyes had taken on a sickly yellow pallor. “The five of you, you turned into monsters—you ate all my men!”

Silence fell over the room. Serph was overwhelmed by a sense of utter despondency. Deep down, some part of him had already known what the answer would be, but like a fool, he’d asked anyway.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Those . . . weird lights . . . came shooting through the air. And then I—and then all of us—we transformed into these . . . monsters.” Harley coughed out a one-note laugh as he spoke. “And then we fought. Friend or foe, it didn’t matter. It was chaos—every man for himself. And anyone who lost was torn apart, and then . . . and then—” His voice was shaking.

“Shut up!” Argilla screamed all of a sudden, bringing up her gun. Before anyone else could react, the barrel of her gun spat fire as she riddled Harley’s body with holes.

“Argilla!” Serph dove in and batted the assault rifle from her hands. Heat quickly kicked the weapon away, its magazine already spent as it went skittering across the floor.

“I didn’t *eat* anybody!” Argilla called out, shaking her head wildly back and forth as Serph restrained her. “I didn’t do it. I couldn’t have done it. It wasn’t me!”

Cielo grabbed hold of her, as well. “Calm down, Argilla. We know you didn’t do it.” But even as he clung to her, he was shaking so badly that it was he who would have fallen over if he weren’t holding on to her.

Serph stared wide-eyed at Harley Q, who lay with arms and legs splayed across the floor, still twitching. The movements of his limbs were unnatural, as if they were no long part of his body, and were instead wriggling about like living things in their own right. As Serph started to move closer, someone grabbed onto his arm, and he looked up to see Heat holding him back, his grip so tight that it was painful even through the combat suit.

“Don’t get too close. Not just yet,” Heat said, and the fierce expression of

hunger on his face was even more prominent than before, enough to send a chill down Serph's spine. "We don't know if he's finished. We still don't know what he really is. We haven't seen what he's capable of in a fight."

"I . . . hunger." Harley's voice was almost too quiet to hear. Dark blood welled up from his gunshot wounds, which were healing even as they watched. His bloodstained lips curled up into a cruel parody of a smile. "Hungry, cold, aching all over—I held my men as they begged for help, as they fell to the ground, their bodies turning black from head to toe. I could feel what they were feeling, their fear, their pain, their suffering and how they kept wondering *how* and *why* this was happening." His words grew stronger as he spoke. "Their bodies were just so full of *information*. And I knew . . . I knew that I could get at it, and it would make me a little bit warmer, but then I'd just get cold again, so then I'd *eat* another of my companions, and it was terrible and saddening and it pained me so, but"—his lips twitched as his grotesque smile broadened—"it just felt so, so good!"

Cielo cried out and jumped back, looking down at his feet. A black liquid with a strange greasy sheen was burbling in from every direction, the same substance they'd found in the hallways outside. "What the—whoa!" The pouch at his hip jerked, and a sampling capsule came jumping out from inside it, the one that Gale had collected on their way in. The capsule shattered, and the black liquid inside joined with the rest. It was all flowing to Harley Q. It spread over his mangled body, blackening his skin wherever it touched him, and soon it covered him completely. Rather than coat him, however, it seemed to be absorbed into his body.

He stirred, as if there were someone else hiding beneath his skin, and his back and shoulders and arms spasmed, twisted, and flailed all about.

A sound like a sigh escaped from his smiling lips. "Now, then," he murmured, one word bleeding into the next. "I'll just have to eat you before you eat me!"

"Open fire!"

At Serph's command, the five-person team focused their firepower at Harley, directing a hail of bullets at his rising form.

They had no effect whatsoever.

Harley appeared to be getting to his feet, but in actuality, he was merely

growing in mass as he rapidly absorbed more and more of the black tar, growing so huge that he obscured the wall behind him. He loomed over the Embryon team as they tried to fall back.

Harley's body had the same greasy sheen as the tar itself, black and sticky. His outline was constantly changing, never settling on a given shape—a squirming mass of tar. One moment he was an abomination sprouting twisting tendrils, the next a polyhedral shape with remarkably smooth surfaces.

“I'll eat you! Eat, eat, eat!”

Cielo shrieked.

His legs wheeled about in the air as the abomination reached out with a long arm and plucked him off the ground. Harley's face peered out from the top of the distorted body—the last part of him that was still human.

Argilla took aim at that face and opened fire. She sprayed holes in the monstrosity, but they didn't even slow him down. As he absorbed the bullets, one of Harley's clouded yellow eyes lolled over to fix on her. “That hurt, you bitch! Hurt, hurt, hurt!”

A black, oozing arm darted at Argilla from behind. She let out a scream. It was as if the entire room had become an extension of Harley's body. No matter where anyone turned, the creature was waiting for them.

Serph shouted as he fired ineffectually at the arms that had gotten hold of Argilla and Cielo. He might as well have been unloading his clip into a massive lump of clay. The blue-black flesh quivered and writhed, expelling the bullets, which then fell to the floor with a clatter.

Heat cursed and kept on shooting, but with each pull of the trigger, the abomination only seemed to grow bigger. The stench of decay in the air changed into something more biting and acrid as fluid dripped from the monster's body, the drops spattering on the concrete like hot oil.

“Dammit!” Heat hurled aside his spent handgun and drew a knife.

“We have to retreat, sir!” Gale shouted. “We are outmatched!”

“No! We can't leave Cielo and Argilla!” Serph shouted, holding his ground.

An instant later he felt a terrible force wrench him powerfully from within.

Serph cried out, dropping to his knees. His gun clattered to the ground. Deep in his gut, he felt a silvery streaming, like a coil of pure energy unraveling itself inside him. Its movements had the liquid quality of mercury as it coursed within him. His body was like a shell, torn asunder so that it could birth forth the thing inside.

Pain and pleasure became one.

The uncoiling force bore against his forehead from the inside, and he twisted his body wildly in a struggle to fight it off, but it was no use. The flow of silver energy burst through his skin, engulfing his entire body in a spiral of light.

Om Mani Padme Hum
Varuna

Serph screamed. He could feel himself becoming something else, something that was both him and yet also a creature that was ferocious and cold and unscrupulous, and his scream was one of denial and despair and fierce delight.

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Through the platinum shimmer Serph’s senses grew keener, and he perceived a shift in the battle.

There was a flash of light, and Harley let out an ear-piercing screech. One of his tendrils wavered, dropping the prey it had seized. The figure tumbled toward the floor, but just before it hit, its body spun around and then whirled up and hovered near the ceiling.

“I’m floating! No, I’m flying!” The voice was distorted, as if it were coming from the depths of a chasm, but it was unmistakably Cielo’s. His face, however, was no longer human—nor, for that matter, was the rest of him.

His mouth had taken on a sharply hooked shape, with narrow teeth visible

within. His arms were long, blue, angular projections reminiscent of the wings of a glider, sporting hands with sharp claws at their ends. A series of five bright stripes ran from his hips to his thighs; his legs were long and slender to match the rest of his graceful form. Lightning appeared to dance in his hands, turning into bluish-purple fireworks that cascaded over his body like water breaking across the bow of a ship.

From somewhere below came a deep rumbling, and then there was a tremendous boom as a section of the floor erupted. A terrific billow of dust filled the room. Then, from inside the whirling cloud emerged a pair of whip-like appendages, twisting up and down and side to side. Harley withdrew in a creeping, worm-like motion as part of his body began to smolder where a piece of searing hot concrete had pierced it.

The figure with the whip-like arms came into view, taking rough, panting breaths. Its arms twisted and darted like singing wires, spiraling outward, skimming across the floor. The contours of the body were feminine, with an ample bust and slender hips. Each of the creature's breasts bore a mouth lined with sharp teeth, ferociously baring its fangs.

"Argilla? Argilla, is that you?" As Serph called out, he could hear that his voice was distorted in the same way that Cielo's was. His body was hot all over, and there was something strange about his sense of vision—everything looked so clear. *Too* clear. He was taking in his surroundings with a degree of clarity far beyond the capability of human eyes.

Argilla let out a high-pitched scream and flailed her whip-like arms as she stalked toward Harley. Harley's twisting, predatory tendrils surged forth, a wave of blackness coming from every direction, but Argilla's limbs spun more swiftly, knocking them all aside.

Her piercing gaze focused on her enemy's midsection.

Without a sound, a black sphere appeared in midair near Harley's gut. At first, it looked as if it were going to merge with the rest of his body, but then the sphere disappeared with a reverberating boom, taking most of Harley's abdomen with it. Only an empty void remained in its wake, and Harley thrashed in agony, bent over the gaping hole where his stomach had been. Harley lurched

toward Argilla in a massive black wave, trying to engulf her, to use her body to replace his missing flesh.

Just before the wave crashed into her, however, she was swept up by a quick gust of bright, emerald-green wind. A moment later she was set down on the far side of the room, whisked away from Harley's attack by a being with a long, slender head and semitransparent, emerald-green wings that draped from its shoulders to its hips. The newcomer quickly brandished its arms, mowing through an oncoming mass of dark tendrils. Its green wings fluttered swiftly, creating a virtual blade of air that sliced through its foe.

Those green wings concealed a supple, long-legged figure. A gleaming white blade extended from one of its pointed feet, cutting through the encroaching tentacles. Its head split open down the middle, revealing row upon row of gleaming teeth, and a squirming tongue flicked into view for an instant before disappearing. *This couldn't be Gale, could it?* And yet Serph knew that it was.

"What're you doing, Serph? Snap out of it. We've got work to do!" A hand with long, sharp claws gripped Serph's shoulder. The voice was strange, but at the same time so very familiar. Serph turned around to look, and swallowed a lump in his throat as he saw the monstrous beast that stood there, its body massive and imposing, a pair of dome-shaped heads set atop its broad shoulders.

"Heat? Is that you? What happened to you?"

"Later. Here he comes. Don't let your guard down."

Serph turned his attention back to the battle. In spite of his injuries, Harley was shambling straight for them. Nothing human remained in his face, but his eyes still burned with a mixture of rage, madness, and hunger. "I'll eat you! Eat all of you! Eat, eat, eat!"

On pure instinct, Serph brought his arms up in front of himself. Before he had time to wonder about the pale blue tone of his skin or the fact that sections of his arms were covered in some kind of carapace, a sound came from both forearms as they split open. There was no pain, only a growing sense of relief. From the fissures in his forearms unfolded long blades fashioned of bone. The blades danced, slicing through Harley's flesh like it was no more than cobwebs. Harley screamed, and his warped body shuddered in agony.

His cries of anguish shook Serph's body to the core. Serph tried to back away, but as he did, something dark and viscous wrapped itself around his torso and began to tighten. Immediately, Serph felt something sharp and silver release itself from within his body in a rush of unseen energy. It mingled with the dust in the air, surrounding him with a wintry chill that bit at his skin. Its effect on Harley was far more dramatic. The monstrosity let out another scream and tried to scramble back as his tendrils froze and shattered like glass.

"So, you have the power of ice? Looks like I'm your opposite, then." A warmth washed over one side of Serph's face as the low voice reached his ear. Serph turned to see Heat, who held an orb of crimson flame cradled in his thick red arms. The long claws at the ends of his fingers slid over its surface, as if caressing the ball of fire, and then he hurled it with an earsplitting bestial roar. The reek of burning flesh filled the air, and Serph could hear Harley writhing behind the ensuing screen of black smoke.

"Heat, we—what *are* we?"

"We'll figure that out later. For now, we've got some new powers, so we might as well have some fun using them. Our prey is this way."

Yes, something whispered in the back of Serph's mind. *Prey. Hunt it down, and then . . .*

Serph realized that the voice in his head was his own, and in his confusion, he felt despair intermingled with an intense, animalistic sense of freedom.

Hunt it down, and then . . .

And then . . .

Serph screamed. He wasn't even aware of it, so great was the sensation of pleasure as the blades of bone in his arms sliced through the flesh of his foe. The oozing tissue froze in the wake of his blades, then, a mere moment later, his opponent was knocked back by a powerful blast from another quarter.

Serph glanced over to see the female figure with the long, whip-like arms—Argilla—already preparing a follow-up attack. Something like a hole in the very fabric of reality formed between her hands, a powerful, gravitational distortion, which she then hurled with a single fluid motion. It detonated on impact with

the creature's torso, forming a massive hole—one that grew larger as the air howled around it.

As the creature screeched and attempted to lash out with its tendrils, it was buffeted by a gust of emerald wind. The being with the enormous mouth—Gale—fluttered his green, cape-like wings, roaring as he soared above the fight, generating another blade of air. His sturdy claws looked like long knives, glinting in the light, and as he kicked his way through the air, he sliced off several dozen more of Harley's tendrils, scattering them in all directions.

The severed pieces squirmed, trying to rejoin with their host, but even as they did, a flash of purple lightning and a gout of red flame came from above. The huge, two-headed creature—Heat—had both of his huge mouths open in raucous, gleeful laughter as he tossed fireball after fireball. He drew steadily closer to his prey, brandishing brutal, curved claws wreathed in flame. Meanwhile, the one who controlled the purple lightning—Cielo—flew nimbly on his brightly colored wings, crowing as he darted between flailing tentacles. He let out a piercing cry as the lightning that wreathed his body arced out in scorching bolts of electricity.

What had happened to them? Even as he fought, somewhere in the depths of his mind, Serph marveled at the transformation. The bodies that he and his comrades now inhabited were something other than their own. Had they even existed before that *thing*—that mysterious black object—had burst open? Perhaps they had lain dormant inside of them all this time. What else could explain the feeling of joy and exultation that welled up inside him? Serph had never felt anything like this during the heat of battle—he had never felt anything like this in his life.

One of Argilla's gravity orbs struck Harley squarely in what had once been his face. His head collapsed in upon itself, and all around the room, the tarry mass of his body quavered. The shaking underfoot made Serph drop to one knee. Mustering one last surge of strength, Harley sent dozens of tendrils crashing down towards the Embryon leader. Serph brought his arms up, shredding the cluster of tentacles just before they struck. The frozen remnants pummeled the ground in a hail of icy shards.

The monster wailed and screamed, trying to pull his body back together as he

fled, but he was assailed by a combination of slashing wind, purple lightning, waves of gravity, and crimson blasts of flame. Serph let out a lingering shout as he unleashed the power building up within him. Pure white frost filled his vision, engulfing their foe's black flesh, turning it into a pale mass of ice.

Serph emerged from his transformation.

He collapsed on the spot, exhausted, feeling like his body had been turned inside out. Nearby, Gale and Cielo had also reverted to their human forms, and kneeled panting on the ground. Heat, still transformed, came stomping towards them, carrying the creature-Argilla in his arms. He set her down.

"Is she still alive?" Serph asked.

"She's all right. Just totally wiped out."

Argilla let out a faint groan of confirmation and nodded her head, eyes still closed. There was a pale blue shimmer of light that sparkled along her skin, which slowly faded as she regained her human shape. While he waited for her to finish reverting, Heat cast off his two-headed, crimson guise. The pale blue light that came with the release of the transformation washed out the color of his red hair and eyes as a winning smile came to his face.

"Did we get him?" Argilla managed to wheeze out.

"He has ceased moving. It appears unlikely that he will resume hostilities. I am unable to confirm any life signs." Gale still panted heavily as he spoke, giving a comic cast to his remarks.

"I can't image he'd survive all that," Cielo spat. Between Heat's barrage of fire, Gale's slashing winds, Cielo's lightning, Argilla's shockwaves, and Serph's projectiles of water and ice, Harley Q—or the thing that had once been Harley Q—was now so badly mangled even its monstrous form was unrecognizable.

And yet, on the brink of death, there was some impossible spark of life still within their fallen foe. Its sprawling tendrils and folds of festering flesh twitched and shuddered, as if still searching for prey. As the five companions watched, the bloated body began to smoke as it writhed.

Heat stepped forward, and Cielo let out a panicked shout. "Hold on, what're you doing? Stay away from him! He's still moving."

“I know he is. Otherwise this wouldn’t be any fun,” Heat said offhandedly as he knelt down next to the quivering mass of meat.

Serph saw the dangerous glimmer in Heat’s eyes again. He looked like a man possessed—the same look of hunger he’d had while walking amidst the death and destruction of the base. A chill of fear ran down Serph’s spine, and he scrambled to get up. “Heat, wait.”

“Wait for what?” Heat’s voice was oddly quiet. His gaze never left the wriggling remains in front of him. “This *thing* only used to be Harley. Now he’s something far, far more powerful, and you know that.”

“I—” Serph had to swallow a mouthful of bitter saliva. “I . . .”

“This man *ate* his own underlings. And it made him stronger.” As Heat spoke, he reached out to stroke a hand along what was left of Harley. He showed no concern at the fine hairs that rose up to grip at his palm. “So if we eat him, it’ll give us power. We’ll be the ones to grow stronger.”

Cielo stared at him in shock. “Heat, come on, cut it out. You’re talking crazy, man.”

“There is no basis for what you are claiming, Heat,” Gale added. “I do not comprehend.”

“What’s there to comprehend? I’m just pointing out the sensible course of action here.”

The color drained from Cielo’s face, and he shrank back. Serph spoke up, his voice raw. “Stop it, Heat. Let’s just go back.”

“There’s something inside of us,” Heat said, as if he hadn’t heard. His hand stroked the nauseating lead-gray flesh slowly, lovingly. “And that something needs to be fed. Fed by our fallen foes. Harley grew by devouring his own weaker henchmen. This time he was the one who was weak. Why shouldn’t it be his turn to get eaten?”

“But Harley used to be a human being!” Argilla cried out, her voice almost a scream. “Just like us.”

Heat merely snorted. “You call this human? This stinking lump of meat?” He

rose and stomped with a heavy boot on the thing before him. It let out a shriek that sounded like nails on a chalkboard, but there were no words in its cry—nothing that could have come from a man. “No. It’s not. Not anymore. And neither are we. So why should we have to hold ourselves to human norms anymore? From now on, we get to decide on a new normal for ourselves. It’s as simple as that.”

“No it’s not, Heat!” Argilla said. “We’re still human. And so we . . . we—”

“Could a human being do this?” As Heat spoke, flames engulfed his left hand. His palm glowed red as it sank into the flesh of the fallen monstrosity, filling the air with stinking black smoke. The Harley-thing shuddered, letting out an earsplitting howl before its cries of pain rose beyond the range of hearing.

“No,” Heat said, pulling his fist out from within the seared mass of flesh, flinging bits of charred tissue away in disgust. “We’re not human anymore, whether we like it or not. We need to accept that. There’s no point in denying it. And besides, we’ve already eaten people once before.”

Cielo swallowed a lump in his throat and stammered something incoherent. Heat continued, paying him no heed. “We have to learn how to survive. The things inside of us know the answers.”

“Heat, stop it,” Serph said. His voice was hoarse with pleading, although he knew his words weren’t going to do any good. Abruptly the stern look in his eyes abated, replaced by a haunted gaze.

“C’mere, Serph,” Heat said softly. “I’m sure you know this already—what it is you’re looking for. What smelling all of this and seeing all of this is making you feel. It’s no sin for us to . . . partake. We do this to survive! Here.” He held out his hand, holding a piece of dripping, bloody flesh that he’d torn from the monster. “Take it. You want to eat it, don’t you?”

Serph backed away.

Then he turned and ran, without looking back. It wasn’t disgust that drove him away—it was the realization that he wanted nothing more than to grab that piece of meat, to sink his teeth into it and let the blood flow down his throat as he devoured it completely, taking in all the power it would give him.

Had there been signs that this was coming? Something he'd missed?

The bewildering struggle and its bizarre conclusion had robbed him of his ability to be introspective. As Serph ran through the ruined hallways of the Vanguard base, his mind was filled with a dizzying array of fragmented images, pain becoming pleasure, man becoming monster, a whirlwind of grief and confusion as Harley's face changed into a mask of revolting hunger and gluttony. And then, flashes of their battle.

They had assumed impossible forms; and somehow they had known how to make use of them. With a mere thought, he had made water gush forth from his arms, cutting through the air with a razor's edge. He recalled the joy he'd felt as those blades of bone burst forth from inside his forearms and sliced through his enemy's flesh; he had become a veritable whirlwind of death. Now, thinking about it made him sick to his stomach. But the worst part, the most nightmarish bit of all, was when Heat had offered him that meat.

"Take it. You want to eat it, don't you?"

That piece of meat, dripping with thick, syrupy blood so dark it was almost black. It had looked . . . delicious.

Argilla was the first to make it out through the gate of the Vanguard base, pitching forward in her haste, as if she couldn't bear to be inside that defiled building a single moment longer. She stumbled down the stairs and then sank to the ground, curling up into a ball as she rocked back and forth. Her face was so caked with tears and blood and soot that it looked like a mask.

"It wasn't me. It wasn't me. It wasn't me," she muttered to herself over and over, weakly shaking her head back and forth. "It wasn't me. I don't want to . . . I don't want to *eat* anyone."

Serph was next behind her. He tried to make his way over to his sniper, but he didn't have the energy, and he collapsed a few steps from the bottom of the stairs. He couldn't muster any words; he lacked the strength to do anything more than look over at Argilla and reach a hand in her direction. He was vaguely aware of Cielo and Gale coming out next, each helping to hold the other up. They took a seat somewhere nearby. Gale's face was pale; Cielo's was even more so, and he held his hands over his mouth and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, as if he

could somehow escape what had happened by blotting out the sight of the world where it had taken place.

Another wave of nausea hit Serph, more intense this time, and he began dry-heaving. He tried not to think about what Heat was doing at that very moment back inside the ruined base.

Take it. You want to eat it, don't you?

He wasn't sure how long he stayed there like that. In front of him, Argilla clutched her head as she shook it back and forth, making a sound like a muted wail. His own skull ached like it was being stabbed with dull needles, and Serph fought hard against the urge to vomit. Lifting his head up at last, he tried to croak out the words, "Why is this happening?"

At that moment, Serph's mind reeled as he felt a painful jolt from within his gut. It was difficult to distinguish from the powerful nausea he already felt, but it had a very different source. Its fearful intensity grew steadily stronger, like something was trying to eat its way out from within his intestines.

He let out an involuntary groan and doubled over, but the pain wouldn't stop. Rather, it continued to intensify, the burning sensation spreading from his gut through the rest of his body. The inside of his head flashed red and white. The image of that dripping piece of flesh came back to him, making his throat and tongue throb violently. He licked his lips, his tongue moving of its own volition. He felt no revulsion at the act; instead, it felt only natural. For a time it was as if he were watching himself dumbly through the eyes of a stranger—and then the stranger melted away, like wax over an open flame.

Only hunger remained. A fierce appetite, a *desire* to feed, instinctive and merciless, welling up inside of him like an incontrovertible need.

Argilla thrashed about, screaming incoherently. Cielo cried out as well as he slammed his head insanely against the ground. Serph couldn't see Gale, but he could hear his urgent pants and groans.

Serph set his hands on the ground and tried to force himself up, his vision wavering, but he suddenly found himself without any support, and pitched forward onto his face. Only then did he realize that one of his forearms had liquefied into a formless mass of the black, tarry substance they had seen

throughout the base.

You're consuming yourself.

The solution to the problem came to Serph with shocking ease, the answer emerging from the thing that now lived inside his body. It needed food to replenish the energy he had expended during the battle—and that meant consuming the bodies of their fallen foes. If he didn't, then the thing inside him would need to digest his own flesh in order to find sustenance. Left unchecked, it would eventually consume him entirely, until only a black pool of tar remained.

They hadn't been the leftovers of Harley devouring his underlings, Serph realized. They were what was left of the people who had spent all of their energy to avoid being eaten, and so had wound up consuming themselves, instead. Somehow Serph knew instinctively that he only had about ten or fifteen minutes before he suffered the same fate. And there was only one way to avoid that.

Cielo suddenly stopped shaking and rose to his feet as if pulled by unseen strings. His head twisted at an unnatural angle as he turned his bloodshot eyes toward Serph. The bright red hunger in them made Serph's body stiffen. He tried to call out Cielo's name, but what came out of his mouth instead was the bestial roar of an animal staring down an intruder. Cielo's eyes quivered. There was a fire in them, and they blinked two or three times before taking on a faint glow.

"Buddy . . . No, I'm not—" Cielo's voice was warped and halting. "This isn't—it's not me!"

Serph wanted to tell Cielo that he knew that, but more than likely, Cielo saw the same thing in Serph's eyes that Serph saw in his friend's. Cielo came towards him, hand outstretched, uttering a long, sobbing cry. He began the motion as a plea for help, but as his hand swept forward suddenly he was swinging for Serph's throat.

Without thinking, Serph brought up his right hand and deflected the attack. His forearm transformed, covered in an instant in glittering, silver-white armor, and with that new expenditure of energy, the aching hunger within him grew.

Some kind of warning squeaked its way out of Cielo's throat, but then his moment of clarity was gone. In a swirl of light he reverted to the form he'd taken during the carnage inside, with glider wings and a beak like a pair of pliers. Purple

lightning crackled menacingly around his body.

Serph knew that he had changed, too. He heard a creaking cry of alarm emerge from his throat. His body was no longer under his own control. It was the hunger that dictated his actions now, the deep-seated, instinctual desire to eat, to eat and quell the pain and emptiness inside.

Without the need to look, he sensed two other figures as they arose behind him and to his left. Before recognizing them as Argilla and Gale, he first acknowledged them only as food—something to be killed, blood and meat to be consumed.

Argilla wobbled from side to side as she approached, the teeth in her breasts glinting in the light. Gale, his massive mouth opening and closing rhythmically, looked over at him as well—despite having no discernible eyes. Cielo, his brightly colored wings unfurled, drew steadily nearer, clacking his beak.

Purple electricity came streaking towards Serph.

Serph avoided the attack. No, not Serph—it was the thing that inhabited his body that deflected the incoming bolts of energy. The arm that did so was no longer human; blades of bone erupted from the sheaths that had been Serph's forearms.

He let out an enraged battle cry. Gale replied with a shrill call that felt like an icepick to the brain. Reason had been driven somewhere far away, and in its place was only a lust for battle and an overwhelming urge to feed that seemed to paint the whole world in shades of red.

Distantly, Serph could feel himself shuddering with joy in anticipation of the meat and blood that would fuel him. His human spirit cried out in desperate defiance as he was consumed by the flames of his increasingly inhuman hunger.

Cielo let out another painful screech as he swooped in for the attack. Serph radiated power from his entire being; it felt completely natural for him to freeze the water vapor in the air between them. A moment later, whirling blades of ice struck his purple foe. Cielo shrieked and backed away, shuddering once as he flew higher. A flash of lightning bathed the battlefield in violet hues. The hovering blades of ice were scattered away, and the ones embedded in his body vanished as well. The flying creature gave another shudder, scattering a rain of

bluish-purple blood, then let out another roar as lightning enveloped its agile form.

Under Serph's feet, the ground began to buckle and collapse, and he only barely managed to leap away in time. Argilla brandished her limbs as she prepared herself for a follow-up attack. Then, a barrage of wind-blades came whipping Serph's way, gust after gust. He dodged them all, leaving them to smash apart overturned vehicles and pulverize walls. Gale, too, appeared to have focused on Serph; he crouched nearby, tongue writhing about, green wings preparing for another blast.

The last shred of Serph's reason was slipping away. He was vaguely aware of someone screaming for help, but he wasn't even sure who it had been. He let out one final cry.

Please. Someone. Anyone.

Stop this.

At the very edge of his perception, Serph detected a new target. An enemy . . . or a new source of food. Either was both.

Swiftly he focused his attentions there. With what passed for his eyes, he spied a peculiar form: a humanoid, not outfitted for combat. It had short black hair and wore nothing aside from a simple white gown. It was a girl, slender and elegant. Though barefoot, she walked toward him with steady steps across the rubble-strewn ground.

There was nothing in her demeanor to show she was afraid—or even cautious—which, paradoxically, put him more on guard. He clicked his tongue to make a rasping sound, the same warning he would direct at anything else he perceived as a threat. He felt the enemy's attention slipping. Now would be the perfect time to strike.

But he did no such thing. He stayed rooted on the spot, unmoving. The girl calmly lifted up one hand as she approached him, and with the other rubbed at the inner part of her wrist. Fresh, crimson blood welled up and began to run, dripping from her arm onto the ground with every step she took. Her pale feet shone in the dim light as she held out her bloodied hand in offering.

He could hear a panicked cry from someone, somewhere, telling him to run—but he couldn't resist the temptation of that streaming blood. With each drop, the sweet aroma of it grew more enticing. He watched as his own dark blue hand reached out to her, long blade still extended. Slicing the girl's tiny head from her body would be like cutting through a piece of string. And blood would gush forth. Sweet blood. Energy. Power. Oh, how he hungered for it!

The girl stood there, smiling as she bled.

Then everything went black.

Serph felt soft skin against his lips and salty-sweet liquid on his tongue.

He jerked upright with a start. A pair of smiling black eyes gazed down at him. The girl shook her head in admonishment and placed a tiny hand on his head, pushing him gently back down. Then she pressed her open wound against his mouth again. Blood ran down his throat, but it wasn't at all unpleasant—a warm drink, slaking his fading thirst. A sense of solace suffused him. The girl stroked Serph's hair, humming some sort of simple melody to herself, almost too quiet to hear.

"Who . . . are you?" It was Argilla who spoke. She lay just beyond the girl, shivering; her voice was no more than a whisper. Faint, pink stains were visible around her mouth. Nearby, Cielo and Gale were huddled against one another in a daze. None of them had the look of hunger in their eyes any longer. Everything was eerily quiet, the girl's soft humming the only sound.

"My name is Sera," she said, her melody changing into singsong words. "I've come to help you. To help everyone." As she spoke, the girl shed a single tear. It slid down her smooth cheek, catching the light for a moment before falling to the bloodstained ground.

"What do you mean, 'help' us?" Argilla asked. She was on the verge of asking more when the group heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. Reflexively, Serph put the girl behind him. Argilla and Cielo likewise drew protectively closer.

It was Heat. He paused and leaned against the battered gate of the Vanguard base, quirking his eyebrows, a closed fist covering his mouth. Noticing the girl his comrades were clustered around, he started to move closer, then abruptly

stopped in his tracks, as if he'd come up against some invisible barrier.

"Heat?" Argilla called out to him, her voice wary.

But Heat remained frozen in place, eyes fixed on the girl. He opened his mouth to say something, but as he did, the girl carefully reached out her hand, just as she had to Serph, spreading her arms to beckon him.

Heat's reaction was quite different, though. What Serph saw in Heat's eyes was something akin to fear. The big trooper stumbled backward, as if buffeted by a powerful gust of wind, and then he turned around and began walking quickly away. Serph could feel the warmth from the girl next to him as he stood mutely watching Heat's departure.

He has chosen.

The words echoed in Serph's mind. He looked around and noticed a small animal with perky, triangular ears sitting nearby—a black cat, with silver eyes.

The future is not set in stone. It is always in motion. But he has chosen; that cannot be changed.

Who are you? Serph asked without speaking. But the cat was already gone, leaving only the memory of its tiny black form and glittering eyes.

Chapter 3

“What? Does not that mean in popular language: God is disproved, but not the devil?” –On the contrary! On the contrary, my friends! And who the devil also compels you to speak popularly!?
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*



“Hey, come on, check it out!” Cielo said as he bounded into the war room. “What do you think? Not bad, right, buddy?”

“I have to admit, Cielo,” Argilla said, standing up from the briefing table and blinking her eyes, “I expected this to turn out much worse with you in charge.”

“Aw, come on. I put a lot of effort into this. And I wasn’t asking you anyway, Argilla. Come on, buddy, look! Didn’t I do a good job?” Cielo stepped closer to Serph.

Serph nodded and managed a grin. “Yes. Well done, Cielo.”

They were back at the Embryon base. The other core members of the tribe were sitting around the briefing table. Cielo’s cheerful voice had the effect of lighting up the whole room, breaking the heavy silence that had fallen. He gestured proudly at the doorway.

Entering behind him was a small figure, eyes wide with surprise. Cielo grinned and pulled a chair out for her. “Don’t just stand there, Sera. Have a seat.”

The girl smiled and sat down. The makeshift surgical gown they’d dressed her in had been replaced with one of the temperature-controlled suits typically worn by denizens of the Junkyard, along with a short khaki jacket. Below that, she wore a slitted skirt and a pair of light leggings. Across her shoulders were the orange markings that identified the wearer as a member of the Embryon. Going by her outfit alone, she looked like a Newborn freshly recruited to the tribe.

But the unguarded expression on her face as she looked around at her surroundings in complete confusion would have made her conspicuous even for

a Newborn; likewise her short black hair and the deep black irises of her eyes. Now that she was here in the room with the others, it was all the more apparent just how small and delicate she really was. The jacket Cielo had found for her was undoubtedly the smallest they had, but even so the protective gear looked baggy on her slight frame.

When Serph's team had returned from the ruins of the Vanguard base, the first thing they had discussed was how the girl had managed to escape from the guarded room at the Embryon headquarters, and from there, how she'd found them out on the battlefield.

How had she made it all that way on foot, without even the simplest protective gear to keep her safe from the enemies she could have encountered anywhere along the way? There wasn't a single path through the Junkyard that wasn't littered with rubble and shattered glass—it was unthinkable that she'd made the whole trip barefoot. And yet she had arrived without so much as a scratch on her feet. There had only been the long self-inflicted cut along her wrist that she'd made to save Serph and the others.

The guards who had been posted outside her room made sworn statements that they never left their posts, and that the door was never unlocked. Lookouts on patrol elsewhere all claimed they had not seen her out and about within the base, nor had they seen anyone leave. In the Junkyard, the loyalty of a tribe's members was unquestioned, and Serph had no reason to doubt the word of his people now.

But that still left no explanation as to how the girl, Sera, managed to show up at just the right place at just the right time. For one thing, she'd been unconscious when they set out. How had she even known to go looking for them?

Her eyes had gone wide when they asked her. "I just felt like I needed to go where you were. I could hear how much you were suffering. I had to go. And so I did, that's all." She looked as though she didn't know why she was being asked such an obvious question. They had tried phrasing the question in a dozen different ways, but she gave no better explanation, and so Serph had had no choice but to let it go. The girl was still weak; she had lost a lot of blood in bringing the four warriors out of their berserk creature-state.

“Hey, are you feeling any better?” Argilla asked now, putting a hand on her forehead. “You must be lightheaded after losing all that blood.”

“I’m all right. I got some rest,” she said, smiling back at Argilla. “Besides, I came here to help, so I don’t mind.”

“You keep saying that,” Gale said. “I would like you to clarify whom you intend to help. Do you mean the five of us here? The Embryon?”

“I . . .” The girl tilted her head, as if not quite understanding the question, and looked uncertainly up at the tall bishop. “I’m here to help everyone,” she said after a moment. “That’s all I know.”

“You appeared in the crater formed after the destruction of an object that appeared at the border of our territory,” Gale continued. “How did you get there? What was that object, and why did it suddenly appear at that location? What relationship do you have to it, or to the transformative powers we have manifested?”

“I’m sorry,” Sera said, hanging her head. “I really don’t know. When I came to, I was outside, and I felt the compulsion to go to you. You were in trouble, so I needed to get to you and give you my blood. That’s all. I don’t know what else I can say.”

“Come on, Gale, she’s in no condition for an interrogation,” Cielo said impatiently. “Look at her. She’s scared. And she just woke up, so she’s probably just, like, all confused and stuff. Once she gets some real rest, she might remember more. Right?”

“I agree with Cielo,” Argilla said—a rare thing for her. “We’re not going to accomplish anything by intimidating her. All that matters for the time being is that she saved us. We should be more concerned about our link to the Church. Has it come back online yet?”

“The link is still down,” Gale answered. “All of our communication requests have been met with silence.”

“We’re getting nowhere,” Heat muttered from his bench against the wall. “I thought that once the girl woke up we might learn something, but all we’ve got is more headaches. She’s nothing more than useless baggage.”

Argilla bristled. “Hey, don’t talk about her like that. She’s the only reason we were brought back from that—that state we were in. If she hadn’t shown up, we’d have . . . we’d have eaten each other.” She shuddered, as if the horrifying memories were replaying themselves in her mind.

Serph felt his own mouth go dry. Argilla was right: he didn’t want to think about what would have happened if Sera hadn’t shown up when she did.

Heat was the only one who hadn’t partaken of Sera’s blood. He said simply that he’d feasted on Harley’s corpse until he’d eaten his fill, at which point he came free of his transformation. He’d added almost offhandedly that “it tasted like shit,” but hadn’t offered any more than that.

Afterward, he had steadfastly refused to take any of Sera’s blood, and his irrational aversion to and wariness of the girl didn’t appear to have lessened after being told how she’d brought the others back to human form. If anything, they seemed to have grown stronger. Now, as she perched on her hard chair, pale face turning this way and that as she regarded her surroundings with amazement, he watched her like a hawk.

“At any rate,” Serph said, forcing the dark memories away, “we have her to thank for snapping us out of our . . . let’s call it a rampage. Also, having Sera near us appears to be preventing whatever happened to the Vanguarders from happening to the Embryon. Isn’t that right, Gale?”

“We do not yet have conclusive proof. However, in comparing the Vanguarders and the Embryon, her presence is the only differing factor of note. Given that we do not know the current state of the other tribes, I cannot make any decisive statement to this effect, but if we assume that the spheres of light spread throughout the entire Junkyard, it is possible that being in relative proximity to the girl serves to somehow curtail these . . . rampages.”

“Good grief, man, could you be any wordier?” Cielo said. “So the short version is that having her here might be what’s stopping us from going crazy? If that’s how it is, then awesome. And y’know, at this point, we should probably stop talking about her like she’s not even here.” He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “I mean, she came to save us, all on her lonesome. And even without getting into all that going crazy stuff, what reason do we have to turn

her away? We could use all the help we can get.”

“He’s right,” Argilla said. “A Newbie like her—less than a Newbie—wandering out there aimlessly? She wouldn’t last five minutes. Besides, maybe she’s the key to stopping our transformations.”

Heat held up his hand. “Sorry to have to burst your bubble, but look at this.” The fireball mark on his right arm flashed with crimson light. The others watched as his forearm transformed into a monstrous, red-skinned hand with four gleaming claws. Tongues of fire danced along the claws and fell from them in tiny droplets of flame.

He waved his clawed hand in front of Argilla, who watched as if frozen until he changed it back. “The girl only holds back the hunger we feel after we fight. Our transformation powers haven’t changed at all. We can assume those forms whenever we want, of our own free will. You’ve tried it for yourself, haven’t you, Serph?”

“Yes,” Serph admitted.

He’d spoken to Gale about it already, and indeed, even after Sera had rescued them, they remained able to use their transformational powers. Rather than activating them freely, though, they seemed to be rooted in natural instincts, triggering automatically once one of them went into a combat mindset. Though they hadn’t tested it yet, it was possible that, in addition to the hunger, strong emotions such as fear or anger could also cause them to change. Perhaps Sera’s presence would help in those situations, but it seemed that she had no ability to remove the transformation power itself.

“Then what’s going to happen to us?” Argilla asked. She was staring blankly at her hands on the table.

“I’m sorry,” Sera said, setting a hand gently on Argilla’s shoulder. Her tone grew firmer when Argilla looked back up in surprise. “At least by drinking my blood and being near me, I don’t think there’s much chance that you’ll suddenly change. And if I can get to people before they lose control, I can stop them. That’s one thing I am sure of.”

“Sera.” Argilla was at a loss for words as the girl embraced her. “You—”

“By being near me, I think people can build up an immunity so they won’t have to devour each other. But the virus mutates rapidly. The others have to take some of my blood before it’s too late to help.”

“On what basis do you make this claim?” Gale interjected. “If you do not have any memories, what makes you so certain of this? What is this virus you mention? On the molecular level, your blood is no different from that of an ordinary human being—and yet it has this power. Explain how this is possible.”

“I . . .” All of the certainty on Sera’s face fell away. “I’m sorry. I don’t know. I honestly don’t. All I know is that it’s what we need to do.”

“We cannot allow our tribe members to ingest a substance whose mechanism of action is unknown.”

Gale had conducted an analysis on Sera’s blood as soon as they had returned to the base; the results all came back in the green. There was nothing about her blood to set it apart from human baseline, save the fact that it was even cleaner than that of a Newborn.

“While it may seem harmless to us at present, there is no telling what kind of negative effects might—”

“Gale, that’s enough,” Serph interrupted. “The important thing is that we know firsthand that Sera’s blood does have some kind of special power. If it might stop what happened to the Vanguarders from happening to us, it wouldn’t hurt to keep her plan in mind.” He turned toward Sera, who was still quite pale. “But you did lose a lot of blood earlier. If you tried to give blood to our entire tribe you’d kill yourself.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sera said, her tone assured. “I needed to use a lot of blood for you because you were in such a precarious state, but the people here in the base aren’t that far gone yet. Just a drop apiece should do. So I wouldn’t need to give much for you to have enough for everyone.”

Serph wanted to ask how she was sure, but he stopped himself. He already knew what her answer would be. For now, it was better to focus on the practical side of things.

“Gale, why don’t you get a blood sampling kit and some pharmaceutical

gelatin capsules—enough for the whole tribe. We can use those to distribute the blood.” Gale nodded and stood. “For now, we’ll tell them that it’s medicine being distributed by the Church due to the current situation,” Serph continued. “We should probably take some ourselves and—Heat, where are you going?”

Heat was already halfway to the door. “I don’t want any.”

“Are you disobeying a direct order? Argilla asked.

“I like my power.” Heat made a show of triggering flames to rise up between his outspread fingers. A flame of a different color danced in his red eyes as he watched. “This beats grenades any day. A little more practice and I’ll have it down. I don’t want to put anything in my body that takes this away from me. Besides, I prefer the taste of my enemies’ blood to some flavorless pill.”

