

Fifth Column

3.1 History

The Fifth Column came together under that code name only in 1939, but its principal members had operated together for some time before that, starting with the group's infamous leader, Requiem. Born in 1900 as Ridolfo Uzzano, Requiem grew up in the small independent Republic of San Marino, nestled in Northern Italy. From an early age Ridolfo was destined for a life in the church. His parents dreamed of their son becoming a bishop or even a cardinal one day, thus bringing long missing honor and respect to their family. Ridolfo went along with these plans readily enough. The Church fascinated him from an early age, especially the more mystical and even occult aspects of theology. He studied hard and seemed pious enough. Then the First World War came when he was just 14. Like so many others of his generation, the unparalleled death and destruction of that war shook him to his core. Unlike many others, he liked the feeling.

Ridolfo stayed with his church studies but his heart was no longer in it. More and more he looked back to the age of an Imperial Church, when the pope ruled with an iron fist and directly or indirectly commanded armies. The power and respect accorded a priest still attracted him, but the religion did not. In 1922, just as he was preparing to be ordained for the priesthood, he found a new religion: fascism. Fascism was on the rise all over Italy at that time, and the independent nation of San Marino was not immune to its allures. Ridolfo became a leading member of the young party, urging his fellow citizens to join with the greater cause for Italian prosperity. Fascism's roots did not sink deep in San Marino, so Ridolfo and his friend called upon Mussolini and the Italian Fascist Party to help bring/force the city into the fold. Ridolfo soon found his homeland too small for his ambitions, and having earned Il Duce's respect, asked to serve the dictator directly.

Ridolfo served as a minor fascist functionary in Rome for several months, often disregarded and disrespected by his older, Italian comrades. Chafing under his menial duties, Ridolfo sought to put his religious training to use in the pursuit of his ambition. He convinced Mussolini to pressure the Pope into giving him access to the Vatican Archives. In return he promised to find ancient Roman and Papal doctrines that would help further cement Mussolini's claim to ultimate authority and win the hearts and minds of his people. With access to the great libraries and archives of Rome and the Vatican, Ridolfo began to unearth dread secrets and mystic texts that few others knew even existed.

All of his scheming and research had a singular goal: Ridolfo wanted to find something, anything, that would set him apart from the herd. Something that would make him special, give him power over others. At first he thought he might find what he sought amongst the various forbidden tomes on black magic and witchcraft that the Vatican kept locked away, but Ridolfo had no interest in selling his soul to demons or any of the other unpredictable forces of hell. One story did strike Ridolfo's eye – an apocryphal tale of the last Roman Emperor in the west, Romulus Augustulus. According to this tale, in 476 the emperor was spirited away by a secret society in Vienna known as the Path of The Dark. There they preserved his bloodline and his power through some sort of dark magic. Ridolfo knew that this was just the kind of propaganda Mussolini was looking for – if he could find someone directly descended from the last Roman Emperor and manipulate them into ceding power to Il Duce, it would be a nice symbolic gesture. Of course it was these stories of dark magic that interested him most.

Ridolfo went to Ravenna and began his search for signs of the Path of the Dark. He had very little luck at first. There was simply no indication in any historical records that such a group had ever existed. But Ridolfo's instincts told him that the people here were hiding something, especially the older residents of Ravenna's most ancient neighborhoods. Unable to get them to talk, he decided to use his position in the Fascist party to force some answers out of them. Under threat of torture and death one old woman finally broke, revealing that the Path still

existed and thrived beneath an ancient chapel.

Ridolfo found the chapel and the hidden stairway beneath the altar. He descended warily into darkness so deep that it swallowed up his lantern's light without illuminating anything. Ridolfo went down into that darkness and did not return for three months. His fellow fascists reported him dead, and the old folks he'd bullied sighed with relief. They thought that he's gotten what he deserved. In fact, Ridolfo was very much alive, although he soon took on a new kind of life that few could possibly understand. There he encountered a race of primordial beings composed of pure darkness called the Nicti. In his last, impotent days as emperor, Romulus Augustulus had stumbled upon these beings and offered them his life in exchange for protection. He ceded them dominion over the city of Ravenna and had a series of special vaults and hidden, underground fortresses created for their use. He also founded a secret society of humans devoted to worshiping the Nicti, known as the Path of the Dark. In return, they spirited him away when Odoacer descended on Rome.

The Nicti are beings of pure darkness who existed before the world was even created, and any contact with direct sunlight causes them immense agony – although it does not kill them outright. They can however infuse a human body (or any living creature for that matter) with their own dark energy. The result is a hybrid being that can walk in light but still wield the fantastic darkness control powers that every Nicti possesses. The fusion of life and dark is painful and often fatal for the human recipient, so few humans are brave enough to try it. Romulus Augustulus was one. Ridolfo Uzzano was another. The fusion gives the human immortality, something Augustulus had used to full advantage. As leader of the Path of the Dark he had secured his rule over Ravenna, controlling it from beneath and living a life of luxury in the darkness of his hidden caverns. Ridolfo's appearance was like a breath of fresh air – he had the ambition and drive that Augustulus had lacked for 1500 years. He made the young man swear allegiance to him and indoctrinated him into the Path of the Dark. He gave him great power and sent him forth into the world to spread the darkness. His only duty was to seek out those strong enough to undergo fusion with a Nicti and send them to Ravenna. Otherwise, he was free to follow the path his ambitions set for him.

