

SUPER SIX
by Jacob Gowans

PART ONE – THE NEW SIX

Chapter One

Monday, December 3, 1990

“I swear allegiance to the flag of the Communist States of America. And to The Atlas, for which it stands, one government, under Marx, indivisible, with equality and justice for all.”

“Take your seats, pupils,” Mrs. Hannity said. “We have a busy day.”

Jack and the rest of the class sat down behind their desks. The girl to Jack’s right, Janice Porter, smoothed out her pleated red skirt. He watched her absentmindedly, imagining the best way to shade the pleats. Last night he had tried doing a portrait of a girl wearing pleats, but the skirt hadn’t come out looking natural. Now he realized he hadn’t correctly captured the way the pleats create layers of shadows.

When Janice saw Jack looking at her, she made a face of disgust. Jack hurriedly looked away with a downcast, apologetic expression. She turned her body so all he could see was the back of her mustard yellow blazer and the collar of her white shirt poking above it.

He tugged on the cuff of his own mustard blazer to make sure his sleeves covered his arms. Meanwhile two girls to his left chatted about *The Sickie Slayer*. Jack jammed his gloved thumbs into his ears to tune them out. He hadn’t had a chance to watch the last three episodes because—despite Jack begging them not to—his sisters had used up all the family allotted programming time. His eyes fixed on a spot on the wall where the white-gray paint was cracked and peeling the worst. Then he started humming a song to block out their voices.

“I can’t believe the Patriot killed Vladimir!” one of the girls squealed.

Jack smacked his forehead. [*Russian slang for crap or are you kidding?*]. *So much for the surprise.*

“I cried for an hour,” the other girl said. “Vladimir was so [*Russian slang for hot or cool!*]!”

The teacher brought class to order by banging her long black stick of Ash on her desk, making the desk rattle on its three good legs. The two girls shut up. *Why couldn’t she have done that one minute earlier? Now my favorite show is ruined.* He tugged on the cuff of his sleeves again and scratched his ear until it started to sting. The pain took his mind off of class for a few moments.

“Assignments out!” Mrs. Hannity said.

Around him, students began taking their homework out of their identical red binders. Jack closed his eyes and did the same. His homework for this class was a sheet of paper, filled front and back with words he’d tried to memorize over the last ten days. Everything was there in his head. With his eyes closed, he could remember all the words perfectly, he’d gone over them so many times.

“Let me remind you *again* of the severe punishments that await anyone who tries to present something progressive or unapproved to my class.” Mrs. Hannity regarded the class so severely that Jack thought a smile would shatter her face. “Not only will you be reported to your parents and the principal, but also to the Ear. Now—”

Before she could continue, the television box on her desk switched on. Mrs. Hannity sighed as she glanced at the clock. Then she hurried to the television and adjusted the rabbit ears to improve the box's reception. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, the first Monday of the month: The Atlas News for Teens.

"Everyone pay attention," Mrs. Hannity said, glaring sternly at her class through her yellow-rimmed spectacles. "If I see anyone talking, that person will receive a demerit ... as will the person being spoken to."

The television showed only static for several seconds until a fuzzy picture appeared blaring a jazzed-up version of the national anthem, *Serve Mankind Mightily*. A man and woman smiled toothily behind a news desk. Several of the girls in the class giggled at each other, while someone in the back of the room gave a wolf-whistle at the woman. Mrs. Hannity's head swung around trying to catch the culprit, but she was a split second too late. The female news reporter was very pretty and wore a bright, pink woman's suit. She was the most beautiful woman Jack had ever seen. He'd drawn her seventeen times and still not managed to capture her beauty on paper.

"Good morning, children of The Atlas," the man said. "My name is Robert Ubar. This is my cohost, Cynthia Wilde. And you are watching Channel Thirteen news."

"We continue with our top story of the year," Cynthia said. "One month remains in the year, and the search goes on for the final member of the Six. Already found and waiting are the other five: Aikaterina Xenos, who bears the gift of Fire, Brianna Gómez of the Mind, Lu Feng with Strength, Malia Kekoa with Undetectable, and Oliver Brown with Senses."

Pictures of each of the five were shown as they said five youth's names. Jack knew them by heart. He'd watched the news reveal each of the five over the past eleven months. He'd drawn their faces two or three times, Aikaterina and Malia's faces he'd sketched even more.

It was 1990. The year of the new Six. Like a million other sixteen-year-olds, Jack had imagined himself becoming one of them, discovering that he bore a gift of one of the Six. Undetectable seemed liked the coolest gift of the Six—to be able to disappear at will—but Strength or Mind would also be [Russian word for cool or rad].

"Though several assertions have been made over the past eleven months," Cynthia continued, "Cold has still not been found. However, historians and experts alike tell us not to worry. There are thirty-one days in the month of December, twenty-eight remaining. Still plenty of time to find the final member of the new Six."

"That's right, Cynthia," Robert said, "Although it is getting late in the year ... Are you worried?"

"I can't say I am. I'm too old to be one of the Six." Robert and Cynthia shared a mirthless laugh at her lame joke.

"So am I. However, for one lucky or special boy or girl, an incredible moment awaits when he or she discovers the gift of Cold and becomes the final member of the 1990 Six."