His mocking retort hung in the air, taking all the wind out of Argilla’s reprimand, and he left before anyone could say anything more. The door shut behind him. Gale turned to Serph, his face expressionless. “Sir, I believe you should consider punishing this insubordination.”

“Leave it be. Heat’s just being Heat,” Serph said. There were too many other things on his mind—who Sera really was, the effects of her blood, their bizarre transformative powers . . . and their hunger for flesh.

Deep down inside, he could feel that his appetite, while it had been suppressed, remained a very real presence. If he let his guard slip, it would come back in full force to consume him once again.

He gazed over at Sera’s porcelain profile. Not for the first time, he had the impression that he knew her face from somewhere. Try though he might, the lingering threads of his memories kept slipping through his fingers.

Serph shook his head, and tried to focus on the problem of what to do about his second in command.

Heat had been a member of the Embryon since the beginning. They’d emerged from the Church as Newborns together, and ever since, the red-haired trooper had been Serph’s right-hand man. No, more than that—it was like they were two halves of the same whole. Back when their previous leader was killed, Serph and Heat had skirted the law that required the losing tribe to join ranks with the

victors. Right after their own leader fell in battle, before the fighting had a chance to settle down, the two of them had managed to single-handedly take out the enemy tribe's leader, leaving both tribes without a leader simultaneously.

That meant the lot of them were effectively Newborns once again. Ordinarily, their individual skill would have determined whether they were killed or taken in by another tribe. Heat, though, had refused go in for either of those options. He'd pointed out that the laws also allowed for Newborns to form their own tribe.

"So that's what we're going to do. And you'll be our leader. Simple as that."

Serph thought back to that conversation. His memories from before the incident with the black object felt distant, like they belonged to someone else, but he could recall the tone of Heat's voice and the look in his eyes with unusual clarity. It was more than a little irregular for a tribe to consist of only a leader and a single follower, but the Embryon had managed to survive.

Now that Serph thought back on it, Heat's pride and arrogance—or, more charitably, his determination and simple refusal to bend to anyone else's will—were qualities that he'd always exhibited. He played by the Church's rules, but he was merciless when it came to facing off against anyone who tried to hold him back. The only exceptions to that had been the leader of his original tribe, and Serph.

Those inclinations were all too apparent now. Whatever that mysterious object had done to them, Heat was right about one thing: the transformations themselves and the powers that came with them far outclassed any conventional weapon.

Harley was a perfect example. After he'd assumed his monstrous form, he'd held his own against an assault by the five Embryon members even after Argilla had blown off half of his face. If they could somehow use their new powers while still keeping a grip on their consciousness and their sanity, they'd be nearly unstoppable.

It was all well and good that Sera's blood could bring them out of their rage state, but if there was some chance that it might inhibit the transformations

themselves, then to Heat, who was rather taken with his new abilities, Sera's blood—even the girl herself—might as well have been poison.

That Sera's face seemed to trigger some almost-accessible memory made the whole situation even more exasperating for Serph. Pangs of doubt twisted within him like thorns piercing his heart. Could Heat be right? Or was his rejection of the girl a sign of something more insidious?

The words of that black animal—the 'cat'—lingered in Serph's mind. *He has chosen*. They had seemed almost a hallucination, and yet the creature's silver-eyed stare had left faint scars across his thoughts, like the scratches of a set of claws. They didn't hurt, but from time to time, they would come to mind, if only to remind him they were there.

Gale was preparing to take a blood sample when he let out a hiss and slumped forward. The tube in his hand fell to the floor, and Sera, who was closest, struggled to hold him steady.

"What's wrong, Gale?" Serph asked. "Are you okay?"

"It is . . . not that," Gale forced out through clenched teeth. "It is a . . . transmission from the Church. A forced interrupt." He brought a fingertip to his temple and creased his brow in discomfort. "It is coming through on a restricted, unidirectional emergency channel. I am putting it on-screen. All other functions will be . . . temporarily suspended."

As soon as he had finished speaking, he went completely limp, collapsing against Sera. Argilla helped her ease him into the nearest chair.

Sera looked up at Serph and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"He'll be all right," Serph assured her, seeing the look of panic on the girl's face. "Once the transmission is complete, he should be fine."

Sera nodded, though she still looked ill at ease. She put her hands atop Gale's and peered into his face. The monitor on the table flickered and came to life, white noise filling the screen. After a few moments of static, a pale, oval, almost-human face resolved on the white screen. The Dissemination Machine.

"This is quite the dramatic entrance, don't you think?" Serph said, his tone rather harsh. "I'd like to know why there's been a communication blackout until

now. And I'd also like to know why you felt the need to go so far as to subject my bishop to a forced interrupt."

"Those questions . . . cannot be addressed." Only the Dissemination Machine's lips moved as it spoke.

The Dissemination Machine was the Church's representative of sorts. While the white warrior priests served as the Church's guards, it was the Machine that was responsible for directly overseeing the denizens of the Junkyard. More often than not, people communicated with it like this, remotely; even Serph seldom interacted with it in person. Now, only its head appeared on the display, a stylized white ceramic representation of a human face, cold and alien.

That air of inhumanity brought Serph's own recent sense of displacement back to mind, but he continued on. "Then does the Church know anything about the current phenomenon—about what's happened to us? We're suddenly able to transform into bizarre new shapes, strange creatures with incredible powers, which we're sometimes unable to control. There have been other unusual happenings as well."

The Dissemination Machine made no response. Serph went on. "I want to know what the Church has to say about this. Is this something that you intended to happen? If it is, I think we deserve an explanation."

"Those questions . . . cannot be addressed," the Dissemination Machine repeated. "This is a notification to the heads of each of the tribes. All tribe leaders are to report to the Temple of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma in Sahasrara at 12:00 LT for an important announcement. Until then, there will be a temporary cessation of any and all hostilities throughout the Junkyard. I repeat: all tribe leaders are to report to the Temple of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma in Sahasrara at 12:00 LT for an important announcement. End transmission." The screen went black.

"What the heck was that all about?" Cielo muttered. "Something to do with our powers, you think?"

"I hope so," Argilla said under her breath.

Gale groaned as he came to. His eyes widened in surprise as he looked up to find Sera peering into his face with concern as she held his hands.

“What is happening?” he asked. “Have I been restrained for some reason?”

“She’s worried because you blacked out,” Argilla said, sounding exasperated. “Can you honestly not tell that she’s concerned for you?”

Cielo snickered. “I guess even bishops don’t know everything.”

“I was merely carrying out one of my expected duties. ‘Worry’ and ‘concern’ are imprecise terms. If you could elaborate further on what you mean by—”

“Yeah, okay, that’s enough of that,” Cielo said as he pulled Sera away from Gale. “Sera, let’s leave this ingrate here and be on our way. I can show you around the building. I’m sure there’s a lot you still want to know.”

“Don’t push her too hard,” Argilla said. “She still needs rest.”

“Hold on. I cannot allow you to do that,” Gale said, rising unsteadily to his feet. “I have orders to take blood samples from her and create medication to distribute to the tribe members first.”

“There’s no rush for that right now, Gale,” Serph interjected. “Although we don’t know for sure what the Church is going to do, given that we’ve been summoned, it stands to reason there might be some announcement about the current situation. If our link to the Church gets restored, maybe we can check to see who Sera is and if there’s any record of her past. There might even be some information about her blood, who knows? Are you still unable to access the Dissemination Machine’s data system?”

“The previous transmission was one-way only. I do not have access.”

“Then I guess I have no choice but to go.” Serph’s face was grim. “Since all fighting has been called off, it should be safe to travel alone. They’ll only let leaders into the Temple, anyway.”

“Are you sure?” Sera was gazing at Serph anxiously.

Cielo put an arm around her shoulder and gave her a playful shake. “Don’t worry, Sera. The Church has records on everyone in the Junkyard. I’m sure we’ll be able to learn more about you. Chin up!”

Sera shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean,” she replied. “I mean about Serph going by himself. What if someone attacks him along the way?”

“Hey, didn’t you hear the conversation just now?” Cielo crossed his arms in mock disappointment. “The Church called for a cease-fire, so attacking anyone is a no-go. Any sort of combat, whether it’s a shootout, or a knife fight, or even a barehanded brawl, is forbidden. And nobody ever disobeys an order from the Church.”

But the concern did not leave Sera’s face. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but instead just hung her head sadly.

“Besides, my buddy here is tough! He’s the toughest of us all. That’s how come he’s the leader of the Embryon, right, buddy?”

“That’s right, Cielo,” Serph said with a smile, meant less for Cielo and more for Sera. He felt a touch of relief when he saw the tension lessen on her face.

“You will still be at risk on your own, sir,” Gale said. “In addition, there is also the return trip to consider. Perhaps I or some of the other tribe members should accompany you.”

“No, we can’t do that. We don’t know if or when I might wind up . . . changed again, and if I do, I don’t want to have anyone else near me. The first time was enough. I want everyone else to stay here and follow up on what we’ve been able to learn already. I’ll be back soon.”

Gale was quiet for a moment, then said, “Understood, sir,” setting a hand to his chest while dipping his head. “Then I wish you luck. Have a safe and speedy return.”

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Sahasrara, the shining lotus . . .

Sahasrara stood at the figurative heart of the Junkyard, surrounded by the other six areas which the tribes fought endlessly over. It was a holy land encircled by a deep chasm whose walls were covered with a smooth, blue metal unmarred by a single blemish or speck of rust. The only way to cross was by one of the eight bridges known as the Arya Marga—the Noble Eightfold Paths—that radiated out from Sahasrara. The outer ends of the bridges were ornamented

with gates through which only the highest-ranking members of each tribe were allowed pass, and the gates themselves were decorated with elaborate carvings of calligraphic text.

The official name of the Church was the Church of the Arbiters of Karma. It was the sole and absolute authority in the war-torn Junkyard, the mediator, the law. Warriors who fell in battle were reborn through the Church's facilities and sent back out into the fray to fight anew. The arbiters were the sacred and sacrosanct heart of the Junkyard, collecting, maintaining, and saving all data about the ever-changing conflict, the rise and fall of the different tribes, the shifting military borders, and the changes in control over each area. They alone oversaw the way to the ultimate goal of all those born into the Junkyard: the gates to Nirvana.

Those gates would only open to those who had lived and died over and over, who accumulated sin after sin and had their karma cleansed time and time again. The only means of escaping the never-ending battle lay atop a pile of corpses tall enough to tower over the six areas of the Junkyard, rising all the way to paradise.

In Sahasrara, there was no sign of the devastation that blanketed the other areas. Named for the thousand-petaled lotus, it was kept apart from the filth and destruction by its dark, foreboding chasm-moat, a circular gash in the earth so deep that it was said that another world existed at its bottom. This lower world was said to be a holy place, where all those who died in this world gathered together and were separated by the weight of their sins before being cleansed. The karma of the fallen was wiped clean there in the innermost depths of the earth; and then, in accordance with samsara, the eternal cycle of reincarnation, they were given new life on the surface as Newborns. It was an underworld where death ruled supreme, and yet also a holy womb of rebirth.

Serph stopped at the edge of the bridge that he'd crossed countless times before. Since he'd become the leader of the Embryon and the ruler of Muladhara, the Church had summoned him here more times than he could remember—and yet now those memories felt like they belonged to another world, another lifetime. He gazed upon the unblemished bridges as if seeing them for the first time. They were made of an unknown substance that had a faint sheen, like metal or polished plastic; the elegant, flowing curves of their

decorative design, dimly lit by the magenta sky, framed the deep, dark abyss below.

Areas like Muladhara and Svadhisthana had seen such vast devastation that they contained hardly any manmade structures that were still completely intact, but in Sahasrara, such structures were abundant. In addition to the long, white bridges like the one that stretched out before him, there were the towering Temple spires that rose against the sky, plazas and staircases and ornate handrails, as well as the various terraced gardens, all parts of a well-designed whole, every piece perfected. Everything glittered white and gold, pristine, with no trace whatsoever of bloodstains or bullet holes or the scorching touch of flame.

Aside from the white-clad warrior priests who were assigned by the Church to maintain order on every level, no one knew what the Church's true intentions were, or what was inside those sparkling buildings. Only a select few people from the Junkyard were even allowed to enter the Church's ground floor, and its other levels were strictly forbidden to all Junkyard denizens. What took place on the other floors had never been revealed, and until now, nobody had been interested enough to want to know. But this time, as Serph headed up the steps toward the Church door engraved with its dual thorned crowns, he felt a subtle sense of annoyance and discomfort that was new to him. The people of the Junkyard lived a life of bloody conflict, fated to suffer through any number of trials, while the monks lived in ignorance in their sublime tower that stretched all the way up to heaven. Serph's finger was itching to give them just a single taste of gunfire.

He hadn't been able to shed his anger at the Church for hurting Gale by issuing the forced interrupt, or for letting the bishop's talents go to waste during a situation as unusual as that which they now faced. As a bishop, Gale *existed* for sifting through information, and being confronted with so many abnormalities without any data to work with was a tremendous burden upon him. Added to that was the fact that the forced connection could have caused severe damage to his friend's nervous system. Serph wasn't willing to just let that slide.

His feelings continued to gnaw at him as he moved to insert the identification ring around his finger into the slot in the gate in order to gain admittance. As he

did so, his eyes drifted up, alighting on one of the inscriptions.

Om Mani Padme Hum

Om, jewel in the lotus, hum.

At once, his blood began to boil, and a burning tightness caught in his throat. He felt an almost explosive force stir within him—another mind, another presence, rising up unbidden. It was a sensation he remembered all too clearly from back in Svadhisthana, with Harley: the hunger, the instinct to fight, the craving for battle.

No.

Serph groaned, wrapping his arms around himself, digging his fingers into his shoulders as he tried to contain the mixture of fear and desire welling up inside him.

He heard a faint, mewling cry from above, and then the tinkling of a bell.

The pressure inside of him vanished as if he had only imagined it. Serph let his arms drop back to his sides, and peered up to the top of the arch.

The cat was there.

Its pointy ears poked up, little black triangles against the magenta sky, and its silver eyes sparkled in its tiny, angular face. It opened its mouth again and let out another meow, then quickly turned around and hopped out of sight, its long tail trailing behind it as it disappeared. The sound of the jingling bell receded with it.

A bell?

It had been around the cat's neck, Serph realized. A tiny decorative bell. And somehow the echo of its sound reminded him of Sera's voice.

Which didn't make any sense at all, Serph thought, shaking his head. This time, he took care not to look up again as he inserted his tag into the slot. Those words above the gate were apparently some sort of trigger for the transformation. He would need to keep them in mind if he ever wanted to consciously enter that state.

Om mani padme hum...

“You’re with the Embryon, right?” someone said to him as he passed through the final gate and into the vestibule beyond. It was a young woman, with yellow markings at her hip and shoulder. That meant that she was one of the Solids, the tribe that controlled Anahata. If Serph remembered correctly, their leader was named Mick the Slug.

But Mick was a man, which meant that this woman was some sort of aide or bodyguard who had accompanied her boss here. Her hips swayed slowly as she approached Serph, and she fluttered her unusually red tongue while looking him over, up and down; she flashed a grin when she saw the black mark emblazoned on his cheek. Sharp teeth glimmered as she smiled.

She let out a long hum of consideration, and then licked her lips. “So it happened to you, too.”

Serph backed away reflexively; as he did, the woman gathered herself into a crouch.

She jumped, leaping three whole meters in a single bound. While in midair, her body was enveloped in an aura of blue light, into which she seemed to vanish for a moment. Then her arms shot out from within that glowing haze, transformed into something skeletal, almost mechanical, many-jointed and twisting like tentacles.

Serph jerked out of the way. Blue light flashed in front of his eyes and the words in the back of his mind came rushing to the forefront. His right arm glowed blue, and he watched as it changed shape and turned bluish-black before becoming encased in a gray-white carapace. His palm split open, and he heard the blade slide out from within. Its pointed tip traced an arc through the air as it severed his attacker’s black tentacle-arm with fluid ease.

The woman let out a screech that sounded like two pieces of metal being scraped together, and she cradled her arm as she landed on the floor. She was no longer a woman by this point, or even human at all. The upper half of her body was something human-like, while the bulk of her form had taken on a more rounded shape, sporting a number of black legs. A long, thick tongue, looking like some sort of internal organ, slurped out from between her lips to lick at her bloody cheek. “Nicely done,” she said in a grating voice. “But you’re not getting

away.”

“Fighting is forbidden in Sahasrara.” Serph’s voice rumbled as well. The burning heat that had collected in the mark on his cheek began to spread out further, suffusing his whole body with power. Even as he issued his warning, he basked in her hostility and malice as if it were a pleasant shower. *There was an enemy here. He could fight it—and then devour it.*

“To hell with the law. I’m hungry.” The creature’s many legs scuttled about as she looked for an opening to attack. Her claws scraped against the polished white floor, making an ear-piercing sound. Although she had lost one of her limbs already, it didn’t look like she was going to back down. Serph thrust one of his arm-blades out in front of himself, feeling the thrill of combat rising within him, along with a hunger that felt so good that it made him queasy. His eyes were drawn to the fluids that dripped from his foe’s severed leg, and the tip of his tongue quivered as if he were already slurping it up, feeling its warmth and tasting the sweetness of flesh.

There was madness in the voice of the thing that had been a woman. “I don’t know who you are, but you hurt me. And you’re going to regret that.” And then she leapt towards Serph again. An instant later he was struck with a disorienting sensation, and his vision went white; blindly he held up an arm to fend off the blow from the sharp claws coming at him from above.

The attack never reached him. A shock rod swung through the air, bathed in pale blue light. The woman let out a shriek as it struck her right in the head and sent her sprawling. Her legs scrabbled at the floor as she struggled to get up, and she let out another deep, visceral scream.

A white figure slid into view. “Fighting is forbidden here,” it said in a voice without emotion or intonation.

“A warrior priest!” The woman’s voice was suddenly tinged with fear, and she hastily emerged from her transformation.

The white warrior priests who defended the Church were so named for the white armor and skin suits they wore, along with full-face helmets with polarized visors, which gave them an imposing, inscrutable air. On their spiked shoulders, engraved in black, were the two overlapping rings that were the sigil of the

Church.

The priest returned his shock rod to the holster at his thigh, making the short, white cape that hung from his shoulders ripple. He was a towering figure, his gleaming white form distinguishing him immediately from the members of any tribe, all of whom were inevitably clad in gray and khaki with the exception of their marking colors.

“Both parties are ordered to cease hostilities. Failure to comply will result in punishment.”

The woman staggered to her feet. She was back in human form now, her entire right arm missing. Rage burned in her eyes as she glared at Serph, but she appeared to have backed down for now. Fresh blood dripped down from between fingers she pressed to the wound, splattering the clean white floor with drops of red. The warrior priest did not appear to notice.

He turned his black visor toward Serph. “Serph, leader of the Embryon,” he said. It was a statement, not a question. Serph nodded, and turned his transformed arm back to normal. The change came as easily to him as breathing, which surprised him and made him feel somewhat disgusted at the same time.

The woman swallowed a lump in her throat; apparently she had not realized who she had just tried to attack. “Leader?” she gasped. “I didn’t—”

“You have come to the Temple as instructed,” the priest said, as if the woman wasn’t even there. “The Church is aware of the destruction of the Vanguard. Request completed.”

The woman let out another quick gasp.

“The leaders of the other tribes have already arrived,” the priest said. “Make haste, Child of Purgatory.” He then turned and began walking away. As Serph followed after him, from the corner of his eye he saw the woman run off, still bleeding from the stump of her severed arm.

The Embryon had triumphed over the Vanguard. That made for a major shift in the balance of power. No doubt the woman was on her way to inform her tribe of the news. Although the Embryon were a comparatively small tribe, her people probably hadn’t anticipated that someone who controlled an entire area

would have ventured to Sahasrara all by himself. Especially not since they were the Solids.

The leader of the Solids, Mick the Slug, was a cautious man, one who put his own safety above all else—the complete opposite of Serph, who frequently took part in front-line engagements. It was said that Mick never left his tribe's headquarters in Anahata. Apparently, the Solids' headquarters rivaled that of the largest of the tribes, the Brutes of Ajna, in terms of defensibility; it was a veritable fortress.

It was unfortunate that Mick's tribe had learned about the defeat of the Vanguard, but the Church would make an announcement in due time anyway. The Solids would just know about it a little sooner, now. As leader of the Embryon, Serph knew that it was also a bit disadvantageous for him to let the enemy see his face, but this wasn't the first time this had happened. He was a front line fighter, and he wasn't shy about making himself an easy target. He needed to be careful during long-range gun battles, of course, but he had ways of dealing with that.

Moreover, Serph realized, the way that the tribes fought was about to change completely. It already had, really. There were people like Heat, who was steadfastly honing his ability to control fire. The woman from the Solids, rather than attack Serph with a gun or a knife, had transformed on the spot in order to engage him in close combat.

He and his lieutenants had assumed that the strange phenomenon that afflicted the Embryon and the Vanguard had extended to the other tribes as well, and now they had confirmation of that fact. Against Harley's monstrous form, firearms had been all but useless. If that level of power had been conferred on all the people of the Junkyard, then the weapons they were familiar with might now be a thing of the past. From now on, conflicts would likely be decided as a clash between one abomination and another, powers against powers.

And the victor would devour the loser.

Serph and his guide passed more people as they made their way across the broad Church vestibule. The leaders of the larger tribes had evidently been accompanied by sizable entourages, which were now waiting here, their leaders

having already been led into the sanctuary.

As the warrior priest guided Serph past them, the crowd began muttering—first with wariness and scorn, and then, after a few moments, with surprise and suspicion. The news that he was the leader of the Embryon, and that the Embryon had defeated the Vanguard, was quickly spreading.

The ones keeping the most watchful eye on him were the Solids of Anahata, all marked in yellow, and the Maribel of Manipura, their markings crimson red. Both were mid-sized tribes. Despite their control of the entire Muladhara area, the Embryon had been at the bottom of the tribal pecking order. Now that they had defeated the Vanguard, however, they now ruled over both Muladhara and Svadhisthana, which made them as powerful as those other two, or perhaps even more so. The Solids and the Maribel were currently deadlocked with one another, and the sudden emergence of a third party that could rival their forces was sure to be no trifling matter to them.

The top two tribes currently vying for power were the Wolves of Vishuddha, in white, and the Brutes of Ajna, in indigo. Fighting among the lesser tribes didn't worry them, to the point that they tended to simply ignore the others' power struggles, but even they turned to look at Serph as he walked past, eyes narrowing with interest. They would be sure to inform their own leaders as soon as they returned.

Meanwhile, Serph was noticing that the Church itself had gotten larger. The structures in the middle of the Arya Marga had been expanded to include several hundred additional floors. The visible portions alone accounted for eight hundred floors underground and a thousand above, and those didn't even account for the highest heights or deepest depths.

The tower rose in nested terraces, wider at the base and funneling upwards. At the top of the majestic, elegant structure were the gates to Nirvana, the paradise where all of one's hopes and dreams would come true. It was the duty of the Arbiters of Karma to judge the sins of those down in the impure world below, and to guard those gates until the day that someone came and settled the Junkyard conflict once and for all.

"Tell me," Serph said to the warrior priest he was following, "what does the

Church think about what's happening? Are they the ones who granted us this . . . transformative power? Have they issued this summons to explain that?"

"The Church does not explain," the priest replied, as if the question had been anticipated. "The Church only gives orders. It gives, it guides, and it takes away—all for the sake of samsara and the path to Nirvana. You need only follow, Child of Purgatory."

Serph opened his mouth, but then remained silent. Asking more would only be a waste of time. The priests were merely a mouthpiece of the Church, and would speak only what the Church would have them say. Realizing that, Serph felt another emotion running counter to the deep-seated awe he'd always felt towards the priests.

What was it? Annoyance? Defiance?

The authority of the priests and the Church they served was absolute—at least, as far as Serph knew. The Arbiters of Karma were the unquestionable and inviolate mediators of the Junkyard. When they issued commands, the people of the Junkyard followed them without hesitation. That was how things had always been done.

But the fight that had just taken place here in Sahasrara had been more than just unusual. Before now, the very thought of it would have been unthinkable. And yet the woman had transformed and attacked him, and he hadn't hesitated in the slightest to use his powers in turn.

Were the laws beginning to lose their effect?

Serph's hand had gone to his cheek without his realizing it, and he could feel a tingling sensation in his strange black bruise. Everything had changed so drastically since those marks had appeared. He had the distressing feeling that the world itself was starting to fall apart, and for a moment he stumbled.

They walked down a long hallway with round columns along either side, arriving at last at the inner sanctum. The warrior priest flashed a light, signaling to the two guards standing by the massive double doors, and then he turned to Serph. "You may enter. Do not tarry further. Already you are one hundred sixty-three seconds behind schedule."

The doors swung open, slow and stately, revealing a lift within. It was circular, large enough for a single person to stand atop it, and it glowed with a faint light. Serph stepped up onto the platform, and as he did, it began to slide along with little or no resistance.

The transfer tube was lined with a bioluminescent substance that gave off a bluish light and cast almost no shadow. As he looked down at the few pale shadows that did dance around at his feet, however, Serph thought of the personal interface for the Dissemination Machine and its expressionless face mask. The light glowing from the organic plates gave him the same impression as the glow of that mask. Maybe that was simply because they were both things under the purview of the Church, but something about it was still unsettling.

It was said that in the Junkyard the dead rose to the heavens and became the rain, which then was collected by the Church to be reborn. But what if some portion of it wasn't able to be reborn, and was used instead for these panels, or the visage of the Dissemination Machine?

Serph shook his head and forced away his ridiculous thoughts. The moving floor came to a halt. In front of him was an open, arch-shaped gate. Inscribed at the top, once more, was the mantra of "Om Mani Padme Hum." He passed through the gate, doing his best to avoid looking at the words. The moment he stepped through and into the darkness beyond, he felt a sharp tingling in the mark on his cheek.

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After spending a moment in complete darkness, the light modulation device in Serph's eyes activated, allowing his surroundings to come slowly into view. He switched into simple night vision mode, which allowed him to see that he was inside a vast dome, with six stages jutting in towards the center. In the middle, hanging down from the ceiling, glowing with a faint, white light, was the Dissemination Machine.

The personal interface that appeared via transmission showed only the face, but the main system itself was made of six human figures, everything from their

waists down and foreheads up embedded in the machinery. Cords and cables formed intricate, twisting patterns, the smooth metal beating like some kind of black heart. The human figures—they were really little more than abstract forms—were hung upside-down like prisoners in steel cages, their blue-black lips opening and closing, emitting no sounds. They were illuminated only by their hands, which constantly moved up and down, bathed in pale blue light, following intricate patterns, as if they were tracing the shapes of letters over and over again in the darkness.

Serph stepped forward and inserted his tag ring into the console that had been set up on his stage.

“Embryon leader, personal name Serph, code EM-00001A, ID confirmed.” As the system spoke, an obscuring screen descended. It was quite rare for all of the tribe leaders to come together, and since the defeat of a leader spelled the defeat of a tribe, any personal information about them—including their faces—was considered confidential. It seemed, then, that the Church wanted to remain impartial in the conflict, and not let the various leaders go back to their people with information about the other tribes. *Well, it's a bit too late for that for me,* Serph thought to himself.

The other stages likewise had screens blocking their occupants from view. Only one of them was empty. The stage that had been set up for the ruler of Svadhisthana sat there unmanned, shrouded in darkness.

“Have the Vanguarders not arrived yet?” asked a man’s voice, deep and resonant and tinged with mild annoyance. It was evidently one of the other assembled leaders. The obscuring screens kept the stages hidden deep in shadow; all Serph could make out were the outlines of the occupants’ legs. That was likely all the others could see of Serph, as well.

“The Vanguarders have been defeated by the Embryon,” the system replied. “The Vanguard leader, personal name Harley Q, code VA-00003H, is a confirmed casualty. Svadhisthana is now under the control of the Embryon. Ergo, the leaders of all major tribes are now present.”

There was only a faint stirring in the air; no one was gauche enough to make a big fuss over the announcement. Even though Serph knew that no one could see

him behind his screen, he could still feel the stares cast in his direction. It set him on edge.

“Bah. That hardly matters,” said another man’s voice. Compared to the first, who had been clear and articulate, this man made wet, lip-smacking sounds as he spoke. “The petty squabbles of the weak don’t concern us. So, why have you called us all here, Dissemination Machine? It must be something important.”

That had to be the leader of the Solids of Anahata, Mick the Slug. It seemed the woman who’d attacked Serph had somehow gotten the news to her boss right away. He made his identity obvious through his half-assed, paper-thin bravado, and his massive form swayed conspicuously behind his screen.

“We have no matters of importance to discuss with you.”

Clearly, the Dissemination Machine’s response was something none of them had expected. Serph bristled and leaned in closer as the air filled with jeering and clamoring. Cries of “What is the meaning of this?” and “Explain yourself!” echoed back and forth, but one voice, that of an angry woman, cut through them all.

“What in the world is going on, Dissemination Machine? Do you take us for fools? We are faced with a situation that is abnormal in the extreme. Have you not brought us here to explain this?”

Of all the major tribes, only one had a female leader: the Maribel of Manipura. The woman who was speaking could only be their leader, Jinana.

“Nearly all the members of my tribe have some kind of strange mark that has appeared on them,” she continued. “They transform into things that cannot even be called human, and are then killed by their own allies. The other tribes must be experiencing this as well. Tell us what the Church has to say about this. That is why we have come here. Is this the will of the Church? Answer us, Dissemination Machine.”

“We acknowledge no such abnormality in the Junkyard,” the Dissemination Machine replied, so emotionless as to almost mock Jinana’s question. “There are no matters for the Church to inform you of, Child of Purgatory, nor was it the will of the Church to order the leaders to assemble. We are aware of nothing. There is no abnormality in the Junkyard; changes to Purgatory are not possible.”

“Then why have we—”

“Allow me to answer that question.” All twelve of the Dissemination Machine’s arms spasmed and flailed, and it spoke now with a completely different voice. This was a voice that had actual intonation and emotion—along with a distinct air of superiority.

Serph took a step forward before he could stop himself, bracing a hand on the obscuring screen to hold himself up. Murmurs of surprise rose all around the room. The six human figures bent sharply backwards, and the pale blue light swirled about in dizzying patterns.

A moment later, their movements went completely still, and then the face masks opened their mouths in a voiceless scream. The glowing lights burst apart and scattered, and then, all of a sudden, the six bodies of the Dissemination Machine hung down like limp, dead flesh. Only its flaccid lips wiggled, all six mouths beginning to speak the same words.

“I am Angel. You know me as the one you look upon as you gaze up at the heavens.”

“Angel,” someone repeated, with undisguised shock in his voice. “Are you the one who controls the Church?”

“If it helps you to think of it that way,” the voice replied, amused. “It matters not. You have only to follow the rules that I am about to give you.”

“New rules?” Jinana asked.

“Yes. It was I who gave you the demonic marks on your bodies. Your *Atma*.”

“Atma.” Someone repeated the word with a hoarse gasp. The voice belonged to Mick. “Then you’re the one who gave us our strange powers and the ability to transform?”

“Indeed. Along with the need to devour.” Serph could hear the gloating in that voice, and it sickened him. “Atma is the power of demons, as well as your Asura forms. It is the vital force of your true selves. As you do battle and devour the flesh and blood of those you defeat, your power will grow stronger. You no longer need mere guns or knives to fight—now you need only your bodies and your new abilities. Your reward shall be the release from your hunger, along with

the path to paradise.”

“To hell with that!” One of the screens was shoved violently back up into place, and from behind it stepped a woman, her pale cheeks flush with anger. She had bright green hair that came down almost to her shoulders, with matching green eyes that seemed to shine from within. Her cheek and one of the legs of her suit were marked with crimson, her tribe color. She glared sharply at the Dissemination Machine, and at whoever was on the other side making its declarations. She shouted up at them. “So many of my people are dead! For no reason at all, they turned on each other, killed each other—and unable to stave off their hunger, they ate whichever of their companions happened to be within easy reach. Some of them are past the point of sanity. If these are your new rules, I will not have them! What in the world are you thinking? You say that *you* did this to us? If that’s true, then I will not forgive you.”

“Ah, you have grown up so quickly. Already you are able to spit such words of contempt,” the being that called itself Angel muttered calmly. “Whether you accept it or not, none of you have a choice in the matter, Asura. You will fight, and as you fight, you will hunger; when you hunger, you will eat, and if you do not eat, you will die. It is simple. Nothing has changed aside from the way in which you will fight. The weak will die, and the strong will remain. And the gates of Nirvana will open only to the strongest.”

“So you’re saying the basic rules haven’t changed, then?” someone asked nervously. “So, just like before, the tribe that’s able to conquer the Junkyard will be shown the way to Nirvana, and will be free to leave this world? We can still keep doing what we always have, fighting for supremacy?”

“No, not quite. There is one—” There was a brief moment of hesitation. “There is one additional condition.”

“And what’s that?” Mick asked.

“There is a girl.”

As Angel said that, Serph felt himself grow tense.

“A girl with black hair. She is still young. A frail little girl with black hair and black eyes. Bring this girl here, to the top of the Temple. Do not kill her; you must bring her here alive. Whoever is able to both conquer the Junkyard and bring the

black-haired girl here shall be the first to have the gates of paradise opened unto them.”

“Wait!” Jinana snapped. “If it’s just a girl you’re after, why do we need these horrific powers? Remove these brands from us and change us back to normal. Bring back those who were devoured and make us forget all that we saw.”

“That is impossible. It cannot be done,” Angel replied, with no hint of sympathy. “You have already had a taste of blood; if you had not, you would not be standing here. It is too late for you. There is no going back for one who has eaten of the fruit of wisdom.”

Jinana let out a low growl and covered her face. Serph had a very good idea of the kinds of things she had seen. What had happened to the Vanguardians had more than likely happened to the other tribes as well, a bloody and gruesome scene straight out of hell itself. Serph and the others had been in the midst of that, too, and if Sera hadn’t showed up when she did, then Serph would be like Jinana was now, gripped in the throes of fear and regret.

No, Serph thought. I probably wouldn’t be alive at all.

Serph decided it was time to take action. “And just who is this girl?” he demanded, throwing up his screen and stepping into full view as Jinana had done. The haze that had clouded his vision vanished, and he could clearly see Jinana stiffen. It looked as though only now, as she saw someone else reveal himself, did she realize she had given the other tribes valuable information about herself.

But she recovered quickly. Masking her momentary shock, she stared with suspicion and interest back at Serph, taking in his silver hair and eyes, and his slim, athletic frame—unusually slender for a tribal leader.

Serph looked up at the Dissemination Machine, trying his best not to let Jinana read his face. “I would like to request detailed data about this girl you seek. What does the Church want with her? A mere description of her physical appearance limits our ability to search for her. What is the girl’s name?”

“Her name is—no, it can’t be.” Angel began to answer, then interrupted itself, and its voice degenerated into static. For a time they could make out only a single, harsh word: *You!* Angel appeared to have lost its composure; its

movements grew more erratic as its murmuring continued. Its words, however, remained unintelligible, lost in the storm of static. The Dissemination Machine shook and shuddered, and yet Serph could all too vividly sense whoever was on the other side fixating a cold and steady gaze upon him. The mark on his cheek—his Atma—tingled painfully.

“I see.” The static noise only got worse, but a few more words slipped through at last. “Ah, I see now . . . Yes. Very well. So be it. He will be . . . surprised to learn of this. This has become most interesting.” Something like laughter mingled with the static.

“What are you laughing about?” Jinana shouted, stepping up to the edge of her platform. “Answer my questions, Machine! Who are you? Who is this girl you want? Why have you given us these powers? Answer me! Answer me, ‘Angel’!”

“I do not . . . need to . . . answer you. And my time . . . is . . .” For a long, painful moment the ear-splitting static prevented any more words from being audible. “My access grows limited. Do not forget this: you are Asura, evil spirits who exist to battle. Your Atma are your true selves. Rend, slaughter, devour your enemies—you cannot escape your hunger and survive. And your hunger . . . shall lead the way to paradise . . .”

Static noise overwhelmed Angel’s voice. It continued for a while longer, and then all sound suddenly cut out. The Dissemination Machine’s dozen arms went limp, sagging downward. The ensuing silence was almost deafening. The only sound was Jinana’s panting, echoing faintly off of the sanctum’s domed ceiling.

“The system has received a critical update.” The Dissemination Machine spoke again in the familiar, emotionless voice it had always used before. Its mouths stayed open as it lifted up its arms and slowly spread them wide. The glowing tips of its fingers began to trace new patterns.

“The Church acknowledges the existence of Atma,” it announced blandly. Jinana and Serph stood completely still, and the other leaders remained behind their screens, all those present holding their breath as the system droned went on. “There have been revisions to the means of fighting, and to the treatment of the dead. Permission is hereby granted to view details on these revisions, along with data regarding Atma. Data on Atma will be transmitted to the headquarters

of each tribe. Take care, Children of Purgatory, until the day of salvation arrives.”

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“Welcome back, buddy!” Cielo leapt up the basement staircase, his thick braids flying, taking three steps in a single bound. He caromed off Serph in his enthusiasm. “So hey, come on, how did it go? What did you guys talk about at the Temple? Did you find out anything about Sera? We’ve been on the edge of our seats, haven’t we, Sera?”

Sera came up the stairs after him. “Welcome back, Serph,” she said. She paused on the landing, her arms full of blankets and pillows and other more unusual things that Serph couldn’t identify—a heap of broken pieces of equipment, shiny shards of plastic and the like. Her cheeks were flushed, and her black eyes sparkled happily. “I’m so glad you didn’t run into any danger. I was just standing around worrying, so Cielo gave me a tour of the place. There are so many fascinating things here, and there’s a lot I haven’t even gotten to see yet. Can I look around some more later?”

“Sure, Sera. Later on. Cielo, where are the others?”

“Gale’s off analyzing stuff or something. I dunno what. Argilla’s at the shooting range downstairs teaching the Newbies. And Heat’s—”

Before he could finish, there was a loud boom from the top of the stairs to the second floor, and a massive fireball came hurtling toward them. Cielo let out a panicked squeal and ducked down, and Serph acted more quickly than he could think, swinging out with his right arm as he focused his power into it. It was bathed in pale blue light from the elbow forward as he unleashed a volley of frigid hail at the approaching fireball. Hot and cold canceled each other out, leaving a harmless burst of water and steam. Serph looked up the stairs, feeling the tingling in his cheek and the power pulsing through his body.

“That’s quite the way to greet someone, Heat,” he said.

“What’re you doing, jackass?” Cielo yelled and shook his fist. “You coulda hurt someone! Sera is right here!”

“Don’t worry. I had my power under control. You handled that well, Serph.” Heat met Serph’s gaze as he slowly made his way down the stairs. His red eyes were unwavering, showing no sign of remorse. He didn’t so much as look at Cielo, whose hair was practically standing on end. Sera merely stood there, her eyes wide with shock.

“And what if I hadn’t? Or what if I couldn’t have?”

“Was that a possibility?”

For a moment, Serph was at a loss. “No,” he said finally.

“Okay, then. So you reacted just like you were supposed to. No problem.” Heat strolled past them into the passageway that led to the first-floor facilities.

“What was that all about? Sera, he didn’t get you, did he?” Cielo asked as he checked Sera over for any injuries. In her shock, she had dropped everything she’d been carrying. As Cielo bent over and started picking things up, he said, “Man, Heat’s acting all weird. He keeps getting all up in your face, buddy, acting all . . . what would Gale call it? Insubordinate? I dunno, like, is it even cool for him to act like that? Is he pissed off at the Church or something?”

“I’m . . . not really sure.”

“Huh? What’s up?” Cielo stopped picking up the junk and looked up at Serph. “Did something happen at the Temple? You’ve got this weird look on your face.”

“There was a lot that happened,” Serph said, picking up a large carbon ball bearing that had landed near his feet. As he rolled it around between his fingertips, he heard more hurried footsteps from downstairs.

“Oh, good—there you are, sir.” Argilla appeared at the bottom of the stairs breathing heavily, gun in one hand. “There was a message from Gale. He says the Church transmitted a data archive containing new laws and rules of combat. And about something called Atma.”

“Already?” Serph handed the bearing he’d picked up to Sera, then slapped Cielo on the back and started walking. “Let’s go over these directives the Church gave us. Come on, Cielo. And you, too, Sera. It seems we’ve already fulfilled one of the new requirements for getting to Nirvana without anyone realizing it.”

“Atma?” Argilla said. “That’s what our powers are called?”

“There are a number of different types of Atma. These are indicated by the different marks that have appeared on our bodies,” Gale explained as the images on the screen scrolled past. The five others sat there in the light of the briefing room’s main monitor, faces growing pale as they watched. Gale’s matter-of-fact voice, however, betrayed no sign of unease. “Atma that are shared by multiple individuals demonstrate weaker capabilities than those possessed by only a single individual, or a select few. The ranking members of the Embryon all possess Atma that are likely unique; the documentation we received refers to these as ‘High Atma.’ The others, of which there are multiple instances, are ‘Lesser Atma.’”

Argilla held her breath as she listened. Cielo’s eyes were big and round, showing clear shock. Sera perched on a bench in the corner, fidgeting with the bearing Serph had found, occasionally swinging her legs.

“Nevertheless, it can be logically assumed that, as Lesser Atma are victorious in combat and continue to devour their opponents, they will grow stronger. However, at least insofar as the documentation shows, there is still a considerable gap between the capabilities of Lesser Atma and High Atma. Accounting for circumstantial factors and individual differences, a rough estimate suggests that a single High Atma has the equivalent potential of around twenty Lesser Atma.”

