



Consecration

Military bastions tend to fall into two general categories: they are either built practically or they're built to show off. The ones built practically are the best for your grizzled tacticians, but the ones built to show off can serve other purposes: they can be symbols. By that logic, Spindlespire was possibly the largest symbol ever scratched onto the planet by human hands.

The message it bore was simple: 'Don't tread on me'.

Spindlespire Ridge is the quintessence of simplicity. The 139 ground floors, the 'spindle', are arranged in a giant starfish-shaped pattern (like the Pentagon, but on a much more massive scale, and with some elegant art-deco touches thrown in). This supermassive building is known as the Asteroidea Complex. Twenty-two columns jut imposingly from around the edges: communication towers and defensive posts. The real magic of Spindlespire lay in the center of the building: a massive pillar looms from the middle of the starfish: over 600-stories of colossal military grandeur. The gigantic tower's design was heavily influenced by gothic architecture, and the black struts and arches of the exterior wind up and around the frame like the arched windows in an ancient cathedral. Looking at the neo-gothic monstrosity from a distance, you'd expect there to be a grand spiral staircase inside and some kind of mad magician or sorcerer at the top engaged in gruesome experiments with dark magic.

Actually, that description's not too far from the truth.

In any event, almost anyone on the planet could tell you the significance of that tower: it is the central headquarters of the Allied Military itself. The proper name for it is

'Distelspitze'. It rises nearly to heaven itself, the monolithic crown jewel set into the ultimate fortress of mankind.

Anyone, or *anything*, that tried to tread on this bastion would end-up with an awfully sore foot.

The wind blew down onto Spindlespire Ridge from the Northern Limestones, a menacing line of mountains capped with crusty black snow (that was a sad fact of life these days: the oceans were purple, the mountain ice black). The wind here was heavy and oppressive. The weather was weird, with the sky always cloudy and mad ravens cawing from the black forests beyond the bastion.

Thunder perpetually sounded in the distance. Storms here came often and without warning. Lightning struck the columns surrounding Spindlespire frequently. The lightning never landed anywhere near Distelspitze Tower, though.

Colonel Roche sat slumped over his monitor in the stuffy basement offices of the complex. This part of the bastion, Asteroidea Core, was the capital of the military's dominant sector: the Northeastern Branch. One would assume very important things go on here, and on that score they'd be right, but Colonel Roche wasn't one of the people who worked on such glamorous activities. In addition to generals and power brokers, Spindlespire had its share of mundane desk-jockeys, and Roche was one of them. His entire day consisted of tedium, followed by *more* tedium: the paperwork that mounted-up after an incarnation assault was simply staggering!

His aide pranced through the door without knocking.

"Colonel," he said, his voice tailored and efficient, "Archives has some footage earmarked for you."

"What do they want me to look at now? Not another commercial for those new Korang combat units, I hope?" He muttered.

"No, sir. It's video footage taken from a Raiden fighter during the last battle."

The Colonel handled the data stick with stubby, tobacco-stained fingers. "Engagement data: Nash Ultima Conflict, recorded from the *Precious Metals Squadron* data-mining vessel *Silver Halide*, Dancer-class Raiden, commissioned out of blah, blah, blah..." he read with disinterest. "What the hell does Archives want me to do with this?"

"Saunders only said that he highly recommends you watch it." The aide replied with a shrug. "He said to look at the 138-minute time mark."

Grumbling, the Colonel slipped the data stick into his console and brought the image up on his wall monitor. His aide dutifully flipped the lights off, bathing the room in darkness. The flickering light of the screen beamed down on their faces.

"What're we looking at, here?" He demanded of the blurry image.

"I... think it's the side of a skyscraper. Saunders told me this footage was taken near the center of the Great City."

"La-ti-tah..." he growled. "What're we supposed to be watching, then?"

"Well, the data-miner who took this footage was smack in the middle of a legion of Toves."

"Bad luck."

"Yes, sir. Anyway, his squadron wasn't around to bail him out."

The Colonel arched an eyebrow. "If that's the case: why is the pilot around to show us this footage at all? That man should be in a box."

“That’s what Saunders wanted you to see.” The young man shrugged. “All he said was: ‘the footage speaks for itself’.”

The Colonel offered the aide a seat, and the men watched the screen as the video rolled.

The image was grainy and constantly shaking as the nose of the *Silver Halide* sliced through the air. Dozens of ruddy skyscrapers hurtled by.

“Not a bogey in sight! Where the hell are all the incarnations, anyway?”

The aide scrunched his eyes, then pointed his finger. “There.” He said. His hand cast a shadow over the screen, and the computer automatically zoomed in on that area.

The Toves were all clustered in the background of the frame, They were circling something, mobbing it like vultures, dancing about in violent arcs.

Roche and his aide saw what that ‘something’ was. It was a ship: it almost looked like a bird, maybe a phoenix with sprawling, elegant wings. They also saw a ruddy yellow light blazing from the cockpit. There were massive fissures all along the craft’s frame: holes in its armor. Large veins of pulsing, muscle-like flesh bulged from these wounds, keeping the ship’s structure intact.

“A Batesian.” The Colonel said, admiringly. “That’s one of the best jobs I’ve ever seen the Mimickers pull-off.” Roche mused. “It almost looks like a real Raiden-Type vessel.” He arched an eyebrow, “Wait- why are all those Toves attacking the Mimicker?” The Colonel sounded confused.

The aide was just as mystified. “Wait a second. Here we are.” The aide zoomed in on the cockpit of the evil-looking craft.

The computer corrected for the yellow light burning inside the canopy so they could see inside. The interior cockpit was dark except for two great, glaring rays of silver light.

The light wasn’t coming from the cockpit itself: it was radiating from a pair of eyes. The eyes were savage, cruel-looking, and monstrous. But that wasn’t the most frightening thing about them; there was something even more disturbing:

The eyes were human.

“Holy God.” The Colonel muttered.

“What in the world?” The aide added, his jaw nearly on the floor.

They gaped at the grainy image wordlessly. The young aide’s eyes bulged: he was reminded of a movie he’d seen last month at a classic film festival. He couldn’t remember the name of the flick, but at the climax of the film these evil enemy soldiers were opening up a giant golden crate that was supposed to let them communicate with their God. Instead of getting a direct line to the Almighty, however, a dozen or so beautiful angels emerged from the box and frolicked in the soldiers’ midst. One of them sidled-up to the leader of the militia, gazing at him with tender, coquettish eyes. Within moments, however, the thing slowly transformed into a hideous, snarling demon. The creatures weren’t benevolent cherubs bearing good tidings: they were angels of death.

