

## *PART 3 - GOING ROGUE*

### *Prologue*

*"All these people..."* Ironclad thought as they entered the train station, their nervous, tense group drawing nervous, tense stares from the hundreds of civilians going about their daily lives. A mother pushing her two twin girls in a stroller moved quickly to get out of the way, and Ironclad saw Specter toss an apologetic look her way. A father stood in front of his young son and held onto his hand, and Ironclad was grateful that the team had put civvies over their suits before they'd left the stolen SAICOD aircraft. He turned his head this way and that, knowing how unabashedly suspicious he looked to everyone, but expecting to see SAICOD agents every time his eyes saw an exit or stairway. He wished Symon was still with them, but he knew the necessity of not being seen with him by the enemy, especially after their ruse had been shattered by the events of the last few hours. His heart ached with loss, the terror of seeing such awful deaths fresh in his mind. After flying in total silence for almost two hundred miles, Ironclad had tried to reach Hunter upon landing, unsuccessfully, of course. He wasn't sure he blamed him, but he at least hoped they would be able to find one another after they all reached Symon's safe house in Canada.

Jade still wasn't speaking to Mace, but to be fair, all of them were focused entirely on getting one man through the station without a meltdown.

"You okay, Trent?" Specter asked the bald, pasty-white man who was panting as he walked in the midst of the team.

Trent, his eyes a little dazed, nodded, and Ironclad saw the spark in his irises. He was just barely holding himself together. He took another look at all the nervous people surrounding them, wishing he was anywhere else than where he was right now. Ironclad envisioned them on the train, crowded into a secluded space, taking turns at helping Trent contain the unimaginable power within for the twelve hours it would take for the train to reach its destination.

Ironclad was grateful that SAICOD valued their secrecy to the degree that even shutting down a relatively small station like this couldn't be done without going through the red tape of other departments in the bureaucracy. Their borrowed time wouldn't last forever, though.

"What train are we trying to get?" Ironclad asked in a low voice.

"Symon gave us enough for as many tickets as we need," Specter answered her husband. "He said to take the next train from here to Banff in Alberta, Canada."

Ironclad's mind was put at ease just a little bit. He'd always wanted to take his wife on a vacation to the Canadian Rocky Mountains. The incredible scenery and the snowy slopes were just bonus, however, added to the real benefit they sought: vast, uncrowded wilderness. It was enough to hide even a family of Specials from America long enough for them to figure out their next move. Ironclad would have to ask Symon about relations between the Canadian government and SAICOD, assuming that anyone else even knew that SAICOD existed. Still, what if The Leech had ensnared other world leaders into his conspiracy of world domination? It would make sense. Conquering the world wasn't something that could be done all in the open, and it required someone with time, patience, and resources. The Leech had each one of those in abundance, and it made Ironclad's stomach twist in knots just trying to imagine the extent of his reach. Plus, Team Dixon's mission to Syria had already confirmed the global scope of Leech's activities. SAICOD may not be able to reach them, but SAICOD was working with The Leech, and that was far worse of a threat.

As if on cue, Oracle winced, a hand hovering to her temples as her other arm supported Trent from one side.

“Oh, no... she moaned. “They followed us...”

Ironclad whirled around, looking back the way they came, realizing that Leech would never allow himself to be seen in public...unless he could change his appearance. The idea made him nearly nauseous. He'd never felt so vulnerable.

Bloodgood's harsh, self-aggrandizing words echoed in his head from the events they'd just escaped:

*“You see, you will never escape. We will always be one step ahead of you, always that much more powerful, more informed, more willing to do whatever is necessary for us to achieve our goals. That is what makes us different. That is what makes us **better** than you.”*

Ironclad allowed himself the fantasy of holding the bald, well-dressed man in his metal hands and ringing his self-righteous neck like a wet rag, watching the expensive cologne drip out. He chastised himself in the next moment for sinking to their level, even just in thought. SAICOD was *not* better than they were. Ironclad and his family had to rise to the occasion and take the high road, never allowing themselves to do the things that SAICOD had done to them, to take the things from others that SAICOD had taken from them. Using their powers that way made them no better than the Leech himself.

A scream reached their ears, and all of them turned to look back at the station lobby. Ironclad's mouth dropped open and he heard his wife gasp as The Leech and his villains all marched in through the double-doors, wearing their suits in broad daylight. People all throughout the station turned to see what was going on, many people backing up in fear, curious but trying to maintain a safe distance. Ironclad hoped that the crowd hid his team, letting them slip away as people all gathered to see the new and interesting people who were on their way to Comic-Con from Albuquerque. Ironclad saw Mace pause, staring at the villains who had entered, sheer dread on his face as he held his fiancée in his arms. She was still drowsy from the SAICOD chemical mixture and not able to fully stand on her own.

“Mace,” Ironclad whispered.

Mace looked at him, his eyes burning with intensity.

“We can't leave these people here with them,” Mace insisted.

“Didn't stop you before,” Jade spat.

“We're getting this family out of here,” Ironclad told him.

“What about all these people?” Mace repeated.

