

**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?]<sup>1</sup>—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.*

## Chapter Four

Tuesday, December 4, 1990

“Mom!” Jack screamed. “Someone! *Help!*” His voice did not—could not—travel far. He was entombed in ice, and drips of it were steadily falling onto his face. “HELP!”

A deep, ominous groaning came from nearby, though he wasn’t sure exactly where. Under the bed? On the other side of the wall? In his semi-lucid state, he pictured an army of ice ninjas attacking his family. *Stop it. Stop being [Russian word for stupid or an idiot].*

He tried to shove his arms and legs into the frosty walls, but his hands and feet slipped off the surface, coming away wet and bruised. His heart thumped so hard and fast that he wondered if it might burst apart. *How much oxygen do I have to breathe? How long until I just die from asphyxiation?* He kicked, jerked, thrashed, and screamed incoherently. Someone had to hear him!

The groaning grew louder. Something beneath him moved. Jack screamed so loud that his throat burned. His entire bed began to sink. Finally, with a roaring *CRACK*, the floor opened and his bed sank through it into the kitchen. The bed hit the lower level of the upstairs apartment with a loud thud and the peculiar sound of something shattering.

A stampede of footsteps came from the stairs as Jack continued to struggle against the ice trapping him. A light switched on. Sara’s face, distorted through the thick sheet of ice, appeared first, her mouth agape in shock.

“What did you do?” she asked, her voice muffled through the ice. It wasn’t perfectly muffled, however. Somewhere the ice had broken. Air was getting inside the cocoon.

“I—I don’t know. H—Help me!”

“How? You’re covered in ice!”

The kitchen light switched on. Jack could finally see the ice with some clarity. Three large cracks ran through its surface and a chunk had broken away near his feet thanks to the bed smashing through the floor. “G—get a hammer!”

Sara rushed to the tool drawer and yanked it open, scattering its contents onto the floor. She looked for the hammer, but didn’t see it.

“Is it there?” Jack asked.

“Here it is!” Sara grabbed the hammer and swung at the ice. It hardly made a dent. She swung twice more, but to little effect. “The ice is too thick. It’s wrapped around the bed, Jack. What’s going on?” The fear in her voice spread to Jack like a super-virus.

Tears leaked down his cheeks. “I d—d—don’t know.” The ever-watching camera of the Eye stared straight at him. He saw its red light blinking through the misty ice. What would they do? Was help coming?

Roxy entered the room and let loose a colorful exclamation when she saw her brother’s state. Jack gritted his teeth together as his chest grew tight and the world around him began to spin. *No, I’m not going to have an attack now.*

“*Get Mom!*” His words came out like a shriek.

“I’m coming!” his mother yelled as she bustled down the stairs. She froze when she saw what had happened. Not only had the ceiling caved in along with half of Jack’s room, but her son was the meaty center of an ice sandwich. Peggy and Jane came downstairs last, right behind Mom.

Peggy yawned and stretched near Jack’s feet so he had a clearer view of her face. “Why’s Jack’s bed in ice?” she asked.

“Oh Jack—Jack—” His mom knelt beside his bed, her hands splayed on the surface of the ice tomb. “*What did you do?*”

Jack gulped air as he tried to talk himself out of an impending attack. “I—I—I don’t know. Help me!”

Peggy clamped her hands over her mouth, screaming as she did so in excitement. “Oh my gosh! Jack is *Cold!*”

“Are you kidding?” Roxy asked. “He’s stuck in ice, dummy! He’s probably freezing to death!”

Peggy shook her head, her hands still stuck to her face. “No, I mean he’s Cold. Jack is the one of the Six! The last one!”

Jane gasped while the rest of Jack’s family stared at him in awe. Jack’s mother turned to the corner of the room where the Eye observed their living room. Similar cameras existed in every room of the house, although it appeared that the one in the kitchen had been destroyed when Jack’s bed collapsed the ceiling. His mom faced the camera in the living room.

“Can you hear me?” she called out. “We need help!”

“Mom, n—no!” Jack cried. “I don’t w—want them to know. I don’t want anyone to know! T—t—tell them it was a mistake!”

“How else are we going to get you out of the ice, dummy?” Roxy asked.

Jack struggled and pushed but he couldn’t budge his arms. “I ... don’t ... care! No one needs to know.”

“But you’re one of the Six!” Peggy said.

“They can stay at f—five!” Jack turned to his mom. He hadn’t been so close to the verge an attack in months. “Please, Mom, d—don’t tell anyone. *Please!*”

Jack’s mom wiped tears from her face and nodded. The girls all watched her with rapt attention. His mom poured herself a glass of water, took a long drink, and picked up the phone. Jack shook his head as her fingers dialed the number.

“No! Mom! Please!”

She turned her back to him and said into the phone, “Hello, this is Apartment 130 in Equality Park. I need to report an emergency. Yes. . . my son is stuck in a block of ice. Yes. Oh ... thank you. Thank you. Goodbye.”

When she hung up the phone, Jack looked away from her, betrayed and ashamed of his own tears.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she said. “They were already on their way. Left before I even called. I—I have to get dressed. Girls, you should, too.”

An air of confusion hung in the room as Jack’s mother went back upstairs. His sisters looked at him, then at her. Roxy left first, then Jane and Peggy. Sara sat with him at the head of his bed her hand resting on the ice near where his face would be. The panic attack was still there, just below the surface.

“Aren’t you freezing to death?”

Jack shook his head and sobbed, struggling to control himself.

“How is that possible?”

“I—I—I’m s—s—scared, Sara.” The words came out like a wheeze as his chest continued to tighten. His heart was thumping at triple its normal pace. “Why would Mom do that?”

“She just—”

Voices from outside the door interrupted his sister. They were accompanied by the sound of boots pounding up the metal steps. A booming fist rattled the door. “Mrs. King,” a man’s voice announced, “this is the Hand. Please open the door.”

Jack’s mom flew back down the steps wearing an modest shirt and a pair of pants.

“Mom, p—please! D—don’t let them in! Tell them it was a m—m—m—m—” Jack tried to say “mistake” but the word just couldn’t make it past his lips. His nostrils flared as he sucked down air to force so semblance of calm on himself, but the whole world was about to erupt.

His mom opened the door. A dozen men and women entered the small apartment, wearing all-black uniforms save for the red and yellow mark of the Hand, the symbol of The Atlas’ military and protection services. One of them carried a bag with her. She dropped it on the floor where it landed with a loud *CLANG*. Out of it came long metal spikes and sledgehammers.

“Hold still, kid,” one of them said.

The Hand worked efficiently, breaking off large chunks of ice at a time. Water had soaked Jack’s clothes. They clung to his scrawny, tall frame and made him look like a clothed skeleton. Jack had always been thin. Throwing up almost daily tended to do that. A member of the Hand checked Jack’s pulse, then put a light to Jack’s eyes to check his pupils. Satisfied Jack was in good shape, they pulled him out of the bed.

Their hands burned his skin wherever they touched. He squirmed and wriggled to free himself from their clutches, but they were far stronger than him.

Jack’s family watched the whole scene with gawking faces. Jane wrapped her arms around Peggy as the youngest started to cry. Sara hugged herself tightly, mirroring her mother. Once Jack was on his feet, someone slipped handcuffs on him. It happened so quickly and smoothly, it took about five seconds to realize it had happened.

“W—what are you d—doing?” Jack asked.

“Take those off him!” his mother ordered. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” one of the Hand said, “we have instructions to bring him in for questioning.”

“Then I’m coming with him!”

“No, Ma’am. You are to stay here with your girls. You will be contacted.”

“I’m his mother!” Jack had never seen her so furious. Her face swelled and she looked ready to attack. Apparently several of the Hand thought the same thing, so they held her back as others escorted Jack to the door.

When Jack saw he was being taken from his home, the panic attack hit full force. Balls of stressful energy flooded his being, spreading out from his guts. “Don’t touch me! I’ll walk! *JUST STOP TOUCHING ME!*”

The Hand agents didn't listen. If anything, they held him tighter. His natural reaction was to scream and quake in protest. His pleadings continued down the stairs until the gagging and heaving started. The Hand agents lifted him by his arms and carried him while his body did what it always did when someone insisted on touching beyond what he could handle.

"Disgusting," one of them muttered.

"It's on *my* shoes," another said.

In school, Jack had experienced many instances where he feared for his safety at the hands of bullies, often on a weekly basis. But nothing compared to this. In between gasps for air he screamed unintelligibly at them to let him go, his voice getting hoarse and scratchy. His body jerked and shook like he'd been possessed. All the way down the stairs and to the vans, he fought them. He feared if they didn't let him go he might lose his mind. He might even die.

Neighbors turned on lights and leaned out their windows to watch. Snot poured from Jack's nose, and drool ran down his chin and neck. He hardly knew what he was doing. All that mattered was being released before some unknown doom overtook him. When they dumped him in the back of a car, Jack could breathe a little better. And when the cuffs came off, his panic subsided enough that he realized what a mess he must look. He leaned forward and wiped his face on the shoulder of his shirt, covering it in slime.

"You think he's really Cold?" one agent inquired after another.

"I don't know how that ice got there. Let's go."

"Kid, are you really Cold?" the first agent asked Jack.

Jack ignored the agent and stared out the window as the car started and his neighborhood of ten years began to pass by.

The agent made no more attempts at conversation. The motorcade headed downtown: two cars in front, two more behind them. It was only Jack's second time riding in a small car. The first time was when, as a boy, he'd gotten lost in downtown Toronto. A member of the Hand had recognized him, picked him up, and driven him home. Only government employees with high ranking status were granted cars, all of which belonged to The Atlas.

In the wee hours of the morning, Toronto was a ghost city. Curfew started at midnight and ended at 0600, during which time only those with curfew allowances were allowed to be out and about. Very few cars were on the roads. No one could even walk or ride a bike. As Jack surveyed the city of Toronto through the glass, he thought about the ice, about his sister's assertion, about its ramifications.

*What if it's true?*

Panic started again, but this time Jack had a better handle on it. He focused on his breathing and allowed himself to relax.

*I can't be Cold. I can't.*

If he was, the universe had made a colossal mistake by picking the most pathetic person ever born to be one of the Six. And the universe didn't make mistakes. A person who couldn't be touched, who couldn't talk to strangers, who wasn't even able to hold a normal conversation without creeping people out couldn't be Cold.

*This is just a freak accident. A practical joke.*

Jack grasped onto that idea. An accident. That's all it was. It would all be cleared up, he'd go back home, and he would figure out a way to fix what he'd done in Mrs. Hannity's class so he wouldn't have to go to reform school. He rested his head on the glass, hoping to cool his forehead, but if anything, the glass warmed him. Too much time spent on ice, his body was used to the cold.

The parade of cars stopped at 60 Lenin Street West in downtown Toronto, a seven floor structure with a massive, off-center clock tower. The words *neo-Romanesque architecture* floated into Jack's brain from somewhere unknown. A magnificent statue of The Atlas stood in front of the building: a giant man bearing the weight of the celestial sphere on his shoulders and back, while on his face he wore a grim, yet somehow happy, expression. Jack had seen similar statues ten dozen times in ten dozen places, but none as large as this one.

The Hand agents got out of their vehicles and let Jack climb out unassisted. One of them took him by the arm, but Jack shrugged him off, glancing across the street, hoping that someone might intervene.

"J—Just—just let me walk. I'm not g—gonna run away."

As Jack drew closer to the enormous edifice, he noted the strange, angular appearance of the chest and abdominal muscles, and the markings carved into corresponding parts of the body: the Ear on the lobe, the Eye on the right iris, the Mind in the center of the forehead, the Heart over the left breast near the sternum, the Mouth under the bottom lip, the Hand adorning the back of the right hand, and the Foot marking the left foot. He couldn't see the mark of the Head from his angle, but he was sure it was there, capping them all at the crown of the statue's skull. This building belonged to the Head, which essentially ran all other parts of the government. Jobs in the Head were coveted above all others because with them came the best housing, more food rations, the finest clothing, personal vehicles, and other perks of which Jack could only dream.

The Hand marched Jack up the main walk flanked by tall bushes on each side. After the bushes came several steps that led up to a triple archway. Jack counted at least thirty visible windows on the south side of the building, but no lights came from a single one. "I—I—I don't think anyone is here," he said, and he started to stagger his steps until he realized they were going to drag him if he wouldn't move of his own volition.

The only thing Jack could see in the glass doors was his reflection. He was a mess. Hair both flat against his head and sticking up at strange angles. His clothes were disheveled and still damp. His tall thin frame was so pale he might be a walking skeleton. But his eyes bothered him the most: so wide and white that they didn't even look like his.

Inside the main doors another agent awaited, his face enveloped in shadow. In the darkness, Jack couldn't see what symbol marked his uniform. Then he realized the man wore no uniform at all. The stranger had an air about him, a sense of power Jack had never experienced before. When Jack and the Hand agents entered, the unmarked agent stepped forward to meet them. He wore small circular glasses perched on a large, beaked nose. Thick eyebrows raised and lowered behind the frames as he surveyed Jack. His hair was just slightly balding, leaving a proud and prominent forehead. Jack couldn't see the man's eyes. He only saw the dim light shining off the reflective lenses.

"Jackson?" the man asked. His voice had a soft baritone quality. "Jackson Frōst?"

Trembling from ear to toe, Jack nodded and kept his eyes fixed on a spot straight ahead of him. He was afraid if he looked the man in the eye, he'd pee his pants. What was going on? And why did they insist on meeting in the dark?

The man with the curved nose looked at the agents of the Hand. "Leave. I will not need assistance in this matter." The next instant, Jack was alone with a man whose face he did not know, in a place where no one else knew he was.



## Chapter Five

Tuesday, December 4, 1990

The man with the beaked nose and circle glasses stared at Jack while Jack pointedly looked away and wondered what in The Atlas was happening. How had he gone from facing multiple demerits in school and a stew-stained blazer to this? All he'd done was wake up under a blanket of ice.

One thing Jack was certain of, however, was that he was *not* Cold.

"Let's walk."

Jack followed the man out another door. A strong breeze blew across his face, and he looked up to see the stars. They were in an open courtyard of grass and manicured plants surrounded by the four inner walls of the building. A walkway led to the center of the square where a life-size bronze statue of Marx peered over the scene. From Karl Marx's mouth water poured into a small circular pool from which twelve more statues, six men and six women in various poses of submission, all drank from goblets marked with the eight symbols of the departments of The Atlas. In that instant, Jack knew where he was.

On a field trip eight or nine years ago, he had visited this building—this courtyard—and walked its perimeter while the teacher talked about the symbolism and architecture. The details of the lesson escaped Jack's memory. What he hadn't forgotten was the classmate who'd pushed Jack into the shallow pool. Jack had almost drowned from inhaling the water when he panicked.

The man and Jack stood side by side, gazing over Marx and his twelve disciples. Jack got the sense that the man took great satisfaction looking over these statues.

"Which one is your favorite?" the man finally asked. Little puffs of steam came from his mouth with each word.

"W—which what?" Jack replied.

"Which person?" The man gestured widely at the twelve statues around the pool. "Which statue?"

Jack looked at them all. None in particular stood out to him, so he chose the one that reminded him the most of himself: the statue with the man whose head was completely bowed, eyes hidden.

The man nodded. "My favorite as well. Complete submission. Not to Marx, not to the man, but to the idea. To Communism." He sighed and looked over the fountain and pool again. "I could give a series of lectures about these statues. Wait here."

The man in the glasses went up to the statue of Marx and knelt in front of it. Whatever else he was doing, Jack couldn't tell. Moments later, the water pouring from Marx's mouth turned into a trickle, then stopped. The pool drained in a matter of seconds, and the floor of the pool dropped by sections, transforming into a spiral staircase.

"Follow me, Jackson."

Going down those stairs was the last thing Jack wanted to do. His imagination went crazy trying to figure out what might await him in the dark. A lair of ninjas, perhaps? The thought paralyzed him. The man stayed in place with his arms folded, observing Jack carefully.

"W—what—" Jack tried to say, but the words were lodged in his throat.

“Speak louder, Jackson.”

“What is d—down there?” He pointed a feeble finger at the stairs.

“My office.”

“Wh—wh—why is it so . . . dark?”

“Because the lights are not on.”

Jack paused with his finger still pointing to the steps. *What other choice do I have?* He could only do as ordered. Ignoring the queasiness in his stomach and the sponge-like consistency of his legs, Jack shuffled a foot forward. Then another. And another. And a few more until he stared straight down into a vertical shaft of pitch black.

“Go.”

Step by step, Jack descended. As he moved, lights turned on, alleviating a small quantity of his fright. The man in the glasses sauntered behind Jack without making the slightest sound. More than once Jack turned to be sure the man hadn't abandoned him. The stone under his bare feet was of high quality, though Jack had no idea what it was. Limestone? Sandstone? Cobblestone? Marble? It was slick to the touch. After a hundred or so steps, his feet touched carpet. Several lights shaped like lanterns flickered on in a series and revealed a long narrow hallway lined with offices, six on each side. Facing them, at the very end of the hall was a white door—whiter than anything Jack had seen.

Each office had a lantern-shaped light next it, making twelve lanterns and twelve doors in total. Most government buildings were drab and in disrepair, but not here. Everything from the carpet to the paint looked new. As Jack followed the man down the hallway, he stole glances at each office. Ornate words had been carved and stained into the wood doors: Priestess, Roshi, Saint, Vicar, Swami, Pirani, Rabbi, Sheikha, Kaisan, Abbess, Bishop, Matriarch.

“Stop.”

The man unlocked the door labeled Bishop, the last door on the right. Between the door on the other side marked Matriarch and the solid white door was a large conference room which sat twelve. Two words adorned the conference room door: The Spirit.

Jack entered the office first. The room was large for a one-man office with a handsome desk in the middle. A large computer sat on top, taking up a third of the space. Jack had only heard about computers, never seen one. He studied it until the door closed behind him and a light switch flipped on. The man pointed to a chair for Jack while assuming the large, comfortable office chair behind his desk.

In other offices Jack had visited, mostly belonging to therapists, doctors, principals, and teachers, Jack usually saw personal items like pictures, awards, and other trinkets that showed off a person's interests, hobbies, or even foreign sports clubs. This office had none of those things, only shelves full of exotic and weird artifacts. Some of the ones that caught Jack's eye were a yellowish chunk of brick shaped like a plate, a jagged piece of glass so clear it looked like pure water, an ancient leather-bound book gilded in gold, a small green plant in a pot with white and gold flowers, a large walking stick with numerous carvings, and a freakish-looking doll made of black fabric clothed in what appeared to be leaves. Jack couldn't take his eyes off them.

The man sat down and cleared his throat, drawing Jack's attention. His right hand rested on a human skull on the edge of his desk. The eye sockets faced Jack. It only took a glance to determine that it was real. When the man caught Jack staring at it, he smiled. Whether that smile reached his eyes, Jack still couldn't tell because the shade of the glasses obscured his eyes. Jack wondered if the lenses were made of mirrors.

"This," the man said, nodding to the skull, "is my little good luck charm. Do you have a good luck charm, Jackson?"

"N—n—" He was about to say no, but then he remember the apartment key he wore as a necklace. "M—my key."

"Your house key?" There was a trace of amusement in the man's voice. Then it was gone as he stated, "So you are Cold."

Jack gripped the arms of his chair and wished he'd been able to grab his gloves before being hauled from the house. "I—I—I don't know."

"I cannot carry on a conversation with you if you refuse to speak up."

"I—I said I d—don't know," Jack said louder, scratching an itch on his left ear.

"What do you know?" the man asked with a touch of impatience. "Let us start with your name."

"Uh, Jack."

"Full name."

"Jackson Emmerick Fröst."

"The Eye observed a phenomenon in your room last night at about 0120. Do you know what they saw?"

Jack had no answer. He sat with his lips sealed and eyes to the floor.

"Turn around."

Behind Jack, a wooden paneling in the wall opened to reveal the largest television he had ever seen. He estimated it to be almost three feet from the top left corner to the bottom right. When the man inserted a large cassette disk into a machine underneath the television, it flickered to life, showing a darkened room that Jack recognized immediately from all the drawings taped to the walls. The dim nightlight, standardized in all bedrooms of The Atlas, provided enough illumination that the camera could see what was happening in the room.

Jack saw himself sleeping, tossing and moaning. It was weird seeing himself on a television screen. The groans and movement grew more fitful until Jack, still with his eyes closed, gripped the sides of his bed and lay very still. Something odd was happening near his hands. Jack squinted his eyes to see better, but the dim lighting in the room blurred everything. Then, like thousands of pale spiders marching in unison, a fog crawled out from under his bed, spreading across Jack like a living blanket. As Jack watched, his heart hammered against his ribs. *Did I really do that?* The fog continued to grow until it covered Jack's entire body.

"Cocooning," the man said. "That's what they call Cold's first instance. Always cocooning. Very few people know about this. Certainly you could not have known."

Gradually the fog dissipated, revealing a layer of ice several centimeters thick. The floor gave a loud creak. Inside the cocoon, Jack began to stir; and moments later the bed crashed through the floor, out of sight of the camera.

The television switched off and the panel slid across it, concealing it from view. Jack turned back to the man in glasses, swallowing loudly in acceptance of what he had done. "What does this mean ... sir?"

"Please call me Bishop."

"Is that your name?"

"More like a title."

Jack nodded.

"Tell me about your loyalty to The Atlas."

"M—my loyalty?" His ear continued to tingle, begging him to fiddle with it.

"How do you feel about The Atlas, Jackson?"

Jack shrugged. It was barely past 0300. His brain was operating on the level of a sparking toaster. All he wanted was to wake up in his bed so this could be yet another bad dream. But the sinking feeling of reality setting into his bones made everything worse.

