

Chapter 1

Atlas's eyes don't work, colorful static dances in his vision, his life escaping his lips with every wasted breath. He can barely feel the pressure on his slim neck now, only numbness. He understands, in some deep place within himself, that he deserves this. He never had anything to live for, anyway. He was and is alone- of no value to others or society. A burden, even to himself. But, selfishly, he still wants so much out of life. Above all else, he wants to be free of the clawing in his chest, free of the loneliness.

Something echoes...

Live.

He reaches up, touching the fleshy, greasy *thing* looming over him. It lurches out a drunken grunt, whipping itself side-to-side. Atlas holds firm, digging his fingers deep. He lets his instinct do the rest. A great, shooting pain surges through his hands and suddenly, he can breathe. The corpse falls limp on Atlas, twitching from the residual electricity running through its muscles. He pushes it off of him, breathing frantically. The air entering his lungs is thick with carbon, but his brain finds it addictive after having gone without oxygen for so long.

Slowly, his vision returns to him, and he stares in awe at the full moon, its milk-white brilliance framed by two, shabby brick walls. Clouds drift in from some faraway place; it might snow later. What strikes him first is astonishment, then relief, then heavy remorse. A regret punctuated gruesomely with the scent of charred flesh, something he'd promised himself he'd never smell again. In his delirious state, he can't muster enough energy to get up, he just turns on his side, away from the body, and lets his stomach turn itself inside-out. He's done throwing up within a few seconds, but his throat is left burning with the remnants of stomach acid, made worse by the suffocating pain around his neck. He takes a few moments to collect himself and drags himself off the concrete. Everything hurts, but he refuses to pass out in a pool of his own sick, next to a burnt corpse.

With gritted teeth, he takes the first few steps. *There we go...* He staggers out of the alley, not looking back. His pace quickens and his gangly legs steadily carry him into a sprint. For several blocks, he runs, feeling the late winter breeze run its hands through his hair. Before he realizes it, he's jogging up to his apartment complex, scaling the stairs, and scrambling into his apartment. Once the door's lock slides shut, Atlas's legs give up. His face meets the cold linoleum and his body slams down, the sound muffled by his thick clothes. They feel itchy and claustrophobic- they want to strangle him to death.

Layer by layer, he claws off his coat, jacket, and shirt. His ribs groan as he sets his lungs free, peeling his binder off his sweat-drenched skin. The bruises at the base of his ribcage starkly contrast his grayish, mole-speckled skin which stretches like tanning leather over his bones. There's a rainbow there, like an oil slick- red, purple, blue, and green.

The room quiets. Atlas doesn't feel as alone as he did moments ago; his breathing, the flavor of iron on his tongue, and the scent of ink and musty paper accompany him. He rasps out a painful chuckle- *this isn't so bad*. He closes his eyes, letting the calm take him. After a few seconds, he opens them and they burn as the sun forces its way in.

"What the..?" he murmurs. He peels his sweaty face off the floor, his eyes darting across the room. STEM-related books and magazines lay strewn across the dusty apartment, some open to random pages of notes and diagrams describing various types of bionic limbs. *That's it- I must've fallen asleep reading again.*

But that doesn't explain why he's only wearing pants or why his throat and fingers hurt. He ignores whatever fantastical explanation his brain tries to spin and instead looks for his phone, which is still safely tucked into the front pocket of his jeans. It's dead- which is why his alarm didn't wake him, but hopefully he isn't late for work.

He does his best to focus on getting ready but all he can think of is how much he wants a shower. He can taste the noxious scent oozing from his skin, lingering around him like swarming flies.

After a quick, cold shower, Atlas puts on a fresh pair of underwear, remaining shirtless to apply his testosterone gel. He looks for the bottle in its usual spot- in the medicine cabinet above the toilet, but it isn't there. There should be a brand new bottle, he'd picked one up just last night...

Fuck...

Atlas rubs his fingertips against the tender skin of his neck and winces in pain. A soreness spreads across his throat and stings angrily down his bony fingers. With his hands still gently pressed to his throat, he rushes in front of the bathroom mirror.