“So, like, the first time I ‘changed,’ I felt like I saw something inside my head,” Cielo said. “A phrase—‘Om mani pada-something.’ And then something that was maybe a name. ‘Dyaus,’ I think?”

“That was the activation command and the name of your Atma. Look here.” A portion of the display was magnified, showing rows of various icons representing the different markings that had appeared on the inhabitants of the Junkyard, and the names of their respective Atma. In the margin was an annotation that read:

Command Words: Om Mani Padme Hum

“When you are about to enter into combat, you can simply focus on these words and you will transform. You will, in essence, be pulling an activation trigger to begin the metamorphosis into your Atma. If an individual is suffering from either extreme psychological stress or hunger, then deliberate control becomes ineffective, but in ordinary circumstances, the command can be used at will.”

“So in other words, don’t let yourself get hungry.” Cielo let out a forlorn sigh. “I mean, these powers are incredible. Really incredible. But really, really gross.”

Heat appeared to be paying little attention to the conversation. He leaned against the wall by the door, creating little fireballs in his palm and extinguishing them over and over in his fist. The fire danced up through the gaps between his fingers like it was trying to escape.

“Heat,” Serph said impatiently. “Come here and listen to Gale for a bit. This involves everyone, including you.”

“I’m not sure it’s really necessary, at this point. I’ve gotten pretty used to this power by now.” There was boasting in his voice, but he pushed off the wall and strode across the room to sit down next to Serph. Sera grew still, watching him warily.

Heat glanced at the screen. The name ‘Agni’ was written underneath the icon for the mark on his right arm.

“Okay, so my Atma is called Agni. Does that mean something?”

“At present, the meanings behind these names are unclear. However, the being calling itself Angel, speaking through the Church’s Dissemination Machine, referred to us as a type of demon called Asura. Is that correct, sir?”

Serph nodded. He had told Gale about everything that had happened at the Temple. Everything, that was, aside from the sensation that Angel was somehow looking directly at him, despite the fact it had appeared only as a disembodied voice. That particular experience didn’t really seem relevant to the situation at hand—and the truth was, he was afraid to speak of it. He wasn’t even sure what it was that instilled such fear in him. He just knew that that voice, neither male

nor female, with its mocking laughter, made him deeply uncomfortable.

“We are unable to confirm the significance of this statement, either; however, ‘Asura’ seems to be a name used to refer to a type, or perhaps types, of Atma, with some sort of special connotation.”

“So I’m Dyaus, Argilla is Prithvi.” Cielo counted off on his fingers. “Heat is Agni, Gale is Vayu, and you’re Varuna, buddy.” He shrugged. “That’s quite a mouthful. Hard to remember gibberish like that.”

“Varuna is the god of water,” Sera said all of a sudden.

The group turned to look at her with a start, as if they’d forgotten she was even there. She winced at the sudden attention, but then blinked and went on. “He is a very ancient Hindu god, the one who maintains *Rta*, the natural order and the laws of the universe. Agni is the god of fire, he who burns away that which is unclean with his purifying flames.”

“What’s ‘Hindu?’” Cielo asked, but Sera didn’t seem to hear him.

“Vayu is the god of wind, controller of the air and weather. Prithvi and Dyaus are among the most ancient of the gods, Mother Earth and Father Sky. All of these are names of powerful Hindu gods. They aren’t demons.”

The others stared at her with looks of surprise, and Sera shrank back in confusion. She turned to Serph. “What’s wrong? Did I say something odd?”

“Sera, how do you—oh, never mind.” Serph knew asking would get him nowhere. Besides, the meanings behind those names weren’t important right now—this new method of fighting they’d had foisted upon them was. They needed to be ready to adapt to the changing situation.

Serph had Gale bring up the specifications for each of their Atma. “Varuna is able to bring the surrounding temperature down to sub-zero temperatures instantaneously,” Gale said, pressing a key. “This allows atmospheric water vapor to be used as a weapon, and it can also be used to injure nearby opponents by freezing the water within their bodies. Both of his arms are outfitted with blades formed out of something that appears to be modified bone. This substance has a hardness roughly equal to that of high-density carbon ceramic.”

“Gale, what about me?” Cielo asked. He looked half-intrigued, half-afraid.

“Dyaus’ distinguishing feature is the power of flight.”

Cielo let out a little whistle. “I can fly . . .”

“In theory, you can fly at speeds of approximately two hundred kilometers per hour. In addition, you have the power to manipulate electromagnetic waves in the air. Effectively, you can use lightning to attack your opponents.”

Gale continued to scroll through the list, reading from it in his deadpan tone. “Agni is the polar opposite of Varuna, able to raise the surrounding temperature to an extreme level instantaneously. Along with the obvious ability to hurl fireballs as weapons, he can ignite the flesh of nearby opponents and blast them apart.”

Heat’s lips curled into a faint smirk as he made a show of creating a ball of fire in his palm, spinning it around before crushing it in his fist, sending a shower of sparks to the floor.

“My own Atma, Vayu, controls air pressure. In so doing, I am able to compress wind into a usable weapon. I am also able to wield a small, localized vacuum like a knife blade. While I do not possess the same flying capabilities as Dyaus, it appears that Vayu possesses the ability to glide in conjunction with his atmospheric control. Last is Prithvi, who is able to shift gravity. This can chiefly be used to increase an opponent’s mass to the point where it collapses in upon itself, or to focus an extreme gravitational distortion on a single point in order to —”

“Stop!” Argilla shouted, covering her ears.

Gale gazed back at her, expressionless. “Why will you not listen, Argilla? These are the weapons we have been given. As a member of the tribe, you are expected to know their specifications and their usage.”

“I know that,” Argilla said. “I know that, but . . .” She took several breaths and then set her hands back on the table, fingers still trembling slightly. “But what is all this? What is it? I’m hearing you talking about these powers like I’m just supposed to understand and accept all this. What I want to know is what these Atma are and how to get rid of them.”

“Atma are the new powers we have been given. They are what we use to fight. Think of them as new equipment. We must understand them and then master their use. Serph has already explained the new rules that the Church presented us with.”

“The Church can go fuck itself,” Argilla sneered, and then clapped a hand over her mouth in shock at what she’d just said. “Wait, no, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all right, Argilla. Everyone, listen.” Serph knew that it was time for him to take charge. He held up a hand to stop Gale from saying whatever he was about to say. “Since waking up after our battle with the Vanguard, have any of the rest of you felt some sort of change in yourself? I don’t just mean the Atma. I mean anything about your . . . your feelings.”

He’d had a hard time coming up with the word ‘feelings,’ and when he said it, it sounded strange to his ears.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Cielo called out as he got to his feet. “How did you know, buddy? Ever since then I’ve been so clearheaded. It’s like I can see things so much better now, and it feels like there’s a ton of stuff I’m only just seeing for the first time. So . . . are you all clearheaded like this now?”

“If by ‘clear’ you mean ‘empty,’ I don’t see how anything’s changed,” Heat said.

“Oh, shut up, Red. Why’s everything always gotta be in broad strokes with you?” Cielo snapped. “Anyhow, it’s like there’s a bunch of stuff that I’m able to think about so much easier now. I’d been wondering if there was something weird going on, so I’m glad you felt the same thing, buddy.”

“I’ve felt it, too,” Argilla added quickly. “In my outburst just now, for instance. Like Cielo said, it feels like everything is so much clearer now. Until now, I never doubted the Church, but . . .” She swallowed a lump in her throat, hesitating for a bit before getting up the nerve to continue. “As far as I’m concerned now, the Church can just shove it. They gave us these powers we didn’t ask for, and they’re making us . . . making us *eat* people. How am I supposed to just be okay with that?”

“I have experienced no particular changes,” Gale said. “I am merely myself.”

“I didn’t figure you’d understand, Gale.”

Gale gave Argilla a cool look, then looked back down at the monitor by his hands.

“What about you, Heat?” Serph asked. “Have you felt anything?”

“Come on, you know that’s a stupid question. I’m always going to be myself. If this power”—he held up a gloved hand blackened with soot from conjuring so many flames—“if this so-called Atma is our true selves, then nothing’s changed. We fight, and we win. That’s all there is to it. There’s nothing strange about that.”

The fireball brand on his right arm glowed the color of blood. A cruel, hungry smile was on his lips, and Serph had to look away.

A puzzled look crossed Argilla’s face. “Did something happen that made you want to ask this, sir?” she asked.

Serph gave a brief overview of his run-in with the member of the Solids at the Temple.

“But Sahasrara is sacred. How could she attack you?” Cielo asked. “That’s just not possible.”

“And yet I was attacked all the same,” Serph said. “If the warrior priest hadn’t intervened, it would have turned into a full-blown battle. The foundations of the laws are starting to crumble. The appearance of the Atma and these new laws that have been put into place are causing chaos on a whole new level.

“We’ve changed; that much is certain. But I think the Junkyard itself is beginning to change as well. In all likelihood, we’re going to see this kind of no-holds-barred fighting happening more and more. Even the powers of Atma that we’ve been given aren’t going to stay the same forever. If what Angel—or whoever it was—said is true, the people who devour others will get stronger. That means the strong are going to rise to the top by preying on the weak.”

“No. Not me.” Argilla shook her head. “I’m not going to kill and eat people. I refuse.”

“Well, if you don’t eat, you’re going to die,” Heat said. “What’s worse, you’ll

probably wind up going on a mad rampage first, and then one of us will have to put you down. It's kill or be killed. The choice is yours."

"Shut up, Heat," Cielo grumbled. "This is making me sick to my stomach."

Argilla groaned under her breath and buried her face in her hands. Silence fell over the room.

"It'll be all right," Sera said, her voice confident and dignified. Argilla's head snapped back up as if she'd been shot. Cielo perked up, too, eyes going wide and round as he turned to look. Sera's face was flushed as she spoke; she gripped the ball bearing tightly in her hand. "As long as I'm here, none of you will turn into demons. I came here to help everyone. That's why I'm here. No matter what happens, I *will* help you."

"Sera . . ." Argilla rushed over to the black-haired girl, wrapping her in a fond embrace. "That's right. We have Sera. It's because of her that we haven't all eaten each other already—that we haven't turned on ourselves like the Vanguard and the other tribes have. She's going to save us."

"The girl's capture is one of the requirements for reaching Nirvana," Gale stated flatly. "It is likely that the other tribes are currently unaware of her presence here; this gives us a distinct advantage. We also have her blood, which is capable of forcibly shutting down another individual's Atma."

"Wait, hold on," Argilla said, turning to glare at Gale. "You make it sound like you're planning on using Sera's blood as a weapon."

"Evidence suggests that it would be feasible."

"Whoa, hey, no. No way!" Cielo interjected. "We're not sucking more blood out of her to use as a weapon. If we take more blood from her as frail as she is, she could die!"

"The girl's survival is a key requirement to entering paradise. If I were to take blood from her, I would not take so much as to adversely affect her health."

"I don't care! I am absolutely, one hundred percent against this." Cielo moved to Sera's side, opposite Argilla, and put an arm around the girl, shaking his head so emphatically his braids became a blue blur.

Gale stared back blankly at Cielo and Argilla. “I find your objections difficult to comprehend. Prevailing in this conflict is our categorical imperative. Our goal is to survive, and to be victorious, in order to reach Nirvana. We must do so by whatever means are necessary. In the battles to come, the girl’s blood will be an overwhelmingly effective weapon for neutralizing our enemies’ combat capabilities—one that we should use without hesitation. It is the only clear choice.”

“Don’t you think it might be a better tactic to keep the girl’s existence a secret, Gale?” Serph empathized with how Cielo and Argilla felt, so he appealed to the bishop’s logic. “If we use a weapon that’s capable of neutralizing our enemies’ Atma, they’re going to wonder how we managed to develop it. It’ll only be a matter of time before they realize we have Sera. If our goal is to keep her safe until the very end while we work to defeat the other tribes, then we’re still at a disadvantage with our numbers as low as they are. We should avoid any plan of action that needlessly exposes the fact that we’ve managed to fulfill one of the key requirements.”

“Understood,” Gale said after a moment, nodding. “Your reasoning is sound, sir. I rescind my proposal.” Serph felt a moment’s relief before Gale went on. “In that case, we should consider placing the girl under secure confinement. Utmost care will be required to keep her presence here a secret. A gag order must be imposed upon the tribe, and the girl must not be allowed to leave the base. The other tribes have likely already begun searching for a black-haired girl. There is a high risk of her being discovered if she so much as steps outside.”

“We’re not putting Sera in confinement,” Serph said, cutting off both Cielo and Argilla, who had begun to clamor in protest. “Obviously, we won’t let her leave this area, and we’ll make sure she stays indoors as much as possible, but full-on confinement would probably have a detrimental impact on both her psychological and physical well-being. We’ll need to bring her to the Church in as good a condition as possible. We need to avoid anything that’ll negatively affect her, Gale.”

Gale narrowed his eyes almost imperceptibly. “Understood. However, there are some flaws in your logic, sir . . .”

“Maybe so.” Serph was quickly growing tired of this conversation. “But we’re

not putting Sera in confinement. That's an order. She'll be allowed to move about freely within our Muladhara headquarters. Naturally, we'll keep her under observation; and as far as secrecy is concerned, she won't be allowed into any hazardous areas—Cielo."

"Yeah, boss?"

"I want you to be in charge of Sera's protection. Talk with Argilla and pick whatever personnel you need, but don't mention anything about Sera's blood to them. That's something that I want to keep between the five of us here. As for Sera being one of the conditions for reaching Nirvana . . . they're going to find out sooner or later, so there's no point in hiding it."

"Roger that!" Cielo smiled ear to ear, then patted Sera on the cheek as she sat looking perplexed. "Isn't this great, Sera? That's the boss for you—so much smarter than Gale!"

"What would the Church want with a girl like you?" Argilla gazed warmly into Sera's eyes. "This 'Angel' really didn't say what it needed Sera for?"

"As soon as I tried to ask, the transmission broke up."

"Such a mysterious little girl." Argilla pulled Sera close and gently kissed her atop her tiny, black-haired head. "It's odd. Atma is this power given to us by the Church. Sera is able to suppress that Atma. But she doesn't have an Atma herself. Or any other means of fighting." She spoke almost dreamily. "Do you think maybe she fell down from Nirvana itself? I bet they don't have Atma there. Nobody eats anyone, nobody has to fight each other, and everyone is gentle and kindhearted, like Sera is."

Heat let out a quiet snort, quiet enough that Serph was probably the only one who heard it. Argilla, meanwhile, oblivious to Heat's contempt, continued to gaze at the girl. "I want to go there, sir. I'll do whatever it takes. I swear I'll protect you, Sera. You're our only hope."

Sera seemed on the verge of responding, but then her face abruptly turned sad, and she looked away.

"So, then what you're saying," Heat said, "is that nothing has changed from before. We're still trying to get to Nirvana. We have to fight, have to win, in

order to take control of the Junkyard and stand supreme over the other tribes. That's our goal, same as everyone else's."

"Seems so," Serph said as he stood up. He was exhausted. "We'll leave the detailed discussion of our strategy for tomorrow. Cielo, send me a list of candidates for people to guard Sera once you've drawn it up, and Gale, I want you working on that gag order right away."

Gale nodded and busied himself at his touchpad. Sera, sandwiched between Argilla and Cielo, looked back at Serph with her dark, limpid eyes. *She looks like she's about to cry*, Serph thought, then wondered if he was just imagining things.

"We'll meet again in twelve hours, at 08:30 LT. You're all off-duty until then. Rest up and get ready for tomorrow. The fighting's about to get a whole lot different. That's all. Dismissed."

Although he'd told the others to get some rest, Serph had found himself unable to do the same. Ever since he'd gotten back to his quarters, all he'd done was lie in bed, tossing and turning. He could hear the sound of his own pulse in his ears as he rested his head against his pillow. The color of blood filled his mind, and while it filled him with disgust, it also triggered an aching desire. He was far from the heat of combat, so the feeling was a subtle one, but it was enough to call back the memory of the hellish things he had seen happen to the Vanguard.

He blinked to call up the time display on his eyeball monitor. He could hardly believe it had only been a day since the last border battle with the Vanguard. It felt like it had happened a year ago or more. It was as if everything he'd ever experienced had simply vanished, leaving him feeling like a Newbie who'd just stepped through the Church gates, powerless and defenseless.

No, Newbies didn't feel. At least, Newborns up until now hadn't felt things like this. The word 'feel' wasn't even relevant to them. Now that he thought about it, Serph wasn't sure he could really explain what words like 'feel' or 'think' even meant. What *did* they mean? As Gale would have put it, *What behaviors do those words represent? Their definitions are unclear. Please use more precise*

terminology.

It was all so baffling. The Church's incomprehensible actions. The intervention of the being that called itself Angel. Atma. The hunger. And of course Sera, the black-haired girl.

He killed the time display and pulled the covers over his head. If he just closed his eyes and rolled over maybe he could at least get a couple hours of sleep. He was just too tired, though, somehow. He didn't need a medical scan to tell him that he was beyond exhausted, both physically and mentally. And because he was a tribe leader, being exhausted wasn't just a simple inconvenience for him. It was a drawback for the entire tribe. He needed to get some rest, whatever it took—

—and before he knew it, he was dashing through the battlefield.

This surprised him a little, but not completely. His vision was strangely hazy, and most of what he could see ahead of him was another man's back. The markings painted on the man's armor were orange, the color of the Embryon. Whoever he was, he was far more muscular than Serph, and taller as well, with dull red hair tied into braids that fell down to the middle of his back.

Serph himself was holding a handgun as he ran behind the other man. The sounds of a pitched battle echoed faintly in the distance. Land mines went off, and a contingent of tanks that had been coming their way was engulfed in flames. He couldn't remember where he was, or the objective of the battle, but that wasn't important right now. All he had to do was follow after the big man in front of him.

Somewhat further ahead, he spotted another man with more vibrant red hair moving about. Serph recognized him as Heat. The shock trooper carried a recoilless launcher slung over his shoulder; he fired a shot at one of the tanks that had avoided the previous explosion. The tank did a half-turn as its drive unit took the hit, and its damaged treads ground to a halt. The man in front of Serph turned his head and flashed a hand sign. Serph ran on ahead, reaching the top of the tank in a single bound.

The tank's turret pivoted, uselessly seeking its nimble opponent. Serph stuffed

a mini grenade down its barrel, then quickly jumped back and flattened himself against the rear of the vehicle. A powerful shockwave shook it from inside. Serph waited, knowing that the heat would build within the thermal-shielded impact armor.

After a few moments the hatch opened and a soldier came tumbling out, on fire from head to toe. Serph sprang up silently and put a single bullet into the back of the man's skull. He kicked the corpse to the ground, then executed the next soldier who emerged in the same way as he had the first. He used a knife to slit the third-and-final man's throat. Blood gushed out as if Serph had slashed a hose, and where it splattered onto the exploded gun barrel, it turned black and sizzled. Leaving the nearly decapitated body in the tank, Serph leapt back to the ground.

The tank shuddered and went dead. Across the battlefield, Heat discarded his spent launcher and headed Serph's way. The other red-haired man had taken up a position in a trench that the enemy had dug off to one side; he took aim with his rifle and began to mow down an incoming group of enemy troops. The command system wasn't functioning very well. The enemy appeared to be losing, but they were slow to retreat. Since an order for a cease-fire hadn't come through, that meant that the enemy tribe's leader hadn't been taken out yet. It looked as if both sides had been pushed to their limits. The battle could still go either way. Serph dove into the trench and looked to the rifleman for further information.

The man turned to him, lips moving, but Serph couldn't hear what he said. In fact Serph got the strange impression that his companion was somehow insubstantial. A bizarre sense of impatience welled up within him. What was he saying?

The man's lips moved once more, but again, Serph could hear nothing. Instead, he felt his head reeling, followed by a certainty that he knew what was going to happen next. The fear that came with it gripped his heart like an icy hand. His companion turned away and began to climb out of the trench. Serph tried to shout for him to stop, but his tongue stayed pressed to the roof of his mouth, and he said nothing. Instead, his body moved on its own, following the man out of cover.

The magenta sky looked sickening, far too bright. There were piles of corpses and pools of blood everywhere. Tanks lay overturned. The scents of scorched metal and burning oil filled the air. And there was the back of that broad-shouldered man, still running ahead of him. They ran forever. Serph couldn't let him go. Couldn't let him go any further.

A gunshot rang out. The broad man in front of him lurched forward as if someone had punched him in the stomach. Serph saw him fall with unbelievable clarity, as if time had stopped, the scene advancing frame by frame, instant by instant.

Heat shouted something. Someone let out a horrific scream. It wasn't until he woke up a moment later that Serph realized the scream had been his own.

Serph didn't feel like staying in bed anymore. The automatic health monitor in his quarters recommended that he take a dose of sleeping pills, but he didn't think that would count as actual rest. Sick of looking at the flashing, flickering display, Serph put his jacket on and left his room to wander aimlessly through the base during the quiet that came with Shade Time.

With the exception of the sentries on duty, everyone else appeared to be getting the rest that their leader had ordered. Occasionally he would pass by another soldier and exchange a nod, and it made him think about just how long he had been here. Back when the Embryon had established this as their base, they had been a tribe of only two. Just Serph as the leader and Heat as his sole follower, his right hand. And now they controlled both Muladhara and Svadhisthana, which meant that, in addition to having a lot more followers, they controlled two whole areas; it put them up in the mid-leagues alongside the Maribel and the Solids.

And the name, Embryon. When Serph remembered its origin, he felt a pang of solemn nostalgia. It had been chosen by someone who, for quite some time, had done something unusual for a denizen of the Junkyard: he had acted alone, as a wandering soldier, moving from battlefield to battlefield, owing no allegiance to any tribe. He'd never had any need of tribal names, but then, when he'd decided to take Serph and Heat, still Newborns, under his wing as his subordinates,

Church law had required some sort of code name to go with the announcement of the formation of their tribe.

The rule was that if more than two people made a point to team up and fight alongside one another on a regular basis, they were automatically considered to have formed a tribe. The man who named the Embryon had spent his whole life acting as a freelancer for any number of tribes, until, for the first time, he decided to form a tribe of his own out of a mere three-man squad. Now all that was left of what he'd given to Serph and Heat were the orange accents on their uniform and the name Embryon itself. That, and the skills and the tactical know-how he had thoroughly pounded into them, which had allowed them to survive on the battlefield.

Serph's thoughts weighed heavily upon him as he rode a series of elevators up through the slanted buildings to the very top of his headquarters.

From there he could see the Temple clearly. He stared out at the dark gray of the Shade Time sky, shot through with flickering twinkles of emerald light that seemed to wander through the distance. The disorderly silhouettes of the Junkyard's ruins jutted up against the faint curve of the horizon, which was blurry with green light tinged with blue. In the middle of it all was the Temple, bathed in the bright white of its searchlights. Even at this distance the tiered lower levels glittered with bewitching beauty. The top of the long, slender spire, however, was lost in the darkness above—unnerving, if one considered that it was the way to paradise.

The silver rain was falling. *The rain of the dead.* Serph stepped out of the elevator and surveyed the rooftop. There was a half-demolished lump of concrete nearby, and he spotted someone huddled up tightly behind it. Only the tips of two boots jutted out into view.

"Who's there?" he called.

The boots quivered and retracted from sight. For a moment, Serph could see nothing in the shadows. Then a head and face came into view, looking back at him—fearful eyes, and black bangs matted wetly to a small pale forehead.

"Sera?" Serph asked, surprised. "Why aren't you in bed? Didn't Argilla prepare a room for you?"

Sera hung her head, muttered something about not being able to sleep, and then wrapped her arms around her knees, huddling up behind the concrete again. Serph jogged briskly to avoid the rain and slipped in underneath the piece of rubble, which acted as a makeshift roof. Sera started uneasily when he sat down next to her, as if she expected some kind of reprimand, but when he merely sat there with one knee drawn up, looking at her in silence, she let out a tiny sigh and allowed the tension to slip from her body. For a while, the two sat in silence.

The rain kept falling, pooling into silver streams that flowed towards the drainage ditch like wiggling tendrils of mercury. The ashen sky and the emerald points of light that danced within it were reflected in its metallic sheen.

“You must like that,” Serph said, seeing that Sera was still holding onto the bearing she’d acquired earlier.

It was a just a black carbon sphere she’d picked up down in the basement. It would have fit easily in one palm, but she clutched it reverently with both hands.

“The world’s the ball,” she replied, passing the sphere back and forth from hand to hand, left to right and right to left. She began to mutter in a quiet, singsong voice:

*The world’s the ball:
Doth rise and fall,
And roll incessant;
Like glass doth ring,
A hollow thing, —
How soon will’t spring,
And drop, quiescent?
Here bright it gleams,
Here brighter seems:
I live at present!
Dear son, I say,
Keep thou away!
Thy doom is spoken!*

*'Tis made of clay,
And will be broken.*

"What's that from?"

"Goethe's *Faust*."

The girl's face was strangely expressionless as she spoke, as if her mind were utterly still. She stared ahead blankly, eyes unfocused. If it weren't for her quiet answer, Serph would have sworn she hadn't heard his question. Then her fingers went slack, and the ball rolled out of her hand. It clattered onto the ground and rolled off into some corner, out of sight. Sera showed no interest in retrieving it; she merely let her hands hang loose and languid.

"There's no sun here, is there?" she sighed.

"You mean like some kind of solar body?"

"There's no moon, either," she went on, ignoring Serph's question. "But I wonder if those shining things might be stars?"

Serph had no idea what she was talking about. "I don't know what 'stars' are, but people say that those green gleams during Shade Time are just light given off by the dead who've risen to the heavens as rain."

"It's not Shade Time. It's *night*. The word is night." Sera said firmly. "And there's no Light Time, either. It's *daytime*. At night, the moon comes out and the stars shine. Then in the morning, the sun rises, and clouds drift across the blue sky. Sometimes it rains, but afterward there are rainbows. Morning, noon, night, then morning again."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Serph wondered where the girl had gotten all her strange ideas. "There's Shade Time and Light Time. That's all I know. What are these 'sun' and 'moon' things of yours?"

"They both hang up in the sky. They're bright and they're beautiful. And they're warm, and they shine and—" She stopped, then, as if at a sudden loss for words. She shut her eyes tight, and after a few moments, she let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know," she said.

“Sera,” Serph asked on a sudden impulse, “do you ever see things happening while you’re asleep? Like memories of the past, from a long, long time ago . . . or images of people who have already been lost?”

“Those are dreams,” Sera said at once. “While you’re sleeping, things that have built up in your deep consciousness, like memories, worries, and anxieties will play themselves out as if they were real, either concretely or as more abstract symbols. It’s a normal thing that the mind does.” Sera looked up at Serph. “Why, did you have a dream?”

Serph looked down at his open hands. They were shaking slightly. With conscious effort, he made them close and steady. The word ‘dream’ crumbled to dust, mixing together with the tiny fragments of the images he’d seen before he woke. Yes, a dream. A dream about *him*. A dream about the day he died . . .

“What sort of dream was it?” Those big, black eyes gazed back at him. “Was it a dream about a person? About someone who’s already dead?”

“It was our former leader—mine and Heat’s.” Anxiously, he opened his fist, then tightened it again as he forced himself to speak. In the back of his head, there was a faint but unpleasant twinge, and he felt a cold weight in the pit of his stomach. “Back when Heat and I were still Newbies, he was the one who took us in and trained us. Until then, he had never been part of any particular tribe, and hadn’t ever formed one of his own. He probably could have put together a force powerful enough to rival even the Brutes, but all he wanted to do was fight for hire when he needed food or supplies, never favoring one tribe over another. Until he picked up me and Heat.”

Sera opened her eyes wider. “Isn’t that strange? Fighting all one one’s own, I mean.”

“The people of the Junkyard fight in order to reach paradise. To reach Nirvana, via the path of salvation put forth by the Church. The gates to Nirvana shall only be opened to the tribe that controls the entire Junkyard. Nobody could ever control the whole thing on their own without belonging to a tribe. Fighting alone without the goal of conquering anything is tantamount to turning one’s back on the salvation offered by the Church. A pointless exercise that does nothing but accumulate more karma.”

“Do you think it was pointless?” Her voice was strangely flat, which served only to make it that much more authoritative. “What he—your former leader—was doing, fighting on his own like that?”

“No.” It was an answer born of reflex. Serph was surprised by the sheer force and decisiveness of his voice. Only after the word was out of his mouth did he realize his own conviction. “No,” he repeated, through gritted teeth. “As far as the Junkyard would see it, sure, what he did was meaningless, but it wasn’t meaningless to him. To him, I think it was the Church and the promise of Nirvana that were meaningless. All that mattered to him was fighting and surviving.”

“Then why did he take you and Heat on as his companions?”

Serph shook his head. *If only he were still alive*, he thought to himself. Back when Serph and Heat were Newborns, they’d spent countless hours in the company of their mentor, but Serph had never learned why the man had taken them in after getting by for so long on his own. Why, out of all the Newborns he could have chosen, had he picked Serph and Heat?

After his death, his body and his karma had been taken up with the rain, where it would have long since mixed with the karma of others to form another fresh-faced Newborn, just like Serph and Heat had been when he’d taken them under his wing. Thinking about it made Serph’s throat feel tight.

Sera leaned in and stroked his cheek. “Are you crying?”

“Crying?” It was another word he’d never heard before.

“When you shed tears because you’re sad, or because you’re happy. Sometimes you’ll make noise, too, but not always.” Her fingers were smooth and cool against his cheek. “But tears come out of your eyes, and they help release your pent-up emotions. It’s another way people express what they’re feeling. Did you cry when he died, Serph?”

“I don’t remember. Probably not. There wouldn’t have been time to, anyway.” The battle had still been in full swing—two larger tribes at each others’ throats, with the finer distinctions of friend and foe lost amidst the chaos. In the dream, Serph had screamed, but that had probably just been something he’d added after the fact. All he could dig up from his distant memories was the image of himself kneeling next to the body, and Heat grabbing him by the arm, trying his

damnedest to pull him away.

“Get up! They haven’t announced that the battle is over yet.” Heat’s voice had finally cut through the cacophony. “Their leader is still alive. I’ve detected a leader unit close by. It doesn’t matter if it’s friend or foe—if we kill either one, the battle’s over.”

They left the body there, just like the countless other corpses. The Church monitored the vital signs of all units, and as soon as someone’s life signs faded, they were counted as a casualty on the spot. It worked the same for leaders. A leader’s death might mean the dissolution of the tribe, but that was the only thing that separated him from the rank-and-file. Once he was dead, he was left there on the battlefield for his flesh to dissolve into the silver rain, just like any other soldier.

One more who fell short of Nirvana.

He had lived his life to the last with his back turned to paradise and salvation.

“Do you—do you come from Nirvana? From paradise?”

Sera shook her head silently.

Exasperated, Serph set his hands on her shoulders and let the questions come pouring out. “What does this thing calling itself Angel know about you? What does the Church want with you? Why do you have the power to keep Atma from going berserk? Why did you suddenly appear to us when you did?”

A pained look crossed Sera’s face as she shook her head again.

Realizing that he’d lost any sense of restraint, Serph forced himself to take a deep breath. “You say that you’ve come to save us. But save us from what? From our Atma? Or something else?”

Sera wrested herself away from Serph. She curled into a ball and pressed her face against her knees as if by sheer force of will she could vanish completely.

But Serph went on. “What is a god? What is a demon? Angel called us demons, but you said that our Atma were gods. What in the world are gods and demons? What do they represent? What do those things mean?”

Sera gave no answer—she only pressed her forehead harder against her knees.

Serph saw a single droplet of liquid fall from between her fingers and form a little spot on the concrete. Unlike the rain, it was true moisture, soaking into the ground. Serph was astonished to realize it was one of Sera's tears.

Sera was crying.

"I don't know," she muttered at last with a quiet sob. "I've been trying to figure that out since I got here, but I just don't know. Things I don't even care about just come to mind, one thing after another, but not the things I want to know the most. Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I supposed to do here? All I know is that I came here to help. But I can't even *do* anything. I didn't come here so that other people would have to protect me. I came here to protect them, to help them, but I . . ."

Her words dissolved into heavy, choking sobs. Still curled up, she rocked back and forth as she wept. This didn't seem to Serph like something as simple as a "release of emotions." She looked like she was ready to rip her own heart out, or cry her entire body away with her tears.

"Don't cry," Serph said after a long while. He was sure there was a more appropriate way of comforting her, but he didn't know what it was. He felt a depressing sense of uselessness. He was a soldier of the Junkyard, a leader who knew how to command troops on the battlefield, and yet he couldn't stop the girl sitting next to him from crying. What would the old boss have done? As he wondered that, it made him remember the scene that had yanked him out of his dream, and he felt a sharp, stabbing pressure behind his eyes.

After a while, Sera wiped her own tears away, took a tiny breath, and muttered a quick apology.

"Don't worry too much about the stuff I say, Serph," she added after a moment. "I don't even really understand what I'm talking about myself. If you smack your hand against something, it'll make a noise, and if you ask me something, words will come out of my mouth. You're better off just ignoring me."

"Don't say that."

At the very least, tears didn't seem to be things that came out on their own, Serph thought. For tears to actually be shed from one's eyes, it appeared that

there needed to be something welling up within you that you couldn't hold back anymore. A release of emotions.

This must have been the reason the girl had looked like she was about to cry in the briefing room. She knew that she was here to help; as far as she was aware, that was her very reason for being. In a way, it was no different than Serph and the others existing solely to fight and conquer the Junkyard. So for her to be in a position where she was the one who was powerless, the one who needed protecting, must have been extremely painful.

"Serph?" Sera began. "Demons are wicked, evil creatures that tempt humans into doing bad things, and who hurt them and kill them. Gods are transcendental beings who greatly surpass humans and demons. They protect people, answer prayers, and are the subject of worship." Sera forced a smile. "But you saved me—you and Argilla and Cielo and Gale and Heat—so you can't be demons. Maybe you're not gods, either, but you're at least human. Like me."

For a while, Serph was quiet, just looking out at the rain and at the glittering emerald lights up in the dark sky. Sera dropped her head again, staring down at the rooftop between her knees.

"Sera," Serph said. She looked back up. "I want to ask you just one last thing: do you want to be here with the Embryon?"

Sera looked totally bewildered, like the words had been uttered in a language she didn't understand. Her eyes flit about restlessly. "If this is about how Gale said he wanted to use my blood as a weapon, I don't mind. I'll do it if it'll help. I just—"

"It's not about that." Serph recalled the irritation he'd felt when talking to Gale earlier. He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder; she flinched at the sudden warmth of his touch, but she didn't look away. "It's not about whether it will help or not. Do *you* want to be here right now? Would you rather go someplace else? The Church is looking for you. Maybe if you go to them, there's a chance you'll be able to get the answers you're looking for. If nothing else, you'll probably be safer than you are here."

He knew how illogical he was being. If Gale were to hear the things he was saying, the bishop would furrow his brow in disapproval. No, he'd just keep the

same expressionless face as always, and say something like, “You are being highly illogical, sir.” But Serph took a kind of pleasure in going against reason. In being illogical.

“Everyone is looking for you, Sera, including tribes much larger than ours. And there’s no reason to expect they’ll treat you the same way we have. They’ll probably figure that they just need to not kill you, and maybe do something like Gale suggested before. They might keep you tied up in confinement somewhere. Right now, you’re the most important thing in the Junkyard. Not even a person, to most of them.

“You’re something that’ll get people into paradise, Sera. *That’s* why you’re so valuable to us. And because you’re a useful tool in stopping our Atma from going out of control. There’s even a chance that, if we do hand you over to the Church, we’ll be released from our Atma. Who knows? They’re the ones who went and stuck these Atma inside us in the first place. So they should be able to take them out, too.”

Serph looked into Sera’s wide eyes, his face reflected in their jet-black mirrors. “Think about it, Sera. Knowing what I just told you, do you still want to be here? With us? Not with the Church or one of the other tribes?”

She didn’t respond right away. Then, she turned her gaze toward the Temple, radiant and majestic, backlit by the green glow of the horizon. “I don’t want to go there,” she whispered. “Not to that place. It scares me. Something about it doesn’t feel right. Just looking at it gives me goose bumps and makes me feel sick. No, I don’t want to go to the Church.”

Her body trembled briefly, and in that moment, panic showed unmistakably in her eyes. “I don’t want to go to one of the other tribes, either. I want to stay with you and the others, here.” She seemed startled by her own words. She turned back to Serph. “*Can* I stay here? Even though I can’t do anything for you?”

Suddenly she threw herself on him, trembling hands clutching his shoulders, her slender frame pressing against his chest. “Even though you don’t know who I am or what I’m doing here, and even though all I do is remember things that don’t make any sense. Can I stay here with you?” Sera looked up at him and held

her breath.

Serph gave a slow, affirming nod. She looked back at him for a while, as if in a daze, and then she began to shake with heaving sobs again.

“Don’t cry,” Serph said, feeling like he’d said it a little better this time. “You can stay here with us if that’s what you want. We won’t hand you over to the Church or any of the other tribes. We’ll do whatever we can to protect you. And you’re already a great help to us just by being here, Sera. So please, don’t cry.”

Her steady sobbing didn’t seem like it was going to stop, though. Tucking her against his shoulder, Serph looked up at the twinkling lights in the dark sky. The silver rain continued to fall in silence.

Just what were *stars*, he wondered? Maybe he’d ask Sera some other time. They had to be something beautiful, though—something far more beautiful than those flickering points of light made from the dead. He could tell that much from the wistful look she’d gotten in her eyes when she said the word. He’d see them someday, Serph told himself. He’d see these stars he’d never seen before. And then he’d see the sun and the moon, too. And the sky.

The sky of the Junkyard was either a dull magenta, or a gray flecked with emerald sparkles. There was no such thing as a blue sky. But somehow, Serph was certain that was something real.

Would the sky he gazed up at in Nirvana be blue? Would it have stars?

He’d have to go and see for himself. For the first time in his life, he knew for sure that he wanted to go there.

“Come on, let’s get some rest,” Serph said. Sera’s sobbing was beginning to lessen. It was getting late. The next patrol would be swinging by Sera’s room pretty soon, and once they discovered she wasn’t there, there would be a huge fuss.

“We’re going to make some new plans tomorrow. Now that we have our Atma, the way that we fight has changed. We need to adapt to that.”

Sera nodded, rubbing her eyes before looking up. Serph stood and reached down with a hand to help her to her feet. Her fingers were so tiny and cold.

“Go back to your room and get some sleep. I’ll go rest up, too. I’m finally starting to get sleepy.”

He led the little black-haired girl by the hand to the elevator. The doors closed, and the elevator began to descend. Rain kept falling on the empty concrete roof.

From the shadows appeared an animal with silver eyes and a long tail. It watched the elevator as it dropped out of sight.

Chapter 4

The system “remembers” the initial conditions which made a particular development possible, the beginnings of each new structure in its evolution. We may say, the system is capable of re-ligio, the linking backward to its own origin. In linking backward, the system “re-lives” its own experience—not in separable details, but in a sequence of holistic autopoietic regimes.

—Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe*



“You want to team up with one of the other tribes?” Heat scowled at the suggestion Serph had made at the start of the next day’s meeting. “Are you out of your mind? They’re the enemy, Serph. We’re talking about people who wouldn’t think twice about crushing us underfoot if they got a chance. And you want us to join up with them? No. What we need to do is take the initiative, strike first and take them out before they can do the same to us.”

Serph continued calmly, despite Heat’s objection. “I’ve been giving this a lot of thought since yesterday. We’ve changed. That’s indisputable. And so the way that we fight needs to change, too. We need to consider new strategic approaches we haven’t considered before. Gale, what do you think about temporarily entering into a formal alliance with the other tribes?”

“There are several instances of cease-fire arrangements being made in the past,” Gale replied, “but these were all mandated by the Church, in order to correct more egregious imbalances in fighting capability, and were not entered into willingly by the combatants. What you suggest—the tribes themselves agreeing to a cessation of hostilities—has never been done, sir.”

“Then we’ll be the first,” Serph stated matter-of-factly. “From a tactical standpoint, which tribe would be the most likely to accept an offer to work together?”

“The following two tribes currently possess military strength rivaling that of

the Embryon.” A three-dimensional image of the Junkyard appeared in the middle of the room. It was centered on the Golden Lotus itself, Sahasrara, with the other six areas forming a rough circle around it. A different color indicated each area, with the Embryon’s territory of Muladhara as well as the formerly Vanguard-controlled Svadhisthana both delineated in orange.

The territory to the northeast was Manipura, colored in red and labeled with the name “Maribel.” Serph had seen the woman who led them back at the Temple. To the southeast, colored in white, was Vishuddha, noted as being under control of the Wolves, the second most powerful of the five ruling tribes.

On the far side of Sahasrara, in yellow, was Anahata, the territory of the Solids. The girl who had attacked Serph in Sahasrara belonged to that tribe. To the north of the Solids were the Brutes, who controlled Ajna, the largest of the areas; their territory was colored in blue. The Brutes were universally recognized as the strongest of the factions in the Junkyard, due to their superior numbers and the more advanced weaponry they possessed.

Gale highlighted the Maribel in red and the Solids in yellow. “These two tribes are at constant odds with each other, and at present, they have managed to fight one another to a standstill. The slightest interference could shatter this balance of power completely. If we are to form an alliance, we should side with one of these two, and strike at the other.”

“I see,” said Serph. “Which do you recommend, then?”