"I don't know. It's fine."

"Fine." Bishop raised an eyebrow at the response. He leaned back in his fancy chair, elbows rested on the arms, fingertips touching. "Fine ... How many times has your mother applied for citizenship in the Western States?"

"Uh ... " As far as Jack knew, she'd applied every year he'd been alive. And probably further back than that. Again he shrugged. "T—t—twenty?"

*"You have to speak louder, Jackson."*

Jack leaned forward, pushing his voice from his diaphragm, a muscle used only a handful times in his life. "Twenty, I think?"

"Nineteen times. Why is your mother so determined to leave our country?"

Jack shrugged. Bishop made a face that told Jack he was getting tired of seeing Jack's shoulders go up and down. Jack's suddenly ear itched like mad, and nothing he did made it go away. The scabs on his ears began to bleed so he stopped itching and gritted his teeth, hoping the sensation would go away.

"Are you eager to become a Western American, Jackson?"

"I—I haven't thought much about it."

Both of Bishop's eyebrows went up this time. "Really? In all these years. Rejection after rejection. You have never thought about it?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"It—it—it's the truth."

"Then what do you think about, Jackson? What occupies your thoughts?"

"Things ... things to draw. I like c—comedy, so I think about good jokes sometimes. I think about school."

"Do you? Your scores, ever since you began school at age three, have been substandard. Test scores say you have a subpar intelligence."

Jack's gut roiled at that comment. No one had ever told him he was dumb. Sure, he'd felt that way at times, but now there was proof? What could he say to that? "I—I didn't know."

"Every year, you spend your maximum allotted time in mental therapy ... ever since age six. So I truly am curious to know what thoughts fill your head."

"I already told you."

Bishop turned on his computer. “Well, let us look and see what other people think fills up that brain of yours.” He folded his hands together on his desk as the computer began beeping and whirring. Once it finished, Bishop typed at a keyboard, then stopped abruptly and read in a loud voice, as though he were addressing a lecture hall.

“Despite my best efforts, Jack displays awkward, even phobia-like social tendencies. Combined with his poor academic performance, I have no choice but to agree with his previous teachers that Jack is destined for menial labor in solitary settings.”

“Wh—who wrote that?”

“One of your current teachers. Jacquelyn Hannity.”

“Mrs. Hannity?”

“How many Mrs. Hannity’s have you had, Jackson? Here is another one. This one from your most recent psychoanalysis with Doctor Gunther. ‘Although Jack is severely set back by his thixophobia, panic disorder, and social anxiety, most troubling is his overall detachment to the human condition and lack of desire to form any sort of bond with his peers.’”

*That isn’t true. I want friends.*

“Do you agree with these assessments?”

“No!” It was the loudest Jack had spoken yet.

“Why not? The list goes on, and many of them make similar diagnoses. These people are educated to recognized symptoms, are they not? Only one teacher actually recommended you for further education post-senior school. Your art teacher. Mr. Bern. A radical progressive now facing expulsion from society.”

“Yes, b—but ... w—what? Mr. B—B—Bern is shunned?”

“Here is my point with all this, Jackson. In the Western States, you would be an outcast. You would be confined to a life of poverty because of your conditions. In fact, you wouldn’t even be able to afford the treatment you’ve received thus far. But here in The Atlas, where everyone—even people with handicaps—are considered equal, everyone is treated the same. Have you ever wanted for food? Clothing? Shelter?”

“No.”

“Nor will you ever. That is the beauty of The Atlas. No one lives in need.”

It was like being in his government classes again where the teachers raved about how wonderful it was living in the Communist States and being a part of The Atlas. Some of the students absorbed it, believed it feverously. Others rolled their eyes and pretended to care. Like most of his classes, Jack had found himself somewhere in between. Perhaps this was the answer to his question.

“Yes, I’m loyal to The Atlas.”

Bishop nodded with an odd smile on his face. “Good. Because The Atlas is counting on you. The Atlas needs you. You, Jackson, are going to be our man inside the Six. You are going to be the one to give us information on each of them to make sure they all become members of The Atlas and join our glorious cause.”

## Chapter Six

Tuesday, December 4, 1990

Jack couldn't feel his lips and tongue. They seemed to have reacted faster to what Bishop had said faster than Jack's brain. The inside of his mouth went completely dry. "Y—y—you w—want me to spy?" He gasped after managing to get all the words out.

"Do you know much about the rest of the Six?"

Images of news clips and interviews passed through Jack's mind in a blur. He remembered their faces, especially the three girls'. He had drawn all their faces more than once. Probably Aikaterina's the most. It was hard to get hers just perfect.

"Jackson? Are you listening?"

Jack blinked and nodded.

"Names? Any information at all?"

"Brianna, Oliver, Aik—aik—aik." He couldn't say it. "Brianna, M—Malia, and— and—" There was one more name. "I haven't p—paid attention as well as I probably should." In truth, Jack had always thought the Six and other celebrities lived on an entirely different planet, one of which he only caught small glimpses.

"Do you know much about the previous Six? The so-called Suave Six?"

Again the answer was no. Jack started to scratch at his ear again, only barely aware that he was doing it. The pain helped ease his nerves, and the lingering sting in his heart at being told he was dumber than most people.

Bishop took Jack's answers in stride. "As a member of the Six, you will have an opportunity to do more for The Atlas than almost anyone in the world. Perhaps even more than myself. Other members of the Six are loyal to us. Think of them as your allies in the cause."

Bishop slid two pictures across the desk toward Jack. One was a girl with dark brown hair and blue eyes. Her face mesmerized Jack. The second picture was also of a girl. Her brown hair was lighter in color with streaks of red highlighting. Her eyes stared back at him fiercely, one brown, one gray. Jack couldn't remember the name for that condition. Both girls were attractive. Bishop tapped the picture of the girl with blue eyes.

"Her name is Aikaterina Xenos, but goes by Kat. She is your opposite. Fire. I have not personally met her; Sheikah did. Sheikah is not assured that Kat is firmly rooted to The Atlas. Therefore she cannot be trusted. The second girl is Brianna Gómez. Abbess has met with her regularly over the past eight months, and has been contacted her by phone frequently. She is fairly confident that Brianna will stay loyal. Out of the two, I believe you can trust Brianna more. There is another member of the Six that we believe can be swayed to our cause if need be."

"Why are you t—telling me all this?"

Bishop's eyes blazed intensely as he stared at Jack. "Because—and always remember this, Jackson—information is power. The more you know, the more you can do. And the more you can do, the better you will serve The Atlas. Just like with my work. We have cameras all over the city, the state, the country ... the world. Why? Information. Knowledge. Power. Service. It all leads to the betterment of mankind."

Jack nodded.

Bishop produced three more files. “These three are also important. You, Kat, and Brianna must convince the other three to join their loyalties to The Atlas. It takes time to develop friendship and trust. Think of it as a long term project. In the meantime, you will pass us information that we can use to further our cause.”

“What cause?” Jack asked.

“Communism, Jackson.” Bishop’s tone made Jack feel stupid. “Spreading it to bring about real change the world.” He tapped on the files. “These are the other three. Lu Feng. He’s from Shanghai in the Qing Republic. In the Qing Republic a person’s last name is not a surname, so he goes by Feng. The Spirit has been unable to get anyone close enough to him to make contact thus far. Feng is Strength.

“The next one is Oliver Brown from Australia. He has Sense. Two agents of the Spirit have reached out to him. One of them was Vicar, the other was a lesser agent. As far as we know, Oliver Brown holds no loyalty to the League of Nations nor any real loyalty to Australia. He’s moldable.

“The last member of the Six is Malia Kekoa. Undetectable. As with Feng, we have been unable to make contact with Malia. She is well protected due to her father’s status in the government. We do, however, have a well-placed agent of the Spirit in the Polynesian government who should be able to reach her before the press conference.”

“P—press conference?”

“Naturally there will be a press conference where all six of you appear together. Your formal introduction to the world. No doubt, there will be a party or two. You will meet the Suave Six, perhaps even a member or two of the Sexy Six. These events are co-sponsored by the League and The Atlas. Agreed upon ever since the Great Treaty.”

“No,” Jack said flatly. He pushed his chair away from the desk. Despite being on the verge of tears, he refused to cry. “I—I—I don’t want to be—I don’t want this! Can’t we keep it a s—secret?”

Bishop regarded Jack with a small frown. “Keeping you a secret is utterly impossible. Rumors are probably already circulating about your discovery.”

“How?” A hot panic rose up in Jack’s chest accompanied by an acute sense of nausea. He gripped the leather-padded arms of the chair and fought his rapidly rising alarm. *Breathe. Relax.* “Why do people even care?”

“Everyone cares. Everyone. If you cannot accept that, you are going to have a miserable life. You had better get used to people caring about everything you do, say, wear, think, and believe.”

Jack sniffed and pinched his ear so hard he almost cried out from the pain. *I can’t do this. I don’t want it. Please take it away. Why, universe, why choose me of all people?* He had nothing to offer the world in his phobia-ridden, sub-intelligent, detached-from-the-world state. He stifled a sob and looked at Bishop. “C—c—can I please just g—go home and pretend that I am normal? That this was a mistake?”

For an instant Bishop’s eyes flashed a trace of sympathy, then it was gone. “No.”

The answer crushed Jack. Tears fell onto his lap as all the terror, hopelessness, and weariness poured out of him. There was nothing he could do ... nothing to prevent a total upheaval of his life.

“It’s time to be a man, Jackson. Life has given you a giant wall to climb. You have two choices: begin scaling it or let it crush you. Only six people, Jackson, six every twenty-five years get this opportunity. Six out of billions. Do you know how old I am?”

*How could I?*

“I am forty-one. The same age as the Suave Six. My mother and father felt it was their duty to have one last child in case I was one of the Six. They felt it their duty to The Atlas. My father’s disappointment ... was deep and bitter because he believed it had been a miracle that my mother—at age fifty-three—conceived me. Destiny was what he called it. Like the story of John the Baptist. Do you know that story?”

Jack didn’t know what Bishop was talking about.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bishop said darkly. “The press conference will almost certainly be on Saturday. It will feature the full Six. Hundreds of cameras will film you and hundreds of millions of television sets will show you. Billions will watch. This will be your big moment to make an impression on the world. We will give you everything you need to help you prepare. An agent of the Ear will manage you, teach you to answer questions with enunciation and volume.”

Pain erupted in Jack’s ear. He pulled his hand away from it and found blood dripping down his fingers from itching at it for so long. He hadn’t realized he’d been doing it all this time. He tucked his hand between his knees and looked down, ashamed. *I’m such a freak.*

Bishop saw all this, but ignored it. “You agent of the Ear will be in contact later today to provide you with more information and help you prepare and travel. This little matter with your school will be swept away. Use the rest of this week to say goodbye to your friends and family. Your life is about to undergo major permanent changes.”

“And—and this Cold? What about that? Are you certain I have p—powers? I mean, if so, how do I use them?”

Bishop stood up. “That is not my area of expertise.”

“Wh—wh—whose ... is it?”

“You will understand more in the coming days. For now worry about nothing. Enjoy your life and focus on that press conference. You must make a good impression on the world as a representative of The Atlas.”

Opening the door, Bishop waited for Jack to leave before following him out and up the stairs into the courtyard. The agents of the Hand who had brought Jack were waiting outside the building on the street, leaning against the government cars, chatting in the early hours of the morning. They fell silent and straightened their backs when they saw Bishop emerge with Jack.

That same strange, nagging feeling that Jack had gotten yesterday in the alley back as he approached the Hand’s car. Only it was stronger than when he’d felt it in the alley. Something was wrong ... different. Someone dangerous was near.

Jack screwed up his eyes and peered around until he spotted an anomaly: a figure dressed in black leaning at the corner of the building across the street. The figure held something up to their eyes, perhaps a camera, Jack wasn’t sure. He stared at the figure a moment too long, because whoever it was noticed that Jack was aware of their presence. An instant later, the figure disappeared.



After seeing Jack safely to the Hand's car, Bishop returned to his office and picked up the telephone. The Secretary of the Spirit answered. "How may I assist you, Bishop?" she asked.

"Matriarch, please."

"Yes, Bishop."

The phone rang twice before she answered. Then it stopped as the secretary informed Matriarch that she was being connected to him. "It's early, Bishop." Her raspy voice carried a tone of interested exasperation. "Even for you. What do you want?"

"The last Six. I just had him in my office."

"So he's loyal to The Atlas?"

Bishop paused, wanting to answer honestly. "He's as loyal as a sixteen-year-old can be. This one is damaged. In a way, they all are."

"All teens are damaged," Matriarch said in her musing tone. "You can't grow up in the world and escape it. Adulthood is about piecing yourself back together. Another reason why The Atlas is so important. We provide the framework to do it."

Bishop closed his eyes in agreement. "But this one is more delicate than your average teenager. Bullied in school almost relentlessly—a failing of the system, in my opinion—leading to emotional disorders and thixophobia. Yet his teachers and analysts interpret his problems as a subpar intellect incapable of dealing with stress."

*You idiot!* a voice screamed at Bishop. *You embarrassment!* Bishop flinched in his chair and blocked the memory out just as a cold sweat broke out on his upper lip. Then he took out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

"You forget sometimes, Bishop, that The Atlas is still made of people. And people carry prejudices and preconceived notions that take generations to eliminate. The Atlas will not become a light on the hill overnight."

"Sometimes in our zealotry, we forget the virtue of patience." Bishop smiled. This was why Matriarch was the most valuable member of the Spirit. Her seniority in the department was not merely a ranking due to her longevity of service, but a reflection of her wisdom gained through decades of service. In many ways, Bishop adored her above his own wife, though he had no romantic feelings for the sexagenarian.

"I'm almost disappointed that I wasn't assigned to handle any of the new Six," Matriarch said. "Though I agree with your psychological profiling of them. Abbess and Sheikah seem to be quite able in preparing them. As for you ... I hope you're not letting your previous experience with the Six make you overcautious about dealing with this new situation. Are you, Bishop?"

"I don't believe so. I learned from that mistake." Bishop filtered the bitterness out of his voice very well. Hopefully well enough that Matriarch didn't detect it. "I can't speak for long. I need to report to the Second."

"Keep me informed. We need to work closely with Abbess to ensure no mistakes are made. The Suave Six are soon going to become third page news in world headlines. If we can sway the new Six to our cause, the fruit we reap will be bounteous indeed." The Matriarch hung up.

Bishop held the phone up to his ear a moment longer, then did the same. An instant later, he picked it up again. "Patch the camera feeds in and around the apartment of Jackson Fröst to my screen," he told the Secretary.

“One moment, Bishop,” the Secretary responded. Seconds later, she added. “Transfer complete. How else may I assist you?”

“Connect me to the Second, please. Inform his secretary that the call is urgent.”

After a pause that lasted over three minutes, a voice came to the phone.

“Listening,” was all the man said in fluent Russian. It was the way he began every conversation. *Listening*. His voice had a slight nasal twinge and revealed a man most likely ten or more years older than Bishop, but there was always that undertone of absolute authority. The Second was the second most powerful man in the world. Below only the Leader of the Head. For many years a thrill of nervousness had accompanied hearing the Second’s voice. Now it was only the constant pleasure of duty, of serving The Atlas.

Bishop kept one eye on the feed from Jackson’s house while he addressed his superior in Russian. “The last Six has been identified and confirmed. “Name is Jackson Emmerick Fröst. Mother is Margo Emily King. Father unknown due to mother’s promiscuity in her twenties. Four siblings, all females. Roxanne, Sara, Jane, and Peggy in order from eldest to youngest. Jackson is the middle child.”

“Is he loyal?”

“He believes he is, but he has never been tested. He is not psychologically well, which, in my assessment, may translate to a total embrace of the principles of Communism or a complete detachment. I intend to remain in close contact with him for the foreseeable future.”

“You carry a great weight, Bishop,” the Second said, “you and the other members of the Spirit. But we will not get another chance at a Six for 25 more years. The Suave Six has made expansion into the free world exceedingly difficult.”

Bishop bowed his head. “I will not repeat my mistakes.”

“You were very young then, and you have grown wiser. Perhaps you will better convince Jackson and the new Six as a father figure instead of a peer. You have ambitions, do you not?”

“My only ambition is to see The Atlas grow.”

“Surely you believe that your talents could be used elsewhere. Your loyalty, intellect, and efficiency are not unnoticed. You may yet find a place in the Head. But you must ensure that the Six serve The Atlas.”

“I appreciate the flattery, but it isn’t necessary. If I am needed in the Head, I will serve with the same zeal and devotion with which I do now. In the meantime, I will keep you well informed of my progress with the Six.”

The line went dead on the Second’s end. Bishop set the phone down on the receiver and pondered on the conversation. Had the Second been sincere about the Head’s interest in Bishop, or had those words just been flattery? A line meant to motivate Bishop to do his best possible work? He hoped not. Anyone who knew him also knew that he didn’t need a carrot dangled in front of him.

Bishop’s attention turned to the screen where a street camera showed the Hand agents returning to Jackson’s apartment. A small crowd had gathered around the building. At least two of the people in the crowd had cameras. *That was fast.*

With an expression of half terror and half shock, Jackson emerged from the back of one of the cars, surrounded by uniforms who parted the crowd around him so Jackson could return to his apartment unmolested. “That family is going to need to relocate.”

He made a note to call the Heart to discuss options for transplanting Margo King's family to a better neighborhood, something more fitting for the family of one of the Six. Then he leaned forward in his chair and rested his hand once more on the crown of the skull. *You need to be stronger, Jackson*, he thought with a sigh. Then he stiffened at the memory of being told something similar by a man roughly his own age when he'd been sixteen. *If you knew how different your life is going to be by the end of the day ... Being a Six will only make your problems worse.*

## Chapter Seven

Wednesday, December 5, 1990

Inside the Shanghai temple of Unom Ka, Lu Feng prepared to enter the first door of the Inner Sanctum, the Path to Kohro. The Inner Sanctum section of the temple was only accessible to long-time practitioners of the Unom Ka faith. Feng had been a believer his entire life.

Along the outer wall of the Inner Sanctum were six doors, allowing six practitioners to walk the Path to Kohro at the same time. Shanghai had many members of the faith, and only one temple to share. So the wait for most Unom Ka members for an appointment to visit the Inner Sanctum was almost eight months. For Feng, he could go whenever he wanted. And lately, he had been going often.

With his hands resting on the large bronze door handles in the shape of a star, Feng took a deep breath and slowly exhaled to clear his mind. Then he turned the handles and pushed through the creaking wooden doors. The light, pleasant scent of incense greeted him. The smell was natural and earthy, meant to invite introspection rather than distraction. The room was dimly lit with candles and simply adorned. The walls bore a painted mural of a dark forest scene.

A statue stood in the middle of the room: an androgynous body wearing a full robe, arms tucked behind the back, and only the feet naked. The face was a mirror. A stepping stool and a chair were available to help the temple visitor more comfortably gaze at his or her reflection, but Feng was tall enough to see himself by simply standing.

For more than five minutes, Feng stared at his reflection until he no longer saw himself. *I am only one man*, he thought. *I am limited by what I can do*. But Feng hoped that as a Six he would be able to do much. He hoped to convert the world to his faith: Unom Ka. Then he removed his shoes and socks and placed them into a chute. The next set of door handles were in the shape of the sun. Feng opened these and went through.

Gone were the trees and darkness. Instead the walls evoked the feeling that he stood in an endless barren field of dirt and dust. In the center of the room was the sexless statue, still barefoot, but also shirtless, surrounded by a ring of earth. Feng went to the statue and knelt in front of it, meditating for several minutes. He let the dirt work its way between his toes and fingers. Contact with the dirt sent a surge of energy through his body. With enough of it, he could tear down the entire temple. *Without sustenance provided by the Earth, I am nothing. A man cannot feed himself. He relies on the earth beneath him*. Then he took off his shirt and placed it into a chute.

The third room's door handle was the moon. The temperature inside was much colder, and the room had the appearance of a massive snow cave. Goose pimples popped up all over Feng's body. Feng removed his pants, now wearing only a simple pair of white briefs. The statue now bore a basin of water. Feng bowed before it, his forehead pressed against the ground. *Water gives life in a continuous cycle of regeneration. The human spirit is like water. Flowing, connected, capable of regenerating and bringing life to others*. When he was ready, he cupped his hands and drank from the basin. The water tasted almost sweet.

The fourth set of door handles bore the image of the earth. A blast of heat met Feng as he pushed open the heavy doors. Even before they shut behind him, sweat broke out on his brow. Within moments, his whole body was sweating. The floor was uncomfortably warm. The walls painted a scene of a mountain ablaze in fire and lava. Feng knelt again, this time before a statue whose face was lined with agony. Its extended arm offered a white robe of thick cloth. *The trials of life burn away that which is unessential. They burn away all but ourselves, purifying those willing to look inward and see their flaws. Am I willing to see my flaws?*

The handles to the fifth room had a human face, eyes and mouth open. Feng left the sweltering heat of the fourth room quickly. A sweet, candy-like fragrance greeted him. It was so enticing that Feng's mouth began to water. He'd been fasting for twenty-four hours, and his stomach gurgled impatiently. The source of the smell was a covered pot dangling from the arm of the statue in the center of the room. The first time Feng had visited the temple, four years ago, he'd opened the pot only to be disappointed that the only thing inside was an incense stick.

Despite being as hungry as he was, Feng had long since learned to block out the cravings and focus inward. *The world is filled with distractions that tempt the senses, but only Kohro matters. As a Six, I must learn to ignore the diversions and listen inwardly to find the path down which Kohro wishes to lead me.* A blindfold had been wrapped around the head of statue. Feng removed it from the fixture and tied it around his own head. Gloves and sandals rest on the floor. Feng donned these next.

