

The 2008

A.P. Schreckenberger Collection

Dedicated to:

K.T. Barrett

For keeping me on the right path

Derrick Brace

*For being a one-of-a-kind friend
SEM baby!*

Matt Broderick

For being a great friend who never let me down

Julie Harrison

*You never stopped believing in me.
So, I'll never stop believing in you.*

Ashley Serpa

For bringing back the thrill of writing

&

My family and friends

Love,

~Wing T.F. McCallister~

Cold Fusion XT

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Cold Fusion

XT

A.P. SCHRECKENBERGER

Ax.SCH

Once, I was asked who I was... why the flow of time and thought was different for me... I showed that person the back of my hand, and the seal of blood that burned its philosophy into me. It's not what I am, I replied, it's what I want to become - a phoenix, a phoenix to carry the fire and the justice of God.

Fac Et Spera

“Hello and good evening ladies and gentlemen; I am Misura Downie and you are watching 22/20. Tonight, we will reveal to the American public a war and a scandal so despicable it has scarred the world forever. Tonight, you will see the true face of terror, peer beyond the defacement of the McKenna Administration, and gaze straight into the chaos of the fallen Chancellorodt shadow government. We will bring to you the lives of three of the bravest kids on Earth, and show how they lived through the carnage, the lies, the deceit, and the fear...”

No one could ever forget that day, when two brothers took their fall of death, embraced the ash and crumbled before the eyes of the eagle. On that fateful morning, a nation of bliss was thrown into the world of scorn and hate, left like a toddler to fend in a realm of violence and fear. A nation that bathed itself in the experiment of equality and democracy was fighting a war against its antithesis, and you cannot fight what you do not understand.

REKKR SAGA:

Episodes

I – III

A retard locked up in the ghetto of some bustling metropolis was not responsible for Nine-Eleven, neither was a corporate criminal mastermind, plotting away from the sanctity of his decadent lair. No, a fucking genius in the middle of a cave,

with lots of money, many weapons, and an ego to match Satan pondered that wicked day, shaped it with his own mind, and laid the framework for disaster. It's pretty amusing to see how many times things come back to bite you in the ass, to see how things you dismissed as unimportant are the pivotal factors in the game of life. Whatever the philosophy behind it was, whatever side you thought was right, America was still fucked. People did not have the time to ask 'Who did this?' or 'I hope everyone is okay!' but really only gave a damn about themselves and their money. No one ever asked me what I was doing on that day, no one ever wondered why the hell I was locked in a bunker in Southwest Arizona, hauling my ass to and fro, carrying big sheets of ferrofibrous armor to an assembly line, but I'll tell you what was going on. While the world was bent over trying to suck its own cock, I was out saving the planet, I was giving it the hope it needed, but now it's all about what I need: the hero.

Can you find a needle in a haystack? Try finding a needle in several thousand haystacks! It was all about that frantic search for the one person who could bridge all the gaps and fit in where all the others faded away into ignorance or prejudice. At first, I figured a child's innocence would provide an easy solution, but alas, the children of the world have changed in this pseudo-apocalyptic universe; they have quickly become tainted by their mothers' fears, consumed by their fathers' pride, and left without true hope. When the last piece of armor was riveted to the XT's titanium frame, I still wondered who could rise up to the challenge of flying her, who would dare to be the phoenix to burst from the ashes before even knowing the flame of death. Everyone knew time was fading into the past as America's economy and Earth's confidence drifted towards a pit of despair, as the forces of authority slowly withered into corrupt entities, leaving a filthy scar on the surface of a once buffed American muscle.

EPISODE 1 (©2005): INTRODUCTIONS – OCTOBER

Phoenix Run [Oct 11, 2002; Phoenix, AZ]:

“Get inside you insolent brats!” an officer called, waving his nightstick as he approached the children. Their eyes lit up with horror as they crept towards the rusted aluminum warehouse wall, pressing their hands against it with the hopes that maybe they would be absorbed into its strength, crippled and torn like most of the nation, but sturdy and unyielding. “I told

you punks to get the fuck inside!” They were not even seven, two boys without a future, without the right to dream. The officer struck one and sent him to the cement with one solid blow to the cheek, an act that would forever leave its scar on the ripples of time. Jagged peaks dug into his skin as he slid, the painful grind ripping his attention away from the terror of martial law. The policeman feigned a sympathetic sigh, “Did you hurt yourself? Or maybe you two were sneaking out for a reason; maybe you’re planning to blow something up? Have any weapons on you?” He straddled the body of the fallen boy and sensually rubbed the child’s jeans, his hands creeping up the skin of his back. The friend had long since run away, shrieking in a frantic escapade down the alley, but no one came to help, no one would dare in a world where the slightest misstep would lead one to death: treason and opposition were unforgivable, heinous crimes. The belt snapped with one quick pull as the officer tugged on the boy’s pants. He grinned, letting out the first grunt of satisfaction as a hand ventured to lower the zipper, but a hand of metal emerged from nothing, a grip of cold steel that tore that lecherous bastard from his prey. Metal wings unfolded from the blackness, unveiling the gold and white tomb of hope, armor with the power to fade into the night and appear at will to save the innocent. “It’s you!” the cop screamed, choking as the other hand of iron shredded his throat and threw the crumpled, gagged corpse into the darkness.

“Are you alright?” the teenager called out, lifting the boy off the ground and setting him on his feet, stroking the child’s injuries with the cold, gentle hands of somber gold.

The child shivered, memories of NPR radio broadcasts flooded his mind: killer of authority, angel of darkness, terrorist, realm of the night. Was this the angel of darkness, a demon of beautiful gold that had spent too much time saving a pathetic mortal? “Uh huh,” he whimpered, squeezing his arm, hoping that this savior would not strike him down.

“Run along home now,” the fighter continued, “and spread the word: there is no longer anything to fear.” The confident darkness consumed the uncertain boy, leaving a warrior in the dreary solitude, but there was no time to reflect as the armor’s headpiece illuminated with streaming data. “Dr. Parks,” the teen spoke in a more serious tone.

The halogen display across the fighter’s eyes brightened as a small picture window emerged. “Kit,” Parks responded. “How did she handle? Did the R.E.M Camouflage work properly? From here it seems fine, but you never know right?”

the doctor's voice quickened as he leaned towards the webcam, his hands frantically shoving papers from the computer terminal and chaotically repositioning his round spectacles.

"Slow down, Doc," Kit responded, tapping his finger on the eyepiece. "Everything is fine; the XR handled herself well during this trial, can't say the same for the Phoenix Battalion though." His light maroon eyes wandered to the inert carcass, resting silently as if frozen in time, a camera that captured the hell of America and the plight of the world. "I'm coming home, Doc," he sighed, watching the dark green liquid-crystal display on the wrist plate flash 'REM' in vibrant red letters. Kit disappeared into the black Phoenix night, leaving a spurt of flame that quickly dissolved to dust and drifted in the wind, invisible to sight but not to mind. "Besides," his voice echoed from the nothingness, "we would not want to keep our new arrivals waiting."

FIRST DATE WITH DR. PARKS [Oct 11, 2002; Wellton, AZ]:

Ash fell to the desk as Aidan pounded the table with rage, the cigarette slowly creeping out of his mouth, both trying to escape from the fanatical tirades of an intelligent, possessed lunatic. His 25-year-old slender frame sat before a small computer terminal as his searing green gaze darted across the screen with every keystroke – movements nestled behind golden shades of an ancient era. He leaned forward slowly, causing locks of light brown hair to caress the still air as his fingers navigated a sea of keys – a silent voice that served as a gateway to a mind far mature for its youth. It would still be difficult acting as a father for these kids, teenagers that had somehow defied the apocalypse, strove on through the terror of the night, and managed to come through, piercing all with the glare of the innocent. Kit Carson Matsko was the first he had found: a boy rummaging through garbage on the streets of Phoenix. Kit had been part of the project since the beginning: the glorious XR trials.

The memories flooded Aidan's mind through the cracked dam of restraint, a block trying to suppress the feelings of betrayal and anger, but contain them Aidan could not. How wonderful he had felt a couple of years ago, when the McKenna Administration first came to him, asking to have a multipurpose recon battle-armor constructed for the world's finest: the Delta Force. The Avalon Xanin Recon model, or XR, was finished in

July of 2001, and was the first armor to offer built in halogen displays, the Avalon One wrist console activated operating system, and directional vernier boosters. Yet, the XR's true power was located in the Radioelectromagnetic Camouflage, called the R.E.M. for short, an incredible cloaking technology that not only made the suit invisible to radar and sonar, but thermal imaging and sheer sight as well. "I love that," Parks whispered, chuckling at how powerful the XR was to become, how its presence would have rained fear upon the enemy in drops of blood, and how the tables would have so quickly turned.

Ironically, the tables did, but not the way Doc had expected... September 11 had been thrust upon them too quickly; it had brought them the war they had hoped to begin, brought them the terror they wanted to inflict, and brought them fear they did not want to have. However, the world responded with audacity, sounding a global alarm to match al Qaeda's resolve, but the total war on terror put President McKenna in a bind, forced him to give up his dreams of aiding a glorious republic, and it quickly became clear that the government's domestic control was beginning to fade beneath the penumbra of the growing war. The Shadow-Front soon took over, unleashing a tidal wave of martial law across the land, closing down the three branches of the Constitutional government, becoming a swelling boil that fed on reaped benefits of beaten souls. Officers of the law became wardens of slavery, reaching out and grabbing from the streets those who looked 'suspicious'. Roads no longer seemed filled with commuters trekking to the daily grind, but 'Patriot' busses that carted suspects to prisons that infected the desert. It was all for pay, of course, bounties placed on a rising star or a person's possessions, contracts that affirmed and encouraged violent muggings, police abuse, rape, murder, and theft. Truly, America had been enthralled by the '1984', 'Cold War' vision, trapped by a hell where democracy meant oppression, and there was no savior in sight.

The element of secrecy allowed them to become the protectors of freedom, allowed the Avalon Project to rise against the eerie shadow and fight for revolution. Kit had come into his open arms, tackled the menacing XR Battlesuit with miraculous determination, and patrolled the streets of Phoenix for over a year. "Today is the day," Parks thought, inhaling another puff of smoke. "Kit won't have to do it alone anymore." With that, he grabbed his gold-tinted Lennon shades and flicked them on to his face, turning towards the door as a hand slicked back his long light brown locks. Meanwhile, Aidan's other hand descended

below his dark grey t-shirt, his fingers latching on to the belt loop of his black boot cut jeans and giving a quick tug before slipping into a lab coat. "Let's get the party started."

XS AND THE GODDESS WITH WINGS:

Night opened up to the moans of a mechanical day, steel whined as another metal crept across its iron-fist domain, and from the clutches of the dark, Kit emerged unscathed. The gold trim of the XR glittered as he walked past the rows of florescent lights, silent onlookers to the young man's thoughts and reflections. Kit's eyes, glazed behind the halogen 'shades', were affixed to his metal boots, his ears were tuned with the rhythm of each step, time, distance, and sound shoved into the past. It was hard to remember the path he chose, hard to remember each one of those steps, and the places they led him to, but he did not regret the journey he had embarked upon. He had been given the means to protect freedom, given the power that anyone old enough to have a real childhood would have dreamt about. For once in his long life of isolation, he was loved, he was needed, he was the hero, but one ultimately surrounded by burdens. Fighting all the time left Kit drained, it stole his emotion, his energy, and his passion for life, but now, hope was on its way and he would finally get the help desired.

The corridor became silent as Kit stopped before the XS: the supersonic battle armor designed for his compatriot. Its elegance was on a level unlike the XR, not a collaboration of circuits and imagery enhancing aides, but a streamlined wonder, pumped with fuel, rockets, and the afterburners to create one of the fastest man-operated, low-altitude vehicles in existence. The jet-black paint sucked the light from the already poorly lit space, and drew Kit's eyes to the void, giving his mind the time to focus on his new partner. How would he react to her and how would she react to him? He twitched at the thought, his narrowly framed body shivering at the potential horror the union held. Kit sighed and lowered his chestnut eyes while nervously dragging his hand through tufts of red hair. However, one thing was for certain, despite his uncertainty, it would be a night to remember.

* * *

Above, the swift chops of rotor blades teased the silent night as a small, stealthy helicopter began its descent to the Avalon base. Blue eyes tried to hone in on the black wasteland

beneath, tried to focus on the glare rising from the Avalon complex, its glowing embers and its constellation of stars that massaged the landscape. Amora tapped her foot anxiously against the solid floor of the helicopter, impatiently waiting for touchdown – the jerk that would seal her arrival, and the jerk that would change her heart. What began as a smooth ride turned into a slow, arduous purgatory, a realm that she rushed could not endure. Time slowed down to spite her, to make her look stupid, to make her feel like a child, its altered course morphing each tap of the foot from a mark of the second to a historiography of millennia. Finally, she felt the chopper touchdown, felt it embrace the cement, solidity of fact and war. For once, she would be able to help, to do something, to save those who deserved to be saved: may the eyes of the innocent watch over us all.

Her hair blew wildly when the doors of the helicopter opened, spewing waves of brown into the night's sea of black. Her figure stood out like that of a goddess in a crowd of the mundane, visibly perfect in form – a body that did not match a hyper-anxious mind. She descended the small metal staircase, carrying her belongings in one hand, and restlessly fidgeting with the other. “Dr. Parks,” Amora said, rolling her fingers in and out in a fluid manner.

He reached out and touched her shoulder, moving it across her black velvet dress suit. “Ms. Hunter,” he responded, peering at her through his gold shades. “I see you have arrived safely.” Aidan stepped to her side and moved his hand to comfortably rest on the back of her neck. “How was the flight from Brussels?” His eyes wandered to her stern face, froze at her appearance, and gazed at her keen nose, its form almost leaping from her body to take the next step, to experience more of the unknown. “How is President McKenna?”

She did not look at him, but kept marching forward into the light, into the sanctity of the Avalon Compound. “I want to see it,” she spoke, her voice echoing throughout the cavernous hangar, bouncing off the rusted steel walls. The appearance of the corridor made her more anxious, made her more desperate to see some real progress instead of a shabby hangar that had been rotting in the desert since the Cold War. Parks affirmed her wish and continued to lead her down the desolate hallway; the ‘it’ she sought was the XS Suit, the machine designed to complement her taste for speed and her desire to hurriedly complete an assignment. In retrospect, it truly was the perfect suit for her, the fastest fabricated object to ever grace and fancy the human

appetite, an impressive war-machine that combined the operating system of the XR with the thrust power of the SR-71 Blackbird.

If seconds felt like millennia to Amora, the year of horror that followed 9-11 must have been an eternity trapped in hell, but as the pair of doctor and pilot rounded a corner, a fresh coat of black and gold paint replaced the bland walls of purgatory. The XS stood as a silent monument to the thousands that lost their lives in a cowardly attack on the innocent, and the even more horrific self-inflicted attack that the American people sustained in the aftermath. “Beautiful...”

An American idol stood before her, a masterpiece of steel and circuitry that were woven together to produce the perfect fighting machine. Amora gawked at her acquisition: the Avalon One OS console built into the wrist plate, the dark green halogen display set against the black and gold trimmed helmet, and the massive SR-72 Vernier system riveted to the back of the armor – pieces that came together to complete the puzzle. “XS,” Amora whispered, mystified to the point that she did not even notice Kit standing in the corner.

“Do you like it?” Parks asked, still watching to see if there would be any sort of reaction. She remained silent, but Aidan picked up the twinkle in her eyes and remembered the reason he asked her to pilot the XS: she was a goddess with wings and needed something to fly.

INTERVIEW WITH DR. AIDAN PARKS [July 4, 2003]:

“I have to say,” Aidan finished his thought, “having Lieutenant Hunter around was a great asset to the force. I knew Amora could haul ass, and bringing her onboard the Avalon Project at such a crucial junction was one of the best decisions I ever made.”

The lights of the 22/20 set burned into his eyes as the dusk-blond journalist Misura Downie continued her hoard of questions. “In reference to that night, Dr. Parks, the 11th of October, how did your two candidates get along?”

Across the light oak table, Dr. Parks promptly fielded her question, “Kit and Amora, excuse me,” he coughed, not letting the error of colloquialism go unchecked, “Mr. Matsko and Lt. Hunter were introduced to one another at the XS holding platform, and quickly engaged in conversation one would expect from two teenagers. Seeing as how it was late, October 12 was seemingly upon us, I asked Matsko to show the lieutenant to her room and suggested that the two of them should retire for the

evening because the second arrival was scheduled for the early morning.”

“You allowed Kit Matsko to escort Ms. Hunter to her room without any supervision?” Downie continued. “Don’t you think that is a little risky considering the amount of sexual isolation the two would face?”

It was rare for Aidan to simply burst out laughing, but that he did, sending Ms. Downie and the whole camera crew into shock and amazement. “Jesus!” Parks bawled. “No,” he mumbled, trying to calm down. “I had no worries...ha...ha. I think you should be more worried about my sexual isolation than those two.”

“Care to elaborate?” Misura asked, dropping her elbows enthusiastically onto the table, but Parks shot a stare that ended that line of questioning. “I apologize,” she replied. “As to this second arrival, the third candidate, why don’t we talk about him?”

SECOND DATE WITH DR. PARKS [Oct 12, 2002; Wellton, AZ]:

His children had been put to bed, and now all that was keeping Aidan awake was the half-cigarette dissolving away before him. He had so many questions to ask Amora, for she could give him the answers that no one else could: the activities of President McKenna, his strategy for returning to the United States, and the estimated duration that they would have to hold the tyrannical advances of the Chancellorodt Shadow-Front. Yet, his attention had been split between her and the coming of the third candidate – the one who would pilot his last model, his greatest creation, the one he had finished on the night of that legendary day, the XT – Wing McCallister. He was by far the most interesting of the three, at least when it came to the past and the flow of time. His father was a top ranking official in the military under McKenna’s first-term, but when 9-11 occurred, he lost popularity with the Chancellorodt cult and fell prey to his over-zealous, Front-supported wife. When the MPs arrived at the McCallister home, they found two dead bodies, and Wing soaked in blood still wielding a butcher knife. To those of the old regime, it was obvious that the kid lost control in a horrid situation, but Wing fell silent at his court-martial hearing, a confused victim abused by the shadow government, and consequently received a life sentence.

Patrons of democracy yearned to erupt in rebellion over the ridiculous decision, but marital law under the Chancellorodt shadow government had already come to pass, and those with that power sought to rid their midst of such idealistic history. Luckily for the Avalon Project, Wing was an excellent escape artist; after all, he had been training with Delta Force before the killing, and had the makings of a phenomenal officer. After learning of Aidan's need for a third pilot to decimate the Chancellorodt's Shadow-Front occupation forces and the corrupt monsters they created, the young McCallister was more than happy to work his wonders and bust out. The last communication Parks received from the lad was an encrypted transmission detailing his acquaintance with McKenna Loyalists after the break and the means of his arrival: an old, hi-jacked MP plane due to arrive at 4:30 AM on the 12th of October.

Aidan's computer screen provided the cramped room's only light as the somber glow of his cigarette evaporated in the rise of smoke. His pondering had led him through the caverns of time, the maze of the present, and returned his conscience at precisely 4 AM. "I should really quit these," Aidan thought, hurling the crumpled butt into a metal garbage bin resting in the corner. His shades haphazardly rested at the tip of his nose as his intense green eyes locked on the screen, "But I guess I'd rather die from my own freedom than those tyrant bastards'." He stood up, taking a deep sigh that filled his lungs with musty air, and stepped out of the closet-space. Nights like this were unbearable; the ones where thoughts from the past boiled within and conscience stirred and excited the broth. It was hard to grasp how quickly the mighty had fallen, how quickly freedom became oppression and revolution, and how the Shadow-Front had methodically annihilated every enumerated right under the banner of terrorist isolation. Yet, the last Aidan heard, the war was ending, and McKenna was set to sign a pact with Europe and Asia that could prompt his return to the United States. The only terror left to isolate was the fear and hatred oozing from this country, the others had died in the aftermath of First Fall: September.

RESIDENT BADASS [Oct 12, 2002; Over Wellton, AZ]:

"Avalon Base, this is Riders of the Apocalypse broadcasting over short-range radio. We have entered your airspace and will be landing in five minutes, over?"

The ground crew responded, “Riders, this is Avalon, read you loud and clear.”

Moonlight bounced from black leather as the young man stood, brushing a collection of dust from his jeans, and walked towards the cockpit. Four others were on the plane with this renegade looking teen: all burly men, guns slung over their shoulders, and knives pinned to their belts. Together, they formed the Riders of the Apocalypse, a band dedicated to destroying the Shadow-Front and putting President McKenna and the Constitutional government back in power. During a raid on the Abulher Prison in northwestern Florida, the four riders ran across a teen already trying to break through the security network. Deep into the mission, it seemed that the apocalyptical horsemen, Sal, Reij, Shado, and Pyro, had been led into an inescapable trap, but with the help of the trained Wing McCallister, not only did the foursome manage to steal a stock load of weapons, but also managed to steal an MP103-APC Harrier, the same plane that was delivering Wing to the Avalon Compound.

Wing gripped a chair with his left hand as the plane began a near vertical descent to the open bay doors beneath. To Sal, the eerie white light emanating from the mechanical gate was the first sign of heaven on Earth, a sign to back the Riders’ cause, to make him feel like they accomplished something. To Wing, it was a sign of redemption, a sign that hell had opened her jaws to swallow him whole, taking eternities to mash and mold him into the hardened callous that he was. There was no time to care about his feelings, or his sensitive past, only time to look into the future, and decimate anyone that got in the way of liberation.

Revolution engulfed Wing’s body as the metallic floor of the hangar bay met the bulky wheels of the Harrier, its raging engines fuming steam in the heroic effort to cool the aircraft’s systems. The plane’s APC compartment hatch snapped away from the steel frame, allowing the black leather to finally be bathed in white light. Enormous boots came to rest on the smooth floor, each step carrying the ripples of time that composed an incredible future. “Welcome to Avalon,” Aidan said, pushing his body from the wall with a slight move of the torso. Wing gave him an even colder response than Amora did, not even addressing the doctor’s presence. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you; the others would have been here, but it’s late and after such a long journey I found it fitting to send them to bed.”

“I don’t get sent to bed,” Wing replied, marching up to Parks with a bold expression plastered to his face. “I didn’t come here to get sent to bed! I came here to kick some ass!”

“Jesus,” Sal shouted, emerging from the Harrier. “He sits patiently during the entire flight, but get his ass out of the plane and he wants to roast some nuts.” He paused, scratching his goatee while he turned to face Dr. Aidan Parks. “You’ll have to excuse him,” he continued. “The guy is really quite nice; it’s just that he is in dire need of revenge. Honestly...”

“He didn’t ask for your analysis, Sal!” Wing shouted. “Although,” his voice was charmed by the subtle hint of compassion, “I guess you’re right. A long plane flight, and a couple years unjustly confined in Abulher will do that to anyone.” The friendly tone had vanished over the duration of the sentence, but Wing calmly extended his hand. “Dr. Parks! I apologize, thanks for the welcome.” The teen grasped the hand of the doctor and held it tight, taking the short time to feel, to visually frisk, this recently solidified acquaintance. He had learned the amazing technique from Delta Force: the ability to read a person’s true feelings by his or her behavior, by his actions, by her confidence, and by the way his gaze felt in the methodic heart. Wing broke the handshake, content with his quick, first-hand, analysis of the doctor, and spun around to introduce him to the Riders of the Apocalypse. Each stood with his arms crossed behind his back, looking forward with keen eyes ready to hear a joyous prophecy. They had brought Wing to Avalon, knowing all too well that he, somehow, would hold the key to bringing Blair McKenna back from Europe, bring America’s leader back to his people, and finally destroy the tyranny that suffocated the winds of freedom. Aidan understood their blank stare the best, knowing that they feared the unknown, and had come looking for the news of salvation, yet there was none to give, except the guarantee that Avalon would try its best to bring McKenna home. Wing’s voice was the only noise that interrupted the tenuous peace, “I’d like to see it.”

With that, the Riders departed into the night, leaving behind their faith and any information obtainable from their stolen aircraft. Wing and Aidan strode down the hall side-by-side, the eyes of the elder studying the third candidate. Beneath the harsh leather sat a man of remarkable skills and intelligence; for indeed, any 17-year-old that could overcome the extensive Delta Force training paved a highway to an immeasurable future. Despite the glorious opportunities, however, it was obvious to

Aidan that the boy's past had eroded his hopes: black over black over black over a darkened soul.

Wing's brown eyes shot past the steel walls of the Avalon Compound, penetrated far into the deepest reaches of the night, and searched for answers. Ever since that day when he found his mother stroking the gun that had slain his father, nothing had been the same. In a heartbeat of time, he had been thrown in prison, his life had been dismantled, and only the seeds of revenge had been planted in his Garden of Eden. While some stood behind him in their silent prayers, he knew the small, passionate outrage over his conviction would only lead to more damnation and understood that it would give the Shadow-Front more reason to extend its already heinous 'patriotic' powers. Thus, he retired to a cell, where stone walls and steel doors told him the true fate of America, a land conquered and contained by fear. This is when Wing believed the world was doomed, screwed by greedy pigs and mental molesters that raped the minds of the people and conformed them to a life of unwavering obedience and warped justice. Yet now, as the night lingered on, the Delta-Force-toned, muscularly built teen stood before the pure justice of the world, his dark flame hair, black leather jacket, and night jeans giving the subtle hint of the previous era; his euphoric gaze, however, provided the hopeful glimpse that the resident badass was here to stay.

Red, white, and blue painted that vision of anchoring hope for Wing McCallister as the gorgeous site of the XT came into view. Like eagle's wings, the majestic SR-71 Vernier system unfolded from the armor's torso, each engine block masterfully painted with America's true colors. The armor was forged with a magnificent touch, a precision that, much like the XT's predecessors, drew the eye and made one obsess over its seemingly infinite beauty. Wing stepped towards it, reaching out with his hand and placing it on the cold, bulletproof halogen eyepiece. Within the clutches of his soul, he could feel the undying pulse of hope, the force that drove him to break from the grasp of the Shadow-Front and emerge from the hell that bound him to captivity.

To Aidan, the moment was a heavenly nightmare; for while the unification marked the beginning of the war against tyranny, it terminated his personal connection to the XT, shattered the sense of possession he had over his magnificent creation, and placed it in the hands of a teen eager to fight. It was as if Parks had lost the XT, watched it be devoured before his own eyes, and yet he stood by, praying that Wing was the

phoenix he had searched long and hard to find, gawking as that crucial moment when man fused with machine became history, and smiling as he witnessed freedom ride from the ashes.

“The XT is different.” Parks did not need to say it and Wing’s dumbfounded expression solidified the ideas drifting between the two minds. “Although it’s hard to believe,” he continued, “the XR and XS are more conventional weapons than this machine. True, the XR does possess the most unique camouflage system in the world, and indeed, the XS is the fastest man-made device ever assembled, but the XT possesses an array of features that remain untested and unproven in the field of battle.

“First off, the other two models run off diesel engines directed through an SR-71 or SR-72 Engine block, while the XT utilizes a cold fusion engine called the Keystone Unit. Thanks to the Avalon technician staff we were able to convert an SR-71 Vernier to run off nuclear power, however, extended airborne use is unadvised because we don’t know how much load the system can handle past two hours of continuous use. In addition, because of the new power system, we needed to change the basic electronics of the suit compared to the older models. The Operating System and LCD unit were both completely upgraded, as well as the communications suite installed on the headpiece.

“Even with the upgrades, we found that the XT was still in danger of producing an overload of energy, thus we created the Keystone Launcher, a weapon mounted on the left-hand glove of the armor. When the Avalon Operating System detects that the Keystone is producing more power than the suit needs, it will begin charging the KL unit. At the critical charge point, the glove will open, releasing a massive energy wave that can be hurled at enemy positions; however, like most of the devices on the XT, a backlash effect is possible, and could effectively leave you for dead. Other than what I’ve said, the buffers and actuators that protect the wearer and amplify his movements remain the same between the three units. I guess if you have any questions or concerns, now would be the time to ask.”

Wing walked around to view the side of the XT, and pulled a large gun from locking clips on the unit’s leg. “That is the Capcast,” Aidan continued, “literally, the only safe weapon on the XT’s platform. Scientifically, it is a modified gauss rifle, allowing users to vary the strength and energy dissipated with each shot. A cartridge holds 24 bullets, the downside is they are difficult to manufacture, thus must be used sparingly.”

Wing continued his visual overview, analyzing every weld, every steel plate, and every feature the XT boasted, searching for a question worth Aidan's expertise. "What about the sword?" he finally asked, referring to a giant hilt erupting from behind the right shoulder blade.

"Never use it," Aidan commented. He was afraid Wing would notice it, and deathly afraid that he would question such a powerful, destructive device. "The Elleron will kill you." It was the one thing Aidan wished he had never created, the one weapon that could creep into his dreams of the future, and twist them into nightmares. "It is a weapon that I could never ask anyone to use."

"Well then, what the fuck is it doing there?" Wing asked, annoyed by Aidan's unintentional teasing.

"The Elleron is a final strike weapon," Aidan sighed, brushing his hair through an aroused strife. "Throughout the XT's use, the sword gathers charge at four times the rate of the Keystone Launcher through capacitors forged within its steel. When used, the sword resonates and produces an electromagnetic wave much like the Launcher, but at a magnitude that can lay cities to waste. Other than the obvious conclusion that many innocent lives could be lost during use, the Elleron is analogous to wielding lightning; one can try, but the sword has a mind of its own. In addition to destroying anything the wielder swipes at, because a high energy circuit is created during use, the user will be shocked as well." Wing placed his hands on the red torso, swiping at where his heart was destined to lie. "You should get some sleep," Parks suggested. "We'll go over the properties of the OS later today." He grinned and proceeded down the hallway, reaching for hopes and grasping for dreams when the night finally let them in.

INTERVIEW WITH DR. AIDAN PARKS [July 4, 2003]:

Misura leaned across the table and stared deep into Aidan's eyes. She was entranced by his fascinating story, almost to the point that she forgot she was conducting an interview, but the reporter chimed in at Park's natural break and fired another question. "You said earlier that your first two candidates got along well, but what happened when Wing entered the mix?"

Aidan scratched his head and yawned, almost screaming his response. "Oh, the three of them got along just...fine..."

TRILOGY'S BIRTH [Oct 12, 2002 Wellton, AZ]:

Gunshots faded into memory, leaving the nightmare to resonate in his conscience. Shortly after, the silenced night had engulfed even the deepest of thoughts, creating a darkness illuminated solely by the sounds of a fictional world. “It’s 11:30 AM, and you’re listening to National Public Radio. Today, a report came out of Northwest Florida that the infamous murderer Wing McCallister escaped from the Abulher Prison and united with the terrorist group, ‘Riders of the Apocalypse’. The Shadow-Front Committee quickly released a report condemning the group and its past atrocities, citing events such as theft of sensitive government material, injury to government officials, and of course the heinous slaying of Senator Miaka McCallister. Wing McCallister is considered to be highly dangerous, and any potential sighting is to be reported to your local police station immediately.” Wing’s legs kicked out of the grey bed sheets and promptly fell to the floor. The cold steel bit his feet as they dragged Wing’s body across the dreary chamber, carrying him across a free realm that looked remarkably like his prison cell: dark, creepy, and flooded with the noise of ignorance. “...local SFC bulletin will be posting pictures of the convict...” Wing pushed his hand through a web of tangled black hair as the ex-military prodigy wandered into the shower.

The pangs of water massaged his back as the raining thunder of his past twisted the pathways of his mind. “You can’t defend...” A voice called to him, bursting from his mind, set loose by the harsh shampooing of the scalp. Solitude was broken as Wing emerged from the cleaning and quickly pressed a towel against his freezing jail-hardened skin. After a moment, he reached out to the sink and doused his toothbrush with the bubbly tap water, listening to the crisp sounds that erupted from his mouth as the bristles dug into the hard white enamel. It was then that another sharp sound rang from the door, its steel resonating as the bangs grew more violent. Wing sighed, becoming increasingly annoyed with every jab at his peace; he hated having his silence broken, hated having the loneliness that he had become used to stripped away by an idiot who did not know any better. Reluctantly, he opened the door before an onslaught of brown hair drifted into his face. Wing twitched and bit down on his toothbrush while stepping back to get a better view. “What the fuck!?” His exclamation rang out as another face appeared in his doorway.

“You’re late!” It was a girl – the first fact to cross Wing’s mind. “You were supposed to be up three hours ago!”

Wing's face glared a skeptical look, visually displaying what his voice would not dare to express, "Who the fuck are you?"

"You'll have to excuse her," the boy interrupted, pushing back spikes of red hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. "She's incredibly impatient."

"Obviously," Wing responded, letting the smart-ass tone sink into her essence. He bit down on the toothbrush even harder; this intrusion ignited his short fuse of distrust.

"Anyway," the redhead continued, "I am Kit, and this is Amora."

Wing found Kit's half-wit introduction somewhat satisfactory and replied in a firm voice, "Wing, Wing McCallister," however, like a child distracted, his eyes did not follow Kit's conversation, but rather Amora's taunting analysis of his dwelling. Was she looking for something, just curious, or possibly trying to classify him for her catalogue of acquaintances? It was not as if Wing did not know who she was; her relationship to President McKenna was well known in resistance underground: she was the inner-circle. His hand twitched as she turned, taking the moment to leer at Wing's horrendous cot. He just wanted to reach out and grab her, scream at her silent scrutiny, and kick her out of his fucking room. Why the hell did she piss him off that much? It didn't make any sense, unless viewed from a mother's mind. Thankfully, a stream of red caught Wing's conscience and attracted the aggression of an uncontrolled hand.

Kit jumped as Amora spun around, clasping Wing's hand with an amazing amount of force. Wing blinked as he examined what he had done: grabbed a ribbon. "The hell?" he whispered, rubbing the blood-red cloth between his thumb and forefinger. Kit watched as Amora's muscles tensed and gulped as her face began to turn as red as the ribbon Wing held. She yanked it from his hand, tore it from his grip along with renegade strands of her rebellious brown hair. "What's with the ribbon?" Wing asked, scowling at her as she returned a devilish glance.

"None of your damn business," Amora responded, pushing Wing away. "He has no right to know," poured through the caverns of her mind, forming the streams of her deepest thought. "My past is mine alone."

Wing regained his balance and stepped forward. "What is your problem?" he shouted, peering into her eyes as she fell into a subconscious world. "You don't have to get all anal about your stupid ribbon!" His torso drifted from her body while

Amora's hand moved to strike. She missed, coming short of Wing's shock-induced grin, failing where she needed to succeed. His eyes shined with an amazing flare, a beacon of satisfaction radiating from the darkness of their brawl. She charged at him, leaving Kit standing awestruck in the background as Wing's toothbrush flew across the room and Amora's ribbon fell trailing behind her quick battle movements. Amora jolted as Wing caught a lightning-fast punch, slowing her momentum to a seeming halt. "Did Aidan know what he was getting into with you?" Wing muttered, watching Amora's face tighten in anger. She threw another punch but Wing swung to the side. "You act too quickly for your own good lieutenant, one day such carelessness could lead to your death."

Amora sneered as she drew back from him, "You'd know about death wouldn't you?" She hated his audacity, his rudeness, and lack of sincerity. Just in the few moments she had been in the room, Amora could clearly summarize his mind, his desire to be perfect, to be clean cut, to do things the chivalric way... while trampling on everyone near to seek his goal. That was the way the world worked, a mess of scrambling animals, trying to work their way to the top of the chain, trying to become king, to rule the ridiculous world with a decorated, greedy, dirty hand. Amora wanted nothing to do with him, and promptly turned around in disgust, praying that she would never have to look at his arrogant eyes.

Her words had dissolved the playfulness in his eyes, changed the color of his soul to match background of the listless room, and left in him no emotions but lifeless love and apathetic anger. It was a drone that infected his heart, never pro, but always reactive to a cause, a stir that inflamed the latent hate to match the fires of hell. She had the heartlessness to turn away from him after a comment like that! What a typical bitch, the kind that rush to complete a task of glory, but nitpick when they start to lose their ground; Delta gone wrong. His hands reached out and clasped her shoulders, promptly sending Amora into a sudden twirl that caused her eyes to meet Wing's once again.

Amora's body snapped to brace for the arrogant gaze, but it did not greet her. Instead, she saw the face of an angry man, a soulless beast that wished to do nothing but harm. His stare frightened her, his clutch made her panic, and she could not escape. Amora felt her throat constrict while her stomach churned with an anxious pain, what would he do, what could he be thinking? Once more, time slowed down to spite her, to trap Amora in an endless realm of nervousness. There she was held

by Wing's dominance, unable to see his next move or fight against a developing threat.

Words jabbed Wing's thoughts and forced him to let go, "You can't defend against..." He watched Amora slip away from him, her bright blue hues swollen in panic, her limbs twitching in fear, just as he had done years ago. The hatred within had subsided, and Amora and Kit were both surprised when a submissive voice cracked from his mouth. "I'll be out in a minute." The ex-convict led the pair out the door with his head glued to the floor and his finger glued to the door's switch.

Amora and Kit stood in the hallway for a moment, listening to the hiss of the door as the steel bulk closed behind them. Its whine half concealed the pounding, but Amora could hear the sound of flesh against metal, the bone-cracking, bone-chilling sound that would only accompany a sorry, depressed being. She had run for all her life, trying to stay one step ahead of the pain, never pausing to reflect, but in that instant, when the beats of the past finally caught up with her heart, Amora realized that she had made a grievous mistake; she had hurt a good person. Her stride began to fade in comparison to Kit's unconcerned bounce and she quickly sagged away from his side. "Go ahead," Amora said, looking back to Wing's closed door. "I think I'm going to stay here for a while."

"Are you sure?" Kit asked, coming to a halt and turning to face his comrade. "It got a little hectic back there; I don't want things to get anymore out of control."

'Don't worry about it' was her reply, and with that she sent Kit down the hall towards the hangar. The havoc was her fault, she had let it get out of control, and now Amora would fix it as quickly as it had begun. Before Wing's door she stood, her back mounted against the base's firm metallic wall, a slide that guided her body to the chilled floor. She imagined how Wing felt, the words piercing him like bullets and tearing him like the battles of his past and those to come in the future. Amora fiddled with her fingers anxiously until he emerged from his room dressed in a black leather vest and torn blue jeans. Wing looked down at her, staring with indifferent eyes, cracking his blood soaked knuckles. Neither had any idea what to say, but with a huff Wing leaned against the opposite wall and quickly joined Amora on the dust-covered floor. It was one of those comedic moments, one of those awkward silences that always precede some sort of humorous breakthrough, the ones where two people who were thought to be from different worlds find themselves drawn much closer to each other than previously believed. "I'm

sorry,” they both said, their chorus echoing in harmony down the dreary hall.