Gale paused for a moment to consider. “I would suggest the Maribel. The leader of the Solids, Mick the Slug, has a reputation for being overly cautious. His tribe is somewhat lacking in terms of offensive prowess, but they are very well defended. If we were to present him with an offer of alliance, there is nothing to suggest that he would accept. Moreover, it is possible he would make a show of accepting such an offer, only to strike as soon as we let our guard down.

“Conversely, the Maribel are at an impasse in their attack on the Solids. Reports indicate that they are continuing to lose troops. Odds are much higher that they would accept an offer for an alliance. Also, since their forces are weakened, after we join with them and defeat the Solids, we will be in a prime position to overtake the Maribel as well.”

“Whoa, wait just a second.” Cielo rose out of his seat, visibly flustered. “You want us to team up with people and then stab them in the back?”

Gale simply looked back at him. “My understanding is that this is what our leader intends. Am I correct in that assessment, sir?”

“No, Gale,” Serph said. “You are not.”

Serph had expected Gale to suggest this tactic. As bishop, Gale had to consider anything that might give his tribe an edge. To him, victory was paramount, with other factors little more than noise in the equation. It was only natural that he would see a potential alliance with another tribe as nothing more than an opportunity to make up for their current lack of manpower, and to eventually place that tribe under their control, to solidify the Embryon’s own power base.

“I want to reach Nirvana,” Serph said, thinking back on what he’d felt the night before. “To do that, we have to win—we have to keep on winning, just like we’ve been doing. At this point, losing means death, and those who die are devoured. Without a corpse left behind to be taken up again with the rain, the soul doesn’t go back to the womb of rebirth. And without this rain, the Church isn’t going to be able to make more Newborns, either.”

“If that is the case, sir, then why do you propose something so irrational? If we are to form an alliance, it should be to enable us to take out two opponents at once. The way to Nirvana will be opened only for the last tribe standing. The Church has decreed it.”

“The Church isn’t what it used to be,” Serph countered. “The laws have changed, too. As far as I’m concerned, they’re the Church in name only. Argilla, if I were to be killed by one of the other tribes—let’s say the Solids—would you join them?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course I wouldn’t.” Argilla had been sitting with her elbows on the table, and she sat up in surprise at the sudden turn in conversation. “I’m a member of the Embryon, now and always. There’s no way I’d ever sign up with another tribe, especially not one that had killed my leader.”

“Better to kill them right back, instead,” Cielo agreed. “But come on, buddy. Like anyone would ever take you out.”

Serph turned to Heat next. “How about you?”

“I’d step up and take your place,” Heat replied, his words blunt, with no sign of false bravado. His red eyes kept their scowl. “And then I’d do what Cielo suggested: destroy whoever took you out. For now, you’re our leader, and I recognize you as such. But I wouldn’t put up with anyone else here taking your place. A leader has to be strong, and that puts me next in line.”

Argilla raised her eyebrows, and Cielo let out a low whistle. For a long moment the air was full of tension.

“Such a turn of events is outside of my current considerations,” Gale said obliviously, calmly continuing his analysis. “As bishop of the Embryon, I am concerned with assuring our victory. Any fallout resulting from the death of our leader is a separate issue. Moreover, such an eventuality would be highly irregular, and my plans are designed to avoid any such circumstances. I cannot plan beyond such irregularities until after they have occurred.”

“So okay. None of us want to join another tribe.” Cielo said. “Then that means —”

“It means that the laws have already lost their effect,” Serph said.

Argilla and Cielo exchanged surprised glances; even Gale seemed taken by surprised. Only Heat’s face remained impassive.

It was an understandable reaction. In the event of a leader’s death, the remaining members of the tribe were absorbed by the tribe that had been their enemy—such had always been the way. And now they were realizing that this dictum, which had been central to law in the Junkyard, which people had always followed unquestioningly, was *not* immutable: each of them had shown they were prepared to disregard it without a second thought.

“We’re only just now realizing this because most of the members of the Vanguard are dead. But if there were many survivors left, we couldn’t expect that they’d just roll over and join up with us. The times have changed. If we were to take out another tribe’s leader, then the surviving members—much like all of you—might simply refuse to accept the circumstances. And then what?”

“So, um . . .” Cielo swallowed a lump in his throat as he looked back at Serph.

“We can’t count on defeating another tribe to gain more troops?”

“We have already received several reports that speak to this question,” Gale said. “Some members of the Vanguarders are still alive. Of those, some have surrendered to us, but intelligence indicates that many more have refused to give in, and are still resisting in various locations throughout Svadhisthana. Their forces are limited, and so we are able to deal with them for now, but there is a high probability that we will see other similar instances of resistance in the future.”

Cielo sighed in dismay. “Well *now* what do we do? There are barely enough of us as is to hold on to Muladhara, and if we try to expand our territory, not only do we not get more soldiers for our trouble, but we also have to deal with insurgents afterwards? Talk about screwed.”

“This is precisely why we need to team up with another tribe,” Serph said, more emphatic now. “We need to cooperate with others, not subjugate them. If we launch a surprise attack and take out another tribe’s leader, then as Gale says, we run the risk of losing troops without gaining replacements. We could end up with more enemies than we’re equipped to deal with. To avoid that, we need to find allies that we can depend on, and build a united front.”

“But in the end, only one tribe is allowed to enter paradise,” said Heat.

“Those are the old laws. That might not even be in effect anymore. Either way, I’m choosing to ignore it,” Serph replied, his tone firm. “I want to reach Nirvana, and I want to bring as many people as I can with me. If people want to fight me, then I’ll certainly fight back. But if people are willing to trust me, then we can defy the Church, or anyone else who wants to stop us, and get as many people as we can to ascend to Nirvana, regardless of what tribe they belong to.”

Argilla was the first to speak up. “Count me in. I don’t want to kill anyone we don’t have to. We should avoid conflict wherever we can. The leader of the Maribel is a woman, right? Maybe she and I can see eye-to-eye.”

“I like the idea too,” said Cielo, raising a hand. “It’s a good plan, buddy. I guess that’s why you’re the boss, instead of Red here.” He jerked his thumb at Heat, who slammed a fist into his shoulder. “Hey, easy, Red!”

“Is there something you want to say, Heat?” Serph asked, but Heat kept his

mouth shut.

“That leaves you, Gale,” said Serph. “Any objections?”

“None, sir,” Gale replied with a measured nod. “However, I will need to create the details of the plan from scratch. This will require some time. Give me two hours, sir. I will send it to your private terminal as soon as it is complete.

“However,” he went on, “while I do not object to the plan, I must point out that you are all being somewhat irrational. Your thought process includes several leaps in logic. Please be aware that there are risks that I am not able to rule out.”

“Yeah, all right, Gale,” Serph said with a wry smile. “We’ll reconvene once Gale has drawn up his new plan. You’re all on your own time until then. Dismissed.”

“Serph.”

Serph was on his way back to his quarters to relax until Gale was done with his preparations, when Heat called after him. Serph turned back warily. “What do you want, Heat?”

“Were you serious about what you said back there?”

“Was I serious about what, exactly?” Serph could see the anger on Heat’s face; his red eyes narrowed with indignation at the question.

“You know what I mean,” Heat snarled, getting right up in Serph’s face. “Teaming up with another tribe is one thing, but you want to keep the alliance going afterwards? Kill or be killed—that’s how it’s always been here in the Junkyard. And whatever else may be going on, that hasn’t exactly changed. Have we all just forgotten that?”

“It’s devour or die now. Trust me, I know that,” Serph said. “If anyone tries to threaten us, we’ll fight back, same as always. But what will we become if we kill and eat people who mean us no harm?”

“Then we grow stronger. That’s the whole point!” Heat grabbed Serph by the arms as he spoke. He leaned closer and hissed into Serph’s ear as he pinned him against the corridor wall.

“You’ve forgotten something important. Eating others isn’t just for survival. It

lets us grow more powerful. Look at what happened with Harley. It's just like Angel said."

Serph felt Heat's breath like a hot wind across his face. The scent of blood hit his nose, and he could feel his throat starting to grow dry.

"While we're here going on about taking the high road, everyone else is out there killing, eating, getting stronger. The longer you try to hold out, the weaker you'll get. If you go on like this, sooner or later, someone's going to hunt you down. They'll beat you, and yeah, maybe they'll even eat you. Or had you not stopped to consider that?"

The stench of blood was strong in the air. Heat's eyes weren't just the crimson red of fire—they had turned the hue of fresh blood. Serph tried to pull away, but he could barely even budge. The grip on his arms tightened, and he let out a tiny groan. "Heat, let go of me."

"You can't make it to your precious Nirvana if you're dead." Heat put more force into his grip. "Either you get eaten, or you eat someone else and you live to see another day. That's how it is in the Junkyard now. Teaming up? Alliances? How long do you think a pipe dream like that can last?"

"Let go of me. Now!"

Serph felt the rage well up within him. A white light shone underneath Heat's clutched hands, and almost instantly, a thick mist sprang up between the two men.

When the mist cleared, Heat's hands and Serph's arms were coated in frost. Serph's forearms had turned grayish-white, and they were covered in a thorny carapace. Holes opened in his palms, and he felt the sharp blades of bone within ready to shoot forth the instant he willed it.

"That's more like it! *This* is how you survive in the Junkyard!" Heat quirked his lips in satisfaction before finally letting go. His frozen skin made a crackling sound, but he showed no sign of feeling any pain.

"Remember this, Serph. The rules haven't changed. Things have only gotten *more* relentless, *more* merciless, that's all. And that's how I like it. Deep down, so do you. So go and fight. Eat. It'll be fun."

“You’ve certainly eaten more than your share of people who couldn’t fight back.”

“Oodles,” Heat said with a grin. Serph was used to that sardonic smile, but now Heat’s canines looked somehow bigger. They were more like fangs now. “But they were weaklings, not even worthy prey. Barely enough to whet my appetite. But the surviving Vanguard troops, well, now they might sate the hunger a little bit. Gale did say there were still some around.”

“Some of them might still want to surrender.”

“We don’t need weaklings like them in the Embryon. Better for the weak to become food for the strong. That way at least they’re useful.”

“Heat!” Serph snapped, and as he did, he heard a loud clatter from around the corner. Both men turned and looked back at the source of the sound.

Sera was standing there with an empty tray held against her chest, her face pale with shock. “I was, um, finished eating, and I was just going to take this back,” she muttered.

Heat clicked his tongue, then shoved Serph away and stormed off down the corridor. “Don’t forget to tell Gale to give me a demerit for insubordination, boss,” he called back. “Assuming the robot hasn’t already sensed it and noted it down somewhere.” He disappeared around the corner, his cape with its large Embryon-orange cross trailing after him.

Sera hurried up to Serph and nervously grabbed onto his arm. “Serph, what’s going on? It looked like you two were fighting. Why is Heat so upset?”

“Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Serph said.

Yes, it was nothing for Sera to worry about. Heat was just angry because he thought his leader was being weak-willed. A leader needed to be strong, needed to be better than the leaders of the other tribes—or at the very least, he had to be an example to his own.

Or maybe I just don’t want to get my own hands dirty, Serph thought. *Maybe that’s all this is about.* As leader of the Embryon, Serph had a responsibility to be strong for his tribe, and now more than ever he wanted to get as many people as he could into Nirvana. If he didn’t slaughter and devour his enemies, sooner or

later, somebody else probably would get the better of him, and then what would become of his tribe?

From a certain perspective, hadn't he always been killing his foes and feasting on them to grow more powerful, even before his Atma had manifested? Even if he hadn't literally been eating their flesh, was there any real difference, when all was said and done, between what he'd done then and what everyone was doing now? He didn't have a good answer for that.

Heat was right. So was Gale, for that matter. At the end of the day, the Junkyard was a hellish purgatory where the strong devoured the weak in order to survive. With their Atma drawing out this new hunger inside them, that fact became all the more tangibly evident. There was no point trying to deny it.

Serph reached out and gently stroked Sera's black hair—his hands had already reverted to their normal form—but he looked past her worried face in the direction that his long-time confidant had stormed off. Drops of blood from Heat's cracked hands formed a trail of red dots along the floor. Perhaps Heat had seen through Serph's desire to be the only one without sin—the mask he'd used to conceal his cowardice.

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"I wonder where the people who used to live here went?" Argilla murmured as she took stock of the landscape.

Heat snorted as he brought up the rear. "This place is a war zone. I think what happened here is pretty obvious."

"No, I meant, like, before all the fighting." Argilla gestured toward the ruins before them with one hand. Buildings lay tumbled on their sides, abandoned vehicles littered the roads, and rusted shutters creaked in the wind. Twisted streetlights lined the roadways, and the crumbling asphalt was spiderwebbed with cracks.

"Sera asked me what sort of people lived in this city before it got this way. She mentioned things called 'houses' that people lived in. 'Stores' where people

would do something called ‘shopping,’ and ‘cars’ that people could drive.” Argilla’s voice grew quieter as she walked, until she was brought to silence for a time by their somber surroundings.

“Anyway, that’s how Sera described it,” she eventually continued. “She said that a city doesn’t just start out a war zone. It had to have been full of people going about their daily lives, all hustle and bustle. And before the Junkyard got the way it is today, maybe it was full of life like that, too, and maybe—”

“Maybe they didn’t fight,” Heat said with a dismissive grunt. “That girl isn’t right in the head. Who knows what the Church even wants with her? We’re put here to fight. Nobody has the luxury of coasting through life without conflict. Well, except maybe the warrior priests.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Argilla protested. “Sera said she doesn’t know how she knows these things. She just knows them.” She paused, and let out a longing sigh. “I bet wherever she came from it was like what she’s describing. That’s what Nirvana must be like. A place full of light and beauty and joy, without all this fighting. Someplace wonderful.”

“Be quiet, both of you,” Serph cautioned. They were coming up on the border of Manipura. “Another two clicks and we’ll be in Maribel territory. We should expect hostiles, and prepare for incoming fire—or some other attack. Anything is possible.”

Since the appearance of Atma, the frequency of firearms use in engagements had decreased markedly. Those with weaker Atma were still at risk of being killed if they were surrounded by a number of humans in a coordinated onslaught, but by and large, conventional weaponry tended to be ineffective against those who had unleashed the power of their Atma. The battle with Harley had shown that well enough.

Serph, Heat, and Argilla had brought their usual firearms with them, nonetheless, but that was more out of habit and for peace of mind. Any battles they fought would be decided with Atma.

Heat and Argilla went quiet at Serph’s command. He could feel that the air was strangely heavy, and he brought a hand to his cheek to touch the pulsing Atma symbol there with his fingers. There was a prickling sensation, and a faint blue

aura flickered at the edges of his vision.

Enemies nearby. Serph could sense them—several individuals with Atma, brimming with hostility, very close and getting closer. His Atma was activating in response to theirs. It screamed for release, to be unleashed upon its quarry.

It wanted to feast on flesh and blood. On life. On power.

“It would be preferable to send a relatively small team,” Gale had said, speaking to the assembled group in the briefing room prior to the start of the mission. “If we send in a larger team, the Maribel may well think that they are under attack, and react accordingly. Also, if our goal is to conduct direct negotiations with their leader, then it behooves us to send our own leader, in order to establish a rapport on equal footing. Two people should accompany him for protection. Are there any volunteers?”

“I’m in,” Heat said emphatically. He flashed a glare at Serph, and the look in his eyes would brook no protest. Serph didn’t say anything. They both knew that Heat was the most accomplished combatant in the tribe after Serph himself.

Argilla chimed in next. “I want to go, too. The leader of the Maribel is a woman. Also, Heat’s not exactly the greatest conversationalist.”

“Very well,” Gale said. He looked to Serph, who gave a nod of confirmation, then continued with the briefing. “I will remain here and provide backup for the ground team. Cielo will continue to keep an eye on Sera and see to her well-being. I take it she is remaining docile?”

“Yeah. I feel kinda bad for her,” Cielo replied, nervously kicking at a table leg. “I mean, she’s probably just really bored, doing her best to keep quiet. I go and talk to her when I can find the time, and that seems to make her happy. She’s got a lot she likes to talk about. Things like the ‘sky.’ And ‘dancing.’”

“Then she seems to be in good hands,” Serph said. “Gale, how much personal weaponry do you think we should bring along?”

“The sheer force of Atma outclasses conventional firearms by several orders of magnitude. Unleashing one’s full potential can neutralize an opponent almost instantaneously. In any case, seeing as the goal of this mission is to establish

discourse, you should carry only reasonable self-defense weaponry to avoid giving the impression that you are seeking a confrontation.

“Also, so that we can stay in communication, you should take this, and keep it at your ear.” Gale produced a small device no bigger than a fingertip. “This acts as a transceiver. With it, I will be able to provide you with further data as I analyze it. It transmits sound only, but will still allow me to stay apprised of your situation.”

Serph nodded and took the device.

“I am currently selecting individuals who possess highly mobile Atma from within our ranks,” Gale went on. “In the event that negotiations should break down, there will be a team of reinforcements available for immediate deployment from the front line. If you sense any danger, call them in at once.”

Gale reached down and pulled out a set of small pouches from a box on the floor beside him. “These,” he said, setting them down and pushing them forward, “contain ampules of Sera’s blood. If you anticipate that your Atma might be at risk of going out of control, take them.”

“Is she all right?” Serph asked as he pulled one of the pouches closer and looked inside. It contained a small package about the size of his palm, and within were twenty ampules of blood, arrayed in two neat rows.

“There were no adverse effects on her health. To outfit three of you, I needed only two hundred milliliters of her blood.”

“I don’t need that stuff.” Heat snorted, tossing his pouch aside. “I’m not putting that junk in my body. If I get the urge to feed, I’ll just hunt down something to sate the appetite.”

“Don’t you dare waste something Sera sacrificed to give to us!” Argilla exclaimed, hurriedly picking up the pouch. “I’ll bring it just in case. This will all be one big waste of time if we wind up eating the people we’re trying to make nice with because someone couldn’t control their urges. This is why I said you’re not exactly ideal for peace talks.”

As Argilla put away the pouch, Heat asked, “You don’t plan on eating, Argilla?”

“No, I don’t,” Argilla replied irritably. She glared at him before she went on.

“Because I’m human. I could never want to rip apart and devour another person. And now that we have Sera’s blood, I don’t have to.”

“So, you’re surviving off the blood of Sera instead of your enemies,” Heat sneered. Argilla swallowed, but offered no response. Heat went on. “You’re not going to find many people who’ll just let you eat them. The girl’s a rare exception. But you’re still eating someone, Argilla. So can the high-and-mighty act.”

Argilla’s face darkened. “No, I—”

Serph snapped at them to be silent, then made a point of storing away his own set of ampules. “We should keep these on us at all times as a precautionary measure. Though we should also keep in mind that in the future, we might not have Sera to help us out like this if we lose control. There’s a lot we still don’t fully understand about our Atma and how they work. But for now, we need to focus on forging this truce with the Maribel. Remember that.”

Cielo let out a breath he’d been holding. Argilla fumbled to put her portion of the ampules away. Serph strode out of the briefing room, aware of Heat’s gaze burrowing into his back as he left.

“Here they come,” Argilla whispered.

Serph nodded, feeling the pulsing in his cheek grow stronger as the throbbing sensation began to spread through the rest of his body.

The three companions were less than a kilometer from the Maribel base now, and Serph’s heart was pounding harder than was natural. He did his best to ignore the sound of his own breathing echoing in his ears and focused his attention on what was around him. The Atma brands on Argilla’s chest and Heat’s arm likewise called out for blood, glowing and pulsing—Argilla’s a deep pink, Heat’s a bright crimson.

Enemies were near.

With his enhanced senses, Serph could feel the presence of individuals hiding behind cover.

Yes, enemies. Enemies had come.

Prey had come.

Small, black shapes darted between the shadows of half-collapsed buildings, too quickly to make out.

Heat raised his head and looked around, grinning as he licked his lips. “Oh, we’ve got a feast waiting for us.”

At the edges of vision, more signs of movement danced about with each passing moment, though no figures ever came fully into view. The sounds of scrabbling claws and fluttering wings filled the air, and a whispering rasp like that of rustling paper grew louder and louder, sending an unpleasant tingling sensation along Serph’s spine.

“I am reading multiple heat signatures converging on your location,” came the crackling sound of Gale’s voice through the transceiver in Serph’s ear. “The device can only scan out to a range of roughly fifteen meters, but I can detect approximately thirty heat signatures in just that area. They are not close enough to pose a serious threat, and I am not detecting anything of an inordinate size, but be on your guard.”

Serph caught fragments of the shadows’ crazed whispers.

“I want the girl. Those full breasts, those succulent thighs, made of luscious, fresh meat . . .”

“The man with the silver hair is mine. Oh, look at that lovely face!”

“That third one, with the red hair—he will make a fine meal. He will be a source of terrific power.”

Heat lifted up one hand, the motion almost casual.

“Heat, stop!”

A moment later, Heat’s arm changed into that of his Atma, creating a ball of fire the size of his clenched fist, and despite Serph’s exclamation, he launched it towards the roof of the building where most of the approaching figures had converged.

There was a keening explosion followed by a low rumble, and then a series of

screams. Various forms were scattered in all directions, and something with large wings and the head and torso of a woman flapped its way up into the sky. Heat grinned to himself with satisfaction.

“Heat, we came here to talk, not to start a fight!”

“Yeah, I know. But this situation here gave me a bad feeling. So I figured I’d do something about it. And look, it worked.”

“I can no longer detect any heat signatures,” came Gale’s voice in Serph’s ear. “Heat’s attack has increased the ambient temperature of the area too much. However, I did detect the signatures of what I believe to be enemies fleeing from the area of increased heat. I do not expect that any hostile Atma are within the detection radius.”

“Acknowledged, Gale,” Serph replied. He shot a quick glance over at Heat and continued moving. For now, he still needed to focus on striking up negotiations.

Before long, they came to a concrete wall roughly five meters high, with a set of massive iron doors that were pocked with rust. The wall had been painted with the crimson red of the Maribel tribe, but countless bullet holes, deep scoring, and burn marks that were all balefully reminiscent of the destroyed Vanguard base had destroyed most of the paint.

There was no sign of anyone there, and no one called to challenge Serph and the others as they would have expected at an enemy stronghold. The Maribel must have known there were intruders in their domain, and yet no one stood guard atop the walls. The barrels of the machine gun emplacements pointed in no particular direction, unmanned.

Argilla was on edge as she regarded their surroundings. “This place can’t have been wiped out already, right?” she said. “Do you think it’s like what happened with Harley’s men?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Serph said. “When I went to the Temple, I saw their leader, Jinana. So she’s still alive. Or at least she was.”

Then the massive iron doors creaked, and there was a low rumble as they began to slide open.

Just inside the doorway, a score of men and women stood in formation. They were armed and clad in combat uniforms, but their expressions were painted with unease, their faces contorted with tension. At their center stood a tall woman with bright green hair and matching eyes. One of her slender legs had been splashed with the crimson color that marked her tribe. Her head held high and a hand on her hip, she shot a contentious gaze at the newcomers.

Serph noticed a teardrop-shaped marking painted on one of her cheeks—one that hadn't been there when he'd seen her back at the Temple. The stern look on her face intensified as she recognized him, and she gritted her teeth so hard that Serph could see the muscles stand out along her jaw.

"You can stop right there," she called out. Her voice was low and hoarse, and yet it still carried a note of authority. "We detected your approach an hour ago. What do you want here, Embryon? Clearly this isn't an invasion. Unless you really thought that you could take down Jinana and the rest of the Maribel with just the three of you?"

The troops on either side of her shifted into a more defensible position. It was a movement that clearly showed ample training on their part. Jinana glanced at them and waved a hand, as if to say, "Not yet."

"We didn't come here to fight you, Jinana of the Maribel." Serph gestured for Argilla and Heat to stay back, as well, and then stepped forward alone. Jinana watched him curiously.

She looked a few years older than Argilla. Her deep green hair didn't quite come down to her shoulders, and her long bangs fell in front of one of her eyes. She wore a custom-fitted suit tailored to emphasize her breasts and buttocks—the costume of a leader confident in both her looks and her abilities. All told, her well-balanced frame and long limbs made for an impressive fusion of fighting prowess and form.

"So what *does* bring you here, Serph of the Embryon? I recognize you from the Temple. You've got guts, coming here in person."

The Maribel troops began to edge forward. Serph couldn't blame them: here was the leader of the tribe that controlled both Muladhara and Svadhisthana, having marched into the midst of their territory with only two soldiers to defend

him. Killing a tribe's leader spelled death for the tribe, and if the Maribel killed Serph right here and now, they'd be in control of three areas in one fell swoop.

"Steady now, men," Jinana called to her troops. "Let's hear why our friend has come—after he takes that thing out of his ear. The Embryon's bishop has been listening in on all of this. He's a sharp one, and I'd rather we keep the conversation here just between us. If you want to talk, we can talk. One on one."

A worried look crossed Argilla's face. "Sir?"

"It's all right, Argilla. Did you get that just now, Gale?"

Serph reached up to his ear and pulled at the thin cable connected to the socket behind his earlobe. The transceiver came free of his ear and fell into his hand.

"Sir, I do not recommend cutting off communications," came Gale's voice from the transceiver, actually sounding somewhat worried for once. "You are vastly outnumbered, and I have detected the presence of heavy ordnance. Hold position, and reinforcements will be at your location shortly."

"It's all right, Gale. Have them hold off for now. Wait for me to contact you again. Do not take any actions until you have my say-so. That's an order. Serph out." Once he finished speaking, he clenched his fist around the device, hard. There was a dull whimpering sound as it died, and then Serph opened his hand, letting the broken pieces fall to the ground. "Are you satisfied, Jinana?"

"Very well," Jinana replied with a nod. She motioned with her head, and her men stepped out from behind her. They trained their guns on Argilla and Heat, prompting them to step back.

"What the hell?" Heat griped.

"Jinana," Argilla called out. "We didn't come here for a fight. We came here to talk!"

"So you say," Jinana said, dismissive and curt. "Serph, come with me."

Heat still looked like he might tear someone apart, and Argilla's face radiated panic. Serph shot them a look, wordlessly urging them to stay calm, and then quietly stepped forward.

“Drop your weapon,” said Jinana. “Your two friends, too. You’re to do exactly as I say from here on out.”

“All right. Heat, Argilla, do as she says,” Serph replied, pulling his gun from its holster and dropping it to the floor. One of the soldiers quickly snatched it up. Argilla looked like she was going to resist, but upon seeing Serph relinquish his weapon, she bit her lip and unslung her rifle from her shoulder and handed it over. Heat bared his fangs in a threatening grimace, but after Serph spoke his name sharply, he unholstered his gun and surrendered it.

“You’re coming inside to talk to me alone, Serph of the Embryon,” Jinana said, giving Serph another once-over to check for any other hidden weapons he might be carrying. “Your two friends will wait out here. If they make any trouble, we’ll be forced to take appropriate measures. Maybe disarming you won’t make a difference, but let me remind you that you’re outnumbered a hundred-to-one here.”

“I understand,” Serph replied. He turned to Heat and Argilla. “Wait here until I get back. Do not under any circumstances invoke your Atma. And please, try not to make a scene, okay?”

“This is bullshit,” Heat snarled, the brand on his forearm glowing faintly. “If we just roll over for these people, we—”

“Understood, sir,” Argilla replied, cutting him off. “I’ll keep Heat in line. You go and have your talk.”

Serph gave them a final nod and wave, then turned around. Jinana was waiting for him by the door. She ushered him inside, alone. The door to the Maribel base closed with a heavy thud behind him.

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“Looking for something?”

“No,” Serph said, interrupting his quick inspection as he made his way inside, following after Jinana and her armed guards. “I’m just impressed at how your headquarters looks so different than ours.”

Jinana let out a quick snort. “Impressed? Yes, I’m sure that’s it,” she replied dubiously, but after a few steps, her facial expression finally relaxed, perhaps due to the relief of being on her own home turf.

“For starters, our base isn’t nearly this well organized,” Serph continued. Probably because their tribe was much larger, the Maribel’s living quarters were much better appointed than the Embryon’s. Unlike the Embryon base, with its cracked concrete walls and exposed ducts, the hallways here had full and even coats of paint, and the floor was lined with white plastic tiles that were easy on the feet. The lighting was far better, too. Evidently they could afford to allow for form as well as military function.

Serph figured that he was seeing only a low-priority section of the Maribel facility, since it was unlikely they’d take him anywhere of critical importance. Even so, from what he was seeing here, he had a whole new impression of how this tribe compared to his own.

“You’re a strange leader, Serph of the Embryon. You’re not one for military discipline. I could tell that the moment you showed your face back at the Temple.” Jinana turned and looked closely at Serph. With his silver hair, silver eyes, and androgynous face, he was someone who stood out in a crowd—and even if he hadn’t, it was common sense for a leader not to let his rivals see what he looked like when they were all gathered together.

“And yet you stepped out from behind your screen to show yourself, as well,” Serph pointed out.

“A misstep on my part. I should not have been so impulsive,” Jinana replied with obvious regret in her voice. “At this point, I suppose it hardly matters, but at the time, I was just so fed up with the Church’s attitude.” No sooner were the words out than she snapped her mouth shut and looked warily at Serph, as if to gauge his reaction to the blasphemy she’d just uttered.

“I understand,” Serph replied, and Jinana’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “I’m finding it difficult to go along with the Church lately myself. Especially now, with what that strange voice calling itself Angel was saying.”

Jinana’s eyes grew wider still; her relief was plain.

“Already, people are starting to ignore the old laws,” Serph said. “And that got

me thinking. That's why I've come to talk to you today. I'd like to propose a partnership with the Maribel."

Jinana had started to move on, but immediately stopped in her tracks again. Serph looked back at her, right into her bright, green eyes, with all the sincerity he could muster. "There's no reason why only one tribe should be able to ascend to Nirvana. I think as many people as we want can make it there, as many as would like to go.

"And that's why I've come to talk to you about my plan, Jinana. Back at the Temple, I saw how upset you were at the loss of your people. And I empathize with the pain you feel. If we can work together as allies, maybe we can avoid going through any more of that pain."

Jinana looked away, saying nothing, and abruptly started walking again. Serph could see that she was recomposing herself. She led Serph toward the far end of the hallway they were in, eventually stopping in front of a door there. She brought her hand up to the door panel, then stood for a moment before addressing the two guards who had accompanied them. "Granato, Zaphir, you're dismissed," she said quietly.

"But ma'am, we'd be leaving you alone with the enemy."

"Granato is right, ma'am. This could be all some trick. He might attack you the moment he's got you alone."

"And you think I'm fool enough to be beaten?" Jinana snapped at them. "I said *dismissed*. Go outside and wait with the others. No one enters this room until we come out."

The two guards clearly disapproved of the order, but rather than face further reprimand, they saluted and headed back the way they had come, though they did turn and look back several times along the way. Only when they were out of view did Jinana say, "Come in." The door panel lit up as she released the lock. "These are my private quarters. Nobody else has ever been in here before."

The room was huge, much larger than the standard-issue quarters Serph himself had. The walls were painted in soft, warm colors, with the floor a darker shade of the same. Despite being in the heart of enemy territory, Serph found himself awash with a sense of calm.

A partition divided the room. Serph could see a large bed and what appeared to be a shower stall on the other side. Jinana's private terminal was larger than the generic model Serph used, with multiple monitors hooked up to it. It appeared that she'd had no difficulty requisitioning the best equipment for herself. Even the chair in front of her terminal was huge and finely made, unlike any chair Serph had ever seen. In contrast to the flat benches he was used to, this chair had a nice, firm back, padded for support and comfort. He let out a soft chuckle despite himself.

"What's so funny?"

"Ah—nothing," Serph said, masking his laughter. "I'm just thinking that it must be nice to be the leader of such a large tribe. I bet you can sit in that chair for hours without getting sore."

"You *are* a strange one," Jinana said with a shrug as she took a seat in the chair. "But before we get started, let me see your Atma. I don't recognize the symbol on your cheek. Is it one of the High Atma?"

"Yes, that's right," Serph said, bringing a hand to the brand on his cheek. In his head, he envisioned the words of the activation command mentioned in the Church's archive file—*om mani padme hum*. His cheek grew warm, and waves of energy rippled through his whole body. All of his senses shifted, and he became aware of things that mere human eyes and ears could never hope to. The pulses of energy welling up within him forced him to open his eyes—open them to something *more*.

He saw Jinana—no, he *felt* her. She leaned back slightly in her chair, bracing herself instinctively. Even though she'd asked to see Serph's Atma, she was nevertheless overawed by the transformation taking place before her eyes.

The world became something beyond human ken and experience. The green-haired woman radiated heat and energy that Serph could feel deep inside him. Something beyond his control made his throat ache and his mouth grow dry. With conscious effort, he was able to usher it away, stressing inwardly to himself that this was not a fight. Where was Jinana's brand? He could feel it in his very skin, activating in response to his own Atma triggering.

"My Atma's name is Varuna," he said. "It commands the power of ice, and

wields blades from both of its arms.” His voice came out of his mouth distorted. This was the first time that his Atma had taken form due to invocation of the command words rather than in response to the heat of combat. He opened up one of his arms, allowing the blade to slide out from within. It was a blade of bone, a curved and graceful implement of death. Jinana stared at its gleaming sharpness as if paralyzed by its bright edge.

“That’s enough,” she said, voice tight with tension. “Change back.”

Serph released the transformation. Bit by bit, his expanded senses dwindled back to normal, and for a moment he was crushed by the feeling of his own insignificance.

That was risky. Evidently, activating one’s Atma could enhance the bearer’s mood. That was likely the first step in triggering the urge to devour. There was a good chance that calling upon that power too recklessly would result in one getting lost amidst those enhanced emotions, unable to turn back; Serph reminded himself that he would need to be very wary of that.

“If you don’t object,” he said, “I’d like to see your Atma. But I won’t insist.”

“My Atma is called Ushas,” Jinana said, more readily than Serph had expected. “Though I’d rather not transform just now. I cannot yet control it as well as you can.”

“Fair enough,” Serph conceded.

Jinana gestured to another chair across from her, and Serph took a seat. “Let’s get back to what brought you here,” she said. “What exactly do you intend by forming an alliance between the Embryon and the Maribel?”

Serph described his plan to her, taking care to go into detail while explaining the logic behind it. The idea to work together had come to him the night before, after he’d sent Sera back to her room. After Argilla’s vocal criticism of the Church, he’d remembered seeing Jinana’s face back at the Temple, outraged at the change the Church had thrust upon them.

If there were others who detested the idea of having to devour people, he had thought, then it should be possible for him to work together with them. For the Embryon this would have the obvious benefit of supplementing their lack of

manpower, but what drove Serph even more than that was the image he had of Jinana, struggling with a grief for which she had no outlet. Serph had already figured that he might be able to talk to her without things turning violent even before Gale had proposed the Maribel as a potential ally. Serph had taken his bishop's analysis as a sign that he was on the right track.

Considering their shared opposition to, and distaste for, both the Church and the concept of cannibalism, Serph figured she would be willing to listen, and might well like the idea of the mutual boost his plan would provide to their dwindling military capabilities. The Vanguard's had destroyed themselves feeding on one another, and given what Jinana had said at the Temple, Serph guessed that the Maribel had not gone unscathed.

After Serph had finished speaking, Jinana was quiet for a while, considering. At last she lifted her face and stared at him directly. "I think I get what you're saying," she said. Her green eyes shone with the solemn dignity of a leader. "But, what do the Maribel gain by allying with the Embryon? You claim that teaming up will bolster our fighting forces, but who's to say you won't turn and attack us as soon as we've helped you defeat your other enemies? It would be the smart move, after all. Never in the history of the Junkyard have two tribes worked together like you suggest. But there *have* been instances of one tribe backstabbing another after the Church has ordered an armistice."

"I can't claim that the same thought hadn't occurred to me," Serph admitted. "In fact, that was what Gale—our bishop—initially suggested. But I wouldn't hear it. Allying with the Maribel is my decision, and as leader of the Embryon, what I say goes. All I need now is for you to trust me, Jinana."

"Trust?" Jinana's green eyes narrowed. Her gaze was piercing as a dagger, but Serph didn't flinch. "That's a strange-sounding word. What does that even mean, 'trust?' Fighting each other is what the tribes do. We aren't like the rank and file who change allegiance if our leader dies—you and I are the leaders, Serph of the Embryon. We have no choice but to be enemies."

"If that's true, then why hear me out at all?" Jinana was visibly taken aback, and Serph went on. "You know that taking our weapons was a meaningless gesture. Invoking our Atma would allow us to do far more damage than any mere firearm would. And you even went so far as to ask to see my Atma. So

why?”

“I . . .” For the first time since he’d come in, Serph saw uncertainty on Jinana’s face. She lowered her head and brought a hand to her mouth. “I didn’t think you meant any of it,” she said at last, as if she couldn’t even believe her own words. “You said that you’d come to talk, that you hadn’t come looking for a fight. I’d never heard an enemy claim that before. So I thought I’d see how things played out. I was certain that it was some kind of trick, that you’d attack as soon as the opportunity presented itself, and that I’d defend myself with my own Atma.”

“But I *haven’t* tried to kill you. We haven’t attacked your men. You know at least that much is true so far. And in addition to the tactical merits I’ve mentioned, there’s one more thing we can do for the Maribel.”

“And what’s that?”

Serph was reluctant to say more. Before leaving for the mission, Gale had insisted that the girl’s existence remain a secret. He had to choose his words very carefully.

“We have a way to keep our Atma from going berserk.”

Jinana’s chair fell to the floor with a thud as she leapt to her feet. Her body shook all over, and her eyes went wide and wild.

“You do?” she said, her lips pale and quivering. “No, it can’t be true! A way to keep our Atma under control? Impossible! The Church archives made no mention of such a thing, nor did Angel. How can the Embryon make such a claim?”

“I can’t give you any details,” Serph said, meeting Jinana’s gaze. The look in her eyes was nearly too much to take. “But I can say this: none of the Embryon have turned on each other—not one, not once. Nor have we eaten any of our own. It very nearly happened once, but we were able to stop it. None of us have lost control of ourselves or our grip on our own humanity.”

“It can’t be.” Jinana’s voice was barely even a whisper, and she slumped forward, catching her hands on the edge of her desk. “But then . . . what happened to us back there? All that carnage and bloodshed, everyone going crazy—and all I could do was watch. And then something—*someone* came over

me, and I couldn't fight it. All that blood . . . and meat." Her voice grew even quieter, and she shut her eyes tightly. "I don't want to remember it. Don't make me."

"There's a way to pull you back from the edge before you go over," Serph said. Jinana looked back up at him. "You need to believe me. I know you want proof, but I can't show you just yet. But that time will come, and you need to trust me until then. It's like I told you before we came in here. I really do mean this. I want as many people as possible to be able to ascend to Nirvana, no matter what tribe they belong to—the Embryon, the Maribel, anyone that will ally with us. If what I saw of you at the Temple was the real you, Jinana, then please, join me."

Jinana hesitated, her tension palpable; she dropped her gaze to the floor and gripped the edge of her desk so hard her fingertips turned white. For a long time she stood motionless. Then she snapped out of her reverie, straightened, and strode toward the door.

"Jinana."

"Come with me," the Maribel leader said without turning around. "I'll give you my answer outside, for all to hear. Our meeting is adjourned, Serph of the Embryon."

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"There's one thing I want to ask you," Jinana said, her stiff voice echoing faintly in the hallway, empty save for the two of them. "This method you have of controlling Atma—can it also bring back someone who's already lost their grip on their humanity?"

"Unfortunately, no, it can't. At least not in most cases," Serph replied, thinking back to how close he and the others had come to crossing that line themselves. "Sometimes, if you can get to the person right after they've started to go berserk, there's still a chance, but if the Atma has been in control for any real amount of time, there's nothing to be done."

"I see." Jinana let out a faint sigh.

“Incidentally, where is the Maribel’s bishop? I haven’t seen him.”

“He’s dead.”

The response was so curt that Serph didn’t know what to say.

“The conflict between his bishop conditioning and his berserk Atma caused his implants to malfunction. When we found him, he was somewhere halfway between Atma and human, holding a gun in his mouth. He blew his own head off, taking out his brain and the implants at the same time.” After a moment, Jinana added, “He went out on his own terms. The consummate bishop.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, but Serph guessed it was masking the pain she felt underneath.

Serph hesitated to ask his next question, but decided to press on anyway. “So then what we ran into outside the base—”

“—are members of the Maribel, yes,” Jinana finished for him.

She didn’t say “were,” Serph thought.

“Some of them lost their minds completely when they first went berserk. Others were able to hold on, but couldn’t deal with their hunger, and so chose to banish themselves before they wound up tearing out their own comrades’ throats. They are my people, and my responsibility.”

She was quiet for a while, then sighed before going on. “I thought that there might be some way to save them. Or at least give their deaths some meaning.”

Serph could feel Jinana’s regret. She seemed to realize that she’d revealed a vulnerable side; her face hardened as she walked onward.

They made it back to the main entrance, and Serph could hear sounds of commotion outside the doors. Jinana said nothing as she brought her hand up to the control panel, and then the doors unlatched with a thud before swinging open to either side. Outside, the restless tribe members had split into several groups, but they turned as one to look towards the doors as they opened.

As Jinana’s people expressed their relief that she was all right, Argilla forced her way through the crowd and practically leapt up to Serph. “Well, it doesn’t look like you’re hurt. But it’s good you came back as soon as you did,” she added

in an undertone. “Keeping Heat in line is kind of a tall order. Another five minutes and I think he might’ve exploded.”