The final set of doors awaited him. The doors had no handles. Each had a small hole to reach inside to pull the doors open. With the blindfold securely fastened, Feng could not see what was inside the room. There was no remarkable smell. After the doors closed behind him, there was no sound. And with the glove, sandals, and robe, he was unable to feel anything either.

"Stop," a woman's voice said in Qingese.

Feng obeyed and knelt for the final time.

"You have come to the temple often these last few months," the woman said.

"What is it you seek?"

"Clarity," Feng answered in his native tongue of Qingese. "Stability. I am told that the life of Six is unpredictable and unstable, especially for the first few years."

"Who tells you these things?"

"My family, my teachers, people who care about me and want me to succeed."

"And so Kohro leads you to seek peace of mind here?"

"I am told the Six have their own places of refuge. I hope they are similar to our own temples."

"Perhaps they are. I trust you have heard the news?"

Feng raised his head. "When I fast, I also abstain from all outside influences. Television, newspapers, and books. I read only the Aru Nom to prepare my mind and spirit for the temple."

"Then you do not know that the final Six has been located. Cold. He is an American from Toronto."

"Do you know his name?"

"Jackson Fröst."

Feng smiled as joy suffused his soul. The Six was complete. Soon they would be united and begin the great work for which they were chosen. He had found out about his gift of Strength almost ten months earlier. It had been a long ten months waiting and watching for the rest of the Six to be discovered. Now it was time.

“Kohro speaks to me, Lu Feng,” the woman continued. “You will be chosen to lead the Six. You are closer to Kohro than any of them. Beyond your gift of Strength, you have wisdom, soberness, and kindness. Your work will be tremendous.”

Feng bowed even lower, his forehead smashed against the floor. But he even as he tried to remain humble, he couldn't help but feel a swell of pride at the chance to lead his team. “Thank you. I will serve with all my heart.”

“But you must also beware,” the woman's tone became ominous. “Your Six will face terrible trials. Dissensions. Even betrayals from within.”

\*

“What is taking you so long, Sebastian?” Brianna shouted in Spanish at one of her scrap dogs. “You were supposed to have cleared that pile an hour ago!”

Despite being ten centimeters taller and almost fifty kilos heavier than Brianna, he appeared cowed by her wrath. “Sorry! Almost done!”

Brianna rounded on another one of her workers. “And you, Juan? What's your excuse? Rocks in your shoes again?”

“We just finished,” Juan explained.

“And what did you find?”

“Nada. Everything's been cleared out.”

Brianna swore at him in Spanish until he blushed. “That's twice this week you've come to me empty handed.”

“It's not my fault—”

“It's your job, Juan! You're here to find usable scraps. If it happens again, you're off my team.”

Brianna left him sputtering while she checked the production of the rest of her crew. Most everyone else did well enough that they earned nothing worse than a dissatisfied glance. By the time she'd finished surveying the day's haul, the morning was growing hot and it was time to send the kids to school. “Sebastian, take the wagons and get the scraps over to the Heart station on your way to school. Everyone else, get to school on time. If I hear about anyone skipping or being ridiculously late, I'll cut your days.”

Her scrap dogs muttered their understanding as they left the yard to wash, change, and get to school in their uniforms. With a stern eye Brianna watched them leave. She wanted to make sure no one had hidden anything that they could sneak away without being noticed. And she didn't live far from the scrap yard. Her walk home only lasted two minutes.

The sound of snoring greeted her. Her father slept in his chair in front of the television. Her little brother, Thiago, was on the floor trying to catch a very large, hairy spider with a cup. “Where's Mateo?” she asked.

“Working,” was Thiago's answer.

“He wasn't supposed to leave until I got back,” Brianna muttered.

“He left with a girl.”

Brianna rolled her eyes. Mateo, her older brother, was dependable about half the time, but never if a girl was involved in his life. She glared at her sleeping father, then watched Thiago for a few moments before leaving the room and telling him, “Kill that beast or put it out of the house.”

Thiago giggled. “But it’s my pet!”

“Kill it!” Brianna screamed. “It’s filthy.”

Her father’s snoring abruptly stopped. “What are you yelling for, Bri?” he asked sleepily. “You’ll wake up your little brother.”

“You have work,” Brianna told him. “Get up and get ready.”

Her father rolled onto his side. “I don’t think I’ll go today. I’m sick.”

“Being hung over doesn’t count as sick. Get up.” The Mind had gone easy on Brianna’s father with all his absences from work this year because she was the first revealed member of the new Six, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t eventually put him back in a reeducation facility if he didn’t start showing more initiative. She was about to say more when the phone rang.

“Answer that for me, will you, Bri?” her father said.

Brianna yanked the phone off the receiver. “Who is it?”

“We discussed politeness, Brianna,” a woman’s voice said. “Was that a demonstration of your best attempt at it?”

A cold wash of fear swept down Brianna’s spine at the sound of Abbess’ stern tone. “No, ma’am. I apologize. It’s been a—”

“No excuses. Only results.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you seen this morning’s news?” Abbess asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“The new Six was discovered last night. Watch the news. Call me after school.”

The phone clicked on Abbess’ end. Brianna went back into the living room and turned up the television. Sure enough, the top story was about a tall, skinny blond kid named Jackson Frōst, the last member of the new Six.

Thiago’s attention was on the television, his jaw hanging open, while the spider crawled up his arm. “That’s Cold?”

Brianna rolled her eyes at his picture. “He looks like he’s about to cry.” All the new Six were embarrassing. Feng, too stiff. Malia, too happy. Aikaterina, too fake. Oliver, too stupid. And now the last one looked to be the worst of them all. Jackson, too terrified.

“Why don’t you turn that down?” Brianna’s father asked.

She wacked him with the back of her hand.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“*Go to work!*”

“I’m sick, okay?” her father complained. “I won’t be able to do a good job.”

“You clean toilets. How hard can it be?” Brianna wanted to scream at him, but it never mattered. He’d been this way for almost seven years, and he wasn’t going to change. She placed her hand on his neck and pushed the idea into his mind that going to work was just the thing he needed today.

But it didn't work. The few times it had, the sensation had been quite visceral. Some sort of energy had transferred between her and the person she'd touched. But it didn't always work and she didn't know why. Neither did Abbess.

Abandoning her father, Brianna showered, dressed in her uniform, and barely caught the bus to school. No one sat by her on the bus, and she preferred it that way. The last thing she wanted were a gaggle of sycophants surrounding her everywhere she went. Brianna had her scrap dogs, and that was all she needed. She had handpicked them over the years, kids who, like she, needed extra rations to supplement their parents wasteful usage. They collected bits of parts from discarded machines and appliances, and gave them back to the Heart repair centers for extra food, television, clothing, or other rations that might be needed.

In Brianna's neighborhood, it wasn't uncommon to see kids scrape by while their parents traded badly needed rations for booze, drugs, or sex. And while none of those things were legal, the Eye and the Hand couldn't be everywhere and see everything. There were always cameras broken and areas of Cordoba, Argentina so slummy that even the Hand didn't want to patrol on a regular basis.

*One day this city will change*, Brianna told herself as she stared out the bus window. *The whole world will change under my leadership. The Atlas is trying, but they can't do it all. My Six will make it right.*

No more children collecting garbage for rations. No more fathers who have to begged or force to work. No more moms who disappear on their daughters. No more little boys with pet tarantulas.

School was much like the bus ride. The other kids avoided her, feared her. More than a few would move quickly out of her way as she strode down the hall to avoid touching her. Brianna had never used her gift in school—never on a teacher or a classmate. Abbess had explicitly warned her about that. But she knew what they feared: that somehow she would get control of their minds.

*Idiots.*

After school she went by the Heart station and picked up the rations as payment for the haul her scrap dogs had brought in earlier that day. Not surprisingly, a few minutes after she got home, Abbess called her.

"I thought we'd discussed you not collecting scraps from junk yards anymore," Abbess said in Spanish with a touch of reproof in her tone.

"You discussed it," Brianna said. "Glad to know you're still spying on me."

"Gathering information is not spying. Everyone in The Atlas knows the purpose of the cameras. The Eye is everywhere to keep us safe. You need to embrace that fact, not challenge it."

"You need to stop bossing me around. I'm not going to quit the scraps. Half those kids *need* the rations our work brings in, and some of the bigger kids will bully them and treat them unfairly. I'm the best shot they have at getting food and clothes."

Abbess sighed, but let the argument go. "How's your English coming along?"

"My English is fine," Brianna answered in English. Her accent was still very thick.

"Brianna, you have a natural tendency to resist authority."

"I thought that in The Atlas everyone is equal."



“We are all equal, but our roles are different. Not everyone can lead. Not everyone can teach. Not everyone can cook. We are all essential in our spheres of influence. Your role is extremely essential. You must remember that.”

“My power is garbage,” Brianna griped. “It’s the worst of the Six.”

“That is false.” Brianna sensed that Abbess was on the verge of anger. “You are the most powerful of them all, especially to The Atlas. How can you not see that?”

“Lu Feng’s gift of Strength—”

“Is magnificent, yes—”

“Or Aikaterina’s Fire—”

“You have the power to change people’s minds! You can direct their thoughts. You can convince the other Six to join our cause, and lead the world toward Communism. The end of war, of suffering, of hunger. If you can convince the Six to join us, think of the great good you will do. Whether or not you have to reach into their minds to do it, it will come from you. You are the light this world has been waiting for, Brianna. You are destined for greatness.”

## Chapter Eight

Thursday, December 5, 1990

“She can’t wear blue,” Erma said. “Blue is practically invisible on television. If she was the only person on the stage, blue would be a great choice. She looks darling in blue. But the last thing we want is her to go unnoticed.”

“We agree on that,” said Leona. “But she is stunning in blue. Have you even seen the dress that Alani picked out?”

“I thought that was for the dance—” Malia started to say.

“Of course I’ve seen it,” Erma said. Then she turned to Malia and offered a placid smile. “Forgive me for interrupting you.”

Malia tried to speak again, but Erma pressed on. “I value your opinion, Leona, but as Malia’s manager, I must insist that we abandon the blue dress and opt for something more bold. Red is always a strong color to consider.”

“Red is a proud color,” Malia’s mother, Alani, suggested. “What type of persona are we trying to project during the conference?”

“Humility,” Leona said.

“Assertiveness,” Erma answered at the same time. She gave Leona the same phony smile she’d given Malia. “Leona, you are an excellent public relations specialist and you have done wonders transforming Malia into a poised young lady who is ready for the public eye, but I must insist that we leave the final say on her attire to me.” She looked to Malia’s mother for support.

Malia leaned over to her mother. “Remember the dance I asked you about?”

“Not now, darling,” her mother whispered back. “We’ll discuss it if there’s time.”

“Very well,” Leona told Erma. “You are her manager.”

“And what if one of the other girls wears a red dress?” Malia finally asked before her mother could say anything.

“Malia darling,” Leona said, “don’t begin your sentences with a conjunction. And you’re starting to slouch.”

Malia sat up straight. “At least consider it. Perhaps I should wear something more reflective of my culture to the press conference? The blue dress was for—”

Erma let out a high, shrill laugh. “Like a grass skirt and a coconut bra? Don’t be ridiculous! The last thing we want to do is alienate millions or even billions of viewers from embracing you because they think you’re dressed strangely. You must welcome them into your world, with only your smile and mannerisms.”

“Perhaps I should go naked,” Malia muttered under her breath. “That would draw every viewer’s attention.”

“Don’t mumble, Malia darling,” Leona said.

“Never mind,” Malia said. “I can wear a red dress. I wanted the blue one for my school—”

“Of course, we’ll need to go shopping for the right one,” Malia’s mother said. “Won’t we?”

Malia brightened at the chance to go shopping with her mother.

“I can clear out some time from my schedule tomorrow,” Erma said.

“What about me?” Malia asked. “It’s my dress.”

“You have speech practice with Leona right after school—speaking of which, you are dropping your T sounds again. We’ll take your measurements later today. You’ve been following your diet, haven’t you?”

*Not exactly*, Malia thought, but she answered, “As best as I can.”

Leona saw right through Malia’s answer. “Darling, you can’t afford to gain weight now. And you’re slouching again. Sit up.”

Malia begged her mom for help using her best wide-eyed puppy expression. But her mother only responded with a stern look.

“We’re all doing this for your own good, darling. You need to keep to the diet. Look at me. I’m the wife of the Governor of Polynesia. I can’t go eating éclairs and cakes anytime I feel like it. That’s part of being in the spotlight.”

“Dad weighs at least three hundred pounds!” Malia argued.

“That’s expected of him. He’s a full-blooded Polynesian. I’m only one quarter. And you’re my darling daughter.”

Erma cleared her throat. “The dress issue is settled. Malia darling, keep to the diet. Now we need to talk about another issue. Apparently each group of Six has a leader. We need to start thinking of ways to help Malia get appointed as the leader of her Six. Assuming it comes to a vote, what can we offer each of these kids to get them to support her?”

“I’ll need to do more research on them,” Leona said. “Do any of them have representatives or handlers to contact?”

“I highly doubt the three from The Atlas do,” Erma said, “especially the newest one. That boy. Oh heavens, Malia darling, don’t fret. I will do everything in my power to keep you as distanced from that skeleton as possible. The last thing you need is to be next to him in a picture or seated next to him at the press conference.”

Malia frowned. Yes, Jackson Fröst was too thin, but there was also something real about him that intrigued her.

“He’s frightening,” Leona said. “I’ll contact the press conference manager and make the arrangements.”

“Be discreet,” Alani said. “Last thing we want is rumors flying around about Malia being a snob or something.”

“I don’t mind sitting by him, Mother,” Malia said.

Malia’s mother patted Malia’s knee. “That’s sweet of you, but let your handlers *handle* these things. You need to focus on prepping for the conference.”

Leona and Erma both gave Malia with their best we-only-want-you-to-succeed smiles. Before she lost their attention, Malia blurted out, “There’s a school dance on Friday that I’ve been asked to attend.”

“By a boy?” her mother inquired.

“No, by a frog,” Malia shot back. “Yes! I want to—”

“But that’s the night before the press conference, Malia darling,” Erma said. “That would be utterly impossible.”

“Mother, please,” Malia said. “It’s the winter festival. And with everything changing on Saturday, I may never—”

“There will always be other dance—” Erma began.

“I’m asking my mother!”

Erma pursed her lips and shot Malia a frustrated look. “This could set us back. This could ruin everything your mother brought us in to do.”

“Erma’s right, Malia darling,” her mother explained. “You’re sixteen. You’ll have many, many opportunities to go to dances.”

Malia nodded numbly. “M—may I please be excused? I need to use the restroom.”

Her mother smiled sympathetically. Malia left the room, but did not go to the restroom. She went to her bedroom and sat at the vanity. Her reflection stared back at her with wide, wet eyes of deep brown that matched her hair almost perfectly. Malia clutched the brush sitting in front of her and almost threw it at the mirror. Instead she slammed it down and crossed the room to her bed. Then, fighting back tears, Malia grabbed her pillow, smothered her face in it, and screamed as loud as she could.

\*

Oliver coughed badly as he tried to hold in the smoke while passing the bong back to Marcus, who laughed at the cartoon playing on the television. A thick haze filled Stefan’s basement where seven teenagers sat on a dilapidated couch, a love seat, and the floor. “You’re such a drongo!” Stefan cackled at Oliver.

“Nah, I *was* such a drongo!” Oliver countered, grinning. “Until about three months ago. Now I’m a bloody celebrity!”

Marcus’s beer sprayed from his mouth as he nearly choked. “Not sure about that, mate. Look at your clothes. They’re rags, mate. Maybe you’re a drongo and a celebrity.”

Oliver tried to laugh, but ended up squirming with a half smile.

“He was a celebrity until that new Six was announced yesterday,” Stefan said. “Now Oliver’s just old news.”

Oliver forced out a laugh this time, even though he wanted to kick Stefan and Marcus in the teeth. Hanging out with these stoners was better than his old friends who only wanted to study, read chess strategy, and ogle girls in underwear catalogs. *The old crew didn’t treat me like dung, but they were bloody boring.* He wondered if Jackson Fröst or Lu Feng would be any better. They both seemed like stiff.

A moment later, the cannabis took effect in the form of a surge of relaxation, and Oliver realized how stupid it was to ever be mad at anyone. The bong was currently in the possession of one of Stefan’s other friends. Oliver couldn’t remember the tall kid’s name despite that they’d been schoolmates for over five years; so he leaned closer to him and said, “Hey, mate, let me cop another hit off that.”

The second hit made Oliver’s heart speed up. It startled him so badly that he dropped the bong and grabbed his chest. Water spilled out, but the bong didn’t break. The others in the room laughed even harder at him.

“Oliver can’t handle it,” Stefan cackled.

“Too much for his *senses*,” the tall kid said.

“I’m fine,” Oliver insisted. “Just burned myself.” But he hadn’t fooled anyone. Were all six of the guys in the room watching him? Did they still think he was a loser? Oliver ground his teeth. He’d been a drongo for too long. He was supposed to be cool now. He was supposed to be up there with the gods.

He picked up the bong, packed and heated the cannabis, and took a massive hit. He held it down until his eyes burned, then let it out.

“Have some style,” Marcus said. “Watch this.” Then he and one of his friends took turning blowing smoke rings, chased by second smoke rings through the first ones.

A deep calm settled into Oliver. He thought less about what everyone in the room thought, and more about having a good time. Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. Stefan sent one of his friends upstairs to get the door. He came back two minutes later carrying five boxes of pizzas.

Stefan sat up. “Wait! Don’t open them yet.” He laughed like a hyena. “Let’s see if Oliver can tell us what toppings they have without looking. Come on, mate! Get over here and impress us.”

Oliver chuckled uneasily and waved them off, but Stefan wouldn’t let it go. Soon all six other boys were chanting his name. Oliver set down the bong and shut them up by giving them the finger. Then he sniffed the first box. Focusing was not as easy in his drug-influenced state, but once he did the cannabis almost seemed to enhance or heighten the individual scents. “Bacon, sausage, pepperoni, and onions.”

Stefan opened the first box with a flourish. Oliver bowed and repeated the process with the next box. “Nutella, strawberries, cream, and powdered sugar.”

Again he was right. After correctly guessing the contents of all five boxes, Stefan cut a circle into the middle of one of the boxes and made Oliver wear like a crown. “The pizza king!” Stefan crowed.

When Oliver tried to take it off, Stefan and Marcus stopped him. “No, no, no, mate. Girls are coming. You have to wear it while they’re here.”

Now Oliver understood the dodgy behavior. Stefan and Marcus wanted him to look like a doofus so they had better chances with the girls. However, since Stefan was Oliver’s best friend these days, and one of the more well-liked guys in school, Oliver did as he was told. The pizza box stayed on his head.

Thirty minutes later, four girls came down the stairs, their heels clacking with each step. Oliver had never been particularly successful with girls, but he knew that pizza boxes on heads weren’t the best way to woo one. Stefan got to his feet first, albeit somewhat wobbly, and greeted them by name. Seconds after Stefan introduced them, Oliver couldn’t remember their names. Two of them he thought were quite pretty, the other two nothing special.

All four went straight for the weed. Since Oliver again had a bong, one of the pretty ones sat by him. He grinned stupidly at her. “How ya goin’?” he asked her.

“Good,” she answered, giving him a dismissive glance.

“I’m Oliver,” he said. “Cop a hit off this.” He lit it for her and waited for her to inhale. Then he took another one for himself. Judging by her lack of reaction to the smoke, she was used to the sensation.

After exhaling, she gave him a smile. “Amy.”

“Amy.” Oliver repeated the name slowly because it sounded cool. “How do you know Stefan?”

“My girlfriend’s going with him. Sometimes he lets us come over and smoke with him. You?”

“School.”

“All the other guys I’ve seen here before. But not you.”

“Well, I’m special,” Oliver said.

“And what makes you so special?”

“I wear pizza boxes on my head.”

Amy raised her eyebrows unimpressed and took the bong from Oliver. He handed her the lighter and waited for her to take her next hit. “Why the pizza box?”

Oliver shrugged. “I’m fashionable. Paris and London are gaga about pizza box hats right now. In a year or so, it’ll catch on in Sydney too.”

Amy burst out laughing. Oliver laughed too and sucked down more smoke from the glass cylinder. “No, really though. I’ve seen you somewhere, haven’t I? Are you on a pizza commercial?”

Oliver guffawed so loudly that he startled Amy. The pizza box fell off his head to the floor. “Take another look.”

Amy squinted dramatically. “You ... are the Prime Minister!”

“I’m the new Six! Oliver Brown. Sense.”

“Fair dinkum!” Amy exclaimed. “I knew you went to Stefan’s school, but I never thought he actually knew you!”

Oliver bowed his head in mock humility.

“Chelsea, come here. Look who it is!”

The other pretty girl in the room, the one who’d been flirting with Stefan, came to see what all the ruckus was about. Amy put her fingers in Oliver’s hair and played with his long brown locks. “Look! Recognize him?”

Chelsea narrowed her eyes and examined Oliver’s face through the haze and dim lighting of the basement. Then her eyes grew really wide. “Bloody hell! You’re Oliver Matthew Brown.”

Oliver bowed again in the same manner as before. “I am him.”

“I’ve had a crush on you for four months. Haven’t I, Amy?” Being told by Chelsea that she had a crush on him warmed Oliver to his toes. No girl that he knew had ever had a crush on him. He’d always been the class fool, sometimes good for a laugh, but mostly just an obnoxious dweeb.