INTERVIEW WITH DR. AIDAN PARKS [July 4, 2003]:

“Different worlds and not far apart at all,” Aidan finished, leaving Misura on the edge of her comfy blue chair. He made her sit in the suspense for a moment before continuing in a know-it-all tone, “Yeah, they were a feisty pair at first, always arguing about this and that! And God, the bloody training sessions, bicker, bicker, bicker! Honestly, you’d figure when the odds are stacked against you and the fate of the world rests in your hands, one would act a little more dignified, but these two,” Aidan sighed, releasing an oppressed breath, “were like fire and ice.”

SESSION 4; Two Suits and a Fox [Oct 18, 2002 Wellton, AZ]:

Have you ever met those couples that argue over everything, the ones always seen together yet never seem to get along? These things will end in the same manner every time: the denial, yes that ridiculous phase when the arguing is endless, and often about pointless topics, such as ribbons; then the revelation, the illustrious moment when love blossoms from the seeds of misfortune. “We’re not in love,” Wing said, shoving Kit into the wall as they strode down the corridor to the hangar. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s all over your face Wing,” Kit replied, rebounding from Wing’s assault and regaining his balance. “You can’t deny it forever.”

“I can deny anything I want.” The duo approached a fork in the massive underground complex. “Besides, there is no proof what so ever that I’m in love with,” his voice cracked as Amora emerged from the unseen junction. “Amora,” Wing continued, his face turning a dark red.

“What’s up with you?” Amora asked, pointing at his flushed capillaries. “You stayed up late again.” Kit desperately tried to contain his laughter, venting it in small, quick puffs that burst from his chest. “What?” Amora responded.

“She must not have heard our conversation,” his mind exhaled an imaginary sigh, releasing the tension Kit had mischievously constructed. How could it have come to this? Only six days had passed since their first encounter, not even a

week had gone by since the two of them stood un-welcomed in his eerie dormitory, trapped in a quarrel that would have proven devastating if not for a shocking retrospection, and now, it felt as if they had never been apart. Around them, the voices of Wing's past began to fade; it was as if they had become his...

"Wing!" Amora shouted, tearing him from the consuming reflection. "Are you okay?"

Wing's thoughts raced, "Have I been staring at her the whole time? What if Kit is right? Nah," he shook his head violently, "camaraderie is one thing, but love, I don't think so!" Kit grinned in anticipation of Wing's answer. "Little absent-minded today, I guess," was the response.

"When are you not absent-minded?" Amora replied, smiling as the brilliant lights from the hangar began to shine from the end of the hall.

"Notice how he doesn't come up with a quick comeback," Kit added, pushing himself between Wing and Amora. He turned to face the silent XT pilot and said, "What's the matter Wingy? Afraid your little secret is going to get out?"

Kit's tone did not bother Wing; it was more teasing if anything, and besides what did it matter if Matsko started a rumor, anyway? Yet, loneliness had evaporated from his heart in such a short amount of time that it left Wing puzzled and disoriented. He was used to running life solo, used to working on his own timetable, used to only caring about his own feelings, but now, everything had to be a team effort, and thus, the tempo of the fight, the tempo of his life, no longer rested on his hands alone. He had tuned out Amora and Kit's ongoing conversation; their playful bashing was a distraction from the real issue: what emotion was driving him to the limits of sanity?

Wing's analysis had already ruled out love: the treacherous emotion that leads children to run to their mother's arms, a demon-in-disguise that hurls innocent lives into the pits of hate; the feeling boiling within was certainly not love.

Maybe happiness was an aptly suited term; indeed, for the first time in a long while Wing was happy. Not since the days when he and his father had trekked across the Earth had he bequeathed such glorious smiles to those around him; not since his early childhood had he been in such a playful mood. "They make me happy," he whispered aloud; his Mother's voice was nowhere to be heard.

Amora gazed deep into his dark brown eyes, wondering what on earth Wing could be pondering. As the days drifted into the past, he began acting increasingly weird: the fighting spells

had declined from violent outbursts to short, humorous gags, the coldness of the past that chilled his heart had thawed by the fire of a rekindled soul, and then, of course, there had been Wing's alarming decrease of situational awareness. It was as though he were stuck in a constant daydream, coming back to reality for an occasional check-up, but then disappearing back into an invisible realm. Curiosity had gotten to her, a frequent event, and strung her along, forcing her to clasp his arms. "What is it?" she asked, her face shedding concern.

Wing looked back at her, the sense of enlightenment coming forth with a twinkle in his eye, the surge rising from his lungs, and ringing from his voice. "You make me happy," he replied while shrugging off Kit's attempted editorial. "You all make me very happy."

The simplicity of his statement bothered Amora because Wing was not a simple person; in fact, his life was riddled with complex emotional bombardments, devastating jolts, and horrendous ordeals that no mortal could defy without being scarred. She knew something else was gripping his conscience, something that he could not grasp or did not want to, and that annoyed her. Over the course of the week, she thought they had grown closer; his past had been revealed to her: the painstaking night when he was forced to slay his mother, the gruesome account of his father's murder, and the painful, lonely days within the walls of Abulher. Yet now, after their friendship had come such a long way in such a small amount of time, he had hidden something from her, a compelling fact that had stroked Amora's curiosity and rage. It twisted her gut and made her wish to howl in grief for every second that she was excluded from his ponderings; then again, maybe there was nothing more to know, maybe it was just that simple, maybe she did make him happy, and that was that.

"No," Wing's thoughts continued, Army methodology taking over, "I would be a fool to deny it: it is not just that."

The light of the hangar engulfed the trio as they continued the midmorning trek, a voyage that would mark the start of something special: the first steps to the end of a tyrannical dynasty. Nothing was as it seemed, as if it ever was, but now the complexity was laid out in detail, at least when the three were intertwined. Separately, the angels could do nothing but defend, hope to outlast the oppression or hide beneath the shadows of despair, but together, a stream of fragmented, confused emotions became one and slaughtered the dark's

demons. Kit could feel the aura of the room surround them as they emerged from the corridor to become one with the hangar's heavenly halo. He watched pride's high take over his comrade's bodies as they stood silently by their respective suits. Their skin, and their metal yearned to become one, yearned to start the fight, and Kit could not help but admire it. Yes, nothing was just that: his search for happiness was merely beginning.

Amora noticed the absent-mindedness evaporate from Wing's face in the presence of the patriotic XT, its brilliant red wings longing to clasp its pilot, its vibrant white joins longing to be moved, and its metallic blue body-frame hoping to be worn once again. His seriousness was more astounding now than when they first met, for in this moment it had a drive, a purpose that wanted to rid the world of a hideous, concealed haunt. The blood red ribbon dragged across her gray t-shirt as Amora glanced at Kit; he was acting strange as well, maintaining a constant visual lock on Wing's occupied soul and affixing his thoughts to Wing's incredible sense of focus. Was she missing something, or was Wing's mental link to the XT really that fascinating?

"Eh-hem!" Aidan coughed, clutching his fists in two tight balls as he approached the group. It was difficult for anyone to overlook the energy flowing throughout the room. Within her metal shells, the Avalon Compound bustled with a budding vibe of hope, its spirit climaxing before the presence of the three incredible battle armors. Being as experienced as he was, Aidan, remarkably, found himself confounded by Wing's seriousness as well; the lad's stern face appeared to be even more foreboding than when he stepped off the plane and his demeanor seemed only to intensify. "Well people," Doc continued, driving the grip of his sneaker into the reinforced concrete floor, "you all have survived a week." He laughed, formulating hilarious scenarios in which they could have not survived. "I mean, come on, getting to listen to Wing and Amora bicker every second of every damn day for the last six days has given Kit and me some quality entertainment. But anyway," his chuckling ceased as Aidan recollected himself with a quick brush down of his loose shirt, "during the last week, while Kit has continued his patrols of Phoenix, the two of you have done a marvelous job discovering the limits of the XS and XT. Yet, before you continue to unlock the mysteries embedded within each chassis, I find it extremely important to introduce you to the rest of the Avalon staff because without them my job, and yours, would be almost impossible."

Wing flinched in agony as his eyes broke from the XT and gazed into Aidan's tired soul. Several seconds later, the

doctor was puffing away on a fresh cigarette, soothed by the nicotine, revitalized by a charade, led by something without a care for other life. Chills shot up the teen's spine as he realized the eerie analogy: there would always be a shadow.

"First, I would like to introduce to you Avalon's second in command, our tactical and technical officer, Turner MacLeod." A bushel of spiky blond hair emerged from the dim corridor as Turner stepped into the light. His space-aged shades gleamed under the bright beaming bulbs of the hangar as he walked towards Aidan. The trio could feel his presence, an almost instant uplift to the dreary sarcophagus of steel; his punk ass walk, bell-bottom jeans, horrendously tight grey shirt, and slight snicker drove like a nail into Wing's skull – its beat piercing the serious mood, and laying down a funky rhythm all its own. For a short flicker of time, the XT pilot felt that this sudden change would destroy the aura of the gathering but it did not. Turner's arrival had boosted his happiness – MacLeod possessed a euphoric essence like his.

On the other hand, Turner's pop star entry continuously annoyed Lieutenant Hunter; how the hell could they expect to accomplish anything while under the command of something that crawled out of a gutter? This wasn't the tactical structure she saw in Brussels, this character belonged in Wing's jail cell. His godly ghetto-mystique consumed her thoughts and drove her mind further into a pounding disbelief; this guy could not be their tactical officer. MacLeod waved, opening his mouth to bequeath words of praise to the team. "You all have done a splendid job acquainting yourselves with the armors and their complex operating systems; I know some of you have finishing touches to brush up on, but I am proud to be working with such an aspiring, hopeful group." His words tore the thorn from her side and soothed the wound. Maybe she had misjudged him, just as she had misjudged Wing.

Perhaps his looks were merely a tough-guy disguise and did not automatically wield a half-ass aptitude. However he acted, however he looked, his statement had placed a sense of confidence in Amora that she had lacked; despite her bonding to Wing and Kit, McKenna's lieutenant had feared the upcoming campaigns. Aidan was obsessed with the suits, the boys were obsessed with the fight, and all the while, Amora was clueless as to how missions were run. It was the first time in a year that she was out of the loop, unaware of her future, and thus unable to forge ahead. She had been forced to slow down for the sake of a rag-tag resistance movement, and it had gotten to her. The last

six days of training had been dull, daunting tests: basic usage of weapons, suit care, and supersonic flight – things Lt. Hunter experienced long before. Now, however, it seemed, events were becoming interesting.

Kit stood as he felt Wing and Turner's auras collide, swirls of joyousness and experience twining from two to one. The two looked very different: one a 21st century hippie and the other a leather-dressed ex-military brass; however, their souls synchronized almost perfectly. Kit ran his eyes up and down Turner MacLeod, noting every feature radiating from the commander's five foot five inch body and brilliant mind. He slid towards Amora in hopes that she would verify his intuitions, and indeed, her eyes affixed to Mac, trying desperately to peek through his dark lenses and see through the windows of the soul.

Wing gazed as Kit whispered into Amora's ear. Was he coming on to her? What the heck was up with that? "I thought I was supposed to be the one who liked Amora," Wing thought blazingly. His gaze turned into a leer as Amora laughed quietly to his comrade's sweet-nothings.

"They put off a very similar vibe," Kit whispered to Amora. "It is hard to describe but..."

"McCallister, good to see you out of prison," Turner shouted enthusiastically, recapturing Wing's jealous leer and tempting him away from Kit and Amora's secret conversation.

"Getting out of that hellhole is always good," Wing replied, giving Turner's grin a needed boost.

"Well, keep working on pushing the limits of the XT! I know she can be a total bitch, but until the suit can fly at its maximum potential, we'll be fighting a severely outmanned conventional war." Wing knew exactly what Turner spoke of. For the most part, flying the XT had been a cakewalk; the guns, the verniers, the Avalon2 OS, and the Keystone Launcher had all been remarkably easy to use. Yet, the XT's specialty technique, the one ability that made it so incredibly special, had eluded his grasp. He had never heard of anything like it; even God would gawk at such an incredible power: the ability to defy physics and stop the flow of time.

That was why Aidan had hunted him down, why he was important to the Avalon Project, because wielding the XT required a sense of concentration, a sense of justice, and a sense of responsibility the other suits did not deem necessary. He was the needle in the haystack that could balance all three, the hero that could manipulate his emotions to do the will of the whole, the one who would push his compatriots and the nation to retake

the United States. “I know you can do it.” Kit and Amora had completely ignored the short conversation, completely overlooked Wing’s discovery of himself, deciding that gossip was more important than learning the XT’s true power, but then again, teenagers weren’t legendary for listening. Whatever their reasoning, Wing had lost the time to focus on it as another voice cried from the dark.

“Good to see him out of trouble is more like it, Mac. Eh Wingy?”

The voice sat in Wing’s ears, its familiar tone sending tingles throughout his body. “A...”

Aidan cut off Wing. “Everyone here knows I am a workaholic, constantly focusing on how my suits perform and not a whole lot else, but one day I had the brains to bring a doctor onboard who cares a little more about the pilots than what they are piloting.” He laughed, pushing his light brown hair away from his eyes, “Second on my introduction list is Doctor Fox, our chief medical officer.” The brunette hugged Wing upon entering as Amora’s jealousy-corrupted leer bathed the room. She twitched as Wing spoke into the older woman’s ear, enviously taking note of the woman’s robust hourglass form and sweetened milk chocolate eyes. Amora did not like secrets and she did not like the fact that Wing seemed not to care. With that, she snapped around to see Kit smiling; there was nothing funny about this, what was he so happy about?

“You’re blushing,” Kit said, his smile growing larger. “Does Lieutenant Hunter return Wing’s silent affections?”

“Shut up,” Amora whispered forcefully, completely missing the keyword of the sentence: *return*. “He is totally flattering her! Look at him smiling, laughing with her, completely ignoring me,” she bellowed a corrective cough, “us.” Finally, Wing and Fox parted, the former inmate taking the time to glance at Amora who continued her fueled gaze. “Care to enlighten us, Wingy,” she muttered through grinding teeth, biting off the ‘Wingy’ with her tongue.

“Foxy lived across the street from me in Chicago,” Wing laughed, knowing already that Amora had drawn her own conclusions. “Don’t worry Amora, I wouldn’t keep any secrets from you,” he continued sarcastically, blessing the room with an enlightened smile. Amora blushed at his comment and quickly spun around in hopes that he would not notice her stupidity. She had failed to follow his advice and had rushed into a ruse.

I GIVE YOU THE UNITED ARSENAL [BRUSSELS; Oct 18, 2002]:

Blair McKenna waved his hands towards the illustrious diplomats of the United Nations, stretching his arm far across the mahogany podium and reaching towards the beautifully carved marble walls far off in the distance as he spoke about the future of the world and the freedom he sought. The president's appearance, as he stood before the prowess of the world, was, in a word, spectacular. The 40 year old from rural Arkansas had transformed himself from somewhat of a country bumpkin to a well-built intellectual.

His wispy grey-brown hair ruffled, his blue eyes brightened behind a pair of round glass frames, and his broad chin quivered as his mouth opened, the crowd listening intently as a great big breath dropped into the president's chest. "As I speak, facilities across Europe and Asia are preparing for the largest grand-scale invasion since World War II's D-Day. Some ask 'Why?' because they are still unaware that the atrocities happening in the United States are byproducts of our war on terror. I made a terrible mistake in my effort to strike down the growth of fanatical terrorist uprisings at the beginning of this century. I left my country at the hands of a tyrant, and now I need your help to get it back. The mission will not be easy, but I know from the depths of my heart that the American people long for their liberty, they long for their country to rise from the ashes, to evolve from the constant, soul-burning reminder that the Earth is not a safe place to live. Together, we forged an alliance that dispelled Osama bin Laden and his viral empire from this world, and now, I beg that we unseat the vile wretch tainting my homeland. Already, resistance movements have made steady gains in America, however, they need, and we need, your help to finish off the psychopathic, paranoid tactics of the infamous Chancellorodt."

He paused, ran his hand through his faded hair, repositioned his spectacles with a wandering index finger, and continued his speech. "My friends, one of our comrades, a beautiful woman by the name of Lieutenant Amora Hunter, a woman who used to sit with us, dine with us, and reflect with us, is now a member of our greatest hope in America: the Avalon Project. As I have explained in the past, Operation Avalon commenced three years ago under a classified presidential directorate to preemptively strike down a blossoming al Qaeda terrorist network. However, the United States intelligence system

failed by not identifying the warning signs of the September 11 attacks, and on that fateful day, they caught the world off guard. In the weeks that followed the cataclysm, I traveled the world to seek support for the foundation of the United Arsenal, and found myself continually drawn away from my homeland.

“It was then that I decided to close Avalon and have former CIA director Turner MacLeod erase all knowledge of the program. Under that canvas of night, under the cloak of secrecy, Dr. Aidan Parks assembled a well-trained staff, three of the finest pilots humanity has produced, and is willing and more than able to carry out the wishes of Earth’s United Arsenal. I beseech all of you here to look back to the past, look back to the America that came rushing to your aid in morally gutless wars, in humanitarian efforts, and in the latest war on terror, and just ask yourselves, ‘How will the world be if the Shadow-Front is allowed to continue its unwanted occupation of the United States?’.

“It is a difficult question that yields a horrific answer; thus, the nations of the world must continue this great alliance to finally uproot the final cell of terror from the hallowed grounds of our Earth: the United States of America. Dearest colleagues, I have nothing to offer but the friendship of the past, the hope of the present, and the promise of a brighter future, one without the harsh reality of tyranny in America, one without fear creeping along our streets, but one with joyous peace and unprecedented prosperity. We have the manpower, the willpower, and God’s gift of surprise on our side. We shall not back down and we shall not turn away. Hell no! We have just begun, and I swear to you all, by the end of a year’s time, I shall set my feet into the rich soil of America and say ‘Yes I am back, and yes we have won’.”

McKenna left the podium to a standing ovation, a roaring applause that rose from the ice-cold hearts of politicians and managed to defrost long dormant emotions. America could not have picked a better president; one who was not afraid to admit his mistakes, and one who was not afraid to ask for help. As he descended the stairway, he grabbed a firm black hand, the friendly welcome to a face beaming with an incredible smile. Blair gazed into the eyes of his vice president, Mr. Emeryl Christianson as they began their long walk down the red-carpeted aisle. “Nice speech,” Emeryl said, yelling over the eruptive audience. “Sir,” he paused, signaling a look of importance to McKenna, “Empress Ryoko has just informed us that the Pacific Fleet has completed construction of the U.A.S. Zero.”

Blair leaned into Emeryl's short, curly black hair, and mumbled, "The Zero has been completed already?" His eyes widened as the heavy wooden doors to the grand chamber shut behind the duo. "Has Parks been informed of this?"

"No, Mr. President," Christianson replied. "We were waiting for your word in fear of security leaks; after all, Avalon is behind enemy lines."

"Assemble the cabinet, have them in Bunker 44 in twenty minutes, and have an encrypted line established with Parks by the time I get there."

A CRIPPLED HAND [Chancellor's Office in NYC; Oct 18, 2002]:

The blackened void did not scare the young secretary as she kneeled in the invisible abyss, wrapping the black sackcloth around her waist with one hand, and clutching a folder with the other. "My lord," she said un-phased by the dreary atmosphere – the voice of a loyal subject. His face gleamed in the light of a small television set that sat atop a deep-red varnished oak desk, while his eyes tuned to the bustling mystique of Blair McKenna wooing the foolish politicians of the world with his weak chatter. "We have recorded the infidel's speech. Your orders?"

The man remained silent for a moment, stroking his thick beard with a burly hand, finally his husky voice boomed in response. "Send it to Manning," he said, continuing to stroke.

"Yes, your majesty," the woman responded, her speech fluttering with a feigned sense that she had gained his respect. "Sir," she proceeded, rising to her feet, tapping her high-heel to the floor as her torso straightened to its rigid maximum, "Val is ready to see you."

"Can you believe him, Lisa?" the lord cried out, waving his arms in disbelief at McKenna. "He calls himself a great leader, he calls himself a mastermind of war, and yet he doesn't even have a clue. He thinks we are unable to do anything, unable to uncover any data on Operation Avalon. Well, we don't need their pathetic garbage to continue our mission!" He pounded the armrests of his velvet chair and rose to his feet in a swift motion, his gaze never breaking from the television set. "You are the fool, Blair McKenna! In a year's time, I shall have gripped this nation with a firm hand, spread my army of control across its fertile soil, and I shall do it with the ones you so blindly trust. Eh, my darling Amora?" Black satin fell to the floor as he stepped from the chair, the cloak shimmering in the artificially

induced night as the lord strode towards his waiting messenger. A sinister laugh rose from the depths of his gut as he motioned her off into the grand labyrinth and sent her on another arduous task in their coliseum. Each puff of his commanding bombastic breath ushered in a new thought of lies and deceit, and each grandiose step he took was a movement towards the domain of suppression. He would find them, crush the Avalon Project with his own sadistic hand, and use that momentum to finally cripple renegade freedom and bring about complete order.

[Wellton, AZ; Oct 18, 2002]:

The sound of food hitting Wing's stomach yielded to the booming address flowing from the Compound's intercom speakers. "Today, news agencies across America received a terrifying report from the Chancellorodt Council concerning Blair McKenna's address to the United Arsenal in Brussels. His words spoke of destroying America, spoke of crushing the tyranny our people represent, and spoke of rewriting the world order," her voice halted as a high-pitched, whinny man took over.

"It's obvious Blair McKenna shows no compassion or respect for the people he abandoned in the wake of 9-11." Wing's teeth tore meat from the bone. "Face it," the analyst burst, "this resistance McKenna speaks of is formed from a bunch of deserters and convicts. Lt. Amora Hunter fled from the Afghan Front when her father and brother were killed in action, and she sided with the former president when he left us in the dark while fucking politicians in Europe and Asia." Amora's tray slammed against the table, causing Wing and Kit's eyes to wander to her wrenched face. "And this Wing McCallister character, while it is still unknown if McCallister has joined insurgent terrorists, Wing was nothing but a cold blooded killer who murdered a rising star in the United States' political realm. Many within the Chancellorodt Council regarded Senator McCallister as a beacon of promise, and gave her very distinguished accolades. They placed enormous amounts of faith in her ability to carry out proper duties that could make America succeed, but that heathen bastard has tainted the name of the McCallister family, not only by murdering such a wonderful woman, but by slaying a war hero, the late General Jack McCallister."

Amora stared at Wing as his eyes twitched under the pressure of disbelief. Had they accused him of murdering his

father? “Don’t worry about it,” he said to Amora, trying to shrug off the hatred burning within. “Those morons will do anything to taint our names; they will do anything to try to screw with our heads.” Amora knew he had it right, knew he had correctly tagged the psychological tactic, but she could feel the pain eat him away. He wasn’t the badass he thought he was, not the ex-convict with a hardcore attitude; he was only a human, a man imprisoned not by bars of steel or concrete, but by the molding of his past. Amora’s leer was starting to annoy him, for he could tell she was prodding into his emotions, trying to work out how exactly he was feeling. “Don’t try that shit with me,” Wing said, his eyelids slowly rolling over his half-scowling eyes. “I can deal with it.”

“But it still pisses you off,” Amora replied, reaching across the table and banging her fists in accordance with the almost tantrumesque rant. “It pisses me off that they called me a deserter, challenged my loyalty to the American people, and shit on my family name. You should at least feel something!”

Wing’s eyes opened, revealing their luminous brown cores, both radiating with a hopeful aura. “I do feel something,” he replied, resting his hands on her clenched ones, taming her raging spirit. “I feel happy here, and right now, that is all I need to feel.” Her hands shot away from his as Amora retracted her arms, redness simultaneously blooming on her shocked face. She watched as Kit nudged Wing’s shoulder and the almost instant reaction that Wing gave to his oppressive grin. “Out of the gutter, Kit! Now!”

Kit’s eyes gleamed as the statement rose from the depths of his lungs, his body erupting in a sort of visual laughter as he belted it for the world to hear, “It’s not my fault that you...”

His comment fell into silence as the intercom clicked over to Dr. Aidan Parks, “Amora, Wing, we need you in Tactics a.s.a.p.” Aidan paused, letting his words echo across the Compound and sink like mercury into its steel hulls. “Kit, please launch your nightly patrol as soon as dinner is concluded. That will be all.”

Kit’s Soliloquy [Phoenix, AZ; Oct 18, 2002/Sept 11, 2001]:

For once, he was the shadow lurking in the night, he was the predator and they were his prey. He was as unseen as the air, but as real as the Earth beneath his feet; the XR carried a human orphan to angelic heights. Kit jumped from building to building,

his body pounding against each metal mass he landed on and his weight relying on a long forgotten and abandoned strength. The industrial harbor that was Phoenix burned to sacred dust after 9-11, its wounds left uncured by a Shadow-Front wishing to instill fear in the people's minds. How much longer would he have to be the city's protector? How much longer would he have to hold the memories so they wouldn't be stripped away from history forever? "Soon," Wing's answer eroded the doubt in Kit's mind, made the young fighter embrace a sense of peace, and willed him on. The buildings stopped crunching under his feet, no longer giving way under the weight of the XR, but, rather, propelled its wearer further.

Simplicity goes a long way, but Kit's life was far from simple: he felt bad for continuously pushing Wing, driving him away by making fun of love. But, there was no hope that Wing would ever understand despite his kind nature. There was no way Wing would ever accept Kit's past, or care to discover its secrets: why he could never love a woman again.

Once upon a time, before he walked streets of Phoenix, a small apartment in New York City had been his home, once his family had sheltered him from the harsh realities of the world, and once he had been on the path of the straight and narrow. "We're all going to die Kit," his sister told him when the flames destroyed American steel. "They'll never let us live; they're going to destroy our seed." They watched from a window as bodies burst from the membranes of glass and tumbled down to the asphalt and cement below. "Mom and Dad are in there, Kit," she continued, putting her hand on his shoulder without a tear in her eye while Kit's swelled with agony. *The XR launched from the roof of another building.* His sister set him on the floor as the tears dripped from his eyes, his hands trying to dig into the hardwood as she vanished into the kitchen. Kit could hear her mumble in the background, spreading her ridiculous prophecy as she doused the studio in alcohol. He did not flinch when she lay on top of him, did not scream when her match brought the flames of hell to their home, and he did not wail when she drew a gun. "We can join them, little brother; there is nothing left for us here in a world without love. Don't cry, I'll be there soon."

He froze as the barrel found its mark between his eyes, his tears halted by short snuffles, his body wanting to become one with the burning floor; he needed to escape; he needed to get out! Kit's heart was broken by her words, his calm was forever ruined, the bedrock existence he had stood on was crumbling,

and death was all that could hold him. The door crashed in the background, the flames parting as the rush of cool air and water cleansed the room, allowing Kit's young eyes to catch the savior standing amidst the hell that still dared to steal his soul. "Soon," he said, Wing emerging from those flames, Wing stepping from the shadow of his past. "Soon." *Bang...*

His fist caught the head of the bus driver, the powerful punch breaking the jaw across the plane of Kit's metal knuckles and sending droplets of blood to the window. Faces of the innocent gazed at him from tiny, torn seats, their eyes tainted by the twine of hate and despair. Cops screamed in the background, readying their guns, preparing to slay an angel, praying to take another life and get a bonus bounty. In the midst of his thinking, Kit had seen the blue armored buses enter the city; the realm of the Patriot Act had come for the free yet again. Officers broke into houses, grabbing fathers from their children, mothers from a humble home, and left the rest to starve through the endless night. Those officers of a hateful law fell into pools of blood as Kit drifted through their ranks, vanishing with the aid of the R.E.M. only to appear in sporadic bursts to shove the fear back down the throats of the ones who preached the shadow bible.

Shots blazed into the nothing as another bastard was thrown off his prey, his head torn from the neck by the cold, firm iron hand and left to mindlessly stare at the horrified innocent he had victimized. Shrieks erupted from the Front soldiers as heads and limbs were tossed at the remaining, their misguided blood squirting in every direction, damning all with the stain of immortal hate. The black-, white-, Arab-, Asian-, American men and woman imprisoned remained untouched, unharmed by the sight, unharmed by the gun and sword. Kit told them to stay in the bus, the voice of an angel warning his flock of the danger wandering in the midnight mist. A puddle of red appeared in the center of the modified school bus, growing as the life's liquid dripped from its metal slayer. "Sorry," Kit said to the stunned captives, "I didn't want you to see me like this, but I don't want you to see what..."

"Don't be sorry, angel," some cried. "We know the truth and we can see the truth." Kit knew they couldn't see the truth; sure, they would see the bloodbath, gore and bone shattered like broken glass about the block. It was hard to believe that once Phoenix was a great place to live, hard to believe that once people came here with the hopes of founding the West, and now all it was... was his battleground. The people left the dull blue

cars, parted ways with the patriotic prisons with their freedom, and with it, saw the horrid trash that littered the street, the sidewalk, and the memorials of a happier time. The stench of human flesh grew thick as the content slaves peered at their vengeance and paid homage to Kit's swift, heavenly hand of justice. 'Soon' was the proclamation they all heard, the choir of God's gift, the blessings from a close afar, left to stir the people's hearts while Kit vaporized from sight; the Angels of Wellton were coming.

COORDINATE ZERO [Wellton, AZ/Kyoto, Japan/Brussels; Oct 18, 2002]:

"Aidan," Turner called, waving his hand through the doorway to a small conference chamber. "The encryption is unpacking; we should be hot in thirty seconds!"

"How much time do you think we'll get out of this one?" Aidan asked, poking his head inside the cramped tech-closet.

"Brussels said we'd have 30 minutes before Shadow-Front would be able to trace the reception point to Wellton, which means we'll have about 10 minutes of secure feed." He paused, letting the twinkle of excitement escape through his eyes. "The kids are here."

"Yeah?" Aidan looked to the back of the room, and, sure enough, there they were, Wing and Amora sitting around a white, plastic table. Amora, of course, was temperamental, anxious, and nervy. Incessant emotions of agitation caused her spine to jerk into a near-perfect upright position every time the large projector sent a flicker to the bland wall.

Wing, on the other hand, was bored out of his mind. Prison had been more rewarding than this ridiculous wait, and for once, he felt that Amora's fast action methods would be useful. He slouched, letting his fists dig into his cheeks as the weight of his upper body came down upon them. He felt ashamed - resting in a makeshift boardroom while Kit was out on the streets. The vibes in his heart aligned peculiarly as Wing continued to wait for McKenna's word. He knew deep down that something in the air was ominous, something was trying to tell him things beyond his understanding, and no matter how hard the young freedom fighter tried, he would never be able to comprehend those feelings. This situation left Wing confused; how could petty emotions affect a man who had slain his mother, was Delta Force material, and managed to impress the meticulous Aidan Parks? Where had his happiness gone? What

was troubling him; why did he feel like he was somewhere else? And why now? With Turner's jubilant cry and Aidan's burst into the room, there was no time to fight the fire - all Wing could do was sit with his friends and hope for the best.

10 minutes prior: Brussels:

The lights of Bunker 44 hummed as they crescendoed to greet the entering Blair McKenna. His staff had been gathered as promised, numerous gentlemen and women, decorated to the highest statures of military affection, and ordained by the blessing of the exiled president. Since they had been banished from America in November of 2001, the loyal members of McKenna's cabinet and Peace Corps had worked thousands of hours, spent billions of dollars, and enlisted the brightest minds of a generation. Since February, they had waited for this moment, that glorious day when their allies in the Empire of Japan would announce the completion of the most power battle cruiser ever built: United Arsenal Starship Zero.

Their ears rang in the promise of Blair's words, their mouths drooled as the aroma of the atmosphere enticed a philosophical hunger, and all that was holding them back was time. The players had come to the stage, each carrying a divine right to lead and the ambition to save the world's greatest democratic experiment. White robes drifted behind their wearers as the fundamental members of the United Arsenal gathered: McKenna, Christianson, and of course, the young upstart known as Chuck Downie. He was legend of the United States' Air Force Academy, a man renowned for receiving top honors in flight school and in officer training. His records across all the branches of the U.S. military were only matched by one other, a legend who was already causing just havoc on the other side of the world. Now, however, it was Downie's turn to take the spotlight. After years of staying by McKenna's side, abandoning his domestic duties, and leaving his military career in the past, the colonel would finally get a chance to lead his troops into battle. The United Arsenal had built a launching craft for him, a behemoth fully equipped with the latest in military technology. 6 nuclear turbine engines; 5 catapult launch tubes, designed to 'rapid-fire' the battle suits Dr. Aidan Parks had created into designated conflict zones; and a ship-wide operating system called V-Hack, created by a joint venture between the Empire of Japan, Sony, and Australia-based Microsoft marked only a

fraction of the Zero's military might. In essence, it was a home in war.

"If we could get the Phoenix Resistance to take out the west coast defense guns, the Zero could easily fly through a back door," McKenna spoke slowly, but his drone had finally interrupted Chuck's hopeful daydreaming.

"Perhaps we should discuss this after the connection with Empress Ryoko is established, sir," Emeryl added, gently tapping an eraser on the black sheet-metal table. "Certainly, formulating strategy is important, but let's not get ahead of ourselves here. She says the U.A.S. Zero has been completed, but we have yet to see it, and have yet to evaluate its capabilities."

"I can assure you, Mr. Vice President," a young girl's voice shouted as the bunker telecommunications screen activated. Her childlike stature and dress, silver hair, and hazel eyes pierced those present in the bunker and caught them in a spell that held tightly to their souls. "The Zero is the most magnificent war-machine you, or the world, will ever see."

She paused, shaking hair away from her eyes, her sparkling aura almost dripping off her body as she continued. "I'm sure it will be, your Excellency," Emeryl gulped, the guilt bombarding his body as her innocent eyes stared him down.

"How much longer until Wellton gets online?" Ryoko asked, finally radiating with a sense of seriousness. "Do you think Wing will be surprised?"

"I wouldn't get worked up about Wing," Blair responded. "I know you two knew each other when his dad was stationed in Japan, your highness, but he has been held in Abulher for the past year." He stopped, taking Ryoko's feelings into consideration, and cautiously proceeded, "But, I'm sure he'll be just the way you remember him."

"Wellton is going hot!" someone shouted from Bunker 44. "It's a thirty minute trace connection; they're giving us ten."

Wing jumped as Ryoko's face appeared. He knew she had that effect with everyone, that ridiculous spine tingling jolt one gets when gorgeousness and innocence perfectly mate. His lips moved but no words came out, much like what had happened the first time they had met. The then-Crown Princess of Japan was a beautiful seven year old, with dreams and aspirations Wing could barely comprehend. Yet, in those few months when his father worked hand in hand to build military

relations with an economically booming Japan, she had taught him about the real world, about how to crush the greed and deceit of aristocracy with honor and dignity.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have ten minutes,” McKenna concluded the silent reunion. “Empress Ryoko, if you would please.”

“Right,” she coughed, her body instantly shrinking into a pip display as images from a launch pad began to take shape. There, in all her might, was the Zero, a masterpiece of steel, circuitry, and ingenuity that even made Aidan gawk in sheer jealousy. “As you can see, it really is a marvelous vessel that combines the elegance of a home-based life style with the practicality of a strong, steadfast destroyer.”

In Bunker 44, jaws dropped, eyes widened, and hearts raced, each organ competing to see which one would get the most thrill, but Blair said it best. A president of so many great words, a president with such talent in public speaking was confined to “fucking sweet”.

“And that’s coming for a politician,” Chuck thought, his military mind already on pace for glory. He was not alone in his quick analysis of the vessel for as he gazed at his new home that other legend was noting the paint jobs on the undercarriage and the canopy: above, painted green and brown to match the ground; below, painted blue and grey to match the sky.

“Our first order of operations,” McKenna added, “is to liberate the city of Los Angeles and destroy the West Coast Defense Network...”

He had barely finished his sentence when Wing exasperated a sigh, “Hell no.” Bureaucrats shitting the day away in Bunker 44 gasped in disbelief that a teen just out of prison would have the audacity to challenge the president of the United States and founder of the United Arsenal. “Going to L.A. as a first course of action is retarded.” Chuck Downie smirked, his bronzed face hooked to the screen as Wing continued his rant. “We’re what, 40 miles from Phoenix? We have a strong base of support there, and you want us to liberate L.A. first, an area in which we have no reconnaissance support or ‘fan’ base? Are you kidding me?”

Chuck concealed a chuckle as he gazed at Blair’s awestruck stare. “He’s right, Mr. President, albeit he delivered his reasons in a slightly unorthodox manner.”

Amora watched as the peeved expression overcame Wing's already rigid manner; deep down, she could tell he was fuming, venting from the stupidity, and defying the system that screwed his life and family. Yet, there was also a sense of responsibility dwelling within his truth, subtly implying through his harsh statements that he cared for the people, and respected the work Kit had done in the last thirteen months, facts Blair had grown distant from in his year of exile. Indeed, Wing had no desire to discuss his plans with a politician like Blair McKenna; true, he had done his part, and kept his word to the American people and the world, but he was not a military strategist. Thus, Wing scanned the room, his eyes running over the brass, scanning for each individual's purpose. His eyes darted across the screen, acquitting each present of his capital charge, until his examination ended on the most decorated person in Bunker 44. "Charles Downie," Wing said, letting loose a timid grin.

"Wing McCallister," Chuck responded with feigned sarcasm.

"I take it that you'll be commanding the U.A.S. Zero," Wing concluded, his grin spreading into a smile because his senses whispered that the charge of authority rested on a foundation of legendary stature.

"You'd be correct." Chuck answered.

"Then you agree with me wholeheartedly?" Wing spoke boldly.

"Yes, Mr. McCallister, I do." He halted, letting his words sink into the Administration's political drive. "We want to establish a route to New York so when the time is right our Atlantic Fleet can invade the city without worrying about the East Coast Defense Net. It would be stupid to leave Phoenix in the dust and attack L.A. when we could easily take it now and have a fallback in case the L.A. Campaign fails. What I would suggest is Kit lay low for a couple of weeks so Shadow-Front sits on the fence for a while. You know, psyche the bastards out? Then, let's say on November 1st, you spring an assault on the Phoenix PD, take out Shadow's city headquarters, and rally the people to kick some ass. Meanwhile, we'll prepare the Zero for full operations and meet you in L.A. after the coastal defenses are destroyed."

Wing laughed, "It's going to be fun working with you colonel."

“Nope, he hasn’t changed a bit,” Ryoko thought, her image returning to its full size. She listened to his conversation with Chuck come to an abrupt end as the present began to slip away.

“We’re almost out of time,” Aidan interrupted. “I like your course of action Colonel Downie. Hold out in Hawaii and bide your time there, knowing the three I got here, you’ll be notified when the moment to invade arises.”