The transformation left Ridolfo with skin that actually absorbed light and a host of super powers. Having been reborn he took on a new name inspired by his church upbringing – Requiem. He literally flew to Rome and offered his services to Mussolini. His timing could not have been better. Under other circumstances the dictator might have fled in terror before such an apparition, but at that moment Fascist Rome was being "terrorized" by some mysterious person calling himself the Freedom Fighter. The police and army were powerless to stop this mystery man, who seemed to have miraculous powers. The Freedom Fighter was beginning to rouse popular support against the fledgling fascist government, not to mention his constant attacks on party officials and military leaders. Mussolini made a deal with Requiem – take care of the Freedom Fighter and he would have a place in the new government and all the support he could ever want.

The battle, when it finally happened, lasted less than thirty seconds. The Freedom Fighter had no super powers of his own. He was simply a brave, resourceful man dedicated to fighting tyranny. His gadgets, daring, and skill were a match for the entire police force in Rome, but Requiem was a whole other order of power. He lay in wait in the shadows for the Freedom Fighter to appear. When the mystery man did, the darkness took form, reached out, and grabbed him. The poor young man never knew what hit him as the dark tendrils crushed every bone in his body. Requiem delivered the corpse personally to Mussolini, who thanked him somewhat warily.

As reward Requiem was given his own palazzo in Tuscany from which he was tasked with squashing all resistance to the Fascist government, especially from secret societies, cults, and the newly emerging super powered heroes. From 1924 to 1936 Requiem led a brutal campaign up and down the Italian peninsula. He killed thousands of resisters and several dozen emerging

heroes. He also sent back a handful of candidates for Nicti fusion to Ravenna in order to fulfill his duties to the Path of the Dark. All that time he built up his own power and amassed his own followers – men devoted to the fascist cause and to Requiem personally. Requiem became a true believer in the tenets of Fascism and when a chance to fight for the cause on a larger stage presented itself, he accepted.

For all his devotion to Il Duce, Requiem had also become a great admirer of Chancellor Hitler in Germany. He made several visits to Hitler in the mid-30's. The Fuhrer was very intrigued by Requiem's powers and wanted to know everything he could about them. His devotion to the Path prevented Requiem from disclosing any sensitive information to the German, but the two men did become close. When The Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, Hitler sent planes to help the fascist government there and suggested Requiem go as well. Mussolini reluctantly agreed to Requiem's request. He headed to Spain to fight against the handful of heroes who had sailed over from America to help fight fascism's spread. This was his first experience with truly powerful heroes and Requiem relished the challenge. He defeated all who opposed him until he first came across a super strong, super tough American hero named The Steel Bull.

Nothing Requiem could do could hurt the Steel Bull, while his own powers kept him safely out of the American hero's crush grasp. At a loss, Requiem turned to Hitler for help. He knew that the Nazis had been developing their own. Hitler's researches included the occult, but were mostly centered on science-based methods of empowerment. One of the more controversial scientists was a mountain of a man named Othman Doul. Othman was an Austrian inventor of "questionable" ethnic heritage. His outspoken, gruff, uncultured manner had won him few friends in the Third Reich's reaches. Still, he was a supremely gifted inventor, especially when it came to new weapons systems. Hitler decided to put Othman to the test and sent him to Spain to help Requiem.

The two did not get along well. Othman found Requiem's powers interesting but ultimately trifles compared to the future science offered. Requiem found Othman's demeanor coarse and offensive. They never did come to like one another, but in Spain they earned each other's respect. Othman and Requiem confronted the Steel Bull on the field of battle, and none of the weapons he'd brought could penetrate the hero's steely hide. Requiem had to use his darkness powers to hide them both and spirit them away, and even so Othman was severely wounded. He has however managed to scrape off a sample of the Bull's skin before they fled the field. IT wasn't long before the resourceful Othman created a special bullet capable of making a small but deep hole in The Bull's skin. They confronted him again, Othman's weapon was successful and Requiem used the hole to introduce a tendril of darkness into the Bull's body, which quickly ripped him apart from the inside.

With their sole remaining champion defeated and their armies routed, the freedom fighters in Spain soon fell before the new fascist government. Othman and Requiem returned to Germany to report upon their success. Requiem now proceeded to help the Nazi's do what he had already accomplished in Italy: root out and destroy any super powered or secret resistance.