The aide shuddered. It wasn’t the concept of a murderous angel that so horrified him, but rather the transformation itself. Somehow those crude and dated special effects in the movie succeeded in scaring the bejeezus out of him. He found that it wasn’t the horror of the monster that got to him, but the slow, sudden realization that it *was* a monster and not some kind of divine lovely. That unexpected twist chilled his blood.

Now he found himself gaping at a very pretty face, but also at a dark swirling hell of vapors surrounding it in the cockpit. Cords and wires clung to the figure's dark body like seaweed. The face was human, pale and lovely, but there was something very wrong with it: the bestial snarl on its lips was beyond human capacity. It was almost beyond *animal* capacity.

It was beautiful, yet terrifying: it was angelic, but it didn't look like a bearer of good tidings.

Colonel Roche's cigar fell from his mouth.

His aide struggled for something to say. The young man's whispering voice was filled with awe.

"Bound... angel..." was all he managed.

A voice sounded behind the pair, startling them. The speaker was hidden in shadows. "Mind your cigar, Colonel Roche, we don't want to start a fire, do we?"

"What the hell- Who's there!?" The grey haired Colonel barked, swirling around. Darkness eclipsed the speaker's face.

Click.

A man's finger flipped the light switch on. The finger was attached to a hand massive enough to crush coconuts whole. The hand belonged to a man who was easily eight feet tall, girded in a nondescript black cloak. His jaws were like a bulldog's, his arms like tree trunks. He surveyed the two men with disinterest; his pupils did not shrink in reaction to the light: a telltale sign of augmentation.

The man standing behind him was, in contrast, much smaller in stature. His hair was silvery, luxurious with graceful ageing and good care. He leaned on a dark black cane and greeted the men with warm, grandfatherly eyes.

"Please, don't get up on my account."

The Colonel rose, irate. "I'll do more than that, friend. Who the hell do you think you are?" he took a step forward, but the towering giant rested one palm on his shoulder, hard enough to stop the fat Colonel in his tracks, but gentle in comparison to what it was capable of.

The enormous man stared at the Colonel and shook his head very slowly.

The Grey-Haired Man clucked his tongue. "Tsk, tsk. Now where are your manners?" he rebuked the golem beside him, and the giant released the Colonel, his face never changing its rocky expression.

The elderly gentleman produced a small pad from his vest pocket. "Now, then, what you've just seen there, Colonel, is actually a little misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?" Roche barked.

"Oh, yes, indeed. You see, the orders on this pad, and they are very *specific* orders, all say that this recording isn't quite ready for release." He handed the pad to Roche. "In fact, that recording doesn't actually exist. Not yet, anyway. Not until we've cleared up a few..." he waved his hand expressively, "what would you call them: 'anomalies' in the feed?"

"What?" The Colonel's aide said in disbelief. "What kind of an order is that? And what do you mean by all that doubletalk? Who the hell even *talks* like that?"

The Colonel's face lost some color as he read the pad. "Stand down, son. His security clearance is 'cotton thistle' level." He growled quietly as he leaned in close to the younger man. "He's been sent by the SJC."

“I do hope we’re all on the same page here...” The Grey-Haired Man turned to the giant who, Roche suddenly realized, had already pulled the data stick from the Colonel’s console. “After all, this kind of ‘misunderstanding’ could start a little fire all its own, and that would indeed be a shame.” Grey-Hair again turned toward the Colonel. “We shouldn’t let such misunderstandings interrupt the normal hustle and bustle of your regular operations, should we?”

There was an awkward silence between the Colonel and his aide. Roche finally nodded. “No, we shouldn’t.”

His aide, noticing the Colonel’s blind deference, swallowed self-consciously. Despite the darkly oppressive aura exuded by the grandfatherly gentleman, he still had a pair of balls on him. He quietly said: “You’ll need to sign for that data stick, sir.” He extended a pad and stylus towards the old man. The giant snatched them up, holding the cumbersome pad easily in his huge palm, then passed them on to the Grey-Haired Man.

“Oh, certainly, of course...” he said with a wrinkly, folksy smile, “we’ve got to obey the chain of command, after all, don’t we?” He scribbled with the stylus and, stepping around his bodyguard, handed the pad back to the aide.

Roche leaned over and checked the pad. There were two letters genteelly sketched on to the signature line in practiced calligraphy: M.A.

“M.A.?” he whispered.

Grey-Hair, his back already to the men, smiled warmly. “Yes. I hope my mark will suffice in place of a full signature. I guess you could call me ‘Force’ if you wanted to, couldn’t you? Just think of me as mass times acceleration!” He chuckled at the corny physics joke, evidently much pleased with himself. “Now, gentlemen, if there are no other formalities...?” His voice lilted with false-diplomacy: he was not asking a question, he was making a statement.

Roche adamantly shook his head. “No, sir: there’s nothing else.”

“Good, good.” The Grey-Haired Man nodded. He motioned for the giant man to follow him. “Come, Havoc: daylight is scarce and time, as always, is treasure!” The curious pair disappeared out the door.

The aide watched the men leave with disbelief in his eyes. “What the hell was that?” He asked.

Colonel Roche calmly walked over to his desk and turned his attention to the mountain of paperwork. He ignored his aide’s questions. “I’m going to need the statistics on our tactical team’s performance during the last engagement.” He ordered.

“But, sir!” The aide countered, “you *saw* that footage, didn’t you? Didn’t you see what was happening in the cockpit of that thing? That was no Batesian Mimicker: it was some kind of Raiden! For God’s sake, there was a young gi-”

“-it was nothing.” The Colonel said severely. “I didn’t see anything. And neither did you.” He folded his stubby little hands on the desk, eyeing his young aide intently.

“Sir!-”

“I don’t think you get it: that guy was a lackey, or something, working for the SJC itself, and the quickest way to get yourself into a whole heap of trouble is to screw around with them. Now, I’m going to say this one more time: I didn’t see *anything*, and neither did you.” He folded his stubby hands over his desk with in an imposing scowl on his face.