“Copy that, doctor,” Chuck replied, giving the good Doc a snap-point and a quick friendly snicker.

“Keep up the good work,” McKenna butted in. “At least I know we have some competency over there.”

The connection to Bunker 44 terminated, leaving a sedated Ryoko leering through the pseudo-screen. “Goodbye Wing,” she said, raising her hand and spreading five slender fingers. “It was good to hear your voice again.”

“Later Ryoko,” Wing replied, his voice fading from a boisterous roar to a calm, delicate murmur.

“I’m severing the link!” Mac yelled, the projector merely hurling static at the wall. “No tracer found; Shadow-Front picked up nothing.” He put his hand on the computer equipment and laughed. “I love you, my little jamming babies,” he cried.

Wing stood up as a feeling of emptiness began to crawl back into his body. It slowly remapped his veins like an incurable virus and feasted on his energy and his soul. Amora rose to follow him, her hands and heart knowing what her fast-track mind could not. Her stride picked up to be by his side as they left the dirty conference room, her fingers slipped in to his, a perfect fit that Wing seemed to not notice, at least to her analysis. But for him, her companionship was a gift from a long absent God, a key that could turn his soul to joy, anger, contentment, and maybe, although unlikely, love. “Not this shit again,” Wing thought, his isolation replaced by the continuing debate between happiness and love. He looked at her, brown and blue swirling together in an invisible sea. Wing felt as though he could fall into those bright blue eyes and disappear into the two black voids staring him down. Yet, he did not; he was unable to escape his life – unable to easily disappear. If she reminded him of his despicable past, he’d want to get away, but he already knew that Amora was the one who made him happy. “Shit!” he wailed as Amora’s fingers cracked his knuckles, the pain breaking his enlightenment.

“So...who’s Ryoko?”

“Amora!!!”

Soliloquy’s Resurrection [Avalon Compound; Oct 19, 2002]:

I don’t know how to explain it other than nothing is as it seems. The dreams I had of helping people, saving them from the devastating grip of the Shadow-Front, rebuilding a democratic America, all of it is shattered before the pools of blood and the scent of destroyed lives. As I walked from the grimy mess of Phoenix, I could feel the pain surging through the XR as blood dripped from her ferrofibrious brows, each piece of restructured steel crying tears of red while trying to preserve a childish innocence. But my innocence cannot be preserved; not even with the help of XR’s extraordinary power can my sins be healed. With each life I slay, with each flame I extinguish, with each dream I rip from this horrid world, I throw myself back to the mercy of my past, hurl my essence back to a family I thought I could trust. However, I could not trust them, so how can I trust again?

When I returned this evening, I caught Wing and Amora laughing as if nothing important was going on in the world. For the first time in my recollection, I was jealous, infuriated that they didn’t have to suffer what I had suffered, angry that while they sat in the safety of the Avalon Compound, I saw the tragedy of a world under Shadow’s cloak. All I could do was weep! Cry my eyes out, expel the guilt from my soul and try to put out my sister’s fire with a flood of tears, and that was when Wing came. I’m sorry that I was a little mad at him, but I did not know how he stuck up for me in the conference with McKenna, or that it was his idea to liberate Phoenix out of respect for my thirteen months of service, but he said he didn’t care because it was the right thing to do. Then he told me about how lonely he felt before the conference, how he felt like he was some place else, that he felt like something was burning inside him. I didn’t tell him about my dreaming, about how I saw him in the flames; maybe someday I’ll have the courage to tell him, but I guess until that day, I’ll just have to pull a Wing and be happy.

He set the blue plastic pen on a small mantle behind his bed and closed the maroon covered notebook. Indeed, he had pulled a Wing, altered the truth of his emotions to describe an entirely lesser feeling. Kit could no longer contain the whirlpool whipping feelings of betrayal and hate about his heart; he could no longer endure the pains of history when it came to love and women. All had died or abused him, left him at the hands of unmerciful flames, and bowed out by taking the leap to an undiscovered realm.

Visions of that day slowly crept into his conscious thought: images of his disoriented sister, ponderings of her demented majesty, and the flames of hell that her haunted soul sought. He had loved her with all of his heart, followed her orders with an unimaginable respect, and cherished her with

more dignity than God's grace. On that day, however, she had laid him down and desecrated that sacred bond: screwed him, controlled him, and finally attempted to put a bullet between his eyes. In her quest for deeper love, she had ruined his hopes, at least until a savior came on angel's wings.

Shadow Says [National Public Broadcasting; NYC, Oct 19, 2002]:

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome to NPB News. This morning we have received reports out of Phoenix that the Angel has struck again. Images from the crime scene that depict incredibly graphic displays of the torn limbs, the mutilated faces, and the slaughtered corpses of Homeland Security personnel have been released to the public. According to the Shadow-Front, most of the victims were civilians, merely bystanders caught in the attack as the Angel descended upon troops scouting the area for possible terrorist cell protégés. This is the tenth assault on government officials this month alone and people across the nation are becoming quite weary of this armored fighter, calling him al Qaeda's vengeance, the spawn of Satan, and the popular nickname: the Angel of Destruction. Reviewing de-classified documents, our investigators found that this barbaric butcher has taken approximately 200 innocent lives, and that number is expected to climb. Citizens of Phoenix are being urged to band together and report any suspicious activity by average built persons about five feet-seven inches tall if seen near government facilities. Do not fear Phoenix; the hearts of the nation are with you. We all sincerely hope that you will successfully conquer this hell-destined evil.”

Phoenix:

The streets had settled into an eerie calm as officers patrolled to prevent their defeat, their ranks struggling desperately to put the fear back in the people's hands. An unknown war had fallen into a trench-bound stalemate: cops looking for a man to kill and that man nowhere to be found. In the tense atmosphere, citizens had grown impatient; the spreading word that these mysterious masked angels would come to spare them from the suffering of Shadow's martial law was not enough. Seeing the officials who had mistreated them having their bones broken, bodies beaten, and lives stripped away was

all that could whet their sullen appetites, but when would vengeance come?

When the time is right...

Wellton, AZ:

Behind the cold, thick doors of reinforced steel the XT sat, its rigid frame perfectly fitting the body of its user. The halogen display flashed a bright green as information on the Keystone Launcher streamed past Wing's eyes. The LCD on the right wrist flickered as the charging time diminished to zero while the left hand of the XT pulsed in its own light, bathing the training facility in a vibrant reflected yellow. Behind a stern faceplate, Wing could not help but snicker in delight; the KL had charged perfectly, and now as that power surged, encompassing his hand in a tomb of energy, the ability to wield justice radiated through his emotions.

From a control room, Turner, too, grinned with joy; the tactical commander was pleased that Wing could control such a large amount of power without fear, loss of control, or the most lethal: corruption. "Wing," he spoke, flicking a small switch and grabbing an ancient 50s radio microphone. His pilot could hear the words as a large intercom pounded the facility with a barrage of sound, its waves uttering the statement Wing wanted to hear since he saw the suit, "Fire at will."

"Copy that," Wing replied into the suit's communications system. His left arm rose with mechanized elegance as the limb of the XT leveled off. One by one, the fingerplates burst open, accompanied by small hisses as carbon dioxide propelled the KL seals to break. Behind each one, a dazzling void of gold waited, no longer dormant due to the XT's control, but free to unleash the remarkable energy they possessed. From each of Wing's five, relatively tiny fingers, sparks of gold merged to form one enormous bolt that dashed across the complex. Wing watched as a ring of mist followed the destruction, heard the air fill the vacuum created by his incredible thunderous flame, and was amazed as a 40-ton block of steel dissolved before his combative mind. "Holy shit," Wing whispered, turning the hand to face his doubting eyes. The steel plates quickly moved to cover the expired voids, giving each reservoir the chance to replenish with the infinite energy flowing from the XT's cold fusion engine. "Wow."

"Oh my God," Turner shouted as the camera monitors focused on the gapping hole in the concrete floor. "It's gone! The

whole fucking piece is gone!” Frantically, Mac turned the microphone back on and gripped it with an excited and anxious hand. “Did you see that shit, man? Did you see that shit? Holy fuck! Parks is going to flip when he sees the tape of that, Wing. He’ll fucking flip! I’m flipping, and I’m supposed to be the sane one.” Turner laughed. “Incredible.” The euphoria dissipated as MacLeod repositioned himself in the ridiculously uncomfortable metal chair, shifting back to take the load off his over-extended, edge-of-his-seat, torso. “Okay Wing,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I’m unlocking the space-time flux controls; I want you to try it.”

“Are you sure?” Wing replied, the skepticism of his own abilities beginning to take over.

“Yes, now couldn’t be a better time. I know you’re still getting used to the suit, but I have faith in you. Just concentrate, focus your energy and thoughts, and let the XT do her thing.” He grabbed a small computer keyboard and typed away, releasing control of the military’s most experimental project, Aidan’s greatest invention, to a 17-year-old, jail-breaking killer.

The XT’s red wings flew into the air, exploding in a gigantic, harmonious roar. Its fanfare propelled Wing on, driving him to will the surreal amounts of energy and consciously control what the conscience could not begin to understand. “Focus,” he thought, his arms falling to his sides, his eyelids slowly shielding his sense of the outside world.

Inside the monitoring station, Turner kept vigil over a computer display, watching as data figures showing the rate of temporal flux emanating from the XT poured through the liquid crystal. Slowly but surely it built; time compression factors began to rise from 1% dilation, to 5%, to 10%, and beyond. Was Wing finally unveiling the awesome power of the XT suit? Turner’s joy began to compound as the temporal field generated by the magnificent Space-Time Flux Engine continued to expand and stabilize. “There’s twenty percent dilation at the core! Keep it up, Wing!”

But to the young pilot, Turner’s shouts of encouragement held in the air like a bad odor, soiling his concentration. “Focus,” Wing whispered again to his mind, drowning out Mac’s unintended idiotic babbling.

The flux indicators maintained stable progression, surpassing the 25% dilation barrier. Turner was astounded at Wing’s control; he knew the pilot would eventually discover the final limits of the XT, but never would he have dreamt that

progression would come this quickly. “30%,” he said to himself, now aware that any communication with Wing would be absurd.

“Stop time, stop time, slow, focus, concentrate!” Wing methodized the phrase, repeating it over and over to himself. He had begun to use the light hum of the engines as a backbone for calm, a root of his success, something to help him drown out the world’s unfortunate interruptions.

“45%!” Turner shouted excitedly, picking up the phone to call in Aidan, but his hopes came to halt at 50%.

Wing’s eyelids shot into the open position as the XT’s halogen display flashed a 2-minute countdown clock. The routine of confidence began to crumble as Wing became confused by this sudden appearance. “Okay,” he thought, his focus beginning to stray. “What is this?” His heart started to pound at a slightly accelerated pace due to the nervousness accompanied with the mysterious origin of this timer. “Okay,” he said again. “Slow time down.” He tried to get it back, tried to maintain the focus Turner had so ardently endorsed, but as the countdown clock ticked away so did Wing’s concentration. “What the hell?” Wing shouted, the slow, andante ticker morphing into a rapid decline. Almost two minutes evaporated before his very eyes, vanished into the unknown without a trace, fading into the subconscious where fear reigns supreme, where darkness greets all who enter uninvited.

“Shit!” Turner yelled, his joyous phone call to Aidan turning into a disastrous cry. “Get the fuck down here Parks! And get Fox, too.”

“What’s going on?” Parks replied, his voice barely coming through the receiver.

“I have to get in there,” Turner replied, “The field collapsed on him. On him, Aidan!”

Wing’s mind wandered through an endless ocean of thoughts in turmoil. It was panic in motion in the darkness, a flipbook of disconnected memories and fragmented dreams. The darkness showed him something, though, something from beyond the bourns of a mortal’s comprehension. It was as if he was peering into a looking glass, granted the opportunity to see into his future, and what he saw was, to sum it up, unpleasant. With that, his body was thrown back into the normal world, his sight left to pierce the normal air, his eyes left to glimpse at a normal face, and his fingers left to grip normal things. To the one in the room who cared to greet him, Wing had but one thing to say, “Fuck.” His heart was still pounding, shooting blood

through his arteries and not giving time for his body to catch up; his head ached as the blurred image of a deep red ribbon was cast over his strained eyes. “Amora,” he choked, her concerned glance coming in and out of focus.

“Shut up, dumbass,” she replied, turning to look at the ‘vitals’ monitor lying beside the bed. “I’ll go get, Fox.”

Wing tore the intravenous units from his arm as he reached over the bed to grab her. “You don’t have to get Foxy yet,” he replied, his fingers clutching as tight as they could.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Amora asked.

She did not have time to continue as Wing waved a finger at her, and Amora did not understand where Wing was about to go, but she knew by the perplexed expression on his face that it had to be serious. “I think,” he said, pausing to let his mind endure the soul’s dynamic conclusion, “that I saw the future.”

With that, Amora broke free of his clutch and backed away, “Jesus, that thing has ruined you already!” she shouted. “Don’t fucking pull that crap with me, Wing McCallister,” she scowled, turning away with her hair drifting behind.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I know what I saw: you don’t have to get anyone, because they are all coming here! Turner will be carrying a video cassette in hand, and Foxy and Aidan will be concluding a conversation about the dangers of space-time flux because the field collapsed on my ass.”

“You’re god damn crazy, Wing. Fox told me herself that she would return in about a half hour, and that was five...”

Amora stopped as the medical bay door cracked open. The two pilots could easily hear the voices of Fox and Parks bickering about the potential dangers of the Space-Time Flux Engine, and the hazards it posed to Wing during its unintentional misuse. Turner was indeed the first to enter, and resting within the firm hold of his left hand was the training room’s surveillance tape.

“Aidan! I’m not going to allow him to use the flux drive if it could kill...”

“He did see it,” Amora interrupted, her anger-induced scowl vanishing as she turned back to see Wing’s pain-breaking grin. Aidan and Fox stopped their conversation and listened to the following silence. “How is that possible?”

“What are you talking about?” Turner asked, placing a hand on Amora’s shoulder.

“I saw the future, Mac,” Wing interrupted, pushing his torso up against the massive white pillow. “In my dreams, I saw

the future. It was all scrambled, almost as if I was trying to recollect memories, but they were all memories I never had, all events I never attended, and then I realized it was all shit that had never happened. I felt myself still lying on the cold, hard floor of the training bay and yet I could see this medical room. I could sense myself resting comfortably in this soft bed, and picture waking up to the blur, the grogginess, and the face that waited to greet me. I could see you, I could see Fox, and I could see Aidan, all of you swarming about this incident with unparalleled concern, all bursting with ideas and opinions, and all wanting to find the answer.”

“How far ahead do you think you saw?” Turner asked, intrigued by the young pilot’s statements.

“Several things came through after this, but they’re too scattered for me to gather. I just can’t get at them without starting to feel sick.”

Foxy’s body lifted as an ironic jubilation shivered throughout her, “And that is why I’m telling you not to push yourself Wing. As chief medical officer I’m going to have to enforce a bed-ridden policy until I find you fit to fight.”

Wing’s legs slid out from under the sheets and quickly found the hard floor. The frigid tile sent chills up his body, but Wing managed to stand upright, his medical gown shifting as he went. Its threads acted as Wing’s angel, parting slightly so Amora could see the burn scars string across his abs. They were the byproducts of the field’s dramatic collapse and the results of the hazardous bombardment of radiation that had pierced the XT’s shell thousands of times in the seconds floating between the frozen and flowing world. She could also see that he was suppressing the pain oozing from the brown, mucus crusted scabs and the slight wince in his eyes as he began to speak. Wing pointed his finger at her but turned his head to Fox, “If she is going to fight, if she is going to train, then I am going to fight as well.” He took a step towards Foxy and looked into her eyes. “I’ll be unfit to fight when I’ve long gone to hell.”

Amora felt her blood boil as Wing’s words seeped into her ears. With clenched fists she shouted, “Don’t be a fool.” The eyes of the room locked on her as Amora’s muscles continued to tense. “Wing, we have 12 days until the start of the Phoenix Campaign, don’t be stupid and screw yourself over before then.”

Wing spun towards Amora and leaned forward. “Are you implying that I can’t handle myself?” he barked, his K-9 teeth wrenching his lower lip.

“No, not at all,” Amora replied, pushing back on Wing’s challenge. The others stood in wonder as the two pilots stared each other down, their torsos drifting forward as if to collide, their aims steady and unwavering. “I’m saying,” Amora said, her calm fading as the sentence progressed, “that you’re being a fucking dumbass!” Wing’s eye twitched in retaliation.

Wing’s finger thrust forward, “I am not going to let you and Kit do all the work when I’m lying in a bed!” His point suddenly shifted to the door. “I did not just tell McKenna to screw his plan because he was overlooking Kit’s accomplishments to be held up in a medical bay because of some freak accident. Forget it; you have got to be kidding...”

Air fled Wing’s lungs as Amora’s fist sat nestled in his stomach. His head fell onto her shoulder as she held him up, her mouth approaching his ear while his alert eyes faded to a black stare. “Wing,” she whispered softly so no one else could hear. “We won’t do anything without you, I promise, but an injured you is far worse than one that hasn’t trained in a little over a week.” Her fingers could almost feel the chest gripping pain surging throughout his body, the callous crust cracking with every movement he made, and the hell he was forced to endure. “Please, just get some rest.” She looked around to see Turner, Aidan, and Fox gazing in disbelief, all three hoping to catch some of her words. She sighed and turned back to Wing’s ear, “Do you hear me, Wing?” He coughed as she hoisted him back onto the bed and laid his head on the pillow. “Besides,” Amora said loudly. “I’m the one that can rush into things; that’s not your style anyway.” She smiled as his eyes slowly closed – *his body taking the time it should* – and spun on a happy foot to meet the trio’s leer.

“Don’t you think that was a little harsh?” Turner asked, the hint of fear tainting his voice.

“No,” Amora replied, her mind wandering into the dominion of the past. “My brother was the same way, always wanting to be the moral leader, always wanting to deliver justice whatever the cost. Sure, he was a great strategist and would meticulously plan each attack and defense, but when it came to right versus wrong, he would always be the first out of the seat, regardless of condition.” The others noticed the shimmer in her eyes, “Just like him.” And with that, the room was bathed in the cloak of a protective night.

Shadow’s Gold [NYC; October 20, 2002]:

Val's hunched body lurched through the realms of hell on Earth while his soul slithered through the catacombs of New York's most famed building: the Chancellorodt. It was an architectural marvel: the Shadow-Front's grand office, a maniacal looking building that dwarfed the surroundings of New York City. To those in power, it was a symbol of that power, a trophy that was impenetrable, indestructible, and, most importantly, feared. But, to the outside world it was a boil, a zit that grew on the sacred grounds of mother earth, and therefore had to be decimated. Yet for Val Manning, the snake looking scientific prodigy of the Shadow-Front, this pinnacle of the underworld was a second home. Within its walls of diamond-coated steel, he had forged the Front's most sinister weapons: guns, tazers, blades, and the invention of his current pleasure. He called it Regen-Alzheimer's-P, a tweaked form of the brain disorder that turned any person into a drone of the system. Scientifically speaking, it was a brainwashing serum, but politically it was far more than that! Val had maniacally used the Patriot Act bus raids as an opportunity for experimentation, and over the course of six months had perfected his creation to the point where civilian resistors could be slain not by the conventional weapons of the world but by his or her own brain. Now, he had done exactly what his lord and master wanted: created the perfect, loyal warrior from one of the Shadow-Front's greatest opponents. "My Lord," he said into the darkness, sensing the black velvet cloak move through the unknown. "Would you like to see him?"

"Yes," he called out, his stern, void eyed face buried beneath the dark sackcloth. A dismal light reflected off the robes as the towering lord walked with the scrawny, crippled Val, his aura destroying any good, and multiplying any evil that dwelled within his reach.

Val nodded as the pair rounded the corner, feasting on his moment to shine, his moment to gain favor with the emperor of the shadow realm. "My lord," he exclaimed, the small corridor budding into a large cathedral. "I welcome you with gracious humility to my laboratory. Within this dark rectory of science I have spent my time perfecting the Regen-Alzheimer's protein and have finally generated the perfect serum to spread your will; thus, with great joy and an eye towards the future, your majesty, I give to you your son."

From the center of the cavern, a gleaming sphere of black spun about a large steel axis. Its metal shell pierced the Chancellorodt lord with an invigorated sense of purpose as the

blinding greed that saturated his soul gave witness to this gloomy moment. As the sphere continued to pivot, its shell depressed inward, revealing a large cavity to all who looked on. Within this open wound, a dormant warrior slept, his long black hair floating off his buffed shoulders in the artificial wind, his muscle built body urging to drive into the enemy, leaving the question hanging in the air: who was the enemy?

“Akaru,” the Lord said, quietly stepping towards the orb. “You have finally come to my side, you will finally help me destroy that vile bastard McKenna, and totally bring this nation into an everlasting domain. I regret to inform that I could not get your sister away from them, my son, for she has been tainted by their impractical idealism, their nonsensical ethics, and their misleading dreams. I know it will be hard for you but Val can make the pain go away forever and together we can crush her corrupt spirit and destroy the ones who infected her. We shall find Avalon, and when we do Wing McCallister will be executed under the horrid banner of his grievances.”

Akaru’s sullen brown eyes pierced his father’s decrepit soul as his weakened arm extended to his father’s shattered heart and crushed it under an imaginary grip, “I couldn’t care less how the members of Avalon die,” he said in a raspy, demonic voice, “but if anyone ever lays a harmful hand on Amora, that person shall pay with eternal damnation.”

“Hold your tongue!” Val belted from the background, slithering from his cloak into the brighter aura of Akaru’s sphere. “Forgive me, sire,” he gasped to his master, running to a small console bolted to the wall. “I shall up the dosage and then he will be as loyal as a puppet...”

“Don’t bother,” he replied, his eyes locked onto the image of his revitalized son. “Leave him as he is, Val,” the lord said, walking away into the darkness. “There is no point in having a fighter who isn’t willing to fight.”

“Don’t walk away from me, father,” Akaru called out, leaning forward to step out of his cocoon, but the weight of needles, tubes, and restraints held him down. “Don’t desert me Lock Hunter! I may be your son, but I’m not a fool...”

Akaru’s voice faded to silence as Val slightly turned a knob on the panel. “I wouldn’t consider this a dosage upgrade, but at least it will shut your rambunctious ass up.” Akaru anxiously followed the scientist’s movements as he paced before the warrior’s temporary cell. “You see, my idiotic boy, you are going to do everything the Shadow-Front desires whether you like it or not. I will not endure another embarrassment from your

rouge tongue!

“Thankfully, even as I speak, the proteins within my miraculous invention are eating away your brain’s control of itself. Within a few minutes, you’ll be nothing but a drone of my lord’s system. You will do as he wishes, you will fight with his vigor, and you shall not utter a word of complaint or I will turn you into the retarded fool you so ardently wish not to become.” Val’s eyes suddenly shined in a dull golden tint to the drowsy Akaru, who struggled to maintain his sound mind. “Which means,” the demented scientist carried on, “that you will put a harmful hand on anyone I see fit to die.”

What would you do? [Wellton, AZ; Oct 22, 2002]:

The blue hospital garments dragged Wing down as he limped through the halls, clutching his abdomen as the crusty, healing scabs, crackled with each baby step. He had been drifting unnoticed through Avalon’s corridors for who knew how long, unseen by the gazing cameras and alone in the catacombs of steel. Of course, he did not need to go far to get where he wanted to go, but in his state it had taken him almost an hour. She called to him, Amora, with her subliminal aura, her face, her voice, and her touch. He had felt miserable in the three days that he had been confined to bed, contained within the purgatory between reality and illusion, awake and sleep, and, God, how he despised it. However, his means for seeking her were not locked in the fact that she had stuck him down, made him look like a pathetic weakling, or any negativism; it was because without her near, sadness had crept back into his heart. Wing’s mother spoke to him again, tainting his soul with the hate and deceit that had infected his life, yet Amora could dispel that wicked voice with one blink, one wave, or one fraction of a word. The base for his denial of love was crumbling away before his thoughts, before the hard fact that she could make him happy with just her presence; his mind knew it was love, but the rest of him was reluctant to accept it.

Finally, his body stopped before a row of reinforced windows, each giving an opening to her world: the training grounds of the XS Battlesuit. Indeed, there Amora was, flying around in the massive underground gymnasium, practicing aerial maneuvers, and just fooling around. Wing reminisced the feeling: the comfortable padded buffers pressed against his body, the security he felt while wearing it, and how that sense must have recently surged through Amora. He wanted it, desired it,

and needed that feel, the duty, and the responsibility that came with his XT. There would be no more waiting, his mind exasperated as a clammy hand struck the window. He turned around and let his body slide down the wall; he could no longer bear to stand, tired from his trek and depressed in spirit. Wing did not realize he was this exhausted as he sat on the dirty, dust-infested floor. His body had taken a beating it did not need and now it was paying the price in energy. With that, he let his head rest between his two raised knees and let the dark dream world take him back.

“Dammit!” Amora shouted, her body sliding across the floor next to Wing. “I knew I saw his ass out here. Wing!” She shook his arm, causing his head to slowly rise while a sleepy moan escaped his lungs. “Wing!” She stirred him again, breaking his impromptu, hallway slumber. “Why are you out here? I thought you understood what I meant: stay in bed and get some rest!” Amora stopped as Wing’s head fell onto her shoulder. Was he really that tired? What could have compelled him to come here, and why would he have the nerve to defy what she said? “Do you understand that I care about you?” she shouted, her voice cracking in dismay as she wailed. Wing’s head leapt off her shoulder, his hand darting to her cheek to catch a falling tear. His eyes were wide as if he were a deer caught in the headlights of a truck; they had been opened to some deep emotion, some prodding thought from the subconscious realm that forced a widened stare upon the beautiful creature before him. Wing’s hand stroked her damped cheek as she gazed at him, wondering how her injured comrade could have unleashed so much energy in such a weakened state.

“Don’t cry,” he said, Amora’s question answered in two sweet words. “Don’t cry.” He spoke with a childishness caught in his voice, a sorrow that no one could dare to escape.

Amora’s ears caught his silent cry, caught the pain pulsing through his veins as she clasped his massaging hand. “Why are you out here?”

His arms slowly wrapped around her neck, his clutch gently pulling her ear to his mouth and his embrace giving her something she rarely felt. There they sat, her in a white tank top and dark blue jeans, and him practically naked in a blue, sleazy hospital gown. No one else was there: no one was there to comfort him but her, and no one was there to comfort her but him. The pangs of the past dissolved as the pair embraced, defying the hate and death that had scarred their lives for far too

long. *For a split second, both of them had realized the inevitable truth, “Without you I’m not happy.”*

Interview with Dr. Aidan Parks [22/20; July 4, 2003]:

“Welcome back,” Misura spoke into the camera. “For those joining us today, I’m speaking with the legendary Dr. Aidan Parks: founder and builder of the Avalon Project. Thus far we’ve spent roughly an hour discussing the foundation of Avalon, the people who made it possible, and the notable moments in the weeks leading up to the Phoenix Liberation Campaign. The American people have finally been exposed to the secrets of the three famous angels, what makes them so incredibly special, and the trials that bombarded the pilots that flew them.” She turned back to Aidan, flicking her golden-brown locks with her hand and quickly setting them back into her lap. “We left off talking about the difficulty Wing faced while attempting to harness XT’s true power and the accident that could have ruined his resistance efforts before they began. What can you tell viewers about the drama swirling around the Avalon Compound during this time and how it affected the members of the project?”

“Bloody hell, it was horrible!” Aidan shouted, shifting back in his chair and crossing his legs. “Absolutely horrible!” he repeated for the audience. Aidan was starting to get comfortable under the spotlight, his edge towards journalists and the horrid world they painted in the last few years dissolving away before Misura’s laid-back eloquence. “When Wing was injured during the first attempt to use the Space-Time Flux Engine, we were all very very scared. Not just for Wing, but for the fate of the entire Avalon atmosphere. When someone who has become part of the team is suddenly out of the action, it takes its toll on everyone there.

“For me, I had to seriously evaluate the war machines I had created, I had to face the doubt of my achievements and convince myself that I had done the right thing. For Mac, he had to face the guilt, face the fear that he had pushed Wing too far too soon, and when you have leadership in doubt, the ranks will start to crumble. For instance, despite Wing and Amora’s chaotic start, the two of them had really began to bond well and fit in with Kit and the efforts he had accomplished. Wing, the hardass he was, was beginning to lighten-up, beginning to seem happier, and that was a much-needed uplift to the operation. Amora, who came in very rigid, very articulate, and very anxious, was settling

down, actually planning ahead, and not getting caught up in her 'in-the-moment', 'one-track mind' thinking. But, when Wing was hurt, there was no anchor, no cohesiveness between the three, no playful teasing, no bonding, and we all suffered because of it.

"Wing became terribly depressed to the point that Dr. Fox was afraid to leave the room for more than fifteen minutes, Amora rarely left the training room, and Kit began to sink back into his sole-survivor persona." Aidan began to fidget with his John Lennon style shades, flicking one of the lever-arms with his thumb while he spoke.

"Honestly, for a couple of days there, I really thought the whole operation was going to flop, tank, and die. Then again, my emotions were in control of my actions at the time, none of us were thinking clearly, and I was no exception. Really, it was the people of Phoenix that brought us back to our sanity. On Kit's last venture into the city before his strategic hiatus, people were giving him stuff: one lady gave him a pie, a guy gave him a few DVDs; it was quite simply amazing and brought the uplift we needed. Amora and Kit pulled a TV into the medical bay and watched a couple of movies with Wing. Truly, I can't tell you if Wing got better faster because he was inspired by the good will, or if Kit and Amora's choice in good movies drove him insane, but whatever the reason, by Halloween night, we were set."

CHANCELLORODT [New York City; Oct 31, 2002]:

The darkened walls echoed with the voice of Lord Lock Hunter as his will infected the minds of his subjects. "Val!" He called - a lion's roar that flooded the satanic cathedral. "This cease of activity from Avalon bothers me," Lock spoke with a sinister tone hanging on his voice, its hideousness trying to break away and spread like the bothersome phlegm coating the walls of his throat. "Send Akaru to Phoenix and have him hunt down the members of Avalon. Tell him to kill as many as possible and leave nothing alive but the memories that Avalon is evil and we are its heroic slayers." He raised his finger, dark, crusted, and slimy like the filth that surrounded his every move. "As for Amora," pause, "tell my son that I will not force him to kill his sister, but I want her brought to me alive and well. I shall follow him soon to see the destruction of this mockery, myself. They are planning something, Val, I shall swear that fact to you but unlike that idiot McKenna who ran off to flirt with the world, I will not be caught playing the defensive." Lock turned his back

to Val. “Inform the Phoenix Authorities that Akaru and I shall be on our way and that we will arrive later this evening. They are to mount their riot troops and to increase patrols by five fold on this Halloween night. The souls of the dead are stirring my friend and their prophecy warns my mind with perfect clarity. Other than that, make sure it is understood that the people’s Halloween festivities may carry on as planned.”

Val Manning looked up with sparkling green eyes, “Yes, my lord. It shall be done to your perfection.”

CHAPTER 1 CONCLUSIONS: [HALLOWEEN SPECIAL]:

Wing’s leather jacket bounced jubilantly as he strode down the brighter halls of the Avalon Compound. No longer did they seem dreary to him as they had during his week ordeal of recovery, but instead shone as a testament to his purpose, a testament to his friends, and an everlasting reminder to that ‘brighter future’ McKenna promised before the world. Kit’s door opened to greet him, no knock was necessary; it was merely a matter of perfect timing. “Hey!” Wing shouted, an enormous smile overcoming his face. “How’s it going?”

“Come on in,” Kit replied, literally pulling Wing through the tiny opening in Avalon’s massive steel infrastructure. Immediately, the vast, vibrant sea of color lulled Wing into a state of shock. His mind wandered, pondering how Kit could have created such a spectacular room from the dull, dreary corridors of the Avalon Complex. Amazingly, during all his time in Wellton, Wing had yet to venture into Kit’s domain, had yet to journey into such a marvelous space, and now, surrounded by the colorful climax, Wing’s senses had been lost. Indeed, the dullness Wing had grown accustomed to paled in comparison to Kit’s display. The once stray teen had painted his realm with an array of neon hues, a battery of hippie objects, and a touch of creativity that commanded respect.

“I hope you spent your free time wisely because I know that you needed a good rest,” Wing mumbled, still in awe.

“Oh yes,” Kit cut him off. “God, I sure did! After eleven days of not having the scent of blood permeate my body, I have to say I feel incredibly refreshed. I just hope the people on the outside are feeling the same way.” Kit mumbled the last sentence, a deep underlying guilt mixing with the blood still tainting his soul. His sorrow was expansive enough for Wing to feel, quite possibly an endless cavern concealed below a thin

canopy of crumbling rock, the moral that kept him going, the ideal that fueled his drive.

“You did not let them down, Kit,” Wing answered the awkward silence. “They told you they were ready for the truth, they knew you were not going to be there to protect them for a few days, and they understood. The people want us to succeed, Phoenix believes in us, they trust us, and therefore they shall be freed. We are merely waiting for the time to be right.” The word ‘time’ shot through Wing’s mind as though an arrow had pierced his flesh. The scent of blood evaporating from Kit’s healing heart was concealed by a much stronger demon, the scent of fate. He felt as though this had happened before, an intuition that crept from his subconscious into Wing’s waking thoughts. “When the time is right,” he said again to sound sure of himself. Kit accepted the answer, hurling himself onto a massive navy blue sofa. “I talked to Aidan,” Wing again broke the silence, “He is giving us the night to ourselves.”

Kit’s door flew open as Amora entered the room overjoyed. “It’s Halloween!” She shouted, seemingly dancing around the room in glee as her red ribbon dangled behind her. “Aidan is letting us go out tonight! Isn’t that fabulous? Hopefully there will be some trick-or-treaters out there; you know some image of the past?” Her happiness overwhelmed the sorrowful mellow of the lair and brought a smile to Wing’s face. To the two boys, Amora’s rigidity had vanished since Wing had gotten better, and in this moment she appeared to be completely organic, a slave to nature, a slave to the cycle of life, death, and the respect of the afterlife that drove this holy night. “I wonder if I could make a costume before tonight; that would be the best! We could all dress up and have a good time before we get back to work.”

“I’m not dressing up, period,” Wing replied, the joy that was engraved on his face vanishing into an overly sarcastic anger.

“Aw!” Amora exclaimed, jumping towards him. “Come on, Wingy. Please!”

“Yeah Wing,” Kit interrupted, crossing his legs as he lay on the couch, “it would be fun, not to mention amusing to see.”

“Forget it!” Wing cried, shooting back stares of discontent at the two other pilots. “There is no way in hell that I am going to dress up for Halloween. It’s childish, it’s been done, and it’s just not going to happen so quit bugging me about it.”

The doors of the Avalon opened, allowing a calm cowboy, a passive priestess, and a wild samurai to venture into

the Phoenix night. Suffice to say, Wing was rather content swinging around two katanas Aidan just happened to have lying around. "I wonder if he always gets party crazy like this," Kit mentioned as he walked side-by-side with Amora, watching the enthused Wing cut through an army of imaginary enemies.

"Well, Wing is just that way," Amora replied. "He's very shy and cold until you prod him to be otherwise." She gulped a big breath. "Hey Wing!" Amora yelled. "Childish?" she snickered sarcastically as Wing's pseudo-armor clanged with every step.

He gazed back at Amora, watching her deep red robe and ribbon shine in the ambient moonlight. "I'm only protecting my priestess," Wing answered, laughing hysterically as he continued to pound air's military to the ground. For some reason, the night still felt familiar to him, still felt as though fate were controlling his every move, putting him on some mystic course to be in the wrong place at the right time. Yet, as the trio's happiness continued to flood his mind, Wing could not see how this gorgeous, moon-bathed night could be so evil. Alas, it was a tribute to the dead, but even the dead enjoyed the games of living at some point and would have to be flattered to know that this citywide party was for them. They saw quite a few goblins as they roamed the streets, each carrying some token of passage: a candy bar from the old era, perhaps a toy that ceased to be made, or a treat that was given by the hands of a dead child and a hurt mother. While the children owned the streets, the dead gazed from above and smiled, giving the greatest gift of all: no authorities had dared to cross their paths and no trouble seemed to taint the city with the rust of blackened ash, or at least that was the case until the restless shadows called forth a wave of tyranny.

"Sir, our Lord will be angry with us if we do not return to the base quickly," Wing overheard an officer cry out from an industrial compound.

"It's alright, Mitchell!" the squadron leader called back. Wing, Amora, and Kit peered around the corner, seeing the pompous bastard kneel down next to a crouching child. "We're just checking on our little terrorist heathens." He grabbed the girl's face and spat at her, causing the little lady to shake violently, her dark somber eyes, long black hair, and petite body twitching in anticipation. "So Sagami," the officer continued with the girl, "tell me, why are your idiotic brothers dressed up as those demons?" He motioned to the three small children

frozen against a slab of concrete, each wearing their own renditions of their powerful XR guardian. “You do me great disrespect by allowing these clowns to wear such unpatriotic things. Your father would be most displeased if something were to happen to you.” He brushed her black hair with his sinister hand. Wing could sense Amora tense up, he could feel her start to burst, and as she lunged from their cloak of night, the memories of the future returned to him. With that, Wing grabbed her hand and dragged her from the light, a motion that saved her from a barrage of bullets coming from the roof of an adjacent building.

“What was that?” Mitchell screamed into his walkie-talkie hearing the rifle shots ring out. The answer came back as ‘just a couple of kids they scared off’; it was nothing to worry about.

However, Wing knew it was something for them to worry about while Amora was still spinning around to flash him a stunned look of disbelief. “I knew it,” he whispered, throwing off the samurai armor to reveal his typical black leather. From his side, the Capcast 6 gun flew into his hand and welcomed its destined master while fulfilling Wing’s renegade prophecy. “I saw this,” he said to Amora, flicking a carbon-dioxide cartridge into the adapter port on the weapon. Wing discharged the gas, causing a stiff foam pad to extend from the back of the handgun into his shoulder and a short infrared scope to emerge from the top. Kit watched as Wing cocked the gun and fired, sending three silent bullets through the crisp desert air and pausing momentarily to jolt the weapon to its original state with a quick flip of the wrist. Wing held the weapon tight and, with two short words, warned his comrades to stay hidden as two tiny steps carried the last angel from the hellish darkness. “What a wonderful night we’re having isn’t it guys?” he shouted to the soldiers of the Front, leering as the commander wrapped his lips around the young girl’s neck.

Mitchell shouted into his walkie-talkie, “Take him out! Take him out.” But, there was no answer, and as the cops gazed into the black leather wonder that approached them, Wing waved the Capcast with a smile on his face.