Othman Doul made special weapons and even armor to equip the storm troopers under Requiem's command. Meanwhile, Hitler's other super soldier programs were continuing apace, principally under the direction of a doctor and biologist named Dr. Ehren Haff.

Dr. Haff was not necessarily the most faithful of Nazi Party members. He did not believe in the inherent superiority of one race to another. Indeed, he thought all humans to be relatively equal in their imperfection. He believed truly and deeply that only science and medicine could truly create a superior race. Dr. Haff developed a series of special formulae and radiation treatments designed to create the perfect soldiers. In 1938 he had his first major success: he created a formula that, when administered properly along with surgical adjustments and so forth, resulted in a human specimen with incredibly strong muscles, damage resistance, and speed. Unfortunately the process left the subject looking decidedly inhuman. Indeed, the very first time Hitler saw one of Dr. Haff's creations he said they looked like vampires. Thus the name stuck:

Vampyri.

Hitler and the leaders of the Reich were not pleased with Dr. Haff's Vampyri. They were monstrous, obviously base creatures, despite their impressive physical prowess. They did not fit the image of the golden haired Aryan superman that the Nazis wanted to promote in the world. Hitler was quite disappointed. In an effort to convince his Fuhrer that the vampyri were truly the next phase of human evolution, Dr. Haff administered the treatment to himself, becoming one of the disturbing creatures. This metamorphosis only served to make him even more of a pariah within the Reich.

As Nazi Germany extended its power and influence into neighboring countries it became clear that a massive war was brewing. It was also clear that the United States could potentially play a deciding role in that war, should it choose to become involved in European affairs. The Reich decided that it would be best to start covert operations in America as soon as possible and to have agents in place to both influence and undermine American society and war plans.

Requiem had been snubbed and largely ignored since his return from Spain. The SS were jealous of his power and quickly outmaneuvered him politically. Hitler no longer took meetings with him and his assignments tended to be routine and unimportant. When he heard of the plans to send a covert team to the United States he quickly volunteered to lead it. Hitler agreed to his request and took the opportunity to rid himself of two other important but noisome underlings: Dr. Ehren Haff and Othman Doul. The trio was sent by U-boat along with several squads of commandos, and no one ever really expected to see them in Germany again.

Thus in 1938 the 5th Column was born, although it had yet to take on that name. Requiem retained the name he had chosen as a code name. He had earned a bit of a reputation in fascist circles and he planned to use that fame to recruit support from sympathetic Americans. Othman Doul chose the code-name Vandal, while Dr. Haff took the rather obvious but fitting name Nosferatu. The three men and their soldiers snuck onto a deserted beach on a moonless Nacht, with Requiem's powers providing all the extra cover they needed. They were just 20 miles north of their destination: Paragon City.

For the first year Requiem and his team remained entirely in the shadows (often quite literally). Each of the three commanders took a full twelve months to set up operations. Requiem spent most of his time playing the role of spy – sneaking into government and military buildings, stealing top secret data and then sending it back to the Fatherland. Vandal and Nosferatu spent their time setting up their labs and machine shops to carry on their work. Vandal's first task was to design himself a suit of self-powered armor to help protect him in battle. He also worked furiously at creating a series of radio controlled automatons and drones that could be used to augment their meager strike force when it came time to attack. Nosferatu began work on a second generation formulae that would have less drastic effects on the human body, all the while improving upon the original Vampyri formula. He created dozens more vampyri to guard the secret labs and underground bases the team was building.

Requiem's secondary task was the recruitment of more soldiers from the local population.

At this time, before the war broke out, there were a disturbingly large number of pro-fascist or at least sympathetic individuals in the U.S. With the Great Depression still lingering and isolationism a very popular political stance, Requiem had fertile ground to sow his seeds of hate. Using all the fascist propaganda scare tactics he knew, Requiem managed to win over several dozen fanatics to his cause. These he sent out across the country to find more like minded souls. All the while a trickle of recruits came from Germany and Italy – usually very competent but politically inept soldiers and officers who had done nothing wrong but who had crossed someone in the Party elite. Requiem and company welcomed them one and all.

In 1939 Requiem's team began to operate in earnest, moving from simple espionage to full fledged sabotage. They began small and clever, disguising their attacks as accidents or random violence rather their true nature. A gas main would break just below a munitions factory, causing an explosion. A drunken truck driver would lose control of his vehicle carrying explosives and

smash into and army base's gates. And ship's boiler would malfunction and explode, gutting the vessel and sending it to the bottom. Requiem's darkness powers combined with Vandal's ingenious sabotage devices allowed the group to destroy millions of dollars worth of war materiel and kill hundreds of innocent people without raising any suspicions.

