

PART 4 – PUBLIC ENEMIES
Prologue

“Maybe Atlas’s rule isn’t always the right way...”

These thoughts barged into Mace’s head as he fled down the hallway. His legs pumped beneath him, propelling him at super-speed, Prophetess sheltered within his armored hold. She clutched his breastplate as well as her weakening grip allowed, and Mace stole a glance at the holes in her sternum where the life-fluids oozed from her body. She needed medical attention immediately. Anyone who would leave a helpless girl like her in this state should be made to pay, perhaps with their lives.

The villains (and worse beings) like the ones he now fled from should be at the top of the list. He understood that Atlas was against them taking the law into their own hands, but they would be doing the world a favor by eliminating such monsters. He twisted and turned as the passageways collapsed all around him, and he hoped against hope that everyone else was able to make it out. He wanted to stop and make sure they were safe, to go back for Jason, Jasmine, Atlas, Mary Anne, but Atlas had thrust the dying Ava into his arms and ordered him to get her out and to a place where her injuries could be treated.

He tried to shield her eyes as he carried her through a dark cloud of dust, years of layers of dust now shaken loose by the same presence that could lay waste to the world just as it was now laying waste to this abandoned Soviet Union-era town. She hung onto him, her eyelids fluttering as she likely attempted to foresee once more beyond the day, as she had so many times before.

“Can’t...” she murmured desperately, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.
“Can’t...see...anymore...”

“Hang on, Ava,” Mace begged. “Just hang on...we’re getting out of here.”

He would not leave anyone behind ever again. He would get Prophetess out, then he would go back for Ironclad, for Specter, for Jake, and for Jade. He would see if he could rescue Symon, even though he was still not fully convinced that the SAICOD Agent was truly on their side. A real hero didn’t leave even a fair-weather ally behind like that.

He’d learned so much from the past few months about what being a real hero meant. Mace suspected he’d be learning about that for the rest of his life, but he was also amazed that he’d changed so much, that he’d been able to overcome so much. It was all because of his darling, sweet wife, Isabella Warde.

“You know I will love you no matter what,” she had said. “But you were born to be a hero, and a hero puts the needs of other people above his own. I may mean the world to you, but you can save the world for so many other people every day. I am just one person. Don’t do what you do for me, or even for us. Do it for everyone out there who needs you.”

Bella was his compass. She was the one thing that guided him down the right path when he doubted himself or his purpose. She sided with Atlas and was determined that the heroes shouldn’t be willing to kill in order to solve their problems. Still, looking at Ava’s pale, blood-flecked face just now, Mace wasn’t so sure that killing was the worst solution. There were so many problems that seemed to be solved by simply removing someone from the equation, even if it was unethical or immoral. Was the greater good actually the greatest good? Or was he just trying to take the easy way out like those who were weaker?

Speaking of which, if Mace was going to deal out vigilante justice, he could also start with the ones who’d betrayed them in the worst way, those who had turned on them and decided

to work for SAICOD to catch their own kind. After everything they'd been through together, how could they do that? Mace knew he was to blame for some of what had happened to get the team to this moment, but he was trying to own up to his shortcomings and be a better hero. He'd risen above petty revenge and was done with all the moral equivocation to act out of anger like the Shadow Killers did. And he was certainly above the gruesome, ritualistic bloodbath that Keagan was willing to perpetuate in order to achieve his dark ambitions, things that made him even worse than the cult from which he ran. But still...was it not true that there were some people whose death would make the world a better place?

Mace shouldered his way through a wall as the floor of the hallway behind him fell inward, sucked into the black abyss that pursued them. Who would have ever imagined that a town this size would have needed a school building this expansive? This area, at least, seemed familiar, even if it was shrouded in thick, choking darkness, and Mace leapt forward, plowing through old plaster and wood and glass like it was Styrofoam and cardboard. Each time he felt the singing, stinging sensation of the darkness beginning to catch up with him, he switched direction, knowing he couldn't keep it up for much longer before it swallowed both he and Ava whole.

Finally, he saw it – a pinprick of light up and to his left. He leapt with all his might, feeling the tiny strands of dark trying to hold him down snap like rubber bands, peeling strips of his armor off with them as he fought through it to get outdoors. He passed through the window frame, wisps of lesser black diffusing in the light of day, and he landed four stories down, the ground quaking with the impact of his escape.

Prophetess gagged, coughing up blood that landed on the side of Mace's face. Mace gently positioned her on the ground, but then picked her up again, having to pull her away from the black tendrils that snaked their way out of the openings of the school, groping blindly in the light for their prey.

“Q – Quint – !” Prophetess coughed. “I...!”

“Shhhhhh, it's going to be okay,” Mace tried to say to her.

“NO!” she spat, eyes wide open, full of racing, changing symbols. “I see...!”

Mace stared at her. She looked like her head was about to explode.

“See what?”

Behind them, Ironclad crashed through a second-story wall and tumbled to the ground, fighting to get free of the darkness. Symon was under one of his arms, the grievously injured agent firing futilely at the hissing, spitting mass.

“Where are they?!” Mace yelled to him, slapping away another tendril with his weapon. It hissed and receded, replaced by two smaller ones.

Ironclad's metal legs pounded deep footsteps into the hardened soil, and Symon tossed his emptied sidearm away, tugging tightly at the tourniquet tied around his gashed leg, then reaching into the packet on his other side to grab a new bandage for his bleeding side. He was still unable to see out of his left eye.

“Are they out?!” Mace asked again. Ironclad plowed through the resistance over to him.

“I thought they came with you!”

“Are we *IT*?!” Symon exclaimed.

Mace stepped forward, swinging his weapon, intending to remind Symon that there was no “we” where he was concerned, but Ironclad held up his hand and turned his wrath away.

Ava suddenly gripped Mace's chest plate, pulling him closer, shaking uncontrollably.

“I SEE!” Prophetess screamed, the other three turning toward her. “I see *everything*!”