“She told me last month she’d root you in a heartbeat.”

Oliver blushed and found himself unable to respond.

Chelsea looked him up and down. “Cat got your tongue, Oliver?”

“Um ... yeah.”

Chelsea looked over her shoulder at Stefan, who was now chatting and smoking with one of Chelsea’s friends. When she turned back to Oliver, she dropped her voice and asked, “Do you want to?”

“Do I want to? Do I want to what?”

“What do you think? Tonight? Can you come to my place? My mum’s gone for the week.”

Oliver glanced at Stefan, the only real friend he currently had. He’d dropped his old loser friends months ago when he’d found out he was a Six and gotten invited to one of Marcus’s parties. Since then he’d been drinking and smoking with Stefan and Marcus regularly. “What about Stefan?” he asked.

“He won’t hear about it from me.”

“Can I come too?” Amy asked. “I want in on whatever you’re doing.”

Chelsea raised an eyebrow at Oliver. “Is that okay with you? Both of us?”

Oliver's tongue had suddenly grown four sizes larger and glued itself to the roof of his mouth. It took a conscious effort to breathe. He glanced at Stefan again. He was chatting up a storm with another girl. *Is he putting the moves on her?* Oliver doubted it, but the idea made him feel a little better. *I'm a celebrity. This is what celebrities do.* A cold, icky sensation crept into his gut and settled in deep. "Yeah, I'll be there."

Chelsea grinned. "Cool. You know where I live? Yeah? See you tonight."

Amy nuzzled up against Oliver. He forced himself to smile for her and told himself that this was what he'd always wanted.

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"Aikaterina! Have you seen Medora?" Kat's mother shouted from the bottom of the stairs. She spoke in Russian, the primary language of the Xenos household.

"I think she went out on a walk!" Kat answered. She sat on her bed cross-legged, her notebook on her lap with her calculus book perched on her pillow.

"At this hour?"

"She, um, she barely finished her homework. She said she needed the exercise."

"When did she leave?"

"Five ... or, um, ten minutes ago."

Kat's mother grumbled away. Kat glanced at the clock. In reality, Medora had been gone for over two hours, and Kat had no idea when she was going to be back. Medora had begged Kat to cover for her until she returned. Kat said yes. She always said yes to Medora.

Earlier that day she'd brought home her pre-finals report card. In all of her classes but one, she had already earned an 1, or a perfect mark, barring an abysmal score on her final exams. Except calculus. In calculus, she would have to nearly ace the final in order to earn a score of 1.

Her mother had not been pleased. "Medora never earned a 2," she'd said after reading the report. In twelve years of school not once."

"I'm doing my best. And I can still get a top—"

Kat's mother forced a smile. "I know. And I love you for it. If only you'd gotten your sister's brains. Everything comes so easy to her. She would have made a great Six too. Wouldn't she?" The faraway look in her mother's eyes had told Kat what she was really thinking.

*You wish Medora had been the Six, not me. Don't you?*

Sitting on her bed, Kat crumpled up the report card and chucked it into the garbage. She would get the 1 and show her mother that she was just as good as Medora. But she thought of all the other years she had achieved perfect or near perfect marks. Nothing had elevated Kat's mother's opinion of her. She was still not-quite-Medora.

Her focus returned to her calculus homework for the next while. Twice more Kat's mother asked if

A tap came at her window. Medora's face peered through the rain streaked glass. "Open it!" she mouthed to Kat.

Kat scrambled across her room to let Medora in through the window. When Medora had left the house, she'd had her hair and make up all done. Now she looked disheveled, soaked, and a little bruised. She coughed and sniffled as she rolled onto the floor, staying on her back to catch her breath. Her eyes were bloodshot and her mascara smeared, her lips red and puffy.

"Are you ... okay?" Kat asked.

Medora gave a particularly long sniff. "Fine. Totally fine."

"Mom's been looking for you for about three hours."

Medora sat up faster than a snapped rubber band. "Did you cover for me?"

Kat gave her sister a disproving look that told Medora she shouldn't have even asked. Then in a quiet voice she asked, "Where were you?"

Medora covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath before slowly laying back down. "Just with some guys."

When Kat closed the window, she noticed the funny scents coming off her sister. One was like burned plastic. The other was more like sweat or a locker room. She put her finger under her nose, and groaned, "Ugh, you stink."

Medora started to laugh.

"Are you tired?"

Medora laughed even harder. "No. Not at all."

It was then that it dawned on Kat what was going with her sister. "You said you were going to quit."

"It's Friday," Medora said. "Give me a break."

"It's *Thursday*."

"I mean tomorrow's Friday. It's my day of boring classes. I'll sleep through them and still ace my tests."

"If you get caught again—Dad's job—"

Medora slapped the floor. "Are you my mother now? Because I have one and she's a total bitch. The last thing I need is two."

"No! No, please don't be mad. I'm sorry. I just get worried. You look like you got jumped in the street."

"A couple of the guys were a little rough. Nothing I can't handle."

"*A couple of the guys?* Medora, how many—"

"Shut up!" Medora almost screamed. "Okay? Just shut up and let me do my thing. I'm not hurting you or me. It's fun. Okay? It's just for fun. What do you do for fun besides smoke?"

"I don't smoke!"

"Please, Kat! You're doing something. You leave for hours sometimes, and always come back ... smelling like smoke."

"You like you've had anything *but* fun," Kat retorted. The bruise on her sister's cheek was getting worse. But Medora was Kat's best friend. Her big sister. Her idol. She let the anger go. "Okay. Whatever, Medora. I, erm, I'm sorry."

Medora giggled. "Whatever yourself. You're leaving soon. You don't have to worry about my crap anymore."

"It's not like that."

"Yeah it is. You're now the big shot Six. I'm just the little nobody in the family now. It'll be Kat this and Kat that until my ears fall off."



Kat snorted. "Yeah ... that'll be the day."

Medora grinned mischievously. "True. Mom thinks I'm pretty awesome, doesn't she? It's because I'm everything she wasn't. Smart, pretty, and popular. Why do you think she married a college tennis coach?"

"Mom's pretty," Kat said half-heartedly.

"Please, Kat," Medora said, rolling her eyes. "You and I are lucky that Mom and Dad's genetic dice rolling made us look the way we do. Especially me. I mean, you're not bad, but I'm the luckier one."

The words stung a little, but Medora was right. She was by far the prettier of the two sisters.

"Speaking of ugly people," Medora continued, "did you see the newest member of the Six? He's a freak! I could go on a week long coke bender and not touch food ... I still wouldn't be as skinny as he is."

Kat forced herself to laugh, but immediately regretted it. "I didn't think he was that bad. Thin, but kind of cute."

Medora stuck her finger into her open mouth and pretended to barf. "My tonsils are cuter than he is. Even you could do better than that."

"Wow. Thanks ..."

"Not because you're ugly, but because you're just so blah. You don't do anything, you don't care about anything. You try to stand out or look amazing. You're just you."

"Is that good?" Kat asked hopefully.

"It's not bad." Medora sat up again and stroked her sister's cheek. Kat closed her eyes and savored the sensation of someone actually touching her. "You're going to be crazy famous whether you like it or not. Just trying being someone who's actually, you know, interesting."

## Chapter Nine

Saturday, December 8, 1990

Saturday morning, Jack sat at the kitchen table with his mother, Roxy, Sara, Jane, and Peggy. They all had bowls of oatmeal with sprinkles of sugar and cinnamon. Monday the new ration cards would arrive via mail. It was the same routine every two weeks. The bacon and muffin rations always disappeared in the first week days, then the pancake batter vanished next. And oatmeal was the last to go. In fact, Jack guessed his family could live off nothing but their extra oatmeal rations for a month. Families were supposed to report any food surpluses, but no one ever did.

Through the front door, Jack heard a great deal of bustling. He pretended not to notice. So did the rest of his family. Over the last four days, they'd gotten used to them. The photohounds. Only a few of them were from the local Atlas news channel. Many of them came from the Western or Southern States, even from foreign lands, all eager to snap up pictures and capture video for television, magazines, and newspapers.

Jack hated them. They made it difficult to go anywhere. They followed him to school, to the museum, everywhere. He wore a hat and large sunglasses which his mother had used the last of their clothing rations for the year to get for him. Jack was just thankful she'd managed to save some rations for almost twelve months. Usually their clothing rations were completely wiped out by October.

For two days, their telephone had rung non-stop before his mother unplugged it, an act normally considered illegal. However, the agents of the Hand stationed outside the house had assured Jack's family that they would be all right due to their special circumstances. But the telephone was the least of Jack's concerns.

School was unbearable. Everyone stared at him. Everyone wanted to talk to him. His counselor called him in to explain that his demerits had been erased. He chatted with Jack like they were best friends. This was the same man who, all year long, had told Jack that he likely had no future outside of janitorial work.

People, girls especially, brushed him in the halls, tried to hug him, even had eerily inhuman tones in their voice when they spoke to him. Not a day passed without him vomiting at least once during school hours. Mrs. Hannity beamed at him every time their eyes met, something he always tried to avoid because she wiggled him out. But worst of all had been the special Channel Nine News broadcast showing pictures and camera footage of Jack. The stupid opening line of the newscast still rang in his ears.

"Cold has been found ... and get this: his name is Jack Fröst!" Robert Ubar hadn't even bothered to pronounce Jack's last name correctly. The *O* in Fröst was long like "pope," not short like "pop." Now the world would think he'd been named after someone from Norse seasonal folklore.

The extra attention and bizarre requests for autographs and pictures was inescapable. He wanted to scream at them to get lost, but couldn't. By the time he got home each day, he locked himself in his room and sketched or painted until his nerves finally relaxed and he could tolerate being around people. If he didn't, Peggy and Jane's new habit of following him around and telling him stories about how many friends they had because they were so "in" now would drive him insane.

Roxy and Sara seemed to prefer him locked in his room. Though Roxy still treated Jack the same as always—like he was something stuck on the sole of her shoe—it was Sara who puzzled him. She had been the first to comfort him when he fell through the ceiling, but each passing day she treated him with increasing frigidity. She no longer spoke to him, hardly looked at him. Jack wondered if this was because she had always been the smart, successful one, and now he had upstaged her—albeit accidentally.

A knock came at the door just as Jack finished his second bowl of oatmeal. Second helpings for Jack were practically unheard of, but today he had an insatiable appetite. Peggy and Jane raced to answer it; Peggy won and flung the door wide open. Two agents stood outside along with a flock of photohounds who snapped a hundred pictures before the doors closed.

One of the agents was a man in the uniform of the Hand. He wore black sunglasses which he did not take off after he entered. He gave a grumpy sort of nod to Jack and his family, then assumed an emotionless expression with his hands clasped in front of him and stoic expression on his face. A dozen more Hand agents were stationed around the building. They'd been there all week.

The other agent Jack recognized because she'd stopped by twice before: Rachel Potter. She wore a classy business skirt and jacket over a pink blouse. A tiny embroidered emblem of the Ear adorned her left breast pocket. The Ear was responsible for approving all forms of entertainment in countries belonging to The Atlas.

Rachel was a pretty lady with an infectious smile. Jack had drawn her eight times in the last five days, though he wouldn't have shown her the pictures even if Bishop had put a gun to Jack's head. "Hello, Jack," she said, handing him a folder of papers. "Here's some information for you to look over regarding your agenda. Have you been practicing your questions?"

Jack put his empty oatmeal bowl in the sink and nodded because that answer was *sort of* true. He had practiced his answering the list of questions for a few minutes ... once, reading through the questions and answering them in his mind. However, she had insisted that he say his answers out loud to another person enough times that he could do it loudly and without stammering. Jack had done nothing of the sort. The last thing he needed was his sisters mocking him.

Rachel smiled prettily at Jack's family, acknowledging them out of obligation. She spoke to them only when she had to, otherwise her attention stayed on Jack. "Are you ready to go?" she asked Jack.

"I g—gotta brush my teeth."

Jack hurried upstairs to his bathroom, scraped the brush over his teeth for about five seconds, and then dashed into his room. Knowing he wouldn't be returning to home for a few days, he wanted to take something with him. Something special. He looked at all his drawings and wondered for a fleeting moment if he ought take one of Rachel and give it to her. He could sneak it around by rolling it up and slipping it in his sleeve. *No. It'd get ruined. And she'd think I'm a spazoid.*

He decided instead to take a few drafting pencils from his bedside cabinet. While stowing three of them away, he found a small pocketknife tucked into the darkest corner of the top drawer. Jack's mother had once said it belonged to his father, a man Jack had never met. He grabbed that, too. Last of all he made sure he had his key, threw the chain around his neck, and tucked it under his shirt.

His mom and sisters congregated near the door to say goodbye. Jack hugged each of them, from oldest to youngest. His mother kissed his cheek and whispered her love in his ear. Roxy's hug lasted the shortest, and Jane's the longest. "Don't go, Jack!" she whined, holding onto his leg. "You're famous now. I'm *in*. Stay!"

Jack's mother eased Peggy and Jane away while Jack tried to figure out what his parting words should be. He'd never spent a night away from home before. He'd tried once, when he was seven, to have a sleepover at a neighborhood boy's house, but Jack got so homesick that he ralphed until the boy's mom brought him home.

"I promise not to throw up on c—camera," was all he could think to say. "See you next Saturday." Then Jack gave them his bravest smile, which didn't feel very brave (and probably didn't look it either), and nodded to Rachel to indicate he was ready.

When the door opened, a blast of sound greeted him. Clicking cameras from every angle, erupting flashes blinding him from all sides. People shouted his name, each louder than the last so their questions could be heard. So many of them all at once. Jack couldn't tell where one question ended and the next began.

The burly agent of the Hand pushed through the photohounds and reporters until they reached the stairs. The herd of people wielding cameras and microphones followed them down to the street level where more news crews blocked their way to the motorcade of seven cars. By the time they finally reached the safety of the third car from the back, Jack breathed just as hard as he had the day he'd jogged—or perhaps stumbled—two kilometers in gym class while his teacher screamed at him from behind with a bullhorn. The driver, an agent of the Foot, hardly waited for them to get seated before pulling out of the parking lot toward the main road.

A half hour later, the motorcade pulled into a private hangar marked with the symbols of The Atlas and the Foot at Toronto International Airport. Rachel and the Hand agent led Jack to the jet where a stewardess wearing a uniform of the Foot greeted them. The aircraft had a remarkable interior which sat sixteen people in pods of four chairs facing each other. Jack had never been on an airplane before. In fact, he'd never left the state of Ontario because his mother preferred to trade her vacation rations for other things like clothes, furniture, and other commodities. Were all airplanes so luxurious?

The plane did not take off immediately. Jack sat in his seat and scratched at his ear, wondering what was delaying the takeoff. Rachel must have noted his curiosity. "We're waiting for the other two to arrive," she told Jack.

"Other t—two?"

"Of the Six. Aikaterina and Brianna."

"Oh." Jack sat up a little straighter and flattened his shirt as he glanced out the window. He saw no sign of them. He wished he'd known he was sharing the plane with two girls. He'd have spent more time brushing his teeth and combing his hair. His gloved hand went to the top of his head to smooth down the hairs that always seemed to pop up at random times. Then he started back at scratching at his earlobe.

"Are you going to be all right during the flight?"

"Huh?" Jack said, still looking out the window for the girls.

"You're starting to play with you ear. Are you experiencing any other symptoms of panic?"

Oddly enough, now that Jack thought about it, he wasn't scared. He was excited to fly. Five minutes later, just as his ear started to really sting and bleed, several more cars pulled into the hangar next to the plane. More agents of the Hand got out with four women. Two of ladies were Jack's age. He recognized Aikaterina first, especially her shockingly blue eyes. Her dark brown hair was done up in twists which Jack figured hairstylists probably had a name for, but he didn't know. She wore a semi-sheer baby blue blouse, a white undershirt, and black pants.

Brianna's red highlights were the first thing Jack noticed about her. They were brighter than the pictures had shown, giving Jack the impression that streaks of flame shot through her light brown hair. She had an intense expression on her face, as though she was hyper-aware of everything going on around her. With the two girls were two more agents of the Ear, like Rachel. One was an older woman, probably in her late forties or fifties. The other was about Rachel's age, maybe a little older, about thirty. These two women fussed over Aikaterina and Brianna, constantly fixing or straightening the girls' clothes and hair. Jack was grateful Rachel wasn't like that with him.

Though he hadn't been nervous moments ago, Aikaterina and Brianna's presence on the plane suddenly made his skin itch and his earlobes tingle. Jack had never been adept at talking to girls. He'd never even been good at *looking* at them. Now he was supposed to spend the next few hours with two beautiful girls that would, supposedly, become his closest friends for the rest of his life. He glanced around the plane to spot the nearest garbage can in case he had to throw up. Thankfully, there was a little bag for just such occasions under his seat.

The four ladies boarded the plane, the oldest woman first. Behind her came Aikaterina and Brianna. Six agents of the Hand entered last, providing security detail. The members of the Hand broke apart, searching the plane's interior from under each seat to the overhead compartments.

"What are they d—doing?" Jack asked Rachel.

"Probably checking for bombs," she said in a tone that suggested bomb checks were a perfectly natural phenomenon.

"Are—are we going to be—be—be bombed?" Jack stammered.

"Of course not."

"Hello," the oldest of the women said, pausing near Jack and taking Rachel's hand. "You must be Rachel **Krishenko**."

Rachel stood and invited Jack to do the same with a glance. "A pleasure to meet you. Ruth, yes?"

"Ruth **Marsters**," answered the elder woman. "And this is Susan **Petrov**." She gestured to Aikaterina's agent. When her eyes turned on Jack, her smile grew exponentially. "And you must be Jackson."

Jackson gave her a quick shake with a gloved hand. Ruth's gaze flickered to it, then away.

"I'm certain you've heard of Brianna and ... you go by Kat?" Ruth asked Aikaterina.

Kat nodded.

Jack gave both girls a quick nod. "P—p—p—p ... Nice to m—meet you."

Brianna's upper lip curled at Jack's stammering. "Thanks," she muttered, then pushed past the group with Ruth. "He can't even talk normally," she added to her agent in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Brianna!" Ruth hissed.

Susan let out a long breath. "Well! This was nice. We have work to do, though, don't we, Kat? I'm sure the three of you will have plenty of time to chat more very soon."

Kat and Brianna settled with their agents into their pods on opposite ends of the plane. Jack and Rachel sat in the middle section. Conflicting emotions coursed through him: disappointment, anger, embarrassment, and an incredible relief that he didn't have to talk to them longer.

When the Hand agents finished their security check, the engines started to rumble. Jack tightly gripped the armrests of his seat. The excitement of flying vanished, replaced with vivid images of crashing planes, bombs, and himself freefalling to the earth. *Bad idea. Bad bad bad. If something happens, I'm toasted!*

His gloved hand attached itself to his ear, but Rachel stopped him from doing too much damage by putting a hand on his knee and getting his attention.

"Hey, I know how to get your mind off flying." She wore her usual, contagious smile. "Let's run through some practice answers."

She pulled out a legal pad from her attaché case. While she perused her list, she twirled her thin pen between her fingers with all the dexterity of a professional baton girl. Jack glanced at Kat more than once, but she was deeply absorbed in her conversation with her Ear agent.

"Okay, Jack, first question—"

"Wait—wait. You—you're going to ask me questions?"

"What did you think I was going to do?"

Jack searched for a loose thread on the cuffs of his shirt to play with. "I—I thought you'd tell me the answers."

Rachel leaned forward, grinning sympathetically at Jack. She placed her hand on his shoulders, patted it gently, but stopped before her touch became painful. "You're okay." Her smile was genuine. "Jack, the answers have to be yours. People need to sense your sincerity or they won't trust you. A bad honest answer is better than the slickest lie. I'm here to help. I'll listen to your answers and help you reword them to sound better."

Jack nodded as he fidgeted with his shirt. Rachel glanced down at his hands.

"First, you have some bad nervous habits. Your ear scratching is the worst because you get scabs on your ears. But playing with your cuffs and stammering aren't much better. Obviously we can't correct all of them today. For now just focus on keeping your hands on your knees or your fingers interlocked. You don't want to be seen injuring yourself on live television."

He thought about telling her that he'd been working on breaking himself of these habits for almost a decade, but what good would that do? The stammering, especially, had been diagnosed as incurable by more than one doctor. Did Rachel know that already?

"Every time you play with your ear, I'm going to slap your face with a flyswatter." Rachel removed the flyswatter from her briefcase. Jack wondered what else she had in there. "It won't hurt, it'll startle you."

"R—right," Jack reach up and tugged on his earlobe without realizing it. Immediately the flyswatter stung his cheek. "S—s—sorry!"

“Stay calm. Remember your breathing.” She gave him another pretty smile. “First question: growing up, was it a dream of yours to be a member of the Six?”

Jack thought back to his younger years. His earliest memories were of himself at age three or four, running through the park with Sara playing Space Wars. She pretended to be Princess Leia, and Jack was Luke Starkiller. He had no recollection of ever wanting to be a part of the Six.

A sharp smack shook him out of his thoughts. “Ow!” Rachel’s eyes were on his earlobe where his gloved fingers had started to fiddle. Jack looked away. “No.”

Rachel frowned. “That’s your answer? Try elaborating.”

“No, I didn’t w—want to be a Six.”

The pen in Rachel’s hand twirled even faster. “I’m going to try an open ended question now. See what you can do with it. Try to tell a story. Ready? Mr. Fröst, who were the biggest influences in your life?”

It was the easiest question yet. “R—Rembrandt, D—Da Vinci, Bosch, Klimt, Picasso—”

“Don’t mention Picasso to the press,” Rachel said quietly. “Ever.”