In the back of his mind Roche had visions of the grand tower in the center of Spindlespire: the 'Distelspitze'. He thought about the dark tip of that tower: it's needlepoint office rooms, and those secretive floors above the headquarters of the New NATO Guard, above the meeting rooms of the Nippon-European Space Agency (NESA), the Sino-Confederate Alliance, even above the war-room of the Ten Powers' Defense Force: the agency above *all* the Allied Military's branches.

He thought about the offices of the gods of war themselves: the chambers of the Superior Joint Command.

The Colonel shivered once before happily delving back into his paperwork, and returning to his safe daily tedium.

The sky was black, and there was thunder in the distance.

The sleek little express elevator rocketed up the outer ring of Distelspitze Tower. The Grey-Haired Man leaned against the back wall of the glass chamber, idly gazing at the sprawling black forest on the horizon.

"That forest is one of the wonders of the modern world, my friend. At least, it was once." He sighed overdramatically. "Until, of course, the False Moon fell, and the entire ecosystem went to hell. After that, the trees all dried-up, turned black. And, of course, all those mad ravens moved in." He clucked his tongue.

Havoc was standing at attention beside the old man; he said nothing.

"It's remarkable how the purest things can be so easily corrupted." Grey-Hair continued. "But you know what I find a little funny? It's that most people don't know *why* the Schwarzwald Trees are black." He absently ground the tip of his cane into the plush carpet. "Most folks assume the trees are sickly and dying, when in fact they're quite healthy, maybe even healthier than *you* are. The environment changed, you see, and they had to change with it, in order to survive. That black tar on the trees is a symbiotic microorganism: it's actually the only thing keeping the forest alive." He looked directly at the golem. "Sometimes purity has to be corrupted, Havoc, it has to adapt to changing circumstances. In the process, I'll admit, it can become a fairly ugly thing. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir." The giant replied with his deep and silky voice.

The Grey-Haired Man nodded. "It was through this corruption and ugliness that the trees survived: they allowed corruption, *embraced* it. They allowed compromise in their *form* in order to continue with their proper *function*." A small smile wormed across his pale lips. "'A rose by any other name', right?" Grey-Hair scratched his wrinkled chin. He was wearing a silver bracelet on his wrinkled wrist. It bore that familiar 'heart and teardrop' design.

"We're no different from the forest," he concluded, gazing at the tarry black trees. "They had to coat themselves in a bacterial slime in order to survive, and that's pretty dramatic. What about us, Havoc? We're getting off pretty easy, compared to that..." The elevator slowed and came to a stop. Grey-Hair narrowed his eyes. "The only thing we humans need to properly motivate us is a healthy coating of hatred." He eyed Havoc: "And every so often we need to dip our hands in blood."

Havoc stepped out of the elevator. His metal boots clanked over the ruddy struts of the open-air landing platform. His long black cape fluttered wildly in the wind. He turned to face Grey-Hair, his face set in that grim, permanent scowl.

“Sven Wraith has a problem down in the Gulf.” The elder man yelled into the billowing wind. “Someone’s sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong: you’re going to go out there and cut that nose off, do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.” He grumbled. The goliath crossed the narrow parapet and popped the cockpit of a sleek little aircraft. The ship was anemically narrow and painted jet black, canopy and all. The body of the ship blossomed out into a pair of razor-thin wings. The ship was somber and drab; it looked like a sulking vulture.

Havoc lumbered in, closed the hatch, and seconds later the ship’s engines flared. It rocketed off into the ruddy black sky, its pink exhaust tail a stark contrast to the bleak, lightning-riddled skies over Spindlespire.

The doors closed on Grey-Hair, and the elevator hummed along the outer edge of the tower, rising higher and higher into the sky. The elderly man watched the pink tail of Havoc’s ship disappear in the sky.

Many sacrifices had been made for the Project over the years, but as of yet blood had not been spilled. This, however, was all for the greater good, and Grey-Hair didn’t lose a moment’s thought on the matter.

After all, he reasoned, sacrifices have to be made for the sake of Antipathy.

This wouldn’t be the first sacrifice in the project’s name, nor would it be the last.

What the hell was the point of ice sculptures, anyway?

Sven Wraith stood in front of the buffet table. A massive white dragon leered at him with dripping teeth. The melting ice was steadily dribbling into the fondue pot.

The Aryl tromped through the reception hall in his immaculate tuxedo. He leaned on his ubiquitous black cane. All around him champagne classes clinked and guests laughed and commiserated.

He found the whole thing somewhat less than pleasing.

Sven found a quiet spot near the entrance to the nuptials garden. He sat on a granite bench, resting his cane over his legs (and subsequently blocking the rest of the bench). The evening sun slanted in through stained glass windows. He’d spent the last few hours being sociable with the guests (as sociable as could be expected from him), and now he was making a conscious effort to appear unapproachable. He was wearing his dark-tinted sunglasses, on the pretext of eye troubles. His vicious scowl, combined with the black glasses, ensured that his ‘negative polarity’ was at a maximum.

“Parahawk!” A deep, slurry voice sounded behind him. An out-of-shape bald man lumbered into view, wielding a champagne glass in each hand like they were nun-chucks.

Sven swung around in surprise and recognized the man instantly. “Chops,” he replied with sudden warmth, “it’s been ages.”

“Seems like several ages, you old battleaxe!” The inebriated man hiccupped as Sven made room for him on the bench. “Or should I call you Aryl now, right? Tch! Somehow I always knew you’d jump right back into the whole damn mess. Heh, I’d have bet money that you wouldn’t have let anything slow you down. Not even something like tha... that damn mess!” Chops fumbled over his words. He drunkenly rested his chin in one hand. His fingers absently scratched his cheek: the skin moved across the jawbone unnaturally, owing to the reconstructive metal implants in the former Typer’s face.

That unnatural display suddenly made Sven want to rub his gimp leg. “You’re drunk, Chops.” He observed.

“Who’s drunk!” He belched, offended. “You’re the one working for those damn butchers again, Svenny, those fucking bastards what left us to rot! Left us out in the cold like that! Anyway: how could you, Hawk!?” he bellowed. “How could you?”

“Sober up, Chops.” A rugged male voice sounded from behind them. A man rounded the bench and shoved a cup of coffee into the hands of a startled Chops.

“Ah, oh: Williamson!” The flushed man garbled like a baby. “Good old Williamson! Together we can talk some sense into old Hawk, here!” He jabbed The RL’s shoulder. It was a move that few people would every try to do when sober, but if he minded, Sven didn’t show it. He suffered the drunken man’s abuse silently.