“What’s going on? Oh, hey, you’re all right,” Heat said, stepping up behind her. He looked Serph over thoroughly, then snorted. “I was just biding my time for when things finally got interesting in there. Too bad.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Serph chuckled. He was glad to see his friend’s face again. And it was looking like they’d be able to avoid a fight with the Maribel. If they could work together with one tribe, maybe they’d be able to negotiate with the others, too.

“I think this is going well,” Serph said. “Jinana hasn’t given me a solid answer yet, but I’ve got a good feeling about it. She said she’d make her announcement in front of the others.”

“Well, I hope it’s the response you’re looking for,” Argilla said, standing on her tiptoes to get a look at Jinana, who was surrounded by her men. Two of Jinana’s guards held out their hands and boosted her up on top of one of the vehicles in front of the guard wall. The people who had been milling about all gathered around her. Even the armed guards that had been assigned to watch Argilla and Heat stopped training their guns on them and turned their attention to what was going on.

“All right, Maribel, listen up!” Jinana called out, her resounding voice silencing the fifty or so soldiers. “The Embryon have brought us a proposition: they want us to cease hostilities, and to form an alliance to work together against the other tribes.”

A quiet murmur ran through the crowd, growing steadily louder. Many people turned to look at Serph and his companions, who had been gathered near the back. Most of their faces were stark with disbelief, and some looked like they were bracing for a surprise attack even now. Serph and his companions knew better than to speak out yet.

Heat began to bare his teeth. “Calm down, Heat,” Serph murmured, putting a hand on his upper arm. “It’s all right. They’re just surprised at the announcement.”

“Nobody in the Junkyard has ever stopped to consider anything like this,”

Argilla pointed out. "It's almost ridiculous to even suggest. I mean, she heard us out, sure, but I'm still getting nervous."

Jinana waited for the buzz amidst the crowd to subside before she continued. "I personally think that we should take them up on this offer of alliance. But on one condition." She held up a hand to urge her people to stay quiet.

Serph looked up, returning her gaze as she looked at him over the assembled crowd, and stepped forward. "What is this condition, Jinana of the Maribel?"

"Serph of the Embryon," she declared, emphasizing his name and title, "my condition is this: we will each choose one person from among our troops to represent our tribe, and those two people will do battle."

Argilla sprang forward. "Hey, hold up! We didn't come here looking for a fight!"

"Which side wins this battle will determine whether we move forward with the alliance or not," Jinana said, ignoring Argilla's outburst. "The Maribel will not kneel before an inferior tribe. We will only work with a tribe that is our equal, if not our better. If the Embryon cannot demonstrate their worth as a tribe, then you will surrender to me on the spot, Serph of the Embryon."

Jinana's green eyes met Serph's silver ones. "And if your champion loses, then, after you have given us the means you spoke of to keep our Atma under control, you will either swear loyalty to me, or you may take your own life while you are still leader of the Embryon. If you would prefer to die in battle, I have more than enough soldiers to grant you that wish. I offer you the choice, out of respect. Are we agreed?"

Argilla looked like she was about to make another protest, but Serph held her back. "Very well, Jinana of the Maribel," he replied, his voice firm. "I agree to your terms. I take it we are free to choose our champion?"

"Naturally. And we will do the same. If you would prefer to call someone in from your headquarters, I am willing to wait until they arrive."

"You won't need to," said Heat, stepping up beside Serph. A smile tugged at his lips, and he seemed to grow larger. His sharp fangs extended and he cracked his knuckles, like a war machine rumbling to life. "And here I thought I was gonna

have to go home without having any fun. I could use a good workout. Plus I'm starving."

"Heat, I'll let you fight, but I don't want you to kill anyone," Serph whispered to him, knowing he couldn't make Heat back down completely. "If you kill your opponent, it's just going to create ill will."

"Don't be naïve," Heat snorted, flashing Serph a sidelong glance. "My opponent's sure going to try to kill me. And you know that if I lose, you're as good as dead. Because if I do, and I think for one second that you're going to submit to the Maribel . . . I'll kill you myself."

"I figured you'd say that," Serph said, somehow smiling despite the circumstances. "But even so, *do not kill your opponent*. Jinana takes the deaths of her people hard. I don't want to hurt her by making her lose another. It won't help our cause."

"You're a fool," Heat spat, and then he stepped further forward, raising his voice. "I am Heat of the Embryon. Which one of you wants to be my dinner?"

The members of the Maribel started to bristle. Heat's brazen taunt had clearly provoked some of them, while others shrank back, intimidated. They turned to one another, murmuring amongst themselves; Jinana remained quiet, arms crossed, allowing her subordinates to decide who would face the Embryon challenger.

After a while, the crowd parted, and a lanky man stepped forward. He was much scrawnier than Heat, but he moved with a nimble and graceful fluidity, his frame strong and sinuous. He had long, purple hair that came down to his shoulders, and he wore his tribal color markings around his right eye. On his upper body, instead of the usual combat suit worn by his tribe, he wore a lightweight, knife-proof mesh.

Hand-to-hand combat was clearly his forte. He brandished a large combat knife in one hand, playing with it as if it were a harmless toy. His eyes were as narrow as knife slits themselves, and he had a small nose and thin lips that flashed a wicked little smile. "My name is Bat," he said in a sneering voice that grated on the ears. "My Atma is Camazotz. I'm going to carve you into pieces."

"I don't need to know the name of my food," Heat retorted, thrusting out his

right arm, the Atma brand on his forearm pulsating with a red light. “Save the bullshit posturing and let’s do this. Unless you’re too afraid?”

The two of them grinned widely at each other. Bat spun his knife around once more before sheathing it at his lower back. A moment later he drew another pair of knives, one in each hand, and shrieked as he spread his arms wide and rushed at Heat.

“What’s with his voice?” Argilla asked, screwing up her face and covering her ears. Serph did the same; the warrior’s shriek created a sensation like needles stabbing through his eardrums. It was clearly a form of high-frequency sonic attack.

As Bat sprinted forward, he began to transform before the onlookers’ eyes. His entire body turned black and grew even thinner as his torso shrank. His legs twisted up and seemed to shrink as they pulled in toward his abdomen, which was now covered in smooth, dark skin.

Unlike his legs, his arms spread apart and grew bigger, the knives in each hand transforming into sharp claws. His wicked smile widened, never leaving his face even as his mouth shifted into a fanged snout. His ears grew to enormous size, flapping back and forth on either side of his head, which had sunk down onto his chest as his shoulders broadened and hunched. His joints popped as they distorted, and with a *whoomf*, membranous, cape-like wings caught the air.

His feet left the ground, and he flapped up a whirlwind of sand as he rose into the skies above the Junkyard as an enormous, black-winged creature. “Prepare to be devoured, you wretch!” shrieked Bat, now Camazotz, his voice ear-piercing as he bared his needlelike fangs. “I will tear you apart and devour every last scrap of you, down to the marrow!”

Heat, meanwhile, had not sat idly by. His smile grew even more confident as he clenched his outstretched hand into a fist, softly murmuring the trigger words —*om mani padme hum*. In an instant, his entire body was enveloped in blue light. He swung his arm, and the light vanished as if he’d cast it off. In his place stood Agni, a massive crimson form with two heads and four sturdy limbs, stomping at the ground. His burly chest and shoulders were clad in vibrant yellow armor, and the hideous heads each bore an enormous, semicircular

mouth.

The sight of this monstrous, fiery presence drew cries of shock from the Maribel troops. Even Serph had never had a chance to study Heat's Atma close-up like this before; the sight was indeed terrifying. Sera had said that Agni was a god of fire, and now Heat truly was the avatar of flames.

Camazotz let out a long shriek and swooped in to attack, and Agni thrust out one of his arms to counter. There was a quick flash, and Camazotz was forcibly driven back. A set of four sharp claws sprang forth from Agni's armored fist. He brandished them menacingly and let out a roar, striking out as Camazotz tried to back away. Camazotz managed to evade him, then beat his wings once, rising up into the air.

"Get back down here!" Agni bellowed as he swung his claws, but all he got in response was a sneering squeal and a fierce blast of wind. Agni dug his feet in and covered both heads with one arm, warding off some unseen force that came battering down from above. At the last possible moment, he jumped back, narrowly avoiding a direct hit—the stones where he'd been standing were blasted up into the air, where they burst apart into tiny shards of gravel.

Some type of gravity attack? Serph wondered. No, it had to be a sort of focused, high-energy shockwave. At first glance, it looked similar to Argilla's power, but that wasn't accompanied by the high-pitched sound that split the air now. Argilla was covering her ears and squeezing her eyes shut to fend off the pain.

Members of both the Maribel and Embryon watched awestruck as Agni let out a bellowing cry and his body erupted in fire. The blazing flames danced and flickered, taking on an arrow-like shape as they roared through the air towards Camazotz. Camazotz whirled swiftly to fend off the attack, whipping up a column of heat and then shrieking as he was burned. The high-powered shockwave that came with his cry missed its target, blasting a large hole in the fortress wall; Maribel soldiers scattered to avoid the falling rubble.

Agni rushed to attack Camazotz as he descended, but the bat-avatar would not be taken so easily. Once more he fluttered his bladed wings, attempting to regain altitude as he fired off another series of sonic shockwaves. Agni couldn't

hope to avoid them all, and several of them scored direct hits on his torso, blasting through his armor and sending blood and bits of flesh flying. The burly beast began to stagger, and Argilla let out a clipped scream.

Camazotz swept in to intercept some of the bloody chunks of meat in midair, making a show of catching them in his mouth. Blood dripped down onto the ground from his fanged snout, and he let out an ear-piercing shriek of glee. “Your meat is rotten, Embryon! How could I sate myself with such filth?”

Agni let out a ferocious howl. Half-chewed flesh made wet, slopping sounds as it splattered to the earth, and Camazotz let out another mocking squeal as he swooped in, slashing with the sharp claws on the ends of his wings. Just before they could connect, however, a blow from a massive red fist knocked him from the sky.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, punk,” Agni snarled, his booming voice seeming to shake the ground itself. He opened his massive mouths wide and sank his razor-sharp fangs into the base of one of Camazotz’s wings.

Camazotz writhed in a desperate attempt to escape. He let out another shriek—not another shockwave, this time, but a scream of pain. Agni snarled and shook his heads, whipping Camazotz back and forth. The sound of rending flesh filled the air, and crimson droplets scattered. Blood pooled on the ground beneath the two combatants. Camazotz flapped his wings two or three more times and finally pulled free, his injured limb drooping. His jaws parted to launch another volley of shockwaves—at such close range, the attack staggered Agni, surrounding him with a scarlet mist. And yet, in spite of the deep gouges on his chest and shoulder, one of Agni’s two heads turned to flash Serph a satisfied grin.

One of the fire-Atma’s hands thrust out, the four claws blazing red with heat as they rammed into Camazotz’s abdomen, sending out a gout of blood.

More blood bubbled out of Camazotz’s mouth, silencing his cries. His body began to spasm and convulse, the shuddering growing steadily more intense until a faint blue light enveloped him and his transformation came undone. Bat, now back in human form, collapsed to the earth, his body limned with red.

The Maribel warrior curled into a fetal position, coughing up ropes of ruddy

spittle. He struggled unsteadily to lift his head as the massive red form of Agni approached. The gouge in Agni's shoulder had already healed, and Camazotz's blood was all but invisible against that red skin. Bat looked around frantically, searching for some means of escaping his imminent demise. A look of abject terror flickered in his eyes.

Serph dashed into the fray. He couldn't let this happen.

"Jinana!" Bat squeaked out. Agni stomped nearer, reaching down and picking up his enemy—now reduced to terrified prey—and bringing the writhing man's head up to his jaws. Just as those rows of teeth were about to bite down on Bat's skull, Serph interceded, grabbing hold of Agni's arm.

"Stop it! The duel is finished. Let him go, Heat."

"Why do you stop me?" Agni demanded, his free head snapping around to face Serph. "He lost, and losers are eaten by the victors. That's the new rule. If I lost, the same would happen to me."

"That doesn't matter," Serph replied. Agni's fury showed; an oppressive heat washed across them, accompanied by the thick stench of scalded blood. The fire-creature showed no sign of pulling his writhing foe's head free of his maw. Serph felt his stomach churn in response to all the blood; he put more force into his voice and his grip on Agni's arm. "Fight the urge! Remember why we came here!"

"I remember!" Agni roared. His other huge mouth tightened around Bat's skull. There was the sound of bone crunching, and then bright, red blood started to spill from between his lips.

Argilla gasped. Even Jinana, who had been standing close by, waiting to see how things would turn out, unfolded her arms and took a step forward, the shock plain on her face.

"That's enough!" Serph snarled through gritted teeth. His eyes were clouded with pain, and his legs wobbled underneath him as he fought to keep his balance. "You wanted blood? You've had your fill. That's an order, Heat! Change back and let him go."

Blood began to run down along Serph's arm. His own blood. Before Agni could

sink his teeth into Bat's skull, Serph had forced his own arm between those tightening jaws.

Agni's huge fangs had sunk into the flesh of his arm, piercing all the way to the bone. There hadn't been time for him to transform, to protect himself with his Atma's armored carapace. The blood reached his shoulder now, a line of red running down from between Agni's teeth. With just a little more pressure from his jaws, Agni could easily bite Serph's arm clean off—and the head that it was protecting would come soon after.

Time seemed to stand still. The only sound was that of Bat's frantic breathing.

At last Agni shifted, opening his mouth bit by bit, sliding his fangs free from Serph's arm before he hurled Bat to the floor like a piece of discarded trash. With a shimmer of blue light, the monstrous crimson form disappeared, replaced with that of a red-haired man with a sullen expression on his face.

"Fine," he said, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his clenched fist, then spitting on the ground. "You're the leader, Serph. I don't have to like your orders, just follow them."

Serph meant to reply with a wry smile, but he found himself grimacing and gasping in pain. He dropped to one knee. More blood dripped from his savaged arm. The limb was mangled from the right elbow forward, looking like it had been jammed into some sort of bladed vice.

Argilla hurried up to him, and she reached out to touch the injured arm. "That was reckless of you, sir." She glared up at Heat. "And you—your leader reminded you over and over not to kill your opponent. It was a direct order!"

Heat merely scowled and looked away.

"It's all right, Argilla. It's not as bad as it looks." This time Serph managed a smile, and he took Argilla's arm to help him get to his feet. He was faintly aware of the Atma brand on his cheek, glowing softly in response to the scent of blood. "Heat went easy on me. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd taken the whole arm, so don't be too upset at—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, though he didn't know if that was due to the pain of his injury, or the sensation of his stimulated Atma. Without a conscious

thought he shoved Argilla out of the way and spun around.

The knife coming his way missed its mark, merely grazing his side instead of striking him in the heart. The brand on his cheek burned, and he heard himself scream with a voice that was not his own.

Instinctively Varuna-Serph expelled a gust of frigid air and ice at Bat, who was coming at him with another knife in hand. Bat staggered back with a shout and dropped the now-frozen knife, which shattered like glass when it hit the ground.

“What the hell do *you* think you’re doing?” Heat snarled as he stepped forward. The Atma mark on his forearm was already beginning to burn red again. Argilla moved to shield Serph, but Jinana was there first, her movements swift and silent.

She stood in front of Bat in silent fury. He was groaning and clutching his hand; the color had gone out of it. It took him a moment to realize that someone was standing in front of him. When he did, he looked up. Then Jinana delivered a loud blow right across his face.

Everyone fell silent, Embryon and Maribel alike.

“Why, Jinana?” Bat said, reeling as he brought a hand to his cheek in disbelief. “If we kill the leader of the Embryon now, the Maribel will have control of three territories!”

“*Know your place.*” Jinana’s voice was low but it seethed with suppressed rage. “*I* am the leader of the Maribel. And you dare defy me, Bat? You lost. It’s done. Accept it. You are to take no further action against the Embryon or their leader.”

Serph had dropped to his knees again. Argilla was seeing to his injuries. “Jinana,” she said, her face bright with hope, “does that mean that the Maribel —”

Jinana nodded, then turned to face the crowd. She stood up tall and straight. “All right, everyone, listen up!” she called out. “The duel is finished. As per our agreement, the Maribel will enter into an alliance with the Embryon.”

Serph looked up in surprise. After a brief pause, Jinana went on, her voice ringing loud and clear. “From now on, our two tribes will fight as one against the

others. No one from our tribes shall seek quarrel with the members or the leader of the other without due cause, and bloodshed is strictly forbidden. This is my decree, as leader of the Maribel. If anyone objects to this, let them step forward now.”

No one spoke. No one moved. Bat had retreated to the edge of the gathering, head hung in shame, his pale cheek twitching. Jinana took a tentative breath, and then finally let her expression relax, the tension leaving her body as she extended a hand to Serph.

“Serph, it is my own failure as leader that one of my men has slighted you. I’ll call a team of medics for you at once to see to your wounds.”

“There’s no need. Things will heal on their own if I just activate my Atma.”

“Consider it a matter of decorum. Please, allow us to help.” And then she smiled. It was the first time Serph had seen her with such positive emotion on her face.

“I never thought things would turn out like this,” Jinana added more quietly. “It’s quite a surprise. And it’s been quite the experience. ‘Trust,’ was it? What a nice little word. I think I like it.”

Serph rose to his feet, still holding her hand. Even he could hardly believe he’d gotten the resolution he’d been hoping for. Here he was, shaking hands with a woman who had been his enemy just moments before. Her hand was warm, and Serph thought that the smile she wore now suited her far better than the face she put forth as leader.

“Jinana, get away from him!” Bat cried out from behind them, his expression one of utter desperation. The power of his Atma had caused the bleeding from his abdomen to stop, but his arm still hung limp, having been nearly bitten off at the shoulder. The color of his bloodied face was a ghastly contrast to Jinana’s. “This is all a trick! They’re just waiting for us to let our guard down, and then they’ll stab us in the back. Don’t let all this talk of ‘trust’ cloud your judgment, Jinana. Think about what I’ve done for you!”

“Silence, Bat!” Jinana didn’t so much as look at him. “The medics will see to you, too. With your injuries it will take you some time to recover, even with the help of your Atma. Until then, go easy and recuperate. Once you’ve had the

chance to calm down, you might understand my decision.”

Bat looked around, a mad expression on his bloodstained face. “Don’t be fooled by them! Will you sell out the Maribel like this? Sooner or later, these people will devour you all, like the red one tried to do to me! You’ll see!” He pointed at Heat, who merely stood impassively in the face of all the wild screaming.

“This way, Serph of the Embryon,” said one of the Maribel as he came forth and pulled Serph away from Jinana. He bore crimson markings, but his tribe uniform was a simple one, and he carried no weapon. “Come inside. This should be relatively simple, just sterilizing and bandaging the wounds. You’ll probably need stitches, but we’ll do the best we can.”

“Oh, uh, thank you.”

“Thank you?” The words had come to Serph unbidden, and Jinana, standing beside him, raised an eyebrow upon hearing them. “What does that mean? Is it something like your ‘trust’?”

“They’re words of . . . gratitude that you say when someone does something for you. I think.” Now that Serph thought of it, they were words that Sera used a lot. When Cielo prepared her clothes, when people said kind words to her, after meals . . . and the phrase had just spread to Serph and the other members of his tribe from there.

Jinana smiled brightly. “Thank you. It has a nice ring to it. I’ll have to remember it, along with ‘trust.’”

“Jinana!”

“I told you to be silent, Bat,” Jinana snapped. She didn’t even turn to acknowledge him. Bat glared at Serph from behind as he was ushered into the base along with Argilla and Heat.

Just before the door closed behind them, Serph snuck a look back. Bat was being tended to by a group of medics, but there was a fire in his eyes, smoldering with unbridled hate. Fresh blood dripped down from his mouth where he’d bitten into his own lip. His entire body shook with rage, a form of hatred unlike anything Serph had ever seen before, radiating malice as if it were a tangible

thing.

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“Here you go,” Serph said, setting the sealed pouch atop the table and sliding it over to Jinana. “Each of these packs contains twenty capsules. You’ll have to forgive me, for the time being, if I don’t tell you what’s in them, but I assure you it isn’t poison. If you want proof, then by all means, pick whichever of the capsules you like and I’ll take it right here.”

It had been three days since their negotiations in Manipura and, as they’d agreed upon then, Jinana had come with a small contingent of her own to visit the Embryon in Muladhara. Serph had come to meet them at the border personally, his patrols having been called back just beforehand on the off-chance that their presence might lead to a fight. Jinana showed similar caution, leaving the men she’d brought with her inside her own territory.

Gale and Heat had wanted to be with him for this meeting, but Serph had refused, insisting on speaking with Jinana alone. After all that he’d gone through to earn her trust, he was unwilling to risk wrecking things by creating some kind of double-standard.

Hushed voices murmured back and forth just outside the door, probably members of the Embryon listening in to see how things were going. Their interest was understandable. It was unheard of for anyone but the top brass to set foot in the Embryon’s main briefing room, to say nothing of the leader of another tribe. The whole of Muladhara was talking about it.

“There’s no need for that. I trust you, Serph of the Embryon,” Jinana said as she picked up the pouch. She opened up the flap and raised her eyebrows as she took a look at the colored capsules within. “So there are twenty here. One of these per individual will suffice?”

“Sometimes, but not always. When taken as a preventative measure, one or two should do the trick, but when someone’s already out of control, it’s hard to say for sure. Around how many members do the Maribel currently have?”

Jinana didn't respond right away. "Fifty-two," she said after a moment, overcoming her long-held reluctance to reveal information about her forces to someone who only days before had been her enemy.

"Fifty-two." The number took Serph by surprise. The Embryon numbered around one hundred fifty members, nearly three times as large.

"That doesn't include those outside our base," Jinana said. "The ones who have . . . given in to their Atma. Have they lost their minds completely? Is there really nothing to be done for them—no way to make them human again?"

"I'm sorry." Sera had already told Serph as much. When asked, she'd hung her head for a while, and then explained that nothing could restore the humanity to those who had been completely taken over by their Atma, no matter how much of her blood they took. "I wish there were something we could do, but right now, it just isn't possible." As he broke the bad news, Serph recalled the dejected look on Sera's face.

"I see," Jinana said, and Serph looked away, swallowing back his regret at crushing her hopes.

"Unfortunately," he said, "we don't have the means to produce these capsules in large quantities. We can only give you enough to keep your present members in check. Given your current fifty-two members, figuring three capsules per member with some extra just to be safe, does two hundred sound all right to you?"

"That will be fine. You have my gratit—no, thank you, Serph." Jinana smiled as she amended her words at the last moment. "That feels better. 'Thank you.' Even the feeling of saying it aloud is . . . extraordinary. Am I using it correctly?"

Serph smiled back. "Yes, I think so." He stood up from his seat. "We'll go ahead and prepare the remaining capsules. You're welcome to say for dinner, if you like. Normal food, of course." Nowadays, the term "food" sometimes had unfortunate connotations.

"I would be happy to. Though I have to say, you Embryon are something else."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's because their leader is just so strange," Jinana said with a teasing

grin, “but the whole time I’ve been here, I’ve felt strangely calm. I’m in the heart of what I’ve always considered enemy territory, and yet I’m even more at ease here than I am back at home with the Maribel—even given the state of your facility, here.”

“Sorry about that.” Serph gazed ruefully at their ramshackle surroundings. “This is the best the Embryon can do, I’m afraid.” The tiny briefing room, with its rough, utilitarian chairs and benches crammed around the map table, must have felt like little more than a storage closet to someone who was used to spacious personal quarters and a big, comfy chair.

Jinana smiled at him apologetically. “Still, the longer I spend here, the more I can feel the tension leaving my body. It’s warm and comfortable down here, too. Relaxing. I think I can understand why you people don’t lose control. You’ve got your capsules to take, and the simple feeling of being in this place helps keep you from becoming so high-strung.”

Serph guessed that Jinana’s feeling of calm probably came from being near Sera. Whereas Serph and the others had become used to it now that they’d been around her for a while, someone coming in from the outside, like Jinana, would no doubt pick up on it more acutely.

Serph went to open the door, and a small-statured man who’d been pressed up against it fell through the opening, sprawling against him with a cry of surprise.

“Cielo, what are you doing here?”

Cielo looked up at him with a nervous chuckle and a sheepish grin. Behind him, Serph saw the other three members of his senior staff, all looking ashamed—with the exception of Gale.

“What are all of you doing here? I told you I was to speak with Jinana alone.”

“Yeah, and that’s so totally unfair!” Cielo said, pushing back off of Serph’s chest and stamping a foot once he was standing upright again. “I wanted to get a look at the leader of the Maribel. I mean, she’s going to be our ally now, right? Plus she’s a lady! How cool is that? Howdy, ma’am. Name’s Cielo. I’m the boss’s star pupil. Nice to meet you.”

“Cielo, you’re only embarrassing yourself,” Argilla said as she hurried to pull him away. “I’m sorry, Serph. I’m sure you heard the crowd hanging around out here earlier. I came down here to shoo them off, and who should I see amongst them but Cielo and these two, trying to listen in. And after everyone else scattered I got all tangled up pushing and shoving with these guys and couldn’t move.”

“You were tangled up with us because you were listening in, too,” muttered Heat from beside her.

Argilla’s face went red. “Okay, maybe I was curious, but—anyway, what were *you* doing here, Heat? You were told to stay away until they were done talking too.”

“I go where I want. Nobody warns me away from anywhere.”

“When I arrived, only these three were here,” Gale stated calmly. “The other members ran off when they realized I was coming. Which I only did in order to ensure that your orders were being followed.”

Serph sighed. He wasn’t sure whether to be upset or pleased. Sure, they had gone against his orders, but he knew they’d only done it because they were worried about him, so he couldn’t be too mad at them for that. The real issue was how Jinana felt about it. He turned around to apologize for the disruption, and to let her know he would get rid of them, but he was shocked to find her laughing uncontrollably.

In the midst of struggling against Argilla’s attempts to hold him back, Cielo’s face went dumbstruck. Argilla and Heat widened their eyes in surprise as well, and even Gale’s mask of objective neutrality slipped the slightest bit. Jinana’s laughter grew even louder, and she doubled over in her chair, as if the amusement was too much for her to bear.

“Oh, boy,” she finally managed to get out through all her chuckling. “I knew your leader was an odd duck, but I didn’t expect his entire staff would be, too. You’re an amusing bunch, Embryon. I like you. I’ll definitely take you up on that offer of dinner now, Serph, and I hope I can sit near these folks. There’s a lot I’d like to talk about. It seems like the fun is just getting started.”

Two hours later, as per schedule, Serph led Jinana back to the border, where she reunited with the members of the Maribel who were waiting for her. She carried with her a package of capsules containing Sera's blood. Her good mood clearly surprised her underlings.

"We shall discuss tactical details later on, Serph of the Embryon." Now that she was at the head of her troops again, her face once again wore the resolute expression with which she projected her aura of leadership. "I think that we shall fight well together. The Maribel have gained a valuable ally. Please tell your people I said as much. Especially the pink-haired one, Argilla, and the wily little blue fellow." She smiled, reminiscing. "Tell Argilla that I especially enjoyed getting to talk to her, and that I hope to see her again soon. I never thought I could talk so much about anything other than battle. She's an intriguing one. I wish I had someone like her on my own staff."

"I'll be sure to tell her," Serph assured her. "And take care to use those capsules only when necessary. We won't be able to replace them right away if you run out. Their supply is limited—we're in the same boat, ourselves. Someday, I'll be able to tell you more, but until then, please try to make do with what you have."

"Understood," Jinana said with a nod, the smile vanishing from her face. She gave the pack of capsules a little pat. "We'll be in touch, Embryon. Until we meet again."

Jinana nodded to her escort and they headed out. Serph watched and waited until the Maribel had all crossed the border back into their own territory before heading back to the Muladhara base.

He found Argilla alone in the dining area next to the briefing room, gathering up the utensils.

"Argilla? Are you cleaning up by yourself?"

"Welcome back, Serph," she said, looking up, her cheeks still a bit flush. "Did Jinana make it back all right? She's an incredible individual. I'm glad we didn't wind up having to fight her. You know, I think this might have been the first time I ever had such a thorough conversation with a single person. I've never even had another woman to talk to on equal footing before. I didn't think it could be

so much fun.”

“Jinana said something very similar about you,” Serph said, a slight smile on his face. During dinner, it had felt like Jinana and Argilla had done the lion’s share of the talking. Things had started out with an air of tension, the talk slow and stilted, but somewhere along the way Jinana and Argilla had begun to really hit it off.

Cielo had tried to jump in on the conversation occasionally, but he’d barely been able to get a word in edgewise. Heat, typically, had kept to himself, eating in silence, and when Serph and Gale had finished their meals, they’d gone off to prepare the remainder of the capsules, leaving the women to carry on the conversation. If Jinana hadn’t had a specific time she’d needed to return to her escort troops, they’d probably still be talking even now.

“Did she really? I hope I get to see her again. Off the battlefield, if possible. I’d love to get to chat with her without having to worry about the time.” Argilla sighed, then shook herself out of her little reverie. “I didn’t say a word about Sera, I swear. I was very careful about that.”

“I trust you. Jinana said she wants to see you again, too,” Serph replied, and then he left the dining hall, heading for Sera’s room.

To be on the safe side, Sera had been confined to her sleeping quarters, not allowed out while Jinana was at the base. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, looking bored, but when she saw Serph, her eyes lit up.

“Has everything been taken care of, Serph? Did you get to have your talk with Jinana?”

“She made it back safely,” Serph said, pulling up a chair and sitting down to face Sera. “I’m sorry that you had to give so much blood. How are you feeling? Are you in any pain or discomfort?”

“I’m fine,” Sera said. “I’ve had plenty of rest, and the medical staff has done a good job looking after me.” Her face was still somewhat pale, but she smiled all the same.

Serph patted her knee reassuringly. “Things with Jinana and the Maribel seem to be going well. We’re looking at launching a joint strike against the Solids in

Anahata. I still need to work with Gale on the details—but if we work together, we should be able to assemble a force that can beat the Solids.”

“So, there’s going to be more fighting.” A look of sadness overcame Sera’s face. “You can’t try talking to the Solids like you did with the Maribel?”

“It isn’t realistic. The Solids are all about deceptive tactics—sneak attacks, that sort of thing. We’re certain we wouldn’t be able to trust them. Also, their leader, Mick the Slug, has a pretty strong self-preservation instinct, to the point that he doesn’t show himself on the battlefield. He probably wouldn’t even agree to meet with us if we came to negotiate. But maybe, if the Embryon and Maribel can fight together and reduce his forces enough, that might change.”

“You couldn’t just tell them about my blood?”

“No. We haven’t even told Jinana yet, and only my own senior staff and I know about your blood’s ability to suppress Atma. If the Solids or one of the other tribes were to learn about that, there’s a very good chance that they’d try to take you by force in order to get their hands on that power. Jinana is sort of a special case in all this. I wouldn’t get your hopes up as far as the other tribe leaders are concerned.”

“I see.” Sera lowered her eyes.

A jarringly cheerful voice broke the ensuing silence. “Oh, hey buddy! I didn’t know you were here. I came to hang out with Sera.” It was Cielo, carrying a tray piled with more than enough food for two people. He scampered through the door and skittered to a stop beside them.

“Come on, Sera, let’s eat,” he said. “I’m still pretty hungry, so I figured I could eat again with you.”

“You’re going to eat again? Didn’t you just have dinner?” Serph said, eyeing the mountain of food in disbelief.

Cielo curled his lips. “Yeah, but the whole time, Jinana and Argilla were talking and they wouldn’t even let me get a word in. And then when I tried to complain about it to Argilla afterwards she was all, ‘A guy like you wouldn’t understand. Leave the grownup talk to us, you little pipsqueak.’ I told her to can it with the trash talk. Besides, I’m not *that* little.”

Serph suppressed a smile as he listened to Cielo's tough talk. He thought back to when he'd seen Jinana off—when she'd referred to the young soldier as “the wily little blue fellow.” It took effort to keep a straight face.

“So Jinana and Argilla have become friends? Oh, that's wonderful,” Sera said happily.

“Friends?” Serph turned to Sera in confusion at this other new word.

“Friends, you know—someone that you enjoy talking to, who makes you smile, and who you miss when they're not around. That's a friend.”

“Is it something different from an ally or a fellow tribe member?” Serph asked.

“They're similar, but a friend is someone you enjoy being with regardless of affiliation, or of any tactical advantage or mutual benefit they bring you. Jinana and Argilla seemed to be having fun, right?”

“So then, like, you and me—we're friends?” Cielo set the tray down on the table and rested his elbows on the bed, looking up at Sera.

She was visibly taken aback. “Me . . . me and you?”

“Well, yeah. I enjoy being with you. We have fun talking, and I like it when I can make you smile.” Cielo counted off on his fingers and tilted his head. “I mean, there are members of the Embryon I'm like that with, too. But like, you can be friends and allies at the same time, right?” He looked up expectantly at Serph.

Serph hesitated a moment, but then looked Sera in the eye and nodded. “I'm not sure I completely understand what ‘friends’ are, but I saw Jinana and Argilla today, and I think it's a good thing for you to be able to enjoy someone's company like that, Sera. I want you to be comfortable and relaxed while you're here.”

“And Heat and Gale might be a little rough around the edges, and maybe they can even seem kinda scary at times, but they've got their good points, too,” Cielo was quick to add. “I think it would be great if we could all be your friends—I'm not using that word wrong or anything, am I?”

“No, not at all.” Sera had been moved to tears. “Thank you, Cielo. And you too, Serph.”

“Oh, hey, no, don’t cry.” Flustered, Cielo waved his hands, and then started to unload the food from the tray onto the table. “C’mon, Sera, dig in. I mean, you’re really cute, but you’re a tad too skinny. Gotta eat up and put some meat on those bones.”

Serph left the room, closing the door on the sound of happy voices. Cielo could take care of things from here.

He mouthed the word “friend” to himself again. As Jinana would have said, it had a nice ring to it. Was friendship really something that could go beyond boundaries? Beyond tribes? It had to be. Argilla and Jinana were proof enough of that. Serph had told Sera that Jinana and the Maribel were a special case, but perhaps, if they played their cards right, it might be possible to find some way to avoid fighting the other tribes after all. Heat would probably tell him to stop dreaming and dismiss such ideas out of hand, but nonetheless there was a bit of a spring in Serph’s step as he made his way back to his room.

Gale was waiting outside when he got there.

“Sir,” he said, “I have drawn up a tentative plan for our joint attack with the Maribel against the Solids. I have a hard copy for you here, and I have also forwarded the file to your private terminal. If anything is unclear, or if you feel anything can be improved, I can make revisions provided you get me your feedback by LT tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Serph said. He felt like he’d been yanked out of a dream and back into harsh reality. Nothing had really changed; they still needed to plan for war. They still had to go out there and kill each other—and perhaps do things far more horrific than that.

He took the hard copy packet and tucked it under his arm. “You should get some rest yourself, Gale. From what I can surmise from my conversations with Jinana, you’re the only bishop in the Junkyard that’s managed to attain a proper balance between bishop conditioning and Atma.”

Gale appeared unfazed by this information. Serph wondered at his self-control. The Atma inevitably brought out one’s belligerent instincts, along with a powerful inhuman hunger, but bishops were conditioned to cut out all emotion and desire to the point where they thought and behaved essentially like

machines. The madness that resulted from that disparity could be fatal. Serph could only assume that the tumult that might otherwise have been raging inside Gale was being kept in check by Sera's blood and her calming presence. He guessed that these factors had allowed the neural connections to Gale's implants to reconfigure themselves, a self-adjustment that enabled his Atma and his bishop capabilities to coexist.

"I fear your responsibilities are only going to increase from here on out," Serph added. "I'm counting on you." He turned and headed into his room, but Gale remained standing by his door as if there were still something he wanted to say.

Serph paused, suspicious of the bishop's motives. "Did you have something else to report? If this is about my breaking the transceiver, I think I heard enough about that the other day."

"The woman poses a risk, sir," Gale said without segue. It took Serph a few seconds to realize he was talking about Jinana, and once he did, he felt indignation well up inside him.

He tossed the hard copy of the report haphazardly onto his desk and then turned back to face Gale in the doorway. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "You think there's a chance that Jinana might betray us? That in the midst of our coming battle together, she'll seize the opportunity to turn on us? Is that it?"

"It is not." Even in the face of Serph's anger, Gale remained unperturbed. "I am wholly convinced that she will honor our arrangement. She would quite literally risk her own life to keep the alliance with the Embryon intact."

"Then what makes her such a risk?"

"She cares too much about her people."

For a few moments, Serph was baffled; then a fierce ire rose within him. He felt like slugging his icy, analytical advisor. What was so wrong with caring about one's people? A good leader saw how important his people were, and didn't squander his followers' lives or let them suffer unduly. Serph said as much, at length, his tone firm with anger.

"You are in a biased position, sir," Gale said flatly. "Though the rules have

indeed changed since the appearance of our Atma, the core tenet that a tribe is eliminated at the death of its leader has not. This means that if Jinana were to die, the Maribel would fall apart, along with the alliance we have forged.”

“And what does that have to do with her caring about her people?”

“I have explained this to you before, sir.” For the first time Serph could recall, Gale looked him directly in the eye. Serph shut his mouth in surprise; the bishop usually kept his gaze down as he provided his monotone data stream. Serph was now seeing him in a somewhat different light.

“I can understand why you empathize with her. Like her, you have an inclination to put the well-being of your people above your own,” Gale continued. “Your actions have demonstrated this since before the incident with the black object, and since the emergence of our Atma, this inclination has become all the more pronounced. But this is a grave mistake. If Jinana dies, so do the Maribel. She is not taking that into account. Likewise, if you die, the Embryon die with you. The other members of the tribe should be employed as your shield, to ensure that you survive at any cost. That is the duty and purpose of such units.”

Serph growled back at him. “You want me to become like Mick the Slug—hiding safely within my base, using the members of my tribe as disposable tools to die in my stead?”

“It can be an effective strategy,” Gale said without pause. “Before now, the Embryon were too weak to fight without their leader alongside them on the front line. However, now that we count the Maribel troops among our ranks, your direct presence is no longer necessary. You should remain at headquarters, issuing commands from here while your senior lieutenants direct action on the battlefield. There need be no reduction in combat effectiveness. For example, our troops have been able to force the surrender of many of the surviving Vanguard without having to put you at risk on the front line, sir.”

“And is that what you’ve written up in your battle plan?” Serph asked, gesturing impatiently at the report he’d thrown on his desk.

“It is not,” Gale said, with just a moment’s hesitation. “A bishop’s responsibility is to assist with the leader’s line of thinking. Therefore, the battle

plan I have drawn up is in line with a strategy that you would personally devise. However, I did feel compelled to say that this plan goes against my own recommendations. You are no longer in charge of a low-ranked tribe—the Embryon now stand in fourth place alongside the Maribel. As your chief tactician, I cannot endorse your risking death or injury by directly participating in battlefield engagements as you have in the past.”

“Then you would prefer to serve a man like Mick the Slug?” The anger had not left Serph’s voice. “Someone concerned only with his own survival, cowering behind sturdy walls? Someone content to watch as his people get killed, so long as it’s not his own neck on the line? Is that really the kind of man you want to serve under, Gale?”

It was a while before Gale responded. “I am a bishop, sir.” There was visible effort on his part as he searched for the right words. “A bishop serves his leader. Regardless of what sort of leader that may be, the responsibilities of the bishop’s position do not change. If the leader dies, the tribe is eliminated. My primary consideration is ensuring that the Embryon do not suffer such a fate. My own wishes do not figure into that.”

“Then think about it,” Serph insisted, stern and clipped. He stepped into his quarters. “Think about what it is you want to do. I’ll have my revisions to the battle plan back to you by tomorrow. Until then, think about whether you serve me, or whether you serve the Embryon.

“And if you decide that I’m not suited to ensuring the Embryon’s continued survival, then you can go look for someplace that has a leader who’s more fitting. But know that I will not be the sort of leader who hides behind a shield of his own people. I don’t ever want to become that sort of leader, and I won’t have you advise me to do so. If you don’t like that, you’re free to speak up at any time. If you want to leave, you’re free to leave.”

“You wish to expel me from the Embryon, then, sir?”

“No. I depend on you, and if possible, I’d like to be able to have you at my side advising me for a long time—for the foreseeable future. I just don’t want to make you work for someone you aren’t satisfied with. Just think it over, Gale. And . . . I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

Gale offered no response.

“You’re one of my most important people, you know,” Serph added more quietly, stepping closer to the door. “I don’t want to upset you. I don’t want you to get hurt. I certainly don’t want you to head off and die in some anonymous ditch where we’ll never find you. At least understand that much.”

Gale hung his head but made no further motion. As Serph closed the door, he eyed the Atma brand on Gale’s shin, pulsing with pale, blue-green light.

There was silence outside the door for a while, and then, after a few moments, the sound of footsteps gradually fading into the distance. Serph steadied his breathing and went to sit down on his bed, looking over the battle plan.

It was a good plan. It really was the sort of thing Serph would have come up with, supplemented with many of Gale’s own excellent ideas. Serph lay back on his bed. Sheets of paper fell onto the floor, but he didn’t have the wherewithal to pick them back up. He was far too tired.

Gale was right, Serph thought with a sigh.

But then, Gale was pretty much always right, wasn’t he? His assessment of Jinana was probably spot-on. She did care too much for her people.

Nobody would have faulted her for counting the people who’d already lost their humanity, and had been exiled from her base, as dead and gone—they were beyond the ability to save. But that didn’t stop her from *wanting* to find a way to save them. The grief in her voice when she’d said so had resonated with Serph someplace deep inside, someplace over which he had no control.