Ironclad looked back as the civilians unwittingly gathered around the colorful group of murderous criminals and psychopaths who were potentially about to subject them to horrors beyond their worst nightmares. He weighed his options - the lives of his family versus the lives of everyone else here. If they engaged them now, Trent would go critical, and then everyone here would be dead. Not to mention, even if they won, they would be exposing Specials to the entire world, right here in the Albuquerque's Amtrak Station.

Ironclad suddenly realized that several of the Leech's crew were missing. The Hypnotist wasn't in sight, nor were Spider and Eagle. Something was wrong here...

The Leech's eyes lit up, changing from red to yellow in the blink of an eye. The crowd murmured, some of them beginning to suspect that this creature wasn't just some nerd's creative makeup job. A young man with a backpack nearby pulled out his cell phone and began to record, and Ironclad realized that he was not doing it of his own free will. He was being mind-controlled. Leech wanted what he was about to do to go on record.

“People of the world,” Leech boomed in his bass voice, causing the crowd to react as a wave, starting to back away. “I bring you a message from my own kind. We have lived among you for generations, those of us with abilities, powers, and gifts.”

Ironclad nearly fainted, and he saw Jade turn white as a sheet. Mace’s arms flexed, and Ironclad saw the bulging muscles that clung to the frail, sweet fiancée as she slept through the dawning of a new age. So this was it. This was how the world found out. Somehow, this was a part of The Leech’s masterplan, and Ironclad couldn’t imagine how this might help him.

Leech continued. “We have pretended to be like you, you humans. We have tried to live in peace. We believed you when you spoke of tolerance, of forgiveness, and coexistence for all those centuries. We believed in all of us being created equal. But we have realized something about you that you refuse to see in yourselves. We see that you are arrogant, corrupt, and selfish. You reject what you do not understand, you fear it. And so, we have hidden, gathering our strength, our allies, our armies, in preparation for the inevitable day when your kind discovers us and attempts to study, contain, and eradicate us from the earth. As the first of my kind to come before you, I want to be the one to let you know that we have no intention of allowing this to happen.”

“Get him to the train,” Ironclad ordered his wife, who nodded. She, Prophetess, and Oracle grabbed Trent and began to help him toward the ticket window, where the woman in the vest behind the counter was watching the proceedings with a stunned expression. Jason stepped up and his lip curled. He cracked his knuckles as Leech’s speech continued.

“Your government has been depriving us of our rights for decades through the Special Abilities Identification and Containment Operations Division. They have taken us from our homes, torn our families apart, conspired against us, and murdered us. We will no longer allow them to treat our people this way. And so, here, today, my fellow enhanced humans and I declare war on the government of the United States and on anyone else who stands with humankind. There is no neutrality - you will either side with us, or suffer our wrath.”

“I don’t believe it...” Mace murmured in shock.

“Today,” Leech boomed. “The war begins...with a first strike.”

The hairs on the back of Ironclad’s neck stood up and he heard Prophetess scream behind him, yelling for him to duck. He did so, a bullet whizzing right by his head, fired from the barrel of the rifle held by Eagle, who was hovering near the roof of the building, almost completely out of sight. The gunshot caused the crowd to scatter. Some of them tried to flee past the villains and get out through the doors, but one wave from Psych’s hands and the doors shut, the tile floor curling up to block the outside world from view.

Above the chaos, Ironclad saw Leech speaking to his followers. He didn’t have to hear him to be able to read what came from his lips.

*“Kill them all.”*

Mace, having heard the order with his extra-sensory powers, turned and started toward the train with his fiancée, but Ironclad grabbed his arm.

“Send her on and get back here,” Ironclad ordered.

Mace was about to reply when a primal yell came from behind, where Trent was crumpled in front of the ticket window. There was red in his shirt - the bullet that had missed Ironclad had struck him!

A bolt of lightning came from his body and shattered the glass of the ticket window. Specter was in and out in the blink of an eye, the ticket woman unable to mentally process the fact that she’d just been teleported out of danger. Her screams mingled with the rest.

“GET HIM OUT OF HERE!” Ironclad yelled to Oracle and Prophetess.

There was a terrible crunch and bloodcurdling screams as the villains unleashed their powers on the helpless civilians.

“I won’t let them do this!” Jade cried out, leaping into the air. She grabbed Eagle as he fired his rifle into the crowd and slammed him into the floor with a crash. She whirled around, her eyes glowing white as Jade Fury shielded as many people as she possibly could from the terror of vortexes, ice spikes, and psychic attacks. Ironclad turned as his other family members entered the fray against the villains before the eyes of the terrified world and set his sights on the monster at the center of it all. Leech stood where he had this whole time, hands clasped behind him, directing his yellow-eyed glare right at the leader of Team Dixon.

*“Do it,” Leech taunted in his mind. “Show yourself to the world. It’s the only way to save them.”*

Ironclad met Leech’s taunt with his own challenge.

*“Have it your way.”*

He knelt down, touching the nearest concrete surface, feeling his body transform in a split-second into the rock-solid form he’d used for so many years. A bullet from a gun somewhere bounced off his cheek, and he barely noticed.

Clenching his fists, Ironclad gritted his teeth, let out a grating snort like a concrete bull, dug his feet into the tile, and charged at full-speed.