

AXIS of CONFLICT
Chapter One : The Philosophy
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"Overcast.

"It's always overcast.

"The murky clouds seem to knot in the sky like a visual stomach ache, and the cold air feels like rain as it beats itself to death against my flesh. On a day like today, my thoughts seem to come easier; problems more obvious. Emotions lose themselves in a flurry of thought, and I can't help but feel as if I'm being choked by the immense fear that's welled-up in my throat.

"Concrete. Weathered and cracking and sprawling as far as I had only imagined it could. And though I've traveled upon this stone a thousand times in my head, this is the first time I could really smell the exhaust. The first time the wind felt this cold. The first time the engine would rattle my lungs when I breath, and the first time that I could lose everything.

"Conformity chases me; hunting me, although I try to escape it. 'Rage' is chasing me. I can feel the scream in my head, so I know it must be real, but not because it plagues only me, but because the girl behind me claws into my skin with the same anxiety. I twist the handle further, and I can feel the motorcycle kick as it moves into its final gear, and that too scares me, since now I know that there is nothing more to give.

The eerie, black circling of a set of crows above catches my attention, and seems to make me recall something strangely beautiful. As the road ahead seems infinite, and the sky above yet larger, painful flashes of reality blind me when I know that, just for a moment, success cannot be real-- because so far I've never felt it.

"The dirt walls that had encased us for nearly an hour's travel suddenly drop into the ground, and as they fall the sun strikes the mirrors that I had forgotten were there. The flash of light forces me to swerve and I feel the bike begin to topple. Where my head was already racing, it too pushed into the fastest gear-- Instant thoughts of death, not just mine, beat into every crack of my mind and somehow my arms twist the bike erect again. Relief showers me, but I shrug it off because that stunt consumed the time I couldn't lose. And now, as a half-dozen looming faces of death behind us reap the harvest that chance has taken from me, my mind blanks with overkill. Even though everything is running at its maximum, it still isn't enough.

"The grinning faces, though hiding behind Kevlar and steel, smile wider as the distance narrows between us. I can feel them about me, though I dare not turn to see. I know that it will be a mere matter of seconds before one of them places a bullet to my head-- or hers, my innocent passenger on this crazy train. As the heat of their engines begins to burn my brain, one, final surge of adrenaline rushes my veins. Suddenly, the last door in an un-explored corridor of ideas bursts open, and it makes sense almost instantly; survival. The lust to survive overwhelms me, guides me, and makes all things seem fair. I realize that the best path to follow, is what the road

chooses for you.

"Although it seemed ludicrous at first, I thought I heard the addition of several new engines in full throttle. And though I still debate whether to turn my head and look, my passenger narrates for me.

"It's the rest of your friends!" she yodels over even the loudest engine, "they're ambushing Sharptooth and his guards!"

If I had even one ounce of confidence in that concept-- Sharptooth, seasoned Commander to the Impack guards in pursuit, being overwhelmed by ANYthing, let alone a petty ambush-- I would almost surely find it appropriate to at least smile. However, Sharptooth has been my rival for years. At one time, I even dare recall him as a dear friend, but now he is only rage. He would kill me if he could catch me, and I've been certain not to let that happen. And though I'm hesitant in thinking that this said 'ambush' will succeed, I regain my pride, because if I die now, it will be with friends in the middle of a noble revolution-- Not as another mere casualty to a crazed conformist.

"We gain several hundred yards with the assault my acquaintances rage. Though this ambush was not planned, and though I certainly did not expect it, their lack of confidence in me is greatly appreciated. Especially by the girl at my back. As I hear several engines dull, and some stop altogether, I conclude that they have regressed to a stationary battle, and only then do I dare turn to look. The grounds between us widen, and the girl asks me if we should have turned to assist, and the only response I can give, through the grin on my face, is "Their stupid attack is going to spare our lives." Or will it?

"I have no possible explanation as to how they gained us so quickly, but two of the pursuers appear at both our sides. Then I look at the speedometer and realize I've slacked off. Again I twist the handle and note the fuel supply to avoid new surprises. The cycle kicks again, and a bullet passes too close to my left temple.

"They have guns!" the girl screams at the obvious, clutching deeper into me and drawing blood this time.