His mind drifted to the Church’s most recent decree, made not long before his latest meeting with Jinana. No longer were the members of a defeated tribe to be absorbed by their conquerors; henceforth, a tribe that lost its leader was immediately dissolved, and the surviving members were left to the wilds, like the Newborns, with no one to help them, until they were either killed and devoured, or until they lost their humanity and became monsters. Either way, Serph thought, it was a far more miserable fate than before.

And now we eat people . . .

Thanks to Sera’s blood and the calming effect that her presence had, the

Embryon had thus far been able to avoid the upheaval that had destroyed the Vanguard and weakened the Maribel. But there was no telling what might happen once they took military action against the Solids, or when they began using their Atma to do battle. As Heat had pointed out, devouring people made their Atma stronger, so if they avoided doing that, they'd be at a severe disadvantage when facing off against others with no such qualms. Even Sera's blood had its limits. They couldn't count on her to solve all of their problems forever.

"What is it," Serph asked himself, "that I'm so afraid of?"

Somewhere inside, he found his answer: *change*.

He'd never had strong compunctions about killing and seeking victory before the incident with the unknown object and the arrival of the Atma. Death had always just been another thing that happened, to others as it would to him, with no special significance. But now it was something of profound concern to him. He didn't want to lose any members of the Embryon, and if possible, he wanted to keep his allies in the Maribel safe, as well—not simply out of tactical considerations, but because that's what his feelings made him want—feelings of compassion, of friendship.

But at the same time, he knew that in order to protect Sera and ascend to this place the Church called Nirvana, he would have to stand atop a pile of corpses, a mountain of blood and flesh. Blood and flesh—the very thought made his throat ache. A tingling sensation ran along his cheek. The Atma that had lain dormant now stirred in response to its bearer's thoughts.

Everything used to be so clear and simple, without the slightest potential for change. You fought, you won, and you kept fighting in order to reach the paradise that the Church promised. Back then, even paradise hadn't been anything more than a concept. Before receiving his Atma, Serph had never even wondered what sort of place Nirvana was; and in all likelihood, neither had anyone else.

And yet now he was filled with an active desire to go there, and to try to bring others with him. Before Atma, the very thought would have been impossible; now that Atma had changed the old rules, although he found that he *did* have

this thought, the idea was outright laughable. A bearer of Atma either devoured other bearers of Atma, or failed to survive.

Gale would tell him he was being contradictory, and he'd be right. But Serph couldn't change what he was feeling—even though a small part of him felt an ever-increasing trepidation at the new emotions he'd discovered inside himself. How far was this metamorphosis going to take them all?

He remembered the power he'd felt when he'd transformed in front of Jinana, and the intoxicating pleasure that came with it. Maybe that was the real source of his fear. Turning into something other than himself was both terrifying and fascinating. *Yes, fascinating.* Along with the fear came a compulsion that Serph could barely resist, something that sought to draw him in, to change him forever into something other than human. "Come here," it seemed to whisper to him seductively. "Relish the blood of your foes, bask in power to your heart's content, and lord yourself over the dead, the despairing, and the indignant."

And Serph feared that he was too weak to deny that call forever. If he were to fight—and devour—his foes, then that voice might well win out. There was also the hard-to-deny temptation that it would be a sort of blissful release, to free himself from a yoke that was holding him back.

Before he won the fight against the Solids, Serph thought, he needed to win the fight against Varuna, against the bloodthirsty demon within him that was his Atma.

Angel had said that the Atma of the Junkyard's inhabitants was the manifestation of their true nature. That may well have been true, but if one couldn't control one's own nature, surely one ran the risk of no longer being oneself. Maybe the Church considered that a success, but Serph wouldn't just let himself be controlled. He wanted to remain himself, as he'd always known himself to be.

He'd heard someone else say something like that, too.

Heat didn't have any misgivings about devouring others, but deep down, he was still Heat, and he hadn't changed. If he had, then Serph wouldn't have been able to stop him during the Maribel incident. Heat had accepted both his Atma and his hunger. Serph now realized that this was why Heat had questioned him

in the hallway earlier, with his qualms about Serph's continuing indecisiveness.

"I'm always going to be myself." Serph envied the strength behind that declaration. Heat was hoping for Serph to show that same strength, to always be himself, come what may. And in order to live up to his comrade's trust, the Embryon needed to make sure he didn't become someone else. He needed to suppress his desires, to control the bloody temptations of his Atma, to be a pillar of self that—

Serph's eyes snapped open.

At some point there, he had dozed off. Somewhere in the distance, he thought that he'd heard a faint meow, but his ears may have just been playing tricks on him.

He got up and walked to the window. It was 11:23 Shade Time—no, it was *night*. From the window, he could see the outer wall of the base and the troops assigned to patrol there. Above the emergency staircase across the way, he spotted a flicker of red light. Peering at it, he realized that Heat was there, leaning against the wall just out of the reach of the silvery rain; he was staring at one of his hands.

Heat's hand had turned into one of the red hands of Agni. Its four claws slowly clenched and unclenched, bands of flame dancing in the spaces between them. The fire illuminated one side of his face. He looked exhausted, and didn't seem aware that Serph was watching him.

Over and over, he created and extinguished those flames; then he stretched out his arms and legs and rested his head back against the wall, growing still as if asleep. His one arm, still that of Agni from elbow to fingertips, seemed to not share its owner's complete lack of energy—the sharp claws continued to slowly move about as if in search of some nonexistent prey.

Serph shut the window and then sat down at his desk.

"I am not," he murmured silently to himself, "going to stop being myself."

No matter what happened. No matter how tough things got.

He started up his terminal, gathered up the scattered pages of the hard copy from the floor, and began to check over the report. He only had a few hours

before he needed to get it back to Gale.

Chapter 5

Proposition XXII: If we conceive that anything pleasurable affects some object of our love, we shall be affected with love towards that thing. Contrariwise, if we conceive that it affects an object of our love painfully, we shall be affected with hatred towards it.

—Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III



The time was 05:02 ST. The sky was still dark.

“An hour before dawn,” Serph muttered to himself, as he’d come to do so often lately. In an hour, Shade Time would change over to Light Time. Sera called that the coming of dawn, when the sun (Serph still wasn’t quite sure what that was) would rise and shine its light upon the world. Here there was just a sickening magenta sky, and a light source that could really only be called an indistinct brightness. Still, Serph thought that “dawn” was a nice word.

Heat and Argilla were in hiding close by. Their objective, a set of black fortress walls, was roughly two hundred meters away. Heads were visible about fifty members up, near the middle of the third tier. There were several artillery emplacements along the edge of the walls, and now and then the personnel manning them would come into view. They were on a higher state of alert than anticipated.

This was the fortress at the heart of Anahata, the stronghold of the Solids—perhaps the most strongly defended headquarters among the tribes. Serph and the others had taken up position behind a building to the southwest of the base’s front side. The defenders had cleared away most of the rubble from the surrounding area to eliminate any cover for attacking forces; up until two or three days ago, there had been a Solids’ lookout post where Serph’s team was now hiding.

The building had been brought down and destroyed in a Maribel assault two days earlier, and it appeared that there hadn’t been time since then for the

Solids to clear away the debris. The Maribel assault had been carried out in order to create a space for a small infiltration team, consisting of Serph and the others, to hide out until it was time for the operation to begin. As hoped, the Solids' leader, Mick the Slug, appeared none the wiser.

The operation called for the incursion to begin at the transition from Shade Time to Light Time, during the faint "pre-dawn," when visibility was rather poor. The acrid scent of charred steel still lingered on the air. Serph blinked once as he checked the time before bringing a hand to his ear, adjusting the reception on his new transceiver.

"Gale, do you copy? What's your status?"

"No issues to report." Given the close proximity of the enemy, they were using a double-layered encryption to prevent their transmissions from being intercepted by the Solids, so there was a slight delay in the response. "Cielo is heading up a flying Atma squad, which has already set out. I am in position two kilometers from the base. Jinana is in command of the Maribel troops. Everything seems to be going according to plan on their end."

"Excellent."

"We will start the attack at 06:00 LT. The incursion will commence thirty minutes later, along the route previously chosen. Blessings of karma to you, sir. Gale out."

The transmission ended. Serph took his hand away from his ear, and then turned his attention to his objective.

The Embryon–Maribel operation against the Solids had so far proceeded according to Gale's plan. First, a Maribel strike team had launched a small attack with the purpose of clearing a path and creating a suitable environment for the infiltration team to sneak in through. This was the group that had destroyed the lookout post. Now, a joint Embryon–Maribel force was preparing to launch an all-out frontal and aerial assault, and while the Solids were preoccupied with responding to that threat, the smaller infiltration team would make its way into the base itself to seek out Mick the Slug in order to either capture or eliminate him.

Combined, the Embryon and Maribel had a little over two hundred troops;

after ensuring they had enough men left behind to protect their respective bases, they could field a primary force of just over a hundred. Ordinarily, an attack force of that size would have been insufficient for a mission this ambitious, but considering how the initial outbreak of Atma had culled the Maribel down to a scant fifty-odd members, Gale surmised that it was very likely that the Solids had sustained similar losses.

“If the primary goal of the attack is simply to disrupt the enemy, then our two hundred soldiers should be sufficient. The critical point is neutralizing the leader, Mick the Slug. The Solids’ stronghold is much larger than either the Embryon’s or even the Maribel’s, but if we launch a joint ground and aerial assault with a force consisting of a hundred Atma, then the enemy will be forced to neglect the base’s interior security. This will create an opening in their defenses and allow for a small team to infiltrate the base and strike at their leader directly.”

Gale really does know me all too well, Serph thought as he went over the plan’s write-up in the back of his mind.

Gale had selected himself, Heat, and Argilla to be the members of the infiltration team. Serph had removed Gale from that list and included himself instead. When he noticed this change among Serph’s revisions to his plan, Gale had glanced tentatively to meet Serph’s gaze.

“Is this because you have doubts about my combat prowess, sir?”

“It’s just a matter of having the right people in the right job. Don’t get me wrong—you’re a fine warrior. But bishops are innately well-suited to tactical analysis, and I’m certain you’d acknowledge that my actual combat abilities outclass yours. Besides, you’re one of the few remaining bishops in the Junkyard. If the worst were to happen to you, you’re not replaceable.”

“You are the one who is not replaceable, sir. If you die, then the Embryon—”

“We went over this last night, and I’m not arguing that point again now. The infiltration team should be made up of those with the best combat capabilities. I’m sure you understand that.”

Gale clearly had his own thoughts on the matter, but did not dissent. He was quiet for a while, and then finally said, “I have been thinking about what you asked me last night—whether I serve my leader personally, or whether I serve

the Embryon.”

Serph set down the hard copy of the report and waited for Gale to go on.

“I did not reach a conclusion,” Gale said at last after a long silence. It was probably the first time Serph had ever heard him speak without his usual unhesitating steadiness. “I am a bishop. It is what I have been fine-tuned to be. I am still unable to fully comprehend what sort of effect my Atma has had on me. However, at least for the time being, I find no contradiction in both serving the continued interests of the Embryon and serving you as my leader. You are currently the leader of the tribe to which I belong and which I serve. That you would ever die or be absent are factors that do not and cannot exist for me. I cannot take such hypothetical factors into consideration, and I—”

“Okay, Gale, I get it,” Serph said, patting his lieutenant on the shoulder, stopping him before he could get caught up talking in circles. “That’s all right for now. Just see if you can figure it out bit by bit. There’s no rush. I depend on you—I *trust* you, Gale. From the bottom of my heart.”

At that, Gale’s eyelids fluttered slightly, but he said nothing further.

And right now, Gale was at Jinana’s side, carrying out communications between the two leaders as he oversaw the operation. Serph felt confident tasking him with that, and Jinana appreciated having a valuable bishop at her disposal. The time for the frontal assault was drawing near.

A dim light began to appear at the edge of the darkened sky, a pale fluorescent magenta. Serph wondered what a true “dawn” looked like, but forced the thought from his mind as he called to his people.

“Brace yourselves. It’s go time.”

As if those words had been the trigger, a series of explosions resounded from the other side of the Solids’ sturdy walls. The figures atop the wall panicked, scattering from their positions. Serph smiled grimly. He could almost hear Gale observing that their disarray was a mark of poor leadership. Once a leader assigned tribe members to a post, they were never supposed to abandon it without an order.

As the growing band of faint light stretched across the horizon, several winged

figures soared into view. They were led by an elegant-looking Atma with a pointed head and wings like straight razors. It was Cielo's alter ego, Dyaus. He made a wide loop above the fortress, then looked down to Serph and the others and let out a triumphant cry.

Lightning flashed above where Serph and his team lay hidden, a bolt fired off by Dyaus that was the signal for the other flying Atma to begin their attacks. One after the other they swept down toward the stronghold. One giant, four-legged beast with sharp claws breathed out a cone of fire as it descended; with a quick flap of its wings, it scattered feathers that turned into piercing needles of light that rained down on the enemy forces. Another released a flickering orb of light that blazed brightly for an instant before melting back into darkness; everything in its path was split in half, and then it struck the ground, causing a strong tremor that kicked up a cloud of thick smoke and dust.

The Solids began to meet the assault with their own flying Atma. Over the fortress wings beat against each other, claws met fangs, and lightning flashed. A pair of struggling forms tumbled out of the sky, but just when they were about to crash into a building, one of them pulled away, flapping its way back up to rejoin the melee, chewing on the bloody mouthful of flesh it had torn from its foe. The scent of burning meat filled the air, mixed with the strong odor of ozone from the storm of electricity.

Serph held his breath and watched the battle raging above as Gale provided him with a constant stream of status updates on the base assault through the transceiver in his ear. Despite their reputation for wariness, the Solids appeared to have been unprepared for multiple attacks over such a short span of time, and the fact that they were facing a combined assault by both the Embryon and the Maribel had them off-balance. There were far more troops for them to deal with than they had faced before, and they were attacking not only on the ground but also from the air—a kind of assault which no fortress in the Junkyard had been built to resist. This would hopefully give Serph's infiltration team much better odds of slipping into the stronghold undetected.

The time had come. Serph flashed Heat and Argilla the go sign and stepped out into the rain. The three wore camouflage ponchos that blended into their surroundings to conceal their brightly colored hair; tiny raindrops glanced off of

the water-resistant material. *Some day, Serph thought, this rain will stop. Once there are no longer bodies left behind to become the rain, there will be no more rain to fall.*

It took about five minutes for them to reach their destination, darting from one fragment of cover to the next. Then they were looking up at a sheer wall without any handholds—a formidable obstacle. But the advance team had already devised a way to scale the surface on their earlier sortie. No mere human could accomplish it, but Serph and the others had Atma.

“Heat.”

At Serph’s command, Heat transformed into the hulking, two-headed, crimson form of Agni. Letting out a low rumble, he slung the rope the team had brought over one shoulder, and then slammed the four claws on each of his fists into the wall. His huge muscles rippled as he began to climb the towering structure. Without a single pause for rest, Agni cleared the nearly fifty-meter high wall, slipped over the edge and disappeared from view. A few minutes passed, then one end of the rope came tumbling down. Quickly Serph and Argilla grabbed hold of it and made their way up the building’s side. When they reached the top they found Heat waiting. He had undone his transformation, and was crouched down, scanning the top of the wall in both directions.

Argilla was the last to reach the top. She rubbed her sore wrists as she caught her breath. “We couldn’t have at least brought a rope ladder? I’m going to have a hard time aiming if I have to shoot.”

“You still think guns are any use?” Heat sneered as he looked at the assault rifle slung over her shoulder.

“Aren’t they? I feel naked without this thing. And it’s like I said before—unlike you, I don’t want to activate my Atma unless I have to, even if we do have ampules with Sera’s blood on hand.”

Heat snorted and turned to look at Serph. “What about you? Are you gonna use the girl’s blood to avoid facing reality too?”

“No.”

Argilla blinked in surprise, and Heat peered at Serph curiously.

“I won’t kill anyone I don’t have to,” Serph said, “but I will kill whoever tries to stop me if it comes down to it. It’s not like we haven’t done it before. At this point, I can’t just hide behind a veneer of blissful ignorance anymore. I need to be strong, to protect myself and my comrades.”

“But, sir—”

“I won’t force you to do anything, Argilla,” Serph said softly. “You’re free to do whatever you think the situation warrants, just like always.”

Argilla started to reply, then bit back her words and simply nodded. She unslung her rifle.

“All right, then,” Serph said firmly. “No more time to waste. Mick the Slug is somewhere on this base. We probably won’t run into too many of his soldiers once we get inside, but the quicker we get this done, the fewer people we’ll have to hurt. Let’s move.”

The combat suits Serph’s team wore had the orange Embryon markings repainted with the yellow of the Solids on the off chance that they were discovered while inside the base, but that didn’t alter the fact that they were in very real danger.

They had managed to descend undetected from the top of the seven-story structure down to the third floor when they found themselves in a long corridor exposed to the sky; at its end loomed an empty gun battery. Far above, they could hear the sounds of their flying Atma clashing with the Solids’ airborne troops, and so they ducked into the relative cover of the open battery. For a moment, the sky was bathed in purple, and then, with a massive boom, everything went white as some type of electrical discharge streaked overhead. It seemed that the aerial battle was only growing more violent.

The only ways to exit the gun battery, aside from the way they had come, were a simple ladder down its outside face and a mechanical cargo loader inside. Descending the ladder would leave them dangerously exposed, and so despite the risk that enemies might be hiding inside it, they decided to use the cargo loader.

Serph activated the loader's call button—a few moments later, its door opened. Argilla leapt forward, assault rifle at the ready. The coast was clear. Serph gave the go sign.

The three of them got in, and the loader began to descend. It wasn't particularly comfortable to ride in, shaking and rattling them around like bullets in a tin can. Soon their view of the outside was obscured, but they could feel the building shuddering from the battle that raged outside.

"Can't you get in touch with Gale?" Heat whispered.

"We're under radio silence. We can't risk the transmission being intercepted." This time, they were on their own. All the more reason to get the job done quickly and efficiently. If they came across any hostiles, they needed to strike first and strike hard.

The cargo loader came to a halt. Heat took a quick look around before waving for the others to get out. The sounds of battle were closer now than before. A readout on the loader indicated that they were on the first floor.

"Guess the stairs are the only way to get further down," said Heat.

"Maybe." Serph looked from side to side. Prior to the operation, they had made several attempts to get their hands on the base's interior schematics—they'd even turned up some data from when the fortress had been used as a base by another tribe before the Solids—but everything had turned out to be unreliable, either faked or simply out-of-date.

"There probably *is* a more direct way to get there," Serph concluded, "but we don't have time to look for it. I guess we'll take the stairs, and if we happen to come across an elevator along the way, great."

The sound of frantic footsteps came suddenly from down the hallway. Serph and the others scattered, ducking out of sight. A group of four or five Solids, shouting as they ran, passed through the T-intersection at the end of the corridor Serph's team had been following. Serph and the others waited until the enemy was gone, and then stepped out of hiding.

But Serph had no sooner breathed a sigh of relief at having gone unnoticed when a voice called out from the opposite direction. "Hey, what are you doing

there?”

It was a pair of armed guards, approaching them from behind with their guns at the ready.

“Anyone who can hold a gun is to join the battle at the main gate. Didn’t you hear the order?” one of the guards growled, waving his weapon at them. “Hurry up, get—wait, hold on a sec.” He started to move closer. “I’ve never seen you three before. Which platoon do you belong to?”

The jig was up.

Before Serph could react, Heat sprang forward, blue light enveloping his body as he changed into his red, demonic form. One of the guards cried out in terror, firing blindly out of reflex. The bullets bounced off of Agni as if they were grains of sand, and the beast seized the man, lifted him overhead, and tore him in half as easily as if he were a piece of paper, raining blood and guts down onto his massive body.

Argilla looked away from the grisly sight. The gush of blood was absorbed into Agni’s skin on contact, leaving no trace behind. One of the Atma’s two rounded heads lolled out its tongue in satisfaction, then flashed a fearsome grin.

In a panic, the other guard activated his Atma and moved to attack, changing into a beast covered in thick, black fur. The claws on its four feet were wreathed in blue-white flames, and it breathed fire from its mouth. Heat, as Agni, let out a roar as he blocked a lunge from the creature’s snapping jaws. The huge, dark-furred beast let out a high-pitched shriek as it raked its flame-clawed forelimbs across Agni’s torso.

Against a god of fire, however, the flames had no effect. Agni barked out another laugh, and then seized his foe’s jaw in a powerful two-handed grip. Bone snapped, and blood mixed with the furred monster’s drool. Red saliva dripped onto the floor as the beast let out a mewling cry for help.

“That’s enough! Let him go, Heat!” Serph called out, getting a hand on Agni’s arm as he tried his best to fight off not only the nausea in his gut, but the fierce desire that ran counter to his disgust—the desire to reach out in hunger for that bloody, pulsating flesh.

“Why do you always have to stop me just when I’m getting to the good part?” Agni said; and though he shoved his prey away, he remained transformed. He stood behind Serph, menacingly brandishing his claws, showing every sign that he would be glad to finish what he started. The guard reverted to human form as soon as he hit the floor, fresh blood running from either side of his rent-open mouth, lips quivering as he crumpled to the ground.

“What are you? *Who* are you?” he managed to slur. “Wait—silver hair.” The man seemed to recognize Serph, and then a new kind of fear suffused his stricken face. “You’re . . . you’re the leader of the Embryon. What are you doing here?”

“Guess we’re just different than that coward you call a boss,” Argilla said, sticking the barrel of her rifle into the man’s mouth. “Now, where’s Mick the Slug? Tell me, or I will blow your head off right here and now. I’m betting you don’t have enough power to transform again.”

“Though if you don’t want to talk, that’s fine by me,” Agni added. “We’ll just go ask your friends who ran by. Would you prefer to be eaten after you’re dead, or while you’re still alive? The choice is yours.”

The man let out a faint whimper. Serph studied him through narrowed eyes. His fear didn’t seem to be an act—the way he trembled as he looked at his partner’s shredded remains was undoubtedly quite real. Serph signaled Argilla with a look, and she pulled her rifle from between the guard’s reddened teeth.

“I don’t know anything for sure,” the man stammered out between sobs. “The boss doesn’t stay in any one place for long, and he doesn’t let anyone know where he is. He gives out his orders by video or radio. A grunt like me almost never actually gets to see him in person.”

“He’s so damn secretive he doesn’t even trust his own people,” Argilla said, clicking her tongue. “These guys are a real piece of work.”

“It’s okay if you don’t know exactly where he is,” said Serph. “Just give us a guess. Some sort of clue.”

Both of Agni’s heads licked their lips menacingly. “I’ll be happy to bite his face off if he doesn’t talk,” the fiery Atma offered.

At last the man mustered up the will to speak. “The most likely place he’d be is the main control room. I think it’s down on the eighth sub-level. I’m not sure exactly where, but when he issues orders, most of the transmissions originate from down there. I’m not sure if the boss is there all the time or not—that’s just what I’ve heard.”

“All right. Thanks,” Serph said, and promptly delivered a quick stunning blow to the back of the man’s neck. The guard’s eyes went wide, then fluttered as he lost consciousness. Serph dragged his limp body back into the cargo loader and hit the controls. The loader began to rise, and Serph watched, waiting until it had risen up high enough. He then manifested his Atma in his right arm, extending his forearm blade and stabbing it into the control pad. It sent out a spray of sparks, and the machine went quiet.

“That should keep him out of our way for a good while,” Serph said as his arm reverted to normal.

“Still soft as ever. It’d be less of a hassle to kill him.”

“You already killed the other one, Heat. That was enough.” Serph paused. “But come on. You heard the man. Let’s head down.”

They proceeded deeper into the base with caution, taking care to spread out and get into hiding whenever someone came along. They encountered a number of guards along the way, but were able to avoid them all without being spotted. Luckily, the interior of the Solids’ base was quite dark, and there were a number of twisting corners and seemingly pointless byways that made it easier for them to remain undetected. The multiple branching pathways were probably a measure to stymie intruders, and the thick, sturdy walls created a sense of confinement that contrasted starkly with the brightness of the Maribel stronghold.

Every so often, the distant sounds of battle still reached them. “I hope that Jinana and the others are all right,” Argilla murmured.

“Focus on the mission, Argilla,” Serph cautioned. “The quicker we get this done, the better off the others will be. Stay sharp.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Serph knew how she felt. Things were going far too well, and it made him uneasy. This was the stronghold of a mid-level tribe, on par with the Maribel. Even if the Solids had lost people during the first outbreak of their Atma, and even if their attention was focused on the attack at the main gate, should there really have been this little in the way of resistance deep inside their fortress?

As the Embryon team members made their way down the stairs, their wariness increased, but the further down they went, the fewer people there seemed to be. Serph wondered if they'd been misled. If Mick the Slug really was hiding down below, given what they knew of his personality, wouldn't he keep himself surrounded by guards? Or would he employ that sort of ruse as a smokescreen while he hid alone someplace else?

Heat drummed his fingertips against his thigh impatiently. He loved a good, down-and-dirty battle; all this sneaking around, hiding behind walls and trying to avoid a fight was clearly wearing on him. Having eaten the one guard earlier had probably only exacerbated his unsated appetite. Argilla, meanwhile, was visibly preoccupied with the situation outside, frequently glancing upward as if she might somehow gaze through the yards of steel and concrete to see what was happening above. She bit her lip anxiously at every distant explosion.

"Hold up. Guards ahead." The tension in the air spiked. Heat let out a quiet grunt and Argilla brought up her rifle. Serph gestured for them to stay back, and then carefully peered around the edge of the stairwell.

They'd made it down to the seventh sub-level, one floor above their supposed destination. The few guards they'd come across along the way had been patrolling in well-armed twos and threes. Now they'd hit a half dozen standing watch in the wide hallway where the stairs ended. They appeared to be guarding some sort of room or facility.

"Looks like we found the place," Heat whispered. "Whether Mick the Slug is in there or not, it's definitely someplace important."

"Argilla," Serph said quietly. "Flashbang grenades. Now."

Argilla gave a nod. The three companions quickly donned the gas masks and goggles they'd brought with them, then the sniper pulled a few of the flashbangs from her belt. She drew back her arm.

“Not yet,” Serph whispered. “Just a little more. Okay. Three, two, one . . . now!”

Argilla tossed three gleaming black spheres down the hall. They made a metallic clank as they rolled toward the guards. The six soldiers startled at the noise, and then the reality of what was happening dawned on their faces.

Just as the guards opened their mouths to exclaim a warning, there was an explosion of light, turning their screams into strangled curses. Not only would the flash keep them blinded for a good ten seconds or so, but the grenades also sprayed out an irritating white gas that filled the hallway. Serph and the others dashed out from the stairwell.

“There’s a door further down the hallway, Serph,” Heat said through the mic in his mask. “That’s got to be the place that guard was talking about. Let’s hurry.”

The groaning, staggering guards were silenced with a single strike apiece before they could mount any sort of resistance. A series of shouts echoed from above—other sentries had apparently heard the grenades going off, and from the sound of it, they were approaching quickly. Nonetheless Serph reckoned that he and his team would have time enough to get at Mick the Slug. Even if the Solids’ leader had of escape route prepared in advance, surely it wouldn’t buy him enough time.

The Embryon team made its way through the veil of smoke toward the door. It was about two meters across, and made of solid steel. It looked extremely sturdy, and there was no visible means of opening it.

“Heat,” Serph said, and Heat murmured in acknowledgment as his arm blazed to life. With a sound like an exhaled breath, a blazing fireball slammed into the steel door. The metal plating turned red under the searing blast, and Heat’s arm, transformed into that of Agni, pierced through it as if it were plastic.

Heat quickly enlarged the opening and the three made their way in through the smoking hole. No guards came to meet them. The chamber beyond was dark; in its midst they saw a large chair that probably belonged to Mick the Slug, but it was empty. Hanging screens and monitors around the edges of the room provided ample places to hide.

“All right, Mick, where are you?” Serph called out. “This is a joint attack by the

Embryon and the Maribel. We're here to accept your surrender. You have nowhere to run. Come on out!"

The only reply was a sound of creaking metal followed by something slamming into the concrete behind them. Serph whirled around, only to see that an even sturdier bulkhead had come down inside of the steel door Heat had destroyed. Argilla let out a quiet gasp, and Heat clicked his tongue. Several low voices could be heard somewhere nearby, chuckling.

"A trap," Heat sighed. "And we walked right into it."

Multiple figures stepped out from behind the hanging fabric and piles of equipment. Serph and the others stood back-to-back, weapons at the ready as they took stock of the situation.

There were somewhere between twenty and thirty figures surrounding them—and not all of them were human. All wore yellow tribal markings. Their snickering filled the air. *A Solids ambush.* Most of the warriors' bodies bore glowing Atma brands. Many of these were identical, marking them as Lesser Atma, but if any among them had gotten the chance to build their strength by devouring others, they weren't to be underestimated.

"Where is Mick the Slug?"

"Not here," one of the Solids said with a sneer. The others laughed in concert, the eerie sound of it echoing off the walls.

"We've known you were coming for a long time, now. If you're looking for the boss, he's probably up on the roof by now, chowing down on the men you brought as a distraction. Either that, or he's on his way to Embryon territory to take this 'Atma-controlling medicine' of yours. But that's just a guess. After all, the boss only tells his underlings what they need to know."

"Medicine?" Argilla said. "But only Jinana and the Maribel—"

"Well, that's what the guy who came to tattle on you told our boss." His sneering laughter was louder now, and his grin seemed to stretch to his ears. "The boss wasn't sure whether to buy it or not, but then you guys did exactly what this fellow said you were going to. I gotta say, I'm impressed with him pulling off something so deliciously underhanded."

Argilla's face had gone pale. "There's no way! Nobody would ever sell out their own tribe!"

"I wish I could've seen the look on that woman leader's face when she found out one of her own sold her out like that. I bet the boss is feasting on her as we speak, savoring every bite."

"You bastard!" Argilla screamed, and her body was enveloped in an explosion of blue light.

"Devour them!" the man commanded, his triumphant voice booming through the room.

A sinister smile crossed the face of the ambush leader as blue light surrounded his features. His smile blurred, but that ear-to-ear grin was the only thing that didn't change as armor formed over his body, and his shape morphed into that of a skeleton wielding a blade in each hand. The undead creature laughed. The data readout in Serph's eye identified him as a Turdak—a Lesser Atma, but one of the more capable ones.

The other soldiers let out a chorus of vulgar cheers as, one after another, they all transformed. The bulk of them were Nues, large yellow creatures with black faces and white manes, lightning dancing over their bodies. These were Lesser Atma as well, and not particularly powerful ones at that, but what they lacked in strength, they made up for in numbers. The Turdak took point as the roaring Nues shot out arcs of lightning in all directions, sending the whole room into chaos.

Serph pulled off his mask and goggles and tossed them aside. His cheek was hot, and he brought a hand up to his pulsing Atma brand. He let the command words, *om mani padme hum*, run through the back of his mind. In an instant, an exhilarating rush of energy surged through his body as blue light washed across his vision. He swung his arm; the light vanished, and the sound of his arm blades extending rang in the air. A low, raspy growl hissed out from between his pointed teeth.

"High Atma!" stammered one of the Nues as it backed away in fear. "It can't be! Why would there be High Atma in a place like this? There's three—"

“There’s three of us,” whispered one of Agni’s heads into the Nue’s ear as its words came to an abrupt halt. The fiery Atma had already transformed and darted forward to attack; now blood bubbled from the Nue’s mouth as its throat was crushed. With his massive red fists Agni quickly wrung his foe’s neck. “I’ve been real hungry. You’re gonna wish you hadn’t mouthed off.”

With a growl Agni sank his teeth into the Nue’s throat. The creature didn’t even have time for a death rattle as its limbs went limp, and Agni used both hands to stuff pieces of the corpse into one of his mouths. The sounds of rending flesh and crunching bone filled the air as blood dribbled across Agni’s muscular chest. His throat bulged, and his big tongue slid around his lips before he spat out a mouthful of bones with barely a scrap of meat left on them.

“Disgusting!” Agni roared. “Isn’t there anyone tastier in here? You there, let’s see how you taste.”

“Get them!” snapped the Tarduk, waving its blades. “And if any of you cowards try to run, I’ll eat you myself! Now get it together and stop them, fools!”

The Nues, which had dropped back upon seeing one of their comrades get eaten, closed in again. A blade too fast for the naked eye to see whipped out to meet them, and several of their number were sliced apart before they could react, spraying blood across the floor. Varuna swung his arm, shaking the rancid blood from his blade; his tongue tingled with the urge to lick it up even as the thick droplets scattered. Again the Nues fell back, then scampered to attack again, howling.

“The woman! Go for her!”

Several Nues rushed at Argilla—now Prithvi—who was standing by the door. She squared off and extended her whiplike arms, claws like razors sprouting from the tips of her fingers. She leaped forward and struck, and the Nue in front screeched as its face was slashed open.

The open mouths on Prithvi’s breasts let out a stream of staccato panting sounds, and the group that had advanced on her were lifted off of their feet, their bodies rising into the air and slamming together. Prithvi increased her gravity warp, focusing it on a point in their midst, and the deadly vortex dragged the Nues relentlessly inward. Flesh and bone strained as they were crushed, the

creatures' roars and snarls turning into cries of agony. Even the gobs of blood that were forced out as their bodies broke were captured by the gravity rift, seeping toward the unseen singularity along with the mass of twisted flesh. Finally, the blood-soaked knot of ruined bodies fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

"What the hell *are* these things?" one of the Nues cried out, recoiling as a ball of fire struck its shoulder. The wound was deep enough to reveal white bone; the scents of scalded blood and burnt fat mingled in the air.

"Dammit! We were told there were only going to be three of them, but nobody said we'd be up against heavy-hitters like this!"

"I am Serph, leader of the Embryon," Varuna said. "These are my top lieutenants, Heat and Argilla. No matter how many of you grunts come at us, you cannot hope to defeat us. Surrender now! We're in a hurry."

"The leader of the Embryon?" scoffed one of the Nues. "No leader would ever venture out onto the front line."

"Maybe not *your* leader," Prithvi said. "Ours is different."

"In the end, this sorry death is all you were ever meant for," Agni said scornfully. "Your leader threw your lives away just to buy himself some time."

"I've had enough of this!" One of the soldiers, on the brink of tears, changed back into human form and backed away toward the door. "I can't take this anymore! We were just told to surround the folks who snuck in and devour them. There was nothing about three High Atma, or—"

Before he could finish, the man's head flew from his body. A spray of red blood splattered the wall, and his freshly severed head rolled along the floor, stopping only when it bumped into the door, eyes still open. The pack of Nues shuddered.

"Don't any of you maggots dare try to run!" the Turdak bellowed. He stomped with a skeletal foot on the back of the headless corpse of his former underling. "No one leaves this room until the Embryon are dealt with. Now kill them! End them! It's your choice if you'd rather be eaten by the High Atma or by me."

The Nues stirred anxiously. They were left with no way out, certain death in front of them and behind. After a few moments, one of them was driven to fury

by the indecision, and it leapt madly at Varuna, its mane standing on end. A blast of freezing cold struck it in midair, turning its entire body into a block of ice that shattered into fragments when it hit the floor. But its headlong rush had spurred the others to action, and now the Nues showed no hesitation as they threw themselves at their foes in a single, reckless rush.

Frenzied Atma lashed out on every side. Somewhere in the back of his divided consciousness, Serph could see himself, his arms transformed into blades as he sliced his enemies apart, skewered them with spears of ice, and fired off frozen blasts of air. The hunger that made his throat quiver in anticipation grew stronger and stronger as the bloodshed went on.

He saw Agni hold a Nue above himself, ripping it in half and bathing ecstatically in its blood and entrails, and he shivered at the sight, as if he could taste the metallic tinge of the blood on his tongue and feel the warmth of the quivering flesh. He imagined that he was the one who was gorging on the meat from the Nue's split-open belly. In that moment, a sight that would normally have made him sick was so wonderfully intoxicating.

The blood of his enemy. The meat. The power. Those sweet, sweet flavors. To fight. To keep on fighting. To win. And to eat again, and do it all over and over . . .

Varuna let out a roar of delight, his hands and mouth smeared with blood.

"I told you not to run!" the Tarduk snarled. Several Nues who had tried to flee amidst the chaos now rolled about on the floor. As they lay there, quivering and incapable of further action, a faint purple haze began to waft around them.

As the mist enveloped them, a rotten odor filled the air, and their flesh began to rot. Varuna let out a sharp warning cry and jumped back.

"Poison," said Prithvi.

Outside the main gate of the Solids' compound, Gale grimaced as he cut off another unanswered call. After three successive attempts to contact the Embryon leader, he could only surmise that something had gone wrong. Serph and his team should have checked in by now. Gale knitted his brow.

This is quite odd.

More than two hours had passed since the infiltration mission began. According to their initial timeline, there should have been word of the operation's success thirty minutes ago. He had taken multiple possible delays into account, but even so, there had been no contact in nearly an hour.

"Bishop Gale." It was a messenger from Jinana, who had taken command of the battle outside the Solids' base. "The soldiers defending the front gate have been nearly wiped out. We'll have the gate open shortly. Should we make our way into the base and provide support for the infiltration team?"

Gale was about to approve the order, but something held him back—a strange pricking of uncertainty. He shook his head. "No. Do not proceed inside yet. Wait fifteen more minutes, and I will have new instructions for you. The current battlefield situation is—"

"We have a clearly superior force," the messenger said eagerly. "These guys had no idea that the Embryon and Maribel were going to gang up on them. That alone has them panicked and off-balance. Plus, we have one of our leaders on the inside. There's no way we can lose."

Gale didn't respond. He dealt in facts and data—optimism and wishful thinking were irrelevant, as was his baseless sense of unease.

But now, for reasons that he could not comprehend, some gut feeling was making him hesitate, although he knew that acting on hunches and instincts was in fundamental conflict with his fine-tuned bishop intellect. Wanting a clearer sense of the current situation on the ground, he stood up and made his way up the embankment to get a view of the battlefield.

The messenger followed after him, speaking hurriedly as if just remembering something he'd forgotten. "Jinana seems exhausted from commanding the battle. Maybe it would be best to have her fall back for now? She's switching back and forth between Atma and human form as she fights, and every so often, she'll double over in pain."

Once again, Gale felt as if he were being pierced by thorns he could not see.

Just then the sound of an incredible explosion near the Solids' main gate

rocked them where they stood. The force of the blast was enough to make Gale stagger, and it knocked the messenger flat on his back.

“What the hell was that?” the messenger gasped from the ground, panting hard. “The Solids aren’t suicide bombing, are they—ah! Bishop, wait!”

Ignoring the man’s panicked shouts, Gale darted down the embankment, his transformation taking hold as he ran. Quickly the tall man with blue-green hair and eyes became a much taller creature with pale green wings and a head that split apart into a massive maw—the High Atma Vayu. He lifted himself aloft with a strong gust kicked up by his own powerful legs; the wind howled as he flew down to the front line in a matter of seconds.

“Bishop Gale!” One of the Embryon members, in Atma form, came running up to him.

“Tell me what happened. Where is Jinana? What was that sound?”

The man opened his mouth, but didn’t get the chance to speak before a blade of air came hurtling toward them. Being Vayu, the master of wind, Gale was able to defend against the attack, shielding himself with a twirl of his body as he quickly sidestepped the strike. The other Embryon member, however, was sliced cleanly in half, throwing a mist of blood across Vayu’s face. The green Atma’s massive tongue slid out subconsciously, allowing him to taste the shock and fear of the man’s final moments. On instinct, he let out a roar.

Snickering filled the air as a dark shadow descended from above. “Oh my, I only got the lackey.”

Membranous black wings flapped balefully, and needle-like fangs showed from a wide, sinister grin. Huge ears flicked about constantly, taking in the myriad sounds of the battlefield. Gale had never seen this creature before, but his leader had given him a description, and had told him the name of the Atma.

It was Camazotz.

Vayu unleashed a low, ferocious roar.

“The mist is toxic. Don’t breathe it in,” Prithvi called out.

Varuna shielded his face with his arms and let out a muffled growl. “You would sacrifice your own people?”

“I have no use for weaklings.” The Turdak’s deathly laughter echoed through the room, its bony teeth clattering together. “They’re all just food. And so are you.” It braced itself and opened its mouth wider, expelling another gout of the noxious mist toward Varuna.

Varuna’s chilling breath got there first, turning the toxic particles into purple shards of ice. But the Turdak’s laughter only grew louder; it brandished its swords as it rushed to close the distance. The air was filled with the sounds of four blades clashing.

The Turdak parried one of Varuna’s swings, then lunged inside his guard as their blades locked together. It belched out more poison gas, and this time, the frigid counter-blast was a moment too late. The gas made contact with Varuna’s skin, causing a tingling numbness and then an agonizing, acidic burning all over his body. He cried out and dropped to his knees.

Agni and Prithvi pressed in closer, looking for a chance to join in the fight.

The Turdak was effectively the only enemy left in the room. Pools of blood spread out from beneath mangled bodies, and everywhere there were charred and half-devoured corpses.

“What’s with this guy?” Prithvi asked as she watched the skeletal Atma cackle at her stricken leader. “The Turdak is supposed to be a Lesser Atma. How can it be this strong?”

“He must have eaten more than his fair share. Most of them people from his own tribe, I wager,” Agni said as he hurled a fireball. With even more maniacal laughter, the Turdak batted the flaming orb out of the air with its swords, and then leapt high, aiming one of his blades at Prithvi’s head.

Before it could connect, however, it bounced off of a wall of pure gravity. The impact spun it around in a full circle before it landed on the floor. Fires burned in the empty skull’s eye sockets as its teeth chattered angrily.