The bruises are new, deep purples and blues, stretching across his neck in vague shapes. Back and forth, his hand crawls over the marks, studying them. He continues spidering along his throat until his eyes wander to his hands. He pulls them away from his neck and stares down at them, turning them over and flexing his fingers. His skin peels in places, blistered and raw, and the areas that haven't peeled

yet are burnt black. He picks at part of the charred skin and it easily peels away, leaving the flesh naked and bleeding.

No...

His heart pounds in his ears, and his head grows fuzzy.

NO...

He lurches forward, catching himself on the counter with trembling hands. A whisper escapes his lips, “No...”

A sick feeling crawls up his esophagus and into his mouth, gagging him. He can hardly breathe- his vision washes white and he barely feels it when he woozily collapses onto the bathroom floor. Like second nature, he drags himself across the tile, feeling bile rise in his throat as he yanks himself toward the toilet. His knuckles go white from how tightly he grips the porcelain as he heaves out acid. There’s barely anything in his stomach, he just crouches there, his gag reflex working so hard that his eyes water from the effort.

In a matter of minutes, his gagging turns into erratic sobs, his chest trembling and heaving. Saliva runs from his lips, into his stubble, dripping down his chin. He quickly wipes it away, swallowing down the taste of acid. He runs his hands up his face, threading his fingers through his curly hair and gripping it tightly. Slowly, methodically, he rocks back and forth, eyes glazed in intense focus.

There’s nothing he can do now, that person is already dead, that much he knows- but things can’t just go back to normal. People will undoubtedly look for him, ask him what happened- hurt him. He thinks of that rainy day in early March- the first and last time he’d hurt someone like that...

A shudder... He pushes that feeling deep inside himself as it tears through, opting to peel his sweaty thighs off the bathroom floor and get dressed. He grazes the apartment, collecting articles of clothing off the floor like a crow scavenging treasure. His binder slides neatly over his torso- snug, *safe*, tucked into his faded jeans and hidden under a large tee with ‘Osman Futurist Biotech, Est. 2053’ printed in bold lettering on the front. The shirt doesn’t smell too bad- just hints of sweat and snow. Suitably dressed, he lifts his head and tidies the apartment, throwing scattered clothes into the corner and stacking strewn books. The physical work gives him time to consider his next move. He can’t just go to work, he’s sure he’s already late, anyway. He might as well stay home, and wait for something to happen... *no, that’s stupid*. He should do the right thing- report the death, give his testimony, and move on with his life. *The sanest option, but before that...*

After throwing out his takeout box collection, Atlas grabs his phone from the kitchen counter. He has several unopened notifications, including a handful of texts and voicemails from his boss, which he quickly swipes away, pretending they never existed. Instead of immediately calling the police, he dials one of his contacts first. The phone rings... *he should be home from school by now*. It's still ringing... *It's Sunday*. Ringing...

...voicemail.

“This is an automated voice message, the person you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please leave a message after the tone...”

Beeeeeeep...

Atlas's voice comes out hoarse and it's painful to speak, but he's still capable of clearly articulating. “Hey, baby bro, sorry for calling out of nowhere. I just wanna let you know I won't see you for a while. Something happened...” He pauses, wincing in pain before recollecting himself. “Sorry again, Haru. Remember that I care about you and I'm not gonna abandon you, I just have a situation to sort out... Don't forget to text me if you need anything or call if something comes up. Love you, bye.”

He hangs up and the voicemail sends automatically. Now that that's out of the way, he calls the non-emergency line. The operator picks up, speaking with a flat, androgynous voice and formal cadence.

“I have something to report,”

He breathes a little too heavily into the microphone and the operator adopts a tone that is somehow simultaneously concerned and annoyed. “Are you sure this isn't an emergency, you sound distressed. Could you describe the situation?”

“I- there's been a death. Early this morning, about two- no, three o'clock. I was headed to the 24/7 Mart when I was pulled into an alley and attacked by someone.” Atlas starts to feel sick again, his skin grows pale. “They seemed drunk or at least *on* something and they... they strangled me and I couldn't push them off. And I couldn't stop myself from...”