Well, almost without raising suspicion. Fortunately there was one her who wasn't fooled. In late 1940, as war raged in Europe, a member of the Freedom Phalanx, Dr. Mnemonic, noticed what was happening. He noticed the statistical leap in accidental deaths and decided to investigate some of the scenes. His planet-sized intellect quickly discerned that it was murder and sabotage – not an accident at all. He soon linked several other “accidents” to the same culprits and had strong suspicions that the Germans were somehow behind it all. He then laid a rather clever trap – offering up a notoriously accident-prone ship carrying vital cargo. His trap worked, although he failed to catch anything. Although the Freedom Phalanx had the ship surrounded, Requiem's powers allowed him to slip in unnoticed and plant the sabotage device. As he was leaving he noticed one of the heroes flying high above. Requiem flew high and intercepted the unsuspecting hero, entangling him in tendrils of darkness and dragging him away into the Nacht.

Nosferatu used every trick in his torturer's book to interrogate the hero and quickly broke the poor soul. The fascist saboteurs now knew that the Freedom Phalanx was on to their existence. Indeed, now that one of their own had fallen, they would be even more interested than before. It was time to move on to phase two. The 5th Column stopped operating in total secrecy and now made an attempt at misdirection. Vandal had been hard at work on his automatons and had come up with a number of different attack robots that could operate fairly effectively and independently in the field. The 5th Column launched a series of very public attacks using some of these robots – robots designed to look like Communist creations. Colored red and emblazoned with the Hammer and Sickle, these humanoid mechanized beasts terrorized the east coast for the next six months.

The “communist” attacks quickly became known in the press as the Red Robots and served their job well. Even Dr. Mnemonic was fooled or distracted enough to pursue Vandal's carefully crafted false leads instead of the true menace. Requiem and Nosferatu were left to run their intelligence and sabotage operations. Throughout 1940 and the first half of 1941 they focused almost entirely upon gathering as much data as they could about the American military and its plans for entering the war. Requiem spent a lot of his time in Washington D.C. during this period, even infiltrating the White House on several occasions. Nosferatu continued to use his Vampyri to try and sabotage U.S. attempts to send aid and war materiel to Britain and the Soviet Union, all the while putting the final touches on his Ubermensch formula. Vandal provided weapons and sabotage devices for the Vampyri and ran the Red Robot attacks against infrastructure and political targets.

The group was providing an invaluable service to the Nazi regime, but Hitler had other plans. He suspected the Americans would enter the war at any time and knew that the Japanese planned to attack Pearl Harbor. And so, not wanting to be one-upped by Japan, he ordered Requiem to gather all his might for a single attack on the American fleet gathered at Paragon City harbor. Requiem was loathe to reveal his power so blatantly, but the Fuhrer would brook no argument. And so, on Dec 7, 1941, the Fifth Column (still not known by that name) revealed itself to the world.

A fleet of cargo ships and navy escorts had assembled in the safe harbor of Paragon City with plans to steam out the next morning. Guarded by several heroes trained in anti-submarine warfare, it was hoped that the large fleet could safely penetrate any u-boat patrols and reach Britain with its cargo of munitions and other supplies fully intact. Instead, it never left the harbor. Although they all opposed the plan, Requiem, Vandal, and Nosferatu executed it perfectly. Most historians remember only the hordes of Vandal's flying robots and rocket-equipped soldiers. Few are even aware of the vampyri who swam below and placed limpet mines or that the Nacht

before Requiem himself assassinated all of the heroes assigned to defend the fleet. It was all over in a few minutes, and not a single ship remained above the waves.

Taken with the even more devastating losses at Pearl Harbor, the country was frightened and outraged. The enemy had struck them at home, and done so with seeming impunity. The U.S. immediately declared war on the Axis and began to mobilize both soldiers and heroes to fight the war. The Nazi attack on Paragon City had not been without its own casualties: several dozen soldiers had died and a number of Vandal's robots shot down. As a result Dr. Mnemonic had plenty of evidence to sift through in his investigation. He quickly realized that the Red Robots had been a ruse to distract him. The same hand had obviously designed the flying robots and advanced weaponry used in the attack. This was proof that the Germans had been active in the U.S. for over a year, a thought that frightened the good doctor.

The papers went wild with speculations about the nefarious Nazi's responsible for the attack. It had obviously been the work of spies and saboteurs stationed right here in the United States. More likely than not, they still hid within our midst. Papers talked of a Fifth Column operating in secret against freedom and democracy. As the Germans had thus far failed to identify themselves, the name stuck.

Requiem and company now entered a new phase of the war. There were police, military, and heroes all searching for them. The time for drawn out plans and fake accidents had passed. The insurgents began a campaign of guerilla warfare and terrorist style attacks. They took to lightning raids on power facilities, steel plants, bridges, factories, docks, and other infrastructure targets. They stayed well away from the "hardened" military targets such as naval bases and army facilities. With civilians taking most of the casualties, the military and heroes were forced to hunt the 5th Column down rather than wait for them to attack a well-defended target.