“You’re one stubborn son of a bitch,” Agni said. “I bet your boss Mick would be proud.”

“But of course. In the Junkyard, one does whatever it takes to win.” The Turdak thrust out its jaw in a taunt. “The boss understands that. He’s not a naïve child like the leader of you Embryon fools.”

Varuna’s legs shook from the poison that had enveloped them as he staggered back to his feet, and a faint, unnatural twitching ran through his shoulders. He gritted his sharp teeth, baring them wider and wider. The Turdak, not noticing this, let out another laugh, and once again the thick toxic mist came pouring.

“Underlings have always been tools to be used and then discarded,” the Turdak said. “Underlings, comrades, allies—food just needs to keep its mouth shut and accept being eaten. Entertaining foolish thoughts only leads to misery, and then—a horrible death.”

“Be quiet,” Varuna intoned, the very words freezing the toxic mist into an array of purple shards of ice that fell harmlessly to the floor. But Varuna was not finished. As his chilling rage grew, it gathered into a frigid sphere that he brought down upon the Turdak, encasing its bony right arm in ice. Varuna’s blade flashed forward, twisting his enemy’s frozen limb and snapping it off at the shoulder. The Turdak let out a mad shriek, its icy bones scattering across the blood-soaked floor. Varuna strode up to the upper arm bone and pointedly smashed it with a single stomp.

“You dare to wound me?” the Turdak snarled, clutching at its shoulder. “You’ll pay for this, you Newbie scum.”

“I told you to *be quiet*.” Again Varuna’s words were ice, and this time, it was the Turdak’s pelvis that froze. Off balance and unable to move its legs, the skeleton creature sprawled onto the floor.

“Sir, get back!” Prithvi shouted. She raised a whiplike arm and swung her claws at the Turdak.

An instant later the creature twisted its neck in surprise, peering up as a crack appeared in the sturdy ceiling overhead, as if the concrete had been struck by a massive hammer. Varuna hopped back out of the way, and the Turdak, forgetting its foes for the moment, scrabbled to crawl safety, true dismay

showing in its eyes for the first time.

But its frozen body trapped it where it was, and as it struggled more violently to move away from the crumbling ceiling above, there was a sharp snap as its spine broke into splinters. All at once the death-Atma fell apart like it was made of brittle, corroded metal. Then the ceiling collapsed onto its feebly spasming form, raining chunks of heavy rubble down onto the gaping skeleton.

“Well then.”

What was left of the fortified room was now an unrecognizable mess. Here and there amidst the rubble, parts of the charred remains of Nues could be seen, along with blood and scraps of unidentifiable flesh. The three High Atma—Varuna, Agni, and Prithvi—stood atop the ruins, rivulets of blood streaming past their feet. Prithvi used her elongating limbs to lift up and dangle the Turdak, who had lost all of its bones from the waist down, as well as its right arm and its left arm from the elbow forward.

“If you were able to come straight down here, then that must mean there’s an elevator that heads directly to the roof,” said Prithvi. “Where is it?”

“Why should I?” Despite being unable to move, the Turdak remained stubborn. “You’d never make it in time, anyway. The boss has probably long since devoured your comrades by now.”

“Tell. Me.” Prithvi hissed. The Turdak’s skull began to creak, and true fear showed in its eyes. The end of its severed spine flailed about like the tail of some desperate animal in a futile attempt to get free. “I will crush your skull right here if you don’t. You do not want to mess with us. You’ve seen what we can do.”

“Damn you, you bitch! Damn you all!” The Turdak’s body writhed, and his eyes rolled about in their sockets. “Do you fools even know what you’re doing? All this nonsense about an alliance, and fighting together—*you still eat people*. Just look at what’s happened since the Atma came. There isn’t anyone standing here right now who didn’t turn to the person next to them during their first transformation and tear out his throat, and gorge themselves on his flesh and blood.”

Prithvi’s arms twitched. The end of the Turdak’s spine flapped about like a

crazed worm as it thrashed its head. “You know I’m right,” it said. “It’s kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten. When the hunger strikes, then ally or not, you’re going to sink your teeth right into the nearest person. There’s no point in trying to deny it. And what’s wrong with doing what you need to survive? You’ve eaten your share of people, too. Even the Embryon slaughter and rend, drink the blood and fill their bellies with the meat of—”

The Turdak’s words were cut off as Prithvi’s long arms tightened around him. His few remaining ribs creaked as they threatened to snap. “Enough of the prattle,” Prithvi hissed. “Tell me where the elevator is. Now. This is your last chance.”

A number of cracks began to appear in the skull as it was slowly crushed. “Wait, stop!” the Turdak cried. “I’ll talk! I’ll talk! Just don’t kill me.”

“Tell us where.” It was Varuna who spoke this time.

“In this room, there’s a secret door,” the Turdak stammered. “That big monitor over there, it’s just a decoy. Push it aside and you’ll find the elevator. It leads straight to the main gate in about a minute. I swear! You have to believe me. Take me with you even. Just don’t kill me—don’t eat me!”

“You’ve been very helpful,” Prithvi said coldly. “Goodbye.”

Before the Turdak could speak, its skull shattered. Fragments of bone skittered across the floor, and the bones from the rest of its ruined body followed soon after.

“As if anyone would want to gnaw on your brittle old bones. How disgusting,” Prithvi said as she glared down at the remnants of their enemy, dusting its fragments off her claws.

“Argilla—” Serph began.

“Let’s go, sir.” Prithvi turned around and headed toward the back of the room. Behind a dusty drape cloth they found a burned-out monitor. “We don’t have any time to waste,” she said. “Jinana, the Embryon, and even Sera might be in danger.”

There was indeed an elevator behind the monitor. The team climbed into it and closed the door, and the lift began to ascend all on its own. There was no display indicating what floor they were on, or even a control panel of any kind; it was just a dark, cramped, gray box.

As they rode upward, the three transformed back to human form. Nobody said a word, not even Heat. Argilla fumbled in her waist pouch with a shaking hand and pulled out one of the ampules of Sera's blood. It was a struggle just to twist its end open; when she finally managed it, she quickly gulped down its contents. She gasped, then held her breath and patted herself on the chest before leaning forward wearily, pressing her head against the elevator wall.

Serph reached out to help her. "Argilla, are you—"

"I'm *fine*," she snapped. She let the empty ampule fall to the floor, where it shattered into bloody fragments. Serph felt his mouth water at the sight, and then felt shame because of it.

"Please, don't talk to me now, sir," she said. "I'm fine. I'm fine, so just—don't say anything right now. Please."

Argilla shut her eyes tightly, and pushed her forehead even harder against the wall. "Please."

Serph took back the hand he'd extended. Heat was silent; he stood in the middle of the elevator, gazing up at the ceiling. He looked as though he were imagining the battle that was raging on, beyond those plates of rusty metal and the darkness ahead.

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The doors opened, revealing the magenta sky. It was after 12:00 LT, and Serph's eyes, which had grown accustomed to the darkness, found the light of midday to be almost blinding. All of three of them were dazzled by it briefly, and as they stood there letting their eyes adjust, something slammed down in front of them with a dull thud.

It was a person—a member of the Maribel, judging by the crimson markings

on his uniform. He'd lost the ability to maintain his Atma, and now that he was back in human form, he was in visible pain. His face and body were covered in blood.

"What's going on? What happened?" Serph asked.

"It . . . it was Bat," the man said after a while, his voice hard to hear. "He told the Solids about our attack. Mick the Slug's High Atma . . . Rahu. He . . . our leader, Jinana . . ."

His head went limp as he breathed his last. Serph lowered him gently to the ground, then stood back up.

The scene before them was brutal. In the glare of the magenta light, bits and pieces of chewed-up corpses appeared to float in a sea of blood. There was an occasional flash of lightning or gout of flame still flaring overhead, but the battle was effectively over. It was an all-out defeat for the Embryon and their allies. Most of the fallen bore crimson or orange markings; Serph could only see a handful wearing yellow.

Argilla stepped closer to Serph and gasped. "Where's Jinana? Where are Gale and the others?"

Before Serph could answer, they both shuddered as a strange chill washed over them. On pure instinct, Serph reached a hand up into the air and unleashed a blast of chilling cold. An ear-piercing shriek filled the air, followed by a gust of wind. He heard the sound of flapping wings as a dark shadow descended from above.

"Greetings, fools." The words came as a rasping laugh. "Looks like those good-for-nothings downstairs failed. Still, they bought us more than enough time. I'd prefer to kill you all myself, anyway."

"Bat." Argilla's hand clenched into a fist. "So you're the *traitor*."

Bat's only response was a high-pitched, sneering laugh as he flapped his wings—Camazotz kicking up a whirlwind. Serph and the others ducked back, shielding their faces.

Rage and regret burned in Serph's chest. Half of the anger was directed at himself. He knew now, seeing the glare the dark-winged Atma directed at him,

that he should have given more consideration to what Bat might have done. *Hatred. Malice.* Such things had never mattered before. But now Bat's malevolence had set off a chain reaction that had led to something that was once unthinkable in the Junkyard: betrayal.

Heat ground his teeth together. "You bastard!" He glared up at the huge, black-furred Atma hovering overhead, eyes full of pure rage. "I should have eaten you when I had the chance."

Just then a massive shape appeared at the top of a small hill nearby, looking down towards them. It was nearly four meters tall, more than twice as massive as Serph and the others even in their Atma forms. At its feet were the bodies of various tribe members—whether they were alive or dead was hard to tell—and its hostile gaze was filled with triumph. It held one of its arms up high, a slender body dangling limply in its grasp.

"Jinana!" Argilla screamed. She was off and running before Serph could stop her, blue light shimmering as she turned into Prithvi. She roared as she leapt towards her giant foe.

A moment later, a black whirlwind cut across her path. Prithvi nimbly jumped out of the way. On the return pass, the black-winged Atma circled in front of her more slowly, making a point to show off his fanged grin. "Careful now, Embryon," he snickered, voice dripping with contempt. "The Solids' boss has quite the long fuse, but if you make too much trouble, you might just lose the head of your precious 'alliance.'"

Without a word, Heat transformed into Agni, and Serph followed suit. Hatred coursed through Varuna's being; the blades in his arms twitched with readiness to spring forth and strike. He wanted nothing more than to hurl himself at his foes with everything he had, to settle the score with his enemies—but as he stared at Jinana's unmoving form, he knew he couldn't do anything reckless.

"How dare you show your face here, Bat! You miserable traitor!" Prithvi's voice was shaking with fury. "And you," she wheeled on the towering foe atop the hill, "you're dealing with us now, big guy. And after what went on downstairs, we've got a pretty good idea of what weak-willed scum you are. Let Jinana go!"

"You've got guts, girl," the giant smiled. "All right, then. Here you go." He

hurled Jinana with frightening ease, as though he were tossing a ball. She rolled when she hit the ground and then lay slack and lifeless. She'd already reverted back to human form.

"Jinana!" Prithvi hurried to her side. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing—shallow, pained breaths, but breaths all the same. She was still alive, but she had a number of broken bones and dislocated joints. Her tribal suit had been torn open across the chest, and her exposed breasts were covered in blood. Her shoulders and limbs were bent at awkward angles, and her once-beautiful face was marred with cuts and bruises.

"Hang in there, Jinana. It's me, Argilla."

"Argilla . . ."

Her green eyes opened, and she looked blearily at the three Embryon members gathered around her before fear clouded her face. "No! Get away from me! Hurry!" She struggled feebly, brushing Argilla's hand aside as she tried to crawl away. "Get as far away as you can, quickly, or I—"

"What are you talking about?" asked Argilla. "We're your allies. We won't leave you."

"Allies?" the giant Atma said to no one in particular, as if the events playing out before him were no more concern than an idle joke. He was an intimidating sight to behold. His massive form was covered in blue armor. His head had a mouth, but the rest of his face was featureless. He had four arms, two thick and sturdy, and another smaller pair that attached to his torso near his neck. There was another mouth in the center of his chest, a gaping maw big enough to swallow a man whole. It opened and closed rhythmically, as if overeager for its next meal.

Abruptly, this fearsome figure disappeared amidst a flash of blue light, and in its place stood an enormous man with dark skin: the leader of the Solids, Mick the Slug.

He stood only half the height of his Atma, but he was so fat that he looked almost wider than he was tall. His dark hair had been arranged in braids that draped down over his round shoulders, and a scraggly beard clung to the bottom of his flabby cheeks. His beady little eyes, almost obscured by his fat face, looked

around keenly, and a cunning smile came to his thick pink lips. On his shaven forehead was his Atma brand, glowing faintly.

“Oh, this little scene is enough to move you to tears, isn’t it, Bat?”

“Yes. Jinana *was* always the sort of leader to think of her allies first,” Camazotz snickered through his fang-filled muzzle. “She even had the medicine that would keep her Atma under control, but rather than take it herself, she went into the ruins and gave her capsules away one by one to those who had been banished, without even caring that she wouldn’t have enough to use on herself. Even here, she kept babbling on about how she didn’t want to devour people or kill anyone she didn’t have to—and now that she’s wound up like this, well, she can’t say she didn’t bring it on herself.”

Varuna knelt down next to Jinana, reeling inwardly from surprise. “Jinana, you didn’t take any? If you just take some now, then in just a little—”

“No . . . My people, they . . .”

Varuna—Serph—didn’t know what to say. Even after he’d assured her that the blood wouldn’t work on those who had lost their grip on their humanity, Jinana had refused to let go of that ray of hope. But if she’d been using her Atma to fight, and she hadn’t taken a capsule or devoured anyone, then there could be only one result.

“I think it’s about time we cleared out,” Mick said, rubbing his hands together. “The fun’s over, and my men are probably hitting the Embryon hideout right about now. The secret of your Atma-controlling medicine will be ours for the taking. We’ll be sure to put it to better use than you fools have. Of course, I don’t intend to stop eating people—it’s just so much fun, after all.”

“Your own people,” Prithvi snarled, voice tinged with rage. “You ate them, didn’t you? Your fellow tribe members.”

Mick leaned back and let out a resounding laugh. “But of course! What other purpose could they possibly serve to my Rahu once they were too beaten down and broken to act as my troops? Beaten and broken, like the woman you were just mooning over.”

Prithvi turned with a start. Serph, still in the guise of Varuna, let out a gasp. A

blue light was beginning to emanate from Jinana's body. Veins of light spread over her body like expanding fissures. This was no ordinary transformation—something was obviously very wrong.

“Get . . . away.” Jinana tried to stand, but she fell back down. Her voice was no longer human. “I . . . can't. You have to . . .” Her words broke off into a rough screech. Her white skin blackened, and lines of blue light webbed over her entire body. Her slender female silhouette distorted and grew bigger while Mick's laughter echoed in the background.

“You bastard!” roared Agni, raising up his arms. Countless wisps of hellfire whirled their way toward Mick, but before they could engulf the enormous man, a pair of black wings intercepted them, scattering the flames into harmless sparks.

“Bring it on!” Camazotz smirked and wheeled overhead, as Agni stared back in shock, seeing that his black wings showed no sign of having been burned. “I may have been off my game before, but I will not play the fool forever!”

Agni growled. “You've been eating.”

“Oh, yes. A veritable feast.” Camazotz laughed, shielding Mick with his wings as the large man grinned with glee. “And now *you're* going to be my next meal. You see how your pitiful little attacks no longer even faze me. I haven't forgotten what you did to me before. I have longed to see you suffer.”

“You're the one who's going to be the meal, you—”

“Now, now, are you going to ignore your ally during all this chit-chat?” Mick's thick voice was oily with sarcasm. Serph, frozen in place, looked over to see Jinana stagger to her feet and let out a loud roar.

“Jinana!” shouted Prithvi. “Jinana, get ahold of yourself!”

The only reply was a rumbling underfoot. The shadowy form that appeared where Jinana lay now took on a grotesque shape. Rearing up, the creature that had taken her place began to approach them, its movements fluid and smooth.

It was the High Atma Ushas.

She had a long and slender neck and limbs, along with the large mouth typical

of High Atma. Atop her head, looking almost like a shock of hair, was a cluster of what appeared to be tentacles. The shape of her torso was still gracefully feminine, and with her skin's pale yellow luster, she almost looked beautiful, but her snapping mouth and sharp fangs showed only hunger and madness. Camazotz and Mick both erupted in laughter.

"Well now, you allies have fun eating each other," Mick called. "If you'll excuse me, I have things to do, so I'll just be going. Oh, and I'd appreciate it if you could kill each other off for me, along with your Atma. Farewell!"

His words were followed by a tremendous gust of wind, so intense that Serph and the others were forced to cover their eyes as sand and dust blasted their faces. When its howling subsided they looked up to see the black form of Camazotz already high in the sky, with Mick dangling from his underbelly like some unsightly tumor.

"Sir, are you all right?" Serph snapped his head up in surprise to see something hurtling toward them. It was Gale, in the form of Vayu. Blood dripped from the claws on his feet as he landed alongside the others. There were tears in his wings, presumably from fighting with Camazotz, and his chest and shoulders bore several cuts that had already begun to heal.

"Your lack of communication had me concerned. I am glad that you are all right, sir. I fear that we have a security leak, and I believe Bat is the responsible party."

"I know. We'll talk later. Is Cielo all right?"

"Right here, buddy!" came the reply from up above. Dyaus swooped low above them. He was still in full fighting mode, blue lightning cascading around his body. "I was gonna zap them good, but Gale told me to hold back. Plus, they did have Jinana. I'm gonna go after them, buddy."

"No. Right now we need to worry about Jinana and Sera." Serph was backing steadily away as Jinana—Ushas—moved slowly toward them, eyes aflame with madness. "You're the fastest, Cielo. Take Gale and head directly back to headquarters. Gale, you're in charge of the defense of the Embryon base. Cielo, your top priority is making sure Sera is safe. Hurry! We'll stay here and deal with Jinana."

Gale reverted to human form. “Sir, take this,” he said, handing over a palm-sized case. “These are bullets for a sniper rifle, with Sera’s blood inside. They’re still in the prototype stage, so there are only six.”

Serph opened the case. There were half a dozen dark red bullets there, obviously hand cast. “I thought I said we were not to use her blood as a weapon.”

“I made these at her own request. She felt it would be of use, should the right situation arise. And now it has, albeit rather sooner than I anticipated,” Gale said, flat and emotionless.

There was no time to argue. Varuna grunted, took the case, and tossed it to Prithvi. “Argilla, change back and shoot these into Jinana. You’re the best person for the job. I don’t know if they’ll work, but we have to at least try.”

“Roger that.” Prithvi transformed immediately into Argilla. Varuna nodded to her, and then he gave Gale and Cielo the go sign. Cielo dove down to let Gale hop onto his back before flying off in the direction of the Embryon base at terrific speed.

Ushas had ceased her advance and now stood a short distance away, languidly rocking from side to side. Glittering golden hair-tendrils spread out like a mist around her. Her arms moved as if searching for something, but the movements were awkward and inconsistent, as if she didn’t even comprehend her own actions. From time to time she would throw her head back and roar as tracks of blue light glowed like cracks all over her body. She made no move to attack. She only growled, her huge mouth opening and closing as if hungrily drinking in the blood and gunpowder in the air.

Argilla, who had lost her rifle in the chaos inside the base, picked up another from a fallen warrior and gave it a practiced once-over. She held her tongue between her teeth as she inserted the bullets. The rifles used by the different tribes were all of a different make. If this one handled differently from the ones she knew best, there was a higher chance that she might miss.

“Sorry about this, Jinana,” she muttered. “Just hold on a little bit longer. We’re going to save you. We’ll turn you back to normal.”

Argilla pulled the trigger, and the rifle spat fire. Again. Three times. Four, five,

six. The bullets filled with Sera's blood all scored direct hits on Ushas. Argilla had aimed well, and they hadn't struck any vital spots, hitting her in the shoulders, arms, and thighs.

Ushas staggered and doubled over, but her roaring cries did not cease. For a few moments, she stood there, dazed, as if baffled by what had happened, but then she threw her head back and let out a scream twice as loud as any she had uttered before. The tendrils atop her head fanned out and pulsated. The fragmented bullets were extruded from her pale yellow skin, and one by one they fell to the ground.

Argilla lowered the rifle in shock. "No! They didn't have any effect at all?"

Agni snarled out through his clenched jaws. "I guess it doesn't work as well if you don't drink it."

"And that probably wasn't enough," Varuna said.

They needed more blood—and they needed to find some way to get close enough to Ushas to make her drink it. If they didn't, Jinana was going to become nothing more than a mindless beast that craved only blood and flesh. They still had more ampules of Sera's blood, but would they be enough?

"How many of the capsules that we gave the Maribel are left?"

One of the Maribel members quickly stood at attention. "I—I'm not sure, but I'll go find out."

"Go and gather up the remaining capsules, as many as you can. And be quick. Have any of your tribesmen who can still move lend you a hand, and tell any Embryon members to bring their own capsules here. We'll give the whole lot to Jinana."

The Maribel trooper nodded and hustled off.

"Having her take the blood is all well and good, Serph," Agni said, "but first we need to get in close and stop her. You know that, right?"

"Oh, believe me, I do."

Ushas tilted her head back and roared up at the sky.

The spreading cluster of tendrils on her head wriggled as they fired off faint rays of light skyward. Moments later, beams of light fell down like rain at the shattered gate of the Solids' base. Ushas lowered her head and watched with eerie mad eyes as the sturdy gate was punched so full of holes that it looked like a perforated sponge before it broke free of its hinges and fell to the ground. The ruined metal plates slowly dissolved.

It appeared that each of the Atma's hair-like tendrils was a sort of specialized weapon. Some could emit killing rays, others were hair-thin but fired diamond-hard needles, while others lashed out with toxic whips that could split things in half and then fuse them back together.

Ushas howled again. With a whirl of her head, she bundled her hair up into something that looked like a drill and charged abruptly at Varuna, who barely managed to jump out of the way. With some new form of attack she blasted a large hole where he'd just stood, the dust billowing on the Junkyard wind. Ushas shook with anger that her prey had evaded her. Her head lashed from side to side like a tree in a storm, and her hair-tendrils flailed about wildly, slicing her surroundings like a laser cutter. A vehicle that stood nearby was split cleanly in half, its two parts collapsing with a crash. Piled-up sandbags, solid fortress walls, and mounds of corpses alike were all torn to pieces and reduced to a slurry under Ushas' stamping feet.

Agni stood at the ready, a ball of fire the size of a human head forming between his hands. Varuna quickly reached out and pulled him back. "Don't provoke her, Heat. She's acting on hunger and instinct now. If you attack, you might just make it worse and prevent us from being able to turn her back."

"So, what? I'm supposed to do nothing? She's coming after us. It won't do us any good if she kills us before we can get the capsules gathered up."

"Argilla, can you use your gravity control to pin her down?" Varuna asked, turning to Argilla.

She had her hand on her gun while she chewed her lip. "Yeah, I think so." She hesitated a moment, then stiffened up. "I can try. No, I can do it."

The Atma brand on Argilla's chest glowed, and then Prithvi stood facing Ushas. She pulled her long arms in and held them against her chest.

Ushas' advance stopped abruptly, as if her legs had suddenly become stuck to the ground. She struggled and screamed and flailed her limbs about, unable to control herself. Suddenly she fell to the ground as though some massive, invisible hand had struck her down. Although she writhed with all of her might and cried out with rage, she could not get back to her feet.

"Serph, here you go." The tribe member who had gone out to collect the blood capsules had returned. He had a pile of capsules cupped in his hands, along with packs slung under each arm—quite a few by the look of it.

"Sir!" Prithvi looked back over her shoulder. Holding back Ushas despite her wild struggles was not a simple task. Prithvi had braced herself against a large boulder, but still her slender form trembled and shook. "The ampules I brought with me are next to my rifle. Use those, too."

There was a pouch leaning against the rifle Argilla had been using before she'd transformed; inside was the case of ampules that she'd kept on her at all times. Serph hesitated, and she shouted to urge him on. "Please, there's no time! We have to save Jinana!"

Varuna shook his head doubtfully, but he took the large pile of capsules from the Maribel trooper into one of his big hands, then picked up the pack of ampules and slung it under his arm. "Argilla, ease up the force that you're putting on Ushas. It will shatter the ampules."

"But sir, until you get close enough to Jinana, you—"

"Do it, Argilla!" Agni said, already bracing himself. "Until Serph gets close enough, we're going to cover him. That's how we're gonna do this."

Varuna glanced back and met Agni's gaze, and they nodded to each other. Prithvi hesitated a moment, then murmured a soft "all right" before raising her hands and releasing the force that held Ushas.

Ushas bounded to her feet with a crazed roar. Varuna sprinted towards her, unable to extend his blades while his hands were full of the capsules. Ushas' deadly hair came whipping down towards him—but just as he was certain he would get speared through several times over, a wall of flame blazed by over his head.

The threatening hair-tendrils were singed, and Ushas recoiled in confusion, but a moment later she attacked once more with renewed ferocity. Again and again she struck, but each time, the wall of fire kept Varuna from harm. Agni, tense but determined, kept his hands raised and extended, looking like he could keep the flames up all day.

Seeing that her attack was having no effect, Ushas jumped back and spun around almost as if she were dancing. As she did, the elegant pleats at her hips rippled like fluttering pennons. Their movement triggered a semicircular blade of light, curved like a sickle, that extended swiftly from her, aimed right for Varuna as he dashed forward.

Agni's flames had no effect on the brilliant blade, nor did Varuna's gust of cold air. Varuna had no way to protect himself as the blade slashed toward him; the precious cargo he cradled in his arms prevented him from even adopting a defensive stance. He took the full brunt of the attack, which opened up several deep wounds across his body.

Varuna let out a scream. The beast within burned with rage, howling with desire to kill its enemy—to deliver twice the pain that it had been dealt, to repay that agony with blood. At the same time, Serph's mind within Varuna fought against those urges, focusing instead on keeping Sera's blood safe. The ampules he clutched tightly in his hands held blood given not through murder or hatred or fear, but out of love and kindness. He could not let it go to waste.

Ushas suddenly fell to her knees as she tried to unleash another blade of light. Barely able to move, she could only wrench her limbs slowly back and forth and howl. Prithvi had once again activated her gravity control, but with less force than before. Ushas howled her outrage, her hair jerking about like jagged bolts of lightning.

Varuna was quick to close the gap. He covered the last several meters in one leap, slamming Ushas to the ground. Entering Prithvi's gravity well made his body painfully heavy, and it took twice as much effort as normal for him even to move his arms. He tore the pouch in his hands open with his teeth and pulled out the ampules inside.

Ushas thrashed her head back and forth. Her mouth snapped about in a blind

rage, and her flailing hair-tendrils lashed at Varuna's back and shoulders, stinging like red-hot needles. For a moment Varuna was almost overcome by the intensity of the pain; he could hear the sound of his own bones creaking as his nerves cried out in agony. But amidst it all, he took the whole supply of capsules, along with Argilla's ampules, and pushed them into Ushas' mouth.

"Come on, Jinana, drink up," he muttered, barely even able to breathe. "Everyone gave all this for you. All our people . . . Argilla, Sera . . . it's all for you."

This was the very essence of Sera, he knew. If anything could save Jinana, it was this.

Varuna waited until that seething mouth was open as wide as it could go before crushing the ampules and capsules together in his fist. All at once, a rush of blood poured down into Ushas' gullet. More than likely, some of Varuna's own was mixed in with it.

Come on, Jinana. Turn back. Everyone's waiting. Your people. Argilla. We know you can do it. Come back, Jinana. Back to yourself. Back to being human.

Come back.

What felt like an eternity went by.

Suddenly, Varuna felt his body grow lighter, and he rolled over onto his side, ampule fragments falling from his hands. His body throbbed as if it had been crushed in a press. Prithvi's gravity control had ceased.

"Sir!" It was Argilla's voice, not her Atma's, drawing closer to him. He could see Heat's red hair, as well. Somewhere along the way, he'd come out of his own transformation. He ached all over, and when he looked at his hands, he saw fragments of glass embedded in his bloody palms.

He heard the sound of ragged breathing from somewhere nearby, and he rolled his head to the side to look.

Ushas was gone—now there was only Jinana. The green-haired leader of the Maribel was gasping painfully for air, her mouth smeared with red.

"Jinana!" Serph dove to Jinana's side and pulled her up into his arms. "Can you

hear me? It's me, Serph. Argilla's here, too. Hang in there, Jinana. Stay strong."

"Jinana, it's me." Argilla knelt at her side, desperation on her face as she held her friend's hand. "You're safe now. You're not going to turn into a demon anymore. Come on, look at me."

But Jinana did not open her eyes. Her body twisted in pain, and her head kept lolling from side to side as she groaned through gritted teeth. Suddenly, her eyes snapped open, a flash of red light appearing and then disappearing within her green pupils, and she let out another moan before going limp once more.

"Sir—"

"It looks like we're not out of the woods yet," Serph said. He stood and hoisted Jinana's body up over his shoulder. For the time being, he guessed, the blood she'd drunk had overcome her Atma, but it hadn't been enough to turn her completely back to her former self. They needed more of Sera's blood, and quickly.

"We need to get her back to the base right away. The Solids still have troops on the move. Argilla and Heat, you stay here and take care of the enemies remaining in the stronghold. I'm going to get Jinana back to Muladhara and join up with Cielo and Gale. I'm worried about Sera."

"Roger that, sir," Argilla said without hesitation, transforming on the spot. "Get Jinana there as fast as you can. We don't know how much time we have."

Agni shrugged after he'd transformed as well. "I'd rather not waste my time fighting these lackeys. But I guess it needs to be done."

"Serph of the Embryon!" A blue-skinned giant lumbered toward them. He had six mighty arms, carrying an assortment of weapons ranging from a sword to a machine gun, and in one hand he even held what appeared to be the crushed corpse of one of the Solids, still in Atma form. "If you're going back to Muladhara, we can help. Zaphir, hurry!"

There was a gust of wind, and a moment later, a golden, four-legged beast with the white face and chest of a woman bounded up, four sturdy limbs thumping on the ground. In place of hair, a white, cloud-like mane encircled her head, and her fringed face bore burning golden eyes. Fluttering white wings

spread out from her body at the point where she transitioned from woman to beast.

“This Sphinx is the fastest member of our tribe—perhaps even faster on the ground than those of you who take to the air. Please, ride her, sir, and take Jinana with you.”

“Ride, Serph of the Embryon,” said the Sphinx. It seemed that she had difficulty speaking, perhaps due to the shape of her mouth while transformed. White fangs showed from behind her red lips. “You will not be able to carry Jinana fast enough on your own. Please, Serph. There is no time.”

Serph remembered the name Zaphir. She was one of the two guards who had accompanied him and Jinana the first time they’d spoken. The blue giant was probably the other of that pair. The two of them looked at Jinana with despair in their eyes, taking in their leader’s pale face and unmoving body.

“All right. Thank you.” Serph pushed Jinana up onto the Sphinx first, then mounted behind her. The golden fur underneath him was soft, but beneath it he could feel unmistakably powerful muscles.

“Hold on tight, Serph of the Embryon. We’re off!”

They traveled at an incredible speed, so fast that the corpse-strewn destruction that littered the battlefield zipped by too quickly for the eye to see. The Sphinx bounded over holes, leapt from one pile of rubble to the next, and at one point even cleared a collapsed building with a single powerful jump that no human could ever have hoped to accomplish, swiftly bypassing one obstacle after another without pause. Serph held on for dear life to ensure that neither he nor Jinana fell off.

The cuts on his hands were starting to heal, but already the Atma inside him was beginning to hunger again. The battle to stop Jinana must have exhausted it. Inside his mouth, his sharp teeth ached, and he felt a burning tingle along his cheek. A feral growl rose up from within his throat. Zaphir looked back at him briefly, then faced forward again and concentrated on running. Serph forced his mouth shut and hunched forward, stifling the raging hunger and pent-up anger inside of him.

Why is this happening? he thought as the inside of his own mind seemed to go red. *Why are we even in this place? What are we doing here?*

“Serph!” Zaphir called out. Straight ahead, a group of enemies lay in wait, their yellow tribal markings identifying them as Solids. An ambush.

“Stand down!” Serph shouted, his voice hoarse. His cheek felt like it was on fire. His teeth elongated into fangs, piercing his tongue; the taste of his own blood spread through his mouth. He grew dizzy. “If you don’t want to die, stand down. I will kill you if you get in our way.”

The Solids hesitated momentarily, but soon enough, blue light began to envelop their bodies. One by one, the forms of their Atma appeared. They were wild beasts, like the Nues in the fortress basement, but these had bony wings sporting membranes of sickly red skin, bodies covered in jet black fur, and paired horns atop their heads.

A rush of power built up in Serph’s arm. He leaned forward over Jinana, shielding her with his body, and clung to Zaphir’s neck with his left arm as his right changed into that of Varuna. The skin from his shoulder to his fingertips turned pale and armored, and with ferocious intent, the blade of bone slipped free.

Soon enough, there was blood in the air.

The feral Atma were no match for Varuna’s lethal strokes as he charged through their midst astride the swift, agile Sphinx. Limbs, heads, and bisected torsos flew, scattered across the landscape like gruesome confetti. Varuna let out a groan of pleasure at the sweet smell of blood and the sensation of his blade slicing through flesh. As if from a distance, Serph watched himself greedily licking up the blood that came pouring down. He was distraught to find himself unable even to feel sickened by it anymore.

Why do we fight? Why do we kill?

Why do we have to kill? Why?

A wild chill filled the air. One of the flying Atma that was pursuing them took a direct hit from Varuna’s freezing blast, froze solid, and shattered apart, the shards of icy flesh scattering on the wind.

Why do we kill?

Because it was kill or be killed. That was the plain and simple reason; but it was also no reason at all. There simply was no good explanation *why* they should have to kill each other in the first place. The addition of the Atma and this insatiable hunger weren't the reason—not the fundamental reason. All they had done was make it even clearer to Serph *what* he and everyone else in the Junkyard had always done, but not why they did it.

Serph and the others were born into this world to fight. They lived to fight. But who was it who had consigned them to that fate? The Church? Who had established the Church? Who was it that had originally dangled this promise of Nirvana before them, this so-called paradise they couldn't even envision?

Who is it that granted us our lives, our karma?

And still he charged through the slaughter, until the last of the wild Atma fell away. Serph shook his arm to fling the blood from it. The alluring aroma of the gore that had splattered over him made his mouth water. There was no sign, now, of any more enemies; and he began to recognize the local landmarks. They were back in Muladhara, near the Embryon base. From the far side of an abandoned building, he saw several columns of black smoke rising up, but there were no sounds of any battle taking place. Serph told Zaphir to stop and ordered her to wait with Jinana in the shelter of a large ruin.

“But Serph—”

“I'm just going to check out what the situation is at the base, and then I'll be right back. If there's still fighting going on, it'll be too dangerous to bring Jinana in. I'll go make sure that it's safe, and I'll come back with reinforcements as fast as I can.”

Zaphir hesitated at first, but then replied, “All right,” and lay down on her stomach alongside Jinana. She remained transformed, keeping an anxious watch over her leader as she licked the blood from her own golden fur.

Serph made his way to the base as quickly as he could while remaining under cover. His throat was dry. Inside his heart, Varuna still raged, still wanted to kill, demanding more blood and more flesh. All around were the lingering scents of battle, gunpowder and blood, and the odor of burned flesh tingled in his nose

wherever he went. It took a conscious effort for him to avoid hungrily licking his lips.

It was not long before he'd gotten into a position from which he had a good view of the base. The first things he saw were the blown-up remains of the support walls at the front gate and several blasted piles of cargo. The ground around the fortress entrance had been scorched black, and the bodies of fallen soldiers were scattered nearby. A good half of them were in Atma form, or bore the Solids' yellow tribal markings, but there were a number who wore Embryon orange as well. Some were completely motionless, but others were still alive, groaning as they tried to get to their feet or crawl across the battlefield.

There was no time to lose. Casting aside any hesitation, Serph dashed through a nearby trench to reach a badly wounded tribe member and helped the gasping man to sit up. His breathing was labored, and Serph had to hold him tightly to quell his instinctive struggling. His eyes blinked a few times and wandered a bit before they stopped and quickly focused on Serph.

"Ahh . . . Sir." The soldier tried to smile, but wound up wincing in pain. "They attacked us while you were away. I'm sorry. We . . ."

"It's all right. Where is the enemy? How are things inside?"

"We have completed clearing out the infiltrators from within the base," a steady voice said suddenly from somewhere nearby.

Serph turned to see Gale standing in a hole that had been blasted in the barrier wall, one hand braced on the side of it. Though his expression was as emotionless as always, he could not hide the weariness on his face. His hood was covered in soot, and his tribal uniform was burned in several places.

"It seems that we made it back here more quickly than they anticipated. There were also fewer hostiles present than I expected. I believe that they were not here to battle, but rather to search for our means of controlling the Atma. I sent out a detachment with a case full of decoy pharmaceuticals and machinery, with orders to pretend to flee; more than half of the enemy forces broke off to pursue them."

Serph carefully lowered the groaning man back down on the ground. He was relieved that his tribe had managed to escape destruction, but he still had Jinana

to think about, so he couldn't afford to relax yet. "Is Sera all right? Did they find her?"

"Cielo took her into hiding. They barely managed to escape, and we are searching for them now," Gale said. He began to wander back and forth, squinting his eyes as he looked around.

For the time being, it appeared that they didn't need to worry about another enemy attack. Serph instructed Gale to retrieve Zaphir and Jinana and bring them into the base. Some of the fallen Embryon members could still move, and they called out to him as soon as they realized he had returned. Serph left Gale's troops to look after them and hurried into the base.

When he stepped inside, he only barely managed to stifle a gasp. It was an awful sight, painfully reminiscent of the grim scene at the Vanguard headquarters. Blood was splattered on the floor and ceiling and burn marks and bullet holes riddled the walls. The main corridor had collapsed, and it would be tough to find another way around.

"Cielo!" Serph shouted his name, but his voice only echoed down the hallway, and he got no reply. From farther away came the sound of collapsing stonework. "Cielo, where are you? Cielo!"

He used his Atma to blast away the mound of concrete that blocked his path. The frost-covered rubble fragments disintegrated into glittering powder, but there was no one on the other side. He could hear sounds of frantic running and shouting, but he couldn't see where they were coming from.

The base had always been a ramshackle affair, difficult to maintain and repair, its various structures and hallways all discombobulated. The result was that they'd had to live with a base that was almost like a maze. "Cielo!" Serph tried calling out again. Then he gritted his teeth uneasily as the voices sounded again in the distance.

Even though he'd really had no other choice at the time, Serph regretted sending Cielo to protect Sera. Dyaus may have been a High Atma, but his greatest strengths lay in flying and long-range attacks from the air; he wasn't well equipped for close-quarters fighting underground. Still, defending the mysterious girl was a task far too important to have been entrusted to any run-

of-the-mill member of the tribe, and so the duty had fallen on young Cielo.

The sense that time was running out weighed heavily on Serph's mind. Jinana needed help soon; with each moment she was being consumed by an Atma she still could not control. Serph called upon Varuna again and expanded his senses, but though he could detect many of the Embryon still in their Atma forms, he did not find Dyaus among them. In all likelihood, Cielo himself was in a highly weakened state.

Or he's dead, Serph thought briefly before quashing the thought from his mind. No. He refused to believe that. He drove his fist into the wall beside him, and with the power of his Atma behind the blow, the dented structure caved in even further, as if it had been hit with a cannonball.

"—ound him."

Serph snapped to attention as he heard a faint voice coming from . . . somewhere. He turned, searching, and realized that the words were echoing through the hole he'd just made in the wall, and the speaker was coming closer.

"—ound him. It's Cielo. Someone needs to let the leader know. Cielo—"

Serph practically leapt through the hole he'd made. The sounds of more shouting and running came from down the hallway on the other side. As Serph came jumping through, an Embryon member very nearly slammed into him, and he started to snap at Serph before realizing a moment later who he was addressing.

"Sir! When did you get back?"

"Cielo's here? Where is he?" Serph demanded, skipping the pleasantries.

Sensing his urgency, the soldier quickly turned and led the way briskly toward the base's lower levels. They made their way down several flights of stairs and past a handful of disorganized rooms. After turning a number of corners, they could hear the sounds of a commotion further ahead. Serph rushed ahead of his man, coming to a room that was packed with people. The crowd was apprehensive, almost panicked.

"Listen, okay? We are not the enemy," one man called out to someone out of sight. An instant later he was illuminated by a flash of pale blue lightning right in

front of his face; he staggered backward and fell to the ground. One of the others helped him back up, and Serph slipped in beside them.

“Sir,” said the second man, turning from his groaning comrade in surprise, “you can’t go in there. It’s too dangerous. Cielo won’t listen to anyone!”

Serph held up a hand to silence him and stepped through the doorway beyond.

The room he entered was a shambles. It looked like an old, unused supply room, except that everything inside had been completely destroyed—smashed and blasted—with the exception of a single worn-out gun locker that still stood, dusty but unharmed, in odd contrast with the chaos around it.

Cielo, in the form of Dyaus, was slumped against the door of the locker, as if still guarding it despite how weary he was. He was in a terrible state, probably lucky to be alive. His left leg was broken, bent at an unnatural angle, and half of one of his wings had been ripped off. He was bleeding from a dozen wounds or more, the blood forming blackish pools on the concrete; the scent of it made Serph’s stomach ache.

“Cielo.”

As soon as the word was out of his mouth, a blast of electricity came at him. Serph batted it away with a swing of his arm. There wasn’t much power behind it; it was obvious that Cielo didn’t have much left to give. Serph made his way to his friend’s side and knelt down.