“Hey, I'm gonna stop you right there. Slow down.” the voice is gentle, yet firm, like a pat on the back. “Take a breather. Are you at home?”

Atlas starts nodding but remembers he's on the phone. “Mhm,”

“Alright, get a glass of water and sit down. But stay on the phone and let me know when you're ready to talk again. Okay?”

He doesn't say anything, feeling cool sweat coat his skin. Goosebumps travel along his arms.

"I need you to respond, please." They sound impatient and Atlas feels a twinge of discomfort rise in him- he can't get himself to speak, though, he only grunts. "Alright, if you can't speak right now, making noise is just fine."

With the phone still held in his left hand, Atlas gets his glass of water, gulps it down, refills it, and repeats. The room-temperature, mineral-y water is heaven and hell on his sore, parched throat. Refilling the glass a third time, he glances out the window above the kitchen sink, spotting something moving into the parking lot. He has to double-check to see what it is, at first, it looks like a shiny blob against the white of fresh snow, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun. However, on a second glimpse, he sees a black sedan with tinted windows parking in a free spot close to the building. Frozen, he stares at it until the doors open. Two men step out, both relatively inconspicuous, maybe too much so, sporting jeans, sneakers, and weather-appropriate jackets. The man on the driver's-side looks toward the building, then to his companion, gesturing up toward the third floor- Atlas's floor. His blood feels cold.

Stop it.

"Sir?"

"Hm?" His attention snaps away from the window as if he's been caught doing something illegal.

"Sir, are you able to talk now? I want you to give me a *clear* picture of what happened. This situation is serious, I need all the details before we proceed with anything."

"Right..." his voice is far away- almost dismissive in its airiness. He can't tear his thoughts away from the two men and their suspicious car. *They could be visiting someone in the building.*

No one in Atlas's building has visitors. It's the place people move into when they have nowhere else to go and no one to turn to. The apartments aren't great, the rent is too expensive for how terrible the neighborhood is, and, in the summer, ladybugs somehow infest every square inch of every unit, hallway, and stairwell.

Atlas ignores this train of thought and returns to his call. "It happened last night, 'round three a.m." His voice is informative- almost confident but still shaky in a few places as he finishes explaining what he remembers of the night before. The operator doesn't interject until he finishes.

“Right. Thank you for reporting this. We’re sending a patrol car to your location to take you to the nearest station, it should be there in five- no, fifteen minutes. Do not leave the house. You’re being detained for the time being- just until we can sort things out.”

“I understand.” He says and hangs up. This is something he immediately regrets.

A sharp knock interrupts the silence, casting an echo over the apartment.

“Atlas Tanaka, this is the police, we’re here to collect you.” The man’s voice is light and clear-young.

Atlas is quiet.

“Are you home? Did the non-emergency operator not tell you we were coming?”

More knocking, louder this time.

“I’m here!” Atlas calls, backing up against the kitchen counter. “They said fifteen minutes, why are you so early?” He stays level, but his heart feels like it might run away.

“We were patrolling close to your building when we got the order to pick you up, we weren’t doing anything so we thought we’d handle it.”

He breathes out, muscles tensing, prepared to run. “This is Rosé, cop don’t... *patrol*,”

There’s a pause... *shit*. Atlas quickly yet quietly grabs his messenger bag and slips on an old sweatshirt and heavy boots. In the time it takes to tie them, the man outside the door has thought of something to say. However, his voice fades under the squeaking of Atlas’s kitchen window. He clammers over the sink, squeezing out feet-first and touching down on the rickety fire escape with a soft *thunk*. Looking down, he’s hit with immediate vertigo, followed by cold terror. At the very bottom of the escape, standing under the raised ladder is the second man, arm crossed while he watches Atlas. “*What are you gonna do?*” his eyes say.

He’ll get his answer.

Atlas charges down the fire escape, metal clanging underfoot as he gains momentum. He descends one floor, two, and three- running as fast as he can off the lowest platform. His boots meet the man’s chest and he folds under the sudden weight against him. Atlas can feel the man’s ribs crunch under his soles, his ankles and knees buckling from the force and height of the jump. Atlas falls sideways, but the man won’t get up. He’s heaving and grasping at his chest, trying to recover from having the air forcibly knocked from his lungs.