Requiem only risked one more large scale engagement. When the 1st Hero Brigade gathered in Liberty Plaza before shipping off across the Atlantic, he knew he could not pass up such a choice target, no matter how great the risk. Requiem massed almost his entire strength for the attack, but this time he lacked the element of surprise. Dr. Mnemonic had predicted such an attack and the Freedom Force and Hero Brigade had prepared accordingly. The resulting battle was the bloodiest and most destructive that Paragon City had ever seen. Dozens of heroes fell, but their losses were nothing compared to those suffered by the 5th Column. Hundreds of robots and flyers were destroyed and scores of soldiers killed. Even a dozen or so vampyri fell in battle. This was Requiem's first great defeat and he did not savor it. He knew well enough that the time had come to quit the field, and so he retreated, beaten for the moment.

With most of the country's heroes shipping out to Europe, Asia, and Africa to help fight the war, only a few remained to directly combat the 5th Column. While it's terror attacks were certainly troublesome and were causing millions of dollars of damage, they still didn't compare to the worldwide threat posed by the Axis overseas. Only a handful of experienced heroes remained in the States, and almost all of them focused their attention on fighting Requiem and his followers. For six months the 5th Column laid low, launching diversionary attacks using robotic forces. Since the United States had entered the war the Reich had stopped sending Requiem new recruits and with patriotism running at a fevered pitch it was impossible to recruit from the local population.

The 5th Column never truly recovered from the loss at Liberty Plaza. It continued to harass and cause trouble throughout the remainder of the war, but as the American economy and industrial base kicked into war time overdrive, the small acts of sabotage and destruction became less and less significant. Seeing this, Requiem redirected his efforts against the country's remaining domestic heroes, carrying out a personal vendetta against them. With little or no direction from Hitler, the group was free to act as it pleased. Noseferatu all but withdrew from the war, preferring to carry on his experiments in a secret underground lab. Vandal spent more and more energy testing bizarre and experimental weaponry, more out of his own curiosity than in an effort to help win the war for Germany. Requiem continued to fight on with what troops

remained, but he had ceased to be much more than a terror for the heroes of Paragon City and other parts of the East Coast.

When the war ended, Requiem and the rest of the 5th Column faded away as well. Defeated and demoralized, the three villains decided to lay low and disappear rather than risk facing trial as war criminals. Requiem arranged for them all to flee to South America. He ventured into Europe and managed to destroy all official record of their existence, although he was almost caught on several occasions. Post-War Europe was awash with super powered spies and soldiers, making any kind of clandestine activity extremely dangerous. He then returned to South America and helped his cohort set up a new base of operation – a secret mountain fastness where all three of them could carry out their researches in relative peace and security. Vandal was happy to have a well-equipped workshop where he could develop his engineering marvels without interruption or pressure for immediate results. An aging man with a heart problem, he worked first to ensure his own long life, developing implants and systems to replace his failing organs and give him what could easily amount to eternal life. Then he began to dramatically improve upon the simple, nearly mindless robots that had served the 5th column so well before and during the War. Nosferatu had now perfected his vampyri formula. A full course of treatment took less than a week and resulted in a total transformation without any ill-effects. The vampyri had incredible strength, toughness and speed and were immune to most types of damage, including bullets. The Ubermenschen formula proved more troublesome, and over the ensuing decades he went through thousands of “test subjects” culled from the neighboring villages. Eventually he did perfect the formula, achieving some truly remarkable results. Meanwhile, Requiem planned. Having never before suffered a defeat so complete, he yearned for vengeance. He had little love for South America, viewing it as a backwards, corrupt, and morally vapid place that was still largely the domain of savages under lesser races. Nor did he want to return to Europe, which to him stank of defeat and capitulation. No, he wanted to return to America, only this time as a conqueror. Easier said than done of course, and Requiem knew this. While giving Vandal and Nosferatu everything they needed to conduct their research, Requiem set about building an army of his own.

For the next 30 years he traveled the globe promoting the cause of fascism. He supported guerilla groups, right wing government cabals, and political parties. All the while he sought new recruits and sent them back to South America for training (and occasionally experimentation). He operated under a number of different aliases and was wanted by Interpol as three separate people. He stayed away from America though, knowing that, with all the heroes there, it was still too dangerous for him.

As his confidence and drive began to loose steam Requiem received a summons from the Path of the Dark. He had largely ignored his masters for quite some time and they were not pleased. He made a pilgrimage to Ravenna and prostrated himself before his dark masters. They chastised him for his lack of faith and forced him to remain in their black lair for a full decade. Vandal and Nosferatu suspected him dead and went their separate ways (neither had liked the other very much) becoming villains in their own rights. All the while Requiem received wisdom, power, and strength from his constant devotions to the Nicti.