“Cielo, it’s me. It’s all right now. I’m not your enemy. You did well. You did your best.”

“H-Hey, buddy . . .” The words came as a croak from between clenched jaws. “You came back. Jinana . . . is she all right? And . . . the others . . .”

“They’re fine,” Serph assured him. “Jinana is outside waiting for treatment. Argilla, Heat, Gale, they’re all fine. And look, so am I.”

“That’s . . . that’s good.” Abruptly Dyaus slumped forward and collapsed, his Atma transformation ending as he ran out of strength. Serph scooped up Cielo’s small human form, then turned and shouted for a first aid team. Someone went running at once.

“Hey, buddy, I—”

“It’s all right, Cielo. Don’t try to speak.” Serph was shocked at just how light Cielo’s body was as he held it, rocking it gently. “I’ll hear all about your heroics later. For now, just be quiet.”

“I did my best. For Sera. Because she’s my friend.” A contented smile crossed Cielo’s soot-and blood-smeared face. “I’ll keep her safe. I’ll do whatever it takes. Absolutely anything. Because I’m your number one guy, buddy.”

He rested his blue-haired head on Serph’s shoulder. The first aid team came in and loaded him onto a stretcher. A moment later, the door of the gun locker, no longer held shut by his weight, swung open with a creaking sound.

Cramped in the dark, dusty space inside was a black-haired girl, curled up and unconscious.

Jinana opened her eyes just enough to let in a hint of light.

Slowly her mind struggled back to consciousness. Her first thought was to wonder where she was. And then came the question of why she was there. Her memories were muddled. She remembered being in pain. A powerful hunger and thirst. Hatred. Fear. An appetite so intense it made her vision go bright red. And then fear, and pain. Pain. Pain.

And then—

Jinana sat up with a start. She saw that she’d been put in a bed, in a room that she didn’t recognize. Her memories came back to her like a tidal wave: Bat’s betrayal, the battle, her Atma going berserk, and then—

The door opened.

“Oh, Jinana!” a woman with soft curly pink hair exclaimed happily as she leaned her head in. “I’m so glad you’re awake. You were out for a really long time, and we were starting to worry. But everything’s going to be all right, now. We can all relax.”

“Relax . . .” She was confused again. When she felt the Atma subsume her consciousness, she’d been ready to die. Wishing for death had been the right

thing to do. She couldn't bear the thought of being a mindless monster, like her own people had become, scattered outside of her fortress walls. She'd rather someone kill her before that, before she killed someone else, or before she hurt one of her new allies—her new friends.

"I . . . I should be dead. What am I doing here? Is this the afterlife? Argilla, you're here, too. Is this the inside of the Temple?"

"This is the Embryon base. Sorry about all the mess," Argilla said, gesturing at the disordered room. She slipped inside and shut the door behind her. Moving to the bedside, she smiled warmly as she patted Jinana on the hand. "I know the beds are hard, but try to tough it out. You're far from the only person who's laid up like this, after all."

"What? I don't understand."

The door opened again. On reflex, Jinana shut her mouth, turning quickly to see what was going on. "Hold on," Argilla said gently. "You shouldn't move that fast just yet. You lost a lot of blood, so you should focus on getting plenty of rest."

She heard a voice from outside the doorway, then a small girl stepped inside, her footsteps shaky and uncertain. The orange on her outfit marked her as one of the Embryon. She looked incredibly frail, even for a new recruit. Serph, looking solemn, came in after her.

Seeing Jinana sitting up in bed, the girl gave a little gasp and put a hand to her mouth; then she hurried over and sank to her knees beside the bed. Her silky black hair brushed at Jinana's lap. "Oh, thank goodness. We made it in time. Thank goodness."

Jinana looked up at Serph for an explanation as the girl buried her face against Jinana's side, sobbing. "I thought it would be too late for me to save you. But I did. I saved you. I saved you."

"This girl's blood is what allowed us to save you, Jinana," Argilla said, stroking the girl's hair gently.

Black hair. The girl raised her tear-streaked face. Her eyes were black to match. Jinana's own eyes widened in shock.

“Her name is Sera,” Serph said quietly. “She’s the ‘black-haired girl’ the Church is looking for.”

Next Stage

Our salvation is death, but not this one.

—Franz Kafka



Varin Omega was in a foul mood.

He should have been the ruler of the entire Junkyard, the one in prime position to reach the gates of Nirvana, but ever since that chaotic day—the day that their Atma had first manifested—he had been in a constant state of vexation, and pretty much everyone else in his tribe, the Brutes, knew it.

He wasn't even sure himself what he was so aggravated about. The Church, the unquestionable highest authority in the Junkyard, had given out information about the Atma, but it had done nothing to help rid him of his annoyance.

He hadn't been overly concerned about Atma, or the hunger that came with it. It had stung that his bishop had died, overwhelmed by the conflicts between the Church's conditioning and his Atma impulses, but aside from that inconvenience the new realities of Junkyard conflict had little effect on his strategies. Just as before, all they really needed to do was to fight and to win. No one knew what happened to those who lost now, but if devouring others made someone stronger, he welcomed the opportunity.

The Atma hunger also served as a driving force for people within the tribe. There were some who had expressed unease at the prospect of feeding on their foes, but weaklings like that were quickly killed and devoured by their more assertive colleagues. Varin Omega was unconcerned with cannibalism amongst his own tribe. Officially, he had forbidden fighting amongst his tribe members as a way of preventing senseless loss of personnel, but if a coward getting eaten enabled a more talented individual to become more powerful, he was more than willing to look the other way.

In the Junkyard, the strong reigned supreme. And not only was that principle the law of the land—it was his own personal creed, as well. Now, as leader of the largest tribe in the Junkyard, he certainly ate his fair share of enemy soldiers

during battles. He had no qualms about the practice; this was how things were done now, and so it was what he did. Nothing had really changed. Weren't they still doing what they always had?

He didn't much like how the state of things in the Junkyard had developed in other ways lately, however. According to intel he'd received the other day, the Embryon, lowest-ranked of the top six tribes, had defeated their neighbors in Svadhisthana, the Vanguard, and from there had gone on to form an alliance with the mid-ranked Maribel. After that, they apparently all but wiped out the Maribel's enemies, the Solids. It was a somewhat far-fetched story, but it had been confirmed several times over. Notices from the Church backed it up. It was unprecedented for two tribes to agree to end hostilities of their own accord without the Church issuing them an armistice order.

And yet after their battle with the Solids, the Embryon had maintained their alliance with the Maribel. The two now helped defend each other's territory, and they were apparently working together in hunting down the remaining members of the Solids and even in taking in Newborns.

Since the Church had not decreed that the Solids were eliminated, that had to mean that their leader, Mick the Slug, was still alive somewhere. Their base, however, had been fully occupied by a contingent of Embryon and Maribel forces, and the word was that members of the Solids were still turning up there to surrender. It was doubtful that Mick would be coming back in the short term. For now, the Solids were no longer a going concern in the Junkyard.

This meant that the Embryon and the Maribel—perhaps it was accurate to say the Embryon had absorbed the Maribel—now controlled a total of four areas: their home territory of Muladhara, plus Svadhisthana, Manipura, and Anahata.

A shudder ran up Varin Omega's spine, but he shrugged it off. He'd seen the Embryon leader once, back at the Temple. He was a young man, with a relatively small, slender frame, along with silver hair and facial features that were nearly feminine. At the time, Varin had thought him a fool for showing himself where the others could see him, but it seemed like the young fellow was steadily making his way up in the world.

As the top-ranked tribe, the Brutes still possessed the strongest military force,

and the area they controlled, Ajna, was the largest in the Junkyard. However, if the current trend continued, the Embryon might manage to overtake the Brutes' current enemy, the Wolves of Vishuddha. Then, despite the Brutes' strength, they would find themselves surrounded on all sides by a superior foe, forced into a defensive battle they couldn't hope to win.

Lately, the conflict with the Wolves had drifted into a temporary standstill. The Wolves' intentions were unclear. Perhaps they simply hadn't yet extricated themselves from the chaos into which nearly all the tribes had plunged after their Atma were first unleashed. If that was the case, Varin thought, then now might be a good time to take out the Wolves and add Vishuddha to the Brutes' domain, but the current situation with the Embryon made the prospect of an all-out war too dicey.

The worst-case scenario was that the joint Embryon–Maribel forces had added the remaining Solids to their ranks and were going to approach the Wolves with an offer of alliance. If the combined forces of three tribes added the Wolves to their number, they would be a foe to be feared indeed. The Brutes needed to prevent any such alliance, if possible, but without knowing the Wolves' current disposition, now was not a time for rash action. He would have to proceed carefully.

The intercom sounded. Varin Omega pressed the call switch. "What is it?" he growled.

"Sir, someone has come to surrender."

Varin detected a hint of fear in the man's voice. He was pleased. The taste of power always put him in a good mood. "Surrender? From which tribe?"

"I, well—"

A deep, gravelly voice interrupted him. "Is this Varin Omega?"

"Who's asking?"

"Oh, you wound me! I know you heard my voice at least once, when the Church had us all come to the Temple." The speaker's lips smacked when he talked; then he let out a deep laugh. "This is Mick the Slug, leader of the Solids, as I'm sure I don't need to tell you."

Varin had somehow been expecting that response. Having lost his base and most of his tribe members to the Embryon, Mick would have a hard time gathering up new recruits from amongst the Newborns, and the forces he did still have were far too weak. After the loss of one's tribe, the next move that a smart leader might make would be to take refuge with a tribe bigger than the one which had defeated him. He'd just have to be prepared for the fact that he wouldn't be given the leader treatment anymore once—if—he was taken in.

"Give me video," Varin said, leaning with his elbows on his desk. The screen on his wall lit up. Nearly half of the image was taken up by a massive man with dark brown skin. His pink lips were spread in a broad grin, showing off his big yellow teeth.

"There's someone else behind you," Varin said. "Who is it?"

"I am Bat, of the Maribel." The man's voice was high-pitched and grating. He looked nervous, too, his alert eyes constantly darting to and fro. Strands of purple, blood-matted hair draped over his narrow shoulders.

"More like 'former' Maribel, really," Mick followed up with a laugh. "He couldn't put up with that dumb bitch of a leader of his, and so he left and came to me. Isn't that right, Bat?"

"I will kill them," Bat said, his tone completely neutral. "The brat who leads the Embryon, the woman, the fools in my tribe—I will show them no mercy. I will tear them apart with my bare hands, and then I will devour them."

The Brute standing at his side looked somewhat uncomfortable hearing that.

Varin shrugged. "You will wait there while I verify your identities," he told them. Then, breaking the connection for a moment, he set about confirming that his visitors were who they claimed to be. If he'd still had a bishop, he could have simply given a brief command and the verification would have been complete in a matter of moments, but as it was, he had to boot up his own terminal, access the Church's system, and do the search himself. He compared their recorded characteristics against the names and positions the two had given. It appeared they were telling the truth.

Varin reopened the channel and peered at Mick and Bat. "By surrendering to the Brutes, do you mean to serve us as ordinary tribe members? Surely you don't

intend to take my place as leader. Regardless of whatever Atma you might possess, there are only two of you. You wouldn't be bolstering our fighting strength all that much. What benefit do the Brutes gain by taking you in?"

"Right here. Take a look at this." Mick held up a small container. It was made of metal, about half a meter on a side. Its pale blue paint job was peppered with bullet holes and bloodstains. "This is a device that the Embryon worked up, to create a medicine that can control Atma."

"What?" Varin shot to his feet. "Control Atma? You must be mistaken."

"Oh, there's no mistake. This was the bait the Embryon used to get all buddy-buddy with the Maribel. For whatever reason, that woman felt she was too good to eat people." Mick clutched the container tightly against his broad chest. "We haven't quite figured out how it works yet, but the stuff it makes is extraordinary. Bat can vouch for that personally. He says that this is how the Embryon have been able to avoid going cannibal after a person's Atma awakens."

Varin grunted. Mick was still grinning toothily.

"The Maribel haven't been wiped out yet, right? Somehow, the right dose of this stuff can even rein in an Atma that's started to go berserk. When the time came for us to fly the coop, we were certain that bitch Jinana was doomed—either going to die or get herself killed, but it looks like she's still alive, and back to normal."

"I see. I will speak to you again after I've looked into your story." Varin switched off the call, pondering this new information. He ran a search, and it seemed that Mick's account of the Maribel leader surviving was true, but the circumstances surrounding her survival were unclear. Had the Embryon really taken steps to change her back and keep her alive?

The idea was ludicrous. The Embryon could have killed her and eliminated the Maribel in order to boost their own tribe another spot up the ladder. If she'd gone haywire, that was all the more reason to finish her off. Had this whole "alliance" really not just been some ruse they'd devised to crush both the Maribel and the Solids in a single stroke? That was what Varin himself would have done.

Thinking about the silver-haired upstart who ran the Embryon drove him into a fit of rage. He couldn't even conceive what the boy could be planning next.

Varin knew he couldn't put too much trust in Mick and his companion. One of them had betrayed his own leader, and the other had abandoned his own people, and then they'd come begging help from yet another tribe. They might talk a good game now, but there was no telling when they'd double-cross him if they saw the opportunity.

But he was very interested in this "Atma-controlling medicine" Mick had mentioned. If the Embryon had been able to use it to eliminate or take over three other tribes, he was sure the Brutes could put it to good use if they could get their hands on it.

If it were me, Varin thought, I'd find a far better purpose for it than those sniveling maggots did.

He was reaching for the intercom switch again when he heard a low voice chuckle behind him.

"You always were so easily deceived by the promise of power, Colonel."

He spun around to see a figure standing by the door, clad from head to toe in a long, black robe. Without a word, Varin called upon his Atma and let out a burst of blue-white lightning, hurling the jagged bolts directly at the interloper.

The man in black held his ground and merely raised one hand, palm inward. Light glowed around the back of that hand, dispersing Varin's attack before the lightning could strike. The intruder's black hood rippled in the darkness of the office; otherwise the man just stood there, as if Varin's attempted attack had never occurred.

Peering at him warily, Varin could see that there was a symbol on the back of the white glove on the man's uplifted hand: a pair of intertwined, thorned circles, the emblem of the Church. It flickered with pale blue light. The leader of the Brutes was dumbstruck.

"You should know that the container they have is a decoy." Another faint chuckle came from underneath the hood. "The Embryon's ever-canny bishop took them for the fools they are. The true means of controlling Atma is

elsewhere. And I know where.”

“Who are you?” Varin asked. He could feel himself breaking out into a cold sweat. He realized that he didn’t know when the man had come in—he might have been standing there for quite some time. The intruder was a small fellow, slender, not even tall enough to come up to Varin’s shoulders, but while he was not physically intimidating, there was something deeply disquieting in his presence. Something about him didn’t quite fit in with the Junkyard at all.

The Church markings suggested that he was a priest, but his sarcastic speech and mocking laugh were quite different from the white-clad warrior priests Varin had encountered before, who carried out the Church’s orders like machines.

“It would be best if you could remember that on your own, Colonel.” There was still a hint of laughter in the stranger’s voice. “For now, consider me to be a messenger from the Church—as well as your new bishop. And you should know, Colonel, that the Brutes now have the full support of the Church. Or at least the support of Angel. My heart goes out to you. After all, you’re the victim here. No one back then could have predicted you’d come to this.”

Varin stood up almost without realizing it. “What are you talking about? Listen, you bast—*ahem*. Look, I would like an explanation. Is there something you know? About the Junkyard? About Atma?” His throat strained to even get the next words out. “About . . . me?”

Who am I, really?

Varin would have been shocked to realize that he was starting to ask the same questions that Serph had not long before. His memories of the time before he was bestowed with his Atma seemed so far away now, as if they had faded behind a veil of mist. It almost seemed to him as if they were unreal—like they were the memories of a completely different person who had fought, who had won, who had led his tribe to prominence.

Someone else. The nagging question he felt now wasn’t about his Atma or anything of the sort. He wanted to know something much more basic—he wanted to understand what actually made up the person called Varin. Who was he? Why was he here? What was he fighting for? Where was the paradise he’d been taught to seek, and what was the salvation the Church promised?

Who am I?

“I can give you your answers, Colonel. Come with me.”

The hooded man beckoned to Varin as he stepped toward to the tactical table. As he began to step away from his desk the Brutes’ leader could hear anxious shouting coming through the intercom. “Sir? Sir, what’s going on? Please respond!”

“Take those two and lock them up somewhere,” he grunted into the microphone, ignoring the subsequent shouts that came through just before he flicked off the switch.

The hooded man stood waiting in front of the table. The lower part of his face was barely visible in the shadows beneath his hood; its contours were rather feminine, the lips slender and curved into a smiling bow. There was a quiet hum as the table established a connection with the Church. A green light began to glow, faintly illuminating the dark room.

The face that appeared was not the expressionless flesh mask of the Dissemination Machine.

“It has been quite some time, Colonel William van Beck.” It spoke in a calm voice that was neither male nor female. “I apologize for the delay in getting in touch with you. First, allow me to say that I am glad that you are well. As we are presently unable to make use of the Technoshaman, establishing a stable connection is not easy. You will forgive me for not speaking up at the Temple; in addition to other Asura being present, *he* was also there.”

Varin was dumbfounded. “Who do you mean, ‘he’?”

“The man who killed you before, Colonel,” the hooded man responded with a chuckle. With a fluid motion, he drew his hood back, revealing a striking visage. His hair came down to his shoulders, a shade of black that didn’t exist in the Junkyard. His skin was pale white, and his face was downright womanly.

Only half of that face was visible, however, due to the dark, blocky goggles he wore over his eyes.

She still hadn't stopped sobbing.

"Hey, Sera, you should really get some rest," Argilla said, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder, unable to bear it any longer. "Cielo's not in critical condition anymore, so why don't you calm down, get some sleep, and you'll be your boisterous little self again. Besides, you're probably still suffering from blood loss right now."

"But . . ." Sera hiccupped as she rubbed at her face. Her eyes were flushed red from all of her crying. "It's my fault that Cielo—"

"Look, it's *not* your fault. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

But Sera still just hung her head and sniffled. Argilla sighed, folding her arms across her chest as she looked at the sleeping form of Cielo on the bed, covered in bandages. There was a faint bitterness in her eyes.

Ten days had passed since the battle with the Solids. The objective of the enemy task force had apparently been to abscond with the Embryon's secret of controlling Atma, and so they hadn't made a point to devour their fallen foes. Gale's decoy had done its job in fooling them, and thankfully they hadn't been drawn into a longer battle; casualties were far lower than expected, and the injuries of those who'd survived weren't all that bad, either. Aside from Cielo, that was.

Given the base's cramped quarters, it had been no small task to fend off the onslaught of enemy intruders while trying to lead a scared girl to safety. But Cielo had gotten the job done.

If the enemy had seen Sera's black hair and black eyes, they would have realized at once that she was the girl that the Church was searching for. After fleeing for dear life, Cielo had shoved Sera into a gun locker in an unused cargo room in the very depths of the fortress, then told her not to open the door, no matter what, before turning to face down a powerful enemy assault squad all by himself.

His injuries had been severe. He'd suffered damage to the joints in his left leg, and one of his arms had been torn completely off. He also had burns and lacerations all over his body, along with countless other external injuries. If it hadn't been for his Atma and its powerful regenerative capabilities, he'd likely

have died on the spot.

As luck would have it, his rescuers had found his severed arm intact where it had been tossed into the corner of the cargo room. The odds were only fifty-fifty that the surgeons' attempt to reattach it would take, but for now, the prognosis was good. He still couldn't move the arm due to the sutures and the delicate nerve grafting treatment that Gale had devised, but at the very least, the medics were confident that necrosis wouldn't set in and cause him to lose the arm.

"Come on, Sera," Argilla said. "You should go back to your room. Cielo's been a real trooper through all this so far, and I'm sure he's going to keep fighting. It won't do him any good if you pass out here."

"I—no, I know that, but . . ." Sera lowered her head again, more tears falling onto her hands, which were clutching her knees. "It's just that . . . I couldn't *do* anything. When the Solids attacked us, I knew Cielo was fighting all by himself, but I was so scared that I couldn't even move. And Cielo . . . The only reason we were attacked was because I was here."

From the bed came a weak voice. "That . . . isn't true . . . Sera."

"Cielo!" Sera practically leapt to her feet, clutching the end of the bed.

Argilla followed suit. "Cielo, you're finally awake! How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Never better. One look at Sera's face was all it took." Even now, despite his shaky voice and pained breathing, Cielo managed to turn his head atop the pillow in order to flash Sera a smile. "Why the long face? A cute girl like you needs to smile more. C'mon, show me a smile."

"She's so stubborn, isn't she?" Argilla wiped away her own tears. "All right, you stay put and don't move. I'm going to get Gale and the doctors."

"Cielo, I'm so sorry." Tears began to well up anew in Sera's eyes as she sat back down beside Cielo's bed. "All I did was watch. I couldn't do—"

A sudden weight fell into Sera's lap with a dull thump, shocking her into silence.

"Heat!" Argilla snapped. "What are you doing? What are you even thinking, bringing something like that in here?"

“She said she couldn’t do anything.” At some point, Heat had entered the room. Now he stood by the door, arms folded, not sparing a glance at Argilla; his intense gaze was focused on Sera’s small, startled face. “There’s nothing I hate more than people who whine about not being able to do anything when they just plain don’t even try. Take it.”

Sera tentatively reached down into her lap and lifted up a heavy handgun, its black surface gleaming like new.

“I’m not saying you need to learn how to shoot a gun. You don’t have the disposition or the upper body strength for it anyway. But if you’re ever surrounded by bad guys, you can at least put that against your head or stick it in your mouth and threaten to pull the trigger if they come any closer.”

Cielo tried to get up. “Whoa, hold on just a—” His words were cut off by a groan of pain.

Heat didn’t look away from Sera. “As long as you’re still alive, people are going to want to hand you over to the Church. Better to present a credible threat than arm you with some small-caliber weapon that doesn’t even suit you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Argilla said sternly. “We are not making her do that. I don’t know what the hell you’re thinking. Sera, here, give me that.”

“Wait,” Sera said, and when Argilla tried to pull the gun from her hands, the girl yanked it out of reach, clutching it to her chest as she got to her feet and scampered for the door. Heat, having said all he needed to say, turned to leave.

Sera called out to him, and he stopped to look back over his shoulder.

“Thank you, Heat,” she said. “I always thought you were just upset with me.”

“I’m not much of a handgun guy, myself. You should ask Serph to teach you.” With that, Heat disappeared down the hallway.

“What was that all about?” Argilla shook her head, still aggravated. “Honestly, I think I understand Heat less and less by the day. Don’t you be sorry, Sera. You’re a marvelous help to us just by being here. Without the blood you gave us, Jinana and so many others would either have died or gone mad.”

Jinana had finished recuperating a few days earlier, and had gone back to the

Maribel base, which had also come under attack from a Solids force on the day of the battle. They hadn't suffered losses as heavy as the Embryon, but the survivors had been disheartened by the news that their leader had gone berserk. Hearing that the Embryon had brought Jinana back from the brink had given a major boost to their morale. They were now rebuilding their base even as they worked with the Embryon to maintain control of the Solids' stronghold and clear out any remaining resistance nearby. They still hadn't found Mick the Slug since he'd fled, and so they had been careful not to let their guard down, but the trust that formed the cornerstone of the Embryon–Maribel alliance was holding strong.

“Come on, cheer up,” Argilla continued. “And . . . that gun doesn't suit you at all, so just let me hold onto it, okay, Sera?”

Sera didn't move. She clutched the heavy gun close, and shut her eyes as if in prayer.

“Argilla, is Cielo really awake?” Serph said as he came rushing into the room, only to stop short when he saw the handgun in Sera's arms.

Sera opened her eyes and looked right at him. “Serph,” she said calmly, “I have a favor to ask you.”

“Stand with your feet a little wider apart, so they're even with your shoulders. Like that, good. Now shift your right foot back a little. Square up your shoulders, and lean your weight forward just a bit. Don't hold your arms straight; let your elbows bend outward. You want them firm but not locked—that's right. Relax your upper body . . .

“Now focus on those sights—you want that front sight right on the center of the target.”

Serph and Sera were out amongst the ruins in a relatively safe area near the Embryon base. The rubble and debris had been cleared away enough to form an open space, and a series of concentric circles had been painted on one of the concrete walls at the far side. Argilla, along with a number of other tribe members who'd been scheduled to patrol during this time, looked on worriedly from nearby.

Sera kept a serious face as she followed Serph's instructions step by step. "Good," he said. "Now hold that stance, and remember, you want to squeeze the trigger smoothly. Okay—fire."

As the hollow gunshot echoed, Sera let out a yelp and nearly dropped the gun. Red paint splattered from a piece of debris; the shot had missed its mark by a mile. Argilla brought a hand to her forehead, and the other tribesmen traded pitying looks as they whispered to each other.

"Like I said, you need to relax your upper body," Serph reminded her. "Especially your shoulders. That's only a paint gun, but it still has some kickback. For someone like you, who's never held a gun before, recoil can be a lot stronger than your body is expecting, and if you tense up too much to anticipate it, it interferes with your ability to aim. Use your elbows like they were springs, to absorb the recoil's impact. Try it again."

Sera rubbed her cheek and nodded. She faced the target and got back into shooting position.

After about an hour of further instruction, Serph told Sera that he needed to go to a meeting with Gale. He and the bishop needed to discuss where exactly they were going to send the girl.

Mick and Bat had fallen for the decoy container, but they weren't going to stay fooled forever. Bat presumably still had the blood capsules that the Maribel had given him, and it stood to reason he and Mick might analyze their contents. They probably wouldn't make the immediate leap in logic that would connect the blood with the girl the Church was seeking, and thus lead them to Sera, but since the enemy knew the location and layout of the Embryon base, the first order of business was for Serph's tribe to find someplace to keep the girl safe.

He drew Argilla aside. "Would you mind looking after things here until she finishes up? When she's done with target practice, I also want her to learn how to field strip and repair her gun. You can handle all that, right?"

"Well, yes, sir," Argilla said, furrowing her brow. "But do you really want to have Sera going into battle wielding a gun?"

“Of course not. I wouldn’t dream of having her see live combat, if I have any choice in the matter,” Serph replied. “But Heat did have a good point. Sera’s really hurt by the fact that Cielo got injured while she stood by, afraid, without anything she could do. She needs to feel empowered, and while maybe it’s a bit drastic, I think letting her get some hands-on gun practice is for the best. Gale approves of it, too.”

“Well, sure.” As more gunshots rang out from the makeshift shooting range, Argilla looked over with a worried expression. “But it makes me nervous. Forget about ever having been in combat—she’s never even held a gun before.”

“Argilla, you know better than anyone that a nine millimeter doesn’t amount to much in a close-combat situation. For Sera, it would just be a means of self-defense.” Serph shrugged as he glanced over at Sera, who was still intently focused on the target. “Besides, with the way Atma are spreading and growing throughout the Junkyard nowadays, even a high-caliber magnum barely qualifies as a powerful weapon. And she’s only training with paintballs, not real bullets.”

Another gunshot sounded, and red paint spread across the wall where the target had been drawn. It wasn’t anywhere near the center of the circle, but she’d at least managed to hit the right wall this time.

“It’s not like she’s going to cause any real damage with a stray shot. Then maybe after she gets used to handling the gun, she can switch over to real bullets.”

“Sure.” Argilla pursed her lips. “But I still don’t understand why she needs to have a weapon. She’s got us to protect her, right? We’re hardened to this way of life. But her? I get what Heat is thinking, but . . .”

“But what?”

“It’s hard for me to put into words,” Argilla responded softly after a moment. “But I just want her to be someplace where ‘kill or be killed’ isn’t how things are done. I want her to stay her beautiful, kindhearted self. And to see her trying to learn how to kill, when it’s so far from who she is, is like watching her trying her hardest just to sully herself. It tears at my heart.”

Serph was quiet for a while, just watching Sera’s target practice, unable to find words to answer.

“I spoke to Jinana,” Argilla went on, voice even quieter than before. “I’m not going to use Sera’s blood anymore. Neither is Jinana. We’re going to kill and devour our opponents, just like everyone else. Because this is what we are now.”

“Argilla?” Serph was startled. Hadn’t it been Argilla who had most fiercely resisted the urge to feed her Atma, who had wanted more desperately than anyone else to go back to normal?

“Don’t say it,” she interjected. “I promise I haven’t given up on myself or anything like that. But Jinana and I talked it over and we came to this decision together. When we fought that skeleton creature in the Solids’ basement, I finally understood. This is who I am, now. What I am. When I crushed that bastard’s skull, it gave me chills. I was horrified—but it felt so, so good. You know what I mean, don’t you, sir?”

Argilla wasn’t looking back at him with her usual pink eyes; now they had taken on a faint golden sheen.

“Yeah.” It took a few moments before Serph replied, his voice calm. “I know what you mean.”

Serph had felt it, too, countless times, in the heat of battle: that detestable thing inside him that stirred up revulsion and pleasure at the same time. Until now, Argilla seemed to have been avoiding acknowledging it. A shadow crossed the side of her face as she averted her eyes.

“Sera’s blood keeps that in check. It lets you get by, without killing, without eating, going on like you’re still human, but it’s . . .” Argilla’s voice trembled, and she wiped roughly at the corner of her eye. “As much as I don’t want myself to get hurt, using her blood is like nibbling away at her life, bit by bit. I can’t let myself say I’m protecting her while putting her through so much suffering. I can’t stand it.”

Serph gently patted Argilla’s hand. He could imagine how long she and Jinana had agonized over the subject before coming to this decision.

“So I don’t need any more of Sera’s blood,” Argilla said after a brief silence, steeling her resolve. “I will fight, I will win, and I will eat those who I kill. And I will become stronger, for her sake. I don’t want to get hurt, but if it comes down to a choice between my safety and hers, I will choose Sera every time. I don’t know if

we'll ever be able to go back to being truly human, someday, but for the time being, this is what we are. That girl has done so much for us that it doesn't matter what happens to me in the course of paying back that debt."

"Stop it with all this 'it doesn't matter what happens to me' talk," Serph insisted. "You're an important member of my team, Argilla. There's not a single person in the Embryon who 'doesn't matter.' That includes Sera, but it includes you, too."

"Of course. I apologize." Argilla stared for a moment at a teardrop on her fingertip, then flicked it away. "But I'm still opposed to having Sera carry a gun. It just feels wrong to me. Especially Heat's suggestion that she use it to threaten to kill herself. Why would she ever even be in that kind of a situation if we're doing our job protecting her?"

"Think of it this way, Argilla," Serph said, watching Sera struggling to load a new clip. "We're going to do all we can to keep Sera safe. Not because of some Church decree, but because we—myself, the Embryon, Jinana, and the others—all decided to. But there are other tribes here in the Junkyard, and they're all looking for her. And the Wolves and the Brutes are the two biggest remaining. Not to mention we don't even know where Mick the Slug is. Sera still has a lot of enemies out there."

"I know that, but—"

"If we don't do everything we can—or even if we do—there's a chance Sera might get captured. In that case, if there was something she could do that could buy her even a little bit of time, or possibly create an opening for us to exploit, we'd want her to do it, right? So having her carry a gun isn't a bad option. Worst-case, if she winds up ever having to actually use it, that means we've already failed." Serph's tone was stern, now. "At that point, rather than having her gun pointed at the enemy or at herself, she may as well be pointing it at all of us."

"If she winds up having to use the gun, we've failed," Argilla repeated with a sigh before shaking her head in frustration. "Fine, I get it. We just need to keep her safe. Plain and simple. No matter what happens, I will protect her. If you want her to carry a gun, fine. But just you watch. She's not going to need to use

it. I'm not going to let anyone lay a finger on her."

"That's the ticket, Argilla." Serph smiled and patted his sniper on the back. "We'll protect Sera. No one lays a finger on her. No one causes her any harm."

A moment later Sera came trotting up to them with soft little footsteps, the gun clutched tightly against her chest. "I'm sorry," she said to them, catching her breath. "I'm not sure what happened, but the trigger won't pull anymore. I think it might be stuck on something. I've looked it over but I can't see why it won't move."

"Huh? Here, let me see it for a—Sera, your hands!" As Argilla took the gun from the girl with a practiced motion, her voice suddenly wavered. Sera looked confused. "Look at those cuts you've got!" Argilla exclaimed.

Sera's delicate hands were bloodied in several places. When she gripped the gun too high, the recoiling slide had struck her hand between thumb and forefinger, tearing open the skin. She had also managed to get a couple blood blisters when she clumsily seated the clip, and another when she pinched her finger in the slide while reloading.

"Sera, it's okay. You don't have to do this if you don't want to." Argilla cupped Sera's injured hands in her own as she looked the girl in the eye. "We're going to be sure to keep you safe, no matter what happens. Training with firearms is fine, but if it's going to cause you to get hurt like this, then—"

"Argilla, *stop*. Please, let me do this," Sera said with such desperation that it made Argilla snap her mouth shut. "Doing this makes me happy. I like that I'll be able to do something the rest of you can do."

Argilla was at a loss for words. Sera averted her eyes, but she went on speaking. "I want to be able to do the things you guys can. I don't want to just stand by doing nothing while other people protect me. All this fighting has been really scary, but you guys are always able to handle yourselves. But you had to learn too, right? And I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me like Cielo did, all because I don't know how. I . . . I want to be able to fight on my own, and so—"

"I understand, Sera," Argilla said. The girl was on the verge of tears, and Argilla breathed a soft sigh as she squeezed her hand gently. "Just don't push yourself

too hard. Why don't you stop here for today, and you can do some more tomorrow. If you don't get your hands patched up, it'll hurt too much for you to be able to aim anyhow. Remember, I'm the best sniper the Embryon has, so I know what I'm talking about."

"All right." Sera's melancholy face at last broke into a smile. "Sure, tomorrow. Do you think I'll be able to hit the target then?"

"Heh. We'll see. But first, if you don't get those hands looked at, you're not going to be hitting anything. Come on."

Leaving Sera in Argilla's care, Serph turned to head off to his meeting with Gale. No sooner had he started toward the base, however, than he heard a panicked voice shouting his name. Looking around, he saw a tribe member hurrying toward them from one of the nearby buildings. On instinct, Argilla pushed Sera behind her.

"What is it?" Serph asked. "Is it Mick and Bat?"

"No, it's not that. It's something that . . . I'm not really sure." The tribesman had run so fast that he was gasping for breath, bent over with his hands on his knees; his face was twisted up in consternation. "On the other end of the base, an entrance to some passageway that wasn't there before just suddenly . . . opened up in the ground, and about twenty Newbies came out of it."

"Twenty?" Serph could barely believe what he was hearing. A passage suddenly opening in the ground was bizarre enough, but to hear that a group of twenty people had made it past the Embryon's security cordon and gotten so close to the base was both improbable and disturbing.

"They say that they're survivors from the Wolves—which doesn't make sense, but it seems that the tribe was . . . swallowed up by something."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. They don't seem to know, either. They just said that, before they knew it, their entire area was swallowed up, and the only place for them to flee was underground."

The thought that some Atma had gone berserk crossed Serph's mind, but it was hard to believe that even a powerful group of feral Atma could so swiftly

destroy the Wolves, the second largest tribe in all the Junkyard. “Who’s over there now?” Serph asked.

“The bishop and Heat, sir. For the time being, all the intruders have been restrained—they gave no resistance. One of the Newbies seems to be their leader. He asked to speak to the leader of the Embryon. The bishop refused him, but Heat said we should go and fetch you, sir.”

Given Gale’s cautious nature, Serph understood why he’d be wary about having the tribe leader appear in front of an unknown party. But why would Heat request his presence?

“I’ll be right there. You go on ahead and tell the others I’ll be there soon.”

The tribesman saluted in acknowledgment and ran off. Argilla and Sera, who had been standing by listening, looked on dubiously. “What’s with that?” Argilla asked. “It doesn’t sound like we’re under attack.”

“Something strange is going on. I’m going to go check it out. Sera, why don’t you stop for today and go with Argilla to get patched up and get some rest. Don’t overexert yourself.”

Sera nodded, her face pale. She clutched her handgun tightly in her injured hands, as if it were some sort of good luck charm, and Serph went to follow after his man.

The ruined back section of the base had been converted into a storage area. Unused materials and broken-down pieces of equipment had been piled inside, leaving almost nowhere to walk. Now, in one corner, an area of roughly five square meters had been hastily cleared, and amidst all the tidied-up junk stood fifteen or sixteen Newborns, faces awash with nervousness. They were surrounded by Embryon members, most of them armed with guns, some having called upon their Atma to add to the intimidation factor.

Gale and Heat were overlooking the scene from a mezzanine one level above when Serph joined them. Serph thought it strange that Heat hadn’t manifested his Atma; if anyone would have been eagerly belligerent in this sort of situation, he’d have figured it would be Heat. Instead, the big shock trooper simply stood

with his arms folded across his chest, glaring down at the group of nervous-looking rookies.

“Sir,” Gale said, turning to Serph as he came in. Faint creases appeared across his forehead. “There is no need for you to be here. I can interrogate these people and report to you.”

“Shut up, Gale,” Heat snorted dismissively. “Serph.” He gestured silently with a nod of his chin, and Serph let his gaze follow.

“Are you the leader of the Embryon?” asked one of the Newborns, trying to step forward. The surrounding tribesmen quickly intercepted him, but he showed no sign of being afraid as he stared past their raised weapons.

Serph could feel his face going pale.

“I apologize for the deceitful means we employed in coming here,” the man said. “But please understand that my men and I were left with no other choice.” He gestured with one hand to his fearful comrades.

The speaker was a tall man in good physical condition. He had a low voice that carried well, and fine red hair a duller shade than Heat’s, tied into dozens of slender braids. He had the white markings of the Wolves painted across his cheeks, but didn’t appear to be their actual leader. His chiseled masculine features and tanned complexion made him look far older than a typical Newborn.

“How rude of me. I haven’t given you my name. I am—”

“Lupa.” The name spilled from Serph’s lips as he stood there, dumbfounded.

“What?” A look of shock crossed the other man’s face. “How do you know my name, Serph of the Embryon?”

Afterword

Thank you as always to all of my long-time fans out there, and greetings to any of you first-time readers, as well. I'm Yu Godai, and this is my first publication with Hayakawa Bunko JA.

The way that the publication of *Quantum Devil Saga: Avatar Tuner* came about was a little different than usual, so first, I'd like to start by talking about how the series began.

It started back in 2000, when Kadokawa Shoten asked if I would like to do the story for a video game. The request had come from Atlus, the makers of the well-known "Megami Tensei" series, and they were looking for someone to write the original story and scenario for a new title related to the series. As a long-time "Megami Tensei" fan myself, I gladly accepted the offer.

What I turned in was a proposal for *Digital Devil Saga*, which this novel is ultimately based on. Thankfully, they liked the proposal I submitted, and so I wound up temporarily living in Tokyo, having a number of talks with the Atlus team, and gradually refining the project.

Before long, I came to realize that novels and game scenarios were more different than I'd expected. The biggest difference is that, in a game scenario, you need to allow room for the player to impact the story, which is a fundamentally different way of doing things than in novels, where in general, the story unfolds from the main character's perspective. Ultimately, I needed to work together with Atlus' own scenario writer if I was going to get things done right. Figuring that elements like worldview, characters, and episodic progression were things both forms had in common, I wrote a story that could be workable as both a game and a novel. In order to establish the world and the setting, to develop a general sense of the story and the main characters, and to get the right atmosphere across, I wrote up the first part of the game (up to about the first boss battle) as a simple, short piece of fiction.

After that, due to a number of reasons, such as not adjusting well to life in Tokyo and declining health, I wound up having to leave the team, but I was able

to continue working on what I had been writing (as the initial contract allowed for publication of a novel version of what I wrote).

Ten years went by, and while there were a few snags along the way, I kept plugging away at the manuscript. At several points I was ready to just give up on it. Right up until publication, I would have people asking, “When is the Avatar Tuner novel coming out?” I would see comments online of people wondering if it was really going to come out at all, and it took a while for me to get rid of the guilt that made me feel.

I’ve mainly dealt in fantasy in the past, and as much as I love science fiction, I’m a fantasy person at heart. Still, I do love science fiction as well, and so what you have here is the result of my trying to the best of my ability to make something of that. Volumes 1 and 2 are focused on the characters’ abnormal transformations, but volumes 3, 4, and 5 change things up a lot, so hopefully you’ll have fun reading that far in.

There are probably a number of people out there who picked this book up because they enjoyed the games, and figured it might be fun to give this a read. Still, this is an original novel, not a novelization. While it certainly shares a number of things in common with the games, it might be better to think of this as a novel put together from my own personal ideas for the game backstory.

Also, for those of you who haven’t played the games but like what you’ve read here, I recommend giving the games a try if you get the chance. Kazuma Kaneko put together some really cool character designs, and the games feature a very elaborate game system that’s a lot of fun. I think that they’re some pretty great RPGs.

The original plan had been for this novel to be released through Kadokawa Shoten, but it wound up getting passed along to Fujimi Publishing, and from there to Tokuma Shoten, and in the course of all this back and forth, before I knew it, ten years had passed since I’d started my original work on it. I was just about to give up, figuring that self-publishing was going to be my only real option for releasing it. I cannot thank my editor Mr. Shiozawa at Hayakawa JA or my contact person Ms. Takatsuka enough for the opportunity to publish this novel,

and for their guidance in brushing up the manuscript. I'd also like to thank Hirotaka Maeda for the wonderful new artwork that graces these covers.

This volume and the next form the first part in a three-part story, consisting of five volumes. I know this is only the first portion of a longer series, but I really hope that you'll read it through to the end. Thank you all again.

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