Atlas wobbles while getting off the ground, but pushes through, approaching the man with careful steps.

“You’re not a cop- why are you here?” he says firmly.

The man is too winded to speak, he looks at Atlas, pain contorting his face. There’s something else in his expression, but Atlas can’t read it.

“Are you trying to hurt me!?” He snaps, suddenly loud. He feels intensity bubbling in his chest. The man is still silent.

Atlas turns away, droning a confused, frustrated mumble as he breaks into a weird, limping jog. He doesn’t know where he’s going yet, as long as it’s away from here.

Chapter 2

Haru breathes out, untying his stubbornly tight laces and kicking off his horribly uncomfortable dress shoes. They used to fit- at least he thinks so. He's been growing too fast to remember if they ever felt comfortable.

"All right, bud?" Ian chimes in, unlacing his brown oxfords beside his wife, Leia, who shimmy out of black pumps. Haru says nothing, peeling his socks off and examining his chaffed heels. His face contorts into something like sorrow. It isn't often that he sees his brother, but when Atlas visits, Haru always notices the bruises, blisters, and scars that map his visible skin. His injuries never seem to bother him, either, he brushes them off with a quick anecdote, never to be mentioned again. Haru can only dream of being that resilient, able to pick himself up after every spill like it's nothing.

"Hey, things have been rough, but please talk to us. We can't help you if you don't communicate." Leia sounds irritated, peering down at Haru with her striking blue eyes. She isn't a mean woman, just intense, especially with that icy gaze. Ian puts a hand on her arm.

"Hey," he says softly, Leia's frozen exterior thaws. "Let's give him some space, life's been rough on him. The news was so sudden..."

The 'news' came that afternoon, at four.

It was a typical Sunday, Haru was lounging in his room, reading. The day was slow and quiet until Ian knocked on his bedroom door. He entered, eyes darting anxiously around the room, and handed Haru his phone. On the screen was a photo of a shaggy-haired child, the picture was several years old, but under youth and feminine features, Haru could recognize his brother. Even in childhood, Atlas's eyes, light green, with white rings encircling his pupils, still bore, framed by dark purple bags. He remembers losing his train of thought, thinking how strange it is to see his brother so young and rounded, without his defined cheekbones and patchy beard. What truly caught him off guard, though, was the headline emblazoned above Atlas's photo: **Teenager Primary Suspect in the Brutal Murder of Local Man.**

His stomach turned, his face fell, and he couldn't talk, as if the intense stew of emotions churning in his gut had paralyzed his vocal cords. He still can't speak; not until things are okay again. *Maybe things will be all right in the morning,* he decides and heads to bed.

Past the entryway is the dining room, and past that is a hallway, at the very end is Haru's room—a corner of the apartment just for him. The door groans open, then clicks shut and Haru's shoulders relax.

Everything is as it should be; the comics on his shelf, the 7th grade homework sprawled across his desk, and his bed, waiting perfectly made in warm silence. But there's something else, a sound, like breathing, and a shape slumped in the far corner. Cautiously, Haru approaches, walking on his toes. There, curled in a ball and sleeping soundly, is his older brother.

*

Atlas is shaken awake very suddenly. It takes a moment for him to remember where he is, but the uncertain fear of his situation soon passes when he realizes the hand on his shoulder belongs to his younger brother. He rubs the gunk out of his eyes and squints at the twelve-year-old's face, and at the long, branching scar climbing the left side of his jaw and reaching down his neck. Haru's hair is the same dark brown as Atlas's, and just as curly, but unlike Atlas, his eyes are black instead of green.

"You shouldn't be here..." Haru whispers nervously. His face is concerned, but Atlas can just barely see the sparkle of excitement in his eyes.

"I know and I'm sorry. I just didn't have anywhere else to go," he sounds weak, unlike the confident man Haru is used to hearing.

"The police are looking for you- they say..." he stops himself, contemplating.