“If you’re looking for your friends, I already sent them to hell.” Another bullet burst from the chamber, piercing the squadron leader with the stinging ray of dark lightning. His abductee gasped as the officer’s eyes rolled into the back of his skull, blood spraying from a hole in the bastard’s temple as the

rotten, sinister corpse fell to the bombed-out building's concrete floor.

The soldiers raised their weapons and fired, but Wing McCallister was not as base as the man he had just slain. He felt no dishonor in devastating the morale of the enemy troops, and effectively used piles of concrete and vast lands of shadow to move towards the moonlight mistress. This angel knew the Front's demonic cast, knew how it operated, and was thus able to use evil's own hate to destroy it. He cried out into the night, "Do you know who I am?" and the officers would shudder in fear, fire with the slightest sound, twitch with the lightest touch of air, and in that regard they fell apart.

Wing, however, was not set on letting them leave this place; he was focused on destroying their minds, he was determined to fling the pain they had caused this maiden back in their faces and watch them wipe the reeking shit from their bodies. One happened to stumble into Wing's morphing cloak and had his neck snapped in half, others fired into themselves, confused by the inauspicious surroundings; whatever the case may have been, when the dust cleared, they had all been dispatched from the world and Wing stood alone before the amazed Sagami Arai.

He sat down beside her as Amora and Kit emerged, her tears painting her face with a salty, red glaze. Wing braced her arms as she wailed, the shock finally eroding to let the pain into her mind. "Everything is going to be fine," Wing said, speaking in a manner that reassured the young Sagami. Her brothers slowly marched towards her, their cardboard armors bravely protecting them as they approached this awe-striking demon slayer.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Sagami asked, looking into his battle-worn eyes. "No one could do such a thing but an angel."

Wing chuckled, rising to his feet, his aura drenching her and her brothers. "I guess you could say that," he replied, hoisting Sagami to her feet and brushing off her dirtied shirt. "Although, I think Wing would suffice."

"McCallister," she whispered, the hours and hours of radio propaganda darting across the neurons of her mind. Her decade old fingers slowly grasped Wing's hand, pulling it close as the remnants of tears dried in the cold night. "Sagami," she continued. "Sagami Arai."

With two words, Wing's head had been sent towards Amora's watchful stare. "Arai," he murmured, some ancient memory

coming from his past. “Zachhzus Arai,” he turned back to Sagami. “Your father, is your father Zachhzus Arai?”

“Yes,” she answered, carrying on the barrage of Wing’s childhood memories. “I need to get home to my Dad.” Sagami wailed, “He could be in great danger.”

Wing looked back at Kit and Amora, the strategist in his old military eyes coming out for the first time. “Amora, Kit, take the kids back to Avalon; if Aidan throws a fit about it being a security breach, then Amora,” he halted, “pull rank on his civilian ass. I’ll take Sagami to get her father and I’ll bring the pair back with me. In the meantime, I want you to deploy the XR and XS, for I have a feeling that the Front has moved to cut us off, and we cannot afford to give them the upper hand. If at all possible evacuate civilians immediately and tell them their saviors have come.” Wing dropped a knee before Sagami and motioned the child to get onto his back. With that, Wing shot into that night, leaving his comrades and the three brothers in the dust. Yes, his meddling with the future had indeed shown him this night, shown him the fires of hell soon to be unleashed, and bequeathed him with an unimaginable gift: a glimpse into the flames of a Phoenix rising; the campaign was set to begin.

EPISODE 2 (©2006): PHOENIX CAMPAIGN

Wing’s breathing grew heavy as he hustled through the darkened Phoenix streets. His feet pounded into the cracked asphalt as Sagami’s weight dragged him down, causing each step to jar Wing with an unfamiliar, hefty force. “Tell me Sagami,” he said, his breath racing between every word, “how has your father been doing as of late?”

Sagami’s fingers dug into his jacket as Wing swung around a corner and shifted his lagging torso. The pair darted through the shadows as Wing, pondering the lack of officers haunting the city, quickly approached Sagami’s dwelling, moving unseen through a gathering swarm of trick-or-treaters. “He’s okay,” Sagami answered, her ears tuned to Wing’s beating heart. Its low bass pulse sank into her soul, nagging at her gut to work in time with the racing teenager, but she could not keep up. Her spirit lacked something his had, lacked a drive and a reason to keep going. Certainly, his display of power had been an amazing site, a dazzling spectacle of movement, agility, and marksmanship that drove those who oppressed her from this

world. “He has really been keeping a low profile since the Chancellorodt placed a bounty on his...”

“No shit,” Wing replied automatically, the desperate aura of her predicament preceding her explanation. In the distance, a tiny aluminum shack stood amongst the shattered industry, a monument of a long departed era but a modern safe house for the world’s most skilled sword-smith. While his body continuously struggled to reach its goal before time ventured into history, and while his mind tuned to one worn photographic image of Zachhzus Arai, Wing continued to strive for the degenerated home. Faster than the eye could blink, a blade touched Wing’s neck as he opened the door to the tin hut, the eyes of a madman’s glare eroding the night from within. The darkness brightened as Zachhzus pulled the door back, causing his terrified face to shine in the moonlight. As the teenager descended to a knee, however, the startled Arai lowered his sword and embraced his terrified, worried daughter. The sporadic events of the evening left Zachhzus confused and dazed, shifting his mind to think in fragmented streams that generated a focus of illusion – *one such image Wing hoped to make perfectly clear*. “Zachhzus,” he said, rising to his feet, allowing his rich brown eyes to make contact with the furious amber orbs. In that euphoric instant, a teenage warrior and a middle-age smith stood face to face, the elder’s tired glimpse, weakened body, and worn foggy-gray clothes a painting of the present world and the scorching reminder of a drawing long past.

The man peered deep into Wing’s soul, knowing full well he knew this grown boy in a younger, weaker form. Joggled streams of memory aligned themselves in the subconscious, tying together pieces of data that had long since been frayed and shredded into the landfill of broken dreams and devastated hope. His past began to come together behind his glazed golden eyes, and as it began to take root, only one word graced the air on its way towards a forgotten son.

“Wing,” was a short word to make up for the years of endless memories, the years when the great General McCallister traveled the world in search of his destiny, in search of an everlasting peace. His time had brought the well-respected strategist to the grand home of Emperor Keipper, the ruler of the realm of Japan. His stone-like mannerism and reputation dissolved before the great openness of the general, and as their children played together in the Garden of Eden, a pact was formed that laid the foundation for the United Arsenal. It was there that Zachhzus Arai, the greatest sword-maker ever known,

had happened about a chance encounter with the adventurous Wing T. McCallister.

“Kon..eee...chee...wah,” Wing practiced before the ever-vigilant ears of the Crown Princess Ryoko, her fingers fiddling with shoulder-length silver hair as Wing’s sound pushed them on.

“Very good,” the young Japanese Crown Princess replied in English, her Asian accent heavily flowing over every syllable. Wing laughed as he extended his hand to the amicable girl. They had spent many months together, strolling, playing, and exploring the dominions of the imperial palace. Normally it was a dull place for the growing 7-year-old Ryoko, a constant reminder of her social obligations, but this American, this Wing McCallister had touched her heart, not in the way a lover would, but in the way a friend would hold another above the flames of hell. He kept her company when the Earth was unknowingly drifting towards disaster, flirting with an unseen, unchecked foe, except if you saw through the eyes of Jack McCallister. Ryoko’s father was constantly chatting with Wing’s dad, always discussing the possibilities of a military alliance, a forged allegiance of untold greatness; to Ryoko, that didn’t matter, Wing was a friend she could never have had before, and that made her happy.

The two snapped their heads as a rugged man stumbled through the brush carrying a fine samurai blade. “Children!” he shouted, plopping himself between the pair and extending the blade to show it off to the impressed couple. Of course, Wing was most certainly impressed, and quickly reached out to grasp the shining, radiant steel. “Stop!” Zachhzus called, moving the sword away from Wing’s envious grip. “What do you wish to become?” He leered deep into the boy’s awestruck eyes, “First, my child, you must answer that! You must adhere to your destiny before your hands touch my blade.”

Zachhzus expected a childish answer, a cute and ridiculous response, but the clever American would not be so easily shaken. With pride, his eyes peered into Zach’s soul, granting the metal-smith a sneak peek of the explanation to come. “I wish to become a phoenix,” he replied. “I wish to be the undying, unyielding, ever-present guardian of those in need. I wish to protect the ones I love, thwart the ones that do grievous harm, and shelter those who are oppressed. I wish to wander into the flames and come out a hero.”

The tip of Zachhzus' sword tapped the cold ground of the present, feeling the voids of his past fill with a new illuminating light. "You have to come with me," Wing said, reaching out to take hold of the man who stood before him.

"Sagami," Zachhzus whispered, "I want you to listen to me child. Go with Wing and do what he says but I shall not leave my home. I have faith that these warriors of destiny will be able to repel harm from this wretched world and I shall keep that belief until the day I humbly pass from the mortal realm."

"Don't be a fool, Zach!" Wing shouted, his teeth snapped together at the end of the sentence, flinging his bite towards the ears of the ever-stubborn Arai. "I can take you to Avalon, you'll be safe there, no one will get to you, however, if you stay here, they will find you, they will use you, and they will kill you."

"And I will stay," Arai repeated, defiantly gripping his blade before the angelic knight. "I entrust my sons and daughter to your gracious care, little Wing, for you have become the hero you wished to be, but know that I have not changed since my palace days. I will not leave my ground without a fight, no matter what those Shadow-Front bastards have in store for me or whoever comes to collect the humungous bounty, I shall not leave." His eyes read the mind of the young, grieving warrior. "I know you can see the unpleasant future just as you saw your destiny long ago."

Zachhzus heaved his daughter onto Wing's strained back and ordered them away. He sent them out of this horrid city knowing that he would return to end the coming fray, to eradicate the vermin seeping from the underworld, but at least his daughter, his beautiful and intelligent Sagami, would escape his curse: once a warrior one will only be fit to die a warrior's death.

Wellton [Nov 1, 2002]:

"You heard me Aidan!" Amora shouted, pushing him out of the way as he stood waving his arms before the entryway into the Avalon Compound. "Consider it an order when I say the kids are staying here!"

"Do you have any idea how much of a security issue this is, Lieutenant Hunter? Are you sure you want to bring kids you don't know into this institution?"

"Shut up, Parks," Amora rebutted, scowling obnoxiously as her blue devil eyes bore into his mind. "What, do you think

they're going to blow us up, do you think they're going to raise up and proclaim from the mountaintops that we are here, or do you think they're little pint-sized terrorists wanting to own the shit out of us because they have nothing better to do with their lives?" She hissed at him, "Jesus, Aidan! Stop acting like the Shadow-Front and help these kids out." Her bark morphed into a contemplative tone. "I saw the look on Wing's face, how deep it was, how the playful twinkle in his eye vanished in the aura of that sinister place, and if anyone can pick up vibes better than him, it's me. Now, move your ass out of the way or I'll move it for you."

Aidan stared back dumbfounded as Amora's hand planted into his left shoulder and pushed him aside. The three children followed their hardcore leader past the gawking scientist into the abyss of the Avalon compound with Kit taking up the rear to keep Aidan from doing anything too drastic.

"Thank you," they chimed as Amora waved them into Wing's unkempt lair. Of course, the mess of clothes and bland walls did not bother the children of Phoenix, those who had spent the last year on the outside, living in the harsh conditions of martial law. The two pilots watched as the little ruffians leaped onto Wing's bed, jumping in a hysterical euphoria as the squeaky, yet firm mattress wailed every time a child's foot landed. Chills pulsed down Amora's spine as the cacophonous moans echoed throughout the room, prodding her thoughts to focus on Wing, what he was doing, how he was feeling, and if he would be okay.

Phoenix West [Nov 1, 2002]:

Wing's head began to throb as he carted Sagami across the desert, streaking through its cold domain as fast as he could. But after running for nearly an hour, and carrying Sagami besides... No! Wing would not let defeatist thoughts control his mind. It was absurd; he had trained with Delta Force, he had lifted the weights, he had run the marathons, there was no way in hell this would have any influence on him. However, something still jabbed at his gut as he ran, something that sent the ever-so-slight tingle of pain to bequeath havoc to the neurons that composed his mind. Wing felt Sagami's soft hands digging into his neck and his smooth leather jacket sliding around him as it sheltered the girl from the wasteland's cold. She had fallen asleep practically 30 minutes before as the pair had darted from the crippled city into the vast darkness and had not dared to stir

since. He hoped Amora and Kit had made it to the Avalon pick-up line and prayed that Turner would be on call to speed the pilots back to the base through the massive underground launch network. Except, this was not the time for assumptions, this was not the time to hurl prayers into the unknown; it was the time for harsh facts of war.

Grains of sand parted beneath his feet, nature's gentle mockery of the shifty foundation of the present, but Wing's display for the hope of the future. Beneath the coarse gravel of the Arizona desert, rested one of Avalon's long resource tunnels. It was originally constructed to be a reservoir for the Phoenix Deep Tunnel Aquifer, a ten-mile reinforced concrete bunker that was modified to carry precious supplies from Phoenix to the Avalon Compound. Of course, after the Shadow-Front take over, and with Kit's sortie count and assignment to the Phoenix metropolis, Turner decided it would be wise to convert it into a massive catapult launcher; more importantly, it meant Wing didn't have to walk anymore, and...

Wellton:

"We're doing it the way Wing wants it!" Amora shouted, pulling away from Aidan as she made her way to the XS hangar. "There is no way I'm going to leave him out there by himself; he's fought way too hard for far too long to be ignored. He knows something is going down in Phoenix tonight, and unless we act fast, the Phoenix Campaign will be compromised."

Both heard the intercom speakers click as they rushed through the barren corridors. "Wing is in the 10-mile tunnel, Aidan," Turner said over the system. "He has Sagami Arai; I'm bringing them in on the catapult now, they should be in the XS hangar in 3 minutes."

* * *

Wing set Sagami in his lap as the service cart blazed down the 10-mile track, screeching and wailing as the metal wheels flew atop their electrified beams. The 10-year old had become aware that something was troubling McCallister, the way his breaths seemed to grow short, the way his eyes gazed blankly into blurred bland cement wall. Wing tried so hard to conceal the blood, hide the fact that in his hours of chauffeuring the young lady Arai his thought-to-be-healed wounds had reopened. Her reaction and guilt plagued his mind but even

greater was the fear that Aidan or Fox would refuse to let him fly, and that, at such a critical juncture, was out of the question.

He sat as still as could be, holding Sagami close, pulling her into his protection but covering up the pain as the sturdy cart erupted down the grand hall. She stared into his vibrant brown eyes, examining the glaze of liquid fire that appeared to coat the irides with an amber varnish. She was flattered by his chivalry, finally surrounded by the sights and smells of her father's fairy tales, allowed to explore the heroic legend, allowed to see if this was the hero Aidan prophesized. "At least one," she thought, pushing her hand into his stomach, grinning as the twitch of pain flashed across his face – the sight of his discomfort and the smell of his blood. "Don't worry," Sagami whispered, "I won't tell."

Wing blinked as the cart rushed into the XS hangar, leaving him to gawk at the inquisitive child. "Just like her father," he thought, rummaging through stacks of memory, skimming the better pages of his life's story. "Always knowing exactly what you're trying to keep secret."

To Sagami the Avalon Compound was the world's first true utopia, a sanctuary from the hells of the outside world and a working testament to the people who tried to bring the old ways back. It was after she was born that the Arai's moved to the States, carried away by the wings of freedom to enjoy the pleasures of working in a nation adorned with a phenomenal education system, a boastful economy, and the wonders of democracy. While Japan had its own prominent features, her father could no longer stay within the sovereignty's borders, and embarked out on his own business venture: the metallurgy company Phoenix Fire.

But on 9-11, along with so many others, her world and her father's vision crumbled to the ground. Zachhzus remained outspoken after the Shadow-Front took power, and with his words came the proclamation for his demise: a high-class bounty sent through the ranks as if by the devil's own lightning. Yet the sword-smith had cheated fate and, with an ironic twist on a moon-bathed Halloween night, managed to entrust his future to her own Wings of freedom.

Amora leered as the cart squealed to a halt in the belly of XS' enormous loading bay; she had gotten the feeling that something was not right, and could tell as soon as her eyes locked onto Wing's sullen face. His arms were loosely wrapped around the girl, his skin resting on top of his leather jacket which faithfully followed his wish to protect her, but his face,

specifically his mouth was tight, and Amora could tell he was biting down, biting down to stop the pain. Aidan, on-the-other hand, was far too concerned with launching the XR and XS that he completely overlooked Wing's arrival.

"Help me the fuck out of here," Wing snapped at Amora as she helped him off the cart. Sagami gazed and followed slowly as Wing's comrade slipped her arm under his and jerked him into an eerily weak skip. Amora's mind slipped into sorrow as she could feel the aura of Wing's frustration permeate her body, his tense muscles aching each time his feet hit the floor, his fear that Aidan's watchful eye would eventually fall upon him, and then, then, the anguish that his desire to resurrect Phoenix would never spark from the ashes of Shadow's world.

"You want to fight, don't you?" Amora asked, landing her fist upon Wing's door as they concluded the exhausting underground trek.

"The Front is up to something," Wing whispered. "I feel it; the air reeks of their stench everywhere I turn." Ice shot through her spine as his words crept into Amora's heart. "They know we're planning to attack; they called our bluff."

"Oh! Bloody God!" Kit exclaimed as the thin aluminum door slid into its tight cavern. He pulled the beaten Wing inside and quickly motioned the others to enter. "Are you fucking stupid?" Kit shouted, pushing the baffled McCallister onto his bed. The three kids stared in wonder as the XR pilot rummaged through Wing's bathroom. "Dammit Wing! Don't you keep any fucking bandages in here?"

Amora grabbed his shoulders and set his torso against the firm mattress, promptly ripping his white shirt off as soon as she completed the initial task. "Well Jesus, Amora," Wing grinned. "You don't have to rush it."

"Shut up," she replied, pushing the blood-stained cloth under the mattress. "If Aidan or Fox see you like this there is no way in hell they are going to let you out in the XT."

Kit returned to the bedside, setting an enormous package of gauze strips in Amora's waiting hand. Her fingers cracked as the knuckles popped, allowing each appendage to wrap around the bandages, her eyes stole any response he had from his mouth and left him speechless. "We know how much this means to you Wing," she continued, ripping open the package and smoothing a sheet over his abs. He blinked as her hair floated, hovered over his face, dangling brown brilliance that made her words drive ever further into the chasms of his mind, "I know you can't be left behind. But don't get me wrong," her calm voice became

infected with anger, “I don’t want you overdoing it while you’re hurt, or else I’ll kick your ass faster than I beasted Aidan’s this evening.” She pounded another bandage onto the scabbed wound.

Wing laughed as the grunts of pain accompanying each of Amora’s dressings subsided. “Okay,” he practically squealed, his brown eyes saturated with a tint of fiery orange. Amora knew he had gotten excited. “I promise I won’t overdo anything tonight!” he shouted, causing the children to jump in shock.

Wing became jittery as Amora’s hand brushed across his skin; he was getting anxious, *primarily*, because she was the one doing the touching and, secondly, because every second wasted in the cramped room gave the Chancellor more time to torture the citizens of Phoenix. Yet in that moment, Wing bathed those present in a vibe that only a hero could create: the intense desire to do the right, the need to fight for all those in need, and the hope of finding love through all the hate. In that moment, when the pains from Wing’s past faded away before her touch, he was truly happy and overjoyed with the sense that Amora had put a sort of endless faith in him. Although, for the first time in weeks, his resistance began to fade, as well. With every stroke, Amora shattered his denial with the truth that they shared much more than happiness, and deep within those enslaved thoughts... “You can’t defend...” rang through.

Bunker 1: [Kyoto, Japan, Nov 1, 2002]:

“Is the U.A.S. Zero in position?” McKenna questioned, his settings altered from the stingy European Bunker 44 to the elegant, borderline prestigious, Bunker 1. Its enormous reinforced concrete shell sat in the middle of Japan’s finest military shipyard, the first of its kind since the end of World War II, and by far, one of the most impressive in the world. Here, the leaders of the world could command their fleets from afar, enjoy the comforts of safety while effectively guiding their respective sides to victory.

McKenna’s finger tapped the leather armrest as he waited for a response. Finally it came, a gesture from one of the A.V. technicians, followed by words so eager to part the lips that uttered them, “Zero is in position, and ‘A-Day’ is underway.”

“Alright!” Emeryl exclaimed, his vice presidential hand spreading across the mahogany tabletop. Beneath his firm black hand rested a map of the United States littered with boxes of red, dots of various colors, and large zones of yellow and green.

Within the page's borders was the data of the first reconnaissance missions conducted by the United Arsenal, short peeks from Mexico and Canada that allowed leaders of the grand alliance to locate enemy positions, decipher the Chancellorodt's complex networking system, and inject fear into the Shadow-Front of a land-based invasion.

"As you can see," McKenna motioned to his advisors, "Data provided from President Villarreal and Prime Minister Wright of Mexico and Canada, respectively, has allowed us to get a partial grasp of the scope of the conflict within America's domain. Shadow-Front has established an extensive defensive network already started by the Avalon Bow Operation of 2000. Judging on Chancellorodt's remarkable technological divisions, we can expect the laser firing def-guns to be even more spectacular than those designed by the Senate team at the turn of the millennium; thus, the range of the guns, highlighted in yellow, has been extended to assure the safety of our forces when they are standing-by."

[U.A.S. Zero; Pearl Harbor – Republic of Hawaii; Nov. 1, 2002]:

Meanwhile, Colonel Chuck Downie paced across the Zero's bright, vibrant mess hall. Before him, seated around the gray plastic tables, were members of the crew, an assortment of individuals from around the globe: Australia, China, South Korea, India, Russia, and Japan. They had come together, ignored the differences that plagued their diversity, and forged an alliance that sought to rid tyranny from the world. Like their brothers and sisters before them, who had created the United Arsenal several years prior to hunt down the human terror Osama bin Laden, these courageous nobles sought to restore peace to the famed, ensnared republic and finally put an end to Shadow-Front's careless slaughtering and the hate-filled media virus that represented the tainted government. The warriors' leader, however, was less concerned with the politics generating this massive fleet, and more concerned with how to speak to them, to bring them together, to be one of those charismatic gentlemen Aidan Parks was so desperately seeking.

The same map of the United States that rested comfortably in the gallery of Bunker 1 was projected onto the clean, white wall of the Zero's mess hall. As Downie stared it down, gazed into the horror that was once his free homeland, he found his voice: a boisterous and robust bellow that grew from a

whisper in his lungs to the roar of a lion. It took three words to hush the talkative crowd, nations distributed into the conglomerate that was his room, his ship. “Ladies and gentlemen,” his words rolled from his tongue like fog drifting off a block of dry ice. Just like the cold element, his speech froze his troops, leaving an eerie silence that resonated as translators’ words trickled off as if a lost echo. “As you can see, the Shadow-Front fears interference from the rest of the world, it fears contamination from multiple nations, but more so, it fears the loss of power democracy will bring in this second coming.

“We do not know too much about the interior defenses of this state, but recon provided by the great dominion of Canada and the rising star of Mexico have shown that America is anxious to protect her borders. With hundreds of mechanized defense guns lining the shores and enormous battalions guarding the land entryways into the United States, it’s fairly obvious the Shadow-Front is putting its human resources into guarding the obvious attack zones along the Canadian and Mexican boundary lines while relying on a supposedly invincible AI system to guard the beaches.”

He paused, thrusting his fist into the air as he stepped towards his attentive audience, “I can assure you, Shadow-Front has yet to see the full extent of our mighty Angels in Wellton, and within a week’s time the West Coast Defense Headquarters in Los Angeles will be annihilated, giving us the perfect route into the United States of America. After that, we plan to attack New Orleans in a blitzkrieg strike to take out the Gulf Coast Defense Headquarters, allowing the Abulher Prison Resistance,” Chuck pointed towards the green patch tainting the yellow and white of Florida, “to join forces with us in the final assault on New York City. Meanwhile, the other resistance group, whose area falls around greater Detroit, will launch a do-or-die campaign against the Niagara Falls-Great Lakes Defense Grid. This will have two effects: 1) it will turn Chancellorodt’s eyes to the immediate threat and 2) turn their voided hearts to the possibility of a Canadian-born invasion. Hopefully, these factors will buy us enough time and allow us to take out the East Coast Defense Control as well as those bastards’ palace. Then, and only then, can the D-Day Fleet, commanded by President McKenna, sweep in to clean up the fuckers’ dirty mess.”

INBOUND [Wellton, AZ; Nov. 1, 2002]:

Wing relaxed as the red, white, and blue frame of the XT spiraled around him, its powerful actuators taking the weight of the world off his shoulders, and its buffer units shielding him from pain's disastrous return. Amora pulled herself up to his face, causing his brown eyes to ignite into an inferno of anxiety that washed away as her warm hand made the mark of the cross upon his right cheek. "Remember," she said, a blue eye vanishing behind a short-lived wink, "you promised." Amora hovered there for a moment, finally deciding to inch closer to his face, and with that she blessed the holy seal with a kiss.

Wing winced as she backed away, his face noticeably flushed and radiating with a red blush that could do nothing but make Amora laugh under her breath. He gulped, trying, yet unable, to avert his eyes from her menacing leer. "You can't defend," flowed through his veins as the vivacious blue gems antagonized his stressing soul. "You can't..." He shut it out, jerking the metal arm upward so that the large metallic fingers rested on her shoulder. "Let's go kick some ass," he replied.

Meanwhile, Kit could not give up the moment, and jumped to Wing in a last ditch effort before Aidan would come to drag him to the XR. With a kiss on the opposite cheek, he immediately took the blush out of Wing's face and drew out a confused stare. "Wing!" Kit shouted, in a girlish, mocking voice. "I lo-o-o-v-e you!!!" The two pilots scowled at their jester as he broke out into a hysterical hilarity, jumping off the XT platform to head for the waiting XR. He vanished into one of the dark tunnels, carried away by the wake of his benevolent humor despite the fact that its laughing bourns shielded an ocean of truths.

Wing's brown eyes locked back onto Amora's; the two stood there for a minute, almost as if the XT's pilot had learned to stop the kinetics of time. "Amora..." He whimpered, obviously wanting to go somewhere, but his thoughts were stopped as Lt. Hunter flicked his forehead.

"Remember," she reiterated, "no overdoing it!" Beginning to shout, Amora exited the platform as well. "I'll kick your ass if you do!" She left as Wing snapped the XT helmet into place, the dark blue halogen visor igniting with light as he stepped down from the steel plateau. The stunning red wings spread their magnificent metal glory across the room as her pilot embarked towards the launch tunnel. It had been so long since he had felt her touch, heard the gentle sound the actuators made with every flex of a finger or a leg, or felt like he could make a difference. To the second, Wing would remember this event, one

of joy, one of pride, one of a real manifest destiny when the red, white, and blue would truly be flown over the United States of America once again.

~You can't defend against the one...~

EVIL'S FLUX [Phoenix; 0350 Nov 1, 2002]:

Akaru's heart beat secretly beneath the veil of Val's serum, the concoction that strove to tear him from his emotions, tried ever so hard to cast his feelings out, but there was one that still remained. Under the hatred of Avalon they had implanted, under the devotion to the Chancellorodt, was the loyalty to a long lost sister. One who he had laughed with, cried with, and presumably died for, one who he could never forget, the one who was tied to his soul by a thin, red, blood-dyed ribbon. Akaru could feel her as he touched the window pane, his fingers gasping to cover more ground, wishing to spread beyond the room, beyond the dreary Phoenix Headquarters, and take hold of his beloved Amora.

His long black hair drifted before his eyes as his quarter's door squealed open, its loud, obnoxious whine driving him to squint, but even more appalling was the disdainful vision of Val Manning. That menacing serum of his had cast Akaru into a life of false loyalties, made him a puppet of the doctor's insanity and his father's insurrection. "What do you want?" he barked, turning to the Ph.D. backed psychotic nut-job.

"Your father wants you," he replied, his tone weaving through the air like a snake trailing its prey. "It seems the time has come for our troops to move out; you should be a little more respectful Akaru for this is when the full extent of your obedience shall be revealed. Of course, your father is much more respectful of your wish to spare your sister's life than I am, thus be warned, if you so much as give me an ounce of sass, I will make you kill her."

He leered at the doctor, rising to his feet in a smooth and elegantly surreal motion, "I told you I'd kill the others off." Akaru drifted towards him. "If you," he replied, "do anything to harm her, your head will rest on a pike." A trail of black hair was whipped into Val's face as Akaru walked past, leaving the enraged doctor with the last words, "As far as I'm concerned, you and your projects are expendable."

"Do not mock me now," Val whispered in the darkness, "do not mock the years of work I have done alongside your

father, you impudent bastard, for I will make you see the full extent of my wrath within the Chancellorrod. Akaru, you believe you can hide behind the will of your father forever, but deep down, I know he is weak, deep down I know he still has an affinity for the democracy he crushed, but I, I believe absolute power is the only absolute. And soon, you will see just how maniacal I can truly be.”

Meanwhile, Akaru strode to his father’s glorious organizational meeting, the one where he would rally the troops against an apparent force of heavenly angels, and with his boisterous words try to compel his minions to ride them to the depths of hell. Something buried within his heart told him not to go, to try to escape, but his body and mind would not give in to love’s temptations and continued him on the march towards battle. The vibrant halls of Phoenix Headquarters expanded into an enormous mess hall as the young Hunter passed the rows of the city’s phalanx. Their cheers fell silent before his presence, all had known what a force he had been in the war against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, and all feared the caliber he brought to the Shadow-Front’s weakening military.

In a cloak of red and black, the ominous presence of Lock Hunter took its place before the ranks of the destined troops. Before their lifeless eyes, the will of an empire laid down its demands to the hands and weapons of man, took claim of their souls in a futile fight against the angels of hope, love, and hate’s own hell. “My comrades,” he erupted before them all, igniting the room with a sacrilegious fervor, “today is ours to shine! From here, we shall crush the Avalon resistance and throw those who dare defy the sanctity of our nation to the dominion of Satan. We shall march south towards the border of our great nation and annihilate any army that wishes to invade. We will watch as the wretched corpses of the Angel of Darkness and any other demonic beasts that further seek to desecrate my seed rot upon the gallows before your joyous souls. And the traitorous president, the one man who left us all to fend for ourselves against the fragments of terror, will turn into a sulky, pathetic mass before the images of their bloodied bodies!”

Akaru clapped for the satire, his long black hair fluttering with every mocking pop his hands created, “Bravo!” he shouted from the top of his lungs, “Marvelous speech father, marvelous!” Akaru’s fist thrust into the air causing the general mass of officers surrounding him to shyly back away. “Why not just sing jovially from the depths of your voice and compel these fools to rush into death?” He looked around. “We are not dealing

with ordinary humans, comrades. These are not just vermin that will heel to your command and die from the cut of your blade; they will hide, they will fight as one for the single purpose to eradicate the order Shadow-Front has given a country whose true-born leader has deserted it. Thus, if you want to live to see the next sunrise, you arrogant fuckers better dismantle the proud ego that has built inside you while walking these crummy streets,” He paused. “Because if you think you’re going to pave over a former member of Delta Force, you might as well pick out a tombstone now.”

[Wellton; 0350 Nov 1, 2002]:

Sound blared over the Avalon’s intercom system, “Wing McCallister – XT lock confirmed.” The XT’s dark blue boot plates were clasped by the catapult’s launch system, setting loose a liberty bell ring throughout the hangar. The enormous SR-71, red wings shot back as Wing leaned forward, the lights of the launch tunnel flickering, their glimmer bouncing back off the blue halogen visor. McCallister licked his lips beneath the steel grill face guard, his brown eyes gleamed as the eyepiece display and the wrist console typed out the joyous words of his redemption: *ignition engage*.

Amora grinned as she readied the jet-black XS for its first combat sortie. The thrill rushed to her head; the old, fast-paced self that lurked inside her began to play its cards and as she waited for the red light on the 7-mile track to switch to a green blaze all that kept her insanity in check was the eerily slow, hideously loud beating of her heart. For once, it was not merely the anxiety that plagued her mind; Amora was nervous, fearful that Wing was extending his limits, perhaps even afraid that he would die. She hadn’t felt this way about anyone before, their simple relationship of bicker and care reminded Amora of her brother, but Wing was not, and never could be, him. Then who was he supposed to be, why did he come into her life, and why did she feel so calm when he was around? These were questions both she and Wing had asked over the last several weeks, questions that overshadowed pains of the past, but those that opened the future to new problems. What Amora was sure of was that her feelings had gone beyond simple happiness – she cared for him.

“Don’t die on us now,” Kit yelled into the XR while its vibrant halogen screen displayed communication connection rates. “Amora would freak the fuck out if you did, and I don’t

want to deal with that Mr. McCallister.” Wing’s laughter echoed through the helmet, his audibly pixilated wails driving into Kit’s ear.

Bunker 1:

“Sir,” an officer of the United Arsenal stepped into the Bunker, immediately addressing President McKenna. His dark blue uniform appeared black in the Bunker’s dimmed light; the personnel were stressed. “We just received word from Dr. Parks,” he continued, popping a salute as he continued to step forward. “The Angels are out of the tunnels, Mr. President. XT will arrive at Phoenix Airport in T-300.”

“Very well,” McKenna replied, his hands clasped together in a union of mind-shattering apprehension. “Make sure they know we’re with them.”

“I’ll pass the message along, sir.” He paused, unmoving, waiting to see if Blair had anything else to add before continuing. “Also, Mr. President, the U.A.S. Zero is fully prepared for its aerial invasion and is awaiting command.”

“Understood.” He had other things on his mind, other pressing matters of angst that drew his attention to Phoenix. “*You can’t just ignore everything Kit has done here...*” His memory of Wing’s words bit at his conscience, “I hope you’re right, Wing, I hope you’re right.”

[Phoenix; 0353 Nov 1, 2002]:

Wing grinned as he cleared the gate, smiled as the howl of the wind wisped past his armor as he flew through the night sky. His mind may have been at ease, but his heart was certainly not; instilled within sat the fat chords of dissonance, ones that called him to a horrid place in his past, ones that made him know disaster was gleaming over the horizon. It took him a matter of seconds to reach the industrial zones of Phoenix, and Wing was pleased to see the streets were deserted. Sure it was almost four in the morning, but this was where the ashes would ignite the revolution.

“Wing,” Kit reported in, his voice a soft, mellow whisper. “I’m almost to the north end of the city; I’ll be entering the red-zone in about 2 minutes.”

“Copy that,” Wing replied, his voice stern. Battle could and would always mold him back into the badass he was when he first arrived at Avalon. After all, he was trained by Delta

Force to kill or be killed, and that was the situation they were in. The CapCast shot from the XT's thigh-plate as Wing's metal encased fingers gripped the trigger. "It seems that I'll be arriving ahead of schedule." The glimmer of tin rooftops under starlight began to fade as McCallister cleared the primary industrial zone, all that remained between him and his enemy was about 1000 meters of grass and the large runway of Phoenix International Airport.

Meanwhile, Akaru had finished re-preparing his troops on the old runway; he grew tired of their arrogance and left, after all, he did have more important functions to attend. "Sire," an officer blared as Akaru walked past, almost afraid of the fierce glare that Akaru shoved back at the young brass. "I've come to confirm that Zachhzus Arai is in the area, my lord."

"I knew that, idiot," Akaru replied, walking past, dragging any care or thanks along with him; those emotions no longer existed to the older Hunter. "Zachhzus," he thought, stepping into the outdoors once again. "I knew you'd be here, always sensing the battle before it started, your swords always shivering at the chance to strike blood." Akaru grinned as he continued off into the distance, "Let those arrogant fuckers die; they have no idea the power the Avalon Project carries, even my father is blinded by his *supreme* mission." *But then again, so was he.*

The cement cracked under the pressure of the XT as the phoenix made its landing. Wing's sight drifted across the halogen screen, thermal data streaming into the suit's OS and giving a marvelously accurate target count. His fingers twitched, the CapCast gleaming in the clouded moonlight as Wing darted towards the over-enthused, over-confident enemy. "24 shells in the clip," he remembered, pulling the carbon-dioxide switch to extend the jet-black barrel. Wing pulled the trigger, sending a bullet ripping through the air that seemed to defy time. Its voyage seemed infinite to the XT knight, the nail-biting epic of a beacon of hope and despair that tore flesh and bone while pushing the values of liberty and equality. Oxymoron, irony, philosophy, whatever strange term used to describe that event, one thing was clear: the ass kicking had begun.

Soldiers cocked their rifles as blood painted the landscape, the site hurling wide-eyed rookies into panic and tossing veterans of WW3 into horrid flashbacks. "Find where it

came from,” an old man’s voice poured from beneath body armor. “Lay down some cover fire and cover your backs.”

Wing had put the XT into full throttle, the light of his blackbird engines casting a blue light in his wake as he burst towards the warriors of Chancellorodt. The soldiers turned to Wing as the light guided their guns, but the bullets were useless against the metallic frame of the XT. Wing, on the other hand, squinted with every ping; something about the sound of bullets heading his way brought back dormant and feared memories.

“There are so many,” Wing thought, the XT halogen monitor locking on to individual targets. “I need you,” he whispered to the armor, “to guide me to the guilty – a phoenix should never burn the innocent.” The OS console embedded in the XT’s wrist plate flashed in the night, causing Wing’s eyes to widen from behind the halogen shield. It wasn’t perfected, but it was noticeable: time was slowing down. He could see the bullets dragged down by liquid air and the eyes of the soldiers attempt to follow him as Wing darted through their ranks. He could tell by their faces those that were fighting because they believed in Lock Hunter’s vision and those who were scared into raising their guns.

“What the hell?” a soldier cried as a neck exploded at his side, its crack sending the jolt of fear up his spine. “Holy shit!” he wailed, tears breaking out from behind his goggles. The bloody hand of the XT rested on the man’s shoulder padding, Wing giving the frantic man a reassuring grip. “Only the guilty,” he said, vanishing into the night, leaving the soldiers in a daze.

“What the hell was that?” some spoke, looking around into the empty abyss of night, the light that had once shown in the firefight departed. “That,” another one began to chatter his teeth, “was McCallister...”

* * *

Akaru strode down the streets of Phoenix, the crumbling sidewalk giving way beneath his firm leather boots. His demeanor matched the night, ominous and forbidding. “From the mouth of the most wretched evil, the river hope begins to flow,” Akaru mumbled, the devastated buildings his gracious audience, witnesses to the battle between the dark and the light. He grinned, his father’s words echoing in his mind, the command to kill them off. Akaru drew a gun from his cloak as a light darted overhead, the dark green shimmer of the XS reflecting that light of the future. “Amora,” Akaru whispered, lowering the gun, “I

won't kill you. The others," Manning's serum tugged at his mind, "they can die, but you," Akaru clenched his fists, "I won't kill my own fucking sister."

