

AXIS of CONFLICT

epilogue : i
"new forever"

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"Boom," it goes, throbbing harder than the last, beating directly from your ears it would seem, pounding without forgiveness. The mere, constant rhythm forces the nausea in, creeping up your throat. Somehow you believe you can control it, or that you should control it, because you're certain someone else may hear it. It's almost your time, you think, feeling the seconds scream through your head like a hurricane through water. You become so obsessed with the droning in your ears, that your mission almost eludes you. You feel the weight of the remote control tug your hand down, hot and sticky in your palm. You squeeze it hard, making sure your fingers are where they should be. As you hold it up slowly to eye level, you note how it blends into the night sky, hiding your fingers except where they peek around the other side, by the switch. Under such conditions, it will be impossible to overlook the inevitable red light when it ignites the night on your face. *Something must be wrong*, you think, *the light should've lit by --* but you stop, hypnotized. The light is on. *That' my signal!* You must do it! But just as the scare of failure is relieved, a new fright overwhelms you, the rectangular, red light blinding you in the darkness. It all relies on you now. Without thought you stare down at the monstrous Tower that looms on the horizon. You finger the switch anxiously. It all relies on you.

"Something's wrong, Jackal," one helmeted man says to his partner, fondling a rifle nervously. They stand on either side of a huge metal corridor that humorously reminds them of a very large titanium, three-tiered, high-security garage door. The hallway is dark and silent like it usually is. Only every-other incandescent light panel is lit, just enough to see.

"I know," Jackal responds, "Everything's too damn quiet." He's fidgeting with his rifle as well. "They're all too damn quiet. Even this late, you can usually hear *somethin'* inside,... This ain't right, I'm callin' Master Guild."

Jackal pulls an odd key from his leather-pant pocket, the tinkling sound of the chain trails behind it. As he turns the key counter-clockwise, his partner screams in panic behind him. Jackal spins around fast enough to rip the chain free from his trousers.

"What did you do?!" the other screams.

"Nothing!! Nothing!"

The silence wasn't meant to last. They both expected something, and deep in their minds they know it. The huge doors they guard start to move upward, slowly, loudly, humming and scratching as they travel. It seems to come from their fright when the two guards squeeze their fingers. Shots flow from their rifles like water from a garden hose, washing over the darkness

growing before them. Neither one sees what they're shooting at, or know why they're even shooting, but they know that the 'panic' is real. Jackal, still firing, is first to take a step forward into the rumbling gloom. Immediately, even through their screams, the overpowering stench of old flesh surrounds them. It only took a mere second since the door was all the way up. As the shots ring, the once slow rumble had turned into the unmistakable roar of a stampede. From out of the darkness, bodies swarmed like aggravated insects, spewing and vomiting from the mouth of the corridor. Twisting and tangling around each other in obvious desperate hurry. They plow themselves over, rushing the two terrified guards whose bullets cannot hope to deter them, and in turn are trampled.

"Freedom!" they scream!

"Go down! Go down!"

In another part of the building, a small room lined with computers and monitors, a small man sits on the edge of his seat. The glasses he wears reflect the blue light back at the monitors, and his face expands in surprise. His hand falls to a console beneath it and slams his fist into a button.

Someplace else in the same building, another red light flashes furiously. The room, otherwise black, is lit up with a flashing red pulse, beating insanely. Beneath it, a computer monitor flicks on by itself, calibrating instantly and showing a blueprint of what must be the building. However, the blueprint is void. There's nothing on it. A scaly green hand pushes the monitor up.

"That's odd," a voice rasps from the darkness.

The red light leaves a silhouette for the eye to trace. Huge and muscular. His head is turned toward the light as he observes its distress. Suddenly something inside him clicks. A tail appears in the silhouette.

"Move! Move! Move!" He screams, turning on the lights.

Another metal door hums with activity, this one much larger. Like the hangar door to the Zeppelin, the door travels upward, slowly, steadily, straining with its weight. From within it, trucks and motorcycles roar to life.

"YEEEEEEEEeeee HAH!"

"MOVE! MOVE! WE AIN'T FREE YET!"

"GO! GO! GO!"

"C'mon, Shellback! Get on the truck!" screams a human-fox hybrid over his shoulder from the driver's seat of a truck. The turtle hybrid, Shellback, tosses another hybrid onto the bed of the humming truck.