Reinvigorated with the power of the Path, Requiem left Ravenna and sought out his old allies. Vandal was running a crime syndicate in Rio while Nosferatu had set himself up as some kind of feudal vampiric lord in the mountains of Peru. Neither was satisfied and when they saw what Requiem had brought with him, they agreed to “get the band back together.” The Nicti had given Requiem a new group of followers – humans who had fused with Nicti to create the terrifying and powerful werewolf-like Nacht Wolves. All agreed that the next logical step was returning to Paragon City and taking vengeance upon the nation that had shamed and defeated them. With no Hitler to force their hand, the 5th Column took its time preparing for their triumphal return. They operated entirely under the radar in the United States for over a decade before they made their stunning debut in the wake of the Rikti invasion. Indeed, they might well have

waited another decade had they not seen a great opportunity in the invasion's aftermath, with so many of the greatest heroes dead or missing. The city was weak and ripe for the taking. Requiem and company had used their time to prepare well for their attack. They had dispatched recruiters all over the country to bring fresh, committed blood into the organization. As their number swelled, Vandal was hard at work using a new technology he had developed – digging and mining machines that could hollow out a cave network in record time. The 5th Column riddled the ground beneath Paragon City with tunnels and caves, setting up scores of secret outposts and fire bases beneath the city streets. There they trained and housed their troops, manufactured their robots, and prepared for the coming war.

When the Rikti invaded the 5th Column was as surprised as anyone. They took a wait and see attitude, fighting off more than a few Rikti incursions into their bases but otherwise keeping a very low profile. If the war had gone too badly they would have stepped in to help beat back the aliens, but Requiem had faith the Statesman and his fellow heroes would eventually beat back these beast men. He was right, and moreover he was pleased with the result: not only did the humans win, but they managed to lose the vast majority of their most powerful heroes in the process and destabilize the entire world economy. Paragon City was carved into a patchwork of chaotic, often untamed zones. Now was the perfect moment to attack.

And so, for the first time in over 50 years 5th Columnists stalked the streets of Paragon City. They followed much the same pattern as before, striking in secret at targets of opportunity, not revealing their presence until a group of heroes including Statesman discovered them. At first the venerable hero could not believe his eyes. The 5th Column was back with a vengeance and at the worst possible time.

3.2 Beliefs and Goals

The renewed and reformed Fifth Column wants nothing less than to create a fascist state in America. From there it plans to expand outwards and bring the entire world to heel under a single, beneficent ruler. Their readings of Plato and Aristotle, along with other philosophers justify their contention that it is morally right for a self-selected elite to rule through deception, hyper-nationalism and state-sponsored ideology. They appeal to the basest, most self-deceitful instincts in humanity. They tell themselves and their followers that they are better than everyone else, and that once the war is over, the world will for the first time know peace and prosperity in every corner of the Earth.

They justify the mass destruction and killing that accompanies their crusade with a particularly twisted form of Social Darwinism. They are the fittest – physically, morally, and ideologically – therefore they will survive where all other will perish. They have grand plans for a time when iron laws will keep everyone in America safe from crime and free to live a fulfilling life, but in the meantime they must first tear down the corrupt, morally degenerate society that exists solely to exploit and abuse the average citizen. They promise a return to some mythical, heroic golden age when everyone knew their place in society and everyone was happy with a select group of white, male rulers making all their decisions for them.

The Fifth Column appeals to a wide variety of hates and discontents. Their propaganda takes the most vitriolic complaints from both the political right and left: The U.S. government seeks to control your life. It is morally bankrupt because it recognizes the rights of women, gays, and non-whites. The democracy has been entirely subverted by special interests so that rich, greedy elites use the tyranny of the masses to control the lives of normal, working class men. Pornography, gambling, video games, movies, and television rot the minds of America's youth. Most importantly it appeals to a twisted kind of patriotism: America has forgotten its roots to the point where now there is no real America: it's all a corporate controlled moral cesspool that's forgotten the meaning of words like honor and nationalism. Everything is for sale. Everything is permitted. Nothing is sacred. All are equal – even those who aren't.

This heady fascist brew wouldn't pass the laugh test for most educated people, but there are plenty of weaker minds out there that readily fall for the Fifth Column line. What sets the Fifth Column apart from all the other militias and extremist groups is that these fascists have very real power to offer those who put on a uniform and mask. They will indeed make you a literal superman, assuming you have the guts, strength, and determination to rise through the ranks. A new recruit has every expectation that one day he will indeed be, if not better, then at least stronger, tougher, and more dangerous than 99.5% of the world's population. That's a very tempting offer, and more and more people take them up on it each day. The Rikti invasion proved a special boon to the 5th Column's recruiting drive. Many felt powerless in the face of such a seemingly unstoppable foe. The 5th Column offered them a way to get some of that power for themselves.

Requiem continues to exploit this feeling of weakness and insecurity that many feel. Most of 5th Column's propaganda these days focuses on spreading the fear that the government cannot and will not protect the common man when time comes. The leaders squabble, look after their political leaders and rely on paid costumed heroes for their safety. It is up to the moral, honorable man to take his future in his own hands and fight with the 5th Column. Requiem also makes much use of the Rikti ability to transform themselves into humans. They stress that aliens could be anywhere, including in the government – including even amongst the city's so-called heroes. Only the 5th Column has the technology, organization, and will to constantly test all of its members to ensure none of them are aliens. Or so they claim.