"The chances are slim, but possible for anyone whose sixteenth birthday occurs this year."

A picture of a small African family appeared on the screen: a mother, a father, and two boys about Jack's age.

“Speaking of chances, Cynthia, let’s meet Kirdoa, from the Communist country of Rhodesia, who increased her chances of having a member of the Six, like many other moms and dads around the world, by birthing two children this year.”

“Two?” Cynthia repeated. “That’s very ambitious.”

“Yes, indeed. Her first child was born in early January. Then she and her husband conceived a second child, this one born in late December. Unfortunately, neither has shown any sign of having Cold.”

Cynthia smiled to the camera and tapped her papers on her desk. “I’m sure she has her fingers crossed. Our next story is about the upcoming vote in French Africa. Only a few months remain until voting on membership in The Atlas takes place. . . .”

Jack looked down at his homework. As his eyes scanned the paper, something poked his arm. He jerked his elbow forward, banging it on the corner of his desk. Several of his classmates turned their heads at the noise. Their stares made him queasy, so he shook his head to tell Marvin, who sat behind him, to stop. Instead, Marvin jabbed his pencil into Jack’s other arm.

Despite that Jack wore three extra shirts underneath his blazer, the poke still hurt. He tucked both his arms in front of him, causing him to assume a strange-looking pose, almost like he was hugging himself.

“Hey freak,” Marvin’s voice hissed in his ear. “Freaky freak . . . freaking freaky freakazoid freak.”

Jack knew what was coming next. Sure enough, Marvin amused himself throughout the rest of the news segment by digging his pencil point in Jack’s back over and over again. All of the pokes hurt quite badly, not the pressure but the sensation—a freezing burn. Jack wanted to say something to Mrs. Hannity, but the thought of everyone’s attention on him again was unbearable. Far worse than the fleeting pain of a pencil point stabbing into skin.

Ignore it, Jack ordered himself. *Focus on the homework*. But he couldn’t. Instead he sketched a picture of himself jamming his fist into Marvin’s nose, which exploded in a cartoonish cloud of smoke. It wasn’t his best work, but it was hard to do wearing the thin cloth gloves on his hands.

Another poke shot pain through his skin, and he arched his back away. “Does that feel good, Frosty?” Marvin whispered to Jack.

“Marvin Adams,” Mrs. Hannity said in her booming voice, “were you speaking after I specifically advised against it?”

“Uh, yes, Mrs. Hannity,” Marvin answered. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hannity.”

“A demerit for you and your cohort. See me after class for your punishments.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hannity,” Marvin answered again.

Mrs. Hannity’s attention turned to Jack. It took him a moment to notice she was staring at him with the same angry, expectant expression she’d given Marvin. “Yes—yes, Mrs. H—Hannity,” he muttered.

He closed his eyes again, fuming. His insides burned with hate: school, Mrs. Hannity, Marvin, pencils, the dim lighting of the classroom, the ugly fading posters of Lenin, Marx, McCarthy, Roosevelt, and a dozen other dead Communists, the cameras watching the classroom, the uniforms. He gripped his desk until his knuckles and palms ached. Two more years until graduation seemed like two eternities.

His reverie was interrupted by the teacher turning off the television and removing it from the desk. “Now, pupils, it is time to present homework. Each of you will deliver your memorized interpretations. Let’s start with our two students who have already earned demerits today: Marvin and Jack. Jack, will you please begin?”

Jack’s heart beat wildly. “F—F—First? I have to go first?”

Going first was by far the worst. Everyone would be watching because they were still interested. Boredom wouldn’t set in for another fifteen or twenty minutes. Jack would be the standard set for the entire class. They would always remember the person who went first. Especially if the first person was a freak.

I can do it. I have it memorized.

“Hurry,” Mrs. Hannity snapped. “We haven’t got all day.”

Jack stood on shaky legs and dropped his paper to the floor. It rocked back and forth in the air before sweeping under Marvin’s shoe. Marvin reached down and picked it up. His broad face grinned at Jack as he handed it back a little crinkled where he pinched too tightly between his fingers.

“This is going to be fun!” Marvin said in a high whisper.

Jack gave the paper to Mrs. Hannity, who read it over with her typical pursed-lips expression. “This content has been approved by the Ear?”

Jack nodded.

“Then you may begin.”

All eyes on him, Jack turned to face his class and deliver his dramatic interpretation. He found the spot on the back wall where he always kept his gaze so he wouldn’t have to meet anyone’s eye. Since he wasn’t good at doing voices, he turned his body to signify a switch in characters. His voice was shaky and small, so he conscientiously tried to boost it from his gut, putting the words into the front of his mind before saying them to avoid stammering.

“Well—” He stopped to clear his throat. “Well, Costello, I’m going to New York with you. You know B—Bucky Harris, the Yankee’s manager, gave me a job as coach for as long as you’re on the team.”

He turned and faced the opposite direction, determined not to look at anyone in his class. “Look, Abbott, if y—you’re the coach, you must know all the ...” Jack grimaced as he tried to say the last word. “... p—p—players.”

A small cough from a boy near the front of the class made Jack glance in that direction. *Is he making fun of my stutter?* Their eyes met. Jack froze and he lost track of what he’d already said. He tried to take a deep breath and regroup, but his chest was too tight to get enough air.

