

AXIS of CONFLICT
epilogue : II
“nothingmen”

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He never *was* sure where the name came from, or who had even given it to him, but Maverick decided there were other times to ponder the origin of his name. It seemed like such an odd thing to have popped into his head, way out here in the forests at night, but it isn't the first time he's needed something to take his mind off of what was surrounding him.

Maverick withdrew the metallic form of a pistol from the front of his jeans, and squatted back onto his ankles staring at the roadside before him. The grass, like everything else out here, was blanketed in the shadows of nightfall, and that seemed so very foreign to him. It wasn't the shadow that amazed him, but the living grass, the trees and the wind; all these things have been so long forgotten he had wondered if he would ever know them again. If the situation had been less serious, he'd remove his boots so he could feel it all as he walked, but he had a mission, and he could not forget it, no matter how hard he tried..

Releasing the weapon that twirled in his powerful hands, he placed it at the road's curb, the shaft pointing in toward him, toward the forest and whatever lays beyond. He stood up slowly, and some branches brushed his head. He did not like leaving a working weapon behind, where someone could find it who was not meant to, especially the people he was trying to escape. He thrust his hands into his pockets again, to double check if the bullets were still there. *Maybe I had put them back into the clip without knowing it.* He thought dumbly, he had to be sure. They were still there, clinking together when his hand jostled them. *Maybe someone else put a new clip in.* He checked that again, too. He can *never* be too sure, but the gun was empty. He felt paranoid, double and triple checking everything as such, but that was his job now. If things did not go as planned, his friends could all die, he could die,... The seriousness of his duty washed over him like a great wave, and his head swam; *Tyro* could die. The girl was the most important to him. She had barely begun to live at five, and he thought that he could easily sacrifice himself if he knew she'd live another day, but he couldn't do that either now. Not now. Too many people are involved now. *Rot, they're all involved.*

It was useless going over it all again, he thought. There is nothing to come of anxiety. He let the bullets clink loudly in his pockets as he walked back into the forest, shaming himself for letting so much unnecessary noise be made, but that was a small worry, he rationed. The trees grew more dense where he walked now, having to push branches out of the way so he could see his own feet. Insects buzzed in his ears. *At least the bloodsuckers aren't out anymore,* he thought, brushing a hand past his ear, *chill probably killed them all.* The near-black dark of the forest was not helping him get over his paranoia. Leaves rustled, winds howled, birds abandoned their places when his path drew too near, and even the branches under his own feet angered him. *How am I supposed to keep everyone safe if I can't even be quiet?* He imagined Sharptooth stalking

in the shadows someplace behind him, next to him. Maybe he already found the camp and killed them all. His pace quickened and fought to prevent the noises from unsettling him, although it was a constant battle.

The forest grew darker. Moonshine could not penetrate the ceiling that the trees had made, not even a strand of light. Maverick walked with his hands outstretched now, feeling in front of himself for leafy barricades or a tree trunk, but it didn't do much good. Twice he stumbled on the undetected rise of a root, and both times he nearly took a mouthful of dirt. *You rot, Shellback. Why couldn't you have stayed with the group?*

Shellback is Maverick's best friend, but even still he could not stay the curses that swallowed his mind. If it wasn't for Shellback's arrogance and need to keep everything to himself, he wouldn't be lost in this forest at night. His thoughts collected. If it wasn't for Shellback, he wouldn't be here at all, most likely. The escape was his design. He could not forget that.

The land rolled. He seemed to walk for hours, when he knew it could only have been little more than thirty minutes, and he accounted it for how tired he was. Despite the dark, Maverick could feel the ground begin to elevate under his feet. The climb up became more arduous as he progressed, tuning into a combination climb and dodge where the trees rooted themselves tight, like walls. The leaves that covered the ground were fresh fallen with the coming autumn, and yesterday's shower made them slick. He slipped on them three times, and once nearly found himself at the bottom again. Again he cursed Shellback's name. The hill finally plateaued into a second level of trees and slicked leaves, encumbered with the night and the secret noises of the unseen. Water surrounded him, in small pools and puddles and the air hung with moisture thick enough to moisten his face as he walked, but it was cold air, and he was cold already. The air reminded him of his thirst, and he longed to be at his destination even more now.

With another muffled '*slurp*' of wet leaves beneath his feet, something bothered his ears and he knew to stop. A noise came from about twenty paces away, thrashing noisily in the wet leaves and then died. It sounded like an animal that had been stalked and killed, and Maverick's heart pounded with horror. He could not see more than what was in front of him, and even that just barely. The noise was unmistakable. Even the dull moan of the injured or dying still carried like a mournful warning, and he backed against a tree. *Would it do any good to climb?* He climbed without deciding. But the thrashing continued, and closer this time, much closer. A pace maybe, not much more. He realized he was fondling where the gun should be, but frantically remembered where he left it and why. Again he cursed, and this time he meant it. If he lives, Shellback will be sorry. He found himself killing Shellback in his mind. His face felt cold, and his chest pounded. Maybe it was Sharptooth. He had always reasoned Sharptooth was just a myth now, because he had seen the grave, but he found himself succumbing to every child-like fear he had ever suppressed. The noise stopped, he realized. *How long? How long has it been?* He didn't know. *Two or three breaths, maybe?* Something stirred, but it was the wind. Leaves fell from above him, in front of him. Spiraled down below him and

vanished into the dark. Maverick peered down reluctantly. He hated being in a tree. Everything, everywhere was black. This altitude gave no new perspective to anything that surrounded him. It was just as dark as the ground had been. Darker. The only way he knew there was even any ground at all was because the tree had to be rooted somewhere, but looking down, even that could be a hasty belief.

The thrashing noise was gone. Nothing moved now, not even the wind. A dead branch fell off of a tree and crashed loudly onto the leafy floor like they had been all night. It was one of those sounds he had become accustomed to, but now he speculated. He thought about climbing down and it terrified him. *If there has been no noise, then the creature hasn't left.* A shiver ran down his spine and would not leave. He remembered what he had thought about sacrificing himself for Tyro, and he was suddenly embarrassed. He could not imagine himself dropping down even for her right now. His hands tightened. He wasn't sure if it was embarrassment or fear. The winds shook the trees again, and he could feel the limb sway beneath him, and half-waiting for the branch to crack, he held on tighter. What seemed like eternity passed. Maverick's fear coagulated into almost pure embarrassment now, and he descended. *Paranoid fool.* Forgetting about the oily leaves, he nearly slid again when his feet touched earth. *This isn't like you, boy,* he thought, *control yourself,* and he straightened-out.

To Maverick's disbelief, the forest appeared darker yet. What was at least seen at an arm's length before could not be seen at all now. His arms seemed to disappear at the elbow. *It was never this dark in the guilds.* Another hill mocked his aching legs, and he cursed again in embarrassment. If he wasn't wrapped around that branch like a fool idiot, he wouldn't be sore. He hoped the walk would unknot the kink, so he forced himself upward, taking note of the oily leaves this time. He stepped his way carefully, to keep from making noise, and he focused intently on the sounds around him.