Williams pulled the drunken man off the bench and walked him into the empty nuptials garden. He spoke with him all the while, eventually leaving Chops on a rose-decorated bench in the sunny garden.

He came back to Sven and sat beside him. “Poor guy.” He commented.

“Mmm.” Sven agreed, pulling the sunglasses from his face. Light from the stained-glass windows reflected off his cold eyes. “I never knew what became of him after our unit disbanded. I guess things haven’t quite gone his way since then.”

Williams nodded. “Chops is still angry, Sven. He’s angry as hell, you know. Drinking’s something he’s never been shy about, but he’s stepped it up since, well, you know...” his voice trailed off.

Sven was uncomfortable talking about the old unit. “Humph.” He grunted. “Well, I’ll say that he’s living in the past: he kept calling me by that ridiculous old squad nickname.”

“Chops was never one to handle change that well, but you can tell that his anger’s holding him back, keeping him from moving on.” He watched through the garden door as Chops drunkenly fingered the blood-red bud of a rose, wobbling unsteadily on the bench. Williams clucked his tongue and shook his head sorrowfully. “Look, never mind him, alright?” Williams eyed the RL’s black cane. “So,” he motioned to the leg, “you still haven’t...?”

“No.” Sven gruffly replied. “Still no improvement.”

“I see.” Sven’s old combat buddy looked back at the banquet table and spotted the bride and groom. “It’s good to see Christianson’s found himself a nice girl.”

“Asina seems like a fine woman.” Sven replied without conviction.

“Any prospects for you?”

“I’m married to the military, Willy. You know that.”

Williams nodded. “Still, I’ve got to say, I was surprised that *anyone* from our unit would stay on with the program, but if it was going to be anyone I knew it’d be you. Guess you haven’t done too badly for yourself, have you, ‘Aryl’?” He laughed. “Hell, if it wasn’t for that whole debacle in the Himalayas I’ll bet you’d be a full-colonel by now. If I’d stayed on I’d be answering to you! Imagine the horror!”

Sven leaned back and looked at Williams contemplatively. “Didn’t you ever think about coming back, Willy? Didn’t you want to try to make things *right* again? Punish them for what they did? Weren’t you angry?”

Williams shook his head. “After the incident I just wanted to make things right with my life. I took the disability-pay and counted my blessings.” He leaned back with a content grin on his tough face. “I got myself a nice job up in the Trossachs Preserve. I’m

a game warden, Sven; you know, watching after all the tourists, making sure they shoot at the right kind of stag and don't take undersized pike out of the lochs, that kind of thing."

"It's a big step down from what could've been." Sven chastised.

"On the contrary, I think it's what saved me. I made a choice: after the disaster there were a few different ways I could go. I knew I could get back on track for a command-level position, like you, but I knew that wasn't for me." Williams grinned. "Sven, I haven't had a ciggy in over a year, and the last time I had a drink, my kid was still in the womb. When I was in recovery over in Northland Hospital I had a chance to think things over, and the more I thought about the war, the more I realized that I'd paid my dues. It wouldn't be good for me to stay in any longer, or to hold on to my anger. I realized after a time that it was starting eat away at me. It was rotting my soul."

"Such notions!" Sven smirked. "You've transformed from a 'shark' into a 'spider' in only a few years' time. And all that spiritual nonsense doesn't really suit you, Willy."

"I'm not ready to start thumping a bible, or anything, but I am more, what's the word?" He absently tapped one kneecap: the muffled sound it produced was metallic. "I'm at 'peace' with things, as they say. I was out there in the Trossachs one day, sitting on a tree stump, the sun shining all around me, and all I could think about was my poor little legs, and how they were decorating the center of some medical incinerator in the basement of Northland. Yeah, sure, they fit me with these sleek little biomechanical prosthetics, but I knew these clunky things would never feel the same again. I could've probably gotten a set of regenerative-organic upgrades from the brass if I'd only stayed on with the unit, like a 'good soldier', but I was too steaming pissed for that, and I was feeling too sorry for myself to do anything else, either."

"Self-pity's unbecoming of a soldier." Sven noted quietly.

"Spoken like a true command-level officer." Williams retorted. "I'm out there by myself, wallowing in my own mental filth, when the biggest, baddest stag you've ever seen leaps right across the path in front of me." He smiled again. "God damn it, that son-of-a-bitch was magnificent: antlers like the roots of a live oak. Mmmm." He lulled his head and closed his eyes, a delicious ecstasy etched onto his face.

"And it 'inspired' you to once again join the human race and re-grow your own metaphorical 'antlers' of pride and self-respect, right?" Sven ribbed Williams playfully with his arm: the quip was not in the least malicious, but it dripped with sarcasm.

Far from showing any indignation, Sven's old combat-buddy grinned widely. "That's how the story would go in a children's book, I guess. But me? I leaped-up after that son-of-a-bitch and brought him down with nothing but my legs and my utility knife about me. Damn well took forever, too."

"Tch!" Sven cackled. "That's more like the Willy I know. Must've been a bloody business, though."

Williams face became more serious. "I remember standing there, the sun setting behind me, and yeah, I'm covered in this bastard's flesh and blood, and it was at *that* moment that I understood that the warfront wasn't where I needed to be." He looked Sven in the eye. "I formally resigned from the Allied Military the next day. 'Let 'em keep their pretty little full-organic prosthetics', I thought. That day I proved to myself that I didn't need 'em anyway." He grinned again. "And, as it turns out, killing that old stag was the last illegal thing I'd ever do, too: it was a white-tail! Ha! One of the endangered ones, you know."

“So... after killing an endangered species of deer, you naturally pursue your dreams of... becoming a game warden.” Sven scratched his chin skeptically, a wry grin spread over his thin lips.

“Didn’t even know the difference at the time.” Williams admitted. “But I leaned. I learned a lot of things after that. It was the start of a whole new life for me, Sven, like I was being reborn. Taking down that deer was deep stuff: it was ritualistic, like I was sanctifying a path for my new life with the blood of that stag.”

Sven shook his head. He smirked, rose from the bench and limped over to the stained glass window near the garden. “I was right, you know.”

“About what?”

“All this spirituality-crap: it really doesn’t suit you.”