“Um ...”

You must know all the players. You must know all the players.

“I—I—I certainly do.” Jack switched poses again. “Line p—please.” He glanced at Mrs. Hannity.

She frowned and prompted him. “Well, you know I’ve never met the guys.”

Jack sighed. *I knew that.* As he repeated the line, he heard a snicker from the back of the class. Someone was laughing at him. *Of course they are. I look like a spazoid!*

After this thought, the memorized lines slipped away from him like a banana peel on an early Saturday morning cartoon. Jack tried to remember them, even squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as possible, but nothing helped.

“Line, please.”

Mrs. Hannity sighed and then *tsked* at him. “So, you'll have to tell me their names, and then I'll know who's playing on the team.”

Jack heard her say the words. They stayed in his short term memory, but the performance was already a failure. He'd worked so hard to do it perfectly, and he'd already blown it. The disappointed, disgusted, and disinterested gazes from his classmates weighed on him. They were waiting for him to mess up. *What's the point in pushing on? So I can prove them right?*

His stomach lurched. He dropped his hands to his side, shoulders sagging, and shook his shaggy, blond hair. More scattered titters came from the class. *Do this, Jack. Do this. You need to pass this class to go to art school.* Mrs. Hannity narrowed her eyes on him, a dangerous look that spoke of impending discipline.

Jack sighed and pressed on. “So—so—you'll have to tell me their names,” he began to say, oblivious to the fact that his body trembled and his eyes were still closed. “And then I'll know—”

“Are you well, Jack?” Mrs. Hannity interrupted. “You're shaking. Why don't you practice some more—”

“No, I can d—do this!” He hadn't meant to shout, but everything was so balled up, his emotions, the words, his muscles. All of it had coiled tightly together into one fine mess. A steady trickle of panic was creeping into his mind and body. *Not now, not today.* Words and pieces of advice from various therapists over the years floated through his mind.

Remove yourself from the fear, one had said. *Breathe deliberately and slowly.*

Count to ten, said another.

Sing a song in your head.

Use clarity in your thinking.

So many voices Jack couldn't keep them all straight. When he opened his mouth to keep going, Mrs. Hannity touched his shoulder, and his mind went blank. Her fingers jerked away as she remembered what a foolish thing she'd just done, but it was too late. The damage was done.

The trickle turned into a stream of panic. The coiling inside Jack's body constricted even tighter. His heart raced and he couldn't breathe. His whole body went cold, then hot. Then cold again. Around him, the room spun. A wave of sickness hit him, and as he had done many, many times before in front of a class, he threw up.

Chapter Two

Monday, December 3, 1990

It all came out. Jack's breakfast, dinner, and perhaps even some toast from three weeks ago. He couldn't remember the last time he'd puked so much. It felt both terrible and relieving at the same time. But when he faced his classmates again, all he felt was terrible.

Everyone stared, most with looks of horror, others with exasperation, disgust, or amusement. Many of them had known Jack for years, and were not strangers to his problems. The panic wasn't gone yet. The vomiting had helped, but not relieved the impending attack. If he didn't get out of the room soon, he was going to crack. And no one wanted a repeat of what happened the last time he had a panic attack. Pale, shaking, and nearly crying, he turned to his teacher. "May I please be excused to see the nurse?"

"I think whatever sickness you feel is all in your head, Jack," Mrs. Hannity's voice was actually tender. "Maybe you ought to face it instead of running away."

As he walked back to his desk, Jack kept his eyes on the ground to avoid seeing the faces of his classmates. *Why am I the freak? Why do I have to stand out?*

"Sit down please, Jack."

Jack wanted to obey. He wanted to follow the rules. But he couldn't. He couldn't sit down. He couldn't stay. Couldn't breathe. Rather than following orders, he grabbed his bag and the rest of his belongings and bolted out of the classroom, the stench of what he'd done still fresh in his nose.

The only sounds in the hallway came from the squeaks of Jack's ratty tennis shoes on the brown, peeling linoleum as he hastily strode the corridor. Lockers lined both sides, several with doors hanging on one hinge. The faster Jack walked the more distance he put between himself and the panic that had threatened to overwhelm him in the classroom. He carefully avoided looking at the cameras watching the halls, each marked clearly with the small red and yellow symbol of the Eye.

As Jack passed the art room, his step came to a hesitant halt. Last year this room had been Mr. Bern's. He could still see Mr. Bern holding one of Jack's art pieces, studying it with a mixture of pleasure and criticism. Then he would hand it back to Jack and ask, "Have you done your very best?"

Every time Mr. Bern asked Jack that question, it forced Jack to reflect on his work. Sometimes the answer was yes. And each time, he knew it. The same when the answer was the opposite. In those instances, he would take his work from Mr. Bern and either start over or fix what had gone wrong.

Mr. Bern had been Jack's favorite teacher. In fact, he was the only one Jack ever felt truly liked him. He had looked forward to working with Mr. Bern over the course of his last year of senior school, but in the final month of the previous term, Mr. Bern had been publically reprimanded and disciplined by the Ear for teaching progressive and obscene art forms. Tears had formed in Jack's eyes during the school assembly as Mr. Bern read his apology and confession, following which the principal of the school and the Chief of the Mind stripped him of his teacher's badge.