Jack nodded apologetically as his fingers found a loose string on his shirt cuff and started to work at it. “D—Deyneka.”

Rachel’s eyes lit up. “Excellent choice. But you didn’t tell a story.”

The questions continued, and Jack did his best to answer them. Almost every question was preceded with a smack to his cheek. The more she smacked him, the more he shifted his attention to his sleeve instead of his ear. The string he pulled went from a centimeter long to two and then to four.

Even though his answers were all bombs, Rachel kept telling him how great he was doing. All the while, the smile on her face evolved into something he expected to see on a plastic doll. By the time the jet landed at the Saint Louis International Airport, her grin looked more like a grimace, his brain oozed like a hot grilled cheese sandwich, and the stitching on the left sleeve of his jacket had completely unraveled. When Rachel saw what he’d done, she shrieked.

“You’re supposed to wear that jacket on television!”

“I’m sorry!” Tightness gripped his stomach as he looked at the mess he had made. “I—I—I wasn’t even th—thinking.”

Rachel grabbed Jack’s arms in a surprisingly strong grip. Bolts of pain shot up to his shoulders. Her eyes widened in both frustration and fear. “You *have* to think, Jack!” she was almost screaming. Both Ruth and Susan glanced at her before turning away. Rachel quickly composed herself. “I need you to stay composed. Okay? I know it’s scary, but you’re not the only one who has a lot riding on your press conference. Okay?”

“Okay!” Jack would have said anything to get her to let him go. As soon as she did, the itchy discomfort in his arms went away, and he relaxed a little. Rachel excused herself and dashed to the back of the plane where the lavatories were located.

The press conference was to be held in a Marriott hotel in the International Zone inside Saint Louis on the banks of the Mississippi River. Though technically within the borders of the Western States of America, this zone served as the location of several important events occurring between the Communist and Western States, principally being the Battle of the Mississippi—the last battle of the Second American Civil War. It was also the place where the American Treaty was signed on July 4, 1950. It was where, over fifteen years ago, the Suave Six publically announced their intention to work exclusively with the League of Nations for world peace and prosperity. It was the site where construction of the Great American Wall began, permanently dividing the Western States from the Communist and Southern States.

The airport was twenty kilometers northwest of their destination, which meant they had to take cars from the airport to the site. The Ear and Hand agents whisked Jack, Brianna, and Kat through security to a garage where five cars waited outside The Atlas's hangar. The vehicles were all identical: large, shiny, and black. They reminded Jack of the Chairman of The Atlas's vast cavalcade.

As he disembarked the plane, Jack caught Kat's eye. She smiled at him in a friendly, unfamiliar sort of way. He blushed and looked away. Behind him, Brianna tapped her foot impatiently. "Can these people walk any slower?" she asked in a thick Argentinian accent.

"Now, now," her agent of the Ear said in a chastising, almost motherly tone, "remember what I said about patience and civility."

Brianna rolled her eyes. Jack and Rachel took the back seats of the middle car with an agent of the Hand riding shotgun. Brianna and Ruth went to the car second to the front, Kat and Susan second to the back. The foremost and rear cars carried only agents.

The cars moved in procession onto the highway. "Do you want to run through any more questions?" Rachel asked, but her tone indicated that she was perfectly fine with him declining.

Jack rested his head on the glass of the window, his eyes on the horizon. He wanted nothing more than to be in his bedroom with his sketchbooks and canvases. High in the sky, a black helicopter flew toward the convoy, either a news chopper or more security. Jack wondered if the procession was being broadcast on the news right now. He wondered what the other three members of the Six would be like, especially Oliver and Feng. Were they more like Brianna or Kat? He hadn't had a real friend since Ryan Marsh's family was relocated to Atlanta six years earlier.

Jack sighed and watched the helicopter. It slowly drew nearer. How many cameras were pointed at him right now? *Take a good look at the freak in the car. The worthless member of the Six.* The helicopter, which was almost directly above the cars, dropped down nose first. A rapid series taps followed. For a moment Jack thought Rachel was tapping her fingernail on her window, but then noise erupted from everywhere at once.

Rachel screamed. The agent of the Hand in the car shouted orders to the driver. A loud *BANG* came from up ahead. The lead car spun and flipped into the air. Bullets, like loud angry taps, slammed into the car's underside. The car directly in front of Jack's—the one carrying Brianna—swerved to the left. The driver of Jack's car couldn't react fast enough and slammed into the second car's side. Jack lurched forward, his head rammed into the front passenger seat, and everything blurred.



## Chapter Ten

Saturday, December 8, 1990

For about ten seconds, Kat couldn't remember where she was or what was happening. *So much noise.* Susan's screams filled the car like a fire alarm that wouldn't shut off. The pitch was just right that it pierced Kat's ears and reverberated in her skull. *Make it stop!* She peered over at Susan through still-blurry eyes. Susan's face was covered in a shining sheet of crimson. So were her hands. Kat unbuckled her seatbelt and fumbled with the door until it popped open, and she fell out of the car.

The pavement stung her hands and sent jolts up her arms. She rolled over and climbed to her feet. The helicopter hovered over the scene and spat out bullets at the cars. The rapid *dunk dunk dunk dunk* drowned out the screams coming from several places. Over a dozen cars had slammed into each other, creating a metallic snake of vehicles. Dozens of people had abandoned their cars, running for refuge in the trees on either side of the road.

The moment Kat's head appeared over the top of the car, the helicopter swerved to the right and the gunner adjusted his aim. As the bullets drew nearer, Kat froze and gripped the side of the car like a vise. Even as she realized that the gunner was aiming for her, she couldn't bring herself to move. The spray of bullets was three meters away. Then two. One.

Someone slammed into Kat, knocking her onto her chest behind the car. Whoever it was, he or she lay on top of Kat, covering her eyes.

"Are you crazy?" a female voice with a thick Argentinian accent asked.

"Look out!" a different, more distant voice cried.

The helicopter passed overhead as bullets smashed into the car. Kat rolled herself and Brianna, the person atop her, under the car while bits of metal, concrete, and glass exploded around them. Wind ripped at their hair, and the roaring of the helicopter's blades created a deafening, oppressive din. A horrible awareness descended on Kat's consciousness. An awareness that she was probably going to die.

A car door opened ahead. Jack fell out of the car on the pavement, clutching his chest, his face as white as the stripes in the road. His ribs rose and fell as though something invisible was squeezing or crushing him.

"Get out of sight!" Kat shouted at him. "Get under the car!"

Jack made no sign that he'd heard her. She rolled Brianna off, spun around, and crawled under the car toward Jack. Overheard she could hear the helicopter making another pass.

"Jack?" she called to him.

Jack opened his eyes, which were somehow both bloodshot and white, and fixed them on her. Not able to speak, he nodded.

"Get under the car before they shoot you!"

He flopped and squirmed until he was next to her.

"How good are you at Cold?"

Only a choking sound came from him.

"Cold. How good are you at it?"

Jack shook his head, managing to look like a scared kitten as he did so.

“I don’t think Brianna’s power will be much help. That means it’s up to me. Just stay here.”

“Wh—wh—what are you g—g—g—”

“Going to do? I don’t know. Stay here!”

Kat rolled out from under the car and jumped to her feet. The hailstorm of bullets abruptly changed direction, now moving toward her. Jack tried to shout something else, but his stammering was getting in the way. Kat had already been briefed by Sheikah about his stuttering problem, but hadn’t realized it was so bad.

The bullets crashed down right in front of Kat’s feet, spraying her with bits of cement and dirt. Kat focused on her sister, Medora, and willed fire into her hands. By moving her hands into a circular motion, she created a wall of heat. The harder she focused on her sister, the more intense the heat grew. Soon it became so hot that the bullets had melted and evaporated before they reached her.

The helicopter flew above and past Kat. She spun, keeping her heat shield alive with her emotional rage. Then she pushed the heat away toward the helicopter. A plume of flames shot upward, licking the underside of the chopper, but not doing enough damage. Kat gritted her teeth. Instead of Medora, she thought of her mother, nagging, criticizing, *comparing* Kat to her perfect sister. The heat welled up beneath her feet, powerful and pleasant. Kat let it build until it *felt* right, and then she released it.

She shot into the air like a rocket. The gunner in the helicopter did not have a good angle at her. And even if he’d had one, Kat kept her hands in front of her as a heat shield. The belly of the chopper grew closer until it was just a few meters away from her face, the blade creating so much turbulence in the air that she almost missed her target.

But she didn’t. Hours of practicing her Fire ability over the last few weeks had paid off. She made contact with the copter, using her heat to melt a grip into the metal underneath. Using her other hand she punched a hole into the helicopter’s belly, then shot fire at its tail. Shouts came from several people inside. Through the hole, she saw a man in golden sunglasses spot her, but before she could let go, he grabbed a canteen and through it at her.

The heat shield melted a small hole in the front of the canteen, but one hand was not enough to incinerate it. Water splashed on her face and in her hair. The flames from her feet and hands instantly extinguished and Kat began to fall.

\*

Jack didn’t dare scoot any closer to the edge of the car for fear of being shot. But he couldn’t figure out where had Kat gone. About a minute earlier, from his vantage point beneath the car, he’d watched as Kat’s feet left the ground. A tremendous, deep *WHOOSH* had come from where she’d stood followed by a sharp increase in the temperature despite the winter air. Several faint yells came from the helicopter, barely heard above the roaring from the blades. Three seconds later, the car Jack lay under rocked when something pummeled into the roof. Glass sprayed on the pavement, followed by Kat, who rolled four times and came to a stop.

The soles of her shoes were gone, and only smoldering remains of her socks adorned her ankles. The sleeves of her shirt smoked too. She lay still, eyes closed, blood covered her face. Jack couldn’t tell if she was alive or not.

More screams came as the helicopter appeared in Jack's view. This confused him at first because he wasn't looking up to the sky, but along the pavement from under the car. *The helicopter is going down!* He saw it for only a moment before it passed from view, colliding into the earth out of sight with a terrible screech of metal twisting and tearing apart. The muscles in Jack's chest relaxed and his breathing came easier.

His moment of respite was short-lived. From somewhere out of sight, Jack heard voices shouting in an unknown language. Kat still lay in the middle of the street, motionless. *Someone needs to help her!* He tried to find a Hand agent to call for help, but the street was otherwise empty.

*It's me or no one.* But what could he do? *Run out there and drag her back?* How long would that take? A minute? More? He didn't have that kind of time. Those people—those attackers—were coming up the hill from the wreckage. He could hear them coming. He didn't even have a minute. He imagined himself running into the street, scooping up Kat, and rushing back behind one of the cars for cover. *I gotta do it. I gotta help her. I can't sit here and do nothing.*

Jack scooted toward the edge of the car, then stopped. He scooted a little more, then stopped again. "Okay," he told himself, "on three. One ... two ..."

A figure ran across the scene from out of nowhere. A small, petite brunette with two prominent bright red streaks running off-centered through her hair. It was Brianna. Before Jack could even react, Brianna started to drag Kat by the arms.

"Wait!" Jack shouted. "I can help!"

"Stay there!" Brianna hissed. "They're coming back."

The voices grew louder. Whatever language they were speaking, Jack had never heard it before. Only a second after Brianna pulled Kat around one of the cars, five heads appeared, walking up the hill to the highway. All five wore black suits and shirts, with white belts and ties. The men had trimmed beards matching their close-cropped hairstyles. The two women wore their hair cut short as well, but not as short as the men. All five wore sunglasses.

The man in the middle, however, wore gold-rimmed sunglasses while the others were all black. He pointed to the others and barked orders. Before any of the five got very far, a card door opened, and an agent of the Hand fired on them. One of the five attackers took a bullet in the shoulder, but the other four scattered and returned fire.

The gunfight didn't last long. The agent shot, or perhaps grazed, one more of the suited men. Meanwhile, one of the attackers worked his way across the body of the car and killed the agent at close range. The Hand agent's gun dropped to the pavement with an ominous clatter.

*Who will stop the attackers now?* Jack wondered. Nothing stood in their way. Jack was a dead man. Brianna, Kat, Rachel ... they were all dead in a matter of minutes or seconds.

*What do I do? What do I do?* He had no way to defend himself. No way to get out from where he was without attracting attention. No options except keep hiding.

Above Jack's head, one of the car doors opened. A woman screamed. Jack peeked and saw two of them yank Rachel from the car. She had a decent-sized cut on the side of her face from broken glass. The men in the suits didn't care about her injury. They dragged her into the middle of the street and the man with golden sunglasses put a gun to her head and shouted at her in his strange language.

Rachel shook her head, crying and screaming. "I don't know what you want! I speak English and Russian!"

"How many children with you?" the man with the golden sunglasses shouted in bad Russian. "How many children with you?"

"What children?" Rachel responded in Russian.

"Children. Six. The new Six. How many children Six?"

Rachel wiped her cheek, saw the blood on her hand, and cried again. "Please don't kill me!"

"How many children?" the man bellow, jamming his gun into her cheek.

Rachel sobbed and shook her head. Jack rolled out from under the car, still hunched down so the man in the golden sunglasses couldn't see him.

"NUMBER!" the man roared.

Jack looked for something to throw at the man, something to get his attention so Rachel could try to escape. There was nothing nearby. *Should I do something?*

"Three!" Rachel screamed with her hands over her ears. She yelled the number several times.

The man with the golden sunglasses nodded his head and pulled back the hammer on his gun. *I can't get there in time*, Jack realized.

He squeezed his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to watch Rachel die. But the next thing he heard was not a gunshot, but sirens. The man looked over his shoulder at the sound, and Jack made a choice. He wasn't fast, he wasn't big, but he was big and fast enough.

Jack ran and threw his body into the man with the golden sunglasses so hard that they both tumbled over, gun and sunglasses clattering to the bullet-riddled pavement.

Shocked at his own behavior, Jack froze. The sirens were getting louder, and the man Jack had knocked over was shouting to his cohorts while scrambling to get to his gun before Jack did. Jack tried to snag the man's leg, but he kicked backward and hit Jack in the nose. Then the man shoved past Rachel to where his gun lay. He grabbed it with his free hand, but Rachel swept her foot hard into his knees, upending him.

The gun fired a stray bullet harmlessly into the air as it clattered across the concrete and stopped within Jack's reach. The man hit the ground, too, and his eyes bored into Jack's. That moment seemed to last an hour. Jack didn't breathe, didn't move, didn't even think. He just stared back into the man's bright irises. They were pale gold, the same color as the lenses of his sunglasses.

As the man got up, his two remaining soldiers crawled around the side of the car at such a slow pace, Jack wondered if they were dying. The man with the golden eyes yelled even more. It was all he seemed capable of doing. When the two crawling soldiers didn't change their pace or even the dull expressions on their faces, the golden-eyed man abandoned them. The nearest car to the rear of the motorcade was also the least damaged. The man with the golden eyes opened the door on the driver's side and shoved a dead agent of the Hand into the street. Then he threw the stunned soldiers into the back seats, and drove off. Less than two minutes later, seven law enforcement cars arrived on the scene. More were coming from the other direction.

They pulled to a stop, blocking off the road, which now had considerable traffic built up in each direction. A dozen law enforcement officers pulled their guns and pointed them at the scene. Jack didn't dare move for fear of being mistaken as an enemy and getting shot. Brianna's voice came from behind one of the parked cars. "They're gone, you idiots!" she shouted, her voice breaking up as she pointed in the direction the attacker's stolen car had headed. "You're too late. Kat's dead."

## Chapter Eleven

Saturday, December 8, 1990

Police. The word was on the side of many of the vehicles that arrived on the scene. Others said Highway Patrol. What was the difference? It seemed simpler to call all law enforcement the Hand. Half of the police cars took off immediately in pursuit of the attackers, following the directions Brianna gave them. The other half stayed behind to apprehend any remaining assailants, perform crowd control, find witnesses, and provide medical assistance to the wounded. Two worked on Kat until medics arrived and took over her treatment. Two agents of the Hand who'd been involved in the gunfight could not be resuscitated and were pronounced dead at the scene. So was Ruth, Brianna's agent of the Ear. Susan, Kat's agent, sat in the car rocking herself and sobbed.

Jack watched as the bodies were placed in large black bags and wheeled onto one of the ambulances. It struck Jack in the gut that these people had given their lives to protect him, yet he didn't even know their names.

As more police arrived to block off the area, medics loaded everyone remaining into the ambulances. They took every precaution moving Kat, who still showed no signs of life or gave any response despite their efforts to revive her. As they helped Rachel onto the ambulance, she sobbed and apologized repeatedly, though she addressed no one in particular. Jack and Brianna, being the least wounded, were helped last. Jack had multiple scrapes and cuts on his face and arms from glass and rocks. While the medics worked, two officers took statements from him and Brianna regarding what had taken place. Once that finished, they were cleared to leave.

Police escorts followed them all the way to the hospital. Jack sat next to Brianna, whose attention stayed fixed on the window to her left. He wanted to say something to her—to explain how he had been about to help Kat right before she did—but his mouth didn't work at the moment, and he eventually gave up trying to think of words to say. Brianna probably didn't want to talk to him anyway.

His thoughts wandered. Who were those people that attacked them? Had their intentions been to kill him, Kat, and Brianna? If so, why? The notion that someone Jack had never met wanted to end his life filled him with dread. When the medics led Jack and Brianna out of the ambulance and into the hospital, Jack glanced repeatedly over his shoulder. What if someone was nearby now, waiting in the darkness to leap out and stab him?

Jack looked over his shoulder every few steps as the medics checked him and Brianna in at the triage desk in the emergency room. Once the matter was explained, Jack and Brianna were immediately taken to private rooms to wait for examination. As the medic closed Jack inside the room, he said, "Don't worry. Officers will be watching the door. We won't let anyone hurt you."

This statement hardly comforted Jack. He sat on the examination table and scratched at his ear, hating the sound the crinkly paper made each time he shifted his weight or stirred. A nurse came in and gave Jack a gown to wear. "You'll need to take off those gloves, too," she added. Removing the gloves made Jack feel more naked than anything other article.

Several minutes passed before someone knocked on the door next to his. A doctor greeted Brianna and closed the door behind him. Brianna was the least wounded of anyone. Jack expected the doctor's visit to her room to be brief.

It was not.

Almost an hour went by before a knock came to Jack's door. The same voice greeted Jack. "Hello, Mr. Fröst?" a man with a fading ring of gray and brown hair asked. "I'm Doctor Crosby. May I come in?" The doctor entered before Jack answered. He wore a long white coat and a small pair of glasses, perhaps only for reading. He smiled nervously as he came in and went straight to the sink.

"Any pain?" he asked Jack as he washed his hands. "Tell me everything that hurts. Leave nothing out."

"I'm f—f—fine," Jack said, but his voice was so scratchy that the words came out in a hoarse whisper.

Dr. Crosby paused what he was doing and looked over at Jack with a raised eyebrow and concerned eyes. "Mr. Fröst, you've just been through a terrible ordeal—"

Jack started to shake and cry. "Terrible ordeal" didn't even begin to cover what he'd just been through. *Nightmare. Disaster. Madness.* All of those words rolled into one horrendous, lethal, insane *battle. A battle!* With guns and people dying and helicopters and things he didn't even understand.

"I d—d—don't want this," Jack said, trying get a deep enough breath that he could calm himself. "I w—want to be n—n—n—normal."

Dr. Crosby placed a hand on Jack's shoulder. While the gesture was meant for comfort, it was like a brand had touched Jack's skin.

"I'm f—fine!" He pulled back immediately so the doctor wouldn't try something like that again. "My—my—my face still hurts a little, but that's it."

The tone of Dr. Crosby's voice became business-like. "Jack, I'm an agent of the Spirit, sent here directly by Bishop. I've already spoken to Brianna, and now I need to speak to you. I need to hear your version of events as best as you can remember. Will you do that?"

"You're—you're with—Bishop sent you?" Jack didn't understand how someone from The Atlas could get to Saint Louis so quickly. "Is Kat going to live?" He wasn't sure why he'd asked the question, but the answer was more important than giving his story to the doctor.

"She's alive. Severe concussion, probably nothing permanent." Dr. Crosby turned on a recorder and held it near Jack. "Okay, Jack, I need you to talk now."

Despite not wanting to talk, Jack told the story, starting from the helicopter's arrival and ending when the police arrived and the attackers fled. When he finished, Dr. Crosby shut off the recorder and stowed it in his pocket. His attention turned to the examination equipment in the room. He checked Jack's eyes, ears, chest, and limbs for any sign of damage. Satisfied that Jack was fine, he wished him well and left.

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel entered Jack's room looking as cool and composed as ever. She had changed her clothes, fixed her hair and makeup, and put a skin-colored bandage over the cut on her cheek so it was barely noticeable. Jack hoped she didn't want to put makeup and skin-colored bandages on his face too.

"Jack!" she exclaimed in a cheery voice. "I'm so glad you're well. We had quite a scare, didn't we?"

Jack stared at her in shock. *How can you say that? You had a gun pressed against your head. You were screaming. You sold us out, you were so scared!* He closed his eyes. Nothing made sense. No one made sense. Doctors were spies. Rachel was crazy. People wanted to kill him.

“What’s h—happening?” he finally asked. “The doctor that was just here—”

“Is not to be discussed,” she finished for him as she set down her attaché case.

“What we do need to discuss, however, is the changes in your itinerary.”

“N—no! I want to d—discuss it!” Jack was shouting as loud as could.