Williams regarded his former wingman with offended eyes. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not saying any of this is religious, you understand. No Gods or angels coming to me with their wise advice, or anything. It was a religious experience of the *mind*, Sven. I’ll tell you what it was like: it was like I’d split apart some kind of big, heavy temple in my head that was filled with all the anger and loathing I’d stored up. See, at that point I was on the verge of *worshipping* those feelings, cuddling-up to the darkness, ‘cause it was all I had to go on: it was the only thing fueling me. Once I took a sledgehammer to that temple of hatred, busted it up, I was free to start anew.”

Sven leaned against the glass wall, his lips perched. He didn’t say anything.

Williams looked away from the RL. “It might not be something you could understand, Sven.” He regarded their comrade, Chops: the drunken man was now passed-out on the nuptials bench in the garden, snoring loudly. “Chops lost most of his skull and face in the incident, and he’s still lost: he’s wandering around in that temple, looking for a way to bust it up. And me? I lost my legs, but I managed to break out of that dark place and escape all those black feelings. But then there’s you...” He paused, “well, you were lucky, Sven, and you didn’t end up losing *anything* in the ambush.”

Sven shot the man a blisteringly icy glare. His eyes were daggers. “I don’t carry the fucking cane for fashion, Willy.”

The man held up his hands defensively. “Woah, woah, yes: partial loss of function, sure, but your ‘parts’ are all still there, aren’t they? You didn’t have it as hard as we did, Sven, in surgeries or recoveries, and you weren’t left with the *emptiness* that comes with losing a part of your body: having it torn apart by Bydo claws, then casually lopped off by a surgeons’ scalpel. My point is that maybe you never even had to build that little temple inside you. You were never lost in the darkness, like we were...” He again looked at the snoring Chops. “...and the way some of us still are.”

Sven bowed his head, quietly considering that point.

Just then a smartly dressed waiter scampered between the men obsequiously.

“Pardon me, gentlemen,” he cooed suavely, “but I’m looking for a Mister Wraith...” he held a tiny data pad in his expertly manicured fingers.

“Mmph.” Sven grunted, grabbing the pad from the overdressed man. He turned towards the stained glass window and consulted the touch-screen: there was a red blinking box in the center of the blank display. Sven dutifully pressed his thumb against it, after which a flash of red light exploded from the small retinal-scanner built into the pad. After that, the screen went black again. Then, very slowly, a symbol crept over the screen.

It was a heart-design with a steaming red teardrop in the center. Beneath the symbol there was one word:

“Come”.

“What is it?” Williams asked.

“I have to go.” Sven abruptly apologized. He casually smashed the pad into the wall as he turned around, destroying the fragile thing instantly without Williams noticing.

“Duty calls, does it?” The former Typer wryly guessed.

“It usually does.” He shrugged. Sven looked over his shoulder at Chops. “You’ll-um, well, can you see to him...?”

“Oh, sure.” Williams waved. He got up and made for the garden. “And, Sven,” he said, turning back towards the RL, “forget all that bullshit of mine, alright? We all choose our own paths, and I don’t fault you for following your gut, you got it?” The pair locked arms with each other: the old ‘handshake’ of their unit. Even after several years the men had the ritual down pat: it wasn’t the kind of thing one forgot easily. Williams tromped off to collect his drunken fellow veteran.

The RL stood before the giant window for a moment.

Follow my gut?

He thought about Williams’ words: all that neo-spiritual rubbish. Deep down inside him, somewhere, those words hit a nerve. Sven wasn’t sure *where* that nerve was, though.

‘You were never lost in the darkness, like we were...’

‘You weren’t left with the emptiness that comes from losing a part of your body...’

As Williams put it: a part of Sven’s body hadn’t been ‘torn apart by Bydo claws.’

The RL pulled his mind from those idle ruminations. He realized with chagrin he was absently scratching at his chest: he’d completely mussed the kerchief that was so delicately peeking from his left breast pocket.

His mind drifted beyond the mundane details of the Antipathy Project to a place he didn’t like to go: he saw the faces of his two pilots, Justin Storm and Chenine Chovert, his guinea pigs, flashing before his eyes. They were dumb faces, idiotic and naïve: mere virgin flesh for the machinations of the Project.

He pushed the images out of his mind, and his hand fell away from his heart. He coldly repeated his dogma: *Sacrifices must be made.*

The Bydo assault against Wraith’s unit did, in fact, leave him crippled and disfigured, even more than Williams or Chops. The only difference between him and his fellow survivors was that his scars were all on the inside: the claws of the Bydo hadn’t ripped his limbs from his body, but they had managed to scoop his heart from his chest.

And in that newly formed hollow bastion there was no ‘temple’ of hate and darkness: Wraith had built himself an entire cathedral. He’d come to realize that his anger made him strong, and his antipathy would earn him revenge against the Bydo that wounded him and those sniveling, inept bastards at their ‘illustrious’ command that sent his unit to its fate.

And the consequences? He could live with them. He knew he could.

It all boils down to simple adaptation. He finally concluded. *Williams started his new life in that sunny, insulated little world, and he consecrated that life with an animal sacrifice. Chops, meanwhile, decided to implode on himself, to collapse, and he consecrated that new life with a barrel of booze.*

Clouds parted in the sky and the stained-glass window blossomed with full sunlight. The light that streamed in was deep crimson and painted Sven's tuxedo and dress gloves a somber red.

Sven remembered the message: his summons from the Committee.

He had something to take care of: to protect the Project, still in its infancy. It was the kind of protection that involved the spilling of blood.

What better way to sanctify my new life? He thought determinedly.

Forty-five minutes later Wraith tromped over the moody moors of the Plutonian Shores. Dark purple seawater lazily ebbed up the black-sand beach behind him, and then disappeared from the shoreline. This depressing place was one of the innermost reaches of the greater Gulf area and the unofficial border of the area colloquially known as the 'Dead Lands'. The sky was hazy with fog and clouds.

Wraith grumbled as he stepped over large, broken slabs of granite and rubble. Sickly looking sagebrush and dandelions peeked through the sandy ruins.

The Aryl hobbled through this deserted wasteland, pausing only as he approached a depression in the ground just around the corner of a cliff face. The pounding of the sea foam was nearly inaudible here; there was no wind.

It was tough to see the steps behind that cliff face. One would really need to be looking for them in order to make them out, but they were there: moss-covered stone stairs leading down a hidden path beneath the cliffs. Wraith descended the steps, the loud clicking of his cane the only sound of life in this stagnant place.