I'll be publically reprimanded too if I don't go back to class, Jack thought. He turned to face the way he came, back toward Mrs. Hannity's class. He wanted to care—he'd certainly get more demerits, or worse, for cutting class—but breathing was more important to him. And he couldn't breathe until he got out of the building. On his way to the main doors, he passed his locker, number 256, the one he'd been stuffed in three times already this year. The most recent time he'd been trapped for over an hour before the Hand came to fetch him. Jack still didn't remember being let out. He'd screamed for help until he fainted. When the Hand had opened his locker, Jack had collapsed, purple faced and covered in sick, onto the floor. Some of the kids had thought he'd died.

That memory made Jack walk even faster to the doors. He practically ran past the foul-smelling trash can that he'd been shoved into head-first. The restrooms he didn't even spare a glance. He couldn't bear to remember what had been done to him on both the boys' and girls' sides. Finally, at a sprint, he tore through the main doors of Southeast Toronto Senior School.

The December air bit into his skin with each breath of wind, and Jack fell to his knees. *Breathe. Just gotta breathe.* His heart still thudded rapidly against his ribs, but the world didn't seem to be spinning as much now. Goose pimples formed on his arms and neck. That was when Jack realized he'd left his coat in his locker. *Not going back in there. No way.*

He fought back a sob, got up, and stumbled into the snow. Then he shoved a handful of clean white snow into his mouth and let it melt to wash the taste of sick out of his mouth. A sudden gust whipped his hair and fluttered the three flags hanging from the pole towering above him: the flag of Ontario on bottom; in the middle the flag of the Eastern Communist States of America proudly displayed its hammer and sickle in the upper left corner surrounded by thirteen stripes of alternating red and yellow; the top red flag bore the symbol of The Man—Atlas—his arms outstretched bearing the weight of the heavens.

"Mom's going to [*Russian word for freak out*]," Jack muttered darkly. It wouldn't be the first time. *And probably not the last.*

From afar, an Atlas-wide bell chimed the hour, a sound heard all over the Communist world with its unified clock. Jack had six hours to kill before the end of school. For a fleeting moment he considered going back inside and resuming his class, but jettisoned the idea as quickly as it came. Instead, he did what he always did when he had spare time: he took a bus to the Art Gallery of Toronto.

Only one other person shared the bus with Jack, a boy about Jack's age sitting near the back wearing a dark trench coat that matched his greasy black hair and sour expression. The kid gave Jack a curt nod, and Jack turned away. At this hour anyone of able body should be at work, and anyone younger than working age at school. Jack caught the bus driver spying him through the mirror at least five times, no doubt wondering why two school age boys weren't where they should be at this hour. When the bus stopped near the main entrance of the Art Gallery of Toronto, or AGT as the locals called it, Jack scurried off the bus with the kid in the trench coat right behind him. Right as the kid in the black trench coat slipped around Jack, his fists jammed into his pockets, the bus driver snagged Jack's wrist with an iron grip. Immediately the sensation of nausea and horrible weakness made Jack's knees wobble. Jack looked back to the kid in the trench coat for help, but he had already moseyed away.

“Don’t get yourself into any trouble, kid,” the bus driver warned in a gruff voice, then let Jack go before the nausea got any worse. Jack shuffled off the bus and the vehicle stamped with a red and yellow sign of the Foot drove away.

It’s me and you, Mr. Turtle, he thought as he stared at the massive stone, glass, and steel structure which formed the exterior into the shape of a massive turtle. Carved into the forehead of the turtle was a symbol of the Mind, the branch of The Atlas which ran the Art Gallery of Toronto and any other institution of cultural enrichment and learning, like Jack’s school.

A woman named Cathy worked the AGT’s entrance booth. When she saw Jack approach, she shook her head with a sad grin. “Why am I not surprised?”

Jack shrugged.

“You keep coming here as often as you do, and the Mind will start rationing museum visits like they do my TV time.”

In an effort to be polite, Jack chuckled, but the conversation made him uncomfortable. It bothered him that he’d come to the museum often enough that someone recognized him. The urge to turn around and leave almost swayed him, but with nowhere else to go, he fought it back. Cameras of the Eye recorded him entering, just as they had recorded him leaving school, taking the bus, and everything else.

The AGT was one of the nicer buildings in downtown Toronto, though that wasn’t saying much. None of Toronto’s downtown buildings looked particularly new. Even the newest ones. But Jack liked the museum’s odd reptilian structure. He had spent days inside it, and was usually one of the first to see a new exhibit, as rare as such extravagances were.

In the museum’s serenity he browsed galleries and sketched on his pad for hours. The statues and portraits of Lenin, Rykov, and other important leaders in The Atlas’ history never mocked him, and certainly never tried to touch him. They let him be. Jack’s favorite wing displayed the art of the Second American Civil War. Jack’s maternal grandfather had fought and died fighting the oppressors in March of 1950, four months before the war ended. Though none of the paintings actually depicted his ancestor, he liked to close his eyes and imagine the scene vividly. Through reading his grandfather’s journals, Jack had developed a deeper kinship to him than most of his living relatives.