"Another two shots pass by my head and one strikes the handle bar, and suddenly I become terrified. The fear swells larger in my throat and the tears of several mixed emotions flood my eyes. Survival, first and foremost, screams at me through it all, and so I plan. The only thoughts I conceive involve striking out at the closest man to my left. Like flipping through the pages of a manual, I search for the most efficient way to destroy him. If he does not die, I will die, or she will die, and so the answer is obvious.

"He nears to the point where I see nothing but him in the side mirror, and the silver-black weapon in his hand glimmers with promise, but as we all know, promises are meant to be broken. The gun seems to pull him through the air as he stretches toward me, and my best idea

yet solidifies. With an unnatural twist I grab his arm with my left hand and steer my bike to cut him off. He squeezes several shots into the side of the road, and with a massive yank I pull him down in front of his own bike and he runs himself over with a glorious burst of red.

"His partner stops; doesn't think twice. His cycle dies almost instantly, and Shellback watches in his mirrors as he dismounts and runs to attend an obvious friend. Shellback hadn't expected companionship-- it was against Sharptooth's way.

"The girl, however, looks on first with horror, and then hides her head in my back with disgust;

"Shellback!!" she screams, panting, and I feel the guilt immediately. A burst of air comes up in misplaced laughter, and that laughter, like alcohol, reeks with false happiness and eats away at the fear and rage that dwelled in me a mere moment ago. But we were safe now. That's all I wanted. And with that last twist of fate where I could have died, a million night's worth of dreams just came true, promising sweet promises of where I could be at this time next year. Turntail screams that man probably had family, and I scream back that I do too.

"The drone of the motorcycle engines have subsided. Only we exist now. The sun has beaten me to the horizon, and it hangs just above it calling me home. Several long miles roll beneath us, the sky ignites into reds and purples, and I realize: I'm already there.

"Again the air caresses me. The girl's fingers have relaxed, and so have I, flying silently across the concrete. I can sense my hair again, flipping against my shoulders and I can feel my blood cool. The girl places her head on my shoulder, pushing my hair out of the way. I wonder if she's thanking me, or just resting. God, I'm tired."

The sun buries itself in the Earth, and a swirl of colors chase after it.

"I don't even know your name," Shellback says, fighting the wind out of his throat.

But she doesn't answer. Shellback turns after a moment to look, but sees and feels her head pressed into him. He can feel her fingers vice-gripped around his arms, and her teeth chattering at his back.

"Oh no," he says.

Somewhere else, about a hundred miles down the same dark road, stands a figure bathed in the black of a tree's midnight shadow. Arms clasped across his chest, he leans into the trunk as the leaves blow gently back and forth in front of him, like a veil. He peers out from the forest's edge down the lonely dark road, waiting. Fallen branches crack behind him as someone treads nearer. He seems unaffected by the noise, still glaring down the road in hopes of seeing something, and a small hand touches his shoulder. The touch, however, seems to be filled with worry so he turns toward it without losing his view of the road.

"Still nothing?" the second, smaller figure asks.

"No," he says, cupping his hand over hers on his shoulder, "You shouldn't be out here. I wish you'd stay back at camp with the others."

"They all kicked me out-- said I was driving everyone nuts, the way I was pacing around."

He turns to look at her without removing his hand, smiles, and looks back at the road again. He lets his hand fall away.

"I'm sorry, Shelly,... Really sorry."

The girl inches closer and puts her slender arms around his chest, hugging him from the side with anxiety on her face.

"I'm not prepared to lose him, Maverick,... I just can't."

And so they stand, motionless, fixated on the road before them with only the trees dancing around.

The trees dance for Shellback as well, swaying in the winds of an eastern breeze. He leans against a tree several yards from the road with the girl laying in his open lap. A small fire burns in front of them, the motorcycle cools to his right. Shellback's black leather jacket is spread across her body, covering only her torso, and he pulls her hair from her face when the wind disturbs it.

"She's in shock," he thinks, "probably after watching that guard die."

He stares down at her, sleeping, and he pulls the jacket up to her neck. Picking up a stick by his side, he pokes the fire and million sparks of ash float toward the sky.

"Gotta' keep her warm," he continues to himself, "gotta' sleep."

Shellback's eyes close. He forces his thoughts to better things, trying desperately to forget about what happened today-- trying to forget where he came from, but it isn't that easy.