His hands are shaking. Atlas reaches out, cupping them in his larger, equally shaky hands. "*I get it.*" his hands say.

"They're saying you killed some guy, it's all over the news. They have a picture of you and everything."

Atlas doesn't move, keeping his emotions on a tight leash as he processes what he just heard. The room's silence no longer feels safe.

After a moment, Haru's face twists with confusion. "How did you even get in here..?"

"Climbed,"

Haru raises his eyebrows, mouth ajar.

"Okay, there's an old trellis 'round the side of the building, all I had to do was climb and jump to the fire escape. Also, your window was unlocked."

Haru closes his mouth and lowers his eyebrows as he imagines it. "I don't think that's believable..."

A smug look passes Atlas's face, then falls into an earnest sadness. "I missed you, baby bro, and I'm sorry... For breaking in- for that call earlier. I just... don't know what to do."

Haru frowns. "So did- did you... kill someone?"

Atlas flinches at the fear in his brother's voice, and he frantically tries to figure out whether he's afraid *of* him, or *for* him. The older sibling solemnly nods and the younger's breath stops, then catches. Tears like large hail fall uncontrollably down Haru's face and he sobs softly.

Atlas's arms snake around his brother's back, pulling him into a firm, safe embrace. Haru cries into Atlas's chest, holding him tightly to stop himself from drifting in his own emotions. But it's hard to breathe with his face buried in his brother's thick sweatshirt. He turns his head, his ear pressing firmly against his heart. It beats like a metronome, slow and consistent.

Haru mumbles something, it comes out slurred and unintelligible.

"Hm?" Atlas patiently hums.

"Why- th-the hell are you so calm?" he sniffles.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know." He sighs heavily, tightening the hug. "Maybe... Because you give me a reason to be calm."

"B-but your life is so much harder than mine- the police are after you. You-"

"You're twelve!" The words come out sharp and more aggressive than intended.

Haru sobs again, guilt still solidified concrete in his chest.

It's a while before either of them speaks again. When Haru's tears let up, Atlas begins speaking gently.

"I need to speak to your foster parents- what were their names again?"

"Leia and Ian Ashfield,"

"Right... Anyway, I think I'm in danger, I need somewhere to crash for a few days- just until I figure things out."

"Wh-" Haru starts, but is interrupted by the long creak of his bedroom door opening.

"Hey, bud. We need to talk, I-"

Ian stands in the lit doorway, face frozen in terror. Then he turns and shouts over his shoulder with a shaking voice. "Leia! Come quick- and call the police!"

“Nonono! He just- Ian, please!” Haru sputters, springing to his feet. Atlas stands as well, eyes wide like a cornered cat as he presses his body flush to the wall behind him.

“Mr. Ashfield-”

“No- no... if you care about Haru, you’ll stay and wait for the police to come.”

Shortly after he says this, Leia scrambles beside her husband and stares at Atlas, mirroring Ian’s horrified expression.

“The- the murderer- Atlas Tanaka, he’s here in our home!” She says into her phone.

“Leia stop! Let him explain!” Haru cries, “Atlas- tell them how you’re not normal- tell them about your powers!”

Haru points to the electrocution scar along his face, pulling down his shirt collar to expose the length of it.

“See, he did this to me- he can’t control it, he didn’t do it on purpose!” A desperate grin has plastered itself to his mouth as his attention flicks back and forth between Ian and Leia.

Atlas can’t think of anything to say- his mouth opens and closes.

Leia is the one to speak first. “They said the body was mutilated- burned. *Electrical* burns.” Her voice is cold with fear and disdain.

“*You...* You sick fuck! You some kinda... serial killer, huh? Electrocuting people to death- calling it your *powers*?!” Hot, unstoppable rage bubbles from Ian’s mouth.

“I-” Atlas murmurs, his voice is weak. “This is-”

He can’t breathe.

Ian is still yelling, Leia is murmuring, and Haru is scrambling. Trembling, Atlas feels his knees giving up on him. He collapses in on himself, hands over his ears.

Stop...

Stop.

STOP!