He came to the end of the path and faced a solid stone wall. The cave was musty and dank with the scent of mildew.

"You don't look like you're enjoying yourself, mister RL." A young, lyrical voice sounded behind him. "Actually, I'm shocked as hell that you made it down here at all. Bravo, amigo." Wraith turned to confront a man clad in a black cloak. Green water from the ceiling dripped monotonously onto his hooded head.

He ignored the man's warm banter. "You're not Johnny." The RL guessed. The cloaked kid's voice didn't match-up with the man he'd so often communicated with. "I've never met you before: are you Peyton, maybe?"

He shook his head. "No, Mister Sven: my name is Joe." He said, moving his fingers in a quote-mark gesture.

Wraith took this 'Joe' in, eyeing the man from his boots to his blue eyes, and nodded. "Hmm." He grunted a greeting. "Well, then, shall we get this over with?"

"That's hardly the kind of attitude we want here." Joe said with a grin. He stepped across the cave and slapped the RL on the shoulder. "C'mon, mister man, there's a couple of things that the Committee wants ironed out."

Wraith glared at the back of Joe's head icily as the youth stepped towards the wall, brought his right foot back, then kicked one of the bricks with all his might. A tone sounded, and a neon outline flashed across the seemingly stone wall: it was a giant heart and a smoldering teardrop.

"Hey, hey, hey: T.I.A.!" The cloaked man sang as he did a little dance, like a cheerleader on the sidelines at a game.

Another tone sounded, and three blank lines flashed beneath the heart symbol. The wall creaked, then shook, then suddenly fell into the ground, as if it were pounded with a hammer.

“After you: Aryl-man!” Joe motioned.

The men descended into the darkness, winding their way down a spiral staircase. Torches on the wall cast eerie shadows throughout the dark chamber.

“You don’t have any ‘non-factory installed’ parts on your body, do you, amigo?” Joe eventually asked.

Wraith shook his head, annoyed by the informal tone of the youth. “I’m an *au-natural*: I have no artificial parts.” He answered coldly.

“Good, good.” Joe nodded. “They’re broadcasting all sorts of nasty little disruption signals and whatnot down here: you can’t even make a phone call. Nothing with an integrated circuit is able to function. It’s all by design, you know.”

“Annoying, but necessary.” He commented without interest.

They came to the end of the staircase and walked for a time across a cobbled subterranean road. After a few minutes of walking along Wraith noticed a third set of steps clicking in the darkness. He glanced to one side and saw another cloaked figure walking with them.

“Amazing how you can do that.” He admitted as the party of three continued down the corridor uninterrupted.

“Oh, skulking has always been a hobby of mine.” The third man replied. “Comes in handy for this kind of work.” He motioned to the younger man in the lead. “Has Mister Montana here informed you about the particulars of this meeting?”

“He seems to spend more time fooling around than being useful. This immature flunkey of yours hasn’t given me any information of consequence.”

“Ouch.” Joe snickered to himself.

Wraith was curious about the man he secretly knew as Ainsworth. “Where’s our Mutual Acquaintance?” He finally asked.

“Oh, come on, Sven, this is just a status meeting, after all. You can’t expect him to drop in for such mundane affairs.” The man eyed Wraith keenly. “However, he’ll be informed of everything we discuss, of course.”

“Of course.” The RL shrugged.

They came to a thick oak door. Torches stood to either side, casting soot and shadows around the cobbled stone walls. The man put a gentle hand on Wraith’s shoulder. He looked at the younger man and briskly motioned towards the door with his head. Joe nodded and drew the door open: it groaned like a zombie. With one last smirk in Wraith’s direction, he disappeared into the next room.

“Wraith,” the elder man said, a serious expression on his face, “there’s some questions, some really *hard* questions coming through about last week’s brouhaha. Do you know anything about a virus that struck Epdin right before the incarnation assault?”

Wraith’s eyes were steel: he didn’t betray an iota of emotion. “I know about the error in the system, if that’s what you mean. What are you saying, Uriah? Do they think that someone intentionally sabotaged the grid? What would be the point of that?” He sounded convincingly skeptical.

“You know about the recent raids on Parity, right?”

“Of course, but that doesn’t concern us; wasn’t that all Spec-Ops’ show?”

“Mostly. It was a long time in the making. Obviously the SJC wasn’t going to let a group like Parity operate forever. Tch! Bydo-loving freaks.” The man scornfully spat on the ground. “But look, the point is, the brass didn’t hit Parity at its prime, Sven: the organization was dying at the time of the raids.”

“Dying?”

Uriah nodded and looked at the half-open oak door. “They were dissolving, experiencing some kind of brain drain from within. Most of their more radical members abandoned the organization, and since the most radical members of an organization are usually the most dedicated-”

“-the result was a sloppier group,” Wraith nodded, “and they couldn’t manage to avoid getting taken down by the military. Well, then, were the hell did all the radicals go?”

Uriah shrugged expressively. “They went *somewhere*, and all intel points to some kind of new group in the works. If there is a new group being formed, Sven, it’ll be made up of all the real freaks from Parity: the radicals, all those psychotically pro-Bydo types. Hell, a lot of those defectors left because they were angry that Parity wouldn’t acknowledge the Bydo as a *superior* life form to humans. A group like Parity is stupid, Sven, but an organization made up of super-radicals like that? It’s scary.”

“Fear doesn’t become you, Uriah.” Wraith chided. “So you really think these ‘super-radicals’ had something to do with the Epdin virus? But if a group of terrorists really did manage to get their hands around Epdin’s throat, it just means that we have to accelerate our program: we need to get things in gear.”

“My sentiments exactly.” The man nodded as he pushed open the door. “But keep in mind when you go in there: a lot of the Committee members are jittery right now. The SJC’ll be dumping all kinds of funds into covert operations to try to monitor all those Parity-defectors. You know, they want to shine a light on them. A lot of people here are afraid that their spotlight might accidentally point in our direction. You of all people know that Antipathy’s not the kind of thing that can survive in the spotlight.”

Wraith grunted. “Well, that’s Ainsworth’s problem.”

“It’s *all* our problem. We can’t afford to have any weak links right now, Sven.” Uriah stepped through the oak door and into the darkness.