Still further back down the road, that very place stands in a smoldering swirl of smoke. The complex sprawls across several hundred acres, like a concrete insect trapped in the earth. Three towers stand forebodingly at the center, and a smaller building rests to the right of them. Circling around the buildings, a concrete wall with pillars seals off the outside world. However, the huge gateway stands open this night. Small fires blaze within its courtyards. Overturned machinery and chunks of concrete litter the grounds like a cemetery, and bodies soak the soil with blood. Though the air tonight moves quickly, it is impossible not to smell the death as it rots

and saturates the winds with blackness. Traces of sulfur, exhaust, and upturned earth linger in between, mixing with the stench that haunts here. Near the towers, a gasoline fire provides warmth for what is seemingly the only surviving life. A male in a brown, leather body suit paces slowly holding his arm in a petty sling. Two others dressed similarly sit across from each other around the fire; one holding his helmet, the other his gun. Laying on the ground with a makeshift blanket covering him, another wounded man groans without attention, and a cloth is wrapped around his eye. All of these men are wounded in some way, and, as they all ease or attend those wounds, they huddle around this fire, waiting. Their leader has yet to be seen. They have no mission, there are no stragglers to capture. The building itself is, without them, lifeless,... but deep and constant moans still possess these grounds, and nobody knows where it is coming from. Perhaps one of the wounded still retains enough strength to cry, or perhaps the winds themselves have created ghosts out of the hollowed buildings and structures-- or perhaps these surviving men have just fashioned them themselves.

Slowly, however, the unmistakable shuffle of shoes on dry land becomes more and more audible, floating into the ears of the condemned. They look first at each other, and then to the source of the growing noise, none really knowing who or what to expect. Finally, a shadow first appears from around the side of an overturned truck, and then the skinny man to which it belongs. He wears dress pants and a neatly tucked white, stainless shirt. A white lab coat seems to complete the look, with neatly slicked hair and glasses. The pacing guard stops closest to the lab-coated man, holding his arm still and showing no signs of insight. Turning his gaze to the sitting men, the lab-coated man looks back to the guard before him and raises his chin.

"Who are you?" he simply asks.

The standing guard crosses his eyes and jerks his head back with confusion.

"Who the hell are you?!" he responds.

"Your employer, who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm Luitenant Cruda, and this is what's left of my unit. We were sent in to retard some kind of escape, but we were too late. There was nothing we could do to control this thing, and our mission leader isn't responding."

The lab-coated man turns back to look at the seated men again, who seem to be in agreement with their spokesperson. He then turns away and begins to slowly walk away.

"Hey!" cries one of the seated men, "what ARE these things? What kind of project are you conducting here?"

The man stops, his lab coat flaps against his leg.

"What did you see?" he responds.

"These,... THINGS," he starts, "like animal-people."

A gunshot from the darkness and the man jerks backward. The standing guard looks back and then gawks at the mysterious man and the he looks straight into him:

"Nothing," he says, "you all saw NOTHING."

The guard is quiet but his jaw hangs open. The lab-coated man disappears behind the truck again, and nobody follows. He strides into an open door at the base of the nearest tower and as the darkness falls off of him, two larger males begin to appear next at his side. They are both dressed completely in black, holding handguns.

"They're going to call this place the next Roswell, you realize that don't you?" the man says as he steps into the corridor.

"There was nothing we could do to prevent this."

"I know that, Lieutenant. I just want to know how the hell the government knew to become involved in this."

"I don't know, sir."

The three walk down a long hallway with only one door at the very end. As they walk, the two larger males' boots clank on the ceramic floor and it echoes off of the walls. A light in the ceiling flickers annoyingly, and it makes it difficult to concentrate.

"We're in very serious trouble here," the man continues, "But first of all, find Sharptooth the deserter, but don't kill him,.... maim him, but don't kill him."

"What about all the others?"

"Nevermind them now. They were meant to escape," he says, inserting a key into the door, "Just concentrate on Sharptooth for the moment." The door clacks behind him, and the two males seem stunned.

"Meant to escape?" the first male screams into the door, "What do you mean they were 'meant to escape?!"

But no answer comes back to him.

"GLEASON!!"

Someplace along that lonely road though, Shellback stares into the night sky. He smells no death where he lays.