Atlas’s voice comes out minuscule. “I didn’t hurt him! I never meant to hurt *anyone!*”

The discomfort in his chest boils over and an electric heat surges through him. Preoccupied with his emotions, he doesn’t notice what he’s doing.

Leia and Ian stagger back as Haru's bedroom lights flicker, buzzing with previously absent electricity. The couple clings to each other, equally intrigued and terrified as they watch the light show. Their eyes then dart down, to Atlas's slumped form, trying to calm himself.

"What is this-?" Leia breathes.

"This is why I told you to listen!" Haru snaps.

The lights aren't flickering anymore, but Atlas is still on the floor, a fine mist of smoke and a slightly burnt smell rising from his skin. No one moves but Haru, who politely pads toward his brother and places a hand on his back.

"Are you-"

"Don't touch me!" Atlas recoils, slapping his hand away. "...please."

It takes a moment, then Atlas is on his feet. He sighs, reaching down to hug Haru.

"I didn't mean for that to happen." He pulls away, holding his brother by the shoulders. "Keep yourself safe, baby bro. It'll be a while before I see you again."

Atlas's arms fall to his sides and he steals a glance at the Ashfields. The two are holding each other close, staring at the brothers as they try to understand what they've witnessed.

Atlas sighs, turns to the window, slides it open, and climbs out, rushing down the fire escape. Once he hits the ground, he sprints from the building. Just as he rounds a corner, something- *someone* catches his arm.

His heart skips as he's pulled into an alley. They lock an arm around him, using their other hand to cover his mouth. He lets out a muffled yell.

"Shush- I need you to be calm. I came to help, I understand your situation." The man says. His voice is nervous and strangely casual.

Atlas glances over his shoulder, from what he can see, the man has long, dark hair, and light eyes. His expression is soft- sympathetic.

"Come on, trust- eugh!?" the man recoils, jumping back and inspecting the damp trail left on his palm. "Did you just lick me?!"

Atlas raises his eyebrows. "If you want me to trust you, then don't put your fucking hand over my mouth."

"Noted..." The man wipes his hand on his shorts... and Atlas suddenly realizes this man is wearing shorts in February.

Psychopath.

Poor fashion choices aside, Atlas needs someone to trust and is too exhausted to run anymore. He warily follows, keeping a careful eye out.

The men end up in a dingy laundromat, half-buried beneath an apartment building on the corner of two obscure streets. They sit a few seats apart, across from a line of empty washing machines. The fluorescent lights are buzzing and a dryer in the far corner is loudly tumbling clothes. Whoever's laundry it is, they aren't here.

Atlas stares at his feet, dragging a boot against the tile and spreading mud across the floor. His gaze travels to the man, sitting with his backpack in his lap, fidgeting with his hands. He tucks a lock of black hair behind his ear before turning to Atlas.

"My name's Em, by the way." he offers his hand to shake but rethinks the greeting, placing it back in his lap.

"And..?" Atlas remarks dryly.

"You're Atlas Tanaka, then? I saw the news. I'm sorry about what happened to you."

"Why?" he breathes.

"Because I get it. I'm a Finch, too." there's a pause, and Em's face changes. "You probably don't know what that means yet..."

Atlas shakes his head.

"A Finch is... a type of human, only slightly genetically different. We heal a little faster, generally have better eyesight, and... there's the *superhuman* thing."

Atlas looks at his feet again, contemplating.

"It's different for everyone, I have acidic saliva, my fiancé can make plants grow, and Ev- Ev's an owl." Em snickers to himself. "That doesn't make sense- you'll figure it out when you meet her."

When you meet her...

"So there are others, but how did you know I was a *Finch*." The word feels strange in Atlas's mouth- finally naming it, calling it something other than "*that fucked up thing I can do*" or just "*that thing*", feels oddly comforting.

"It's stupidly obvious when you point it out. Look at my eyes real quick, do you see those white rings around my pupils?" He opens his eyelid wider and, right there amid the blue, is a white halo. "*That* is how you tell."

“Yeah... Yeah it is obvious, isn't it?” Atlas produces a defeated laugh.

There's a loud buzz- the clothes are ready.