Wraith balled one fist as he considered that statement, and as he thought about what he was about to have ordered in his name. He’d indirectly killed over 12,000 people by crippling Epdin, but that kind of atrocity didn’t register within him as being completely wrong in itself. He’d merely set some events in motion, weighed down the dice, so to speak: how they played through after that was out of his hands. And, after all, everything was for the greater good in the end.

But he was about to order something very different: it was not simply setting events in motion, or weighing down the dice. No, he was signing a warrant, a death warrant, for Antpathy’s sake.

... *we can’t have any weak links, can we?*

Wraith released the pressure on his hand.

“No,” he said to himself, “we cannot.”

The main chamber was spacious, almost cavernous. Every bit of torchlight was centered around the main dais, where a large granite-topped podium stood with the imposing presence of an altar.

Wraith spent the better part of 45 minutes briefing the Antipathy Committee, his eyes blinded by the flickering torchlight. His audience sat at round tables in front of him, blanketed in shadows.

When he finally finished the speech he was greeted with silence. It was a vast, tomb-like silence. Finally a noise filled the dank hall: it was a soft, high-pitched squeal. The squeal repeated itself once.

Wraith shielded his eyes and found the source in the audience. One long-hair young man sat at a table by himself, a black cloak folded neatly over the chair on his left. The hood of the cloak dangled lazily like a swaying cradle; two glowing eyes peered from that little nook, and a gnarled beak jutted out of the clothing.

“I wasn’t aware that we were letting civilians sit in on this meeting.” Wraith declared.

The young man smirked good-naturedly. He sat confidently and genteelly, his legs crossed and his elbows balanced on the back of his wooden chair. Despite his youth the man’s hair was dark grey and cropped in a conservative style, rife with the first signs of hair-loss. The overall effect wasn’t one of weakness, however, but unbecoming maturity.

The bird in his cloak cawed again.

“Are you letting your raven speak for you, Serafino?” Wraith jabbed.

The man inspected his nails disinterestedly. “Civilian or not, I’m here at the personal request of my CEO. My company wants results from its investment, and you can bet your bottom dollar that they plan to follow the project *very* closely.”

Uriah, who had taken a seat near the podium, turned his body to face Serafino. “Everybody in this room is as devoted to the operation as your company, Mr. Grafsteen. We’ve just as much to gain, and as much to lose. Don’t the shareholders over at Gouden Preek trust our Committee?”

Serafino leaned in closer to Uriah, his expertly trimmed hair and perfect teeth glowing in the torchlight. His pale eyes sparkled with fire. “Trust, but verify.” He slowly answered with a smirk. “And don’t pretend that our sacrifices are anywhere near equal. My company’s nearly bankrupted itself by shelling out its cash reserves to you, not to mention all the free R ‘n D we’ve been giving to the project.”

An older man in the back scoffed at this. So far the man watched the proceedings with a neutral, even look on his clean-shaven face, but at Serafino’s words he could no longer remain silent. He spoke without emotion in his voice, droning in the formal cadence of a scientist. “The Labs are having just as rough a time keeping the Hybrids together, you know.”

“Not so.” Serafino sternly countered with a wag of his finger. “Think about it: the only thing the Bydo Labs need to do so far is fill-up a few metal shells with that test-tube goo of yours and then call it a day. Honestly, can you imagine what would’ve become of your pilots by now without our customized genomic stabilizers? And God knows those things weren’t cheap to develop or produce.”

The scientist shook his head. “And what about our little trip into Dimension 26, eh? I didn’t see Gouden Preek contributing to that little foray.”

“Humph. We made no promises to *ever* actually collect material for you, and you know that. Speaking of that little trip, I’d like to renew my objections to activating the *Heart*: my company can’t guarantee that our Genomic Stabilizers will work properly with that kind of payload. Protecting a human pilot from a few tons of living Bydo flesh is one thing, but a core?” his voice trailed off as he shook his head.

Uriah nodded and addressed the assembly in a commanding voice. “There has been some concern over the new Hybrid, and I first want to say that we have every confidence that Gouden Preek’s genomic stabilizers will function without a problem. After all, those specialized Karat Spheres are working just fine, and I don’t foresee any additional problems with using them as a safeguard in the *Heart*.” He looked up at the podium, staring Wraith in the eyes. “That said, I’ve recently spoken with our Mutual Acquaintance, and he demanded that we select a more, how should I put it, *traditional* candidate to pilot the new vessel.”

“Traditional? You mean a Raiden veteran.” Wraith assumed.

“Just so. We know your feelings about sacrificing an honest-to-goodness soldier for the Project, but some higher ups in command are starting to scratch their heads, Sven. I mean, so far one of your candidates is a washout from the VR training program, and the other never even *enlisted* in the pilot’s academy. It raises the eyebrows of some very important people.”

“I think my little seat-warmers have performed adequately, so far anyway.”

“But they’re not just *supposed* to pitter around slaughtering incarnations.”

Serafino stood and gestured with his hands. The mad raven in his cloak fluttered its wings wildly and emerged from the dark hood to land on its master’s shoulder. “That kind of cowboy gun fighting was never what the Project was about.”

“I agree.” Wraith said with a knowing smirk. “And in that vein, you’ll be happy to hear that the Hybrids are all set to go to Jupiter.”

“With the fleet, you mean?” Uriah sounded surprised.

“I got the message from Johnny Unitas just the other day.”

Hushed whispers echoed throughout the hall. Serafino Grafsteen scrunched his face contemplatively, then nodded. He sat down with a quiet, but satisfied, grunt.

Uriah leaned forward, hands folded on his round oak table. He looked far less gung-ho than Serafino. “You want to use Antipathy against the Galilean Mass.” He surmised. “That would put us well ahead of schedule. But is it ready? I mean, are you sure it’s ready?”

“The Battle of Nash Ultima may have been a disaster all around, but it did happen to serve us rather well.” Wraith smiled darkly. “As for the First Vector: it’s ready, no question. Samuel Roont has confirmed it.”

Uriah’s bushy grey eyebrows twitched at this. A more content look spread across his grandfatherly face. “I see. Then that just leaves us with the competence of your little female seat-warmer.”

“Your delivery-girl.” Serafino corrected.