Amora's bright blue eyes widened from behind the halogen glare. "Wing," she whispered into the microphone, "this area of the city is way too quiet. I don't see any troop movement in the southwest sector – it doesn't look like they're fucking defending the city at all."

She listened as the mic-click came through her headset, "They're going South," Wing replied, he had entered the airport terminal moments before and wandered through the corridors. "They think we're going to attack from Mexico."

* * *

Dr. Manning and Lock Hunter had moved to an offsite launch base. They both knew their time had come to depart from the scene. As the sleek black limo pulled through the gates, Val glanced happily at the dingy welcome sign. "Area 49..." he muttered.

Hunter nodded in reply and grinned, "This facility is entirely underground. The only ones that know of its existence are those who work here, my son, and us." The car stopped outside of a large steel hatch.

"We're here, my lord," the driver asserted, stepping from the vehicle with a crisp motion to open the door to the cabin.

"It's ironic really," Hunter continued to Val, "when you think about it. Avalon is probably buried in a place much like this one, but that bastard McKenna did a good job of covering its location. If only we could find it, find their wretched base and smoke them out like the rats they are."

Manning laughed. "Why smoke them out," he replied, "when we can use them as an example for the world? It's been far too long since people have taken America seriously. They still listen to that idiotic Blair, the president that has not even set foot on his home soil in how long? A year!?"

Lock laughed, "They'll be used as an example alright," his laugh began to degenerate into a cackle. "I'll make a fool out of Wing; I knew from the beginning that boy would be a problem for us. It's not even his damn fighting we have to worry about, Val." Hunter paused. "It's his fervor that needs our concern."

"Fervor?" Val asked, for once the maddened scientist was puzzled by Lock's twisted claim.

“Yes,” Lock responded, “I was reviewing his records from the pre-war days. Every commanding officer noticed it, an unfamiliar quality that somehow allows that boy to keep going even under intense circumstances. There was never an outburst associated with his skills or abilities; he is in perfect control of everything he wields, and even worse, the boy can motivate just about anyone. Looking back, I can only call him God’s perfect berserker, and all he needs is the time to show off his skills.”

Manning sneered. “Then it would be best if we didn’t give him the opportunity.” The two men stopped as a hiss came from beneath them, jets of steam oozing from the ground and the light of hell following in its wake. A demon’s smirk caressed Lock’s face as the two descended into the abyss of 49 – *where evil’s heart could hide from the innocents’ eyes.*

Interview with Dr. Aidan Parks [cont’d July 4, 2003]:

Aidan’s eyes glanced over at Misura, who, awed by his story, sat in disbelief. “This is when the Shadow-Front released the hybrid, correct?” She coughed, brushing her hair back to distract attention from her mind’s captivity.

“Yes,” Aidan muttered a response, “it was soon after the commencement of the Phoenix Campaign that we encountered the first of the Shadow-Front’s true audacities: forced genetic hybridization. I thought building the XT was a miraculous achievement, and that time dilation was one of the most rapid advancements in science, but scientists have been researching time for centuries. In a year, the Shadow-Front formed a genetics division and successfully spliced human DNA with that of other species, and certainly while it was a horror to witness, it was an incredible leap for science and technology.”

Misura nodded shyly, tapping her microphone with the nail of her index finger while uneasy words slipped from her mouth. “You’re speaking of Colonel Rachael Wolfe, doctor?”

SPAWN OF EVIL’S HEART [0417; Nov 1, 2002]:

“You’ll have to forgive me, Dr. Manning,” Lock said as the two roamed through the barely lit hallways of Area 49. “I’m afraid I’ve been keeping a project from you over the years. You see, when I was working with the CIA on the scattering of Area 51, I found that our old friends at the Pentagon were delving into genetic recombination and searching to duplicate Wing’s unique trait!” Even Manning twitched as a series of locks popped open,

wailing screams flying from behind a sound proof, reinforced door as it slid open, giving access to another corridor. From behind the array of steel plated gates, the wails grew louder with every step, many cursing in other languages, scratching against the armor with all their might, only to be shafted. Manning found himself hurrying pace to stay with Lock, not sure if he was terrified or thrilled by the anticipation of what Hunter would say to him. "It was the early notions of the super soldier concept," Lock continued. "First, they tried merging animal instincts with the human race, yielding often terrible results." He stopped and took a key from his pocket, opening one of the cells to show Manning a decrepit corpse, a body indistinguishable from the hellish bloody boils that consumed it. The doctor stepped back as the stench poured through his nostrils, immediately causing him to gag. Val was out of character, this was his dominion and yet he was speechless. "When I set up research here, I had them use the swine we corralled in the bus raids; after all, once an animal always an animal, right? From there, we gained a slew of knowledge, each case providing varying degrees of success, but we all came to the conclusion that while the procedure had been perfected, the discipline of the beast was always lacking."

"You expected discipline from the terrorist dogs?" Manning bit, his intensity immediately dropping off. "You'll have to excuse my outburst, but that was an incredibly foolish assumption."

"That's why we're here," Lock interrupted, strutting ahead to the final door in the hallway. "It's also the reason for my initial apology." He slowly stuck the key in and twisted his wrist. "We used your serum." Lock grinned as he stepped inside, the lights flickering in silent reverence to the intruding darkness.

Val followed with a slight quiver as snarling from behind the gate quickly intensified. His eyes darted across the room, seeing men, women, and children chained to the floor, mostly Arab-Americans and a few foreigners taken from the raids. The doctor could not help but grin as their leers fell upon his body. "Swine," he muttered to them, following Lock to the end of the annexed hall. There stood a woman in uniform, unchained and unmoving, seemingly trapped in solitude. Her eyes, however, held captive by tinted shades and her blood-hued black hair served to bolster an illusion that the Chancellorodt duo was in serious danger. Of course, this illusion was quite real.

Lock snapped, causing the girl to lift her head. For an instant, the glimmer of red eyes pierced through the shades and

caused the two men to freeze. It was a degenerating horror that plagued the minds of the two before subsiding into the past. “Dr. Val Manning, I’d like to introduce you to Colonel Rachael Wolfe, former commander of Delta Force Division A.”

Val’s eyes narrowed as he locked his gaze on to the tint of her shades. “Wolfe...” He mumbled, taking a small step forward and continuing his muttering, “...Delta Force.” A grin almost immediately appeared on his face, his brow boasting an aura of confidence in the depths of hell’s danger. “Perfect.”

[Phoenix; 0418 Nov 1, 2002]:

Akaru continued to walk through the empty streets, his eyes leering down the straightaway of pavement, the desert heat it contained behind sucked into his dark, cold demeanor. “I was right,” he whispered, quickening his stride, “My father is a fool to think they’re invading from Mexico; they wanted to liberate Phoenix, and that is exactly what has been accomplished.” Akaru twitched, the feeling of Val’s serum at work inside his mind, pushing him to tell Lock of the grievous miscalculation, but he ruffled his long black hair and shrugged it off. “Natural selection,” he growled, stopping his pace in front of the shack-like home of Zachhzus Arai. “I will surpass them all.”

Akaru’s eyes shifted as he heard a shout erupt from the small home, Zachhzus lunging from the door, sword in hand, screaming as loud as he could. “Be gone demon!!” he wailed, turning his waist to lead the blade towards Akaru, but the shadow warrior dropped back with a grin. “You’re not fit for this world any longer!”

Akaru laughed and dodged Zach’s feeble attacks again and again. “And you’re too old to deal with me smith,” he retorted, black jeans dipping to the asphalt before a mass push to grab the tsuba of Arai’s katana. Zachhzus gasped as Akaru’s other hand burrowed into his gut; Z had broken the first rule of combat: never underestimate the enemy. He had misjudged Akaru’s strength and was now going to pay the price for his misfortune. “However,” Akaru continued; the cunning in his voice blatantly clear, “I have a purpose for you Mr. Arai, if you’re willing...”

“My place is here,” he said, casting his golden glare upon Akaru. “I have absolutely no desire to join the Shadow-Front in its radical quest to ethnically cleanse America.”

Akaru just let his fist dig in, pushing Zach into the wall of his shack with a grin. “I really don’t give a damn about my

father's crusade. He'll fail just like every other tyrant, but me, I'll succeed tomorrow where he falls today. I shall be the true liberator of America, and then there will be an everlasting peace."

Zachhzus ruffled, trying to push out from the intensity of Akaru's grip. "I don't give a shit about the "purity" of your visions," he bit, his muscles bulging from the agonizing effort. "You're just as corrupt as your father if you enslave people to get what you want."

Akaru dug his claws into Zach's throat, grinning as the man grunted in pain. "I don't want people, douche-bag." He bit, nails digging deeper into Arai's flesh as tiny blood red droplets appeared on the claw tips. "I want their armors." He paused and shook his head, locks of long black hair flowing in an eerie, foreboding breeze, "I want an armor that will crush McCallister and set my sister free of his spell."

Zachhzus' grunted once more and twitched from Akaru's grip as his amber eyes swelled from the pressure. "I refuse to make you an armor suit like those kids have. Forget it!" He gulped and took a step back as Akaru reached out and dug his nails into the spine.

"I don't really think you have a choice, metal smith. Make me armor or I'll break your spine in two and beat your fucking children with your dead carcass. I don't care if they happen to be under Avalon's protection, I will find them and I will kill them if you refuse to help me. I don't think you want to underestimate the validity of my fucking threat, do you Mr. Arai?" Zach gasped as Akaru's nails dripped with his blood, his eyes slowly closing from the pressure of the massive grip. His sword dropped to the cold, worn asphalt street. "That's more like," Akaru snickered, flinging Arai over his back and stepping towards the hut. "There will be no proof of your life," Akaru grinned, taking an M4 grenade from his pocket and tossing it into the small shelter. "Ka..."

[Phoenix Int'l Airport; 0425 Nov 1, 2002]:

"Boom!" Kit yelled, the arm of the XT appearing around Wing's halogen display.

Wing's heart jumped as the hand materialized from the void of nothingness, his eyes glaring as he smacked the XR's helmet. "What the fuck are you doing Kit!?" Wing blared, trying to cover up his shock with anger.

“You really should pay more attention,” Kit said, a grin appearing on his face from behind the protective shield of the XR Battle Armor. “I can’t believe I snuck up on you that easily; you should be lucky I’m a friend and not one of them.”

Wing scowled, grabbing Kit’s arm and dragging him down the halls of the abandoned airport, the lights flickering occasionally as the pair reached a rather rustic hallway. “I was thinking about what I saw here,” Wing mumbled, walking slowly towards an obscurely placed door, its gray paint labeled with a bright red “keep out”. The floor became moldy as they approached the gateway, a hygienic hell that caught Kit’s eye. Wing placed his hand on the sheet metal door and flinched, behind its warning a crystal image of the night that destroyed his life, a night filled with death. He pushed the entry open, the small rift drawing out the stagnant air of rotting flesh and blood. The gap widened, the scent growing more putrid with every inch added to the black void. The words KEEP OUT had disappeared from sight as the hinges swung around, leaving the horrendous view of decrepit corpses in the wake of a loud creak. Kit visibly shook as Wing flipped on the light; the room was much larger than Matsko expected, each foot yielding a hoard of bodies in various stages of the decomposition cycle.

Those in the back had rotted to a point where bone, long dangling strips of ligaments, and decayed muscle still hung loose from the marrow. The bodies closer to the door were less decimated; most of them were of Arab descent, an un-shocking discovery that angered Wing to the core. One thing, however, puzzled Avalon’s resident badass: on the necks of the bodies, an eerie rendition of the number 49 had been carved into the flesh. “What the fuck is 49?” he muttered, leaning down close to a male’s carcass, running his armored fingertips over the gore engraving.

Kit shook as he strode further from the door, the stench of death overwhelming the XR’s helmet filter. His eyes twitched as he reached the center of the room, the only spot of normalcy he found in the pit of hell. There a wooden table sat, covered with various papers. Most of the sheets were drenched in blood, all marks of the number 49. In a panic he tore the sheets from the desk, scattering them towards the bodies that made the marks.

From their mausoleum he unearthed another sight, a small folder labeled Counter Avalon Task Squad. Kit lifted the folder from the desk and opened the manila cover to the first page. Tears dropped from his eyes as he read a letter attached to the Chancellorodt. The page, like the others he had

scattered was dotted in blood, mixing with a dulled pen to provide a clear explanation as to what he was holding. Before his eyes lay a message from all the victims of the airport catacomb, all those who had been slain for a twisted scientific experiment. Somewhere in the desert, the Front was plotting to play God, to mix the genetic soup of the world's great beasts and somehow make a chimera to hunt Avalon down. In the midst of strife, the bodies surrounding the two pilots had sacrificed everything to hide the folder Kit held, and in return, all they asked was to be guided to paradise by the so-called Angels. "You'll be guided," Kit whispered, "by the Angels of Wellton."

[Interview with Dr. Aidan Parks; July 4, 2003]:

"Wait a damn minute," Misura exclaimed, the set of 22/20 falling silent as Dr. Aidan Parks explained the horrors of that night. Her mouth moved to ask another question to the extremely patient Aidan, but no words escaped her breath for the facts of their country had crushed the reporter's heart.

"It is pretty sad," Aidan interrupted, his fingers rolling over a cigarette that sat dormant in his hand, "to think about the horrors committed in Phoenix." He pushed his Lennonesque shades back to the base of his nose and huffed, causing his gelled brown locks to waiver. "When Kit brought me the papers from that night, we really learned about the monster we were facing, we learned about Area 49, where it was, what it was doing, who was responsible, but more importantly we saw into the future." He paused, running a shaking hand nervously through a tuft of brown, gelled hair and continued, "I don't think it was the tragedy that impacted me the most, though; I think it was the way the kids handled it that really impressed me."

The Axis of Evil: Wing's Horrible Secret

Wing flipped through the bloodied manila folder, his eyes wide as each page flashed before him, his senses tingling and the crusted ooze of life and death eroded to reveal one glaring name. "Lock Hunter..." Wing whispered, his skimming morphing into a more thorough examination. "The Shadow-Front is led by Lock Hunter," his jaw practically dropped as he looked to Kit. "Amora's dad is still alive and he is the fucking enemy." Wing's voice trailed as he spoke, his feet stepping back from that awful place, away from the decrepit bodies, the scent of ethnic cleansing, and the words that could destroy the one he

cared for. “Come on Kit,” he muttered, falling into the hallway, the KEEP OUT sign dangling in his face, a silent taunt to the haints he had resurrected.

Wing twitched as a pain engulfed his left hand, *sinistaris* speaking softly in his ear of the pain and devastation the news would cause. He could feel the flow of pain rise up his arm, a viral flood of hate and despair that coursed not only his veins but the actual fabric of his muscle. Like most torrents of the sinister kind, the outpour fell right onto McCallister’s heart, causing him to sink to his knees as Kit approached his side.

After a moment, Kit began to speak, but was stopped as Wing handed the folder to him. “Kit,” he uttered softly, rising to his feet slowly, the horrendous pain anchoring his heart to his gut. “Take this back to Aidan but make sure that Amora knows nothing about this until I talk to her. Do you understand me, Kit?”

Kit nodded, taking the document into his golden metallic grip, gazing at Wing with concerned reddish eyes. “What are you going to do about this Wing?” he asked, gulping as he glanced over his friend, the fire sparking from every fiber of his being.

“Go,” Wing replied, his head glancing to Kit. “Go and keep going until you get back to Aidan.” He smiled as the left hand of the XT armor flexed, echoes raging down the hall as the fingertips of the titanium plates extended. The flare of the Keystone Launcher reflected off the ground, an auspicious light that bombarded the horror from beyond the gate of hell, the cuing note for the chorus of angels to take flight. As the light grew in strength, Wing raised his arm towards the dreary sarcophagus, “Consider yourselves guided.”

* * *

Kit had been airborne for several minutes before the gleaming light overtook him, before Wing’s heavenly symphony overwhelmed the fair glisten of the XR. He turned around to watch the spectacle of visual brilliance, gazing awestruck at the photograph of time in which a mesmerizing blue light devoured the entire facility – paving a blazing path to the heavens above. Kit’s grip on the document tightened as he gazed back towards the horizon of Avalon, sighing lightly as he opened a communication link to Amora’s XS, “Come home Amora,” Kit whispered into the headset. “The base has fallen.”

The watchman fell silent, drifting into the night from whence he came, leaving behind a sea of sacrificial fire. From

that drifting flame, as if floating out from a dream of the past, Wing emerged, the reaper who had guided the just to their respective heavens and the sinners to the torture chambers of hell.

Deep down, Wing's soul was ablaze, much like the phoenix, an eternal wish he prophesized to Zachhzus a decade prior. His inferno had done exactly what it sought to do, but in its ravaging wake, more questions than answers were found. For the first time since the death of his parents, Wing discovered he was truly scared; he had no idea what to say to Amora, how to break the joyous news that her father was alive but by some star-crossed Shakespearean debacle became the leader of the Shadow-Front. The glorious wings of the XT rose in hope of a dawning sky, the flare of the modified SR-71 gleaming as hoards of nuclear driven fuel poured into its igniter. As Wing's solemn gaze cast across the remnants of the Shadow-Front stronghold, the thunderous roar of his armor cracked the darkness, a key that had indeed survived the first night, the proclamation from a banner of red, white, and blue that freedom would not stand down.

[Wellton; 0500 Nov 1, 2002]:

Wing's back pressed against the wall as Amora buried into him. Her tears and whimpers drenched Amora's tiny space in sheets of sorrow, the news of her father's ambitions breaking a once massive spirit with ease. "Shhh," Wing spoke softly, his cheeks red as he wrapped his arms around the girl's shoulders, "everything is going to be okay." She sniffled and pushed him against the wall once more, her hands digging into his chest in search of a heart less devastated than her own. "I promise Amora, everything will be fine."

Her voice cracked as she felt Wing's hands stroke her back, as she felt her icy despair driven back by his warm touch. "How could he do that?" she wailed, gripping him tighter. "How could he be alive and not tell me? How could he run the Chancellorodt Shadow-Front? That's not the type of person he was... he would never betray his country."

Wing continued his back rub, unsure of what he should say to the frantic Lieutenant Hunter. Certainly, he knew giving her such news would break her heart, he knew that showing her what he and Kit found would be the hardest thing he ever had to do, but it was something that had to be done. "Amora," he replied quietly, pulling her close. "This isn't your fault, none of

it is. Please, do not put such guilt upon you heart because you'll only suffer for it. What your father does has nothing to do with the person you are; if he was corrupted by hate in the wake of terror that only shows the strength of your resolve.”

Amora pulled away from him, her tear-filled blue eyes looking into his caring gaze. “Wing,” her voice cracked again as her hands drifted away from his chest. A fresh batch of tears burst from her eyes as she lunged into him, her hands wrapping tight around his waist. “How come you always know the right thing to say? You big dumbass!”

Wing's body slid down the wall, dragging the crying Amora with it as it sank to the cold floor. Wing shook his head slowly in disbelief, his mind emerging from shock as he lifted Amora's chin with a gentle hand. He held her there for a moment, a slight blush appearing on each face as Wing's fingers spoke for him. The eternity held on by a thread of fate as he led Amora's lips to his, each passing second giving the eyes of the anxious another glimpse into the shadows of the past. As she gazed into those darkened spheres, portals to the world of the mind, their lips brushed and snapped the trance as one name cried out from the looming darkness. “Akaru,” she squeaked and fell back, her cheeks painted red with guilt as she looked up at Wing. In his eyes, Amora saw her brother's likeness, a ghastly reflection that magnified the viscous burden already pouring over her soul.

McCallister sighed, his hand twitching violently while his mother's words ran unopposed through the caverns of his mind. “You okay?” he asked softly, glancing down at her with a soft stare. Internally, the voice was menacing, a pleading cry for him to give in to his animalistic needs, but Wing held the sentence at bay for the sake of freedom, and, externally, gave Amora the little hope he could offer.

“Akaru,” she said again, slowly rising to her feet and yanking Wing from the floor. “Have you heard that name before?” she blared, her saddened blue eyes becoming fierce with rage. “I need to know, Wing. Was he in the report!?”

Wing twitched, his eyes sinking to the floor as he thought in the midst of endless time. Its bourns had placed him on that infernal edge – a kiss that had fled the struggle for peace before the guns of an anxious war had fired through her soul – and now, walking that thin line, Wing had found no relief. “I don't know,” he whispered, his fists clenched as Amora held him tight. “It's possible, but I don't remember that particular name.”

Wing fell to his side as the temperamental Amora thrust him back and stormed after Aidan.

“I need to know,” she muttered, her feet stomping into the floor as the calm and comfort she felt with Wing degraded into the sinister fanfare of her chaotic past. The soothing chaconne that had embraced their time together came to an abrupt end as the cursed brand sought to revamp an outlandish beat. Its dissonant rage tore at her heart, resurrected a buried trust, and left Amora with a new purpose. “I have to get my brother back,” she spoke again, her pace quickening as she burst into a sprint. “I wasn’t there for you Akaru, and I don’t know what exactly happened, or how you could have survived. But, if you and father are part of the Shadow-Front, I need to know why, I need to see what kind of person my big brother has become – I will rescue you this time.”

Wing sat back in disbelief of the events that had transpired. He could feel his gut churning, the undeniable pain surging through him, telling him to follow her. Yet, another force was at work, a dark, meandering conscious, the wicked voice of his mother that held him back from a love that sat waiting before the forge. He could feel the nausea take over as he rolled towards the door, his fingers reaching out to grasp hold of the cold, hardened steel that built their underground resolve. Yet, as time ticked by, those bonds of solidarity began to break, for the tempo of the past was leading the fanfare.

Amora tore into Aidan’s closet of an office and hurled herself into his papers. “Hmm,” Aidan muttered, scratching the back of his head as he watched the frantic girl desperately search for the key to her family history. “It’s over there,” Aidan scoffed, pointing to a folder on another desk top. “You could have been a little more polite about...” Amora grabbed the folder and departed as quickly as she came. “Never mind!”

The blood red pages revealed their hidden message to the frantic Hunter in a voice that whispered from the shadows of a broken mind. “Come to me,” it said as she flipped through page after page, searching for the one name that could retune the tempo. “Come and find him,” it muttered, the eerie text reeking of her father’s malevolent needs. Amora turned the page again and her eyes drifted over the notes, the pictures, and the values of the new world order, but she did not find what she was looking for and spun with a huff. She jumped as his hands clamped onto her shoulders and gazed into the eyes of an

exhausted soul. “Wha...? Wing?” Amora mumbled, her cheeks turning red as she continued to gape into his outreaching spirit.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he said, pulling her close to him and hugging tight. “Remember,” Wing whispered, “we promised we’d fight them together?” His fingers ran down her back as he tugged her closer. “We’ll go,” he said, “to find your brother, but please don’t go alone.” While Amora’s flagrant temper slowed to a halt, her heart raced; the more she was with him, the better she felt, and now, even in the midst of inner turmoil, he forced her to feel at peace. Her mind stepped back to watch as Amora’s hand moved of its own accord and rested gently on Wing’s soft cheek. The rage dissipated from Amora’s vibrant blue eyes as she looked into him and the void was filled with a gentle, watery warmth that crept in from the edges of darkness. Amora leaned into Wing to complete the fragmented kiss, pulling on his shirt slightly as she clawed closer to him.

Wing smiled as his mother’s voice rang true in his head, speaking the solemn oath of the past, “You can’t defend against the one you love.” Yet, in the calm before the storm, Wing came up with his own answer to the conflict that had plagued his life for so long, “If I can’t defend against, then I’ll just protect the one I love.”

The Dark and the Light: Conflicting Souls for a Single Love

[22/20; July 4, 2003]:

Aidan glanced at Misura’s solemn gaze and sighed, “Yeah, this is when things got a little hectic.” The doctor twiddled his thumbs and stared at his finely tied shoelaces before continuing. “We all knew the connection Amora had towards her brother but we had no measure of its severity until Wing talked to her. He showed up at my door about ten minutes after Amora stormed out with the folder and told me that she would go whether we supported her or not. It’s hard to tell with Wing if he’s thinking in the military or loving mindset, but this time, I think it was a little of both worlds.

“If we had let Amora go it alone, there was a chance she’d be lost forever with no way out; but the option of a full out assault had become impractical because we had such a limited time window. And of course, you cannot forget about Kit and Sagami – both were opposed to going entirely, for they had other interests. Wing seemed to have the right idea, however, and I

agreed to let him and Amora go in while the others prepared the mobile units for the Los Angeles campaign. We had to act quickly, though, with Chucky on the way, and the Arai kids still in our custody, there was a lot to do and very little time to get it done.”

[Wellton; Nov 1, 2002]:

Kit intercepted Amora in the hallway as the sun rose over the arid Wellton desert. His hands pressed into the stern steel walls while hard maroon eyes met leering blue. “Don’t do it Amora!” Kit wailed, his hair waiving as his head bobbed in anger. “We don’t have the time and can’t risk losing you guys! I know you care about your brother and you want to know if he is still alive, but we can find him later. You and Wing are crucial...”

“Save it Kit...” Amora growled, her canines glinting as she tilted her head towards her comrade. “Aidan already gave Wing and me permission to go and that is exactly what we are going to do. You, on the other hand, should stop hunting my attention and help Aidan outfit those cars with the R.E.M. My brother means far more to me than you could possibly know; I let him down once already and I don’t plan on doing so again.”

Meanwhile, time had woven other threads of fate that plucked the chords of dissonance. It had been a long night for Wing as he drearily strode to his quarters, and the young pilot knew that rest was an immediate priority. However, Sagami Arai had other plans for Mr. McCallister and used the opportunity to voice her plea. “Wing,” she spoke softly, quietly following him while her eyes wandered. He continued to walk towards his room, smiling while Sagami continued her tale, but Wing had already composed this part of the symphony.

“I already asked Aidan to take you and your brothers to your father. Since the Shadow-Front didn’t mobilize to the actual city of Phoenix, I’m thinking Zachhzus is just fine.”

Sagami smiled and jumped to his side, taking his hand while giving a soft whimper. “I’m not only worried about my Dad, Wing.” She looked up into his eyes and gave a gentle smirk. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to you so I don’t think going on your mission with Amora is a good idea.”

Wing’s soft eyes fell upon the concerned girl as his mind pondered over his thoughts on this matter. “I understand it’s risky, Sagami,” Wing finally replied, continuing his journey

down the hall as he proceeded to speak. “But sometimes, you have to revoke the rights of the tactician for the rights of a person. We’re not the only ones that have gone through a lot, or the only ones that need help. Amora has gone through a lot too and I think that going to Area 49 will help answer some questions that have plagued her mind for some time.”

“B-but!” Sagami pleaded, lifting up Wing’s shirt in the blink of an eye and running her fingers across his scars. “You’re still not fully healed and you’ve already been out for the whole...”

Wing set his hand on the young Arai’s head and smiled. “Don’t worry about me Sagami.” He smiled. “You have to understand that, in life, some risks are worth taking... that is why history repeats itself, because those crucial risks are always the same.” Sagami blushed as she listened to Wing’s performance. “Helping the ones you love is always the top priority: it’s why your father wanted you here with me, it’s why you came to stop me from going, and it’s why I have to go with Amora.”

As Wing reached the door to his room, the girl blushed and quickly called out to him. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for me Wing,” she said, anxiety still controlling her mind. “Please get some rest and don’t overextend your limits.”

Wing looked back with a soft smile and stepped into his room as he gave Sagami a quick nod. With that, the lights of his domain dimmed to darkness and his steel tomb slowly closed, leaving the world with a question of unmatched consequence: would the phoenix be ready to fly again?

[BUNKER 1; 1400 Nov 1, 2002]:

Blair sighed as he sat alone in Bunker 1; the others had drifted off hours ago, driven by the need to experience freedom once again, but he had remained in confinement, hoping and praying that all was well on the other side of the planet. Rare satellite images of Wing’s bloodstained victory had crept through the voids of his sparkly blue eyes hours before, yet he still had not heard from Avalon. Fear bit at the president’s mind, much as it hunted countless others in his distant native land, but there was no longer any time for fear – the red phone rang.

Turner’s voice filled the president’s ears, but the call was short and to the point. “I’ll get right on it,” Blair said, setting the handset atop the aged rotary phone. He rose slowly from a worn chair and strode towards the bunker stairwell. “Hey,” he

shouted, hoping a member of his cabinet would take note. “Tell Downie the time has come!” Blair put his hand on the door to the small conference room and looked around. His gray hair flashed softly in the surreal light as his eyes darted over pictures of what America had used to be. “Good luck to you all,” he whispered, an image of Wing consuming his mind. “May the humble phoenix rise again and may the eyes of the innocent watch over us all.”

Where is the Phoenix Fire Assassin? [Wellton; 1500 Nov 1, 2002]:

Sweat poured from Kit’s body as he tinkered under the hood of a small, sport-car looking sedan. His teeth horrifically bit into another piece of solder as he affixed the final component of an R.E.M. block to the vehicle. His tired arms drooped as he closed the hood and stepped inside the cabin; its gutted interior was relatively spacious and together with the other six modified contraptions, there would be more than enough room to cart Avalon’s impressive collection of goods. As the engine’s thunderous roar filled the hangar, a grin invaded the teen’s face; the R.E.M. had done its job, and just like that, the vehicle disappeared from sight. “We’re ready to go,” Kit whispered, turning off the car and exiting as the metal frame returned to the optical realm. “Let’s just hope all goes well.”

Wing and Amora quickly entered the hangar bay, each hauling metal chests containing their respective armors, while Aidan lagged behind. “You two will be driving the number one car,” he said, motioning to the sedan closest to the launch tunnel. “There are no second chances on this one,” he paused, staring solemnly at the backs of their heads. “Turner and Fox are helping the grounds’ crew load up important files and components...”

Wing interrupted, “So after we leave and after the convoy rolls out, Avalon Base will be destroyed.” He spoke calmly, finishing the haul to vehicle #1. “I take it our personal belongings will be removed as well?” Wing asked, throwing the crate into the cleared cabin.

“Yeah,” Aidan replied quietly while glancing quickly around the hangar. “This place has been my home for a long time,” he muttered, pulling a cigarette from his lab coat. He spun around as Amora threw her trunk in the car and sighed, “This is gonna make me all kinds of antsy.”

“We don’t have time for this Aidan,” Amora wailed, flicking her ribbon and tugging on Wing’s arm. “You guys get the hell out of here,” she shouted, dragging the wide-eyed Wingness to the car. “And you! Get in the car, dammit!” Wing twitched and hopped into the vehicle, his eyes watching the frantic Amora get behind the wheel. Her head snapped towards him as she turned the ignition key, “Don’t you even think that I’m too anxious to drive either, McCallister!” While her voice roared inside the cabin, to the outside the sights and sounds of the sleek sedan were voided by the powerful R.E.M. system.

The jet-black paint of the car faded as the wheels crossed the threshold into the launch tunnel, and seconds later, there was no trace of Wing and Amora at all. McCallister’s eyes glanced at the steel rails of the launch tunnel, the streaks of oxidized metal whipping past as he ventured towards the surface world. The lights of the tunnel faded in-and-out as the pair passed through each massive cement block, while the red of the burning Arizona sky peeked in through the gateway to heaven. But the stairway quickly ended as the invisible tires dug into the dried, crusted dirt of a decrepit America. The pair of tracks left in those ominous sands were the sole signatures for a twine of silent heroes whose mystical endeavors had left a powerful government scurrying for a quick fix and a final solution.

[Area 49; 1515 Nov 1, 2002]:

Lock stood in a bunker of the impressive Area 49 compound while his steady hand calmly stroked his scraggly beard. His gloomy black eyes blended well with the dreary jungle green of the room, and the lights that dangled eerily above served only to illuminate the sea of decay that floated about the premises. The cloaked ruler of Shadow-Front drifted towards a map of his domain and glanced at the large X’s placed in northern Baja California and in southern British Columbia where his advisors believed the United Arsenal invasion would begin. Yet, Lock did not trust his staff and therefore he concocted his own scheme to discover what Blair was really planning. The Area 49 folder found in the labyrinth of the Phoenix International Airport had been nothing more than a plant; sure the victims of his brutal torture wanted to share their pain with the world, but he would use their conniving for a far greater purpose: to lure his daughter with the quest for truth.

“She’ll come to me,” he muttered, his eyes wandering from the map to the mold infested walls. “She’ll wonder how I

can still be alive, and ask if her brother shared the same ‘merciful’ fate.” His fingers caressed the black steel of a gun affixed to his belt and the chilling sensation triggered a grin that pierced the stagnant veil of evil that coated the room. “Come back to me my child,” he snickered, continuing to stroke the gun lightly as he paced the room. “Come back to me and learn your fate.”

[Wellton; 1517 Nov 1, 2002]:

The sedans were ready as Aidan shoved the last batch of his papers into the trunk bed. In the passenger seat of his vehicle, Sagami Arai sat waiting, her impatient eyes glaring at the walls of steel and stone before the Avalon convoy departed. “This is it,” Aidan mumbled, sliding into the seat and glancing at the young girl. “I’ve asked your brothers to stay with Kit until we’ve confirmed your father’s safety,” he continued. “I doubt there will be any trouble, seeing as how the city was empty this morning, but there is no reason to put your brothers in potential danger.”

“That’s fine,” Sagami interrupted, her heart beating nervously with every passing second. “Can we go?” she asked, watching Aidan tap anxiously at the steering wheel. While the journey to Los Angeles was a bittersweet voyage for Aidan, the thought of venturing into Phoenix was a nightmare for Sagami. Certainly, Wing had saved her and her brothers from the hells of that Halloween night, but had the ‘Ode to All Hallows’ spared her beloved father.

“Yeah,” Aidan replied, turning on the ignition. His solemn gaze fell to the dashboard as the R.E.M camouflage cloaked the car and Sagami watched as his timid hand reached for a radio mounted between the seats. Sweat dripped from Aidan’s brow, his shades sparkled in the fluorescent sun, and the radio receiver slowly approached his parched lips. “This is it,” he spoke softly into the black plastic piece. “I’m taking Sagami to pick up Mr. Arai,” Aidan continued. “There is no turning back from here guys. Our base, our lab, and our home will no longer exist when I exit the hangar gates. We will meet at the California border off I-10 as soon as possible and wait there for Wing and Amora. There are shortwave beacons in all the sedans to warn each car when it is near the proximity of another, but please, we must retain secrecy at all costs, therefore I am asking that the radios be saved for emergency communication only.”

The other vehicles checked in with an ‘affirmative’ and rolled out at their own pace into the waning Arizona afternoon.

Aidan looked back to Sagami, her fragile dark eyes meeting his emerald ones as he put the car gear in drive. "Let's do it," he muttered, steering towards the doorway with a slight grin. The others had departed, and now it was his turn; for years, he had been locked away in the palace of the underworld, becoming the Vulcan of the modern age, but now he had his heroes and the time to leave had come. "Sagami," Aidan muttered, placing a small device in her hand. "When we clear the gates," he continued, "I want you to push the red button on this thing, okay?"

Sagami nodded and looked over the small black device as the hangar lights reflected off its glistening surface. "Is this the detonator?" she asked hesitantly, still gazing at the object. Aidan punched the accelerator and grinned as the car catapulted into the launch tunnel. Sagami's eyes widened as they shot through the cement barrel, the vibrant lights passing overhead casting a reflection on even her darkened eyes.

It took Aidan several seconds to reply, but as the light of the surface world came into view, he nodded. "Yes," he replied softly, his lead foot slowly depressing the gas pedal all the way to the floor. "As soon as we reach the surface, I want you to push the button."

"Okay," Sagami retorted, slightly irritated at Aidan's repetition – after all, she was not merely a child. "I understand, already!" she continued, resting her elbow where the side window met the doorframe. The end of the tunnel approached rapidly and Sagami tentatively wrapped her fingers around the detonator; sweat seeped from her hand as the two rocketed towards the sky with the engine humming an epic symphony.

[Area 49; 1520 Nov 1, 2002]:

Colonel Rachael Wolfe sat in the medical bay of Area 49 while Dr. Val Manning cloaked the room in a façade of good cheer. "Extend your arm," he spoke, flicking a syringe of his potent Regen Alzheimer's Protein serum. Wolfe cracked her knuckles and extended her arm slowly, her hellish eyes glaring deeply into the conniving doctor.

"I know why you fear him," she grinned, her slender frame concealing her true strength. Manning remained silent as he pushed some serum through the needle and watched it drip to the rusted floor below. "Don't give me that silent treatment, snake!" she roared, her claw like nails digging into his arm as she leered into his amber eyes. Her dark maroon hair wavered as

a chuckle erupted from her lungs. “I taught that boy everything he knows, but he’s the perfect berserker you want, and that bothers you.”

“Shut up,” Val replied, using his free hand to shove the needle into her arm. “I don’t give a damn about your relation to Wing! I just want you to keep him busy while Lord Hunter speaks with his daughter.” He gazed into Rachael’s hate-filled eyes and grinned while slowly injecting the serum into her body. “Now be a good wolf and do your damn job.”

Wolfe stood up and grabbed the doctor by the throat. “Let me make something perfectly clear to you genius,” she snarled, tightening her grip. “Hunter should have told you that your little serum doesn’t take over my mind that well. Its only purpose is to amplify my focus so I kill what remains within mission bounds.” Val gulped and tried to step back. “I smell the fear sweating off you, Manning.” She pulled him closer and whispered into his ear, “You can’t figure out why your “perfect” serum doesn’t work on everyone, why after a couple of doses those with strong wills can resist its influence, but the answer is quite simple: the heart overpowers the mind.”

“If Akaru doesn’t wish to kill his sister,” she continued, “he’s not going to, no matter how much shit you pump into him, but I can tell you exactly why he’ll hunt down Wing. He knows as much as I do that that punkass is worthy prey while you are vermin that I could crush with my bare hand.” She twitched as her cackle burst into maniacal laughter. “Your problem is that you threw Akaru and me in with the lot of your civilian guinea pigs. You assumed that he and I would be damn pushovers! But we’re not like the hiding swine of America; we were all trained by some branch of the Armed Services. Truly, your serum is an incredible invention, but it’s only perfect when used against a scared mother fucker. With me, with Akaru, and with those pilots, it’ll be like smoking a joint.”

She tossed the doctor into the wall as a twinkle formed in his amber eye, one that was coated with a sheet of deceit. “I smell them,” Rachael muttered, walking out the door with a growl. “Have fun wasting your life,” she roared and headed down the hall, adjusting her summer-cut dessert camouflage wear.