Rachel put a finger over her lips. “Jack—”

“D—don’t t—tell me—”

He was cut off. Not by a hand or a word, but by Rachel’s lips pressing against his. Jack’s lips burned. His whole head quaked. But he didn’t pull away. No one had ever kissed him. He had believed no one ever would, certainly not a woman such as Rachel. *Don’t be a spazoid!* His lips were tight and dry, hers warm and lingering. Finally he could take it no more. He pulled away, his chest as tight as a snare drum.

“W—w—w—w—” No matter how hard Jack tried, he couldn’t finish his thought.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, blushing as red as The Atlas flag. “You saved my life. And—and I’ve always wanted to kiss a member of the Six.” And just like that, Rachel was all business again. The kiss had almost never even happened. “As I was saying we need to talk about the changes in your itinerary.”

“What changes?” Jack’s voice was a whisper. A cold burn still lingered almost pleasantly on his lips where she’d touched him. She was almost ten years older than him, but he didn’t care. He was in love.

Rachel set down her case and removed her notepad. “The conference has been pushed back three days. This gives us an excellent opportunity to prepare for it with the other members of the Six. Frankly, I didn’t think you were ready. Now we can fix that.”

Jack started to rub his face but the cuts stung, so he stopped. “Has my m—mom called? My family’s p—probably worried.”

“I don’t know, Jack. I’ll find you a phone soon. In the meantime, you and Brianna have been cleared for release. As soon as new Hand agents arrive, you’ll be taken to the hotel. We can wait for them in a secure lounge on the hospital’s top floor.”

Rachel led Brianna and Jack upstairs to a room with the sign STAFF LOUNGE on the door. Two security guards flanked the door. “Is anyone inside?” Rachel asked one of them.

“No, ma’am. No one else will be allowed in until you leave.”

“How long will that be?” Brianna asked. “And where’s Ruth?”

“Let’s sit down and discuss the itinerary for the next few days,” Rachel suggested in an excessively cheery tone.

“Where is Ruth?” The question had turned into a demand.

Rachel’s face paled as the calm demeanor she had restored now seemed to verge on shattering under the weight of Brianna’s interrogation.

“I can’t say if she nor Susan survived the attack,” Rachel finally said. “Until we know more, I’ll be working with all three of you to prepare you for the press—”

“I don’t want your help.”

Rachel took a deep breath and put the corner of her handkerchief to her eyes. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve been assigned—”



“I said I don’t—!”

“Ruth was my mentor, Brianna,” Rachel said, her voice wavering. “I’ve known her for six years. And Susan joined the Ear shortly after I did. They are my friends. This stings me more than you or Kat. Now please sit down so we can go over the itinerary.”

Jack didn’t want to sit down, but he did as he was told. Brianna stood in place with her arms folded. Rachel took the end of the couch, sitting properly with her legs tightly pressed together. The television displayed a news station showing footage of a crew cleaning up a highway where a multi-car accident had occurred. Jack recognized the location instantly.

Rachel did not hesitate to change the channel.

“Turn it back!” Brianna said.

“No need to dwell on what—”

“*Turn it back now or I’ll make you!*”

Jaw clenched and lips pursed in a strained grin, Rachel did as she was told. A moment later, man’s voice described the scene of the attack. “Witnesses say an armed helicopter opened fire on several cars carrying members of the new Six from the airport to the hotel where a press conference is scheduled to take place in mere days. Conflicting reports say the death count is somewhere between seven and twenty, including agents of the organization known as the Hand, The Atlas’s policing body. No word yet if any among the dead are members of the new Six.”

Jack glanced over at Rachel, whose eyes stared blankly at the screen, a strange, frightened smile glued to her face. Rachel always smiled. It was part of her job to be happy and upbeat all the time. No tears came from her eyes, though he saw hidden sadness in them. Brianna, on the other hand, shook as she turned on Rachel again.

“Is Ruth dead?” she asked. “Did you know and not tell me?”

“I was ordered to say nothing to anyone.”

“Ruth was my agent! I had a right to know!”

“You do know,” Rachel stated flatly. “You just heard it.”

“Hold on a moment,” the news reporter continued, “Reports are coming in from Saint Louis Memorial Hospital is all three members of the new Six survived the attack, thanks to the heroism of Jackson Frōst. According to those at the scene during the attack, Frōst, the Six with the power of Cold, put his life on the line, braving gunfire to save the life of Aikaterina Xenos, the Six with Fire. While—”

“*What?*” Brianna shouted louder than ever. “That is bullshit! I saved her!”

“Please stop yelling, Miss Gómez,” Rachel said.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Brianna shot back. She grabbed Jack by the collar. “Is that what you told as your version? That *you* saved her?”

“W—what?” Jack asked. “No!”

“Then how did that story end up on the news?” Brianna jammed her finger hard into Jack’s chest. He reacted by pulling his chest inward. “You are twisted!”

“I—I—but—no—but—I—”

“Did you tell them that you took down the helicopter too?” she pressed. “Taking credit for what Kat did? I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Jack stopped trying to defend himself. Rachel said nothing. He wondered if she even heard Brianna because Rachel hadn’t moved since the news came on. She sat perfectly still and proper with her face frozen in that unsettling smile.

Jack couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't be near Brianna. He went into the restroom and locked the door behind him. In his head, her words still rang: *You are twisted*. Jack pulled at his earlobes until they were about to rip off. Invisible steel bands wrapped themselves around his chest, squeezing all the air out of him. *Breathe. One. Breathe. Two. Breathe. Three.* He sat on the floor and counted up and up, trying to calm himself.

It wasn't working.

He got off the floor and crawled into the shower. Then he pulled the curtain shut and turned on the cold water. It drenched his clothes, hair, and skin. His skin turned purple and he shivered violently. *I don't like her.*

The thought of Brianna being a constant presence in his life from now on seemed like a form of eternal punishment. *The Squabbling Six. That's what they'll call us. It's all a great big stupid joke. The universe is laughing at me.*

Rachel knocked on the door. "Jack, are you taking a shower?"

He didn't answer her. So she knocked again.

"Jack, say something."

He said nothing, couldn't say anything. He could hardly breathe. The panic attack was full blown. Jack lay on the floor, the world dark around him. Happiness fled as he sobbed. His eyes burned and his fingers and toes tingled. The rest of his face burned hot from the rush of blood. His nose and ears had lost all feeling.

Rachel pounded on the door, then called for help. When security found Jack, he had all but shut out the world in his despair and panic. In his arm he felt a distant prick of a needle, and the darkness of the world closed in on him.

## Chapter Twelve

Sunday, December 9, 1990

Jack woke Sunday morning in his hotel room and spent the whole day holed up. Rachel stopped by twice, once to check on him and do a question and answer practice session, the second time she came with an update on Kat's condition. If her reports could be trusted, the doctors expected a full recovery and planned to release her that night or early the next morning. The upcoming press conference had been rescheduled for Wednesday instead of Monday.

Jack asked Rachel multiple times if she had heard any word from his mother or sisters. The answer was always no. Since Jack wasn't allowed to use the phone in his hotel room, he had no way of contacting his family. He tried not to focus on this. Rachel constantly reminded him that he needed to keep his mind on the press conference, but he didn't really care about it.

Sitting around in a room all day was exhausting. He tried watching the news on his in-room television, but it was frustrating. All the networks were telling the same hogwash story about how Jack had been a hero, not Brianna. Jack asked Rachel to call the networks and set the story straight, but nothing came of it. He resolved to tell everyone the truth during the press conference.

The attackers had not been found. Every time Jack thought about the incident, he remembered the man with the golden eyes and his chest muscles started to tighten again. The only thing keeping his food down and panic attacks at bay was Rachel helping him through his breathing exercises. She told him not to worry, he was well-protected. Jack kept hoping she would kiss him again, but she never did. Rachel acted the part of the Ear agent at all times.

Late Sunday evening, a knock came at Jack's door. He was tired, but he got out of bed and padded across the room. He spied through the peephole and saw two boys his age. He recognized them at once: Feng and Oliver, two more of the Six. His hand rested on the lock; perhaps he should just go to bed.

"Hey, mate," Oliver said in a heavy Australian accent, "I can hear you breathing behind the door. You're going to let us in, yeah?"

"Y—yeah," Jack opened the door for Feng and Oliver. "Hi."

"Oliver Brown. How ya goin'?" Oliver stuck out his hand for Jack to shake. He was shorter and stockier than Jack had expected. Perhaps reaching 5'8" in his ratty, torn shoes. He had thick arms and a strong chest. His wavy hair fell over green eyes that stared back at Jack. In the picture Bishop had shown Jack, Oliver had appeared to have brown hair. But in person, Jack saw it wasn't so simple. Depending on how the light caught Oliver's head, it went from brown to blond to auburn. Oliver wore an off-white button-up shirt with no tie, no suit coat, and a pair of pants that looked like something he might have purchased third or fourth-hand.

Jack gritted his teeth and shook hands with Oliver. "N—nice to meet you."

"Lu Feng," the boy with black hair said in an even thicker Qingese accent.

Jack repeated the process with Feng. Unlike Oliver, Feng was tall and thin, but not nearly as thin as Jack. His frame revealed a solid strength, and where Oliver had good features, Feng was strikingly handsome. He wore his black hair short and parted, but spiked in places. Like Rachel, his smile seemed stuck on his face, but his was different. It was warm and genuine; his eyes were so light a brown that they were almost bronze. As soon as Jack finished shaking Feng's hand, he jammed his gloved fists into his pants pockets and stared down at Oliver's shoes.

"So," Oliver said, "you're already Mister Hero, yeah?"

Jack shook his head. "No, that stuff—that stuff wasn't true. I d—didn't do anything."

"You saved Kat," Feng said. "You are Mr. Big Hot now."

Oliver snorted. "It's Big Shot, Feng."

Feng laughed. "Yes, Big Shot."

Jack shook his head. "No—I—no—I—whatever ..."

"We came by to see if you wanted to hit the town," Oliver said. "We're gonna go out, find a club, dance, girls ... should be fun."

"Oh—n—no," Jack said as he took a step back. "I c—can't go. They're w—watching me."

"Those guys with the hands on their shirt, yeah? They left. I'd guess you've got five minutes to sneak out before they come back. Come on, mate. It's dancing time."

"Uh, d—d—dance? No, I—I'm not a dancer."

"I'm not a dancer either, but I do dance."

"That's what I—I meant. I don't dance."

"Really? Not even with girls?"

"Girls?" Jack's voice reached a higher octave, and he swallowed hard.

Oliver and Feng laughed. "Oliver will help us find the girlfriends."

Oliver put an arm around Jack and pulled him out the door. "Come on," he said as he puffed out his chest. "No worries, mate. I'll teach you a thing or two about the ladies."

It was Jack's first time on his own. Truly on his own. Saint Louis wasn't Toronto. Saint Louis wasn't part of The Atlas. That meant no Eye, no Ear, no Hand. No one watching over him. In Toronto, if someone tried to attack you, the Eye saw it and sent the Hand. If you got hungry, you stopped at the Mouth and ate. What would he do if he got hungry? Here they used money. Real money. He had none of that stuff.

Apparently Oliver and Feng did.

A yellow car picked them up from the hotel. The sign on top read TAXI. Jack watched Oliver buy the car with just a couple of dollar bills. The car took them downtown to the heart of Saint Louis. "Somewhere we can dance hardcore," Oliver had said as they got into the back seats. "Somewhere the girls are all 10s."

As they drove, Jack stared out the window. Oliver did all the talking, peppering Jack with questions about Toronto, life in The Atlas, the attack, and what kind of girls Jack liked. All of Jack's answers were short, often one word, or a simple, "I don't know." The car ride wasn't long, but Jack's ear was already starting to bleed when they reached the club.

As the car pulled away, Jack exclaimed, "Where's y—your car going?"

Oliver frowned at him.

"Didn't you just b—buy that car?"

Oliver chuckled. "Mate ... I paid for our ride not the whole car." He spun around, closed his eyes, and slowly inhaled. "Smell that?" he asked, eyes still closed.

Jack sniffed the air tentatively.

"What am I smelling?" Feng asked.

Oliver grinned. "Girls. I can smell them. I can smell them all, mates."

Bright neon lights from the dance club cast colorful glows onto the street and glittered off the windows of nearby buildings. Giant searchlights climbed into the sky from the rooftop. The taxi pulled to a stop outside a large club surrounded by crowds of young people ranging in age from younger than Jack to people in their 30s. Most of the crowd wore bright colors that matched their hairstyles: pink and baby blue, yellow and orange, green and sapphire. They were all dressed far more elegantly than Jack and his two companions.

"This is the best place for dancing?" Oliver asked a man in tight striped pants approaching the club with a group friends.

"Oh *indeed*," the man in the pants said, his white teeth smiling brightly against his black skin. "If you want some tight dance action, ain't nowhere better."

Jack read the huge, brightly lit letters above the door. "Poison Betos," he muttered to himself.

"Time's wasting," Oliver said, clapping hard on Jack's shoulder. Jack flinched but Oliver didn't notice.

"Time to dance!" Feng cried out in his thick Qingese accent. "Cowladunga!"

Jack took a step back as he thought of the throngs of people.

"Forward only, Jack," Oliver said as he pressed lightly against Jack's back. Jack arched his back away instinctively. "You can do it."

A long line of people wrapped around one corner of the building. Some of them were already dancing in the street. Jack headed toward the back of the line, but Oliver grabbed his shirt.

"Uh uh. We're VIPs now, yeah?" Oliver brushed off his shoulders one at a time, his expression cool and confident. "Watch me work the bouncers."

Jack didn't know what a bouncer was until he saw a two giant men at the door letting a group of four inside. One bouncer was huge and brown with pink hair and a nose piercing like a bull. The other pale and bald save for a thick, bright blue fan of hair running across his head from ear to ear. His ears were pierced with shark teeth dangling from each side. And he looked at Oliver as though he might expect to find something similar under his rattlesnake boots.

"Beat it, junior," he said, then turned back to the crowd to admit two more and take their money.

"Don't you know who we are?" Oliver asked, raising his voice over the din.

"Things that float in a toilet bowl," the bull-ringed one said. The other guffawed long and loud.

"Try three of the new Six." It was a pronouncement, a declaration, not a statement. Oliver thumped his own chest. "Oliver Brown, Jackson Fröst, and Lu Feng. In the flesh."

The bouncers looked at each other. "Prove it," they both said.

Oliver took a step back. "Jack ... Feng, either of you want to, yeah, demonstrate yourself?"

Jack wasn't sure Feng even understood what was going on.

"I—I can't ..." Jack stammered.

Oliver rolled his eyes. "Feng, strength, yeah?"

Feng nodded, knelt down, brushed his fingers along the ground, and then punched his fist into the concrete. What remained after he withdrew his hand was a near perfect indentation. He scooped crumbs into his left hand, clenched his fist, and offered his right to the pale bouncer with blue hair. The bouncer gave him his hand. Feng tightened his grip and smirked almost shyly. The bouncer glanced down at the hand as the grin on his own face flickered like an old light bulb. His face grew red and he licked his lips. Then he gritted his teeth, screwed up his eyes, and exclaimed, "All right! All right! You can pass. They're the real deal."

"For sear?" the other bouncer asked. "Yo, y'all need to sign something for me."

Oliver roared laughter. "No worries, mate. What can we sign?"

The bouncer pulled off his shirt, revealing a heavily tattooed and hairy body.

"Sign this."

He passed them a marker; they all signed the rag of a shirt. Then the bouncers let Jack, Oliver, and Feng go inside.

The stench of the club assaulted Jack immediately. Sweat, perfume, cologne, and something he'd quickly learn was alcohol were all rampant. Alcohol rations were very rare in The Atlas, saved only for holidays, so Jack had not grown accustomed to the smell being so pervasive. Everyone—*everyone*—had a beer or glass of alcohol in hand. Some people showed no effect, others had difficulty keeping their balance while they danced. But all seemed to be having a good time.

The lighting was dark save for the colored strobe lights and illuminated jewelry that both girls and boys wore. The heavy beat from gigantic speakers made the floors and walls pulse with the music's tempo. Jack found it difficult to focus on his breathing with the rhythm assaulting his body with such force.

Even more difficult was not touching anyone. The club was packed. They hadn't been inside a minute when Jack started to sweat, especially his gloved hands. His stomach was queasy with knots. Everyone around him was having fun. *What is fun about this?* he wondered. *A giant stink fest while loud music tries to synchronize our heart beats.* Jack ached for pencil, paper, and a quiet spot to draw until Oliver and Feng were ready to leave.

"Guess what everybody!" the deejay of the club announced. "We've got three special guests tonight. Oliver Brown, Lu Feng, and ... Jack Fröst! Buy 'em a round, give 'em a kiss, make 'em feel welcome!"

Oliver threw his hands up and screamed. "Oh yeah! Bring it on!"

Feng mimicked Oliver. "Bring it on!"

Jack found an opening in the crowd and shot the gap, disappearing before Oliver and Feng could catch him leaving. His first thought was to find a bathroom stall and hide, but the long lines snaking toward both restrooms dissuaded him. Jack took another turn and found a lounge. A thick and pungent haze lingered in the room, but it smelled nothing like cigarette smoke. Almost everyone inside this room was male. Many of them had long hair and grungy clothes, *dirtheads* was what the kids in Jack's school called these types—the kinds who did everything they could to look as disheveled as possible yet not get in trouble with the Mind.

The dirtheads gave Jack a fast study, but no one seemed impressed by what they saw. Instead their attention was on a television screen. Jack had no idea how it was possible, but they were playing a game on the television using small devices connected to the television.

Desperate to be alone, Jack explored other rooms. In several of them he found people using drugs and each other's bodies as recreational delights. Seeing these things for the first time both terrified and titillated him, but the need for peace and quiet was greater than his curiosity. Finally he found a closet full of cleaning supplies. It smelled like chemicals and mildew, but Jack didn't mind. He crammed himself inside, shut the door, and threw up in a mop bucket. Vomiting improved his state of mind instantly. He plugged his ears and focused on breathing. Each time he closed his eyes, Jack saw his mother and sisters. He would have given anything to be back home. Even back in school.

Voices outside the closet interrupted Jack's pity. He didn't know what they were saying because they spoke in a foreign language, but the voices were familiar. He'd heard them the day before. One of them belonged to a woman. The other belonged to a man.

A man with golden eyes.

## Chapter Thirteen

Monday, December 10, 1990

Feng sat at the booth flanked by two girls whose names he did not know. One had brilliant blue hair down to her chin, the other's was white with black spots. Both were older than him, the blue haired girl by perhaps five years, the other, he guessed, by three. But he was too scared to ask. They smelled like heaven and were always touching him, a brush of his hand or his shoulder, a hand resting on his thigh. One had even leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Oliver basked in the attention from the girls grouping around him. They seemed to like everything about him from his jokes to his accent to his never-ending smile. He somehow gave each one a bit of his attention despite being outnumbered five to one.

The older of the two girls with Feng put a drink in his hand. He stared at it for five seconds before realizing what it was. He handed it back to her. "No drink."

The girl laughed airily. "You're so silly!"

"I do not drink the alcohol," Feng explained further, hoping his English was good enough to convey what he meant.

Everyone laughed this time, even Oliver. Though Feng has expressly told Oliver that he would not be partaking of alcohol at the club, his fellow Six leaned in, gave the glass back to Feng, and whispered, "Just take a sip, mate. One sip won't do a thing. But if you don't touch the stuff, you'll scare off the girls."

Feng couldn't not understand what was so frightening about not drinking. He sniffed the beverage. It had a sweet scent, like the six baptisms he'd had at age 12. During the baptisms, he'd committed to living Unom Ka to its fullest, including abstaining from alcohol. But the temple leaders always said that in order to covert people to Unom Ka, they must first be a friend. Would one drink to show his friendship really hurt?

The girls seemed genuinely interested in him. Perhaps one of them would want to be his girlfriend. Between his schooling, sporting activities, and meetings at the Unom Ka temple, Feng had never had time for girls despite his high level of interest. Making things more difficult for him was his parents' rule that he could only hang out with kids who shared his faith. Now here were two, very friendly and flirtatious, and all had to do ...

Feng raised the glass to his lips and swallowed. He expected the taste to be bitter, but it was actually sweet and enjoyable. He smacked his lips and grinned. One of the girls threw her arms around him and kissed him, her tongue trying to ram past his teeth into his mouth. Feng pulled back in surprise, then pulled her closer to him for another kiss. The other girl kissed him next. Oliver roared and cheered Feng's name.

"Let's dance!" Feng cried. A quiet voice in the back of his mind advised him to look for Jack, but Feng wasn't worried about Jack. He was worried about keeping the girls and Oliver happy.

The music pulsed in the air, the bass almost tangible. Feng was not a great dancer, but the more of the drink he sipped, the more the beat moved through him and guided his limbs. The girls wrapped themselves around him, pressing themselves into him like a second skin. His heart raced inside his ribs, thundering with excitement, nervousness, and a tinge of guilt.



The main dance floor went dark except for the strobe lights and lasers. Bodies jumped, swayed, and gyrated all around him, even on the balcony surrounding the main floor. A woman's voice crooned unintelligible words. Oliver was hardly dancing now, his arms and lips locked with one of the girls who'd shown interest in him earlier.

One of the dancers on the balcony leaned over the railing to watch Oliver, the frame of his or her glasses glittering in the darkness. Something warm and wet touched Feng's ear. The blue haired girl dancing with him had licked it. She grinned at him mischievously.

"Let's get out of here," she suggested coyly, her tone suggested wanting.

Feng had to think about the words to interpret their meaning. "You want to leave the club?"

"I mean go somewhere private."