The only thing about the museum Jack disliked was the lack of diversity in structure and style. Missing were the impressionists, the romanticists, the expressionists, and the neoclassicists. The only art form celebrated in The Atlas was realism. Even in his art classes, these other forms were only mentioned with disdainful brevity. But Jack had learned the basics of these forms by sneaking into his school’s basement where they kept stacks of old instruction books, even some that were pre-Civil War. They captured his eye and imagination, though there was no future in pursuing them in his studies.

Late in the afternoon, Jack left the museum and wandered over to the nearest Mouth Feed. He didn’t particularly like this Feed; being downtown it was busy and he’d have to wait in line. The chalkboard inside the shop displayed the menu items of the day: a bowl of beef stew, a hearty salad, or a roasted chicken sandwich.

Jack stood in line for ten minutes, keeping his head down and eyes fixed to the floor. He knew he looked out of place in his school uniform, but nothing could be done about it. The man behind him bumped Jack on accident when gesturing to his friend in line. Bolts of pain shot up Jack's hand from where he'd been touched, and he pulled his gloved hands into his sleeves until he reached the counter and ordered.

"Uh ... b—beef stew," Jack stammered to a plain young woman behind the counter wearing an apron stitched with the red and yellow signal of The Mouth.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to speak up," the lady asked.

"B—beef stew," he repeated. "Uh ... please."

"Your ration?" the young woman asked.

Jack fumbled with his wallet until he found a crinkled and folded ration card. She took it, punched a hole in it, and handed it back with a large bowl full of stew.

"Good call," said the man behind Jack. "Love the stew." He placed a meaty paw on Jack's shoulder, which caused Jack to overreact and spill the soup all over himself.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Jack shouted, an edge of desperation in his voice. As the world began to spin again, he focused on his breathing, trying to calm his mind and body. "I'm s—s—sorry, sir," he said, "I can't—I ... uh—"

The man stared at Jack with an expression of concern and apology. Jack backed away, his gloved hands in the air. He had to get away. From everyone. He couldn't go back to the museum with his blazer a stewy mess. His mom was going to be furious at that. Her allotted laundry day wasn't until Saturday, five days away. She'd either have to find someone who would switch or he would have to hand-wash his clothing. Most likely the latter, and deservedly so.

With nothing better to do and nowhere better to go, Jack walked the cold streets of Toronto. He knew the city well. He'd lived here all his life. Moving to a new city was rare in The Atlas unless one had an authorized job transfer. And Jack's mother had no such thing. Jack covered his face with his hands. *She's gonna kill me when she finds out I ditched school again.*

An hour into his stroll, he cut through an alley between another Mouth Feed and a Heart appliance repair shop. Steam poured from a street vent, vanishing when it reached the height of Jack's boney chest. He stood in the steam, letting it warm him. From out of nowhere, he got a nagging feeling that he was being followed. It wasn't the first time he'd had that feeling, yet he had never experienced it so strongly. He glanced over his shoulder and saw nothing. "H—Hello?"

Jack saw nothing, heard nothing, but still looked around for a camera of the Eye to tell him he wasn't alone. He knew there must be one somewhere, but couldn't find it.

"I—I—I'm a ... ninja. You don't wanna mess with m—me."

Last week his therapist had said the feeling was part of his anxiety disorder, so he ignored it. The Eye had cameras stationed everywhere. Everyone was always being followed and watched. Everyone was always safe.

Ignore the feeling. Everyone is safe in The Atlas. The longer he wandered, the colder his hands and face grew. He ignored this, too.

I should have told that guy I was sorry for yelling. It's not his fault I'm a [Russian word for freak].

Perhaps, if Jack was lucky, hypothermia would set in; then his limbs would have to be amputated, and he'd have that much less of his body to worry about people touching and setting him off. Part of him wanted to go back to the man in line and apologize, explain that the man shouldn't worry because he, Jack, was a freak of nature. A person that can't stand to be touched. But Jack would never do such a thing. He would never speak to a stranger without provocation.

As Jack crossed a glass-enclosed skywalk over a large city park on the border of Toronto, he caught a whiff of something foul. To his left, a tall fence marked where Toronto ended and City of the Shunned began. Jack had seen the place before. Smelled it before. Technically the City of the Shunned was part of Toronto, or at least they were connected somehow. Jack couldn't remember exactly how his teacher had explained it in class months and months ago.

Shanties and hovels filled the city as far as Jack could see. The stench made his stomach curl almost as badly as someone trying to caress his skin. He could see a few people in there, gathered around fires and moving about almost aimlessly. Jack disliked them: the rejects of society. The criminals. Those who spurned The Atlas' way of life or renounced Communism. Those deemed too degenerate or indolent for to remain a part of The glorious Atlas.

They weren't killed or imprisoned, just taken to the City of the Shunned. Inside this city-outside-a-city, no cameras were needed because no one cared what they did. Everyone pretended they didn't exist. Jack wondered briefly if the glass skywalk over the park had been built to remind people of certain consequences.

He sat down in the glass walkway and sketched the shanties and their occupants until the hour grew late enough that he could go home without rousing suspicion. While his mother would eventually hear from the school that he had skipped classes, it wouldn't be tonight. And not from him.