Despite the confrontation, a grin affixed itself to Manning’s face, and as he sat down at his workbench his malign brilliance finally regained form. He snickered quietly, “This whole time I’ve been worried about the dosage, but really the problem lies with the Alzheimer’s protein. While I did my job in

finding a serum that could scramble a person's renegade neurological ambitions and force his focus down the path of righteousness, I failed to remember the critical fact that emotions remain wild in Alzheimer's patients." He slammed a pad of notebook paper onto the bench and began to scribble, "But! If I were able to lace an anger inducing statin or steroid to my precious neurological toxin, thereby blinding those insolent brats from their thieving emotions, the serum would truly be perfect."

The doctor's eyes narrowed as he grabbed jars of pills and liquid medications from a nearby cabinet. "There isn't much time," he thought, spreading the drugs out on the tabletop. "If Lock wants to fulfill his sadistic dream, and if what that brat Wolfe said is true, then my lord will need this new serum for Amora."

* * *

The degraded iron fence that marked the hellhole of Area 49 came into view as the sporty sedan chugged through the Arizona wasteland. "This is it," Wing spoke softly, glancing to Amora, who slammed her foot on the brake. The vehicle appeared from the arid abyss as the pair of pilots emerged from the cabin. "Slow down," he continued, watching her tear the XS from its slumber.

Amora glared as she retied the knot of her glorious red ribbon. "I don't have time for your lectures Wing," she muttered while sliding into the XS's frame. Wing quickly grabbed her arm and leered into her vibrant blue eyes. "Let go of me, McCallister!" she blared, tearing away from him. "I have to see if he's here! I have to see if my Dad is here, too!"

"Stop it!" Wing shouted, stepping close to her. "We're in this together Amora. That's what I told you back at the compound, and that's the story that we're going to stick to. If you run in there all anxious and jumpy, you're going to die, and I'm not going to be responsible for the death of another loved one!" He stopped and bit his tongue, his cheeks flushed as he continued to stare into her eyes.

Amora blushed and stepped back from the XS as her hand reached out and lured Wing in by the chin. She kissed him softly as her other hand dangled around his neck and a slight smile appeared on her face while she pulled away. "Wing," she muttered weakly, her hand rubbing his skin. "You know I don't want anything to happen to you or me, but my brother means a lot to me. I have to know the truth before I can hope to move on with my life."

“Aww,” a sarcastic voice bellowed from behind the fence, “isn’t that adorably cute?” Rachael leaned against the iron-gate with her elbows drooped lazily between the blackened spike tops. She watched as Wing turned around to face her, those crystal brown eyes of his meeting her gaze. “Don’t mind me,” she said, “I’m just here to keep you company while Amora has a chat with her daddy.” She motioned to the armors and grinned, “Those are pretty, but I don’t think they’ll be any use to you here. The only one capable of killing anybody in this damn place is me, and I’d rather see what the little homicidal freak has to offer than some sissy diplomat.”

Amora twitched and was about to burst when Wing lifted his hand. “Get in the armor,” he said, glaring at Rachael. “I take it that means the only one allowed to enter without incident is her, colonel?” He bit the colonel and shifted his sight to Amora as she slid into the XS.

“You’d be correct, sergeant major,” she replied, leaping over the fence in a display of pure strength and agility.

Wing looked to Amora and sighed. “Be careful, Amora. Don’t trust anything or anyone you see in that place.”

Amora walked forward and passed Rachael on the way to the gate. “Keep walking,” Wolf mumbled to her, “and your father will take you to the underworld soon enough. Just keep going straight and you should find him eventually.” Their red and blue eyes clashed as they crossed, invisible sparks of the American spectrum darting through a sea of war. Amora looked back to the gate and her eyelids dropped into a scowl; there was more to focus on at-the-moment than a craving lunatic – the devil was waiting.

In the meantime, Rachael Wolfe set her hellfire gaze back on her former subordinate. “You’ve come a long way since the days at boot camp,” she laughed as Wing shrugged his shoulders. “You should hear the shit they say about you down there! All the babbling about why you need to be feared: first it’s your charisma, which I guess is a bureaucratic way of saying you’re a good motivational speaker, then it’s all the shit you’ve done since breaking out of Abulher, but the final reason is that you’re a god damn killer. I’m sure you read that stupid folder about what’s going on here and saw their bullshit dream to make a perfect berserker.”

She grinned at the twitch in his eye and continued. “Of course, everybody knows the brutality with which Wing kills when he gets pissed or when a loved one is put in danger. You

snap like a bitch on a hissy fit! You crawl around like a filthy animal and after your meal is done, you slink back into the shadows to recuperate your poor, injured mind.” Her voice grew sarcastic as the last sentence concluded. “But me!” she roared. “I’m a fucking wolf! I will put the safety of my pack well above my own, and trust me when I say that the safety of my country is my top concern. You are an idiot, your friends are idiots, and some of the people in the Chancellorodt are idiots, but I will do whatever it takes to eliminate the mistakes. Thankfully, it seems the perfect trap has been set to reel in my dream’s first victory.”

Wing’s eyes glazed over as his mind worked to complete the picture of her drastic vision. Within the chambers of his conscience, the facts aligned and his worst fear towards the visit became reality. In an instant, he flinched and ran for the gate, sprinting as fast as he could towards another loved one about to feel the sting of betrayal. “So this was a setup!” he sneered, but Rachael jumped in his way, her body low to the ground while she leered up at his shocked face.

“Aww, is Wing upset because he thinks his girlfriend is in danger? Don’t be a cry baby! You knew that a classified folder lying in the middle of an airport had to be a setup, but you took the chance! Do not feel too bad though; everything in that folder is true, but Lock let it “escape” his notice because he knew Amora would seek the answers to her questions despite the risk.” She grinned and cracked her knuckles once more. “But you don’t need to hear this because you have much more important things to worry about.”

Her fist shot towards his face, but Wing countered, shoving his fist into hers with a low, demonic growl. The crack of bone caused each of their ears to twitch and the canine Wolfe quickly jumped back with a smile. “This is going to be fun,” she mumbled, her hands raised for a slash while her feet dug into the dry, cracked soil.

* * *

The lights dangled above as Amora walked down the hallway. Minutes had passed since she was drawn into the underground abyss and sucked in by the lure of hell. Despite the damp, unpleasant surroundings, the creepy setting did not bother her; after all, the young pilot had toured the world with President McKenna and she had seen far worse things. In the meantime, her mind remained focused on Wing’s words, his warning to her to take it slow, and her conscience tried to force the bind on her anxious heart. However, ominous prophecies and a strong mind

do not satisfy an enraged heart, and as Amora heard voices echoing throughout the cellar, her pace quickened.

“...I’m not sure if it will work, Lord,” Amora caught mid-sentence, her pace continuing to increase. “The wolf pointed out the flaws in my creation, but like any decent scientist, I tried to perfect my serum. However, there isn’t enough time to lace the additions to the mix; therefore I had to make a potent solution instead.”

The voice pounded her ears as a familiar tone followed the reptilian mumble. “Good work, Val,” Lock said, waving him away. “I’m sure your work is fine, but now I have a special visitor with whom I need to speak.” He looked past Manning to the doorway and smiled, his dark eyes met Amora’s scowling blue leer. “There’s my girl,” he said pseudo-proudly, his arms raised as the scientist nervously slithered out of the room.

Amora stepped forward and leered into her father’s eyes while her blood boiled in agony. “It’s true then,” she muttered, continuing to walk forward, her stare unwavering. “You are the head of a tyrannous, homicidal, prejudicial government cult.” Amora stopped her march, halting so her father stood at the opposite end of the massive map covered table.

Lock tapped his waist and smiled, looking at his daughter with a keen expression. “Honey, honey,” he mumbled before continuing. “You’ve been corrupted by a lot of evil men, my child. How could a man that deserted his country ever be perceived as an honest human being? You put such blind faith in a person who was so eager to leave his nation to receive protection from others that he forgot the people he served. You put such blind faith in a boy who killed his own mother, who ended many innocent lives, and who is deep down a berserker with the ability to falsely motivate the masses while desecrating millions of people.”

Lock’s eyes overlooked the XS during his brief pause while Amora stared on in stunned disbelief to her father’s words. “But that’s not why you’re here, is it?” Lock replied to the silence. “You’re here because you found something that belongs to me and it made you want to ask certain questions about a supposedly concluded past.” Hunter wrapped his fingers around his dark cloak and gazed into his daughter’s eyes. “I suppose the first thing that took over your mind was the fact that I was still alive, and then came the hope that maybe your brother was still alive as well.”

Amora’s fists slammed against the table as she leaned towards her father. “Damn right I want to know if he’s alive, you

bastard!” she exclaimed, pointing at him. “How could you do this?” she yelled, glaring angrily. “You knew I loved him and you took him away! He was a good person!”

Lock grinned and leaned forward as well, snickering menacingly as he hunched. “Is that any way to speak to your father, young lady?” he asked in a calm, parental tone. “And your brother still is a good person.” Lock paused, making sure Amora’s attention was firmly held. “You see, Amora, when Blair realized he had lost control of domestic affairs during his crusade in Europe, he appointed the Chancellor to take over. At the time, the board was nothing more than a handful of right-wing senators who had weaseled their ways into the elite brackets of society. Of course,” he continued, “there was one who knew what she was doing: Ms. Miaka McCallister. A brilliant woman really and an absolutely captivating character she was. Ironically, America’s greatest enemy is the son of the one person who realized that running America with a bunch of old, arguing politicians, like Blair, compromised national progress.

“Sure, those geezers were all elected members of the Constitutional system, but they had no edge. Miaka discovered that the only way to secure America was to do it with military might. However, she needed a man with the balls to do it right, and that man was me. Really hun,” he blurted, moving around the table to approach her, “I didn’t intend for your brother to get involved. I was quite pleased knowing the fact that my children were guarding America, but my ascendance was to be known only my Senator McCallister and the few old fogies that supported her ideas. Unfortunately, your brother happened to overhear my plot and like a righteous slave of idealistic democracy, he opposed me. Even now, after I have tried to persuade him dozens of times in a variety of different ways, that foolish son of mine manages to resist my influence.

“Just look at you,” he continued, coming to rest a hand on the shoulder of the XS in an effort to sway the tone of the conversation. “You’ve grown up into such a strong, young woman, and evolved from that desk strategist you were.” Amora stepped back and looked into her father’s eyes, the voided cores casting an evil spell. “You have nothing to fear, Amora. You have only come to seek the truth, and I have waited here solely to provide you with a truthful answer. I could never kill my own daughter, despite the fact that we don’t see eye to eye.” He slowly gripped the helmet of the XS and lifted it from its emotionally torn pilot. “It’s just unfortunate that such a gifted individual doesn’t side with her father. I am sure Akaru would be

pleased to know that you were safe within the family's grasp, as opposed to running around with those vigilantes. The stress of it all has torn your brother apart; it is why he fights me with such fervor and why he has resisted the effects of Manning's ingenious serum. Yet," Lock placed the helmet of the XS on the table, and moved his hand to her flushed cheek.

Amora remained a statue before the power of her domineering, charismatic father. His words froze her exhausted body and shocked her into a state of inanimate being. She had once again quickened her pace at the wrong moment in time, and just like Wing had predicted, it had brought her to the brink of moral death. "Manning assured me he found a solution," Lock continued, his other hand reaching from his waist and jabbing a syringe into Amora's neck, "and you are the glorious key to salvation."

Amora stepped back as she felt pressure build throughout her body. Her peripheral vision faded to white as her muscles swelled and the pounding of blood rang through her ears. "What did you..." she spoke, her voice falling silent as the swelling continued. Lock watched as the veins in his daughter's neck swelled, the blood of anger overriding her compassionate emotions.

"Return to me," Lock whispered, dropping back with a grin. "You've been misled my sweet child. Akaru and I have been waiting for you; we want you to rejoin the family. Take the stress of your departure off your brother's grieving heart and return to us." Amora stared at her father as her vision continued to degrade, bands of darkness streaming down the tunnel of her sight. "Blair is the traitor, A.J.," he continued, rambling on with a smirk. "He abandoned us! He betrayed us, and he must not be allowed to destroy our great home." Lock paused, running his hands down his cloak and forming them into clenched fists.

"And Wing!" he blared, "is the modern-day version of Hitler! He's nothing but a brutal, conniving, maniacal slayer. He tortured his visionary mother to death and ended the lives of dozens of innocent men and women. Help me end this war, my sweet, lovely daughter! Destroy Wing before he destroys us all." The voice echoed in Amora's mind as her knuckles cracked and her eyes dulled. The new serum was in full control of her already disheveled conscience and with that, Amora smiled and nodded affirmatively.

"Excellent, my child," Lock continued. "But before you go, tell me where Avalon is and where the invasion force is planning to strike."

Amora grinned and stepped towards her father. “The Avalon Compound is located in Wellton, Arizona,” she muttered, administering a soft cackle. “As for the invasion force,” she looked to the map and smiled, but before the next sentence could escape her mouth, the interruption came.

~several minutes earlier~

The sun further sank towards the horizon as Rachael slammed Wing into the ground. Both were bleeding as Wing kicked up to his feet, his shirt torn, revealing large canine scratch marks that ripped into his chest. Despite the recent maneuver, Rachael was not in good shape either; her abdomen had been struck repeatedly, leaving a constellation of welts and bruises that bathed her skin in a sea of black and blue. Her camouflage attire had been ripped and smudged, and the exposed skin had been scrapped and cut by the rocky desert landscape. There was no doubt, as Wing charged forward, that both were in pain. He wailed as Wolfe threw a punch, grappling her wrist with his hand and contorting the combatant’s arm with a great deal of strength. Yet the colonel would not take the pressure for long, and she rolled out of the hold with a burst of energy.

“Damn you,” she mumbled, rising to her feet and clutching her gut as the bruises seared her nerves. She watched Wing twitch as he came towards her and knew that her clawing had done a great deal of damage. “I’ll devour you,” Rachael continued, glaring as he charged her again. Their fists collided, but Wolfe would not be caught in the same trap twice; she quickly ducked down and planted her boot into Wing’s chin as she dove to his flank. McCallister landed with a thud, his shoulder blades cracking as his body sprawled out. “This is my chance,” she thought, leaping at him to deliver a final slash to his throat.

Wing shuddered as the pain pulsed through his torso, but he did not have the time to wait and quickly swiped with his left hand. His nails dug into Wolfe’s cheek in the midst of her leap, and the force of his swing sent her to the ground. She shouted as her body collided with the arid dirt, streams of blood dripping down her face from where his nails ripped the skin. “Are you thirsty?” Wing asked, the pain intensifying as he once again rose from the ground.

“Shut up, McCallister,” Rachael sneered, pushing herself up gradually. “Dammit,” she thought, wiping the blood from her cheek, “Since when did he become this strong. With those

injuries he should have gone down by now,” her own words echoed through her thoughts, “but the heart overpowers the mind and the body.” She grinned and began her new attack strategy; if attacking his body did not work, and exhausting his mind failed, the only option left was attacking the heart. “You’re too beat up,” she said. “Even if you do strike me down, you will never get to Amora in time. By now she’s probably dead, another decrepit corpse for the Area 49 collection, and the best thing is: it’s all your...”

“I asked you a question,” Wing interrupted, calling the tactic and stepping forward while his body hunched to the pain. “Are you thirsty?”

Rachael fell silent and gazed at the beaten flesh and bone approaching her. She was puzzled by Wing’s continued advance, and her mind lost its edge as she watched the crimson veil pour over his body. Wolfe jerked as the distance between the two combatants lessened, her stomach churning in agony from the devastating blows. She had lost her mode of attack and, after licking the remaining blood from her cheek, decided to respond. “No, I’m not thirsty.”

Wing’s mind was saturated with the fragments of his mother’s last words, the parting message she had given to him through the blood of her demise. His worn gaze sharpened, flaming into a leer as his answer dispelled all doubts. “You can’t defend against the ones you love” fell to “Then I will just protect her!” Wing gained a second wind and darted at his opponent, taking the true form of a phoenix rising as he gripped her throat with his found claws. Wolfe swiped once more at his gut, grinning sadistically as blood poured from his wounds, but Wing did not release his hold. “Are you sure?” he muttered. “Because, you need a nice tall glass of shut the fuck up!” McCallister slammed her into the ground with all his might, causing the ground to shatter beneath the shocked wolf. She groaned as the crack of bones once again split the air, but the symphony of battle no longer had the heart to play and the colonel fell silent.

Wing looked beyond the fence and stood tall, his heart resetting his battered body as he ran towards hell’s gate. Wolfe was right when she said that time was running out; he could no longer let the seconds pass, and in the anxiety, in the desire to save the one he loved, he overlooked the XT’s strength and flew into hell with his own wings.

[Phoenix; 1545 Nov. 1, 2002]:

Aidan took a hard left and let off the accelerator as he darted through the empty streets of Phoenix. Sagami held onto her seatbelt as the glint of rusted metal shot past the window every few seconds. She glanced at Aidan, who seemed to be having a good time as he continued to speed, and sighed nervously. It was true that this part of town had become sparsely populated in the days following the Shadow-Front take over; the industrial sect had been predominantly run by the Arab-American community, but following the bus raids, most owners had been deported elsewhere. Yet, despite the lack of people in the area, Arai still feared that Aidan's frantic driving would get them killed.

"Slow down!" she wailed, clinging to her seat belt tightly and Aidan pressed down on the brake. Sagami breathed rapidly and leered at the scientist with her dark, agitated eyes. "You drive too fast!" she continued, pointing to a broken spotlight in the distance. "That's the turn."

Aidan smiled and continued to slow the vehicle, scratching his head as he made a one-handed turn. "Sorry about that," he said softly before continuing. "It's been a long time since I was able to go out and hit the streets like that." The doctor glanced down at his child companion, her eyes wide in disbelief as she stared through the front windshield. Aidan quirked his eyebrows and mumbled, "Are you okay, Sagami? Really, I won't drive that fast if you don't want me to." He watched as tears formed in the child's eyes and shut off the car while looking to the splinters of wood and metal piled at the end of the block. The scientist did not have to ask to figure out what was wrong, and he slowly slid out of the car, opened the passenger side door, and took the young Sagami by the hand.

She silently unbuckled her seatbelt and let Aidan drag her out of the car. Her legs were weak as she walked close behind the doctor, fearing the presence of her father's body amongst the corpse that was her home. However, as the two approached the home, Aidan did not detect any signs of the sword-smith, and anxiously led Sagami into the ruins of the shack. "This was a grenade," he mumbled, looking at the blown out pieces of tin and the shrapnel scattered about the street. "I don't think we have to worry, kid," Aidan continued, squeezing her hand gently and giving a reassured look. "If he was dead, the Shadow-Front would have him on display. It's more likely that he made his way out and escaped somehow."

Sagami cried as the burned, snapped floorboards creaked beneath her feet. “Daddy,” she whined, holding onto Aidan’s hand as the tears trickled down her reddened cheeks.

Aidan sighed and knelt down beside the ten-year-old girl. “Sagami,” he spoke softly, looking into her eyes with a smile, “I am sure your Dad is okay; he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to be caught up in something like this. You have to be strong in times like these, hun.” He placed his other hand on her shoulder and nodded slightly, but his sweet talk only worsened the feelings boiling inside the girl and she quickly dove into him.

Her eyes overflowed with tears and the wet, salty masses slowly dripped down her cheeks only to be engulfed by Aidan’s lab attire. Parks lifted her up, placing the girl so her head rested on his shoulder while his arms embraced her in a comforting hug. Sagami’s eyes continued to pour tears as her vision slowly wandered about the destroyed room. The charred smell in the air petrified her and the ghastly appearance of her tiny shack only made the feared loss of her father worse. Yet from the emotional darkness, a small glimmer of hope sparkled from beneath the floor, showering Sagami’s eyes with a barrage of bright light. The flicker caused her to leap from Aidan’s arms and pounce on the spot, her hands ripping the dry wood from its battered frame.

Beneath the desecrated grounds, she found a mighty blade, an unfinished sword forged by her father’s renowned hands. Her eyes widened as she read a small note wrapped around the beauty’s spine. “*All is well my child. This one is for the phoenix of our times. Finish the Anstelveve for me. You know whom it is for. Love, Dad.*” The girl’s tears slowly dried as she embraced the blade, its polished steel gleaming in her gentle hands as she turned back to Aidan with a gentle smile. “It’ll be okay,” Sagami said assuredly to the doctor, walking towards him with tear stained cheeks. As the pair walked back to the car, Sagami practically hugged the blade, its pulsing warmth surrounding her with the love of her father and its daunting spirit crying for its hero to come.

[Area 49; 1530 Nov 1, 2002]:

Amora grinned and stepped towards her father. “The Avalon Compound is located in Wellton, Arizona,” she muttered, administering a soft cackle. “As for the invasion force,” she looked to the map and smiled, but before the next sentence could escape her mouth, the interruption came.

Wing leapt into the room, his blood dripping to the floor while his leering eyes took focus on Amora. “Don’t say another word Amora!” he wailed, gripping the ferocious claw marks that riddled his chest. In an instant, Amora tackled Wing into the hard tile wall and grinned as her powerful XS snapped his injured shoulder blades with ease. Wing screamed and fell to the floor when Amora stepped away to watch his gargled cough paint the floor with a streak of bright red. She turned to her father with a smile and nodded as the lord gazed on happily. His dream was unfolding before his very eyes: the resistance that had plagued him for so long was losing its force, the teen who he had feared was being disassembled, and his own daughter was the one doing all the work.

“Avalon will be torn apart from the inside,” he snickered, watching Amora stand over the helpless Wing. “Make him suffer,” Lock bellowed before his daughter planted the boot of the XS on Wing’s sprawled arm. Amora nodded once more and stepped down; with the powerful hydraulics of the XS driving a sheet of steel, Wing’s arm offered little resistance, and the bone quickly snapped. His screams did little to phase her, her mind remained locked within the bounds of Manning’s serum and the consequences of that destiny became strikingly clear. “Do it again,” Lock continued, his mind not yet quenched by the fetish found in Avalon’s self-destruction. He laughed as Wing screamed again, the same arm being crushed by a cold-hearted Amora.

Lord Hunter grinned as he watched Wing’s body slowly become inanimate. The teen’s screams died out and he lay flat on the cold, damp floor while Amora’s steel boot continued to bear down on Wing’s arm. “Kill him,” Lock said, gazing to Amora with a gentle smile. She calmly raised her leg and rested the heel plate on Wing’s dormant head. With one twitch of her muscle, she could bring an end to the war, she could give the victory to her father, and Lock was leaning forward in anticipation. “Kill him!” he exclaimed, waiting to see Wing’s mind decorate the canvass of Area 49. Amora growled, the frost around her heart giving way to the fire behind it. The serum flowing through her mind desperately tried to get her to stomp down, but her love was slowly regaining control. She looked at Wing and shook her head frantically, jumping back and leering at her father.

“No,” she sneered, feeling the effects of Manning’s prototype fade away. “I’m not going to kill...”

Lock had heard enough and quickly drew the gun that had been affixed to his waist. His dark cloak ruffled as he glared

at his daughter, his teeth bearing menacingly at her through his thick beard. "Then I'll kill the both of you," he said, pointing the pistol at Amora without regret. "I have nothing to lose," he continued, staring angrily. "I've already lost you once, child; do you think I would care if I lost you again?" He was about to pull the trigger when the right arm of Wing pounded into the lord's neck.

"You're not going to kill anyone!" Wing shouted, flinging Lock into the wall with another shout. Wing rammed his head into the skull of America's king, his left arm hanging limp at his side while he grunted with each attack. Lock collected himself and raised the gun slowly but Wing kicked it away and leered into Lock's soul. The teen's eyes cast an eerie amber glow as he continued to pound into Lock, the lord's dripping blood only driving Wing deeper into berserker rage. Amora stood in disbelief as Wing viciously assaulted her father, their grunts of love and agony piercing her ears with symbolic dissonance. Wing licked his lips and drove Lock to the floor before planting his boot into Hunter's gut. "But me," he snickered, "I'll have fun killing you."

Lock glanced into Wing's demonic eyes, their brown cores completely tinted with the angry gold shade. He watched as Wing smirked sinisterly, blood dripping from seemingly every pore of his beaten body. Hunter was amazed by Wing's rebound and gazed silently at the warrior's shattered arm. Towering above him was fear's only fear, the light that shined through the dark of night, the third Angel of Wellton. Lock Hunter's mind filled with doubt as he continued to stare at the pest and feel the grip of death that held him down. "It's not my time to die," Lock mumbled, continuing to look at Wing's scorching leer. "I won't fail in my moment of greatest success." He glanced at the ceiling and wailed, "Rachael," with all of his might, hoping that his personal killing machine would come to his aid.

In a snap, the beaten wolf bolted into the room, her blood adding to the collage that covered the walls and floor as her claws dug into the fuel line of the XS. She grinned as the diesel burst from the lines and with a pleased smile leapt to the protection of her fading lord. Wolfe grabbed hold of Wing's broken arm and yanked it, causing him to flop to the ground in another yelp of pain. Her eyes shot to Amora, who was having trouble controlling the fuel leaking XS, as she picked up the injured Lock. "My lord," she said calmly.

“Kill them,” he replied angrily, trying to push her back into the action, but Rachael held on tight. “What are you doing, Wolfe? Now is our chance! Don’t let it slip away.”

She carried him towards the door, her eyes continuing to look over the detained Amora and injured Wing. “Now is not the time, sir,” Rachael muttered, carrying him into the hallway. “Without you, Chancellorodt has no chance for survival. Trust me when I say that we’ve done enough damage for one day: that suit can’t operate with its fuel lines severed and Wing will be out of action for a while. At this moment, the top priority is evacuating this installation and getting you to safety.”

Wing’s eyes shot open as he lay on the chilled floor. The sinister amber aura had sunk into the netherworld of his subconscious and he quickly looked to Amora with a pain-ridden smile. “Are you alright?” he asked, his lush brown orbs staring into her clouded blue crystals.

“Shut up, dumbass!” she wailed, trying desperately to move the sluggish armor. “We have to get out of here,” Amora cried, watching the diesel coat the room. Finally, she gave up, shut down the XS, and pulled the release trigger with a huff. Before her feet could hit the ground, her body was already lunging for Wing while her throbbing heart called out for his touch. His blood saturated the skin of her fingers as Amora dragged them along his injured chest, her eyes staring at his left arm in complete disbelief. “I’m sorry,” she said, taking her ribbon and tying it around his bloodied forehead before picking Wing up on her shoulders. “I should have never dragged you into...”

Wing put his right hand over her mouth and smiled, whispering in her ear softly, “I love you.” The words erupted from his lungs, formed a crescendo of hope from the decadence of absolute despair, and made sweet music for Amora’s perked ears.

She gently nibbled on his index finger and turned back to him with tears welled in her glistening eyes. “I love you too, Wing,” she spoke, watching his eyes close as a smile appeared on his war-torn face. When Amora snapped her gaze to the XS, her tears dropped to the ground, her brown hair drifted in the stench-infested air, and her mind contemplated how to get Wing, the XS, and herself to the surface as quickly as possible.

[Interstate 10, Arizona; 2247 Nov 1, 2002]:

Sagami cast her sights on the night deserts of Western Arizona as she and Aidan continued their voyage to Los Angeles. The katana blade still remained in her unyielding grip, its powerful aura of steel soothing the 10-year-old with the promise that everything would turn out okay, but Aidan was incredibly nervous. His golden shades rested on the tip of his nose and his green eyes calmly glanced over the road while his mind pondered the tough questions. He desperately hoped that the other vehicles had made it to the border safely and prayed that Amora and Wing had escaped the clutches of evil's domain without falling victim to its traps and lures.

Little did he know what difficulties waited on the other side of the horizon, little did he know that hours before Wing had come close to death, and that, as he thought wearily, the ones he cared for were fighting against time. The short-range beacon beeped as a ragged sign emerged from the shroud of the night, its tattered steel signaling in great white letters that Aidan and Sagami had made it to their destination. 'California' welcomed them with open arms, and Aidan's sorrow become sprinkled with happiness. The beacon showed that all the other vehicles had made it to the border without incident, and now in the dark of night, all Avalon had to do was to wait for its two stray stars. The two that twinkled dimly in a night of love and war, the two that ventured in to hell's own house, and the two that fought death face to face but went astray. Wing and Amora were still missing and Avalon could only beg for their safe return.

Los Angeles is waiting...

Episode 3 (©2007)
The Blurred Line
L.A. Campaign

Wing listened silently to Amora's words as his body lurched forward. The seat of the cloaked car could no longer constrain Wing's bloodstained chest as it fell limp on the strained seatbelt. However, the battle with Lock and Rachael had not taken McCallister out yet, and he struggled to maintain his consciousness by listening to Amora's frantic voice.

Amora glanced at Wing anxiously as the pair raced for the California border. She could tell from his posture that there was not much time, and with every second that ticked away, death marched towards her fallen love. "Hang on Wing," she

muttered softly, her sweaty palms gripping the steering wheel with all their might as the 17-mile marker drifted into roadway memory.

She looked over again to see Wing's eyes as his body replied with a slight grin. "I'll be fine," he said weakly, holding his position to reassure her. Amora jumped as she saw his body finally give up, saw the blood drip from his mouth, and watched his mind slip towards the realms of unconsciousness.

"Wing!" she shouted, tears welling in her softened blue eyes. "I love you!" she wailed, crying as the miles passed away. Her tears streamed as the word *California* appeared in the distance; it marked the line of hope, the line of life and death, and the blurred line that would determine Wing's fate.

"I love you, too," Wing replied weakly, his eyes slowly opening to capture a final image before he yielded to the invading darkness. "I love you, too."

"He's coming out of it!" a man's voice cried, the sound of medical equipment droning in the background. "Wing," he cried, "wake up boy!"

Wing opened his eyes slowly to a blinding light. "Where am I?" he mumbled as his eyes focused on a brightly lit hospital room. His heart raced as a bold figure stood above him, gazing down with somber brown eyes as short, wavy strands of gray hair drifted in an artificial wind. "Dad," Wing whispered, trying to sit up before pain surged within his chest.

"Take it easy, son," the general replied. "You've been through quite a lot. It's good to have you back."

The screech of tires against asphalt stabbed the silent air as Amora slammed the brakes of the small vehicle. The horrendous noise caused the heads of her companions to snap their sights to the car. Fox already knew what had happened as she ran to the car, watching as the blood-covered Amora stumbled out the door. "Help him Fox," she said, collapsing on the pavement in exhaustion while the others came to assist.

"Oh my God," Fox said, opening the passenger-side door to see the blood-coated Wing. "Aidan!" she cried, looking to him with a blank stare. "Bring my car over here, and do it fast!" She leaned into the grey colored sedan and unbuckled Wing's seatbelt, watching silently as his beaten body fell gently into her arms.

On the other side of the car, Kit lifted Amora's head into his arms. "Calm down," he whispered as she shivered in fright.

“It’s my fault, Kit,” she whimpered, her tears freely flowing as she stared up at him.

“No it’s not,” he replied gently. “He chose to go with you because he loves you. He’ll pull through, Amora. When has Wing ever let us down?”

“I’ve been through a lot?” Wing questioned, his mind searching through forgotten memories, yet it could not see what he hoped to find. “Tehran,” he murmured, looking to his father with a questionable stare. His conscience tried desperately to hold on to forgotten friends and a forgotten world, but the story was replaced with a far different tale. Wing gripped his temple as a pain ripped through his thoughts. “There’s something I’m supposed to remember! There’s someone I need to remember!” he screamed, trying once again to get out of the hospital bed.

“Shh,” Jack said, sitting beside his son and placing his hand on Wing’s forehead. “You’ve been in a coma for months, Wing. The doctors feared this would happen, but don’t worry because I’m here for you. I’m here.”

“Why do I remember Tehran?” Wing blared, his mind and body struggling desperately.

“Shh,” Jack spoke calmly. “Relax, you were on a mission with Area 51 to test the Parks Detonator and it malfunctioned.”

“Parks,” Wing twitched as the name burned into his thoughts, but a soft, feminine voice quickly soothed the searing pain.

“May I come in?” a girl called from the hall, her soft grey eyes peeking through a crack in the doorway.

“Of course, Lukainy,” Jack replied, standing up with a smile.

“I love him!” Amora cried, clutching to Kit with all her might. “Don’t die Wing! Please don’t die!”

Fox glared at Kit. “Get her away from here,” she growled before turning back to Wing. His body was strapped down to the trunk bed of her sedan and punctured by the numerous pieces of equipment Fox brought with her. “He’s comatose,” she whispered to Aidan fiercely. “His vitals look stable, but until we get to the Zero, a thorough examination is impossible.”

“Could we lose him?” Aidan asked, his eyes glimmering under the starlight of the California night.

“We can’t take our time,” she replied, glancing to him with a concerned stare. “I can’t check for internal bleeding from here,” Fox continued. “He could bleed out before we have the chance to save him.”

Amora shivered in Kit’s arms as she gazed into the stars above, their gentle shimmer calming her slightly. “Don’t go,” she whimpered, lying helplessly in Kit’s gentle grasp. “Don’t leave me behind.” Amora lowered her head while drowning in the sea of irony. For her entire life, she tried to be one step ahead of everyone, and now, she found herself lagging behind in a race no one wished to win. She could not catch her love in time, she could not be his brake when he needed one, and because of her ignorance, the checkered flag of eternal slumber loomed at the end of his highway.

“L-Luky,” Wing whispered as the name flooded his body with strength. He sat up for the first time, his rich brown eyes meeting hers as long strands of dark black hair shifted behind his back. He gazed over her radiant skin and sleek blonde hair as his mind drowned in soothing, yet forgotten, memories.

“Wing,” she whispered back, silently sitting on the bed beside him. Jack smiled and exited the room, softly closing the door before departing. “I missed you,” she said weakly while her arms slowly wrapped around his chest.

His cheeks turned a crimson red as her fingers gently pressed into the skin of his back and as his heart beat rapidly as her warm lips pressed against his parched ones. “I missed you, too,” he replied after a moment of hesitation. His arms reached slowly around her neck as fragment memories poured like rampaging rivers through his drained soul. “It all feels like a dream,” Wing whispered, kissing her cheek gently before continuing, “like a dream I just can’t remember.”

Luka frowned and hugged him tighter, whining slightly as she could feel him struggle. “It’s okay, honey,” she whispered, returning his kiss with a gentle smile. “I’m here for you now.”

[Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Nov 2, 2002]:

The third movement began as the light tap of a quiet drum beat across the steel floor of the U.A.S. Zero. The count-off pulsed through Ryoko’s legs while her soft hazel eyes glared at the console of the V-Hack computer system, its greenish tint injecting her heart with anxiety. She stared as the cursor blinked

at her, its rhythmic pulse the metronome that drove her steady step. Her hazel eyes widened as the data dripped into her mind, her head snapping to Charles as the thunderous rip tore at her vocal chords. "There's been an explosion in Wellton," she shouted at him before glancing back to the screen in disbelief. "Hawaii's Seismic Institute confirmed the shockwave, colonel; it was a twenty kiloton detonation."

"That son-of-a-bitch," Downie muttered, his green eyes meeting Ryoko's concerned stare. "Don't worry, Empress," Chuck smirked, brushing back his slick brown hair as his steel-toed boots gently tapped the floor. "Did they tell you when the explosion occurred?"

"About nine hours ago," she replied softly. "Colonel, they also want you to know that the Chancellorodt increased its anti-satellite defenses this morning. Kinetic kill vehicles eliminated U.A.'s coastal observation units a little before 3 Pacific. The staff apologizes for the delay, but they had to check the archives to confirm the ballistic signature."

Chuck sighed and glanced at his Communication's Officer. "Lieutenant," he groaned, leaning forward while tugging gently on his camouflage uniform, "I need you to patch President McKenna to my quarters immediately. If we lost our coastal satellites then we are completely blind and I need to fucking..." He stopped and shook his head. "Never mind lieutenant," Chuck mumbled, heading out the large oak doors with a huff. "Just get me the president and scratch the profanity!"

"Blair," Chuck growled, holding on to a small red rotary phone as he sat in his office, "you should have told me Chancellorodt extended its anti-satellite coverage to the coastlines. We're completely blind now! It was hard enough to get shots of Phoenix, but now we have to rely on visual intelligence from the inside?"

"Don't worry, Charles," Blair's twangy voice erupted from the receiver. "I'm sorry I didn't inform you, but I've been working with the Chinese and Russian Space Agencies. Thankfully, I convinced them pull their satellites away from the coastal orbits until the Los Angeles grid is taken offline. Hopefully after that we'll be able to get our first images of the interior region."

"Have you received any additional word from Parks?" Downie asked, resting his polished black boots upon a large mahogany desk. "At our current speed the Zero should reach the red zone in about two hours." He paused as the visions of

disaster and success flowed through his mind. Downie was walking the mythical line between reality and fantasy, a line where a step to the left could lure him into a world of false hope or where a step to the right could throw him into the fires of a tyrannical inferno. “I’m going to hold about 100 kilometers back from the line,” he said to McKenna. “I can’t risk going in too early because that could jeopardize our whole operation.”

“I trust your judgment, colonel,” Blair responded. “Please keep in touch if you need anything. I have instructed the staff to maintain an open line with the Zero at all costs and I will inform you of any dire situation.”

[I-10, California; Nov 2, 2002]:

Aidan pressed his foot into the accelerator as the Avalon convoy sped down Highway 10 towards Los Angeles. His knuckles faded to white and his teeth clenched as his vibrant green eyes affixed their gaze to the road stripes darting beneath the chassis. It was as if the stripes were Aidan’s prey, streaks of white blood left behind by an animal desperately trying to escape the lead-foot aggression that would save the pack. Kit glanced at the speedometer nervously as Aidan continued to push the vehicle, but he remained silent, hoping that the doctor would explain his sudden vehicle reassignment.

“This mission will depend solely on you Kit,” Aidan shattered the silence, his eyes still glued to the road ahead. “I doubt Amora will pull herself together in the next couple hours, and that means you are going to have to take out the Los Angeles grid on your own.” He sighed and shook his head slightly. “I shouldn’t have let them go on that stupid mission,” Aidan snarled, his scowl piercing the advancing asphalt. “Fox doesn’t even know if Wing will make it through the night...”

“He’ll make it,” Kit interrupted, his chestnut eyes staring into the starry-night sky, “and Amora will pull through.” He smiled and continued to gaze as his fingers gently tapped against the passenger-side window. “Wing’s a warrior, Aidan. He has yet to back down from a challenge even when he was horrible shape. I know people give him a bad rap for being a badass, but he cares about us a lot more than he lets on. Not to mention, he truly loves Amora; he won’t die on her.” Kit paused and glanced through the rear-view window at the darkness that cloaked Amora and the others. “As for Amora, she won’t let Wing down either. She’ll bounce back and fight for him because she wants to fight for him and for his affection.”