All of these claims help support the 5th Column's most important talking point: heroes are not the saviors, but the oppressors of mankind. The 5th Column teaches that heroes are a menace because they have no control. They are free agents who cause ten times more chaos and destruction than they do good. They have stolen the power that should rightly belong to the good and decent men of the world. They set themselves up as gods and lord their powers over common, morally upright men. That power must be restored to those who deserve it – racially pure, morally upstanding men.

Thus the ultimate goal for the 5th Column is quite simple: eradicate anyone who disagrees with them. Once they've achieved universal approval for their ideology, then the world will be at peace. Anyone who disagrees with that ideology is thus an enemy of the peace and must be eliminated forthwith. Simple.

3.3 Behavior Patterns

The Fifth Column runs constant operations in Paragon City. Their basic philosophy is to stay on the offensive at all times, masking their more long-term schemes with a never-ending series of small raids and attacks. The group expects a high turn over and casualty rate, especially amongst its lower ranking troops. Thus MekMen are very popular for basic harassment missions, as are Iron Valkyries. Wolfpack bots are too expensive and important to be frittered away on distractions.

These harassment attacks take all forms, from thefts and raids designed to provide funds and equipment to the cause to kidnappings, bombings, and terror attacks designed to do nothing more than scare and distract the local authorities. Hand in hand with every attack there is always a propaganda message to "justify" it. The 5th Column's strict and hateful ideology make it easy to find an excuse to attack almost every decent, civilized person in the city. Race, creed, political leanings, corporate affiliations, friendships, education, and even the clothes they wear have all served as excuses for death and terror. The 5th Columnists always leave pamphlets or other media behind to explain their actions.

The lower ranking troops do not usually operate directly out of the many underground bases that the 5th Column maintains throughout the city. Vandal has built some truly amazing drilling and building machines that make creating an underground cave network much easier than one might imagine. Nevertheless, the 5th Column values these facilities and does not want cannon

fodder level captives revealing their location to every fledgling hero who manages to capture one of them. These lower level soldiers have their own hideaways – sometimes in sewers or caves, but more often in abandoned buildings or warehouses.

The underground facilities serve as launching points for more serious attacks on the city and its heroes. They are of course much sought after by heroes and law enforcement, but the villains have proven very skilled at hiding them. Some connect directly to the underground levels of existing buildings while others are accessed through existing cave or sewer tunnels. The caves allow the 5th Column to move around beneath the city with relative freedom, although they must avoid Rikti, Lost, Devouring Earth, and other threats as they travel.

Requiem and friends are masters of patience and long-term planning. They will set the seeds for an operation months or even years in advance. They have placed moles and infiltrators throughout the city, using their influence only when necessary in order to preserve their security. These long-term operations are usually aimed at the total destruction of some valued capitalist or democratic institution. They don't just rob banks, they drain their assets, destroy their buildings, discredit their officials, and terrorize their employees. A crusading left wing politician does not just have his name smeared, he is assassinated, framed as a pedophile, discredited as a liar and drug addict, and has his entire family and most of his friends brought to ruin. They have learned the lesson that you should never leave an enemy any room to strike back. Defeat him utterly and move on to the next target.

While politicians, scientists, writers, artists, journalists, actors, police officers, and military leaders are all viable targets (basically anyone who promotes a world view counter to their own) the favorite targets of such operations are heroes. The 5th Column wages a constant war against heroes, plaguing them with ambushes and harassment attacks. But when they set their sites on eliminating a hero entirely they take their time and study the hero's every facet. They often start by attacking him where he's weak – family, friends, loved ones, and cherished institutions. Then they move in for the kill, exploiting his weaknesses and cutting him off from any possible sources of aid. They don't always succeed, but when they do it is invariably final and spectacular.

The Fifth Column's quest for real social change in the United States has led it to form a "legitimate" political party that ostensibly has no ties to the terrorist activities of the parent group. Known as the American Empire party, it seeks to create a United States where wise laws and benevolent rulers ensure safety, prosperity, and moral certitude for every man woman and child. A place for every person and every person in his place. Not surprisingly, this is not the most popular political party in American history. Nevertheless, it does have its adherents and serves its two main functions: a legal way for Requiem to distribute his propaganda and an outreach tool for finding new recruits. The 5th Column is very scrupulous about hiding any direct ties to the group and so far it has avoided being classified as a domestic terrorist supporting group.

Of course there's more than one way to manipulate politics. Requiem knows that almost every politician has a dark secret or two that they don't want the public to know. He uses his Nacht troops and Vampyri to gather sensitive information on every politician, right or left wing, in the city. He doesn't use it for blackmail or to influence the process – he just releases it to the public through various media contacts. When there are no secrets worth revealing he has his troops plant false evidence and then reveals that. Requiem wants total dissatisfaction with the current U.S. government at every level. The more people become dissatisfied, the more likely they are to turn to extremes, like his own American Empire party or the 5th Column itself.