His neighborhood, Equality Park, was a sprawling district of apartments. F4-6S was what the sign to his neighborhood read. Families of 4 to 6 members with a single parent. Each unit came with a small master bedroom and a greater chance of meeting another single parent of similar demographics. Jack's family lived in building H on the third floor, despite his mother's years of appeals to be moved a lower level. She had an arthritic right knee that complained when she climbed steps. Rhythmic thumps came from the court where a group of kids played a spirited game of Four square.

"Look out!" someone yelled from behind.

Jack whirled around and barely avoided two kids racing on bikes. One of the bikes was blue, a lot like Jack's missing one. He wondered briefly if it had been that kid who'd stolen his bike a month ago. Jack's mother had requested a new bicycle from the Foot, but his theft claim had been denied due to lack of proper care for the bicycle. Jack had missed his semi-annual repairs appointment twice in a row, and so the Foot interpreted this to mean that he didn't care enough about The Atlas' property. He had to wait a full year from the date of the claim to re-appeal.

He shuffled up the stairs to apartment number 130 and used the key hanging around his neck by a string to unlock the door. His mom made him keep the key as a necklace because he'd single-handedly run through the family's key replacement rations in three months. Inside the apartment, his sisters, Jane and Peggy, sat at the table doing homework. Jane smiled at Jack, her four front teeth missing. Peggy saw him and rolled her eyes, a common expression for the ten-year-old.

“Where's mom—”

Jane's eyes grew as large as golf balls and she pointed behind Jack. Jack whirled around to find his mother wearing an apron and an apoplectic expression. “Your school called. Explain to me how you're facing expulsion.”

Chapter Three

Monday, December 3, 1990

Jack's mother fixed her eyes on him, her expression more strained and severe than normal. Her already thin lips were stretched tight, the crow's feet around her eyes deeper than usual, and her brown-gray hair was all but disheveled. Once, when Jack and his sister, Sara, had been snooping around, they'd found pictures of their mother under her bed. She had been quite pretty and happy in the old photos. But Jack did not remember that woman. The only mother he had known was the wrinkled lady with the constant crestfallen face caused by years of hard labor and stress.

"I'm sorry," was the only answer he could muster as she glared at him.

"That's it?" His mother balled her hands into fists. "You're *sorry*? Jack, you idiot! What is going on in your head?"

"I—I—I—" What could he say when he had no right answer? Jack knew that whatever came out of his mouth would be the wrong thing.

"Do you want factory work? Or to sweep floors the rest of your life? Because that's where you're headed."

Jack stood there, shoulders slumped, and listened.

"But what's worse is how you bring the family down. Do you see what's sitting on the table right now?"

For the first time Jack noticed the thick white envelope on the table marked Western States of America, and groaned. Each year his mother sent away for an application for citizenship in the Western States, and each year she was denied. It was not the forthcoming rejection itself he dreaded, but his mother's mood for a month afterward. She would sulk for a week, then scream at Jack and his sisters for every little thing they did wrong, then go back to her depressed silent state until she snapped out of it.

"Do you think the Western States is going to admit our family with a boy who is incapable of finishing senior school?"

"I t—tried, Mom," Jack said.

"Tried what? You stormed out of your class! You left the school building! You're a truant. Meanwhile, your sisters are doing everything they can to improve their situation, to improve their lives, while you muck it all up!"

Tears welled up in Jack's eyes. If he tried to explain himself to his mother, he'd just make things worse.

"You have nothing to say for yourself? No apology or good excuse? You're just going to stand there like a mime?"

Jack whispered, "I'm sorry, Mom." It sounded as lame as the first time he'd said it. "I did my best."

"Just go somewhere," his mother spat. "Just go somewhere that I can't see you for a while."

Jack climbed the stairs, dropped his stuff in his room, changed his clothes, and flung himself onto his bed. Not long later a knock came at his door.

"What?" he asked.

"Can I come in?" Sara, his older sister, asked.

Jack didn't respond because he knew it wouldn't matter. Sara always entered whether he wanted her to or not. "I heard about what happened. What *really* happened."

"How'd you hear?"

"Does it matter?" Sara sat down at Jack's desk near the side of his bed and rifled through a small stack of his newest drawings with moderate interest. Her red hair framed her pale, fair skin like a picture. She was prettier than the rest of Jack's half-sisters; and though he'd never admit it, Jack liked her best. Though they were less than a year apart in age, they did not go to the same school. Jack was in his final year at the public school like most kids his age. Sara was also finishing her final year at a *gifted school* after scoring in the top percentile on her standardized examinations at age twelve. It had taken Jack four years to get over the resentment he felt toward her for going to a different school.

When he didn't answer her, Sara removed one of his drawings from the stack. It was a drawing of five kids. "Your friends?"

Twin pink spots grew on Jack's face. "The S—Six. Or f—five of them."

Sara flipped the paper over and studied it. "Oh, right. Yeah, I can see that now. Why did you draw them?"

Jack shrugged. "They're always on the [Russian word for news]. I had a d—dream one night about them. So I d—drew them the next morning."

"It's actually good. Really good." Sara placed the paper back on the stack and sat next to Jack on his bed. His sisters had all learned long ago to never touch him. "Want to tell me about it?"