“Your milkmaid.” Joe Montana, standing in the back of the hall, snickered crudely. “And about that little lady, Aryl-man: if you want to send-out any more of her medical updates to the group, would you mind adding some full-body scans next time? It’s not that I don’t find your chick-a-dee’s chromosomes sexy as hell, but I certainly wouldn’t mind seeing some full frontal-”

“She’ll accomplish her task.” Wraith spoke over Joe’s vulgar innuendo. “The worst case scenario, of course, is that we’ll lose the *Chaste Gazer*.”

“And the girl.” One woman in the audience commented.

“That’s inconsequential. Remember: all our subjects will be useless to us after they deliver their payloads.” Wraith retorted.

“That brings up another interesting question:” Uriah commented, “what do we do with our Hybrids after they’ve completed their missions? Assuming, of course, they’re still in one piece when they do?”

The scientist was lazily staring at his shoes. At these words he suddenly looked up, his eyes severe. “Destroy them: no question. I wouldn’t want them to be active any longer than we need them to be.”

A crew-cut man behind the scientist scoffed. “Do you have any idea how suspicious it would be if we started melting-down those ships? The SJC is suspicious enough as it is, and even our Mutual Acquaintance couldn’t help us if we start burning up those multi-million dollar machines for no reason.”

“The Hybrids may yet prove useful as general-combat ships.” Wraith suggested. “I say we should keep them active even after they’ve completed their missions, at least until Antipathy takes them.”

Uriah shrugged at this. “I don’t see any other way, because I agree that we can’t just get rid of them.”

The scientist persisted. “I’m very uncomfortable with that idea. From Wraith’s own reports I’m afraid that the *Platonic Love* is growing far more cohesive than we ever anticipated. As you know, the subject piloting that ship has already caused one sympathetic-reaction to occur, and that incident nearly killed our delivery-girl.”

Joe Montana broke in. “Hey, now, wasn’t the whole point of building the *Love* to see what would *happen* if a Perfect-Fifth were crammed into a Hybrid? I’d thought that you’d want to play this one out. You know, see what happens.”

Uriah shook his head. “The purpose of the *Platonic Love*, just like the *Chaste Gazer*, is solely to serve the aims of the Antipathy Project. Any other research or discoveries we make are nothing but icing on the cake.”

There was silence in the cavern as everyone took in that statement. Finally the scientist broke the silence. “Just keep an eye on that Perfect Fifth of yours, Wraith. We designed the Hybrids to be as sterile as possible, to try to limit their abilities, but with enough stimulation *anything’s* possible. You know that.”

“And with too *little* stimulation, the flesh is stunted and we get a fiasco like *Cross the Rubicon*.” Uriah sighed in exasperation. “It’s a precious balance. You could say that this whole damn project is nothing but one huge balancing act: an act we’re required to perform in the dark, no less!”

Wraith chewed his lower lip self-consciously: this was as good a moment as any to broach the subject. “And it’s important to *keep* it in the darkness, isn’t it?”

Joe Montana tilted his head to one side. “And just what’s that supposed to mean, mister-man?”

The torchlight danced around Wraith’s figure, almost as if his caped body were engulfed in flames. In the back of his mind Wraith thought about the crimson blood of Williams’ stag and how it decorated the man’s crippled body as he stood over the corpse

in triumph. He also thought about the blood-red wine that painted the walls of Chop's cirrhotic liver as he stumbled through his world in disgrace.

Wraith bit his lip even further until he could feel the salty tang of his own blood. He finally looked down at old Uriah.

"Send a message to our Mutual Acquaintance: tell him that I have a problem at Base-10." He finally said. "It needs to be taken care of immediately." His eyes were unflinching. "And it needs to go away forever."

The wind was savage that evening. It blew in from the cold night sea and howled through the lower struts of the base. The iron floor was rusty from the constant blanket of sea salt that ravaged it. It was very dark: the only light along the path came from the occasional floodlight strung-up over the walkway, pale and hazy in the fog.

Angela's heels clicked and clanked as she stepped across the catwalk. A purple fog mired the venous metal pathways, obscuring her view of them. The nurse stopped at one side railing and lit a cigarette for herself. She rested her arms on the handrail and looked out at the black seawater below her. It was a few minutes to daybreak and the dark horizon was already blossoming with a ruddy red light.

Red at night: sailor's delight. Red in the morning: sailor's warning. She played the sing-song rhyme in her head.

Suddenly there was a noise behind her.

Angela turned on her heels, startled. There was a figure in the darkness, far behind her.

"Doctor, is that you?" She asked, blowing a train of smoke from her lips as she spoke. She absently tossed her cigarette into the water as the figure approached. "It's me: Angela. I wanted to talk to you about something I noticed in Miss Chovert's genetic scan after the last battle." She crossed her arms and leaned against the handrail, a sheepish look on her face. "I know that waiting for you down here is a little weird, and, well, it seems silly, but I didn't really want the subcommander to know that I was telling you about this. I know that you usually like to take a walk down here at sunrise, so..."

The figure was drawing nearer. Angela's face suddenly drooped and the color went out of her cheeks: she realized that the shadow coming near her was *much* larger than the petite female doctor.

"W-who's there?" She tried to sound assertive.

The looming figure paused for one second. Then, quite suddenly, it charged straight towards her. The sound of heavy boots tromping over the strut reverberated across the platform.

Angela raised her arms defensively. "No! Get away from me!" She cried. The nurse braced herself against the handrail.

The dark assailant slammed his body into Angela with savage force. The lithe woman grunted with surprise as the air was knocked from her lungs. A superhuman force thrust her violently backwards. There was a reverberating 'snap' as her back was literally crushed against the rail. Then a large pair of hands swept Angela's legs up and over the rail. The limp woman went over the side with a wordless scream plastered onto her gaping face. The nurse disappeared into the angry sea, her body vanishing beneath the waves with a sickening plop.

Havoc leaned down over the rail, his eyes glowing fiercely in the misty darkness. He watched the dark purple waves ebb and flow beneath him, not moving an inch. His face was a blank, remorseless block of stone.

After a few minutes the behemoth looked out across the sea. His left eye blinked and flashed in rapid rhythm. After a few seconds his little black ship screamed into view, belching a steady pink exhaust tail behind it. It hovered soundlessly below the platform.

Havoc, with one fell motion, jumped from the rail down to his vessel. Without looking back he disappeared inside the cockpit of the vulture-like craft. The ugly black bird then screamed low over the turbulent ocean waters as the golem flew it westward, retreating from the light of the rising sun.



T I A