"Just go, Maverick! I'll catch up!"

"Sharptooth'll kill you! Get on!"

"GO!"

Wheels slide with motion, and the truck roars away. Shellback turns anxiously, surveying the hangar-ramp. He stands more than six feet tall, muscular and well proportioned. Most of his height comes from his legs, and gives the impression of a quick runner. As he flicks his head back and forth, long, ratted hair trails behind it, swishing over the shell on his back.

"You!" He screams, "over there! Now! Keep moving!" He starts in a gallop, sprinting toward an unmanned motorcycle. He doesn't hesitate in noticing that guards are beginning to appear everywhere. He planned this. He knows what to do. A guard reaches the bike before he does, but can't un-holster his weapons fast enough. Shellback kicks the guard's face while stealing his two guns. Always handy to have during an escape.

"Shellback!" shrieks another hybrid. In turning, he realizes that it's RazorClaw, a hybrid-lizard that is taller than he, and bald. His massive tail flips back and forth in apparent anger, and he holds onto a moving vehicle with one arm, "Where the hell are you going?! Get on your truck before you screw everything up!"

"CrossBreeder!"

"Forget the bitch! We aren't waiting!"

Shellback swells with anger. He raises a gun to RazorClaw when he looks away, but the bullet does not come from his gun. A shot screams with an echo from the distant left. Before he can turn, Shellback witnesses RazorClaw fall from the truck. Shellback sees the assassin: Sharptooth. The alligator-hybrid. Shellback kick-starts his bike again, revving it while staring at the felled RazorClaw. His friend at his side aiding him. Shellback looks away.

"Asshole."

The ground slides beneath him. Dirt clouds behind him as he races away with a sudden burst of gasoline. Bodies are already starting to litter the ground, but most of them are the guard's. Shellback smiles with victory. He feels good. A truck in front of him swerves nastily to avoid another attacking jeep of guards. From the back, a girl tumbles off. Shellback's eyes widen with expectations of hitting her. In a mad swerve of his own, he nearly topples to the ground but the bike slides on a free dirt patch mixed with blood. He three-sixties around and ends up facing the side wall. Dizzy, he roars toward the girl, who is just now standing up with a limp. He stops beside her.

"Get on!"

"I--"

Shellback slaps her down behind him, and they take off with a roar. Bullets bounce from where they were just standing. Sharptooth leaps down from the balcony doorway and ignites his motorcycle.

"Leaders 'one' and 'four!' Follow me! Put 'two' on standby!"

"Has anyone found the prompt?!"

"Incapacitate! Incapacitate! Shoot on last resort only!!"

"Somebody secure Tyro!"

Sharptooth and five others roar out in pursuit of Shellback and the caravan he was following. About a hundred yards from the perimeter, Sharptooth falls from his bike in pain and clutches his throat in agony. As he stands he screams to his pack:

"Somebody turn this damn collar off!!"

Shellback seems to be enjoying himself, although he hasn't said anything to his passenger. He has won. That's all he's concerned with. None of them have any idea what to expect next, but they've won. No, he's won. It was his plan they activated, HIS idea, HIS strategy. Some died, he knew they'd have to. It's a price to pay, unfortunately. Lives must be sacrificed for freedom, there is no other way. He won.

"So you're the mighty Shellback, are you?" she at last says, rubbing her head.

He laughs, "Yeah. Not what you expected?"

"Not at all,... Am I bleeding?"

"No."

"Damn this hurts," she says, still holding her head. With one arm wrapped around her driver, they remain silent for a moment, the whipping wind attacking them as the bike approaches one hundred and forty miles per hour.

"So what's your name? You look familiar," Shellback notes, curious.

"I get that a lot. I guess I look like my sister."

"You found a sister?"

"Yeah. I guess I have a sister."

"You're lucky. We usually don't find much family. They separate us. So what's your name?"

"Oh,... Turntail. Sorry. Damn this hurts." she says, pushing the bump on her head.

Shellback laughs again. "So how does it feel?"

Turntail ignores the bump for a moment, grabbing on with both hands now that the bike is going too fast.

"WE'RE FREE!!" she screams at the top of her breath, and Shellback smiles. It was HIS idea.