One of the least talked about but most pervasive activities of the 5th Column is its propaganda machine. The group puts out a constant stream of fascist and hate literature under a bevy of different publishing fronts. They also maintain several dozen right wing Web sites. They even have a pirate radio station that broadcasts in Paragon City on an irregular basis. Most of the propaganda is ridiculously right wing and extremist, but some of it hides in sheep's clothing.

These publications mimic more accepted right wing ideals and then serve as gateways to the publications that more accurately present the 5th Column's twisted message. Finally the 5th Column is doing its best to win the hearts and minds of the people it hopes to rule – white, fascist males. If you fit into this decidedly narrow category then the 5th Column will do a great deal to help you, even if you don't ask for it. They secretly pay bills, arrange for employment opportunities, provide scholarships for children to attend "right-minded" schools and so on. While these "charity" operation have had only limited success, they do sometimes win over support from someone who would otherwise view the group with disdain.

3.4 Enemies and Allies

As one of the largest and most powerful villain groups in Paragon City, the Fifth Column has little need for allies, but it certainly has many enemies. Their very ideology, casting themselves as heroes in the face of oppression and moral failure means that they must openly oppose most of the other villain groups. In truth Requiem has little use for any of them, although he's not above manipulating and using them when it suits his needs.

The Rikti are of course dire foes. The 5th Column fights them as ferociously as it fights the city's heroes and they are always sure to trumpet their successes every time they defeat an alien cohort or uncover a hidden nest of invaders. The Rikti don't even distinguish between heroes and the 5th Column. As far as they're concerned, both are equally dangerous.

Lesser but equally evil groups like the Banished Pantheon and the Devouring Earth also draw a similar amount of hatred and disdain. The Banished Pantheon is viewed as a mongrel religion for lesser races and a bane to all decent, civilized men. The Devouring Earth are merely monsters in need of extermination, like any other pest.

The 5th Column views the Circle of Thorns with a kind of fearful respect. Requiem senses in them a power even greater than that of the Nicti and he is loathe to cross them until he understands them better. The group has little to do with magic and so leaves such occult matters to the Circle and its followers. Their party line is that such practices destroy the moral fiber of man, but they do not actively seek a conflict with the underground sorcerers.

The 5th Column has some hopes for groups like Freakshow and the Sky Raiders. Both represent radical political statements that are anti-government. Although neither has an ideology that is on the face of it compatible with the 5th Column, Requiem thinks he can subvert them both and win them over. So, for now, he sometimes works with these groups.

Crey Industries is considered as much of an enemy as the Rikti, and for many of the same reasons. While Requiem has nothing against the Countess personally, he recognizes that corporate greed and malfeasance are great motivators and that by acting directly against the company he appeals to the prejudices of his constituency. The two are locked in a bitter, continuing feud, although Crey is too powerful for the 5th Column to attack directly.

As for the lesser groups like Vahzilok, the Tsoo, and the Clockwork King, Requiem scarcely pays them any mind. The Tsoo are of course despised for racial reasons while the Clockwork King is thought a madman. Nosferatu has taken some interest in Vahzilok's work, but the two groups have had little direct contact.

3.5 The Future

The future for the 5th Column involves branching out their activities and searching for new paths to achieve their victory. Even with a decade of planning and laying groundwork for their assault, the 5th Column has not had the quick victory it hoped for. The influx of new heroes and rival villains has made their task much more daunting than they ever imagined. At this rate, America will not fall into fascism any time soon – if indeed it ever does.

One of the most major changes will be dramatically increased cooperation with the Path of the Dark. Right now only Requiem even knows where the Nacht Wolves truly come from and who the Nicti are. In the not too distant future the beings of pure darkness will extend their tendrils

into Paragon City, unleashing a whole new horde of foul creatures.

The 5th Column will also begin to take a very strong interest in portal technology, something that right now they have very little exposure to. Their primary goal will be to reestablish a link with the forbidden world of Axis America. If they can bring the Reichsman and other alternate-Earth Nazis onto their dies, they would have a much greater chance for victory.

Although Requiem rules the 5th Column with an iron fist and has substantial support from his subjects, there are small factions of discontent. Some of the vampyri and Ubermenschen have taken their own propaganda to heart and view themselves as better than the rest of the world, including their leaders. A cabal of them is likely to split off and form its own, competing villain group, possibly with a very different, radically left wing ideology.

Finally there will be the 5th Column's very public push to exterminate the Rikti once and for all. They will create a new "hero" group devoted to fighting the aliens and recruit heroes into its service. No one will know this is actually a 5th Column front group which Requiem can manipulate into not only attacking Rikti but other targets that he falsely identifies as "Rikti Controlled" or "Rikti Influence" or even "Rikti Sympathetic." Even player heroes will get sucked into this group until they come to realize its true nature.