Oliver gave Feng a thumbs up and went back to trying to mash his lips into his dance partner's. The blue haired girl headed toward one of the side halls and yanked on Feng's hand. A bang and burst of fire came from the balcony. Something whizzed by Feng's head, and someone near him screamed. A body hit the floor. More bangs followed.

Feng dropped for cover. Oliver did too. One of the girls with Oliver was shrieking so loud, Feng thought her voice might somehow shatter the building. Screams and shouts came from everywhere. By the light of the strobe, Feng spotted a man in a black shirt, white tie, and golden glasses staring down at him while he reloaded.

Feng reached into his pocket where he kept a handful of dry soil. Just before the man finished reloading his gun, Feng wrenched off a shoe and flung it, using a bit of the soil to fuel his Strength. The shoe hit the man in the chest and knocked him backwards. More shots rang out from the opposite balcony. A searing pain cut across Feng's shoulder, and he spun around.

Another shooter!

Feng threw his second shoe in the same manner, but this one missed as the assailant ducked. Oliver grabbed Feng's arm. "It's us they want. We gotta get outta here!"

Hunkered over, both boys ran from the dance floor into the smaller amongst the dozens of other clubbers scattering for protection from the gunfire. Feng's arm burned from where the bullet had grazed him, but he refused to let it slow him down. No sooner had they reached the hall, then he stopped and checked the wound.

Oliver kept running until he noticed Feng wasn't with him. He skidded to a stop. "What you're doing? Run!"

"What about Jack?"

Oliver glanced behind him, then back to Feng. "I can't help him if I'm dead. He's gotta learn to take care of himself. Just like we do."

Three seconds later, Oliver was out of sight.

Feng thought for a moment about following him, but something told him he had to find Jack. The only trouble was that Feng had no idea where to look. Dozens of people were running at him and past him to get out of the club. None of them were Jack.

Feng pushed through the herds and opened every door he saw: bathrooms, private dance rooms, closets. Jack was nowhere to be found. *What if he's already outside?*

Something deep in Feng's gut told him that wasn't the case. He had to keep looking. He opened one room that stunk of drugs. Something large flew at Feng's head, but he narrowly avoided it by jerking aside. Some kind of electronic box crashed into the wall, then at least a dozen young men with long hair stormed him.

"Get him!" someone roared.

A fist drove into Feng's gut. An elbow cracked his nose. Hands grabbed his shirt and hair, yanking him down to the floor. Innumerable feet kicked and kicked and kicked and kicked until Feng couldn't see or hear anything.

\*

Oliver waited with his arms folded for Feng to come out of the club. His body wouldn't stop trembling, but not from the cold. Oliver hardly felt the cold.

*I'm not going back in there.* All he had to do was close his eyes and see the carnage with perfect clarity. Police sirens were approaching. While many people still fled the club, others congregated in the streets to watch. A couple of newshounds were already on the scene. The girl with the polka dot hair was crying out for her friend with the blue hair. Oliver wondered if the other girl had been shot as she'd been dancing closely to Feng. When she saw Oliver, she grabbed his shirt.

"Where is Hannah?" she practically screamed at him. "Did you see her?"

Oliver shook his head and backed away. The newshounds spotted him and started making their way through the masses toward him. Oliver imagined how he'd look on camera doing nothing while his fellow Six were still stuck inside the building.

*I'd look like a bleeding dingo.*

Resigned to his fate, he pushed his way back inside, pressed himself against the wall, and took a slow breath through his nose. Among all the scents in the club, he found the smell of gunpowder and held it there until it he knew it as well as his own body odor. The quaking in his body got worse as he moved down the hall, back still against the wall.

"Go! Go before he gets up!" a voice shouted followed by a dozen footsteps. A group of guys who reeked of weed turned the corner and tore past Oliver. Their long hair whipped behind them. Oliver wanted to ask who was after them, but couldn't find his voice.

He paused to listen. Low voices from a distance, the language incomprehensible. Quiet footsteps. Ragged breathing. A couple in the throes of passion, ignorant of everything happening around them. Muffled sobs. A toilet flushing.

*But which ones are Feng and Jack?*

Oliver was pretty certain neither Feng nor Jack were engaged in intercourse, so he ruled that sound out first. The footsteps were coming toward him, so he went in the opposite direction, toward the labored breathing.

Around the corner and way down the hall was a lump on the floor. Oliver hurried toward it. Feng lay on the floor, curled into a ball, his breaths wet and wheezy. "Feng," Oliver whispered. "Can you hear me, mate?"

Feng stirred a little, but made no sound. Oliver put a hand over his mouth when Feng's face became visible in the dim lighting. Almost every inch of Feng's face was bruised or bleeding or both. "Bloody hell, mate," he hissed. "What did they do to you?"

He grabbed Feng and lifted him to his feet.

“You gotta walk a little. She’ll be right, mate. Just gotta help me out so I can get you out—”

Another sob came from down the hall. The quiet footsteps from behind drew closer. Oliver looked back but no one was there. Feng slumped and almost fell, but Oliver caught him.

“Please, Feng. You gotta help me a little. We need to find Jack.”

They walked only two more steps before Oliver heard the muffled sobs again, coming from behind a door a little ways up the hall. *Keep going. Whoever that is, it’s not Jack.* But as Oliver reached the door marked Utility Closet, his nose told him a different story. It was Jack.

Oliver opened the door slowly. Jack was huddled inside, blood crusted his ears, cheeks, and the tips of his gloves. Tears and snot slickened his face. His eyes were wide and unfocused as he muttered in an eerily cheerful voice, “Time to go home now,” in between each whimpering sob.

And he’d wet himself.

The careful footsteps drew ever closer, accompanied by the quiet conversation between two people speaking a foreign language.

“Jack,” Oliver pleaded in his quietest voice, “you have to get up, mate. They’re coming for us. Get up!”

Jack fixed his hollow eyes on Oliver, wide and wet with tears. “Time to go home now. Home to Toronto. No more Six.”

Oliver couldn’t hold Feng much longer. The kid was six inches taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than Oliver. *I can get two of us out of here. If I just close the door, there’s a chance the shooters won’t even spot him.*

But if he was wrong, the guilt would eat him up. And the last thing Oliver wanted was someone’s death hanging over him. He glanced back down the hall. The footsteps were so close. Oliver grabbed Jack by the neck and pulled him out of the utility closet and behind the door.

The door hung open in the middle of the hall, blocking more than a third of the hall’s width. Oliver pressed Feng and Jack to the floor, his palm flat against Jack’s mouth, now slick with Jack’s fluids. From underneath the door, Oliver saw them come: a man and a woman in black shirts, slacks, and white ties. One of them wearing golden sunglasses. Both carrying guns.

Behind Oliver, a groan came from Feng. The man and woman stopped, drew their guns, and opened fire. The gunfire was deafening in the hallway. Splinters of wood from the door covered Oliver as he pressed himself into the floor. Tears leaking down his eyes and he bit his lip so hard that he tasted his own blood.

Jack’s eyes squeezed tight as fresh tears left streaks on his blood stained cheeks. The attackers took careful steps down the hall. One reloaded before the other’s clip emptied. Oliver scooted back a little from Jack, ready to run for it if necessary.

Feng was trying to dig into his pocket for something, but couldn’t summon the strength to get his hand deep enough.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver muttered to them.

Sirens came from outside the club. The attackers halted. The woman looked to the man, who jerked his head backward. They reversed direction and ran back the way they came. Oliver let out a tremulous sigh, but refused to lose his cool. Wiping his face, he grabbed Feng and Jack, and pulled them to their feet. Keeping the door as cover for as long as possible, he went in the opposite direction.

It took about five minutes, but he found an emergency door down a dark hallway. When he kicked it open, a shrill alarm sounded. The door spilled into an alleyway filled with flashing lights and people in uniforms. All of them wore a hand symbol. Several of them rushed forward and grabbed Jack and Feng. Another put a black bag over Oliver's head and thrust him into the back of a car while he screamed, "Get off me! Get off!"

## Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday, December 12, 1990

“Today marks the day we’ve all been waiting for: the formal welcoming and introduction of the new Six to the world. An event twenty-five years in the making. It happens only once a generation. And this year we had to wait all the way to the end—only nineteen days left—for the emergence of the last of the most famous group in the world. Still, despite their newness, I can’t help but feel I already know some of the Six. I mean, we’ve already heard so much about them. So much drama and coverage. Two attacks on the Six in the last week. Do you feel the same way, Britton?”

“I do, Susan. The last few days have been a whirlwind almost all of them, especially the newest, Jack. He was part of that horrific attack that left several dead on the freeway in Missouri. Then not two days later, he was nearly killed inside a club with Oliver Brown and Lu Feng.”

“There has been a lot of controversy surrounding that club attack,” the female newscaster named Susan added. “All three boys are obviously underage, yet they were admitted inside. Two of them had alcohol in their system. And one, most likely Oliver, tested positive for other drugs in his blood. Not a great way to kick off their introduction to the world.”

Jack groaned and switched off the television. Vera, the new agent of the Ear assigned to help him, blew a stale breath in his face as she sighed in frustration. She was much older than Rachel, and much less patient with him. Her fingers worked to tie a bowtie around Jack’s neck, constantly brushing his skin and causing him pain. Jack had no idea how to tie a bowtie. He’d never even owned one.

“Have you heard from Rachel?” he asked the older woman.

She scowled. “Nyet,” she said sternly, and continued in brisk Russian. “And you can stop asking because I likely never will.”

Jack missed Rachel. She was much more gentle and understanding than Vera. Perhaps that was what had gotten her dismissed. That and the fallout from Jack leaving the hotel unsupervised. Vera hissed and pulled the tie out from under his collar to undo the knot. “Stupid things,” she muttered.

Jack had come to his senses in a hospital room Monday morning. Rachel sat beside him with tears in her eyes. After making sure he was okay, she proceeded to reprimand him as soundly as anyone ever had. No matter how many times Jack apologized or tried to explain, Rachel wouldn’t hear it. When she brought in Vera and introduced the older woman as her replacement, Jack said everything he could think of to prevent Rachel from being dismissed. But it hadn’t mattered. Rachel was gone.

Vera had put Jack through the paces all day Monday and most of Tuesday in preparation for the press conference. Tuesday night, the new Six had gathered in one of the hotel’s grander rooms for a photo op session. Jack had not gotten a chance to speak with anyone but Oliver, who asked Jack if he wanted to hit up another club that night. Jack stammered out as polite a declination as he could under Vera’s stern glare.

Security was much tighter than before. Both police and agents of the Hand were everywhere. Jack, Brianna, and Kat's agents of the Ear never let their wards out of their sight. The photo shoot itself was a somber affair. Smiling only came easy for Oliver and Malia, but even Malia's cheerful expressions seemed rehearsed. When Jack tried to meet her, Malia's publicist stepped in and blocked him. "We're on a tight schedule," the publicist explained coolly. "You'll have a chance to speak to her tomorrow."

"B—b—but—"

"Excuse us," the publicist said as she and Malia's manager whisked Malia out of the room.

Oliver put a hand on Jack's shoulder. When Jack flinched, Oliver jerked his arm away as though he'd touched a burning pot.

"Sorry, mate," he grinned, "forgot about your thing. I'll get the hang of it eventually, yeah. Meantime, how lucky are we, right? Three beautiful girls to hang with forever and ever and ... hey, where's Malia going? I didn't even get a chance to—"

"Her p—p—pub—pub," Jack started to say, but he couldn't get out the word.

"Publicist?" Oliver asked.

Jack nodded. "Taking her h—home."

"Well, that leaves Brianna and Kat, yeah? Maybe we could double for dinner with them tonight or something. Hit up another club downtown. Whaddaya say?"

Jack didn't want to say that he was too scared to go out of his hotel, but Oliver guessed it anyway.

"Are you going to let your fears tell you what to do, mate? Where's the fun in that?"

"The answer is no," Vera said, somehow instantly appearing at Jack's side. "Stay away from Jack until after the press conference."

Oliver made a face at Vera. "Who are you? His great-great-great grandma?" Vera glared at Oliver with the ferocity of a tiger until he backed away. "Easy now ..." he said as he did so.

Jack had spent the rest of Tuesday night in his room practicing with Vera for the press conference.

Once Vera had Jack's bowtie just the way she wanted it, she started on his hair. Mousse, gel, and hairspray made his pale blond hair so stiff he doubted a grenade could move it. Then Vera brushed off his suit and surveyed him with approval. "Will you remember everything we've practiced?"

Jack nodded.

"This is a big deal, Jack. For you, for Rachel, and for The Atlas. I do hope you will take it seriously."

Jack swallowed. A pit formed in his stomach. "I—I—I will."

Vera tried to smile, but it ended more like a tighter version of her usual scowl. The banquet was set in the hotel ballroom. Vera accompanied Jack down and helped him through security. Dozens of photographers were inside snapping away at the Six as they entered and mingled. Oliver, wearing a drab suit and a tie that didn't match, and Kat, in a brilliant red gown, were already present, though not speaking to each other.

Brianna and her new Ear agent arrived next. Brianna's new helper was a wizened woman with more wrinkles than Vera and Ruth combined. She led Brianna about, patting Brianna's arm and muttering encouragements. Brianna's sour expression only deepened when she met Jack's gaze. She wore a tight red dress that matched her highlights, but with mustard yellow stars around the lower hem at her ankles. Down the hall Malia approached with her entourage flanking her.

They halted the instant they saw Kat and Brianna in their dresses. A look of fury erupted on the face of Malia's people. Jack couldn't quite make out what they were saying but it had something to do with clothes.

"Let's go, Jack," Vera said, pulling him by the sleeve so he wouldn't freak out.

"Who—who all is coming again?" Jack asked her as she led him inside.

"I told you: your Six, the old Six, someone from The Atlas and someone from the League. These photographers have been approved by both governments. Nothing to be afraid of. You're safe."

Jack didn't feel safe. Nightmares of helicopters and gunfire transforming into dragons invaded his dreams. All the news had to say was that no suspects had been found. Even Vera knew nothing about what had happened. As Feng and Malia entered the banquet hall and rounded out the Six, Oliver approached Jack. "Wasn't sure you'd make it, mate. You missed a heckuva night last night."

"Oh, did you g—go out with the g—girls?"

"Nah." Oliver waved them off. "Brianna told me to off in Spanish. I looked up the words I remembered and they weren't nice. Kat said she needed the rest. Feng wouldn't go out either. So I hit up a club by myself and found this girl who let me—"

The photographers suddenly started chattering and focusing their lenses on the doors. Jack and Oliver turned to see what the commotion was all about.

"Holy monkeys," Oliver exclaimed. "That's Adam Xu!"

Jack recognized Adam as well. As Leader of the Suave Six, he had the most recognizable face in the world. Despite being forty-one years old, he hadn't aged in years, he smiled perfectly for the cameras and waved at Oliver and Jack as he entered. Behind him came the rest of the Suave Six: Tanveer Riar who possessed the gift of Fire. Blake Taylor of Strength. Yury Novikov of Senses. Mike Moreau, perhaps the most popular of the Suave Six, Undetectable. And Henrik Frösén, Cold.

All strong, powerful men, handsome and charming. Deserving of their name in every way. Jack envied them. If he had anything to do with the nickname his six eventually earned, it would probably be Spaz Six.

The Suave Six all posed and waved for cameras, then did one as a group. Jack noted how comfortable each man seemed to feel with the others, how the camaraderie was almost tangible, and wondered again why the universe had deemed him, a freak, worthy of such a group.

The new Six were brought together by Ear agents and staffers to meet the Suave Six. The photohounds really went crazy as Jack and the new Six shook hands with each of the Suave Six. Jack focused on steadying his arms and ignoring the pain he felt each time one of the Six took his ungloved hand. By the time he finished shaking hands, his skin burned and his breaths were sharp and rapid. Oliver looked at him with concern.

"You okay, mate?"

Jack tried to grin as he nodded, but wasn't successful.

“You really have a problem with that, don’t you?”

Again Jack nodded.

“Stick with me. Anyone tries to touch you, I’ll stab them with my fork.”

Jack and Oliver got plates and filled them with food. Jack chose the things he’d never tasted before: fried shrimp, crab cakes, halibut salad, and samples of each dessert. As he ate he watched the procession of guests entering. After the Suave Six came a woman in a blue dinner gown with auburn hair and a man with black-gray hair styled in a bad comb-over. As soon as Jack recognized the Prime Undersecretary General of the Head of The Atlas he jumped to his feet. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Kat and Brianna do the same. Training to show respect for high ranking government officials began at an early age in The Atlas. Both the woman in blue and the Prime Undersecretary were accompanied by security and agents.

The Prime Undersecretary’s greeting of the Suave Six was cool and quick while the woman in blue chatted with them warmly for several minutes. Meanwhile the Prime Undersecretary went around the tables to greet the new Six. First he met with Malia and her manager while Malia’s publicist made sure photographers got plenty of pictures.

By the time the Prime Undersecretary made his way to Jack’s table, Jack trembled with anxiety. The Prime Undersecretary was the fourth most powerful man in The Atlas, or perhaps even the world. Only the Chairman of the Head, the Second, and the Secretary General had more power. In fact, the Chairman was such an important role, that no one outside the Head knew his or her identity.

“Hello Jackson,” the Prime Undersecretary said in flawless Russian. “An honor to meet you. I trust you are staying out of trouble?”

Jack’s face burned at the comment. He answered in his best Russian. He never stuttered when speaking his second language. One of his speech therapists had said it was something to do with the way people’s brains were wired. “Yes, sir. I apologize—”

The Prime Undersecretary raised a hand. “I too was a youth once. Let the transgression pass and don’t repeat it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you must be Oliver,” the Prime Undersecretary now said in English. “You are a very fortunate young man.”

“Yeah, thank you.” Oliver said with a touch of cockiness. “I feel that way right now.”

The Prime Undersecretary smiled warmly. “Remember that with such a wonderful gift comes a duty to improve the world. It is not all parties, women, and fun.”

“Well,” Oliver said, “those things don’t hurt.”

The Prime Undersecretary smiled again and patted Oliver’s shoulder. “Be a good man.” And to Jack he added in Russian. “Keep an eye out for this one. Don’t let him influence you to negative behaviors.”

Jack thanked him and returned to his seat. Oliver snorted. “What did he say in Russian?”

“J—just t—told me to be good.”



The way Oliver nodded told Jack he didn't believe him. "Yeah, well, this isn't anything like I thought it would be so far. You know? Parties, glamour, money thrown at us for contracts and endorsements. All six of us being best friends like that." He snapped his fingers. "Not what I envisioned at all. Malia's got a celebrity stick so far up her toosh she can hardly walk. You, Kat, and Brianna got shot at by who knows. Then me and Feng. After Sunday night, Feng's already on his way to becoming a monk. I don't get what's happening. Or what's gonna to happen once this stupid press conference is all over. Do I just go back home?"

Jack had no more clue than Oliver. He hoped when the press conference was over, he could go back home and pretend all of this had never happened. For a day he had been excited about the prospect of friends, real friends. Now he just wanted to be alone.

"You mind if I sit?" said a voice from behind. Jack turned to see Henrik Frösén, a tall thin man with eyes like blue ice and wavy blond hair. Jack and Oliver both stammered to tell him it was all right. "It's a pleasure. A real pleasure. Today brings back so many memories of me twenty-five years ago." Henrik spoke with the slightest hint of a Scandinavian accent. As he sat Jack heard a sloshing sound. He realized that Henrik had a pouch on his side with some kind of liquid in it. The pouch's strap went under his shirt, but the container stayed at his hip. "I can't tell you how much I and the rest of the Six have been looking forward to meeting you all. It's all been hinging on you, Jack."

Jack smiled shyly.

"Yury will join us soon, Oliver. He told me to save him a seat with you."

"Fair dinkum! Yury is going to eat with us?" Oliver rubbed his hands together nervously. "I'm hoping to learn everything I can. Ever since I found about my gift, I've tried to work at it, but it's hard. Hopefully Yury can give me some tips."

"Oh I bet he can do more than that. I can't say much at all, but just ... keep your eyes and ears open. Things will happen fast."

"What things?" Oliver asked.

Henrik smirked and shrugged.

"Careful, Henrik," a new voice said. "Oliver's heart rate is climbing like a firefighter on a ladder." Yury sat next to Oliver and pointed to his plate. "Don't eat the tuna. Smells like it's been washed in bleach."

Oliver leaned over and smelled his fish. "Really?"

Yury tapped his nose. "Nothing gets by me. I have all my food prepared by a chef or else my taste buds get assaulted like Mike Tyson warming up on a punching bag."

Jack had no idea who Mike Tyson was, but it excited him to be sitting with two of the Suave Six and being spoken to like an equal. Yury introduced himself to Jack in perfect Russian.

"So neither of you have had much luck using your gifts?" Henrik asked Oliver and Jack.

"I—I—I haven't really t—tried," Jack explained.

"I use it a bit. Mostly to impress girls." Oliver grinned and waggled his eyebrows.

Henrik frowned at Jack. "That's too bad, Jack. I picked it up quickly."

Yury gave his attention to Oliver. "You're a lucky guy. Senses is the best gift of the Six."

"No kidding?" Oliver's tone was skeptical.

"Don't doubt it."

Henrik snorted. "I know at least five people that would disagree."

The woman in the blue dinner gown from the League of Nations stopped at the table and Yury's retort died on his lips. Jack's jaw dropped a little when he saw her. Her auburn hair shone, and her green eyes gazed at him piercingly. Every centimeter of her face was exquisite.

"Jackson Frōst and Oliver Brown," she said, extending Oliver a slender, smooth hand. "Margaret O'Sullivan. What a pleasure and honor to meet you."