“Kit,” Aidan interrupted, chuckling as he glanced to the boy with tiring eyes, “I think you’re reading into this one a little too far.” After a short pause, the doctor grinned as a snicker-like grunt cracked from his tongue. “Letting your admiration of Wing go to your head, aren’t you?”

Kit growled and mumbled, “You’re just jealous because I know what’s really going on between them and you’re too busy driving around at 140 miles an hour to realize it!” He paused as a scowl took form around his eyes, and Kit’s voice became firm as he uttered his convictions. “Amora will stand to protect him.”

Amora’s sight never broke from Wing’s bloodstained form as the sedan streaked down I-10. Fox’s milk-chocolate eyes never broke from the road as her silence caressed Amora’s ringing ears. The girl wished that Fox would speak and let her scolding thoughts seer the deafening silence that accompanied the stillness of the journey. The doctor eventually obliged and turned to Amora with a gentle smile. “Don’t worry about him,” she spoke softly. “He’ll make it, that boy always has and I know he will again.”

Fox’s words surprised Amora. She was waiting for a lashing and a verbal onslaught that could heal her wounds with the gauze of guilt. “It’s still my fault,” Amora replied with a whimper, her subconscious secretly searching for the beating she desired. Her arms wrapped tightly around the beige velvet upholstery and her eyes began to water as she awaited Fox’s response.

Fox sighed, speeding up as her thoughts quickly came to a boil. “Get the hell over it Hunter!” she yelled, scowling at the girl in rage. “You’re a fucking soldier and you’re letting the pressure get to you? He loves you! I promised I’d take care of him! Isn’t that enough for you, or are you just going to start crying your eyes out again and beg that you hadn’t dragged his ass to Area 49? You’re acting like a damn idiot.” Her knuckles turned white as her fingers tightly clenched the steering wheel, “He’s suffered a lot more than you have yet he still will overcome anything to achieve his dreams.”

A smile slowly crept on Amora’s lips as the masochist within her began to flower. “Thank you,” she said, looking to Fox as a tear fell down her cheek. “I know I’m acting like an idiot because I need to feel the guilt, but I’m ashamed because I know Wing wouldn’t want me to be burdened by his pain.” She gently crawled over the seat and lay down next to Wing, staring at his lips as the smile relinquished control back to sadness. “I

feel bad,” she said, “because he may never know how much I truly love him.”

[Department of Internal Justice-Midwestern Branch, St. Louis; Nov 2, 2002]:

It was as far as the trio could go before Lock needed significant medical attention. Rachael leaned over the Chancellorodt leader, panting as the scent of blood drowned her sense of smell. Her neck ached from her fight with Wing, but at least she had managed to save Hunter from that beast. “Hang on, sir,” Wolfe spoke with a gentle grin. “We are almost to ‘Dodge’ and then we can get the best care for you.”

Lock tried to sit up, but the stinging pain raging through his spine kept him bound to the floor of the military helicopter. “Get the troops to cross the border.” The words erupted from his mouth as globs of drying blood dribbled down his face. “I’m tired of this mockery.” His voice was strained as he tried to sit up again with a grunt. “Launch the damn nukes!”

Val emerged from his self-enforced punishment of silence and looked to his lord with a concerned gaze. “We can’t launch nukes, Lord Hunter,” he said. “Every United Arsenal nation would retaliate with their nuclear forces and there would be no chance of survival. We cannot jeopardize the power base we have already obtained, my liege.”

Wolfe licked her fangs and glanced at Lock’s blackened eyes. “There’s nothing I’d love to see more than the pain and suffering of millions.” Her sadistic tendencies emerged as the images of burning bodies and screaming, squirming men aroused Rachael’s deepest pleasures. She cracked her knuckles with a flick of her claws and looked away suddenly, her devilish eyes mellowing slightly as she murmured hesitantly, “Unfortunately that snake is right, sir. Nukes are not a viable option at this time. We have the troops and we have a powerful defense array that can protect us to a reasonable degree.”

“Send the troops,” Lock growled, anger cloaking the pain as he leered at Wolfe and Manning. He hated the fact that they were right and despised the fact that in his rage he had overreacted. For the first time in his reign over the Chancellorodt, Lock felt as though his power was beginning to slip away to the soothing light of a phoenix. “Give the order as soon as we land, colonel,” he grunted, his hate-filled eyes staring through the small windows of the chopper at the star-filled sky.

[-War-, Tehran, Iran; 2008]:

The sweltering heat of the desert drained Wing as he walked down the corridor of a gutted industrial sector apartment. The United States' military led the crusade into Iran to hunt down President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The lanky, dark-skinned, bearded man catapulted the proud Islamic Republic to the plateau of the nuclear powers a couple years prior. However, the rest of the world was not supportive of Iran's nuclear ambitions and quickly cited the nation's ties to al Qaeda and Hezbollah as a precursor to launch another Middle-Eastern invasion. And thus, Wing found himself with his father and a few comrades in the scorching heat as the war drearily dragged along.

Luky gazed at her love, looking over his features as he strode down the hallway in beige shorts and a red tank top. She watched silently as his long black hair blew back in the sauna breeze, its ragged tips fingers that gently played the harps of the wind. Her grey eyes appeared to melt as they affixed to the drops of sweat that dripped from the back of his neck and she yearned to kiss him.

Wing, on-the-other-hand, looked to the ground, his soft brown cores dancing over the cracks in the battered tile floor. One again, a new collection of memories appeared in his mind, snapshot *déjà vu* images that flickered as if they were being projected from a silent-movie reel. The surroundings felt familiar to him, but Wing still could not help feel as though he were completely out-of-place. The bells were ringing in his head, and he could see them swing from the towers of his thoughts, but his ears could hear no sound. He felt lost.

McCallister shivered as Luka's lips pressed against the back of his neck and his step froze mid-stride as her arms latched around his waist. She was the only thing he had here that made him feel found and as she kissed again, he heard a bell ring. "A..." he was interrupted as Lukainy spoke. "I missed you," she said, pressing her arms into his stomach gently as she rested her chin on his shoulder. "I really missed you."

His heart skipped a beat as Luky gently pulled on him more. Her soothing touch seemed to lighten the heavy load tied to Wing's body and soul as the boy gently looked back to Luka with a slight smile. "I missed you too, baby," he whispered, brushing one of his hands against her cheek as his smile turned into a grin. Wing loved the feel of her arms around his waist and gently pulled Lukainy into a hug of his own. Something still

nagged at the back of his mind, but he could hear the symphony of remembrance whenever he touched this beautiful girl and wanted nothing more than to be with her.

[Interstate 10, California; Nov 2, 2002]:

Amora's thumbs gently rubbed against Wing's dirtied cheeks, and, for a moment, the girl thought she saw a smile creep onto Wing's dried lips. Tufts of Fox's brown hair fell over the seat as she took a moment to gaze at the emotional Amora. "He knows how much you love him," she said quietly, glancing at the bloody ribbon tied around his forehead before looking back to the road.

"Do you think so?" Amora asked, the first hint of restraint chaining her troubled thoughts. "I really hope he does, Fox." She fell silent as the true fear overwhelmed her, the pulsing ache that made her know the truth. Deep down she missed him dearly and prayed that he would remember to come back to her.

[San Diego, California; Nov 2, 2002]:

Long black strands of hair drifted in the gentle San Diego breeze as the dawn sun beamed through the broken windows of a dilapidated storage facility. Akaru's sullen eyes looked to each shattered pane as though it were a displaced soul, a purgatory for their nation that, when left alone, each descended into the bourns of hell, but when united, the eyes of glass would witness his legacy – with the help of Zachhzus Arai.

"This will be perfect," Akaru muttered, his hand clasping the handle to a sheet metal garage door before he threw it open with a great deal of force. "Arai should be able to set up a shop in here." Akaru grinned and stepped inside, glancing at the rows of fire that pounded against the cement floor. The mark of the cross was sewn into the dance between light and dark, hundreds of thousands of lost dreams and visions delicately laced to the solid foundation.

From behind Akaru, a scraggly, unkempt man limped slowly into the building. Arai's amber orbs pierced the dreary display as his sight fell lazily to the spectacle of fire and shadow that coated the cold floor. "This is where you want me to work then?" Zachhzus asked slowly, his years of wisdom drenching Akaru's hurried anticipation.

“Yes,” Akaru replied. “I can get you all the supplies you’ll need to make me armor as strong and as powerful as McCallister’s.”

“You’d probably kill me if I declined,” Zachhzus replied, “but I’m afraid I can’t make armor for a man drowned in the flames of vengeance. Even that fire cannot protect you from that of the phoenix.”

“Do it and I shall guarantee your children’s safety, even if they are captured by Chancellorodt forces.”

“I trust Wing to take care of my offspring,” Arai replied, clasping his hands together as he stared Akaru down.

“Do you honestly think Wing can last forever, smith? He’s one man fighting against an entire nation that fears and hates him. He’s trapped in an inescapable prison of suffering that lurks within the memories of his past. If he does die and you do not agree to make me a suit, I will break your children’s fucking spines with my own bare hands. I’ll dig my fingers into their soft, tender necks and twist slowly, listening eagerly to their screams of pain as shock, blood loss, and suffocation devour their blessed lives. I couldn’t care less about them and I will not protect them unless you give me an incentive to do so.”

Zachhzus leered at the young Akaru as a small grin crept onto his aged face. “Do you think I’m an idiot?” Zach asked quietly, stepping forward, his dark steel-toed shoes passing over the radiant, burning emblems. “I’m not going to help the Chancellorodt; I trust Wing to take care of my kids regardless of the offer you put on the table. I don’t believe any promise from them.”

“This has nothing to do with the Chancellorodt,” Akaru glared, his sight piercing the eyes of Zachhzus. “My father is an absolute idiot,” he said, looking out the shattered windows as images of his haunting past began to resurface. “I spent the last two years dealing with that moron Manning and his pathetic serum. He thinks it works, but really, I’m indifferent as to who lives and who dies. All I want is for my little sister to be okay, and I will do anything to ensure that I am there for her this time.”

A spark flashed across Arai’s amber cores as he gazed back at Akaru’s muscular frame. “So why do you stay with your father then?” he asked. “Why bother staying if you think he’s an idiot?”

“That is none of your concern,” Akaru replied, realizing the sword-smith was prodding for information. “Just make the armor to my specifications and I can guarantee you and your family’s safety. In fact,” Akaru grinned, deciding to tactfully

place a hint, “there may even be a swifter end to this confrontation than you realize.” Zachhzus eyed Hunter as he walked towards the exit, his long black hair waving behind him as he spoke, “And don’t even try to leave, Arai.” Akaru slammed the massive metal door to the ground and stepped into the sun-soaked streets with a wide grin plastered to his face. Sweat dripped from his eyebrows as he walked into the heat, the light burning his darkened eyes as his mind drifted to thoughts of the past. “You’re an idiot, dad,” he mumbled, “to not understand your own children.”

**[Department of Internal Justice-Midwestern Branch
(Dodge), St. Louis; Nov 2, 2002]:**

Wolfe stepped from the helicopter as it landed outside the Dodge Building in Saint Louis, Missouri. The large stone structure loomed before her, a menacing complex that represented the power of the Gilded Age – as well as its flaws. The building could have easily passed for Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry and its towering central spire was an icon of the Chancellorodt government. In the past, St. Louis used it as a place of learning, but eminent domain was declared following the Hunter’s coup and the building became the privileged home of America’s donor banks. Rachael’s long reddish hair flew in the breeze generated by the powerful craft, and as the noise from the chopper faded behind her, she darted up the steps of the headquarters.

The colonel licked her lips as a young team of medics rushed past her, heading to Lock Hunter with a stretcher clenched to their hands, but Wolfe had more important business that required attention. Through the chaos, Lock’s message remained clear: they would not wait for the United Arsenal any longer. They would attack Canada and Mexico instead and crush the invasion before it began. She had the honor of declaring more bloodshed, had the honor of being there to declare a new war, and held the ability to see life drain from unsuspecting fools and weakened dreamers – the perfect prey for a wolf.

In the meantime, Lock was en-route to the infirmary. Blood further darkened his black robes, and covered his pale white skin with a crusty crimson veil. His breathing grew heavy as the medics carted him down the hall, rows of lights dousing the leader in a golden wave as the doors of hell came closer. The best doctors in the nation were on-call to examine the most powerful man in the world, and as soon as Lock arrived in his

private suite, needles and probes were being planted all across his body.

Val glanced through the windowpane of the elegant room and watched as the staff ran from computer to computer, gathering information on Hunter's condition as quickly as they could. After several minutes, the chief examiner emerged, and whispered into Manning's ear. "He has massive internal trauma, sir. He definitely has a severe concussion, and his kidneys suffered enormous stress. I'm afraid there is nothing we can do for him now without a suitable donor."

"Are there any kidneys in the bank?" Manning asked, glancing to the doctor with a concerned gaze.

"I'm afraid there are no kidneys currently in the freezer, sir," the doctor replied, his head lowering slowly as short grey locks of hair fell over his eyes.

"What about a pig-donor?" Manning interjected, knowing that Hunter would hate the prospect of being saved by an animal, but also knowing that it was the only way.

Upstairs, Rachael had already given the orders for troops to cross the Canadian and Mexican borders when a new assignment came to her from below. She cracked her knuckles while heading towards two enormous rusted steel doors, their mass surrounding the idolized spire. It was amazing that in only a year, the Chancellorodt elite converted the space into a cellblock filled with various pig-organs to be used in the event of an emergency. Yet as two guards opened the squealing gates, Wolfe did not hear the grunts of pigs, but the yelps of animals she considered far lower. From beneath the dome of the grand prison, thousands of cages lay scattered about, each filled with an Arabian beast captured in the government's raids.

Screams erupted as Rachael walked forward, her sharp camouflage attire contrasting greatly with her blood craving eyes. She walked up to the cage containing a small child and kicked it out of the way, grinning wildly as the boy yelped and cried. The shrieks grew louder as Wolfe walked through the rotten mess, her smile widening when she found the correct cage. Within the strips of steel sat a cramped Arab man. His cheeks and chin were taken over by a wild, rugged beard – a savage growth spawned from the seeds of captivity. His eyes gleamed with hate as he stared up at the colonel in silence, his leer trying to penetrate her cold and focused demeanor.

Rachael's hellfire eyes returned the harsh stare, the hate from her fight with McCallister finally boiling over as she ripped

the lock off the cage to begin a battle with a new victim. The man leapt forward, his knees cracking as they popped from the tight realms of confinement, but Wolfe avoided the feeble attack and kicked the Arab out of the way. “Pathetic,” she thought to herself, strutting towards his sprawled out body as her mind continued to wander. “Oh well, at least I can have fun with him.”

“Damn you bastards!” the man cried, leaping from the ground with a shout, his accent thick only with disgust towards betrayal. Rachael ignored his plight for his suffering was inconsequential to her life. His past and strife meant nothing to her – all that mattered were the sounds of death he would bequeath her in his final moments of life.

She grinned as the feel of blood saturated her needy claws. The warmth overtook her and the soothing scent of carnage filled her nostrils with a surge of pleasure. “I have good news,” Rachael replied with a grin, staring as the prisoner clenched his bleeding neck. “I’m going to watch you die a pitiful death, and then your organs are going to save the man who put you here. How does that make you feel?” Her eyes gleamed with lust as she yanked the man’s wrists, cracking them with ease as the blood seeped from the slit in his throat.

He began to panic, gentle words pouring from his stained lips as he prayed for God’s mercy, but Rachael held tight to his limp limbs and kept his spirit tied to the material realm. “No one is going to help you,” she snickered, watching as the man’s knees began to give out. “Your God is not going to rescue you. Here, we are the gods and you are the beasts created solely to serve us. Your life is no longer valued for you are nothing.” His suffering was no longer enough; Rachael craved more, desired to taste the pain she was inflicting, and needed more than the slowly fading chords of a person’s pathetic symphony.

Wolfe twisted his wrists slowly, grinning darkly as the man yelped in pain. She dropped his limbs after hearing the arms break, splinters of bone appearing from beneath his toned skin. Her claws wrapped tightly around his skull, holding his limp body above the ground as her other hand worked deep into the soft flesh of his neck. Rachael smiled as he gagged, a fresh gulp of blood spraying her neck and shirt. The colonel did not mind, in fact she yearned for more, and with a pop of her claws she decapitated her prey.

She watched as the body fell to the floor, the head still clenched in her tight grip as the eyes of the slain man rolled back into his skull. Wolfe twitched, still craving more than a rotting corpse and a bloodied floor. This time she had to satiate her

unquenched appetite and settle the anger that was boiling in her veins. She tilted her head back and held her arm straight up, letting the blood from her victim drip across her fangs. Rachael sighed with content as the blood filled her mouth, its taste saturated with the hate that quickly quelled her voreaphiliac needs. Finally, Wolfe swallowed the blood, growling happily as she let the head fall to the ground and hoisted the body over her shoulder. She had what she needed.

[U.S.-Mexico Border; Nov 2, 2002]:

A young man stood on top of a gentle ridge overlooking the arid lands along the U.S.-Mexico border. His long, dusty reddish hair blew back in the crisp desert breeze as his harsh darkened eyes gazed towards the advancing troops of the Chancellorodt Shadow. Behind the ridge, thousands of his troops and tanks waited for an order, waited for the words to escape the mouth of Chuck Downie's fiercest rival – Major Zedekiah Davis.

He was dressed as a minion of the night, a man whose emotions were concealed by a castled demeanor and whose body was covered by a cloak of black leather. To his troops, he was the figure of authority, the antithesis of his outgoing Academy brethren. As much as Wing was regarded as a phoenix, he was regarded as a hawk, as the sovereign angel of darkness.

Davis scowled, his gloved hands running softly over his whiskered cheeks as his mind tinkered slowly. "What are they thinking?" he muttered to himself, watching as enemy tanks crested a sand-stripped ridge. "They think we're the attack force." The stern man slid his arm out from beneath his midnight cloak and clenched his fist into a tight ball. It was the signal for the troops who lay dormant behind him to prepare for battle for soon the first shots of war would ring true.

Zedekiah eyed the spark of light and quickly caught the sound of thunder with his predator ears as a tank round lobbed over his head and crashed into the troops behind him. The commander stood unaffected and outstretched his arm, giving the order for his tank battalion to return fire. Davis grinned as the hum pounded against his left eardrum like a cello or a bass would if he were conducting an orchestra. Deep in his heart, he knew he was conducting a piece of blood and death and that in a mere second the first bang of his mighty composition would alter the world forever.

[-War-, Tehran, Iran; 2008]:

Wing's reunion with Lukainy was interrupted as boisterous voices pierced the arid halls. The Iranian air stung at Wing's face as the dry, baked wind was saturated with the thick, buttery sound of excited comrades. For some reason, as he stared into a sea of friendly faces, the situation felt familiar to him and as a single blink ended his blank stare, names filled his confused mind.

His worn eyes fell on a petite teenage girl standing at the head of the oncoming pack. Her crisp stare, punk-cut camouflage tank-top, and leather boot capped black jeans overrode her small stature and her demeanor froze Wing and Luky in their places. "Don't hog him all," she grinned to Luka and waved her hand to the consortium of soldiers behind her. "We all want to see how our little Wingy is doing." Her brown eyes turned harsh as she pressed her pointed nose into Wing's cheek and let out a roar. "No dying dumb ass!"

Wing squinted at the blaring tone and looked down at her with a twitch. "Alright Ash, I get the point! I'm not dead." Her roar had given him a slight headache and he looked to Luka for some soothing comfort. "I'm fine, really," he replied in a softer tone, his eyes wandering about the desolate space. "I just feel a little out of it right now, but that's all." He had clung to Luka's hand in the midst of his short speech and looked to the group for any more clues to unlock the puzzle of his scrambled mind.

However, Wing's condition only worsened as he looked to the flock, his eyes peering as if he was a shepherd of the past caught in the headlights of the future. More names flooded his thoughts as he looked from face to face, more memories blossomed from the seeds of a forgotten past, and none of them carried the slightest hint of comfort. The only comfort he felt was the feel of Luky's skin against his own.

[Outskirts of Los Angeles; Nov 2, 2002]:

Aidan breathed in and let the ash-grey smoke from his cigarette pour into his nerve-racked lungs. The morning sun rising over his backside only meant that a new day of hell was upon him, but the events of yesterday already left Parks in weakened spirits. First, he had to deal with the trauma surrounding Sagami's father, then he had a long conversation with Kit, and upon arriving at a suitable deployment location, he

learned that the XS' fuel line had been severed in the fight at Area 49.

"Damn kids," he muttered, flicking the butt to the cracked cement floor of an old mechanic's garage. "They clearly do not appreciate my work at all." He sneered and looked over the XS with a heavy sigh of disgust. The doctor knew immediately that he would have to find a new fuel line in order for the XS to return to operational status. Yet, the disrepair of his second child was not Aidan's only concern; Wing's blood painted the sleek black metal like the graffiti that defiled the aluminum walls around him and he could not risk shattering the remains of Amora's conscience.

"You want me to take this one, Aidan?" Turner's soothing voice dripped into Parks' ears as he adjusted his shades and turned around to greet his partner.

"Yeah, Mac," Aidan replied, pointing to the XS with a weary hand. "Damn thing needs a new fuel line, although there's probably one in here somewhere. Also, a good cleanup because..." He fell silent and stared at the blood cracking atop the metal as if it were that sands of a desert parting before the flames of the underworld. "How's he doing?" Aidan's voice fell flat as the technical tone he carried faded before the tides of concern and compassion.

Turner wandered to the walls of the garage and searched the dust-covered crates, hoping to find a suitable fuel line. His blonde hair appeared to wave slightly as the sun poured through every crack in the abandoned structure. "Fox still has him stabilized," he replied quietly while reaching behind a work bench. "Amora won't leave his side and insists that she has to keep talking to him. Poor girl has been through a lot with her father and all; it is not that surprising that this put her into shock." His eyes widened as he retrieved his hand from the tight space with several meters of industrial gauge rubber tubing clenched in his grip.

Aidan sighed and lifted up the door of the garage. Its metal cringed to the shrieks and whines of the small wheels as they rolled up the rusted iron rails with a great deal of resistance. Parks' green eyes squinted before the blinding sun, the shadowy figures of his comrades bleeding through the radiant light. As the yellowish glare diminished, the shadows dispelled, revealing a silent Kit and Sagami standing idly by the car that carried Fox, Amora, and the bedridden Wing.

Aidan caught the silent greeting from his medical counterpart and stared gently into the soft chocolaty eyes of Fox

as she sat in the driver's seat of her R.E.M.-enhanced coupe. "Adrienna," he spoke softly. It was the first time he had ever used Fox's first name, but the situation had dissolved their professional demeanors.

Fox did not even have to hear his questions before turning to the cleared out trunk space and giving some solid words of support. "You doing okay back there?" she asked Amora, staring down at her as the girl's arms were wrapped around Wing's bloodied head. Her sacred ribbon provided his wounds with a bandage and his blood mixed with the memories of her brother in a spectrum of maroon and red.

Amora held on to him gently, her hands stroking his cheeks lightly as she turned back to Fox with a slight smile on her face. "He'll be okay," she spoke gently, caressing him with every quanta of love she possessed. Her blue eyes wavered like a calm sea as the shock eroded before the waters of affection. "He'll never be alone," Amora continued, still staring into Fox's sweet eyes, "and he would not want me to sit here sulking about him. He'd say, 'Slow down Amora, and think about what will make you happy.'" She chuckled slightly she returned her gaze to the fallen love. "He can be such an idiot sometimes," she whispered as two newborn tears slid down her cheeks before pressing her lips to Wing's forehead, "but that is why he came after me. Maybe someday he will understand that protecting him is what makes me happy."

Kit and Sagami looked on silently as Aidan made his way around to the back of the car and propped himself up against the opened trunk gate. "Amora," the doctor spoke softly, his eyes concealed by the lenses of his sunglasses as he stared down at her. "The XS needs some work before it can be sent into the field and Kit cannot run this mission solo." His shoe kicked into the gravel lot that surrounded the garage, and Aidan listened to the soft clicks that the pebbles made as they scattered about randomly while he collected his thoughts.

"I want you to take the XT," he continued, a small crescent of green peeking from behind the dark spectacles as Aidan eyed Amora. Her cheeks flushed as her grip on Wing's head lessened slightly and as her crisp blue orbs glanced over Wing's body. "It's what he would want," Aidan spoke gently, leaning into the trunk bed in a gesture that prodded her for a decision.

Amora fumbled her words as her cheeks continued to redden. "But the XT is Wing's armor," she stuttered weakly, her eyes affixed to the blood-soaked ribbon that wrapped around his

head. "I couldn't possibly..." she paused, her voice drowned in confusion. "I'm not strong enough, Aidan." Amora sighed and paused, Wing's words floating above chaos' sea as her heartbeat slowed to his unconscious coaxing. "He'd want me to take it," she whispered as she slid her arms from his head and set it gently on the floor of the trunk bed. Slowly, she crept through the door towards Aidan, for the first time in a long time, her heart and mind plotting the course of action.

He smiled as she stood before him, her fists clenched tight as the redness in her cheeks slowly departed. "I don't expect you to master the armor's systems," Aidan replied. "It's far too dangerous considering what happened to Wing a few weeks ago, but you should be able to fly it for this mission. Hopefully, we will have the XS repaired by the time you get back."

She nodded and looked towards Kit and Sagami, who stared, eagerly awaiting her decision. Kit grinned and kicked the tire of the car lightly, his plain green shirt catching the gentle Californian breeze as he shoved his hands into his jean pockets with a huff. "C'mon Amora," he said and nodded in the direction of another car. "Let's get you suited up."

[U.S.-Mexico Border; Nov 2, 2002]:

Zedekiah tried to shout over the tank rounds that flew by him and the crackling noise of crumpled metal that burned into his ears, but his soldiers only sporadically heard his commands. He grunted as a burst exploded from the muzzle of his MP5, the bullets tearing through the muscle of the Chancellorodt military. Davis pitched the shaft of his gun into the skull of an advancing enemy, and his drumming drowned out the blood-curdling screams that soaked the battlefield in cacophony. The man's hands gripped tight around a knife he could not move as the jagged metal dug into his young face, life pouring from his eyes and nose as The Hawk murderously ravaged his prey.

The major watched with his blackened eyes as the young man fell to his knees, his nose severed as red rivers drenched his neck. With a snap, Davis reached into his midnight cloak and retrieved a silver .357 Magnum revolver before planting a single round in between the boy's gouged eyes. The body had not even crumpled to the ground by the time Zedekiah turned to gun down another pack of advancing soldiers. His mind and body worked as a solid military machine and the major knew he would outlast everyone in a melee. Yet, the lesson he had learned in the

countless years of war was that attrition was the true route to success, and as he saw the slain bodies of hundreds of men, he knew the battle's climax had passed.

A small group charged Zedekiah, the men's guns raised as their bullets parted the air around his cloak. Davis dove to the side, rolling atop the bodies and pulling one over him for cover as a tank round ripped through the squadron. More young lives were lost as an arm landed beside the major, blood dripping across his face as he reared up from under the desecrated carcass. The crimson streams of blood blended with his hair as it wavered in the death-laced breeze. An eerie silence painted the battlefield as bones and torn pieces of flesh littered the landscape.

In the distance, the Chancellor's forces were withdrawing, leaving their dead to settle the peace with those of the United Arsenal who had fallen. "Maybe in the afterlife they will find salvation," Zedekiah whispered, waving for his tanks to move forward and guard the ridge they had captured. "It's too bad that the lives of the innocent can be blinded into doing the work of the greedy. But no one can go it alone and that is a fact of life." He spoke quietly to the bodies as his remaining forces gathered, their heads held low in silence for the fallen brethren of war as the sun penetrated a background of blood-bordered clouds.

[Outskirts of Los Angeles; Nov 2, 2002]:

The scent trickled into her nose and forced Amora's cheeks to flush a bright red as the XT's helmet locked over her face. His smell poured into her lungs, its influence strong enough to bite at the deepest thoughts in her mind. She yearned for Wing as she felt the padded insides press against her and she pretended that the soft foam was really his skin. She craved for his hug, his soft lips to push against her ear, and his sweet words to force her heart and mind to keep time.

Like a pristine glacial lake, her blue eyes glimmered, their cores surrounded by a pocket of tears as she stared gently into Kit's maroon hued orbs. The silver faceplate of the XT hid Amora's soft smile as she felt Wing's strength penetrate her body. Kit returned her concealed grin for he knew what emotions darted throughout her thoughts from the tears welling in the corner of her eyes. His past had severed the ability for him to trust his heart with a woman, but his ability to trust Amora with his life continued to blossom. His silent affections for Wing

grew stronger as he stared at the armor even though its shell was filled by the person the phoenix held most dear.

The moment mended some of that distrust that had long ago frosted half of Kit's heart before his hands gripped the XT's helmet while he mouthed to Amora, "He's proud." The teen smiled once more before stepping back, his chestnut hair gently falling over his softened eyes as he turned to the crate containing his own suit. He had come to love Wing because they were brothers etched into opposite sides of the same token. One stood atop the hate that changed his life and forged ahead with blades of fire that crushed the words that scarred his mind, while the other receded into the netherworld of nothingness and cloaked the love he felt in a veil of secrecy.

And now after his deep-red eyes had stared into Amora's crystalline sea, a small prick fluttered his yearning heart. He realized the truth behind her bond with Wing, the depth that it held, and the reason why both of them continued to fight. He desired that bond more than anything and craved that someone would love him like Wing loved Amora – love him enough to enter the fray and fight for his life and the love he had to offer.

As Kit's mind wandered through the bars of his silent deliberation, Amora's fingers danced to the music of her own thoughts. The tips delicately stroked the console on the wrist piece and Amora sighed contently as the pad springs adjusted to a more suitable feminine fit. The key changed as her eyes slowly drifted to Wing and she wondered if he truly would be proud of her. Notes began to fall flat as doubt injected dissonance into the pages of their symphony until the silent conductor prompted the question.

The words *Save Profile?* appeared on the soft plastic touch-screen and the XT waited for Amora's answer. She blushed while glancing repeatedly between the small console affixed to her wrist and the man pinned to her heart, its beats intensifying as the decision lingered. Her metal coated fingers flexed gently before one pressed down upon the small outlined *Yes* button. Amora's heart slowed as she watched the system save her data, but the intensity of the bursts pulsing through her arteries did not diminish. She had become a part of Wing in every way, shape, and form, for now their identities in war blended as one, as well as their hearts.

[-War-, Tehran, Iran; 2008]:

Luka's cheeks reddened as newfound warmth surged throughout her body. Her heart throbbed as she lunged into Wing's abdomen with her arms wrapped around him tightly. She did not know the origin of the feelings painfully shooting through her veins, but Lukainy knew from the tug at her heart that she longed for Wing, and it showed in the sparkling tears that adorned the corners of her grey eyes. She gripped the back of his red tank-top and tugged on it for support, preying that he would never feel pain or see his own blood again.

Wing gripped her shoulders gently and pulled her up slowly, his arms draping over her shoulders as he took hold of her dark blue t-shirt. "I'm here for you, too," Wing spoke gently, his hands rubbing up and down her back.

Luky nodded with a soft whimper as she stared into his rich brown eyes, her heart beating heavily as Ash and the others moved in to further the gentle embrace.

"Remember," Ash said, her sandy eyes shooting towards each member of the group. "We are a team, we are a family, and we will stick together through everything that comes our way."

Sirens wailed as a loud explosion crashed in the background, a misplaced cymbal cue that threw off the rhythm of the solemn display. The harsh bite of *R P G* flowed on the waves of the wind, echoed throughout the small corridor, and caused those nearby to look to Wing for his response. His head had twitched in the direction of the blast, his eyes had narrowed, and the seeds of his memories had blossomed into a ripened fruit. He was their commander, he was the respected one, and he was the conductor of this band.

"Luky," he said, looking down into her grey eyes with a smile. "Get to intelligence and run the sit-reps for the squad. I will need location, number, and firepower estimates in addition to terrain reports." He leaned down and kissed her. "I have faith in your abilities and I want you to know you will never let me down."

His eyes flashed a hint of amber as he turned to the others around him. The thoughts continued to flood the basin of his mind as his mouth opened once more to bark commands. "Ash, K.T., Derrick, Matt," he yelled, barring his canines as another explosion rocked their compound. "Grab three AK-47s, a SASR, and an M40 in addition to our Com packs. Then, meet me back here A-SAP."

K.T. leaned into a metal cabinet before retrieving her favorite AK-47 assault rifle. She shrugged her shoulders lightly and allowed her long, reddish-brown hair to retreat down her back before cradling the metal baby in her arms. K.T., unlike the other members of the squadron, was a large and powerful girl who had grown up on the mean streets of Motown. Her father was a manager at one of the numerous automobile plants, which guaranteed K.T.'s comfort level while using heavy machinery. The trait showed in her well-built biceps and dominant shoulder blades, but those qualities brought her a lot of criticism from the rest of the armed forces.

Her aquamarine eyes narrowed as she picked up two more assault rifles for Wing and Derrick. She knew that those two would be on the frontline under any circumstances, but that is why she respected them and joined McCallister's unit. The others stationed at Camp Pennsylvania avoided K.T. because of her size and strength, but Wing tossed his male ego aside long before and befriended her. It was through his acceptance that K.T. realized her full potential, and since that day, she refused to trust orders from any other.

Meanwhile, Matt and Ash had reached a cabinet placed at the opposite end of the corridor. Their arms stretched into the darkened void as each retrieved a sniper rifle of preference. The dim light reflected off Matt's sky-blue eyes as they overlooked the nightshade barrel of steel. Like many of the others in McCallister's unit, Matt was a neglected soldier in which no one saw any potential. Before joining the military, he wandered the streets of Chicago looking for a purpose, but found nothing but bums trying to mooch a penny or drag him down.

Finally, the redhead had enough and joined the military with the hopes of reuniting with his childhood friend. However, disgrace marred the path to glory as Matt's array of problems infected the ranks like a sadistic virus. He scowled when the memories seeped from his subconscious in silent images that yearned to scream. Their taunts filled his mind while he remembered the cold mud filling the pores of his face and the splashes of water that blinded his sight. He recalled the crisp voice of his schoolyard friend piercing their jabs like a harsh winter wind – a cold that gripped their throats and refused to yield.

Matt yanked the cartridge of his SASR into place and looked through the scope. He refused to forget the day Wing showed him his role in the family and made sure that each time

he pulled the trigger a life was saved in exchange for the one taken. "I trust you," he spoke, looking to Ash with a nod before deploying to the rendezvous point.

Beneath the medical building, Luky sat at her intelligence terminal. An armada of computers surrounded the girl and bathed her in an eerie green light that saturated the air with knowledge. Waves of data caressed the blackened pupils at the center of her grey eyes as they darted from screen to screen in search of the information her love would need. Her fingers played with the foam of a microphone headset before she spoke, "Wing, are you there?"

His voice cracked through the static on the line while Lukainy's fingers dashed across her keyboard. She already had a surveillance drone in the air by the time Wing demanded the first situational report. "There are two enemy groups," she continued. "One is attacking from the north between Building C and the IV Complex and the other is coming from the west just to the south of Building 54."

"Copy that," Wing replied into his com set. His firm and crisp voice always soothed Luky's mind and brought a smile to her face that radiated confidence. She was another soldier that trusted him with her life, but she also trusted him with her kind and gentle heart.

[San Diego Command; Nov 2, 2002]:

Akaru's darkened eyes leered at the television screen as a journalist prepared to make a special report. The teen had arrived at the San Diego Chancellorodt base several hours before and had decided to ignore the command to deploy to Mexico. Hunter knew that ambition had blinded his father and that the Chancellorodt dictator had overlooked the blatantly obvious. "If I were in charge," he sneered, "I would never have made such a pitiful mistake."

"Today," the reporter stammered with a cough before proceeding, "we received word from the Chancellorodt Capitol in New York that a prominent member of the Council was critically wounded in an assassination attempt carried out by United Arsenal forces. The Council issued a statement that it will not yield in the wake of this tragedy but will continue the fight against international forces that wish to destabilize our great nation. In addition, the name of the wounded statesman will be concealed from the public in order to protect national interests,

but we have confirmed that this person was heavily involved in military operations.”

Akaru grinned as he continued to watch the bulletin. He knew they were speaking about his father. “The fool underestimated her,” he muttered darkly as his leer intensified. “Or maybe he underestimated McCallister.” Hunter chuckled as rhetoric about America’s great and virtuous democracy spewed from the journalist’s mouth. The Council was merely a façade created to replicate the Constitutional Government long displaced from power. It was part of Lock’s twisted game to captivate the American people without the Chancellorodt appearing to be the enemy, and Akaru realized that it was one of his father’s legitimate gifts.

Even though the Chancellorodt declared martial law and enacted heavy penalties for acts it considered treasonous, the Council remained as a blessed image of wartime democracy. No one outside of the upper-echelon paramilitary forces knew that Lock pulled the strings, and as long as the dictatorship remained hidden from the average American citizen, pride would work as suppression’s enforcer. It was one of the few lessons Akaru took to heart, for he knew that manipulation equaled victory. “Yet,” Akaru whispered, “one cannot control the masses forever. As soon as they realize what is really happening, fear’s paradox will take over.”

“Commander,” a timid voice echoed through the bleak corridor, “you have a phone call on Line 71.”

Akaru turned and looked to the white countertop station and the short, blond-haired private that manned the outpost. The soldier’s eyes looked weak in comparison to Hunter’s harsh hues, but Akaru decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt. To the military, anything spoken over Line 71 was the word and will of God. It was the direct line to the Chancellorodt Council, or as Akaru and the elite soldiers knew, the line to General Lock Hunter.

The teen shuddered as the slithering voice of Val Manning seeped through the pores of the phone’s plastic frame, but for once Akaru had to bare the exaggerated paranoia dripping into his ear. “I’m sure you saw the announcement, Akaru. We need you to report to Dodge as soon as possible in the event your father does not make it through surgery. I expect you to keep this news a secret for now; the news of Lock’s injuries could break down our military might and fertilize the weeds hiding in the underground.”

“I’m not going,” Akaru replied. “You of all people should know that my appearance would only generate suspicion.” He sighed and glanced to the television with a slight twinkle in his eye. “I think it’s time,” he said, “to have the Council make an official declaration of war against the United Arsenal. If they did issue a direct attack, it means they have something bigger planned, Manning.”

“We have already received reports of attacks on both the Canadian and Mexican fronts, Akaru,” Val hissed. “There is no reason to declare war when the war has already begun.”