"N—nothing you haven't heard b—before," he mumbled.

"Your skin is so pale it's almost blue. How long were you outside?"

"A while. Walked h—home from the ATG."

"Figures." Sara snickered. She always found it funny that Jack left school to go to the museum, and often pointed out the irony. But not today. Instead she said, "I'm sorry."

"Where's Roxy?" Jack asked softly.

"In the kitchen," Sara said.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut so tightly that he started to get a headache. "Does she know?"

"I didn't tell her." Sara's tone implied that Roxy knew, and she was furious about it. "Before today you were one demerit away from being sent to reform school, Jack."

"I'm not going to r—r—reform school."

"You can't stop them. And reform school is so horrib—"

Jack rolled away from her. "Could you just l—leave me alone for a while? I d—don't f—feel like talking."

Silence hung between them until Sara stood up and went to the door. "Dinner's in a few minutes, so don't fall asleep."

After Sara left, Jack picked up the picture of the five members of the Six and stared at it for a long time. *What a life that would be. No more problems. No reform school. And I could do art with anyone willing to work with me.* He crumpled up the picture and threw it into his waste bin.

Dinner was awful. Jack and his sisters split cooking duties, and Mom cooked on the weekends. Monday was Roxy's night. Even little Peggy and Jane cooked better than Roxy. The meal was meatloaf. As usual, Roxy burned it, but judging by the slice on Jack's plate, she'd put his portion back in the oven and *really* burned it. While the rest of the family had bland, slightly overcooked burned meatloaf, Jack was served a chewy black slab of char drenched in ketchup. He gagged twice but never ralphed.

Jack was proud of that.

During the meal, his mom sat at the table and filled out the application for citizenship in the Western States while occasionally shooting him angry glances. Peggy and Jane dominated the table talk, telling tales of what they'd done and learned in school, anecdotes about their friends' silly antics which only they laughed at. They were only a year apart and shared many of the same friends. Sara mentioned she'd been invited, for the third time, to try out for her school's renowned chess team, but declined due to her desire to focus on her studies. Roxy complained about her university professors making her classes too hard.

Jack didn't think Roxy had room to gripe. She'd gotten into college by the slimmest of margins, much to the surprise of everyone, Roxy included. Jack tuned everyone out while trying to choke down the meatloaf. He chased each bite down with a huge gulp of water, leaving him gasping, eyes watering. Despite his efforts to be discreet, Roxy noticed and scowled at him.

"Anything you want to say about your day?" Jack's mother finally asked him. "Any words to offer to the family?"

Jack shook his head. Queasiness hit him like a punch in the gut, though not caused by the meatloaf. Peggy and Jane watched their mother with anxious, curious expressions. Sara kept her eyes down, and Roxy didn't seem to care at all. She turned twenty in four months, at which point she could apply for housing with her friends nearer to the university. Everyone knew she was counting down the days to move out. Sara was counting down, too, because she'd finally have her own room.

"You have nothing to say about your decisions today, Jack?" his mother pressed.

"No."

His mother set her fork down and wiped her face with a cloth napkin. "Well, I have something to say."

"I'm concerned about your life choices. Rather than face your problems, you hide behind them and doodle. Meanwhile, your family suffers from your choices."

"Mom, I—"

"Since you were so eager to say nothing, you will let me finish. I know you have your struggles, but you seem content to let them bog you down rather than rise above them. You want to be an artist? Perhaps be a curator of a museum? You'll need a top notch education to do those things."

"You—you—you—don't even kn—know what happened!"

"No, I don't," his mother agreed. She folded her arms across her chest and fixed a stern eye on Jack. Again he noted how old she looked. At thirty-nine, he would have guessed her to be almost fifty. "I have no idea what happened because you won't tell me. And that's fine. But no one forced you out of school today. That decision was yours. You made a poor choice."

Jack kicked his chair aside as he stood. “D—don’t talk to me about p—p—poor choices, Mom.” He closed his eyes to try to stop the stuttering. It hadn’t been this bad in quite a while. “Who—who’s m—my f—father?”

A profound silence fell over the family. Even little Jane sat with mouth gaping, her four front missing teeth on full display. All were stunned that Jack—timid spazoid headcase Jack—had broached the territory that even Roxy, in all her years of defying her mother, had never dared to set a toe into. Margo King had conceived five children by five different men. They all knew, but they never spoke about it.

“Why do you f—fill out forms year after year for admittance into the W—Western States, when we all know it is never going to happen? Who would w—want to let you in? A single mom with no education, no useful skills, and five kids? The whole idea is [Russian word for idiotic?]”

His mother stared at him with a stunned expression. As tears began to fill her eyes, she hid her face and swept the forms she’d been working on off the table. Jack wished some sort of horrible pride would confirm that what he’d just said was the right thing, but all he got was a nausea deep in his guts.

It expanded rapidly until Jack had to run over to the sink and threw up for the second time that day. The meatloaf somehow tasted even worse coming up. When he was done, he rinsed his mouth and hurried upstairs to his room where he slammed his door shut. The sudden rush of air made the dozens of papers taped to Jack’s walls flutter and rattle. A morning vomit, a spilled lunch, and an evening vomit ... he would feel the hunger pains tonight.