Henrik took Margaret's hand and kissed it, which Jack thought was a remarkably bold gesture. "Ms. O'Sullivan is the greatest combination of beauty, brains, and bravery ever put into human form. She's also Third Viceroy of the League of Nations."

"Flattery ..." Viceroy O'Sullivan said, though her eyes twinkled at the compliments. "I work directly with the Suave Six to further the expansion of freedom and capitalism throughout the world. I hope to extend that relationship to the new Six."

Oliver's face made it clear that he would like nothing more than a relationship with the Viceroy. Jack, however, thought of Bishop and the task he'd been given. *I'm supposed to be persuading Malia, Oliver, and Feng to support The Atlas.*

"W—well ..." Jack cleared his throat. "That would b—b—be something to think about."

"What Jack means," Oliver said, taking the Viceroy's hand again as slickly as a sixteen-year-old could, "is that any relationship with you would be something to look forward to. I hope I speak for the rest of the Six when I say that because it comes from the heart." He, too, kissed the Viceroy's hand.

Smirking, she narrowed her eyes on Oliver. "I think you were born about fifteen years too late." Then to Yury and Henrik, she added, "This one's as suave as all of you put together. It's a pleasure to meet you both." She shook Jack's hand and nodded to the rest, particularly Yury and Henrik. "I look forward to the press conference."

Jack braced himself for pain. But when the Viceroy touched his hand, a thrill of eagerness or wanting swept through him. What exactly it was he wanted, he couldn't tell. Certainly not *her*. She was too old for him. The emotion was fleeting, and after it passed Jack felt stupid.

He ate in silence while Oliver, Yury, and Henrik talked. Listening to their conversation helped Jack forget about the conference and the recent horrible events that had occurred since entering the Western States. All of that came to an end when a man in a suit entered the banquet and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the press conference is set to begin in thirty minutes. Please prepare yourselves for your introductions."

## Chapter Fifteen

Wednesday, December 12, 1990

Vera found Jack in the crowd as those invited to the banquet dispersed. Her voice had a sterner quality than usual as she said in Russian, "Let me look you over. Do you remember what we practiced?" She glanced down and saw that he had unraveled a bit of the cuffs of his shirt. "Keep the gloves in your pockets. You can't wear them."

Jack's stomach gurgled. He wondered if he should tell her that he may have eaten too much than was wise, but couldn't bear the thought of her getting angrier at him. She glanced at his ears, which he'd managed not to scratch up too badly. She removed a pair of scissors from her purse and clipped the hanging threads from his shirt. "Good as new."

Her fake smile sent a wave of revulsion through Jack. "I—I—I'm just gonna go use the restroom before ..."

"Be back in five minutes."

Jack gulped and fought the urge to run as he went to the restroom. His ear started to itch and required all his self-control to not dig into it with his fingernails. Instead, he started playing with his jacket cuff again, then stopped as he remembered that Vera had just fixed the stitching. The bathroom was empty except for Mike Moreau, the Undetectable member of the Six. His blue-black skin made his white teeth and eyes look all the brighter. His blue eyes followed Jack in the mirror.

"Someone's nervous," he said in a deep bass with a thick French accent. His smile filled and brightened his entire face.

*What would you know about nervous? You're the most popular man in the Six.* Jack couldn't count how many times he'd heard girls talk about Mike Moreau and his beautiful blue eyes. Posters of the Suave Six were banned in The Atlas, but girls still managed to get their hands on pictures of Mike Moreau.

"No need to be scared, brother," Mike continued, "you are about to become the most famous man in the world. You're a good looking kid, you know?"

Jack fought back a laugh. He was anything but good-looking. His weird chin, crooked nose, and pale sickly skin gave him an freakish, elf-like look. "Thanks."

Mike's smile grew and he patted Jack's arm. Jack winced. "Remember that people want to like you. Just don't give them a reason not to. See you out there, brother."

Jack went into the stall, shoved his fingers down his throat, and waited. Nothing. He did it again, gagged, but could not ralph. *Come on. Come on. Come on!* He pressed his fingers back as far as they would go, but all he got was a mouthful of saliva and a bleeding bite mark on his knuckle. Jack slapped the wall of the bathroom stall with his hand so hard that it stung. A knot of anxiety grew in his stomach, rapidly spreading to his chest and groin. His heart was thudding so fast that he couldn't catch his breath.

*Stop.* Jack knelt down on the floor and put his arms up against the wall. *Breathe. One. Breathe. Two.* He continued this past two hundred, forcing down the panic until he reduced it back to a knot in his stomach again. That much he could deal with.

After checking himself over, he left the bathroom and found Vera. She looked him over again, tittered with his hair, and escorted him to the green room. "You look ... handsome," she said. Jack interpreted this to mean that she had done her best, but it wasn't good enough. "Now wait here until they call you out."

The rest of the Six stood around. Malia and Kat were chatting with Malia's publicist. Sometime in the last thirty minutes, Malia had changed into a pretty blue dress with a necklace of white stones and a matching hair clip of blue and white flowers around her tied back hair. Even her fingernails had been painted blue with white flowers. Kat and Brianna both wore the same red dresses he'd seen them in earlier, though Brianna's had yellow stars and hugged her body tighter than Kat's. Oliver had on a suit which didn't fit well. His shoes were in bad need of polish and shine.

Feng's face was still badly bruised, particularly his lips and eyes, the cuts on his nose and cheek only partially healed. The makeup applied to conceal his wounds didn't help much. Each time Jack saw his friend's face, he cringed with sympathy pain.

Feng gestured for Jack to come sit next to him in an empty chair. "How is you Jack?" he asked in his Qingese accent.

"I f—feel stupid."

"You look good."

"Thanks." Gritting his teeth, Jack pulled at his collar where his neck was starting to itch and burn from the constriction.

Feng cleared his throat. "I hope ..." He paused, brow furrowed. The bruises made his face appear so painful that Jack could barely look at him. "I hope you forgive me. But they say we have mistakes so we can teach from them."

"F—forgive you for what?"

The host of the press conference came into the green room with the Suave Six. He wore a slick smile that matched his hair and a flamboyantly green and white suit with a pink tie. "Okay, folks," he said in a strong Irish voice. "Here's how it's going to go. I'm going to walk out and introduce the Suave Six. I'll have a quick chat—maybe three or four questions—with them. Then I'll introduce the new Six one by one. Just come out, smile, and do your best to answer the questions I give you. Nothing hard. This isn't a debate. I know some of you are nervous, which is understandable as it's your first time. If you get stuck, I'll help you along."

With that he left for the stage. Several televisions were mounted in the green room. Jack watched the host enter the conference and take the podium. "Good evening ladies and gentlemen of the world! My name is Britton Hugh, and it is an honor to have been chosen to moderate this historic press conference. Experts estimate that over 60% of the world's eight billion population will watch tonight's event live. Another 35% will see it replayed in their time zones. It will likely break all records of televised events in the history of the medium. To be a part of such a occasion is truly humbling.

"To begin, I wish to introduce you to some old friends. I give you the Suave Six: their Leader, the Mind, Adam Xu."

Jack watched as Adam strode onto the stage with such confidence and power. A man who, at 41, looked not a day older than 25. *Someday that will be me.*

"Strength," Britton Hugh said next. "Blake Taylor."

Blake had more swagger than Adam. He was taller than even Henrik, but just as fair haired.

"Fire. Tanveer Riar."

Tanveer gave the crowd and camera a short bow and a small smile.

"Cold, Henrik Frösén."

Henrik didn't seem quite as comfortable in front of the camera as his peers, but he still had a great smile and a steady stride.

"Senses. Yury Novikov."

Not as tall, and not nearly as well built as the other five, Yury still had a likeable demeanor. He took a seat next to Henrik and waited for the last to be introduced.

"Now I haven't saved the best for last, though we all know he's very popular. And here he is: Undetectable, Michel Moreau!"

Although the photohounds and reporters did not cheer or clap, the room changed when Mike entered. He had that something—that presence—that the rest of the Six hadn't mastered. Jack saw him and instantly wanted to like Mike, wanted to be noticed by him. He was the favorite. His dark skin reflected the lights pointed at the stage, and his big bright smile shone as he entered and waved.

"They're all here!" Britton exclaimed. "Before we meet the new Six, let's take a minute to chat. Just the seven of us. For the last twenty-four years, your group has been the newest Six. Now that's not the case. What will change? Adam, you're the Leader. You speak first."

"You know, it's an honor for us to meet the new Six," Adam stated to the camera. "I'm sure the whole world felt the same way about meeting us, but this is something I've been looking forward to for a long time. We've been doing what we do for twenty-five years. But it really doesn't seem that long."

"Tell me about it," Blake said, chuckling dryly. "Seems like yesterday we were trying to figure out what in the world was going on and what we were supposed to do with these so-called powers. Now I almost feel like the old hand. The new Six are the luckiest people on the planet. They get to experience everything we did."

"In many ways I still feel like I'm learning," Mike Moreau added. "And I'm sure the new Six will have many things to teach us."

Tanveer Riar had the strongest accent of all the six. Jack found it a little bit difficult to understand all his words. "I still remember well what the new Six are going through. It is confusing, exciting, frightening, and a hundred other emotions. I can only guess how many questions they have."

"Rest assured we want to answer them," Britton cut in. "And some of them we can answer right now. It is time to formally introduce the new Six!"

One by one Britton called out the names of the Six and asked them to introduce themselves in a microphone once they were seated. Jack was last and sat at the very end of the row next to Brianna. "Hi," he said quietly into the mic. "M—my n—name is Jack. And I like t—to d—draw."

Some of his peers gave long descriptions of themselves. Malia listed all of her accomplishments in student government and education. Oliver cracked a joke about boomerangs and kangaroos, getting a laugh from all of the Suave Six. Jack had stammered out that he liked to draw.

He searched for Rachel in the crowd, but then stopped. *She's gone. It's Vera now.* And seeing Vera's stern expression would only make things ten times worse for him.

"Welcome, all twelve of you," Britton continued. "I know I'm starting to sound like a broken record, but it really is an honor to be with you tonight. Tanveer mentioned that you new Six must have questions. I am willing to bet that he is correct. How many of you new Six have questions you are dying to have answered?"

Oliver raised his hand first so Britton directed him to ask the first question.

“My question is for Cindy Lapin. She was in my geometry class last year. I asked her to the winter dance and she said no. I was wondering if she’s reconsidered.”

The audience roared. Britton offered a placating smile.

“How long did it take you to develop your powers?” Kat asked before anyone else had a chance. “Any of you?”

Adam Xu answered first. “Because of certain choices we made, we had little aid from other Six, we were left to figure things out on our own ... by and large.”

“Certain—” Brianna started to say, but a look from Mike cut her off.

“Some answers,” Mike added, “will have to wait until the conversation between us is more private. Some information is meant only for the eyes and ears of the Six. This is one thing to always keep in mind.”

Britton rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Ah yes, the infamous secrets of the Six. Boy, wouldn’t we all like to know more about those!”

Henrik raised his hand. “Let me go back to Kat’s question: it takes time. And certain ... events will help you along. But as a Six, you are never quite alone as you think. This is both good and bad. Trust is something that becomes difficult to do. The Six have few true friends and many false friends—that doesn’t mean enemies. Never assume that anything you say or do isn’t being heard or seen.”

“Why don’t you teach us?” Brianna asked, though it didn’t sound much like a question.

“Our role isn’t that of teachers,” Blake said. “We hope you will learn from your own success and errors.”

Tanveer added. “You’ll have plenty of both.”

Feng raised his hand. Adam looked at him with eyebrows raised. Feng took that as permission to speak. “What is the place in the world for us?” he asked.

Henrik and Adam exchanged a meaningful glance before Adam answered, “What do mean, Feng? Are you asking what is the role of the Six in the world?”

“I want to make our world better than the now.”

“That’s a great starting point,” Henrik said. “I hope we all feel that way. Even when we have differences of how to do it, the intention matters most. When we have that in common, everything else eventually comes into place.”

“I believe I should start,” Feng continued, now facing the camera,” by apologizing for the actions I did in the club that has made so much of the noise in the televisions. I acted against the ways I was taught to behave. I embarrassed my family, myself, and my faith. I will never do those things again.”

A loud applause followed Feng’s statement, but he did not smile. It was hard to tell through the bruised and cut skin, but Jack thought his friend look genuinely humiliated by what he had done. Oliver, on the other hand, just grinned like the whole thing was a joke.

When the applause died down, Malia asked the next question. “Where do you live? And where do you spend your time?”

Mike set down his glass of water so he could answer her. “We spend most of our time divided between Geneva and Los Angeles, the two capitols of the League of Nations. We stay busy working with them in various capacities, but we also spend time in solitude to train and study. We have our sanctuaries.”

As soon as Mike mentioned this last word, the comfortable expressions of the rest of the Suave Six vanished. They looked at Mike with faces ranging from anger to caution. Jack and the rest of the new Six picked up on this at once.

“What is a—” Brianna began to ask before being cut off by Blake.

“Mike meant we each have our own places where we go to escape the pressure, the celebrity—places where we can reflect and meditate.”

“Nice recovery, Blake!” Britton cackled. “But it sounded to me like one of those mythical secrets almost got out of the bag! Careful now, children. Once something gets out there, there’s no going back.”

“So ... what can we talk about?” Brianna asked.

“Wait, Brianna,” Adam said. “We don’t mean to give that impression. Let us explain some basic things that you need to know now. First, the whole world is watching you from now on.” He smiled knowingly at the cameras. “Particularly in this instance. It takes getting used to. Some of you may really struggle with it.”

Oliver and Feng glanced at Jack, but he pretended not to notice.

“And some of you may love it,” Blake added, looking pointedly at Brianna and Oliver. “There’s nothing wrong with either, so long as you don’t take it to the extreme.”

“The second thing you need to know,” Yury continued, “is that everyone you meet for the rest of your lives is not going to be as close to you as one of the Six. By being what you are, you simply cannot hope to share certain experiences with outsiders. Non-Six. Other people just won’t understand. Why do you think so many of the Six have intermarried? The Six of you will experience so much together, you’ll learn to look past your differences and embrace one another like something even closer than family.”

“Are you saying we should not trust other people?” Feng asked.

“No—” Yury said.

“And yes,” Henrik cut in. “You should trust everyone as little as possible. Because you have something people will want.”

“Our powers can’t be stolen, can they?” Malia asked.

“He’s not referring to your powers,” Mike said. “But to fame, wealth, things both intangible and otherwise that people around you will covet.”

“We don’t mean to scare you,” Blake said, “just warn.”

“Which of you girls am I going to marry?” Oliver asked, drawing the biggest laugh from the crowd yet.

“Any takers?” Britton interjected, his attention on the three girls. What had been humorous quickly turned awkward. “All right then. Now I’d like to formally ask the new Six some questions, a sort of get-to-know-you format.” From his suit pocket, Britton removed a small stack of note cards. “The first question is for all of you. You are all considered the most fortunate people in the world, but if you had to change your power for a different one, which would it be and why? Start with Brianna.”

“Strength,” Brianna said without hesitation. “Because it’s the most powerful.”

“Strength,” Oliver agreed. “Anything to impress the ladies.”

“Senses,” Kat said. “Because I could know when anyone is lying to me.”

Feng, who already had Strength, took a moment to think. “Mind. So I could help people understand the things I think are so important.”

Malia grinned at Feng. “I would also choose Mind. The human brain is so powerful, and it would help me understand people better and how to help humanity.”

This left Jack. He also didn't need to think about his answer. "Undetectable. S—so I could d—d—disappear."

Britton nodded at them. "Interesting answers. My next question is for Miss Gómez. Your powers aside, what strengths and weaknesses do you bring to this team?"

Jack leaned forward so he could see Brianna's face.

"Most of all, I bring leadership," Brianna said with little thought. "I am a natural leader in many ways. I let my principles guide me, principles of equality, justice, and fairness. I also bring motivation and an unconquerable spirit."

Across the stage, Jack caught Oliver rolling his eyes.

"And weaknesses?" Henrik asked.

Brianna shrugged with a grin. Friendly laughter followed. "Maybe I'm lucky. I have no weaknesses."

"Very interesting," Britton commented. "You were the first of the Six to discover your power, the Mind. That was almost eleven months ago. What have you learned about yourself and your role in the world since then?"

"That I am ready."

"Such confidence!" Britton exclaimed. "I like that. Miss Kekoa. What about you? You have the power of Undetectable. How has the discovery of that changed you?"

Malia smiled coyly. "I am still trying to figure everything out," she began in a soft, sweet voice. It was nothing like the voice Jack had heard before. "It has been on my mind almost constantly. One thing I hope to do with my powers is create a sense of worldwide community. We focus so much on our differences of ideas and beliefs and looks. Why not focus on what we have in common? Humanity. Friendship. Love. If we can foster these ideas, we can—"

Oliver snored into his microphone and pretended to snap awake. Malia glared at him, but held her tongue. Britton jumped in quickly and steered the conversation toward Oliver. "Thank you for such an honest answer, Miss Kekoa. Mr. Brown, since you are having trouble staying awake, let me ask you: what is one aspect of being a Six that you most look forward to experiencing?"

"Meeting the future Mrs. Brown?" Oliver said, beaming at his own answer. Roaring guffaws came from the crowd.

Brianna rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath something about an embarrassment.

"Nah, I'm kidding. Actually, I'm looking forward most to campaigning against The Atlas and stopping the spread of communism. The world needs more freedom, and I hope to push that angle as hard as I can."

The silence that followed his answer was almost complete as reporters jotted down Oliver's words. Jack wondered what Bishop thought of Oliver's statement.

"A very spirited response, Mr. Brown. My next question goes to Mr. Lu Feng. You possess what is perhaps the most envied and admired power, Strength. Wielding this power, what role do you see yourself filling among the other five?"

"I want to be the beacon of my faith. Unom Ka. I hope to show to the Six and to the world the valuableness of it. Yet my role is no different to the other people. To pick up the world. To serve everyone, including these five who sit near me. Maybe some say my power is the better, but ... people who do not have my powers change the world every day."



Britton's next question went to Kat. "Miss Xenos, if you could look into the future, where do you think you would see yourself in ten years?"

Kat sat up straight and looked straight ahead at the cameras. The smile on her face reminded Jack of his sisters' faces whenever they desperately needed help from a bad situation. Her words came across as rote and hollow. "I hope that girls around the world can look at me as an example of someone who sticks up for women, who lives with courage, and who represents the weak and voiceless. I can't sit back and watch any gender, race, or any other groups be trodden down or set back by another. And, erm, in ten years, I think we will see tremendous progress made on all fronts of human rights and world peace."

The realization hit Jack that his question was next. Immediately his stomach seized up and the urge to bolt from the stage flooded him. He reached for his ear, but instantly returned his naked hand back to his lap. He wanted to fidget with his cuff, but knew that was out of the question, too. *Please give me something easy.*

The twisting sensation in his guts grew worse. Jack closed his eyes and breathed, forcing his brain to stay calm. *I'm not going to throw up*, he ordered himself. *I'm not going to embarrass myself and my family.*

"Mr. Fröst," Britton began, "you are the newest of the Six. For the last year, you've read about the other five as they've been discovered and discussed in news stories. What has gone through your mind over the last months as you've watched them and how did your mentality change when you realized you were the sixth?"

Jack suddenly felt like he was at the dentist with a saliva ejector stuck in his mouth for so long that every last drop of moisture had been robbed from him. For the first time since he'd sat down, he noticed a pitcher of water sitting only two feet away from him. He stood and reached for it and poured himself a glass, but his hands, unlike his mouth, were sweaty. The pitcher slipped from his grasp and spilled all over the table.

Jack froze, mortified at what he'd done on a worldwide broadcast. Should he clean it up? Pretend that nothing had happened? The water leaked over the side of the table until Brianna scooted her chair away from where it spilled. Jack, however, did not, and the water drenched the crotch of his pants. He quickly sat down, but water had spilled from his pants onto his chair, too, now soaking the backside of his pants, too. Several people on the front rows noticed this and smirked, whispering behind their hands.

"Mr. Fröst?" Britton repeated. "Do you wish to answer the question?"

"Uh ... n—n—no. N—not really," Jack answered before even thinking about what he was saying. His response earned him the loudest laughter of the night, but it sounded to him like jeers and taunts. His stomach cramped up like it'd been stuck in an apple press.

Britton chuckled with the audience as he read the question a second time. Jack didn't even hear it. He couldn't focus on anything but the spilled water. The idea struck him that he should just walk offstage, and it struck him quite forcefully. He glanced in that direction and saw Vera's glare fixed on him. With great exaggeration, she mouthed to him, "ANSWER THE QUESTION!"

The other five stared at him now. He looked away from them, but all he saw in front of him were cameras. Innumerable lenses and blinking lights and faces of people he would never know. A sharp wave of nausea hit him, causing him to grip the wet table to get it under control. In his periphery, he saw Vera gesturing frantically, but he couldn't look at her. *Breathe. One. Breathe. Two.*

"You need to answer," Brianna hissed to him, her lips unmoving.

"I'm—I'm—I'm—" Jack tried to force the word *fine* out, but his mouth and brain couldn't connect. Brianna reached out to touch Jack's arm to offer him support or comfort. Jack knew that if anyone touched him right now, all would be lost. He started to pull away, leaning in the opposite direction, though not dramatically. He didn't want to cause a scene. But Brianna was determined to display her support to the world.

*No, no, no!*

His wishes were no use. Brianna rested her small hand on Jack's shoulder and gave it a squeeze, a squeeze of solidarity or support ... it didn't matter. Its effect was instant. His stomach constricted like an angry boa as Jack's mouth flooded with saliva. His head went light and his entire body lurched forward as Jack ruined the biggest moment of his life in front of the entire world.