“You’re too conservative,” Akaru replied, pressing against the wall as he barked into the receiver. “Now is the time for motivation. We can’t appear to be weak, but you obviously can’t see that. My father keeps you around for a reason, but you’re not a military genius, you’re a lab rat. If he is really out of the picture, as his right-hand man, it is your responsibility to show some initiative. And if you can’t fulfill your obligations, then I’ll be happy to take that responsibility away from you.” Akaru’s mind continued to tick as he listened to the hisses of the snake; he would let the supposed mastermind take the façade of glory and lead the twisted version of America into the flames of hell.

[Dodge, St. Louis; Nov 2, 2002]:

Manning sneered as he slammed the black rotary phone with a thunderous crash. He leered into the grand abyss, staring into the endless nothing as his mind and body pulsed with limitless anger. Veins bulged from his temples as the thought of Lock’s sniveling brat created sharp, painful convulsions that traversed his body. “I can’t wait,” Manning bit, “until I shove my needle into that kid’s neck and watch as my new serum breaks him like it broke Amora.”

The snake slithered to the doorway as his amber eyes gazed at the grey tile floor. “Maybe the kid is right,” Manning mumbled while the gears of his thoughts began to turn. “I’ll show him my kind of initiative.” Phonic chills filled the catacombs beneath the massive stone structure as the doctor disappeared into the elaborate abyss. Meanwhile, thoughts flowed through the labyrinth of Val’s mind in search of chaos’ great blueprint. Thick, vengeful blood filled the chasms of his body while the void of hate dissolved the cores of his flame-stained eyes.

“Akaru is staying in San Diego for a reason,” Val whispered, the dim lights above passing by quickly in the scientist’s haste. With every step the doctor took, rage chiseled his renegade passion into a well-focused machine. “I will break him,” Manning grunted as his boot pounded into the floor, “and I will figure out what he is hiding.” The man’s knuckles bled white as sharp, unkempt nails broke the skin of his palms. The greedy blood boiled as Manning’s hands dug into fine denim pockets and stroked the smooth plastic that harbored his ingenious horror.

“Well, someone certainly looks angry,” Rachael snickered while emerging from the darkness. Her hellhound eyes affixed to the reptile’s leer as Wolfe licked some dried blood from her lips and proceeded forward cautiously. The bones in her fingers shifted as she cracked her knuckles before pointing her claws to the doctor. “Now, what has you all twisted in a knot?”

“That is none of your concern,” Val hissed. The rage in his fingers built as he smacked her claws aside and his eyes burned with true disgust. “I dislike disobedience,” he shouted, “and I dislike people in the Chancellorodt not taking me seriously. I figured after a year of service as Hunter’s personal aid that people in the Council would have the decency to call on me in a time of need. Instead, they want his brat to fly out here...”

“Aw,” Rachael cried sarcastically, “is that what has your panties in a wad?” She laughed and shook her head, letting her blood mane sway while her sinister eyes sought Val’s soul. “I told you, Manning,” she roared, “that you overestimate your own accomplishments. You stand here thinking that because you made some serum that you have a free ride with Lock. Well, it didn’t work, and he was injured because of your failure.”

Val’s response took Wolfe by surprise, for the doctor replied with a gentle grin. “Let me ask you something, Rachael,” he interrupted. “What do you really think of Lock? Compared to me, you claim the man is a genius, but from where do you think that genius comes? After all, the project at Area 49 stemmed from my research. Your power and existence come from a graft of my design and brilliance!”

“Be careful what you say, doctor,” Wolf replied, narrowing her gaze. “Such words could land you in a death camp. But if you must know, you and Lock share similar qualities: you are both stubborn, you both tend to make irrational decisions when mad, and you both rely on my help to get what it

is you want. I don't know what your problem with Lock's kid is, Val, but there is no way I'm going to help you get what you want."

"You misunderstand me, Wolf," the doctor replied, gripping the syringe in his pocket before shoving the needle into the girl's neck. "I only want to take some initiative."

[Los Angeles; Nov 2, 2002]:

Amora's eyes focused on the streets below as she flew over the city of Los Angeles. The booming metropolitan capital of the west was still groggily resting under its blanket of smog that Saturday morning, and Amora realized it was the perfect time for their strike. The newly paved streets told her that the Chancellorodt treated this city well, or at least it attempted to make that impression. Most likely, the billions of dollars poured into the city's improvement plan corresponded to the development of the defensive perimeter that thousands of soldiers called home.

"Are you ready, Amora?" Kit radioed on the short-band. Amora smiled when she heard the tense crack in his voice. She captured the little speck of reality during the surreal flight and held the experience close to her heart as a reminder of her duties. She knew that Kit would need her help on the battlefield, but, more importantly, Amora knew that Wing would depend on her later. "Amora," Kit said with a more serious tone.

Amora took in Wing's scent from the XT and sighed into the microphone. "Yeah, Kit," she replied while gazing at the vibrant sun that peered over the Hollywood hilltops, "I am ready."

[-War-, Tehran, Iran; 2008]:

Wing grunted in the desert heat as he threw an Iranian soldier into the reddish rock ground. The man sneered and adjusted his helmet before lunging towards Wing from the shadow of Building 54. Sweat dripped from Wing's brow as he rotated his torso in a smooth motion that allowed his AK-47 to slide down its strap to his side. The American soldier quickly slid his hand into his black bulletproof vest and retrieved a serrated blade before leaping towards the enemy.

Their helmets collided as the renegade beats of bullets swarmed about the standstill duet, and their knives crossed just above the vivacious melody of the heart. Wing scowled as he

stared into the eyes of the Arabian knight and bit his lip in anticipation. Suddenly, the pressure vanished and Wing ducked behind a steel crate after a SASR round ruptured his adversary's skull. Blood from the arterial splatter flew from Wing's soaked arms as he reached for his com-piece.

He could hear the projectiles ringing like chimes as they scattered from his makeshift shelter. "I got snipers on me, Matt," Wing roared while he curled up against the building. He twitched as a round blew through the crate and covered his head when a piece of shrapnel burrowed into his arm. Wing could not hear Luky's voice over his screams of pain, but after a few moments, he knew that she had done her job correctly.

"Stop screaming already!" K.T. roared. "It's just a flesh wound, baby." She took hold of Wing's ankle and yanked him around the corner of Building 54.

"What are you doing?" Wing grunted, clutching his wounded. "There's another group at the IV Complex; you shouldn't be wasting your time on me. Now get going, soldier!" Wing pressed his back against the smooth, brown stone edifice and rose to his feet.

Derrick's calm voice flooded Wing's earpiece soon after the commander regained his footing. "Do you want me to take command?"

"Yeah, D," Wing replied, gritting his teeth. "You and K.T. head to IV and do what you can. I'll try to keep up with you, but combat-wise I will just slow you down." McCallister winced as he pulled his hand away from the wound and saw his blood ooze to the surface. "At least it's not serious," he said while glancing at K.T. in relief. The girl retorted to Wing's demeanor with a glaring scowl as she stepped towards him and reached into a pouch on her camouflaged vest. With a snap of her wrist, K.T. retrieved some gauze and medical tape and quickly yanked Wing's arm with a huff. "You really irritate me when you act like that, Wing," she bit while pressing the gauze to his wound. "You know you can never slow us down because you set the pace." She taped the gauze down and glanced towards the IV Complex. "I believe you said it was time to get going; I got your back, commander."

Wing smiled and gripped the handle of his AK-47 with his free hand. Moments like this emphasized the exact reason why he requested K.T.'s assignment to his unit. She was the bulldozer that could not back down from any challenge, and even when he was in doubt, she remained willing to follow his lead. "We'll take cover by the southeast corner," Wing

commanded, his eyes analyzing the landscape. He jogged steadily with K.T. guarding his four o'clock position and knew from the sound of her breath that she was ready to fight.

"There's a group of five on the western face!" Luky shouted through the com-set as Wing and K.T. reached the corner of the brick structure.

The towering woman pressed Wing's face into the brick as she forced him down. "Stay down commander," she whispered as the muzzle of her assault rifle inched around to cover the southern wall.

"I've got the northern side in my sites," Ash informed. "There is no need to worry about them hitting your backside, K.T." She paused and looked at the northern wall through the M40 scope. "Derrick," she continued, spotting the armored soldier as he moved towards the northwest corner of the complex. "I have you covered."

The buffed, camouflaged warrior gently repositioned his set microphone and checked the straps of his sand-colored helmet. "Copy that," he replied to Ash while approaching the corner. His eyes glanced to the jagged fragments of brick that marked the event horizon of danger as his fingers silently wrapped around a fragmentation grenade.

"They're moving toward you, Derrick," Luky roared as her drone took another pass over the building. In an instant, Derrick pulled the pin from his grenade and tossed it around the corner. He backpedaled with his gun raised as the device exploded and heard the shrieking screams that accompanied the bomb. Bits of flesh and fountains of blood painted the landscape while K.T. and Wing heard a set of frantic footsteps that indicated the approach of two enemies.

"You got three, D," Wing said while K.T. double tapped her trigger. He patted K.T.'s shoulder as he heard the thuds of bodies hitting dirt. "Well done," he whispered, pulling the com-piece away from his lips as he glanced at her. "And thanks," he continued with a smile on his face, "for supporting me when I was unsure of myself."

The girl grinned and covered the microphone with her hand. "Wing, we all support you because we know you make good decisions. It doesn't matter if you've been on injured reserve for a while. It's your mind that we put our faith in regardless of where or when." A deep blue shrouded the irides of her aquamarine eyes as her glare pierced the centers of his pupils.

McCallister did not need to hear the philosophical words that flowed through the oceanic colors in her eyes. He knew what she was going to say and nodded to the silent sentence that encouraged him never to give up on himself. “Lucian wants to know if he should deploy the 3rd Tank Squadron to your position,” Luky said, pulling Wing from the momentary oasis of solitude.

“No,” Wing replied after flicking the microphone back toward his mouth. “Everything is fine here,” he said. “Lucian should send the squadron to the perimeter to intercept any snipers still hiding outside the base’s grounds.” Wing scoured the base with a sigh as his mind noted the location of every fallen person. The aftermath remained the hardest part of war for him to comprehend, for even though the equation boiled down to his life or their lives, the fuel for the machine of death retained a secretive property. Never could one extrapolate the reasons for fighting without stumbling upon the complex, mystifying enigma that drenched each soldier in the blood of humanity’s doubt.

[Los Angeles; Nov 2, 2002]:

Sagami gazed silently as her three brothers surrounded the car that became Wing’s impromptu hospital bed. She fiddled with her long black hair while her mind wandered through memories of the day Wing rescued her. The cores of her somber eyes seemed lost in what appeared to be an eternity, but the fact remained that those events, which seemed long passed, were not even three days old. She sighed and continued to watch her brothers stare at Wing’s unmoving body while she wondered if they felt the same shame that she did.

He had risked everything for her family, when she had risked nothing, and now as the waves of silence caressed her ears, Sagami felt the tides of depression. While she had only recently met McCallister, she knew that her father – would never put that much faith, no – would never place such a burden upon any mere man. “We will have to protect him,” she stated while drifting towards her brothers. “I want you to keep your eyes on him,” she spoke as her arms wrapped around the younglings’ shoulders. “Dad needs us to fulfill his wishes, and what he wants is for this one to inherit his heaven’s blade.”

The children looked to their sister with astounded eyes before glancing through the car windows to Wing. They were all quite young, but each realized that to gain their father’s respect, Wing must have done something incredible. They nodded to

their sister's request before Sagami stepped back and returned to her seat by the abandoned garage. Her ear pressed against the steel frame and she could hear Turner, Aidan, and Fox discuss the current operation.

"It is going to be tough," Aidan mumbled to Fox and Turner, "but I know that Amora and Kit will pull through."

"Well," Turner replied, "the operation is pretty cut-and-dry. I'm more concerned with the kids' psychological stabilities. We obviously know that Amora went through a great deal of emotional trauma due to the Area 49 incident, but we haven't paid much attention to Kit's needs either. We're just going to have to wait it out and hope everything turns out for the best, but I think we can all agree that we need to sit down with them later."

"You're right," Fox interjected, "although I should probably get back to Wing." She smiled and looked to the doorway with a small gleam in her chocolate eyes. "He never was the type that liked being alone for very long."

Amora adjusted the output to the XT's thruster block before descending rapidly. "Do your stuff, Kit," she screamed while bright white flames burst from the turbines. "Just remember that you are not alone!" Her eyes narrowed as the ocean appeared from beneath a patch of clouds, and her gaze fell upon her target. Hundreds of cannons sat pointed towards the sea in a silent greeting that bequeathed death to those who tried to breach America's borders.

"Time for the distraction," she roared while extending her arms. Data lines flowed across the halogen plate before Amora felt the shudders on her left hand snap open. She listened to the whine the suit made when the Keystone Launcher charged and was overwhelmed by the outpour of energy that ravaged the ground below. Her eyes widened as she saw soldiers run from their barracks in the wake of torn asphalt and twisted steel, and Amora's heart responded with quick, hard beats that fluttered from the exhilarating display.

On the ground, Kit slipped through the chaos undetected. Around him, soldiers ran from Amora's devastating attacks unaware that the first angel of Wellton was lurking in the un-cast shadows. The R.E.M. concealed the young warrior from the eyes of many, yet Kit had to be careful not to let his guard down during the fray. It was still possible that a panicked soldier could

plow into him, and while he would be able to defend himself easily, Kit liked to keep casualties to a minimum whenever possible.

Matsko carefully worked his way through broken asphalt towards the Pacific Ocean. Between him and its pristine beauty sat the domed structure that housed the controls for the west coast defense network. He wished that they had been cleared to demolish the ugly mess that separated him from tranquil seas, but considering the vast quantities of uranium-235 and plutonium-239 inside, a weapon attack was ruled out to save Los Angeles from possible radioactive fallout. Instead, while Amora put on the fireworks display above, he would sneak into the facility and disable the controls of the network without disturbing the massive and dangerous power supply.

Streaks of metal and trails of burning rocket fuel flew past Amora's face as she dodged a counterattack of surface-to-air missiles. Aidan certainly had manufactured incredible armors, but she knew that there was no way the XT could withstand a direct hit from a missile. She growled and darted towards the surface while dodging another volley and landed atop one of the SAM sites. Amora's fingertips grazed the actuator buttons implanted in the mechanical claws of the XT. Quickly, the powerful fingers crumpled the barrel of the SAM device before a burst from the SR-71 modified jets catapulted Amora back towards the heavens.

The XT's HUD lit up with streams of halogen blue as Amora glanced down one of the base corridors. The onboard operating system detected a vibration wave and matched the signal to a UK imported Challenger tank. "Dammit, Kit," Amora said to herself, "hurry up." The tank crew began setting its sites on the XT and Amora nervously gazed at the wrist console. She had limited choices at this point and could either try dodging the tank on the ground, or fly up high and try to deal with the remaining SAMs along the way. Information continued to pour into her ocean-deep blue eyes as she darted behind one of the barracks.

Sweat dripped across Amora's brow as she flanked laterally and watched the barrel of the impressive tank keep her in its sights. Its beige body recoiled as a tank round landed directly behind Amora. She squinted at the cacophonous moans and shrieks that the XT made as it slid through asphalt and concrete rubble, and throbbed from the percussive blast that laid her out in a pile of churned gravel and broken glass. She panted

heavily and pushed herself onto her hands and knees while her blue eyes leered sinisterly down the gun of the tank.

“I’m not going to let him down,” she spoke, dragging her armored hands across the scratch marks that scared the XT’s chest plate. Each gouge in the steel made Amora’s heart quiver as if each mark marred her love and affection for the man whose smell, whose aura, and whose energy flowed into her through every pore. She would not let herself or the piece of her love that she wielded die at the hands of anyone. Her heart continued to pound as unnerved sweat poured down her cheeks like tears falling from the heavens. She had been driven to the point at which the decision to survive became hers, at which her choice to survive required a well-formulated purpose and heartfelt response. Her legs pushed into the gravel, and as the energy swelled within her tightened calves, Amora clenched her dreams. She would no longer rush blindly into the night and she would no longer let her desires slip away through the flimsy mesh of anxiety. Instead, she would show her direction with each step that brought her closer to Wing and with each step that would make him proud of her. She would carry Wing’s spirit with her and let him absorb her experiences and she would not let their love and desires be erased by those as blind as she had been.

Water dripped from worn rusted pipes and the hum of turbines filled the air as Kit walked down the corridors of the power facility. Rows of blue cabinet racks adorned the grey, cement floored hallway through which Kit walked, and his soft maroon eyes fell upon the oscilloscopes that decorated the doors of each device. The small screens added little to the dim fluorescent light that illuminated the cramped passageway and Kit found himself questioning the eerie serenity that drifted throughout the building. He wondered why he had seen no guards on the way to the central core, and why he had found no workers attending to the machinery. True, Amora had provided an amazing distraction, but there was no way troops could have evacuated the building in the time allowed.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps came through Kit’s headset as he reached a large locked vault door. “Shit,” Kit whispered, realizing that the personnel had sought safety in the very room he was supposed to destroy. The sounds of voices and footsteps continued to seep through the steel entranceway as Kit rethought his method of attack. It was possible that armed guards could be stationed inside the chamber and that a gunfight could

yield the worst-case scenario in which the destruction of the controls occurred before the deactivation of the core.

Yet the teen had little choice for the fate of the U.A.S. Zero rested upon his armored shoulders. With a thrust, he jammed his arms into the vault door and gripped the crumpled steel with the XR's powerful hands. Accompanying that cacophony, the jagged melodies of women's screams and men's gasps leapt from the bulky gate. With a twist of his hips, Kit broke through the door and stared into the abyss of the control room while alarms joined the blossoming symphony. He stepped forward into the darkness as glimpses of frightened faces peered past his invisible body, and in that instant, time seemed to freeze.

Amora's eyes widened as a 2:00 flashed slowly on the XT's halogen display. Before her, a tank round remained suspended in midair as if it sat in a dense sea of invisible fog. She felt the air break around her like the surface of freshly fallen snow yielding to children's feet as she rose slowly and looked about with a dumbfounded stare. A cool rush of air flooded the suit as the XT switched to internal life support mode and Amora stood confused as she heard the ducts to the outside snap shut. Slowly, the truth of the experience flooded her conscience.

The world sat frozen at her fingertips as if crystallized by her desire to live and through her love for Wing. She remained cautious as she timidly stepped around the tank round and smiled at the faint popping noise the air made over the pounding of her own beating heart. Her hand gently brushed over the surface of the ballistic steel, and Amora could feel the varying pressures that spiraled about the bullet in a helix. "It's like swimming in the arctic," she spoke aloud, hoping to put into words what Wing could not be there to see.

Her gaze fell upon the tank and the smoke that reached from its muzzle like a hand pointing towards the stars. Amora stepped forward, trying to remain calm as the waterish atmosphere broke around the frame of the armor. She breathed slowly as the halogen display read 1:59 and reached for the gun barrel with her right hand. Amora watched as the smoked air cracked like glass to her touch and continued to part as she gripped part of the gun shaft and clamped it tight. She sighed softly and closed her eyes, already knowing from Wing's ordeal that she needed to let go of her grip on time calmly, for nature's wrath remained a hidden judge of her intrusive sin.

The people inside screamed as a thunderous boom cracked outside and a pulse of air shocked the structure. “They are going to blow the reactor!” a man screamed in agony as he bolted past the concealed Kit and flailed down the hall. Kit walked silently to a computer terminal while his mind pondered the man’s panic-driven comment.

“Are we really portrayed that way?” Kit thought to himself as he looked over the controls. “Have they really been led to believe that we would shower a city in radioactive vapor?” Kit input the commands as quickly as possible and grinned when the confirmation appeared that the rods had been separated into small, isolated amounts. With the core below critical mass, the grid would run out of power and Kit could annihilate the computer terminal without fear of causing a nuclear catastrophe.

He was thankful that there had been no security personnel within the bunker, but still he had to be wary of the civilians remaining in the chamber. Most stared at the computer terminal nervously and their eyes clung to the information that the power had been safely cut. Suddenly, wings of gold appeared as the invisible shield that guarded Kit peeled from the armor. His eyes stared into the workers as he looked around and he decided it was the time for him to save as much life as possible. “We wouldn’t shower Los Angeles in fallout,” Kit said as the group backed away from him towards the wall. “I disabled the reactor to prevent such a catastrophe. Our war is with those that manipulate the American people, not with the American people themselves. I’m going to destroy this terminal now,” he spoke calmly with serious tone, “so I must ask you to leave the building immediately.”

Whether they heard his words or not was irrelevant, but Kit doubted that, in their panic, the people realized the truth behind his message. He glared as they continued to back away and watched as most stuck to the concrete wall by a film of their own sweat. Matsko abruptly shoved his fist into the control panel and cut through it all the way to the chamber floor. Sparks ejected from the pile of machinery and finally the workers fled through the hole in the vault door. Quickly, Kit reached into a compartment on the XR and retrieved several small C4 devices before placing the explosives in various locations about the room. With the noncombatants gone, he was free to return to the shadows and fade into obscurity underneath the blanket cover of his precise and decisive bombing.

Outside, Kit found a miraculous spectacle; thunderous cracks roared all around him as Amora appeared to dart across incredible distances before decimating the turrets of enemy tanks. To Kit, she seemed to vanish from reality an instant after striking the barrels and reappeared only for fleeting glimpses before focusing her attention on the next target. It took the boy a minute to uncover the truth behind her incredible speed and precision but as soon as he deciphered the phenomenon, Kit immediately appeared from the abyss and darted towards the sky with breakneck speed.

Amora watched as the remaining SAM sites launched a pack of missiles towards the sky and glanced upward as Kit passed over her. She smiled as she spotted his frame and realized that warping time prohibited her from receiving his radio transmissions. Once again, she bent down and felt power build in her legs; with a leap, she darted into the sky and felt the frozen air break around her as she flew to save her friend. Outstretching her arms, Amora clamped down on the guidance wings of the surface-to-air missiles before reaching her arms around the XR and pulling Kit to a higher altitude.

Kit looked down in response to a crack that pulsed through his ears and the slight pull of a vacuum that filled beneath him. The boy did not know that his plan had worked until he glanced upwards and stared into Amora's vibrant eyes. Her persona had changed and Kit could see the transformation pour from the gates that served as the windows to her soul. "Don't do something that reckless again, Kit," Amora said while the renegade missiles plummeted into the ocean.

Normally, Kit would have replied with a sarcastic response; however, in this case, such words seemed inappropriate. It was the first time that he could remember that a female saved him from danger, and it was the first time that he saw Amora shed her shell of anxiety and regret and turn her weakness into her greatest strength. Deep down, he wished that Wing could have been there to see her transformation for in many ways she had surpassed both of them. "He's proud," Kit replied, gazing at the strength beaming from her eyes. "That's what my guy's instinct tells me."

Amora slowly released her grip on Kit and let him fly on his own power. "Thanks Kit," she whispered as the two altered their course to return to Aidan and the others.

Kit shook his head and replied, "Thank you for reminding me everyday that I can find trust and friendship in girls again." This was certainly difficult for Kit to discuss

openly. The debacle with his sister had scarred his faith in the female populace, and it was often taken for granted that Kit's friendship with Amora was an emotional struggle that had not been fully overcome.

"How you feel isn't a crime," Amora said, turning her head to him. "It's what you do that matters, and that's a lesson we can both take from Wing."

[London; Nov 2, 2002]:

Blair looked out the window of a vintage jet-black Mercedes as it weaved its way through the rainy streets of downtown London. He had left the comfort of Bunker 1 and Asia for the dreary scenery of the United Kingdom to meet with his chief military advisor on the European front. McKenna was slightly fatigued from his flight but took the time to smile to his driver as the man pulled up to Buckingham Palace. As far as the president knew, the operations in the United States were running as planned, and it would be only a matter of time before Downie brought the Zero into enemy airspace.

Of course, McKenna's visit to the United Kingdom served political purposes as well, for the president wanted to make sure that the second phase of his operation was running as planned. Blair's fingers ran over his velvety blue sport coat as he stepped into the rain while his faded brown hair danced in time to the softly falling drops. A man quickly approached from the palace steps, and Blair could tell that beneath the dark leather coat waited his upbeat general. The man lifted his midnight officer's cap and nodded as strands of dusk-blond hair fell beneath the reflective black rim. "Mr. President," he spoke while his brown eyes glimmered with hope and admiration.

"John," Blair replied with a sincere voice as he outstretched his hand and gripped the man's worn, callused fingers. "You should know that of all people I expect you to still call me Blair."

The general nodded and led McKenna inside the palace. The stone structure, while looming, remained an elegant example of ancient architecture, and Blair could not help but glance at the decorative patterns hand-carved into the massive bricks. "We have Charles on the line," John said, referring to Colonel Downie. "He's about to bring the Zero into the red zone, sir." The paces of the men quickened as John led his president into a modernized room situated on the second floor of building.

Blair stared at the plush red carpet and carved mahogany tables. On the surface of fine wood, padded computer screens and keyboard-mouse setups inscribed the tables' edges, and soldiers of the United Arsenal hurriedly clicked away to maintain the connection with the U.A.S. Zero. Downie's face appeared on a large flat panel screen mounted onto one of the walls, and his grin let McKenna know that the Avalon operation had been successful.

"There's no power output from the defense guns at all," Downie stated as his canine teeth sparkled under the Zero's lights.

"You are cleared to enter U.S. airspace," McKenna replied as a commanding tone saturated his gentle voice. "I'm going to ask that your technicians record the following message and broadcast it with the Zero's antenna."

He watched as Chuck turned around and barked some orders before glancing back to the screen with a nod of approval. "You are good to go, Mr. President."

"Citizens of the United States of America," Blair spoke confidently as his icy blue eyes looked crisply into a camera lens, "I do not know the last time you were allowed to hear me speak openly with you, for in the time that I have been away, a tyranny took hold of the country I love.

"The freedom you believe you have today is nothing but a lie and façade. Defense guns line your coasts where beaches once lay, and authorities are free to take who ever they believe to be a threat to the state. There is no democracy where you live any more because there is only terrorism. I am sure many of you doubt me because I have been gone for so long, and I apologize for abandoning you in times of need. You need to trust me when I say that the freedom you think you have is a lie erected by a group of elite individuals and not those you put in power over a year ago.

"Once again, I am unaware of the last time my words were allowed to flow through America freely, but I will promise you now that I am still your president, and it is my plan for Blair McKenna to return to the United States. You may hate me for my course of action and you may not trust my intentions, but look to the armors whom your Chancellorodt fears and discover for yourself who the true terrorists are. Only the truth will set us all free."

Blair watched as Downie gave him a thumbs-up before the screen faded to static and snow. "They must have crossed into the red-zone, sir," John commented, hinting that while the

guns were down the Shadow-Front's satellite jamming system remained enabled.

"They will be fine," McKenna replied, watching as John began to remove his soaked leather coat. "That nephew of yours is an amazing soldier," he continued, glancing over John's name badge.

"I know he is," John replied with a smile as he held his hand over his heart and the name he held dear. "My brother would certainly be proud of him, as a man, and as a McCallister."

[Los Angeles; Nov 2, 2002]:

Misura Ackart sat at her desk in the Los Angeles office of NBC when the report of an unauthorized broadcast wave came to her attention. Her hair flew wildly behind her as she ran down the hall to the coffee room to grab a peek. Her co-workers could barely believe what they were seeing as a man who disappeared from their lives a year ago suddenly told them the realities they were living were merely nightmares.

"The FCC will probably release a statement to terminate all subsequent broadcasts of this message," a colleague spoke. The tension built in the small cubicle as those loyal to the government shrugged it off as terrorist propaganda. Yet the message was sincere, and for those in the journalism community who grew tired of increasingly harsh supervision from the FCC, this was the story of the year.

"It's really Blair," Misura whispered as she let her experience hush those mumbling in doubt.

The group turned as a panicked reporter rushed down the hall with sweat dripping from his face. He planted his hand against the wall and huffed while gazing at the others in disbelief. "They attacked the base," he roared frantically. "They attacked the base and took out our defenses."

"Terrorists!" one screamed from the back of the cubicle, enraged at the attack. "Such reckless actions could have killed us all!"

The group stirred as the young man caught his breath and looked up wearily. "But you don't understand," he said. "They took out tanks, the guns, other defenses, but..." The lad paused while glancing at the broadcast of McKenna as his declaration to seek the truth filled the air. "...there was not a single casualty."

[Dodge, St. Louis; Nov 2, 2002]:

Wolfe breathed in the basement air of the Dodge facility and twitched her nose. The smell of mildew sat in her nostrils and the moisture made her feel as though she was trudging blindly through a swamp. She came to a halt and glanced through a window, peering with soft blood-colored eyes as Lock sat up in his hospital bed. He looked groggy and tired, but the look in his eyes let Rachael know he recognized her. Soon after Lock made eye contact, he motioned her into the room with his IV-pricked hand and greeted her with a gentle smile.

“You did well,” he said as his dark eyes stared into her red orbs. Her hands twitched as she glanced down at him, her body fighting an invisible foe that ravaged her mind. Lock continued to stare as Rachael reached into her back pocket and retrieved a standard pistol. Its black paint glimmered in the somber light as she pointed it towards her mentor, but Lock did nothing but smile and gaze into her eyes.

“I see,” he continued, allowing his head to rest against his white cloth pillow. He paused for a second before letting his eyes close and spoke quietly, “Your gaze reminds me of hers. It is lost and confused and your body is doing what another mind wants you to do. That is how it once ended between a woman who I loved and me. She was a brilliant senator that wanted America to be strong, yet she knew that Blair was not the man for the job. Her husband ignored her pleas to become America’s military commander and head of the Chancellorodt party.

“It was a decision he would later regret because Miaka saw me as her next choice to become the leader of a new America. For a senator, I found it surprising that she had such little faith in the American people, but her faith in me was seducing and I could no longer resist her love and affection. Later, Jack discovered our love and the plot to make me the overseer of the council of senators that formed the Chancellorodt movement. He was going to retrieve McKenna and bring his master back like the lapdog he was; I killed him off and sent him to his grave, but it was Miaka – my love – who paid for my crime.

“She looked so lost and confused when she took the weapon away, and she failed to recognize the strength of her own son. She thought that he would crumble and break but he did not, and he inevitably killed her.” Lock’s gentle stare turned into a violent leer as he growled angrily at Rachael. “He took

away from me the only woman I could truly love. I hate him because I cannot break him, nor can I break my own children.”

He spat as Rachael cocked the pistol and leaned forward, spewing a menacing grunt. “But I will not be broken, either!” He paused once more as his sight fell into the open, emotionless, blood-coated voids. “Will you let Val break you, too?” Rachael’s eyes widened as the pistol discharged and her ears shook as the violent pop rang throughout the hallways. Blood poured between Lock’s eyes as Rachel leapt through the door and grabbed Val’s throat.

The scientist trembled as her claws dug into his neck and popped the trachea. Quickly he began gasping for air through the enlarging hole in his neck. “I’ll break you,” Rachael sneered as she listened to his pathetic gasps, “and I’ll break his kids, too, and most importantly, I’ll break Wing, and I’ll do it my way.” Her claws penetrated deeper into the flesh and Rachael licked her lips as the squirts of blood stroked the walls with every beat of his fading heart.

Her body shook as the thoughts in her mind amplified the agony and disgust. She shoved her other hand into Val’s gut and wrenched his organs. The red in her eyes appeared to ignite as soldiers lined the hallways and looked at the sight. Their jaws dropped in horror as they watched Val’s body fall to the ground in a crumpled pile, and their bodies quivered in fear as they looked to the devil’s stare reaching out through her fiery orbs.

The insanity of Val’s tinkering with her mind and the pain in Lock’s final chapter drove Rachael to the edge and made her thoughts teeter on the blurred line between genius and madness. Through the chaos, her vision of America began to take root and as she glared at those watching the scene with dumbfounded expressions, she barked her orders as the alpha of a new regime.

“He’s a criminal,” she growled at the awestruck soldiers, “and an assassin. Inform the Council that as third in command of Lock’s operations, I hold the right to assume his duties. Also,” she roared as she approached the terrified and nauseated group, “fetch me the best computer scientists at our disposal.” She strode past them with a gleam in her eyes as drops of blood fell from her claws like springtime drizzle. “I’ll take the initiative for now.”

[The Penumbra of Fate; L.A. & San Diego, Nov 2, 2002; Iran, 2008]:

The blue in Amora's eyes matched the color of the Pacific Ocean as the Avalon convoy parked near a bluff north of Los Angeles and close to Malibu. In the distance, she could see the outline of the U.A.S. Zero and its underside cannons as the vessel neared the American coastline. From the ground, it looked like a silvery sky-blue star that answered her prayers and fulfilled her dreams. Onboard were new friends, new faces, and the best hope for Wing's survival.

Kit, too, glanced towards the sky with a bashful stare; he knew not if his new comrades would accept him or his emotional burdens, and wondered if anyone drifting above would have the power to quell the confusing emotions lurking within his mind. He remembered what Amora told him and smiled, accepting the fact that as long as he tried to save himself from the prejudice he held, all would be well.

His eyes turned to gaze upon Amora's stature, and Kit remained enamored by the new aura radiating from her. Every second since they returned, she reminded him more and more of Wing and every word she spoke seem to come directly from the care and love he had for them. It was only in this time of dire need that Kit realized it was not just Wing that watched over them. Kit smiled as he looked into Amora's oceanic eyes and his canines shined beneath his parted lips. His family had never abandoned him because his family was all around him.

Amora continued to look at the approaching Zero, her mind focused on neither Aidan nor the others, but on an unending picture of Wing that could never fade from her thoughts. When she returned, she immediately sought him out and crawled beside him, whispering into his ear that she had taken care of his XT. She described to him the experiences she held dear and commented on how he seemed to smile when she told him about the freshly fallen snow.

Lukainy clung to Wing as she pressed an icepack lightly against his arm. A nurse had come in about an hour before and removed the shrapnel before stitching his injuries, but Luka remained nervous as she glanced wearily at the jagged pieces of metal that rested on a nearby table. Her grey eyes closed slowly as she kissed the icepack before pressing her chilled lips against Wing's warm ones.

"Like freshly fallen snow," she whispered, watching the blush appear on his tender cheeks.

He responded to her kiss with a gentle smile and gracefully grazed her arm with his hand. "I am okay, Luky," he

whispered as his amber-toned eyes gazed into her foggy cores. She shook her head and pressed towards him tighter, a little angry that he would get himself hurt again the day he was released from the hospital. "I'm proud of you," Wing continued, hoping to change the subject before she chastised him for getting hurt once more. Luka shivered from his words and stared at the wonderful smile that made her heart yearn for him; she could not stay mad at him for long because he proved to her every second that he wished for her to remain safe and loved.

She shivered as she watched the U.A.S. Zero hang overhead and gazed at its massive star-shaped underside. The spectacle was even more impressive than when the mighty ship drifted over the ocean, and her heart beat rapidly as a large zip-line platform descended from the center of the hull. Amora listened to the chains in the zip-lines, and the small bell-like ringing each link made as it approached the ground. It was a percussive symphony that played gently in her ears – yet more so with her mind – for each link was a tiny step that brought Wing closer to the help that he desperately needed.

The steel platform hit the ground with a twangy thud and immediately Kit and Amora helped load and anchor the vehicles to the plane. After a few minutes, everything was ready, and the various members of the Avalon staff, from those who held the smallest task, to Aidan, Fox, Turner, and the three pilots ascended to their new castle in the sky.

To the south, Akaru wandered slowly into the warehouse that became Zachhzus' workshop. "It seems that the timetable has been pushed forward, old man," Akaru said while watching the smith pound away at sheets of acquired metal. Zachhzus stopped his careful hammering to peer at that boy as he approached the bench. "My father has been removed from the picture, which means the battles down the road will only become more complicated and dangerous."

Akaru looked to Arai as his eyes filled with a touch of sincerity. "Finish the metal work old man and then get the hell out of my sight and on with your life." He turned around and walked back into the warm, sun-baked streets as Zachhzus examined his step. The old man could not help but smile as his amber eyes looked over the sheets of the tough metal and as his hands once again began to pound the pieces into shape. While the boy had been tarnished by the deeds of the evil, something about his march made Arai feel that there was more hope than he

had previously recognized. Deep down in Akaru's soul there was the drive of a bold leader, and Zachhzus hoped that with each strike of his heavy mallet, a little more of the boy's true spirit resurfaced.

Outside, Akaru's eyes looked to the sky as the sound of life began to return to the streets. He knew that his father's dream was beginning to crumble, and that if he wanted his vision of America to become reality, he would have to act fast. The Council would decide whether he or Colonel Wolfe would overtake his father's duties, but Akaru feared for the worst. He understood his father's work at Area 49 and knew that playing God would yield incredibly dangerous consequences, for now a voreaphiliac was in a position to be granted control of the Chancellorodt.

Deep within, Akaru felt the icy grasp of his father's reign beginning to thaw under the San Diego sun. He wanted to find Amora, he wanted to tell her everything that was happening, and he wanted to revive the country he once loved. But there were obstacles to overcome, there were rivals that could destroy his hopes and prevent him from accomplishing his dreams. "Rachael, Amora, Wing," he whispered while still staring at the crisp blue sky, "it's like breaking through freshly fallen snow."

Luka softly dragged Wing outside and tightly pressed the icepack to his arm as the ravenous heat enveloped the pair. The others were waiting, as well, with grins and teases to haunt Wing for getting hurt again that quickly. Yet, there was laughter and friendship, and soon the group huddled together and took the time to reflect on the earlier battle.

Charles and Ryoko stood at the edge of the Zero's hull while they gazed down at the approaching Avalon team. Both looked at all of the personnel, wondering what it would have been like to be with them, pondering what it was they each were thinking, and questioning why Wing McCallister was not standing proudly with them.

He was standing along the opposite side of the blurred line as his eyes drifted upwards towards the heavens. Sure, he was with his friends and with the one he loved, but feelings continued to tug at his heart and play with his mind. Wing continued to feel out of place as though he were living through some twisted dream that could only be a game. Yet, this dream

felt more real than others he had once had, and thus, he looked to Luka for strength, comfort, and protection.

Amora looked to the resting Wing before she stared at the crate containing the XT. It was her duty to protect it now and to protect Wing from the coming battle; she nervously prayed that she would live up to the challenge. Her brown hair whipped about in the ocean-boosted breeze, and she stroked her locks before peering upwards at the Sun skimming the southernmost edge of the Zero's frame.

Slowly, she stretched her hand towards the vibrant star...

*Carefully, he extended his arm and tried to grab the vibrant
star...*

...as pain and confusion sat in their minds...

*...dreams and desires calling across space and time,
while loved ones dwelled near...*

Yet, the affection was not quite complete,

as each had the protection but still had hearts to seek.

*And thus, as a silent Love drifted on Wings to her new castle in
the sky,*

both looked to the star of hope and whispered back in rhyme...

... "Something's missing..." across the Blurred Line.

To Be Continued...

[Rekk Saga: concluded]