The sounds of his family cleaning and chatting seeped into his room while he doodled at his desk with pencil and paper. Drawing was one of the few things he did while not wearing gloves. He sketched a scene from earlier in the day when he spilled his stew. Only the man he’d bumped into wasn’t a normal man, but an ogre with a mace. Jack’s sketched expression spoke of defiant bravery. In the picture, he was ready to defend himself. His face wasn’t pale, thin, and weak, but proud and strong, his chin full and prominent.

It’s a lie. Jack balled up the paper and tossed it into the bin. He closed his eyes and drew his mother. Her face careworn, a tear rolling down the crease where her nose met her cheek, her eyes downcast and full of hurt. *I’m sorry, Mom. And I’m sorry I don’t have the guts to tell you that I’m sorry.*

The sound of glass shattering made Jack jump and his mother let out a sob. Through the thin floor, Jack heard Roxy console his mother. “It’s okay, Mom. He didn’t mean it.”

“It’s true,” his mother moaned in a muffled voice. “I’m horrible.”

Next to his grieving mother, Jack drew himself. He sat next to his mother, his hand on hers, his eyes sorrowful for saying something so cruel. He rendered himself more realistically in this drawing, his weak chin, his bony thin frame. His usual pathetic self.

Jack drew until [Russian word for Lights Out?]¹—the time at night when the Heart turned off all unessential electric devices. Drawing had been Jack’s passion since he was two. He could draw for hours and not get bored. Every citizen of The Atlas in good standing received personal rations for birthdays and government holidays like Marx Day, Victory Day, or Equality Day. Jack saved his rations for art supplies. Unfortunately, no one else in his family took an interest in his art besides offering a casual, “That’s nice, Jack,” or, “Shouldn’t you be studying?”

At [Lights Out], one by one, he heard his mom and sisters go to bed. The only disturbance was when Peggy yelled, “Mom, the water’s brown again!”

“Let it run for a minute!” came the answer. And then all fell silent. Once he was certain his sisters were all in their rooms, he stole down the hallway and slid the drawing of himself and his mother under his mother’s bedroom door. Then he crept quietly back to his room. As he tried to fall asleep, his stomach growled at him. He thought about going down to the kitchen and scrounging for a bite, but didn’t want to risk waking somebody. He had caused enough trouble for one day.

Strange dreams filled Jack’s sleep. In the first dream, he stood in front of his class performing a perfect rendition of Abbott and Costello’s “Who’s on First?” His fellow pupils gave him a standing ovation after his performance. When he sat down at his desk, he realized his pants zipper had been down the entire time. As he tried to yank it up, the class surrounded him, jeering, and then all took a turn throwing up on him.

His second dream took place at the museum in the gallery of the Second Civil War. Several of the figures in the paintings jumped out of their canvasses, followed by armies of soldiers. Both sides attacked with Jack stuck in the middle dodging a hailstorm of bullets, bodies, and bayonets.

In the third he was on display at the museum. A nude statue. Dozens of people walked past, studying him as they would any other sculpture. Jack tried to explain that he was real, but no one believed him. No matter how much he moved or yelled and cried, no one saw him as anything but a statue. A fake.

He woke after this dream. His stomach gnawed worse than ever. He had to eat if he wanted to get back to sleep. A light greeted him in the kitchen. His mom sat at the table, sipping coffee and filling out the lengthy application for citizenship in the Western States. But as she worked, she spoke to someone else. Jack peered in before entering, but still couldn’t see the second person. So he listened.

“He’s just a boy.”

“He’s sixteen.” The voice was a man’s, powerful and deep. “He’s ready.”

“He’s not!” his mother yelled. “His phobias cripple him.”

A bang came from somewhere unseen. Jack’s mother flinched. “It doesn’t matter what you think! If I say he’s ready, then the conversation is over.”

Jack pushed into the room. His mother spun to face him, her hand covering her mouth. From across the kitchen, a tall figure marched toward him. For some reason, darkness covered the man, and all Jack could see was his towering outline.

“M—m—mom, who ... is that?” he asked as he shrank back.

The giant grabbed Jack by the throat and lifted him into the air. His hands were like ice, choking Jack, cutting off his windpipe. Jack panicked, kicked wildly, and looked to his mother to save him. His mother, however, watched helplessly. Tears streamed down her face as she sipped her coffee. Jack's vision went fuzzy from the lack of oxygen reaching his brain, and he struggled mightily to free himself. It was no use. The grip was too strong, the man too powerful.

"Mom," he choked, "help me."

But his mother still didn't move. Wouldn't. No matter how much Jack pleaded and struggled, it was useless. His limbs grew weak, his brain cloudy, as his vision slowly faded to an endless sea of blackness.

Jack jerked awake in his bed. He tried to sit up, but his body would not respond. His arms and legs and everything in between were stuck. Cold sweat dripped down his face. A rhythmic thumping came from his chest as the panic steadily escalated. Everything around him was a strange black blur.

More cold dripped down his face. *Not sweat.* Jack licked his lips. *Water.* He thrashed and screamed, but the sound didn't go anywhere. Like his limbs, the sound had nowhere to go. The walls pinning him were slick and cold. *Ice.*

I'm trapped, Jack realized. *Trapped in a cocoon of ice.*